

**Beauty Ideals in the Checkout Aisle:
Health-Related Messages in Women's Fashion and Fitness Magazines**

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Abstract

This study analyzed magazine covers, as well as editorial and advertising content in women's health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines. Results indicated that models in these magazines were of relatively the same thinness, and that there was very little emphasis placed on weight loss for the sake of overall health. Models in fashion/beauty magazines were glamorous, while models in health/fitness magazines were conspicuously thin. Health and body image content was generally framed as appearance-related rather than health-related in both types of magazines. These representations emphasize a thin, glamorous ideal, contradictory to the health-related messages that could be used to promote healthy body images and provide readers with healthy dieting and exercise advice.

Keywords: body image, fashion, health, magazines, thin ideal

Introduction

Mass media can reflect basic beliefs, attitudes, and values toward female beauty, and can even change attitudes and beliefs when people are exposed to images of ideal beauty and attractiveness. While it is not unreasonable to expect women's beauty and fashion magazines to place a tremendous emphasis on appearance, it might be expected that women's fitness and health magazines would be framed instead as having emphasis on health and wellness.

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However, in the magazine world, health may often be framed, defined, or examined via appearance. Therefore, a healthy body may be portrayed as one that is thin and attractive. Previous studies have demonstrated the ability of magazines to shape how women feel about their bodies and appearance, and how magazines reinforce cultural norms about body image and weight loss.¹

Many studies have examined the representation of appearance and the body in women's magazines, but this study is the first to examine both health/fitness magazines and beauty/fashion magazines to determine the framing of health-related messages sent to readers in editorial and advertising content. Recently, Willis and Knobloch-Westerwick have asserted that since the launch of *Women's Health* magazine in 2005, health and fitness magazines have become the dominant source of weight-loss and body-shaping messages, and that this type of content has shifted away from beauty/fashion or general interest magazines.² They suggested that "the bulk of diet and exercise coverage in women's magazines is now found in magazines specializing in this niche."³ The academic literature since 2005 has done little to examine this shift in content; much of the literature on body image and beauty ideals in women's magazines is more than ten years old. The current study seeks to update the literature on beauty/fashion and health/fitness magazines, and determine how this shift has changed the way that women's magazines portray body image and beauty ideals.

Women's Magazines and Body Ideals

Framing refers to the ability of media outlets to shape the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of media consumers through the selection and emphasis of particular attributes of media messages.⁴ Media content that employs specific frames tells viewers which aspects of communication are the most important, and therefore the most relevant to their interpretation of the message being presented.⁵ By emphasizing both healthy weight-loss and body-image content, or content that accentuates unhealthy ideals and methods, magazines have the power to shape the thought process of audience members. This shaping process is known as framing effects.⁶ Women's magazines, therefore, have the power to shape how women think about weight loss and body image.

Previous studies have looked at the effects of the framing of diet, body image, and self-esteem images that appear in different kinds of media, including magazines. Overall, findings indicate the importance of the "media's role as an essential source of nutrition information relative to knowledge and rules for body shaping and weight management behavior."⁷ Women who are consistently exposed to unhealthy framing of thin-ideal body content and conflicting messages about weight loss and body image are affected by what they see and read. In particular, women who were exposed to messages on women's magazine covers containing appearance frames were more likely to experience shame related to their own body image, and a higher level of appearance-related motivation to exercise.⁸ Thus, women's magazines set a standard for how women should look, and the methods they should employ to look this way. However, the pictures that appear in these magazines, as a result of heavy retouching, are not even representative of the women who appear in the photographs, who have been airbrushed to perfection,⁹ leaving readers striving to achieve a completely

unrealistic ideal. Research that examined the effects of exposure to appearance-oriented content has been conducted using surveys and experiments, and the results are fairly consistent: exposure to appearance-oriented content tends to lead to lower impressions of self, body image distortion, lower self-esteem, and appearance anxiety.¹⁰

While media have the power to shape overtures about women's body image ideals, it may not affect all women in the same way, as "the media are not simply a judicial mechanism that limits, obstructs, refuses, prohibits, and censors."¹¹ Instead, some women may rebuff the attempts of magazines to frame and shape their body ideals, while others are more susceptible to the effects of framing.¹² For example, race may play a role in the shaping of attitudes towards body ideals. Research has indicated that Latina women are more likely than white women to be able to resist the cultural ideals that state that thin is the optimal body type (Goodman, 2002).

