MAKING MEANING OF BODY-SIZE DIVERSITY IN MAGAZINES:
A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF READER COMMENTS

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

Mom, thank you for never once doubting me, in school or in life. Granny, you taught me to be curious and I’m forever grateful. Dad and Mel, thank you for your support and humor. Andrea, I couldn’t have survived this without my personal cheerleader, sounding board, and best friend. To Dalene, Ileana, Melanie, Amanda and the rest for inspiring me and reminding me that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and to my amazing co-workers, especially Tanya and Ashley, for asking me “Are you done yet?”
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MAKING MEANING OF BODY-SIZE DIVERSITY IN MAGAZINES: A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF READER COMMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Using grounded theory method, this research qualitatively analyzes more than 1000 reader comments left in reaction to an image of a plus-size model in *Glamour* magazine in 2009. The core categories that emerged through coding include the role social comparison had in how readers made sense of an image that was outside the thin ideal normally presented by magazines, the language commenters used to describe and talk about bodies and their perceived meanings, and readers’ stated expectations for magazines. Their core finding of this research is that in making sense of the body they were seeing on the pages of a magazine, readers drew comparisons to their own bodies. For some women, seeing a body that looked like their own for the first time in a magazine dramatically increased their stated affinity and loyalty to the publication. This research offers greater understanding of the role magazines play in shaping bodily expectations.
As a culture, we have at some point lost the knack for being able to see diversity of shape and form as anything other than a series of mistakes that need to be edited in Photoshop.

-Lesley Kinzel

Chapter 1

When the nightly news or newspapers cover the obesity epidemic, the story is often illustrated with b-roll or a photograph of “headless fatties,” a term coined by Cooper (2007) to describe the people whose bodies are decapitated through photo cropping and used to represent the entire concept of increasing weight gain among the American populace. However, the fat bodies in other media, women’s fashion magazines in particular, are used differently. Media critic and New York Times writer Ginia Bellafante explains that for the most part, bodies of size have been relegated to specific “size” issues of magazines (Bellafante, 2010). The typical image of a body found in magazines is one that that adheres to the thin ideal, which says that a beautiful body is inherently a thin body.
Figure 1: Example of a “Headless Fatties” Image

Figure 2: “The Woman on Pg. 194”
Bellafante cites one particular incident as a “shift” in magazine media’s acceptance of corpulent bodies. In September 2009, *Glamour* magazine ran a photo of size 12-14, 180 pound model Lizzi Miller, which accompanied a story in the Life/Happiness section on being confident. The text below the photo read: “Once and for all: The sexy things men really love (Solomon, 2009).” From Bellafante’s view, the photo was unique because it was a less rarefied, more mainstream inclusion of a larger model; this is the “[released] from the fringes” idea to which she refers (Bellafante, 2010). Since 2009 she has seen more plus size models appearing outside of specially labeled magazine editorials and even appearing more frequently in runway shows and on television. Aside from its status as a perceived point of change, *Glamour*’s publication of the image is noteworthy because of the large audience reaction it received.

In August 2009, the month the magazine hit newsstands and subscriber’s mailboxes, the editor-in-chief of *Glamour*, Cindi Leive, wrote a blog post for the magazine’s website about the “flood” of emails she had received in reaction to the image (Leive, 2009). As of March 3, 2013, 1,308 Comments in reaction to and discussing the image have been left on that blog post. Leive and Miller appeared on *The Today Show*, ABC, MSNBC, the *Los Angeles Times* and numerous other blogs and media outlets wrote about the reaction to the image. One comment from the blog Matt Lauer read on *The Today Show* sums up the core message that media outlets reporting on *Glamour* focused on: “This woman rocks and we need more women like her to make a mark on what real women look like.” Much of the positive reaction centered on female readers who saw their own bodies reflected on a magazine’s pages, many for the first time. Readers
applauded the magazine for showing a more realistic image of women, one they could relate to. Some of the media attention surrounding the incident included a kind of disbelief that a magazine had moved away from the expected skinny-model mindset. For example, CNN’s Campbell Brown entitled her blog post about the incident “The latest look in supermodels…can it be real?” (Brown, 2009). *Glamour* took full advantage of the buzz surrounding the incident, publishing a group photo of seven nude plus size models in their November 2009 issue. In her editor’s letter for that issue, Leive reaffirmed the magazine’s commitment to including a variety of body sizes in the images they published. She expressed a sense of gratitude to readers for voicing their opinions and inspiring the magazine to ensure that the women inside the magazine were as diverse in body size as the women buying it.

Centered on this image and the reactions it provoked, this research is a constant comparative analysis of the comments on the Glamour.com post. From a methodological perspective, this research uses grounded theory to establish a theoretical framework that creates an understanding of how readers talked about and reacted to the image, looking specifically at how the readers compared their own bodies’ to that of the model, the language used to describe fat and thin bodies, and the affect the image had on how readers felt about *Glamour* as a magazine.

This research begins with a review of the literature in this area, including definitions of relevant terms. Studies on obesity stigma and social comparison theory are included to provide a framework from which to more accurately analyze the themes present in the reader comments. A brief exploration of plus size modeling is also
included. Finally, a detailed description of the research methods is included. This encompasses both a description of the methods and the means of analysis applied to the data collected.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review, spanning scholarship from 1954 to the present day, is to provide a historical background on discussion of the body and corpulence. Media effects studies on the impact of the pervasive use of thin bodies on readers’ self-esteem are examined, in part to make a point about the ailments, both physical and social, that could be improved through a diversification of the bodies shown in media. Finally, the impact and nature of the fashion industry’s mandate that “thin is in,” will be briefly discussed. The concepts of objectification theory and obesity stigma will be woven throughout.

Definition of Terms

Before beginning critical analysis of the literature, it is necessary to define some terms specific to this area of study. The concept of a thin ideal, and the term itself, come up frequently in this literature, but a clear, concise definition of the term was difficult to find. For the purpose of this study, the thin ideal is the idea of a thin body as the kind of body everyone should aspire to, the “perfect” body, hence the “ideal” part of the phrase. Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) identifies the body as a key site of female self-worth, and the shaping of it becomes a lifelong “body project” of creating a physical identity that adheres to societal expectations of feminine beauty. When media consumers are constantly exposed to images of thin bodies, it sends the message that a thin body is the
norm. Another term that will be used frequently in this research is body diversity. In the same way that magazines and all media should attempt to be representative of all kinds of invisible populations, including racial, ethnic and religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community, diversity in the kinds of bodies represented in the media is important. Body diversity is a carefully chosen word for it emphasizes a crucial point. Thin bodies are not bad bodies anymore than fat bodies are; they are just the only bodies American media culture finds acceptable. To argue for the complete removal of thin ideal imagery from mass culture would send the message to thin women that there is something dangerous and undesirable about their bodies. Finally, the word “fat” is used as a non-pejorative adjective to describe bodies of size.

**Obesity stigma and social comparison theory.** When considering present day visual representations of the body, it is important to look first at the value and meanings modern-day American culture has placed on corpulence. This is especially important to research concerning the inclusion of plus size models in magazines because it touches on the origins of some of the sentiments audience members might reflect back on the bodies they see. In 1968, two separate papers were published on the topic of obesity stigma. These researchers provide the foundation and original conceptualization for why obesity is stigmatized. Cahnman (1968) explores multiple causes for social aversion to fat bodies. His first hypothesis is that the framing of obesity as a health issue, wherein the people affected are somehow negligent gluttons who don’t take care of their own health, creates a stigma against overweight and obese individuals because it portrays them as having zero self-control or restraint. This is in line with Duncan’s (1994) textual analysis of
*Shape* magazine in which she found that the magazine sent the message that a body devoid of fat is an attainable goal for every woman to aspire to and it is suggested that this is the “natural” way to be, even “at 50” or after giving birth. This “natural” frame, by making a thin body seem like the only natural state of being, reaffirms Cahnman’s suggestion that fat bodies are stigmatized because those people are seen as having gone to extremes to push their bodies past their natural state. Cahnman refutes this health argument by citing the American Medical Association as saying that an obese individual should be “regarded as a victim of anatomic and physiologic circumstances rather than just a glutton.” Although the word “victim” in that statement would be considered politically incorrect today, the sentiment remains true that obese individuals are often obese because of circumstances outside of their control, not because of lack of self-restraint.

The second source of stigma Cahnman identifies is that of a social or moral disgrace associated with corpulence. He talks about the framing of weight loss that puts the emphasis on the “sin” of “indulging” in high calorie foods; a dieter is someone who must be reformed, saved from the evil temptations that have gotten them to where they are. He also equates this idea with one of socioeconomic class, saying that bowing to the whims of the stomach is an antiquated sign of lower class status, a linkage that might still exist subconsciously today. The third hypothesis is that stigma comes from an association between corpulence and depravity; essentially that fat people are compensating for some kind of mental or psychological disturbance by eating excessive amounts of food.

Published the same year as the Cahnman study, Maddox, Black and Liederman (1968)
did an experiment in order to establish a ranking of where obesity stood among other stigmatized physical conditions. They found that their “normative” group ranked a photo of an obese child as the least likable child, lower than children with facial deformities, missing limbs and children in wheelchairs. This brief overview of the history shows how the social aversion of fat bodies has evolved and developed over time, influenced by historical social conventions. Much of what Cahnman wrote about is still applicable today. It is important to understand what long-standing social biases might make people not want to read magazines with plus size or overweight models and why editors might choose not to include them (their own preexisting personal biases for example).

**Media Effects Studies**

Many scholars have looked at the effects exposure to the thin ideal can have on the self-esteem and body image of women and teens. The literature shows that women of all ages experience diminished self-esteem and negative body image following exposure to images of the thin ideal. Groesz, Levine and Murnen (2002) conducted a meta-analytic study using the data from 25 different studies on the effect of thin ideal on consumers. They found that these negative effects on body image and self-esteem are heightened for those under the age of 19. Scholars have looked at this phenomenon specifically, focusing their attention on the body messages in magazines targeted at teens. In their content analysis of 50 years of *YM* and *Seventeen* magazine coverage, Luff and Gray (2009) found conflicting textual and visual messages in magazines of particular note. Although body size of the cover model increased over time in the teen magazines they studied, the number of stories on dieting and exercise also increased. This seemingly
paradoxical idea that promotes regulating body size through regimented eating and exercising and yet is paired with images of bodies that increased in size relates to research by Duncan (1994) on the self-monitoring and body-patrolling women are expected to observe. Drawing from Foucault’s “notion of panopticism,” Duncan (1994) examines how magazines encourage women to constantly self-monitor their own bodies through the lens of patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty. (The panopticon is a prison structure that places the guard in a central tower in view of all the prisoners so that the guard in the tower can see all the cells, but the prisoners cannot see the guard. Not knowing whether the guard is watching encourages the prisoners to be on their best behavior at all times.) Duncan refers to Bordo’s research on how women with anorexia use weight loss as a way to gain entry and acceptance into the masculine world. Uniquely, Duncan applies the concept of panopticism to media’s effect on women’s self-monitoring behaviors in two ways. The first is the Efficacy of Initiative frame, which says, “all one needs to do to get healthy, lose weight, sculpt muscles, and become beautiful is to make a private commitment to a new regime.” Duncan saw this frame in Shape’s monthly success stories, which highlight how “real women” lost weight. This frame creates the assumption that all it takes to reach the thin ideal is dedication to accomplishing it and conversely paints those who fail to live up the thin ideal as simply having not tried hard enough. This is in line with the stigma Cahnman (1968) identified that equates corpulence with laziness or lack of moral fortitude. The second frame is that “Feeling Good Means Looking Good.” Panopticism comes in here through the images and text magazines publish which allow readers to monitor the normalcy of their own
weight and measurements through comparison to the bodies they see in magazines and judgments about the weight and size of those bodies, traditionally private information made public knowledge. Through their publication of comparison materials magazines like *Shape* encourage and allow women to engage in self-monitoring of their own bodies and weight. However, magazine editors choose the bodies females readers are comparing themselves to, whether they be models or “successful” real women, based on larger societal conventions of feminine beauty and sex appeal.

