

**An Analysis of Women's Fitness Magazines: Rhetorical Strategies and Themes  
in Magazine "Cover Lines"**

An Honors Thesis

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**Abstract:** As part of the booming health and wellness industry in the United States, women's fitness magazines contribute to and reflect the cultural conversation. To better understand how these publications both influence and respond to changes in fitness culture, the study analyzes a decade (2012-2021) of "cover lines" from three of the most popular magazine titles in the category (*Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health*). Using critical discourse analysis, rhetorical themes (editorial biases, framing or perspectives) and rhetorical strategies (commonly employed techniques to attract readers) are identified and discussed.

**Keywords:** women, fitness, magazines, critical discourse analysis, rhetoric

## Introduction

Culture has been described as the “symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies” (Banks, Banks & McGee, 1989, p. 15). In concert with other dimensions of culture (societal symbols, beliefs, values and artifacts), language is fundamental to human communication and plays a pivotal role in shaping and perpetuating cultural conversations (Barkan, 2011). Today, writers in the mass media use language in ways that not only shape those conversations, but also take cues from them. As Fairclough (1995) explains, the relationship between those who disseminate discourse and those who interpret it is “often opaque” (p. 132). Therefore, it is important for scholars to understand more about the encoding of mass media messages and the extent to which that process is both reflective of and informed by the broader culture. This study analyzes the use of language in women's fitness magazines over a 10-year span (2012-2021) and identifies *rhetorical themes* (editorial biases, framing or perspectives) and *rhetorical strategies* (commonly employed techniques to attract readers) using critical discourse analysis (CDA). As the findings of this study suggest, these publications constitute an important voice in the cultural conversation around fitness, however, changes in societal norms and values have demanded that they also adapt.

## The Rise of Fitness Culture

Fitness, and more specifically, women's fitness as a force in American culture is a relatively recent development. Those who study American culture often cite 1969 as a cultural turning point, when Judi Missett founded Jazzercise, an aerobic exercise class that catered to women. What started as a jazz dance class was reimagined into an entirely new experience, in which women could aspire to achieve the body of a professional dancer without becoming one (Leach, 2019). While standards of both male and female beauty have existed for centuries, by the

mid- to late- 20th century, men and women in the United States were taking more personal responsibility to conform to those standards. Eventually, exercise regimens and trendy diets were everywhere, promising toned bodies and results for those trying to lose weight. As gym memberships initially grew in popularity, few of those spaces were co-ed, perhaps accelerating the development of women's fitness culture (Petrzela, 2019). In 1982, another phenomenon would raise the bar yet again, in the form of *Jane Fonda's Workout*, which eventually became the best-selling home video of all time (Mansky, 2019). Fonda's videos offered American women the ability to workout on-demand at their convenience while also launching fitness fashion as a concept (Mansky, 2019). *Jane Fonda's Workout* was released just a decade after Title IX passed, which made sex discrimination illegal, but Fonda still saw an opportunity to bring fitness home for women who didn't feel comfortable going to the gym (Mansky, 2019).

Both Jazzercise and *Jane Fonda's Workout* revolutionized women's concept of fitness and their relationship to their own health. Both programs introduced tools of empowerment. For example, Jazzercise was a pioneer in offering day-care options for attendees and *Jane Fonda's Workout* introduced a flexible personal improvement opportunity for women working in the home. In fact, Missett recalls receiving thousands of letters from Jazzercise participants who expressed new feelings of confidence to not only improve themselves, but even to leave an abusive husband or demand a raise at work (Petrzela, 2019). The emergent fitness culture saw women growing not only in confidence but also becoming more autonomous.

As is true of many cultural phenomena, the mass media would take its opportunity to introduce volumes of commentary and debate. Despite the astounding success of both Jazzercise and *Jane Fonda's Workout*, contemporary media critiqued both for valuing thinness over health, accusing them of perpetuating ideals of female beauty behind a veneer of innovation and hype



(Petrzela, 2019). Actress Jane Fonda was harshly criticized for being a hypocrite, given her admission that she personally struggled with an eating disorder and body image issues while simultaneously serving as the face of women's fitness (Petrzela, 2019). Culturally, a significant tension was emerging between the empowerment of "you-go-girl" messaging and stubborn standards of beauty perpetuated by the media (Petrzela, 2019). Fitness culture has had an indelible influence on American society, but as it relates to women in particular, that influence brought with it both positive and negative impact.

