

THE FEMININITY DIET: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCURSIVE
FORMATION OF FEMININITY AND WEIGHT LOSS IN CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL MEDIA PROMOTIONS

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Trish Cranford DeMuynck, for her unrivaled curiosity, sense of humor, and devotion to love. Mom, I hope you know that this achievement is the culmination of your unwavering support and contagious passion for learning. This thesis is also dedicated to my nephew, Greyson Hull, for his laughter, energy, and love of exploration. With your hunger for knowledge, nothing is beyond your reach, Grey.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies the communicative means by which the conflation of femininity and weight loss is perpetuated and sustained across contemporary health discourses. Through the rhetorical lenses of Michel Foucault's discursive formation and Kenneth Burke's dramatisic cycle, several examples of contemporary weight loss promotions are examined. The continuation of Barbara Welter's "Cult of True Womanhood" is clearly seen within Kim Kardashian's 2018-2019 Flat Tummy Co. (FTC) sponsored Instagram posts and WW's (formerly Weight Watchers) 2018-2019 rebranding campaign videos. Together, these texts exemplify the popular repressive messages that normalize and intensify the self-subjugating weight loss behaviors engaged in by women. Kardashian's FTC sponsored posts utilize individualized guilt induction, messages of faulty agency, and the appropriated slim-thicc body hierarchy to conflate feminine purity and submissiveness with weight loss. WW's rebranding videos co-opt symbols of wellness and deploy a three-fold compositional narrative to conflate and modernize feminine domesticity and piety with weight loss. Through the analysis of these confluations this thesis maps the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. The analysis concludes with a discussion of methods to reduce the formation's influence in online spaces.

I. INTRODUCTION

A 2014 meta-analysis found that eating disorders have the second highest mortality rate of all mental disorders.¹ While some eating disorders can be attributed to a biological and emotional predispositions, scientists believe that targeting societal factors can significantly reduce the likelihood that a person will develop an eating disorder.² These social factors are largely the normalization of “body dissatisfaction...basing self-esteem on appearance...[and] dieting and body snarking.”³ Psychologists categorize these types of factors as the “sociocultural idealization of thinness,”⁴ and trace their existence throughout generations of familial interactions, medical studies, social media posts, and dieting campaigns. This hazardous, and ultimately deadly, idealization of thinness is the prevailing marketing ploy of weight loss programs. If a business can remind consumers that being thin is ideal, while also maintaining that the consumer is not thin enough, they are able to sell their diet product as the solution no matter how unhealthy, irrational, or habit-forming.

Though the products may differ, diet promotions that target women repeatedly utilize four conceptualizations of weight loss: it offers a means of social and bodily redemption from laziness and immorality; it cleanses the body of imperfections like fat

1. Edward Chesney, Guy M. Goodwin, and Seena Fazel, “Risks of All-Cause and Suicide Mortality in Mental Disorders: A Meta-Review,” *World Psychiatry* 13, no. 2 (2014):153-50, doi:10.1002/wps.20128.

2. “Prevention,” NationalEatingDisorders.org, NEDA, Accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/prevention>.

3. NEDA, “Prevention.”

4. “Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders,” NationalEatingDisorders.org, NEDA, Accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/statistics-research-eating-disorders>.

and processed foods; it makes bodies more controlled, smaller, and permissible; and weight loss shows a dedication to health for the security of one's family. Though on the surface, these appear to be scattered assumptions, the four pillars of weight loss echo Barbara Welter's *Cult of True Womanhood*: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.⁵ By linking the expectations of womanhood with the conceptualization of weight loss, diet companies profit from a target demographic of women while also reinforcing cultural assumptions of femininity. If a woman is to be a true woman, then she is to be thin no matter the means. Therefore, as a method of idealizing thinness, weight loss companies and participants uphold a discursive formation that conflates femininity with weight loss, further perpetuating the normalcy of eating disorder behaviors among women. This study utilizes Foucault's theory of diffused power in accordance with Kenneth Burke's dramatic cycle to analyze four Kim Kardashian-Flat Tummy Co. promotional Instagram posts and three rebranding commercials from WW (formerly known as Weight Watchers) to identify and critique the hazardous discursive formation of femininity and weight loss within contemporary dieting advertising.

Justification

The association between weight loss and femininity is clearly indicated by the prominence of dieting and disordered eating among females. In The United States, girls begin to express a fear of gaining weight starting as young as six years old.⁶ Studies show that almost 25% of elementary-school aged girls "diet regularly" and "can talk about

5. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

6. NEDA, "Statistics & Research."

calorie restriction and food choices for weight loss fairly effectively.”⁷ This startling statistic is a manifestation of the “sociocultural idealization of thinness,” which psychologists believe to be “the best-known environmental contributor to the development of eating disorders.”⁸ Children are taught body dissatisfaction by example. Experts commonly trace these fears back generationally, pointing primarily to mothers who exhibit excessive concern about their own weight.⁹ This body dissatisfaction and emphasis on appearance exists primarily within feminine populations,¹⁰ signifying that weight loss is largely an issue of gender.

Weight concerns and body surveillance grow as a child matures. A 2003 study showed that “58.6% of teenage girls and 28.2% of teenage boys [were] actively dieting.”¹¹ Today, the onset of social media creates increased body dissatisfaction¹² and an “internalized drive for thinness,”¹³ which in turn heightens this likelihood of diets among young people. Dieting is considered “the most important predictor” of eating disorder development, and nearly half of all teens already engage in unhealthy dieting

7. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

8. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

9. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

10. Hannah L. Quittkat, Andres S. Hartmann, Rainer Düsing, Ulrike Buhlmann, and Silja Vocks. “Body Dissatisfaction, Importance of Appearance, and Body Appreciation in Men and Women Over the Lifespan,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10, (2019): 864. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2019.00864.

11. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

12. Zoe Brown and Marika Tiggemann. “Attractive Celebrity and Peer Images on Instagram: Effect on Women’s Mood and Body Image,” *Body Image* 19, (2016): 37-43. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007.

13. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

methods without the consent of a doctor.¹⁴ The National Eating Disorder Association reports that “1.0% of young women and 0.1% of young men” will meet the criteria for bulimia “at any given point in time.”¹⁵ More so, “between 0.9% and 2.0% of females and 0.1% to 0.3% of males will develop anorexia” in their lifetimes.¹⁶ Girls are twice as likely as males to developing an eating disorder.¹⁷ In adolescence and beyond, women are subject to increased social pressures and behavior expectations that accelerate their vulnerability to disordered eating behavior. These behaviors are then celebrated in the public sphere, demanded in the private sphere, and passed onto the next generation.

The rhetorical construction of femininity in weight loss norms negatively impacts men as well. Studies show that males make up a quarter of people with anorexia, but they typically go undiagnosed because “many people assume males don’t have eating disorders.”¹⁸ This places males at a higher risk of dying due to anorexia.¹⁹ There is a gendered cultural expectation at play here that is killing thousands of men. This is due to the positive association of femininity with disordered eating habits, and even more broadly, the association of femininity with weight loss in general. Further, this phenomenon traces back to the fact that toxic masculinity dismisses all things feminine. If a male displays excessive weight loss or an obsession over restriction and purging, then

14. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

15. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

16. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

17. “Report: Economic Costs of Eating Disorders,” *Harvard School of Public Health*, Accessed Sept. 7, 2020, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/stiped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/>.

18. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

19. NEDA, “Statistics & Research.”

his problems are attributed to his expression of feminine traits and therefore are disregarded, and he is humiliated. Expectations of masculinity are so ingrained into our cultural framework that cisgender men are both shamed into hiding their disordered eating behaviors/thoughts and not considered fallible to such a womanly problem.

