

## THREE

# “How to Hook a Hottie”: Teenage Boys, Hegemonic Masculinity, and *CosmoGirl!* Magazine

*Suzanne M. Enck-Wanzer and Scott A. Murray*

“Hooking Up Dos and Don’ts”  
(*CosmoGirl!*, September 2007 cover)

“4 Dates Guys Love”  
(*CosmoGirl!*, April 2008 cover)

“What He Tells His Friends After You Hook Up”  
(*CosmoGirl!*, November 2007 cover)

“387 Ways to Make Him Fall For You”  
(*CosmoGirl!*, February 2008 cover)

To say that the world of teenage dating is complicated by our media-saturated world is quite an understatement. With mixed messages, gendered double binds, and sex stereotypes emanating from nearly every medium of U.S. popular culture, it should be little surprise that teenage boys and girls alike experience more anxiety than ever in respect to dating. Messages reminding budding women to maximize their femininity and let “boys be boys” saturate girls’ magazines throughout the market. Since their conception in the 1940s, teen magazines have become staples of pop culture throughout the developed world. Typically intended for girls and young women, magazines such as *CosmoGirl!*, *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *J-14*, and *Teen Vogue* cover a wide array of topics, including school, beauty, fashion, celebrities, music, and—most importantly—teenage boys. Advising girls

how to catch the elusive boy species, columns, testimonials, and images combine in these magazines to construct an image of the prototypical teenage boy—one who is sexually assertive, emotionally evasive, and naturally prone to aggression.

There is a growing body of research dating back to the 1970s investigating girls' and women's magazines with an eye toward how these texts reproduce and reinforce gender roles.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the power of mass-mediated artifacts to socialize women and girls into cultural norms and mores, most research confirms that female lifestyle magazines are guided by a singular focus on beauty and (heterosexual) romantic relationships. As Garner et al. suggest, magazines aimed at women and girls "fill in the contours and colors of what it means to be a woman and how women should relate to men (59). On the flipside of this spectrum, as Diane T. Prusank (2007) observes, "little work has been done to understand the portrayals of the males who appear in these magazines" (160). Though there is some growing interest in researching constructions of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines, Mia Consalvo (2003) rightly insists that this focus on adult men "fail[s] to interrogate constructions of young or adolescent boys" (28). The importance of studying discursive constructions of younger males is especially important, Consalvo continues, because such research "may show gender as a process being worked out—rehearsed, refined, and modified" (28). Indeed, it is the premise of this chapter that a critical examination of how masculinity is prescribed (and proscribed) in teenage girls' magazines can help us better question our cultural investment in a very narrow range of acceptable attitudes and behaviors for adolescent boys.

Given the dearth of research on how boyhood masculinities are created, circulated, and reinforced through mediated portrayals aimed at girls, this essay seeks to provide one antidote. Specifically, this critical analysis of *CosmoGirll* magazine interrogates several prevalent frameworks of meaning that reinforce what Robert Connell (1995, 1996) calls hegemonic masculinity.<sup>2</sup> If we can identify the messages being directed at girls, we can, by extension, realize how girls are being trained to (re)act toward boys. Such a revelation is important because hegemonic masculinity relies upon the willingness of those dominated to sustain the very system of their oppression. As such, in this essay we argue that *CosmoGirll*'s positioning of teenage boys vis-à-vis teenage girls masks its support of hegemonic masculinity within a discursive scaffolding of girlhood empowerment. Buttressing other studies of popular magazine portrayals of gender differences, this current study pays particular attention to the constructions of boyhood masculinities and argues that *CosmoGirll* reinforces hegemonic masculinity by portraying 1) males as sexual initiators; 2) males as emotionally distant; and 3) males as inherently more aggressive. After explaining the theoretical underpinnings of hegemonic masculinity, we provide a brief background on *CosmoGirll* magazine and teen girl magazines as a genre, and, finally, delve into the text itself to offer evidence for

the presence of the three characteristics mentioned above. Ultimately, as Consalvo contends, “Until masculinity and its different constructions are better explored, . . . we as news audiences and citizens will be blind to how these masculinities are linked—falsely and not—to damaging traits and behaviors” (41).

