

## **Can Women's and Men's Health Magazines be Judged by Their Covers? Differences in Magazine Models and Headline Frames**

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### **Abstract**

The mass media, including magazines, play a role in promoting body dissatisfaction, which is the leading cause of disordered eating. The current study is a content analysis of the framing of women and men's health magazine headlines over the course of three months. The purpose of this research was to investigate the differences in cover images and headlines on women and men's health magazines, focusing on the areas of the pictured model's body that are shown and revealed on the magazine cover and on the framing of the headlines. Women's and men's health magazine covers often show models from the thigh upward and with arms revealed without clothing. Models on women's health magazine covers are more likely to be pictured with body parts revealed without clothing. Headlines on women's health magazine covers focus more on appearance and weight loss, compared to headlines on men's health magazine covers, which focus more on body competency. In order to prevent body dissatisfaction and promote healthy living, health professionals, magazine companies, and individuals should be aware of these differences.

### **1. Introduction**

Eating disorders (ED) are prevalent in America; 20 million women and 10 million men will suffer from an eating disorder in their lifetime <sup>16</sup>. Although eating disorders do not discriminate by gender, women have a higher risk of developing ED than men. Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and other eating disorders may involve severe emotions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning weight and food issues <sup>15</sup>. These debilitating disorders arise from a variety of factors including physical, psychological, interpersonal, and social issues.

The media are among these influences, acting through the link to body dissatisfaction, a major factor for developing an eating disorder <sup>15</sup>. Research suggests that the media represent the ideal body along with misleading information on how to obtain it, serving as a trigger for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Through channels such as magazines, the media increases individuals' attentiveness and internalization of thin ideals, thus, increasing the risk for body dissatisfaction and EDs <sup>21</sup>.

Several theoretical models explain how the media may affect the thin body ideal. First, media theories such as framing theory, cultivation theory, and social learning theory describe how the media present unrealistic realities for viewers. According to framing theory, media frames can have an influence on the audience's thoughts and actions because of the way they impact memory. When people see or hear media stimuli, ideas having similar meaning are activated for a short time afterward, and these thoughts can activate other related thoughts. For example, Jennings et al. (1980) found that women who were shown ads depicting women as sexual objects displayed less self-confidence during an impromptu speech compared to those who were shown reverse-stereotyped ads <sup>12</sup>. Consequently, media frames that highlight appearance may cause women to cultivate a similar perspective regarding the self.

According to cultivation theory, media also cultivate beliefs that match the media-depicted world, yet the effect of the media does not generalize to the actual experiences of viewers<sup>8</sup>. If individuals are repeatedly exposed to the television “worldview” of the ideal body, one may misinterpret such portrayals as being representative of the “real world” rather than those of the “media world”<sup>8,10</sup>. For example, if a television program shows a Size Two woman constantly overeating and remaining sedentary, yet remaining thin, this causes the viewer to assume that this is reality. Therefore, cultivation theory explains how media exposure might influence attitudes and behaviors concerning body image, drive for thinness, and disordered eating<sup>8</sup>.

Like framing and cultivation theories, social learning theory describes a reality for media viewers because, as Albert Bandura states, “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action”<sup>2</sup>. Modeling is a type of cognitive shortcut that allows individuals to learn information in a quick and efficient manner. Although it is timely, it can also be harmful. According to social learning theory, as images of thinness and dieting exist in the media, modeling of dieting behaviors will exist as well<sup>10</sup>.

Theoretical frameworks also explain how individuals relate their experiences to body image perceptions specifically. For example, social comparison theory suggests that individuals tend to rate and compare themselves according to others<sup>1</sup>. There are two main types of comparison: downward comparison and upward comparison. While downward comparison is based upon others that we perceive as less fortunate than us, upward comparison is based upon others that we perceive as socially better than us. Downward comparison leads to heightened mood and self-worth. However, when people use upward comparison, they tend to develop a negative mood and poor self-evaluation. Researchers found that women who compared their bodies to others’ bodies had more body dissatisfaction<sup>6</sup>. Upward comparison ultimately causes disordered eating and the desire to be thin<sup>6</sup>.