Magazine Covers

The covers of women's magazines bombard consumers as they wait in line at grocery and convenience stores and have the possibility to influence their body image even if they do not buy or read the rest of the magazine's content. Previous research on weight-loss and body image content on women's magazine covers have found that the messages on covers alone have the ability to affect women's body image.¹³ These studies have found that 78% of covers contained some kind of message about body-image or appearance.¹⁴ By contrast, the same study found that covers of men's magazines did not contain body-image content.¹⁵ A longitudinal study of women's magazine covers that spanned 1959 to 1999 found that over time, cover models became increasingly thin, and were more often shown full-body.¹⁶ As time went on, magazine covers—and American society in general—placed more emphasis on a thin-ideal body shape for women. Additionally, research suggested that the increasing emphasis on thin, full-body models on magazine covers was correlated with disordered eating in American women.¹⁷

When looking at the different types of framing that exist in messages on women's magazine covers, health and fitness magazines were found to contain just as many appearance-related messages as health-related messages.¹⁸ This is somewhat contradictory; if these magazines are truly published to cover topics about health, then they should not be framing weight-loss content as appearance-related, but should rather be focusing on health-related messages that appeal to women in general, not just women who want to lose weight in order to appear thin and attractive. Similarly, "94% of the covers of women's magazines showed a thin female model or celebrity in excellent shape."¹⁹

Previous research has also found that the women who appeared on women's magazine covers were often "young, thin, and wore revealing clothing."²⁰ Additionally, one-quarter of women's magazine covers contained conflicting messages about body-image and weight-loss. These covers featured content about unhealthy food right next to content about toning or tightening one's body.²¹ These conflicting messages were only found in "traditional" magazines such as Family Circle. This study also stated that the type of body-

image content featured on women's magazines covers inferred that losing weight or shaping one's body would lead to a better life.²²

Magazine Content

Women's magazines feature both editorial and advertising content that is meant to appeal to a variety of demographics of women. Previous research has examined both types of content, but recent literature is lacking, especially looking at both of these concepts together. The most recent content analysis on health and body-related messages suggested of future research that "it would be advantageous to differentiate between magazines, as the characteristics of the body-shaping and weight-loss messages may differ by magazine."²³

Weight-loss and body shaping messages account for almost one-fifth of all the editorial content in women's fitness and health magazines, where the emphasis of this content is placed on appearance rather than on health, and exercise rather than healthy diet.²⁴ Appearance-related messages are more likely to be featured in magazine headlines than health-related messages, and exercise-related messages were more likely than diet-related messages to be in magazine headlines.²⁵ Researchers have suggested that when magazines place the emphasis of body-image and weight-loss related content on exercise rather than healthy diet, they are going against the suggestions of health professionals that recommend a combination of diet and exercise to achieve healthy and long-lasting weight loss.²⁶ Similarly, there is a discrepancy between the messages that appear in magazines and healthy diet recommendations put forth by health professionals, where British magazines were more likely to promote trendy fad-diets rather than "evidence based healthy eating guidance."²⁷

Previous studies have examined the appearance of female models in advertising content, both in health/fitness magazines and beauty/fashion magazines. Results have shown that while both health/fitness oriented magazines and beauty/fashion magazines feature models that are young, thin, and white, beauty/fashion magazines were more likely to stress the unattainable appearance of the models.²⁸ Additionally, models that appeared in women's health/fitness magazines were more likely to appear in little clothing than models that appeared in fashion/beauty magazines.²⁹

