"Make Over Your Body": Conflicting Messages in Women's Fitness Magazines

Joy Zoodsma

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SHAPE Magazine is a women's fitness magazine that has been consistently popular since its initial publication in 1981. This study explores how the messages of health and beauty in this publication have evolved over the last three decades, especially in response to the cultural imperatives of consumerism and feminism. It critically analyzes the visual and textual messages on SHAPE Magazine covers and in letters from the editor, which offer important examples of the ways in which SHAPE attempts to “hail” readers – to draw them in, to convince them that what the magazine has to offer is relevant to their success as women.

This study builds upon previous critiques of societal expectations about female roles, especially as presented in popular culture. My examination reveals how the distinction between beauty messages and health messages has become blurred and explores the contradictory discourse presented on and in SHAPE Magazine covers and letters from the editor, highlighting the conflicting ideologies of feminism and consumerism that the magazine embraces. SHAPE encourages women to be healthy, happy, and confident while also exhorting them to pursue an impossible standard of physical fitness and attractiveness.
“MAKE OVER YOUR BODY”: CONFLICTING MESSAGES IN WOMEN’S FITNESS MAGAZINES

by

Joy Zoodsma

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Joy Zoodsma
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INTRODUCTION

Women’s magazines constitute a fascinating area of popular culture in which women are both empowered and objectified. Emerging in the mid-1800s, early women’s magazines targeted a specifically female, largely middle or upper class audience, serving primarily as conservative sources of information about fashion and domestic life. With the rise of mass production during the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women’s magazines became available to the general public for a nickel or even a penny an issue. Suddenly readership grew exponentially, and magazines competed for reader attention. Wood (1949) explains the marketing technique employed by Edwards Bok, one of the earlier editors of *Ladies’ Home Journal*:

To stimulate reader response, Bok, immediately on assuming the *Journal* editorship, turned to what is now called the “survey technique,” offering a series of prizes for the best answers to questions he put to his readers. What in the magazine did they like least? Why? What did they like best? What new features would they like to see started? Thousands of answers were returned, and the editor acted on the reader advice thus obtained. Bok had, he says, “divined the fact that in thousands of cases the American mother was not the confidante of her daughter, and reasoned if any inviting human personality could be created on the printed page that would supply this lamentable lack of family life, girls would flock to such a figure.” (1949, p. 109)
Magazines were tailored to the needs of their audience in the hopes of encouraging customer loyalty. This allowed female readers to identify on a personal and intimate level with a magazine. One of the first women’s magazines, *Godey’s Ladie’s Book* (1830-1898) created a sense of “we” in its vernacular, cultivating an experience of like-mindedness between readers, editors, and writers. This presented a united front of working towards the same purposes. This was partly because more than half of female magazine editors and staff were women, and a voice of unity came through the writing. Women’s magazines became in some sense, communities. The purposes of these communities and magazine messages have been the subject of much speculation and debate. Current cultural norms regarding the role of women were represented, or reinforced. Odland (2010) explores this, observing how *Ladies’ Home Journal*, the most popular women’s magazine in the post-WWII era, constructed the maternal identity of the ideal woman. *LHJ* provided a complex and ambivalent portrayal of domesticity and regarded maternal identity as an incontrovertible ideological position.

Zuckerman (1998) points out how contemporary women’s magazines could easily be misconstrued as representing a clean break from the overt sexism present in publications of the past. Instead, she describes how current trends in women’s magazines are outgrowths of earlier choices in the marketing world. One of these aspects is the theme of escapism. Stevens (2003) researched the imaginary shopping spaces that women’s magazines construct, addressing the anticipatory, imaginary, and experiential consumption that they provide, and how women interact with these magazines in the same way as they view products in a department store. The magazine medium creates
shopping spaces that celebrate looking and browsing while also condoning the objectification of women that is a hallmark of consumer culture. This feeds into the major themes of women’s magazines, such as pampering, indulgence, and guilty pleasure, all of which add up to escapism (Stevens, Brown, and MacLaran, 2003).

Part of this escapism is the portrayal of unattainable beauty through images of ideal bodies. Glamour and “femininity” grace the pages, drawing women in while simultaneously offering solutions designed to keep them “in.” These images, especially in the fashion magazine world, may have unfortunate effects; research suggests that they are correlated with eating disorders, bodily dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem (Joseph, 2009; LeBesco, 2004; Martin & Gentry, 1997). The beauty ideal of the fashion world has been particularly condemned for its waif-like thinness. Studies have demonstrated that the mass media (particularly women’s fashion magazines) are a primary source of information and reinforcement in relation to the nature of the thin beauty ideal, its importance, and how to attain it. Fashion magazine consumption has been found to have a variety of effects on women, including disordered eating, internalization of the thin standard (Lager & McGee, 2003), and even confusion as to what a healthy body is supposed to look like. Concern for adolescent girls’ self-esteem has drawn heavy criticism to women’s magazines, especially fashion magazines.

In the early 1980s, women’s magazines branched off into a new genre that highlighted both fitness and beauty. These fitness magazines (e.g.: Women’s Health, Shape, Runner’s Guide, Prevention, Fitness, Health, Self, and Redbook) claimed to focus on holistic health and wellness for the modern woman, with articles on health, nutrition, fitness, sex, and lifestyle. Perhaps because fitness magazines are fairly new to the world
of women’s magazines, little research has been conducted on them. Health messages within women’s magazines, such as those about obesity awareness, menopause coping, and cancer prevention (skin, cervical, and most prominently, breast), have been studied, but magazines designed specifically for women’s fitness still present a relatively unexplored frontier. Some research suggests that fitness magazines often contradict themselves by promoting a healthy body and mind in their articles and advertisements, while overwhelming their readers with images that present a pencil-thin physical ideal (Lager & McGee, 2003). These fitness magazines can therefore be deceptive because they seemingly offer health tips, while concurrently promoting an arguably unhealthy body type that requires malnourishment and excessive exercise.

Fitness magazines are subject to conflicting forces that may produce disjointed messages. A prime example of this is SHAPE Magazine, a popular women’s fitness publication that was established in 1981. It claims to offer “the latest health, fitness, beauty, and fashion news for today’s modern woman” (SHAPE Facebook page, 2012), but SHAPE and other fitness magazines often have contradictory, competing goals. Their organization, presentation, ideology, and advice reflect multiple stances: they are consumerist, feminist, health aware, body critical, and fashion-worshipping. The editors for women’s fitness magazines are concerned with the bottom line of profit in a consumer environment, which makes the survival of these magazines in such a fragmented information age much more difficult and complex. Yet, the writers and editors at SHAPE Magazine seem to sincerely wish to empower women, to help them be the best that they can be. In other words, the magazine staff members appear genuinely interested in assisting women, though the content they choose can often seem contrary or dualistic.
Consequently, I wish to argue that women’s fitness magazines are splintered in their messages: they simultaneously embrace both women’s health and consumer culture, incorporating aspects of empowerment and objectification into their definition of “fitness.”

This study will examine the health messages offered by SHAPE Magazine through a careful study of eleven issues of the magazine from the 1980s to the 2010s. While these eleven issues are by no means a representative sample of the evolution of SHAPE Magazine over the past 30 years, they provide direct evidence of the magazine’s goals and messages and are a reflection of the cultural context in which they were produced. Consequently, these eleven issues offer historical insight into how SHAPE Magazine has attempted to functioned as a lifestyle guide for modern women, embracing a simultaneously feminist and consumerist orientation that has produced inconsistent, even conflicting messages. Important frameworks for this analysis of SHAPE Magazine include the dynamics of consumer culture (especially Featherstone’s theories of the body in consumer culture) and the impact of feminism (with an emphasis on Wolf’s discussion of the “beauty myth”).

The Body as an Icon of Consumer Culture

It was in the 1920s that the forces of contemporary consumer culture coalesced, creating a system in which psychological (or created) need eclipsed physical (or “real”) need. A culture that may seem “natural” today emerged for many reasons, the most prominent being that advertisers wanted to create an expanding market for the products of the industrial age; they “needed” people to consume. The emergence of consumer culture was catalyzed by mass media that included motion pictures, tabloid press, mass
circulation magazines and radio, all of which publicized new standards of appearance and behavior to which the public could aspire (Featherstone, 1991). The mass media became the “guardian[s] of the new morality, enticing individuals to participate in the consumption of commodities and experiences once restricted to the upper class” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 172). A key goal of the media, especially modern advertising, was the cultivation of dissatisfaction and envy, essential engines of consumer culture.

The body is an ideal arena in which to encourage self-surveillance and consumption of “improvement” products, as each person’s body is continually changing: growing older, getting bigger (or smaller), and so on. Images of difficult-to-attain “ideal” bodies in motion pictures, magazines, and advertising have proven an effective marketing tool. Pachter (1975, as explored in Featherstone, 1991) declares, “Today’s popular heroes are no longer the mighty, the builders of empires, the inventors and achievers. Our celebrities are movie stars and singers, ‘beautiful’ people of leisure” (p. 330). These beautiful people are exalted in an age of surveillance, where images of the body are plastered across screens and printed pages. Within consumer culture, the inner and outer body are fused together, where the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body (Featherstone, 1991). In short, the body has become the means by which society judges health and worthiness.

The idea that the body is a pure entity untainted by society is a fiction (Orbach, 2009). Rather, the mass media saturate everyday life and are constantly influencing our thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the ideal body. In the early twentieth century, these new messages glorified the leisure lifestyle. Images of youth, beauty, luxury, and sexuality stirred the suppressed desires of society (Featherstone, 1991). Advertising
introduced the concept of buying things that were not needed physically, but rather psychologically. This came to include the body, which could now be displayed unashamedly. The body itself became a site of consumption.

The constructed body is a result of societal pressures, seen most prominently in advertising. Advertisements emerging in the early 1900s argued that ideal bodies were crucial to happiness in the home and marriage bed (Featherstone, 1991). Impacted by the findings of Sigmund Freud (1918), prevailing attitudes toward sex shifted, highlighting the importance of sexual satisfaction. Suddenly one’s mental health was dependent on an active sex life, and consequently, physical attraction was a necessity. This fed directly into consumer culture, along with the rising influence of fashion, feminism, science, and Hollywood. With the bodily exhibition of the fashion world, the public consumed glamorous images and became conditioned to having a critical attitude toward and perception of their bodies and lifestyles. The advancement of women in the public sphere, especially in terms of achieving the right to vote in 1920, brought a backlash against feminism: a thinner, more boyish physical ideal (best exemplified by the figure of the flapper) replaced the fleshy, curved female body of the nineteenth century. This new bodily ideal can also be related to the influence of the Industrial Revolution and women working in factories, where individuality did not have high value, efficiency was prized, and excess and/or waste were derided. Human fat had no place in this new environment. The body was viewed as a machine, a machine with strength and functionality that declined steeply with the loss of youth. Bordo (1993) observes that the female body has always been a socially shaped and historically colonized territory, a fact that classifies women and the female body as victim, caught in the constructs of a consumerist,
patriarchal culture.

In the early twentieth century, Hollywood and the fashion industry became undeniable forces in consumerism, a constant reminder of the value of beauty and youth. Movies foregrounding youthfulness flooded the market. Celebrities endorsing the latest fashion statements appeared on glossy magazine pages. Advertisements capitalized on this, planting seeds of discontent within consumers, ensuring their business for decades to come. People suddenly not only needed things, they wanted things. Instead of purchasing clothes for functional reasons, women wanted clothes that were representative of popular styles and that drew attention towards the bodies they worked hard to achieve. This change in and of itself displays the influence of mass media on consumer thought; fascination with the media and its influence rose. Furthermore, with the rise of secularism, people were looking to science for answers to life’s questions, especially in relation to the body. As science introduced the scale, the definition of the calorie, and the concept of regulated, mathematical nutrition, regulating one’s eating appeared straightforward, and fitting into a stylish outfit was possible. In other words, because science had shown that there was a “simple” relationship between excess bodily fat and immoderate consumption of calories, it seemed clear that anyone with a bit of willpower should be able to lose weight, increasing pressure to attain the physical ideals promulgated by the mass media.

With the rise of consumerism and bodily surveillance, people began to realize that their social standing and lifestyle choices depended on the appearance of their bodies. Dieting, makeup products, exercise, medicine, starvation, fashion choices, and cosmetic surgery all became options and influences in achieving and maintaining the ideal body.
Advertising helped to create a society where individuals were “made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 175). Then, as now, consumer culture constructed the body as a vessel of pleasure: desirable and desiring. The closer the body is to representing the idealized images that saturate our mass media, the higher its exchange value (Kern, 1975). That exchange value is closely correlated with youth and efficiency.

Consequently, fear of aging has increased. While consumerism introduced a plethora of products that claimed to delay the aging process, the inevitability of growing older magnified people’s insecurities, insecurities that have persisted to the present day. Women especially have a strong fear of getting old, as there is a rigid standard for females’ physical appearance versus the standard for males, which is more forgiving of signs of advancing age. Women in positions of power are especially criticized for looking their age, whereas men in positions of power are viewed as more intellectual and therefore wiser with the arrival of outward aging (Slevin, 2010). It is not so much the fear of getting old so much as it is a fear of looking old. Denying the natural aging process feeds into the existing sexist political system of American culture. However, there seems to be a psychological process behind these long-standing fears, and Slevin (2010), suggests that people worry about becoming obsolete with age. This calls into question the priorities and messages of our society, as aging bodies become increasingly marginalized. While aging remains a societal, collective process, it also is a privatized fear. This is one of the effects of a hypervisual, consumer culture, which espouses a questionable doctrine of self and promotes a crippling anxiety rather than an appreciation for the experience
and wisdom one gains through the process of aging. With the rise of bodily surveillance, we are constantly fighting self-consciousness.

Women may find themselves fixating on their flaws, condemning their bodies for not representing the physical ideal they wish to achieve. Featherstone (1991) presents an analysis of these anxieties and perceptions regarding the body in consumer culture. He states, “Within consumer culture individuals are asked to become role players and self-consciously monitor their own performance…bodily imperfections become penalties in everyday interactions” (p. 189). We have become uncomfortable with bodily imperfection and accustomed to absorbing an onslaught of ideal female bodies. A prime example of this is the fashion industry, a world that thrives on presenting and promoting youth, beauty, and surveillance and exists to draw attention to the ideal female body. The physical ideals presented in women’s magazines, even specialty fitness magazines, have their foundation in the world of fashion.

**The Fashion Industry**

“In the modeling world they can tell you to your face your skin does not look good with my clothes or I don’t want black girls this season or you’re too fat. . . . They say those types of things. And it’s not illegal” (King, 2007). The fashion industry (defined as the high fashion, or the French haute couture "high sewing" or "high dressmaking" modeling and designer business) has been simultaneously glorified and condemned for its exacting and often impossible views on beauty and the female body (Joseph, 2009). Orbach (2009) observes, “The effects of the artifice employed by the beauty and fashion industries are different. Here the space between fantasy and aspiration
collapses and one melds into the desire of the other” (p. 100). She describes how fashion magazines avoid portraying ordinary bodies, instead presenting unattainable, wafer-thin females as the ideal for the masses to pursue. While women’s fitness magazines arguably developed as a backlash against the fashion magazine industry’s body ideal, the new “fit” female ideal that has evolved is still as exacting and unrealistic as its predecessors. In addition, fashion messages permeate women’s fitness magazines; instead of women working out in whatever clothes are available and practical, they are expected to look “cute” or attractive while exercising. The market for fitness fashion is extremely profitable and perpetuates the existing pressures women feel to be “fit” for society. The end product of the air-brushed model redefines standards of what normal beauty is to us, imprinting our minds with dissatisfaction and desire. The rhetoric of women’s fashion and fitness magazines aims to improve the body, to upgrade it. Women who attain this goal of extreme slenderness are interviewed and praised for their work ethic and determination. The goal is to inspire and encourage other women to be more like them, the ideal, so that they too can experience health and happiness (Woodstock, 2001). The underlying message then is that people cannot live the life they were meant to live unless they pursue the beauty ideal. Wolf (1991) has termed this phenomenon “the beauty myth.” Wolf argues that this beauty myth, like many ideologies of femininity, “mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women’s attempts to increase their power” (Wolf, 1991, p. 7). On television, fashion reality shows such as The Hills, The City, Project Runway, and America’s Next Top Model have been prime time hits in recent years. These programs, with the exception of America’s Next Top Model, which occasionally will feature a “plus size” model (a woman who is usually a size 6 or 8), showcase women who
adhere to the beauty ideal.

One of the most prominent activists agitating for change in this industry is media and fashion mogul Tyra Banks, who has had a successful career as a model and as a casting agent on America’s Next Top Model. Joseph (2009) explores the standards of the fashion industry as exemplified in the “Fat Scandal” of Banks. On January 3, 2007, celebrity fashion websites, blogs, and tabloids exploded with negative comments regarding the former supermodel’s figure. Photographed in a bathing suit, Banks appeared in gossip magazines targeted towards women looking normal (Us Weekly, People, OK!, In Touch) but her figure did not appeal to the fashion or women’s magazine world. Banks explains that people [the fashion industry] are used to consuming her body as carefully produced to be artificially flattering. She then states, “…If I had lower self-esteem I would probably be starving myself right now. But that’s exactly what’s happening to women all over this country” (Joseph, 2007, p. 245). The resulting message is “express yourself” - but also “contain yourself.” Consequently, one attains success in the fashion industry through bodily conformity. The fashion industry has helped stall women’s progress by prompting a fixation on the body. Compared with the heady momentum of the women’s movement from earlier days, there is a dispiriting climate of confusion, division, cynicism, and mostly exhaustion (Wolf, 1991, p.10). The gaunt, youthful model has replaced the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood.

