

UNAPOLOGETICALLY ELLE:  
HOW PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN *ELLE* CONTRIBUTES TO THE MAGAZINE'S  
THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST IDENTITY

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By ELIZABETH CASTLE  
Professor Jennifer Rowe, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

UNAPOLOGETICALLY ELLE:  
HOW PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN *ELLE* CONTRIBUTES TO THE MAGAZINE'S  
THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST IDENTITY

presented by Beth Castle,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

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

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Prof. Jennifer Rowe

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Dr. Berkley Hudson

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Dr. Amanda Hinnant

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Dr. Victoria Johnson

## DEDICATION

To my family, near and far, for the visits, the letters, the meals, and the enduring support. But most of all, for my parents, James and Dianne, who encouraged me to go to graduate school, and for my brother, Chris, his wife, Lacy, and their two lovely boys, William and Hunter, because they never stopped sending their love.

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ABSTRACT

Women's magazines have traditionally used a combination of audience, advertising, and editorial to create an individual identity that distinguishes their publications from other women's magazines. That identity, or brand, is supposed to represent the magazine's values and its mission. Yet, despite the differences among women's publications, previous literature has shown them to promote unrealistic portrayals of women, both in terms of their achievements and their physical appearance. This study looked at how *Elle* magazine used one of its brand components, its editorial voice, to frame women's personal experiences in terms of third-wave feminist themes. It looked at how language in editor's letters, personal essays, and profiles used themes of independence, assertiveness, personal choice, and diversity as well as acknowledgement of the existence of a patriarchal society to create the feminist ideology of an *Elle* woman. The researcher discovered that magazine's editorial content depicted feminist values in degrees of third-wave feminism and postfeminism: editor's letters presented an ideal for women's lives, profiles tested and sometimes failed to achieve that ideal, and essays criticized the patriarchal society that obstructs those achievements.

## PREFACE

This research focused on *Elle* magazine and how its editor's letters, essays, and profiles established the magazine's editorial voice, one of three components of a magazine's brand, in terms of third-wave feminism. In women's magazines, brand often translates to identity and ideal: Publications use content on all platforms to reinforce the characteristics they admire in women, whether physical, emotional, or otherwise. That ideal woman embodies the magazine's identity, so writers consistently promote those traits from issue to issue. By looking at the way they framed four third-wave feminist qualities — personal choice, independence, diversity, and assertiveness — I was able to analyze the magazine's ideology in terms of third-wave feminism and draw conclusions about the degree of feminism endorsed by the magazine.

My goal in studying this topic was to find out what the feminist ideology of the *Elle* woman would be if she were a real woman, a topic I pursued because I noticed a trend that I perceived to be an editorial shift in the magazine's ideology. *Elle* isn't marketed as a feminist magazine, and even as an *Elle* subscriber and feminist myself, I wouldn't say that it is. But as a reader, I noticed reoccurring mentions of feminism, themes centered on women in the workplace, and profiles of seemingly aggressive women taking on nontraditional roles. My curiosity about the way writers developed those themes translated to a single question: Is the *Elle* woman a feminist, and if she is, where do her values diverge from traditional feminist ones?

I centered the research on the third wave because I wanted to place the *Elle* woman in a more culturally relevant environment. Feminist ideologies are more individualistic today than previous waves, so one of the key characteristics of the third

wave is its independence. I wanted to see how *Elle* spoke to women's experiences in society now, not how it compared to values established thirty years ago.

But for me, the most important part of doing this research was to capture *Elle*'s evolution for later researchers. If the magazine is, indeed, devoting more articles to feminism and women's equality, then its stereotypical image as a women's magazine might change some day, too. I hope this research provides a starting point for studying the development of the magazine's brand, and women's magazines in general, as feminism integrates further into our society.

## Introduction

The first two paragraphs of the editor's letter in *Elle*'s July 2014 issue, the magazine's first-ever social media issue, describe cover model and comedian Anna Kendrick as "...genuine and relevant, a critical thinker in 140 characters." As an avid Twitter user with an extensive following, Kendrick is described by editor-in-chief Roberta Myers as the "It Girl for the social generation" because she's funny, smart, and powerful — the ideal woman for *Elle* readers to emulate.

But Kendrick's vibrant, social media status isn't the only pro-feminist plug in the editorial note: In her preview of the rest of the issue's content, Myers discusses social media's "inhospitable" environment for women, how "powerhouse" women are reinventing the technology industry, and why dating apps such as Tinder are promoting an empowering "sexual revolution." In fewer than 500 words, Myers introduces feminist ideals and sets the tone for the magazine; she presents women's empowerment not only as a goal, but also a necessity for a modern lifestyle.

As editor-in-chief of *Elle*, Myers' voice embodies the magazine's brand, but her personal take on women's issues featured in the magazine is not the only one shaping the magazine's identity or the way it portrays women's lives. This research took an in-depth look at how articles such as Myers' made up *Elle*'s editorial voice and, therefore, shaped the way the magazine as a brand depicted women and their interaction with modern feminist values in society.

The overarching goal of this research was add context to earlier feminist studies of women's magazines by finding out whether there has been a shift in the tone of women's editorial content. Previous research on women's publications has found they

encourage women to achieve unrealistic expectations in areas such as their physical appearance or their personal and professional success. Until recently, countless studies looking at the portrayal of women's lives through editorial and advertising content have focused on women's magazines' emphasis on traditional gender roles, due mostly to the publications' relationship with advertisers and the slow integration of the feminist movement into media representations of women's place in society (Duffy, 2013). As evidenced in these studies, culture adapts slowly, but even in comparison to that sluggishness, women's magazines' adaptation has been lethargic, sometimes decades behind the acceptance of some feminist ideologies. By studying articles in *Elle's* twelve issues published during 2014, the researcher was able to infer to what degree feminist portrayals of women have become a part of the magazine's editorial choices and, consequently, the magazine's identity.

The magazine's mission statement formed a preliminary framework for the way *Elle* as a brand approaches its interpretation of women in society:

ELLE inspires women to explore and celebrate their own style in all aspects of their lives. Our smart, irreverent take on fashion, beauty, and pop culture is at once aspirational and accessible, encouraging readers to cultivate not just personal style, but the success that comes with personal power. (Elle Media Kit, 2014)

Like many magazine mission statements, the goal of *Elle's* statement is to define an audience and then shape content around those ideal readers (Furat & Sonmez, 2013). In research terms, this results in a form of framing: The magazine uses rhetorical devices, images, and page designs to present *Elle* women and their roles in society in a consistent

way. Entman (1993) argues this is an essential function of journalism because it turns real-world topics such as women in the workplace, at home, or in politics into relatable content, but social construction theorists would take its effects further. Social construction theorists believe personal experience drives how magazines present the world (Tracy, 2012). They argue that the way media consumers interpret their worlds is the result of subjective, not objective, reconstructions of the natural world through media language and interaction (Tracy, 2012). In women's magazines, that interpretation is reflexive. "If the reader accepts the position of 'woman' offered by the magazine, she takes on both the role and the character which it defines as womanly" (Beetham, 1996, p.11). This study will show how *Elle* writers use one piece of the editorial process, language, to present women's personal experiences and how, through that framework, the magazine endorses certain characteristics among women, traits readers might mimic in their day-to-day lives if they accept the *Elle* standard as their own.

In previous studies about similar topics, researchers have used feminist theory to analyze magazine framing. This study will have a similar approach, but it will also take *Elle*'s demographic into account. According to the 2014 *Elle* Media Kit, the median age of *Elle* readers is 37.2; however, that number encompasses two generations, X and Y, and skews toward the younger of the set, with 45 percent of readers between the ages of 18 and 34 and 55 percent between the ages of 25 and 49 (*Elle* Media Kit, 2014). That means most women who read *Elle* turned 18 sometime after the mid-90s, right in the middle of the shift toward third-wave feminism. Because of this time peg, studying the magazine's content and identity in terms of third-wave feminism makes more sense than the broad feminist approach.

Third-wave feminists, the most recent generation of feminists, are not like their predecessors, who lobbied for change in a society that didn't understand or accept feminism. Most women today grew up in feminist culture and see feminism as a lifestyle, not a cause (Kinser, 2004). They believe advancing women's rights comes from making personal choices that align with feminist beliefs. As a result, their feminist ideologies, or even definitions of feminism in general, vary from person to person and are difficult to pin down in terms of a larger feminist movement.

In order to create a representation of how modern women should function in society, then, women's magazines can't just choose whether to publish feminist content. They have to consistently represent their interpretation of womanhood through a set of values expressed as personal beliefs. Because *Elle* editors pick and choose content that represents its brand, the degree to which those values align with prominent third-wave feminist themes would reveal the magazine's interpretation of and alignment with modern feminist beliefs. For the purposes of this study, I looked at the way four third-wave feminist themes — assertiveness, diversity, independence, and personal choice — interacted with patriarchy in the magazine.

Their working definitions were as follows:

**Assertiveness:** advocating for aggression, confidence and boldness as means for women to show their individualism, gain personal power or defy traditional gender stereotypes. If, for instance, a woman felt like her sexuality was being oppressed, she would assert her right to express herself despite outside opinions.

**Diversity:** accounting for the effects of differing races, cultures, sexualities and socioeconomic statuses on the discussion of women's experiences and their interactions with patriarchy. The first-and second-wave feminist movements often centered on the needs of upper-middle-class white women. A third-wave feminist article, for example, would acknowledge the difference between a black woman's experiences with patriarchy as opposed to a white woman's. Another might delve into the obstacles lower-class women face in their struggle for gender equality.

**Independence:** the emphasis on individualism and career gain where they intersect with traditional gender norms and social expectations. A third-wave feminist article that stresses independence would depict a woman who wants to be both personally and professional free from traditional gender expectations but faces setbacks because of the current male-dominated society. She would want the freedom to choose her career, lifestyle, partner, etc., without restraint.

**Personal choice:** supporting a woman's right to choose, not only in a political sense, but on a personal level. Third-wave feminists would argue women's freedom of choice dictates the control they have over their lives, so their decisions should govern how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Here, acknowledgment of patriarchy would reveal women's absence of choice and, therefore, personal power.

By using these themes to examine the editor's letters, profiles, and personal essays included in the magazine, I was able to assess *Elle's* representation of women's

experiences in society and then determine how the themes of those experiences represent third-wave feminist values.

The purpose of this study was to assess the personal experiences *Elle* presents as a part of its identity and, therefore, its brand. Editors assign articles in an effort to live up to the mission statement. The goal is to give a glimpse of what *Elle* thinks a modern woman cares and thinks about in a society that already accepts women in the public sphere. The magazine's audience — the women driven by success and personal power — is a population who is, by default, immersed in feminist values. What makes them uniquely *Elle* is their desire to lead lifestyles endorsed by the magazine. This research showed how the magazine's brand creates a mental picture of women through its editorial voice, and how that picture of the *Elle* woman functions in terms of third-wave feminist values.

## Literature Review

### Defining women's magazines and their identities

In order to understand how the portrayal of women in *Elle* articles creates an image of women's experience today and, therefore, contributes to the magazine's identity, it is first necessary to understand what characteristics define magazines and how those traits apply to women's publications.

At their most basic definition, magazines are periodicals that serve the needs of a specific readership, or targeted audience (Husni & Main, 2002). Although the magazine approach to journalism is similar to that of newspapers, it is also inherently different. Magazines, like newspapers, mix topics, story forms, and writing voices to create diverse publications, but according to historian Margaret Beetham, magazines have traditionally had a more pointed approach to content selection. Unlike newspapers, magazines don't publish to relay news necessarily; they publish to communicate with their niche (Beetham, 1996).

In *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age*, researcher Brooke Duffy (2013) develops that role further: She argues a "niche" is just one part of a larger community of interactions used to define magazines, especially women's publications. A strong magazine presence is the result of more than just a focus on the needs of a singular audience; it is a conglomeration of audience, advertising, and editorial voice (Duffy, 2013). Each publication shunted under the magazine umbrella is defined by its desired readership, the effects of its relationship with advertisers on content, and the voice its editorial staff uses to communicate with that audience. The final product is the magazine's identity, a personality meant to directly connect with readers.

### **Challenges of audience.**

The relationship between magazines and their readers is just that: a relationship. In a 2010 interview, Samir Husni defined the connection audiences form with a magazine's identity as personal and experiential; readers buy magazines because of how they make them feel. "We collect magazines, hoard them, put them on our coffee tables. They can be a conversation starter, a relationship starter" ("What is a magazine?," 2010). Today, reading a magazine intimately links audiences to magazine identities.

Kitch (2005) puts Husni's comment into historical context. In the past fifty years, the magazine industry has become "more specialized, focusing on smaller but more homogenous audiences defined in terms of shared identities and interests," but the approach many magazines take in framing shared experiences among their audiences is similar across magazine genres (Kitch, 2005, p.3). Many use the image of a typical, yet ideal, person to represent their values as a publication. Thus, magazines glorify the characteristics of one person — celebrities, politicians, "real" readers, or writers — and present that persona as a model for readers to emulate (Kitch, 2005).

For women's magazines, the success or failure of that model varies because of the magazines' transient reader base (Hermes, 1995). Although women's magazines target female audiences with specialty coverage of women's health, fashion, service, and entertainment, Hermes (1995) found that content in women's magazines was infrequently consumed, which was a groundbreaking study for the time. Her interviews revealed people who read women's magazines do so out of convenience and routine rather than loyalty (Hermes, 1995). Although the publications are staples in American culture, the groups of women who form the magazines' audience spend so much time balancing work

and home responsibilities that they rarely become regular, participatory readers. Unlike audiences of publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, women's magazine readers interact with magazines sporadically, with notably less concentration and more detachment (Hermes, 1995). The magazines "have become such standard parts of our lives that their status is almost unquestioned" (Hermes, 1995, p.15).

Gauntlett (2008) affirms that people who read women's magazine are ambivalent toward the publications, but he contests Hermes's previous assertion that readers today leave content unquestioned. Audiences consume women's magazine content and enjoy some of the information they receive, he argues, but they do not passively accept the image of womanhood presented in the magazines (Gauntlett, 2008). For many readers, pop-culture references or a few ideas about how to look and behave become the big takeaways after a quick newsstand scan; most understand the content is not a perfect representation of real women in society, so they pick and choose from the information they enjoy. As a reader told Gauntlett, "*Elle*, and really all women's magazines I know, make it look so easy to become the sort of woman they idealise. That's not the point of reading these magazines. You get something to compare yourself with but you don't have to accept the ideal or follow it, that depends on the reader" (qtd. in Gauntlett, 2008, p. 206). Women's magazines suggest ways for readers to think about themselves, for the lifestyles they could lead, but it is up to readers to process that information and incorporate it into their own sense of identity (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 216).

With that in mind, perhaps the best way to understand the approach women's magazines take to their audiences is through their mission statements, or written declarations defining their editorial goals and the qualities of their ideal readers.

Throughout the history of women's magazines, publications have used these statements to guide their editorial decisions and develop recognizable traits from one issue to another. Duffy (2013) notes that 17<sup>th</sup>-century publication *Ladies' Mercury*, the first magazine to solely target a female audience, claimed for itself "all the most nice and curious questions concerning love, marriage, behavior, dress, and humour of the female sex, whether virgins, wives, or widows," (qtd. in Duffy, 2013). Although this is more of a blanket mission statement than a singular audience, the statement defined what the magazine offered its readers and, considering the lack of competition at the time, was as specific as it needed to be to garner a selective audience.

Because there are a variety of magazines published today, mission statements are much more defined than they used to be. Women's fashion magazines such as *Marie Claire* pick and choose from distinct personality traits before solidifying their image: The Hearst Corporation-owned monthly orients itself as "...the fashion magazine with character, substance and depth, for women with a point of view, an opinion and a sense of humor" (Marie Claire Media Kit, 2014). Other publications follow suit. *Vogue* is *Vogue* because it caters to an haute-couture-obsessed reader, and *Glamour* is *Glamour* because it idolizes the all-American, optimistic girl next door (Glamour Media Kit, 2014). As such, these prescribed qualities become markers of singular readerships, often defining consumer groups within the genre's sector and, Duffy (2013) argues, capturing women's magazine readers in a revealing light: "Presumably we can tell more about an individual who subscribes to *Allure* and *Good Housekeeping* than we can about someone who reads the *New York Times*, loves period dramas, or is a fan of John Grisham novels" (p. 30).

### **Challenges of advertising.**

But even with such decided audiences, Duffy (2013) says magazine identities are still more nuanced than the medium's promoted aims. Because women's magazines were originally designed with traditional gender roles in mind, the way a women's publication constructs its "magazineness" has more to do with culture than reader surveys. As consumer magazines, women's fashion and beauty magazines have promoted the latest lipsticks and styles on the market to women in the confines of their homes (Beetham, 1996). As such, they have built strong partnerships with advertisers, and women's magazines have become a private way for women to participate in the public sphere.