The rhetorical power of feminine expectations reaches further to exert power beyond cisgender women and men. A 2015 study found that out of 300,000 surveyed college students, transgender students were most likely to report eating disorder diagnosis and behaviors.²⁰ The study points to the use of ED behaviors as a means of gaining control in “stigmatized social categories,” which is common among survivors. Additionally this research suggests “that striving for weight loss may be a way for transgender women to conform to feminine ideals of slimness and attractiveness”²¹ but the study’s lumping together of trans men and trans women, which is common among transgender research, did not allow for the link in causality. Another 2015 study on “eating related psychopathy in trans individuals” in Europe did differentiate between trans men and trans women, suggesting that binary gender norms contribute to the significantly higher rate of eating disorders among transgender folks in comparison to cisgender individuals.²² The study even notes that both cis and trans females felt a high drive for thinness.²³ While I cannot

20. Elizabeth Diemer, Julia Grant, Melissa Munn-Chernoff, David Patterson, and Alexis Duncan. “Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Eating-Related Pathology in a National Sample of College Students.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 57, no. 2 (August 2015): 144-9. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2015.03.003>.

21. Diemer, “Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation.”

22. Gemma Witcomb, Walter Bouman, Nicola Brewin, Christina Richards, Fernando Fernandez-Aranda, and Jon Arcelus. “Body Image Dissatisfaction and Eating-related Psychopathology in Trans Individuals: A Matched Control Study.” *European Eating Disorders Review* 23, no. 4 (July 2015): 287–93. doi:10.1002/erv.2362.

23. Witcomb, et.al., “Body Image Dissatisfaction.”

speak to the transgender and non-binary experience, research indicates that the conflation of femininity and weight loss as a contributing factor to the systematic oppression of gender minority bodies.

Overall, the links between body, gender norms, and weight are deeply enmeshed, and problematizing the conflation of femininity and weight loss can offer strategies for alleviating burdens placed on people of all genders. Therefore, this study analyzes the promotional methods of two popular weight loss companies, Flat Tummy Co. and WW, to highlight their induction of self-disciplining and self-surveying behaviors among women. By examining this conflation of True Womanhood²⁴ and weight loss, this study seeks to expose harmful gender expectations that lead to the creation and concealment of disordered eating habits across the gender spectrum.

Literature Review

Although eating disorder behaviors commonly are associated with the field of psychology, analyzing discourses from a communication perspective provides practical and valuable insights. In the context of eating disorders, psychological research offers broad explanations of why. By studying weight loss messages through a communicative lens, rhetorical and critical scholarship develops a specific understanding of the tropes and strategies used to normalize disordered eating behaviors. The existing communication scholarship surrounding the harmful conflation of femininity and weight loss depictions has three common themes: slenderness as a means of women's oppression, dieting as an act of morality, and the use of Foucauldian theory to analyze weight loss discourse. Although direct links between the Cult of True Womanhood and

24. Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood."

weight loss campaigns have not been made, the existing literature provides a foundation for this connection.

Slenderness as Women's Oppression

Women and Gender Studies scholars commonly analyze weight loss messaging through a feminist lens. Feminist critics assert that the body is a site of oppression for women, noting the policing of body size “and general configuration,” women’s “repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements,” as well as the “display of body as an ornamented surface.”²⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky’s scholarship homes in on what she calls the disciplinarians (history, parental figures, teachers, and media) while also looking to the “institutionally unbound discipline” suggested by Foucault’s work.²⁶ Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* analyzes the body as a text of femininity, crafted and sustained by a complex navigation of cultural oppression, internalized oppression/self-subjugation, and resistance methods that sometimes effectively oppress the body as well.²⁷ These foundational studies inform countless feminist critiques of weight loss rhetoric.

Many feminist critiques center upon advertising and public media. These examinations illuminate the unrealistic and harmful beauty standards placed on women, as well as the commercialization, exploitation, and objectification of feminine bodies. Deborah Harris-Moore’s work revolves around veiled notions of choice and agency in

25. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, (London: Routledge, 1990), Accessed March 31, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

26. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 74.

27. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

body transformations such as cosmetic surgery and weight loss.²⁸ Other scholars extend John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*²⁹ to critique the visual methods that advertisers use to promote body and feminine ideals. For example, Emily Ling analyzes the compositional aspects of online weight loss advertisements to unearth the fusing of "female sexual attractiveness" and slimness in societal conventions.³⁰ Additionally, feminist researchers dissect ideologies mobilized by advertisements to link femininity and weight loss. K. Lau's 2016 article, "Problematizing Femininity in Slimming Advertisements," analyzes the "ideological construction of femininity" in Malaysian weight loss magazine ads through Jewitt's visual social semiotic framework.³¹ Harris-Moore, Ling, and Lau's scholarship crystalizes the feminist critique of weight loss promotions and highlights methods of women's oppression within everyday media.

Dieting as Moral

In analyzing weight loss discourse, communication research highlights the linking of dieting and morality. William Hoverd and Chris Sibley's 2007 work explores the intertwining of Christian morality into "cognitive appraisals" and "conditions of the body."³² The researchers found that participants "rated health-related behaviors such as

28. April Hemdon, "Book Review of *Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection: Cosmetic Surgery, Weight Loss, and Beauty in Popular Culture* by Deborah Harris-Moore," *Gender & Society* 30 (2016): 556–58, doi:10.1177/0891243215575288.

29. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

30. Emily Ling, "Interactive Meaning Potentials in Weight-Loss Web Advertising: The Female Body in Crisis," *Kritika Kultura* 25 (2015): 4-25, doi: 10.13185/KK2015.02503.

31. K. Lau, "Problematizing Femininity in Slimming Advertisements," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 24 (2016): 1627, <http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=120300693&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

32. William Hoverd and Chris Sibley, "Immoral Bodies: The Implicit Association between

exercising and dieting as more pious and less sinful than their negative counterparts (not exercising, overeating).”³³ Other scholars address this implication of morality related to dieting by exposing our redemptive conceptualization of weight loss. In 2012, Phillipa Spoel and her colleagues interviewed 55 older North American adults about their opinions of healthy living.³⁴ After coding and analyzing the answers, the researchers found that participants utilized “value-laden terminology and logic” to construct a form of the Burkean guilt, purification, and redemptive process in regard to healthy eating.³⁵ This redemptive concept further promoted an assumption of morality that is the basis of many weight loss promotions. While research has yet to highlight the entire discursive formation of The Cult of True Womanhood in weight-loss ads, scholarship surrounding the piousness of weight loss further supports this connection in the public understanding of dieting.

Foucault and Weight Loss

Michel Foucault’s understanding of power and the creation of the docile body has become a common lens through which communication scholars critique dieting discourse. These studies typically radically criticize the existence and normalization of self-surveying behaviors, though occasionally, one will present a more optimistic view of

Moral Discourse and the Body,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46 (2007): 401-2, <http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4621987&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

33. Hoverd and Sibley, “Immoral Bodies.”

34. Philippa Spoel, Roma Harris, and Flis Henwood, “The Moralization of Healthy Living: Burke’s Rhetoric of Rebirth and Older Adults’ Accounts of Healthy Eating,” *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness & Medicine* 16, no. 6 (2012): 619-35, doi:10.1177/1363459312441009.