The fashion and media industries are primary agents of ideological production that produce omnipresent, hegemonic constructions of beauty, race, and gender that are promulgated by women’s magazines. The focus on the body in the fashion world and consumer culture is key because “. . . it is the essential structure of the sexual subject on
which gender is inscribed. If a woman’s body is not the right size and shape nothing else will fit—certainly not any positive self-identity” (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 83). In this context, the body is much like a canvas to be painted by consumerism. The founding CEO of *SHAPE Magazine*, Christine MacIntyre, saw an opportunity to utilize this canvas. MacIntyre wanted to create a popular culture health magazine for women that featured models who looked different than those presented on the fashion runway. MacIntyre envisioned *SHAPE* as a magazine for women interested in improving their health and fitness that would feature healthy bodies instead of seductive ideals. While this approach certainly reflected a response to the fashion industry’s feminine ideal, it was also addressing an important movement, one that has evolved in the thirty years since the magazine’s foundation in 1981. MacIntyre’s goal reflects aspects of the circulating beliefs of feminism and the role of this new healthy, modern, woman.

**Feminism and the Body**

Feminism attempts to theorize the role and nature of gender inequality by examining women’s roles and rights in society. Feminists have traditionally viewed changing the natural body as a risk and an example of oppressive and unrealistic beauty standards. Feminist scholar Naomi Wolf examines the “beauty myth” and how it has evolved to suit the needs of American culture in her work *The Beauty Myth* (1991), which is now twenty years old but still very relevant to this study. The “beauty myth” convinces women that it is imperative for them to pursue beauty and makes men believe that they should desire only those women who *are* beautiful, according to the exacting standards of physical appearance established by the mass media, especially women’s magazines. This
principle is “determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (p. 12). The beauty myth evolved in response to women gaining power in our society and is ultimately meant to keep patriarchal social control in place. Wolf surmises that “images of female beauty [are] a political weapon against women’s advancement” (p. 10). These images saturate our visual media, and play an important role in the marketing machine. Lager & McGee (2003) hypothesize that thin idealized images of women influence and maintain patriarchal control over women because this ideology has set the standard that women feel they must attain. These unrealistic ideals keep women in subordinate situations because women’s energies are directed towards the battle for a perfect body (Grogan, 1999). Women remain in this position because they are a part of a culture where thinness and beauty are linked to positive, desirable traits such as happiness, popularity, and attractiveness (Bordo, 1993).

Since the analysis presented in this study considers the relationship between women’s fitness magazines, consumerism, and feminist thought, I will present the evolution of feminism, including a brief description of first-, second-, and third-wave feminism, and post-feminism, especially as they relate to the female body. First-wave feminism emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and focused primarily on women’s suffrage. Prominent leaders of this movement included Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Coffin Mott. These women were crusaders for the political and social voice of women despite the negative social consequences they faced in the patriarchal political system of the time. The ground was fertile for this movement as women were tired of the restraints of Victorianism and
wanted to be active in the public sphere. Marital rights were also being questioned. In 1890, New York passed a revised version of the Married Women’s Property Act which allowed women to have input regarding their children’s wages, wills, and property inheritance (Dicker, 2008). The end of the first-wave chapter is often associated with the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, granting women the right to vote in 1920. First-wave feminism marked the addition of women’s voices to public life and most significantly, paved the way for further reform. While they were still not viewed as equal to men, women started to have a larger voice within society, and this fueled their desire for even greater participation.

Second-wave feminism, also termed the Feminist Movement or the Women’s Liberation Movement, is associated with the 1960s and 1970s. This movement entailed developing an awareness of and advocating for change on multiple issues such as legal inequalities, sexuality, the workplace, family, and most notably, reproductive rights. Gaining footing as independent thinkers and workers after World War II, second-wave feminists demanded social reform. The Civil Rights Movement was taking shape, helping to create an atmosphere in social inequities of all kinds were no longer being quietly tolerated by disenfranchised groups. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a work that is credited with jump-starting second-wave feminism with its straightforward description of women’s marginalization from public life and positions of power. After taking over factory positions during World War II, women felt justified in calling for equal opportunities in the hiring process and in the workplace. Issues such as equal pay and status were addressed through legal victories such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title IX (1972), the Women’s Educational Equity Act (1972), the Equal Credit
Opportunity Act (1974), the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978), and the formation of the National Organization for Women. Women began to occupy the workplace in greater numbers and find a voice with other women. The movement gained momentum and attention with perhaps one of the most notorious court cases of the period, *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which legalized abortion. Second-wave feminism allowed for women to accomplish much in the way of basic legal and societal rights, and provided a foundation for changes in the ways that women were perceived.

Second-wave feminism short-circuited as a result of dissent on the issue of sexuality, specifically pornography. These “Feminist Sex Wars” in the late 1970s and early 1980s heralded the birth of third-wave feminism, which essentially emerged in the wake of the second wave’s internecine disputes. The Feminist Sex Wars divided feminists into two groups: anti-pornography and pro-sex. Anti-pornography feminists wanted civil laws passed restricting pornography distribution and consumption. They perceived female oppression as the result of male sexual dominance, consequently condemning pornography, prostitution, sadomasochism, and other manifestations of such dominance. In addition, such feminists felt that pornography was created by men for men and consequently reinforced the male-dominant paradigm. Sex-positive feminists considered sex and pornography empowering avenues for women. Their ideology focused on sexual freedom as central to women’s freedom. As a result, any attempt to control or ban sexual activities was read as discriminatory. Sex positive feminism united anti-censorship activists, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or queer) activists, producers and distributors of pornography and erotica, and sex radicals. The idea was to embrace the entire range of human sexuality.
Third-wave feminism developed in the early 1980s as second-wave feminism waned. Partly a response to the perceived shortcomings of the second wave, third-wave feminism supports the belief that meaning of women’s behavior is largely constructed and context-dependent. It is a broad movement that attempts to include all voices against oppression, from those that emphasize minorities’ rights to those that highlight struggles related to socioeconomic status. The third wave’s attempts to widen the spectrum of representation have positioned it as an important advocate for LBGTQ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgendered, and queer) rights and identities. Accordingly, third wave feminists see controversial female sexual issues such as pornography as no longer being exclusively used against women but also by women, making them less of a tool reflecting male dominance and, instead, more malleable, flexible products that can be co-opted by females.

Thus, the third wave embraces diversity and considers women in control of their sexuality, power, and influence. While past forms of feminism seemed to assume a definition of womanhood that excluded other races and socioeconomic classes other than white, upper-middle class women, third-wave feminism seeks to broaden past definitions and gender expectations. Stereotypes are seen as counter-productive and exclusive in third-wave feminism; consequently, a more post-structuralist interpretation of gender is embedded in third-wave doctrine. For example, supporters of the third-wave claim that it allows for each woman’s own definition of feminism to be created and incorporated with her identity (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). While this depends on a more universalist view of female identity, the existence of the third wave suggests that society has not resolved the social issues that propelled the movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Tait,
Female sexuality in industries such as pornography has been readdressed by third-wave feminists, with many reconsidering the original feminist perspective that women in pornography and other sex work are always exploited victims (Johnson, 2002). And some third-wave feminists, such as Naomi Wolf (1991) have argued that more subtle ideological means, such as the beauty myth, are now used to control women. However, the roles and expectations for women and their bodies remains a point of contention between third-wave feminists and post-feminists.

In the twenty-first century, post-feminist frames have largely replaced other (second- and third-wave) feminist frames for comprehending the constructed body (Joseph, 2009; Tait, 2007). Post-feminism, or a backlash against feminism, emerged in the 1980s as the second wave was evolving into the third wave. There are no leading crusaders of this movement who would call themselves “post-feminists.” Rather, the term “post-feminism” evolved out of second wave feminists’ critiques of current society’s seeming indifference towards women’s equality. Prominent third-wave feminist scholars such as Wolf (1991, McRobbie (2004), and Joseph (2009) lead the academic dialogue on the influences and consequences of post-feminism for contemporary society. McRobbie (2004) explains how a misunderstanding of equality is present amongst society’s female population, arguing that post-feminism is most clearly seen in presumptively “feminist” media entities such as Sex and the City, Bridget Jones’s Diary, and Ally McBeal where the “feminist” leads claim to be enlightened women who enjoy their sexuality but rely on a man to complete their life. Such twisting of feminist concepts reflects a “post-” attitude, where women have, in a sense, become victims of their own success because it appears that the feminist movement is no longer relevant or necessary. Contemporary “post-”
feminists such as Katha Pollitt or Nadine Strossen have generalized the term “feminism,” claiming that it simply means that women are people. Consequently, any argument that identifies differences or inequities between men and women is labeled as sexist rather than feminist. Thus, the “post-” framework contradicts or counters many of the assertions of second- and third-wave feminism, providing a watered down, “girl power” attitude towards women.

The imperative behind the post-feminist perspective was a desire to redefine femininity. In post-feminism, the word “feminism” became ‘the f-word’” (Wolf, 1991, p. 2). Women who complained about the sexist body ideal were assumed to be ugly or unhappy themselves. In the post-feminist frame, constructing the natural body to meet the sexist ideal is an empowering personal choice, and physical transformation is a path to happiness and self-confidence (Tait, 2007). While third-wave feminists still concern themselves with oppression against women, minorities, and LBGTQ members, the post-feminist paradigm generally argues that sexism has been eradicated, thus fundamentally opposing third-wave feminism and its attempt to broaden the feminist struggle. Post-feminists focus on individual rights over women’s rights in an attempt to avoid coming across as being “anti-men.” While third wave feminists have tried to avoid “essentialist” definitions of femininity and argue for a universal female identity, post-feminism focuses on a universalist human identity. This evokes a tendency to generalize and gloss over essential issues surrounding current oppression. Where third wave feminism attempts to extend the feminist struggle, post-feminism halts that development by embracing the belief that sexism and oppression have been eradicated.

Evolving in the 1980s in a backlash against second-wave feminism (and emerging
third-wave feminism), post-feminism acknowledges the negative connotations of the word “feminist” and some of the stereotypes associated with those who have advocated on women’s behalf. Prominent feminist scholars such as McRobbie (2004) and Joseph (2009) have been critical of post-feminism, which has a tendency to boil down the complex concepts of first- and second-wave feminism to brief statements, such as “women are people,” or terms like “girl power.” The individual is valued above all and is encouraged to make decisions on his/her own. The social systems in existence are not understood as playing influential roles in these decisions. Women are no longer viewed as victims of oppression. Joseph (2009) notes that in the United States in the new, post-feminist millennium, gender is popularly understood as a “personal, individual, and mutable trait, and not a structural, institutional, and historic force” (p. 5). This makes it difficult to identify and address gender discrimination and/or hierarchical issues, which are not acknowledged and thus become accepted as “normal” (Brunsdon, 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; McRobbie, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In regard to the physical appearance, this leaves little room for bodies that do not reflect current gender norms.

A popular cultural phenomenon that provides a solid comparison between differing feminist attitudes toward the body is the rise of cosmetic surgery and its normalization. This is a relevant example as it is the most extreme method of constructed beauty. In consumer culture, women are expected or encouraged to shape their bodies to reach a difficult-to-achieve ideal, but the pathway to that ideal can be shortened through surgery. With the prominence of Botox ads, crash-dieting dietary supplements, and testimonies from cosmetic surgery health advocates within women’s magazines, the topic of cosmetic surgery and the female body is relevant to any discussion of feminism. Fewer
topics better illustrate the fracturing of feminism and the different approaches taken when it comes to pursuing beauty through drastic body modification. This is especially significant to an analysis of women’s health magazines, as they seem to continually fuse health messages with beauty messages, or rather repackage beauty messages to look like health messages. With the constant emphasis on constructed beauty and the pressure women’s fitness magazines place on women to make their bodies conform to a young, thin physical ideal, cosmetic surgery presents itself as a logical and available option. The celebration of eternal youth also may cause women to consider some of the more drastic body-improvement options, such as cosmetic surgery. A brief discussion of how different branches of feminism view serious alterations to the body is helpful in understanding explicit and implicit messages about the body in women’s magazines.

While second- and third-wave feminists consider cosmetic surgery another form of female oppression, post-feminists view the decision to modify the body surgically as a personal, often empowering, choice. Early surgical alterations of the body were performed during WWII on badly burned war victims. This practice fulfilled a very different need than today’s demand for beauty. The bodies of wounded Air Force crews had to be reconstructed, as the aviation fuel burned at such high temperatures that the resulting flesh damage was beyond the reach of healing techniques that were then available. Since the need was there, plastic surgery evolved to accommodate it. These surgically repaired pilots became known as the Guinea Pig Club. They were put in the spotlight as war heroes for their valor and bravery, not stigmatized for facial irregularities (Orbach, 2009). By contrast, today’s plastic surgery patients are also in the public eye - but as talk show hosts, celebrities, and elites with wealth and prestige (Jones, 2004). For
the normal woman who is distressed or dissatisfied with her natural body, these exemplars of medical “fix it” surgeries offer a way forward. The modern woman’s story is not the same as the aviation war victims. Her compulsion to change her body is the result of a different kind of assault: the images and rhetoric that bombard her daily may convince her that she needs surgical modification.

Examples of the medical “marvel” of plastic surgery have shown women that their bodies can be medically “fixed” (Orbach, 2009). This shift of mindset regarding the body is abhorred by many feminists. Multiple second- and third-wave feminist scholars have voiced objections to society’s surgical turn. Within the feminist context, cosmetic surgery is considered dangerous (Jeffreys 2005; Morgan 1991; Wolf 1991), ageist (Wolf 1991), racist (Padmore, 1998), and sexist (Jeffreys 2005; Morgan 1991; Wolf 1991). Feminist scholarship on cosmetic surgery primarily focuses on weighing the oppressive aspects of its practice with the individual’s pre-surgery/post-surgery experience. Davis concludes that cosmetic surgery is about “exercising power under conditions which are not one’s own making” (1995, p. 163). The normalization of cosmetic surgery, an option frequently showcased in women’s magazines, is a direct result of society’s desire to reward inner beauty with outer beauty, and this is a reflection of our culture’s post-feminism. Instead of cosmetic surgery being negatively associated with vanity and inauthenticity, cosmetic surgery has become something that celebrates women’s ability to change the way they look. In this sense, cosmetic surgery enables women to feel more like their “authentic” selves, the person they were supposed to look like, rather than their “natural” selves, filled with faults and imperfections. This ironic dynamic paints cosmetic surgery patients as heroic protagonists, willing to risk surgery to obtain their dreams. The
domestication of cosmetic surgery thus exemplifies post-feminist discourse. Now it is accepted and supported more than ever for women to make their “own choices,” even if these choices are, in actuality, the result of buying into the need to obtain society’s standard of beauty.

Scholars have observed the decay of feminist criticisms of constructed beauty makeovers within women’s magazines. Brooks (2004) and Woodstock (2001) note that magazines have twisted and distorted feminist texts to render constructed beauty as an expression of self-determination. Consequently, as “scholars and activists have attempted to ‘free’ women of manipulating their health and beauty practices, the rhetoric of magazines ‘frees’ women to embrace them” (Woodstock, 2001, p. 437). This irony shows how feminist views have been “displaced by the post-feminist celebration of physical transformation as the route to happiness and personal empowerment” (Tait, 2007, p.119). As a result, society’s current paradigm of self-fulfillment has more to do with achieving ideal physical standards than obtaining health. What emerges is an air-brushed, idealized, and arguably unhealthy body on the covers of women’s magazines, followed by the readership’s daily attempts to attain it.

**Women’s Magazines and Fitness**

The concept of a magazine for women solely about fitness is fairly new. As I discussed earlier, women’s magazines as a whole have developed over more than a century and a half and have served multiple functions. They have been sources of education, forms of entertainment, and guides to fashion. Magazines are usually more visual than books, and offer a two-way communication between readers and
writers/editors, typically involving letters from or to the editor or advice columns. Thus, from their inception, women’s magazines have included a very personal correspondence with their readership. In a 1989 study, Shevelow focused on the differences between women’s magazines and the earliest general magazines (e.g.: *Athenian Mercury, The Tattler, The Spectator*), which spawned ‘sister’ publications geared towards women that encouraged reader participation and identification. She notes, “To read [early women’s magazines] was to confront the potential of writing to them, the possibility of recounting in print the details of private situations. To write to the periodical was to be read not only by the [magazine] society, but by the periodical’s entire audience” (Shevelow, 1989, p. 66). Women wanted to give and get advice within a medium designed for dialogue, and this approach carries over into today’s women’s health magazines, most notably in *SHAPE Magazine*. Readers write to the editors asking for workout advice, exercise buddy programs, and nutrition tips, and in turn, the editors at *SHAPE* publish some of the readers’ insights and feedback. The result is a magazine with which the readership feels connected, an approach taken in women’s magazines since their creation.

In an analysis of *SHAPE Magazine*, McCracken (1993) found that the content promotes “ideal body images for women that are to be attained through exercise, dieting, grooming, and the purchase of products” (pp. 63-4). McCracken asserts that *Shape* publishers “reify women as inanimate objects that are traditionally part of male culture” (p. 264). However, fitness magazines arguably function to objectify women and glorify consumerism because they rely upon advertising revenue to exist. Wolf (1991) argues that the beauty ideal showcased by magazines like *SHAPE* serves both a financial and a social function: it keeps women under “control” by focusing their attention on body
improvement that can be attained through the purchase and use of consumer products. Images of beauty are not the only content on offer in women’s fitness magazines, which routinely present messages about female empowerment through fitness. Yet the celebration of women’s power and subjectivity is continually contradicted and undermined. Indeed, the choice of the word “fitness” alone is intriguing as magazines like SHAPE seem to define “fitness” as a combination of health and beauty. Fitness is about getting the body in “shape” and lends itself towards a superficial definition and measurement of health through beauty.

