Semiotic Analysis

*Shape* Magazine is one of the most popular and sought after women’s magazines in society today. It is sold all over the United States as one of the top fitness, health, and beauty magazines in modern, American culture. It provides women with helpful advice in leading a healthy lifestyle while offering fashion and beauty tips to give women an extra edge in maintaining a perfect, physical image. *Shape* magazine features many advertisements for exercise, fashion, make-up, and even health facilities across the nation. In the November 2008 issue of *Shape* magazine, an advertisement for *Equinox Fitness Facility*, a health club with branches in major cities across the country, is featured on a one page layout. The ad showcases four people, three women and one man, who are quite simply considered physically perfect according to modern, American culture.

Signifiers in the advertisement are shown in many different facets of imagery. The focal point is the couple in the center. The female is sitting on a cement bench that has ancient, Roman influences. Her hair is long, dark, and luscious and she is strikingly beautiful. She is leaning back with her weight on arm that is arched and positioned so delicately. Her skin is perfect and her features are flawless. She is wearing nothing except a white bra and panties with white high heeled shoes. The man standing over her is stunning, as well. His physique is muscular and masculine. He assumes the role of “tall, dark, and handsome” as if it
originated from him. He is only wearing a pair of black, men’s underwear briefs. He is standing over the female and they are gazing into each other’s eyes quite passionately. While the intimacy from this image captures the audience, he holds a stem of grapes over her. His position over her body and the way she eats from him indicates that he is in complete control over her and she is emotionally and physically submissive to him. The two women, positioned on either side of the couple, are physically beautiful and perfect, as well. However, unlike the couple in the center of the image, they appear distraught and unhappy with their current situation.

These two women have long, wavy hair and they wear similar clothing to the leading lady in the middle. Unlike her, they wear gold apparel and the style wraps around the bodies, still just as sexually explicit. The clothing suggests influences from ancient Rome. They both stand in high heels but the posture is lacking. They appear to carry looks of distress and discomfort in their faces. On their bodies, they have black markings on the face, breasts, legs, abdomen, and thighs. These patterns are what plastic surgeons mark on patient bodies before cosmetic procedures are performed to help guide the doctor as he/she performs the transformative operation. Their mood is parallel to the background and environment of the image.

With a dark background, the environment is mysterious. The floor is made of brick and what little furniture is shown is dated. In the background, there is a statue of an ancient Greek being, physically perfect, as well. A bouquet of red flowers is sitting in the distance placed in a dated silver and gold vase. The text written in the advertisement states “Happily Ever” in bold, scripture font and beneath it, the text continues to state “what’s your after?” in smaller, thinner font. The company logo is “It’s not fitness. It’s
life.” The advertisement is unique and suggestive in many fashions because it combines historical ideals and images with modern interests.

Syntagmatic signifiers in the advertisement, such as the flawless couple in the center and the grieving women on either side, work together to enhance one main idea that commonly appears in modern culture – our desire to be physically beautiful and perfect. The advertisers are blatantly suggesting that in order to achieve optimal physicality and happiness, similar to the content couple in the image, one must become a member of the *Equinox Health Facility*. The gym is a facility for women and the advertisement imposes on women’s desire and quest to become beautiful and perfect. Not only will one achieve physical perfection but she will also gain the attention of a strong, attractive, masculine man. However, the two women aside from the leading lady, who engage in surgical, cosmetic procedures, will consistently strive for outwardly perfection that they are desperately starving for. In a society where plastic surgery is so common and acceptable, it is reasonable for a health club to use negative signs for cosmetic surgery in order to gain more interest in exercise and fitness.

The people in the image are without a doubt, outwardly beautiful and perfect. They have porcelain skin and their bodies ignite a glowing effect. They appear static and statue like. The way their bodies are portrayed allows signifiers to point to a timeless and even vain, distant society that has influenced modern culture in many ways. Thus,
connotation begins to occur. The figures point to ancient Roman culture. The ancient statue in the background and the fruit the male figure holds over his female subject’s mouth begin to show the audience the influence of this ancient culture.