Self-discrepancies are representations in the self-concept of ways in which one falls short of an important standard<sup>11</sup>. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that there are two major representations of the self: the actual and the ideal self and, when there is a large gap between the two, then a self-discrepancy occurs. This is an unfortunate side effect of the media because individuals strive to reach the ideal beauty standard but often fall short. Research indicates that there is a relationship between long-term exposure to thin-ideal media and developing self-discrepancies, which result in eating-related pathologies<sup>6</sup>.

Context also plays a role in the pathway between media portrayals and body perceptions. Objectification theory states that women who live in an objectifying culture learn to perceive and describe themselves by their external traits (i.e., how they look) rather than internal traits (i.e., how they feel)<sup>9</sup>. When others view women as objects, then women tend to develop the same views. Focusing on body weight is especially correlated to women’s levels of self-objectification, body shame, and disordered eating<sup>22</sup>.

The influence of the media is particularly of concern because of the frequency and intensity of interaction with media by girls and women. College-aged women report spending over 14 hours on average per week with the Internet, television, and print media<sup>3</sup>. Fifteen to 18-year-olds spend an average of 13 minutes a day reading magazines<sup>19</sup> and college-aged women spend about 2.19 hours a week reading magazines<sup>3</sup>. Once they become older, the popularity of media does not diminish. The *Kaiser Health Poll Report* survey found that four in 10 (40%) of all adults say their information about health and health care comes mainly from traditional media sources such as TV, radio, and newspapers<sup>20</sup>. Among the various types of media, magazines in particular are able to grab the attention with inviting cover images and headlines. Headlines provide the best-recalled information from the story, long after details fade from memory<sup>17</sup>. Considering that magazines already reinforce an appearance-driven culture by constructing appearance as an individual’s most important trait, headlines, with the amount of power that they contain, have the potential to affect readers’ body perceptions and self-esteem.

## 1.1 Health Magazines

Health magazines appear to promote health and wellbeing; however it is unclear that the messaging on magazine covers is always consistent with the intent. For example, Susan Bordo sarcastically explains, “the new criterion circulating among young teenage girls: If you get rid of it [fat] through exercise rather than purging or laxatives, you don’t have a problem”<sup>7</sup>. Bordo uses sarcasm here because over-exercising or exercising to look a certain way is harmful. Excessive exercise and disordered eating may represent weight and shape preoccupation, arising from the same core psychopathology<sup>13</sup>. Health magazines also may associate health and appearance in unhealthy ways. For example, research shows that just as often as women are told to do something for their health, they are also told that they need to observe healthy practices in order to look good<sup>1</sup>. Confusing and contradictory messages are not limited to women’s health magazines; there may be a similar effect on men due to a focus on

body competence, which emphasizes one's instrumental traits and the skills of the body, such as strength and flexibility. Placing an emphasis on muscularity can cause men to develop body dissatisfaction<sup>15</sup>.

To better understand the potential for health magazines to convey messages around body image, the current study investigated the headlines and images on covers of women's and men's health magazines. Previous research has evaluated the headlines of women's health magazine headlines, but there is little research comparing women's and men's health magazine headlines<sup>1</sup>. In this study of cover images and headlines in women's and men's health magazines, researchers hypothesized that: (1) women's health magazines show more body areas, including those revealed without clothing, than men's health magazines, and 2) women's health magazine headlines contain more appearance-related frames and fewer body competence-related frames than men's health magazines.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Sample

The sample of women's and men's health magazines was identified from one large bookstore in a mid-size city in North Carolina. The bookstore did not have a "Health and/or Fitness" section; therefore, inclusion criteria for health magazines sample were developed. Eligible magazines had to be found in the "Women's Interest" or "Men's Interest" magazine section in the bookstore, and the magazines had to meet two of the five following criteria: they contained the word "health" or "fitness" in the title; the model on the cover was wearing workout attire or a swimsuit; the model was participating in a health or fitness related activity (running, cooking, a sport, working out);  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the cover headlines included health and fitness related topics (e.g., strength, changing your body, physical activity, well being, weight, dieting); and/or the most prominent headline was about health and/or fitness (strength, changing your body, physical activity, well being, weight, dieting).

