

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Women's Individual Accounts of the Romantic Content in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* and its Relationship to their Lived Experiences.

Abstract approved:

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The following question guided this research: How do female readers understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* magazines, and how do they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their personal ideas and behaviors regarding romantic relationships? This study involved a series of responsive interviews in which the participants shared their perceptions of both their readership and the magazines' content. The results of this study suggest four primary responses to the research question: 1) the women gave, but could not explain, concurrent descriptions of the magazines as "just entertainment" but also as sources of useful information; 2) although the women described both positive and negative qualities of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*'s romantic content, they also described the romantic and sexual content as relevant and compelling; 3) the women argued that their mature perspective of the content prevented them from being unduly influenced by it; and 4) a few participants' academic awareness of criticisms of women's magazines altered their perceptions but not their readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. These themes and their implications for future research of women's magazine readership are discussed.

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Women's Individual Accounts of the Romantic Content in *Glamour* and
Cosmopolitan and its Relationship to their Lived Experiences

by
Shauna Q. Weaver

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Shauna Q. Weaver, Author

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Women's individual accounts of the romantic content in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*
and its relationship to their lived experiences

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the development of the modern women's magazine in the 1960s, the genre has undergone a great deal of scrutiny from researchers in the social sciences (Heywood, 2006). One of the most critically received sub-genres of women's magazines is typified by *Cosmopolitan* and characterized by a marked emphasis on interpersonal and especially romantic, heterosexual relationships (Ward, 2003). Feminists and communication scholars, in particular, have been interested in the messages created and/or distributed by these relationship-centric magazines to their millions of regular female readers. Although the magazines have changed somewhat over time in response to shifting trends and social norms, content analyses from the last four decades suggest that much of the substance has changed very little in that time (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Furthermore, while the magazine industry has suffered in recent years, magazines in this category have continued to prosper, particularly *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*, each with circulation rates between 2.3 and 2.9 million readers yearly (*Cosmopolitan media kit*, 2010). Therefore, tens of millions of readers, mostly young women, have been repeatedly exposed to similar messages over a period of approximately forty years. It is important to consider, then, the content of these messages and their impact on readers (Ward, 2003).

Research in this area has typically focused on one of these two areas: content or influence. Content analysis work has been undertaken qualitatively by one researcher or quantitatively by a team of coders; both methods implement a created

system of categorization which is used to describe the data. Influence or media effects research has been conducted primarily in the form of quantitative surveys, which test the hypothesized relationship between two previously defined variables, such as magazine readership and body image. Although there have been a few notable dissenters, the vast majority of researchers in the history of this subject have concurred that magazines such as *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* contain messages that are in some way problematic and that exposure to these messages can be detrimental to women. For example, a number of researchers have argued that *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* convey the message that sexuality is a powerful tool for women who are interested in establishing and maintaining a romantic relationship (Durham, 1998; Gill, 2006; MacDonald, 1995; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). The results of other studies suggest that women's real-life sexual attitudes and behaviors are linked to this type of magazine consumption (Kim & Ward, 2003; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008).

While the findings of these and other studies have been constructive in understanding both the content and influence of these women's magazines, it is suggested here that research reflecting a reader-centric approach may be valuable through the contribution of previously unseen or unexplained perspectives. Only a handful of previous researchers have utilized reader interviews to shape or inform their conclusions (Currie, 1999; Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995; McRobbie, 1991; Stevens, Maclaran & Catterall, 2007).

The reader interviews in this study represent a significant departure from the majority of the earlier content analyses and effects studies not only in terms of method but also in terms of philosophy. The responsive interviewing and grounded theory

techniques used in this study are founded on an interpretive constructionist understanding of meaning-making. This philosophy emphasizes the individual construction of meaning through social interaction. Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the highly subjective, individual social realities of the participants. This is an important departure from most of the previous studies, which have attempted to obtain the objective truth about what the content is or how it is perceived and utilized by large numbers of women. The application of an interpretive constructionist research philosophy to the subject generates important new information about the ways women in this study read and make meaning of these magazines.

The subject of this research is relevant to me on a personal level. Like several of this study's participants, I started reading *Cosmo* and *Glamour* at the age of 17 or 18, during my first year of college. I was aware that these magazines were thought of as low-culture or trashy entertainment, but I found them enjoyable to read and even felt a little perverse pleasure in reading something frivolous. I thought of the magazines as purposefully exaggerated; a lot of the content seemed overly salacious or shocking, even as some of the fashion and beauty tips seemed genuinely helpful. Admittedly, I did not think of the magazines very analytically. As an advertising student, my thoughts about reader influence were limited strictly to the ads. I never thought much about what reading *Glamour* and *Cosmo* might mean for me personally.

During my first year of graduate school, I wrote a term paper about women's magazines. In the process, I read a number of articles about magazines like *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, feminist studies critiquing their content as well as quantitative studies measuring the effects of readership on variables like body image, eating disordered

behavior, and self-objectification. My first reaction to these studies was to capitulate entirely. Taken from the right perspective, virtually all of my personal flaws could be seen as the result of my women's magazine readership.

However, I felt concerned that the studies on women's magazines largely reflected the views of feminists and social scientists. While the large body of preexisting research has generated a great deal of information regarding the content and potential influence of women's magazines like *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, my personal experiences with these magazines suggested that readers could contribute previously unheard or unconsidered perspectives from which to consider women's magazine readership. This research is the result of my curiosity about how other women perceive their processes of reading and making meaning of women's magazines, particularly with regard to the magazines' most prevalent and controversial scholarly subject: romantic, heterosexual relationships.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter introduction

The goal of this study is to discover how women understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines, and how they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their social constructs regarding romantic relationships. This literature review provides a summary of the scholarly research in the area of women's magazine content and readership, particularly with concern to content addressing gender roles and heterosexual, romantic relationships. Content analyses have suggested that women's magazines share several basic assumptions about the nature of men and women in romantic relationships. While scholars have largely agreed that these assumptions reflect or promote traditional, patriarchal values, the scholarly community is divergent on its opinions of the influence of this content on readers' beliefs. It is suggested here that social constructionist theory may provide a new perspective from which to consider the question of potential reader influence.

This chapter consists of four sections. First, a summary of the historical background and contemporary characteristics of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* provides the context for this study. Second, a review of previous content analyses research identifies four important themes relating to gendered sexuality prevalent in women's magazines. Third, an overview of the divergent scholarly opinions regarding women's readership and meaning-making processes indicates the need for further exploration of the subject. Last, an explanation of the relevance of social constructionist theory reveals the significance of magazine readers' perspectives, and a review of previous research utilizing reader interviews establishes the rationale for this study.

2.2 Background

The modern era of women's magazines began in the 1960s (Heywood, 2006). The increasing popularity of television posed a significant threat to magazine sales, and the movement of women from the home into the workplace signified an important change in the ideologies of female readers (Heywood, 2006; Smith, 2008). Created in response to these changes, *Cosmopolitan* was the first so-called new women's magazine. Pioneering *Cosmo* editor Helen Gurley Brown revamped the magazine's image to reflect the new women readers, that is, single, working women who had needs and desires that reflected their extra-familial interests (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). "Brown's reworking of American Dream mythology," according to Ouellette (1999), "involved the construction and reconstruction of a desirable self, the presentation of identity as self-made, the valorization of femininity as a creative production... [and] the refusal of Victorian social norms" (p. 377). *Cosmopolitan's* subsequent success inspired a number of followers, including *Glamour*.

Today, *Cosmo* and *Glamour* have a number of readily identifiable characteristics that demonstrate both faithfulness to, and the extension of, Brown's original ideology. Machin & Thornborrow (2003) describe the created space of modern *Cosmopolitan* as "a type of imaginary world ... in which women appear to have enhanced agency and power" (p. 456). This depiction of heightened agency reflects Brown's emphasis on women's self-efficacy. Within the pages of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, women are encouraged and instructed to use their agency to improve their physical appearance, self-identity, health, work life, and relationships, especially those with men (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Firminger, 2006). Ward (2003) found that most of

the topics addressed on the magazines' covers were concerned with dating, love, marriage, and sex.

One of the most notable characteristics of today's *Glamour* and *Cosmo* is the prevalence of explicit sexual content. Such magazines are argued to be today's most accessible media for information about sexuality (Ward, 2003; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998). "Where TV implies and insinuates," Ward (2003) explains, "[women's] magazines are explicit and direct, exposing readers to nude and provocatively posed models, frank discussions of sexual techniques, and specific suggestions on how to improve sexual relationships" (p. 355). Menard & Kleinplatz (2008) argue that these magazines are one of only a few sources of explicit sexual information in Western society. In the case of *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, the content is so explicit that conservative groups have lobbied with some success for the magazine covers to be hidden from the view of children in grocery store checkout aisles (Gauntlett, 2002).

Despite this partial obscurity, both *Glamour* and *Cosmo* are readily identifiable to both the savvy reader and the grocery aisle regular. The cover features a beautiful, smiling woman (often a celebrity), and a number of tongue-in-cheek, provocative lines that signify the content inside (e.g., "Five Girly-Man Trends That Have Got to Go," White, 2010). Within the pages of the magazine, consistent, familiar formatting and short articles facilitate incomplete and non-sequential reading (McRobbie, 2003). The writing itself is humorous and lighthearted, suggesting to the reader, some argue, that the content is simply fun and unserious (McRobbie, 2003).

Regardless of this apparent levity, the majority of researchers have argued for more than four decades that women's magazines are important media with the potential for serious influence. As unlikely as it may seem, in an era with ever-increasing choices for media consumption, monthly publications *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* continue to be prosperous, each with circulation rates between 2.3 and 2.9 million issues sold yearly (*Cosmopolitan Media Kit*, 2010; Gill, 2006; Smith, 2008). This popularity is even more striking, considering the overall decline of print media sales in the last decade (McCleneghan, 2003). "Women's magazines, it is apparent, continue to be a powerful force in the consumer market," Smith (2008) argues, "being bought and read by women and potentially affecting women's decisions and behaviors" (p. 25).

2.3 Women's magazine content

As the previous section revealed, women's magazines have been a subject of scholarly interest for several decades. The content of these magazines has made them particularly intriguing to scholars in the fields of women's studies and communication. Women's magazines¹ cover a variety of subjects: men and relationships, fashion and beauty, fitness and health, entertainment and current events. They create a shared community of women (Seneca, 1996) and engage those women in the process of looking, acting, and judging (Wolf, 1999). They give advice on what to wear, what to care about, and how to think about things (Christian-Smith, 1990; McRobbie, 1991).

¹ The studies summarized here considered the content of *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and/or virtually identical but less popular magazines, such as *Seventeen*, *YM*, or *Marie Claire*, or their foreign equivalents. This specific genre of magazine is referred to broadly in such literature, and here, as "women's magazines."

Magazine articles illustrate the struggles of real women in modern society (Gill, 2006). They provide images of what women look like and how they relate to others (Wolf, 1999). Women's magazines are purportedly about many things, but they are primarily concerned with the sociological production of womanhood (Gauntlett, 2002). Wolf (1999) argues, "Each and every page, each and every word and image in *Glamour* constructs what 'woman' means" (p. 178).

Part of the meaning of womanhood, according to *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, lies in the comparison to manhood and in definitions of how men and women relate, especially romantically (Chang, 2000). The basic assumptions that women's magazines share about romantic relationships can be summarized in these related assumptions the magazines make about women and men (adapted from Ward, 2003):

1. Women strongly desire a committed romantic relationship, but men do not.
2. To present their best possible selves to future mates, women must constantly survey and improve their attitudes, behavior, and appearance.
3. Men are primarily sexual, and women can or should use their sexuality as a tool to attract and keep men.
4. Women are responsible for maintaining relationships because men are unwilling and/or unable to do so.

As a whole, these assumptions emphasize the importance of a heterosexual, romantic relationship in a woman's life and suggest that women possess the sexual and communicative tools to achieve and maintain those relationships. In the following sections, further discussion of each of these assumptions provides a more complete understanding of the magazines' content and the context for this study.

2.3.1 Desire for a committed relationship

The first of these assumptions reflects the magazines' emphases on heterosexual, romantic relationships. The majority of the content in women's magazines is concerned with men: where to find them, what they want, and how to attract them (Ferguson, 1983; Lindsey, 1994). A successful heterosexual, romantic relationship is always the goal, and faith in achieving one never falters (Carpenter, 1998; Firminger, 2006; Gauntlett, 2002). The medium constantly confronts readers with the message that "the road to happiness is attracting males for successful heterosexual life" (Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991, p. 112).

Researchers note that this message has remained remarkably unchanged for decades; although today's modern, more empowered woman does not *need* a man, she should still *want* a man and desire a monogamous relationship with one, reflecting a traditional, heterosexist imperative (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as purely sexual and notably reluctant to commit, "with relationships almost foisted upon them" (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 306). According to women's magazines, the goal for men is simply sex, but the goal for women remains a committed, monogamous relationship. One of the purposes of women's magazines, then, is to teach women how to obtain that relationship.

2.3.2 Surveillance and improvement

To earn that romantic relationship, readers are told in the second assumption that women must engage in an ongoing process of constant self-surveillance and improvement. A long-term, committed relationship is the goal, and women's

magazines claim to provide their readers with the means for achieving that goal.

According to Gauntlett (2002), these magazines continuously reinforce the idea that a heterosexual relationship is the route to happiness and that if women are “good enough,” the right man will “come along and sweep them off their feet—ideally into wedded bliss” (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 190).

This perfection-seeking progression encompasses both women’s physical appearances and their behaviors. A significant portion of the magazines’ content is focused on the individual quest to find one’s best possible appearance through the use of recommended techniques and products, especially for the purposes of attracting men (Ward, 2003). Women’s magazines portray men as primarily interested in sex and as evaluating women based predominantly on their appearance (Firminger, 2008). Therefore, women are encouraged to consistently appear to their best outward advantage, especially in accordance with the preferences of men, as dictated in the magazine (Currie, 1999; Firminger, 2006; Gill, 2006).

According to women’s magazines, an important part of understanding what men want is first decoding their confusing or even mystifying behavior (Currie, 1999; Firminger, 2008). Articles regularly interview real men regarding their likes and dislikes in girlfriends, survey men to generate statistics about male preferences, and feature articles such as “Colors That Make a Man’s Heart Race,” or “What His Hug Reveals” (*Cosmopolitan*, Dec 2009). “If girls’ happiness requires finding romance and love,” Firminger (2008) explains, “girls should learn to be informed consumers of boys” (p. 274). This knowledge of what men want assists women in the pursuit of not only finding, but also getting the elusive “right guy” (Currie, 1999).

The male perspective also exerts influence over recommended social behaviors. Readers are told which types of attributes are most effective in attracting men, and which are not. For example, self-confidence is one of the most often encouraged social behaviors, not as something beneficial to women's mental health, but because it is the quality men cite as the most attractive in a potential partner (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). However, bossiness or mom-like behavior, for example, is less attractive and therefore discouraged (Garner et al., 1998).

These lessons are further emphasized through regular columns of true, embarrassing stories submitted by readers. Young women who perform the wrong behaviors, typically with a male audience, share their embarrassment with other readers (Currie, 1999). While these confessions may foster feelings of camaraderie among readers, the column "also reinforces the notion of self-surveillance [and] socializes girls to think of boys as the audience and judges of their behavior" (Firminger, 2008, p. 271).

After helping readers identify both successful and unsuccessful physical attributes and behaviors, women's magazines couple more specific instructions on achieving these ideals with a heavy emphasis on self-efficacy. A prominent message in such magazines is that "while a woman might realize what she needs (a man) she cannot figure out how to go about attaining one without reading the magazine first," according to Smith (2008, p. 20). Within the magazines are a preponderance of advertisements and articles that offer women specific advice on how exactly to behave, or what products to buy, in order to attract men (Durham, 1998; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993; Winship, 1987), along with

instructions on how to use those products (Duke, 2002). These articles and advertisements present this information in such a way that purchasing these items and using them becomes a natural part of becoming a woman and following the path to achieving feminine fulfillment (Duke, 2002; Ferguson, 1983). However, the path is a narrow one; anything perceived as sexy, stylish, and attractive is strongly encouraged, while whatever is not is mocked and insulted (Gauntlett, 2002).

Women's magazines propose to help their readers avoid social embarrassment by identifying ideal attributes and behaviors (Gill, 2006). According to *Cosmo's* mission statement, "*Cosmopolitan* is the lifestylist for millions of fun fearless females [sic] who want to be the best they can be in every area of their lives" (*Cosmopolitan Media Kit*, 2010). This lifestyle advice is often described as easy, quick, or effortless to execute. These easy fixes range from hairstyles, makeup trends and healthy habits to sexual techniques and relationship patch-ups. Women's magazines strongly suggest that their readers can achieve any personal goal with the appropriate amount of dedication (McClenaghan, 2003).

Despite the seeming tone of encouragement and optimism, critical scholars have long disparaged these forms of self-efficacy. While women's magazines positively suggest that women have the abilities to improve things about themselves that they dislike, the magazines also carry the inherent idea that women *should* improve, particularly in the realm of physical appearance, and especially to accommodate the desires of men (Gill, 2006; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). This improvement frequently happens as the result of purchasing recommended products, which a number of critics have suggested is part of a larger goal of the magazine, that

is, to frame women as consumers in order to support their advertisers (Firminger, 2006, 2008; Gill, 2006; MacDonald, 1995; Smith, 2008; Wolf, 1999). Firminger (2008) argues that, “The feminist ‘girl empowerment’ becomes personal, appropriated to sell products. The choice and purchase of products and services sold in the magazines promise recreation and transformation, of not only one’s outward appearance but also of one’s inner self, leading to happiness, satisfaction, and success” (p. 274), especially romantic success.

2.3.3 Gendered sexuality

The third assumption made by women’s magazines is that sexuality is a significant tool for women in pursuit of their desired relationships. In women’s magazines, sex plays an important role in the process of achieving romantic success (Durham, 1998). Women are taught that important distinctions need to be made between male and female sexuality: men possess an animalistic, uncontrollable sexuality, whereas women are able to use their sexuality as a tool to enhance their own agency (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). Although women’s magazines increasingly discuss and celebrate women’s enjoyment of sex, scholars are critical of today’s sexual content for its limited discussions of sex and for the continued emphasis on male pleasure (e.g. Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gauntlett, 2002; Overall, 1999).

A number of researchers argue that women’s magazines perpetuate traditional sexual stereotypes (e.g. Carpenter, 1998; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Durham, 1996, 1998; Ward, 2003). Men’s sexuality is depicted as animalistic, insatiable, aggressive, urgent and uncontrollable. Men are portrayed as naturally virile and in a constant state

of desire and readiness (Firminger, 2006; Garner et al., 1998; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Ward, 2003). In contrast, women are portrayed as careful or even manipulative sexual agents, who may enjoy sex but who primarily utilize their sexualities as a tool to get what they want (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).