There are few content analyses on body-image and health-related information in women's magazines that have been published on samples that appeared in magazines from the last ten years. Some studies look at samples older than ten years old,³⁰ or are historical in nature.³¹ Willis and Knobloch-Westerwick acknowledged the aging nature of content analyses on body-image and weight-loss information, stating that much of the literature referred to "relatively dated samples."³² This is especially problematic because research has suggested that there has been a shift from weight-loss or body image content being contained in health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines to the majority of this content being featured primarily in health/fitness magazines within the last ten years, particularly since 2005.³³

Hypotheses and Research Questions

In order to assess the hypotheses and research questions posed in this study, the following operational definitions are provided. First, body-image and weight-loss information is defined as either editorial or advertising content that focuses on health, beauty, weight-loss, or body-image messages. This content may or may not feature a model, but does feature some kind of verbal or visual reference to ideal body image, weight, or health. Second, women's health/fitness magazines are defined as magazines that predominantly focus their content on weight management, fitness, and health topics. Third, beauty/fashion magazines are defined as women's magazines that focus their content on appearance, fashion, and relationship advice.

Although health/fitness magazines may claim to contain healthy messages about body-image and weight-loss information, previous research has shown that health/fitness magazine covers carried as many health-related messages as appearance-related messages.³⁴ Based on these earlier findings, the current study analyzed the "teasers" for stories and content featured on health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazine covers, and investigated the following hypothesis:

H1: Health/fitness magazines will feature equal numbers of health- and appearance-related messages in their cover teasers.

Because no previous research appears to have analyzed the types of messages on the covers of beauty/fashion magazines, we also posed the following research question:

RQ1: What will be the proportion of health- versus appearance-related messages in the cover teasers of beauty/fashion magazines?

Studies on magazines covers have indicated that over time, magazines have become more likely to feature full-body photographs of models instead of photographs of just heads or faces,³⁵ as well as models that were thin or in good physical, athletic form.³⁶ Beauty/fashion models were also more likely to display an unattainable appearance and little clothing.³⁷ These images featured on magazine covers reinforce stereotypical beauty ideals. Based on the previous literature, the current study analyzed model thinness, glamour, and whether the model's full body was shown in order to assess the following hypotheses:

H2a: Models on both health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazine covers will be shown in full-body photographs.

H2b: Models on beauty/fashion magazine covers will be thinner than models on health/fitness magazine covers.

H2c: Models on beauty/fashion magazine covers will have more glamorous appearance than models on health/fitness magazine covers.

One study found that health/fitness magazines were more likely to contain appearance and exercise messages than overall health or diet messages.³⁸ To follow up on this

finding and test its application to beauty/fashion magazines as well, the current study analyzed content from both types of magazines to assess the following hypotheses:

H3a: Women's health/fitness magazines will use appearance rather than health messages to frame body-image and weight-loss content.

H3b: Women's beauty/fashion magazines will use appearance rather than health messages to frame body-image and weight-loss content.

Research focusing on the appearance of models in women's magazines has found that fashion and beauty magazines featured models that were very thin and had an unattainable appearance.³⁹ Magazine content was analyzed for model thinness, glamour, and whether the model's full body was shown. Additionally, Wasylkiw and colleagues suggested that future research should use makeup as an indicator of "body-as-object" focus.⁴⁰ To follow up on this research, the current study looked at the difference between celebrity, athlete, and unknown models in order to investigate the following hypotheses:

H4a: Models in both health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazine content will be shown full-body more frequently than face-only in photographs.

H4b: Models in beauty/fashion magazine content will have a thinner appearance than models in health/fitness magazine content.

H4c: Models in beauty/fashion magazine content will have more glamorous appearance than models in health/fitness magazine content.

Previous content analyses⁴¹ have looked at advertising and editorial content separately, but there has been no study comparing the two types of content within the same sample. While magazines may espouse healthy body images or dieting and exercise tips in their content, they may still publish advertising that advocates for an unhealthy body ideal. These magazines may purport to espouse a healthy message, but they may still be presenting readers with unhealthy advertising messages. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: How is body image and weight loss content being framed between advertising and editorial content in women's magazines?