The women's health magazines included *Inside Fitness*, *Women's Health*, *Prevention*, *Fitness*, *Women's Running*, *Fat Loss*, *Muscle & Fitness* hers, *Oxygen*, *Shape*, *First for Women*, and *Self*. The men's health magazines included *Men's Running*, *Fitness Rx*, *Men's Health*, and *Men's Fitness*. The inclusion criteria did not include some magazines that may be considered health magazines. For example, *Sports Illustrated* did not meet the criteria; the magazine's main purpose is to convey information about sports and sports team, not to promote health directly.

The data collection involved a visit to the bookstore on the first week of the month during three consecutive months from February to April 2013, and taking pictures of each of the magazine covers. The magazine cover headlines and images were then coded outside the bookstore. The study included a total of 41 health magazine covers: 29 for women and 12 for men (Table 1).

### 2.2 Coding Procedures

#### 2.2.1 units of analysis

The two units of analysis were the magazine cover image and the cover headlines. A headline is a phrase located on the cover of the magazine indicating the topic of a particular article. Each magazine had between four and 11 cover headlines. Across the 41 issues, there were 316 headlines (Table 1).

Table 1. Magazine and Headlines in Study Sample

	Magazines			Headlines		
	Women	Men	Both	Women	Men	Both
February	13	5	18	90	47	137
March	9	3	12	62	27	89
April	7	4	11	55	35	90
Total	29	12	41	207	109	316

### 2.2.2 general information

The magazine's cover was coded first, beginning with the title, month, and price. The magazine's model's race/ethnicity (African American, Indian, Asian, Latin/Hispanic, White, Unknown, and Other) and clothing (workout shirt, workout pants/capris, workout shorts/undies, sports bra, swimsuit, and jeans/pants) also were coded.

### 2.2.3 body areas shown and revealed without clothing

The amount of the model's body shown on the cover also was coded, ranging from only the head, upward from the torso, upward from mid-thigh, the whole body, and upward from the knee. The areas of the body that were revealed without clothing and the areas of the body that were accentuated (made a focal point or posed in an unnatural position) were coded. The body areas included: legs, shoulders, midsection, bottom, arms, face, and breasts.

### 2.2.4 frames

Cover headlines were coded for the types of frames (message) they conveyed. The types of messages/frames included: how to look better (*appearance frame*), lose or maintain weight (*weight loss/maintenance frame*), how to complete something in an easier way (*convenience frame*), save money (*budget frame*), eat better (*food frame*), increase sexual pleasure (*sex frame*), improve the body's instrumental traits (*body competency frame*), how to complete something in the most effective or timely way (*efficiency frame*), fit in with societal norms (*social desirability*), increase emotional wellbeing (*emotional wellbeing frame*), and prevent or treat illness (*prevention/treatment frame*). The difference between convenience and efficiency is explained by the following examples. An example of a convenience frame would be, "Muscle up from Home." An example of an efficiency frame would be, "Motivation Makeover- Never Fall Short of a Goal Again." In the convenience frame, it may not be more efficient or timely, but it is an easier way to do something. In the efficiency frame, it is telling the reader how to do something in the best possible way that it can be done.

Since several headlines had more than one frame, each headline was coded with up to three frames. The frame that was most prominent was coded first. For example, the headline, "South-Beach Slimmer! Lose 17 Lbs. Fast on gluten-free South Beach! Cures headaches, bloating, tiredness!" was framed first as *weight loss* because the primary purpose of the frame is to inform readers' on how to lose weight. The second frame is *prevention/treatment*, because although the primary purpose of the frame isn't to prevent or treat something, there was an additional purpose for the headline regarding curing several health issues. A third frame was not coded because there is not another category in which the headline fits.

### 2.2.5 prominence of headline

The most prominent headline on each magazine cover also was coded. This headline was the one with the largest font. There was only one on each cover.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Body Areas Shown And Revealed Without Clothing

All of the magazine covers (n=41) portray models and both women (n=29) and men (n=12) are shown most frequently upward from mid-thigh up (on 72.4% and 58.3% of covers respectively). Women's whole bodies are shown on 3.4% of covers, while 25% of men's entire bodies are shown. Women are shown upward from the torso on 13.8% of covers, compared to 16.7% for men. Women are shown upward from the knee on 6.9% of covers and only their heads are shown on 3.4% of the covers. Men are never shown upward from the knee or with the head only (see Figure 1).