In *Gender, race and class in media*, Steinem (1995) links this public-private dynamic to its effect on female readers' identities and the blurry line between editorial and advertising. In women's magazines, the tradition of creating "complementary copy," or editorial articles that promote products advertised in the magazine, occurs often. Few studies have researched that claim, but Cunningham and Haley's (2000) interviews of *Ms.* editors highlight the prominence of that practice: The editors said advertising requests for "positive editorial coverage" that promoted their products were common, as were attempts to censor certain editorial articles (Cunningham & Haley, 2000; Cunningham & Haley, 2003).

That practice does not extend to other consumer publications such as *People* and *The New Yorker*, something Steinem (1995) says changes the purpose of the magazines. She states advertising relationships turn women's magazines into luxury publications, or product-driven magazines that associate their identities with essential consumerism. And Cunningham and Haley's (2003) research affirms that concern. According to their

interviews of women's magazine readers, consumers are not bothered by the ethical implications of the advertising-editorial relationship in women's magazines because they believe it is part of their business model (Cunningham & Haley, 2003). The readers said women's magazines are not serious magazines; they are product publications, so they expect to see brand-name items in both editorial and advertising.

The perceived "nonseriousness" of women's magazines is something Steinem (1995) speaks of in her argument, but she adds that linking a magazine's survival to advertisers provides a platform for them to preach "messages that associate happiness with consumption and perfection with femininity" (p. 251). If a woman has enough money, then she can be anything, even the magazine's cover model. By purchasing products sold through the magazine, readers are supposed to "fix" flaws, even if those flaws don't really exist (Steinem, 1995; Markula, 2001). Through editorial, products are advertised as solutions that will make female readers look slimmer, feel more confident, and have more-fulfilling relationships with men.

Markula (2001) notes how damaging this endorsement can be to female readers. "When the magazines motivate us to work toward the model look, they provide us with an opportunity for a positive change: to obtain our best body ever" (Markula, 2001, p. 274). But that body is not always attainable — body shapes vary because of factors such as weight, height, and age — and the images themselves do not necessarily match the message of "empowering" editorial articles. The magazine might preach body positivity while its advertising points out women's alleged imperfections (Markula, 2001). Many feminist scholars have argued that discrepancy is unhealthy for female readers who attempt to comply with unattainable magazine beauty standards (Markula, 2001).

Yet for the magazines themselves, that indirect participation in the publications' consumer culture is often a good thing. Whether it's the lipstick readers choose or the clothes they wear, by participating in a magazine's advertising culture, readers signal their alignment with the magazine's world and, therefore, its identity (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).

### **Challenges of editorial voice.**

The final bracket of magazine identities depends solely on content and how editorial decisions weave audience and advertising together. A magazine's editorial voice is a summation of its topic coverage as well as its established style and tone of writing, the former telling readers what to care about and the latter how to respond to those subjects. "A magazine with a well-defined voice not only offers the reader consistency and imagination, it also gives advertisers the opportunity to develop unique ads to match the magazine's voice" (qtd. in Duffy, 2013, p. 122).

The way this voice presents itself depends on the person who wields it; writers use their own diction and syntax to shape personal yet unified versions of a magazine's style. But the most influential, and indicative, version of that voice starts at the top of the masthead. A magazine's editor-in-chief serves as the "face" of publication. As Duffy states in her research, editors-in-chief at every magazine have traditionally been encouraged to infuse their personalities into the publications they work for and befriend their readers through editorial letters and interviews. The ideal editor-in-chief persona has a voice that feels conversational and relatable; the identity establishes intimacy with readers and, therefore, magazine credibility (Denisa, 2012). At a magazine like *Seventeen* or *Glamour*, this role translates to a big-sister-like confidante only found in women's

magazines, and readers' perception of the façade's "in-tune-ness" trickles down to the remainder of the editorial content (Duffy, 2013).

Research into discrepancies between men's and women's magazines shows how marked a difference this familiarity makes on editorial style. The overall tone of the women's magazine genre is optimistic, a trait that masks the reality of women's lives with a "lust for life, love, work, shopping, and leisure" (Denisa, 2012, p. 29), but that is not the case with men's magazines. In Marisol del-Teso-Craviotto's lexical study of four women's magazines — *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Working Women*, and *Ms.* — the researcher examines how magazines use vocabulary to establish gender ideologies and how those ideologies compare to the tone of men's magazines.

The researcher found that magazines classified as men's or women's publications have similar vocabularies to other magazines in their category, but as a group, they approach their common language sets along gendered lines. Like men's magazines, "Women's magazines try to emulate what their editors suppose is the language of their readership, and address women with casual but appropriate language," but they do so through advice and guidance, an approach not found in men's magazines (Del-Teso-Craviotto, p. 2016). Whatever the ailment, a women's magazine writer has experienced it and has a life lesson to share; the magazine's voice attempts to provide a sounding board for female readers to unite under (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2005; Denisa, 2012).

Men's magazines take a less intimate approach. Their common lexicon, which uses words such as "ass," "beer," and "balls," establishes a "buddy" tone, or a casual report hinged on male sexuality (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2005, p. 2010). In general, the researcher found that this difference aligned the two sets of magazines with their

traditional gender expectations. Men's magazines endorsed open and aggressive sexuality as a talking point among friends and peers while women's magazines encouraged women to reserve those concerns for their closest friends (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2005).

Within the women's magazines themselves, Del-Teso-Craviotto (2005) found subtle nuances that indicated the magazines' ideologies. *Ms.* framed vocabulary such as "woman" from a social perspective, which contributed to a more progressive feminist agenda. *Good Housekeeping* had a more traditional approach to gender roles, and *Cosmopolitan* was even more traditional than *Good Housekeeping*. Del-Teso-Craviotto (2005) concludes this ties editorial voice to advertising and audience, which, in turn, shapes the magazine's identity in terms of its ideal consumer group.

Whether that identity reflects the reality of those target audiences is debatable, however. Duffy (2013) says the distinct language usage contributes to a polarized view of women's lives and has since the magazines' inception. Women have traditionally been portrayed as either mothers or careerists, seductresses or prudes (Beetham, 1996), and as feminism has developed within the publications, not much has changed. Women are still framed using traditional gender roles, their needs coming second to men's (Furat & Sonmez, 2013). Instead of providing articles that focus on audiences' needs regarding femininity and womanhood, women's magazines often reinforce unattainable cultural expectations of beauty and sexuality as well as traditional, submissive roles that contradict their sometimes-promoted career goals (Furat & Sonmez, 2013).

The conclusion Christanne Miller drew in her 1987 research of women's magazine editorial voice remains true: "Popular magazines' style seems to be a matter of

policy, and that policy appears to be based more on cultural stereotypes than on anyone's actual language use" (p.1).

### **Women's magazine identities as brands**

If audiences, advertising, and editorial make up a magazine's identity, then maintaining that collective voice is essential to developing a recognizable publication. Machin and Thornborrow (2003) argue preserving this personality creates a selling point, or brand, that gives people a reason to buy the magazine in first place, and Kim, Sullivan, and Forney (2007) support that statement. The researchers define "brand" as an "overall experience that is unique, different, special and identifiable" (Kim, Sullivan, & Forney, 2007). Readers and potential readers buy a magazine because they know it will be the same every time, so the identity of a magazine is almost synonymous with its established brand (Kim, Sullivan, & Forney, 2007).

In the past twenty years, maintaining individual magazine brands has become a major challenge to the magazine industry, though (Husni & Main, 2002). With the integration of the Internet into the publication cycle, new media has challenged each traditional component of magazine identities: the audience is more expansive, the interdependence of editorial and advertising is compromised, and content production involves less editing and revision (Husni & Main, 2002; Duffy, 2013). Although this change has caused some print magazines to shutter, many publications have survived such expansive industry changes through brand extension, or the strategic expansion of the magazine's identity into multiple retail industries at once (Husni & Main, 2002; Duffy, 2013).

This strategy isn't new — *People* and *Good Housekeeping* have been calling

themselves brands for years — but its link to a magazine’s survival has never been so industry-wide (Duffy, 2013). “‘The brand’ is now recognised as the most valuable immaterial asset available to an organisation. It is an intangible but powerful symbolic force which carries the identity, the reputation, the shared meanings, of a corporation, a product, a service, a person, even a nation’ (Dyson, 2007, p. 634). The success of a brand depends on its ability to provide content that represents the identity of the magazine on every platform, so the original print product is crucial. It becomes the parent brand, and its voice transcends all of the magazine’s platforms.

Machin and Thornborrow (2003) look at modern parent brands in terms of sole print extension to see whether a magazine identity in one country transitions to its sister publication in another. They studied *Cosmopolitan*’s “fun, fearless, female” brand and its ability to transcend discourse in 44 global publications. Their goal was to track the brand’s presentation of women’s sexual and work practices and to see whether *Cosmo* discourse encouraged women to give the “*Cosmo* world,” the created brand, enough significance to align their own tastes with the magazine.

Their results varied, however. Machin and Thornborrow (2003) argue magazine brands attempt to sell an identity, a product, in hopes of reaching a wider, though not necessarily more diverse, audience, and that product links back to the magazine’s personality. Yet they also argue that a brand can conflict with the reality of readers’ lives. “What *Cosmopolitan* sells to its readers are not magazines, but independence, power and fun,” but some aspects of that identity are lost to traditional gender roles (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, p.454). Articles published under the *Cosmo* brand encouraged women’s social interaction over technical, creative, or intellectual skills and presented

women as inherently alone; women had to achieve personal power through pleasing or manipulating others, mostly through their sexuality. In the *Cosmo* world, this was independence and womanhood (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, p.454).

How readers take in that message depends on their interpretation of the text (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). Machin and Thornborrow (2003) argue many critics of women's magazines underestimate the tone of these articles, which downplays their inherently fun and imaginative purpose. The *Cosmo* woman is a fantasy, and the magazine emphasizes that notion across its all of its brands. Readers decide whether to buy the magazine's lipstick or heed its editorial advice, and the more they buy into that image, the more significant the magazine's brand becomes to their personal identity. "Thus, the heritage of 1960s feminism has become intertwined with consumerism, allowing consumerism to become a discourse with which women can do and signify their roles and identities across the globe" (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, p.455).

### **Theoretical framework**

When depicting feminists and the women's rights movement, this framing has been particularly prevalent. "To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Entman says frames can have four functions: they decide what an underlying agent is doing with costs and benefits, identify causes of a problem, dictate moral judgments, and offer solutions to and predict effects of societal problems (Entman, 1993).

Bronstein says the negative representation of a movement through minutiae such as word choice and story arc can discredit its supporters and its cause, which is epitomized in the depiction of the second-wave feminist movement. Ashley and Olsen (1998) studied news frames in the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* during the second wave's reign. The researchers theorized feminists would be framed as less important, less legitimate, and more deviant than antifeminists and hypothesized that feminism-related articles would be more event-based than antifeminism coverage. Most of their hypotheses proved valid, with the deviant frame being the exception. Media outlets, they discovered, rarely covered the feminist movement, and if they did, feminists were framed as disorganized, butch stereotypes in conflict with traditional femininity, a claim later strengthened by other researchers studying similar frames (Bronstein, 2005).

As for feminist influence on the framing of women's roles, women's narratives change slowly. In 1975, Franzwa examined 122 *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping* fiction articles published between 1940 and 1970 to see whether the feminist movement was influencing magazine content. She learned the magazines consistently reinforced traditional female roles, attitudes, and norms (Franzwa, 1975). Seventeen years after her study, Demarest's and Garner's (1992) magazine analysis had only slightly more promising results for women: The researchers studied 1,052 articles published in *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* between 1954 and 1982, a sample set framed in ten-year periods surrounding the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Although the nonfiction articles they examined showed magazines were steadily promoting feminist themes over declining traditional roles, the progress was slow and only spiked when a major news event brought women

back into the spotlight. The researchers found the results telling of the discrepancy between women's magazines and their readers. Said the researchers, "It would seem that, despite 25 years of awareness of 'the feminine mystique,' the image and the reality of women's roles as depicted in women's magazines are still far apart" (Demarest & Garner, 1992, p.367).

But much of the research into media framing of feminism ended in the early 1990s, just as third-wave feminism was beginning. Since then, feminist beliefs have shifted from second-wave, "victim" feminism to "power" feminism, and finally to a coupling of postfeminist and multidimensional feminist views (Kinser, 2004; Bronstein, 2005). Today's feminists have never been the counterculture their predecessors were, so they're accustomed to feminism existing as more of a culture than a cause. Because of previous feminist waves, they grew up "...with a vocabulary for talking about sexism, reproductive rights, sexual autonomy, fair treatment, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender issues, workplace equity, global awareness and intersections of race, class, and gender" (Kinser, 2004, p. 138). They feel entitled to equal rights, and as media-savvy Millennials, they use digital platforms to assert their place in a masculine world.

For many third-wavers, communication of feminist ideals comes in the form of personal narratives, where they can share "...how it feels to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates one's sense of identity, and how one stabilizes that identity while being knocked about by postfeminist and backlash forces" (Kinser, 2004, p. 137). The idea is to show women how to live a feminist life, not how to bolster feminism, so the third-wave approach to feminism is often less politically active but more ideologically varied than earlier waves. As a result, journalists struggle to classify the

themes of third-wave feminism into one stereotype without comparing it to the second wave. They denote the movement's emphasis on personal choice, assertiveness, and independence as "Feminist Lite," or the dispassionate, disengaged version of second-wave feminism that is only concerned about doing what feels good (Bronstein, 2005). "When journalists portray third-wave feminism this way, they obscure continuities between second and third waves, as well as the third wave's desire to modify feminism to modify feminism to better address differences among women" (Bronstein, 2005. P.795).

### Research Questions

RQ1: How does *Elle* express themes of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity in its editor's letters, profiles, and personal essays?

RQ2: How do the editor's letters, profiles, and personal essays recognize women's existence in a patriarchal society and the limits they face as a result of that reality?

RQ3: How does the magazine's take on each theme develop characteristics of the magazine's ideal *Elle* woman and, as a result, contribute to how the magazine's brand presents itself in terms of third-wave feminism?

## Methodology

The purpose of this research was to understand the degree to which the content in *Elle* magazine shapes the representation of women's lives and experiences in terms of third-wave feminism and to understand how that image contributes to the overall identity, or brand, of the magazine. In order to do this, I completed a textual analysis of *Elle*'s articles published during 2014. The research analyzed how the magazine uses language to frame personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity in women's personal experiences and how each article addresses the way women apply those themes to their lives while functioning in a patriarchal society. After looking at how *Elle* presents those themes in each article, I compared them to see how *Elle* as a brand aligns with third-wave feminist ideologies.

Although researchers have argued textual and framing analyses are separate paradigms, their relationship is symbiotic. Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) define framing as "process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy," but the definition can be expanded (p. 221). Entman (1993) adds frames are created "by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments." In this case, the "issues" *Elle* frames are women's experiences, and the consistency of stock frames in *Elle* articles that align with feminist theory — those of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, diversity, and acknowledgement of patriarchy — showed the degree to which the magazine's editorial voice promotes feminism as a part of its brand identity.

Feminist theory attempts to show how patriarchy's existence reduces the role of women in society and illustrates the ways those effects should be changed (Tracy, 2013), but according to Hinnant (2009), analyzing the feminist ideology of a text is difficult because there is not one conclusive feminist ideology. By studying the way content is framed solely in *Elle*, this research showed the magazine's individual feminist ideology, not a conclusive representation of all third-wave feminist values. The way third-wave feminist values interact within the magazine's text helped me draw conclusions about how the publication defines feminism for itself, where its values conflict with each other, and where an *Elle* woman would fall on the feminist spectrum.

As noted by Tracy (2012) and Bronstein (2005), the "*Elle* woman" identity is a personal experience-driven entity that socially constructs how readers perceive the world, or in this case, how they interpret women's roles in society. For this reason, I looked only at editor's letters, personal essays, and profiles in the magazine to see how writers use either their first-person accounts or interviews with women outside the magazine to represent the identity of *Elle*.

In order to restrict the sample to female-driven experiences, the articles I included were centered on women. All essays written by men were excluded because of their first-person male perspective; any profiles written about men were left out for the same reason. However, if a profile was written by a man but is about a woman, then I still included it in the study because, theoretically, the writer is interviewing the woman through the *Elle* voice, not his own.

In each of the twelve issues I analyzed, there are between three and fifteen of these three kinds of articles, the majority of which are profiles and personal essays. Each

of these kinds of articles is developed more through the personal experience of the writer or the interviewee than research, so the reality writers frame showed the experiences that comprise who the magazine wants readers to emulate and, therefore, what the magazine's brand represents.

Duffy (2013) states the identity of a magazine is the result of its audience, advertising, and editorial voice, but because of the connection Kinser (2004) draws between personal narratives and third-wave feminism, I looked at the way *Elle*'s editorial voice affects its brand. Modern feminism is not as issue-driven as its first- and second-wave predecessors; instead, women today attempt to incorporate feminist ideals into their daily lives. Focusing on editorial voice and, more specifically, articles in the magazine that frame a woman's personal experience in the world narrows the study to the way women live today, or the way they incorporate aspects of feminism into their everyday interactions. For this reason, I examined the frames in three types of regularly published *Elle* articles: essays, profiles, and editor's letters. The first two types of articles provide accounts of women in society, whether first person or otherwise, and the final type, written by the publication's editor in chief, shapes the entirety of the magazine. Each article category represents its own version of who *Elle* thinks are strong women in society — personal experience, noteworthy achievements, or career status — so together, the articles showed a spectrum of female life experiences that make up the magazine's identity.