Recent decades have brought an increasing recognition and acceptance of female sexual desire in women's magazines (Carpenter, 1998). Farvid & Braun (2006) claim that, "[in recent years] women's magazines have openly described and celebrated an 'active' female sexuality; *Cosmo*, in particular, has pushed the notion of 'egalitarian' and 'emancipated' sex and constructed the 'fun, fearless female' as the embodiment of a desirable feminine sexuality" (p. 296). *Cosmo* and *Glamour* both frame women as sexual instigators and as consistently enthusiastic participants. This sexual zeal is portrayed as normative, attractive and advantageous (Farvid & Braun, 2006). "In any typical *Cosmopolitan* article relating to sex... the goals of the fun, fearless female are to feel sexy and confident in bed, to give amazing orgasms and to get what she wants," according to Machin & Thornborrow (2003, p. 462). They argued that, "Accounts such as these seem to suggest empowerment and emancipation in representations of women's sexual relationships" (p. 462). Women who read *Glamour* and *Cosmo* are encouraged to enjoy sex and to take pride in their sexual prowess.

However, despite the increasing emphasis on sexual liberation, the main goal of sex for the *Cosmo* girl remains pleasing her male partner (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Although giving pleasure to a man may bring some power and/or pleasure to a woman, there remains in this dynamic an inherent reliance of the woman on the

reactions of the man for her pleasure. Women are encouraged to enjoy and actively participate in sex, but mainly because men find that behavior attractive. In women's magazines, "getting what you want has to be justified by being what the man wants," Machin & Thornborrow argue (2003, p. 464). Overall, although women's magazines increasingly support the idea of an active female sexuality, they continue to promote the idea that women are principally sexual objects rather than sexual agents; women are primarily fulfilled by acting as sexual commodities for the purposes of attracting and keeping men (Durham, 1996; Garner et al., 1998; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).

In the pursuit of their relational satisfaction, women are encouraged to utilize literally hundreds of pieces of specific sexual advice, which can be found in virtually every issue of a women's magazine (Ward, 2003). These tips are explicit instructions to women on how to kiss and caress their partners and for how long, how to perform oral and manual sex, and which intercourse positions are the best for great sex. The advice is accompanied by aggressive encouragement, typically in the form of guaranteed male pleasure (Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008). For example, the cover of the Dec. 2009 issue of *Cosmopolitan* proclaimed: "His #1 Sex Wish: 71% of Guys Crave This Move. You're Gonna Want to Drop the Magazine and Do It on the Spot." Although some articles also discuss female pleasure directly, many more assume that the reader will experience pleasure by successfully pleasing her partner, even if it means performing acts which she finds uncomfortable or distasteful (Gill, 2006; MacDonald, 1995; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008).

Therefore, although today's women's magazines seem to celebrate an adventurous female sexuality, scholars argue that the sexual acts within are still based on traditional gender roles (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Masturbation and homosexuality are infrequently discussed (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Durham, 1998; Garner et al., 1998; Ward, 2003), and prescribed sexual activities follow traditional Western sex scripts (Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008). Thus, while magazines such as *Cosmo* emphasize their racy sexual content and modern sexual liberation, content analyses suggest that the messages instead promote a pseudo sexual empowerment that adheres to stereotypical gender roles (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Ultimately, women are primarily encouraged to use their sexuality to manipulate men's sexual desires in order to entice them into a committed relationship (Durham, 1998; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; Overall, 1999).

2.3.4 Relationship maintenance work

The last of the four assumptions made by women's magazines admonishes that once a woman has established the desired relationship, it is her responsibility to maintain it (Chang, 2000; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Garner et al., 1998; Prusank, Duran, & DeLillo, 1993; Ward, 2003). Women are "responsible for doing the emotional work and maintenance and for being change agents in relationships, not allowing room for or even expecting males to take on any of these tasks" (Firminger, 2008, p. 273).

Men are frequently depicted as lacking basic communication, relationship, and emotional skills, "inept, incompetent, unaware" (Ward, 2003, p. 356), and unwilling to

or incapable of change (Chang, 2000). Chang (2000) studied the advice women were given in response to personal letters in *Cosmopolitan*. She concluded that men's supposed relationship faults were accepted as unchanging facts, while women were encouraged to identify and apply problem-solving strategies, make difficult decisions, and even modify or change their own expectations or behaviors in order to make the relationship work. Chang (2000) and others argue that this framing of women as relationship tutors and communication therapists encourages young women to subordinate their own needs to the needs of their male partners (e.g. Garner et al., 1998).

2.3.5 Content summary

The content of women's magazines suggests that female readers' top priorities are or ought to be the creation and maintenance of long-term, heterosexual, romantic relationships. This process is solely the responsibility of the reader, whose task it is to find an appropriate mate, entice him into a relationship by using the products and techniques recommended by the magazine (despite his natural desire to avoid such relationships), and maintain that relationship through effort or self-change, if necessary. Success in this arena is solely the responsibility of the female reader; her failure is proof of her own lack of either self-esteem or effort (Firminger, 2006). Accordingly, "the woman of today's magazines is not waiting for any man to come and pick her up; instead she is tracking down partner perfection like a heat-seeking missile" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 191).

A primary concern among scholars is the promotion of traditional gender and relationship roles. Although women's magazines use the feminist language of girl power, traditional gender politics and patriarchal gender norms are reinforced, rather than questioned (Firminger, 2008). "Overall," Ward (2003) notes, "the sexual content of magazines is reported to construct a traditional portrait of gender roles, and of the female sexual role especially, with a heavy emphasis on women's pleasing men through enhancing their beauty and promoting their sexual availability" (p. 357; also Garner et al., 1998). While women's magazines have made some advances, "for the most part... women's magazines are pushing the same message they were half a century ago: women's existence revolves around landing the right guy," although "today's technique is great sex rather than great cooking" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 190).

As a whole, scholars have argued that the content of women's magazines constitutes an unrealistic and troublesome conception of reality, particularly one that "sexualizes women's submissiveness and objectification" (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 296; also Durham, 1996; McCracken, 1993; Winship, 1987). Although scholars overwhelmingly agree that the content of women's magazines is socially problematic, they disagree about the attitudes or intentions of readers and thus the influence of the magazines' content (Alexander, 1999; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Ferguson, 1983).

2.4 Reading and meaning-making

The role that women's magazines play in the construction of their readers' ideas about romantic relationships is connected to the ways women read and make meaning of these magazines. The preexisting research on magazine influence is

considered here in terms of this reading and meaning-making process. Taken from this perspective, previous research can be seen to support two distinct hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is that women think about and read women's magazines in a lighthearted, unserious manner (Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; McCleneghan, 2003; Stevens, Maclaran, & Catterall, 2007; Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1999). The act of reading a women's magazine represents a temporal indulgence, an escape into a fantasy world of women's idealized pleasure and empowerment. According to this theory, content can be enjoyed or even laughed at, but it is not taken seriously. Therefore, the ideas and suggestions of women's magazines are unlikely to be incorporated into women's constructed ideas about reality.

The second hypothesis is that although women derive pleasure from reading women's magazines, they also regard the magazines as sources of information. Thus, because women consider the magazines to be informative or instructive, readers are likely to make meaning of the content by incorporating it into their existing schemas. Some researchers argue that women may unconsciously use women's magazines as sources of information, and integrate the content accordingly. Quantitative media effects research of sexually-oriented media genres may lend support to the possibility of influence.

This section will first summarize the arguments of those researchers who believe that women's magazines are primarily pleasurable for their readers, and then contrast those arguments with those who consider women's magazines to be both

informative and influential. These summaries will provide a basis for the rationale for this study in the next section.

2.4.1 Magazines as entertainment

A number of researchers have argued that women's magazines primarily represent a lighthearted and enjoyable experience for female readers (Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; McCleneghan, 2003; Stevens et al., 2007; Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1999). According to this perspective, women's magazines, characterized by an unserious tone and playful style, provide women with a pleasurable escape from reality. In this way, scholars have suggested, women's magazines' content is unlikely to influence readers' ideas or schemas about reality.

Researchers have posited that the lighthearted style of *Cosmo* and similar magazines indicates to readers that the content should not be taken seriously. In their study of *Cosmopolitan*, Machin & Thornborrow (2003) argued that the magazine's style and content is fantastical and wholly unserious. Images of women in *Cosmo* depict an imaginative and picturesque world where women are empowered by their beauty and sexuality, they claim, and the writing has a "playful low modality... which distances the article from real sex between real people" (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, p. 461). Instead, textual and visual elements combine to form a simplistic, designer fantasy world.

Machin & Thornborrow (2003) argue that the fantasy-type elements encourage women to read *Cosmopolitan* in an unserious fashion. Correspondingly, several researchers have found that women typically read women's magazines sporadically or

incompletely, often failing to read whole stories or articles (Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995). In a survey of teen readers, Duke (2002) found that the young women were likely to read magazines while engaging in other activities, such as talking on the phone or watching television. Duke and other researchers have suggested that this lack of attention is likely to result in a lack of retention and subsequent influence.

Some scholars have claimed also that young female readers do not perceive the magazines' content as pertinent to their lives. Duke (2002) discovered that some teen girls who did not identify with the magazines' models critiqued the magazines' realism while reading. Similarly, McCleneghan (2003) found that college readers of women's magazines disagreed with a number of statements including: "*Cosmo* and *Glamour* establish an image of what a female should be; I read *Cosmo* and *Glamour* because each magazine sets the record straight about being female; The articles appearing in *Cosmo* and *Glamour* are very personal and appeal to what I want my life style to be" (p. 321). Thus, McCleneghan argued that *Cosmo* and *Glamour* are not chosen by readers for their abilities to inform young women's ideas and decisions regarding their life style.

Instead, researchers have suggested that women simply find the act of reading women's magazines to be enjoyable (Hermes, 1995; Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1999). Currie (2003) proposes that women's magazines allow women to feel a sense of belonging to an "imagined community of women" (p. 243). Wolf (1999) posits that this imaginary community helps women to feel connected to other women, especially those who spend much of their time alone or at home. In interviews, Stevens et al. (2007) found that women's magazines "both facilitate and legitimize 'me time'" in the

busy lives of their readers, and allow them to enter an imagined “‘dream world’ of mutual desires and shared concerns” (p. 248). In this way, women are able to escape the realities of their lives by engaging in an activity that promotes feelings of connection with other women who have similar interests.

In addition, this escape might take the form of imagined self-metamorphosis (Hermes, 1995). “Women’s magazines allow [readers] to consider transformation at an imaginary level by offering them a multiplicity of possibilities and pleasures,” claim Stevens et al. (2007, p. 249). In perusing the magazine, scholars argue, women understand the content primarily in the context of playful fantasy. Readers of women’s magazines lightheartedly enjoy the sense of female camaraderie as well as the fanciful depictions of reality. As Hermes (1995) states, “Women’s magazines become meaningful through brief moments... of affirmation, reassurance and dreams of perfection” (p. 62-63).

2.4.2 Magazines as informative and influential

In contrast to those who argue that women’s magazine provide a playful, fantastical escape, another group of scholars argues that women’s magazines are utilized by readers not only as sources of pleasure, but also as sources of information (e.g. Currie, 1999, 2001, 2003; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991; Ward, 2003). These scholars claim that women’s magazines are designed to appeal to specific groups of women by addressing the unique experiences of each group (Currie, 2003). Therefore, titles such as *Glamour* and *Cosmo* appeal to single, young women with topics such as developing successful careers, dating and establishing relationships

with young men, and achieving trendy appearances through beauty and fashion tips. While some argue that this content is purely fantasy (e.g. Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; McCleneghan, 2003), others argue that readers take this content more seriously.

Several researchers have found that young women readers have strong interests in the magazines' advice (e.g. McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991). In interviews with teen readers, Currie (2001) learned that teens felt the magazines told them "things they need[ed] to know about themselves and their social world" (p. 261). McRobbie (1991) found similar results in her interviews with teen readers. Young women in Currie's (1999) study preferred that content which they considered to be realistic, and reported that in some cases they evaluated the magazines' advice more compelling than their own knowledge or experience.

Currie (2003) and others have also suggested that in addition to the influence readers recognize, some readers may be unconsciously influenced by women's magazines. A number of scholars have argued that women's magazines as a whole comprise a social institution that fosters and maintains a specific conceptualization of femininity in its readers by providing a pleasurable activity, a process which is all the more insidious because readers believe that exposure is simply "fun" and without consequences (e.g., Currie, 2003; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991). As Currie (2003) explains, "the construction and maintenance of any social order entails the construction of pleasures that secure participation in that order.... However appealing, pleasure as an act of reading is never 'innocent' or separate from its societal role" (243). Here, Currie suggests that even readers who consider women's magazines to simply be lighthearted fun may in fact be influenced by the magazines'

social constructions. In this way, Currie and others argue that reading pleasure does not preclude influence (Currie, 2003; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991).

Many critics express concern that the adopted ideologies of women's magazines could have a measurably detrimental but unconscious effect on the lives of young women. In quantitative studies, women's magazine consumption has been associated with issues such as negative body image (Goodman, 2002), eating-disordered behavior (Thomsen, McCoy, Gustafson, & Williams, 2002), and self-objectification (Carpenter & Edison, 2005). Several studies have suggested that the sexual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of young women are correlated with magazine consumption (Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008). For example, Kim & Ward (2004) found that "women who frequently read adult-focused magazines were less likely to equate sex with physical and emotional risks and to endorse stereotypical views of the male sexual role" (p. 55). Studies have similarly discovered that regular exposure to sexually oriented genres of television (like soap operas, sitcoms and music videos) is associated with more stereotypical sexual attitudes and behaviors, especially among women (Ward, 2003). Though this correlational research cannot establish causation, these findings may suggest that women's magazines are capable of fostering or promoting certain attitudes or behaviors in their readers.

2.5 Impetus for study

The preceding two sections summarize the existing scholarly ideas about women's magazine content and readership, indicating at least two significantly

different conclusions regarding the nature of the information in these magazines and the consequent influence of the assumptions promoted in that content. This section will establish the rationale for the study at hand, based on unaddressed or underexplored areas on the subject of women's magazine readership.

An extensive history of content analysis research has generated four key assumptions prevalent in women's magazines. These assumptions are shown to reflect an image of femininity that is highly concerned with finding and maintaining a successful, heterosexual, romantic relationship by monitoring and modifying one's own appearance, behaviors, and sexuality. *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* both present themselves as a woman's guide to achieving these goals. However, researchers have argued two divergent opinions regarding whether or not female readers perceive and utilize women's magazines in this way. Additionally, quantitative research has suggested that reading women's magazines may in fact influence women's attitudes regarding romantic relationships. Therefore, approaching the question of influence from the perspectives of the readers will add an important dimension.

Readers' perspectives have the potential to contribute new information or ways of thinking about women's magazines. The reader-centric approach in this study relies upon social constructionism, which informs the interview method. The social constructionist perspective suggests that the process of reading and meaning-making is a complex one, best understood from the perspective of readers themselves. Because the subject matter involves personal information about romantic relationships, private conversations, and sexual interactions, this approach allow for richer data to emerge.

Using college-aged women in this study may provide more reflective information and can provide the kinds of peer conversation that will enrich data. A discussion of several previous studies involving reader interviews reveals that *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*'s key demographic, college-aged American women, has been underutilized. This chapter concludes with the specific research perspective, the research question, and a forecast of the methodology to be used.

2.5.1 Social constructionism

In addition to reviewing key assumption driving the content of women's magazines, this literature review demonstrates that scholars have generally concluded that women's magazines are primarily sources of either information or entertainment. The truth of such claims has important implications for the ways women read and make meaning of magazines like *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*. McCracken has suggested, for example, that a young woman who reads women's magazines and considers the content to be informative may adopt the magazines' prescribed ideas and behaviors (McCracken, 1993). By contrast, others have posited that women perceive these magazines to be purely fantastical and are unlikely to be influenced by any of the magazines' suggestions (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). These polarized positions each may in part provide explanations for readers' experiences; however, these arguments also may oversimplify what is in reality a complex process of reading and making meaning. Women readers' own perspective may provide insights toward understanding that complex process.

Using a social constructionist approach to communication may provide the means to add women's voices to the conversation about women's magazines. According to social constructionist theory, women's magazines will be perceived and understood differently by each reader according to her perspective. Social constructionists believe in the existence of multiple, subjective truths (Schwandt, 1994). Knowledge is created through human social interaction, an ongoing process that shapes and changes meaning through communication (Miller, 2005). Social constructionists are concerned with the process by which people create schemas of meaning, or social constructs, through these cultural and social exchanges (Schwandt, 1994). Accordingly, this study is concerned with readers' perceptions of the ways their readership of women's magazines has contributed to their social constructs regarding womanhood and heterosexual, romantic relationships.

Given the social constructionist perspective, content analyses and quantitative research have limited power to explain the complex process by which women's magazines are perceived and interpreted by their female readers. Both content analysis and quantitative research are based upon the scholarly views of the researcher; content analyses reveal the researchers' interpretations of the text, and quantitative research tests researchers' hypotheses. While these methods are valuable for elucidating the magazines' content and for revealing significant attitudinal or behavioral trends, to understand the readers' interpretations of their meaning-making processes, it is necessary to ask the readers themselves. Reader interviews can be an effective method for a researcher to gain a depth of understanding about a complex subject or process, without being limited to what they already know or expect (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

2.5.2 Reader interviews

Engaging women's magazine readers on an individual basis through interviews constitutes one effective method of exploring how women read and make meaning of these magazines. To date, only a few researchers have utilized reader interviews to learn more about the ways in which young women read teen girls' or women's magazines (Currie, 1999; Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995; McRobbie, 1991). These interviews yielded varied findings, which were included in the previous section on reading and meaning-making. A review of these interview-based studies indicates the impetus for the study at hand.

Radway's (1984) lengthy interviews with romance novel readers provided the template for what Hermes (1995) called the "New Audience Research," where the readers' perceptions and opinions formed the basis for her research conclusions. Since then, a small number of researchers have applied a similar methodology to the study of teen girls' and women's magazines. Although all of these researchers have contributed valuable information on magazine readership, the changes in media climate as well as previous research's focus on teen readers both suggest the potential contribution of this research.

The age of previous interview-based studies is a significant consideration. Of the four studies discussed here, only Duke's (2002) study is less than ten years old. In the last ten years, communication culture in America has undergone radical transformation. The magazine industry has been in decline as the struggling economy and increasingly accessible news and entertainment turn consumers toward the Internet (McCleneghan, 2003). Today's college-aged women grew up in a vastly

different technological age than the previous generation and are likely to have a new perspective of women's magazines.

In addition, three of the previous studies focused on teen readers of the girls' equivalents of *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. Although the magazines are markedly similar, the participants were significantly younger than those in this study. McRobbie (1991) and Currie (1999) both interviewed teens, in England and Canada, respectively. The primary focus of these studies was on the girls' readership of specific teen magazines, and their descriptions and reactions to the content. Duke (2002) similarly interviewed African-American teens, and focused on the racial significance of the girls' impressions of the content of teen magazines.