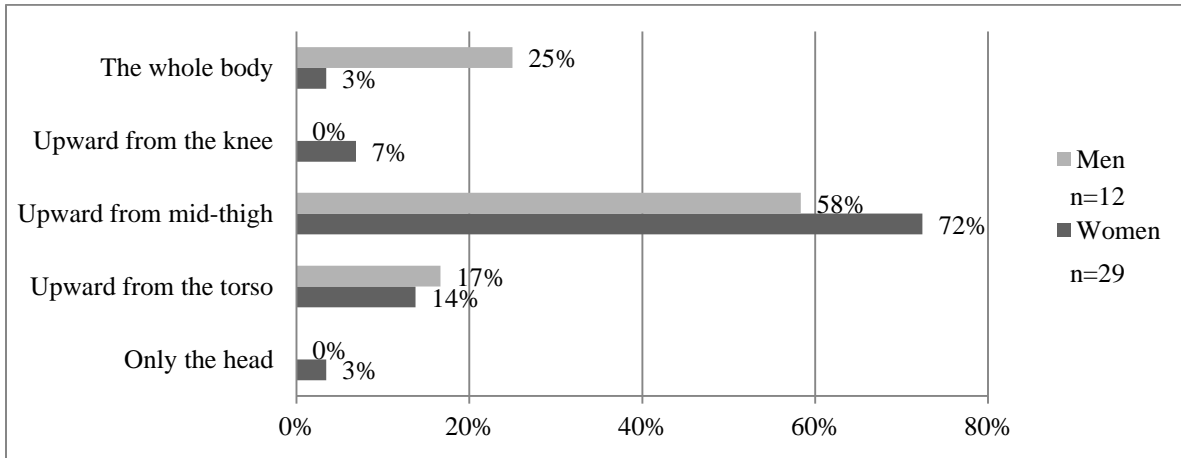


Figure 1. Amount of Body Shown on Health Magazine Covers

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of health magazine covers that contain each body area revealed without clothing. Arms are most commonly revealed without clothing on both women's and men's health magazines (86% and 83% respectively). On women's health magazine covers, the other most commonly revealed body areas are: arms, midsections (72% of covers), shoulders (66%), legs (66%), parts of the breasts/chest (38%), and parts of the bottom (3%). On men's health magazine covers, the other most commonly revealed body areas are: legs (25%), midsections (17%), shoulders (17%), and chest (8%). None of the men's health covers show any part of men's bottoms without clothing. In general, women's body areas are revealed without clothing more often than men's body areas.

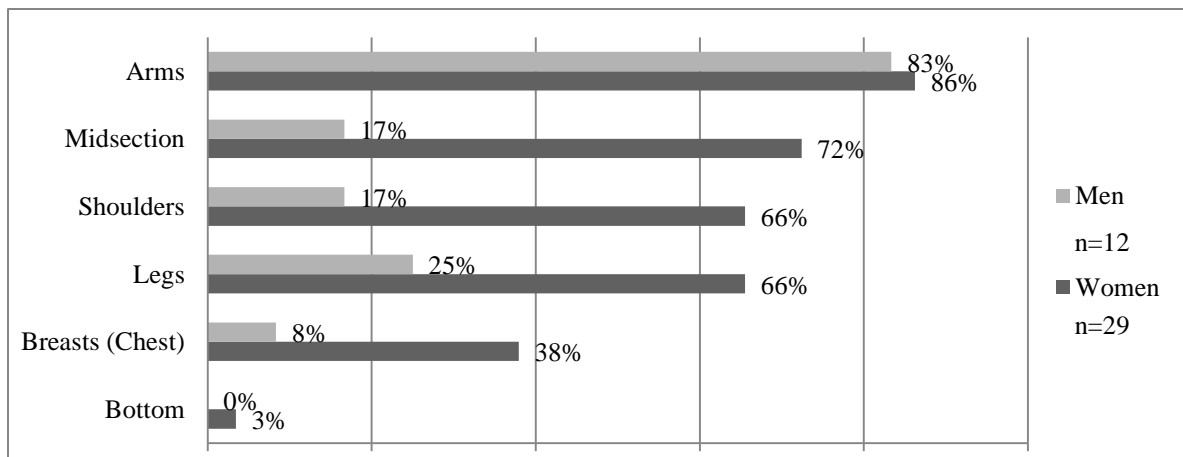


Figure 2. Parts of Body Revealed without Full Coverage of Clothing on Health Magazine Covers