To limit the selection of articles and keep the study as recent as possible, I only looked at essays, profiles, and editor's letters published between January 2014 and December 2014. An analysis of an entire year gave a full picture of the magazine's

monthly publication cycle, so annual editions such as the September fashion issue and the November Women in Hollywood issue were represented in the study. This time frame also comes more than twenty years after the estimated birth of third-wave feminism, which means modern feminist ideologies are more likely to have become a part of the magazine's voice and feminism a part of women's lives.

Kinser's (2014) assertion that young women today have always had feminist terminology in their vocabularies also influences this decision: I wanted to use content about women living in a society that already accepts feminism's existence because it most accurately represents the challenges of modern feminism. Today, many postfeminists believe feminism has already succeeded in attaining women's equality so it is no longer necessary. How *Elle* addresses, or doesn't address, the fact that women still function in a patriarchal society showed whether the publication truly has a feminist ideology or is actually promoting ways for women to function in a still-unequal gender class system.

My analysis was an amended version of grounded theory, which states textual themes should emerge from collected data rather than from earlier research or literature (Tracy, 2013). I took an iterative approach to this theory because acknowledging previously researched themes related to feminism and third-wave feminism links my own research to other feminist magazine research, but I was also open to refocusing my themes when I found a common thread during the analyses.

With that said, Bronstein's (2005) assertion that modern feminism is the updated version, not a rejection, of first- and second-wave beliefs was crucial in developing my initial themes. She says modern feminism hinges former feminist values on the more

recent concepts of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity; feminism today is “power” feminism, but the principles established during “victim” feminism have not changed. Women still function amid patriarchy (Bronstein, 2005). The third wave’s focus on diversifying its traditionally white middle-class supporters is one of the most significant changes in the movement, and even then, the shift is meant “to modify” feminism to make it accessible to more women, not change it completely (Bronstein, 2005, p.795). A third-wave feminism-based article, then, would not only reject portrayals of women in traditional gender roles, but it would also positively frame women who embrace their personal choices, assertiveness, independence, and diversity without accepting a place as second-class citizens in a male-oriented society.

Bronstein’s (2005) discussion of third-wave feminism provides tentative themes for my research, and this background was key to the first step of my analysis, which looked at how the headline and subhead of each article framed the topic of the article. My goal during the initial coding process was to understand the way the magazine framed the article’s topic before a person read the main story, so I looked at word choice and phrasing in the headline and subhead to find out whether they supported my research themes. On page 552 of the September 2014 issue of *Elle*, for instance, there is a profile of a Latin-American female political candidate, Lucy Flores, running for lieutenant governor of Nevada. As a researcher, I coded the feminist topic of the article — a woman making a powerful career move and running for political office — and then read all of the text outside the story. The headline here is “Gang girl to governor,” so I knew the story would be about overcoming adversity, which I argued presents Flores as a powerful, independent figure.

The second step of my analysis looked at the narrative structure of the article. In previous textual analyses, researchers have looked for trends in descriptions that frame aspects of women's lives, so my research was similar to that approach. I analyzed the way writers discussed women's independence, assertiveness, personal choice, and diversity. Then, I decided whether the articles' support of those themes acknowledges the existence of a patriarchal society and, if it did, how they address that issue. For an article like the one about Flores, studying the anecdotes and words the writer uses revealed how the article frames the politician. For instance, writer Rebecca Traister describes Flores as a "triumphant pathbreaker" and uses the term "different" to juxtapose the politician with former male leaders. According to the writer, Flores will be a good leader because "she's better equipped than most to represent an electorate that has always been more colorful, and more female, than the dudes who've spent centuries in charge."

As a researcher, I noted Traister's powerful adjective "triumphant" and noun "pathbreaker" as positive frames about Flores' power. I also recorded the writer's choice to use "dudes" to describe men in the same sentence as "female" for women because it frames women's success as a result of men's failure. The use of the word "pathbreaker," too, connotes the idea that patriarchy still exists and Flores is helping to break it down, which, given the context of the rest of the magazine articles, could be argued as part of a third-wave feminist ideology. I acknowledged that other pieces — the editor's letters and personal essays — are first-person accounts of women's status in society, but I analyzed them the way I would a profile in order to get a comprehensive look at the techniques writers use to depict prevalent issues in women's lives.

The third step in this process was analysis. How do themes in *Elle* present women's experience in today's society in terms of third-wave feminism? If the compilation of the magazine's articles represented an actual woman, how would she, Elle, define her feminist ideology? At *Elle*, the mission statement creates a model woman for the editorial team to create, but that statement is only an ideal, not necessarily an achieved reality. The actual content in the magazine will show which frames writers rely on to depict women's experiences, and the aggregate of those frames, as a representation of *Elle*'s editorial voice, gave a more accurate idea of the magazine's brand.

Defending the validity of my claims was difficult because qualitative studies can be interpreted differently among researchers, but I backed up my findings by comparing each article to the others. Beck (1993) says the three markers of effective qualitative studies are credibility, audibility, and fittingness, so my highest priority in this research was to make sure any conclusions I formed consistently represented *Elle*'s depiction of women's experience in society throughout the 2014 publication cycle, reaffirmed other research in the feminist theory field, and could be confirmed by other researchers in follow-up studies.

To ensure this kind of rigor, Creswell (2013) recommends using multiple validity strategies throughout the research process. For my analysis, triangulation was a clear starting point: Because I was studying how the text represented third-wave feminism, I compared my analyses of each piece with the others. For example, in the May issue, *Elle* has a profile of singer Miley Cyrus where she discusses using sexuality to exert her independence. I coded "independence" alongside other third-wave feminist ideals, but I acknowledged Cyrus' use of a patriarchal approach to independence as a less-feminist

experience to include in the magazine. If I found that idea consistently among the magazine articles, then I considered it an aspect of the magazine's identity and a clarification of its feminist ideology.

Similarly, my focus on multiple kinds of texts within each issue provided different vantage points of women's lives. My interpretation of the magazine's take on feminism in today's world came from first-, second-, and third-person accounts. By constantly comparing the nuances in those perspectives, I defended my interpretation of *Elle's* content.

Other validity strategies were equally essential. Thick description of the frames I found in the magazine should help readers follow my thought process, and I included specific examples of the most prevalent themes I found in the magazine. These examples comprised quotes from body text and headlines that depicted the magazine's interpretation of third-wave feminism. I also discussed any discrepant information I found; that negative data not only added credibility to my findings, but it also helped me discuss the degree of feminism in the publication. I think it is necessary to note that I did not expect the magazine to be radically or even liberally feminist. Information that veers away from feminist standpoints provided a better understanding of the identity of the magazine.

To avoid bias, I included a preface that acknowledges my conflicts of interests related to this study. Because I am an *Elle* reader, I consider myself a feminist, and I grew up during the third wave, my evaluation of the content in *Elle* could be skewed by my beliefs; a forward about that partiality adds credibility to my research. Similarly, Creswell (2013) says qualitative researchers often infuse their studies with comments about how

their findings are “shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture history, and socioeconomic origin” (p. 202). As a young white female who grew up in a middle-class family, I fit into both the traditional feminist demographic as well as *Elle*’s readership. Any thoughts I had about the research process contextualized how the magazine represents the beliefs of its actual readers through its “*Elle* woman” and made up for any angles I might not have seen because of my background.

### **Limitations**

The greatest challenge of coding for third-wave feminism is that its traits are often undefined. Because third-wave feminists mold feminism to their own beliefs, the ideology itself is constantly in a flux. As a researcher, I took those changes into account by starting with broad themes and allowing the magazine’s editorial content to direct the study; however, my conclusion that *Elle*’s editorial content promotes mostly third-wave feminist characteristics could still be debated because of the nature of third-wave feminist ideology.

Likewise, because I used broad themes, varying issues of diversity were often placed under the same umbrella, and in future research, they might not be. The prevalence of socioeconomic homogeneousness could have overshadowed the magazine’s inclusive attitude in other sections. Only by looking at *Elle* solely for diversity would this problem have been avoided.

## Analysis

As previously discussed, the themes used to analyze the editorial content in *Elle* were derived from Kinser's (2004) research, which links personal narratives to modern feminism. Kinser (2004) argues third-wave feminism is not as issue-driven, nor as activist, as previous waves because women today have grown up amid feminist values and terminology. Instead, women often use narratives to share how they incorporate feminism into their daily lives (Kinser, 2004).

With that in mind, this study of *Elle*'s editorial content focused solely on editor's letters, profiles, and personal essays that featured women published during one full production cycle of the magazine, or twelve monthly issues. In total, there were twelve editor's letters, seventy profiles, and fourteen essays between January 2014 and December 2014. Although both male and female writers were analyzed, all profiles of men and first-person essays written by men were excluded in order to maintain a female perspective. The researcher coded how each article framed Bronstein's (2005) third-wave themes — personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity — in relation to patriarchy and how that collective framework represented the feminist ideology of *Elle*'s brand.

### **Editor's letters**

The editor-in-chief of *Elle*'s U.S. edition is Roberta Myers, known to readers as “Robbie.” Her editor's letter introduces each issue of the magazine by overviewing the main content of the issue, including the cover model and feature well, and talking about any behind-the-scenes work that happened while the staff pulled the magazine together. The synopses also draw connections between the *Elle* brand and larger cultural and

societal issues that have an impact on women, such as the representation of women in the media, women's health care, domestic violence, politics, and fashion.

Myers primarily uses this space as a first-person brand platform, where she incorporates her own opinions into an analysis of the qualities an *Elle* woman should possess and the subjects readers should care about. Each editor-in-chief page opens with a headline, something short that teases to the text below, but does not necessarily add to the meaning of the letter. The letters themselves begin with a personal anecdote or experience, which creates an initial frame for the article. Myers uses that personal stance, or angle, to shape the summary that follows: a chunked out review of the women featured in the issue and the topics *Elle* has chosen to highlight that month.

This structure is relatively formulaic from issue to issue. In the November issue, for instance, under the headline "Talent show," Myers recounts her parents' divorce and her childhood decision to stop participating in pageants, despite them being somewhat lucrative and her father's wishes. In the lead, Myers details how, at 13, her pageant coach, Ben, told her all she needed to be successful "was a little help 'up top' (my chest, not my brain), longer hair (maybe I could lighten it a bit?), and talent" (Myers, November, p. 82). Then, because the magazine is *Elle*'s 21<sup>st</sup>-annual Women in Hollywood issue, her anecdote leads to a rundown of the actresses featured in the magazine and their uncontrived talents. Myers links their experiences in male-oriented show business to her own in pageantry and explains why those ongoing obstacles represent a larger problem in today's society: "It may seem crass to mention money, but in Hollywood, money talks, and women are finally starting to have much more to say.

But they can still face a tough kind of sexism, starting with the still prevalent casting coach” (Myers, November, p. 82).

The letter then draws out that commentary on sexism and women’s role in society by highlighting the essay in the issue. Myers says she included Laurie Abraham’s abortion essay in the magazine because of the “culture of silence” surrounding the topic. She argues society negatively influences women’s right to choose by shaming women into silence if they decide to have abortions. Myers compares the longevity of that practice to the career setbacks women in Hollywood have faced for decades: Women haven’t seen changes in either health legislation or Hollywood gender inequalities because society won’t address the problem (Myers, November, p. 82). Using the concept of “choice” as a unifier, Myers ends the letter by tying her advocacy of pro-choice abortion legislation to her pageant anecdote and women’s place in Hollywood. She concludes that it is not only woman’s right to choose, but also to feel empowered by her choices and to talk about them openly.

Throughout the twelve letters included in this study, Myers makes it clear that this seemingly subjective take on the magazine’s content is intentional. She says her role is to promote *Elle*’s brand, and Duffy (2013) and other researchers would agree; historically, the editor-in-chief’s perspective has shaped the voice of her magazine. Calling herself and other *Elle* editors “deciders,” Myers says their “primary job is to sift through what is and what isn’t going to tell the very best story about who we are who we think you are,” which is, in short, the essence of editorial decision making (Myers, August, p. 48). She notes that each woman featured in the magazine embodies some aspect of the magazine’s brand because it is the editorial team’s job to “showcase women we aspire to be: strong,

sexy, smart, fun” (Myers, March, p. 154). Through that straightforwardness, Myers implies that her decisions about who and what should be in the magazine reflect qualities of the *Elle* brand as a whole. So, it follows that the way she frames her letters, the stance she takes on each article she chooses to introduce, represents that brand as well. When Myers uses themes of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity to address patriarchy and promote aspects of feminism in her letters, her opinions parallel the voice of the *Elle* brand.

### **Personal choice in editor’s letters.**

Nine of the twelve editor’s letters emphasize personal choice as a defining factor of women’s lives, though one less so than the rest. Three letters make little-to-no reference to personal choice, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The most common way Myers frames this theme is by emphasizing personal choice as a reflection of personal taste and an expression of the self. Throughout the letters, she says personal choice is a key attribute of the magazine’s brand, which, she explains, caters to a variety of women who should feel empowered to assert their individuality through their choices. This focus on defining an *Elle* woman is, perhaps, why three of the 2014 editor’s letters focus solely on choice in terms of *Elle* staff. Myers says editors, herself included, act, first and foremost, as brand advocates, who chose cover models, profile subjects, and essay topics that represent what they care about and what the magazine stands for. According to Myers, the editors at *Elle* “try hard to help women find the best versions of themselves,” by providing readers with decisive women worthy of emulation, or, in Myers’ words, an “articulate board of amazing women who are going to help us articulate the agenda for American women” (June). The word

“articulate” indicates just how vocal, how integral to day-to-day life, those choices should be: Myers believes the *Elle* woman is not only someone who expresses who she is and what she cares about by setting her own agenda, but also one who does so outwardly. Whether at home, in her career, or in society, her personal choices showcase who she is and what she cares about. So, in letter after letter, Myers says it the editors’ job to choose what women should be talking about, and often, that conversation includes unresolved issues related to women’s equality in today’s society.

Because *Elle* is a women’s magazine largely focused on fashion, beauty, and pop culture, the most straightforward examples of choices as a form of self-expression often occur when Myers is talking about what women choose to wear (Elle Media Kit, 2014). In the August issue, Myers says an *Elle* woman “feels that getting dressed is an important part of telegraphing who she is and what tribe she’s in (or aspires to)” (Myers, August, p. 48). The word “telegraphing” suggests that, through fashion, a woman announces herself; she channels her personality through her clothing. This statement reinforces Myers’ description of the magazine’s brand and implies a sense of personal power through clothing choice. And with the addition of the parenthetical phrase “(or aspires to),” Myers frames fashion decision-making as a strong determiner of how a woman controls the way others perceive her and her career trajectory. Fashion, according to Myers, directly reflects who a woman is, who she wants to be, and how she shapes the persona she presents to the world.

Although this focus on fashion aligns with traditionally women-centered content, Myers frames image control through personal choices as a way for women to navigate patriarchy by directly acknowledging some of the pervading misconceptions about

women in today's society. In the February issue, her letter, "Big personalities," opens with a discussion of a study that suggested average women were more aggressive toward evolutionary attractive women, or those with scientifically approved waist-to-hip ratios and revealing clothing (Myers, February, p. 62). Myers addresses the study sarcastically, diluting the research to a men-versus-women power struggle: "The researchers suggest that, from a sociobiological perspective, the short-skirted avatar was perceived as a threat for attention from potential sperm-donating and shelter-giving men, as we're all supposedly in a battle for high-class male genes" (Myers, February, p. 62). Here, her tone suggests that the researchers are not only wrong, but also reinforcing stereotypes about women. According to Myers, the study is biased and implies women are inherently weaker than men, so their competition with one another is just a basic, animal instinct. They dress provocatively so men will find them attractive, and they will survive (Myers, February, p. 62).

Myers rebuffs that claim by reorienting fashion as a personal choice derived from a desire to evoke happiness in, first, oneself and, second, in others.

Although she acknowledges that, yes, it can sometimes lead to sexual desire in men, fashion is dynamic and comes from a place of empowerment, not submission:

"Who we dress for, and why, is an interesting question for a fashion magazine. So much of fashion is provocative, but not all that much of it seems intended solely to provoke lust in men. Modern fashion is about provoking any number of sensations, feelings, and thoughts in oneself and others—from pleasure to gratitude to, yes, even some aggression."

(Myers, February, p. 62)

But fashion isn't the only form of self-expression, and Myers uses that same empowerment element to positively frame women who exert control over their decisions in both their personal lives and careers.

In many cases, this framework happens through praise and observation; Myers highlights what she believes are women's admirable decisions by analyzing them through her own experiences. For example, before she introduces a profile about New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's wife, Charlene McCray, in the January issue, Myers provides readers with an anecdote. While taking a 14-hour flight with a high-profile business associate, Myers says she was embarrassed at the thought of waking up disheveled next to the colleague because she would look so unlike her office self, so vulnerable (Myers, January, p. 28). The colleague told her not to worry, that she should embrace the messy truth, because that is who she is underneath the makeup and the put-together façade. And after considering this opinion, Myers says she chose to accept his reasoning and to embrace her vulnerability because it was a part of her personality (Myers, January, p. 28).