Method

A content analysis of six women's beauty/fashion and health/fitness magazines was conducted to examine the way health messages were framed and communicated to readers. The study used three beauty/fashion magazines and three health/fitness magazines. Issues of each magazine published between January and June of 2013 were coded. Digital and hard copy issues of each magazine were used; however, for any single magazine, the magazine version (digital versus hard copy) was consistent. Content that was available only through the digital versions of the magazines was excluded from analysis. Content from the covers of the

magazines as well as the inside content was coded. This was done to ensure that a relevant sample was analyzed.

Magazine covers are important to analyze because “often it is the cover that initially attracts the reader to the magazine. Titles, catch phrases, and pictures displayed on magazine covers are usually all that the reader has time to look at in a store.”⁴¹ Furthermore, people may view the cover in a store without ever reading the inside content. Celebrities or models featured on the cover receive much more distinction than models featured inside the magazine; the two types of content represent different audiences and different levels of prominence. Lastly, since magazine covers can be viewed at a newsstand, grocery store, or even online, the messages they communicate to readers and viewers arguably reach an even broader audience simply because the cover (and its related textual content) is accessible by more people, whereas the inside content is accessible only to those who purchase the magazine.

Sampling

After procuring a list of the largest magazines by circulation,⁴² the magazines with the largest circulation (both print and online) that were representative of the beauty/fashion or health/fitness magazine category were selected. For the beauty/fashion category, these were *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire*. In the health/fitness category, the top three magazines were *Shape*, *Fitness*, and *Women’s Health*. Titles such as *Elle* and *Vogue* were excluded from analysis because they focused more heavily on high-fashion content than beauty or body-image topics.⁴³ We created the categories of beauty/fashion and health/fitness based on the focus and purpose of the magazine, and assumed that if the magazines had the highest circulation within their respective categories, they will have the greatest number of readers with interests in health/fitness or beauty/fashion. Furthermore, the magazines in the beauty/fashion category were ones that spanned a broad range in terms of reader demographics. None of the publications included in the sample is a general interest magazine; rather, each has a specific target audience. By selecting multiple magazines, it is possible to speak with greater authority about the probable effect or influence the magazines could have on readers.

One objective of this study was to analyze the body image and weight loss stories that were teased on each magazine’s cover, and another study objective was to analyze the health stories published in each issue. A secondary goal was to analyze the advertisements published in each magazine that had appearance-related content. Thus, two units of analysis were used—magazine cover and magazine content—and two separate coding sheets were utilized. For the first category, 35 magazine covers were analyzed, which included the cover of each magazine published between January 2013 and June 2013. For magazine content, advertisements published in the first 50 pages of the magazine were included in the sample. The rationale for selecting the first 50 pages of advertising was so that the sample would include the best sense of the key ads placed in the magazine. The key placement locations for advertisements are the back cover, the inside front cover, and the first few pages of the magazine.⁴⁴ Certainly, there are ads scattered throughout the pages of a magazine, but if a

company wants to get eyes on its ad, the company will spend the money to put it prominently in the first pages of the magazine.⁴⁵

In addition, all health-related editorial content was coded, which included stories teased on the magazine cover as well as health stories that were listed on the table of content page. A total of 662 ads in 35 issues of the six magazines were coded. A total of 158 health-related editorial stories in the same 35 issues were also coded.

Intercoder Reliability

Two coders examined earlier issues of each of the magazines to test the coding instrument. The first round of coding was conducted on content not included in the sample. The two coders examined four different magazines—two beauty/fashion and two health/fitness magazines. Satisfactory intercoder reliability was achieved for both units of analysis. The overall reliability on the magazine covers was .94 using Cohen's Kappa, and the overall reliability on the magazine stories and advertisements was .91 using Cohen's Kappa. The range of reliability coefficients on each variable ranged from .74 to .99.