### 3.2 Type I Headline Frames

The Type I frame is the most explicit type of frame coded for a headline. Among all headlines in men's magazines (n=109), the most common Type I frame is body competence (43%), followed by appearance (16% of headlines), weight loss/maintenance (13%), prevention/treatment (6%), food (6%), sex (6%), social desirability (6%), emotional wellbeing (1%), efficiency (3%), and budget frames (2%). None of the headlines are related to convenience. Among all headlines in women's magazines (n=207), the most common Type 1 frame is weight loss/maintenance (24%), followed by appearance (23% of headlines), body competence (17%), prevention/treatment (9%), food (8%), emotional wellbeing (7%), sex (4%), social desirability (2%), convenience (1%), efficiency (4%), and budget (2%). Women's health magazine headlines contain more appearance frames and weight loss/maintenance type I frames than men's and men's health magazine headlines contain more body competence type I frames than women's (see figure 3).

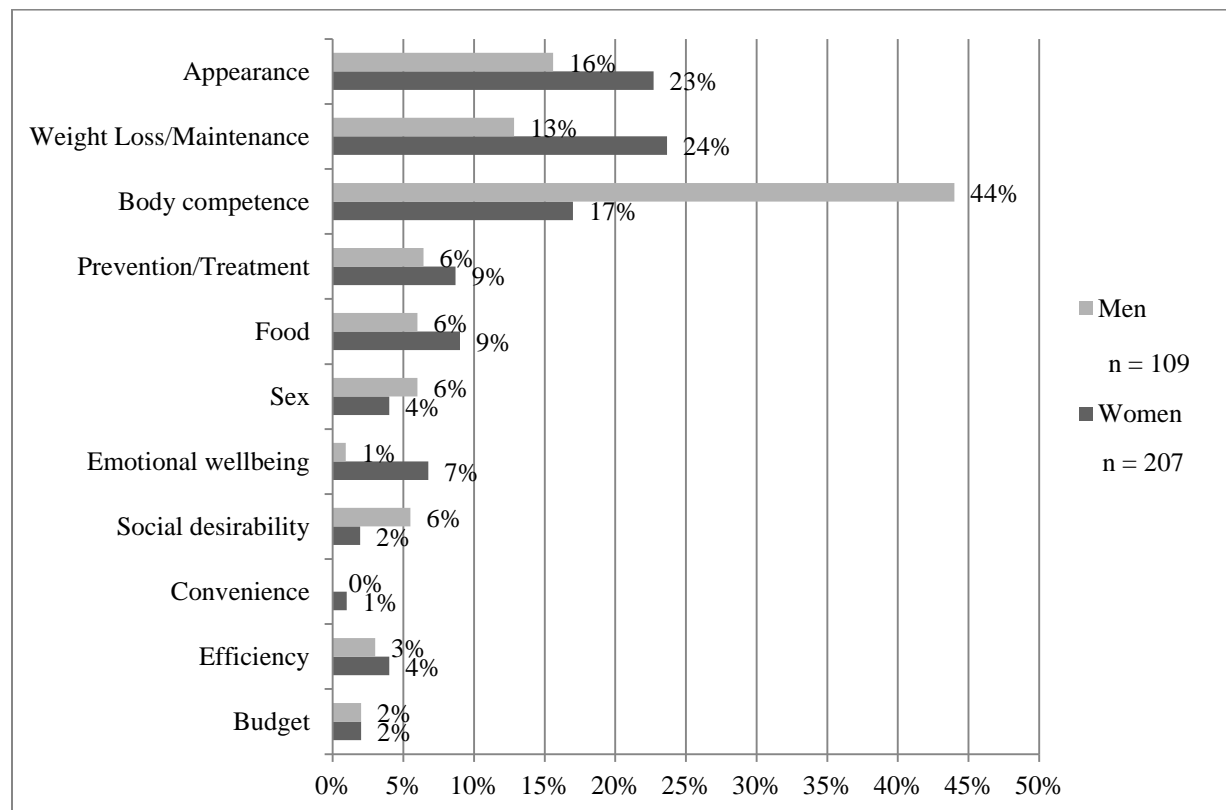


Figure 3. Type I Frames for Health Magazine Headlines

### 3.3 All Headline Frames

Since each headline could be coded up to three times, the 109 headlines on men's magazine covers yielded 149 coded frames and the 207 headlines on women's magazine covers yielded 291 coded frames. Since appearance and weight loss/maintenance frames both convey an overall appearance-related message, any headline coded with one of those two frames was counted as appearance for the purpose of this analysis. Among headlines on women's health magazine covers, the most common frame was appearance/weight loss/maintenance (52% of headlines), followed by body competence (24%), food (17%), efficiency (14%), prevention/treatment (11%), emotional wellbeing (9%), sex (4%), budget (4%), social desirability (3%), and convenience (1%). Among headlines on men's health magazine covers, the most common frame was body competence (54% of headlines), followed by appearance/weight loss/maintenance (33%), food (11%), efficiency (10%), social desirability (9%), prevention/treatment (7%), sex (7%), emotional wellbeing (2%), budget (2%), and convenience (1%). As shown

in figure 4, headlines on men's health magazine covers contain more body competence frames and fewer appearance/weight loss/maintenance frames than headlines on women's health magazine covers.

