

PROFESSIONAL PROJECT ANALYSIS

Last summer, I completed my professional project at Rodale.com, the health-editorial website of Rodale, Inc., which is located at the company's headquarters in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. Rodale.com is branded with the phrase "Where health meets life," and its primary mission is to educate readers about growing environmental and health concerns, in addition to encouraging them to implement healthy practices and lifestyle changes. As an added bonus of working at Rodale headquarters, I was also given the opportunity to rewrite several of my articles for *Prevention* magazine's online platform. According to its media kit's mission statement, *Prevention* prides itself on being a publication that "inspires, challenges and leads readers to passionately embrace a healthier life, from nutrition to food, medicine to mood, exercise to the environment." *Prevention's* purpose is to use its health, fitness and nutrition content as means to inspire and encourage readers' self-confidence.

While working at Rodale, Inc., I aimed to study and understand the meaning behind cover images and sell lines, particularly in the field of women's fitness magazines. My experience at *Rodale.com* and *Prevention* magazine were crucial tools in helping me explore how editors use the publication's content, tone, language and word choice to capture readers' attention and relay a specific message. Having a better understanding of these writing tactics aided my research of three women's fitness magazines: *Fitness*, *Shape* and *Women's Health*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Terms

Before reading this literature review, it is imperative to define several key terms that are crucial elements in understanding this research component. These terms are: *language, interpretation* and *body dissatisfaction*.

Language can be viewed as a simple concept but has various elements that are often overlooked. As defined by Eskes, Duncan and Miller (1998), “Language means both: ideas found within language itself and specific words and phrases used to communicate these ideas ... dominant ideas about the social world are found in language” (p. 323). Editors use text and images to communicate messages to readers, but language extends beyond syntax — accompanying images are also vital fundamentals of language. Although readers might consider images to be dissimilar from written communication, “the visual is often just as loaded with ideology about health and beauty as written discourse and can be read as text” (Eskes et al., 1998, p. 323). Words and images work together to formulate languages that relay magazines editors’ messages.

Eskes et al., (1998) defines interpretation as “decoding messages located in features of the text” (p. 324). In this research, interpretation is essential in exploring how readers understand and decipher the messages found in women’s fitness magazines after viewing cover sell lines and images. Interpretation is the reader’s ultimate take-away message and the magazine’s lasting impression.

Body dissatisfaction is explained as “negative appearance evaluation” (Sinton, Birch 2006, p. 165) and closely relates to psychological well-being. When readers experience body dissatisfaction, their mental states are negatively affected, which causes them to develop poor self-esteem.

Knowledge of these key terms will help with understanding this research component and provide clarity on the following subject matter.

Fitness Journalism

The women’s fitness magazine industry originated in the early 1980s, with the creation of *Self* in 1979 and *Shape* in 1981, which were the first publications to heavily promote women’s fitness and health content. Fitness journalism aids readers in self-improvement and is service-driven. However, in regard to women’s fitness magazines, instead of stressing the importance of overall health and well-being, this magazine genre offers suggestions and practices that place large focus on enhancing readers’ appearances — not necessarily achieving the best fitness level. Duncan (1994) found that women’s magazines encourage readers to take part in a “frantic pursuit of bodily perfection” (p. 49). In correlation with body-focused sell lines, cover images encourage women to alter their bodies. “In the early 1990s, women’s fitness magazines emphasized the importance of positive self-esteem. Confidence and positive self-esteem were important attributes for an attractive, fit women” (Markula, 2001, p. 159). The literature revealed that the first women’s fitness magazines showcased accurate depictions of fitness, health and self-esteem.

Editors send messages to readers that allude to the idea that confidence is found through body shape and size. Although fitness magazines' editors claim to send inspirational messages by encouraging readers to become their best versions and develop healthy lifestyles, various publications have diverted their textual attention to emphasize slimness rather than physical fitness. "These magazines unmistakably construct a woman's worth based on her looks" (Markula, 2001, p. 166). Editors of women's fitness magazines are more concerned with size and weight instead of actual fitness level. These publications relay messages that do not always suggest ideal health implications; thus the content found in women's fitness magazines does not always offer advice in improving athleticism or getting in shape. This literature review will analyze different facets of fitness journalism's messages and vocabulary, and focus on how featured cover content can relay body-conscious messages.

The Beauty Emphasis

According to Fouts and Burggraf (1999), female obsession with beauty is instilled early in life because "the vast majority (86%) of appearance enhancement" (p. 473) is targeted to young viewers and "suggests a trend toward an increasingly thinner stereotype of the female body" (p. 474). Regardless of how much advice and suggestions are featured within the interior of fitness magazines, outer covers show an undeniable emphasis on women's external appearances, which is communicated through sell lines, headlines and photographs. By reading body-focused text, readers are exposed early on to "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most

important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003, p. 711). Rather than framing fitness and health as something women should strive for to satisfy individual happiness, confidence and self-gratification, fitness magazines use language that subtly and blatantly alludes to an obsession with one’s looks. These types of publications imply that “body image is malleable and can be influenced by observing ideal body shapes” (Fouts and Burggraf, 1999, p. 474). The words, phrasing and images on fitness magazines catch readers’ attention, persuade them to buy the publication and falsely promise that readers can look similar to the models featured on the cover. “Messages found in magazines support and even encourage the perception that female happiness is tied to physical traits, with ultra-thinness being the hallmark of beauty” (Sauer, Robels-Pina, 2003, p. 4). Magazine editors are suggesting that in order to be happy and healthy, readers must correct their body imperfections.

Women’s fitness publications primarily use language that appeals to readers’ cognitive feelings and behaviors, and Duncan (1994) proposed the idea that a magazine’s definition of fitness is determined by factors such as thinness, external beauty and weight — not cardiovascular level, physical activity or strength. Instead, fitness magazines are “functioning to ensure women’s compliance to a public and monolithic feminine body standard of slenderness and beauty” (Duncan, 1994, p. 52). Thus, women continue to receive advice on how to strive for an unattainable body, rather than embracing their own natural physique and becoming healthier individuals. In regard to fitness and appearance, “areas of body work provide women with ‘socially approved vocabularies’ that explain

their failure to accomplish ideal beauty and thus serve to neutralize the flawed identity that an imperfect body implies in Western society” (Gimlin, 2002, p. 15). Fitness magazines’ covers repeatedly provide women with an abundance of body-slimming or weight-loss advice, so readers are constantly told they are flawed and should correct their imperfections.