Coding Categories

The first unit of analysis used in this study was magazine covers. Magazine covers were coded for the following variables: magazine name, type of magazine, type of model on the cover, model attire, model thinness, model glamour, and teaser message. Type of magazine was coded as health/fitness or beauty/fashion. Cover models were coded as celebrity, unknown model, or athlete. Options for model attire were bathing suit or tight workout attire equivalent (two-piece), shorts and shirt, jeans and shirt, shirt and skirt, dress, athletic pants, other, or not shown (face only). Model thinness was coded on a scale of one through five, where "one" was conspicuously thin and "5" was conspicuously fat. Model glamour was also coded on a scale of one through five, where "one" represented no makeup or attention to hair, and "five" represented a model who had very heavy makeup and a specific hairstyle. The coding schemes for model thinness and model glamour were consistent with the method employed by Bissell and Yan.⁴⁶ Finally, teaser messages (tags that appeared on magazine covers) were coded as weight loss/diet (losing weight by dieting), weight loss/exercise (losing weight through exercise), weight loss/appearance (losing weight to improve appearance), weight loss/general health (losing weight to improve overall health), appearance/clothing (focused on clothing as beauty), appearance/overall beauty (focused on hair, makeup, or beauty tips), appearance/attractiveness (instructions on how to appeal to the opposite sex), and other (did not readily fall into one of the other categories, such as ads for perfume or cologne).

The second analytical category was magazine content. All health or beauty related advertisements within the first 50 pages of each magazine and stories related to health throughout the entire magazine were coded using the following variables: magazine name, type of magazine (see above), size of advertisement of editorial content (1/4 page, 1/2 page, full page, etc.), and type of content (editorial or advertising). Content messages were also

coded for the following categories which were consistent with the options described above: type of message, type of model, model attire, model thinness, and model glamour.

Results

There were a total of 789 items of magazine content analyzed in this study. Four-hundred-fifteen items (52.3% of the total sample) appeared in health/fitness magazines, and 374 (47.2 % of the total sample) appeared in beauty/fashion magazines. Editorial content represented 158 of the items (19.9%), and the remaining 631 items (79.6%) were advertising content. Additionally, there were 35 magazine covers analyzed. Eighteen covers were from beauty/fashion magazines, and 17 covers were from health/fitness magazines. The discrepancy in number of covers results from *Women's Health* publishing a dual January/February issue rather than two separate issues.

Hypotheses 1 stated that health/fitness magazines would feature approximately equal shares of health- and appearance-related messages in their cover teasers. RQ1 asked whether beauty/fashion magazines would feature approximately equal shares of health- and appearance-related messages in their cover teasers. The following table represents the frequency by type of the teasers that appeared on the covers of health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines:

Categories	Health/Fitness Magazines		Beauty/Fashion Magazines	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Weight Loss: Diet	20	26.67	4	16.67
Weight Loss: Exercise	25	33.33	1	4.17
Weight Loss: Appearance	15	20.00	5	20.83
Weight Loss: Health	2	2.67	0	0.00
Appearance: Clothing	4	5.33	1	4.17
Appearance: Overall Beauty	5	6.67	9	37.50
Appearance: Attractiveness to Men	4	5.33	4	16.67
Total	75	100.00	24	100.00

Appearance-related teasers were defined as teasers that fell into the following categories: weight loss/appearance, appearance/clothing, appearance/overall beauty, and appearance/attractiveness. Health-related teasers were defined as weight loss/diet, weight loss/exercise, and weight loss/general health. H1 was not supported, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 12.79$, $p < .001$; health/fitness magazines featured more health-related teasers. RQ1 is answered in that beauty/fashion magazines featured significantly more appearance-related teasers than health-related teasers, $\chi^2(1, N = 20) = 5.00$, $p < .03$.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that models on magazine covers would be shown in full-body photographs. All of the models that appeared on the covers were celebrity models, and were shown full-body on all 35 of the magazines examined. H2a was supported.

Hypothesis 2b predicted that cover models in beauty/fashion magazines would have thinner appearance than cover models in health/fitness magazines. Models on the covers of health/fitness magazines had a mean thinness score of 2.06 ($SD = .43$), and models on beauty/fashion magazines had a mean thinness of 2.17 ($SD = .51$). This difference was not significant, $F(1, 33) = .45$, $p > .05$. H2b was not supported.