As a result of competing imperatives that influence its content, SHAPE Magazine offers contradictory rhetoric that is both feminist and consumerist: it simultaneously promises empowerment yet continually cultivates dissatisfaction, especially with physical appearance. These competing messages are particularly evident on the magazine covers and in the letters from the editor, which offer examples of the ways in which SHAPE attempts to “hail” readers – to draw them in, to convince them that what the magazine has to offer is relevant to their success as women. Thus the covers and letters represent instances in which the magazine’s ideologies are presented more explicitly and perhaps with greater intensity than in other sections of an issue. This study examines the covers and letters from the editor from a series of SHAPE Magazine issues that span its thirty-year history. They provide a rich vein of evidence about SHAPE’s strategies for engaging readers and the ideologies that the magazine has espoused, especially in response to broader cultural phenomena such as feminism and consumerism.
METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented in this study is built upon research conducted on women’s fitness magazines, in the hopes of later being developed into a larger project on the constructed body. This study focuses on SHAPE Magazine for women, and offers an historical perspective on the publication’s evolution. I chose this magazine for my study due to its comparatively long term of publication and widespread circulation: over 250,000 copies are distributed each month. Unfortunately, back issues of SHAPE are not readily available, except at considerable cost. Using ebay as a resource, I was able purchase the following eleven issues: August 1982, October 1987, December 1989, December 1990, June 1992, November 1997, December 2001, June 2005, May 2008, October 2011, January 2012. I then examined these issues, which span the thirty-year life of the magazine (1981-2012), not as a representative sample, but rather as evidence of the conflicting ideologies that the magazine has embraced over the last three decades.

These eleven issues highlight the tension between messages of empowerment and objectification in SHAPE, and their relationship to the imperatives of feminism and consumer culture. An exhaustive analysis of every single aspect of each issue was beyond the scope of this study, so I chose to examine the covers and letters from the editor, both of which appear in every issue of the magazine. As I mentioned in the literature review, the covers and letters from the editor represent instances in which SHAPE’s ideologies are on display, perhaps more prominently than in other sections of each issue, and vividly illustrate the competing forces that influence the magazine’s content. On the covers, consumerist messages of dissatisfaction and objectification dominate, while the letters
from the editor are framed as inspiring missives about the benefits of female empowerment and self-improvement.

Although my primary focus is the covers and letters from the editor, I did review the content of each issue in its entirety to provide additional context/insight for my study. My goal was to identify typical or recurrent ideologies embraced by the magazine, and then to relate those principles to the impact of consumer culture or feminism. My research entailed first reading each issue from front to back. Magazine lingo can be quite similar from issue to issue, so in order to avoid blurring the evidence from each month and year together, I tried to take substantive breaks between my consideration of different issues. After reading through an issue, I returned to the magazine cover and letter from the editor and marked things that stood out as relevant, given my interest in feminist and consumerist themes. In the visual realm, I identified the subject(s) of each illustration (human models, products, and so on) and then considered their characteristics (for human subjects, this included body size, apparent age, race, clothing styles, and so on). I also paid attention to the composition of shots, including such areas as framing, lighting, and angle, and to any charts or graphs that appeared. In regard to textual evidence, I highlighted obvious “marketing” language, repeat words, styles of lingo, connotations, and explicit themes. Though both the letters and covers contain images and text, on the covers, images are the principal element, while in the letters, text is more prominent. In each case, I also considered the relationship between text and image(s), noting any inconsistencies or contradictions (such as an illustration of a thin, sculpted model with a “Get Healthy” caption). In a second sweep, I tried to identify the ideologies being promoted, which I expected would emerge directly through repetition or the
space/prominence occupied on the page and, more subtly, as a result of the juxtaposition of text and image(s). I then refined my identification of these tenets, attempting to ensure accuracy and to avoid the blurring of concepts due to the large volume of texts and images I was examining. Finally, I related the ideologies I had detected to the pressures of consumer culture and the imperatives of feminism, basing my approach primarily on the work of Featherstone (1991) and Wolf (1991).

Hopefully, my examination provides an in-depth look at SHAPE Magazine’s conflicting presentation of health and beauty messages. SHAPE markets itself as a magazine for today’s modern and healthy woman, but undermines that explicit goal with content that encourages its readers to be dissatisfied with themselves and pursue an unrealistic physical ideal. A close review of the covers and letters to the editor in the eleven issues I studied demonstrates this inconsistency. In their monthly letters to readers, editors tout the feminist goals of the magazine, while the covers blatantly objectify women and encourage consumerist behavior. These conflicting ideologies embraced by SHAPE are arguably a result of the magazine’s feminist impulses and its attempts to survive and thrive in an increasingly consumerist environment.
ANALYSIS

I ideologies of Consumerism and Feminism on SHAPE Magazine Covers

As I have noted, messages of consumerism dominate SHAPE Magazine covers. SHAPE’s foregrounding of consumerist ideologies is fairly consistent over the thirty-year life of the magazine; however, as I will discuss, such messages have become more urgent in tone over the last decade as the Internet has begun to compete with print publications such as women’s magazines. Though the covers of SHAPE regularly present consumerist themes, they also reflect the culture of the times in which they were published. Each cover features a model or celebrity representative of the female ideal of that period, typically garbed in either a tight-fitting outfit or a bathing suit. For example, in the 1980s, the cover model has visible body fat, big hair, and stylish workout clothing that is more conservative when compared to cover models from the mid-1990s to 2012. (See Appendix for illustrations of all covers and letters to the editor.) The female ideal becomes leaner, more toned, less clothed and more sexualized over time, especially in the twenty-first century. Another noteworthy change is the use of space and color schemes. The covers go from presenting modest visual density to offering a bombardment of headlines, marketing tools meant to highlight the cutting-edge material of the magazine. From 1982 to 2000 there were an average of five headlines featured on the cover. From 2001 to 2012 there were an average of ten headlines featured on the cover, thus demonstrating at least a two-fold increase in the number of “teaser” announcements intended to invite readers into the publication. Headlines peaked in the 2008 issue, a
situation that could perhaps be partially attributed to a shift in editorial strategies (Valerie Latona had just replaced Anne Russell as editor; I will discuss the impact of specific editors later in my analysis). This circumstance could also be reflective of Zuckerman’s (1998) observation that current trends in women’s magazines are outgrowths of earlier choices in the marketing world (rather than the result of the decisions of any particular editor) and therefore progressively promote escapism through the endorsement of the consumerist life. Women can easily lose themselves in the latest and greatest products, perhaps even using them as coping mechanisms (Stevens, Brown, and MacLaran, 2003).

In my analysis of the covers, I identified a number of ideologies that reflect SHAPE Magazine’s dual focus on consumerism and feminism. The significance of these ideologies is substantial, as they are featured on the front cover of the magazine, the most prominent place for SHAPE to display and promote its content. As I have noted, the cover is used to attract readers; therefore, it employs what the publishers consider the most effective and engaging marketing strategies. The primary goal appears to be cultivating dissatisfaction and consumer desire, especially in regard to the body, so that readers will be motivated to “improve” themselves through the purchase of appropriate products. The covers do invoke philosophies of female empowerment, but these references are more subtle and occupy a secondary, more superficial position. The consumerist ideologies embraced on the covers encourage women to pursue a multifaceted physical ideal that promises (and demands) beauty, health, and youth – an ideal that can never quite be reached. Such ideologies can be titled or described as follows: “Spending on the Body,” “A Healthy Woman is a Beautiful Woman,” “Fat as Antagonist to ‘Best You’,” and “The Eternally Youthful Body.”
Though consumerism overshadows other ideas or approaches on the covers, the editors do attempt to support the notion of empowerment as they “hail” their female readers, perhaps as a nod to the magazine’s feminist orientation. The covers feature female subjects in active poses that imply strength, try to be inclusive in their selection of models of different races and ethnicities, and suggest that women can be fortified and invigorated through their life choices, especially in regard to food and exercise. Ideologies of empowerment include “Food as a Moral Choice,” “Featuring Women,” and “The Power of Instant Gratification.” As I will discuss, these ideologies endorse a “faux” empowerment that offers but never actually delivers influence and authority: for example, SHAPE includes minority women on its covers, but in very small numbers and in a presentation style that differs from the one employed for their models of white or European ancestry.

I conclude my discussion of the covers by considering the irony and inconsistency of their content and ideologies, highlighting the magazine’s dual devotion to the incompatible realms of consumerism and feminism. I also speculate that the female physical ideal promulgated by the magazine has shifted over the past thirty years into a leaner, more toned version of its earlier incarnations, reinforcing anti-fat and eternal youth messages. Consequently, the materialist ideologies embraced by SHAPE are arguably a result of the emergence of markets that thrive upon messages of bodily discontent.

*Spending on the Body*

While SHAPE claims to be about helping its readers improve their health, the number of products it features on the cover (and inside the magazine) suggests that
women need to be highly concerned with perfecting themselves externally, beyond health. These consumerist messages range from advertisements for the latest workout equipment and health fads, to beauty products. *SHAPE* headlines reflect scientific discoveries about nutrition and exercise, and other ideas about health in the decades they were published. For example, the earlier issues of *SHAPE* have evidence of the anti-fat craze (1980-2000). Warnings about fat consumption and the need for cardio to atone for body “mistakes” permeate the headlines: “is your workout burning fat?” (1989), “bonus! pull-out diet cookbook” (1989), “fat proofers for your kitchen and your diet” (1989), and “Beat holiday weight gain” (1997). [Note: Here, as in all succeeding citations of headlines, the text appears in italics and the capitalization (or lack thereof) follows the pattern employed in the original headline.] In addition, headlines about fat-free foods and the prevention of weight gain occupy significant space. The concept of building strength and obtaining lean muscle tone does not surface until the 1997 issue, and from then on, product endorsement and specific body part toning gloss the covers. Health messages evolve from being about thinness to achieving a thin and toned body (Lager & McGee, 2003). Instead of a healthy diet and exercise plan being the focus, weight loss and dietary secrets take over the headlines. *SHAPE* does offer some valid health advice, but overall, cover messages are tailored to fad health and dietary solutions, especially those that require the purchase of products. New discoveries about nutrition and health are acknowledged but presented in watered-down versions for the *SHAPE* demographic (white women aged 18-35). Weight-loss messages are present in the headlines on every cover I analyzed and product endorsements underscore and extend these messages. *SHAPE* has a consistent orientation towards consumerism, endorsing weight-loss products, habits, and lifestyle
choices.

In addition to consumerist weight-loss messages, SHAPE also orients itself towards promoting beauty and anti-aging products, and presents purchasing as a solution to women’s problems in life. This is reflective of Bordo’s observation that the female body has always been a socially shaped and historically colonized territory (1993), a fact that classifies women and the female body as victim, caught in the constructs of a consumerist, patriarchal culture. Women are expected to construct their bodies into an ideal for men (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991). This involves being hairless, flab-free, tan, toned, fashionably clothed, styled, eternally youthful, and accessorized, a pursuit that requires money and time (Orbach, 2009). The covers of SHAPE offer constant “fixes” for the body. Headlines such as “Would you change your breast size?” (2001), “Look Great Special: 20 quick fixes” (2001), and “LONG FOR THICKER HAIR? How to get your locks healthy!” (2005) communicate that looking “great” entails ridding oneself of the features that do not conform to the beauty standard embraced by SHAPE. Consequently, body characteristics such as small breasts, thin hair, dry or pale skin, body hair, cellulite, and wrinkles can be fixed by buying products advertised to extinguish these “flaws.” On a fitness level, sculpting one’s body to fit a thin and toned body ideal involves jumping on the advertised health equipment bandwagons (Wolf, 1991). In the 1980s and early 1990s, this consisted of headlines promoting exercise products: “GEAR UP FOR FITNESS: Two-wheel bike tours, bike buyer’s guide & fashions” (1982), “fit gifts: plus the best gym equipment you can buy!” (1989), “VIDEO PICKS & PANS 1990: Exercise Tapes and What We Think of Them” (1990), “Knock ’em Out! Get in fighting trim with the new Boxing Workout!” (1992), and “Get Long & Lean: Why everyone is
From the late 1990s to 2012, the headlines for certain exercise products and fads began to occupy significantly more space on the covers, in addition to beauty products. This reflects the rise of more intense consumerism and the marriage of the health industry with the marketing industry. This also communicates the influence of the Internet and consequent information availability and bombardment. Suddenly, having one advertisement or message was not enough; advertisers and companies knew that their products would get lost in the noise of advertising unless there was a way to send their advertisements repeatedly and colorfully (Featherstone, 1991). As a result, the headlines on the covers of SHAPE reflect this intensity, offering more frequent and insistent claims about the path to an ideal body: “YOUR SECRET DIET WEAPON” (2005), “STOP YOUR STOMACH UPSETS!” (2005), “5 nutrients you need now (Surprise! NOT calcium)” (2008), “Best swimsuits for your figure” (2008), and “BURN 600 CALORIES: THE CARDIO MACHINE YOU SHOULD BE USING” (2012).

These messages, in addition to their frequency on the cover space and size/font choice, indicate that while health can be obtained from certain exercise techniques or fad nutrition, it is not the main focus. “Product pushing” equals profit, so messages on materialistic “needs” allow SHAPE to continue its publication. Readers are continually exhorted to spend money on their bodies. For example, almost half of each issue of the magazine is made up of advertisements promoting body improvement products. If there is an ad for a certain exercise machine in SHAPE and readers see this ad and the editors’ endorsement of it on the cover, it is possible that this will encourage a purchase of the equipment. Consequently, advertisers will view SHAPE as a successful marketing
medium and *SHAPE* will receive money from them in exchange for ad space. In addition, these materialistic ideologies reflect the social norms of consumerism and how closely they are tied in with female identity (Wolf, 1991). Women subscribers to *SHAPE* come to expect product placement and may even crave these consumerist messages. Instead of feeling assaulted or bombarded by consumerism, women who are themselves products of such a consumerist culture could find digesting *SHAPE* affirming of their perceived norm regarding expectations for the ideal woman. Consequently, these women’s normative beliefs create a strong motivation to comply with the messages of the magazine, molding their overt behavior to adopt the *SHAPE* lifestyle through physical transformation. This entails buying into the representation of the female ideal and working hard to obtain the products necessary for achieving it. Eradicating imperfections is one of the goals continually endorsed by the magazine, especially on its cover. Since unwanted or “ugly” body characteristics do not disappear naturally, the featured products provide women the help they “need” to eliminate their flaws. This causes the body itself to become a site of consumption instead of a symbol of health and strength or a vehicle for action.

*A Healthy Woman Is a Beautiful Woman*

As I have shown, *SHAPE* covers present spending on the body as an imperative, urging readers toward the purchase of body improvement products. A related consumerist notion promoted by the covers is that beauty equals health. On *SHAPE Magazine’s* Facebook page, their mission statement claims that the magazine is “dedicated to helping you live a healthy and happy life! Shape your life. Eat right. Get Fit” (Facebook, ‘About’ section, May 2012). While the magazine consistently urges women to live a healthy
lifestyle (which includes daily exercise and a healthy diet), the covers suggest that one cannot enjoy optimal “health” without first achieving exacting physical goals. For example, the images of cover models depict the female ideal. This ideal is somewhat fleshier than the high-fashion ideal in the sense that muscle tone seems to be a “health” requirement; yet the percentage of body fat is still extremely low, much like high-fashion models (Orbach, 2009). The featured models are representatives of the ultimate healthy lifestyle, in which they eat right and are fit. However, not only are their bodies perfectly proportioned; they are arguably amongst society’s most beautiful females. Their makeup is “perfect,” constructed to be seamlessly natural, with tan skin, a glowing and airbrushed look, manicured nails, carefully made up eyes, slender noses, and styled hair. The tiny and delicate facial features paired with a body that is slender and toned, and muscles rubbed with oil and makeup, depict a female posed to represent the ideal healthy woman SHAPE is condoning. It is as Featherstone (1991) argued – we have become uncomfortable with viewing bodily imperfection as a result of absorbing an onslaught of ideal bodies. The resulting ideology conflates beauty with health. Indeed, a woman may exercise regularly and have a healthy diet; yet if she has large eyebrows, small eyes, a large nose, or excess muscle mass that does not allow for her to fit into a typical sample size (0-6, as worn by SHAPE cover models), she is not “healthy.” She is ugly, or possesses undesirable features that prevent her from looking like the picture of health portrayed on the front cover.

The fusion of beauty with health is exemplified through the cover models, who reflect the makeup and fashion trends of their time. For example, the 1989 cover features Paula Abdul with the heavy makeup typical of the 1980s. Her eyes are dark, her lips red,
her skin tan, and her body dressed in the latest fashion of a professional backup dancer. To confirm the effort that went into beautifying her, the bottom of the Contents page (located just inside the magazine) lists the hair stylist (Victor Vidal-Cloutier), makeup artist (Paul Starr), and professional fashion stylist (Leslie Campbell) who worked on Abdul’s cover look. The fact that it took a professional team to put together the cover look is proof that this cover beauty is not only constructed but also marketed with a deliberate effort and message. Every issue of SHAPE lists the stylist team that put together the cover look, with noticeable changes in the size of the team and details about the featured outfit; while the 1989 Paula Abdul cover credits three people with the look, the January 2012 Molly Simms covers credits over five people, in addition to listing all of the clothes Simms is wearing, including pricing and retail store availability. In addition to that, there is a separate paragraph titled “To get Molly’s gorgeous look at home, try these products from Dolce and Gabbana” in which six more makeup products are listed. Consequently, it is obvious that while the cover model might be intended to represent health, she is expected to also represent ultimate beauty. Such models may prompt women to notice their own physical “flaws” and fear that their personal health and beauty do not approach the ideals featured by SHAPE. This gap can cause dissatisfaction and/or unhappiness, which are ironically the very things SHAPE supposedly fights against. The magazine claims that it offers advice on how to live a “healthy and happy life,” yet optimal health is a distant and ultimately unreachable goal that must be constantly pursued by attempting to conform to the exacting standards of physical perfection promulgated by SHAPE.
Fat as Antagonist to “Best You”

If SHAPE covers present the female body as a site of consumption – an entity that demands constant attention and perfecting, that is never quite “right” or “finished” – the most common messages center upon the removal of excess fat. Every cover I examined contains prominently featured (i.e., large font) headlines about how to fight fat. These messages connect fat with laziness and poor quality of life and suggest that it is a barrier to self-actualization, which is consistent with previous research conducted on the ideal, virtually fat-free female body (Bordo, 1993; Joseph, 2009; King, 2007; Wolf, 1991). The covers address the reader as someone who is in the process of reaching her potential self. This means she is not quite at her target weight, still has beauty tricks to learn, products to buy, and new exercise techniques to master. To the beauty experts at SHAPE, any surplus fat on the female body is inefficient and problematic. Weight-loss headlines comprise almost half of the total number of headlines, and consistently focus on exercise or diet tips, strategies, and products: “Beat holiday weight gain” (1997), “REMODEL YOUR BUTT: FAST FIXES FOR FLABBY, FLAT, OR FAT ASSETS” (2005), “Whittle your middle into bikini shape” (2005), “GO FROM FLAB TO FAB” (2008), “Super-quick fat burner” (2008), “BLAST 700 CALORIES: The cardio plan anyone can do” (2008), “THE #1 CALORIE CUTTING TOOL” (2011), “EAT THIS & LOSE WEIGHT” (2011), and “DROP A DRESS SIZE: 20 Minute Secret Solution” (2012).