### **Fitness Magazines**

During the latter half of the 20th century, the print magazine industry expanded to include a new category: health and fitness titles. From their inception, magazines in this category were typically written for exclusively male or exclusively female audiences, but most of today's leading female-targeted fitness magazines lagged male-targeted titles. For example, *Men's Health* launched in 1986, followed by *Women's Health* in 2005 (Men's Health, 2022, February 28; Women's Health, 2021, November 4). A forerunner of health and fitness magazine titles, *womenSports*, is recognized as the first magazine dedicated to women in sports and was launched in 1974 by tennis star Billie Jean King's Women's Sports Foundation on the heels of her victory in the Battle of the Sexes. It recognized female athletes and discussed women in sports. The magazine was later merged with *Self* magazine (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). *Self* launched in 1979 and focuses on women's health as well as beauty and style (Self, 2022, February 24). Since 2017, *Self* has been published exclusively online, exemplifying a trend among print magazines (Trachtenberg, 2016). However, there are still popular women's fitness titles published in print, including the aforementioned *Women's Health*, plus *Health* and *Shape*, all three of which boast some of the highest circulation figures in the category (Health, 2021,

November 4; Shape, 2021, November 4). Men's magazine titles in this category have also expanded, with *Men's Fitness* launching in 1987 and *Men's Journal* following in 1992 (*Men's Journal*, 2022, February 28).

It is important to understand how magazines in the fitness category speak to men and women differently. For example, a study that compared discourses of *Men's Health* and *Women's Health* found that the female-targeted publication commonly referenced “weight loss, dieting, and appearance-based themes... [to] achieve beauty and thinness,” (Bazzini et al., 2015, p. 207). In contrast, *Men's Health* was observed to feature more content about “physical strength and muscularity rather than appearance...” (Bazzini et al., 2015, p. 207). As society seemingly races towards a more body-inclusive future, it is important to appreciate how this may influence the appeal of fitness magazines aimed at either or both genders. In a recent study, Chaplin (2018) talked to female readers of *Women's Health* and learned that some were unwilling to buy the magazine “due to *Women's Health's* promotion of idealistic bodies rather than overall health,” (p. 60). Are women's fitness magazines possibly ignoring the complexity of what “fitness” looks like for each woman, instead characterizing it as a broad, all-encompassing concept? Also, will the mass migration from print to online formats force changes in not only how these magazines speak to women, but also how they are marketed? A leading publication in the category, *Health*, has recently announced imminent plans to go online-only (Smith, 2022). As is true of many industries, the only certainty is change.

### **Body Image as Cultural Conversation**

Arguably one of the most powerful influences on the discourse in women's fitness magazines is the cultural conversation about body image and its ongoing evolution. Within their definition of objectification theory, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that “women who live

in an objectifying culture learn to perceive and describe themselves by their external traits (i.e., how they look) rather than internal traits (i.e., how they feel),” (Aubrey, 2010, p. 51). This “self-objectification” can be instigated or heightened by social influences, such as the mass media (Aubrey, 2010). To that point, many women have experienced the desire to be thin from a young age. A 2006 study of young girls found that between the ages of five and eight, many had already begun “living in an appearance culture in which both peers and the media influence body image and dieting awareness” (Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2006, p. 141). Just by living in a “thin-is-in” society, “youth and thinness... define feminine beauty” (Malkin et al 1999: Roberts and Gettman 2004), leading women to believe that in order to be desirable they must look a certain way (Bazzini et al., 2015). Despite the ubiquity of the “thin ideal,” the past decade has seen changes in how the ideal body is defined, despite the fact that “we as a culture, as a society, are obsessed with size” (Howard, 2018, para. 4).