Although these studies yielded new and interesting information about teens' reading habits and preferences, each researcher ultimately discounted some of the teen participants' comments. For example, both McRobbie (1991) and Currie (1999, 2003) disputed their readers' sometime characterization of the magazines as simply "fun" as naïve and overly simplistic, and expressed concerns about the magazines' influence over teens. These contradictions are presumably based upon the conclusion that these young readers were not able to effectively analyze the effects of their own readership. It seems likely that, in asking readers to consider not only their readership but also their interpretation and integration of the magazines' content, adult women might make more thoughtful and analytical participants.

College-aged women are the ideal participants for this study because they constitute a significant population rich in unexplored data. Women between the ages of 18-34 and college students comprise *Cosmo* and *Glamour*'s largest demographic

bases (*Cosmopolitan media kit*, 2010). Since these women read *Glamour* and *Cosmo* more often than any other group, it seems likely that their familiarity with the magazines might generate rich and interesting comments and reflections. Additionally, adult women may be able to reflect on the magazines' content and possible influence in a more meaningful way than teenage girls. Finally, although content analysis and quantitative studies have frequently considered not only *Glamour* and *Cosmo* but also college-aged women, reader interviews have chosen specific areas of research that did not include these magazines or this demographic. For these reasons, this study was designed in an attempt to bridge the gap between the preexisting research on women's magazines and the previous interviews with teen readers by engaging in interviews with college-aged women in order to gain their unique perspectives.

2.5.3 Research question

The goal of this study is to explore the romantic content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour* and the idea of reader influence from the perspectives of the readers themselves by engaging in reader interviews. Although researchers for several decades have been formulating opinions regarding the nature of the magazines' content and the effects of magazine readership on young women, the perceptions of the readers of *Glamour* and *Cosmo* remain largely unexplored. To that end, this research will consist of interviews with college-aged female readers in order to explore with those readers their perceptions of the magazines' romantic content and their ideas about that content's possible influence on their own social constructs. College-aged women constitute an important group of women's magazine readers, both in terms of their

demographic significance and their potential ability to thoughtfully and analytically consider not only their reading habits, but also the effects of that readership.

The question that guides this research is: How do female readers understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* magazines, and how do they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their personal ideas and behaviors regarding romantic relationships? This study will expand upon previous research by acknowledging and exploring the complex nature of social constructionism through participants' accounts of their experiences, by taking a reader-centric approach, and by conducting interviews with the college-aged women who are the primary readers of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines.

2.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter provided the context and rationale for this study by summarizing the existing research on the subject of women's magazines. First, a brief history of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* situated the magazines in relationship to other periodicals. Second, a review of content analysis research revealed four major assumptions about the nature of womanhood and heterosexual, romantic relationships pervasive in *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. Third, a summary of previous research suggested that women's magazines are primarily either purely entertaining and consequently not heuristic or informative and influential. Fourth, an overview of the social constructivist perspective and a summary of previous research involving reader interviews established the impetus for the study at hand.

The remainder of this thesis reports the details of this study. Chapter 3 presents a detailed description of the interview methodology. Chapter 4 provides results of the interviews, including extensive examples of the women's contributions. The thesis concludes with interpretations of those results and conclusions for further research in Chapter 5.

3 METHODS

3.1 Chapter introduction

The literature review established the need for a study that considered how college-age women understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* magazines, and how they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their personal ideas and behaviors regarding romantic relationships. To explore with women their perceptions of both their magazine readership and its significance in the creation of their social constructs, this study incorporated Rubin & Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing model and Charmaz' (2000) suggestions for grounded theory analysis. The methodology was consistent with the social constructionist perspective, which is primarily interested in the process by which meaning is produced (Schwandt, 1994). In this case, interviews with seven female readers of *Glamour* or *Cosmopolitan* yielded insights into readers' perceptions of their meaning-making process as related to romantic, heterosexual relationships.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the method, including an explanation of Rubin & Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing model and Charmaz' (2000) guidelines for grounded theory research. Each of the following sections will further detail the recruitment procedures, the method of conducting the interviews, and the caveats of this research. The final section will explain the analysis process, which will lay the foundation for Chapter Four, in which the results are presented.

3.2 Theoretical overview

As discussed in the previous chapter, social constructionist theory suggests that the process of reading and making meaning is complex. This process is best understood from the perspective of the reader. To that end, I conducted reader interviews with seven female participants. I then analyzed the transcripts of these interviews to identify important themes and ideas. In this section, I will summarize the theoretical perspectives underpinning this method.

Throughout the interview process, I was guided by Rubin & Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing model. This model is founded on the interpretive/constructionist philosophy, which recognizes the subjectivity of human perception, whose proponents aim to "understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). To that end, responsive interviewing is a fairly flexible process that allows the researcher to learn from the participant as the interview progresses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In this way, the researcher is able to investigate a complex situation or process more thoroughly than she could through a survey or rigidly structured interview, both of which limit discovery to a predetermined set of variables (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). For this study, responsive interviews were an appropriate way to explore readers' perceptions of women's magazines and processes of meaning-making in accordance with social constructionist theory.

The data of each interview were coded and analyzed according to the methods of grounded theory research. These methods, as explained by Charmaz (2000), are guidelines for analyzing qualitative data to create theoretical frameworks that help

explain that data. Constructivists who utilize a grounded theory approach recognize the benefits of working from the data to build theory instead of beginning with theories or hypotheses that will necessarily limit and artificially structure the data. For this study, that meant that the results and conclusions would be based upon the data of the readers' interviews, rather than previous research. As with responsive interviewing, the focus is on the readers' perspectives. In this way, constructivist grounded theory analysis is a natural complement to the responsive interviewing technique. The following sections will elaborate on how these research models were actualized in this study, through recruitment, interviews, and analysis.

3.3 Recruitment

The goal of this study was to explore the ways women read and make meaning of women's magazines; since the magazines are targeted at and ostensibly created for young women, I was particularly interested in the responses of those women. Because of that, male students were not recruited for this study. Young women attending college form a significant proportion of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*'s readership; *Cosmopolitan* identifies 3.3 million annual readers who are currently attending college (*Cosmopolitan media kit*, 2010). For that reason, female college students were selected as the ideal participants for this study.

Female readers of *Glamour* and/or *Cosmopolitan* were recruited first using the email listserv for speech communication majors at a large, state university (Appendix A). This listserv reached 228 undergraduate students at the time of the email. By contacting speech communication majors, I hoped to attract participants by appealing

to their interest in communication research. However, no students contacted me in response to this email.

Two weeks after the listserv email, I began to recruit participants from undergraduate-level communication courses at a large, state university. These courses are required for not only speech communication majors, but also a large proportion of the university students as a whole. In this way, I hoped to reach a relative cross-section of the undergraduate population at the university. I attended eight classes, with a total of approximately 200-250 undergraduate students. Prior to the start of each class, I introduced myself as a graduate student at the university and briefly described the topic of study (Appendix B) before distributing a sign-up sheet for interested female students' first names and email addresses. These sign-up sheets generated about 30 potential participants.

Participants also were recruited by referral. Several personal acquaintances voluntarily told friends about the study, who in turn contacted me via email. These acquaintances contacted approximately five women total, of whom three women contacted me. Interactions with these referred participants were indistinguishable from those who were recruited from classes; I did not know any of the women, and we never discussed our mutual acquaintances.

Each of the potential participants was sent an introductory email which gave more information about the study and asked for a response email with the participant's available meeting times (Appendix C). Five women responded affirmatively to this email. I then arranged a mutually agreeable meeting time with each of these five women through the exchange of further emails. Two days before each interview, I sent

the participant a reminder email that contained the details of her appointment as well as a short summary of the specific areas of discussion (Appendix D). This email stated that the interview would specifically address the participant's perceptions of the romantic content in *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* and would elicit her ideas about how or whether this content was related to her own thoughts or behaviors. This email expanded upon the introductory email (Appendix B), which stated that the interview would contain questions about the participant's perspective of the content and about her personal ideas and experiences.

I intended for the reminder email to prompt participants to consider the research subject prior to the interviews and facilitate a thoughtful, pertinent discussion. Because the interviews were scheduled to be only one hour long, I thought that participants might not have the time to fully consider the subject during the interview itself. My intention was to allow the participants to spend time thinking about the subject before the interview, which might allow for more fully developed ideas to emerge during the process. At the same time, I recognized that participants might choose not to do so, although I felt that this choice would not affect the truthfulness of their statements during the interviews and therefore the significance of those statements.

Seven female students participated in this study. The participants ranged in age from 18-27. All of the participants self-identified as White or Caucasian. All of the participants self-identified as *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour* readers, although their readership ranged from an estimated six to twelve issues per year.

While I originally intended to interview 6-12 women, I concluded with seven, partially because of the difficulty in finding participants. The combined methods of the email listserv and the in-class recruitment addressed approximately 450 students, but culminated in only four participants. Of the 30 potential participants recruited from classes, only five participants responded to my initial email and scheduled an interview time. One of those participants did not appear for her scheduled interview, and did not respond to subsequent emails. All of the potential participants were also sent an additional reminder email (Appendix E), but no additional participants responded. The remaining three participants contacted me through referral. The relatively small number of actual participants in comparison to the number of women recruited suggests that these seven participants may be unique in some way; the participants in this study may be more open or self-disclosing than other women, or more interested in communication studies. Both of these factors may have contributed to the participants' seemingly frank and candid responses.

Although I had initially hoped to interview as many as 12 women, I specified that I would accept between 6-12 participants, and I felt satisfied with the results of my interviews with the seven participants. Prior to these interviews, I conducted two pilot interviews with fellow graduate students in the speech communication department in order to familiarize myself with the responsive interviewing process. These trial interviews allowed me to approach the interviews considered in this study with a greater awareness of and comfort with the interview process, which, based on my interactions, I believe resulted in an increased rapport with participants and ultimately greater amounts of authenticity in participant responses. Finally, the results

of the seven participant interviews revealed a significant amount and depth of information, with a great amount of agreement among participants. I felt comfortable making the conclusions of this study based upon those seven interviews, and therefore decided not to pursue any additional participants.

3.4 Participants

Following each interview, I assigned each participant a pseudonym, which was then used throughout the coding and analysis process to maintain confidentiality. The following are brief introductions to each of the seven participants.

Ally is a 23-year-old graduate student in psychology. She has been reading *Cosmo* since her senior year of high school.

Becky is a 27-year-old graduate student in English. She has been reading *Cosmo* since she was 18, but more regularly in the last few years after starting to date her current, serious boyfriend. She has a subscription to *Cosmo*.

Cristin is an 18-year-old freshman majoring in exercise science. She has been reading *Cosmo* since she was 16. She has a serious boyfriend who lives out-of-state.

Danni is a 21-year-old junior majoring in speech communication. She has been reading both *Glamour* and *Cosmo* since she was in middle school. At the time of the interview, she was enrolled in a women's studies body image class that frequently discussed women's magazines.

Emma is a 21-year-old junior majoring in psychology. She is engaged. She reads *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, and has been reading them since she was in middle school.

Fiona is a 24-year-old senior majoring in speech communication. She has a boyfriend. She started reading *Glamour* and *Cosmo* as a high school student at sleepovers with her girl friends.

Gillian is a 21-year-old senior majoring in speech communication. She has a boyfriend. She has been reading *Cosmo* since her senior year of high school, when a friend got her a subscription.

3.5 Interviews

The location for each interview was a small study room in the campus library, which was reserved ahead of time to ensure privacy during the interview. I greeted each participant in the lobby of the library and then walked with her downstairs to the reserved study room. These few minutes gave me the opportunity to introduce myself and chat with the participant in an attempt to establish some familiarity before beginning the interview. I typically asked each woman about the events of her day so far, her major, and the courses she was taking that quarter. Although the conversations were casual and unplanned, they also established a pattern of easy, informal conversation, and I typically shared some personal anecdote which possibly increased her comfort with doing the same during the interview.

The interview rooms were all on the first floor of the library, each with a small table and four to six chairs and a small basement window. Each room had a glass door, which was closed for privacy but allowed both of us to be seen from outside. None of the participants displayed any uneasiness about being seen; there was no pattern of participants choosing a chair facing away from the door, for example. Before

beginning the interview, each participant read and signed the document of Informed Consent (Appendix F). I briefly reiterated the contents of the Informed Consent form and the subject of the study, as outlined in the confirmation email (Appendix D). I told each participant that I would be asking her questions about *Glamour* and *Cosmo* magazines, especially the relationship-based content. I encouraged her not to feel anxious about having the right answer, explaining that I was interested in hearing her own ideas and opinions.

The interviews were audio-recorded using a small digital recorder that sat on the table and was relatively unobtrusive. Participants were told of this recording before the interview several times in writing and once verbally, immediately before beginning. I relied on these audio recordings heavily, as I found that taking notes detracted from my ability to listen carefully to the participants and from the conversational feeling of the interviews. Therefore, I took no notes during the interviews and instead relied on my notes written after the interviews and my audio recordings to compile the information.

Each interview was approximately one hour long. This length was decided on as a compromise between probable interview depth and participant availability; the one-hour time slot was a relatively small amount of time for participants to commit to, but allowed for a reasonably in-depth conversation. I am satisfied with this compromise. I spoke with over 200 students in undergraduate courses and was able to recruit only four, so although I do feel that additional time would have yielded more information, I suspect that asking participants for more than an hour might have made the recruitment process even more challenging.

During the interview, I worked from a pre-established interview protocol (Appendix G) which contained questions related to several subjects: reasons for reading the magazine(s), descriptions of the romantic relationship-related content, and perceptions of the connection between that content and personal, lived experiences. These subjects were chosen based on my previous research into social constructionist theory and preexisting studies of women's magazines. I intended that these broad subjects would allow participants to explore their ideas about *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, the content, and their ideas about its relevance to or influence on their own lives. The protocol also listed a number of follow-up questions and prompt questions, which were used to help the participants discuss the topics more fully. Although we discussed the same broad subjects during each interview, the exact questions asked and the flow of the discussion were unique to each participant, as set forth in the responsive interviewing model.

At the end of each interview, I walked with the participant to the library entrance. The conversation during this time was similar to the conversation prior to each interview, in that we did not discuss women's magazines. Largely, the participants were interested in how the study was going, to which I gave vague responses about how I was enjoying talking to each of the participants, and gaining additional perspectives on women's magazines. I was cognizant about the amount of information that I disclosed, keeping in mind that I might possibly contact the participants again later for more information, and that I did not want to influence those responses or possibly make them feel that I was critiquing their interviews.

Four weeks later, after analyzing the information and writing Chapter Four (Results), I emailed a copy of the chapter to each participant and asked her to read the chapter and to respond via email to set up a time to discuss her responses in person (Appendix H). Six of the participants responded to the email saying that they had read and approved of the content, and did not want to meet. One participant did not respond to this or two subsequent emails.

The audio recordings and their transcriptions were kept as digital files on a password-protected computer in a secure location, and all physical information including Informed Consent documents and memos were kept in a locked filing cabinet. I also assigned each woman a pseudonym which was noted in a file on the computer. This pseudonym was used throughout transcription, analysis and writing to maintain confidentiality.

3.6 Caveats

The responsive reader interviews yielded a significant amount of rich and interesting data; however, careful consideration of the methodology revealed several areas of concern throughout the process. One concern is that participants may not have felt comfortable enough to disclose intimate feelings or personal history. The study room setting was the logical combination of legality, privacy, and convenience, but the environment was unfamiliar to most of the participants. The experience of sitting in a small, sterile room with a relative stranger may have made some of the participants uncomfortable and prevented them from disclosing some information. I attempted to facilitate sharing by establishing myself as a peer, a female student of similar age who

also has read *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. Participants seemed to accept me as a peer in this way; for example, participants often spoke of the content in a way that assumed our shared knowledge of it. For the most part, participants seemed relaxed and were responsive.

My largest concern as a researcher was regarding my inexperience as an interviewer and qualitative researcher. I worried about the extent to which my beliefs, attitudes and interview style had an effect on the interviews. As Rubin & Rubin (2005) note, an interview is an interaction that is shaped by both participants. Although I sought not to allow my personal opinions or research knowledge to lead or direct the conversation, I realize that my ideas influenced my verbal and nonverbal communication during the interviews. Although I made a conscious effort to make my responses non-committal, I was more likely to follow up on statements that I found intriguing. For example, Fiona said that *Cosmo* promotes women in business, which is “obviously positive.” I agreed with the statement, so I did not follow up on it, although I realized I would have if she had said it was “obviously negative.” In this way, my opinions and interests played a part in guiding the discussion.

In an attempt to be transparent about the process by which my own ideas influenced the interview process, I kept a separate journal of my thoughts about and reactions to each interview. I originally intended to include this journal as a complement and point of comparison to the results presented in Chapter 4. However, as the interviews and analysis progressed, I realized that I was truly a participant in the research process, that my opinions did not stand apart but were integrated into and influenced by that process. For this reason, I chose not to include the journal entries.

The results of this study reveal the participants' interests and ideas as they emerged during the interviews, often in ways that I did not expect. Nevertheless, this study as a whole necessarily reflects our mutual creation of meaning.

After conducting the interviews, I discovered a previously undiscovered study of women's magazine readers. Hermes' (1995) interviews with eighty male and female readers of women's magazines in Amsterdam utilized a constructionist philosophy and emphasized the need for a reader-centric approach to the question of reading and meaning-making, much like this study. Acknowledging the similarity of these methodologies, I concluded that the disparity in time and distance still justified the need for the study at hand. Hermes' interviews took place 15 years ago, with participants ranging in age from 19-70, although most of them were in their 30s or 40s. Her participants read a variety of magazines, including gossip magazines, feminist publications, and men's magazines. Although the philosophy of her research and mine are very similar, the area of focus is quite different, since I am considering only a small subset of mass market magazines. Additionally, my participants grew up and read women's magazines in a different generation than her participants, and on a different continent. It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that my findings could contribute new information to the subject. However, given the similarities between the two studies and the time in my research at which I discovered her work, I decided not to read Hermes' results until I had finished my own results section, to avoid any influence. Hermes' findings were subsequently incorporated into the literature review and the discussion.

3.7 Analysis

Analysis of the data was a continuous process throughout the study that began with the first interview. After each interview, I wrote a memo containing my impressions of the interview and the data. When all of the interviews were concluded, I first listened to, and then transcribed each of the recorded interviews. Following Charmaz's (2000) suggestions for analysis, I listened to each interview several times to familiarize myself with and contextualize the data.