SHAPE claims it offers to readers an opportunity to learn how to get the body they desire and need. Every issue that I examined has a headline offering this ideal body plan, which suggests that obtaining and maintaining this body equals reaching one’s potential as a successful person. This potential self is sexy, flab-free, fit, carved, and
exceptionally slender. Most importantly, this ideal can be sold to the reader as a commodity, a reflection of consumerist values (Woodstock, 2001). The model or celebrity on the cover is an aid to this marketing campaign, as she poses next to headlines such as “Tighten Your Tush” (1992), “Get Long & Lean: Why everyone is doing Pilates” (1997), “30 minutes to your best abs, butt, & legs” (2001), “30 DAYS TO YOUR BEST BODY!” (2005), “SLIM DOWN BY MAY 31” (2008), “GET THE BODY YOU WANT in the time you have” (2008), and “GET THE BODY YOU WANT in 15 minutes a day!” (2011).

Fat is presented as the primary obstacle in this journey of self-actualization. One cannot obtain an ideal body if fat is present, as Wykes & Gunter note (2005). As a result, food has extremely negative connotations; it is associated with failure to discipline one’s body. Food causes bodies to become fat, and fat is constructed as disgusting, a symbol of one’s lack of self-control, a failure that does not have a place in the female body ideal. This potential of food to produce unwanted changes in one’s figure is illustrated in foreboding titles about “holiday weight” or “eluding those extra pounds.” Fat is, of course, a natural part of the human body. It is ironic, then, that obtaining a “fat-free” body is portrayed as a “natural” thing, or how women are intended to look.

This unnatural, fat-free ideal demonstrates how SHAPE editors might believe they are crusaders of feminism, but in actuality, their covers from 1997 to 2012 reflect a post-feminist mindset that dovetails with the goals of consumerism. Post-feminism can (perhaps unintentionally) manipulate women by taking oppressive messages and presenting them as liberating: women can be “free” to improve their bodies, to pursue an elusive physical ideal. Based on the weight loss messages on the cover, SHAPE appears
to be a magazine that has largely managed to avoid the influence of second- and third-wave feminism (although, as I will discuss in the next section, stronger traces of feminism are present in the letters from the editor). On the covers, the clearest evidence of feminist thought is in the messages of strength building for women: “ALL NEW ASSERTIVE WOMAN’S WORKOUT” (1987), “Knock ‘em Out! Get in fighting trim with the Boxing Workout” (1992), “Knock ‘em Out! Get in fighting trim with the Boxing Workout” (1992), REMODEL YOUR BUTT” (2005), and “The workout that got Denise sculpted and strong” (2008). This could be an attempt to recognize that the female body has traditionally been weaker compared to the male body and thus in need of muscle tone – and power.

Yet women need to still be able to survive in a patriarchal society, so instead of recommending the extreme muscularity of overt masculinity, SHAPE offers beauty messages in addition to the strength-building messages. This combination presents the female ideal as slender and nearly fat-free, but with muscular definition. This woman is then distinctly feminine but possesses the power to be androgynous if it is needed in the work world. Indeed, the female body ideal has changed from being waif-like and frail to maintaining thinness but also introducing strength (from the June 1992 issue – October 2012 issue). Perhaps this view of the female body is SHAPE’s way of fighting the system of female oppression – rather than being a woman who stands out as being masculine, women should remain feminine but also have strength. This could potentially be an empowering message to women, but it unfortunately gets lost in the flood of objectifying beauty messages and endorsements, and ultimately female readers are left with messages about unrealistic physical standards. The concept of fitness is lost to the concept of the
fat-free body, and female empowerment and liberation are smothered by consumerist messages of sexuality and physical perfection (Wolf, 1991). This ultimately reduces the female reading these messages to a two-dimensional version of womanhood: body and beauty. Consequently, the importance of the mind to female identity is lost in post-feminist, consumerist frames. Women are then left to piece together a coping plan for dealing with the symptoms of their discontent, rather than the root issues. They are left to believe that eliminating their fat will lead them to happiness and success.

*The Eternally Youthful Body*

Just as the covers of *SHAPE* consistently promote weight loss, they also valorize youthfulness, something that can (and even must) be endlessly pursued, as bodies are always aging, always demonstrating worrisome signs of growing older that can be improved or eliminated with the purchase of appropriate products. *SHAPE* presents ideal, youthful female bodies on its covers. Besides using headlines such as “30 DAYS TO YOUR BEST BODY!” (2005), and “Get the BODY YOU WANT in 15 minutes a day!” (2011), *SHAPE* also identifies the elements of a perfect body. This is executed by singling out specific body parts and areas and describing them in idealistic, youthful terms. The ideal female body is the ageless body, and the adjectives used seem appropriate for a young girl’s body, rather than the body of a mature, adult woman; readers are encouraged to be slim, long, lean, and in “bikini shape” (2005). The pre-pubescent female body exemplifies eternal youth for the anti-aging industries, once again masking a consumerist ideology with the pretense of feminism (Slevin, 2010). Women can be “empowered” by remaining young – but if youthfulness is the primary measure of
their value to society, they are trapped in the endless pursuit of an unreachable ideal that is always already slipping away. This ideal body consists of taut and hairless skin, limber and flexible appendages, muscles that are taught and wiry (especially in the legs), a firm and flat torso, and perky buttocks. There is a youthful sexual innocence that is communicated by this body and its description. Interestingly, in the 1980s, SHAPE did not single out specific body parts on its cover texts. Rather, headlines promoting low-fat or fat-free dietary choices dominated the cover theme, amplifying the association between thinness and youthfulness: “A Food-Mood Quiz That Fights Fat” (1982), “fat proofers for your kitchen and your diet” (1989), and “is your workout burning fat?” (1989). In the early 1990s, SHAPE began offering headlines about how to improve certain body parts by making them appear leaner and tighter (i.e., more youthful): “Tighten Your Tush” (1992), “6 Powerful Moves For Legs You’ll Love” (1997), “Get Long & Lean” (1997), “REMODEL YOUR BUTT: FAST FIXES FOR FLABBY, FLAT OR FAT ASSETS” (2005), “4 WEEKS TO BIKINI ABS” (2008).

In addition to describing these ideal body parts, there are a significant number of words singling out certain body parts that are placed next to the corresponding part of the cover model. Such models are notable for slim, toned, and youthful bodies, bodies that do not reflect mature or middle-aged womanhood. Not only does SHAPE offer an article on “4 Weeks to Bikini Abs” but it visually communicates what those “bikini abs” should look like by placing the text next to the model’s abs. Every cover model has hairless, taut skin and lean muscle tone. The hairless look is featured more prominently in the 2005-2012 covers. Before 2005, most of the cover models were featured in workout gear or a one-piece bathing suit, and were posed at a partial or complete profile, with a twist of the
From 2005 on, the cover model is featured in a revealing bikini with an exceptionally low-cut bottom piece. Her body is facing the camera straight on and her legs are often opened or parted, revealing a hairless “shaved look” which implies that this model’s hairlessness does not stop at the bathing suit bottom. Rather, the model’s hairlessness and opened legs draw attention to the small part of her lower body that is covered – her shaved pubis. This shaved look reflects the infantilizing of the female genitalia. The shaved pubis “fuses current conservative prudery and American squeamishness about the body with a pornographic culture that considers this particular type of hygiene to be sexy” (Hall & Bishop, 2007). This is an important symbol that references women’s role in society. A woman cannot be both a crusader for her feminist rights and beliefs and also a sexually submissive, infantilized girl. Yet the cover model and the surrounding texts offer conflicting messages. While members of the female readership likely have access to multiple sources of education and information that help them form conclusions regarding their role in society, it is frustrating that SHAPE is not a “different” kind of women’s magazine at all; the splintered approach usually so characteristic of popular women’s magazines also applies to SHAPE. It empowers women to pursue what is ultimately a demeaning (and unattainable) consumerist ideal: endless youthfulness.

Consequently, this does not imply progress for a magazine that claims to help women “Be their best selves.” Apparently being your best self consists of buying into the sexist messages of what female bodies should be like and do. SHAPE reduces females to domestic sex objects, wherein the ultimate achievement is taking the time and money to produce young, attractive bodies for the male gaze. The texts surrounding these models
urge SHAPE’s readers to strive towards achieving a pre-pubescent ideal. In order to qualify as “in shape” one must fight the reality of a post-adolescent, mature body. Yet since this is an unnatural pursuit, women must spend a considerable amount of time and money chasing youthfulness. Luckily, SHAPE provides headlines on their covers and product endorsements in their letters from the editor so that their readers can be fully informed of the latest and greatest products that can help restore and prolong youthfulness.

*Food as a Moral Choice*

An ideology that is less explicitly consumerist is the presentation of food as a moral choice, a way for women to demonstrate their willpower and control on the path to health. In other words, self-control, especially in regard to food, is presented as a virtue that demonstrates one’s strength – and affords a potential reward (a healthy and attractive body). Part of maintaining a flab-free figure involves a meticulous diet plan. This concept of dieting for appearance and not just health is present over the thirty-year life of SHAPE. Foods are discussed in a way that suggests that they are evil or destructive to the appearance of the human body, or are labeled with adjectives that reflect what is desirable about the ideal female form. Headlines such as “SLIMMING SALADS: Best recipes from around the nation” (1992), “Luscious, low-fat and easy holiday desserts” (2001), and “SUMMER’S 6 MOST EVIL FOODS” (2005) all advertise particular foods as sinful or corrupt, and others as sexually appealing (i.e., sexy or slimming). By labeling certain foods with this “thin” lingo, SHAPE is glorifying dietary requirements to their readers. This reflects once again SHAPE’s two-dimensional approach to health. Even the
foods to be consumed are labeled with beauty messages. The women gracing the covers (and pages) of SHAPE would not be caught eating anything but the most slimming and sensuous treats, enabling them to continue looking like the ideal. This reflects a prejudice toward fat, both in food and in/on the human body in the name of feminism. In the Victorian era, women were expected to be smaller than men, with an emphasis on tiny waist size. This was reflective of the frail, submissive Victorian woman as a cultural standard, a patriarchal ideal later fought by second wave feminists (Wolf, 1991). Women were not seen as creatures with appetites; indeed, to have an appetite for food would tarnish a woman’s purity. Instead, the woman was to be angelic, practicing a denial of self and appetite. While the Victorian ideal has been criticized widely since the feminist movement, traces of its influence can still be seen in women’s magazine literature, especially in the connotations surrounding food.

This presentation of food as a moral choice arguably teaches women an unhealthy approach to eating. Rather than being presented as something to fuel the body and sustain life and energy, food is judged based on the body it can potentially produce. This can teach women to relate to food as a reward/punishment system, a doctrine utilized by people with eating disorders (Joseph, 2009; LeBesco, 2004; Martin & Gentry, 1997). Anorexics view the body as a calorie system, wherein extra unwanted fat deposits exist. Food is seen as a necessity to maintain a daily ritual of excessive exercise, nothing more. Burning more calories than one consumes enables the body to rid itself of fat deposits. Yet after the fat deposits have disappeared, anorexics continue to see continual “imperfections” in their bodies. So the subtraction of food calories and the pursuit of exercise persists. When an anorexic has exhausted her body from lack of calorie input
and excessive exercise, she may consequently “feel” the need to reward herself with minimal calories, such as a quarter of an apple. Bulimics, on the other hand, also utilize the reward/punishment food perspective. Oftentimes combined with anorexic tendencies, bulimics deprive their bodies of calories for a certain period of time and then reward themselves with desired food that is “off limits” or “evil.” This period of overeating is seen as the reward, when their period of deprivation is over. Yet the overeating brings on purging sessions that are followed by the victims being wracked with guilt or disgust at their own lack of self-control. Therefore, they punish themselves with excessive purging and resolve to eat little or nothing for an extended amount of time. This manipulates the purpose of food and the purpose of the human body and emphasizes an obsession for food calculations. This reward/punishment system reduces the human body to fat content and food to an evil that prevents fat loss. Consequently, when magazines such as SHAPE present food as a moral choice, they are actively engaging in reducing the female body to an input/output system that must avoid growing larger at all costs. To endorse “acceptable” eating and condemn “evil” eating is to promote disordered eating. This is a critical step backwards for a magazine that claims to be about female health and happiness.

This moralizing of foods also teaches women the virtue of self-control, cultivating the physical and psychological strength to say “no” to certain foods. By denying herself immoral, or “evil” food groups, a woman demonstrates that she is in control of her body. This shows strength, which translates into discipline for the body. On the other hand, giving in to these food temptations portrays weakness and the resulting feeling is one of failure and laziness. This translates into having a “slack” body, one that is asexual and
undesirable. Flab is bad, and thin is in. The exterior becomes the canvas for internal judgment. Arguably, *SHAPE* is condoning a culture of superficiality and unhappiness rather than one of health and satisfaction. Implying that women have empowering choices around food is an empty claim, as those choices serve only to further objectify women and their bodies.

*Featuring Women*

One important way that *SHAPE* appears to empower women is simply by foregrounding them; they are the lifeblood of the magazine, the center of its focus. Every issue features a woman on the cover, but we must ask what kind of women are presented and how these models and their poses and attire may support or undermine the goals of feminism (or other social movements). The cover images suggest that an ideal woman is a highly sexualized white young woman. And, in the eleven issues I analyzed from 1982 to 2012, only one issue (1997) features a minority on the cover: Tyra Banks, who is arguably a very light-skinned African American, a trait Banks credits for helping her infiltrate the high fashion industry. In addition, cover models featured from 1982 to 1990 are wearing revealing workout gear meant to highlight their legs, lean curves, and cleavage. From 1992 to 2012 the cover models wear bathing suits, with one exception (the December 2001 cover model is wearing tight white jeans and a sleeveless knit top). Often the poses of the models suggest sex appeal, highlighting prominent breasts, butts, abs, and thighs. In addition, the Tyra Banks cover features her in the most conservative of the bathing suits employed from 1992-2012. This one-piece black suit hides features such as the abs and breasts of the model. Black is considered one of the more slimming or
“forgiving” colors by the fashion industry, and a black one-piece bathing suit does not usually communicate sexiness or youth to the degree that other suits might. Rather, it connotes conservatism and/or shame regarding certain “problem areas” of the female form. Since Tyra Banks is the only black model featured and she is photographed wearing the most conservative bathing suit of the covers, it could suggest a racist perspective (such as a denial of black female sexuality). SHAPE sends a possible message that white women are “worthy” of showing the trademark “defining female traits” such as stomach and breasts, while minorities should conceal these areas (Joseph, 2009). While SHAPE desires to be a crusader of women’s health to its readers, it seems to only choose white women for the majority of their covers. What does this communicate about their bodily ideal for their readers? If a reader is not Caucasian it would be difficult to relate to this ideal, let alone attain it. While SHAPE tries to be inclusive in its presentation of health messages to its readers, its choice of cover models seems to exclude numerous segments of the American population. (Ironically, white women’s sexualization on the covers also serves to objectify them in ways that African American women may partially avoid because of their marginalization.)

Sexist messages also permeate the covers, contradicting the feminist foundations of SHAPE Magazine. If a reader is looking for a magazine that claims to help her create a happy and healthy lifestyle, she will receive messages about the importance of sex appeal defining her identity as a woman if she chooses SHAPE. On the covers, readers are presented with models supposedly representing female health and empowerment. However, everything about the presentation of these models glorifies the sexual appeal of the women. For example, entire female bodies are typically visible on the cover and are
positioned and dressed in revealing outfits that highlight and sexualize their physical features, a technique often used to sell products using sex appeal (Orbach, 2009). In addition, the model is posed in sexually appealing ways, often with her legs parted, revealing perfectly toned and hairless inner thighs that lead to the vagina. Also, with the exception of the 1982 and 2001 covers, the models wear lower cut shirts or bathing suit tops that highlight their breasts. This is the definition of sex appeal, as framed by the male gaze. (As I will discuss later, even women can be trained to look at themselves from the perspective of men.) The model has been perfected for the consumption of the reader; the viewer is asked to relate to the model as an inferior, to admire her dedication to obtaining such a perfect body. It is clear that the models exercise faithfully, lift often and work hard because they are slender, with well-defined muscle tone. Consequently, the model’s body and how she looks in the featured bikini is the most important message. This reduces women to sexual objects rather than making them a celebration of empowerment and ability. Models are placed next to headlines that, instead of discussing their abilities and contributions to the world, highlight their workout routines and dieting habits.

While SHAPE is a health magazine, its definition of health is only two-dimensional. It is important to offer fitness and dietary advice to improve female health and lifespans, yet an obsession with beauty can quickly blur the difference between health and beauty messages. In addition, this approach excludes the mental, spiritual, and emotional sides of health. Consequently, the definition of health that SHAPE promotes limits women in their pursuit of a happy and satisfying life. SHAPE’s version of health is problematic as it can glorify out-of-balance priorities for readers. While SHAPE’s claims
are about holistic health (a more multi-dimensional approach to well-being), its *texts* and *images* are inconsistent with this approach, suggesting that females can only be celebrated when they are slim and youthful and have mastered a fitness routine and diet similar to the one practiced by women who have achieved the ideal. This leaves little to no room for marginalized bodies, and since most of the female readers presumably do not look like the ideal presented on the cover, this disenfranchises a significant portion of the magazines’ target demographic (Joseph, 2009). Yet *SHAPE* manages to turn messages of bodily dissatisfaction into “positive goal-setting,” enabling women to avoid a serious consideration of female identity and instead perfect their bodies. This is a classic example of how consumerist messages of conformity and materialism are disguised as feminist power (Brooks, 2004; Woodstock, 2001). In addition, this approach of *SHAPE* promotes profit, as women will find that they need guidance to achieve the sexist ideal. To promote health, *SHAPE* could choose other, more concealing, attire for its cover models, could present the featured bathing suits without using a model (a sexist image in and of itself), or could use other pictures of fitness or holistic living, such as a photo of fresh fruit or the coastline, but since a scantily clad female model is utilized, the implication is that she has the appropriate body for these sexist types of clothing and lifestyle, and furthermore, that readers can gain this type of body if they work like her on their bodies or buy the products and clothes featured by her.