Festinger (1954) attempts to explain why this assessment takes place with his social comparison theory. The theory says that people compare themselves to others in order to make judgments about themselves. While Festinger’s original work relates more specifically to comparisons of opinion and ability, an instance in which nonsocial methods for evaluation don’t exist (the example he uses is that one could test whether an object was fragile by hitting it with a hammer, but no such physical test exists to determine whether one political candidate is better than another). Placing value on a particular body type works in much the same way. This theory can be applied to the study of the bodies in magazines when one considers the pseudo-social environment created through magazine reading. Readers see what is presented in magazines and those images and ideas are normalized by their existence in the magazine. Using the social comparison theory, it could be concluded that the images of the body presented in magazines serve as models of comparison for the reader, making them question their own body or lifestyle based on what they see. This is where the real impact of exposure to the thin ideal can take affect. Exposure to the thin ideal can have a profound impact on women’s mental
health, but the impact of the exposure varies based on the degree to which the women “internalize” the message (Thornton & Maurice, 1997; Smeesters, Mussweil & Mandel, 2010, Munro & Huon, 2005). Internalization has multiple contributing factors. Smeesters, Mussweil and Mandel found that when exposed to plus size, average size and thin models, the respondents in their study tended to associate themselves with the images of bodies closest to their own BMI. However, the effects of this association were different based on the viewer’s size. The women with lower BMIs who identified with the thinner models experienced an increase in their overall self-esteem whereas the women who identified with the average or plus size models felt worse about themselves.

Because of the pervasiveness of obesity stigma, the women with higher BMIs were stigmatizing themselves, recognizing that their association with the heavier models was not a positive. A similar but slightly more nuanced finding from Thornton was that the lower self-esteem many women experienced after exposure to the thin ideal would influence them to simply not consume the media. With that in mind, it must be noted that in the Smeester study, it was the heavier women who experienced the worst effects, even when the models they were exposed to had higher BMIs themselves. One conclusion from these studies is that an increase in the body-diversity in magazines might result in fewer women reading a magazine. Because of the self-stigmatizing behaviors the women engaged in, obesity stigma mars what could be a positive experience of feeling like the models in magazines are like ones self. A criticism of the Thornton study is the extent to which the authors give women agency in choosing not to consume media that lowers their self-esteem. Although they admit that it is almost impossible to avoid exposure to
the thin ideal entirely, saying that women who do not adhere to the strict ideal of the thin physique will be “disinclined to expose themselves to media sources emphasizing portrayals of idealized attractiveness and hence would experience little self-evaluative negative consequence as a result” (Thornton, 1997) oversimplifies the purposes magazines serve. In avoiding the medium altogether because of the body messages contained within, women would be denying themselves access to any other relevant content sandwiched between those images and removing themselves from the shared social culture that develops around magazine titles. Granted, the Internet does allow for an increased degree of control on the part of the reader. By visiting a magazine’s website, reader’s could go directly to the content that interests them and avoid certain images.

**Alternatives to the Thin Ideal**

While it does not explicitly promote or advocate for body diverse media messages, some scholarship has found that body size in images might have less of an impact than one might assume. Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found that advertisements featuring thin models and average size models were equally effective. The authors felt this meant advertisers could use more average size models, a way of showing more realistic and healthy body images, without risking their sales. This is of particular importance to this study because it calls into question whether magazine readers would feel similarly about body diversity in the publications they read. One could argue that the same concept applied to magazines could disprove the argument that people won’t buy magazines that feature average or plus size women.
Although the above-mentioned findings could be seen as positive, not all inclusions of bodies of varied sizes are. Stemming from obesity stigma comes the concept of “headless fatties” (Cooper, 2007). By removing the identities of the people photographed, these images communicate the idea that being fat is something shameful and embarrassing, something that one would never want associated with them. Heuer, McClure and Puhl (2011), in their quantitative analysis of the visual accompaniments to online stories about obesity from major news sources, found that 72 percent of the photos of overweight or obese individuals were negative or stigmatized. Criterion for considering a photograph stigmatized included a disproportionate emphasis on the person’s abdomen or lower body (the “headless fatties” phenomenon), portraying an overweight or obese abdomen with clothing, with their head cut out of the image, in poorly fitting clothing that emphasized body size, eating or drinking unhealthy food or drink or photographs illustrating overweight or obese people in a sedentary activity. Although these stigmatized images seem to play into the idea that people become obese based solely on the lifestyle choices they make, such as eating too much fast food or watching too much television, the researchers found that stories about the genetic causes of obesity were most likely to be illustrated with a stigmatized image (Heuer et. Al, 2011). This research is of particular importance to the study of plus size models in magazines because using overweight and even obese models is a step toward more positive visual portrayals of the fat body. Although not everyone has model good looks, the inclusion of plus size models is the opposite of stigmatizing; it represents a magazine’s willingness to represent all body types in their publication. The extreme to
which negative images appeared in the media sampled by Heuer, McClure and Puhl is indicative of the overall American attitude toward overweight individuals, that being fat is something so shameful a publication can’t show your face. Photos in news sources such as ABC.com (one of the outlets included in Heuer et. Al sample) admittedly have somewhat different purposes than those in magazines because they tend to be illustrating a story about data relating to obesity rather than more qualitative ideas about the body. The image of Miller in Glamour is interesting because, much like the stigmatized images examined by the above researchers, the photo was created to illustrate a story loosely related to the body. The subject of the story was “What Everyone But You Sees About Your Body.” The image was not part of a fashion editorial, which serves a different function in the realm of women’s magazines. Thomson (2009) further explores the “headless fatties” phenomenon in the media, but instead dubs the identity-less people in the photos “spectacular decapitations.” Again, these images reinforce the idea that people should be overwhelmingly ashamed of their fatness. Bordo (1997) writes that in American culture, children are taught, “being fat is one of the worst things one can be.” Bordo’s essay appropriately segues into the next section on the feminist scholarship and arguments surrounding the inclusion of fat bodies in the media.

**Feminist Lens**

Many scholars have studied the complexities of the having a female body in American society. This research draws from this foundation in examining the gender-specific nuances and social constructions of femininity that are based on the body. Bordo (1997) writes that eating disorders are a symptom of more than just the bodily
expectations placed upon women; they are a manifestation of “general anxieties about the body as the source of hungers, needs, and physical vulnerabilities not within our control.” This idea of control is central to the feminist arguments that women are encouraged to keep their bodies small and frail as a way of keeping women physically weaker than men. Gremillion (2005) says that the body is a powerful site of agency and control for individuals and that equating thinness with femininity says a lot about the gendered power relations in many cultures. Another important feminist argument is the potential objectification of women’s bodies that is inherent in modeling and fashion photography, and in much of American culture’s portrayal of women. Even if the women represented in magazines and other media are not all extremely thin models, the focus is still being placed on their bodies. Plus size models are usually still considered conventionally attractive, even beautiful, but with a dress size larger than a women’s 14. Objectification theory, proposed by Frederickson and Roberts, “places female bodies in a sociocultural context with the aim of illuminating the lived experiences and mental health risks of girls and women who encounter sexual objectification.” Sexual objectification of the female body leads women to constantly monitor their bodies with regard to the cultural yardstick, which is disseminated in part by the media (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). By retaining a focus on the body, regardless of size, the objectification of women in media images is still not being challenged.

Feminist activists have also proposed counter-hegemonic ways of initiating change in the way American culture constructs corpulence. Johnston and Taylor (2008) focus on the Dove Real Beauty Campaign ads, which features women of many shapes
and sizes proclaiming confidence in their bodies just the way they are. Johnston and Taylor see the Dove campaign as a mainstreaming of a previously marginalized feminist ideal: that women have a right to feel beautiful at any size. They criticize the Dove ad, which could be seen as comparable to the inclusion of varied body sizes in magazines, for not challenging the ideology that a women’s identity is intrinsically linked with her appearance, a concept that is linked with Objectification Theory. From a feminist perspective, it’s also important to look at how the body messages in the mass media are gendered. In their analysis of men’s and women’s magazine covers, Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler (1999) found that messages about weight loss and the body were prevalent on women’s magazine covers and that the editors framed weight loss as critical to a woman’s happiness and emotional well-being. In contrast to the appearance-centric women’s magazine covers, men’s magazines overall focused more on lifestyle and activities. Although this study is now more than 10 years old, and men are beginning to feel body pressure of their own from the mass media, it’s still alarming to know that for every one article about diet in the men’s magazines, there are 10 such articles in the women’s magazines.

**Fashion Industry’s Impact**

In her participant ethnography research, Czerniawski (2011) addresses the differences between the fashion and modeling industries’ conceptualizations of the term plus size, as well as the average person’s idea of plus. For both groups, the size at which someone, generally a woman as the term is not often applied to men, is considered plus size differs. She says that the fashion industry considers any size over an American size
eight to be plus size, while most retailers’ plus size departments begin at a women’s 14 or 16. Czerniawski combined her own observations from immersing herself into the plus size modeling industry and seeking work as a plus size model, with semi-structured interviews with plus size models and casting agents. She found that within the field, models engage in all kinds of modification of their bodily image in order to fit the proportions expected of a plus size model, which includes using padding to emphasize curves in places they might be lacking, or shoulder pads to increase their appearance of height. She also discovered that within the industry, plus size models are often shamed for having lost weight, an ironic twist on the fat shaming that can happen as a result of obesity stigma.

This review of the literature has shown that media effects scholars have found a connection between exposure to the thin ideal and decreased body satisfaction, though some scholars have debated the degree to which the media are responsible. This literature review also addressed the history of obesity stigma in American culture and the ways in which Festinger’s social comparison theory can be applied to the pseudo-social comparison readers engage in with the images of the body they see in magazines. It also touched on media effects, including media’s role in encouraging constant monitoring of one’s own adherence to hegemonic ideas of beauty through Foucault’s panopticon. Considering that central to this research is the portrayal of corpulent bodies, the ways in which fat bodies have been depersonalized and stigmatized in the mass media were examined. Finally, the role of the fashion industry and the important differences between how the fashion industry and the rest of the world defines the term “plus size” are
examined. This literature review marries multiple concepts that all play a role in how the images of the body we consume can affect our individual perceptions of our own bodies and the role mass media play in either continuing to propagate the thin ideal, continuing stigmatization of corpulence or attempting to counter these hegemonic ideals of beauty and attractiveness. This is an area full of unexplored research topics, all of which are incredibly relevant in today’s increasingly body- and weight-obsessed culture.

Some theories at play in this research include uses and gratifications and spiral of silence theory. Interestingly researchers such as Milkie (1999) have found that magazine readers, in her case teen girls, can identify that the message about the body they are receiving could be destructive, yet they still enjoyed reading the magazines as a way to relax, as entertainment and as a source of information they weren’t getting from their peers or parents. These kinds of gratifications of magazines might explain why women continue to buy and read them even though consumption of the images and articles within them can make them feel negativity toward their bodies. Uses and gratifications model assumes an active audience member (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973) who is making choices and decisions about what media to consume and why. Because women must seek out fashion and lifestyle magazines for purchase through newsstands or subscriptions or locate them online, the audience can be seen as active. Also, the “gratifications” or desires being satisfied by media often come from surveys of the audiences themselves, much like how Milkie’s participants expressed a desire to read magazines to relax.