I then transcribed and coded each interview. During transcription, I kept a page of notes about recurring themes that I heard across and within interviews. In the initial thorough coding, I tried to identify key statements or important ideas in the participants' speech. I did this throughout the entire text of each interview by finding the main statement or statements in each "paragraph" of speech and then noting them in a separate column. As I was doing so, I highlighted quotes that clearly expressed those key ideas. As the process of listening to and coding interviews continued, I looked at those principal statements and attempted to identify key elements, issues, and themes across interviews. As new themes emerged, old themes were reconsidered and revised as needed. When a new theme emerged, I looked at all the themes to see if they still provided the best explanation of the data. For example, I initially identified a theme of "reading women's magazines as a teen to learn about womanhood." However, as I continued to consider the women's comments, it became clear that for the participants, these statements were part of two larger themes, one about the problematic influence of women's magazines on the readers as teens, and another about the positive contribution of women's magazines to the readers' relationships.

During the process of identifying themes, I engaged in extensive memo writing, as suggested by Charmaz (2000). I wrote memos that discussed and elaborated upon the themes that emerged, and used the process of writing to clarify my thinking about the data. The women's statements converged on a number of topics that comprise one primary theme, with four sub-themes. The most quantitatively and affectively significant idea arising from the interviews was the participants' explanations of not taking women's magazines too seriously. This theme was informed by four sub-themes, reading for lighthearted entertainment, reading for utility, criticisms of the content, and maturity and perspective. Each of these sub-themes is presented in more detail in the next chapter.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Chapter introduction

The goal of this study was to answer the question: How do female readers understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* magazines, and how do they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their personal ideas and behaviors regarding romantic relationships? The previous chapter described the process of conducting, coding, and analyzing the interviews with female college-aged readers whose statements form the basis for this study's conclusions. In this chapter, the results of those interviews are presented according to an organizational structure which emerged during the coding process. In Chapter 5, I will discuss these results in more detail.

During the coding and analysis process, one theme became apparent as the most quantitatively and affectively significant idea among the participants: I do not take *Glamour* or *Cosmo* too seriously. This statement was made a number of times by each of the participants and was also echoed in the women's descriptions of the ways in which they read and make meaning of the magazines. This attitude toward women's magazines was also evident in the fact that the women had difficulty recalling or discussing the magazines' specific content during the interviews. In this chapter, I will elaborate on this phenomenon and how its emergence shaped the direction of this study. I will also present four sub-themes encompassing the major topics of discussion during the interviews, each of which reflects the participants' ideas about not taking the magazine too seriously.

The first sub-theme is lighthearted reading, which includes sections on the magazines as primarily read for entertainment, the magazines as impulse purchases, and the magazines as fun to read. The second sub-theme is reading for utility, which the participants considered to be the magazines' secondary purpose. This sub-theme includes sections on the content as relatable, relevant and empowering; the content as useful to romantic relationships; and the sexual content as helpful or important. The third sub-theme is criticisms of the content, which includes sections on the participants' criticisms of the content, others' effects-based criticisms, and participants' concerns about effects. The fourth and final sub-theme is maturity and perspective, which includes sections on how maturity and life experience help readers, and how teen readers may be at risk. Taken together, these sub-themes inform the participants' emphases on not taking the magazines too seriously.

4.2 Not taking women's magazines too seriously

When considering the interviews as a group, one primary theme emerged as the dominant or most prevalent idea. I have called this theme "not taking women's magazines too seriously" because this seems to encompass the most significant idea. However, the participants all used a variety of terms which I interpreted to be parts of this same theme, including "taking the content with a grain of salt," "reading the magazines lightheartedly," "it's just for entertainment" and "taking the magazine for what it is [i.e. just a magazine]." Each of these phrases will appear in quotations throughout this chapter and are used interchangeably by all of the participants. This theme of approaching women's magazines with a certain amount of levity plays an

important role in the way that the participants defend their readership and explain their processes of reading and making meaning of the magazines' content.

Although the participants' lighthearted attitudes were not altogether surprising to me, I was surprised to discover that the participants had difficulty recalling much about the magazines' content, although many of them had been reading the magazines on a semi-regular basis for years. The original interview protocol (Appendix F) relied quite heavily on the participants' abilities to recall or summarize the magazines' romantic content and then compare it to their own ideas and experiences. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that the participants would not be able to make these comparisons to the degree that I had imagined. This miscalculation arose from my own assumption that other college-aged women would have thought as critically about the magazines as I had. Of course, my critical thoughts on the subject developed over years of study on the subject. My pilot test subjects were likewise graduate students in communication, and therefore their responses were more similar to mine and did not prepare me in this sense for the participant interviews.

The result of this discrepancy was that the responsive interviews largely focused on the participants' experiences as readers and their thoughts about reading and making meaning of the magazines as a whole, rather than with regard to specific pieces of content. Although the interviews diverged from the interview protocol in response to the participants' statements, this unexpected result contributed to understanding readers' perceptions of women's magazines. The participants' abilities to recall only broad categories of information in the magazines complement their categorization of women's magazines as primarily sources of lighthearted

entertainment, which are not taken too seriously. This theme is supported by four sub-themes, which are presented in the following sections.

4.3 Lighthearted reading

The first sub-theme explores the primary way in which the participants described reading women's magazines. Three topic areas comprise this sub-theme. First, the participants overwhelmingly explained that they and most other readers purchase and read the magazines primarily as a means of lighthearted entertainment. Second, the participants emphasized their lack of commitment to the titles and impulsive purchasing habits. And third, the magazines were described as enjoyable to purchase and read, both as mindless time-fillers and as casual social experiences. This continual emphasis on the magazines as fun, unserious, and largely unimportant supports the primary theme of not taking women's magazines too seriously.

4.3.1 Magazines are read primarily for entertainment

The participants unanimously emphasized their lighthearted and unserious approach to the magazines. For example, Danni described her casual attitude toward

Glamour and *Cosmo*:

I don't know, the articles are just, like, fun to read. They're just like- I don't take them personal- personal or serious. I'm like, 'Oh, that's funny.' They just have, like, funny like lighthearted stuff.

Gillian similarly stated that entertainment is the biggest reason to read *Cosmo*, emphasizing that the magazine is not taken too seriously:

Um. I read [the articles], and I kinda- like that one, I'll think, you know, 'OK, that kind of makes sense.' And then another one I might think, 'Well, I don't know about that.' I guess it's just kind of an entertainment thing. I'll be sitting

around and I'll read it. I don't always agree or, like, say, 'Wow, they're so right,' and live by that.

The overall perception of the participants seemed to be that the magazines are primarily understood by readers as lighthearted entertainment. Furthermore, the participants argued that the magazines were intended to be read this way. As Danni explained:

I think that the - I think the magazine's goal is to... like, give women a lighthearted sense of just like fun tips you- tips and I don't think they want people to take them seriously.

The participants cited the magazines as primarily entertainment although they also acknowledged the usefulness of some of their tips. While some of the magazines' tips might be useful or informative, the participants explained that they are not read in a serious manner. For example, Danni illustrated:

Um. I don't take them seriously, like, 'I'm gonna try number 10 on my relationship,' thing, I just kind of read it and I'm like, 'All right. That's fun. Let's see if it like- well, maybe it would be fun to see if it does work.' But I don't take them seriously.

Cristin similarly argued that reading *Cosmo* is first and foremost a form of entertainment:

So... I think it's kind of just an entertainment, like, not taken seriously. But like a couple things could be, like, a possibility of something you could try or do, I don't know. It's just kind of an entertainment, not really a source of information.

Gillian also explained that while she sometimes learned from the tips in *Cosmo*, she did not consider the magazine to be an important source of information:

I mean it's- I think a big part of reading it's to be entertained, just- it's a magazine, it's not your life manual, but um. I think just myself read it, like you kinda get ideas and you learn something new, so.

Becky agreed that women purchase *Cosmo* for the entertainment value, stating that while the magazine's advice can be helpful, that is not the primary reason for purchasing *Cosmo*:

Like, I'm gonna get it of course for the entertainment, um, coz I think some of the articles are fun and um, makes for a good read, coz you're like, 'Oh!' But then also helpful in the sense that sometimes, you know, I can't say that I have not- I mean, I have definitely applied some of the things I've read, um, to my relationship.... I think it can act like that. I don't think people mainly read it as like an education thing, you know? I don't think women are like, 'Oh Cosmo, educational.'

Although the magazines could provide readers with useful advice, the participants argued, they are primarily designed for and read in terms of their entertainment value, and are not taken seriously. Therefore, although the magazines contain a great deal of tips and advice, their primary purpose is to entertain, and that is how they are typically read. This attitude was also reflected in the participants' descriptions of purchasing the magazines.

4.3.2 Magazines are impulse purchases

The participants all described a woman's magazine as an unplanned, incidental or otherwise casual purchase. Only one of the participants, Becky, had a current subscription to *Cosmo*, and she mentioned that her sister had purchased the subscription for her. Gillian had previously had a subscription, which her friend bought for her. The other participants seemed to use their lack of subscriptions as evidence of their casual interest in women's magazines. For example, in the first minute of her interview, Ally distanced herself from *Cosmo* by saying:

Well, I'm not like a religious reader. I- in the sense that, like, I don't have a subscription or anything. My roommate had one for three years, so I didn't have to get one, um, but I did read one every month, yeah.

Although she explains that she is “not a religious reader” because she doesn’t have a subscription, Ally also acknowledges that she read the magazine monthly for years, until recently. Other participants seemed equally interested in establishing their lack of attachment to the magazines. Emma’s mother, who works in a beauty salon, provides her with *Glamour* and *Cosmo*:

She always, to this day, whenever she gets one, I just went home last weekend, and she was like, ‘Emma, there’s a new *Glamour* out on the seat of the car.’ Like, whenever she gets it from the mail, she will just give it to me.

Although Emma reads *Glamour* and *Cosmo* monthly, she never purchases them, instead getting them from her mother or borrowing one from a roommate. Many of the participants, like Cristin, explained that they did not feel a strong incentive to purchase a subscription:

Like I’ve wanted to get a subscription, but it’s not that big of a deal to get one, I guess. One day I’ll just be like, ‘Oh, I should subscribe to it then I’ll get it all the time,’ then I’ll forget about it. And then I’ll see it in the store and be like, ‘Oh. Let’s read this.’ Like, it’s not something that’s so important to me that I have to have it.

The idea of spontaneously buying the magazines on sight was a common one. Danni similarly said, “Yeah, it’s like an impulse buy. I see it and I’m like, [feigning reluctance] ‘Ohhhhh, okay’ [laughs].”

Several participants mentioned buying *Cosmo* to read during flights. Cristin, who flies regularly, said that she always buys *Cosmo* before flying, but described the process as though it were a recurring, spontaneous purchase:

At the airport, I get it when I buy gum. That’s usually why I go into the store, coz I always like to have gum when I’m on a plane. So I go in there and then I’m like, ‘I have to have this too.’ I can’t- I just can’t go on a plane without *Cosmo* anymore. It’s like- every single time I go on a plane, I get *Cosmo*.

Only a few participants stated that they sometimes enter a store with the intent to buy *Glamour* or *Cosmo*. Fiona explained her recent magazine purchase:

Um, because I was- didn't really have anything else to do, and I was at my boyfriend's house, and he didn't have anything worth reading, coz I didn't want to read *ESPN Magazine*... so um, I went, and I think it was a *Glamour* that I bought.

However, Fiona added that like the other participants she typically buys *Glamour* impulsively in the checkout aisle of a grocery store. Cristin compared this type of purchase to buying candy, "Yeah, it's kind of like candy, like you don't need it, but then you see it and you want it." For Cristin and the other participants, a magazine is a spur-of-the-moment treat. As a group, the participants largely emphasized their casual or unplanned magazine purchasing habits, which reflected their lighthearted and unserious attitudes towards women's magazines.

4.3.3 Magazines are fun to read

The participants similarly described their magazine reading habits as informal occurrences. Participants read *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour* in one or more individual or social situations, where readership was described as a way to relax, to fill time and avoid boredom, or to engage with others socially. Each of these situations involved utilizing women's magazines as the means for lighthearted entertainment.

When talking about reading *Glamour* or *Cosmo*, all of the participants described situations in which they read women's magazines alone. The primary function of the magazines in these instances was to fill time or to provide mindless entertainment. For example, four of the participants stated that they always buy *Glamour* or *Cosmo* before traveling in order to keep themselves occupied. Ally

typically picks up the magazine when she has a few minutes of spare time, “I’m not really like an avid reader, like I have to pick up my *Cosmo* and go from cover to cover and read *every* article. I’m a flipper.” Ally enjoys the ability to pick up and put down the magazine as her schedule allows.

Five of the girls described the magazine as a mindless source of pleasure in their everyday lives, an enjoyable break from their schoolwork. Fiona compared reading *Glamour* to watching a lighthearted movie:

So just- just to be able to read something and have it be light, um, I think, you know, too. When you’re in school you’re reading so much factual, textual information that it’s kind of nice to get a break and just read something that’s completely- kind of like watching, um, a no-brainer movie. Like you don’t really have to think about it, you don’t really have to pay attention to anything, but it still is entertaining you and for that period of time you’re happy because you’re not sitting around going, ‘Huh. What am I going to do today?’

Danni explained that she enjoys reading a *Cosmo* or *Glamour* when she has the opportunity:

Yeah, like, when I do have- or Christmas break, I might like pick one up. Like when I have time and it’s like lighthearted, and I don’t have to read my books that are recommended for classes. I’m like, ‘I can read whatever I want to read.’

For Danni, women’s magazines are an enjoyable “mental vacation,” a reward for her hard work in school. Emma similarly described reading a magazine as a pleasurable activity that she would like to do more often:

I’ve been reading them pretty much since I was I middle school, but not as much recently just because I’m usually busy with school work and... don’t really have time to just sit and read for pleasure.

Becky, whose sister bought her a subscription, explained how getting *Cosmo* in the mail provided her with an excuse to take a “me night” one evening every month:

I get it, and I don’t just [read it]- like, I’m making time for that magazine tonight, you know? ... That’s a really good feeling... relaxing. You can sit back

and have no worries, read these- some people call 'trashy' magazines, nothing educated about it for me, and you know, just kind of, just doing something that... just feels good.

Danni similarly explained that she enjoyed the somewhat illicit activity of reading the magazines: "I think Cosmo and Glamour are like guilty little pleasures." While all of the participants had read *Glamour* or *Cosmo* alone as a form of relaxation, they all had also read the magazines with or to someone else, typically one or more girl friends. Reading a magazine with other women served as a form of entertainment and/or as a source of connection.

Most of the participants expressed the idea that almost all girls their age read *Cosmo* or *Glamour*. Danni explained that the magazines are common topics of conversation among her friends, "Every girl I pretty much know has it- like picked up *Glamour* or *Cosmo* and we can talk about it." Ally offered a common description of reading a magazine with a group of her girl friends:

And then like, with my girlfriend we would always read aloud like all the sex stuff, or relationship advice. Those were the two big section we'd read, like, actually aloud to each other, like, 'Can you believe she did this?' or 'Can you believe that they said that?' We would read them, and I think then reflect on what we thought of them. So like some of them would be really funny and like... for the sex tips, if you'd read something like, 'Use an ice cube.' And you're just like, 'Okaay...?!' Or and then someone would be like, 'Oh, I've done that before!' So it's more... it was more like to start the conversation.'

Like Ally, most of the participants had read *Glamour* or *Cosmo* with one or more girl friends in an exchange which involved them reading "funny" or "outrageous" sex or relationship content aloud, followed by a discussion of related personal experiences.

Emma described a comparable experience with her roommates:

I live in a co-op of 46 girls, so they'll end up on the counter when we're all having dinner and we're like reading, 'Oh, seven ways to be a better kisser.' We'll like read it out loud and either say, like, 'That's really funny,' or, 'That's just stupid,' or just kind of, like, talk about it between us.

Cristin's best friend lives in another state, but the two of them still have similar discussions, although they occur over the phone using the *Cosmo* website:

Sometimes I'll go online and she'll go online too and then we'll call each other and be like, 'Oh, read this article.' And then we'll, like, read through it and laugh and then go through another one, and just kind of like that, I guess.... We have like the same opinions of stuff, so whenever it's like, 'Those people are crazy,' it's just like, 'Oh my gosh, yes, those people are crazy' [laughs].

For Cristin, discussing *Cosmo*'s online content is an enjoyable way to stay connected with her long-distance best friend. Overall, the participants explained that women's magazines constituted the means for sparking an enjoyable and often humorous discussion with their girl friends about men, sex, or relationships. Whether read socially or alone, purchased impulsively in a checkout aisle or borrowed from a roommate, women's magazines were described by the participants as a means of pleasurable, lighthearted, often humorous entertainment.

4.4 Reading for utility

Despite their emphasis on the primary value of women's magazines as entertainment, the participants also acknowledged that the same magazines also have the ability to aid or inform. The second sub-theme addresses the participants' descriptions of reading women's magazine for information or utility. The participants largely considered the content to be relevant and often empowering to young women, helpful for generating discussion in romantic relationships and facilitative of women's conversations regarding and explorations of sex.

4.4.1 *Relatable, relevant, empowering*

All of the participants read *Cosmo*, and three of them also read *Glamour*. The participants favor *Glamour* and *Cosmo* over other women's magazines because they find the content to be relatable and relevant to things they are interested in. They also argued that the magazines have the potential to help women become more empowered and have better sex lives. Overall, each of the participants described a number of benefits that women experience as a result of reading women's magazines.

All of the participants explained that they choose *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour* over other magazines because they find them to be "relatable." Gillian chooses *Cosmo* over fashion magazines because she considers the content to be more relevant to her life:

I feel like I relate to *Cosmo* the most, just coz a lot of the topics in there are like... relative to my life, I guess. Like, *Vogue* is more like high fashion kind of stuff, and I'm not really like that, I guess.

Cristin similarly prefers *Cosmo* and *Glamour* over gossip magazines:

It's not all about, like, celebrities. It's more personal, I guess? ... Yeah, it's not like all about gossip, like other magazines can be, just like all about all the celebrities and what their drama is and all that. So it's kinda- well, most of it at least is more personal.

Although *Glamour* and *Cosmo* both contain fashion advice and celebrity gossip, participants preferred them to purely fashion or gossip magazines because of their relationship content and true stories. For example, Becky enjoys reading true stories about "real women," or non-celebrities, "[b]ecause, um, they're like real life stories that apply to me. You know, like, that could happen to me." Emma enjoys reading *Cosmo* more now than she did in the past because she is now engaged and finds the relationship content more applicable to her own experiences:

And I think the relationship stuff definitely applies to my life now because I'm engaged, and so I feel like I can understand it, and then talk to my fiancé or talk to my friends about it, and see how it applies to my life.

Part of what makes *Glamour* and *Cosmo* so easy to relate to, according to the participants, is the content that gives women valuable advice on fashion, beauty, and relationships. These topics are important to women, according to several participants.