Hypothesis 2c predicted that cover models in beauty/fashion magazines would be more glamorous than cover models in health/fitness magazines. On health/fitness magazines, models had a mean glamour score of 2.70 ($SD = .69$), where the scale ranged from 1-5 with a 1 representing the least glamour. On beauty/fashion magazine covers, models had a mean glamour score of 3.17 ($SD = .62$). This difference between the two categories of magazines was significant, $F(1, 33) = 4.37$, $p < .05$. H2c was supported.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that body-image and weight-loss content would be framed in terms of appearance rather than health in health/fitness women's magazine content. Hypothesis 3b predicted that the same content would be framed in terms of appearance rather than health in women's beauty/fashion magazines. The most frequent type of content in all of the analyzed magazines was appearance: overall beauty (Table 2). Health/fitness magazines featured 168 items of content framed about health (weight loss/diet, weight loss/exercise, and weight loss/general health) and 187 items framed about appearance (weight loss/appearance, appearance/clothing, appearance/overall beauty, and appearance/attractiveness). This difference was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 355) = 1.02$, $p < .31$. Therefore, H3a was not supported. Beauty/fashion magazines only featured 17 items framed in terms of health, and 319 items framed in terms of appearance. This difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 336) = 271.44$, $p < .001$. Therefore, H3b was supported.

Categories	Health/Fitness Magazines		Beauty/Fashion Magazines	
	Editorial	Advertising	Editorial	Advertising
Weight Loss: Diet	27	25	5	1
Weight Loss: Exercise	68	32	3	3
Weight Loss: Appearance	10	4	9	1
Weight Loss: Health	4	12	3	2
Appearance: Clothing	1	5	2	1
Appearance: Overall Beauty	11	138	6	282
Appearance: Attractiveness to Men	6	12	2	16
Other	0	60	1	34
Total	127	288	31	374

Hypothesis 4a predicted that models in both health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazine content would be shown in full-body photographs more frequently than a face-only photograph. Models were shown in full-body photographs 274 out of 308 times (88.96%) in health/fitness magazines, and 163 out of 276 times (59.06%) in beauty/fashion magazines. This difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 584) = 69.10, p < .001$. H4a was supported because models were shown full body more frequently than face-only in health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines.

H4b predicted that models in beauty/fashion magazine content would have thinner appearance than models in health/fitness magazine content. Models in health/fitness magazines had a mean thinness score of 2.01 ($SD = .46$), and models in beauty/fashion magazines had a mean thinness score of 2.05 ($SD = .43$). This difference was not significant, $F(1, 549) = 0.89, p > .05$. H4b was not supported.

H4c predicted that models in beauty/fashion magazine content would have more glamorous appearance than models in health/fitness magazine content. Within health/fitness magazines, models had a mean glamour score of 2.41 ($SD = 1.00$), and models in

beauty/fashion magazine content had a mean glamour score of 3.10 ($SD = 1.08$). This difference was significant, $F(1, 672) = 5.5, p < .001$. H4c was supported.

Finally, Research Question 2 asked how content would be framed in advertising and editorial content across magazine type. Table 2 (above) represents the types of content that appeared in both editorial and advertising content. In all magazines analyzed, there were 110 health-related editorial items, 47 appearance-related editorial items, 75 health-related advertising items, and 459 appearance-related advertising items, $\chi^2(1, N = 691) = 194.21, p < .001$. This lopsidedness was present even when the analysis was split by magazine type, where health/fitness magazines framed editorial content in terms of health while emphasizing appearance in advertising, $\chi^2(1, N = 355) = 74.42, p < .001$, as did beauty/fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1, N = 336) = 68.51, p < .001$. Therefore, RQ2 is answered in that editorial content was generally framed as health-related, while advertising content was generally framed as appearance-related.