### Hegemonic Masculinity

As indicated above, there has been a bevy of research on constructions of femininities across popular media; however, emphases on the construction of masculinities have, most often, been an afterthought or implied by default. Depicting boys and men as if they were genderless has helped to reinforce the privileged position of invisibility when it comes to patriarchal dominance.<sup>3</sup> To claim that masculinity is privileged and invisible is not to say that men and boys have no gender. Rather, the gender of men and boys seems unimportant; gender is a topic that more frequently guides discussions of women and girls, thus making the gender of females (hyper)visible. This concealed gendering of boys and men is pivotal to allowing for central aspects of males to seem naturalized and preferred in U.S. public culture (Hirdman 2007, 159). In response to the invisibility of masculinity, Richard Dyer (2002) makes the following analogy: “One would think that writing about images of male sexuality would be as easy as anything. We live in a world saturated with images, drenched in sexuality. But this is one of the reasons why it is in fact difficult to write about. Male sexuality is a bit like air—you breathe it in all the time, but you aren’t aware of it much” (89). This sense of being everywhere and yet nowhere is what renders masculine privilege (generally speaking) so powerful in Western culture. This privileging of masculinity, we should note, is most seamless when it is accompanied by other privileged social identities (e.g., heterosexuality, whiteness, U.S. citizenship, middle/upper class status); to be sure, as bell hooks (2000) reminds us, not all masculinities enjoy the same sense of social power. It is this general privileging of masculinity (as opposed to femininity) that informs what is known as “hegemonic masculinity.”

Connell’s research on masculinities has been highly influential in enabling critical explorations of the gendering process. Drawing together the two ideas of masculinity and hegemony, hegemonic masculinity is Connell’s term for “[t]he form of masculinity that is culturally dominant in a given setting” (1996, 209). Embedded in social institutions ranging from schools and governing bodies to families and the media, hegemony is never totalizing and is, at its core, not obvious. As articulated in critical/cultural theories assembled by Antonio Gramsci (1971), hegemonic powers and privileges maintain their dominance through broad-based ideological support and the appearance of being “common sense.” Hegemony is supported both by those who most benefit from its sustenance, but also by those who are positioned subserviently; because it is naturalized, it

also goes unquestioned. Steve Craig (1992) helps to round out this definition of hegemonic masculinity by noting, “In modern American culture, part of [our] expectation is that men will participate in and support patriarchy, and the traditional characteristics of masculinity are made to seem so correct and natural that men find the domination and exploitation of women and other men to be not only expected, but actually demanded” (3). Contrasted with femininity (which emphasizes nurturance, submission, and empathy) and less culturally powerful masculine identities such as homosexuality, the idea of hegemonic masculinity provides a theoretical lens for conceptualizing the myriad ways that men collectively have privilege over women (Connell 1996, 209). Notably, as Antony Easthope (1990) argues, once constructions of masculinity can be highlighted and exposed, the power of its hegemonic privilege can be challenged and “called into question” (168). This is the goal of our critical exploration of *CosmoGirl!*—to call into question hegemonic masculine privilege by detailing not only its effects on girls (which have been studied elsewhere), but to think more thoroughly about its deleterious effects on boys.

### Mediating Meaning

Before offering an analysis of *CosmoGirl!* as it relates to hegemonic masculinity, it is important to recognize the significance of such discourses. Douglas Kellner (2001) offers the now-familiar suggestion that life in today’s media culture “dramatize[s] social conflicts, celebrate[s] dominant values, and project[s] our deepest hopes and fears” (38). Challenging expectations that news representations of various stripes (ranging from national newscasts to fashion updates) are transparent and *true*, there is a wide range of scholars who remind us of the ideological potency of media portrayals to uphold hegemonic power structures.<sup>4</sup> From a critical/cultural perspective, it is not necessarily a question of “accuracy,” but of the constitutive function of a discourse; in other words, how do characterizations found in mediated discourses help us form knowledge about the world(s) in which we live? Creating not just *what* we think about, but *how* we think, mediated representations exert great power.

Typically, research into these questions tends to critique more “mainstream” sources of news; however, as Ana Garner et al. (1998) argue, magazines are, for teenage girls especially, an important source of gender information and thus, a valuable area of study due to their accessibility, affordability, and availability (60). As Garner et al. continue, “Magazines constitute part of the media stories that shape both society’s sense of culture and our sense of self in culture” (59). In line with this research, Debbie Treise and Alyse Gotthoffer (2002) found that teenage girls use magazines as a source of information about sexuality, ranking the value of such discourses on par with information provided by their parents and peers.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, for some readers, the content of girls' magazines is actually thought to be more convincing than personal experiences and first-hand knowledge (Currie 1999). Ultimately, as Stephanie R. Medley-Rath (2007) concludes, "Readers actively use [teen girl] magazines by looking for relevance with their own lives and to sort contradictory messages and gain sexual knowledge" (25).<sup>6</sup>