In addition, the cover model is an object of the male gaze. She has been chosen based on how she looks and is positioned in a way meant to present her sexually for the pleasure of heterosexual men. The term “male gaze” was coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” and is credited to second wave
feminism. Mulvey uses the term to describe gender asymmetry in film, but the term has been applied beyond the cinematic realm. The male gaze exists when the camera assumes the point of view of a heterosexual man, which is ironically a frequent occurrence in magazines written by women for women. Mulvey observes that, in mainstream cinema, the male gaze typically takes precedence over the female gaze, reflecting an underlying gender inequality. Yet Mulvey also argues that the female gaze is ironically the same as the male gaze, as women have been taught to look at themselves from the perspective of men. From this perspective, a woman who embraces an objectifying gaze may be simply conforming to norms established to benefit heterosexual men, thereby reducing the recipient of the look to an object. While Mulvey’s perspective can offer insight into how the cover models are shot, women have made progress since the 1970s. Some women might choose to (unconsciously) adopt this male gaze while reading a magazine, but other women may feel alienated from the cover, as the model featured is not meant to be their friend; rather she is meant to intimidate and illustrate the ideal promise of a flourishing (consumerist) life.

Because these models are presented for the pleasure of the male gaze, they are valuable or worthy as sexualized objects, not for their abilities in the intellectual world. The message is to be in shape so one can attract men, not so one can live an active well-rounded life. It is arguable that a woman who takes the time to live an actually healthy lifestyle is smart because she cares for her body and educates herself about what is healthy. But instead of depicting the value of investing in a healthy lifestyle (e.g., healthy heart and organs, reductions in heart disease and stress, regulation of hormonal levels, etc.) SHAPE depicts the value of investing in an outwardly attractive body, presumably
for the promise of a thriving sex life. While sex itself may be a healthy activity, making sexual fulfillment the visual focus of the cover creates an arguably unhealthy standard for women. This standard is unhealthy because it reduces the model to a sexual object, produced to appeal to heterosexual men. As mentioned before, this model alienates women from a truly healthy lifestyle, instead promoting an almost pornographic ideal of beauty and helping to perpetuate the patriarchal order. This is unarguably a sexist message. The implied lifestyle of the featured models is two-dimensional: exercise and objectification. Thus a magazine that goes to great pains to celebrate and inspire women by featuring them on its cover is, in many ways, doing both the models and the readers a disservice.

*The Power of Instant Gratification*

*SHAPE* covers may also appear empowering because they promise readers results. Women are assured that if they take action – purchase the product, follow the advice, etc. – they will see rapid changes in their lives, bodies, and health. Reflective of American culture, *SHAPE* communicates a love for efficiency and a hatred of wasted time. Consequently, a generous portion of cover headlines are dedicated to promising readers instant results, or gratification. This is achieved largely through enthusiastically punctuated, instant language, a writing style that utilizes words and numbers to imply immediate results. The body and its health are quantified, enabling *SHAPE* to offer its readers compact strategies for obtaining the ideal physical state. Every cover from 1992 to 2012 quantifies body improvement strategies, reassuring readers that specific effort(s) will yield specific physical reward(s). These headlines consist of the following: “Tighten

The ideal body is the efficient body, primed for consumption (Featherstone, 1991). An efficient body is reflective of a competent, organized person. Since SHAPE focuses on external appearance and uses that to measure a reader’s virtue, a body with fat signifies waste. Waste is inefficient, undesirable, lackadaisical and represents unrealized potential. The instantaneous lingo on the cover communicates motivation, power, and ultimate exercise efficiency and reward from SHAPE to its readers. Yet, this promise of results – fast, predictable results – is also a trap. Quantifying the process of body discipline makes the road to attaining an ideal body seem mechanical, even mathematical. By making the process “scientific,” these texts suggest that there are no excuses: an ideal body should be within the reach of any woman. Error cannot exist if one follows the rules. If weight loss and body toning is mathematical, there is an equation that spits out a result. Deviating from this equation heightens the sense of failure on the part of the woman participating. After all, anyone can follow a simple equation or prescription. Failure to do so not only condemns your body but also calls your intelligence into question. A smart woman calculates what it takes for her to be “in control” of her body and then sets forth to attain it as soon as possible so that society will accept and possibly even revere her like one of the cover models for such a magazine. Instead of having the freedom to celebrate
all truly healthy body types, *SHAPE* urges women to obtain a “fit” body as fast as possible, preferably using their consumerist suggestions. And of course, no matter how straightforward and/or quantifiable the body improvement tips may be, the pursuit of physical perfection is still endless: once one goal has been achieved, there is always another to pursue. The body can always be perfected further.

*Irony and Inconsistency in Language and Ideology*

In the end, *SHAPE*’s covers demonstrate the antithetical nature of the magazine’s feminist and consumerist goals. I would argue that part of *SHAPE*’s success can be attributed to its ability to utilize irony in a masked way, wherein a passive reader might not notice the inconsistencies and may therefore be likely to fall prey to the magazine’s consumerist messages. While *SHAPE* claims to be about health, it has contradictory tendencies, since it also advertises the latest fad diets and products, many (or most) of which experienced medical professionals would discredit. Since *SHAPE* relies on advertisements for its revenue, unhealthy messages promoting consumption of fad products consistently appear on the covers. This creates an ironic situation in which a magazine claiming to be about the “best you” and “healthy and happy lifestyles” offers unhealthy tips and inconsistent logic, a consequence of trying to combine feminist aims with consumerist lingo. The result is mixed messages for the reader. Much like oil and water, consumerism and feminism do not mix smoothly or coherently.

These mixed messages have grown significantly in number and intensity since the magazine’s founding in 1981. While some ironic language was present initially, it was not prominently featured on the cover. Rather, inconsistencies in logic appeared mainly
in the text of articles that promoted both healthy and unhealthy ideas. However, in 1997, that changed; the magazine covers began to feature more inconsistent messages and ironic language. This could be due to the rise in health fads during the late nineties and the proliferation of the Internet. Marketing became ubiquitous as companies began to build websites and purchase Google ads that came up with each Internet search. The public was inundated with an unprecedented number of media messages, many of them advertisements. During this period, SHAPE started utilizing more headlines on its covers and more images throughout the magazine, perhaps trying to echo or mimic the new, fast-flowing stream of information on the Internet. This increase in the number of messages led to an increase in inconsistencies. In other words, SHAPE produced more messages and consequently more conflicting content. This is consistent with findings from Woodstock (2001) in regard to the contradictory lingo often present in women’s magazines. The more images and texts utilized, the greater chance these two modes have of shifting out of alignment. Indeed, at their core, ideologies of consumerism and feminism are contradictory and cannot, in their purest form, coexist together without undermining one other (Featherstone, 1991; Wolf, 1991).

An example of this is the November 1997 issue of SHAPE, in which model superstar and celebrity Tyra Banks graces the cover in a simple, black one piece bathing suit (as described in an earlier section). The headline “Mending Body Image: A groundbreaking project” is next to her. Additional headlines such as, “Simple strategies to elude those extra pounds” and “Get long and lean: Why everyone is doing Pilates” surround the “Mending Body Image” message. These textual inconsistencies in addition to the visual inconsistencies of Tyra Banks looking particularly thin send the reader
mixed messages. A headline on how to repair one’s body image is closely juxtaposed with other headlines that cultivate bodily dissatisfaction. These contradictory messages coexist next to an image of “health”: Tyra Banks, modeling a difficult-to-achieve standard of physical perfection. This 1997 November cover is not the only example, although it does signify the beginning of greater prominence of these messages (and their contradictions).

Since then, multiple conflicting concepts have been presented on the covers. These consist of headlines combining unhealthy foods with weight loss, images of an unattainable ideal next to headlines advertising holistic fulfillment, and advice on how to deal with endless options or stress when the magazine advertises many of the ideologies that cause the very symptoms being advertised as negative. The following headlines hint at some of these inconsistencies: “Luscious low-fat and easy holiday desserts” (2001), “WHY weighing endless options is driving us crazy!” (2005), “HERE’S YOUR GET-HAPPY CHECKLIST” (2005), “Eat pizza, lose weight” (2008), and “THE NO-HUNGER DIET: EAT AND STILL loose!” (2012). These headlines advertise a low-fat, thin ideal while also acknowledging women’s physical and emotional hunger. Getting and keeping weight off is arguably the primary focus of each cover from 1982 to 2012, though other headlines, such as the following, promote body love, acceptance, and mental and emotional happiness: “What’s Eating You? A Food-Mood Quiz That Fights Fat” (1982), “WIN YOUR STRUGGLE AGAINST: THE THINNESS MANIA” (1987), “MOODS & FOODS” (1987), “EMOTIONAL HUNGER” (1987), “THE NURTURING COMPLEX” (1987), “STOP PANIC ATTACKS! PUT THE BREAKS ON YOUR ANXIETIES” (1987), “de-pressurize your holidays” (1989), “Lose weight: The world’s
“Best swimsuits for your figure” (2008), and “GET THE BODY YOU WANT” (2008).

The ironic language and logic presented in these headlines suggest that a woman
is expected to not only be physically healthy but outwardly beautiful, the object of men’s
desire, and a careerist who runs the home, a concept aligned with Wolf’s Beauty Myth
(1991). In our society, women are often confronted with contradictory ideologies about
their roles and their own desires and aspirations. Perhaps women have learned to digest
and accept these conflicting messages, since irony is already present in their lives (Bordo,
1993). Indeed, magazines such as SHAPE argue for female fitness, health, and happiness.
Yet they also handicap these positive messages with negative ones that promote beauty
over health, unrealistic body standards, sex over mental and emotional well-being, and
most obviously, a plethora of consumerist messages meant to create bodily dissatisfaction.
Women are then left to struggle with their food choices, gender roles, sex appeal, and
mental and physical health. SHAPE offers a marriage of societal ideals and expectations
and female empowerment. These contradictory ideologies and ironic messages can leave
women confused or enslaved to expectations (McRobbie, 2004). Their confusion can be
caused from attempting to reconcile messages of liberation (depicting what empowered
women can do), with sexist/objectified images (showing a passive feminine ideal of
beauty). Women encounter “corrections” of female bodies as they digest SHAPE, instead
of truly feminist messages about freedom and equality.

Based on the cover messages, SHAPE seems to be post-feminist in orientation for
a majority of the issues I analyzed, a perspective that in some ways aligns with
consumerism because a focus on body improvement is presented as empowering.
Discussions of women’s affairs beyond weight loss and beauty are virtually absent. The issue of chronic stress for women raised on some of the magazine covers has the potential to be explored within feminist frameworks, but instead of delving deeper, SHAPE negates the potential for critical analysis by discussing the symptoms of the problem of stress rather than the causes. Instead of asking why women are so chronically stressed and eating for emotional reasons, the magazine offers a “fitness fix” that any competent woman, with the right moves, can employ to eliminate stress and move on with her life. Perhaps it never crossed the minds of the editors at SHAPE, but women could be chronically stressed because they are fed constant messages to do it all while looking perfect. Women are educated by SHAPE to put an unrealistic amount of time into pursuing a near-impossible ideal, while balancing social pressures to have a career in addition to being a housewife or mother. The sheer number of pressure messages has women up against a wall; they crave freedom from male oppression and physical standards while simultaneously feeling trapped by society’s expectations for ideal beauty, careers, and households (McRobbie, 2004; Wolf, 1991). SHAPE shows women that to play the game and be successful in work and home endeavors, they must look a certain way. If they do not, they cannot be successful or “healthy.” These messages consequently become oppressive and ultimately reflect the power of patriarchy.

**Ideologies of Consumerism and Feminism in SHAPE Magazine’s Letters from the Editor**

Every letter from the editor in SHAPE Magazine aims to educate, motivate, and lead by example for its readership. The letters from the editor are a rich area of study since they represent the most personalized part of the magazine; indeed, each one is a
message from the person in charge (the editor in chief) written directly to the readership. This relationship is a significant one, as content matters are debated, trends are discussed, and the philosophy of the magazine is outlined. To study and analyze these letters is to take a direct look at the values and beliefs of the magazine. It was interesting to contrast the letters to the editor with the cover content, as it revealed what the magazine is using to draw women in as compared to what is said inside the magazine, especially by the editors, who seem to view themselves as fitness and feminist pioneers for women, exploring cutting edge lifestyle trends and reporting them to the readership. The ideologies presented in these letters have evolved over the thirty years of the magazine’s existence. Popular health fads are expounded upon; women’s roles, strengths, and weaknesses are explored and discussed; and the content of the letter (in terms of text length) shrinks progressively. The editors paint themselves as human, yet also as the ultimate fitness example for the readership. SHAPE has been through five editors-in-chief during the past thirty years. The founding CEO, Christine MacIntyre, was editor-in-chief from 1981-1989; Barbara Harris took over from 1989-2005; Anne Russell had the position from 2005-2008; Valerie Latona ran the magazine from 2008-2009; and Tara Kraft obtained the position in 2009.

As I have said, the typical letter has evolved over the years, although all of them have occupied one page. In the beginning, with MacIntyre and Harris, the letter involved anywhere from 7-10 paragraphs, with text consuming most of the page space. Pictures were employed as small visual aids for points being addressed within the letter, but they were not the focus of the page. From Russell’s leadership to the present day, the text of the letter has noticeably shortened while product endorsements through photos and
captions have grown. Despite these changes in content and length, the letter still consists primarily of a message of encouragement towards a healthy lifestyle, a reflection on a topic of interest to the editor, and a theme for the month. I have identified several, sometimes conflicting, ideologies in these letters from the editors. In comparison to the covers, feminist messages are much more clearly foregrounded, though they exist against a consumerist context. The ideologies of female empowerment can be described as “A Different Kind of Magazine,” “Crusaders of Feminism,” and “Fitness As Feminine,” while I have labeled those that more directly cultivate consumer desire as “Buy, Buy, Buy!” and “Physical Fitness as an Imperative.”

The ideologies in the letters from the editor, especially those that relate to female empowerment, evolve in parallel with feminism, first reflecting the objectives of emancipation and strength that characterized the second and third wave and then adopting the more individualistic, consumerist orientation of post-feminism. And the ideologies presented in the letters are influenced by each editor and her goals for SHAPE. Since only eleven issues were analyzed, it is difficult to state with complete confidence that each editor has (or had) a distinct approach, yet certain editors had more identifiable goals and beliefs for SHAPE than others, reflecting a balance between feminist messages and consumerism that I will discuss in the detailed analysis that follows. Despite the changes in leadership for the magazine, SHAPE’s letters from the editor have maintained some ideological consistency that may have been driven by the goals of the publisher, irrespective of whoever was editing the magazine. Themes such as SHAPE being a different kind of magazine, fitness as something feminine, consumerism as necessity, fitness as an imperative to being a desirable woman, encouragement messages, and health
messages are all part of what has been an effective (and profitable) approach to marketing the magazine. Weider Publishing is extremely successful and most likely employs these messages because they resonate with women who purchase this health magazine (Woodstock, 2001).

A Different Magazine for Women

In a variety of ways, the editors of SHAPE have used their monthly letters to assure women that SHAPE, unlike other women’s magazines, treats women’s fitness as an important concern that cannot be trivialized with misleading or unsubstantiated information. Thus SHAPE’s initial nod toward feminism may be seen in founding editor-in-chief Christine MacIntyre’s early attempts to convince her readers that SHAPE was a “serious,” empowering publication offering credible and scientifically sound health advice, something unusual in popular women’s magazines, which often promoted fad approaches to health or dieting. MacIntyre presented SHAPE as a different magazine - a superior magazine. Her letters frequently mention that SHAPE is committed to bringing its readers reliable information about fitness and to being “anti-fad.” While the cover content suggests otherwise (fad diets and products are frequent subjects of the headlines), the letters from MacIntyre mention the doctors involved in each issue and their credentials. The medical field is consulted for every health article cited in her letters, including those that deal with back pain, exercise therapy, and weight loss and nutrition. In the August 1982 issue, MacIntyre comments,

At SHAPE, we won’t let you down. I make certain every article you read is filled with information you can trust, written by health professionals
who care about you! You know, I’ve been called a maverick because I won’t print silly or sensational articles about phony fad diets, miracle health cures, or sexercises as other magazines do. That’s because I am committed to helping you become the best and most fit person you can be. But as you know, it’s the personal commitment that counts. So stay committed to the fitness lifestyle and we’ll stay committed to helping you with it! (August 1982, p. 8).

MacIntyre wanted SHAPE to set a fresh standard for women’s magazines, one in which there would be scientific support for the advice that was printed so that readers could trust it and rely upon it. Over the years, medical credibility has remained a requirement of the magazine, yet the editors after MacIntyre do not mention it explicitly. Rather, it seems assumed as new exercise techniques and diet products are discussed by Harris, Russell, Latona, and Kraft. For example, every issue of SHAPE that I examined has a page that lists the Editorial Advisory Board, which includes the names of the medical experts consulted for the articles published. While the succeeding editors do seem to reflect MacIntyre’s belief that SHAPE is a “different kind of magazine,” the reasons why it is special seem to fluctuate; while MacIntyre believed it was different because of its seriousness and medical credibility, Russell, Latona, and Kraft seem to believe it is unique and valuable as a result of its trend-setting popularity.