35. Spoel, et. al., “The Moralization of Healthy,” 402.

particular aspects of self-subjugation. Cressida Heyes' 2006 study titled "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers" exemplifies the latter, and offers a contrasting view to the perspective in this thesis. While her research brings to light the self-disciplinary practices of Weight Watchers meetings and propaganda, she also dedicates a large portion of the article to emphasizing that "we have reason to embrace the increases in capacities it permits without acceding to the intensification of disciplinary power it currently requires."³⁶ Heyes is optimistic about the transformational rhetoric of dieting. She believes that Weight Watchers' discourse brings forth the member's use of "ascetic language" to "constitute practices of freedom" while also "cultivat[ing] docile bodies."³⁷ Her application of Foucault's work to the weight loss realm represents a unique perspective on the diffusion of power that appears to be sympathetic towards the paradoxical liberation of self-disciplining strategies.

On the other hand, Jen Pylypa's 1998 "Power and Bodily Practice" adopts a Foucauldian lens to reveal the gendered expectations of weight in her discussion of the potentially deadly ideals that this discursive formation brings about. In contrast to Heyes's examination of the individual's transformation, Pylypa widens the scope of her research to identify the systemic hazards of dieting. Pylypa's study utilizes Foucault's conceptualization of the docile body to link anorexia and femininity.³⁸ She relies on his theory of biopower to articulate the dissemination of power through "knowledge and

36. Cressida Heyes, "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2006): 126–49 doi:10.2979/HYP.2006.21.2.126.

37. Heyes, "Foucault Goes to Weight," 140.

38. Jen Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice: Adapting the Work of Foucault to an Anthropology of the Body," *Arizona Anthropologist* 13, (1998): 21-36.

desire”³⁹ from health discourse and advertising into “bathroom scales,”⁴⁰ diet products, and subsequent self-surveying behaviors. Although Pylypa and Heyes draw upon the same theorist, Pylypa aligns with the more common application of Foucault’s ideas to diet discourse by emphasizing the gendered harm brought on by this discursive formation and delving into the patriarchal root of disordered eating habits.

Situating the Study

This thesis builds upon these three major themes in the literature to provide a more complete understanding of the use of the cultural dimensions of femininity in weight loss depictions and their subsequent normalization of eating disorders. This analysis aligns with the feminist use of Foucauldian models of power, including institutionalized oppression and self-subjugation strategies, though it differs from Bordo and Pylypa’s suggestion that anorexia is a grasp at boyishness. Instead, this study focuses on the conflation of the feminine ideal with weight loss methods to address how restrictive behaviors found in anorexia, bulimia, pathological dieting, and OSFED (Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders) are an attempt to enact femininity. In doing so, this study builds upon the theme of dieting as moral and extends its association with The Cult of True Womanhood. This analysis also utilizes the model found in Pylypa’s application of Foucault’s ideas by studying the overarching naturalization of weight loss methods among females.

Additionally, this study addresses the lack of contemporary relevance in the extant dieting analyses. Many studies are centered around old, almost archaic forms of

39. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice.”

40. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice,” 26.

media. This study therefore examines the use of social media in promoting dieting discourses. Moreover, given the rapid onset and co-opting of the body positivity movement in the weight loss industry, many studies done within the last five years lack an explanation of a powerful and relevant dimension to weight loss: wellness culture. While wellness culture is based upon socially progressive principles, this study will trace the ways in which dieting campaigns appropriate wellness symbols to make traditional femininity more palatable to a “body positive” consumer. Overall, this study analyzes the conflation of femininity and weight loss within dieting campaigns to understand how the weight loss industry continues to reify traditional notions of gender and subsequently naturalize disordered eating habits among females.

Method

This thesis utilizes a Foucauldian theoretical perspective as the overarching analytical tool in conjunction with the dramaturgical theory of Kenneth Burke. Foucault opposed the idea of power being defined as something possessed by the ruling class.⁴¹ Instead, as Bordo describes it, Foucault saw power as a “dynamic or network of non-centralized forces” that “assume particular historical forms, within which certain groups and ideologies *do* have dominance.”⁴² This power is diffused throughout the masses and works “‘from below’...through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms.”⁴³ Foucault defined this power-relation as “biopower,” in which dominant

41. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 26.

42. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 26.

43. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

institutions discipline bodies through “small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion.”⁴⁴ This disciplining “increase[s] the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience),” creating a self-subjugating body and naming it as the site of power-relation maintenance.⁴⁵ The disciplinary institutions, therefore, take the form of Jeremy Betham’s panopticon, imposing and normalizing self-surveillance and self-disciplining behaviors.

Moreover, as interpreted by Pylypa, Foucault believed that biopower’s discursive force is manifested in knowledge that “results in a discourse of norms...to which individuals desire to conform.”⁴⁶ Biopower’s conceptualizing of discipline as desirable transforms “constraint to liberation.”⁴⁷ For example, as Pylypa notes in her analysis of fatness vs. fitness, fitness discourses quietly link free will to willpower and empowerment to self-discipline.⁴⁸ This constrained liberation is common within weight loss discourse that functions by “constructing an illusory experience of empowerment or resistance.”⁴⁹ Bordo ties constraining liberation to the prominence of eating disorders among women by arguing that the methods of weight loss of anorectics can be perceived as an act of resistance against the feminine form, though in reality, creating a further subjected

44. Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 183.

45. Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 182.

46. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice,” 21.

47. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice,” 27.

48. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice.”

49. Pylypa, “Power and Bodily Practice,” 28-9.

body.⁵⁰ The self-subjecting, self-surveying, and self-disciplining technique can be linked to the institutional apparatus of weight loss advertisements, and therefore these texts in particular require analysis.

In examining the promotional techniques of dieting companies, common themes of guilt, symbolic victimage, and redemption through repression are illuminated across weight loss discourses. Specifically, to consider the evolution of True Womanhood, this thesis examines the common conflation of femininity and weight loss within two sets of promotional examples, replacing the popular magazines that Welter used to formulate the constitutive features of True Womanhood⁵¹ with contemporary weight loss promotions. These artifacts depict weight loss in accordance with the characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, and locate these values as central to the self-disciplining behaviors of the modern woman. This discursive formation of femininity and weight loss not only exemplifies the longstanding notion of traditional feminine qualities among seemingly progressive ideals but also offers an explanation of the increased susceptibility of women in regards to eating disorders.

Specific Artifacts and Contexts

This thesis focuses specifically on two examples of modern weight loss promotions. Both analyses utilize Burke's dramatic cycle in combination with Foucault's repressive hypothesis to identify the discursive mechanisms used to maintain and evolve the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. The first set of artifacts is a selection of Flat Tummy Co. sponsored Instagram posts published by Kim

50. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

51. Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood."

Kardashian from 2018 to 2019. These photos and captions exemplify the use of innovative social media platforms, trendy weight loss products, and contemporary celebrity endorsements to target and directly engage with young consumers. Further, the Kardashian disciplining techniques weave together traditional expectations of feminine purity and submissiveness with weight loss discourse. The Kim Kardashian Instagram posts are examined through Kenneth Burke's guilt, redemption, and purification process alongside Foucault's repressive hypothesis. In dissecting the cyclical notion of repression in weight-loss ads, the study reveals the methods that bind the enactment of femininity to the constraining and illusory liberation of perpetual dieting. This analysis also reveals the normalization of self-disciplining within social media and wellness cultures to track the expansion of the discursive formation into contemporary discourses.

The second set of artifacts is a series of three videos produced by Weight Watchers concurrent with their rebranding to "WW." These videos illustrate the evolution of a historic weight loss program as it is "clawed-back"⁵² into a social reality focused on wellness. Because these texts are commercials, they offer an example of discursive strategies that target both older and younger women. Moreover, the ads demonstrate how in contemporary diet discourse, femininity and weight loss are fused with the traditional proscriptions for domesticity and piety. Because they are videos, the WW ads are analyzed compositionally to examine the visual and audial associations of femininity and weight loss through their distorted wellness aesthetic. This examination reveals the strategies utilized by WW to reinforce traditional gender norms and induce disordered eating among women during its rebranding into a wellness company.