Although thinness continues to reign as an ideal, the rise of underrepresented voices on social media, post-feminist music stars and reality show icons like the Kardashians have had an undeniable influence on standards of female beauty. In the latter-half of the 2010s, some significant cultural events have challenged the idea that only certain types of women are beautiful. In 2016, *Sports Illustrated* (SI) featured Ashley Graham, the first plus-sized model ever on the cover of its annual swimsuit edition (Figure 1, p. 8). This uncharacteristically unretouched cover photo garnered positive media for SI as they presented alternate imagery of female beauty to an overwhelmingly male audience (Adams, 2016). In 2017, pop superstar and entrepreneur Rihanna launched Fenty beauty in 2017 and made body inclusivity a priority in the marketing of products under that brand name. Today, models of different sizes, races, and genders are featured in all Fenty and Savage X Fenty runway shows, advertisements, and on the

brands' respective websites (SavageXFenty, 2022 March 7; Fenty, 2022, March 7), as Figure 2 (p. 8) illustrates.

Pop singer Lizzo's breakthrough 2019 album, *Cuz I Love You*, included hits like "Juice" and "Tempo" that include many references to the beauty and sexual appeal of plus-size women and have become anthems for that community (Lizzomusic, 2022, March 9). As celebrities and brands begin to bypass outdated beauty ideals, body image and societal beauty standards are experiencing a major evolution.

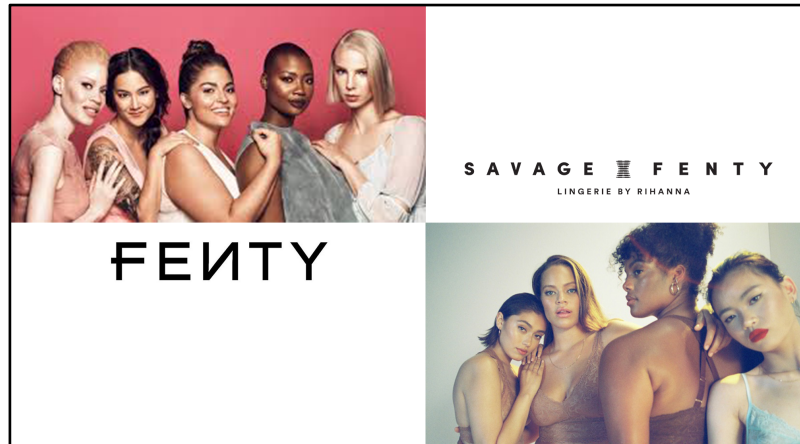
### Figure 1

*Plus-size Model Ashley Graham on SI Swimsuit Edition Cover (2016)*



### Figure 2

*Examples of Advertising Imagery for Rihanna's Fenty and Savage X Fenty Brands*



## Method

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 2005; Wodak, 2004) to analyze how language is used on the covers of women's fitness magazines, how it reveals rhetorical themes and strategies within the genre and how it might reflect the cultural conversation on female body image. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative methodology that rigorously examines how language is used to characterize a given topic or construct. The goal of this form of analysis is “to systematically explore often opaque relationships” between the intent of those disseminating discourse and how it is interpreted by readers (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132).

Fairclough (2003) identifies three dimensions of the CDA methodology: *genres* (the framework in which discourse is presented), *discourses* (the form that the discourse takes) and *styles* (identifiable themes and/or strategies in how language becomes rhetoric, or intentional communication). For purposes of this study, the *genre* is the women's fitness magazine category and the *discourse* takes the form of “cover lines,” or the brief identification of editorial content presented on every issue of a magazine's cover. The author's analysis of cover lines is intended to reveal rhetorical themes and strategies, or *styles*, shared by magazines within this genre.

CDA's methodological approach has been used to analyze magazine discourse as it relates to a variety of sociocultural topics, particularly connected to gender. Sullivan (2015) applied the CDA method to examine how UK women's magazines portrayed the concept of “work-life balance” and Jenkins & Johnson (2017) used this methodology to explore how health policy and public health initiatives aimed at women were presented by feminist magazine titles in the United States. Other researchers have used CDA to analyze discourse in men's magazines. Stibbe (2004) documented how language perpetuated hegemonic masculinity in *Men's Health* magazine and Conradie (2011) focused on the linguistic construction of gender ideology in *For Him Magazine (FHM)*.