Spiral of silence will be an important theory to this research, as it concerns the ways in which public opinion is formed, a key part of the analysis of online commenting.
Developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974) spiral of silence says “…public opinion is the opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based.” Her research found that, in groups, individuals will be more or less likely to speak out in favor of their opinion based on whether they believe the majority of the group holds their same opinion. In the context of a study of online comments, spiral of silence is important because it might have skewed the perceived dominant opinions of the comments as a whole. As more people see that their opinion is not shared by the rest of the commenters they might be less likely to leave a comment, or more likely to leave a comment in defense of their minority opinion. Although the proposed research is not looking for quantitative assessment and therefore the number of comments from any given position is irrelevant, the spiral of silence’s effect on commenting as a group discussion is important.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Questions

RQ1: What themes are prevalent in the commenter’s expressions?

RQ2: What role does social comparison theory play in how the commenters communicated their reactions?

RQ3: How did the inclusion of the photo change readers’ perceptions of the magazine (as illustrated by their comments)?

Research Methodology

A qualitative method allows researchers the ability to delve into the meaning-making rituals people use to help them make sense of the world around them. Eysenbach and Till (2001) call the Internet “the most comprehensive electronic archive of written materials representing our world and people’s opinions, concerns and desires.” These personal opinions, manifested through the comments left online, offer insight into what people were thinking at a given moment in time, provoked by what they have just consumed.

Studies that used a grounded theory method or even a textual or rhetorical analysis of the comments left on online posts were difficult to find. Quantitative content
analyses of online comments were much more common. Misogynistic comments about female bloggers (Mathieu, 2011), college political group’s Facebook wall posts (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers & Neely, 2010) and reader comments on newspaper coverage of corporate social responsibility (Cho & Hong, 2008) are all examples of research on online opinion-expressions which used quantitative methods to code comments. All three involved some researcher analysis of the tone or sentiment behind the comments. For example, Cho and Hong used the labels “cynical opponent” to describe oppositional comments or “pure acceptor” for people who accepted the stance of the story without question. They even went as far as to quantify what the comments were about, such as the statistic that three fourths of comments were made about monetary donation types of corporate social responsibility. However, knowing these numbers offers very little insight into the kinds of comments made and what they might say about larger societal ideas about charity donations or corporate responsibility. The same kind of method could be applied to the Glamour post. The researcher could code for those who felt the image was a positive thing, those who feel it promotes unhealthy habits and so forth and give percentages that would provide insight into the overall picture of how people felt about it. One could conclude the majority of comments were positive or negative, but that research would say nothing about the role magazines play in constructing body norms through images, or what techniques the commenters used to make sense of the controversy, such as making comparisons to their own weight and size.

This study examines the reader comments left on the blog post “The Picture You Can’t Stop Talking About: Meet the Woman on pg. 194.” Published on August 17, 2009
on the Vitamin G health and fitness blog on Glamour magazine’s website. The post addresses the audience and media reactions the magazine’s staff witnessed after publishing a 3-inch by 3-inch photo of plus size model Lizzi Miller. Although the post is more than three years old, commenters are still leaving behind permanent records of their reactions, even as recently as July 2012. Readers reacted strongly to the image and the blog post became the outlet for their opinions, both positive and negative. From a media studies and audience research perspective, the comments can provide interesting insight into how readers feel, or at least how they say they feel, about a magazine’s inclusion of a model whose body challenges the traditional thin-ideal.

Using the constant comparative method of analysis, the comments were analyzed, allowing the pervasive themes and ideas to emerge. The total number of comments at the time the data was pulled for analysis was 1,272. Comments were copied from the website into a word document to preserve the data (in case the comments were deleted by Glamour, etc.) and to add to the ease of analysis. The researcher is the sole coder. Given the exploratory nature of this research, and the fact that previous research on the topic of plus size models in women’s magazines is virtually nonexistent, grounded theory method is important for establishing logical conclusions that are “grounded in data, not speculative (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).” In order to gain a better understanding of the role spiral of silence might have had in the commenting, the comment data was analyzed from the first comment to the most recent comment, with each post being coded for the dominant ideas contained within. The number of categories was limited when they became theoretically saturated. Glaser & Strauss explain that a concept is saturated when
the coder can see whether or not the next incident, in this case the next comment, “points to a new aspect.” Although the theory produced by this research is closely linked to the subject at hand, and therefore not widely applicable to other subject matter, it could serve as a foundation for future research on portrayals of the body in mass media and offer insight into an unstudied phenomenon in magazine journalism.

The researcher expected to find that magazine readers interpreted the photo of Miller through a variety of lenses, including through social comparison or a feminist lens, and also had different recommendations for how *Glamour* should address future similar images. The researcher expected to find that some of the types of obesity stigma Cahnman outlined more than 40 years ago would still be influential today, especially opposition to the image that positions the inclusion of diverse body sizes as a threat to reader’s health. Those health elements were evident in the comments. The researcher also expected a certain amount of derision or inferences about the model’s own morality based on her body size will be present in the comments. This proved to be a false assumption; readers did not seem to make judgment calls about the model’s morality based on her size. On the more positive side of things, the researcher anticipated that part of readers’ responses to the image will include approval, compliments or comments that indicate an increased sense of respect for the magazine for doing something that challenges the perceived norm of the thin ideal promoted by the media. This concept was found in the comments. Comparisons to self were also anticipated, as was the presence of rhetoric that conceptualizes one kind of body as natural and others as alien. If the findings had been unexpected and varied dramatically from what is described above, that would
further justify the use of the grounded theory approach. Those unexpected concepts and
categories that emerged will further add to understanding of how magazine audiences, as
well as people in general, express their opinions about body image.

This research fills a gap in the scholarship that, thus far, has mostly utilized
comments from a quantitative perspective. The subject of plus size models’ inclusion in
magazines is also lacking in scholarly research. The comments examined capture a
particular moment in time and a significant event that will allow theory building in an
area with a multitude of future research opportunities.
Chapter 4: Findings

This study sought to create a grounded theory of *Glamour* readers’ reactions to and relationship with the image of a plus size model published in the magazine. The core theme that emerged is that readers compared their body to the model’s and these comparisons resulted in either increased or decreased affinity to the magazine based on their existing perceptions of fat bodies. Readers who saw themselves, or their own bodies, reflected in the image and interpreted the framing of the body type as positive felt an increased sense of loyalty to the magazine, while readers who felt negatively about the model’s body size were critical of the editors’ choice to use it. A second dominant finding related to how readers talked about the model’s body and bodies in general, primarily that commenters, often times those who supported the magazine’s decision to use a larger model, used negative thin descriptors such as “skin and bones” and “Holocaust survivor” to describe the bodies of thin models or thin women in general (in some cases alluding to the bodies of other commenters). Finally, sentiments emerged that give greater context to the incident as an indicator of what readers want or expect. These insights speak more to the publishing industry in general and what the use of plus size models could mean for women’s magazines and editors.

For the sake of clarity in these findings, the commenters’ statements are taken at face value. For example, if a commenter indicated feeling a certain way about the image
or a change in behavior or thinking after seeing the image, this text captures it as such (e.g. “the commenter thought” as opposed to “the commenter indicated that he thought”). Moreover, the findings accord commenters the gender they associate themselves with via the comments.

Over the course of coding, some things became apparent about how readers used the comment form on the blog post and how conversations formed within. The comment field is an open call to action: users could use it to express simple statements about the image, the blog post, or the incident as a whole. Sometimes these comments went beyond the topics at hand and expanded to the larger sphere of bodies and weight in American society. Commenters who chose to could read the comments first before leaving their own, or disregard them all together. Many commenters simply left a comment stating their opinion, however, others viewed the thread differently and read and interpreted other comments before engaging in the discussion. This is where the thread becomes more dynamic, with users analyzing the opinions that have already been presented and, in some instances, addressing other commenters directly.

Some of the most substantial back-and-forth conversations involved the user tinybeauty. She first entered the conversation on August 25, 2009 (after roughly a third of the total number of comments had been left) and continued to comment, most actively through the afternoon and evening of the 25th, until leaving her last comment on August 28, 2009. She returned to the conversation multiple times to continue her comments and respond to readers who had directly mentioned her in their comments. She commented 22 times and was mentioned by other commenters, both those agreeing with her statements
and refuting them, 10 times. She identifies herself as a woman and says she’s “going on 25.” The core arguments in her first post are that as a self-identified thin woman, the thin-shaming language in the comments and the assumption that thin women are anorexic or experience disordered eating offended her. She relies on the “naturally thin” argument to make her case saying “Sadly, I can out-eat most girls my age (going on 25) and stay a natural size 0.” She continues to address many of the prominent themes of this research including comments that position larger bodies as somehow more “natural” or “normal,” the argument that aspirational imagery sells magazines, and the “anyone can do it” mindset that implies that anyone could be thin if they just put in the effort and those who aren’t thin are therefore lazy. It’s this idea that the commenters who mention her later took the most issue with, specifically this part of her comment:

Yes, you may eat healthy and exercise, and still have extra weight around your belly like that, but in the long run, that extra weight adds MAJOR health problems. Nothing is impossible to get rid of with a little hard work. It's great to feel comfortable in your own skin, and I think everyone should, but I also think we shouldn't give up on bettering ourselves and using this whole "plus size models are real women and tiny people are the devil" era as an excuse for being unhealthy.

The comments that followed call out tinybeauty for making claims about how easy it should be for overweight women to “get healthy” when she herself is a size 0. Commenters like echodawn also challenged her assumptions about size and health. When another commenter, eyes_of_caramel agrees with her, piling on an even more radical
opinion about the ability all women have to control their weight (i.e. reduce their weight) by working for it, tinybeauty seems to back track, saying that she was making generalizations about weight and health and that the model “…is a beautiful woman” and that it’s “great that she is comfortable in her own skin.” The rest of her comments in the vein of defending thin women and thin models, arguing against negative, thin-shaming language and words like “emaciated” that were used by other commenters in describing models.

This is one of the more prolonged, significant conversations between multiple commenters that took place in the thread and while it is not indicative of the conversation as a whole, it’s revealing in terms of how dynamic the conversations was at some points, going beyond reactions to the image or the incident itself, to a larger conversation about the assumptions people make about other’s health, status, and lifestyle based on their appearance, and revealing on other phenomena already identified throughout the comments, such as thing-shaming language, prompted reaction and discussion amongst other users. Tinybeauty’s comments also demonstrate how readers used their own bodies and eating habits as the point-of-comparison for making their arguments, such as her statement that she can eat what she wants and still stay thin, revealing a core issue in how those arguments are formed; not all bodies look or function the same way or respond the same way to diet and exercise. This method evaluation that reflects back on the self is explored further in the next section.
Making Sense of the Image Through Comparison to Self

Readers who encountered the image, whether through the original source (the print magazine) or online through the blog post, made sense of what they were seeing through comparisons to their own bodies. It’s worth noting that this was a voluntary action on the part of the readers. The closest thing to a directive to compare is this question Leive raises in the body of the blog post: “With all the six-packs out there, do you even know what a normal belly looks like anymore--other than the one you see in the mirror?” (Leive, 2009).