52. John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, 2nd ed. New Accents, (London: Routledge, 2003).

The Kardashian Instagram posts and WW's rebranding videos span a variety of modern media, targeting both old and young, and adapting to significant societal shifts like the slim-thicc beauty standards and wellness culture. This thesis seeks to reveal that, although weight loss advertising increasingly appears to conform to progressive societal norms, the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss continues to exist, expand, and oppress people of all genders.

Preview of Chapters

By applying Foucault's theory of the dissemination of power to analyze the discursive formation of femininity within dieting advertisements, this thesis critiques how the conflation of femininity and weight loss becomes normalized through the expansion of discourse and the induction of guilt. This first chapter provides a general overview of the study, methods, and texts analyzed. Chapter two weaves together Kenneth Burke's dramatic cycle and Foucault's repressive hypothesis to map the discursive formation in contemporary discourse, as well as provide insight into the symbolic motivations behind participant engagement. Chapter three highlights the association of feminine purity and submissiveness to weight loss by applying Burke's dramatic cycle to Kim Kardashian's Flat Tummy Co. sponsored Instagram posts. Chapter four examines how WW's rebranding campaign videos conflate feminine domesticity and piety with weight loss particularly through their appropriation of wellness symbols. The thesis concludes with a summary of findings and discussion of implications regarding this discursive formation and contemporary weight loss promotions.

II. DEFINING THE DISCURSIVE FORMATION

Barbara Welter's Cult of True Womanhood exemplifies Michel Foucault's

description of discursive formations and their functions. Welter gathered the four themes of femininity from nineteenth century “women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature”⁵³ yet their existence expanded beyond these literary works. These “cardinal virtues” of true womanhood—piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness—acted as a standard “by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society.”⁵⁴ The expectations of womanhood were dispersed and maintained through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public discourse, though they were most easily analyzed through popular cultural texts of the day. The textual and interpersonal discourse subsequently shaped the behaviors of women. An individual woman’s adherence to these standards was subject to societal surveillance and was also subject to her own surveillance. The discourse of the Cult of True Womanhood is a dynamic and elusive system, but it can be traced through popular cultural texts and patterns of self-subjugation.

Foucault centers the body as a site of oppression in his concept of discursive formations. His theory proposes that discipline and punishment exist in powerful and subtle ways throughout discourse. Much like Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, Foucault argues that a discursive formation simply articulates societal standards and suggests a surveilling entity.⁵⁵ Those subjected to the discourse will then create and sustain the formation’s power through the normalization of self-disciplining and self-surveilling

53. Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

54. Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood.”

55. Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 179-87.

behaviors.⁵⁶ In the context of Bentham's panopticon, prisoners discipline themselves to follow the prison's rules even though no one may be there to enforce them.⁵⁷ For example, the prisoner may wish to stay up late, but they go to bed at nine each night to appease the presumed guard in the watchtower. This disciplining and monitoring of the self therefore subjugates the prisoner to the will of the panopticon. Foucault refers to the capacity of inward-facing disciplining power as biopower, and the self-disciplined body as a docile body.⁵⁸ The self-subjecting behaviors of individuals within a discursive formation make the body "more obedient as it becomes more useful"⁵⁹ to the induction of self-restraint of others. Therefore, the body acts as the site of oppression in its use of self-disciplining behaviors to uphold restrictive societal norm.

Because discursive formations largely manifest themselves in self-subjugating behaviors, recognition of the patterned behaviors can provide a starting point in the mapping of these formations. Subsequently, everyday discourse (i.e. knowledge and desire) that supports and surveys these behaviors can lend insight into larger public texts that act as the formation's watchtowers. Put together, the patterns of docile bodies, everyday discourse, and popular cultural texts can begin to illuminate the wider discursive formation.

The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss is a seemingly omnipresent mechanism of power. The docile bodies shaped by it have been identified

56. Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 182.

57. Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 183.

58. Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 182.

59. Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 182.

throughout modern Western history and have recently increased in number. This formation disciplines bodies both through their gender expressions and health behaviors, making each component contingent upon the other. This chapter sets out the foundation of the dynamic and longstanding discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. First, the connections between Foucault's theory of the repressive hypothesis and Burke's theory of dramatisitic cycles are discussed. Establishing this link provides a thematic framework through which the discursive formation will be viewed. Next, this chapter maps out the existence of this discursive formation by establishing the pattern of self-subjugated bodies and connecting this pattern to the themes of desire, confession, and redemption in everyday discourse. This discussion concludes with a brief identification of illustrative popular cultural texts that are examined in the analysis chapters.

The Discursive Formation through Repression and Purification

Discursive formations are mechanisms of discipline that derive their "force from [their] ability to function through 'knowledge and desire.'"⁶⁰ Knowledge and desire are embedded in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public discourses, making them difficult to trace, yet prominent in everyday communication. The discourse is primarily enacted in a pattern of docile bodies, but it can also be identified through "norms and normality."⁶¹ These societal norms house self-subjugating behaviors and are spread through a desire in "which individuals [seek] to conform"⁶² to these communicated norms. The discursive

60. Jen Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice: Adapting the Work of Foucault to an Anthropology of the Body," *Arizona Anthropologist* 13, (1998): 21.

61. Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice," 21.

62. Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice," 21.

formation of femininity and weight loss is composed of and fueled by a compounded knowledge and desire concerning gender and health. The discursive creation and reinforcement of these desires can be identified through Foucault's repressive hypothesis and Burke's cycle of guilt, purification, and redemption.

Foucault's Repressive Hypothesis

Foucault describes the discursive shaping of desire through his concept of the repressive hypothesis. Discursive formations are upheld by rules concerning the content, mode, and agents of discourse.⁶³ These restrictions therefore act as the repressive force, and require that "none may enter into the discourse on a specific subject unless [they have] satisfied certain conditions."⁶⁴ Restrictions can be vast, "lay[ing] down gestures to be made, behaviour [sic], circumstances and the whole range of signs that must accompany the discourse."⁶⁵ In the context of the Cult of True Womanhood, the societal expectation of feminine purity was expressed through a variety of restrictions. For example a true woman must "sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let [her] eagerness to see anything induce [her] to place her head close to another person's."⁶⁶ A true woman must then display her virtue by repressing her desire to sit near someone, share a book, or express excitement. The desire to act or speak a certain way is therefore eclipsed by the desire to remain in good standing within

63. Michel Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 301-329.

64. Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge* translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 224-5.

65. Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," 225.

66. Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 157.

the discursive formation. The repressive hypothesis explains how the collective subjugation of desires promotes a set of societal rules and expectations.

The repression of one's desire can only last for so long until it inevitably overshadows the individual's yearning to be highly regarded by their peers. Those who break the restrictions are still confined within the bounds of the discursive formation, however, and must therefore perform a ritualistic confession. The confession must not only address the act of breaking the rule, but extend into the mere desire to break the rule.⁶⁷ In acknowledging their breaking of the rule and promising to follow the restrictions more closely in the future, confessors re-establish the sanctity of the discursive formation's restrictions and further represses their personal desires. Repression will eventually lead to another breaking of the restrictive norms and therefore the repression and confession cycle will perpetually fuel itself. As Foucault states in his lecture, "Discourse on Language," "disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules."⁶⁸ Participants within the discursive formations regulate the type, tone, and source of acceptable discourse, and employ a desire to remain in good social standing to induce self-surveilling and self-disciplining behaviors of their own individual desires.