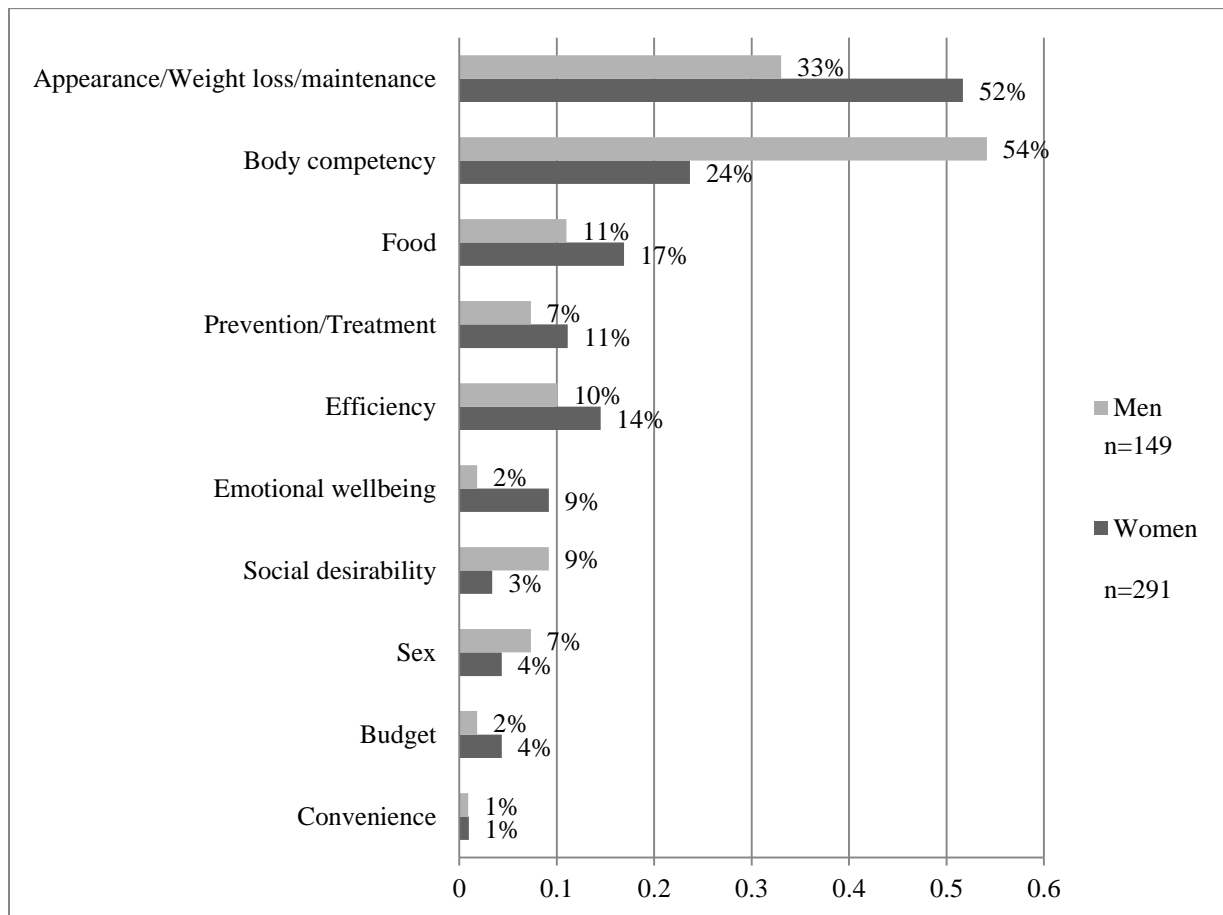


Figure 4. Types of Headline Frames on Health Magazine Covers

### 3.4 Frames Of Most Prominent Headline

The most prominent headline is usually the first headline to grab the attention of the reader. The 41 most prominent headlines fell into five frame categories on women's and men's health magazine covers: weight loss/maintenance (38% and 42% respectively), body competence (17% and 42%), appearance (38% and 42%), food (3% and 0%), and prevention/treatment (3% and 0%). The most prominent headlines on women's health magazines are primarily appearance-related and weight loss/maintenance-related, while on men's health magazines, the most prominent headlines are primarily both body competence-related and weight loss/maintenance-related (see Figure 5).

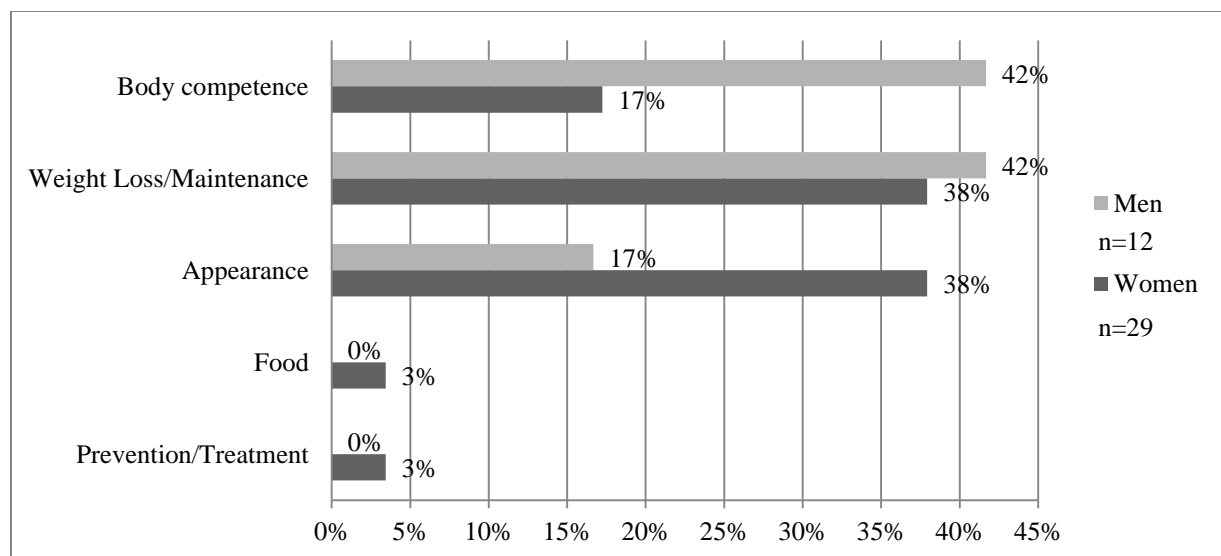


Figure 5. Most Prominent Headline for Health Magazine Headlines

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

The current research demonstrates the strong emphasis on appearance and body competence in today's women's and men's health magazines. The findings partially support the first hypothesis, that women's health magazines show more body areas, including those revealed without clothing, than men's health magazines. Eighty-three percent of both women's and men's health magazines show the cover model's body from the knee upward; however more men's health magazine covers show the full body compared with women's health magazine covers, which are a little more likely to show the body from the torso upward or just show the model's head. With the exception of arms, which are shown without clothing on about four in five health magazines regardless of whether they are women's or men's, women's health magazine covers are more likely to reveal every other body area (shoulders, mid-section, legs, bottom) without full clothing.