Readers recognized that the model’s body was different from their conception of the “model body” usually seen in magazines (bodies which emphasize the thin ideal) and had to grapple with how they felt about this body. One way they did this was through comparison to their own bodies. They identified similarities between the models’ stomach and how their own tummies looked, or identified with her dress size. The magazine image offered women a unique chance for comparison by giving them access to something they couldn’t see when walking down the street or socializing; they could see a basically naked, size 14 woman. Readers understand intimately what their bodies look like when they look in the mirror, but in the real world, clothing filters exposure to other body shapes. The model’s nudity opened the image up to closer inspection and greater comparison for readers. The thin ideal is a factor here too, with dominant images of mostly undressed women being more of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit model variety, bodies that typify the thin ideal, rather than larger bodies with visible fat like Miller’s. By
publishing the image, *Glamour* gave readers rare access to a point of comparison closer to the size of the average American female (a 14, according to the *New York Times*).

Beyond this basic level of comparison, readers made assumptions about how the model had developed her tummy. Although it is unclear whether Miller is a mother herself, many readers compared their own post-childbirth bodies, specifically their torsos, to that of the model. Others implied or insinuated that the model herself was a mother. This phenomenon seems to hinge on the fact that the model’s slight tummy roll is a prominent focus on the image, both because of her size and the natural shifting of weight that happens when seated. She’s bent over slightly, furthering emphasizing this part of her body and drawing attention to it. Readers zeroed in on this zone of her body and related it to childbirth. This highlights complex ideas about the phases of a woman’s body, the ways it changes over time, and the intrinsic link between femininity, beauty, and motherhood. This concept appeared in both positive comments like from user cpiekarski,: 

I love her stomach, that [sic] is the stomach of a woman who has had children!

Mine is similar and I am 5ft and 109 pounds.

And in those with more negative connotations, like this one from user IbanezRG550:

I would love to send this picture also to Hooters girls, beauty queens, cheerleaders and models so that they can prepare themselves for the nightmare that follows pregnancy.
In addition to this outlet for comparison, commenters felt that seeing the image in *Glamour* was a lens unto their own bodies; it allowed them to perceive their bodies differently. A tangentially related code emerged which is that magazines make what is acceptable; *Glamour* gave being a size 14 validity by finding space for that body in its pages. Reader roadserangel had a realization about her own body after seeing Miller’s in *Glamour*:

> It’s a picture of me (aka like me) and I never realized until now how beautiful and normal I am.

AilynMarie had a similar experience:

> Looking at this picture of Lizzie I can't help but see a TRUE mirror image of myself. Lizzie and I share nearly identical measurements. I'm 5'9, weigh about 175, and definitely have that hanging belly! And yet she's absolutely stunning.

Finally, these comparisons helped many readers feel a greater sense of being able to relate to the model, which positively influenced their opinion of the magazine because they could see themselves in its pages.

**Seeking External Sources of Approval**

In commenting on the blog post, readers were participating in the larger social conversation about the image. *Glamour*’s editor and the model were appearing on television, being written about in other news sources, and talking about the incident on their blog, meaning that the commenters on the post could have been driven from sources
other than the print magazine. Based on the comments, it’s clear that some participants were brought to the blog by seeing it on a friend’s Facebook or via email (as of March 10, 2012, the post has been “liked” on Facebook 2.8 thousand times). Commenters also talked about how they posted the photo to their own social sites. The desire to share the image is related to the image’s perceived rarity because the use of larger models in women’s magazines is so infrequent it elicited many “I was shocked” reactions; readers wanted others to see the photograph and let them know it had been published.

However, this sharing behavior could also have been motivated by something else. Female commenters talked about showing the image to their male romantic partners. They offered up these male reactions to the image as a form of proof of their body’s acceptability. This behavior seems exemplary of the idea that women’s bodies are given value by society, and in many instances, magazines, based on how attractive men find them. Those body judgments exist on a spectrum of heterosexual assumptions. It wasn’t enough for the women to find the model beautiful or be pleased or concerned that the magazine was embracing larger bodies; they had to seek out affirmation from men on her beauty or ugliness. This phenomenon has a second, more personal motivation, too. By seeking male sexual approval (does he consider the model attractive or desirable?), the women who likened their bodies to the model’s may have been seeking validation of their own bodies too. Commenter ocmswim had this to say:

I saw this photo pop up on the screen when I was at the gym… I saw in the mirror that multiple guys were looking at it. It kind-of [sic] made me smile, here I am
doing rep sets to make sure my thighs look a certain way, etc. and their [sic] all staring at her!

The line of thinking in this comment is that if the men at the commenter’s gym could appreciate Miller’s body, they could also appreciate the commenter’s body, even with the perceived flaws she was trying to correct in the gym.

Related to this idea were comments that pointed out that media images play a role in shaping male expectations of women’s bodies. The argument seems to be that if more images of larger women were part of the visual diet that men and others consumed, it could cause a shift in body size expectations of women because of the role magazines have in making what’s acceptable. This could affect both a woman’s ability to feel that her body size is validated, but also make it more socially acceptable for men to find a fleshier female body attractive. Commenter “p2k” identified with the model’s body size and offered up her husband’s reaction to the image while also arguing for a change in visual diet:

By the way, I'm disappointed to say that my husband was shocked to see this photo, in spite of the fact that this is indeed what my own body looks like. The more photos like this that appear ON THE COVER (hint) of magazines, the better chance of changing the perception of what a beautiful and normal woman's body looks like!

Magazines themselves are an external source of approval, and by publishing the image of Miller, Glamour was putting its stamp of approval on her body shape and size in much
the same way that they might inspire readers to go out and buy a new lipstick shade because “Glamour says it’s cool.” This approval was a revelation for readers who identified with Miller’s body. Many commenters explicitly stated that seeing the image in *Glamour* increased their body confidence, made them feel better about their own stomachs, or positively changed how they felt about their own body. The taboo of being a size 14 or having a tummy roll was lessened by the magazine’s approval. User mckailey said she was brought to tears upon seeing the image, “I thought, ‘She looks like me, and if they put her in the magazine I must not be too bad,’” she wrote.

The reader’s ability to compare her body shape to the model’s was heightened by the fact that she is nude in the photograph. In daily interactions with their bodies, readers can see very clearly what they look like naked. Our access to images of other nude bodies is limited to close family members, romantic partners, or pornographic and/or erotic images. In the case of the latter, the bodies in question generally are expected to adhere to certain gendered societal norms of sexual attractiveness (visible muscle tone for men and large breasts for women, for example). However, by publishing this image of an “imperfect” body, *Glamour* gave legions of men and women access to a point of comparison not typically showcased by mainstream magazines.

**The Taboo Nature of Fatness**

This study has already established how larger bodies have been stigmatized by outlining Cahnman’s three sources of stigma. However, commenters identified a separate issue that could be cause for stigma: taboo. Although they don’t use that term explicitly,
readers pointed out that the image in *Glamour* was unusual because it presents a larger-than-average model without apology or shaming, as evidenced in this comment from user mrswhite072895:

First off, she was all soft curves and wobbly. Then I saw her belly and my heart rejoiced. Not only because she had belly but she was unashamed of showing it. She wasn't posing to cover it up.

This is where the code “brazen fatness” emerged. A prevalent theme in readers’ comments was the model’s bravery. They saw publically exposing one’s perceived flaws and opening up one’s body to public criticism and appraisal as an act of courage to be applauded. Because of the shame that exists around being overweight, appearing in a magazine with a fat body was commendable. “Kuddos [sic] to Lizzi though, for being brave enough to do a semi-nude picture, and to tell the world that beauty does radiate from within,” user Xmichra wrote.

This undisguised visualization of fatness was an eye opener for many commenters who expressed surprise at the bold openness. Brazen truly felt like the right descriptor for it. This is not a “headless fatty” (Cooper, 2007) whose identity and status as a fat person is an anonymous one. Instead, it’s an image purposefully published for being emblematic of self-acceptance (the angle of the story is loving yourself, flaws included). By running this particular image with the story, *Glamour* made public and visible something that taboo and stigma say should be disguised.
Fear Mongering Behavior

The essential argument of “fear mongering” commenters, those who cried foul on *Glamour* for glamorizing what they saw as a body emblematic of a public health crisis, is that by giving a size-14 body positive attention, *Glamour* is encouraging readers to reach or maintain an unhealthy weight. This encouragement could be seen as occurring in two forms: Firstly, by making it acceptable to stop trying to lose excess weight or, by prompting readers to “let themselves go” and gain weight because fat bodies have achieved the covetable status of magazine-worthy. Three unique codes emerged that all fall under this fear mongering concept:

The code “too fat, too young” emerged to describe the idea that the editors at *Glamour* and readers who express support of the inclusion of fat bodies are posing a particularly dangerous threat to public health given the model’s age (20, which was revealed in Leive’s blog). It describes comments that specifically cite the model’s age as compounding the perceived negative aspects of using a larger model. These commenters are furthering preconceived ideas about health, weight, and size by implying that Miller should do more to take care of her body while she still can.

Commenters also took issue with the idea that *Glamour* was bowing to the average by including a body that indeed, looks more like the typical American woman than most fashion models. These commenters see Miller’s inclusion as a lowering of beauty standards that would further exacerbate weight-related health issues in this country. There’s an underlying sense that in this obesity-epidemic-fearing world,
magazines shouldn’t give tacit approval to larger bodies just because they’re becoming the norm that plays into the idea that larger women don’t have the willpower or dedication required to force their bodies into a socially acceptable shape.

Finally, commenters accused *Glamour* of normalizing obesity by giving unspoken approval to bodies that look like Miller’s. By lessening the stigma associated with larger bodies, *Glamour* was seen as risking public health.

**Critical of the Magazine**

In addition to the fear-monger critics described above who made health-based arguments against a national magazine’s acceptance of a larger body, commenters were critical of *Glamour*’s editors for their use of the image and its placement and context within the print magazine. There are three key arguments:

1) Critics who saw *Glamour*’s use of the image and the tacit approval that was associated with it as hypocritical because the magazine and Glamour.com still contain weight loss and diet messaging.

One example of this thinking is evidenced by user lulu541983’s comment:

Instead of publishing “Exactly what to eat to lose weight” perhaps Glamour should be publishing “Exactly what to eat to be healthy” because being a size 0 does not equal healthy. Until you can do that to me [sic] this article was simply a publicity stunt; a publicity stunt with a positive message, but never the less [sic] a publicity stunt.
2) Readers who felt plus size women were ghettoized to an article about body acceptance and not included in content throughout the magazine including fashion tips and editorial fashion photo stories. The general sentiment in these remarks was that *Glamour* created a false impression of their degree of body acceptance (made worse by their self-aggrandizing blog post).

Reader AMYMDAVIS specifically calls into question the lack of larger models in the magazine’s fashion spreads:

> My only problem is we are told by you this is NORMAL and yet when you use fashion models you still use the twigs. Why aren't normal women used to model the clothing featured in your magazine? We want to see what clothes will look like on us not twigs.

While OceanWindnRain wonders why models like Miller are not use on the magazine’s cover:

> Honestly – I’ve never picked up the Glamour magazine because the cover, although lovely, looks like every other cover out there – one with a beautiful, but size 2 woman. Had I seen Lizzi on the cover - I would have grabbed it for certain. Putting the picture on page 194 insinuates that there’s a little “shame” surrounding her size. The response to that picture should be proof to the contrary. Come on Glamour! You can do it!

3) Commenters expressed frustration that this was the first time *Glamour* used a plus size model (which could be an inaccurate perception) but at the very least they were critical
that this the first time they had taken a public position on body acceptance. Their exasperated rallying cry was “It’s about time!”

Reader iturner6 put it thusly:

It’s about time that our media reflect the reality of the American Person [sic] and show true beauty.

Two less prevalent criticisms are that even though using a plus-size model was a step in a positive direction for Glamour, Miller was still a model with traditional good looks and uncommon beauty. Some readers called for the inclusion of more “real women” models, people they could admire and appreciate who are not professional models. A second minor criticism was that Glamour’s use of the image was some kind of publicity stunt done to garner attention and press and not a commitment to body diversity that they intended to stand behind.