The Importance of Size and Weight

As a direct result of societal pressures, women’s cravings for thinness have escalated into a cultural phenomenon that is largely fueled by fitness magazines. Readers see “portrayals of thinness as a desirable trait” (Harrison, 2000, p. 121) and become accustomed to regularly reading about unattainable body images, which makes them feel inclined to lose weight so they can “produce and maintain a healthy body, which is defined primarily in terms of its appearance” (Gimlin, 2002, p. 213). Fitness magazines imply that if readers reach a certain weight and size, they have met the standards of being fit, beautiful and successful. Additionally, women’s fitness magazines “seem to focus on improving one’s life by changing one’s appearance, especially by losing weight” (Malkin et al., 1999, p. 654).

Women refer to fitness publications for advice. When readers are exposed to rhetoric that is primarily geared toward encouraging women to strive for a specific body image that might not be within reach, women’s focuses shift from personal accomplishment and physical ability to concerns with image. To further emphasize fitness magazines’ hints at beauty, verbal encouragement and reference to body size

“seems to indicate that the thin woman has accomplished certain goals, attained a certain social standing, and has rid herself of other life problems” (Williams, 2007, p. 103).

Thus, it is through fitness magazines’ language that female readers learn how to define femininity and fitness by shape and weight instead of cardiovascular stamina or athletic merit. Fitness magazines also reiterate the notion that women should have a will to health and constant vigilance to being fit. Language and word choice imply that women are shameful or morally wrong if they do not adhere to certain body standards. “It is implied through both images and text that being thin means being happier, sexier and more lovable” (Malkin et. al, 1999, p. 654). When fitness magazines pair this type of text alongside specific images, readers compare themselves and strive for preposterous fitness standards, which can ultimately lead to body dissatisfaction.

The Use of Display Type

When Eskes et al., (1998) analyzed fitness magazines from 1995, the researchers deduced that display text was related to femininity and empowerment because it was used to “construct and maintain an image of the ideal female body (e.g. slender, muscular and curvy) while using words, phrases and ideas that urge women to pursue this ideal to empower themselves” (p. 319). Fitness magazines’ editors use words to persuade consumers to read the publications and transform their figures to look like the featured cover models. Duncan (1994) found that “editorial comments invite the reader to take note of these inspiring examples of personal initiative. Personal choice and commitment are presented as the keys to a perfect body, which is within the reach of every individual”

(p. 53). These publications convey the idea that in order to be fit, one must be beautiful and thin. Eskes et. al, (1998) describes:

The discourse of feminism, embedded in words such as strong, choice and empowerment, and other words that denote have been co-opted and used as a device to convince women of the necessity of bodywork, all while citing the future gains in health, and more important, beauty. (p. 341).

Textual and visual components influence readers to be more concerned with attractiveness than health, which heightens women's feelings to alter their bodies. "The text suggests that so long as one wants this private conversion experience, one can have it. What the text fails to point out is the body shape being advocated is cut from a single, public mold. It is a slender, toned fashion model shape free of flab and cellulite, with only minute variations allowed" (Duncan, 1994, p. 53). Cover sell lines imply that it is easy to mirror a specific image, so women should work to transform their bodies to match a featured look. Women's fitness magazines encourage readers to always be aware of their bodies, when "the reality is that most magazines airbrush photos and use expensive computer technology to correct blemishes and hide figure flaws" (Derenne, Beresin, 2006, p 257). Language within fitness magazines indirectly implies that if females are not constantly maintaining a hegemonic body size and mirroring specific images, they are less beautiful or less healthy than those who successfully fulfill said body standards.

The Impact of Cover Sell Lines and Images

Previous research has focused on exploring body image and how readers perceive themselves after consuming fitness publications and appearance messages, namely from the magazines' covers. Fitness magazines' covers appeal to readers through a specific beauty ideal, and "for the majority of women, this ideal is impossible to attain and may lead to feelings of inadequacy" (Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler, 1999, p. 647). These messages imply that fitness is related to beauty and in order to be beautiful, you must adhere to a picture-perfect image. When looking at women's fitness magazines, research has also shown that covers are arguably one of the most vital publication elements because "often it is the cover that initially attracts the reader to the magazine. Titles, catch phrases, and pictures displayed on magazine covers are usually all that the reader has time to look at in a store" (Malkin et al., 1999, p. 649). Cover elements are largely influential because they are used as attention-grabbing sales tools —sell lines and images carry great clout. The aforementioned study also found that "an examination of body types displayed on magazine covers revealed that 94% of the covers of women's magazines showed a thin female model or celebrity in excellent shape" and that women's magazines were "likely to contain messages about diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery to change body size" (Malkin et al., 1999, p. 651). This type of advice encourages readers to alter their bodies in order to be accepted.

Conclusion

Readers consume women's fitness magazines that frequently use the words "weight," "fat" or "diet,"— language that implies that instead of strength, cardio level, physical shape or stamina, external qualities are primary indicators of fitness level. Likewise, the images that featured are on these publications' covers do not necessarily portray an ideal health level; in some instances, these body parameters are not attainable because the images have been digitally manipulated. Editors of these fitness publications claim the magazines provide beneficial advice, but display text skews the magazine's definition of healthy and allows readers to believe appearance is a measure of fitness. Furthermore, cover images have transformed since fitness magazines' surge in the 1980s. Fitness publications have diverted readers' attention away from being physically fit and healthy for individual fulfillment. Instead, readers now focus on maintaining a certain size and shape so their bodies are deemed presentable. Rather than using language and providing content that is applicable to a variety of readers, fitness magazines' editors send messages that imply readers should be follow the same standards and obtain identical physiques. Additionally, readers become accustomed to believe fitness is dictated by looks — the covers of fitness magazines depict these concepts as a unified idea, and women are told to view fitness as a measure of beauty.

Fitness magazines' covers remind women to focus on enhancing their looks and "links feeling good to looking good so that real health issues are subordinated to beauty issues," (Duncan, p. 51), which does not encourage a realistic or accurate definition of physical fitness. When readers are exposed to dialect and images that continually

reference size and shape as a measure of fitness, consumers fixate on external appearance instead of maintaining a healthy lifestyle because “the discourse of shame and confession fuels both of these mechanisms [initiative and commitment] by deepening motivation and imparting a sense of moral urgency” (Duncan, p. 51). Previous research shows that in regard to health and fitness, magazines’ specific text and images urge women to focus on fulfilling a specific body standard. This research project will seek to further understand the meaning behind fitness magazines’ cover sell lines, in addition to analyzing the word choice and images that deliver editors’ messages to readers.