In order to lead into the McCray introduction, Myers then draws the connection between her own decision to accept her deeper self with the idea that fake "selves," her work-ready look, never live up to the real thing, like her airplane bedhead. She says women often fail to showcase who they are because they're so intent on creating someone who fits into the workplace mold, but when faced with less-society-regulated choices, like who they decide to marry, they reveal glimmers of their deeper cares: "I've always thought that if you want to know what someone is about, look at her significant other—just meeting the other half fills in all kinds of blanks—oh, that's what she finds attractive. That's what really matters to her. This is who she loves" (Myers, January, p.

28). In this case, Myers says McCray, a successful activist and political strategist in her own right, expresses a part of who she is through her marriage to a prominent politician. Myers suggests that, despite McCray's vocal advocacy career, the person who she chose to marry represents her truer self because she has more personal control and intimacy connected to that decision.

Although it could be argued that this framework presents McCray in a traditional, submissive female role by suggesting her private life is more important than her public one, Myers reassesses that archetype by directing acknowledgment why McCray's "sideline" job as politician's wife is different from other women who've held the same position: She says, "They always say that we get the politicians we deserve; how nice when we also get a first spouse we admire" (Myers, January, p. 28). She then follows that statement with a list of McCray's achievements, saying she's a "sexually fluid writer and activist, a Redbook staffer, a poet, a speechwriter, and, ultimately, one of her husband's chief political strategists" (Myers, January, p. 28). Through this combination, Myers suggests that other women before McCray haven't been admirable, most likely because they didn't have their own pursuits, and that McCray's ability to drive her own career alongside her husband's more prominent one makes her an *Elle* woman.

Myers consistently uses techniques like these to address women's relationships with patriarchy and its gendered stereotypes. In multiple letters, she emphasizes personal choice as a way to achieve career success within male-dominated society, mostly through risk-taking and strategy. In fact, in this same letter, Myers quotes McCray saying of her career that, "it's important to take risks, and to realize that you never know where your life might take you," before discussing some career advice offered in Louisa Kamps'

creativity essay: Sit next to someone you don't know, and talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to (Myers, January, p. 28). Myers says the choice to abdicate one's comfort zone causes women to perceive the world, and their career options, differently. In this way, the decision to take control of their careers affords them greater independence, even within the limits of patriarchy.

In that same vein, Myers consistently addresses the issues women face in the workplace, especially in terms of patriarchy obstructing their choices and shows them how to function alongside those barriers, not protest them necessarily. In her letter, "Lifer," which was published in April, she talks about the misnomer of work-life balance, which she says is a false choice that suggests women should juggle their home and career lives in order to function in a patriarchal society (Myers, April, p. 94). It is, in essence, what feminists have termed "having it all," Myers acknowledges the fault in the idea: "Making the best of an untenable situation seems like a not-good-enough way to go through life, yet many women who both work and have children feel that's pretty much their only option" (Myers, April, p. 94). Because of the way public and private work shakes out between genders, women feel shortchanged, like they will spend every hour of their days working if they want to have the same career opportunities as men.

Instead of calling for change, however, Myers accepts this reality, and she does so by looking, again, at her own choices:

"I'm sure I'd feel good if I just took a vacation, but I didn't set up my life that way, and as demanding as it is, I feel lucky to have it ... Rarely do we acknowledge that the reason we signed up for it all is because it's wonderful. Did we really think it wouldn't be hard?" (Myers, April, p. 94).

Myers' analysis of workplace conditions is consistent with Kinser's (2004) analysis of third-wave feminism.

### **Assertiveness in editor's letters.**

Ten of the twelve editor's letters positively frame assertiveness, or confident aggression, as a component of the *Elle* brand, but two letters do not include any noteworthy references or anecdotes that reflect that trait. Unlike the way Myers frames personal choice, her own personal experiences do not generate an assertiveness theme in any of the letters. Instead, her descriptions, especially her use of adjectives and adverbs, convey the dominant personal power and, therefore, confidence of the women featured in the magazine. And by consistently introducing these women using assertive personality descriptions, Myers indicates that the aggressiveness they embody coincides with the *Elle* brand.

This trend occurs most often when Myers talks about each issue's cover models and the women profiled for the magazine's features, two categories that tend to overlap. When Kristen Wiig is on the cover of the August issue, for instance, Myers says putting her on the cover "was an easy choice to make, because she is such an Elle woman—wickedly smart, brutally honest, funny, profane, and profound" (Myers, August, p. 48). It's clear from this statement that the women who best represent the brand are the ones featured on the front of magazine and, by Myers use of words such as "wickedly," "brutally," and "profane," they are chosen because they embody strong, even traditionally masculine, personality traits.

Myers repeats this framework throughout her letters, with similar constructions detailing the assertive traits of the cover models in all of the issues that include single-

person celebrity features as their main cover refer. In the October issue, which features Lorde, Myers says the young singer has “the confidence to stand up to all the would-be handlers, shapers, producers, etc.” and quotes Lorde saying, “I’ve developed something of a fearsome reputation. People know that if you talk down to me, I will roll my eyes or whatever” (Myers, October, p. 100). This pairing serves to frame Lorde’s aggression as a strong component of her success; she knows who she is, and she doesn’t let anyone try to control that image.

In terms of third-wave feminism, Bronstein (2005) would say this is right on the mark because it implies power feminism and individualism over second-wave victim feminism and collectivism. Myers highlights women who are independently strong, not champions of a cause or even members of a larger feminist movement. The traits they possess, which she lists in her letters, illustrate their self-confidence and security with themselves and the way they live their lives.

In terms of the magazine’s brand, perhaps this best example of how Myers’ framework shapes the magazine is in the December issue, where she devotes the majority of her letter to cover model Rihanna, who is featured in one of the issue’s photo shoots. In the letter, Myers says this is the fifth time the singer has been featured in the magazine during her 15-year tenure as editor-in-chief. As she ruminates over that fact, she discusses how Rihanna’s personality has contributed to the magazine: “What does it say about ELLE, I wondered, that we were so drawn to her again and again, as she grew and matured and became nothing less than a global powerhouse whose many iterations held our attention, and defined us in a way, too?” (Myers, December, p.88). By calling Rihanna a “powerhouse,” Myers suggests she embodies not only strength, but also great

force and energy, and by referring to the singer's "many iterations," the editor indicates Rihanna has never failed to be captivating, to possess the characteristics of an *Elle* woman.

As Myers continues the letter, her elaboration on those traits continues to develop the assertive framework that defines Rihanna's place in the magazine. She describes the singer as "a musical force; a social media savant; and a single-word phenomenon who puts her desires, agenda, and failures out for all to see but couldn't care less about the heap of judgment that comes with that" (Myers, December, p.88). All of these descriptions — a "force," a "single-word" phenomenon, and a woman who "couldn't care less" — frame Rihanna as powerful because they either connote physical action or depict the singer's confidence in herself. Similarly, when Myers goes on to describe the way Rihanna acted during her photo shoot, the implied directness of the singer's actions and movements suggest her authority; "she didn't 'act' for the camera. As you will see, she was direct, self-aware and self-regarding; not self-aggrandizing, but centered, straightforward, and calmly determined—secure in the knowledge of who she is and who is charge" (Myers, December, p. 88). The way Myers describes Rihanna's calm ease in front of the camera, her assurance, reveals the singer's personal power and decided control over who she is going to be and how her career is going to be portrayed.

Notably, Myers also addresses some issues related to women's assertiveness and patriarchy in her letters, mostly through the way she discusses women's careers. As discussed in the personal choice analysis, Myers' February letter looks at what she says are scientists' misconceptions about women's aggression toward one another. When the researchers conclude that women compete to find and keep men, Myers disagrees,

arguing instead that female aggression is everywhere and that it often has nothing to do with sex (Myers, February, p. 62). Many women, Myers says, thrive under the guidance of female mentors and camaraderie, and those relationships foster their careers, especially when they are in male-dominated industries. Her example, here, draws from the issue's cover features: Women in TV. Myers argues that the women profiled in the issue have been advocates for one another and other women throughout their careers. In fact, they've spent their careers purposefully surrounding themselves with women. She urges readers to do the same and to channel their aggression toward their careers like the actresses have (Myers, February, p. 62).

Similarly, as she continues the letter, she notes one woman in the magazine who stands out from the Women in TV profiles, FOX News Channel anchor Megyn Kelly, because she physically represents the stereotypical image of women in the workplace. Myers acknowledges that Kelly wears "sexy skirts and high heels" but pairs that fact with the anchor's assertive, career-minded qualities (Myers, February, p. 62). Kelly is a "firebrand" and a "smart, charismatic women...who doesn't much care who finds her threatening" (Myers, February, p. 62). Myers calls her a "force to be reckoned with" (Myers, February, p. 62). This construction of Kelly's image alongside the cooperative frame of the Women in TV profiles seems to indicate that Myers sees a fault in both patriarchy's objectification of women and encouragement of women's passivity, at least where their careers are concerned.

#### **Independence in editor's letters.**

All of the editor's letters indicated some importance in establishing women's independence, but the prevalence of that theme varied from letter to letter, with eight

letters placing a strong emphasis on individualism and one on women's collective independence, or women's dependence on one another.

The two most common themes found in these letters explored the relationship between women's independence in society and in their careers, both of which Myers linked back to patriarchy's influence over women's lives.

The January letter clearly depicts this frame. In the first paragraph, Myers begins to introduce the issue's content with a rhetorical question: "If you think you're great, how much does it matter what other people think?" (Myers, January, p. 28). This question shapes how she frames each article she highlights in the remainder of the letter because each features a woman choosing to defy convention in order to establish her independence.

The first woman in this letter, Chirlane McCray, who was discussed previously, in the personal choice section of this analysis, falls under this frame. Myers begins her discussion of McCray through her choices: McCray chose to marry then mayor-elect Bill de Blasio, and that choice represents an aspect of who she is (Myers, January, p. 28). Through Myers' initial rhetorical question, she depicts this choice as a key element of McCray's personality that has given her freedom to be herself, even in a seemingly more-traditional role, where she is the wife of a politician, not a politician herself. Then, instead of framing McCray in terms of her husband's career, Myers focuses on how she has established a career independently of her husband's success, saying McCray has gone on "to become a writer and activist, a Redbook staffer, a poet, a speechwriter, and, ultimately, one of her husband's chief political strategists" (Myers, January, p. 28). Although including this information does not negate the fact that, in the public sphere,

McCray takes a sideline role to her husband, Myers' take on her choices and career trajectory interweaves two ways women can establish independence in today's society: through choices that add to their happiness and their drive to establish their own careers.

As the letter continues, Myers reinforces this relationship through her introduction of cover model Joan Smalls (Myers, January, p. 28). Myers says Smalls, who is the only supermodel on the cover of any of *Elle's* issues in 2014, deals with the same issue all models do: She constantly has to overcome the image of what a woman should look and act like, or in Myers' words, the "idealized version of what the culture values at the moment" (Myers, January, p. 28). Myers says Smalls does this by stepping away from that spotlight, both personally and professionally, despite society's expectations of the way models should think and behave. Smalls is "charming, funny and devoted to her family"; she maintains those aspects of her private life while still being "a force in the fashion world" (Myers, January, p. 28). Myers frames the way she approaches her life and career, how she limits other people's influence by controlling her exposure to it, as the ideal way for a woman to live independently amid seemingly powerless, or at least uncontrollable, circumstances.

With that said, although this framework recognizes the way patriarchy can regulate women's lives and emphasizes non-traditional roles for women, Myers' career-minded, be-yourself model of an *Elle* woman often hinges independence in a male-dominated society on unrealistic standards. In the June and July letters, Myers addresses women's inequality when she talks about society's perception of women's magazines and the number of women working in the technology industry (Myers, June, p. 48; Myers, July, p. 38). In both, she says women need to be respected for the work they do, not

whether they align with traditionally feminine traits; they should be allowed to succeed in their careers independent of society's stereotypes.

But in those same letters, the way Myers discusses women taking on male-dominated industries has a catch: Each woman she applauds for overcoming patriarchy's obstacles is seemingly flawless. For instance, Myers says July cover model and actress Anna Kendrick is so funny that she beats out her male counterparts; she's known for "expertly sending up Justin Timberlake and Andy Sandberg" and "exchanging rapid-fire banter with George Clooney" (Myers, July, p. 38). However, Myers also says Kendrick is "beautiful and smart, and, yes, has a great voice ... Gen-Y sexpot with the power vibe of a '40s femme fatale" (Myers, July, p. 38). This frame creates a mental image of an *Elle* woman who has a powerful career, one that breaches a tradition-driven boys' club, and is simultaneously a well-rounded image of female perfection. Again, Myers seems to emphasize an ideal of a woman who has, and does, everything.

The June letter shows most prominently how this conflict affects the *Elle* ideology. In the lead, Myers criticizes Maria Shriver for telling young girls to ignore what women look like in magazines because the images are retouched.

Myers argues everyone knows all images, not just photos of people, are edited for consumer magazines, and she doesn't think it's fair to say girls shouldn't look up to the women in *Elle* because they all have successful careers worthy of emulation:

"What is often overlooked in the sweeping statements about the 'women we see in magazines' are, well, the many, many women in our pages who aren't 19-year-old fashion models. We feature women who are intelligent, vibrant, and passionate about their work and the world. We regularly talk

with writers, athletes, politicians, playwrights, fashion designers, chefs, code writers, entrepreneurs, and CEOs—any of whom I’d be thrilled for Frankie (her daughter) to look up to.” (Myers, June, p. 48)

Yet, despite this diversity, nowhere in Myers’ argument does she acknowledge that many of the women in the magazine are, in fact, young models because of *Elle*’s relationship with advertising. And Myers’ focus on women’s traits — their intelligence, outgoingness, passion, and career success — further emphasizes *Elle*’s pursuit of an unattainable ideal. In the letter, Myers says an *Elle* woman is “someone who in balking at tradition created her own,” but that independence entails its own standards, which often include some form of financial, social, and physical perfection (Myers, June, p. 48).

#### **Diversity in editor’s letters.**

Diversity was not a dominant theme in Myers’ editor’s letters, with only five of the twelve letters including references to ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age, or socioeconomic status. Of Myers’ allusions to those traits, few analyzed diversity’s relationship to patriarchy, but two touched on diversity as a characteristic of the *Elle* brand.

One occurred in March, when Myers responded to criticism of one of *Elle*’s February Women in Television covers (Myers, March, p. 154). Of the four covers published that month, only one, of Indian-American actress Mindy Kaling, was printed in black and white. The rest of the covers, which depicted white actresses, were printed in color. Although most readers responded positively to the cover, “there was a very vocal minority who thought we’d somehow dissed both Mindy’s body and ethnicity because we shot her in black and white at a close angle” (Myers, March, p. 154).

Myers leans on *Elle*'s brand to defend the magazine's decision: "The notion that we would try to hide Kaling's shape or ethnicity is counter to everything we believe in," she says, adding that she thought the photo they chose perfectly represented an *Elle* woman, no matter her ethnicity (Myers, March, p. 154). "I thought that Mindy looked powerful, beautiful, potent, and sexy in the best sense of the word: When she looks at the camera, you see a woman who's alluring and in control, a woman who's not afraid of her own desires" (Myers, March, p. 154). Myers' use of "powerful, beautiful, potent, and sexy" aligns with the way she frames assertiveness and independence in other letters, and Kaling's fearlessness embodies the same bold confidence Myers highlights from issue to issue.

Interestingly, Myers uses this focus on the brand to interject a subtle patriarchy reference into the letter. She says the covers were supposed to celebrate actresses "whose talent, work, and all-around genius and coolness inspire us, in a medium in which, historically, women haven't been able to produce and act in their own shows" (Myers, March, p. 154). The incorporation of Kaling into this group implies *Elle*'s version of feminism includes a level of diversity similar to that of the third wave, which looks to modify feminism to make it more accessible to women, not change it completely (Bronstein, 2005).

This insinuation is furthered in her discussion of diversity a few months later, in the August issue:

"We hear from people all the time: people who don't like our fashion choices: our models (too fat, too thin, too old, too young—you see what I am getting at), our cover stars, as well as general feedback from

homophobes and cranks who don't appreciate our inclusive attitude.”

(Myers, August, p. 48)

Myers, as a voice of *Elle*, supports extending the brand, and possibly feminism, to a larger set of women. To her, the idea of “inclusivity” means featuring and serving women who identify with different ethnicities, sexualities, ages, and weights to the *Elle* woman lineup. But her exclusion of characteristics such as socioeconomic status and religion still conflict with the third wave's effort to break away from feminism's traditionally middle-class and upper-middle-class demographic.

### **Profiles**

There were seventy profiles published in *Elle* during the 2014 publication cycle. Although the number of profiles vary from month to month, each issue includes at least one long-form profile featuring a celebrity at the height of her career, whether in television, film, music or otherwise. The magazines also include a few shorter profiles, though the subject and length of these articles vary, and longer Q-and-A profiles, which are also included in this analysis.