Burke's Dramatistic Cycle

Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatistic cycles extends Foucault's repressive hypothesis by providing a way to describe the individual and symbolic enactment of

67. Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," 303.

68. Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," 224.

redemption within a discursive formation. In his theory of symbolic action, Burke defines humans as symbol-using animals who strive for perfection through the discursive creation of order.⁶⁹ The symbolic journey that Burke describes in this definition reveals a cycle of redemption that parallels Foucault's repressive hypothesis. Both theories describe how creating meaning and maintaining stability within a society is governed by repressive rules and norms.

Burke's theory of symbolic action describes the innate human need for a discursive order. We are "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy"⁷⁰ in all that we do. Through symbolic action, we create and sustain societal norms and restrictions. The societal expectations then establish a "hierarchy" or order in accordance with a person's loyalty to the restrictions. Burke's reliance on norms and restrictions corresponds to Foucault's discursive repression of knowledge and desire. In both theories, the degree to which participants adhere to the restrictions determines the way their discursive community perceives them. Those who strictly follow the societal rules are seen as acceptable within the hierarchy or discursive formation. At this intersection of theories, Foucault's discursive formation shows us that although social acceptance may appear to grant rule-followers more freedom in the hierarchy, their higher social regard actually indicates an increased surveillance, and subsequent docility, of the person. While Foucault highlights the repressive nature of hierarchy and order that comprise a discursive formation, Burke explains the meaning and motivations that lead individuals to enact a reestablishment of

69. Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-4): 507, doi: 10.2307/3848123.

70. Burke, "Definition of Man," 507.

the hierarchy.

Burke emphasizes that humans are perpetually attempting to grasp at perfection within their maintenance of the hierarchy. As animals “rotten with perfection,” we are subject to “a kind of ‘terministic compulsion’”⁷¹ to create and uphold the perfect order. Since the hierarchy is created by imperfect people, however, we are destined to either break the established rules or feel an underlying discomfort in our position within the hierarchy. Burke calls this imbedded guilt “the negative.”⁷² Burke’s concept of the negative complements Foucault’s repressive hypothesis because it is only by repressing desires that we in turn increase our desire to both break and then repair the restrictions. Burke’s striving for perfection therefore parallels and provides a symbolic dimension that underscores the self-propelled cycle of repression and confession described by Foucault.

When one violates the repressive expectations in the discursive formation, this transgression calls forth a need for atonement of the negative through ritualistic confession. Foucault’s confession corresponds with the purification stage in Burke’s dramatic cycle. For Burke, the introduction of the negative into the hierarchy requires a symbolic kill, or casting of blame, in order to redeem the perfect order. The symbolic kill can occur through scapegoating, the humiliation of others, or through mortification, the humiliation of the self.⁷³ Mortification resembles the confession ritual, in which an individual seeks to sanctify the hierarchy through denouncement of their own actions and the commitment to self-disciplining and self-surveilling behaviors within the hierarchy.

71. Burke, “Definition of Man,” 511.

72. Burke, “Definition of Man,” 507.

73. Burke, “Definition of Man,” 510.

Scapegoating coincides with someone's refusal to confess within the discursive community. In a discursive formation, if someone breaks a restriction and does not repress a desire, they are then cast aside, humiliated, and considered unacceptable by their peers. Both confession and mortification reinforce what is acceptable within the discursive formation and further subjugate the individuals within the hierarchy.

Additionally, both Burke and Foucault provide a cyclical conceptualization of this pattern of guilt and redemption in their theories by describing how the reestablishment of norms ensures an eventual breaking of and consequent need for redemption.

The Pattern of Docile Bodies

Feminine bodies are made docile in the discursive enactment of gender and weight loss. Susan Bordo identifies this discursive formation as the "politics of appearance"⁷⁴ which largely manifests itself in females as weight management and eating behaviors. Bordo states that through "interiorizing"⁷⁵ the "inspecting [social] gaze"⁷⁶ of appearance, expressions of femininity commonly become self-subjugating. Her primary focus is on those habits that constitute eating disorders, as they notably "aris[e] out of and reproduc[e] normative feminine practices of our culture."⁷⁷ The disordered practices "train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same

74. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993): 27.

75. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

76. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

77. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27

time being experienced in terms of power and control.”⁷⁸ These practices mimic the illusory liberation of Foucault’s discursive formation by offering women a “dissociated power from the body”⁷⁹ that is turned inwards to further its own docility.

The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss has produced an exponential increase of docile bodies in the rise of eating disorders among females. Between 1960 and 2001, the incidence of eating disorders in America had doubled.⁸⁰ Now, “at least 28.8 million Americans will suffer from an eating disorder in their lifetimes”⁸¹ and females are twice as likely as males to have an eating disorder.⁸² This drastic increase of eating disorders is concentrated among women. Since disordered eating practices are extreme manifestations of self-discipline and surveillance, it is clear that a pattern of feminine docile bodies has arisen in recent years. Further, the biopower of this discursive formation is growing both in capacity and in reach, as evidenced by recent studies that suggest “nearly half of all Americans personally know someone with an eating disorder.”⁸³ Therefore, we all participate in discourse that reinforces repressive

78. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27

79. Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 182.

80. Jennifer Daw, “Eating disorders on the rise: A Capitol Hill briefing calls attention to eating disorders,” *American Psychological Association*, Oct. 2001, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/oct01/eating>.

81. “Report: Economic Costs of Eating Disorders,” *Harvard School of Public Health*, Accessed Sept. 7, 2020, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/>.

82. “Report: Economic Costs,” *Harvard School of Public Health*.

83. “Facts About Eating Disorders: What The Research Shows,” *Eating Disorders Coalition*, Accessed Set. 7, 2020, <http://eatingdisorderscoalition.org.s208556.gridserver.com/couch/uploads/file/Eating%20Disorders%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

norms concerning gender and weight. The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss is expansive, resulting in a pattern of increased docility of feminine bodies and upheld, intentionally and unintentionally, through our everyday discourse.

Hierarchy, Confession, and Redemption in Everyday Weight Loss Discourse

The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss produces a hierarchy of social norms. The discourse within has a code of “enunciations” that specify where, when, “in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships”⁸⁴ people can discuss diet topics and construct power-relations accordingly. Acceptable diet and weight loss discourse largely defines good and bad food engagement and weight loss behaviors. These discourses celebrate individual demonstrations of “willpower” and “determination” and ignore their systemic roots in consumerism, racism, classism, and patriarchy. This structuring gives way to a self-induction of guilt and redemption. Overall, the discourse of dieting and weight loss favors the body of the thin white woman, regardless of her methods. The discursive themes of hierarchy, confession, and redemption are therefore expressed and perpetuated through everyday discourse that defines and reinforces acceptable behavior, enacts victimage, and celebrates visible results over behavior.

One definition of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss is the set of discursive boundaries that divide acceptable and unacceptable discourses of diet and weight loss. The most prominent markers of this formation are the moral attributions, and subsequent repression, of food and food engagement. Foods that are “whole,” have low caloric density, and satisfy simple macronutrients are generally deemed good or

84. Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” 301.

acceptable. Foods that are “processed” and have high caloric density are deemed bad, or unacceptable, within the discursive community. Most importantly, the restrictions placed on food are then projected onto the eater. Someone who eats good food is perceived as more pious and virtuous than people who eat bad food. Good food engagement displays individual willpower and, therefore, these participants are easily accepted in the discursive formation, despite food access and variety depending on geographical and socioeconomic conditions.