THEORY

Theories form the basis and groundwork for research. In *Doing Qualitative Research* (2009), David Silverman claims, “without a theory there is nothing to research” and “theory provides both a framework for critically understanding phenomena and a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized into what is known” (p. 110). My research of women’s fitness magazines will be driven by the framing theory as a way to explore how readers interpret text and images, in addition to connecting magazines’ messages with social responsibility and reality. Framing is the practice of bringing forth particular viewpoints to understand what is emphasized in a publication’s message. “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 1997, p. 11). This research will explore how magazines’ framing portrays a specific message to readers.

The concept of framing is attributed to Erving Goffman, who declared that a frame is “defined by its use” (Silverman, p. 29), and is largely dependent on the engaged participants. In regard to women’s fitness magazines, it is crucial to use the framing theory because it plays a key role in how a magazine’s language and overall presentation translates to readers. For this research, framing helps narrow the focus to analyze the messages magazines’ editors are sending to women.

In a recent study by Aubrey (2010), framing was used to document how fitness magazines frame health advice, and the study was focused specifically on three

publications: *Shape*, *Self* and *Fitness*. Aubrey's research was concentrated on "investigating whether exposure to appearance frames (i.e., do something in order to look better) affected women's body-related self-perceptions compared to health frames" (p. 50). By using the framing theory, Aubrey's research shed light on how, depending on a publication's frame and language, "one might expect that messages in health magazines would be more focused on health and well-being and less on familiar themes of attractiveness and sexiness" (p. 50). Framing created a guide and point of reference, and Aubrey was able to evaluate messages derived from text and images focused explicitly on body and external image.

My research uses the framing theory as a means to determine editors' motivation behind using specific language and photos on the covers of their respective fitness magazines. It was important to use framing to understand the thought process behind text interpretation, because "media frames can have an influence on thoughts and actions of audience members" (Aubrey, 2010, p. 51). It was also vital to examine headlines because that particular language and images set the tone for the entire magazine, and also communicated the magazine's goal and purpose. This theory was helpful in analyzing appearance frames in fitness magazines and allowed to me to see that magazines often fixate on and portray slimness and additional body traits as a measure of fitness.

METHODOLOGY

Rodale, Inc. publishes *Women's Health*, the world's second-best selling women's fitness magazine that has a total circulation of 1,616,737 and a rate base of 1,500,000, as reported in ABC Publishing's June 2012 statement. My research focused on exploring the evolution of *Women's Health's* covers alongside the two other leading women's publications (*Shape* and *Fitness*) to see how editors formulate their language for sell lines and cover images. Because women's health and fitness magazines have such a prevailing presence in the journalism industry, I chose to delve further into this niche and analyze the text and images used by these publications. To execute my research, I conducted a qualitative content analysis that focused on one question: What messages do editors send through cover images and sell lines?

When devising my research strategy, I chose to compare each magazine's issues from the 2007 and 2011 calendar years. I selected these specific time periods because although *Women's Health* officially entered the market in 2005, the publication was bimonthly until 2007 when it became an almost-monthly magazine. (They publish approximately ten issues per year.) Because 2007 is the first year all three magazines competed against one another on a consistent basis, I wanted to pinpoint the editors' emphasis and focus. Additionally, I chose to compare the second year's worth of magazine covers from 2011 because that was the most recent calendar year prior to my research; I wanted to observe what changes each magazine had implemented as they continued to grow as publications, while still fueling and satisfying women's interests.

Because each magazine promotes mission statements that declare a strict focus on fitness, I decided to explore if these publications were actually meeting their mission statements while simultaneously serving their audiences.

After concluding my extensive research, scrutinizing a total of 72 magazines (24 from each publication) and comparing both the text and visuals that command each cover, I determined each magazine's emphasis and where the editors placed focus. Rather than painting an overall picture of health, physical fitness or encouraging women to live confidently and embrace their bodies, the magazines collectively encouraged low weight, wearing a small clothing size, and external appearance as vital components to achieving overall success in being physically fit and happy.

While performing this research, my focus was to reveal the prominent message of these three fitness magazines and determine whether the publications' editors followed through with their claims of promoting active and athletic practices that zeroed in on healthy lifestyles. To a certain degree, physically fit women tend to naturally have a toned physique and aspire to showcase their outer beauty through mindful habits, but fitness is not a topic that can be generalized to fulfill every reader's individual health needs. Before embarking on my research, I combed through the magazines and created ten categories that would help me sort through cover lines and assign the text to specific subject fields. One of the largest difficulties I faced when creating my categories was determining how to differentiate between subject matter and assign the content to specific fields. When I originally began coding the magazines' text, my category definitions generally remained the same, and I made a few minor changes. I had approximately

categories that were broader, so they included many more sell lines. However, when I repeated my coding process to finalize my sorting, I found myself shifting a decent number of sell lines among the different categories and creating new fields. Because the original categories became so large, I decided to break down the subject matter into more descriptive areas. For instance, instead of having a blanket category that included size and weight, I divided that type of content into two fields: Weight-Loss Strategies and Body Slimming. Each had enough sell lines to stand on their own, and I think it was important to make my categories more distinct. As I continued to solidify the definitions and type of content and language each category needed to entail, I made any additional, necessary changes. My final categories included the following:

- Body Slimming, Toning, Shaping and Sculpting
- Weight Loss Strategies That Reference Food, Eating Less, Dieting/Fad Diets, Cutting Calories, and Portion Size
- Overall Well-Being With an Emphasis on General, Mental and Physical Health
- Exercise Help, Workout Advice and Tips for Becoming Physically Fit and Staying in Shape
- Beauty and Grooming Tips and Tricks
- Cooking Tips, Food Advice or Swaps, Recipes and Overall Healthy Eating
- Boosting and Gaining Self-Confidence, Feeling Content and Self-Assured and Viewing Happiness as Success
- Sexual Appeal, Sex Secrets and Tips and Physical Enhancement

- Clothing, Apparel and any Fashion-Related Item (Includes: swimsuits, casual attire, exercise clothing, running shoes, etc.)
- Miscellaneous (Items such as: contests, quizzes, money-focused content)

After completing multiple rounds of textual coding and comparing images from 2007 and 2011, my results suggested that regardless of how much variety each magazine tried to incorporate with its coverage, the underlying theme circled back to one dominant category: Body Slimming, Shaping, Sculpting and Toning. This finding was evident; after combining both years' sell lines, the "Body Slimming" category had double the amount of sell lines as "Exercise Help" (ranked third) and one-third more sell lines than "Weight Loss," which was tied with "Overall Well-Being" for second place.