Ancient Roman and Greek society and culture are known for vanity and emphasis on physical human perfection. This is indicated in artwork, literature, and sexual explicitly. The figure to the left is significant in understanding Greek culture. This woman was then and still is today considered physically perfect. Her figure is flawless and feminine with perfectly shaped breasts, waist, and legs. Certainly a vain society that placed major emphasis on physical attributes, they often produced images that are considered too beautiful for the average person. Meaning the images they created were a figment of what was considered to be flawless and not what the actual person truly looked like.

As similar to modern, American culture, we are consistently handed images in television, magazines, billboards, and advertisements that often times portray a person with the utmost physical beauty that an average person simply cannot attain, thus this ideology is unachievable and unattainable.

Greek and Roman cultures also had a high tolerance for sexuality especially targeted towards giving men more sexual freedom than women. Men were far more sexually promiscuous than women, again similar to society today even though women have more sexual freedom than ever before.
When a woman acts sexually free in public she is usually brought down to the level of a prostitute and considered used and impure by her fellow peers, however, men are typically allowed to get away with the same actions. Men were often times given permission to have affairs with other women while they were married to someone else. Of course, this was forbidden for women in ancient society. Like the advertisement, the male image in the center denotes masculine authority, freedom of sexuality, and control, exactly like Greek and Roman cultures. The women are starved for his attention and he can clearly have either one he chooses to pursue. The women who do not have his attention or affection will take whatever necessary measures to gain his attention, even if that entails drastically changing their bodies through surgery.
It is important to consider the audience this advertisement was meant for. Given the background that it came from a women’s health and fitness magazine, it was meant for women to see. Typically, women who purchase this type of literature are in the age bracket of 20s to early 30s. She is usually single and career oriented. She primarily focuses on finding her identity and the image she allows people to see of her is one she puts a large amount of time and effort into. It is representative of her accomplishments, ideas, and ambitions. She is also interested in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and looking her best usually takes precedence over many other aspects of her life. This is the product of media that says women are judged primarily on their physical attributes rather than personal accomplishments. The advertisement speaks volumes to vulnerable women who fit the category of the target audience. She longs to be beautiful and she longs for the attention of a perfect man to come to rescue her. Hence, the literal text that states, “Happily ever… what’s your after?” Women are certainly not a stranger to fairy tales and they are commonly presented with a “happily ever after” theme that, in essence, imposes upon a woman’s strong desire for a male rescuer. However, this advertisement takes one step further and allows the modern woman to choose the happily ever after she desires but the images suggest that male affection is essential in maintaining life-long perfection and happiness, essentially, completion.

As a young woman, I am easily able to identify with the advertisement. I am drawn into the emphasis of beauty and even the elegance the primary female assumes. I fit the category the advertisers are gearing towards. I am in my early 20s,
single, and sincerely considered about my future career. The text speaks volumes to me as it imposes on my dreams of being a flawless beauty, my appreciation for happily ever after fairy tales, and my desires for a handsome man to be at my side. However, just as the text states, I may choose the ever after as I see fit. My goals may differ from another woman in a different part of the country and we are able to embrace that. The text is truthful yet shallow all in the same. The focus on beauty excludes intelligence, hard work, achievements, education, and future ambition that women can entail, as well. It focuses solely on the basis that a woman’s self worth is dependent entirely on her physical attributes. Unfortunately, this is the culture in which we live. Men are praised for their ideas, inventions, discoveries, and accomplishments and women are praised for how fantastic they look in a swimsuit, even though women are gaining more credit for other accomplishments. Still, in the media the primary concern is beauty and perfection.

As most women’s magazines today use symbols of gorgeous, perfect women to signify what is ideal for the female body, women are constantly striving for physical perfection and will take whatever necessary measures to gain that image. When I showed the text to my teenage sister and asked her opinion, she stressed that she felt as though the advertisement was telling her she is required to be outwardly perfect in order to be happy and loved. Two-thousand years ago, societies produced images of perfect people to please the eye and show divine physicality. As far as cultures have come in every aspect of development is
both impressive and promising, however, it is still evident, that after all of these years,
the strife for outwardly perfection is still trumping many other aspects of culture that
drastically impose on one’s, especially a woman’s, self worth and value.