Rhetoric

In examining the words commenters used to describe their own bodies, the model’s body and bodies in general, the researcher found that the adjectives and phrases used by commenters to characterize bodies played a significant role in how those comments were perceived by or affected other participants in the conversation and provided insight into how we converse about bodies. Two core rhetoric-related themes emerged: the use of thin-shaming negative thin descriptors, and the “average” and “normal” body descriptors.
The most significant finding from this analysis of rhetoric was the prevalence of “average” and “normal” descriptors. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the comments, it became apparent that they have shades of difference. These words were frequently used to describe the model’s body, commending the magazine for featuring a body that many women could relate to. However, they carry different connotations. Normal implies that thin bodies are the opposite of normal in today’s society being thin is an abnormality. This led to some defensive comments from thin women, further discussed below. The “average” descriptor however is related to the theme that emerged in the comments that by including larger bodies in their magazine, *Glamour* was “bowing to the average” or letting the increasing body size of the American populace overly influence their decisions. There are two separate camps of thinking here: one that supports this move toward the “average” because it creates a more inclusive environment for women of all body sizes and those who believe that giving positive attention to larger bodies encourages people to accept an unhealthy weight rather than work to change their body.

The code “negative thin descriptors” was applied to phrases or words used to describe thin bodies that have strong negative connotations. Examples include: “boney stick,” “toothpick,” and “skin and bones.” These harsh descriptors reasonably prompted strong reactions from commenters who identified as thin. The core argument thin women used to defend themselves against negative thin descriptors was that they were “naturally thin.” Although the conversation in the comments at times got heated, with personal attacks and conversations taking place between commenters, the negative
descriptors and consequent rebuttals were more general in nature, speaking about large undistinguishable groups. Much of the rhetoric around bodies centered on effort and intention; the amount of work people are willing or unwilling to put toward their body goals. It’s interesting that in using the naturally thin argument, women are removing themselves from the equation, asserting that they don’t deserve to be criticized or harassed because that’s just how their bodies are “naturally.” It’s ironic because that’s the position heavier women often assert in the comments too, and yet, commenters assert that they just haven’t worked hard enough to fit the bodily mold (the “anyone can do it” frame, discussed below).

A third code emerged as a result of the thin shaming in the comments, which was that the incident as a whole and the reaction to it had caused some thin women to feel a sense of inferiority because they were rejected from the praise and support of larger bodies. There’s a sense of betrayal that after working to fit bodily standards, or having had an acceptable body their whole lives, increasing fat acceptance had left them feeling shunned.

Assumptions About Weight and Health

The conversation in the comments expanded far beyond the image in question and became a forum for public discourse around fat bodies and fat acceptance in general, the expanding waistline of the American populace and the relationship between body size and health.
The idea that body size and overall health are directly related was inherent in arguments made by commenters about the model’s health. Although the commenters didn’t claim to be medical professionals, and neither does this researcher, some readers made assumptions about the model’s health (heart-health, etc.) based solely on what they could see of her body shape and size. It was clear to most upon seeing the image that the model’s body was somewhat larger than that usually seen in women’s magazine.

However, many commenters found something else to be self-evident about Miller’s body – that she was unhealthy. Many cited her BMI (calculated by plugging her height and weight, as reported in other media outlets, into a BMI calculator, which results in a BMI of 25.1, roughly one pound away from the normal weight range for her height). Despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary, such as the Leive’s statement that Miller is an “avid softball player/belly dancer,” a statement seemingly made in anticipation of negative comments, readers made assumptions about Miller’s level of physical activity.

Critics of the model’s size, and simultaneously the female commenters on the blog who identified themselves as the same size or weight of the model, sometimes applied an “anyone can do it” frame to their logic. At its most basic, the argument is that if someone works hard enough, they can reach a healthy weight and physically attractive body size, and they should make that effort. Frequently, these commenters used themselves as examples, explaining that they too had been fat once, and that through hard work, exercise and eating right they changed their bodies for the better. Because the Glamour image and the comments surrounding it are seen as supporting the “decision” to have a larger body by making it more acceptable, these commenters likely were feeling a
little hurt: they had worked so hard to not be fat because fatness is stigmatized. By lessening that stigma, the reaction to the image decreased the value they derived from their hard work to lose weight. This frame also rules out the health and ability reasons that a person might have a larger-than-acceptable body. It puts the onus completely on the fat individual and harkens back to Festinger’s sense that fat people are seen as lazy because they don’t “control” their body and its size. It removes the emotional and physiological reasons people gain or retain weight from the equation.

The oft-presented counter to the “anyone can do it” argument was the “still fat” argument women made using their own bodies as examples. Using their own experiences with the body and weight loss, commenters countered the idea that all it takes to achieve normal weight is a healthy lifestyle (i.e. fat people fail because they’re too weak-willed to not eat junk food, or not dedicated enough to go to the gym). Their argument hinges on their assertion that they “eat right” and exercise, but that their bodies would most likely be considered “fat” by other commenters or observers. Their lived experiences in their bodies have taught them that even when they exhibit the perceived “right” behaviors of archetypically healthy individuals, their body size betrays them, refusing the adhere to expected norms.

What It Means for Magazines

An unexpected phenomenon that emerged in the comments were women who went online to say that they had previously been anti-women’s magazines for any variety of reasons, who opinions were changed for the better by Glamour’s use of the image and
their declaration of body-acceptance. Many talked about how they had stopped reading women’s magazines like *Glamour*; becoming disenfranchised with the ideas of beauty they often presented. The image in *Glamour* was noteworthy enough for these readers that they said it had made them reconsider their aversion to women’s lifestyle magazines.

Commenters also explicitly stated that they saw the press coverage and conversation that took place around the publication of the image (the “incident”) as a sign of change in the industry. This illustrates how mainstream the body acceptance movement had become in recent years.

In contrast to the above, some commenters felt that *Glamour*’s use of plus size models would be economically unsustainable. They feel that aspirational images of thin models are what sell magazines that people wouldn’t pay for a magazine that regularly used larger models. Some expressed this view by saying that they themselves buy magazines for the aspirational, beautiful model’s in the imagery, that if they wanted to see “average” looking bodies, they could just walk down the street. Others however, assumed that this view was held by society at large and that there simply are not enough people in the world open to embracing larger bodies as beautiful to support the sale of a magazine that includes or promotes them.

**Readers’ Demands**

Although this study did not quantify the opinions presented in the comments, positive reactions, which encouraged the magazine to embrace body diversity, outweighed those who were turned off by the image. These positive commenters
applauded Glamour’s actions, and used their readership and money as leverage for the magazine to keep its commitment to increased body diversity. They also called for even more kinds body diversity especially height, ability and race.

Many readers left general comments that applauded Glamour’s use of the image. They engaged in a form of positive reinforcement of the decision. Commenters also noted that by using larger models in their magazine, the publication had positively set itself apart from other women’s magazines on the market. Simply put, these readers now see Glamour as a magazine that stands for body acceptance and that has increased the publication’s value in their eyes, in comparison to other titles. Readers who applauded Glamour in this way also exhibited an interesting carrot-on-a-stick-like behavior; they dangled their readership and money in front of the magazine’s editor (the author of the post) as incentives to continue using larger models. In these comments, readers explicitly state that they will subscribe or buy more issues now that Glamour has taken this stance. There’s an underlying threat in these comments too, that readers will be waiting and watching to see if Leive follows through on her commitment to “celebrating all kinds of beauty” (Leive, 2009).

Through their applause and commendation, readers still asked more of Glamour. Demands to put Miller on the cover of the magazine are in line with some of the Readership Reward comments. It’s a “put your money where you mouth is” philosophy. By using a picture of a larger model to illustrate their story, Glamour planted the idea that they are pro-body diversity. By blogging about the reaction, they basically gave themselves a giant, public pat on the back, and asked readers to hold them to a new
standard. In the text of the blog post, Leive writes “Trust me, *Glamour’s* listening, and this only strengthens our commitment to celebrating all kinds of beauty.” Readers however, question the depth of that commitment when they propose that the magazine put like-bodies on the cover. Do they believe in body diversity enough to stake their sales and reputation it? Do they believe in their “body revolution” enough to expand upon it? User secretasian asks explicitly for a written promise “to publish at least 5 pictures of "average"-sized women in your magazine each month,” in exchange for her promise of a lifetime subscription. The magazine’s readers took the declaration of a revolution seriously and took to the comments to insist that the magazine follow through on its promises.

In addition to calls to put larger women on the cover, commenters pressed *Glamour* to expand their thinking on what body diversity means. Commenters called for more short women, women of color, and differently abled bodies to be included in the magazine. There was a clear desire for the magazine to be more representative. Finally, there were commenters who felt that magazines only show extremes of body sizes: either incredibly thin women or significantly larger women. Although their definition of what size body occupies the larger end of that scale is open to criticism (i.e. are they considering a size 14 body to be an “extreme” body size, when women above a size 16 are rarely seen in magazines?) their point seems to be that women in the middle size between a 2 or 4 and a 14 or 16 are rarely featured.

The following table summarizes the nine core code categories that emerged and provides additional comment examples.
**Figure 3: Categorized Example Comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example Comment</th>
<th>Username and Date</th>
<th>In Reference To:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comparison to Self</strong></td>
<td>I am 5'8&quot; and a size 14. I look normal and healthy, but the beauty industry would call me &quot;plus size&quot;. This is such a confidence boost, seeing a woman baring all that looks like I do.</td>
<td>tbould94 8/24/2009</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeking External Sources of Approval</strong></td>
<td>As for men looking at this, coming from very good male friends, (who are very handsome), they found Lizzi extremely sexy.</td>
<td>ccat75 8/28/2009</td>
<td>Magazine Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Taboo Nature of Fatness</strong></td>
<td>I honestly thought I was the only one with a hang to her belly. After three kids I thought it was one of those things that happened to me and I was not supposed to show it. It's just one of those things people never talk about or anything I've ever seen before.</td>
<td>jenniferlmc1975 8/23/2009</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fear Mongering Behavior Critical of the Magazine</strong></td>
<td>Obesity is the number one health problem in the U.S. This was the WRONG message to send.</td>
<td>jherz 8/19/2009</td>
<td>Bodies In General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetoric</strong></td>
<td>Teeny weeny skinny girls are not as beautiful as the media makes them out to be, they're skin and bones, when has bones ever been sexy?</td>
<td>Princezzkate97 8/21/2009</td>
<td>Magazine Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions About Weight and Health</strong></td>
<td>why cant we put someone who is a 6 instead of a 14. [sic] this magazine is saying it is good be to BIG and unhealthy, I am sure her BMI is over 25 putting her at risk for all kinds of medical conditions.</td>
<td>jbo3 8/24/2009</td>
<td>Magazine Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What It Means for Magazines</strong></td>
<td>I’m glad people are talking, maybe it’ll mean this be we a change we can expect to see in magazines from now on!</td>
<td>jamin 8/25/2009</td>
<td>Magazines at Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reader’s Demands</strong></td>
<td>If they included more models like this throughout the magazine I’d consider renewing my subscription! I canceled it last year because it just kept getting worse and worse - listen up: self-confidence at any size is IN!</td>
<td>Mrssquire 8/20/2009</td>
<td>Glamour’s Editors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was designed to create a greater understanding of how magazine readers made sense of the image of a plus size model found in *Glamour*, a national women’s magazine. The concepts of obesity stigma and Duncan’s interpretation of Foucault’s “notion of panopticism” as it relates to self-regulation of body size and the effects of media consumption on self-esteem were outlined in Chapter 2. Festinger’s theory of social comparison is a key framework in examining how the female readers related to the image by comparing what they saw in the magazine to what they see in the mirror. It says that individuals compare themselves to others in order to facilitate self-evaluation. Finally, the spiral of silence phenomenon in which public opinion is created from the opinions that people feel comfortable expressing in the public sphere without putting themselves at risk of being ostracized was discussed and will be examined in relation to the discussion that took place in the comment thread.