FINDINGS

Fitness Magazine

Fitness is a women's monthly national magazine that originated in 1992 and, in 2005, was acquired by Meredith. *Fitness* ranks among the company's top five magazines and has a circulation of 1,511,170 and rate base of 1,500,000, which is identical to *Women's Health* (ABC Publishing, June 2012). The publication's title essentially speaks for itself, with a mission statement that declares: "*Fitness* motivates women to move — for fun, for health, for life. With workouts and diet plans that get results, plus inspiring beauty and health tips, *Fitness* empowers women to be fierce about reaching for and achieving body success, however they define it" (*Fitness* Media Kit).

In 2008, *Fitness* welcomed a new editor-in-chief, Betty Wong, who led the magazine to several prestigious journalism awards, which include a Folio Eddie Gold Award, MIN Editorial and Design Award and Ad Age Media Vanguard Award (*Fitness* Media Kit). In regard to readership, *Fitness* has a median age of 39, with 63% of its readers falling into the 25-49 age bracket. I examined 24 covers of *Fitness* (one issue per month) from 2007 and 2011 and sorted each sell line, including phrases and teaser statements into the aforementioned categories. I also compared images. My findings were quite interesting, as they did not directly coincide with the information promised in the magazine's media kit and mission statement.

Fitness: Textual and Qualitative Content Analysis:

On each glossy cover of *Fitness*, readers can locate a recurring tagline that reads “Mind, Body & Spirit,” various sell lines that advertise that particular issue’s content and a large image of a female model who is usually wearing a bikini or other revealing attire. The model is typically positioned in some sort of standing pose, and the image displays approximately three-fourths of the model’s body. Out of all 24 *Fitness* issues, only three covers feature a complete body shot that show the model in a seated pose. Otherwise, the cover image normally stops when the photo reaches the model’s shins. The image selection is interesting. In 2007, all 12 *Fitness* magazine issues featured the cover model dressed in a bikini, and only two issues displayed women wearing a full-length cover-up over their swimsuit top to conceal their stomachs. The clothing choices are slightly outlandish, especially considering that readers likely are not wearing swimsuits during the winter months, or apply full makeup and style their hair before heading to the gym to exercise. The cover images from 2011 are fairly similar to 2007 though there seems to be slightly more effort in covering the models. There are approximately six covers where the model is wearing a shirt over her bikini top, or even a shorter dress-like cover up. The images splashed across the magazine’s covers speak volumes; when studied alongside the accompanying sell lines, the reader interprets a different meaning of fitness — a meaning that is determined by looks and a certain number on the scale. The covers are plastered with phrases such as, “Lose Your Belly Bulge: Drop a Jeans Size, Banish Cellulite, Get Rid of Back Fat,” (*Fitness*, March 2007) or “Lose 10 Pounds: Your 20-minute plan to get sexy, slim and summer-ready” (*Fitness*, April 2012). These types of cover sell lines were

prominent and made it easy to place items into the “Body Slimming” Or “Weight Loss” categories. Rather than learning new exercise tips, workout suggestions or how to achieve a certain level of athleticism, *Fitness* magazine’s sell lines send messages to readers that imply the following: Appearance is a key element in being considered fit, in shape and attractive.

Fitness magazine’s media kit provides an editorial breakdown of the following content percentage: 35% Fitness, 21% Food/Nutrition and 14% Health/Medical science, which totals to 70% for the Health and Wellness Edit. However, after performing my research and sorting through sell lines, I found that the “Body Slimming, Sculpting, Shaping and Toning” category (subject matter distinguished from anything fitness or exercise-related) ranked first for both 2007 and 2011 because it had the highest number of results than any category. Based solely off cover language, *Fitness* editors are sending a message to readers that instead of stamina, strength or athletic performance, body size and shape are appropriate indicators of physical fitness.

In 2007, the category titled “Exercise Help, Workout Advice and Tips for Becoming Physically Fit and Staying in Shape” trailed behind the body-slimming category by approximately half the number of sell lines, which suggests that concerns about body size was the message editors were sending readers. Additionally, in 2011, the exercise category dropped another notch to third place and took the back burner to the two leading categories that centered on body slimming and weight-loss strategies. Considering the magazine’s title, it seem as though the editors would focus on more appropriate content that fulfills the publication’s name and mission to inspire women to

reach their peak fitness levels. Nonetheless, these results are not overwhelmingly surprising, especially after examining the covers and reading sell lines that constantly fixate on self-absorbed topics such as “Shrinking Belly Bulge” (*Fitness*, August 2007), promote “Doctor-Approved Crash Diets” (*Fitness*, November 2007) or encourage women to “Go from Heavy to Hot” (*Fitness*, September 2011). Ironically enough, these particular sell lines are the phrases that are displayed in bright, bold text and capitalized fonts, which make them stand out more than those with smaller typography. I found that although the headlines might be written enthusiastically and more conversation-like, these “trigger” words, such as fat, thin, body, weight, flab, inches, pounds, lose and shrink are the words that dominate the covers. Furthermore, these phrases are typically located alongside the model’s chiseled body, which creates an overall aura that is fixated on body image.

Shape Magazine

Shape was created in 1981 and, in 2003, was obtained by American Media, which touts the magazine as a woman’s playbook to a happy and healthy lifestyle. The magazine prides itself on aiming to maintain a positive and motivational tone, with a mission statement that builds the publication “to be the leading authority on the active lifestyle and the go-to resource to empower women to live life to its fullest” (*Shape* Media Kit). When reading through the publication’s goals and intentions, I noticed that *Shape* acknowledges that it does, in fact, touch heavily upon beauty and looks. The publication’s media kit clearly states that while the content is focused on fitness and

nutrition, “*Shape* provides all the information and inspiration she’ll need to achieve her health and wellness goals...and also offers essential lifestyle advice, covering style and beauty, to guide our reader as her new look takes shape.” I found this statement to be an accurate depiction of the publication; when comparing all three magazines, *Shape* definitely appears to be the most glamorous with a greater emphasis on beauty.

In 2010, Tara Kraft joined the publication as editor-in-chief. The magazine’s circulation totals 1,633,333, which puts the publication in first among all three magazines. The median reader age is 40.3, with 79% of readers falling between the ages of 18-49. Although the *Shape*’s mission statement somewhat admits that the magazine is more focused on women looking their best instead of performing well athletically or actually being in shape, the publication remains extremely popular. According to ABC Publishing’s statement from June 2012, *Shape* had the top circulation in the active lifestyle set and ranked first among these three magazines. *Shape*’s total circulation weighs in at 1,635,933; *Women’s Health* follows closely behind with a circulation of 1,617,737, and *Fitness* takes third at 1,511,170.