For example, while Harris is the editor who most closely echoes McIntyre’s approach to the magazine, her first letter to the readers, entitled “Fashion Fun in Carmel” (1989), discusses a recent fashion shoot at Carmel, California. She also highlights the workout buddy system and the benefits of having a friend in fitness. However, she never
argues that SHAPE is a new kind of magazine for women, nor does she celebrate it as superior to similar publications. The idea that SHAPE is distinctive or better is not mentioned. Rather, Harris’s letter makes the assumption that women are committed to the magazine and do not need to be praised for their readership, nor convinced that SHAPE is special and therefore worthy of their attention and respect.

Russell’s 2005 letter is similar in the sense that nothing is overtly stated regarding SHAPE’s practice of securing expertly vetted and medically reliable fitness advice, but she does highlight how SHAPE offers a popular “Bikini Body Blitz.” In general, Russell values bringing her readers the latest fitness trends. Like other editors, she briefly previews and celebrates several articles from the issue, such as: “Author Stacy Clino’s enlightening health story ‘Do the Right Thing!’ may prove to be a surprise” and “Check out ‘Love Your Body’ (page 64) for the quirky responses your fellow readers gave when asked about what they liked best about their bodies” (2005, p. 22).

Latona has a similar rhetorical approach in which the usefulness of the magazine is equated with its ability to be up-to-date and trendy in regard to its fitness and fashion advice. Endorsed products take up significant space in her 2008 letter, so the text is short, focusing on SHAPE’s interview with celebrity cover Denise Richards. While Latona also briefly previews some major articles from the issue, none point to SHAPE being different from or better than other women’s fitness magazines such as Women’s Health, Fitness, Redbook, or Health. In other words, Latona promotes the content of the issue, but unlike earlier editor MacIntyre, she does not make the argument that SHAPE is a special or atypical women’s fitness magazine. Instead, she appears to assume that SHAPE’s worthiness has been established by its continuing success.
Kraft seems especially proud to be writing for SHAPE in her letters. This comes across in her extremely upbeat and confident style and product endorsements. In both of the letters that I examined, Kraft discusses breast cancer and its impact on women. Thus the topic of discussion is medically related (especially with the prevention messages she offers) but Kraft does not attempt to cite medical evidence or claim that SHAPE is presenting the most cutting-edge research on the issue. Rather, she mentions how readers should know their family history, get regular checkups, and do self-breast exams. Yet Kraft does single out SHAPE as being a company that is distinctive in its commitment to ending breast cancer; she endorses SHAPE’s sixth annual Pilates for Pink event, mentioning that she’s “thrilled to say that to date, SHAPE has raised $675,000 for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation” (2011, p. 15). Kraft implies that SHAPE is a magazine that not only cares about the breast cancer issue, but also one that actually does something to actively seek out a cure. In this sense, Kraft argues that SHAPE is a different kind of magazine for women, or at least one that readers can be proud to read. Interestingly, though, her letters, like the others that followed those of early editor MacIntyre, tend to highlight more trivial aspects of fitness advice, such as trendy diets, or promote the purchase of products, such as those associated with the “Pink” campaign against breast cancer. As I will argue in the next section, this shift from a concern about empowering women with reliable health information to “helping” them follow fitness trends and/or purchase products to improve themselves (or support breast cancer research) reflects a wider cultural shift from second- and third-wave feminism to post-feminism.
Crusaders of Feminism

SHAPE’s editors clearly attempt to embrace feminism, although their “brand” of feminism shifts, evolving from a framework that foregrounds female strength and self-care (driven by the concerns of the second and third waves of the feminist movement) to a post-feminist, more consumerist, orientation that the editors still present as empowering to women. Every editor-in-chief at SHAPE writes her letters to readers with a feminist tone, with the exception of Anne Russell. These editors view themselves as crusaders of female empowerment and choose to utilize their letters as a forum to express or dissect relevant issues women face. The gravity of these letters and their presentation of women’s positions differ; as I noted above, later editors offer a more post-feminist tone. Earlier editors such as MacIntyre and Harris reflect on aspects of feminism and explore the role of women and fitness in the wider culture. MacIntyre writes with a feminist tone to her readers, urging them not only to be fit and committed to a healthy lifestyle, but also to rethink their roles as women in society. The theme of the October 1987 issue is nurturing, and MacIntyre questions the double standard women fight. She writes:

We as women are expected to be the nurturers in our society. Yet often we aren’t given the nurturing we need so desperately. Because we women are frequently deprived of the love and attention we need and deserve, we turn to food – a cheap, quick, and effective, but not totally rewarding method of nurturing ourselves. And if we eat too much or the wrong type of food, we tend to gain weight or sometimes develop eating disorders. Women today receive mixed messages – feed others, but deprive yourself; eat, but stay thin (October 1987, p. 12).
MacIntyre offers valid insights into society’s expectations of women and their relationship to food and nurturing, reflecting some of the concerns of second-wave feminism (Wolf, 1991). She highlights contradictions present in the magazine as well. Her writing is rooted in traditional feminism, acknowledging that a woman’s relationship with food is reflective of the existing male-dominated structure where women are meant to be the beautiful muses who sustain the home. Overeating is to harm one’s exterior, and since the exterior is the reflection of inner virtue, women cannot “afford” to partake in this behavior (Orbach, 2009). MacIntyre is correct when she says that women can drive themselves to destructive habits in an attempt to fulfill societal expectations. Women may starve themselves or overeat as a result of their belief that they should nurture others but deprive themselves. MacIntyre calls attention to this dilemma and challenges women to analyze their eating habits and the emotions surrounding them.

When Barbara Harris took over as editor in chief in 1989, the tone of the letters changed. While it was not made clear why Harris took over, Weider Publishing was becoming more successful and Harris had a background in fitness advocacy. Harris focuses on stress for women and how exercise offers a release for that stress. While the covers of Harris’s tenure at SHAPE project shallow, post-feminist content, Harris herself offers a feminist perspective. Her focus on building physical strength for females is tied to her belief that females need to be strong both emotionally and mentally. Harris argues that female oppression can be overcome with physical strength; she takes a central aspect of masculine identity and appropriates it for women. Harris views gender equality as physical equality in her writing. While the cover content rarely matches her letter content, Harris has an understanding of female oppression and is herself an example of feminine
power in the workplace. For Harris, physical strength is a reflection of mental strength, and many of her letters try to draw attention to what women can offer, such as self-nurturing. She says, “You especially need to focus on taking care of yourself [during the holidays] because what you offer to others on a personal level – your company, love and support – is the most precious and lasting gift” (December, 2001, p. 14). Yet the root issues behind the stress and objectification women face are not mentioned; rather, advice is given on how to cope with stress, instead of addressing its cause. Harris’s passion for a healthy and stress-free lifestyle is evident, and her writing often echoes MacIntyre’s by at least mentioning common feminist struggles such as women’s roles in society and personal tendencies. Harris fills most of her letters with friendly encouragement and exercise testimonies of readers and editors. However, she seems to fixate on female physical power and its relationship to de-stressing. In her June 1992 issue, her letter entitled “The Power Behind the Punch” focuses on the newest workout trend of boxing. She writes about her own experience with the workout, saying, “As the weight lifter of the group, I too enjoyed my physical power when the instructor held up a pad and told me to punch it as hard as I could – harder, harder, harder. I felt pushed to express my strength to the max, and it felt good” (SHAPE, June 1992, p. 10).

The letter for June also includes a testimony from one of Harris’s fellow editors who joined her in the workout: “‘Boxing was a complete stress reliever for me,’ states Kathy Nenneker. ‘As I was punching I felt like I was releasing something. Usually you have to temper those feelings. This way you can just punch and let them go’” (SHAPE, June 1992, p.10). Both women appreciate the empowerment that comes with physical expression of aggression. Harris continues, “Your body has much more to offer than its
looks” (p. 10). Instead of asking why women are taught to believe that they should focus their efforts on perfecting their bodies (i.e., physical qualities), she focuses on the productivity of exercise as a form of empowerment and stress relief. Rather than having to “temper those feelings” (arguably of oppression) women can punch them out, releasing the negative messages through physical expression. Harris presents this female empowerment as healthy and exciting. This perspective shows the tension between the sexes and the pressures women deal with in order to exist within the male hierarchy. Harris seems to be urging women to fight back and find their voice, but through exercise, an acceptable form of expression for women, as opposed to intellectual involvement, a perspective consistent with research conducted on SHAPE by McCracken (1993). This can be interpreted as an attempt on Harris’s part to redefine exercise or physical empowerment as feminine.

After Harris’s departure from the magazine, SHAPE made a noticeable change in its letters from the editor. The magazine went from being feminist in its tone to becoming more overtly post-feminist. SHAPE started celebrating “girl power” and empowerment through sexualization, physical transformation and desirability. The focus became increasingly on outward appearance as it celebrated the “perfect” physical ideal. Anne Russell focuses on how to obtain a bikini body and avoid the dangers of ticks and parasites while burning calories outdoors. Russell excitedly describes to her readers how that month’s issue will offer tips such on obtaining “taut, toned triceps” and specific “target training for incredible abs” (June, 2005). Her main focus is on improving women’s “problem areas” for bikini season: the butt, arms, and abs. Yet at the end of her letter, Russell summarizes how the magazine features stories that ironically have to do
with lowering stress and practicing self-love. She writes: “Other stories . . . include
‘Fewer Choices, Less Stress?’ (page 244) which examines why what seems like a good
thing – infinite options – may actually be making your life less livable. And check out
‘Love Your Body’ (page 64) for the quirky responses your fellow readers gave when
asked what they liked best about their bodies” (June, 2005, p. 22). This is an ironic series
of messages, given that they appear in a letter devoted primarily to obtaining the perfect
bikini body and ridding oneself of “problem areas.” The consumerist messages in
Russell’s letter are contradicted by her mention of an article on the negativity of infinite
options. One is caused by the other – yet instead of pointing this out, Russell
demonstrates how *SHAPE*, along with most women’s magazines, is skilled at turning
consumerist messages of dissatisfaction into positive goal-setting and female
accomplishment (Brooks, 2004; Woodstock, 2001). The letter presumes that women have
achieved a place of equality in society and are “free” to pursue the perfect body,
something that is depicted as empowering.

The post-feminist themes do not stop with Russell. Her successor, Valerie Latona,
offers even less text in her letters and combines multiple pictures and consumerist
advertisements in the right hand margin. While Latona uses her letter to highlight
Mother’s Day, the potential depth of her message is negated by the distracting images of
sexuality, anti-tanning messages, and a list promoting things to be consumed for the
month. While the tone of her letter is touching as it focuses on the “mother-daughter bond”
and the influence mothers have in their daughters’ lives, it is short and surrounded by
post-feminist messages about needing a bikini-fabulous body to be the perfect mother: fit
and adored. The next and current editor-in-chief, Tara Kraft, demonstrates a similar
approach with her letters. The content is brief and focuses on breast cancer awareness, workouts for women, and an impressive product endorsement display. Her approach reflects the present age of communication and information, in which brief messages are frequent and pictures help readers fill in the intellectual blanks. Kraft is known for her extremely upbeat tone and reflections on influential women. Yet her discussions of the women she focuses on rarely highlight their emotional, intellectual, or spiritual health. Rather, Kraft points out their “success” (being beautiful and financially esteemed) and uses their prominence as inspiration for a Halloween costume idea (e.g., her celebration of Lucille Ball) or as a means to argue that beauty is always reflected on the outside of a woman (e.g., her memoir tribute to the Pink breast cancer awareness campaign co-founded by Evelyn Lauder). Yet Kraft seems to write with the belief that she is genuinely helping women and is standing on the front lines of feminism, determined to bring them the latest and greatest news for female empowerment and celebration. She does this by glorifying elegant women in pop culture such as Evelyn Lauder, Lucille Ball and Julianne Hough in addition to the products made by women for women. McRobbie (2004) explains how this is common practice with today’s post-feminists. Though the letters lack real feminist content, Kraft makes sure to compensate for this with plenty of upbeat messages and product endorsements, reflecting a post-feminist mindset (Joseph, 2009).

*Fitness As Feminine*

One arguably feminist message offered by the letters from the editor involves an attempt to claim fitness (especially physical strength) as an aspect of the “feminine.” Editor-in-chief Barbara Harris was a bodybuilder before she took over *SHAPE* in 1989.
Clearly passionate about a healthy lifestyle, Harris used the letters from the editor as an outlet for reader motivation, encouragement, and personal example. In the November 1997 issue, Harris explains how the image of fitness is changing. This perspective builds upon her June 1992 letter about women finding a voice through physical empowerment. Harris states, “Today, the [image of fitness] is distinctly female. While men have traditionally dominated sports, women now account for 53 percent of fitness participants” (SHAPE, June 1997, p. 12). She titles the letter “Fitness is Feminine.” This has feminist roots as Harris acknowledges that men have traditionally controlled the field of exercise but also notes that the situation has evolved considerably. Other editors-in-chief after Harris also paint exercise as feminine, but more importantly, as the key to being sexually desirable. While MacIntyre and Harris focused on how fitness can be a tool for achieving equality between the sexes, the later editors (Russell, Latona, and Kraft) depict fitness as a woman’s duty to master the perfect physique for male appeal. Consequently, these later editors reflect a post-feminist mentality, and their messages condone a culture of female oppression through objectification (Joseph, 2009; McRobbie, 2004). Though women are now “allowed” to pursue physical fitness, high value is placed on meeting narrow appearance standards to gain male approval.

This oppression is evident through the product promotions in the letters from the editors. A “bikini” body is marketed and endorsed in the June 2005 issue by editor-in-chief Anne Russell. Fitness is about maintaining the perfect exterior, according to the “essential” guide to summer promoted by Russell. An image of an ideal woman in a revealing bikini floating on an inner tube on the water accompanies the letter. This image takes up one-third of the entire page, suggesting its significance. In addition, SHAPE’s
May 2008 issue addresses Mother’s Day and the role of mothers in daughters’ lives. While the text focuses on the importance of female nurturing from mother to daughter and expressions of affirmation and love, the largest image on the page is one of a very young, blond, and sexually appealing woman in a revealing red bikini smiling as she holds her “daughter,” also in a bathing suit and giving her “model” mom a kiss. The sexual appeal and physical fitness of the “mother” model is apparent and is the main focus of the image as almost her entire body is in the shot. Her beauty and smile as she receives a kiss from her daughter can be touching if one can get past the sexual prominence of her body. This image undermines the sincere, emotional undertone of the text of the letter. This is a nurturing mother who presents herself for the scrutiny of the male gaze. These mixed messages persist as the issues become more prominently sexual over the years. From 1982 to 2004, the letter features a small picture of the editor, and occasionally a couple of small pictures of SHAPE readers or group shots of fitness personnel. From 2005 to 2012, revealing images of female figures appear more frequently and are often placed next to texts urging women to “be their best selves.” While the tone is one of female freedom and liberation, the images reflect materialistic messages and gender oppression.

This is consistent with the continual rise of consumerism and SHAPE’s ability to adapt in order to make a profit (Featherstone, 2001). It is clear especially with editor-in-chief Tara Kraft that marketing ploys are being blatantly utilized to promote consumerism and magazine sales. While touching reflections on women as mothers and daughters and examples of past heroines can make for nice content, SHAPE surrounds these reflections with both visual and textual messages targeted towards exploiting and
shaping women’s beliefs and attitudes (Brooks, 2004; Woodstock, 2001). By providing these texts of dissatisfaction and a wide range of “helpful” products, *SHAPE* aims to heighten women’s desire to mould their bodies according to the subjective norm. This has the effect of increasing the possibility that women will buy into the messages of bodily dissatisfaction and consumerist fixes that are presented (Tait, 2007). This promise of the possibility of beauty is marketed as “feminine fitness,” a concept MacIntyre and Harris did not seem to support. Blatantly objectified women are presented as thriving, “healthy” women. Instead of fitness being appropriated as a feminine enterprise, the real message here is that beauty is feminine and health is secondary. These themes persist in other messages as well.

*Buy, Buy, Buy!*

Perhaps the most omnipresent ideology in the letters from editors over the 30 years is consumerism, although product endorsements have arguably increased exponentially over the years, making them one of the defining aspects of the letters from the editors. The layout of the letters provides the most obvious evidence of the shift. While MacIntyre and Harris were editors, the majority of space was devoted to writing, with few product recommendations being offered. Over time, the majority of space became dedicated to product placement and endorsement. Although all popular magazines have consumerist themes, the intensity and frequency with which imperatives to consume (i.e., to purchase products and services) are presented has increased over time. While consumerist messages in *SHAPE*’s letters from the editor began as a solution to weight loss problems, they have evolved into endorsements of beauty products, fashion
must-haves, and luxurious lifestyle ads, reflective of the pattern of consumerism: more is better (Featherstone, 2001). MacIntyre initiated this trend by encouraging readers to sign up for exercise classes, condoning weight loss, and advertising the “Down Under Sweepstakes” (a vacation in Australia for the winning readers). Harris added fashion styles, essential home décor, dietary needs, and holiday gift ideas to the list of endorsements. Russell started endorsing bikini fashions and Latona created a side column entitled “SHAPE wants you to:” next to the letter from the editor. This column consisted of certain product and lifestyle endorsements, from learning how to eat correct foods to picking the right shade of lipstick. Perhaps the biggest step toward consumerist messages was taken by current editor-in-chief Tara Kraft. The text of her letters shrank drastically in length, down to about a quarter of the total page space. The remaining space consists of a section entitled “This Month I’m Loving…” in which different things are featured, from stationary and makeup to luxurious vacation resorts and spas to television and movie choices. Thus the letters have less text and are accompanied by illustrated “endorsements” for specific products. This theme of consumerism echoes the content layout of the magazine covers.