The previous chapter outlined the nine core concepts and numerous sub-concepts that emerged during constant comparative coding. This chapter will examine how those concepts relate to one another to provide a more robust understanding of the significance of the *Glamour* incident, what ramifications the use of plus size models might have for magazines, how readers talked about bodies and body size, and the ways in which they used social comparison to make sense of the image. Finally, this chapter will relate
concepts outlined in the previous chapter with the theories and scholarship presented in
Chapter 2.

The first research question of this study asks broadly about the themes present in
the comments. It is intentionally vague, leaving the researcher open to explore in-depth
the results of coding. The categories and codes within those categories that do not
specifically relate to the second and third research questions, regarding social comparison
theory and readers’ perceptions of the magazine respectively, will be discussed in this
section.

**Dominant Themes**

A noteworthy finding of this research was the way the taboo nature of fatness
manifested itself in how readers said they felt about the image and the meaning it had for
them. The concept of “Brazen fatness” emerged as a descriptor for comments on the stark
reality of seeing an image of a fleshier nude female body. Part of what makes the
*Glamour* incident worthy of study is the attention it garnered from readers (expressed by
the large number of comments and the flood of letters Leive says the magazine received)
and the media (evidenced by the numerous national television appearance Leive and
Miller had in 2009 and the numerous media stories about the model and the public
reactions to her body). Based on the comments about the bravery required to pose nude
while fat (regardless of the fact that as a model, Miller is paid to do so and likely takes on
only the jobs she feels comfortable with), one could assume that the reaction was so large
because of the taboo surrounding fatness. Because of that taboo, a form of obesity stigma,
the public is not regularly exposed to larger bodies, especially images paired with positive frames. Looking back at Cooper’s (2007) “headless fatty” concept, the visual trope of making fat bodies anonymous, the researcher hypothesizes that the what made *Glamour*’s use of Miller as a model so radical is not necessarily her size, but that she is presented as confidently owning her size. By naming her in the blog post, the editor made the incident about her and not her body, giving her a degree of agency in the message being communicated about having a larger body that is lacking from other media portrayals of bodies of size. This also provides a contrast to Heuer, McClure and Puhl’s (2011) finding that the majority (72 percent) of images that accompany new stories about obesity are framed in a negative, stigmatizing manner. Although the story in *Glamour* that the image accompanied was not specifically about the obesity epidemic, it is clear that how images of bodies are framed dramatically influences how readers interpret them. In Smeester, Mussweil, and Mandel’s 2010 study, women who identified with the average or plus size models in advertisement felt negatively about their bodies because they recognize the stigmas associated with corpulence. However, in the case of the image of Miller, the connotation of the image is positive (embracing one’s body confidence), allowing readers who associated their body with the model’s to feel positively.

Media’s role in communicating messages about health and body size is key to the arguments that “fear-mongering” commenters made, mainly that by giving positive attention to a body that these commenters perceive as being unhealthy, *Glamour* was encouraging people to reach or stay at an unhealthy weight. Although the core argument of many media effects studies into exposure to images that promote the thin ideal is that
they reduce women’s self-esteem, others have argued that in an attempt to have a acceptably thin body, a magazine-worthy figure, women could resort to disordered eating behaviors. Interestingly, examination of the fear-mongering comments suggests that rather than a concern that female readers will “let themselves go” and gain weight, these commenters are more concerned that by making a size 14 acceptable, *Glamour* is making it ok for larger women to stop trying to lose weight. It’s giving women an out from the hegemonic cultural discourse surrounding women and weight that says one should always be trying to achieve “perfect body” status, and that anyone is capable of reaching their desired weight. Duncan (1994) called this the “Efficacy of Initiative” frame, a discourse that implies “that all one needs to do to get healthy, lose weight, sculpt muscles, and become private commitment to a new regime.” What *Shape* magazine, Duncan’s site of study, fails to point out is that the model women are supposed to be working toward is one shaped by societal ideas of what constitutes feminine beauty. This is something still lost on some *Glamour* commenters, who rely on the argument that one should reshape their body because it’s best for their health. By making it acceptable to be a size 14, *Glamour* is going against pervasive messages in American culture that demand that women constantly monitor their weight and work toward a smaller body size, by whatever means necessary, in order to fit in with their peers or be seen as sexually attractive, adhering to the conventional feminine ideal. There is also an underlying sense in these comments that Miller is being punished for her lack of restraint, the sin of indulging rather than adherence to a Spartan lifestyle with the hopes of achieving body perfection.
The negative commenters, who openly stated that Miller and those with bodies like hers needed to lose weight, whether they framed their argument under the guise of aesthetics or health, are the “guards” in Foucault’s panopticon metaphor. They criticize, sometimes rather harshly, a body that doesn’t adhere to the thin ideal. Knowing that these “guards” are out there, waiting to critique one’s body establishes the panopticon effect in which women learn to hold themselves to certain bodily standards (equivalent to the prisoners being on their best behavior) to avoid open criticism or bullying from their peers (equivalent to the punishment or threat of punishment from the prison guards). By entering the conversation online and publically stating their distaste for larger bodies, these commenters reaffirm that there are people in society who are watching and judging, thereby establishing the idea that if one is to be protected from the scrutiny of these body guards, one must adhere to the behaviors (exercising, dieting, “eating right”) perceived to be the habits of “well behaved” women. Those who left critical comments knew fully well that they could be upsetting or offending other participants in the conversation, especially those who identified positively with the model’s body, yet proceeded to be critical, either not caring or deliberately provoking a reaction from others. It’s interesting to note that the “guards” are other women, other female readers of the magazine, and away from the online world, female peers. Duncan sees the “panoptic gaze” as enforcing patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and the incorporation of male sexual approval into negative comments reaffirms that notion. In a sense, these female critics are serving as proxy men, ensuring that other women are adhering to thin body standards for the sake of men, as in user stealth1’s comment:
After looking at this picture I often wonder "how many men" thought this picture was absolutely disgusting! I honestly can't believe that anyone would find this photo "Glamourous [sic]"! … Shame on Glamour for thinking this was sexy!

Duncan’s “panoptic gaze” is a male one; men appraising and evaluating women’s bodies in order to insure adherence to the thin ideal, reinforcing the need to be thin in order to be considered sexually attractive, both by men and by society at large. In the comment above, it becomes apparent that women have, in some cases, adopted the male gaze as well. Stealth1’s concern is that Glamour’s conceptualization of “sexy” in one that men won’t agree with. In this way, women can be both the “prisoners” (those expected to adhere to certain behaviors) and the “guards” (those enforcing the behaviors). The prisoners not only have to worry about the male gaze, but about critical women who feel it’s their place to disseminate the perceived expectations of men (“shame on Glamour for thinking this was sexy!”). Comments like these are fraught with complications; firstly, there are assumptions across the board about what men will or will not find attractive, and secondly, that sexual attractiveness is defined through a heteronormative lens.

Beliefs about the thin ideal appeared in the language used by the commenters when talking about their own bodies, the model’s bodies, and bodies in general. Terms like “real women” and “normal” popped up in descriptions of the model’s body and bodies like hers. These adjectives were applied to descriptions of larger, fleshier bodies like Miller’s. Understandably, other commenters, oftentimes those who self-indentified as thin, took issue with this assertion that all women are not “real” or “normal” and that being thin was somehow abnormal. This seems at odds with the assertion in studies like
Duncan’s (1994) that the thin ideal is the standard of feminine beauty and that larger women are the “other.” Within the *Glamour* comments, thin bodies tended to be othered while larger or “curvier” bodies were described as “normal.” While fear-mongering commenters used the threat of a nationwide obesity epidemic as an example of the danger of normalizing larger bodies, it is perhaps that same idea, the thought that more Americans are overweight and obese than in the past (approximately two-thirds of the American populace is overweight or obese according to the CDC) that has prompted these “normal,” descriptors, normal could be seen as synonymous with “representative of the majority.” As Americans’ waistlines have expanded over time, what “normal” or average looks like has changed. Magazines have continued to use waif-like models while their readers have steadily increased in size, creating some dissonance for readers. They talked about Miller being a relatable model, a sense of camaraderie and understanding that they said increased their feelings of loyalty to the magazine because they could see themselves there; it longer felt like a place that only thin women were given access to.

A second rhetorical phenomenon emerged in addition to the “normal” and “average” language used by the commenters. Dubbed “thin-shaming language,” it is typified by harshly negative descriptors used to describe thin models or thin bodies in general. This language put self-identified thin commenters on the defensive, arguing that they are “naturally thin.” This dynamic reveals underlying thinking about how body size is achieved. There was a camp of commenters who clearly felt that a fat body is a flawed body, one that should be molded and changed and shaped by force into a thin (or at least thinner) body, however, thin women felt the need to distinguish themselves
through the use of language (“naturally”) from thin models or other women who are seen as somehow being capable of achieving a certain degree of thinness by some kinds of unnatural or undesirable means, such as disordered eating, drug use (hence the phrase “heroin chic”). There’s a dichotomy evident here in that larger women are expected to work to make their body adhere to the thin ideal, the idea that anyone can do it if they try, and yet thin women position their size as something that comes “naturally” either refusing to admit or to recognize that it takes effort to maintain a certain size. The way these women describe their bodies reveals something about how women are expected to downplay the work involved in “body projects,” all the while shaming larger women for not participating adequately in the group struggle for perfection.

The language used by the commenters to describe their own bodies and the model’s body revealed their existing biases about weight and body size and a kind of double standard around what makes a body “acceptable.” Although commenters who were critical of the model’s appearance definitely had a presence in the thread, expressing their distaste for her body aesthetically and raising concerns for the health implications of featuring potentially overweight women; truly nasty descriptors or insults were rare. However, commenters in support of the use of the image casually used thin-shaming language and phrases such as “Nobody wants a bone but a dog,” from user Scout1621. There’s an underlying sense that it’s ok to be harshly critical of thin women’s bodies, but not fat women; thin-shaming language was more prominent than fat-shaming language. The researcher sees two plausible explanations for this behavior: larger women were reacting to the perceived slights they’ve experienced because of the privilege afforded to
thin women in American society by taking an incident that positions fleshier female bodies in a more positive light and using it as an opportunity to “give thin women a taste of their own medicine” in a sense. There’s also a double standard that positions fat-shaming language as politically incorrect, but doesn’t regulate thin-shaming language to the same extent.

As expected, this research found support for Maddox, Black, and Liederman’s (1968) nearly 50-year-old finding that larger bodies evoke “a uniformly negative evaluation and the imputation of socially objectionable behavior and personal characteristics” including a perception that they are “lazy” or “sloppy.” Negative comments centered around the negative health messages the image purportedly sends and/or criticism of larger bodies as un-aesthetically pleasing which begs the question: are these commenters truly concerned about Miller’s health and the health of women who identify with her body size, or do they frame their argument that way because it’s the politically correct way of shaming others into making their body’s aesthetically appropriate for mass consumption by strangers? However, the historical perception that people become overweight or obese because of some moral failure did not appear in the comments; judgments on the model’s behavior centered more on her ability to change her body if she chose to, as in the comment “A few situps [sic] wouldn’t kill her,” from user Bob4, than her outward appearance being some sign of internal depravity.