While these studies applied the CDA method to editorial content within magazines, this study instead focuses on discourse featured on magazine covers. Cover lines are commonly used by print magazines of all genres to offer readers a preview of stories and features included in a particular issue. The use of “cover lines” on magazine covers is believed to have greatly expanded during the 1950s, when publishers began using them to capture readers' interest on increasingly crowded newsstands (Quinn, 2021). As print publications confront dwindling readership in favor of online content, publication designers are constantly looking for ways to use traditional cover elements in new and exciting ways, asserting that covers are “still there to tease, to show” (Morely, 2018). Essentially, cover lines are more than just markers for editorial content. They are also a form of point-of-sale advertising and an intriguing form of discourse for analysis.

This study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. *Do cover lines on women's fitness magazines reveal rhetorical themes (editorial framing, biases or perspectives) across the genre?*

2. Do cover lines on women's fitness magazines reveal rhetorical strategies

(commonly employed techniques to attract readers) across the genre?

3. Do cover lines on women's fitness magazines reflect any influence from the evolving

cultural conversation on female body image?

To answer these research questions, this study examined three women's fitness magazines published in print format: *Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health*. Although other women's fitness magazines are published in this category, these three titles were selected for analysis because they satisfied essential criteria. First, to give the study a longitudinal perspective, a sample of magazines published over a ten year span (2012-2021) was needed. Second, the magazine titles analyzed had to be published in print format for the duration of that time period (several well-known titles in the women's fitness category have discontinued print editions and moved online).

*Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health* are three of the best-known and most widely circulated titles in the women's fitness category. Each magazine typically publishes 10 issues per year, however, *Shape* magazine published 12 issues in 2012, yielding a total of 302 issues for the study's sample (n=302). Further details about each magazine are provided in Figure 3 (p. 11).

### Figure 3

*Details About Magazine Titles Analyzed*



*Health* magazine  
Circulation: 1.3 million  
Publisher: Dotdash Meredith  
Founded: 1981



*Shape* magazine  
Circulation: 1.6 million  
Publisher: Dotdash Meredith  
Founded: 1981



*Women's Health* magazine  
Circulation: 1.5 million  
Publisher: Hearst  
Founded: 2005

For the analysis, cover images for all 302 issues in the sample were collected and every word appearing on these covers was systematically recorded with the exception of most articles (ex: a, an, the) and conjunctions (ex: and, but). Each word was entered in a separate cell of an Excel spreadsheet to allow for word searches and word counts during the analysis. Whenever numbers appeared, they were noted with their context. Additionally, certain cover lines were recorded in their entirety whenever they were observed to demonstrate similar rhetorical themes or rhetorical strategies across the three magazine titles. The analysis of all magazine covers in the sample was conducted between November 2021 and February 2022. An example of how one magazine cover was coded is provided in Figure 4 (p. 12).

**Figure 4**

*Example of Coding Method for a Magazine Cover*



*Shape magazine - October 2016*

**WORDS**

love	starts	workout
my	inside	great
shape	out	sexy
strong	15 calorie	healthy
sexy	burners	desserts
abs	fast	unique
7 ways	vibrant	easy
tighten	hair	delicious
tone	secret	100+ buys
Jessica	major	amazing
Alba	volume	new
beauty	best	beauty

**COVER LINES OF NOTE:**

- love my shape
- “Beauty starts from the inside out.”
- 15 Fast calorie burners
- Healthy desserts - unique, easy, delicious



## Findings

Using the CDA methodology, it was a primary goal of this study to identify *rhetorical themes* (editorial framing, biases or perspectives) and *rhetorical strategies* (commonly employed techniques to attract readers) based on an analysis of the 302 women's fitness magazine covers from 2012-2021 that constituted the sample. Fairclough (2003) describes these forms of rhetoric as *styles*, marking the way in which language becomes intentional communication.