Gillian, for example, explained the relevance of the magazines' content:

I mean, I think that they put out these articles and everything because it's things that are relevant to the women that read them. So it is- I think that they are things that women want to know more about, or improve on, or just be more informed.

All of the participants agreed that *Cosmo* and *Glamour* address subjects women are interested in, and have the potential to help women with various areas of concern.

Danni argued that *Glamour* helps women learn to look better and be more confident, and shows them, "This is how you can help improve who you are or maybe help improve your self-esteem." Several participants agreed that *Glamour* and *Cosmo* contain empowering messages for women. For example, Emma argued that the magazines teach women how to be confident in a variety of social situations:

Cause I feel like a lot of the magazine's [longer] articles... they're mostly about, um... how to be powerful in the workplace, or how to be confident around your family members, how to just exude, like, inner peace when you're around people. How to be comfortable in all situations, something like that. And kinda just having this power and, like, the comfort in your own skin kind of thing.

Gillian explained that *Cosmo* places a great deal of emphasis on being a "strong, successful, independent woman," which was echoed by a number of other participants.

Although a number of the participants criticized the magazines' ongoing emphasis on being in a romantic relationship, a few also explained that the message was not just one-sided. Fiona described the magazines' dual messages:

I feel like there was a lot of emphasis on... it's kind of like two separate sides, like, one is, you know, 'Try to get the guy, blah blah blah,' but then the other side was also, um, very I think, you know, pro-woman, 'You don't necessarily need a man, you can be successful on your own.'

Emma positively described the magazines' depictions of women as independent, even within the context of a relationship:

I think having a man also kinda... well, I don't know [laughs]. Coz it can be both ways. Having a man can sometimes, from the magazine's point of view, be very womanly. Like, you have a man, that's the norm, you're in a relationship, whether you're dating or you're married, just as long as you're in a relationship, that's good. But then sometimes the articles are like, 'Independence!' You should be like- even if you're in a relationship, you are your own person, and you do not depend on him, and you have your own stuff going on.

For Emma and several other participants, these depictions were "rational and realistic" portrayals of real women's desires to be both independent and professionally successful, but also involved in a successful, romantic relationship.

4.4.2 Useful for romantic and sexual relationships

Participants addressed the romantic and sexual content of *Glamour* and *Cosmo* as informative or practical. Several participants opined that women's magazines could help women in the context of a romantic relationship, particularly as a discussion tool. Where reading *Cosmo* or *Glamour* with girl friends was portrayed as humorous entertainment, reading the same magazines with a boyfriend was a means to an end. Although the participants described these occurrences as infrequent, they also illustrated the magazines' potential to improve relationship satisfaction.

For example, the participants explained that the magazines contained a number of creative, affordable date ideas. Ally stated, "I think [their advice] is good because they come up with creative things that I would never think of like to do for a date..."

like miniature golfing.” A number of participants related sharing these ideas with a boyfriend. For example, Cristin said, “I’ll be reading to [my boyfriend] and I’ll be like, ‘We should try going on a totally different kind of date.’ And he’ll be like, ‘Oh yeah, that sounds cool.’” *Cosmo* and *Glamour* were portrayed as valuable sources of new date ideas, or as starting points for a creative date discussion.

Women’s magazines were also described as the impetuses for other types of relationship discussions. For example, Emma explained that she has given her fiancé the “Man Manual” section of *Cosmo*, which contains relationship advice for men, to good results:

Every now and then they’ll have a tear out for your man that has the little article of, like, ‘Be more sympathetic, be more romantic,’ and it’s like... that kind of stuff I’ve showed him a couple times, and he’s like, ‘Really?’ And that’s good coz then I’ll have an opportunity to be like, ‘Yeah, it would be really nice if you were to—like, said I love you more, or would just like give me a massage like out of nowhere,’ and so he says, ‘Oh really? I had no idea.’

Emma felt that *Cosmo* helped her talk to her fiancé about her needs and desires in their relationship. Similarly, Becky, who has trouble talking about sex with her boyfriend, has used *Cosmo* as a resource for generating ideas for their sex life:

I’ll take over a *Cosmo* to his house and just read it on like a Friday night when he’s watching football, and I’ll be like, ‘Oh, look at this, maybe we should do that’... so yeah, I’ve definitely, like... incorporated him into it. He just kind of, like, laughs, but actually sometimes I’ve literally seen him read it, and [he’s] been like, ‘Oh, hey’ [suggestively]. [Laughs].

For Becky, *Cosmo* provides a low-pressure and humorous way to approach the subject of sex with her boyfriend.

Within the context of a romantic relationship, several participants acknowledged the influence of women’s magazines, particularly the more explicit *Cosmo*, on their sex lives. *Cosmo* has helped these women in several ways, by

providing sexual tips and ideas, by promoting sexual experimentation, and by encouraging women to be open about sex. Three of the participants explained that *Cosmo's* sex tips had contributed to their overall knowledge about sex. For example, Becky described how she has remembered and used sex tips from *Cosmo*:

I don't really, you know, I would never really think like, 'Oh Cosmo really- you know, Cosmo's the key to my relationship success in the bedroom,' but yeah, I mean, I think... unconsciously it has, you know? Coz like I'll read this stuff and I'm sure that it... pops in my head, you know, like, 'Oh, I read this, guys like it when I, you know, do this,' and you know, I'll try it.

Fiona similarly described the almost unconscious process of reading and remembering the tips for later use:

Well it's kind of funny because I feel like a lot of the stuff that I've read, I've always kind of kept in the back of my mind. Or like the things that've stuck out, I think you keep in the back of your mind kind of as like, um, you know, another reference point.

Although the participants did not always use the sex tips in *Cosmo*, and unanimously considered some of the tips to be shocking, "gross," or "porn star"-like, several participants agreed that reading the sex tips promoted creative sexual activity. For example, Gillian felt that *Cosmo* could help women by reminding them to keep their sex life exciting:

Yeah, I would say that women who read *Cosmo* regularly might have... um, more the idea that like, sex is a really big part of a relationship, and always needs to be exciting, which- I don't think that's a bad thing to think. Coz it might actually help or benefit them, as opposed to someone who's never read a *Cosmo* and doesn't think anything like that and kinda just... goes with the flow as opposed to doing something out of the ordinary.

Fiona similarly argued that reading *Cosmo* could help some women have a better sex life:

And that, you know, when they talk about 'How to keep things spicy in the bedroom,' 'Don't be afraid to ask for this or that,' um, so I feel like for some women that might be really helpful.

Fiona also referenced *Cosmo*'s encouragement to talk candidly about sex:

So I guess that's another point, also, that for some people- like, some people may find it extremely helpful, because they might have a really hard time finding it in themselves to- or they need reassurance that it's okay to say this or ask for this.

Becky also thought that *Cosmo* provided women with a socially acceptable outlet to read about or talk about sex with girl friends or partners:

But yeah, I think that they do kind of make women be these sexual beings that... you know, and- I think a lot of times it- that *Cosmo* is good because sex is so inappropriate to talk about? And maybe women are afraid to share those things with their friends, or sisters, and- and so I think *Cosmo*'s a good way to kind of, just be like, you *can* talk about this, like this is acceptable, you know?

Becky and other participants considered *Cosmo*'s sexual content to be unique among modern media and potentially helpful for women within their own intimate relationships.

Overall, although they considered women's magazines to primarily function as lighthearted entertainment, all of the participants also discussed the magazines' potential to inform or facilitate, especially in the area of romantic relationships. In fact, the participants felt that tips and advice comprised the majority of the magazines' content. For example, Ally stated, "Everything [in *Cosmo*] is advice about a man-everything's about a woman and a man's relationship, like, content-wise." However, the participants felt that learning from this advice was merely a secondary benefit of reading because they do not take women's magazines too seriously and instead approach this content with a flippant, lighthearted attitude.

4.5 Criticisms of the content

Despite the fact that they enjoyed and utilized women's magazines, the participants' opinions of the content were not all positive. In the third sub-section, I will explain the participants' descriptions of criticisms of women's magazines, both their own and others'. Though the participants shared several concerns regarding the magazines' depictions of romantic relationships, they ultimately dismissed others' concerns about the magazines' influence by emphasizing the lighthearted manner with which they and other women read the magazines. However, a few participants also argued that women's magazines contribute to a large and powerful social force that pressures women to look or behave in certain ways.

4.5.1 Participants' criticisms of the content

Although the participants all expressed that they enjoyed reading women's magazines, they also shared a number of concerns about or critiques of the magazines' content. The primary critiques of the content included that the magazines create the perception that being in a romantic relationship is normal or ideal, the magazines encourage women to engage in romantic game play or manipulation, and the magazines suggest that women should adjust their behavior to accommodate male partners. Despite these seemingly serious concerns about the nature of women's magazine content, participants largely responded to such content with humor.

Participants stated that they felt women's magazines to be promoting romantic, heterosexual relationships as normal and desirable. Since a great deal of the content appears to be aimed at readers who have or are trying to obtain romantic relationships,

reading women's magazines makes some of the participants more concerned with their relationship status, as Ally explained:

And I know that the more I read *Cosmo*, like when I'm reading it more often, um, I think a lot more about relationships, and how I'm not or I am in one.... I think it makes you feel like crap, actually.

Several participants referenced women's magazines' tendencies to encourage consistently flirtatious behavior as a means to attract potential mates. For example, Emma disparaged the magazines' misleading messages about the "need" to be in a relationship:

Like you're weird if you aren't in a relationship and you need to always be thinking about how you can dress to meet a guy's needs, or get him to look at you. Coz that's not true.

In order to get or maintain the prized, romantic relationships, women are told to follow the magazines' advice to influence male behavior in certain ways. Four of the participants complained that women's magazines encouraged women to participate in this type of manipulative behavior in order to get what they want. Fiona remarked on *Cosmo*'s frequent "man-handling" advice:

Well I know that they always have articles about, um, you know, if you're at a party or something, how to get a man to notice you from across the room, or... um, you know, when you're in bed with your partner, how to get him to... perform some kind of sexual act that you... want to have performed.

Fiona and other participants criticized the magazines not only for the prevalence of such relationship-centric advice, but also for the content of that advice. Emma censured the magazines' emphasis on dressing sexy to attract male attention, "Like I recognize that you shouldn't be very slutty. I don't want to use the things I wear to attract a man, coz that's like taking advantage of the way guys are wired." Danni

similarly criticized the magazines' implication that sexual promiscuity is an effective means of finding a boyfriend:

I think that that sends a negative message to women and if young girls are reading that, they're gonna be like, 'Oh! I'm gonna have sex so I can get a boyfriend.' Doesn't work that way.

Cristin explained that she disliked the frequent advice on how to manipulate male partners' behavior:

Like it'll say—and this is another one of those articles I *hate*—it's like, 'Best kissing tips,' or it'll be like, 'How to get your guy to be a better kisser.' ... Not really a great, like- some people can agree with the changing thing, but I'm not like a fan of the changing your boyfriend into, like, how you want him to be thing.

Cristin felt that such manipulation was both unkind and unnecessary. Fiona decried the majority of *Cosmo's* advice, arguing that it did not encourage women to find and engage in meaningful, healthy relationships:

So I see sometimes the flirting tips or some of the, you know, 'get him to do this or that,' that kind of stuff, and it seems like, um... almost like playing a game. And I feel- I feel like someone could look at those things, and I mean if they took that advice very seriously, I feel like they would have a hard time, um, developing relationships that were- where they were being... being supported, being represented. I feel like it could affect the way that, um, younger women approach relationships, in a negative way.

As a whole, the participants felt that while *Glamour* and *Cosmo* purported to help women establish and maintain successful, romantic relationships, the magazines' advice was often more troubling than effective. Another example of this troubling content was the advice that encouraged women to adjust their behavior to accommodate men. Five of the participants criticized content which suggested that readers put the needs of their boyfriends before their own. Gillian argued that although perceptions of gender roles are changing, women's magazines still promote the old-fashioned idea that women ought to take care of men:

Just the way that society suggests that women should be, like, in the past, like, being that housewife and having- yeah, I'm thinking like in the 50s or something. But- and obviously you know that's changing, but it's still kind of out there that women are the nurturing ones, the ones that are there to take care of their family, their husband, whatever, so.

Using similar language, Ally criticized *Cosmo* for continuing traditional gender roles:

So, I mean, like I- if you look at like a magazine from like the 1960s or 50s, I- it's the same content just racier now. It's still about... men and how to woo them and how to keep them happy, and... I mean, that's like the bulk of it.

Ally also argued that narratives of relationships in *Cosmo* were "cookie cutter" and encouraged women to attract the attention of a great guy, and then modify their behavior to fit certain ideals in order to keep him:

But then after that, after the big, 'Wow he's amazing!' It's, 'Okay, you're too confrontational, you're too much, you need to tone it back.' And then it's the adjusting to him to make the relationship work.

Danni was also critical of this content, arguing that women's magazines ought to empower women to feel confident in who they are instead of encouraging them to change:

I think that sometimes, like, they make women, like, conform to what a man wants, instead of what a woman, like, should do to feel confident. And, like, they'll teach like- conform women to what men want instead of, like, empowering women to be like, 'I don't care, I can do what I want and if you don't like it, then that's me. I don't need you if you're not gonna like who I am as a person.'

Although all of the participants felt that some of *Glamour* or *Cosmo*'s advice was problematic or misleading, they still continued to read that advice, explaining that they were attracted to the entertainment value. For example, Cristin recalled reading a *Cosmo* article about what to do with a sporty boyfriend:

Um... it'll say like, 'He's a big football kinda like fan, you know, so when he's watching the game with his friends, just try to like, let him have his little football game and you can make him snacks' and stuff like that. So it's kind of like- in that kind of guy, you have to be his little servant kind of [laughs] and

like... when he's not doing his, like, football thing, you can have him come back and try and get your attention, I guess [laughs].

Although Cristin did not agree with the magazines' advice, she recounted reading and being entertained by it. Fiona described a similar experience reading *Glamour*:

I'd like to think I've gotten more critical [of *Glamour*], but at the same time, I'm still- you know, if I was really, *really* critical I probably just wouldn't even waste the time or the energy. Um. So it's um... I enjoy it for the- the silliness of it, and I've been more cognizant of the fact that, you know, a lot of this stuff is... is um... yeah, just kind of frivolous, but I still like to read it, coz it's entertaining.

While she describes the content as silly and frivolous, Fiona admits that her criticisms of the content do not keep her from reading it, because she finds it entertaining. Emma agreed that while she may not agree with everything in *Cosmo* or *Glamour*, she still reads and enjoys the magazines:

Sometimes [my girl friends and I will] be sitting in a room and we'll be reading it and I'm like, these articles are like- the last three articles I've read were not very good, and like they don't apply to me and I didn't agree with them, but then I just keep going through it... I don't know [laughs]. Cause there's so much I like about it, and there's so much that I don't like about it, that I guess the parts that I like just keep me coming back.

Although the participants did not agree with some ideas espoused by *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, they expressed enjoyment with reading the magazines overall.

As a group, the participants expressed a number of strong critiques of the magazines' content, especially that content which encouraged women to value romantic relationships above anything else, and to engage in prescribed behaviors to attain them through manipulation. Despite these criticisms, none of the participants felt that this content was bothersome or troubling enough to prevent them from reading it. Instead, most of the participants recounted enjoyable experiences reading and laughing at advice they considered to be silly or ridiculous.

4.5.2 Others' effects-based criticisms

The participants used their lighthearted reading experiences as the basis for their responses to critics concerned with the magazines' negative influence. During their interviews, all of the participants discussed criticisms they had heard regarding *Glamour* and *Cosmo* magazines. These critiques came from a variety of sources, including peers, parents, boyfriends and teachers. Typically, the women reported that critics were concerned with the negative influence of women's magazines on their readers, particularly in the areas of sexual behavior and subservience to men. The primary response of the participants was that the critics incorrectly assumed that young women read *Cosmo*, *Glamour* and similar magazines in a serious manner. Two participants, who had taken or were taking college-level courses on women's magazines, also argued that women's magazines were simply part of a larger social force that promoted problematic ideals.

The participants recognized two major critiques of women's magazines, namely that the content influences young women either to be sexually promiscuous or to be submissive to the desires of men. The overwhelming response of the participants to these critiques was that women do not read *Glamour* and *Cosmo* as seriously as their critics imagine. For example, Danni had mixed feelings about the critiques she heard from peers and in academic literature in a women's studies course:

But you have to just like take- when you read *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, take a grain of salt and just enjoy it, don't take it seriously.... I agree with some things [I heard in class], and other things I'm like, just take it lightheartedly, they don't mean any harm.

Danni argued that women should not take the magazines seriously, and that she understands the content to be both lighthearted and well-intentioned. However, she

also acknowledged that there was some truth to the criticisms, which was a common theme among participants.

Several participants said that their boyfriends were critical of *Cosmo* or *Glamour*. For example, when Cristin quoted *Cosmo* to her boyfriend, he expressed his concerns about some of the magazine's advice:

[My boyfriend] just doesn't want to hear, like, the word '*Cosmo*' [laughs]. Coz he thinks that like... 'You're taking the advice seriously and, like, living by it, like all of it?' and not just some reasonable things, like new dates and stuff like that.

Cristin agreed that some of the advice is unreasonable, but stated that she does not take that content seriously. Cristin and other participants had similar responses to their mothers' critiques of *Cosmo*. For example, Cristin discussed her mother's concern with the sexual content:

Yeah, I think [Mom] just thinks it's like- since on the front it just says 'sex' really big, she probably just thinks, 'She's gonna read all that sex stuff and then go out and do it'... so that's probably why she doesn't like that I read it, but since I know that I'm *not* doing it all in there, I read it anyway coz I don't think it's a problem.

While Cristin's mother is concerned about *Cosmo*'s explicit sexual content, Becky's mother has read *Cosmo* and is worried about the magazines' depictions of heterosexual relationships:

Um, but I think my mom's kinda feminist... She's like, 'That's disgusting to me, like, they should, you know, why does it cater to men?' Not men, but, you know- 'Why is this um, all about women pleasing a man?' ... I'd hear it and be like, 'Mom, it's- for me, it's like, yeah, I mean I can kinda see that, definitely, but for me it's like, I take it as it is.' Like, I'm not sitting here thinking, 'Oh my god, OK, I just want to make my man happy.' I have to sometimes say, 'Mom, I'm not taking everything to heart, you know, trust me.' Like, I read it for enjoyment and things like that, but I'm not taking it to heart.'

Both Cristin and Becky responded to their mothers' concerns by arguing that they do not follow all of the magazine's sex and relationship advice. Although they do not

disagree that the content is highly sexual or promotes pleasing men, Becky and Cristin argued that they do not take this content as seriously as their mothers imagine.

A few participants' mothers were not critical of the magazines. Danni's mother read *Cosmo*. Fiona's mother did not read *Cosmo* or *Glamour*, but did not seem to worry about Fiona reading such magazines:

We have- we have a very open relationship in terms of, um, talking about things like that [sex]. So I don't think she ever was worried that, oh, I would be reading something and then run off and do something bad, because I read about it in *Cosmo*.