The findings support the second hypothesis that women's health magazine covers contain more appearance-related headlines and fewer body competence-related headlines than men's health magazines. The majority of women's headlines contain appearance (including weight loss/maintenance) frames, despite their placement in health magazines. These findings are consistent with previous research that found women's magazine covers are more appearance-related than that of men's<sup>1</sup>. In the long run, appearance frames of health advice might encourage women to take an extrinsic approach to their health, with the emphasis on being healthy for the purpose of looking good<sup>1</sup>. Since researchers have found a direct link between the media's focus on appearance and eating disorder pathology, the majority of health magazine headlines reinforce unhealthy eating patterns. According to objectification theory, when women are valued only by their appearance traits, rather than their instrumental traits, they will self-objectify and their focus on appearance will increase. If women's headlines contained more body competence frames, then self-objectification could decrease, and ultimately decrease body dissatisfaction and EDs.

The majority of men's magazines contained body competence frames. It may appear that these headlines are designed to improve strength in order to be healthy. However, another explanation may be that the headlines might actually increase appearance. The media place a substantial emphasis on muscularity for men. Pressure from mass media images on males is correlated with body dissatisfaction, low body-esteem and self-esteem, psychological disorders (e.g., depression), and behavioral outcomes (e.g., excessive exercising)<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it is important to note that even if the men's headlines were not explicitly appearance-related, the body competence messages could implicitly be promoting appearance, and ultimately poor body image and eating disorders.

This study has some limitations. First, the sample only includes three month's data, and the data were collected close to the New Year when the media focus on New Year's resolutions such as losing weight. Additional data could produce more accurate results by creating a larger sample size and accounting for seasonal shifts in media



messages. Future research should look at the body competence frames in men's health magazine headlines understand more about how they are related to appearance. For example, could gaining muscle be a reason to look better rather than to increase body strength and skill? Another way to understand this possible association would be to conduct a study to investigate what men and women think about when they read these headlines. Other research found that women exposed to appearance-related frames reported more body shame and appearance-related motivation to exercise than women exposed to health related frames <sup>1</sup>. Similarly, another study determined that men who viewed advertisements with male models had higher body dissatisfaction compared to men who saw advertisements without models <sup>4</sup>.

This research has several implications. Health professionals must be aware of the media's messages for men and women. For one, the focus on appearance puts individuals at a greater risk for body dissatisfaction and EDs. Therefore, health professionals must be sensitive to this issue and be able to recognize a negative body image in order to prevent EDs and improve the quality of lives. They should also be mindful not to reinforce any appearance related schemas.

In order to promote healthier body image and shift the socially constructed ideals of beauty, several different levels of society need to promote change. At the micro level, people should ban disappointing forms of media. If individuals do not give companies the demand for their products then they will not supply them. Individuals should also write policy letters to companies asking for them to change particular advertisements or phrases and offering them favorable alternatives. A hopeful example is 14 year old, Julia Bluhm, who simply started a petition on Change.org when she was concerned about the Photoshopped images of women in *Seventeen Magazine*. Afterwards, *Seventeen Magazine* agreed to "never change girls' body or face shapes" when retouching images <sup>18</sup>. If everybody was mindful about their impact on the media and took steps to cause change, then the media could be more positive.

At the macro level, companies should consider altering the framing of headlines in women's and men's health magazines. Instead of focusing on appearance, health magazines can focus on prevention/treatment and emotional well-being. By focusing on health, individuals will not focus on the way their bodies look and their body dissatisfaction will decrease. Focusing on appearance does not promote health.

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