Aimed at girls ages 12–17, *CosmoGirll*'s print magazine was launched in June of 1999, published monthly until December of 2008, and currently enjoys a vibrant online presence at CosmoGirll.com. Distributed by the media corporation Hearst Magazines, *CosmoGirll* boasted a circulation of 1.4 million by the end of 2008, making it one of the largest selling teen magazines in the U.S. market. Similar to other teen magazines in form and function, the sampling of *CosmoGirll* pieces analyzed in this chapter provides a glimpse into broader constructions of the sexual scripts and ideologies prescribed to teenage girls and implicitly assumed of teenage boys. This study investigates *CosmoGirll* as a rhetorical artifact, paying particular attention to the advice columns, articles about dating and romance, and editorial responses to readers' letters.<sup>7</sup> The archive of *CosmoGirll* surveyed for this essay spans five years (2004–2009). In all, 32 articles that met our search standards were analyzed. Specifically, articles were selected if they included the keyword "dating" in the Lexis-Nexis database, offered explicit advice to girls about dating, and featured prominent gender paradigms.

The findings of our analysis are quite consistent with analyses of gender role constructions found in other studies of teenage girls' magazines. The argument forwarded by this essay is not that *CosmoGirll* is fundamentally different from other teen magazines. Indeed, it is quite representative of the genre of magazines targeted toward teenage girls. It is the "normalcy" of the messages conveyed in this magazine that reinforces the power of the ideologies conveyed. As Hirdman (2007) confirms, "[S]exualized representations of femininity can . . . be understood as expressions of some of the paradoxes and contradictions connected to masculinity . . ." (162). Thus, where this study deviates from other analyses of teen girls' magazines is in its focus on how the discourse helps reinforce cultural investments in hegemonic masculinity. Importantly, in line with other invocations of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, *CosmoGirll* and other magazines of its ilk hail girls and women into the subject position of willing participant of their own domination. In the end, such mediated discourses buttress a social system wherein girls and women are rhetorically conditioned to maintain the very structures that work to oppress them.

### Rules of Engagement

To begin, *CosmoGirll* reinforces elements of hegemonic masculinity through its portrayal of teenage boys as the primary initiators in relationships. In line with

traditional expectations of hegemonic masculinity, Nicola Gavey and Kathryn McPhillips (1999) suggest that “[d]iscourses of conventional heterosexuality constitute the male as the active, leading partner and the female as the passive, responding partner” (365). David Wyatt Seal and Anke A. Ehrhardt (2003) echo this expectation of masculinity with their study of urban male sexual scripts. Specifically, they observe:

As with courtship, traditional heterosexual script theory portrays men as the initiators of sexual intercourse and women as the boundary setters<sup>8</sup>. . . Men are expected to actively initiate and pursue all sexual opportunities, whereas women are expected to delay sexual activity until emotional intimacy has been established. (296)

This is not to suggest that all males are *naturally* more likely to initiate intimate relationships; rather, social conditioning (scripts) promotes such an expectation for “appropriate” masculine action. Seal and Ehrhardt remark further that “many men learn by a very young age that part of being a man is to compete and to conquer. . . ‘[r]eal’ men initiate and control heterosexual interactions, and ‘real’ sex is defined by penetration—a behaviour characterized by active ‘doing’ to another person” (315).

While usually not explicitly sexual in content and advice, the articles featured in *CosmoGirl!* reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic masculine construction of males as the initiating, active gender. First, the magazine advises teenage girls to let boys take the lead in advancing the relationship. In “The New Dating Rules,” young women are told to “never text, call, e-mail, or [instant message] him first” (Khidekel 2007a, 96). The reason for such prescribed hesitation, according to the columnist, is that “[i]t’s basic guy nature to want to feel like he worked hard to get you. They like to call first, so let them” (96). A similar article, “How to Make Love Last,” details how Lauren, 17, succeeded in building a strong relationship with Kyle in part because she let him say “I love you” first (Khidekel 2008a, 100). “Lauren waited for Kyle to say it first, which is a good idea,” the column observes; “[a]t this age, boys have a lot of the social power. . . so they may not know how to deal if you say it first” (100). Yet another article, “Do You Scare Guys Away?” strongly dissuades teen girls from taking the initiative in a relationship, lecturing that “[b]eing strong-willed can be hot, but when it’s too obvious you’re into him—and you create ways to be with him rather than let them happen—you could weird him out. You may also look desperate” (Khidekel 2005a, 44). Such advice mirrors Amy K. Kiefer and Diana T. Sanchez’s (2007) characterization of masculinity as active, concluding that “traditional gender-based sexual roles dictate sexual passivity for women but sexual agency for men” (269).