The discursive formation’s exclusive reinforcement of individual dedication extends past food engagement and into weight loss behaviors. Everyday discourse in the discursive formation houses restrictive norms that indicate the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors of women. Acceptable behaviors of women require that they spend hours each day self-subjugating via weight loss or thin-maintenance activities.⁸⁵ Frequent and intensive work out routines and the constant discussion of these self-disciplining behaviors are therefore deemed good within the formation, and even granted high social regard among peers. Conversely, a woman’s lack of weight management behaviors, or simply her lack of discourse about her dedication, is framed as unacceptable and deviant within the discursive community. Self-disciplining behaviors of weight loss uphold of the restrictions of the discursive formation, ignore systemic inhibitors, and celebrate women with a proven adherence to the norms.

A major discursive enactment of the formation’s hierarchy is the societal celebration of an individual’s proven loyalty to weight loss. This celebration primarily

85. Amelia Morris, “Watching our Weight: An Exploration Into the Politics of the Body Using Intersections Between Post-Structuralist Feminism and Foucault’s Discipline and Punish,” PhD diss., (University of Birmingham: 2018).

hinges on a woman's bodily submission to the discursive formation's restrictive norms. If her body is slimmer than it once was, she will be considered desirable by her peers. An example of the celebration of repression in everyday discourse is the phrase "you look so good! Have you lost weight?" This common compliment equates a woman's worth and desirability with her proven ability to lose weight. She has shown she is able to submit her body to the restrictive norms of food engagement, activity, and size and is therefore able to be perceived as both a true and desirable woman. Additionally, there is a vein of everyday discourse that houses both repression-celebration and publicized self-surveillance within phrases like "I wish I could look like her." Women who show a visible adherence to the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss are rewarded with high esteem and made into objects of desire, triggering a desire for self-discipline among those who measure themselves failures in comparison.

In the ordering of this discursive formation, rarely do women consider themselves on par with others. Instead the discourse creates a power relation that deems one person greater and submits the other. The submissive nature of this discursive formation ensures that its hierarchy is upheld by the docility of the body. Moreover, a person who is able to enact dedication to the formation's rules gains an illusory liberation from an induction of the negative.⁸⁶ By obtaining the desire of her peers through weight loss, it is assumed that slimmer women have the power to overcome guilt or shame in their bodies. In reality, the power of those in high social regard is turned inward to uphold the formation's restrictive norms. This inevitable introduction of the negative calls for continued redemptive acts, which further catalyzes guilt and shame upon those with less celebrated bodies and

86. Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice."

behaviors.

Confession and purification are two of the most prominent discursive acts in this particular discursive formation. These are required when someone approaches, or desires to approach, the unacceptable discourse and behaviors. An example of the desire to approach unacceptable behavior is the concept of a “cheat day” in a dieting program. A cheat day is typically allotted for the breaking of diet restrictions and given a pass by the community as long as the necessary quasi-redemptive steps are taken. A cheat day’s very existence, and its unique acceptance into the discursive formation, implicates the degree of repression that the formation pushes on innate desires of eating and rest. Cheat days illustrate the casting of morality onto food engagements and the types of behaviors that require confession and redemption. That act is a practice round of confession in which a participant must exclaim “I’m so bad” in response to eating an unacceptable food, knowing they will follow the restrictions again tomorrow. While the cheat day creates space for a rare engagement with bad food, participants must still acknowledge what they are doing is bad and recommit to diet the next day.

If the “cheating” expands past that meal or day, individuals must publicly condemn their actions and repress their desires further. This is where confession is most common among everyday diet discourse. Many weight loss campaigns program confession into their dieting strategies. Weight Watchers (now WW) is the leader in this technique. Weight Watchers participants meet in weekly groups to discuss their diet “successes” and “failures,” mortify themselves, and re-commit to upholding the restrictive norms.⁸⁷ For example, someone may admit that they had cake for their child’s

87. Morris, “Watching our Weight.”

birthday, therefore accepting the guilt they feel for their unjustified position in the hierarchy, placing the blame on themselves, and reasserting the unacceptability of enjoying sweets.⁸⁸ They then must enact the symbolic kill by performing their shame for their actions and celebrating those that can avoid this unacceptable behavior, therefore humiliating themselves in the hierarchy. Furthermore, the self-subjugated woman must promise to recommit herself to the self-disciplining behaviors of weight loss, and vow to tell a “success” story at the next meeting so she can once again be found acceptable.

Confession exists in unprompted discourse as well. It is common to hear someone explain their “need to go on a run” in response to a “bad” meal they recently consumed. Sometimes it even spills into food choices, such as when someone might publicly declare they are ordering a salad or partaking in a juice cleanse because they ate processed food the day before. In both prompted and unprompted discourse, admission of guilt is almost always partnered with a symbolic killing of the self, a rededication to desire repression, and a reinforcement of the restrictive norms of weight loss. Although a person’s engagement with unacceptable dieting behaviors causes others to perceive them negatively within the formation, their confession and mortification reestablishes the hierarchy and brings them back into good social standing.

On the rare occasion that a woman chooses to not rededicate herself to the maintenance of the hierarchy, she becomes a scapegoat for other women. Scapegoating is commonly done by women who feel the inevitable shame of the body hierarchy and cannot manage to mortify themselves further. They then direct their symbolic kill onto other people who reject the hierarchy. This allows the first woman to enact the

88. Morris, “Watching our Weight.”

importance of the hierarchy without subjugating herself more. This pattern is seen in both every day and pop-culture discourses. Culturally, consider the phrase “the war on obesity” regularly found in newscasts or the before-and-after photos of weight loss advertising. Even in fictional or staged TV there are game show premises, film tropes, and stereotypical characters all meant to associate fat people with clumsiness, unintelligence, apathy, and the grotesque. Some of the contemporary examples of this are the longstanding, and recently revamped, reality show *The Biggest Loser*, the popular Netflix series *Insatiable*, and Amy Schumer’s 2018 movie *I Feel Pretty*. Each centers its plotline around the humiliation of fat folks and the reestablishment of thin-bodies as rightfully beautiful. This seeps into everyday discourse as well. The scapegoating of non-adhering women can clearly be seen online through the regular trolling, harassment, and abuse of women’s bodies on social media. The acceptability of negative portrayals of women who reject the hierarchy also shows up in the ways thin people shame themselves as “fat” and “out of control” in their personal confessions. The discrediting and disdain of people who do not engage with weight loss restrictions is normalized in every day and cultural discourse. These scapegoated women, both those who are fat or those simply not singing the hierarchy’s praises, are perceived negatively and labeled as deviant by participants of the formation and suffer the consequences of this fate.

The ongoing repression, guilt, confession, victimage, and redemption of dieting creates an exasperated desperation to uphold and climb the body hierarchy through whatever means are possible. Mobility in the hierarchy is granted to those who prove their dedication to dieting through visible weight loss and the obtainment of a desirable form. This produces a results-over-method celebration that is most apparent in the

celebration of bodies altered through plastic surgery. Kim Kardashian's physique clearly represents this phenomenon and an analysis of her influence will be featured in the later analysis chapters. Whether alterations are natural or extreme, women who get liposuction, implants, and even ribs removed are celebrated for their dedication to weight loss despite actually partaking in dieting behaviors. Because altered women adhere to the current definitions of desirability, their extreme repression body lends to the increased biopower of the formation.