Discussion

Although there were differences between health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines in the presentation of body-image messages, it was clear that health/fitness magazines, such as *Women's Health*, *Fitness*, and *Shape*, offer little more than a repackaging of the thin-ideal images that have long been associated with beauty/fashion magazines. These magazines' readers are exposed to messages that contribute to a system of meaning that places value on thinness and celebrity, thus disenfranchising women who do not meet these standards and creating an unattainable cultural beauty ideal. The results were generally consistent with previous research, which has shown that body-image and weight-loss magazine content emphasizes appearance rather than health.⁴⁷

Even though beauty/fashion magazine covers featured more glamorous models, cover models in both magazine categories scored similarly in terms of thinness. Within content, there was no difference between health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines in the overall thinness of models. This indicates that both beauty/fashion and health/fitness magazines place a high value on thinness, even though this may not represent a healthy body weight. This is consistent with previous research, which has stated that portrayal of women in magazines "frames appearance as the main rationale for fitness and sport."⁴⁸ These portrayals of health offer encouragement to readers who maintain their health only for the sake of thinness and glamour, and also reinforce the norms of a health industry that values stereotypically thin ideals.

The results of this study suggest that women's health/fitness magazines are failing to accurately frame health per se; rather, they are framing health only as thinness and glamor. By framing weight-loss and body-image content in this way, magazines have the power to change the attitudes and opinions of female readers,⁴⁹ as "frames can be meaningful and important determinants of public opinion."⁵⁰ While female readers may not immediately change their views after being exposed to such frames, thinness and glamour message may have a cumulative effect over time. Female readers should exercise agency and realize that

they are viewing unhealthy and unattainable images—part of a larger cultural portrayal of women as thin and glamorous rather than fit and healthy regardless of weight or appearance. If magazines are truly a source from which women infer their health, fitness, and beauty ideals,⁵¹ then framing health as thinness should be seen as problematic.

Magazines try to attract potential readers by carefully selecting cover subjects and interesting stories. For all of the magazines included in this analysis, cover models were exclusively celebrities and had high thinness and glamour scores. The overwhelmingly large percentage of celebrity models clearly indicated a nod to readers' fascination with celebrities.⁵² To some extent, the cover models represented the idealized appearance that all readers should aspire to and desire to achieve, whether it was via a beauty/fashion context or a health/fitness context. Furthermore, the cover stories teased around the cover model often included "follow me" instructions, such as "how she got her powerful post-baby body,"⁵³ advising audiences not only what to read within each issue, but also what to do to become the next "her." Even though health/fitness and beauty/fashion magazines seemingly have very different objectives, the content teased on the covers of both types of magazines was predominantly focused on weight loss for the sake of overall appearance.

While it is not surprising to find many teasers about appearance and overall beauty on beauty/fashion magazine covers, health/fitness magazines also placed an emphasis on appearance and overall beauty. What was especially interesting in the analysis of magazine covers was that the lowest percentage of stories teased on health/fitness magazines were those about weight loss for the sake of general health. Many of the stories teased on the health/fitness magazines told readers they could get "flat abs and lean legs—8 easy moves"⁵⁴ or how to "eat anything (yes anything!) and still drop pounds—fast!"⁵⁵ without making any references to health.

In terms of the representation of female models across genres, the portrayed models' bodies were conspicuously thin across magazine types, which confirmed previous research that fashion and beauty magazines tend to use noticeably thin models, at the expense of those of average or plus sizes.⁵⁶ Models across magazine genres were coded as conspicuously thin. There was no significant difference between the thinness score for models on the covers of the different types of magazines, nor was there a difference in the thinness score assigned to models used in advertisements or the editorial content within magazine of both genres. While beauty/fashion magazines are already well-known for presenting thin ideals to their audiences, it is surprising that health/fitness magazines are also featuring ultra-thin models, which seems to contradict their reported focus on health. This only further solidifies the notion that in order to be considered beautiful or attractive, one must also be thin, and it problematic because it marginalizes women who are fit but not thin, particularly women who participate in sports that require a muscular body. It was expected that the models used in the health/fitness magazines might be closer to average size or at least not conspicuously thin, because thin does not always equal healthy,⁵⁷ but our findings did not confirm this expectation.