Interestingly, editors Latona and Kraft have utilized consumerism to encourage cancer awareness. Latona promotes sunless tanning products and warns her readers about the dangers of tanning booths and sun exposure in her May 2008 issue. Kraft promotes breast cancer awareness in both her October 2011 and January 2012 issues. She points out that SHAPE Magazine is a large donor to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation through their Pilates for Pink event. Multiple photographs of “pink” gear are presented in her letter from the editor page and websites are provided for purchase information. In the
January 2012 issue, Kraft pays tribute to beauty product pioneer and Pink Ribbon Campaign co-creator Evelyn Lauder. The majority of the page is a visual spread of products designed by Lauder, some involving breast cancer awareness, others independent of the movement. A website link is provided for all featured products. While these product and campaign promotions can be worthwhile or even honorable, there is a fine line between consumption for a good cause and consumption to enhance one’s body. These materialistic consumerist messages convey the importance of improving one’s exterior presentation. This poses a problem for a magazine that claims to be about health, providing further evidence that the word “fitness” at its core is about exterior appearance more than internal health. Consequently, it makes sense that SHAPE would label itself a fitness magazine over a health magazine.

Yet the editors of SHAPE truly seem to believe that mental and emotional health can be equated with or measured by physical health (i.e.: the exterior reflects the interior). Consequently, the dualistic ideologies in their writing can be justified or may seem to make sense within this framework. However, when these messages are analyzed with feminist frames and/or compared to credible health information, SHAPE Magazine appears quite splintered in its claims and presentation. This situation develops with the existence of two objectives: what SHAPE utilizes to draw women in, and what is said once women open the magazine – consumerism versus feminism. These two aspects of SHAPE are different in their goals, creating an inconsistent framework for the magazine’s existence. SHAPE chooses to play the game of consumerism and sexualization in order to invite women to pick up and purchase their magazine; yet once women open the pages, conflicting messages of identity and health are presented, including editors’ attempts at
being feminist crusaders.

*Physical Fitness as an Imperative*

Though the editors may try to crusade for feminism, they also embrace consumerism. As I noted in the previous section, women are encouraged to purchase a variety of products, many of them related to the body. The letters to the editor also present physical fitness as an imperative, as something that women should pursue as part of their duty as women. Every editor of *SHAPE* magazine demonstrates a basic pragmatic philosophy regarding the body and women’s duty. This is shown primarily through the encouragement of weight loss. Most fitness messages involve keeping off unwanted weight through adopting a healthy lifestyle. The editors present health as the responsibility of the reader, a life choice one needs to adopt. Self-esteem is something that can be improved if one decides to love his or her body; health is something to be obtained if one develops self-control; and weight-loss is possible when the person takes responsibility for his or her own life and chooses to change. Each letter from the editor argues that through willpower and commitment one can achieve exterior perfection and self-actualization. Harris reflects this perspective prominently in the December 2001 issue, encouraging *SHAPE* readers to rewrite their futures of healthy women:

“What are you going to be doing when you’re 83?” This is the question that 83-year-old fan Benno Caris, current world-champion racewalker, asks groups of students . . . it’s obvious that exercise is key to maintaining our vitality. Without, we cannot stay at a healthy weight or feel our best. To help you maintain your commitment to movement – even during the holidays – we
have a cardio plan to match your mood and energy. Hopefully our article will help you care for your body throughout this busy season. As Fan points out, “If you don’t take care of your body, where are you going to live?” (December 2001, p. 14).

Readers are encouraged to make the change, and consequently, it is their own failure if their bodies do not look like the ideals presented within the pages that follow. Health is viewed as a personal choice, duty, and source of empowerment. The readers must take care of themselves. Such an imperative is consumerist in orientation, because it encourages an ongoing sense that more must always be done (purchased, utilized, acted upon) in order to make one’s body “fit.” Despite the nominally feminist messages highlighted in the letters from the editor, the cultivation of dissatisfaction, especially in regard to appearance, echoes and reinforces the consumerist ideologies foregrounded on the covers of SHAPE.
CONCLUSION

Final Thoughts, Limitations, and Future Research

Final Thoughts

Analyzing the covers and letters from the editors proved enlightening, as much of the inconsistency and irony of the magazine reveals itself when these two areas of evidence are compared. While the covers are superficial in their focus on images and brief headlines, they do reveal the values and purposes of SHAPE. Yet what the covers advertise and what the editors write can be contradictory, so it is interesting to observe what the magazine is using to draw women into the world of SHAPE and then what it actually says once women look inside. The covers foreground consumerism, cultivating women’s dissatisfaction with their bodies, while the letters tend to emphasize feminist principles of empowerment. While I would argue that weight-loss themes are a priority in both the covers and letters, the close connection between beauty and health is not as readily apparent in the letters, especially the earlier ones. Editors MacIntyre and Harris focus more overtly on health messages and second-wave feminism, while later editors, most noticeably editor Tara Kraft, concentrate on beauty messages, often repackaging them to look like health messages. In addition, the instant gratification theme, ever-present on the covers, barely registers with editors MacIntyre and Harris, although it increases significantly with Russell, Latonya, and Kraft. Messages of materialism and consumerism are present in both the covers and letters and grow in prominence and frequency over the thirty years of the magazine, probably as a result of the SHAPE’s
profit goals.

It was especially enlightening to study the feminist messages in the letters and compare them with the feminist movement as it existed at the time of each letter’s publication. One of my greatest frustrations with writing the literature review was trying to find a clear explanation of post-feminism. The longer I researched, the clearer it became: post-feminism stands apart from first-, second-, and third-wave feminism. This is because, unlike the previous waves of feminism, “post-” exists and operates without a leader or figurehead who openly claims to be post-feminist. It wasn’t until later research that I discovered that some of today’s leading post-feminists do not refer to themselves by that term; rather, they identify themselves as crusaders of women and/or feminism. Unfortunately, celebrity culture has the loudest voice right now and most of these post-feminists masquerading as feminists are celebrities such as Tyra Banks, Kim Kardashian, Lady Gaga, Demi Moore, Britney Spears, and Jillian Michaels. What has the potential to be a good message of female empowerment gets lost in the proclamations of “girl power!” and positive attitudes toward plastic surgery and other societal norms of beauty. The woman’s “right to choose” is viewed as empowering, despite the fact that the celebrities proclaiming this are bound to and embracing the male gaze. This contradictory lingo is confusing, as I cannot easily understand why women who essentially negate or dismiss the progress of feminism would claim to be crusaders of it. Yet it also makes sense; feminists are victims of their own success, and, as with any progressive movement in history, the pendulum may swing too far in either direction before (hopefully) settling in a productive middle ground. Right now I believe that Joseph (2009) is correct in thinking we are currently in a “post-” society as the result of a backlash against feminism. Women
are told to be powerful but also to be perfect objects of the male gaze. Post-feminists would argue that they are feminists who are pro “girl power.” This begs the question: Are post-feminists simply women who have adopted the male gaze as their normative perspective? More recent letters to the editor in *SHAPE*, as well as covers that continually exhort readers to pursue an unattainable physical ideal, suggest that this may be the case. In other words, the magazine’s contrary goals of consumerism and feminism may now neatly dovetail with and reinforce one another, as post-feminism, in a consumerist fashion, encourages women to “improve” themselves.

While I am critical of the magazine and the dissatisfaction it may cultivate, I do see that *SHAPE* may also be helpful to its readers. For example, the obesity epidemic is a point of concern for many Americans (myself included). *SHAPE* offers valuable information about nutrition and weight loss. It is usually difficult to lose a considerable amount of weight when a person finds him/herself fighting obesity and basic encouragement and motivational messages can provide assistance. I also find *SHAPE*’s nutritional messages beneficial, as the magazine does promote healthy food consumption and an awareness of overeating or emotional eating. I believe the problem arises with the use of images portraying unrealistic female ideals exhibiting beauty first and foremost. Apart from images, the articles in *SHAPE* do offer some good advice on health. Unfortunately, magazines are intended to be more visual (hence their differentiation from books) and therefore their deployment of unrealistic ideals will probably persist. This is unhealthy for women as it perpetuates a masculine hierarchy and reduces women to pawns in a sexual game of consumerism. By providing these idealistic female images, *SHAPE* reinforces the cultural norm of females viewing themselves through the male
gaze. Such images plant the seeds of discontent within readers, encouraging bodily dissatisfaction and priming them for consumption of featured products.

This study has shown that women’s fitness magazines are about much more than just “fitness” or “health.” The publishers do promote health and fitness but concurrently present unrealistic physical standards for women and emphasize oppressive gender roles. This emphasis has arguably been socializing women to read femininity as something developed through the purchase of consumer products. Buying the right products will make a woman more feminine (more outwardly beautiful) and ultimately desirable by men. SHAPE mixes health and fitness with “traditional women’s consumerism and images of consumption” (McCracken, 1993, p. 63). Readers, especially women, are expected to consume in order to achieve health and fitness. They need expensive workout clothing, and of course, they need many beauty products to ensure that they “look cute” when they go to the gym. SHAPE deceptively masks the promotion of consumerism with the presentation of strategies for having a healthy body.

This study has shown that, despite the long-standing feminist movement, editors currently embrace a post-feminist perspective at SHAPE, breezily implying that female oppression is a problem of the past. Ironically, however, much of the content in SHAPE demonstrates the limitations that women still face, especially as objects of the male gaze. There is only so far a woman can go in society, because she will still always be typecast as female and known and valued for her beauty. This is a degrading message for women, as it perpetuates a system of masculine dominance and weakens women’s abilities to view themselves as having more to offer. It takes an important issue such as physical health and turns it into a focus on the superficial: beauty. Perhaps if the purpose of
SHAPE was to provide health advice so that women could be strengthened in order to live longer, more productive and progressive lives, then the focus could shift from beauty to liberation. If women take care of themselves and live healthy lives, then they have the gift of time to pursue and enjoy the fruits of their labors. This could allow for women to play greater roles in the sciences, in business, or in public affairs. Health is multi-dimensional. A woman can look amazing and be able to run a 25k but if she buys into the sexist messages offered by the mass media (such as women’s fitness magazines), she limits herself in terms of what she can accomplish and whom she can impact. Perhaps the solution to empowering women to truly embrace feminism and holistic health lies in creating a new social framework, one that has not been articulated yet, instead of attempting to adapt to the masculine structure that currently exists. Women will never reach their true potential if they (and we) continue to buy into the sexist messages of consumer culture.

Having been obese myself, I know what it is like to wrestle with identity as an overweight woman wanting to be healthy. It can be difficult to focus on losing weight for health and not to become consumed with meeting society’s expectations about appearance. I found myself in a love/hate relationship with women’s fitness magazines; on the one hand, I was given healthy food recipes and motivational advice and exercise tips. On the other hand, I found myself looking at images of women who were not me and realistically probably would never be me. SHAPE attempted to address “low self-esteem” in several issues a year. This was my first encounter with the irony of the magazine, as I found myself believing in the words they had written to their readers; happiness does come when one is healthy and can accept her looks. However, it is
unfortunate that *SHAPE* offers those messages while simultaneously sending other messages about how to pursue a physical ideal. If one is looking to *SHAPE* to find a meaningful path to inner and outer health, she will be disappointed. The medical field is full of trained nutritionists and health doctors who can provide useful insight and healthy options and motivation for patients. *SHAPE* can be an aid to that but not a source of information about inner and outer health. Even as I write this, it sounds splintered, yet that reflects the very nature of the subject of this study.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this thesis study. The most prominent one is the lack of material to do a more in-depth and complete analysis. Finding and purchasing every issue *SHAPE* has released since its foundation was not an option. This would have been a more accurate study if I had analyzed the cover and letter from the editor of every issue of *SHAPE*. Since this study incorporated an historical perspective, it made sense to purchase material as evenly spaced throughout the thirty years of *SHAPE*’s publication as possible. Every 2-5 year period is represented, yet having every issue would have strengthened my examination and my conclusions.

There are also some inherent weaknesses and limiting factors to conducting an analysis such as this because of the potential ambiguity of the meanings of signs (Bignell, 1997). Readers may understand messages differently, resulting in a range of varying views and effects. It is hard to say with certainty that each cover and letter will communicate its intended meaning, or whether the magazine editors and layout artists actually intended to communicate what I understood. Because every person has different
life experiences, views, and beliefs, the number of different interpretations are vast, and to some extent not identifiable. However, I am hoping that the care and deliberation with which I approached my analysis has helped to minimize bias in the interpretative process.

Furthermore, I have had personal experience with dramatic weight loss and transformation through physical change. This experience may bias me towards a harsher critical lens, especially in regard to publications that encourage and exploit these processes in pursuit of profit. While I certainly focused on remaining unbiased, there is always the risk of human error in research. Also, I have been a consumer of SHAPE magazine for over ten years, making it a subject matter with which I am familiar, perhaps too familiar.

**Future Studies**

Women’s magazines are a perennially popular area of mass culture. They are intriguing because of their propensity to empower and exploit their female readers, encouraging both self-determination and never-ending consumer desire. Women’s fitness magazines, which focus quite literally on the “fitness” of females, intensify this dynamic, promising health and physical strength while constantly highlighting unrealistic, even unattainable, bodily ideals. I only examined a small sample of one popular fitness magazine; it would be educational to have additional research on other women’s fitness magazines, such as *Women’s Fitness, Health, Women’s Health, Fitness, Natural Health, Prevention, and Yoga*. Women engage with these publications on a regular basis, and the opportunity is there for analysis. Do these other publications, like SHAPE, simultaneously embrace consumerism and feminism, thus offering mixed messages to
their readers? Do other publications demonstrate evidence of a recent shift toward post-feminism, allowing ideologies of female empowerment to be marginalized?

In my view, the rise of post-feminism, especially in publications that are supposed to support and galvanize women, is startling and disturbing. The post-feminist perspective permeates many media messages produced for contemporary females and at times negates the long and difficult road women pioneers have battled to gain rights and respect. It would be worthwhile to invest in studies about women’s understanding of where feminism is today. While feminist critics are able to present their beliefs and observations much easier via the Internet, I think it would be beneficial to consider many women, including those who may not be familiar with feminist theory, in order to understand how they interpret their roles as women amidst the many voices that are available. While the philosophy of the current mass media market seems clear (a post-feminist outlook that reinforces consumerist principles), I would be interested to see what the women reading fitness magazines believe. Perhaps there is an interpretive framework that we have not yet identified, and women purchasing fitness magazines are finding uses and gratifications of which we, as researchers, remain unaware.
Figure 1 – 1982 SHAPE Magazine cover
Figure 2 – 1982 SHAPE Magazine Letter from Editor

My family loves to take long leisurely bike rides all year round. We have no excuse for not using our bikes often because there’s a bicycle path right in front of our house! Before I could really enjoy our rides, though, I had to solve one nagging problem—my bike seat. It wasn’t broad enough, and I couldn’t ride long without having to rest my sore derriere—until I got a wider seat to fit the problems of my gender.

If you don’t own a bike, or worse yet, have had yours stolen as I have, read “How to Choose the Right Bike for You.” We give you all the information on choosing the right bike (and bike lock). Summer is the time to discover that a bike can be your best and most reliable exercise partner. Plus, we’ve included tips from an exercise physiologist on how to get fit using your bike. I asked cycling enthusiast Pat Calligan to write an article on bike tours you can take when you go on vacation this summer, and when Megan (she’s five) gets a little older, we’ll take one of those tours. What a healthy and wonderful way to see America!

If cycling doesn’t tickle your fitness fancy, we’ve got lots more in store for you in this issue. In the article “High-Tech Fitness,” we show you how to get the most out of any workout, no matter where you are. We cover all bases with a complete training program for every major muscle group on Nautilus, Universal or Paramount machines and free weights. Dr. Bryant Stamford, exercise physiologist and fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine, talks you how using free weights differs from using machine weights.

If you have back pain (and few of us escape it), you will become a committed reader of Shape by following the advice of Dr. Hamilton Hall. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about! I used to suffer from back pain until I discovered that one of my legs is shorter than the other and began performing specific stretching and strengthening exercises (many of them illustrated within this article). In fact, I never get out of bed in the morning without doing thirty to forty sets of the knees-to-chest exercise. Believe me, exercise does wonders in reducing back pain, but if these don’t work for you after several months, see an orthopedist.

If you’re a moody eater, that is, you eat when you’re sad or happy or angry or frustrated or lonely or bored or all of the above, take heart! Our Editorial Advisory Board member Henry Jordan, M.D., a behavioral weight-control therapist, shares with you his specially designed quiz and article on how your moods affect how much you eat. More importantly, he gives you practical and useful guidelines to implement changes in your behavior. You can go on (and off) diets forever, but if you don’t get to the causes of why you eat or overeat, you can never permanently shed those unwanted pounds.

As those of you who are regular readers of Shape know, we are interested in helping you discover what is keeping you from achieving your maximum potential. We want to make ourselves into the most perfect beings we can sculpt, but being fallible, we need help, encouragement and guidance. This should come not from just any magazine, but from one whose editors care. At Shape we won’t let you down. I make certain every article you read is filled with information you can trust, written by health professionals who care about you!

You know, I’ve been called a maverick because I won’t print silly or sensational articles about phony fat diets, miracle health cures or sex exercises as other magazines do. That’s because I am committed to helping you become the best and most fit person you can be. But, as you and I know, it’s the personal commitment that counts. So stay committed to the fitness lifestyle, and we’ll stay committed to helping you stick with it!
What does food mean to you? As a woman who wears the hats of an editor, mother and wife, I don’t prepare three meals a day, but I know that I’ve used food to nurture my family—when I breast-fed my son, Jeff, when I make special gourmet meals for my husband, Don, and when I do the marketing with my daughter, Megan. Of course, I sometimes take time out from my work at Shape to bake cookies to bring to Megan’s school parties or to make special ethnic food for our family gatherings. You may have much more contact with food than I do because we, as women, are expected to be the nurturers in our society. Yet often we aren’t given the nurturing we need so desperately.

Because we women are frequently deprived of the love and attention we need and deserve, we turn to food—a cheap, quick and effective, but not totally rewarding, method of nurturing ourselves. And if we eat too much or the wrong type of food, we tend to gain weight or sometimes develop eating disorders.

Women today receive mixed messages—feed others, but deprive yourself; eat, but stay thin. To help you better understand your intimate relationship with food, we’ve put together the special section you see in this issue, called “Women and Food.” It explores the dilemma that almost all women face today—the use and misuse of food. These articles don’t provide easy answers, but they do provide the information you need to understand why you may have developed a problem dealing with food, or how you could be heading for one.