The celebration of ends over means enables obsessive and disordered eating habits. Women may engage with unhealthy get-fit-quick products like hunger suppressants or laxative based detox-teas, or go further to adopt unhealthy diets or behaviors. For example, the popular diet Keto is centered on depriving oneself of necessary nutrients until the body has to dip into its fat storage to maintain its normal functioning. This diet is widely known and celebrated because it produces results, regardless of its problematic methods. Additionally, women commonly feel as though their self-disciplining behaviors have to increase with each induction of guilt and shame. This intensified re-dedication to desire-repression commonly resembles the obsessive restriction, calorie counting, and exercise habits of eating disorders. Yet, these actions meet the qualification of redemption and perform great individual willpower. Therefore, it is not uncommon for women who practice obsessive, or pathological, dieting to be granted high regard within the formation. The pattern of docile bodies associated with the exponential increase in females with eating disorders is connected to this perpetual repression and redemption in the discursive formation. The celebration of bodily-ends over means encourages participants to unknowingly inch their way into disordered

behaviors.⁸⁹ Therefore, participation in the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss requires unsustainable and largely unhealthy self-subjugation.

Participants in the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss construct its hierarchy, enact confession, and gain redemption through everyday discourse. Since positive regard is given to visible displays of weight loss no matter the means, the division of acceptable and unacceptable discourse reflects this celebration. Engagement with “good” food, effective weight loss products, and demonstrations of individual willpower eclipse conversations of food-enjoyment and mental wellbeing. People who partake in unacceptable behaviors must symbolically kill their personal desires through self-humiliation, confession, and rededication to the formation’s restrictions. Those who do not adequately mortify themselves must either scapegoat someone else or be the scapegoat of others. Both forms of victimage momentarily satisfy the guilt inherent in the discursive formation’s hierarchy and re-sanctify its repressive norms. The repression and celebration of ends over means inevitably will induce guilt into the hierarchy again, restarting the cycle of purification and redemption. This cyclical notion of dieting encourages increasingly drastic weight loss methods, and in turn produces discourse that celebrates the extreme docile body. The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss is therefore expressed and perpetuated through everyday discourse that defines and reinforces acceptable behavior, enacts confession or scapegoating, and celebrates the bodily ends over its means.

Femininity and Weight Loss in Popular Cultural Texts

The expansiveness of this discursive formation allows the hierarchical,

89. Morris, “Watching our Weight,” 27.

confessional, and redemptive themes of everyday discourse to take shape in various forms. One of the most identifiable and influential ways that the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss appears is within popular cultural texts such as advertisements. This thesis furthers the understanding of the conflation of femininity and weight loss by analyzing popular and contemporary modes of promotional weight loss media. First, this thesis examines the discursive markers of femininity and weight loss in Kim Kardashian's Flat Tummy Co. sponsored Instagram posts. Next, the thesis analyzes Weight Watchers rebranding campaign videos to examine how the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss has adapted to modern wellness culture. Together, these popular cultural texts illustrate the wide range of medium and strategy used to shape and reinforce the discursive conflation of femininity and weight loss.

III. ANALYZING KIM KARDASHIAN'S 2018-2019 FLAT TUMMY CO. SPONSORED INSTAGRAM POSTS

Kim Kardashian's 2018 and 2019 Flat Tummy Co. (FTC) sponsored Instagram posts illustrate the conflation of femininity and weight loss. By drawing upon Burke's redemptive cycle, in accordance with Foucault's repressive hypothesis, this analysis demonstrates how these texts utilize the enactment of feminine purity through bodily submission and redemption within the discursive formation. Kim's sponsored posts offer a unique opportunity to examine the contemporary shaping and reestablishment of the body hierarchy through the ostensibly intimate and individualized connections fostered on Instagram. In these four posts, Kim nonverbally and verbally reinforces the social order through her modeled repression of personal food-desire and expression of acceptable desirability through docility.

Kim Kardashian's captions cast shame upon her viewers, inducing guilt and suggesting mortification as their means to bodily redemption. She offers redemption through self-subjugation, distrust in one's own willpower, and utilization of FTC products to visibly prove one's rededication to the slim-thicc hierarchy. This rededication enacts feminine docility to exhibit purity. Additionally, Kim's attribution of her cosmetically altered figure to FTC products upholds the cyclical and hazardous nature of dieting, as her viewers inevitably will fail to obtain her body type with these non-FDA approved products. The inherent failure of Kim's modeled mortification ensures the continuous need for and enactment of feminine redemption through increasingly unhealthy and disordered weight loss behaviors. Ultimately, applying Burke's dramatic cycle to Kim's FTC sponsored Instagram posts highlights the individualized shame and

self-subjugation cultivated in contemporary weight loss promotions. Moreover, in identifying this mortification this analysis highlights the repressive norms of gender and weight loss in the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. Specifically, the redemption methods portrayed in Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored posts articulate the conflation of feminine purity and submissiveness with the enactment of docility through weight loss.

Context and Artifact Descriptions

The Kardashian name is notorious in pop culture, referencing a decade of both negative and positive public perceptions and millions of dollars in branding and business ventures. The Kardashians first entered the limelight when patriarch Rob Kardashian defended OJ Simpson in his televised murder trial.⁹⁰ The family started as privileged, but through the efforts of Kris Kardashian the name gained recognition. Kris and Rob divorced, Rob later died of esophageal cancer, and Kris went on to marry Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner, known at the time as Bruce.⁹¹ Not only did Kris need to oversee the rumored \$100 million estate that Rob left behind for his family, she also revamped Caitlyn's public persona.⁹² At this point, Kris began her career as a publicity manager that

90. "Kim Kardashian West Biography," *Biography*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.biography.com/personality/kim-kardashian>.

91. Rachel Askinasi, "Meet the Kardashian-Jenners, Heirs to a Massive Reality TV Empire, Who Have a Combined Fortune of More Than \$1.6 billion and Are One of the Most Influential Family 'Dynasties' in The World," *Insider*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.insider.com/how-the-kardashian-jenner-family-built-their-empire-became-famous-net-worth-2019-3>.

92. "How Much are the Kardashians Worth? A History of the Kardashian Family Money," *Huffington Post*, October 29, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-much-are-kardashians-worth_n_2762279.

would later engulf her children and grandchildren.⁹³ Rob and Kris's family consisted of four children, Kourtney, Kim, Khloe, and Rob Jr., and in Kris's second marriage to Caitlyn Jenner, Kendal and Kylie Jenner were born.

In 2006, the Kardashian daughters began their personal enterprises with the opening of "a consignment-type of retail store" D-A-S-H.⁹⁴ As "momager," Kris took this as an opportunity to pitch a Kardashian reality TV show called "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" (KUWTK).⁹⁵ The show began in 2007 and continues to be broadcast. The year 2007 also marked the leaking of Kim Kardashian's infamous sex tape with Ray J, which resulted in a legal dispute resolved by a \$5 million settlement for Kardashian.⁹⁶ Partnered with this sensational story, KUWTK became popular with young people. The show started as a "vulnerable" depiction of Kim, Kourtney, and Khloe climbing the ranks of fame and maintained its popularity as, in the words of Kim, a rare glimpse into the normalcy of billionaires.⁹⁷ The show is the pillar of the Kardashian empire, creating unprecedented name recognition and spawning spin-offs and passion projects. The daughters began their social media reign in conjunction with the popularity of KUWTK.

Initially, KUWTK's producer prompted the Kardashian daughters to join Twitter, and this evolved into a profitable Instagram presence. The Kardashian women grew their

93. Askinasi, "Meet the Kardashian-Jenners."

94. Askinasi, "Meet the Kardashian-Jenners."

95. Amy Chozick, "Keeping Up With The Kardashian Cash Flow: Are Kourtney, Khloe, Kendall and Kylie America's Savviest C.E.O.s?," *New York Times*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/style/kardashians-interview.html>.

96. *Biography*, "Kim Kardashian West Biography."