Paralleling this expectation of males as the initiators of romantic relationships, *CosmoGirl!* accedes to hegemonic masculinity by advising young women to adopt a passive or supporting role in romantic relationships. In “5 Things a Guy Wants in a Girlfriend,” teen girls are told that “[a] great girlfriend doesn’t let her pride stand in the way of letting her guy walk away from a silly argument at least *thinking* he got his point across (even if you still secretly disagree with him)” (Seidell 2007, 87). The article also states that girls should avoid “little disagreements” and “pick [their] battles” (87). “The Guys’ Code of Romance,” a column written from the “voice” of teen boys, subordinates females as passive and elevates males as active by instructing girls to submerge themselves in their boyfriends’ interests out of romantic obligation:

My friend Jennifer tells me her boyfriend always asks her to go with him to basketball games—but sitting in a loud, brightly lit gym is so not romantic to her. My advice to her, and to all of you: Go to the game. When a guy asks a girl to join him in doing stuff he’d normally only do with his guy friends—go to the batting cage, play *Madden*—it may not seem romantic. But by inviting you along to do “guy things,” it’s as if he’s saying, “I feel so close to you, I want to share all of my life with you.” So hit those bleachers and cheer on his team. To a guy, it doesn’t get any mushier than that! (Gilderman 2006, 112)

Reinforcing these expectations that girls should “stand by their man” and play the submissive supportive role of nurturer and cheerleader, “5 Things” advises girls thusly:

Stupid as it may seem, guys get worked up about things like video games and sports. The best girlfriends realize that these things really mean something to guys and affect us on an emotional level. . . . And it’s nice to have a girl who’ll cheer right along with us, whether or not she really cares what just happened. (Seidell 2007, 87)

None of the dating columns taken from *CosmoGirl!* featured advice on how to get teen boyfriends more interested and involved in the girls’ activities. In accordance with hegemonic masculinity, the hobbies and commitments of young women are presented as inconsequential to the relationship, whereas the interests of boys take center stage. Girls are asked to collaborate in their own subordination by viewing the interests of their (heterosexual) partners as being more important than their own individual investments.

A third, less overt way that boys are represented as the sexual initiators (and instigators) in relationships is through teenage girls’ articulation of anxieties about young male libidos. “Under Pressure” most candidly explores this concern, chronicling several girls’ encounters with sexually insistent boys. Marcy, the featured girl in the column, leads the discussion:



Whenever my guy and I are alone, he starts kissing me and trying to get me to undress even though I keep telling him I'm not ready to have sex with him. He says just kissing is fine, but then he gets tired of that and starts taking off his clothes. Sometimes I take off my shirt to make him happy. Lately all he wants to do is have sex and I'm afraid he'll leave me after I give in to him. I really like him and don't want that to happen. (Lawrence 2006a)

"Under Pressure" highlights the experience of three other girls who struggled to negotiate male sexual initiative—Kelly, Heidi, and Leila. Kelly, a 21-year-old from Connecticut, writes that "[i]n high school I dated a guy who pressured me. I was infatuated with him but I listened to my gut and didn't sleep with him. Thank goodness—it turned out he was hooking up with tons of girls and lying to me!" (Lawrence 2006a). Heidi and Leila, both 17, each were dumped by their boyfriends after refusing their sexual advances.

"Prom Q&A" (2009), a compilation of prom-related advice, also discusses the issue of handling male sexual initiative. One anonymous teen girl asks, "Where are fun places to go after the prom to avoid being in a sex situation with my guy? What if he brings it up?" Another inquires, "I know most guys think of prom night as a guarantee that they're going to score. How can I tell beforehand if my date is one of those guys?" (1). Anxieties about boyfriends who are uninterested in sex, or advice on engaging in pleasurable sex practices initiated by the girl, remain silent in the discourse of *CosmoGirl!*. These findings are consistent with other studies that view female sexual agency as being fraught with anxieties about contracting disease or pursuing bodily pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Broadly read, the representations of young males in *CosmoGirl!* reinforce what Jackson (2005b) and others observe to be a crucial feature of hegemonic masculinity: "the social construction of femininity and masculinity. . . through its positioning of women as passive recipients and men as active instigators" socially, romantically, and sexually (283). Once again, girls are encouraged to see it as being in their best interest to abstain from initiating sexual pleasure, to resist the advances of the elevated male libido, and to deny their own curiosities about sexuality. Such positioning simultaneously encourages girls to expect boys to act accordingly, thus reinforcing rigid codes for teenage boys to be sexual initiators.