Although Fiona's mother does not particularly like *Cosmo*, she did not worry about Fiona being influenced by the magazine's content because of their close relationship. Like all of the other participants, Fiona argued that she is not negatively influenced by the sexual content in *Cosmo*. For the participants, the ability to take the magazines lightheartedly was linked to a freedom from negative influence.

4.5.3 Participants' concerns about effects

A few participants expressed this sentiment, yet also described their concerns with the negative influences of women's magazines. Two of the participants, Ally and Danni, had taken or were taking classes that dealt specifically with women's magazines. These participants argued that critics mistakenly assume that readers take women's magazines seriously, but also stated that women's magazines are part of a larger social mechanism that pressures women to behave in certain ways. Ally explained that women's magazines contribute to social pressures to have a successful, heterosexual, romantic relationship:

I think it's a fantasy that's been... pretty much ingrained in 90% of the females' minds since they were like... two. So in *Cosmo*, it's about finding...

The One. And then you move on to your next magazine, and then it's like, *Good Bride* or whatever, and then it's having The One, and so you move on to the next one, and it's like keeping The One.... So it promotes the fantasy of marriage and children and the white picket fence more than any other fantasy that we- we as women should have.

Ally critiqued women's magazines for contributing to what she considers to be a problematic fantasy prevalent among women in American society. Danni stated that women's magazines contribute to the pressure she feels to look good:

Yeah, I think if I stopped reading [*Cosmo* and *Glamour*], I would still feel, like, the pressure, just from everything else. Coz like, not just magazines, like, people, not- yeah, it's like society who does it any it could be like, classmates, who make you feel that way, or... anybody.

Although both Ally and Danni argued that women do not read *Glamour* and *Cosmo* as seriously as critics assume, they also claimed that women's magazines play a role in pressuring women to adhere to certain societal ideals. However, neither woman found this to be problematic. Both women continue to read *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour*, and like the other participants claim that they do not take the magazines' content seriously. Nevertheless, the participants' critiques of and concerns regarding the magazines' content illustrate their perceptions of the magazines as having at least the potential for negative influence.

4.6 Maturity and perspective

Women's magazines, according to the participants, purport to be advice manuals for young women and contain a combination of both realistic and problematic ideas. The fourth sub-theme will present the participants' remarks about the importance of maturity and life experience in understanding women's magazines from the right perspective. As adult readers of *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour*, the participants

explained that they do not take the magazines seriously because they are mature and have a clear self-concept. However, the women argued that younger readers may be at risk for negative influence because they lack the life experience to effectively evaluate the magazines' content. Therefore, all of the participants opined that teenage girls should not read *Cosmo* or *Glamour*.

4.6.1 Maturity and life experience help readers

The participants argued that most adult women do not take women's magazines seriously because they are mature and have sufficient life experience. The importance of this knowledge lies in the ability to discriminate between good or helpful content and bad or harmful content, which varies from person to person, as Fiona explained:

And I think that... the whole grain of salt thing, for me, is about... getting to know yourself and then being able to kind of decipher, um, what you read and not take everything at its, um, face value, because it's going to apply differently to everybody. And so, if you just keep that in mind, then I think you'll be- the reader would be better off than taking everything as absolute fact and this is how it works and this is how it will work for you.

The idea of "knowing yourself" was commonly mentioned as an important prerequisite for interpreting women's magazine content. Danni explained that she is able to decipher the magazines' relationship advice because she has a clear sense of self, "I just think it's, um... knowing who I am and where I stand and what I believe in." Emma also referenced the importance of her personal experiences in being able to recognize useful or applicable content:

I think the maturity level, and just the information of um... just relationships and experiences I've been through, coz I think I can understand when the material applies and when it doesn't.

The participants claimed that most other women their age and older were able to read women's magazines with the same discrimination. As Emma explained, a reader with sufficient experience and self-concept will be able to make sense of the magazines' content in comparison to that knowledge:

And so I think when you're at the college level, if you have a pretty well-established self image, then it's not going to affect you as much. It's still going to have an influence on you, but I think you can read the articles with a grain of salt, and take some that looks good and not let it- just not let it harm you.

This idea was common among the participants; like any other text, they argued, women's magazines are interpreted within the context of one's existing experience. Because women's magazines primarily deal with relationships and womanhood, those experiences are the most pertinent in the interpretation of women's magazine content. Personal experiences allow readers to pick and choose among the content in order to find useful or relevant information, while ignoring or laughing at, thus escaping any harmful influence from the rest.

4.6.2 Teen readers may be at risk

The participants stated that women's magazines contain both good and bad advice, and that it is the role of the reader to utilize their life experiences in order to distinguish one from the other. For this reason, all of the participants believed that teenage girls should not read women's magazines because teens are more likely to take all of the content seriously, even that content which is problematic. Five of the participants read women's magazines as teenagers themselves and described how their interpretations of the content at that time differed from their interpretations today.

Because they have less life experience, teens are more likely to accept all of the magazines' advice as the truth about relationships and about womanhood, as Fiona explained:

I feel like when you're between the ages of 16 and 20 you're pretty, um... you know, easily influenced by what you read. And- and if you haven't been in a lot of relationships and you haven't really, um... gotten to know yourself or gotten to know yourself in relationships then I think it's pretty easy to take- to take that as, like, 'Oh this is how it is,' and you know, 'This is how it's like when you're a grown up and you're a woman,' like, 'This is how things are.' Coz you don't know yet.

A common statement from participants was that women's magazines give the appearance of having the truth about romantic relationships, and teens are more likely to accept that than adults. This statement was supported by a number of stories from participants about how they as teens personally used women's magazines as a source of information about womanhood. Emma felt that *Cosmo* and *Glamour* comprised a significant part of her understanding of what it meant to be a woman:

Coz when I was younger, I read everything in it. It all got absorbed into my brain.... And I really feel like it formed all of my ideas, what I thought was good, and had to do with being a woman, being feminine, being pretty, and how to relate to guys all came from magazines almost.

Fiona explained a similar experience with *Cosmo* as a teen:

Coz I remember seeing one when I was pretty young and thinking, um, you know. 'This stuff is very interesting, coz I haven't- I haven't had experiences with a man like this before, so this is all very interesting to read about.' So, um, I think it- I think it was kind of that discovering... that part in myself, um, as I was growing up.

As teenagers, the participants were attracted to *Glamour* and *Cosmo* because of the sexual content, as Danni describes:

Well, when I was like in high school or like middle school, me and my girlfriends would like sneak *Cosmos* and then look at them, like, 'That's a big girl magazine,' but we would buy it anyways and sneak it and read it during sleepovers and like read all the sexual stuff.

The idea that the magazines were intended for older girls was what primarily attracted most of the participants as teenagers, as Fiona explains:

I- I always kind of thought of [*Cosmo* readers] as kind of, you know, late 20s, early 30s, you know, they're out of college, they are, you know, professionals in one way or another. So that's kind of... so the reader's perception is that it's for someone older, so maybe that's part of the appeal is that- 'Oh my gosh, I'm kind of privy to all the stuff that happens when you're, you know, a woman.'

Since the participants accepted *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as truthful texts providing insights into womanhood and heterosexual, romantic relationships, they accepted the content of the magazines as truth. However, these misconceptions can be outgrown, as Fiona describes:

Once- once you've, um, kind of started to figure things out for yourself, um, then you can see how... parts... just wouldn't be relevant anymore, because you've already figured that out on your own.

Nevertheless, although five of the participants began reading *Cosmo* and/or *Glamour* prior to the age of 18, all of the participants agreed that teenage girls should not read the magazines. The primary concern for the participants was the sexual content, which is especially explicit in *Cosmo*. Emma began reading *Glamour* and *Cosmo* in middle school, but believes that girls in middle or high school shouldn't read women's magazines:

Reading [*Cosmo*] now, I read things that I would not have thought were good for me to read when I was young. And because my mom never talked to be about it, I had a lot of [sexual] things on my mind that I probably shouldn't have been thinking about. And... I think just the... the kind of explicit details that they go into in the magazines aren't really appropriate for a younger audience. So for me, I wouldn't agree with someone... reading it who's younger.

Danni, who also started reading *Cosmo* in middle school, agreed that girls at that age should not be exposed to the magazine's sexual content on the basis that young girls should not be thinking about sex:

Definitely not in middle school. In middle school you're like awkward and you feel pressures from every which way, you're trying to fit in, and they don't need to know about sex stuff at all. Whatsoever.

Cristin expressed a common concern over the effects of the sexual content on younger readers, as opposed to older readers, who are able to utilize it appropriately:

And I think probably younger than 16 probably is not a good time to read it. Not even younger than 18, I think I probably started reading it too early, but... like, now I don't really think it's a big deal. It's kinda just like how you interpret it, like, if you're actually going to go out and use everything that's in there when you're that young, then that's probably not a good idea. But if you're older and you're like in a relationship and stuff, then I don't think it's a big deal to read about that kind of stuff.

Several participants mentioned that as teenagers, they did not feel comfortable discussing these subjects with their parents, and that the magazines were their primary sources of information. As Fiona explains, this lack of resources puts many teen girls in a problematic position:

So if a lot of the information they're getting is this type of information, and they are not at the point in their lives where they can see where some of the, you know, discrepancies might come into play, then, um, then I feel like it could definitely be more harmful, um, for those- those girls and women.

Overwhelmingly, the participants felt that girls younger than 18 should not read *Glamour* or especially *Cosmo* because they are unlikely to have sufficient experience to read the magazines without taking all of the relationship advice and sexual content seriously. Interpreting the content in this way, the participants agreed, might promote sexual promiscuity at a young age and foster unhealthy or incorrect ideas about heterosexual relationships. However, readers of the participants' age and older (18+) were generally considered informed and experienced consumers, who are able to take the magazine "for what it is," utilizing its advice appropriately and appreciating its value as entertainment.

4.7 Chapter conclusion

As a group, the participants were mainly concerned with explaining their readership of women's magazines. The primary theme arising from the data was not taking the magazines too seriously, which seemed to encompass a great deal of the participants' statements during the interviews. Four sub-themes emerged that elucidated different aspects of what it meant to "not take the magazines too seriously." In the first sub-theme, the participants explained that they purchased and read the magazines predominantly for lighthearted entertainment. The second sub-theme established a secondary use for the magazines, as sources of information or utility. In the third sub-theme, the participants explained their own concerns regarding depictions of romantic relationships in women's magazines, but argued that critics who worry about influence overestimate the readers' investment in the material. However, in the fourth sub-theme, the participants described the importance of maturity and life-experience in reading the magazines lightheartedly and therefore argued that teenage girls ought not to read women's magazines.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Chapter introduction

The purpose of this study was to consider the question: How do women understand the romantic content of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour* magazines, and how do they perceive connections between their readership of this content and their personal ideas and behaviors regarding romantic relationships? In order to explore this question from the women's perspectives, interviews were conducted with seven female college-aged readers of *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour*. The previous chapter presented the results of those interviews in an organized set of themes which emerged during the coding process.

One important result of the interviews was that the women did or could not discuss the content or their magazine readership from the analytical perspective that I had anticipated, as discussed in Chapter Four (4.2). The women had difficulty recalling much of the content or explaining their reasons for reading or enjoying *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, particularly in light of their frequently contradictory ideas about these magazines. The participants' comments suggested to me that they had not critically considered these issues prior to the interviews; this factor plays an important role in this chapter's conclusions and implications.

In each of the following four sections, emergent themes reported in Chapter 4 provide data for the interpretation of four separate responses to the research question. Those four responses are comprised of these topics: entertainment/information, evaluation of content, perspective and influence, and managing conflicting feelings. In each of the following sections, these responses will be explained and presented.

Implications for past and future research in light of the particular response conclude each of the four sections.

5.2 Response One: Entertainment and information

The first response to the research question addresses the participants' descriptions of their uses of the content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. The participants explained that they consider these magazines to be media which provide primarily fun, lighthearted entertainment. However, the participants also described instances in which they had utilized advice given in the magazines, although they explained this learning as secondary to entertainment. The women's descriptions suggest that scholars may have created an artificial dichotomy wherein the magazines are either only entertaining or only informative. This section will demonstrate the participants' categorization of the magazines as lighthearted entertainment and address the participants' comments regarding the utility of the magazines' advice. This section will conclude by presenting the response to the research question and by discussing the implications of these statements.

5.2.1 Primarily entertainment

The participants largely described *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as means of fun, lighthearted entertainment, as presented in the first sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.3). This categorization of the magazines as lighthearted, enjoyable reading provides the basis for the participants' claims that they do not take the magazines too seriously and also informs their explanations of reading and making meaning of the magazines'

content. The women explained that the magazines are purchased casually, read lightheartedly, and are in fact intended to be used in this way.

The participants described *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as recurring, spontaneous purchases (4.3.2). Based on the women's descriptions, it seems as though this act of purchasing a magazine is part of the pleasurable experience that the women associate with these magazines. Cristin compared buying *Cosmo* to buying candy, which seems an apt metaphor. Candy is often purchased spontaneously in the checkout aisle; in fact it is adjacent to the women's magazines. As Cristin said, "You don't need it, but then you see it and you want it." Just as someone purchases a familiar brand of candy in anticipation of impending enjoyment, a woman may get pleasure from buying a *Glamour* magazine with the anticipation of an enjoyable experience to come. The blurbs on the cover generate excitement about the content inside. Purchasing a magazine is also like candy in that the women considered magazines to be rewards or indulgences. Especially for college students, who stressed the disparity between the magazines and text books, women's magazines, like candy, are consumed for pleasure.

The participants explained that they choose *Glamour* and *Cosmo* for the magazines' abilities to provide lighthearted entertainment (4.3.1). As Becky stated, "Like, I'm gonna get it of course for the entertainment, um, coz I think some of the articles are fun and um, makes for a good read." Danni agreed, "They just have, like, funny like lighthearted stuff." The participants described reading these magazines to fill time—as something to do when they have nothing to do—indicating that they do not consider the magazines to be particularly important (4.3.3). Additionally, reading

Cosmo and *Glamour* were described as undemanding activities that often go hand-in-hand with other activities like watching television. Several participants contrasted their use of the magazines against their use of textbooks; reading textbooks is considered a mandatory, educational experience, whereas reading *Cosmo* and *Glamour* is enjoyably lighthearted and unserious.

Furthermore, several participants suggested that *Glamour* and *Cosmo* are intended to be read in an unserious fashion (4.3.1). For example, Danni explained:

I think that the- I think the magazine's goal is to... like, give women a lighthearted sense of just like fun tips you- tips and I don't think they want people to take them seriously.

Here Danni implies that her lighthearted view of the magazine is appropriate to the intentions of the magazine's creators. A few participants also expressed the comment that they take *Cosmo* or *Glamour* "for what it is—just a magazine" (4.2). This statement implies that for the participants the magazine format itself recommends a casual and unserious reading. There is also a suggestion in this statement that the participants have the ability to recognize the magazine as an unserious format and utilize it appropriately.

The participants' comments in large part echoed those of the researchers who argued that women's magazines represent a lighthearted and enjoyable experience for female readers (Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; McCleneghan, 2003; Stevens, Maclaran & Catterall, 2007; Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1999). Machin & Thornborrow (2003) argued that the tongue-in-cheek, fantastical style of *Cosmo* encourages women to read it in an unserious fashion.

Correspondingly, several researchers found that women typically read women's magazines incompletely and in conjunction with other activities, suggesting a lack of

attention (Duke, 2002; Hermes, 1995). However, while many scholars argued that, for these reasons, women are unlikely to retain or employ any of the magazines' content, the participants in this study considered some content to be relevant or useful.

5.2.2 Secondly information

Although the participants identified lighthearted entertainment as the primary reason for and result of reading *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, they also acknowledged that some of the content is helpful or informative, as presented in the second sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.4). While some scholars argued that the magazines' lighthearted tone and categorization as entertainment would prevent readers from incorporating the content into their real-life attitudes and behaviors, the participants in this study said that the content is relatable and often helpful. Nevertheless, the participants emphasized that they considered the magazines' utility to be secondary to their entertainment value.

All of the participants stated that they felt that some of the content was both realistic and directly applicable to their lives in several situations. Typically, the women described utilizing the magazines' content in the context of their romantic relationships (4.4.2). The advice the participants used varied significantly. Several women acknowledged the usefulness of the magazines' tips for cheap dates; many women recounted using the magazines' sex tips; a few women described situations in which they had used the magazines to facilitate serious discussions with their significant others. The participants' comments demonstrated the range of the

magazines' advice on romantic relationships and indicated that the women considered it to be applicable under a variety of circumstances.

However, the participants indicated that they fundamentally read the magazines' content for entertainment, not information (4.3.1). Cristin explained that she considers *Cosmo* to be principally entertainment:

So... I think it's kind of just an entertainment, like, not taken seriously. But like a couple things could be, like, a possibility of something you could try or do, I don't know. It's just kind of an entertainment, not really a source of information.

Cristin's statement was typical of the participants' as a group. Although Cristin also stated elsewhere that she had used some of *Cosmo*'s advice, here she categorizes the magazine as chiefly a form of entertainment, and "not really a source of information."

Gillian similarly said:

I mean it's- I think a big part of reading it's to be entertained, just- it's a magazine, it's not your life manual, but um. I think just myself read it, like you kinda get ideas and you learn something new, so.

Gillian stated that while she acknowledged getting ideas and learning new things from *Cosmo*, she does not consider it to be a "life manual," or an important source of educational information about how to live successfully.

This perspective may indicate that previous research which categorized women's magazines as either informative or entertaining falsely dichotomized what is, in reality, a complex comingling of the two. Participants' statements agreed somewhat with those of the scholars who argued that women's magazines are both informative and influential (Currie, 1999, 2001, 2003; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1992; McRobbie, 1991; Ward, 2003). Currie (2003) stated that women's magazines make their content relatable and relevant to female readers by referencing the

common experiences of those women. Furthermore, the participants in this study did apply some of the magazines' advice, as suggested by these scholars. However, unlike Currie's (2001) teen readers, the young women in this study did not feel that the magazines were important sources of social information. Rather, the women stressed their perspective of the magazines as entertainment.

5.2.3 Implications for response one

Participants described *Cosmo* and *Glamour* primarily in terms of their value as lighthearted entertainment yet also acknowledged the magazines' informative or useful natures. The women reported that they do not take the magazines too seriously, describing the magazines' romantic content chiefly as a form of entertainment. Therefore, the participants felt that the content was almost entirely non-influential on their ideas and behaviors. The participants were not able to explain how the functions of entertainment and information worked together, or why they described the magazines as "just entertainment" yet also acknowledged its utility. The participants' perceptions of the magazines' entertainment and informational value could be further explored in future research.