### *Rhetorical Themes*

Three major rhetorical themes emerged from an analysis of thousands of cover lines from women's fitness magazines analyzed in this study: (a) the setting of expectations for the achievement of fitness and health goals appear to have become more realistic over time, (b) "fitness" is conceptualized holistically, incorporating body and mind, and (c) framing of women's relationship with food has evolved over time.

**Evolving Expectations for Achieving Fitness and Health Goals.** Over the course of the 10-year period (2012-2021) during which the magazines in the sample were published, the word "fast" (as in "quick") was used in cover lines a total of 87 times. However, "fast" appeared only *eight* times from 2018-2021, marking a dramatic reduction in its usage. Similarly, the word "easy" was used in cover lines a total of 81 times over the same 10-year period. Cover lines from 2018-2021, however, use the word "easy" just 22 times. Cover lines from 2012-2017, in general, suggested quick and seemingly effortless results, whether or not they used the words "fast" or "easy": "Walk off 15 pounds fast! Easy plan inside" (*Health*, Issue 7, 2012); "Flat belly now – hello abs! – in just three days" (*Shape*, Issue 4, 2015); "Fastest beach body workout!" (*Women's Health*, Issue 6, 2014). The implication, as presented in cover lines, that fitness and health goals

could be easily achieved constitutes a significant rhetorical theme and was initially pervasive within the sample, but notably less apparent in recent years.

**“Holistic” Fitness Incorporates Body and Mind.** A persistent rhetorical theme across the sample of women's fitness magazines was the idea that women who pursued fitness goals would also enjoy commensurate emotional/psychological benefits. A 2012 cover of *Shape* (Issue 9) urges readers to “Tame tension while getting toned,” while *Health* (Issue 7, 2021) offers the opportunity to “Optimize your body and mind” and *Women's Health* (Issue 11, 2014) promises “Yoga moves that melt stress.” While women's fitness magazines might be primarily viewed as resources for exercise tips and nutritional advice, this holistic framing of fitness that includes the mind is also evident in the way the editorial staffs of each magazine in the sample describe their content, often using terms like “wellness” and “lifestyle” to make this connection (Health, 2022; Shape Media Kit, 2022; Women's Health Media Kit, 2022). In this genre, today's readers are discovering “Good-mood workouts” (*Shape*, Issue 8, 2021) as complements to more straightforward exercise routines and diet plans.

**Evolving Framing of Women's Relationship with Food.** Over the 10-year period during which magazines in the sample were published, a relatively recent and noticeable shift was evident in how editors communicated with women about food. Cover lines analyzed from 2012-2017 that addressed food were more likely to use the words “diet” (25 times) and “calories” (39 times), framing women's relationship with food as cautionary and important to monitor: “Burn calories, melt pounds, sculpt curves” (*Health*, Issue 1, 2017); “100 best diet tricks ever” (*Health*, Issue 9, 2012); “Bikini body diet - our easy 3-month plan starts now” (*Shape*, Issue 4, 2012); “11 lazy ways to burn more calories” (*Women's Health*, Issue 3, 2015).

Notably, the words “diet” and “calories” virtually disappeared from cover lines analyzed from 2018-2021, with “diet” used only three times and “calories” never appearing again. Instead, cover lines relating to food were more positively framed, as *Shape* magazine promised to help readers “eat for vibrant health” (Issue 3, 2020). Recipes also became more commonly offered, as *Health* magazine touted “One and done! Easy, delicious sheet-pan dinners” (Issue 7, 2021) and other cover lines featured healthy food options and prep tools. Importantly, the analysis also revealed that the word “weight” or the term “weight-loss” appeared in cover lines only *six* times from 2018-2021, compared to 39 times in issues published from 2012-2017.

### ***Rhetorical Strategies***

As previously discussed, cover lines are more than simply markers for the editorial content of a magazine. They are also, in essence, point-of-sale advertising messages intended to entice magazine readers to pick up that issue. In addition to the rhetorical *themes* already discussed, the analysis also yielded insights for how words (and some visual elements) were intentionally (rhetorically), consistently and strategically used to “sell” the content of women's fitness magazines. Four rhetorical strategies employing language are presented here as well as some observations about cover visuals.