### Don't Stand Too Close to Me

In addition to casting males as the principal initiators and sexual instigators in relationships, *CosmoGirl!* paradoxically presents teenage boys as emotionally distant and romantically inept. Though there exists research suggesting correlation between gender and emotion that has demonstrated differences in the ways men and women experience and express feelings,<sup>10</sup> Walton, Adrian, and Evanthia (2004) argue that perceived differences in emotional behaviors are "socially con-



stituted”—or created—through performance, discourse, and social scripts (402). Matt Englar-Carlson and David S. Shepard (2005) support this finding in their research on couples counseling, finding that males often struggled in therapy sessions because men are socialized to “appear invulnerable by emphasizing emotional stoicism, physical toughness, and not asking for assistance” (384–385).<sup>11</sup> Y. Joel Wong and Aaron B. Rochlen (2005), summarizing recent research on men and emotional behavior, conclude that men’s perceived inability to be emotionally expressive comes from a host of socially scripted causes including a “lack of awareness of emotion, inability to identify feelings, negative evaluations of one’s emotions, and perceived lack of social opportunity to express feelings” (69). This research all supports broader conceptions of hegemonic masculinity by reinforcing an invisibility of masculine gender performances and expectation that men be sexually and physically active while requiring women to perform the labor of emotional support and expression.

The dating columns featured in *Cosmo Girl!* participate in the socialization of young men into these harmful emotional attitudes. “Who Loves Ya, Baby?” is one of the most explicit articles “uncensoring” male emotional dysfunction—in this case, non-committal behavior—and opens with the tagline: “he told you he loved you, then he told us the *truth*” (Benson 2006, 88). In this exposé, six males confess to dishonestly saying “I love you” in order to maintain an intimate relationship. C.J., 19, writes that he used “the L word” to persuade a friend to have sex with him:

For some stupid *guy reason* I wanted to hook up with my best girl friend, so one night at a party I said “I love you” to her face—we’d said it over the phone before, but it was kind of half serious. We did hook up that night, but it backfired when I realized she wanted a relationship. I have feelings for her, but not those feelings. (88, emphasis added)

Other boys in the article blame emotional inarticulateness or uncertainty for their false declarations of love. Chris, a teen from Murfreesboro, admits “My girlfriend told me ‘I love you’ after three weeks, so I said it back. But really, I still love my ex, who I talk to on the phone every night. Lying makes me feel like crap, but I know hearing me say it makes her happy” (88). Mirroring other tales of boys who falsely declared their love after a girl had initiated talk of love “too early” in the relationship, the articles of *CosmoGirl!* reinforce hegemonic masculinity by presuming that masculinity means initiating all romantic progression (especially sexual advancement), but without any of the work necessary for nurturing a mutual, emotionally mature relationship.

*CosmoGirl!* also articulates a number of generalized concerns about male lack of empathy and intimacy. “5 Things” reinforces the mixed messages being sent to

teenage girls. In one sentence, girls are told not to initiate intimacy, in the next, they are told: “don’t leave [boys] guessing” because “truth is, guys aren’t great at reading subtle hints. . . just tell your guy what you want—it will make your life easier, and he will be a lot less confused” (Seidell 2007, 87). Similarly, “Do You Tell Him Too Much Too Soon?” warns girls against “over-sharing” emotions and feelings with new boyfriends, and “Just How to Be Friends” states “Guys don’t discuss the minute details of their romantic relationships with each other like girls do, so they don’t expect platonic girl friends to either. If you do, he’ll get confused” (Graham 2004; Khidekel 2006, 150). *CosmoGirll’s* reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity’s construction of males as emotionally isolated is consistent with Kirsten B. Firminger’s (2006) research on teen girl magazines, in that young female readers are “invited to explore boys as shallow, highly sexual, emotionally inexpressive, and insecure” (306).

Self-disclosure and the “emotional work and maintenance” of relationships, according to hegemonic masculinity, are the provenance of women and girls; through its representation of teenage boys *CosmoGirll* does not include allowances for boys to become agents of this so-called “feminine” work (305). Qualities associated with femininity are, once again, swiftly cast off as something not *natural* to young men and, by extension, not desirable. Once again, while this characterization is more obviously disadvantaging toward teen girls, it is arguably just as harmful to boys. By reinforcing social codes that would preclude boys and men from exploring their emotions, such discourses function to close men off to important aspects of individual and collective development.