Although the participants agreed that the majority of the content in *Glamour* and *Cosmo* is comprised of advice, the women also stated that they primarily read the magazines for entertainment, which suggests that the participants may find reading advice to be entertaining. Ascertaining the nature of the participants' meaning for "entertainment" was difficult because they had trouble remembering or explaining their use of much of the content, as discussed in Chapter Four (4.2). Because of this

difficulty, future research might engage with women as they are reading a magazine (e.g. Duke, 2002) in order to facilitate discussions on what they are reading and why they find it entertaining. Researchers have propounded various reasons why women might enjoy reading the content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. For example, Hermes (1995) and Stevens (2007) suggested that women may enjoy reading the advice not for its utility but because it allows for some imagined self-transformation, an idea which would be interesting to explore with women while they are reading.

Future researchers also could address participants' potential problems with recall by using one of several other methods. Conducting two interviews with each participant may give the participants more time to consult the magazines or more fully consider the interview questions. Additionally, focus groups, used alone or in combination with interviews, might generate more information as the participants elaborate upon and elicit responses from one another. Since many of the participants described reading the magazines regularly with small groups of girl friends, a different approach to this research might involve witnessing these communication events to observe the participants' comments and interaction styles. This unexplored avenue of research might yield some interesting findings about the role of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* in women's interactions with female friends.

Throughout the interviews, the participants tended to emphasize their lighthearted view of women's magazines while acknowledging their secondary, but significant, use of the magazines as sources of information. This explanation suggests that studies such as McClenaghan's (2003) may not fully explain some readers' use of these magazines. It seems likely that the participants in this study, like those in

McCleneghan's, would disagree with statements such as: "*Cosmo* and *Glamour* establish an image of what a female should be" (2003, p. 321). However, while McCleneghan (2003) concluded that his college-aged participants did not consider *Cosmo* and *Glamour* to be informative, the women in this study do consider some of the magazines' advice to be useful. There is an important distinction here between regarding women's magazines as guides to achieving ideal womanhood and regarding them as sources of entertainment that nonetheless contain some useful advice. This distinction has not been addressed or explored sufficiently to date.

5.3 Response two: Evaluating the content

The second response to the research question appertains to the participants' evaluations of the content in *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. Although the participants identified both positive and negative qualities of the content in these magazines, the women explained that this seemingly troublesome combination did not deter them from reading the magazines or even lessen their enjoyment of the magazines. Instead, the participants described the magazines' content as enjoyable to read as well as relatable and relevant to their interests. This section will illustrate the participants' negative critiques of the content of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, their positive comments regarding this content, and their depictions of the content as relevant and relatable. Finally, this section will present the response to the research question and discuss its implications.

5.3.1 *Bad or unhelpful content*

Participants made several negative critiques of the romantic content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, as described in the third sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.5.1). These critiques were essentially that the magazines exaggerate the importance of romantic relationships and that they give some bad advice on how to get or maintain them. These critiques are reminiscent of assertions made by scholarly researchers regarding the content.

Participants explained that the majority of the content in *Glamour* and *Cosmo* focuses on heterosexual, romantic relationships, and that continual exposure to this type of content heightened their awareness of their relationship status (4.5.1). Similarly, researchers critiqued the heterosexist imperative inherent in these magazines' emphasis on romantic relationships (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Ferguson, 1983). The women in this study also critiqued some of the magazines' advice on how to obtain a romantic relationship (4.5.1). For example, Fiona claimed that the majority of the magazines' relationship tips did not promote healthy, meaningful relationships:

So I see sometimes the flirting tips or some of the, you know, 'get him to do this or that,' that kind of stuff, and it seems like, um... almost like playing a game. And I feel- I feel like someone could look at those things, and I mean if they took that advice very seriously, I feel like they would have a hard time, um, developing relationships that were- where they were being... being supported, being represented.

Much as researchers previously have done, the participants generally censured *Cosmo* and *Glamour*'s tips on using flirting, sexuality, or manipulation to attract or maintain male attention. As Currie (1999) noted, a significant proportion of the content in the magazines is devoted to identifying and promoting such ways to find and attract the right men.

A number of participants also complained that the magazines encourage women to change their attitudes or behaviors to accommodate men (4.5.1). As Ally explained, *Cosmo* tells women to undergo changes to please their male partners and maintain romantic relationships, “It’s, ‘Okay, you’re too confrontational, you’re too much, you need to tone it back.’ And then it’s the adjusting to him to make the relationship work.” Several researchers also disparaged the magazines’ tendencies to portray relationship maintenance work as the sole responsibility of women (Chang, 2000; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Garner, et al., 1998; Prusank, Duran, & DeLillo, 1993; Ward, 2003). Overall, the participants echoed a number of the academics’ serious critiques of the content in women’s magazines, yet participants also identified a number of the contents’ positive attributes.

5.3.2 Good or helpful content

Participants described a number of positive qualities of the content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, as identified in the second sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.4). The women explained that they considered the content overall to be empowering to women and that they thought the sexual content encouraged women to discuss sex openly and to have healthy sexual relationships. Some of these comments directly or essentially contradict the claims previously made by researchers studying the magazines’ content.

The participants explained that overall, they considered the content of *Glamour* and *Cosmo* to be empowering to women (4.4.1). They described the magazines’ “pro-woman” attitudes and emphases on being independent and self-

sufficient, even within the context of a romantic relationship. Danni claimed that *Glamour* empowers women by showing them, “This is how you can help improve who you are or maybe help improve your self-esteem.” Here Danni implies that *Glamour* is a helpful tool for self-improvement, and that the process of reading the magazine and gaining ideas for self-improvement is empowering to women. These claims stand in direct contrast to those of the researchers, who agree largely that the content is disenfranchising to women. Farvid & Braun (2006) argue, for example, that the magazines create a conception of reality that “sexualizes women’s submissiveness and objectification” (p. 296). The stark contrast between these ideas demonstrates a significant disparity between the academic perspective and the perspective of these participants. This disparity appears not only overall but also in sexuality and dating advice.

Although the researchers and the participants in this study discussed similar types of sexual content, they had different ideas about what it signified. Researchers have claimed that the magazines’ content is limited to traditional sex scripts and oriented to male pleasure (e.g. Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008). Conversely, the participants felt that the sexual content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour* positively encouraged them to try new things and be more sexually adventurous (4.4.2). Additionally, the participants expressed the idea that the magazines’ sexual content made sex talk more acceptable. Several participants referenced the fact that, for them, women’s magazines are one of only a few common sources of information about sex, as Ward (2003) also noted. While researchers have described the magazines to be relatively

poor sources of information, the participants instead applauded the magazines' sexual forthrightness and encouragement.

The participants also felt that the magazines provided some good tips and advice on dating and relationships (4.4.2). While some researchers (e.g. Firminger, 2006) lamented that the prevalence of such advice seemed to make relationship work the responsibility of women, the participants felt that it addressed issues they were interested in. In general, the participants were able to identify several important positive qualities of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*; perhaps the most important was that they considered the content to be relevant and relatable.

5.3.3 Relevant and relatable content

The participants explained that they choose to read *Cosmo* and *Glamour* over other women's magazines because they consider the content to be personally relatable and relevant to their interests and desires, as discussed in the second sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.4.1). The women seemed to consider this relevance to be the magazines' most important positive trait. Gillian defended *Cosmo*'s content by saying:

I mean, I think that they put out these articles and everything because it's things that are relevant to the women that read them. So it is- I think that they are things that women want to know more about, or improve on, or just be more informed.

Although Gillian does not agree with all of the advice given in *Cosmo*, she maintained that the magazine discussed those subjects and gave that advice because it was pertinent to the readers.

While the participants held a number of both positive and negative opinions about the magazines' content, they ultimately enjoyed reading all or most of the content in every issue, both good and bad, as primarily entertaining and secondarily informative (4.3). Although bad content might be problematic for those who take the magazines seriously, the participants maintained that they take the magazines lightheartedly and are in fact often entertained by the bad content. All of the participants' descriptions of reading the magazines with friends, for example, involved a laughing critique of the magazines' more outlandish advice (4.3.3). The combination of the participants' comments regarding their enjoyment of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* suggests that the women find the magazines particularly entertaining because of the publications' focuses on subjects they identified as important or interesting: men and relationships, beauty and fashion, and health and fitness.

5.3.4 Implications for response two

Participants described both positive and negative qualities of the magazines' romantic content. The participants seemed to feel that the romantic content was both potentially helpful to women and potentially harmful to women. The bad content, however, was only harmful to readers who took it seriously. Therefore, the participants, who described themselves as not taking the magazines too seriously, did not consider the negative content as a potential harm to themselves, only to other, more naïve readers. Therefore, the women's awareness of the magazines' problematic content did not change their readership or enjoyment of the magazines. The participants seemed to think that they could sort good content from bad and keep the

positive effects while discarding the negative, thus controlling the influence of the magazines on themselves. Furthermore, the participants identified *Cosmo* and *Glamour*'s romantic and particularly sexual content as valuable contributions of these magazines.

This second finding has important implications for considering both past and future research on women's magazine readership. The disparity between the participants' statements and the researchers' claims points to two distinct perspectives on the magazines' content. The view of many researchers has been that the content of magazines like *Glamour* and *Cosmo* is problematic because it depicts a troubling social reality where women fulfill traditional, patriarchal gender roles and value the desires of men above their own. In contrast, the participants in this study largely reported that, although some of the magazines' content was bothersome, the magazines overall were positive, empowering, relevant and realistic. Where scholars have suggested that women's magazines may have the power to negatively shape readers' social constructs regarding romantic relationships, the participants seemed to feel that most of the magazines' content aligned with their existing constructs, suggesting that researchers' constructs may differ significantly from those of the participants. Future study might further examine the relationship between the magazines' content and participants' social constructs regarding romantic relationships by exploring the participants' descriptions of the social constructs they hold presently and their accounts of the origins of those constructs.

Other studies also might consider more closely the process by which participants determine if a magazine's advice is helpful or problematic. This process

may vary depending on whether the women are reading alone or as part of a group.

How does a group of women decide which content is good, bad, or funny?

Additionally, which content do they enjoy reading alone and which content do they enjoy reading in a group? The context may affect the seriousness of the participants' attitudes regarding the content. Finally, it would be interesting to discover how women explain their enjoyment of reading advice they consider to be bad, and how they compare that to the enjoyment they experience reading good advice.

5.4 Response three: Perspective and influence

The third response to the research question relates to the participants' responses regarding the possible influences of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* on readers. Although the participants were aware of others' concerns about the effects of women's magazines on readers, the women argued that these critics both overestimated readers' investment in the magazines and underestimated readers' abilities to discern between good and bad content. This argument suggests that the participants view their own perceptiveness as an important part of utilizing the magazines appropriately and avoiding negative influence. This section will examine the participants' explanations of their perspective of the magazines, the women's descriptions of influence as a conscious decision, and their categorization of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as adult magazines. This section concludes with a discussion of the implications of these statements.

5.4.1 Lighthearted perspective

As explored in the third sub-theme of Chapter Four, all of the participants were aware of and described both personal and social critiques they had heard of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* (4.5.2). Most of these participants interpreted these critiques to be based upon the magazines' explicit sexual content. Several participants also expressed an awareness of negative critiques based on the magazines' depictions of gender roles, although the women seemed less sure of what those critiques were about. The participants' responses to the critics' claims implied two primary findings. First, the participants felt that critics overstated these women's attachment to the magazines. Second, the women seemed to have some resentment toward the critics in their own lives because the women perceived the critics as questioning the women's intelligence as readers.

In their descriptions of criticisms they had heard of women's magazines, the participants portrayed the critics as people who took the magazines seriously (4.5.2). For example, Danni recounted her thoughts about the critics in her women's studies course, "But you just have to like take- when you read *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, take a grain of salt and just enjoy it, don't take it seriously." Danni seemed to feel that these critics read the magazines too seriously and also that the critics assumed other readers would take the magazines seriously as well. Becky's mom also read *Cosmo* critically, and subsequently Becky interpreted her mother's concerns about the content as implying that Becky read the magazine in a serious or literal manner, to which Becky responded, "'Mom, I'm not taking everything to heart, you know, trust me.' Like, I read it for enjoyment and things like that, but I'm not taking it to heart."

The participants seemed to think that women's magazine critics were overestimating readers' attachment to the magazines. As readers, the participants felt that they were not extremely attached to the magazines or invested in the content. Therefore, they dismissed the critics' concerns by restating their detachment and arguing that their readership was typical of most women's magazine readers. Overall, the participants' responses to critics implied that since they did not take the magazines seriously, there was no harm in reading them. This perspective aligns with that of the scholars who argued that women's lighthearted readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* signifies a lack of attachment to, and subsequent non-influence by their content.

5.4.2 Conscious influence

Like these scholars, most of the participants did not address the idea that the magazines' content could unconsciously influence their significant ideas about social reality. Currie (2003) and others have suggested that, in fact, readers' perceptions of mere enjoyment may mask their induction into the magazines' constructions of social reality. However, most of the participants did not address unconscious influence as a possibility. Two participants, Becky and Fiona, described a subconscious process where *Cosmo's* sex tips unthinkingly become part of their sexual knowledge (4.4.2). But neither Becky nor Fiona seemed to feel that this process was problematic or challenging in any way to the idea that overall, their perceptiveness as readers prevented them from being unconsciously influenced by the magazines' content (4.5.1). Rather, most of the participants each expressed the idea that their mature

perspectives allowed them to safely read the magazines' content and purposefully choose which, if any, advice they would enact.

The participants' conceptions of an overt cause-effect relationship influenced their interpretations of others' concerns. Accordingly, the participants related critics' concerns in a simplistic manner (4.5.2). For example, Cristin described her mother's worries about *Cosmo*, "Since on the front it just says 'sex' really big, she probably just thinks, 'She's gonna read all that sex stuff and then go out and do it.'" Cristin portrayed her mother's thought process as simple-minded and responded with humor. Cristin, like several of the other participants, seemed amused yet exasperated by her mother's concerns and argued for her own ability to read women's magazines without being influenced by the content. For these women, the clear assumption was that if they were influenced by the content, they would know about it, and since they did not recognize any influence, they felt confident in dismissing the concerns of the magazines' critics.

5.4.3 Teen readers

The participants explained that they, like most other adult women, do not take *Glamour* and *Cosmo* seriously, based on the perspective gained as a result of maturity and life experience, as discussed in the fourth sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.6). This perspective, it was implied, allows women to see these magazines clearly for what they are, lighthearted reading material with a limited applicability. This vision of women's magazines bears a significant resemblance to the claims of several researchers (e.g. Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). However, while those researchers

focused on the qualities of the material that suggested an unserious reading, the participants, not overly analytical of the magazines' content, argued that it was their maturity and perspective that allowed this lighthearted interpretation (4.6.1). This argument implies that nothing about the magazines necessarily tells readers whether or not the content should be taken seriously, other than its status as a publication. Rather, it is up to the reader to decide whether or not the content is valuable or sound.

Adopting this perspective, the participants believed teen readers are at risk of taking the magazines seriously (4.6.2). The four participants who had read *Cosmo* or *Glamour* as teens all expressed that they had taken the magazines seriously at that time. As Emma explained:

Coz when I was younger, I read everything in it. It all got absorbed into my brain.... And I really feel like it formed all of my ideas, what I thought was good, and had to do with being a woman, being feminine, being pretty, and how to relate to guys all came from magazines almost.

Emma described the magazines' influences as extremely powerful in her teen life, influencing if not forming her ideas about relationships, beauty, and femininity.

Emma's is a strong statement, but it was echoed by the other three participants as well. Clearly these participants felt that these magazines have the potential for enormous influence over teen readers. Although these participants felt that they were able to eventually grow out of this influence, they also described the potentially harmful effects of the content on young women. These participants all stated that it would be better for teen girls not to be exposed to the explicit sexual information and problematic relationship content in *Glamour* and *Cosmo*.

Interestingly, although these participants expressed concerns for themselves as teenaged readers of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, the women did not address the idea that

they might someday have similar concerns for themselves as college-aged readers. Rather, the women seemed to feel that they had reached the level of maturity where they could understand *Cosmo* and *Glamour* exactly as the magazines should be understood. The women explained that, as teenagers, they took the magazines too seriously and as they grew up, they developed the appropriate perspective. The participants did not suggest that as they continued to mature, they would continue to view the magazine differently.

5.4.4 Implications for response three

Participants responded to others' concerns about the effects of women's magazines by arguing that they (the participants) are perceptive and mature consumers of these magazines. The women said that they felt that they were aware of and consequently not influenced by any problematic content, which suggests that the participants view influence as the result of a reader's conscious decision to allow influence to occur. The participants' statements point to their emphases on the ability and responsibility of each reader to perceive and utilize the magazines appropriately.

The participants' ideas about potential reader influence have some important implications. Overall, the participants were confident that their lighthearted perspectives of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* prevented them from being unconsciously influenced by the magazines' content, and they responded dismissively to critics who claimed otherwise. For several participants their mothers were important critics, therefore, an appropriate study would examine the interactions between young women readers of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* and their mothers who disapprove of the

magazines, to consider the comments of both parties regarding the magazines' content. Future study might explore the question of influence with both mothers and daughters.

The participants expressed concern for those who took the magazines seriously, most notably teenagers, whom the women perceived as young and naïve. This concern seems to suggest that the participants perceive *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as a form of adult entertainment. One study might ask women to identify in a magazine that content she perceives as potentially harmful for teenagers. The identification of this content and explanation of its potential bad effects could shed light on the messages female readers do or do not find socially problematic and facilitate further discussions about the impact of reading such content on adult readers as well.

Additional research might explore solely the question of influence, especially the idea of unconscious or subconscious influence. This study sought to gather and explore the participants' ideas about their readership, but another study might challenge participants to examine their assumptions about the nature of the magazines' influence. Researchers could also ask the participants to imagine what they might think of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* in ten or twenty years; would the women anticipate having additional concerns about the content or its influence, and what would those concerns tell us about the women's perceptions of the magazine today? The participants in this study seemed to indicate that *Cosmo* and *Glamour* were appropriate for adults. However, several of their mothers did not like the magazines. Do the participants anticipate having these feelings when they are their mothers' ages,

and do they believe that the magazines are appropriate or relevant for all adults, or just young adults?

5.5 Response four: Managing conflicting feelings

The fourth response to the research question pertains to a few participants' descriptions of their conflicting feelings regarding *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, as discussed in the third sub-theme of Chapter Four (4.5.3). Although two participants each learned and accepted a seemingly serious criticism of women's magazines, they continued to read these magazines. These participants' comments suggest that both women have some way of managing their feelings that allows them to continue reading the magazines, albeit perhaps with some sense of doubt or guilt. This section will illustrate the participants' statements regarding conflicting feelings and discuss the implications of this finding.