In the literature review of this study, concerns were raised about the potential for objectification of women inherent in magazine modeling; women’s bodies are used as exemplary objects, either as mannequins for modeling clothing or as a representation of
beauty existing only as part of the “art” in a magazine, not as sentient beings with meaningful personalities or ideas. Regardless of what larger societal change could come from increasing the diversity of bodies magazine readers are exposed to, there still exists an issue with presenting bodies, both male (as in Cosmopolitan’s monthly feature on “hot” guys) and female, as objects to be consumed by readers. Comments around the model’s attractiveness especially point to the model being sexually objectified by readers. While the story in print blatantly positions the image as representative of “what men want” sexually with the display copy “Once and for All: The Sexy Things Men Really Love” below the image, the text of the blog post doesn’t present the model in the context of male sexual approval, and yet, readers offered up their varied opinions on her attractiveness. It seems a nude female body cannot be removed from the hetero-dominant discourse around sexuality. Women offered their appraisals of how men might feel about Miller’s body, or directly sought out the opinions of heterosexual men.

Throughout the discussion in the comments, generalized assumptions about obesity, bodies, and weight loss became apparent. A very subtle theme emerged in the comments that offers some insight into how the readers formed their opinions of other people’s bodies. The “Childbirth Body” code encompasses comments that imply or directly assert that the model has had a child (resulting in the way her stomach looks). These readers seemed to identify more with the model because of the way their bodies had changed after pregnancy. These comments reveal something about when it is and is not seen as acceptable to have a larger body, or a body with excess fat. There’s nothing that mentions that Miller is a mother in the text of the blog post, but interestingly, it is
mentioned that she’s 20. In making sense of the tummy pooch they were seeing on Miller’s body, these readers would rather assume that she was a teenage mother than that she’s just overweight. This also reveals an underlying idea about the phases of women’s “body projects” (Brumberg, 1997), the idea that a pre-baby body seems to be about working toward the closest thing to perfection that woman can achieve. Only after giving birth do women seem to be able to work toward accepting their body, because they can appreciate that it has fulfilled its purpose of bearing children.

In making assumptions about what Miller’s body size might mean about her life, readers also passed judgment about her age. Comments in this vein were given the code “Too Fat, Too Young” and often implied that the risk associated with being overweight was greater for Miller because of her age (20) and that as a young person, she should be capable of achieving an acceptable weight. This is another way in which commenters solidified the idea that bodily expectations, and what can pass as an acceptable body, are different for different women in different stages of their life. While demographics for the commenters are unavailable, one hypothesis about ageism in the comments is that older readers might be more forgiving or more accepting of a softer body than younger readers. Interestingly, Duncan’s research addresses age in the context of the weight loss success stories presented in Shape. She found that that magazine framed a thin body as the natural way to be, regardless of the reader model’s age, or motherhood status. Conversely, younger readers (who mentioned their own age, or being the same age as Miller in their comments) wrote about finally being able to relate to a magazine model whose body for once looks like theirs. Further research into this area should consider how age, race, and
other demographic factors might change the way women interpret images of plus size models.

**Spiral of Silence**

As outlined in Chapter 2, spiral of silence theory, developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), says “…public opinion is the opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based.” In the case of online commenting, spiral of silence comes into play when the researcher considers what opinions might be missing from the data set, or opinions that might seem less pervasive, as a result of being forced out by what potential commenters saw as the dominant direction of the comments, or the perception of what would be politically correct to voice in a public online forum. One would be remiss in not including a discussion of the potential impact of spiral of silence theory in a study of public comments, however, the nature of this research and the methodology used made it more difficult than the researcher expected to ascertain the role this theory might have had in the *Glamour* comments. In this instance, more rigorous documentation of when users entered the conversation and what transpired before they left would offer more insight into the behavior other commenters engaged in that might lead participants in the conversation being wary to voice their opinion, sensing they were in the minority. However, because of the nature of online commenting, it would be impossible to tell whether a) someone read the article and didn’t comment because they recognized they held an unwelcome opinion or b) a commenter stopped posting after being pushed from the conversation by others (i.e., without interviews or some other form of tracking, there’s no fail-proof way
of knowing whether the commenter disengaged because of the spiral of silence phenomenon, or simply lost interest in or forgot to check back on the comment thread). Because the research did not analyze the comments before coding began, in order to allow categories to emerge organically, it was difficult to know before research collection began whether spiral of silence would be a documentable phenomenon or not.

The above having been said, there are a few instances in which the researcher saw the possibility of spiral of silence’s effect on the conversation. One tactic commenters used to force out negative or critical commenters was to assert that those who are critical of Miller’s body or who passed judgments on other commenter’s health or appearance were doing because they are insecure about their own bodies and were trying to make themselves feel better by making other feel worse. The threat of that assertion might have dissuaded some commenters from adding to the discussion if they felt they might be personally attacked.

Another way commenters were pushed from the conversation by other users was through disassembly of negative comments or arguments, picking apart the pieces of the comment and trying to discredit the commenter. Critical commenters who made health-based arguments against the use the plus size models frequently had their comments picked apart by others who made counter arguments. The core argument coded in this context were those who contend that health-based critical arguments are unfounded because it’s impossible to know the model’s health status just by looking at her; body size is not the sole determinant of health. Because of these “attacks” on certain veins of commenting, people who shared the same opinion might have been dissuaded from
participating in the conversation, skewing the overall message in a more positive direction.

Although is it impossible to say for certain, the researcher believes that spiral of silence will have played some role in the overall perception of the comments as positive, i.e. that the general reader response was that *Glamour* and like magazines should embrace the use of larger models. The text of the blog post itself positions the outpouring of reader response as positive. Readers with qualms about viewing pictures of larger women or purchasing magazines that purport to embrace body size diversity would know from the get go, before even considering leaving a comment, that they are going against the established position of the magazine and the post. This makes the harshly negative comments in the thread, especially those of a more personal nature that decry the model and people with bodies like hers as lazy, disgusting, or worse, the cause of someone else’s unhealthy behavior (the “Promoting an Unhealthy Weight” code), even more noteworthy. These commenters knew that they were going against the predominant opinion, yet still felt it necessary to speak up, emphasizing just how strongly they felt about either the potential dangers of normalizing obesity, or simply how fiercely they found the model’s body unappealing.

**Social Comparison Theory**

Research question number two examines how Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison manifested in how readers related to the image. This was studied through
examination of comments regarding the direct comparisons commenters made between their own bodies and others bodies (such as other magazine models, and Miller’s body). Readers interacted with the image of the model’s body in much the same way they might interact with others under Festinger’s frame, that is, how the social environment created by the publication and public discussion of the photo allowed readers to compare their own bodies to the model’s.

As discussed above, the model’s body was given value via its acceptance and promotion by a highly regarded magazine. By comparing their own bodies, either its physical appearance (a tummy roll) or stats (size, weight, height, and/or BMI) readers were trying to answer whether a) their body could have earned a spot in a magazine; b) their body was the same, larger, or smaller than the body pictured, which was openly being called “disgusting” by some commenters; or c) their body was attractive in the way they perceived the model’s to be. It is possible that other motives for comparison exist.

By reading visual cues in her body language in the image, commenters made assumptions about Miller’s degree of confidence in her body, many pointing specifically to her radiant, relaxed-seeming smile. In some ways that attitude seems infectious; it transferred to the women who could see their own bodies in Millers, thereby making it easier for them to feel somewhat more confident in the shape and size too. The prominence of this “Smile Factor” effect in the comments makes clearer an important point about the use of larger models in magazine media; readers will interpret the image based on a variety of visual cues contained in the image (like body language or clothing) and around the image (like display text) and all of the facets combine to set the tone for
how readers will feel about the image. Women who related to Miller’s body felt positively about their own. Had the model looked dejected or ashamed, it’s likely that the women who found her body relatable could have felt the same way. If by increasing the body diversity of the models in their pages, magazines hope to positively impact the self-esteem of their body diverse audience, the frames applied to those images must be considered carefully.

Magazine Audiences

The third research question of this study asks: How did the inclusion of the photo change readers’ perceptions of the magazine (as illustrated by their comments)? Interestingly, many commenters talked about their existing relationship with women’s magazines and how their perceptions of *Glamour* (and its position among other magazines) was shifted by the editors’ embrace of a larger model. Some commenters explicitly stated that they once read women’s magazines but had since been turned off of them because they no longer felt relevant to their lives, in part because of the images of bodies contained within. This confirms Thorton and Maurice’s (1997) finding that the decreased self-esteem some women experience after exposure to images promoting the thin-ideal would lead them to consume the depressing media less often. Commenters talked about the model being relatable, and representative of the majority of women. Seeing the image in *Glamour* shifted their perception of the magazine; they could see themselves in its pages, thereby increasing the publication’s relevance to their lives. Although the comments were not quantified, there seemed to be more women who felt positively about the magazine because of its use of the image than women who were
turned off from it. Spiral of silence could have been a key factor in why more women who felt negatively about the use of the larger model did not appear more in the comments; given the general sentiments of the blog post and the overwhelmingly positive comments on the post, it could be seen as politically incorrect to express distaste of the image or the models’ body.

Readers also talked about how *Glamour* had distinguished itself from other like-magazines by breaking from the norm and using a larger model. This could have business benefits for the magazine if supporters buy it over other titles because of the perception of the title as body positive. It’s interesting to note though, that the use of plus-size models seems somewhat more common in avant-garde, high fashion magazines such as *V Magazine* and *W Magazine*, both of which have used plus size models in fashion editorials in recent years. The readers of these magazines are potentially very different than *Glamour*’s; *V* for example has a much larger male readership. It’s possible that the image was so startling for *Glamour* readers because they are not consuming some of the other media that have used larger models in the past, thereby making *Glamour* seem unique in its competitive set.

Another key factor here is the degree of agency the magazine’s editors have in choosing to use larger models. Readers called for larger models on the cover and in clothing spreads. While the editors ultimately have the decision making power to choose models for these sections of the magazine, there exist a variety of factors that could prevent them from championing a more body diverse message. First, and maybe most significantly, are the opinions of advertisers. Ultimately, the magazine is a money-
making venture and satisfied advertisers pay the bills. If the magazine found that subscriptions had increased from readers who wanted to see larger models, this could be seen as a benefit for the publication’s advertisers (more eyes on their products) and the magazine’s sales staff (a larger circulation being a selling point), however, it’s also possible that in altering its course from mainstream beauty messages the magazine could alienate new or existing advertiser. Secondly, it’s unlikely that the editors would ever take much risk with their cover image. Celebrities sell and veering from a formula that works would be an economic risk for the magazine. One way the magazine could incorporate body diversity on its cover (which almost always features a female celebrity) would be an open-mindedness about choosing what celebrities to feature; highlighting women whose bodies don’t adhere to traditional ideas of feminine beauty or the thin-ideal. However, these cover decision should still be based in the context of what a usual cover model would be chosen for (a new movie, album, or life change) rather than being chosen solely as embodiments of certain physical attributes.

Finally, editors are hindered by the availability of designer clothing in sizes above a women’s 12 or 14 and the willingness of designers to have larger women photographed in their clothing. *Glamour* acknowledged these restrictions in the print article that followed “The Woman on Pg. 194” blog post. The author, Field, writes:

Let’s say you fit the most popular American dress size, a 14, and you want to wear high-end designer fashion. Good luck to you, because most designer fashion labels don’t make a size 14 (they stop at 10 or 12). That an aesthetic decision, not a business move, says Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst for the market
research firm NPD. ‘We know that larger-size women will pay almost anything for good-quality clothes that fit, and luxury brands could benefit greatly from serving that need,’ he says. ‘But there remains a deep stigma against going plus-size in the high-end fashion market. Find a brand that’s willing to bet its image and licensing revenue by doing this, and you will find a progressive company.