### Boys Will Be Boys

Finally, *CosmoGirll* normalizes (though does not condone) male aggression through a recurrent articulation of female anxiety about physical and emotional abuse. Hegemonic masculinity and relationship aggression are intimately linked, for as Amy Cohn and Amos Zeichner (2006) observe, “men are socialized to appear dominant and powerful,” and “may, therefore, learn to use physical force or domineering approaches to resolve conflicts and cope with confrontational situations” (187). Marcia K. Fitzpatrick et al. (2004) offer support for this claim, finding in a psychological survey that increased levels of masculine “gender role ideology” in males correlated positively with both perpetration and acceptance of physical and emotional violence (97–98).<sup>12</sup> Other researchers, such as Theresa C. Kelly and Chris D. Erickson (2007), have criticized earlier studies on the relationship between masculinity and sexual coercion as problematic, but nonetheless concede that both gendered constructions of masculinity and femininity play an important role in fostering relationship aggression (242–243).

A number of articles in *CosmoGirl!* focus on male aggression and abuse, offering advice to teen girls who may find themselves in unhealthy relationships. One article, “Tainted Love,” opens with the tagline “are you in love—or are you in *danger*,” and recounts the murder of a high school junior, Elizabeth Butler, by her abusive boyfriend, Ariel. The piece then highlights three other high school girls formerly in abusive relationships, each offering their own experience as a cautionary tale to their peers. Katie, for example, “a preppy B+ freshman in high school,” became involved with a boy four years her senior who refused to meet her parents and, mistaking a friend’s car in her driveway for another boy’s, left phone messages saying “who’s with you bitch—I’ll kill him!” and “I never loved you—I only used you. I hope you die” (Welch 2005, 136). Carrie, a close friend of Katie, tells of her own abusive relationship, where her boyfriend Jake insisted she have sex with him every day and “instituted a point system, punishing Carrie with points if she did something he didn’t like.” After incurring over 200 points for offenses such as writing him only one note in school per day or “standing too close to another guy” in the hall, Jake demanded that she redeem herself by “[having] sex with an older guy he knew while he watched” (136).

Another article, “Possessive Boyfriend,” follows a similar format. Seeking advice from *CosmoGirl!*’s “Love Doctor”—pop psychologist Cooper Lawrence—16-year-old Laura writes

I’ve been with my guy eight months and I love him, but recently he’s been controlling and possessive to the point where I’ve found myself so limited—even as far as just going out with my friends. And I feel brainwashed, thinking I shouldn’t even hang out at the movies because it will make him mad. He gets so angry with me that I cry—it sucks! (Lawrence 2006b, 134)

“The First Time I Realized My Self-Worth” (Miller 2008), “Love Lessons: Romance Red Flags” (2008), and “I Was Topless on MySpace” (2007) touch on similar themes. In “First Time,” high school cheerleader Mitzi Miller recounts her relationship with varsity basketball co-captain and All-State point guard Dexter Riviera, who frequently turned conversations into “CIA-worthy interrogations about [her] alleged flirtatious behavior” and become controlling and derisive (142). “Love Lessons” warns teenage girls about troublesome boy behavior—“he constantly criticizes you,” “he doesn’t respect your limits,” “he tries to control you”—and “Topless” details how Michelle’s ex-boyfriend hacked her MySpace account and posted private mobile phone images of her baring her breasts in revenge for ending the relationship (132).

While *CosmoGirl!* certainly does not endorse abusive behavior on the part of teenage boys, its coverage of male psychological and physical aggression nonetheless reinforces traditional gender identities by representing to teenage girls an

image of males consistent with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. As Garner et al. (1998) summarize, young women are socialized to perceive hostility and antisocial behavior as an ordinary element of masculinity—“[b]ecause guys are ‘inconsiderate,’ ‘manipulative,’ and ‘possessive,’ girls can expect to be treated like ‘dirt’” (70). This representation, as Garner et al. would insist, circulates throughout the culture and functions as a social script on “how women should relate to men” in their romantic lives, which underlines the importance of Jackson’s (2005b) suggestion that these constructions reinforce teenage masculinity as being both irresponsible and being driven almost solely by quests for sexual pleasure, power, and control (59).

As with the other themes explored in this essay, the teen readers of *CosmoGirll* are not invited to question these elements of hegemonic masculinity and investigate the social conditions that encourage aggression and emotional reticence to flourish, but rather are advised on how to adapt to or avoid them (“dump the disrespectful jerk,” “break it off, *pronto*,” “cut the guy loose”). Such a framework of teaching girls to simply avoid naturalized male aggression is common in U.S. public culture (Hall 2004). Returning once again to Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, this tendency follows precisely the power of hegemony, or “the process by which a social order remains stable by *generating consent to its parameters* through the production and distribution of *ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people*” (Jasinski 2001, 283, emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> By using popular mediated discourses to counsel teenage girls only to evade or acclimate themselves to a “social reality” fraught with problematic masculine attitudes and behaviors, *CosmoGirll* perpetuates hegemonic masculinity by accepting its construction of young males and failing to articulate a “counter-hegemony” that would “challenge the values and practices of the dominant culture” (Jasinski 2001, 283, 285). This failure has strong implications for how teenage girls perceive and (re)act toward teenage boys in our culture, thus influencing how young males come to perceive and (re)act toward themselves and their peers.