Shape: Textual and Qualitative Content Analysis:

Aside from the recurring phrase that reads, “Shape Your Life,” each *Shape* cover from 2007 featured a toned model dressed in attire that revealed her bare stomach. Most covers featured the women wearing two-piece swimsuits, which was similar to the *Fitness* covers. After examining the images, I was able to point out only one cover that appeared semi-athletic. In that particular issue, a tennis star was featured, so she was

obviously clothed in a sports bra and tennis skirt, which although it was not a bikini, it was still an outfit that revealed her stomach. *Shape*'s second set of cover images from 2011 includes similar photos though obvious styling efforts added a few long-sleeved shirts over the models' swimsuit tops. Similar to 2007, *Shape*'s cover models' attire was also consistent with *Fitness* — both publications made a point to add more clothing on their 2011 covers. Nonetheless, there was one glaring cover that stood out above the rest, and that was because the featured actress, Kate Walsh was photographed entirely nude. On this particular magazine issue, aside from carrying over the phrase, "Shape Your Life," the published sell lines were ultra-shallow and focused solely on physical traits that are showcased by a few of the following phrases:

- "Lose That Arm Jiggle for Good"
- "Kate Walsh Bares All: How She Stays This Hot at 44"
- "Fight Fat & Win!"
- "Lean & Sexy Now! Flat Abs, Toned Thighs, Tight Tush"

Shape's media kit also includes a statistic that lists 26% of its total content as fitness/sports material, which occupies the highest percentage. In their pie chart, fitness/sports ranks first and is closely followed by beauty/style. These published claims seem inaccurate, especially because none of these abovementioned phrases even mention physical fitness and instead, promote body image and beauty. However, sell lines are not necessarily indicative of the entire magazine's content because these cover blurbs are meant to sell the magazine, not represent the entirety of inner subject matter. It is possible there is more fitness-related content inside the magazine but, based on the cover, that is

not the message editors send to readers. If editors want women to adopt healthy habits and truly learn about fitness and sports, the previously listed phrases, language and emphasis do not reflect that objective. In fact, according to my coding results, from 2007 to 2011, *Shape* magazine's heavy focus on body image increased.

Although the editors at *Shape* might have good intentions of promoting fitness and sports content, my research suggests differently. Similar to my findings with *Fitness* magazine, the "Body Slimming" category was most dominant and increased as the years progressed. Ironically enough, in 2007 the "Exercise Help" category was positioned in second; in 2011, it dropped to fourth place, behind "Body Slimming," "Weight-Loss Strategies" and "Overall Well-Being." These results lead me to believe that the editors at *Shape* might have a more skewed and superficial view of fitness and are trying to send readers a message that is primarily concentrated on body size and shape. The magazine's title, *Shape*, could refer to women actually being in shape and fit; however, my findings suggest that the publication's message places a greater focus on readers' body shapes and sizes. This notion is evident, especially after seeing that my "Boosting Self-Confidence" category ranked dead last in 2007 and, in 2011, only elevated to seventh place out of ten total categories. My research supports that the editors at *Shape* view fitness as having a tight, toned and solid body, and that fitness tests or confidence in exercise do not necessarily fulfill their standards of being in shape. *Shape*'s voice is intended to be "always positive and motivating" (*Shape* media kit), yet the advertised content and short blasts are so fixated on picking apart readers and telling them they need to transform themselves. For example, the April 2007 cover told readers "You Can Do It! Burn More

Fat in Less Time: Drop 5 Pounds This Month With These Calorie Blasters,” while November 2007 encouraged them to “Stop Winter Weight Gain Before it Starts.” In March 2012, *Shape*’s editors showed readers how to “Lose that Arm Jiggle — Fast!” or “Fight Fat and Win.” The magazine’s tone might be more relaxed and attempt to be inclusive, yet it encourages readers to highlight their flaws and indirectly hints that their current state and weight are not up to *Shape* standards.

Women’s Health Magazine

In 2005, Rodale, Inc. successfully launched *Women’s Health* as the sister counterpart to *Men’s Health*, the world’s largest men’s magazine that sports 39 editions in different countries. In 2009, the publication acquired a new editor-in-chief, Michelle Promaulayko, who remains in that position. Although *Women’s Health* is somewhat new to the women’s fitness magazine world, it has steadily built its reputation as a lifestyle resource that provides readers with the “must-have action plan for today’s modern woman. *Women’s Health* gives readers the tools they need to make instant, positive changes in their lives” (*Women’s Health* media kit). Similar to *Fitness* and *Shape*, *Women’s Health* declares itself different from other brands because of its distinctive approach that propels women to improve their lifestyles.

As previously stated, in regard to circulation numbers, *Women’s Health* is sandwiched between *Shape* and *Fitness*. Its circulation numbers are commendable at 1,617,737, and since its fairly recent origination, the publication has climbed the ladder of women’s fitness publications to trail closely behind *Shape*. Before conducting this

research, I was most intrigued in studying *Women's Health* to see if it fulfills the editors' promise of providing readers with a satisfactory and well-rounded amount of content, instead of emphasizing beauty and appearance as measures of worth.

Women's Health: Textual and Qualitative Content Analysis:

This publication and its editors declare that they want readers to be proactive in gaining healthy habits in a physical and emotional sense. To achieve this goal of connecting with readers on a level deeper than surface qualities, the magazine's main communication strategy is to use a "frank, irreverent voice of a trusted girlfriend" (*Women's Health* Media Kit). I wanted to see if this tone was evident, especially since the publication is promoting the idea that its voice is different from the average women's magazine.

After performing my coding for the *Women's Health* year's worth of magazine issues from 2007, the one notable difference I found was the winning category was very different when compared against *Fitness* and *Shape*'s. The category that rose to the top of *Women's Health*'s list was "Overall Well-Being." Thus, in 2007, the magazine did support its media-kit claims that it was striving to help women achieve a balanced lifestyle and be well-rounded in all areas of health; the abundance of sell lines in the well-being category reflected that. In fact, contrary to *Fitness* and *Shape*'s leading category in 2007, the "Body Slimming" division was ranked sixth of ten for *Women's Health*; whereas, it came in first for the other two magazines. The weight-loss category placed second, so body image was not entirely ignored though the sell lines were not as image-

focused as *Fitness* and *Shape*. Similar to the other two publications, *Women's Health* used large lettering with an all-caps style, bold colors and exclamation points to highlight statements and make its writings translate as more conversational.