5.5.1 Incorporating academic knowledge

At the time of the interviews, two of the participants, Ally and Danni, either had taken or were taking college-level courses that discussed the negative impacts of women's magazines like *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. While Ally and Danni both stated that they do not take the magazines seriously, they also argued that the magazines promote a number of problematic social ideals (4.5.3). Danni said that she feels pressure to look a certain way from a variety of sources, including women's magazines. While she acknowledged the role women's magazines play in creating her social construct of a physical ideal, Danni emphasized the omnipresence of these

types of pressures in society, “I think if I stopped reading [*Cosmo* and *Glamour*], I would still feel, like, the pressure, just from everything else” (4.5.3). Furthermore, she said that critics should think of the magazines lightheartedly because “they don’t mean any harm” (4.5.2). Therefore, although Danni finds that women’s magazines contribute to her feelings of insecurity regarding her physical appearance, she believes that the magazines are not created with malicious intent and also that they are no worse than any number of other social forces.

Ally similarly critiqued *Cosmo* for promoting “the fantasy of marriage and children and the white picket fence more than any other fantasy that we—we as women should have” (4.5.3). However, she also attributed that fantasy to other women’s magazines, other media, and society in general. And, although she finds this fantasy distasteful and complained that reading *Cosmo* makes her feel bad about not having a boyfriend, she continues to read it. What both Ally and Danni seemed to be saying was that *Cosmo* and *Glamour* have the ability to promote negative feelings about their bodies or relationship statuses, but that many other things also have that ability. The social emphases on an ideal female beauty and successful, romantic relationships are widespread; therefore, the participants felt that perhaps women’s magazines had been unfairly singled out as the worst perpetrators and unjustly criticized.

It is interesting to note that both Ally and Danni mentioned learning about women’s magazines in a scholarly environment, which was a point of departure from the other participants (4.5.3). Danni, who was taking a women’s studies course on body image at the time of her interview, discussed what she had learned in this class

about influence of magazines and other social forces on women's body issues. While Ally did not refer to specific coursework during her interview, her critique of women's magazines is reminiscent of the positions put forth by a number of social scholars (e.g. Evans, 1991). Thus the critiques of both Danni and Ally seem to have academic roots. It is possible, therefore, that Danni's and Ally's contradictory comments regarding the potentially negative influences of these women's magazines result from their personal struggles to reconcile their ongoing magazine readership with their newly acquired academic knowledge.

Danni, in particular, described studies she had read that she construed as true and explained that her women's studies course had opened her eyes to the social pressures regarding body image. Since *Cosmo* and *Glamour* undisputedly contain a large number of pictures of beautiful women and depictions of women in relationships, it is relatively straightforward to accept the premise that the magazines promote these ideals. However, as Danni pointed out, many other societal forces also promote these ideals. Therefore, Danni concludes that she could stop reading women's magazines, but she would continue to feel the pressure from other sources, so she chooses to continue engaging in an activity that she finds enjoyable, albeit with a new awareness of the magazines' content. Danni's acceptance of the inevitability of this social pressure seems to prevent her from seriously challenging women's or even her own readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. Instead, she chooses to live with a seemingly burdensome awareness of the negative pressures she describes as present in virtually every part of her social world.

However, both Danni and Ally seemed undecided about whether or not this type of critical awareness could allow them to read women's magazines without feeling bad (4.5.3). Both women referenced the fact that their awareness of the magazines' pressures did not prevent them from feeling the effects of those pressures. However, each woman seemed to feel that they still had control over the magazines' other negative influences. For example, although Danni expressed frustration at not being able to resist the body image pressures, she also said in another statement that she was able to navigate the magazines' sometimes misleading relationship content because she has adequate self-confidence and life experience, "I know... who I am and where I stand and what I believe in" (4.6.1). This contradiction seems to indicate Danni's difficulty reconciling her new academic theories with her existing ideas about her own ability to read and enjoy women's magazines without harm.

5.5.2 Implications for response four

These two participants' awareness of academic criticisms of women's magazines altered their views of these magazines but did not change the reading habits of the participants. These participants, Ally and Danni, seem to manage their conflicting ideas about the value of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* by considering the magazines within an inescapable, larger social context. In such a context, these magazines could be viewed as relatively minor contributors to social pressures regarding body image and romantic relationships. Therefore, the participants may perceive their readership of the magazines as a relatively harmless but still enjoyable activity. This is the only rationale the participants gave for continuing to read the

magazines, despite these serious critiques. It seems that the magazines are highly compelling, for reasons these two women—and in fact all of the participants—were not able to identify or explain.

The fourth finding suggests a number of different areas of potential future research. Clearly, the participants in this study who had taken a class that directly addressed the negative influences of *Glamour* and *Cosmo* had a greater awareness of those influences and more conflicting feelings about their readership as a result. A future study might focus on women enrolled in appropriate courses to talk with them explicitly about their management and incorporation of their academic knowledge into their existing ideas about women's magazines. Additionally, Ally and Danni's continuing readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour* is intriguing, considering their statements regarding what they perceived as true evidence of the magazines' negative influences. Future research might consider what types of evidence women would accept, and what kind or how much evidence would be necessary to convince a woman to stop reading *Glamour* or *Cosmo*, if one wished to do so. Accordingly, one might also study readers' explanations of why they enjoy reading these magazines, as previously suggested. Also, Ally and Danni both stated that they considered women's magazines to be only one part of a larger social mechanism that contributed to body image and relationship pressures. Future research could ask women to consider what role they perceive magazines as playing in this social mechanism as compared to its other parts and to discuss their management of these pressures.

5.6 Conclusion

Analysis of the themes that emerged from the participants' statements yielded four premises which inform the study of women's magazine readership. These responses to the research question reflect the primary theme of the women's comments, as discussed in Chapter Four (4.2), not taking the magazines "too seriously." These responses reflect the participants' emphases on their own perceptiveness and agency. The women argued that they, like many other readers, perceive *Cosmo* and *Glamour* appropriately as magazines that are not meant to be taken too seriously. The participants also expressed the idea that this perspective allowed them to distinguish good content from bad and thereby prevent negative influence. The participants' assertions of their own agency regarding the effects of the magazines' content seemed to function as a way for those participants to manage what were in many cases dissonant or conflicting feelings regarding both the magazines' content and its influence on readers, as discussed in the following four responses.

First, the participants described *Cosmo* and *Glamour* as means of lighthearted entertainment, explaining that they do not take the magazines "too seriously" for this reason. Because of this, the women argued that the magazines' content was largely unrelated to their ideas and behaviors; however, the women also identified situations in which they utilized the magazines' advice. The participants were not able to explain their contrary descriptions of the magazines as both non-influential, that is, "just entertainment," and also sources of useful information. While this contradiction disturbs some researchers and can be viewed as problematic, these women did not

view it problematically and interestingly, that dichotomy by itself creates yet another layer of inquiry with regard to this topic.

Second, the participants seemed to feel that the romantic content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour* was potentially both helpful and harmful to readers. However, the participants excluded themselves from this potential harm by referencing their abilities to recognize and discard any bad or problematic content. Not only did the women's awareness of problematic content not prevent them from reading the magazines, the participants identified the magazines' romantic and sexual content overall as an important factor that made these magazines more relevant and compelling than other women's magazines. While the women's positive characterizations of the romantic content represent a significant departure from the perspectives of many researchers, the women's social constructs regarding romantic and particularly sexual relationships constitute an intriguing area of future research.

Third, the participants demonstrated an awareness of others' concerns regarding the effects of women's magazine readership. However, the participants responded by arguing that they are mature and perceptive consumers of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*, and that they are therefore unaffected by the magazines' negative content. The participants' statements indicated that they considered any influence to be the result of either a reader's inability to perceive the magazines in an appropriately unserious manner or a reader's decision to consciously accept the magazines' advice. The women's acceptance of their readership of potentially harmful content is likely to be problematic for scholars like Currie (2003) who hypothesize negative influence as

occurring unconsciously. Accordingly, future inquiry might challenge women to examine their assumptions regarding their own agency as readers.

Fourth, two participants' academic awareness of criticisms of women's magazines altered their perceptions but not their readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. These women described the magazines as but one component of an inescapably large social mechanism that contributes to the pressures women feel regarding body image and romantic relationships. Therefore, the participants stated that they continued to read the magazines, although aware of the publications' role in contributing to those pressures in their own lives. Understanding how these women measure the magazines' pressures against others and where and how those other pressures emerge is a critical piece toward understanding how the women function with the contradiction.

These premises demonstrate significant points of advancement in the scholarly knowledge of women's readership of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*. This study expanded upon previous research by exploring the perceptions of college-aged readers of these women's magazines. Where preceding interview-based studies have largely considered the perceptions of teenaged readers of these and similar magazines, this study demonstrates that these young adult women have developed distinctive perspectives of the content in *Cosmo* and *Glamour* and its significance. These perspectives are unique from those presented in previous research and suggest that, as these young women grew older, they report that they are able to integrate knowledge that forces them to accommodate more complex or even contradictory ideas about women's magazines and their own readership. These women conclude

that their increasing knowledge affords them the abilities to discriminate among topics in these magazines; further, they conclude that their abilities to discriminate reduces or even eliminates adverse influence effects these magazines have on the women's social constructs. The participants' statements suggest that their perceptions of their own agency in controlling the magazines' influence allow them to manage a number of seemingly problematic contradictions in their ideas about the magazines' content and its potential effects on readers. This study indicates future research that investigates and elaborates on these perceptions and this process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Listserv Recruitment Email

Description: Recruitment email distributed to the student email listserv of the university's speech communication department.

Dear Student,

Are you a woman AND do you read *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour*?
OR... do you know someone who does?

I am a graduate student here at Oregon State, looking for women to participate in a study about magazine readership. Participants will take part in an interview that will last approximately one hour.

If you are a woman (aged 18+) who has read at least six issues of either *Glamour* and/or *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the last year, and you are interested in contributing to communication research, please contact me at **weaverstudy@hotmail.com**.

Thank you for forwarding this email to others who might be interested.

Participation is completely voluntary but greatly appreciated!

Thanks in advance for your help,
Shauna Weaver

Appendix B: Recruitment Script

Description: Recruitment script presented orally in speech communication courses.

Hi, my name is Shauna Weaver, and I'm a graduate student in the MAIS program here at Oregon State. I'm currently looking for women to participate in a study about magazine readership. Participants will take part in an interview with me that will last approximately one hour.

If you are a woman, 18 or older, who has read at least six issues of either *Glamour* and/or *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the last year, and you are interested in contributing to this research, please write your email address on the sign up sheet that is circulating. If I get your address, I will send you an email with more information, and we can go from there.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and not at all related to this class. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your grade.

Thank you for your attention, and have a good day.

Appendix C: Introductory Email

Description: Informational email sent to prospective participants.

Dear _____,

Thank you for expressing an interest in this study!

If you choose to participate, you will take part in a one-on-one interview with me (the Student Researcher), which will last approximately one hour. This interview will take place in a study room at the Valley Library (on OSU campus), unless we can find another location that is more convenient to you.

During the interview, I will ask you questions about things you have read in *Glamour* and/or *Cosmopolitan* and about your personal ideas and experiences. Although I will ask you to describe personal information, you will not be required or expected to divulge anything you wish to keep private.

The interviews will be audio-recorded to help ensure accuracy, but these recordings will be kept private. Your participation in this study and any information you disclose will be kept strictly confidential.

The goal of this research is to explain the ways women describe and make use of the content they read in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*. This research will contribute to a large body of work in the social sciences that deals with women's magazines by presenting new information: the reader's perspective—your perspective!

If you are interested in contributing to this research, I am interesting in hearing your point of view. Please respond to this email by providing 5 possible meeting times over the next two weeks. Please identify 5 different 1-hour blocks you might have available in your schedule when we might meet and talk.

When I receive your email, I will select one of your suggestions and return an email to you promptly so we can set a date.

Again, participation is completely voluntary but greatly appreciated!

Thank you,
Shauna Weaver

Appendix D: Confirmation email

Description: Email sent to participants with whom a meeting time had been previously established, to remind them of their scheduled interview.

Dear _____,

This is a reminder that we have an appointment at [date, time and specific location] for a one-hour interview. [Directions to specific location.]

In this interview, we will discuss two things in particular:

1. Your perception of the romantic content in *Cosmopolitan* and/or *Glamour*
2. Your ideas about whether or how this content may be related to your thoughts and behaviors.

Prior to your interview, you may choose to think about these things (although you are not required to). You may look through issues of these magazines if you'd like, but please do not discuss the topic with anyone else. I am most interested in hearing what *you* think.

You do not need to bring anything to the interview, but you may bring issues of *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour* if you feel it is helpful or relevant to do so.

Please contact me if you have any questions; otherwise, I will see you at the interview.

Thank you,
Shauna Weaver

Appendix E: Reminder Email

Description: Email sent to all of the women who signed up to participate, thanking past participants and reminding non-participants about the study.

Hi ladies,

Thanks to all of you who participated-- I had a great time talking to each of you. It's been so interesting to hear everyone's perspective, and fun to get to know y'all.. this is a great group!

I'm still looking for more participants, so if you have any friends who are interested (or if you're on this list but haven't talked to me yet), you can contact me at this email address.

Thanks again, you guys are the best!
Shauna

Appendix F: Informed Consent

Description: Document of Informed Consent, presented to and signed by each of the participants prior to the interview.

Project Title: **Women's individual accounts of the romantic content in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* and its relationship to their lived experiences.**

Principal Investigator: **Judy Bowker, Speech Communication**

Student Researcher: **Shauna Weaver, MAIS**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to explore women's perceptions of the relationship-related content in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*, especially as those perceptions are related to each woman's own personal experiences. To accomplish this research, I will be conducting a series of interviews with women like you who regularly read at least one of these magazines. This study will give us a deeper understanding of how women think about and utilize the content of these magazines. The results will be used in a student thesis. This project is significant because it will contribute a new type of information to the existing body of research on women's magazines, information that could be of interest to magazine readers, producers, and researchers.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to participate in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. Please feel free to ask about the research, about your rights as a participant, and about possible risks or benefits—any questions you have about participating.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you are a woman over 18 years of age who has read at least six issues of either *Glamour* or *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the last year.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with me (the Student Researcher). This interview will take place in a reserved study room at the Valley Library, except in those cases where this location is not convenient to you; in those instances, a similarly private space in a public building will be selected. During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions intended to stimulate your thinking about your experiences with *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines. The

interview will be audio recorded, although I will be the only person to ever hear the recording. Your name will not appear anywhere in the finished research paper, and I will keep both your name and any information you reveal confidential.

The interview will take approximately one hour. After the interview, I will ask you to pass on information about this study to other women you know who may be interested in participating. The referral is completely voluntary; if you choose not to refer another person to this study, you may still participate yourself. Your decision not to offer a referral will not preclude you from participating in this study. If you do refer someone, I ask that you refrain from discussing the specific nature of our interview with her.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with your interview in this study include loss of privacy or embarrassment in discussing personal information with the investigator. To minimize these risks, any and all information will be kept strictly confidential and physical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet on campus. Participants will be encouraged to maintain a level of self-disclosure that suits their comfort level; you will not be required to share information you elect to conceal.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

Although we do not know if you will benefit from being in this study, the potential benefits might be an increased awareness of the ways you reconcile the material you read with your own attitudes and behaviors. You also may increase your levels of analysis of your own meaning-making, analytical, and decision-making processes. If this research is published, other people might benefit from reading research participants' anonymous ideas and the analyses of those ideas. In addition, this study will contribute to research regarding the relationship between women's readership of certain magazines and those women's personal experiences, thus contributing to conclusions about the risks or benefits women may be exposed to by reading these magazines.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. To help protect your confidentiality, I will keep physical data in a locked cabinet on campus and virtual data on a password-protected computer at the same location.

If the results of this project are published, an alias will be used and your name will not be printed.

Audio/Video Recording/Photographs

One mandatory aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of your voice during the interview process. These recordings are being made only for the investigator's reference during the research process and to ensure accuracy. Only the Student Investigator will have access to these recordings, which will be stored on a password-protected campus computer. They will be deleted following the conclusion of this research project.

DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you choose to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to participate. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. You are free to choose not to respond to any questions you would prefer not to answer. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers will discard any information you have already disclosed.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project or would like a copy of any of your information at any point, please contact: **Shauna Weaver, weaverstudy@hotmail.com**. You can have a copy of the transcripts of your interview up until the conclusion of the study (approximately January 1, 2010), or a copy of the completed thesis at any later date.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Appendix G: Interview protocol

Description: Protocol used to guide the interview process.

Getting acquainted

1. Do you read *Glamour* or *Cosmopolitan* or both?
2. How long have you been reading ___?
3. **Can you tell me briefly why you read ___? (*content, benefits, experience*)**

About the reading

4. **Describe for me what kind of romantic content you find most often when you read _____.**
5. What other romantic content do you read about in _____?
6. How does ___ talk about romantic relationships?
7. What kinds of things do you usually see in ___ about relationships?

The reading & the lived experiences

8. **Now that we've discussed the romantic content of ____, can you describe for me how you see that content relative to your own romantic experiences?**

Ideas similar

- a. Can you tell me a story about a time when your experiences/ideas seemed similar to something you read in ___?
- b. Have you ever read something about relationships in ___ that you related to?
- c. Can you give me an example of a time when you used the advice you read in ___?
- d. Does ___ do a good job of describing things realistically?

Ideas not similar

- e. Can you tell me a story about a time when your experiences/ideas seemed notably dissimilar to something you read in ___?
- f. Have you ever read something about relationships in ___ that you did not relate to?
- g. Can you give me an example of advice you read in ___ that you did not or would not use?
- h. Do you think ___ describes things unrealistically?

9. Do you think that women who read ___ have a different perspective on romantic relationships than those who don't read ___? Why or why not?

10. **Do you think that reading ___ has changed your perspective?**

General Prompts

Can you give me an example?

Can you tell me a story about that?

Can you tell me more about that?

What would that look like?

If you could explain it, what would you say?

Earlier you said ____, can you tell me more about that?

Why do you say that?

What about someone you know?

Appendix H: Participant feedback email

Description: Email sent to participants to ask for feedback on the Results section.

Hi _____,

I hope your Spring term is going well so far!

Attached is a draft of the Results chapter of my thesis... it's still a work in progress, but I wanted to give you a chance to read what I've been working on. Your code name is _____.

This kind of research is really a collaboration between me, the researcher, and you, the participant. While ultimately I am the one to draw conclusions about the things that all the participants have said, I want to make sure that I correctly interpreted the things that you said during your interview. If you are interested, I would love to have your feedback on this chapter. I've highlighted your name to help you find comments regarding you specifically.

If you are interested, please read the attached file and get back to me this week. I'm sorry for the tight timeline, but I have a looming deadline! We can meet up for a few minutes at your convenience to discuss any feedback you have. Or if everything looks good, just let me know!

Thanks for your help! I hope you're having a great term.

Best,
Shauna