For most of the issues, the long-form feature serves as the main feature, and its accompanying photo shoot, the cover image; however, the magazine's annual theme issues often take prominence over the longer article because they comprise multiple medium-length profiles under the same title. These multi-source features include the February “Women in Television” issue, the May “Women in Music” issue, and the November “Women in Hollywood” issue, but *Elle* also uses other unofficial themes to curate its content throughout the year, such as July's “Social media” issue and December's “Women in Art” feature. Of the profiles examined for this study, the

majority were written by women, but men wrote at least one or two profiles in each issue. All profiles about men were excluded from the research.

Gender aside, the articles have a few similarities: They are written mostly in third person, but include first-person commentary throughout the article, the level of which varies depending on the celebrity status of the featured woman. For instance, the writer of the Lucy Flores profile uses the politician's background as fodder for the article, but the June feature profile of Angelia Jolie interweaves writer commentary into a brief overview of Jolie's acting history (Traister, December, p. 552; Bullock, June, p. 192-205, 234-235). The writers rarely interject their full, first-person perspectives or experiences into the magazine, but when they do, they dramatically alter the tone of the profile. In some ways, these shifts, among others, help them shape *Elle*'s editorial voice in terms of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity and add an element of feminism to the magazine's brand.

#### **Personal choice in profiles.**

References to personal choices are not included in all of the *Elle* profiles, but most of the articles in the magazine center around at least one pivotal life choice that has shaped each featured woman. Most of these allusions to personal choice fall into one of two categories: A woman either decides to redirect her life so she can be happy at work and at home, or a woman expresses some aspect of who she is through her choices. The themes often intersect, and both conflict with patriarchy throughout the profiles, but the writers rarely acknowledge that controversy explicitly.

The first personal choice theme, which frames the relationship between women's careers and their home lives, occurs the most often, probably because editors choose to

feature women in the magazine who already have successful jobs. Writers use this career-home frame to show how women's decisions in the workplace haven't stopped them from living their personal lives; featured women consistently continue to pursue traditional gender expectations such as motherhood and femininity while also being high-profile go-getters in the workforce. Writers include quotes, paraphrases, and anecdotes that recreate play-by-play accounts of powerful, career-minded women who have learned to spread their time among multiple pursuits.

A specific example of this can be found in the February issue, where the profile of actress and comedian Zooey Deschanel opens with the title "The happiness project," followed by a subtitle that describes her most recent work, directing and starring in television comedy *New Girl*, as her "personality-turned-brand" because she has infused so much of herself into her career (Long, February, p. 199). With this combination, from the start, *Elle* implies that successful careers are those that make women happy and happiness is the direct result of finding a way to integrate women's work into their personal lives, and vice versa.

In order to create a full picture of what that integration looks like, the profile itself highlights the series of decisions Deschanel has made to craft a career she truly enjoys: She says she works in television because she doesn't want to travel for film, and she adds that, as a film producer, she only makes movies that appeal to her. Even more importantly, she says she never gives up something she wants, even if pursuing another project or focusing on her home life means she has to work nonstop: "I never wanted to give anything up," Deschanel says. "I mean, why not at least *try* to have it all?" (Long, February, p. 199).

For almost all the profiles in *Elle*, “having it all” means making the choice to balance traditional women’s roles with career-oriented ones instead of choosing one over the other. In Deschanel’s case, she pairs what the writer calls her “supergirly persona” with her career drive: The writer says Deschanel is “an ambitious, hardworking, formidably talented woman who also happens to own a Hello Kitty sewing machine” and “she staunchly rejects the notion that loving puppies and polka dots precludes being a woman of power” (Long, February, p. 199). But other profiles match up different gendered pursuits with career aspirations. The March profile of singer Idina Menzel, for instance, discusses how she manages to jet set from show to show while still taking care of her four-year-old son. “If I want to tuck my son into bed and read him a story but that means I have to take a red-eye to get to a concert—which I would never think of doing otherwise—that’s just the way it is,” Menzel says (Green, March, p. 346). *Elle* consistently depicts women’s decisions not to choose to one path over another as a positive way to achieve career success and personal happiness.

Still, the reality of why women like Menzel have to overwork themselves in order to balance work and family lives is rarely acknowledged in the magazine. An October profile of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg alludes to some awareness of how patriarchy constrains women’s time, but not much. In the story, Ginsberg says women don’t have to choose between having a family life and work life as long as they have a spouse “who believes you should have a chance to do whatever your talent and hard work enable you to do” (Weisberg, October, p. 360). Including this quote suggests *Elle* understands the inequality between men’s and women’s work at home, but the magazine

does not mention those issues in other profiles, so it's hard to know for sure whether the brand acknowledges patriarchy in that respect.

### **Assertiveness in profiles.**

Assertiveness is a dominant theme throughout the *Elle* profiles; only seven of the seventy articles contain little-to-no insinuation of aggression, self-confidence, or personal power. Thus, in nearly every area of their lives, women featured in the magazine are brazen and outspoken, traits *Elle* depicts through descriptions and quotes within the articles.

Of these, the most notable is the use of the word “unapologetic,” which *Elle* writers employ frequently. The descriptor was found more than once in nearly every issue, and it was often used when writers referred to a featured woman’s boldest statement or most controversial stance. For instance, in the May issue, the profile of rapper Iggy Azalea says she is “...well aware of her association with her early, unapologetically raunchy tracks, like ‘Pu\$\$y,’” and in the July issue, the profile of writer Emily Gould mentions her “unapologetically feminist agenda” (Hyland, May, 288). In both of these examples, the writers frame the women’s choices as a rebellion against a norm, the former admonishing sexual conservatism and the latter prejudices against women’s equality. This usage occurs in multiple profiles, and though subtle, it reveals a true driving force behind the *Elle* brand in terms of assertiveness: An *Elle* woman is not ashamed of herself, what she believes in, or the choices she has made, and she feels no need to apologize to society for believing in her and other women’s right to express themselves. Her self-confidence comes from her ability to stand behind her own beliefs. The same assessment could be applied to entire profiles, which, across the board,

emphasize similar rhetorical devices to convey the magazine's overall assertiveness theme.

At a larger scale, however, full-length profiles are also qualified by other elements in the story. *Elle's* consistent inclusion of quotes that make bold statements or use profanity, for example, often suggests featured women's assertiveness, as is the case with this quote about whether singer Miley Cyrus considers herself a feminist:

“I'm just about equality, period. It's not, like, I'm a woman, women should be in charge ... I still don't think we're there 100 percent. I mean, guy rappers grab their crotch all fucking day and have hos around them, but no one talks about it. But if I grab my crotch and I have hot model bitches around me, I'm degrading women? I'm a woman—I should be able to have girls around me! But I'm part of the evolution of that. I hope.” (Gevinson, May, 322)

Cyrus' profanity, in the context of her beliefs about women's equality and gendered double standards, reinforces her conviction, and *Elle's* editorial decision to use her voice to express feminist sentiments strengthens the magazine's pro-women, individualistic brand.

But when quotes like these are paired with the writers' observations during interviews, that boldness wanes to a seemingly well-rounded portrayal of the interviewees. By far, the most common frame that results from this blend is a good-girl-bad-girl dichotomy, which presents featured women as relatable, girl-next-door types who also embody aggressive, traditionally masculine traits or talk openly about their sexuality.

Actress Dakota Johnson, who is featured in the March issue for her upcoming lead role in the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, exemplifies this trend. The book-gone-film places her in the role of Anastasia Steele, a woman exploring sadomasochism for the first time. Throughout the profile, Johnson's quotes about how she landed such a racy role for her first big break in Hollywood are aggressive. When she recounts waiting to find out whether she got the job, she says, "It was kind of brutal ... I was calling every day, being like, 'What the fuck is going on?'" Toward the end, it was like, "I either have this part or I'm an asshole" (Rodrick, March, p. 429).

Under traditional gender role standards, her use of profanity is distinctly unfeminine, but the writer, Stephen Rodrick, uses his own commentary to stem that aggression. As he continues to interview her about her career, he mentions that her parents are both celebrities and she has a strained relationship with them because of it. "Given all that, why would she follow her parents into the family business?" he says, adding, "At that question, the face of Hollywood's next big vixen is consumed by a little-girl-lost look" (Rodrick, March, p. 433). Rodrick's insertion of himself into the story frames Johnson from his perspective, which casts her as a "little-girl-lost" at odds with her newfound sexual prowess.

He repeats this device throughout the profile, even including "giggles" when Johnson's boyfriend calls mid-interview, and finally ends with Johnson's photoshoot for the magazine:

"When we arrive at the shoot, Johnson disappears for two hours. I still have some doubts about the smart-aleck kid pulling off an erotic role. But then she emerges in a tight green dress, blue eyes shining behind her

makeup, grinning ... Johnson gazes into the lens with a vaguely hunted look, her hands pushing stocking downward. Then the shooting stops, and Dakota strolls over to a monitor for a look. She can't suppress a giggle. 'There are good shots of my ass, you can't go wrong with some good ass shots.' Then she walks back to her dressing room, high heels in hand, a girlish bounce in her step." (Rodrick, March, p. 520)

This paragraph interweaves good-girl, bad-girl frames to create the mental image of a superficially sexy, yet relatable, *Elle* woman. Rodrick's juxtaposition of Johnson's giggle and "girlish bounce" with her sexy photo-shoot restricts the way her confidence is framed in the story. He implies that, although she is powerful, she is also vulnerable, another common trait paired with women's assertiveness in *Elle*.

A quote from the June profile of Angelina Jolie, pointedly sums up the purpose of this kind of framework. When writer Maggie Bullock describes Jolie returning to work after spending months at home with her children, she says, "After turning herself over to the softer side of womanhood, she wanted to fight, throw punches, kick bad guys. To remind herself (and the rest of us) of the flip side of her coin" (Bullock, June, p. 234). *Elle* promotes assertiveness, confidence, as long as its balanced by traditional femininity.

### **Independence in profiles.**

The prevalence of independence in *Elle* profiles varies. In order to assess the way the theme frames the articles, the researcher analyzed each one in relation to how it depicted the featured woman's achievement of financial, emotional, or social freedom. Although the majority of the profiles implied, at least once, that a featured woman's

independence was a positive trait, five showed no signs of the theme, and ten suggested that some independence negatively impacted a woman's success.

By far, financial or career independence was the most common overarching theme in the profiles. Notably, all of the women in *Elle* are successful careerists, and though many are mothers, that aspect of their lives either takes a backseat to their professional aspirations or bolsters the promotion of women who live seemingly well-rounded, have-it-all lifestyles. *Elle* writers positively reinforce this theme as a characteristic of an *Elle* woman by using descriptions of featured women who intertwine their career-driven personalities and natural talents with their success, convey their control over their career trajectories, and emphasize their inherent likeability because of their independence.

The July profile of cover model and featured celebrity Anna Kendrick provides a prototypical example of this framework. The profile begins with an extended subtitle that orients Kendrick's career in terms of her control and her hard work. The subtitle says, "The Internet loves kittens, bacon, and...Anna Kendrick! With a sharp sense of humor and serious smarts, she has turned herself into the savviest social-media star of her generation. Now, with seven projects on the horizon, the acting, singing, joking sensation is about to go supernova" (Langmuir, July, p. 162). By virtue of the first line, Kendrick is likeable, or at least *Elle* says she is. Then, in the second sentence, *Elle*'s use of active voice extends that likeability to the way she controls her career and the success she has garnered from that power: She has used her charismatic personality to turn herself into not only a social-media star, but also the savviest one of her generation; in terms of *Elle*, this portrays Kendrick as the epitome of social and career success. Finally, in the third line, the magazine's emphasis on the variety and number of her current projects shows

how difficult that rise to fame has been and continues to be. Kendrick seemingly does everything, and that versatility has put her on a “supernova” track to fame. The overall effect of the entire subtitle, then, positively frames Kendrick as a woman who is likeable because she chose to direct her career and talents toward achieving financial independence.

Writer Molly Langmuir continues to frame Kendrick’s independence this way throughout the profile. Like other *Elle* profile writers, she devotes a paragraph to listing Kendrick’s most recent career successes, and then follows that paragraph with a statement that places Kendrick at the helm of her achievements:

“She does drama, folks! She sings! She raps! She’s hilarious! She can make a whole song out of tapping a plastic cup! ... Tweet by tweet, joke by joke, Kendrick, now 28, has carved out a space in which to define herself. And the result is that despite living a life most of can’t relate to, she herself seems entirely relatable.” (Langmuir, July, p. 162)

Langmuir’s use of active voice and exclamation points gives the profile an upbeat tone. And her pairing of Kendrick’s multifaceted career with her girl-next-door persona positively frames each of her accomplishments as something readers, too, could emulate.

To add credence to this framework’s place in *Elle* brand, later in the profile, Langmuir writes, “If you were a celebrity, wouldn’t you be exactly like Kendrick?” and adds that Kendrick exists outside the norm because she doesn’t live the Hollywood lifestyle (Langmuir, July, p. 199). “To be a celebrity to who is self-aware and relatable in spite of acclaim, the superhuman skill set, the Oscar nomination, the seven films on the horizon—to remain normal in abnormal circumstances—is not easy or natural,”

Langmuir writes (Langmuir, July, p. 199). Financially, Kendrick has achieved her independence, and socially, she continues to do so every day by actively choosing to be different from other women pursuing similar careers.

Such promotion of an against-the-grain personality is another independence characteristic found throughout the *Elle* profiles, with many writers focusing on featured women's rebelliousness or outlier nature as a trait that sets them apart from other women. In the May issue, the Women in Music profiles do this through their headlines: Words such as "renegade," "subversive," and "maverick" open the Iggy Azalea, Lily Allen, and Kacey Musgraves articles with a theme of originality that later echoes in their respective profiles. The Musgraves profile notes "how country music sees itself, as home to the sincere outlaw," and adds that Musgraves is a member of the tribe (Goodman, May, p. 297). Writer April Long calls Allen a "true original," and Veronique Hyland says Azalea "proved the naysayers wrong" (Long, May, p. 293; Hyland, May, p. 288). Each of these phrases serves to orient the featured musician against a societal norm in a way that positively frames her bold attitude.

The November profile of Tina Fey gives a firmer example of how this frame functions in the context of full articles. When writers contrast women in *Elle* to societal norms, they often use other more-traditional women to juxtapose the featured woman's defiance and create an independence theme. In his profile of Fey, writer Boris Kachka leads with an anecdote about Fey's agents, who want her to stop booking so many dramas and show her range. Fey scorns their advice, and Kachka, speaking to the readers, says "It isn't so much the self-serious ambition that seems to turn her off; it's the celebrity's reliance on others to craft her career—to tell her who to be" (Kachka, November, p. 309).

The combination of the negative anecdote about Fey's stifled independence, the description of her reaction, and Kachka's summary of her emotions opens the profile under a main thesis: Fey isn't like other celebrities because she understands that the crux of a woman's independence is her ability to control her future. Then, as the profile continues, Kachka backs up this claim. He calls Fey a "realist who learned long ago that the only way to succeed was to write her own ticket," and includes anecdotes that detail her work to maintain her independence from outside control (Kachka, November, p. 309).

With that said, some profiles in *Elle* attempt to undercut women's independence, especially if they are notably aggressive or sexual. Sometimes, this is subtle: The Kendrick profile includes two paragraphs that question whether her attractiveness has precipitated her fame. But in at least eight profiles, writers use a woman's appearance to downplay her personal authority over her career.

In the February issue, the profile of FOX news anchor Megyn Kelly presents a standard example of how these two opposing forces appear in the magazine. Kelly is known for being outspoken and asking unusually direct questions, but through the subtitle and the lead, *Elle* minimizes these traits. In the subtitle, the magazine introduces Kelly as "the most controversial news anchor of the moment," and notes how fearful other networks are of her success. But in the lead, writer Ben Dickinson highlights her "naughtily moussed blond bob framing her flashing blue eyes and perpetually glossed lips," calling her the "FOX fox" instead of mentioning her aggressive reputation again. (Dickinson, February, p. 184). The juxtaposition creates the image of a sexualized figure who has a high-power career, a mix of antifeminism and feminism in one.

As the article progresses, this pattern continues. Although Dickinson acknowledges Kelly's success and aggressiveness as an anchor, the majority of those triumphs are qualified by the fact that she is attractive. In one anecdote, Kelly questions a statistic during a newscast and decides to go with her gut on air. Then, when the show goes to commercial, Dickinson says she "rose from her anchor desk and stomped down a hallway, her toned gams pumping, to visit her off-the-set number crunchers" (Dickinson, February, p. 185). Her brazen decision to trust herself over her team shows her confidence, yet Dickinson's description sexualizes that move, objectifying her instead of focusing on how her ability to think independently has fostered her success.

The article also attempts to deflect stereotypically annoying female characteristics that might be associated with her high level of success. A quote in the article reads, "And she can be just as tough as nails and bear down on people. I think she's got the strongest set of qualities of any woman in the news part of the medium in history," but Dickinson clarifies that statement, among others, through description (Dickinson, February, p. 186). He says, in response to how her aggressiveness has led to her independence, that the "earthy timbre of her voice —she's almost incapable of sounding shrill" (Dickinson, February, p. 186). This association, though an attempt to give credence to her reporting, only serves to reinforce a negative stereotype of women in power and, therefore, negatively frame women's independence.