Although *Women's Health* remained loyal to its mission statement in its early years, from 2007 to 2011, the content type and focus undoubtedly shifted. Four years later, as *Women's Health* continued to compete against seasoned women's fitness magazines, the "Body Slimming" category jumped from sixth place and landed the top spot in first. This drastic jump suggests that as the magazine grew and was compared against other women's publications, editors needed to change their focus and content level so they could keep up in competition with the other two magazines. This is certainly supported after observing that the exercise category dropped from third to sixth place. In 2007, *Women's Health* featured phrases such as "8 Simple Steps to Perfect Health," (June 2007) and "Jeans That Flatter *Any* Shape." (September 2007). However, in 2012, the sell lines shifted to "Look Great Naked! Burn Mega Calories, Build Lean Muscle, Sculpt Sexy Curves," (May 2012) and "Resize Your Thighs! Lose Belly Fat Fast!" (July/August 2012). Additionally the phrase "It's good to be you" was stamped across every cover in 2007 but, in 2011, that branding tagline was only seen on two out twelve covers. On the ten covers missing that phrase, nothing replaced the tagline. I think that was a bold move, especially because it was featured in a small font that did not obstruct the page; that phrase was a constant reminder that women could truly be happy with themselves. It is a correct statement to say that in 2011, the focus of *Women's Health's* editors deviated away from enjoying inner happiness to perfecting outer image.

As *Women's Health's* content evolved, its images followed suit. In 2007, there was abundance of swimsuit styling and in eight of the twelve cover photographs, the model's bare midriff was flaunted. The only difference between *Women's Health's* swimsuit photos than from the previously listed publications' images was that *Women's Health's* covers had a more realistic, sporty feel. Although there certainly was a concentration on how the women looked, a large portion of the photos were women wearing plain swimsuits or walking out of the ocean with their hair wet or pulled up into a ponytail. This differs from *Fitness* and *Shape* because in those publications' 2007 covers, the models were always dolled up with overdone hair and makeup; it was hard to convince readers the women were actually on the beach in a bedazzled swimsuit or taking part in any type of physical activity. *Women's Health's* 2007 covers were more toned down and did not have as large a focus on glamorous clothing or emit a high-fashion feel. However, in 2011, *Women's Health* cover images also certainly stepped it up in the looks category, and the models seemed to get smaller in size, and dolled up in makeup and overall appearance. Although editors began styling the models in dresses, jeans, and other clothing besides swimsuits, which was a drastic difference when compared to *Fitness* and *Shape's* 2011 covers, the models' appearance overshadowed the apparel choice because they were considerably more made up. This action implies that the magazine's editors felt the need to emphasize women's appearance to remain competitive, and this idea is reflected in the cover content and photographs.

Fitness magazines' text and images support the idea that editors use covers as marketing vehicles to entice and convince readers to buy their respective publication.

Magazines have a duty to serve readers, but they also have pressure to remain competitive and produce a profit. The results from my qualitative analysis reflected that as the magazines strived to become the frontrunner of women's fitness publications and vie for the top spot, editors' primary focus shifted from providing strictly fitness content. Instead, editors appealed to readers by promoting beauty tips and weight-loss tactics. My research suggests that editors certainly recognize these pressures to land the top spot, and there is so much at stake to ensure that their publication is considered the best — especially in a market that is as competitive as women's fitness magazines. When comparing magazine covers from 2007 and 2011, the majority of the cover content shifted from fitness to body slimming. Instead of adhering to the magazines' mission statements, it is clear that magazine editors aimed to please readers and framed their content around interest and entertainment, rather than providing realistic advice for healthy living.

Figure 1: This bar graph is a visual representation of my category coding. The bars represent each magazine's number of sell lines per category for both 2007 and 2011.

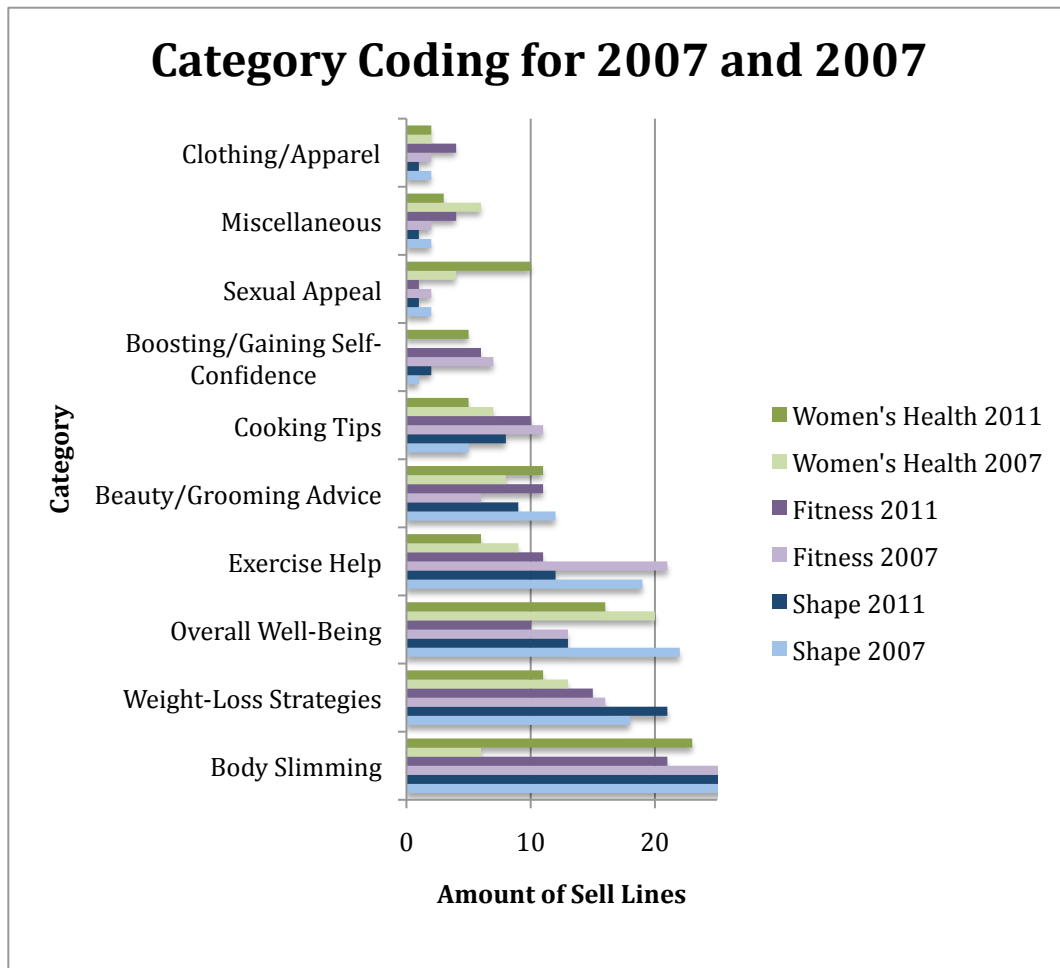


Figure 2: This chart also displays my category coding, but with specific numbers. In list form, this chart displays the category breakdown and provides a comparison of each magazine's numbers.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