Editors are considering all of these factors, and the possible monetary repercussions, when making decisions about the kinds of bodies to feature in their pages, decreasing their ability to make decision based solely on their own view of certain kinds of bodies, therefore removing some degree of their agency as decision-makers and agenda-setters.

Although some commenters did express the opinion that magazines should only include images of thin bodies because people buy them to see beautiful women, not average-sized bodies that they could see walking down the street (the “aspirational images sell” code), other readers used their promise of readership as a motivator for the magazine to keep using average-sized or plus-sized models. Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found that advertisements using thin and average-sized models were equally effective. The researcher hypothesized that the same might prove to be true about readers’ allegiance to a magazine. In the case of the advertisements Halliwell and Dittmar studied, the efficacy related to the ads ability to make people want to buy a product. In the case of *Glamour*, the product is the magazine itself and whether the content, images included, contained within is enough to make readers want to subscribe or pick it up on newsstands every month. Despite their fervent promises to subscribe for life, wielded like threats intended to hold Leive to her word, *Glamour*’s audited circulation, as reported by the
Audit Bureau of Circulations decreased every month after the September issue in which the picture of Miller appeared. While it’s impossible to attribute that decrease to a single factor, it is a fairly steady decrease compared to the rest of 2009, which saw circulation bounce up and down from month to month, reaching a peak of 2.7 million in August, the month the September issue appeared on newsstands.

Ultimately, commenters who felt passionately enough about the image to comment on the blog post and pledge their allegiance to the magazine might have been in the minority. Despite the fact that the number of comments on the blog post indicates a respectable level of engagement, it was not as much of a “revolution” and Leive might have hoped, at least not one that had real business ramifications. There was no marked spike in sales around or after the publication of the image, despite the commenters who claimed to have subscribed as a result of the image. Future studies into the potential business benefits or risks of using larger models could compare circulation numbers across multiple titles before and after the publication of images of larger models, or be conducted via surveys of readers immediately after the publication of an image in order to gauge whether commenters who view the image intend to subscribe, and a follow-up into whether they actually do.

The commenters were clear in outlining the things they would like to see more of in Glamour and by extension, magazines like Glamour. They called for varying kinds of bodily diversity, including age, race, and ability. An interesting phenomenon observed in these comments were demands for more mid-sized bodies, or put alternatively, accusations that magazines only show extremes of body size, either unusually thin or
large women. This is valid point not often discussed in media stories about the magazine industry and plus-size models. In much the same way that commenters took issue with “normal” and “real” descriptors for larger models, the invisibility of in-between sized women creates an assumption that magazines, and therefore their readers, should only appreciate waif-like or zaftig beauties. Commenters also bemoaned the fact that, in this particular instance, the use of the plus size model was relegated to a story about body confidence and not incorporated in images throughout the magazine, such as in fashion spreads or street-style photography. The lack of larger models used to demonstrate how new fashion would look on differently sized bodies was given particular attention by female commenters who felt that fashions were not shown on bodies they felt were similar to their own, making styling advice and the like given by the magazine less relevant to their lives and bodies.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through the use of the constant comparative method, this study examined reader reactions to an image of a plus size model in *Glamour* magazine. The codes, concepts and categories that emerged fall within four core areas: the rhetoric used to describe bodies in the social sphere, the social comparison processes readers engaged in while making sense of the image, the assumptions about weight and health expressed in the comments, and the expectations and desires audiences have for *Glamour* and women’s magazines like it.

This method allowed the researcher to reach organic conclusions about the impact of the image and the ways readers interpreted it. Coding was done by hand on a printed version of the data, notes in the margin led to larger theoretical memos. As the core set of codes emerged, they were sorted and formed into larger categories as coding continued. Corbin and Strauss explain that coding can be stopped when the researcher feels they have reached “theoretical saturation,” the point at which the researcher can tell that the next incident does not reveal anything new that has not already been documented. For this research, that “saturation” point was reached after analysis of approximately a thousand comments, meaning that the newest comments were left untouched and the bulk of research centered on the hundreds and hundreds of comments left in the first few months after the publication of the image and the blog post (a very large portion of the overall
number of comments were left in the first month, while comments left after August 2009 are a much smaller percentage of the total).

This study found that magazine models could function in much the same way that one’s peers do in terms of social comparison; readers drew comparison between their own bodies and the model’s in order to assign some value to their own body. The value-assignment nature of this behavior was amplified by readers’ feelings that magazines make what’s acceptable; by giving their approval to the body of plus size model, Glamour gave readers a new way of seeing their similarly “flawed” bodies as deserving of recognition too. This theoretical finding about the role of social comparison has practical repercussions too. Magazine editors should be aware that their work exists in this pseudo-social environment and standards about bodies, health, wealth, and more exist as facets of the magazine’s content and general stance, but also as potential real world points of comparison that are open to comparison by readers. All of the standards set by magazines, not just bodily ones, could lead to readers making judgment values about their own worth, health, and more through social comparison behaviors.

This study also found that in creating an environment that was more accepting of fat bodies, there were potentially unexpected repercussions for thin women. Commenters who self-identified as thin confessed to feeling inferior because of the positive attention being given to larger bodies and the thin-shaming language used by other commenters. While encouraging fat acceptance, commenters used language that in turn made thin feel women feel ostracized or criticized, such as the labeling of average-sized women as “normal,” implying that thin women are abnormal in some way. Finally, the key finding
related to magazines sales was that readers expected the magazine to follow through on its promise to represent diverse bodies in its pages and used their subscriptions and newsstand purchases as leverage.

The idea that a magazine image could make readers see their own bodies differently is a powerful one. In a culture where traditionally beautiful, thin models are used in print advertisements and fashion spreads, not to mention the prevalence of imagery featuring thin and toned actresses, one image was enough to change the way these women felt about their own bodies. It shifted the way they saw their own tummy rolls because they saw the model as beautiful and could recognize that in themselves. Readers called for an increase in the kinds of diversity represented in *Glamour*. They wanted to see short women, women of color, differently abled, non-traditionally attractive women, women who reflected the magazine’s diverse audience. One can logically assume that if the were to deem some of these under-represented groups beautiful too, similar boosts in self-esteem would be seen in people who identified with those models. Commenters identified that the issue with calling some women “normal” or “real” because it implies that some women aren’t those things. A more encompassing descriptor would be “relatable” or even “representative,” *Glamour*’s readers want to feel like they could be part of the glamour-ideal.

As discussed above, the language used in the comments revealed underlying prejudices and biases the female commenters had toward others’ bodies. The words many commenters choose to describe thin models and other thin women stung with the smack of anger, hurled like insults. It’s an interesting phenomenon to take note of us as more
media outlets are writing about body positivity and fat acceptance movements; all bodies are inherently “good,” so the language and tone of journalistic pieces about them should be sure not to position one as preferred over the other.

Many readers clearly want to see more body diversity in *Glamour*, but they expect the magazine to embrace the message a little more heartily than one small image on one page of one issue. Calls to put Miller or models like her on the cover were numerous, as were requests for other kinds of bodily diversity. Still, there remains a small section of the audience that wants to see images of thin, traditionally beautiful models in magazine pages because that is the need magazines gratify for them; aspirational beauty that transcends the ability to relate to the model that others embraced.

One goal of this research was to provide some concrete advice that could be put into practice by magazine editors making decisions about the kinds of bodies represented in their publication. *Glamour* did follow through on Leive’s promise that the magazine was “listening” and featured seven (also nude) plus-size models, including Miller, in its November 2009 issue, but whether that commitment to body diversity continued is unclear. Given the vehemence with which commenters demanded change, to not follow through would be to potentially alienate a sector of the publication’s audience when they were feeling their most loyal. It seems *Glamour* has continued to support a body positive message in the years since they first published the photo of Miller. In the March 2012 issue and on the magazine’s website, Leive made a public declaration on the magazine’s stance on digitally altering models’ body size:
You told us you don’t want little things like freckles and scars removed, and we agree; those are the kinds of details that make each woman on the planet unique and beautiful. And while our policy has always been not to alter a woman’s body shape, we’ll also be asking photographers we hire not to manipulate body size in the photos we commission, even if a celebrity or model requests a digital diet (alas, it happens) (Leive, 2012).

However, the editors must strike a balance between keeping their promise and satisfying the readers who want more body diversity and not alienating readers who buy the magazine because of the aspirational body imagery.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of this study include the time period of the post because, as almost three years have already passed since its creation, the social climate that surrounds images of plus size could have changes since the post. However, the overall media attention this particular incident received makes this post an important site of study.

Considering that this research looks solely at the audience’s documented reactions, one limitation is that it does not take into account how the editors reached the decision to publish the image, or the public statements they made as a result of reader reactions. Future research could involve interviewing, surveying or conducting focus groups with commenters or other readers who are shown the image in order to allow the researcher more flexibility to explore motivations. A study of this nature should be set up in such a way as to collect reactions immediately after the publication of an image, collected either through focus groups or interviews, in order to get the most authentic information on the
current social climate. Furthermore, similar methods could be used to examine motivations of the journalists who commissioned the image and chose to publish it, as well as the ramifications the inclusion of diverse body sizes could have in the magazine industry. Also, this research does not address certain aspects of the photo itself; for example, the fact the model is nude. Further research into how corpulent bodies in magazines are dressed or not dressed and how they are packaged by the magazine (i.e. are plus size models only included in special issues? Are they shown in contrast to thin models?) would be a significant addition to the scholarship. Interview or focus group research with editors or stylist into the motivations for featuring undressed plus-size models could shed some light onto the question of whether the lack of designer clothing in larger sizes limits a magazine’s ability to use larger models. Future studies that analyze the gaze in the image would also be interesting, especially when considering Miller’s slight turn away from the camera and gaze into the distance.

Given that *Glamour* made a public promise to use models of all shapes and sizes, a study that looks at the use of larger models over an extended period of time would complement this study. This research could also include a more in-depth analysis of the correlation between the magazine sales and subscriptions and the use of plus size models. This kind of cross-title research could confirm or deny Bellafante’s assertion that the publication of Miller’s image in *Glamour* constituted a “shift” in the way larger women are regarded by beauty-defining industries such as magazines and fashion houses.

This research provides some insight into how magazine readers reacted to the image of plus size model, and the ramifications the use of the image might have for the
publication as a business. It also examines the ways in which women related to the model on the magazine, finding that the positive framing of the image led these readers to feel more positively about their own body. The power the image had was that it allowed readers to step back from their bodies for a moment, removed from their preconceived ideas about their size, and see a size 14 woman how the magazine’s editors had seen her, as smiling and relaxed in her own skin. Once they started to draw comparisons between themselves and the model, relating their own tummy rolls or stretch marks to hers, they could appreciate the beauty in their own forms as well.

This study also uncovered a potentially harmful side affect of conversations around body diversity and fat acceptance: the potential for ostracizing thin women through language that implies that being thin is “abnormal” or has other negative connotations. This nuance in how bodies are described by others offers some insight into the prejudices and biases that can develop over the lived experience in a certain body. Some of the most negative thin-shaming language came from commenters who identified with the model’s size; it can be inferred that there is some kind of unspoken battle between women who cut each other down based on body size, making it all the more important for body diverse messaging to make it clear that all bodies have value, and that the use of larger models should not be interpreted as an affront to thin women, but instead as an effort toward increased representation in media images.
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Audit Bureau of Circulations (2012) Paid and Verified Circulation of *Glamour* magazine