### **Diversity in profiles.**

As stated previously, in order to study the diversity in *Elle*, the researcher coded for allusions, anecdotes, and quotes that discussed aspects of a featured woman's demographic, particularly her race, age, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. Although the

twelve issues studied included many diverse profile subjects, the majority of the women featured in the magazines represented a standard demographic: white upper-middle-class straight women. With the exception of one article, the May profile of Miley Cyrus, these profiles did not directly recognize conflicts of diversity in society. Only the profiles of diverse women — especially those that featured non-white or homosexual women — breached discussions of diversity.

As such, the lack of diversity *Elle* profiles needs to be addressed. From issue to issue, most women in *Elle* are white, well-educated, and affluent, and their cookie-cutter backgrounds reflect that reality: Despite their personality or career differences, most were raised in middle-class families, attended private schools and universities, and currently live wealthy lifestyles.

For instance, the February and June issues profile Susan Minot and Marianne Williamson, respectively. The two women, both white, have different careers: Minot is an author writing about women in Africa, and Williamson is a religious politician running for Congress in Los Angeles. Yet, their profiles mirror each other because they grew up in similar circumstances and, today, would be classified by the same socioeconomic status. Writer Will Blythe dubs Minot a “Boston Brahmin,” alluding to her family’s wealthy background, political influence, and Puritan roots (Blythe, February, p. 191). She also has two homes, one in New York City and another in Maine. Similarly, writer Amanda Fortini calls Williamson’s childhood “typical” because she grew up in a middle-class family, with a stay-at-home mother and well-known immigrant lawyer father (Fortini, June, p. 181). As a politician, Williamson represents California’s District 33, “one of the wealthiest and most influential districts in the country” (Fortini, June, p. 184).

Neither Minot nor Williamson faced financial difficulties while she was growing up, and both attended private college, though Williamson dropped out to pursue ministry.

In both of these cases, *Elle* writers attempt to normalize these women's lives by downplaying their upper-middle-class lifestyles. When Minot talks about her other home in Maine, Blythe adds, "she may join in a cocktail party or lobster dinner after working all day. But even then, she says, 'I'm not living the total vacation life'" as if to nullify her wealth with her work ethic (Blythe, February, p. 191). And when talking about Williamson's lifestyle, Fortini frames social class as an intrinsic consequence of Williamson's personality. The writer notes that "Early in her career, Williamson got a lot of flak for being a 'celebrity guru' who hung out with famous people" but then quotes Williamson defending herself against that criticism: "'These are my people! ... In this district, people read the same books I read. They watch the same movies. I live in the same zeitgeist'" (Fortini, June, p. 234). These attempts to qualify women's high-income, socioeconomic status with other factors, such as work or personal choice, occur frequently in the magazine's profiles of white women, and the frame suggests the normalcy of wealth among women who embody the *Elle* brand.

However, other profiles seek to balance this representation by adding a more-diverse set of women to the magazine. At least twelve of the seventy profiles analyzed for this study feature women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds; the magazine's writers use these profiles as platforms for discussing how diversity intersects with society and patriarchy, especially in terms of how it affects women's careers. This relationship is most often depicted through quotes and anecdotes, and it shows up in almost all of the

diverse profiles that Roberta Myers introduces in her editor's letter. Overall, Myers is more likely to introduce racially diverse profiles than those of white women in her letters.

In the January issue, for example, Myers discusses how the subjectivity of society's beauty standards affects models (Young, January). Then, in one of the issue's profiles, cover model Joan Smalls, a Puerto Rican model from a coastal farm town, discusses her ascent in the fashion industry. She says she came to New York because she didn't fit the beauty ideal in Puerto Rico, only to find that her race would influence her career just as profoundly. In one anecdote, she says a modeling agency told her she need to straighten her teeth because, in the United States, she's considered a black model and black women, unlike white ones, can't have crooked teeth.

*Elle*, through the voice of Smalls and then writer Molly Young, provides this analysis of that disparate approach beauty:

“Fashion should be about creativity and visionaries, and last time I checked, the world is a multicultural place. Why shouldn't a little girl from Puerto Rico see the runway and think, I can wear that?’ ... ‘People hide behind the word *aesthetic*. They say, “Well, it's just that designer's aesthetic.” But when you see 18 seasons in a row and not one single model outside a certain skin color...?’ She raises an eyebrow. ‘There are people in the industry who are advocates, who support diversity. And there are people who do not. I don't get it. Beauty is universal. These doors have to open.’ Designers who tend toward starkly monochromatic runways are only diminishing their own relevance.” (Young, January, p. 114).

The quote-and-analysis mix, used here, serves two roles: It comments on the way society attempts to dictate women's beauty standards, and it voices the obstacles non-white women face in an industry traditionally controlled by men. One or both of these issues are addressed in the magazine's other diverse articles, and *Elle* uses a similar tactic for each.

### **Essays**

The final portion of this research analyzes 13 *Elle* essays published during 2014. Although the magazine often publishes essays written by men and women, the essays written by men were excluded from this study to keep the focus of the research on women's personal experience. Likewise, the magazine did not print any female-written essays in February and July, so those months are also excluded. Most of the essayists included in the magazine are members of the *Elle* staff, either as writers or editors, but some writers such as Marisa Meltzer contribute freelance articles to the magazine.

In terms of the essays' content, there is at least one overarching similarity: All of them address the way women interact with, and overcome, obstacles in today's society. The essay topics vary, but in many cases, that focus on breaking down social barriers yields writer commentary on feminism and patriarchy. In fact, only three of the 13 essays fail to address patriarchy directly. Through essays, *Elle* writers talk about how issues such as weight loss, work-life balance, the male gaze, fashion, and abortion are restricted in a male-dominated society.

A typical *Elle* essay begins with a first-person lead, usually an anecdote, and transitions into an explanation of the writer's conflict, or the reason she is writing the essay in the first place. For instance, in the March issue, writer Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie begins her essay “Why can’t a smart woman love fashion?” with an anecdote about watching her mother get dressed when she was growing up in Nigeria. Adichie describes her mother’s clothing and explains that dressing well is part of the Nigerian culture. Then, she introduces her conflict: In America, she has to downplay her love of fashion, so other writers will take her career seriously (Adichie, March).

Like other *Elle* essays, the remainder of the article is devoted to exploring this conflict and why it exists. Writers use anecdotes and interviews with “experts” to help them form a conclusive opinion about the problem and, usually, touch on a deeper reason for its existence. Adichie parallels anecdotes from the years she hid her fashion devotion with surface commentary about society’s misgivings. She says, for years, she wore less-provocative colors and pretended not to care about clothing because in Western culture, “Women who wanted to be taken seriously were supposed to substantiate their seriousness with a studied indifference to appearance,” (Adichie, March, p. 208).

Then, she transition that assessment to the pinnacle moment in her observations:

“I didn’t want to look as if I tried too hard. I also wanted to look older. Young and female seemed to me a bad combination for being taken seriously. Once, I bought a pair of high heels to a literary event but left them in my suitcase and wore flats instead. An old friend said, ‘Wear what you want to; it’s your work that matters.’ But he was a man, and I thought that was easy for him to say.” (Adichie, March, p. 208)

In this example, she adds a layer to her initial observation about women in Western culture by comparing society’s differing expectations of men and women. And by using anecdotes to describe how those social constraints affected her, she shows

readers the flaws of society. When she finds a way to overcome them, she asserts her power over that influence and feels more like herself because of her choice: “I dress now thinking of what I like, what I think fits and flatters, what puts me in a good mood. I feel again myself—an idea that is no less true for being a bit hackneyed” (Adichie, March, p. 208).

Throughout most of the *Elle* essays, writers use similar techniques to address the disparity between the status of men and women in society, especially when talking about personal choice and independence. Women’s assertiveness, then, comes as a result of those structures.

The essays rarely, if ever, discuss diversity, except in regard to the way upper-middle-class lifestyles establish women’s freedom, empowerment, and success.

#### **Personal choice in essays.**

Like the Adichie essay, *Elle* writers consistently frame personal choice through their central conflict: They introduce the notion that society controls one of their choices — a social norm tells them how they should think, feel, or act — and explain that they are dissatisfied with that lack of freedom. As they explore how that reality has shaped their lives, how they have attempted and failed to align with an unsolicited expectation, they search for a better way to cope with that reality. In most cases, the solution is personal: Women need to stand by their choices, despite outside factors because those decisions will make them truly happy.

As noted before, patriarchy is one of those controlling forces, and it manifests itself in almost all of the essays. *Elle* writers use personal anecdotes to show how

patriarchy has obstructed their choices and to point out where women's equality still needs to be addressed.

A good example of this can be found in Laurie Abraham's November essay, "It's complicated," where she discusses the culture of silence surrounding abortion in America. In the essay, Abraham, who has had two abortions, argues that even though abortion seems more acceptable today than it used to be, society controls the way a woman's choice to have an abortion is perceived. Because abortion is shrouded by shame, she says, people often justify a woman's choice to have one with sympathy, framing her as a victim of a tragedy instead of an empowered decision-maker (Abraham, November, p. 292).

Abraham uses her own story to rebut that trope: "But I want to tell a different story, the more common yet strangely hidden one, which is that I don't feel guilty and tortured about my abortion. Or rather, my abortions" (Abraham, November, p. 292). In the remainder of the essay, she reviews the backstory of each abortion and explains her reasoning behind each decision.

She talks about her experience with the culture of shame surrounding abortion and addresses her own misgivings with the fact that she's never felt guilty about her decision, like society has told her she is supposed to (Abraham, November, p. 293-4).

"It's been less than 50 years since modern feminism began to reshape our rights under the law and our desires and expectations (sexual and otherwise) in relationships. It's deeply unsettling to defy what Politt calls the centuries old 'self-sacrificing, other-oriented, maternal' ideal. What

kind of woman are you, Laurie? Shame may be part of the psychic bargain women strike with themselves.” (Abraham, November, p. 345)

Then, she blends her narrative with social commentary from women’s health and feminism experts in order to address the relationship between the stigma and patriarchy. Through her anecdotes, she show patriarchy’s control: She says women choose, for whatever reason, to have an abortion, and, currently, the culture, whether pro-choice or otherwise, decides if that decision was appropriate.

And through quotes from social researchers, she explains why silencing women’s choices has large-scale effects on women’s lives.

“What’s most important, she says, isn’t the actual procedure. It isn’t the YouTube video that shows how simple first-trimester abortions are, but what happens afterward: the lives women go on to live. The education, the work, the love and relationships—the marriage you wanted, the children you could raise well. That’s the untold story of abortion, she tells me.”

(Abraham, November, p. 346)

The combination of personal narrative and reporting lets Abraham address where women still face setbacks, and through her voice, so does *Elle*.

The essays are not solely focused on patriarchy, however; multiple writers use the articles to reassess their relationship with early waves of feminism because they feel their ideologies are too stringent. In the January essay, “The last feminist taboo,” Marisa Meltzer talks about feeling the need to hide the fact that she diets because she is a feminist. “There’s a thread of old-school feminist thought that says taking pleasure in being admired for our looks is participating in our own oppression, minimizing our brains

and power,” Meltzer says, adding that she fears she’s the “wrong kind of feminist” because she secretly worries about her weight (Meltzer, January, p. 89).

The discrepancy between her actions and feminism becomes the central conflict in her essay because she feels she is being forced to choose an ideology that doesn’t fully represent who she is. Meltzer criticizes feminism because it entails a set of expectations that aren’t necessarily healthy for women. She says traditional feminism tells women to love and accept their bodies, to promote body positivity at all times, but in her experience, doing so doesn’t makes her healthy or happy.

In fact, Meltzer believes the feminist ideal of a body-loving, diet-free, empowered woman restricts women with unrealistic expectations:

“There’s also a strain of ambivalence that’s more nebulous and apolitical: the notion that evolved girls simply don’t need to diet. The modern woman, after all, is that highly capable, have-it-all creature to whom career success, confidence, and effortless style—and, oh yeah, the yoga body and the eco-conscious, preservative-free diet—come naturally. She’s too damn smart to overeat in the first place. If anything, she’s already healthy and getting ever healthier.” (Meltzer, January, p. 89)

Still, even with this analysis, Meltzer does not reject feminism, and that’s a key component of this and other *Elle* essays. Instead, she addresses her fear of being a “bad feminist” by exploring the problem and talking to other women. In the end, she reasons that feminism, like other forms of social policing, “often gets into an unappealing cul-de-sac where there’s this set of practices or beliefs that you have to be a part of to be a good feminist” (January, “The last feminist taboo,” p. 89). And she decides to reinterpret those

criteria, so they fit her life. Meltzer chooses, per feminism doctrine, to love her body, but she does so while dieting and exercising in order to achieve a healthy lifestyle because she says she feels most comfortable that way.

This choice empowers Meltzer, and in terms of *Elle*'s brand, it's a common approach to feminism. The magazine consistently promotes choices that make women feel more confident and independent. Such emphasis on individuals over movement-based feminism aligns with third-wave feminist ideology.

### **Assertiveness in essays.**

Of the essay themes, assertiveness is the most indirect. Aside from the possibility of writers showing their confidence by addressing often-taboo topics — abortion, feminism and weight loss, homosexuality, unhappy marriages — much of their boldness occurs as a result of their personal choices and sense of independence; they stand out among other women because they make unconventional decisions or defy society's expectations.

A large chunk of that assertiveness in *Elle* is built around fashion and how clothing that reflects a woman's personal taste projects confidence. In fact, the relationship between fashion and assertiveness is so common that it appears in five of the 13 essays. Some, like the Adichie essay and a September article by Alice Gregory, even employ the same angle and explore the place of materialism in smart women's lives. Because of their repetitiveness, these essays most clearly address what the *Elle* brand perceives as ongoing gender inequalities in today's society.

For instance, Adichie says she hid her love for fashion so other writers would take her career seriously, and Gregory criticizes high-power women who spend more time validating their attachment to clothes than enjoying fashion:

It can sometimes feel as though there's a surplus of first-person writing by women who assert, often indirectly, that materialism is all right so long as its object is archival, for foreign, or handed down along the maternal line—that clothes-related joy is admissible only if it's a symptom of something more substantial: an appreciation of history, an ambition to travel, family pride. . . . many otherwise self-assured women seem constitutionally incapable of allowing a pretty dress to be just a pretty dress. Cultural anthropology can be a save face for the intellectually maligned.” (Gregory, September, p. 288)

In both of these examples, the writers argue the stigma against loving something traditionally feminine polarizes women as either well-dressed bimbos or intelligent slobs. For Gregory, that characterization mirrors the belief that women can either have a family or a career and creates an even more damaging result: Women attempt to straddle both stereotypes in order to succeed. “Appear to care too much and you're a ditz,” she writes, “don't care enough and your ideas remain invisible to the people who are in a position to promote them” (Gregory, September, p. 288). Through her analysis, the magazine implies women's ongoing inequality is evident in the double standards they face while trying to embody every expectation at once.

With that said, the common thread among all of the fashion essays is how the emotional aspect of clothes defy the cultural perception of them. In the articles, the

writers compare the way clothes make them feel — strong, empowered, and confident — with the way society perceives their sense of style. That conflict becomes the center of an argumentative essay in which the writers defend their clothing choices and explain why the perception is wrong.

Although many of these essays function like the Adichie and Gregory articles, one essay in the September issue flouts their angle. In “Lolita for life,” Stephanie LaCava talks about her style choices, which, as a small redhead with a childlike figure, often make her look like a young girl. As alluded to in the title, LaCava enjoys playing with the contradiction between her size and her sexuality; she dresses in risqué-yet-girlish outfits because she feels empowered by that disparity. “Dressing this way both hides and highlights things I value most about myself, which—despite the accusing looks of some women on the street—aren’t my legs, but rather my combative spirit, my sexuality, my curiosity” (LaCava, September, p. 272).

In terms of personal assertiveness, LaCava’s essay hits the mark. She asserts herself through her sexuality, something characteristic of third-wave feminism, in defiance of other people’s expectations. Even her husband, who wants her to dress more maturely, hasn’t been able to shake her peculiar fashion sense (LaCava, September).

Still, the essay falls short of acknowledging patriarchy. LaCava takes on a traditionally submissive role under the guise of assuming more power. She’s aggressive, but she directs her aggression toward other women with the goal of gaining men’s attention, of objectifying herself. “Undeniably, there’s a small thrill, a tiny power in rejecting other women’s standards, in playing the provocateur,” she says. “And in

knowing firsthand the one sure way to win the attention of every man and piss off every woman in any given room: Wear thigh-high socks” (LaCava, September, p. 276).

In many ways, this focus on capturing men’s attention by out-sexualizing other women takes away from the feminist aspects of her piece. LaCava implies that, in a patriarchal society, women can still be confident, but only as the result of men’s desire. Even toward the end, when she says she enjoys confusing men with her clothing style — they never think she’s going to be intelligent, too — she doesn’t discuss why they have those expectations in the same way that Abraham’s abortion essay and Meltzer’s weight loss essay do, nor does she use any additional reporting to back up the sociological validity of her article.