Rankings for total sell lines from both years:

1. Body Slimming: 143 total
2. Weight-Loss Strategies AND Overall Well-Being: 94 total
3. (See above; tie for second)
4. Exercise Help: 78 total
5. Beauty and Grooming Tips: 57 total
6. Cooking Tips: 46 total
7. Boosting and Gaining Self-Confidence: 21 total
8. Sexual Appeal: 20 total
9. Miscellaneous: 18 total
10. Clothing and Apparel: 13 total

Comparison from 2007 to 2011 for EACH category and magazines

BODY SLIMMING

2007: 68

2011: 75

OVERALL INCREASE

Shape 2007 = 27

Shape 2011 = 31

INCREASE

Fitness 2007 = 35

Fitness 2011 = 21

DECREASE

WH 2007 = 6

WH 2011 = 23

INCREASE (Largest increase)

WEIGHT-LOSS STRATEGIES

2007: 47

2011: 47

STAYED THE SAME

Shape 2007 = 18

Shape 2011 = 21

INCREASE (Largest increase)

Fitness 2007 = 16

Fitness 2011 = 15

DECREASE

WH 2007 = 13

WH 2011 = 11

DECREASE

OVERALL WELL-BEING

2007: 55

2011: 39

STAYED THE SAME

Shape 2007 = 22

Shape 2011 = 13

DECREASE (Largest decrease)

Fitness 2007 = 13

Fitness 2011 = 10

DECREASE

WH 2007 = 20

WH 2011 = 16

DECREASE

EXERCISE HELP

2007: 49

2011: 29

DECREASE

Shape 2007 = 19

Shape 2011 = 12

DECREASE

Fitness 2007 = 21

Fitness 2011 = 11

DECREASE (Largest decrease)

WH 2007 = 9

WH 2011 = 6

DECREASE

BEAUTY AND GROOMING TIPS

2007: 26

2011: 31

INCREASE

Shape 2007 = 12

Shape 2011 = 9

DECREASE

Fitness 2007 = 6

Fitness 2011 = 11

INCREASE (Largest increase)

WH 2007 = 8

WH 2011 = 11

INCREASE

COOKING TIPS

2007: 23

2011: 23

STAYED THE SAME

Shape 2007 = 5

Shape 2011 = 8

INCREASE (Largest increase)

Fitness 2007 = 11
Fitness 2011 = 10
DECREASE

WH 2007 = 7
WH 2011 = 5
DECREASE

BOOSTING AND GAINING SELF-CONFIDENCE

2007: 8
2011: 13
INCREASE

Shape 2007 = 1
Shape 2011 = 2
INCREASE

Fitness 2007 = 7
Fitness 2011 = 6
DECREASE

WH 2007 = 0
WH 2011 = 5
INCREASE (Largest increase)

SEXUAL APPEAL

2007: 8
2011: 12
INCREASE

Shape 2007 = 2
Shape 2011 = 1
DECREASE

Fitness 2007 = 2
Fitness 2011 = 1
DECREASE

WH 2007 = 4
WH 2011 = 10
INCREASE (Largest increase)

CLOTHING AND APPAREL

2007: 6
2011: 7
INCREASE

Shape 2007 = 2
Shape 2011 = 1
DECREASE

Fitness 2007 = 2
Fitness 2011 = 4
INCREASE (Largest increase)

WH 2007 = 2
WH 2011 = 2
STAYED THE SAME

MISCELLANEOUS

2007: 10
2011: 8
DECREASE

Shape 2007 = 2
Shape 2011 = 1
DECREASE

Fitness 2007 = 2
Fitness 2011 = 4
INCREASE

WH 2007 = 6
WH 2011 = 3
DECREASE (Largest decrease)

My research question is: What messages do editors send through cover images and sell lines? To investigate this inquiry, I conducted a textual and visual analysis that yielded obvious results: Editors of women's fitness magazines, particularly *Fitness*, *Shape* and *Women's Health*, send a message to readers that they should focus on improving physical traits and body characteristics; their idea of fitness is exclusively based on how women look, and being "fit" is not necessarily determined by physical activity or athleticism. Although each magazine had a few slight differences in how it presented its content and images, body slimming was essentially the main selling point, especially within the most recent calendar year.

Fitness, *Shape* and *Women's Health* are frontrunners in the women's fitness magazine world, and I expected to see similarities among the publications' covers. In addition to featuring sell lines that are primarily focused on body traits, all three magazines are bright, colorful and jam-packed with various tips on self-improvement. In 2007, *Women's Health* was more distinctive because its cover content was focused on giving women peace of mind and informing them about overall health while *Fitness* and *Shape's* editors emphasized body slimming. However, in 2011, my coding revealed that *Women's Health's* editors also stressed the importance of body appearance, which meant the researched publications became more similar and collectively emphasized external beauty.

All three magazines use a light-hearted, comfortable tone to relate to readers and encourage them to take control. Although the excessive use of exclamation points can seem overwhelming — especially when used six times on a cover, as demonstrated in

Fitness, June 2007 and February 2008 — I do agree the voice is friendly and not overly formal, which likely appeals to readers. Nonetheless, aside from visual presentation, the publications' tones and word choices have the potential to be misinterpreted, especially because the subject matter could be a sensitive topic among the targeted readers. If women have currently been struggling with weight loss or poor body image, sell lines that tell them they are not skinny or thin enough could be detrimental to their ego and self-esteem. If women are reading that their efforts are not on par with ideal fitness standards, they might become discouraged, rather than commending themselves for their hard work. Duncan (1994) found that women's fitness magazines projected "a blanket invitation to all readers to assess their bodies for their flaws and reshape their bodies accordingly" (p. 54), which remains evident in my research. My research paralleled with these findings because the magazines heavily emphasized slimness as a measure of physical fitness and necessary trait for success. Because women's fitness publications imply that readers will benefit from taking their advice, readers feel pressured to change their bodies in order to be accepted and live up to fitness standards that are displayed on magazines' covers. If these publications' editors were strictly concerned with helping women and providing a guidebook to a happy and healthy lifestyle, body shape and size would not be constantly reiterated.

This research is important because it exposes underlying messages that are transmitted through magazines' cover components. There are various ways readers can interpret images and phrases, but these three fitness magazines' word choices and languages imply that weight, size and shape define readers' fitness statuses. It is crucial

for editors to understand how readers could potentially receive the magazines' messages so they can use covers as outlets to provide useful and realistic fitness suggestions and tips. Women want to feel included and implement the magazine's advice into their daily lives, so it would be compelling to see how circulation and readership changes in response to noticeably different cover content. The act of promoting a healthy image and providing women with attainable weight and exercise standards would expose readers to a more practical depiction of fitness and be a positive influence on their self-esteem.