### Hegemonic Masculinity Reconsidered:

Michael Moller (2007) observes, “[I]f masculinities are socially constructed, then there must be conditions under which masculinities can change” (264). This potential for social change and the amelioration of gendered conflict stands at the heart of this chapter. Though the constructions of boys in *CosmoGirll* reinforce many of the dominating aspects of hegemonic masculinity, Raymond Williams (1977) and other writers commenting on the nature of hegemony emphasize that it is never absolute and never complete. Hegemony is constantly in a state of change; it is always a process of becoming, doing, and undoing. It makes sense, then, to seek out and challenge those elements of hegemonic masculinity that

can be subject to scrutiny and change—an important place to start if we are to begin wrenching apart the myriad systems of dominance and subordination that oppress all who are involved.

Throughout this essay, we have argued that part of how hegemonic masculinity is supported and reinforced is through the public construction of masculinity as *naturally* more active, emotionally withdrawn, and aggressive. However, these representations are never permanent and always dependent on time and place, as the process of gendering is one wherein expectations and foundations are constantly being formed and reformed in response to or anticipation of cultural and historical changes. As Moller (2007) argues, “[I]f masculinities are malleable, at least to some extent, then it becomes less necessary to live with those articulations of masculinity that are damaging. [Our job] then, is to mount and sustain arguments for change” (264). We intend to offer such arguments by exploring some of the implications this study has for how we as scholars and citizens (re)imagine teenage masculinities.

We might begin by drawing an analogy to the study of race. Following the lead of Stuart Hall (1992), Gilbert B. Rodman (2006) discusses problems of representing race in the following way: “[R]acism, as it currently lives and breathes in the United States, depends at least as much on the gaps in contemporary public discourse on race as it does on flawed media representations of people of color” (96–97). This observation can easily be extended to include representations of gender in U.S. public culture, which function in much the same way as race, or age, or class, and so on. The question that we and other critics (should) ask is not one of how accurately the images found in *CosmoGirl!* and other teen magazines represent what *really* goes on in teenage relationships, but rather one of how what is and *is not* represented tells teens how to act and (re)act toward one another. By responding to both the presence and absence of discourses found in this magazine, we aim to elaborate on their significance to a broader critique of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to the mass media.

First, it should be uncontroversial that our analysis revealed that the information presented in *CosmoGirl!* assumes a primarily heterosexual readership. Such a finding is in line with other analyses of teenage girls’ magazines.<sup>14</sup> As Jackson (2005a) points out, this pattern of heterosexual presumptions is “readily understood in the context of a society in which heterosexuality is both normative and compulsory” (291).<sup>15</sup> In our sampling of articles and columns, there were in fact two articles that referred to “alternative” sexualities (LGBT individuals and androgynous sexualities), and while it might seem progressive for other sexual orientations/options to be discussed at all, it is exactly because of its presence that heteronormativity is reinforced. By marking non-hetero sexualities and identities as Other, *CosmoGirl!* bolsters most mainstream discourses that presume heterosexuality as the natural and preferred position to occupy, especially for teenagers

whose sexual identities are always already considered troublesome. This heteronormatizing affects not only teens who do not identify as straight; the heterosexist paradigm in its entirety offers all young men a very narrow range of options for how, when, and with whom they express their intimate, romantic, and sexual interests. Boys in our culture are told time and again that they not only must be interested in girls, but also that they must perform a heterosexual role that denies them the opportunity for intimacy with other boys. Men in this positioning are expected to deny their vulnerability and intimacy in all relationships.

Significantly, the constructions of masculinity found throughout our analysis disallow masculinity as a site for emotional exploration and growth. As Hirdman (2007) notes,

[S]exual representations show how responsibility for emotional and sexual needs are transferred to women, as is the responsibility to satisfy these needs. In this sense, representations of femininity do not just stand for “the Other” but also for emotional and sexual aspects that masculinity has to place outside itself in order to remain and be regarded as “one substance.” (168)

The “one substance” of masculinity is one that rests firmly on one side of the classic mind/body split, thus denying boys and men access to their own emotionality and the benefits associated with the sharing of intimacy with other individuals. The social policing of boys and their intimate relationships promotes a climate wherein teenage boys are all too often stripped of meaningful relationships with individuals of both sexes. This proscription also provides traction for hegemonic expectations that boys will act aggressively toward others rather than with nurturance and compassion.