In addition, the glamorization scores were overwhelmingly high across magazine genres. For example, the models appearing on the covers of the health/fitness magazines were portrayed most frequently in a bathing suit or two-piece workout attire, consistent with previous research.⁵⁸ It is possible that the combination of the visual representation of ideal beauty along with teasers that tell readers how to “shed 10 lbs fast”⁵⁹ are the easy way to sell readers to advertisers. These narrow representations presented by leading fashion and fitness magazines illustrated the power of the beauty myth and its potential to make readers feel that they do not measure up.

Not only were representations of beauty and thinness on magazine covers fairly narrow, but the inside content further reinforced these unattainable ideals portrayed. The glamorization scores for inside magazine content were also high across genres, further cementing the notion that glamour and thinness define attractiveness. The content category with the highest percentage of stories in both the health/fitness and the fashion/beauty magazines was appearance/overall beauty, which contained stories that emphasize beauty in terms of makeup, skin, hair, and thinness. Again, given what are seemingly very different objectives for the health/fitness versus beauty/fashion category, one would expect different content between the genres, but that was not the finding of the present analysis. What was somewhat surprising was that the percentage of inside content related to weight loss/general health was only 4.51% of all content included in the sample. This does seem to send a fairly clear message to readers that weight loss for the sake of general health is not high on editors’ priority list, and is consistent with the research conducted by Willis and Knobloch-Westerwick.⁶⁰

Fitness in women’s magazines is being framed as thinness, which may not be a reflection of women who actually participate in sports in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Female athletes may have bodies that are negatively stereotyped as “masculine”; musculature and strength in female athletes are necessary for their performance, but such bodies not being represented in the pages of magazines that purport to display health and fitness in women. Instead, women in these magazines are thin, reinforcing the idea of the “female body as a sexual object that is valued for its static attractiveness and ornamental values,”⁶¹ rather than for the sports and activities it can perform. Female readers are exposed to images of thin models purported to be athletic and healthy, and no depictions of healthy, fit, athletic women who are anything but thin. If the representations of health presented in women’s magazines are to be believed, many female athletes could be perceived as “unhealthy” because they are not thin.

Despite these worrying findings, women are active participants in the interpretation of body image and health content in magazines; they do not simply regurgitate the images they see in magazines into their daily lives.⁶² Female readers buy the types of magazines that represent the lifestyles to which they aspire, but they are consistently exposed to an unrealistic, unattainable portrayals of femininity and health. This is particularly troubling for women who are seeking health and fitness information because “frames appear to activate existing beliefs and cognitions, rather than adding something new to the individual’s beliefs

about the issue.”⁶³ Readers who may already believe that healthy equals thin see magazine images that are likely to reinforce and activate these beliefs. Women who turn to magazines for advice and guidance on health and fitness end up looking at images of thin, glamorous celebrities. This frames the cultural representation of health as equal to thinness, which is principally damaging to the women who expect read messages about nutrition, exercise, and healthy lifestyles. While readers can reject such stereotypical framing, they will continue to be surrounded by other representations of cultural norms that reinforce the thin body ideal and fail to deliver accurate messages about health and fitness.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present study sheds light on the way health was contextualized by fashion/beauty and health/fitness magazines; however, the results presented here are not entirely generalizable to all magazines genres. This study is only a snapshot of six months of magazines; future research could re-evaluate these findings over a larger period of time, or after a substantial amount of time has passed. It should also be noted that the readership for the magazines examined largely include that of Caucasian readers versus African-American or Hispanic readers. Of the covers models analyzed, only three of the models were of any other race than white. Further studies should include an even broader sample of magazines and magazine genres as the messages found in magazines targeted toward African American women are somewhat different.⁶⁴ Future research should focus on the audiences for beauty/fashion versus health/fitness magazines, and on the effects of the messages presented in these magazines.

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