**Celebrity Testimonials to Enhance Credibility.** Every women's fitness magazine in the sample (n=302) featured a female celebrity, typically an actress, singer, athlete or noted personal trainer. Each celebrity's photo appeared on the cover accompanied by a cover line explaining their contribution to the issue. Notably, none of these female celebrities were plus-sized and only 89 were women of color (*Health* featured 24, *Shape* featured 32 and *Women's Health* featured 33). Cover lines for these celebrities commonly addressed exercise tips, shared recipes or issues related to motherhood or family: “Carrie Underwood's slim-down secrets” (*Shape*, Issue 9,

2015); “Giada’s (De Laurentiis) flat-belly meals” (*Health*, Issue 4, 2012); “Rosario Dawson on healthy relationships with food, her partner, and more” (*Women’s Health*, Issue 3, 2020).

**Impressive Numbers.** In addition to the ways words constituted rhetorical strategies, numbers were also often used to enhance the appeal of a cover line. Depending on the context in which they were used, a higher or lower number could deliver the same impact. For example, *Health* tempted readers with “Burn 1,000 calories with one fast workout” (Issue 1, 2012), while *Women’s Health* promised “The 10-minute trick to glowy, smooth skin” (Issue 1, 2020). The use of odd numbers was also popular, presumably to attract more attention: “17 best weight loss tricks ever” (*Health*, Issue 6, 2016).

**Action Groupings.** Given that cover lines are typically brief and are intended to say a lot using just a few words, the use of language is economical in nature. The analysis of the study’s sample magazines revealed a common practice of combining multiple actions into a single statement, usually related to exercise: “Flat belly, tight tush, lean legs - one do-it-all-move, page 94.” (*Shape*, Issue 3, 2014); “New power foods - increase energy, end cravings, shed pounds” (*Women’s Health*, Issue 9, 2013); “Toned abs! Shapely butt! Lean legs!” (*Shape*, Issue 7, 2013); “Best abs ever - melt flab, sculpt muscle, end bloat” (*Health*, Issue 4, 2017). This strategy is efficient and also creates the impression that an article will contain an abundance of useful information.

**“Fixes,” “Shortcuts” and “Secrets.”** To heighten the perceived value of information to the reader, cover lines often used the words “fix,” “shortcut” and “secret” for effect: “3 minute health fixes - stop headaches” (*Health*, Issue 1, 2012); “Fake a good night’s sleep - fixes for dark circles and tired skin” (*Women’s Health*, Issue 10, 2014); “New shortcuts for fast, amazing meals” (*Shape*, Issue 9, 2017); “Get-gorgeous shortcuts - best holiday hair and makeup quickies”

(*Health*, Issue 10, 2015); “Vibrant hair! The secret to major volume” (*Shape*, Issue 8, 2016); “Secrets wealthy women know” (*Women's Health*, Issue 9, 2014). These cover lines imply that the reader won't get the same information anywhere else (namely, a competing women's fitness magazine).

## Discussion

The findings of this study offer evidence of intentional communication decisions in the women's fitness magazine category that have influenced the cultural conversation and others that seem to be influenced *by* that conversation. In this section, the author's interpretations of these findings are offered, as well as questions that arise for further research.

Some rhetorical themes noted in the findings suggest that the editorial staffs at *Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health* shifted their perspectives and, in some cases, reframed concepts as their read on the evolution of fitness culture dictated, while there is also evidence that their editorial posture may have actually anticipated or driven aspects of fitness culture.

As described in the findings, after 2018, the promise of quick and seemingly effortless results for women pursuing health and fitness goals virtually disappeared from cover lines. This could be explained by the confluence of cultural “firsts” and highly visible events around the same time, as discussed in the literature review, that challenged the idea that there should be one standard of beauty for women. The rising viewpoint that women can be “fit” at any size could have prompted editors to rethink their results-oriented, imperative framing of “getting fit.”