Of the *Elle* essays, hers is an outlier, but a notable one. LaCava’s piece is the only one that addresses sexual assertiveness in such a traditional way. Its inclusion in the magazine contradicts the other evidence of feminism found in the essays.

### **Independence in essays.**

All of the *Elle* essays emphasize the writer’s independence in some way, with personal choice driving the majority of the anecdotes about women’s freedom. Like they do with the assertiveness frame, writers share a series of experiences that illustrate times they have defied convention in order to achieve personal liberation. For instance, in a December essay, Meghan Daum ignores advice from Nora Ephron, who thinks she should be a screenwriter, because she doesn’t believe the career suits her. When she looks back on the decision, she realizes her journalism career has given her the independent success she didn’t know she craved, and she feels empowered by that autonomy (Daum,

December, p. 116). These personal successes drive minor undercurrents of the independence theme throughout the *Elle* essays.

But the major commonality among many of the essays is the way they address patriarchy and its influence on women's independence, both in their careers and their personal lives. The writers introduce a problem — balancing their work and home lives, attempting to live up to society's beauty standards, et cetera — and then explain how they cope with the way that aspect of patriarchy restricts their independence. The important nuance in these essays is that they don't overcome those binds necessarily; women learn to function despite them, often addressing gender inequalities alongside their analysis of their personal problem.

Two essays provide good examples of this frame. In Laurie Abraham's April essay, "The hours," she discusses the theory behind *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has Time*, a book about work-life balance. She argues that the ideal worker, a person who is in the office 24/7 and has no personal commitments, became obsolete after women joined the workforce. Now, instead of women taking care of domestic duties while men go to work, women do both. Abraham says this purported ideal has "kept us all from imagining, never mind agitating for, changes in government and employment policy that would take the pressure off overburdened, stressed-out families" (Abraham, April, p. 264).

To validate this argument, she interweaves it with examples of the sacrifices she has made to maintain some independence despite cultural pressure to work all the time. When she had children, she purposefully pared down her career goals in order to establish relationships with them. "On the motherhood front, based on my own capacities

and limits—primarily how easily preoccupied I can get with work and even household tasks—I had to create, and protect, swaths of clean time with my girls” (Abraham, April, p. 264). She also works from home most of the time.

Abraham continues to address the problem in society by commenting on its more subtle effects on her life: She still fears that, by making sacrifices in her career for her family, she will lose ground at her job (Abraham, April). As an *Elle* editor for 15 years, hers is an interesting perspective in terms of the magazine’s brand. Abraham’s fear directly links back to the magazine, both as a conduit of its voice through one essay and in terms of her actual career. In this way, *Elle* implies that the challenges of work-life balance affect more than just one woman; they affect all women who straddle public and private spheres. Like Abraham, women are working to establish themselves within an inhospitable environment.

The second essay that uses this frame looks at limitations on independence outside the workplace. Virginia Vitzthum reassesses the male gaze in her June essay, “Eye of the beholder.” When she starts to date women, she finds herself admiring them like men do and wonders whether she, too, is objectifying them. Although she ends up deciding she is not, her commentary on why the fear of the male gaze exists pointedly addresses how women cope with male-dominant sexuality and society’s preoccupation with controlling women’s bodies. Vitzthum says women measure themselves “against an ‘objective’ standard” and spend most of their female-female relationships reassuring each other that they fit the beauty ideal (Vitzthum, June, p. 156). “Much of straight-girl friendship is in building this vast sister-shield to deflect the withering rays of men’s real or imagined aesthetic judgment,” she says (Vitzthum, June, p. 156).

When she begins dating women, she realizes this shouldn't be necessary, that the male gaze exists when men, and sometimes other women, attempt to limit a woman's beauty to her physical appearance and ignore her individuality.

“I already have practice loving women's kindness, expressiveness, self-awareness, self-depreciation, listening, the way they roll up their sleeves and take care of sick people, and their wide definition of sexy. Women's beauty gets folded into all those things. It's not distinct; it's additional. And it's not objective, it's subjective. It's personal.” (Vitzthum, June, p. 158)

Like Abraham's essay, Vitzthum merely provides commentary and experiences that express a still-prevalent problem in today's society. Both essays illustrate how women endure, collectively, patriarchal restraints, and the writers' call for a cultural mindset shift adds nuance to how magazine promotes independence among its readers.

### **Diversity in essays.**

As standalone articles, many of the *Elle* essays hint at some form of diversity. But when studied as a larger set, no distinct trends appear because few writers embrace the same kind of inclusiveness. Vitzthum discusses homosexuality, Adichie talks about integrating her Nigerian culture into America, and Meltzer introduces the concept of body diversity, yet these topics do not show up in the other essays.

In some ways, this is telling of the content diversity in *Elle*; the magazine appears to speak to inclusivity through many different voices and opinions. According to editor-in-chief Roberta Myers, that's part of the *Elle* brand, so the staff purposefully tries to

represent different points of view, body types, ethnicities, and sexualities, among other things, in the magazine.

Yet, the articles often show a collective lack of diversity, too, which contradicts this effort and the promoted brand. Throughout the 13 essays in this study, writers downplay socioeconomic diversity in order to endorse upper-middle-class lifestyles. They emphasize the importance of money and “looking rich” to women’s personal and professional success.

The easiest place to find this frame is in the seven fashion essays because writers use mainstream fashion as a comparison point for high-end styles. Although this juxtaposition occurs regularly, two essays illustrate its effects perfectly: Alice Gregory’s May article, “All hail the new hipster,” and Amanda Fortini’s September piece, “French twist.”

In each, the writers examine the high-end fashion world, but from different angles. In Gregory’s essay, she explains that she’s a middle-class woman who’s learned how to pair cheaper labels with designer clothes to make herself look richer. She says, “With my entire annual net income, I could probably afford a single Celine outfit (minus the purse), but I know how to dress to defy my tax bracket” (Gregory, May, p. 102). Fortini’s essay, on the other hand, analyzes the fall runway for its bourgeois trends. She explains that bourgeois is an exclusive French social class characterized by a set of ritualistic behaviors, and she argues elite women’s fashion should have that same regularity. The components of modern elegance, she says, boil down to a simple uniform: “Rag & Bone jeans, black Celine pants, a black silk shirt and cashmere sweater from Co, a black A.P.C. blazer, and a handful of T-shirts” (Fortini, September, p. 310).

Then, both writers compare designer clothes to street style, dubbed “fast fashion” because the garments are made quickly and the trends change so often. In these essays, the main issues with fast fashion are its accessibility and, therefore, its commonness. Because the clothes are affordable, everyone buys them.

The writers argue such availability waters down the purpose of chic, runway style, which is to highlight the personality of the woman who wears them.

“Perhaps stylish women over 25 ... will make bourgeois chic their own. Similar impulses are behind both sartorial modes: to pare down, to streamline, to spurn the herd mentality of trend chasing, the fallacy that individualism can be bought, and the waste and clutter of fast fashion.”  
(Fortini, September, p. 310).

The writers continue to pit class against class throughout the remainder of their essays, with Gregory summing up the overall thesis of their argument: A successful woman “can afford—both financially and socially—to be underdressed” (Gregory, May, p. 100). Money gives people the freedom to stop trying to be trendy; they wear timeless designs because they can afford them. For Gregory, that kind of wardrobe guards itself against possible “tacky” pieces, or those that would come from fast fashion stores. She says the more expensive look is worth pursuing because it signals a woman’s trajectory in society. “Cool is no longer categorically aspirational—cool is mass market. When it comes to getting dressed in 2014, affluence—or, in my case, the illusion of it—begins to look like the last unattainable goal” (Gregory, May, p. 100).

Notably, both essays represent an ongoing disparity in *Elle* articles. Writers attempt to reconcile the expense of fashion through the eyes of a self-purported, less-

wealthy writer, like Gregory. But, inevitably, the essays glorify money by emphasizing its social capital and showing how readers, too, can become members of a higher class. The *Elle* writers rarely acknowledge how their own biases shape this frame, either. Once, in a September essay, Gregory hints at the origin of this focus on class: “A lot of [writers] are women who, like myself, live in Brooklyn, work in media, and, if asked, would self-identify as both smart and stylish. We enjoy the cultural luxury of ‘overthinking it’” (Gregory, September, p. 290). “Luxury” is a key word, here, because the Elle brand emphasizes such freedom through class time and time again.

## Conclusion

In the literature about women's magazines, researchers say the publications are meant for a transient readership, one too busy taking care of the family to sit down and read longer pieces, so the editorial content is light and nonserious, something women can put down easily. That isn't the case with *Elle*.

From the start, the magazine had a density and weight to its articles, a sense of cultural relevance, that wasn't discussed in previous literature. Women's magazines have long been known for their playful writing style, but *Elle's* has a more serious tone. And after months of studying the magazine's editor's letters, profiles, and essays, it's clear there's more nuance to its editorial content than quick reads and fashion advice: *Elle* writers know who their audience is, who the *Elle* brand caters to, and they target that demographic as they discuss topics such as women's health, careers, confidence, sense of style, and relationships. The magazine's goal is to help women excel in all of those areas, so writers rely on representatives of successful *Elle* women to serve as models for their readers. In terms of branding, this is spot on.

But the true value of this research doesn't lie in the implementation of *Elle's* brand or its differences from other women's magazines. By looking at how the magazine's brand compares to third-wave feminism ideologies, this research showed how one publication represents a subset of women who ascribe to similar beliefs.

In the case of this study, that belief is a fusion of third-wave feminism and postfeminism. Overall, the magazine lacks diversity, but it endorses women's personal choice, independence, and assertiveness. Writers encourage readers to make decisions that make them happy and represent who they are, an individualistic approach

representative of third-wave feminist values. They also endorse aggressive confidence and career and cultural independence that speaks to the power feminism of the third wave. However, they value women who achieve these traits by taking on everything they can, so writers often fail to acknowledge the gender inequalities women face when attempting to achieve work-life balance. This finding, in particular, fits with previous assessments of women's magazines and the larger feminist understanding of female-oriented editorial copy; the unrealistic expectation that women should be beautiful, smart, funny, bold, independent, and provocative still pervades women's magazine content. And the combination of these opposing sides, the mix of developing third-wave ideals and traditional depictions of women in magazines, creates a less-feminist, yet still third-wave, ideology for the *Elle* brand.

**RQ1: How does *Elle* express themes of personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity in its editor's letters, profiles, and personal essays?**

#### **Conclusions about personal choice.**

Of the four themes studied for this research, personal choice was the most influential because it acted as a catalyst for other themes in the articles. Overall, *Elle* encourages women's personal choice as a form of self-expression and individualism, mostly through anecdotes and quotes. Women who decide what they wear, where they work, and how they spend their free time shape the way others perceive them, and they use their personal experiences to validate that claim. This power results in independence and assertiveness.

In each issue, this frame is established, first, in the editor's letter. Roberta Myers uses personal choice to show how women craft every side of themselves, or, as she calls

it, their “best self.” This can be in terms of appearance — through fashion choices that reflect their personalities — or it can be something more substantial, like their careers and their relationships. At one point, Myers, a pro-choice advocate, even adds that women’s right to choose whether to have an abortion is an important part of her place in society. Choice, she implies, dictates who women marry, where they work, how they feel about themselves, and how others perceive them. Throughout her letters, Myers implies that the power of choice is integral in developing and maintaining a woman’s assertiveness and independence.

Profiles work as an extension of that idea. The magazine features already-successful women, those who take control of every area of their lives, and writers key in to the decisions that have perpetuated those achievements. Instead of choosing work or home, these women choose both. Writers frame each personal choice as the merger of traditionally feminine roles with post-feminism ones; women choose to “have it all” instead of trading one thing for another.

In some ways, the essay category is the outlier of the three article types. Although writers focus on the importance of choices that shape more-perfect perceptions of the women making them, they also address more problems with patriarchy obstructing their power than the editor’s letters or the profiles. Where the other two kinds of articles are more likely to interpret their ability to balance work and home lives positively, the essays call for cultural change. Even among fashion articles, the essay writers touch on societal nuances Myers and the profile writers do not. Despite women’s ability to craft their personal image, they say, the way other people perceive them is still dictated by patriarchal stereotypes.

A good way to look at how the three article types present personal choice is by degree. Myers introduces each issue with an ideal: Women should have the power to define themselves in every area of their lives. Hers is the have-it-all perspective that feminists say encourages women not to choose between options such as work and home, career and motherhood, or femininity and being taken seriously. They can do everything.

Then, the profiles test, and attempt to depict, that ideal. Real women who don't work for the magazine share how they've succeeded in balancing different facets of their personalities, home lives, and career aspirations. Although they're working all the time, they're seemingly happy because they've chosen to take on everything they love. They balance traditionally girly fashion tastes with their hard-won careers, and they champion their financial success while maintaining fulfilling relationships at home. Through their quotes, anecdotes, and even the writers' commentary, the women seem empowered by their choices, and if they address obstacles they've faced because of their gender, that confidence glazes over their struggle. The profiles promote Myers' model, as if to tell readers, "*Elle* thinks you can do this because this woman already has."

Finally, the essays offer *Elle's* analysis and start to skew toward feminism. After promoting an ideal, testing it, and seeing results, writers who've been in similar roles as the profiled women assess where women's lifestyles fall short of those standards and share what needs to be done to achieve success. These articles seem to ask, What choices do women need to make in order to be happy, and why can't they make those choices in our society? In regards to third-wave feminism, or just feminism in general, essays are where the magazine really voices its derision for the way patriarchy still controls women's options.

### **Conclusions about assertiveness.**

Some form of assertiveness appears in most *Elle* articles, though it is more apparent in editor's letters and profiles than in essays. This is, perhaps, because of the nature of the articles: The first two use descriptions and quotes to shape the description of featured women, and the latter relies solely on first-person accounts, so the articles are more likely to discuss challenges to assertiveness than self-confidence.

The general frame of this theme, however, does not change because of the article type. *Elle* emphasizes assertiveness throughout its issues by promoting women's aggression and individualism, often applauding women who take on a "riot grrrl" mindset or go against the norm. But then, the magazine qualifies those traits by reinforcing women's femininity. Many of the featured women come off as simultaneously tough and sensitive, careerists who juggle motherhood on the side. This approach creates a mental image of women attempting to straddle traditionally masculine and feminine traits.

The editor's letters begin this framework by incorporating aggressive adjectives and adverbs into descriptions of featured women and cover models. Many of the terms reflect masculinity, and Myers endorses those descriptions by praising women's tough-girl personas as the epitome of confidence and success. Because of her word choice, the *Elle* ideal develops around the notion that assertive women don't care what people think of them because their individuality is intrinsic to who they are. In this way, Myers strongly emphasizes third-wave power feminism over victim feminism (Kinser, 2004). That practice, then, carries into the profiles, where writers consistently frame featured women as unapologetic and unafraid. They use profanity, make bold decisions, and embrace their sexuality. To *Elle*, that is assertiveness.

Interestingly, the use of this kind of language mimics the "buddy" tone Del-Teso-Craviotto (2006) found characteristic of men's magazines, where writers use profanity and sexuality to build camaraderie with readers. This might imply a future shift toward more fluid gender roles in *Elle*, but the where the framework shifts away from this practice is more indicative of what characteristics the brand values right now. In the profiles and editor's letters, writers moderate women's assertiveness by pairing aggressive quotes or descriptions with traditional women's roles and female stereotypes, such as motherhood and vulnerability. In the May Women in Music issue, for instance, *Elle* pairs titles using words such as "renegade," "subversive," and "maverick" with singer profiles that highlight women's revealing lyrics, their emotional bravery and vulnerability. The same thing happens in other issues when profiles feature non-musicians who exert their power in the workplace or openly express their sexuality; *Elle* softens their depiction by pairing women's boldness with descriptions of their girlishness, attractiveness, likeability, or overall femininity. To put it plainly, the assertive *Elle* woman sounds the girl next door with a reputation for speaking up, breaking rules, and, in many cases, kicking ass.

In the essays, women attempt to find balance between the disparity in these competing roles. And like the personal choice theme, the writers offer analysis of the larger societal conflict that keeps women from achieving that goal. Writers' often-posed question, "Why can't a smart woman love fashion?" provides a textbook example of the way *Elle* employs this frame across the board: In order to be who they are, women have to overcome double standards and cultural expectations that have long been characteristic of male-dominated societies.

Alice Gregory's September essay sums up the reoccurring issue:

“Twenty-first-century women who are especially ‘successful’ in the self-presentation department—fit figures, stylish clothing, deceptively natural-looking makeup, hair that behaves—are liable to be underestimated. In certain circles, knowing how to do your hair is, if anything, a peril—the result of a noxious myth that says working hair to look your best is somehow irreconcilable with having intellectual ambition. To be taken seriously as a woman can require almost impossibly well-calibrated sensitivity to nuances in dress and makeup: Appear to care too much and you're a ditz; don't care enough and your ideas remain invisible to the people who are in a position to promote them.” (Gregory, September, p. 288)

In terms of feminism, some researchers would say this aggressive-vulnerable pairing is an accurate way to look at the third wave. Even if *Elle* doesn't always acknowledge the obstacles women face in today's society through its assertiveness theme, the reversal of roles such as motherhood from restrictive to empowering is characteristic of third-wavers. Similarly, the way traditionally female traits often conflict with the more aggressive ones in the articles shows where women's inequality needs addressing.