As noted previously, much of the scholarship that exists regarding girls’ or women’s magazines focuses on masculinity only, if at all, as a by-product of how these texts construct femininity—masculinity is merely seen as the antithesis to femininity. What most scholarship fails to attend to is how constructions of hegemonic masculinity harm *boys* as well as girls. Though we would acknowledge that patriarchal privilege disadvantages girls and women in ways that are disproportionate to its effects on most boys and men, we cannot overlook how expectations of masculinity unfairly narrow the options available to males and harm their potential to live more fully. The pressures placed on boys who might fall outside of the expectations of hegemonic masculinity are tremendous, especially as it relates to dating and sexual expression. If what is portrayed as *reality* to girls is that boys are naturally emotionally inept, naturally more active, and naturally more aggressive, boys are in turn interpolated into these positions in ways that strip them of agency and determination as individuals and diversity as a group. While it is rather widely acknowledged that boys police the gendered behaviors of other boys

(e.g., through bullying), what this study illustrates is that girls too are conditioned to scrutinize the gendering of boys. Though not as apparently dominating, this type of gendered containment perpetuates damaging cycles of power and control.

Finally, we would be remiss not to comment on how *CosmoGirll* reinforces hegemonic complicity toward the aggression of boys. On this front, *CosmoGirll*'s advice to teenage girls might seem somewhat empowering at face value—the magazine acknowledges that girls are thinking about and perhaps engaging in sexual activity and urges girls to end violent or coercive relationships. This surely demonstrates an advancement beyond texts that assume that sex and sexuality are of little relevance to girls; however, once again, the discussions found in *CosmoGirll* implicitly naturalize masculinity as more actively aggressive—the advice to girls is at once contradictory and problematic. *CosmoGirll* echoes other cultural texts by telling girls to stand unwaveringly by their boys as they play video games and basketball, to avoid “head games” by letting boys affirm their desires first, but to leave a boy who becomes *too* disrespectful. This pattern of supporting and deferring to boys up until they go “too far” does little to challenge the system of hegemonic masculinity that expects boys to push for “too much” and be emotionally absent. This framework also leaves the hegemonic norms intact by responding to a wide-ranging pattern of masculine aggression on a case-by-case basis, rather than at the level of mainstream culture.

In the final analysis, our study of *CosmoGirll* reinforces research conducted by others on the topic of teenage girls' magazines in a number of ways. Boys are represented in the advice columns and dating articles as more active, emotionally distant, and naturally aggressive. Girls are expected to embrace the opposite characteristics that are associated with being feminine: support boys and their interests, let them take the lead, don't pressure them into intimacy or intimidate them with self-disclosure, and expect—but don't tolerate—abusive or aggressive behavior. What this analysis fundamentally reveals is how such characterizations reinforce an underlying current of hegemonic masculinity that harms girls and boys alike in ways that we ought to challenge. In the end, it is not just the health and well-being of teenagers that is at stake, but also the ability to build a social world that denies the reach and influence of a deeply rooted cultural ideology founded on messages of gender inequality, distrust, and conflict.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Durham (1996, 1998); Ferguson (1983); Garner, et al. (1998); Jackson (2005a, 2005b); McCracken (1993); McRobbie (1996, 2000); Peirce (1990); Steiner (1995); Walkerdine (1984); Walsh-Childers et al. (2002); and Winship (1991).
2. See also Whitehead (1999).



3. See, for example, Katz (1995).
4. Following in the scholarly tradition of Antonio Gramsci (1971), to suggest that U.S. culture is guided by hegemonic power is to argue that our dominant ideologies are viewed popularly as “common sense” and accepted generally as beneficial not only to the ruling classes, but to those who are dominated as well.
5. See also Walsh-Childers et al. (2002).
6. See also Brown et al. (1993); Jackson (1999); and Milkie (1999).
7. Though letters are likely crafted by *CosmoGirl!!* writers to represent reader concerns, questions of their validity are unimportant in this context; the printed letters work in tandem with other articles and images presented in the magazine to render a particular construction of what teenage sexuality *does*, and by extension *ought to*, look like (see, for example, Jackson, 2005a).
8. See also Brooks (1995); Tiefer (1995); and Byers (1996).
9. See also Fine (1988); Jackson (2005a); and Vance (1992).
10. See, for example, Averill (1983); Brody (1993); Fischer and Manstead (2000); and Jansz (2000).
11. See also Bruch (2002).
12. See also Aromäki et al. (2002).
13. See also Cloud (1996).
14. See, for example, Carpenter (1998); Jackson (2005a, 2005b); and Medley-Rath (2007).
15. See also Rich (1980).

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