As the culture cultivated a broader definition of beauty and fitness, cover lines analyzed in this study's sample offer evidence (over a 10-year period) that these titles may have been pioneering voices to incorporate mental health/wellness under the same banner as physical fitness. As early as 2012, all three magazines in the sample featured cover lines that linked

emotional/psychological benefits with the achievement of fitness goals (ex: “Tame tension while getting toned”) (*Shape*, Issue 9, 2012) and persisted with stories and features across the 10-year period examined. It is reasonable to speculate that editors recognized mental fitness as content of interest for all women that could attract more readers. Whether or not this is the case, this broader framing of “fitness” on their covers could have helped accelerate this idea’s acceptance in society. Further research (perhaps interviews with current and former editors of these publications) is needed to determine how and why this editorial decision was formed ahead of broad cultural agreement.

Another thematic shift apparent from this study’s analysis of cover lines involves the relationship between women and food. From 2012-2021, many food-related items were featured on the covers of *Health*, *Shape* and *Women’s Health*. However, once again around 2018, a marked difference in style was noted in the cover lines about food, as the words “diet” and “calories” virtually disappeared. In fact, the word “diet” was used only three times on covers in the last four years of the sample and “calories” never appeared again. The word “weight” or the term “weight-loss” appeared in cover lines only *six* times from 2018-2021, compared to 39 times from 2012-2017. Essentially, it appears that these magazines’ editors made a conscious decision to shift their perspective from what food does *to* women to what food can do *for* women. More items focusing on nutrition, healthy recipes and food preparation techniques replaced cautionary information about calorie-counting and fat.

In addition to the rhetorical themes revealed by this study, significant evidence of rhetorical strategies (commonly employed techniques to attract readers) was also present. These strategies could be described as a sort of “toolbox” for selling fitness magazines using their cover

art and cover lines. The strategies described here were observed across the three titles and felt omnipresent at their rate of repetition.

In light of this paper's discussion of an evolving cultural conversation about women's fitness and standards of beauty, one prominent editorial decision by the teams at *Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health* seemed to demonstrate a strange disconnect with cultural reality. Each and every one of the 302 covers featured a female celebrity (actresses, singers, athletes or personal trainers) and none were plus-sized models. Furthermore, only 89 cover models were women of color. Given that magazines in many other categories (even *Sports Illustrated*) have already recognized and responded to calls for broader representation, it feels culturally tone deaf to see this category thoroughly reject that idea. While some may suggest that fitness magazines are about aspiration, how do the "predictable" cover models of *Health*, *Shape* and *Women's Health* align with other editorial decisions that seem more sensitive to women's perspectives?

From a purely structural perspective, the language of cover lines on women's fitness magazines often conform to templates. For example, this was observed in how cover line writers used numbers (arguably to enhance the appeal of a story or simply attract attention). Consider the perceptual difference between "How to choose a workout" and "10 things to think about when choosing a workout." There was also a common practice of combining multiple actions into a single statement (usually related to exercise) which does make sense when words are at a premium, but is probably also intended to exaggerate the amount of valuable information in a story. Finally, some of the most-often used and valuable words in a cover line writer's vocabulary are "fix," "shortcut" and "secret," amounting to some of the highest word counts noted across the analysis. These terms lend a sense of exclusivity and heightened value to the story titles, presumably to competitive advantage. For anyone who aspires to be involved with

the marketing of magazines and the design of their covers, skill with these “tools” feels absolutely necessary.

Because this study was focused on the use of language, only the most obvious visual magazine cover elements were addressed in the findings. There is a clear opportunity for more research looking at visual elements of women's fitness magazines in greater detail. Furthermore, more research examining power asymmetry between genders (as evidenced by some of the findings here) would be interesting for cultural/critical scholars to undertake.

### **Conclusion**

As the mass media's discourse continues to shape (and be shaped by) culture, studies that examine their rhetoric and how influences come to bear will be an important contribution. This is particularly true in relation to evolving cultural conversations, because as people's attitudes change, the media's rhetorical approaches often shift in response. The cultural conversation around women's fitness is currently one of the most visible (and political) in today's world, demonstrating seismic shifts in just the past few years. How the media uses language to talk to women about fitness, both from an editorial perspective and on the marketing front, will continue to be a fascinating area of exploration as we seek to understand the “opaque relationships” between encoders and decoders of information. Studies like this one will help us continue to compile evidence to gauge that balance of power.



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