### **Conclusions about independence.**

Compared to personal choice and assertiveness, independence is not a strong theme in the magazine; however, it still appears in all three article types, and of the four themes, the way writers frame it is the most consistent from issue to issue. *Elle* frames

independence in terms of career and culture. Writers use quotes, anecdotes, and descriptions to imply that women who achieve financial and cultural independence have control and, therefore, power over their lives.

This framework presents itself differently in essays than it does in editor's letters and profiles, where career and cultural frames are fairly similar. In the latter two article types, Myers and profiles writers discuss women who are already successful, so their stories focus on how they achieved that success, especially in traditionally male-dominated industries. The writers often emphasize women's ability to "go it alone," or at least defy convention, in their respective fields. Featured women choose to ignore society's expectations of their bodies, their sexuality, and their home lives in order to establish their own careers. Such "freedom" gives them the ability to function amid seemingly uncontrollable circumstances.

Similarly, through the women's personal accounts in these articles — or, at least, writers' analyses of them — the magazine attempts to make featured women's lifestyles look appealing, often suggesting that financial and cultural independence is derived from the way *Elle* women live through their careers. Sometimes writers do this indirectly: They praise women's non-stop work ethics by devoting whole paragraphs to resume-like rundowns of the women's careers. But, more often than not, writers state, plainly, that featured women are living the dream. They include editorializing lines like, "She's so cool" or "Who wouldn't want to be just like her?" Then, they attempt to make featured women sound more relatable by pairing descriptions of their seemingly down-to-earth personalities with quotes about their struggles toward, and aggressive pursuit of, success. In these articles, *Elle* women are not only relentless in achieving their ambitions, but they

are also smart, funny, likeable, and attractive. They are the women every man wants to date and every woman wants to be friends with.

In terms of the *Elle* brand, this approach to women's independence is crucial because it varies so much from the way essays express women's independence at work and in society. Although the essays praise ambition, wealth, and individuality, they rarely do so through such rose-colored depictions of women's roles in society. Many of the essay writers focus more on overcoming obstacles to their independence than on championing their careers with what seems like unassailable ease.

To some extent, then, essays moderate the "perfection" presented in editor's letters and profiles by addressing the challenges of patriarchal expectations: Through first-person accounts, essayists discuss the sacrifices they've made to achieve things such as work-life balance, sexual freedom, body satisfaction, and personal style. Unlike the women featured in editor's letters and profiles, writers can't simply "drown out" society's expectations of who they should be or how they should look. Essayists struggle to assert their independence, and they offer examples of ways they've coped with that difficulty, but they rarely overcome obstacles completely. Instead, they discuss the issue and find a way to be satisfied with their circumstances. That satisfaction gives them a sense of personal independence, though not necessarily the kind promoted in the other article types.

It's worth noting, here, why the independence theme is likely less common in the magazine. The theme is strongest in *Elle*'s essays, where women voice the majority of their concerns about their lack of independence because of the oppressiveness of patriarchy. The editor's letters and profiles, on the other hand, present a way of achieving

independence using examples, albeit unattainable ones, that already exist. That difference in story form might contribute to the theme appearing less frequently because one calls for more cultural change than the other.

### **Conclusions about diversity.**

Diversity is the least represented theme in the magazine, but not completely absent. The profiles often use quotes to examine issues of race, and on a few occasions so do the editor's letters. Sexuality and differing body shapes are more commonly talked about in essays and editor's letters than in profiles, but the prevalence of those topics is relatively equal to other subjects in the magazine; they are neither underrepresented nor frequent.

The most common issue coded under the diversity theme is negative. Whether implied or outright, in the profiles and essays, many of the writers focus on the importance of having a higher socioeconomic status. The featured women in the magazine are often white, educated, and upper-middle class. Although the profile writers attempt to downplay women's status by finding relatable traits to hone in on, they also praise it by default because they have chosen to feature those women in the magazine.

Essays only serve to reinforce this assessment. Many writers mention their alma maters and upbringings — Ivy League schools and suburban childhoods — while discussing their backgrounds. And in multiple articles, writers talk about the importance of wealth and status in achieving personal and professional fulfillment. The idea of “looking rich” crops up among the magazine's fashion essays almost as often as criticism of fast fashion does. Writers make it clear that the look and lifestyle worth achieving is the exclusive one, and in order to gain access to that club, readers have to have money.

This finding conflicts with third-wave feminism in some ways because it limits the accessibility of the ideology. Bronstein (2005) says a major goal of third-wave feminism is to “modify” feminism to address wide-reaching groups of women. She adds that after years of feminism being the territory of white middle-class women, one of the major shifts between the second and third waves was the introduction of inclusivity (Bronstein, 2005). A third-wave feminist publication should make an effort to address patriarchy’s influence in all demographics. In a few of her letters, Myers says this is an aspect of the *Elle* brand, but it’s not represented on the social-class front. *Elle* endorses exclusivity.

Still, the few articles that address race, sexuality, and body positivity align with the third-wave ideology, especially in that they all comment on patriarchy’s interaction with their diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Myers’ tendency to mention these articles in her editor’s letters is notable. Socioeconomic status aside, Myers presents women featured in her letters as versions of the *Elle* woman no matter what demographic they represent. At least on the surface, then, the magazine attempts to pursue diversity.

**RQ2: How do the editor’s letters, profiles, and personal essays recognize women’s existence in a patriarchal society and the limits they face as a result of that reality?**

The extent to which *Elle* writers acknowledge patriarchy throughout the 2014 issues varies depending on the article type, but the general nature of that commentary is similar across the board. *Elle* writers acknowledge the existence of patriarchy where it inhibits personal choice as well as personal and professional independence. They also attempt to combat society’s restraints on women through assertiveness: Writers hone in on examples

of women's individuality, a trait most often expressed through their bold or profound statements about their sexuality, appearance, and public perception.

As such, most instances of articles addressing patriarchy in the magazine look at the culture of patriarchy rather than the legislative systems that keep it in place. *Elle* articles often discuss how outside factors control the perception of women in society, whether physically or otherwise, and how featured women simply choose not to care about those expectations. The magazine positively frames women who are "outlaws" amid patriarchy because they have found a way to drown out that commentary. As noted in the assertiveness analysis, the word "unapologetic" is key, here, because it epitomizes the magazine's ideal. *Elle* women don't apologize for who they are, the choices they've made, or the way they pursue their careers, even if all of those factors conflict with traditionally male-oriented values.

That's not to say, however, that the magazine consistently addresses patriarchy or even feminism in general; the depth of that analysis depends on the structure and subject of the article. Essays, which have the largest percentage of patriarchy discussions of any section, are more likely than the other categories to take a topic related to women's inequality, such as abortion or the male gaze, and lead into a detailed account of how the writer has dealt with those obstacles. Writers discuss how patriarchy controls their choices and their sense of independence and emphasize how stifled they feel because of the constraints society places on them. Then, whether through reason or additional research and reporting, the women attempt to reconcile themselves to that reality. And instead of truly overcoming the setbacks they face, writers draw on personal power and support from other women to help them control their lives. Similarly, where patriarchy is

concerned, the articles coded positively for diversity are more likely than non-diverse pieces to discuss issues of women's inequality. The way race, sexuality, and body diversity intersect with patriarchy are all addressed at least once in the profiles and essays. Myers, too, acknowledges their importance to the magazine in at least two of her letters.

On the other hand, editor's letters and most of the profiles take a more concise, surface-level approach to patriarchy analysis, which is, perhaps, why these categories include fewer codes for patriarchy than the essay or diversity sects. Within the context of larger pieces, Myers and profile writers use their own commentary or quotes from featured women to foster brief discussions of women's roles in society. They state, plainly, that featured women work in male-dominated industries or models struggle with unattainable beauty standards, but they rarely delve deeply into these topics. Instead, they applaud these women for overcoming those challenges and continuing to pursue their careers and lifestyles.

This portrayal is often misleading because it simplifies patriarchy's influence on women. Although *Elle* makes it clear that patriarchy inhibits women, the profiles and editor's letters that showcase women brazenly defying culture often gloss over still-unchanged gender discrepancies in today's society. For instance, most of the profiles, and even one editor's letter, praise women who put their careers first, who are involved in every job at work, yet still manage to have fulfilling private lives. Writers present this as an idolized, and possibly achievable, lifestyle if readers work hard enough. Yet, only one article, the Ruth Bader Ginsberg profile, recognizes that the discrepancy between men's

and women's work at home is as the reason this challenge exists. The other profiles simply highlight women who exemplify well-rounded personal and professional pursuits.

The difference between the essays and the profiles and editor's letters, then, comes down to the power of choice and how attainable writers make independence sound. Essayists are more likely to discuss ways patriarchy has limited their choices and taken away from their freedom, and editor's letters and profiles are more likely to tell readers they have the freedom to make decisions, they just need to work hard enough to achieve them. Together, these perspectives acknowledge patriarchy, but they do so in conflicting ways, one as an ideal and the other as a first-person, experience-driven reality.

**RQ3: How does the magazine's take on each theme develop characteristics of the magazine's ideal *Elle* woman and, as a result, contribute to how the magazine's brand presents itself in terms of third-wave feminism?**

Based on the research into personal choice, assertiveness, independence, and diversity, a few conclusions can be drawn about the characteristics of the *Elle* woman: She is individualistic, aggressive, confident, and unapologetic. She's most likely white, wealthy, and straight, but she's aware of the incongruities women face because of factors such as their race, sexuality, and body type. Her career is her main focus, but that doesn't keep her from pursuing other areas of her life because she knows how to balance everything. She's also seemingly well-rounded, a mix of feminine sensibility with bold ambition. And she's aware that women still face inequalities, but she addresses those obstacles on a personal level, not as a member of a collective group.

In many ways, these traits represent third-wave feminism. The prevalence of aggressiveness, confidence, and individualism match Bronstein's (2005) definition of

“Feminist Lite,” where third-wavers are concerned with doing what feels good rather than supporting a legislature-driven cause. The *Elle* woman would be more likely to be associated with feminist beliefs than an entire movement because she’s so focused on developing her persona, achieving her own career goals, and defining feminism for herself. This focus on the cultural of feminism — how women talk about sexuality, autonomy, equality, and women’s rights in their day-to-day lives — rather than the defined ideology is more concurrent with third-wave feminist values than second wave ones (Kinser, 2004).

Similarly, the *Elle* woman’s acceptance of traditionally feminine traits aligns with what researchers have said is a reversal since the second wave. Third-wave feminists believe it’s possible to pursue fashion, beauty, and femininity without necessarily falling into old patriarchal roles (Kinser, 2004). The way *Elle* pairs aggression with these traditional tropes is, for third-wavers, empowerment because it links back to power feminism and not second-wave victim feminism (Kinser, 2004).

Yet, there are many areas where the *Elle* ideal falls short of the third wave. Although the magazine often talks about race and sexuality, diversity-wise, it still promotes a mostly white upper-middle-class lifestyle. That partial failure at inclusivity is incongruent with the accessibility so characteristic of the third wave, and *Elle*’s few articles that address other kinds of diversity are still overshadowed by the prevalence of white, educated women in the magazine (Bronstein, 2005). Also, some aspects of the magazine’s brand speak more to postfeminism than the second or third waves. The fact that *Elle* women attempt to do everything, to “have it all,” fits with the idea that feminism has progressed unevenly, forcing women to carry both the domestic and career burden.

But the magazine rarely acknowledges that incongruity. Instead, writers laud women's ability to balance everything because it means they have become powerful and successful. According to Kinser (2004), this is a postfeminist perspective because "It co-opts the motivating discourse of feminism but accepts a sense of empowerment as a substitute for the work toward and evidence of authentic empowerment" (p. 134). If these women were truly empowered, by feminist standards, then they wouldn't be working themselves to death to keep their careers and home lives in tact.

Where the *Elle* brand rectifies these inconsistencies is its acknowledgment of patriarchy, which, at the very least, aligns it with feminism and not postfeminism (Kinser, 2004). It's clear from the magazine's editor's letters, profiles, and essays that the brand supports feminism because the writers often say women are still treated unequally in today's society. The magazine's acknowledgement that feminism is a necessity, not a now-concluded movement, drives *Elle* away from postfeminism (Kinser, 2004).

Overall, then, the majority of the *Elle* woman's characteristics belong in the third-wave feminist ideology, though traits sway the magazine's brand in other directions. The brand endorses a third-wave feminist who is confident, individualistic, and aggressive, but in terms of the diversity, the magazine is still relatively second wave because it lacks the comprehensive inclusivity idolized among third-wavers. Likewise, the magazine's focus on independent women who achieve everything flawlessly develops a postfeminist perspective that it's impossible to ignore because it happens so often. In every issue, there are multiple articles that imply readers can and should do everything because women have earned that right. This oversight of patriarchy's still-powerful control over women's lives takes away from the magazine's third-wave ideology, and

again, aligns the magazine with previous criticism of the portrayal of women in women's magazines.

Yet, collectively, *Elle's* consistent awareness and discussion of gender inequalities speaks to the magazine's feminist approach to women's experiences and, perhaps, hints at its eventual transition away from such a have-it-all mentality. In the editor's letters and profiles, the magazine tells women to make choices about their careers, families, and relationships, so they will be happy. Writers present women with examples of assertive, independent women who represent that kind of individualistic *Elle* ideal. Then, the essays take a critical look at how that woman comes together, or doesn't, because of forces beyond her control. This grouping, if anything, reveals *Elle's* third-wave feminist brand: Women still are functioning in an oppressive culture, yet society has advanced enough since the second wave for them to at least see potential for, and have confidence in, their own success.

Yet despite the prevalence of third-wave feminist themes, the current editorial content still presents those ideals in conflicting ways. The editor's letters create an ideal way for women to live in society; they suggest women's equality is valuable and attainable. The profiles, then, test that ideal. Featured women often succeed in attaining both their personal and professional goals while also representing unattainable beauty, personality, and time management standards. Finally, the essays criticize the society in which that ideal functions. These articles are the most accurate representation of women's lives in today's society because they offer personal experiences with patriarchy and analysis of why women's equality has not been achieved.

### **Further research**

Because this research only looked at one component of the *Elle* brand, there are multiple ways future researchers could develop this topic further. Researchers could investigate the relationship between *Elle*'s editorial content and its advertising to see whether the findings stated here carry over to the magazine's advertorial brand. Similarly, researchers could look at the third-wave feminist ideology of the magazine's service content, which was not read during this study, to see whether the brand extends to those shorter articles.

Other interesting avenues for study could look at the ideologies of *Elle*'s staff writers, who consistently publish profiles and essays in the magazine. During this study, the researcher noticed that some reoccurring bylines addressed patriarchy more directly than others. It would be worth comparing staff essayists to contributing essayists to see how the brand shifts within itself and how it brings new voices into its fold.

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## Appendix A: Key terms

**Acknowledgement of patriarchy:** to say that one accepts or does not deny the truth or existence of a male-dominated society

**Assertiveness:** advocating for aggression, confidence and boldness as means for women to show their individualism, gain personal power or defy traditional gender stereotypes. If, for instance, a woman felt like her sexuality was being oppressed, she would assert her right to express herself despite outside opinions.

**Diversity:** accounting for the effects of differing races, cultures, sexualities and socioeconomic statuses on the discussion of women's experiences and their interactions with patriarchy. The first-and second-wave feminist movements often centered on the needs of upper-middle-class white women. A third-wave feminist article, for example, would acknowledge the difference between a black woman's experiences with patriarchy as opposed to a white woman's. Another might delve into the obstacles lower-class women face in their struggle for gender equality.

**Independence:** the emphasis on individualism and career gain where they intersect with traditional gender norms and social expectations. A third-wave feminist article that stresses independence would depict a woman who wants to be both personally and professional free from traditional gender expectations but faces setbacks because of the current male-dominated society. She would want the freedom to choose her career, lifestyle, partner, etc., without restraint.

**Personal choice:** supporting a woman's right to choose, not only in a political sense, but on a personal level. Third-wave feminists would argue women's freedom of choice dictates the control they have over their lives, so their decisions should govern how they

are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Here, acknowledgment of patriarchy would reveal women's absence of choice and, therefore, personal power.

## Appendix B: *Elle* resources

### *Elle* mission statement

“ELLE inspires women to explore and celebrate their own style in all aspects of their lives. Our smart, irreverent take on fashion, beauty, and pop culture is at once aspirational and accessible, encouraging readers to cultivate not just personal style, but the success that comes with personal power.” (Elle Media Kit, 2014).

### *Elle* demographics

Total audience	5,794,000
Women	5,327,000
Median age	37.2
Age 18-34	45%
Age 25-49	55%
Median HHI	\$68,326
HHI \$71,000+	46%
Any college	70%
Employed	67%
Single	44%
Readers per copy	5.46
	(Elle Media Kit, 2014)