This, like all issues of Shape, contains a wonderful variety of ways for you to get the exercise your body needs. Because I’ve worked out all my life, I know that sometimes a regular routine can become downright boring. That’s the reason that each month we present a truly special fitness program. This month it’s “The Assertive Woman’s Workout,” a unique program that will get your body—and, yes, your mind—in shape. It also offers you an active method of releasing tension and feelings of built-up aggression.

To improve your flexibility, turn to “Smooth Moves,” a complete guide to stretching. And don’t miss this month’s strength-training routine, which features bodybuilder Claire Furr demonstrating exercises guaranteed to improve your posture.

At Shape we don’t ignore your psychological health. In fact, for all of you who’ve ever suffered from an anxiety attack, help is on the way in the form of “Don’t Panic! How to Stop Anxiety Attacks,” by Gary Emery, Ph.D., and James Campbell, M.D. Don’t miss it!

In this column I often talk—brag, if you will—about Shape’s fabulous sweeps. But just in case you thought I was exaggerating, I’ve included photos of the winners of our recent Hawaii contest, which we called “Come Back Beautiful” and see for yourself that these five women had a fantastic time on their super vacations and came back beautiful, when you turn to page 49. You’ll have a memorable time, too, if you’re a winner in our current “Down Under Sweepstakes.” Don’t forget to send in your entry today.

Until next month, keep working out and stay happy.

Sincerely,

Chris
Figure 5-1989 SHAPE Magazine Cover
We at Shape have a special holiday gift for you this year—it’s a membership in a unique new pen-pal program called Friends in Fitness.

Each month I receive a tremendous amount of mail from you readers requesting support and encouragement in your search for a fit lifestyle. After several brainstorming sessions the editors of Shape came up with what we think is a brilliant idea. If you join Shape’s Friends in Fitness program, we’ll match you up with a reader of similar interests and needs. We’ll be the matchmakers, and Friends in Fitness members will reap the benefits of each other’s support and encouragement.

Reebok’s Superstars

At the Museum of Natural History in downtown Los Angeles, a new “exhibit” appeared this month, as the Reebok National Aerobics Champions worked through the program on stage. From left to right (standing): Tenaj Milward, Linda Shuster (Shape’s exercise choreographer), Paul Bell, Murfian Tucker, Barbara Harris (Shape’s editor in chief), Troy Marks, Doreen McGee; (front) Greg Carelli, Marlean Tucker. Find out why they look so fit on page 74.

We’ve established two categories of Friends in Fitness members—those who already enjoy a fit lifestyle and those who are just beginning to take fitness seriously and feel they need help and encouragement.

Keep in mind that Friends in Fitness is a support system—not a source of medical advice or diet and prescriptions.

If you’re interested in being a part of this exciting program, complete and sign the application on page 116. Then write a letter describing your fitness level and goals. A short paragraph describing who you are and your occupation and interests outside of fitness will help us to match you with the perfect Friend in Fitness.

Gaining a friend who shares your interest in fitness may be just the inspiration you need to make 1990 your fittest year yet. Happy holidays from the Shape staff.
Figure 7-1990 SHAPE Magazine Cover
On Holidays

Wishing you joy that will last forever.

TO BALANCE THE HUSTLE AND bustle of the holiday season each year, I take some time out to review my past year; I like to do the same thing here at SHAPE. As usual, you readers have helped us make this a special year for us, and I'd like to share some of the ways you've done that.

Last December, we started a pen pal program called “Friends in Fitness” to help you expand your sources of support in your fitness pursuits. We have paired up more than 3,000 Friends in Fitness, with similar goals and interests, who encourage and inspire each other toward their daily fitness goals. Dyane Leshin, of Santa Cruz, California, writes to confirm that our goal for this program has materialized:

“Hi! I’m writing to tell you that I’ve been having a great writing relationship with my Friends in Fitness pen pal. I want to thank you for creating the program in the first place. I live in Santa Cruz, California, while my pen pal, Cindi, lives in New Jersey. We often send each other long epistles which touch on practically everything that’s happening in our lives. Cindi’s letters‘ cheer me up when I’m down more than anything else. (They are ten times better than chocolate!) . . . Our friendship has been extremely inspiring.”

Thanks to our Friends in Fitness for investing time in each other. By helping each other to live in a healthier way, they’re making the world a better place. (If you’d like to become a Friend in Fitness, just send in the application on page 126.)

Another unique project here at SHAPE is our annual Reader Model of the Year program. This year the program will center around the theme, “Helping Children Find Fitness—A Joy That Will Last Forever.” For the next year, SHAPE will support this cause through fund raising and fun, educational fitness events for children throughout the United States. The 1990 Reader Model of the Year finalists will be invited on a special week-long cruise to an exotic location during which, through a series of fun activities, they will help us teach a select group of children how to enjoy healthy and fit living. The finalists will be announced soon. (Watch for applications for the 1991 program in future issues.)

If you get bogged down during the holidays, remember, these days are meant to be enjoyed. And we’ve dedicated this issue to helping you do just that. Remind yourself that stress is manageable and that it adds perspective and depth to our daily lives. (Read more about this in “Success Over Stress” on page 92.) Share your enthusiasm for fitness with friends and family members by doing some armchair shopping from our Holiday Gift Guide (see page 98). Also, make time for a workout that will stimulate and relax you. (Try our relaxation workout, “Take It Easy,” on page 78.) And go outside to play. Call your neighborhood friends to go biking or skating, take the dog for a walk, or make angels in the snow. As you do these things, listen to the rhythm of life, and remember, life is too important to be taken seriously.

Happy Holidays,

Barbara Harris
Figure 9-1992 SHAPE Magazine Cover
The Power Behind the Punch

Your body has much more to offer than its looks.

Executive Art Director Kathy Nenneker, the tallest and a runner, agreed that, though physical beauty deserves appreciation, the body has more to offer. "You watch yourself in the mirror as you do the moves," says Nenneker, "but you’re watching for how well you're doing the move. With that concentration, you don’t have time to feel self-conscious about what your body looks like."

Research affirms that physical activity has the remarkable power to enhance a woman’s perception of her body. Each of us came aware of this in a different way while learning to box.

“I’m so small,” says Brody, “that people always say, ‘Oh, isn’t she cute.’ Boxing made me feel tough, like I could take action and be aggressive.”

Exercise choreographer Linda Shelton, on the other hand, felt the power to overcome limitations caused by a previous injury. “After hurting my back several years ago, I felt more vulnerable when it came to being able to protect myself,” she says. “But boxing made me feel better about that.”

The weight lifter of the group, I too enjoyed my physical power when the instructor held up a pad and told me to punch it as hard as I could—harder, harder, harder. I felt pushed to express my strength to the max, and it felt good.

Pounding with everything you’ve got is a great way to let off the pressures of the day as well.

“Boxing was a complete stress reliever for me,” says Nenneker. “As I was punching, I felt like I was really releasing some-thing. Usually you have to temper your feelings. This way, you can just punch and let them go.”

Put a little punch in your routine, the boxing workout on page 95, as your new activity for a world of fresh experiences. No matter what shape you are in—you’ll discover, as we did, a new appreciation for the way your body serves you.

Every body—yours too—expresses its own unique beauty, especially when in motion. To further prove the point we urge you to check out “Beyond the perfect 10” on page 76, featuring women athletes who represent a variety of fit body types. Each underlines a crucial element necessary to her or his speed, power, flexibility, grace and endurance. As you observe each image and feel her individual athleticism and self expression through images. To sense the artistry expressed in this piece, read the following poem by Jane Brody.

Speed is the wind streaking your hair
Going so fast you can’t even speak
Grace rides a feather, drifting through air
Leaving no footprint, no marks it has been
A snake and a daisy are wrapped around alike

Unlike a trunk of infallible timber
Power’s the slam of a dead bolt locking
Endurance, the infinite ocean’s rocking
Ah, how wonderful the freedom of mind
That lies at the heart of athletic devotion

Now close your eyes and imagine your own athleticism, then lace up or slip on shoes and go do it.

My best to you.

Barbara Hart
Editor in Chief
Figure 11-1997 SHAPE Magazine Cover
The image of fitness is changing. Today, it’s distinctly female. While men traditionally have dominated sports, women now account for 53 percent of fitness participants, according to a 1997 report from the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association. The report estimates that this year will be a good one for the outdoor sports market because of the increase in adventure travel and the growing women’s market, and that the latter also will have a positive effect on the athletic footwear market (including hiking boots).

Mind-body fitness also is big, particularly Pilates-based exercise, various forms of yoga and tai chi. Established forms of exercise remain popular, too: low-impact and step aerobics, and weight training, which is booming with both women and men. Running, walking (with women paraking in huge numbers) and cross training are fitness staples, while group exercise has been reborn into Spinning, rowing and treadmilling.

The array of movement options is staggering, and this variety can provide you with different perspectives on you and your body, which is what this issue of SHAPE is all about. Check out “The Power of Pilates” on page 98. You’ll find out why this activity has become so popular and discover how to balance your fitness with our floor-based program.

With the athletic footwear business booming, there’s no better time to become a smarter consumer. Turn to our fall shoe review, “Foot Notes,” page 88, in which we present our road-test results of latest women’s shoes for hiking and backpacking, trail running (a hot, new footwear category), and indoor and indoor cross training.

If you haven’t hit the slopes lately, you’ll find that skis have changed, too. The new fat (parabolic) skis (see “Revenge of the Fat Boys” on page 114) are the hottest things on snow and should help boost the dwindling downhill market.

How about an alternative to the downhill slide into a 7-pound seasonal weight gain? In “Avoid the Holiday Seven,” page 80, we offer realistic strategies and a meal plan for you to enjoy the holidays sans blimp.

Lastly, instead of trying to change your body, have you considered changing how you see it? In “Through the Eye of the Camera,” page 106, read how three women improved their body images by participating in a revolutionary photography project. Research shows that getting involved in sports and physical activity is one of the best ways to view your body more positively. After all, fitness is feminine. Be a part of it.

My best to you,
Barbara Harris
Editor in Chief
Figure 13 - 2001 SHAPE Magazine Cover
“What are you going to be doing when you’re 83?”
This is the question that 83-year-old Fan Benno-Caris, current world-champion racewalker, asks the groups of students she addresses at various colleges around the country. Awe and silence is the common response.
Fan began racewalking at age 70, and she has won more than 75 medals, trophies and awards. She’s a sought-after speaker on wellness and senior fitness, and she has written several books of poetry. Most recently, she won the gold medal in the 10,000-meter competition for the 80-84 age division at the World Veterans’ Athletics Championships in Brisbane, Australia. Fan wrote the poem below, called “The Starting Gun,” to describe her experience there.

I know Fan personally and love her message. She’s one of my heroes because of her commitment to loving life and inspiring others to be fully alive in their bodies — at any age. We can draw similar inspiration from the people of Okinawa, Japan, the longest living and healthiest people on Earth. Many of them live to be 100 and still are in their own homes (not nursing homes), tending their gardens. Scientists who have studied the senior Okinawans attribute their longevity to their healthy lifestyle: eating well, exercising regularly and living spiritually. To learn the secrets of their good health and weight management, see “The Healthiest Diet on Earth” on page 92.

From Fan’s story, the Okinawa research and numerous other studies, it’s obvious that exercise is key to maintaining our vitality. Without it, we cannot stay at a healthy weight or feel our best. To help you maintain your commitment to movement — even during the holidays — we have a cardio plan to match your mood and your energy, “Cardio Cure-Alls” on page 86. Hopefully, our article will help you care for your body throughout this busy season. As Fan points out, “If you don’t take care of your body, where are you going to live?”

You especially need to focus on taking care of yourself at this busy time of year because, of all the holiday presents you give, what you offer to others on a personal level — your company, your love, your support — is the most precious and lasting gift. Stay well and have a beautiful holiday.

My best to you,

Barbara Harris, Editor in Chief
barb@weddernuth.com
Figure 15-2005 SHAPE Magazine Cover
Figure 16-2005 SHAPE Magazine Letter from the Editor
Figure 17-2008 SHAPE Magazine Cover
As a mom to a 5-month-old girl, I am constantly reinforcing my understanding of the powerful connection between parent and child.

Just days ago, I received a heart-wrenching phone call: A close friend of mine—a mother to a 4-year-old daughter—had passed away suddenly, with no warning. Young (she was just 41), vibrant, and always full of optimistic advice, Elizabeth was a true lover of life. A cookbook author, former TV newscaster, and longtime member of a close-knit book group, Elizabeth was one of those people whom everyone adored. Her daughter, in her childhood innocence, hasn’t grasped the enormity of the situation (something that, as an adult, I am still struggling to comprehend). “Nothing can brace you for losing your mother,” says our cover model, actress Denise Richards, who talks for the first time on page 68 about spending her first Mother’s Day without her mom, whom she lost to cancer in November. “It affects you to the core of your being,” she says. In our interview with Denise, she discusses how her own daughters have helped her through this emotionally difficult time. With this issue, we honor mothers and daughters everywhere; in “The Mother-Daughter Bond,” page 248, we showcase the relationships of five special duos who took on physical challenges together. “Experiencing new adventures made our friendship stronger,” says one mother. Another observes: “Finding a spiritual path to fitness helped us see that we’re truly on a journey together.” As a mom to a 5-month-old girl, I am constantly reinforcing my understanding of the powerful connection between parent and child. And for Elizabeth’s daughter, my hope is that one day she’ll know just how much her mom was loved by everyone—and that she will be greatly missed. Take time to give your own mom a hug today.

THE SHOCKING TRUTH I LEARNED THIS MONTH

Women across the country are still using tanning beds to “get a little color.” Being fair-skinned myself, I remember doing it when I was younger to get some pre-summer sun-kissed radiance. Now my back is crisscrossed with scars from all the problematic moles I’ve had to have removed, including one very early stage melanoma. Do yourself a favor and get your “tan” from a bottle—and read the advice on page 125.
Figure 19-2011 SHAPE Magazine Cover
From the Editor’s Desk

In the Pink

When it comes to having a fit body and a healthy future, knowledge truly is power.

Everyone, it seems, has been touched by breast cancer. Our smart, funny, and gorgeous cover model, Olivia Munn, told us about her grandmother who battled the disease successfully, and my beloved Aunt Theresa succumbed to it when I was 10 years old. Knowing that a family history ups your risk—and that early detection is key—I’m super-vigilant about annual checkups and regular self-exams. (For more stay-healthy strategies, turn to “What You Don’t Know About Breast Cancer...” on page 193.)

To support the crusade against the disease, I’ll be joining staffers and readers in NYC’s Union Square Park on October 2 for SHAPE’s sixth annual Pilates for Pink event. I’m thrilled to say that, to date, we’ve raised $675,000 for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

In preparation for the day’s strengthening sessions (and my fast-approaching wedding), I’ve been doing our “Get Cut” sword workout (page 128). It totally tones and torches calories, and it’s really fun!

Finally, I encourage you to take our survey on page 21. We sincerely value your opinion and want to know what you’d like to see more of in the magazine. Thanks, and I’ll see you next month!

LOOK GOOD... FEEL BETTER

Women undergoing cancer treatments need to smile. This organization’s beauty classes lift the spirits of thousands each year. (lookgoodfeelbetter.org)

I LOVE LUCY

I can’t get enough of fellow redhead Lucy Ball and charming Desi Arnaz. My fiance and I are even dressing up as them this Halloween.

SoulCycle

I recently took a group-cycling class with SHAPE staffers at this popular studio in NYC. We’ve added soulcycle.com

Tara Koren, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Follow me on Twitter @TaraShape, or write to me at TellTara@shape.com.

From the Editor’s Desk

In the Pink

When it comes to having a fit body and a healthy future, knowledge truly is power.

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Figure 21-2012 SHAPE Magazine Cover
Figure 22-2012 SHAPE Magazine Letter from the Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

Remembering a True Beauty

The world lost a fierce health warrior in November, when my friend and former employer Evelyn Lauder passed away at age 75 of ovarian cancer. As senior corporate vice president at the company launched by her trailblazing mother-in-law, Esté de Lauder, Evelyn definitely made her mark on the beauty industry. But she was also passionate about education. (No surprise there. Before joining the family business, she was a public school teacher.) And her decision to teach women about breast cancer after beating the disease herself was likely her most singular achievement.

Evelyn’s crusade began in 1989, when she initiated the fundraising drive that established the first-ever breast center to offer every service for the disease under one roof. (It’s since become a model for similar facilities around the world.) Then, in 1992, she co-created the Pink Ribbon campaign, which handed out the now-iconic little bows to women at department-store makeup counters to remind them about breast exams. The following year, she founded The Breast Cancer Research Foundation (BCRF: bcrf.org), which has raised more than $350 million to date. Even former President Bill Clinton noted these accomplishments, remarking upon her passing, “The U.S. now has the highest breast cancer survival rates in the world, thanks in no small measure to Evelyn.”

On a personal note, I will always remember Evelyn walking ever-so-gracefully down the halls of the company headquarters—inspiring us all, with every step she took, to be beautiful inside and out. She was a tremendous role model; funny, smart, and very wise. “You can’t hold back time,” she once said. “But you can look forward to what’s coming next and do everything in your power to create the best possible future.” Evelyn certainly did, and for that, we are all truly thankful.

Evelyn Lauder

She made us all think pink. Nineteen years after the Pink Ribbon campaign began, more than 135 million bows have been given away worldwide.

In Great Taste

Evelyn helped spread the word about the link between diet and disease when she created this cookbook in 2006. All royalties went to BCRF.

Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative

Mother of Evelyn’s brilliant ideas. Every October, 250 landmarks around the world, such as the Empire State Building, are bathed in pink light to focus attention on breast health.

CLINIQUE CLARIFYING LOTION

When the Estée Lauder Companies launched Clinique in 1968, it was Evelyn who came up with the name. This facial exfoliator was one of her favorites. ($27, clinique.com)

TARA KRAFT HORAN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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York: Four Walls Eight Windows.