Cover language is a vital tool that editors use to engage readers. During my internship with Rodale.com, I learned that editors select specific words and phrases to capture readers' attention, and my editors coached me how to write headlines in order to achieve their readership goal. At Rodale.com, the tone of voice was very much "in your face," and the editors' intentions were to use language to alarm or shock readers so they would continue to read further into the article and drive more traffic. Using this knowledge and referring back to my previous research and readings for my literature review, I expected to find a sizeable number of the fitness magazines' messages and word choice to be heavily focused on external body traits. However I did not anticipate the hefty amount of weight-centric sell lines that drastically overshadowed any type of fitness focus. Malkin et al. (1999) found that women's magazines were "likely to contain messages about diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery to change body size," (p. 651), but my findings revealed that weight-loss methods were the most recurring, promoted topics. This discovery is important because it displays how women interpret fitness magazines' cover messages. Additionally, after conducting my research, I was appalled when I saw

how frequently each magazine featured half-naked women. Before performing my content analysis, I suspected to see a great number of swimsuits, but the total quantity of covers with barely-clothed models exceeded my original expectation. Sauer and Robels-Pina (2007) found that “messages found in magazines support and even encourage the perception that female happiness is tied to physical traits, with ultra-thinness being the hallmark of beauty” (p. 4). That finding was certainly evident in my own research, which is an important development in pinpointing how readers could interpret magazines’ messages, as well as how editors depict fitness. If editors want readers to consider their publications to be exercise and healthy-lifestyle guides, they are not using cover sell lines and images to execute that goal.

To correlate with editorial changes, magazine editors should improve their cover-image selection to feature women who look healthy and athletic — not frail and meek. They could also learn how to dress their cover models in attire that is fitting for the current season or trend, and not always picture them in a bikini or skimpy clothing that shows off their flat stomachs. It would be more logical to style the cover models in clothing that is trendy or practical, so readers could replicate these styles.

Editors of women’s fitness magazines rarely produce covers that are solely focused on fitness. *Fitness*, *Shape* and *Women’s Health* find similarity in their approach to readers, and my research supports the following: Through cover images and sell lines, editors of women’s fitness magazines send self-absorbed messages that stress the importance of outer image and how you look rather than physical ability and fitness level. Although each publication has a few individual touches, all three magazines cohesively

promote a similar idea of health, fitness and wellness, yet their cover content showcases other intentions. If women's fitness magazines are truly focused on athleticism, appearance and weight-based concerns should be irrelevant. Instead of picking up one of these publications and following suggestions to improve stamina, exercise performance or overall health, readers are instructed to be self-conscious about their weight and fixate on correcting their body flaws.

Conclusion

I believe all three publications could make vast improvements on their cover sell lines and images if they want to encourage women to live a healthy lifestyle. Because circulation numbers and readership have only increased since each magazine's origination, the editors have the flexibility to rework how they frame these publications' message without losing their followers. After performing this research and studying 72 magazine issues, the coverage on body slimming and sculpting was exhausting, yet eventually expected; cover after cover, readers were always instructed to lose weight and alter a different part of their bodies. My main concern with the magazines' stress on weight loss is that some of their readers do not need to drop pounds; thus, the magazines could actually be detrimental to readers' self-confidence and cause harm rather than benefit, which ultimately leads to body dissatisfaction. Also, editors of these fitness magazines need to be mindful of the messages that their respective publication's cover image sends. Aside from the fact that the majority of the covers featured half-naked, petite celebrities and models, the images often have little correspondence to the featured

sell lines. If a sell line encourages women to be “Confident, Healthy and Strong” (*Fitness*, August 2007), or “Dance Off Pounds” (*Shape* August 2012), it would be more appropriate for readers to see images that depict those actions. It seems all too easy and expected that every cover is going to feature a model who was photographed in a swimsuit, so I would recommend providing the readers with greater image variety.

The editors of women’s fitness magazines, specifically *Fitness*, *Shape* and *Women’s Health*, are similar to personal trainers and readers refer to their content for advice on being healthier individuals. Therefore, fitness magazine editors should concentrate on helping readers set individual health and physical fitness goals instead of highlighting body imperfections. Rather than assuming that all of their readers need to lose an overwhelming amount of weight, editors should inspire women to work toward improving and maintaining their overall health. By promoting progress instead of perfection, the editors of women’s fitness magazines could send positive messages that encourage fitness instead of thinness.

After conducting my qualitative content analysis, I believe future research should involve human subjects or some type of reader panel. Researchers could use a focus group or survey to record readers’ reactions to the presented fitness content. It would be fascinating to learn how these women interpret cover content and gain insight on readers’ thoughts and emotions after they are presented with body-centric material. A potential research question for readers would be: How do you feel after viewing the covers of fitness magazines? I suspect the results would vary and the research would likely be an extensive process, but it would be worthwhile to interview an array of women who differ

in age, weight, size and fitness level and gauge their reactions. It would be perplexing to observe whether readers' current physical traits or athletic level affect how the take-away message they receive from the magazines' cover sell lines and images. This type of future research could help editors ensure that they are staying true to their mission statements. By providing readers with better tools and advice to living a healthy and active lifestyle, these publications would better meet their promoted goals.

As additional research is conducted on women's fitness magazines, I think it would be extremely interesting to explore how readers respond to specific numbers. During my internship at Rodale.com, my editors described how quirky numbers seem to resonate better with readers. For example: Instead of settling on 20 healthy junk foods, I provided viewers with 21 snack ideas. My editors said that, although it seems strange, stories that have quirky, uneven amounts tend to get more traffic and hits than typical numbers such as 10, 15 or 20 ways to improve your health. I am sure subject matter plays a large part of readership, and page views are likely not based solely on number choice, but it could produce interesting findings.

Furthermore, the most pertinent area of research would be to study immediacy and readers' reactions to time frames and deadlines. Women's fitness magazines tend to provide time pegs to achieve your goals, such as: See Results in Just 10 Days (*Fitness*, February 2007), Bikini Body Diet—Our Easy 3-Month Plan Starts Now (*Shape*, April 2012) and A Flat Belly in 15 Minutes (*Women's Health*, September 2012). It would be compelling to see if specific time frames directly affect readership or, to take it a step further, impact newsstand sales. Readers like to be reassured that their hard work will pay

off, and they like to have a certain end date or time period to reach their goal; thus, it would be fascinating to explore if content that provides a set time span encourages and promotes reader demand and loyalty.