97. Chozick, "Keeping Up."

fan base and influence through Instagram by creating personal posts and launching their individual business ventures. These ventures largely focused on lifestyle products, subsequently building the Kardashians' brand basis and "expertise" in the wellness and beauty industries. The oldest daughter Kourtney launched a wellness website named "Poosh," which many would consider similar to "Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop website."⁹⁸ Khloe, who has a fitness focus, began her "body-positive denim line" on Instagram and promoted her spin-off television show "Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian" and book "Strong Looks Better Naked."⁹⁹ Kim used Instagram to establish her name as a stand-alone brand. Initially, Kim cultivated an online persona with her "Kimojis" and video game "Kim Kardashian: Hollywood," which uniquely allowed her fans to take on her persona as an avatar and pursue the same pathway of "success."¹⁰⁰ Kim became known for her selfies, even releasing a print copy of all her Instagram selfies in a book called "Selfish."¹⁰¹ The combined Instagram-based business ventures of Kourtney, Khloe, and Kim established the Kardashian lifestyles as attractive and luxurious. Additionally, Kim's focused creation of her own online brand allowed her name to hold a particularly alluring strain of grandiosity and desire within the Kardashian enterprise.

The Kardashian brand is coveted by both followers and marketers. The

98. Dearbail Jordan, "How Did The Kardashians Make Their Millions?," *BBC News*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-47793131>.

99. Askinasi, "Meet the Kardashian-Jenners."

100. Dusty Baxter-Wright, "How Did Kim Kardashian Actually Get Famous? A Timeline of Her Career: There's More to It Than Just a Sex Tape," *Cosmopolitan*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a12464842/who-is-kim-kardashian/>.

101. Baxter-Wright, "How Did Kim Actually Get Famous?"

Kardashian daughters reportedly sell single Instagram promotional posts for “up to \$1 million.”¹⁰² As the *New York Times* stated, “Kim alone has nearly three times more Instagram followers than all of Condé Nast’s U.S. print publications combined...so why not send those fans [directly] to your own online store?”¹⁰³ Specifically, Kim Kardashian West’s account boasts 188 million followers to date, making her the seventh most followed account on Instagram.¹⁰⁴ This type of user reach is almost impossible in direct business to consumer advertising, but tapping into Kim’s averaged 3 million likes and 26 thousand comments per post exponentially builds both business credibility and profit.¹⁰⁵ Kim Kardashian’s promotional posts act as an increasingly influential mode of advertising, and the Kardashian lifestyle is well-known and well-desired within pop culture and social media discourse. Therefore, Kim Kardashian’s FTC sponsored Instagram posts are some of the most far reaching and effective pieces of contemporary weight loss promotions. This influence is found largely in Kim’s massive followership and cost of endorsement, yet her post-power can be primarily seen in her 2019 FTC controversy and Instagram’s subsequent rule change.

The Kardashians’ involvement with FTC had been under fire before the 2019 FTC controversy. This critique was largely led by Instagram’s body positive and fat liberationist communities which pointed out the damage and unchecked power that the Kardashian weight loss posts had on younger female users. These critiques largely went

102. Chozick, “Keeping Up.”

103. Chozick, “Keeping Up.”

104. Profile statistics from <https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/kimkardashian> as of September 17, 2020.

105. Profile statistics from <https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/kimkardashian> as of September 17, 2020.

unnoticed by Instagram’s policy makers until *The Good Place* star, Jameela Jamil, brought the critiques into broader public discourse. As an eating disorder survivor and the leader of the trending body positive challenge called “I Weigh,”¹⁰⁶ Jamil is a prominent voice in the online body positive and fat liberationist movements. Combined with her acting success, she has over a million followers¹⁰⁷ on social media which also catapulted the Kardashian controversy into national news.

In 2018, Jamil began drawing attention to the Kardashian FTC issue by pointing out their promotion of unrealistic body standards and non-FDA approved diet products. One of her comments¹⁰⁸ on Khloe Kardashian’s (since deleted) FTC promotional post went viral, bringing the wider cause to light. Afterward, Jamil crafted and shared a petition to “Stop Celebrities Promoting Toxic Diet Products on Social Media.” This petition specifically calls out “celebrit[ies]” who disregard their use of “a personal trainer, a chef, a surgeon and...photoshop” and instead claim that their unrealistic physique largely is due to the diet products that sponsor these celebrities.¹⁰⁹ Specifically,

106. The “I Weigh” challenge encouraged participants to post photos of themselves on social media with captions or overlaid text that stated “I weigh...” followed by positive descriptors of their personality and/or personal achievements.

107. Social media statistics from <https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/jameelajamil/monthly> as of October 17, 2020.

108. Jamil’s viral comment read: “If you’re too irresponsible to: a) own up to the fact that you have a personal trainer, nutritionist, probable chef, and a surgeon to achieve your aesthetic, rather than this laxative product... And b) tell them the side effects of this NON-FDA approved product, that most doctors are saying aren’t healthy. Side effects such as: Possible Flat Tummy Tea side effects are cramping, stomach pains, diarrhea and dehydration... The I guess I have to. It’s incredibly awful that this industry bullied you until you became this fixated on your appearance. That’s the media’s fault. But now please don’t put that back into the world, and hurt other girls, the way you have been hurt... You’re a smart woman. Be smarter than this.”

109. Jameela Jamil, “Stop Celebrities Promoting Toxic Diet Products on Social Media,” Change.org, January 2019, https://www.change.org/p/instagram-diet-detox-products-should-not-be-allowed-to-be-sold-by-celebrities-on-social-media?recruiter=934492666&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=share_pe

the text of the petition indirectly critiques the Kardashians for their FTC promotional posts, but Jamil also highlights the widespread and hazardous tactics of social media diet-culture. Jamil points out that the practice of online endorsements like the Kardashians' FTC promotions are “false and irresponsible advertising and it is part of a pervasive and disturbing rhetoric that preys upon eating disordered behaviour [sic] and the new trend of ‘quick fix’ that relies upon a naive and vulnerable customer who is not educated as to the full list of health implications these products and diet restrictions can bring.”¹¹⁰ At nearly 250,000 signatures to date, Jameela Jamil’s petition brought the unchecked power of the Kardashian’s FTC posts into public discourse, exposing Instagram’s role in the promotion of eating disorders amid calls for change in the company’s policy.

As this pushback reached national news, Instagram introduced a new regulation,¹¹¹ announcing that it would impose “tighter restrictions...on some posts related to diet products and cosmetic surgery.”¹¹² This means that currently Instagram posts promoting “miracle” weight loss products and procedures with ties to purchase methods are hidden from users who identify themselves as minors.¹¹³ Users also can hide these posts on their own accord. Upon establishing this new regulation, a significant number of Kardashian Instagram posts, primarily their FTC sponsored posts, became

tition.

110. Jamil, “Stop Celebrities.”

111. Sonia Roa, “A Brief History of Jameela Jamil and The Kardashians’ Differing Views on Body Positivity,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/04/03/brief-history-jameela-jamil-kardashians-differing-views-body-positivity/>.

112. “Instagram Tightens Rules on Diet and Cosmetic Surgery Posts,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/18/instagram-tightens-rules-on-diet-and-cosmetic-surgery-posts>.

113. “Instagram Tightens.”

blocked from minors and users who opt in to the new regulation. While this regulation is a success for body positivists and fat liberationists, there is still a caveat. Many users—specifically those most vulnerable to eating disorders—avoid setting up their profile under their legitimate ages because Instagram accounts require users to be thirteen years old. This means they can still access the problematic posts of influencers like the Kardashians. Furthermore, people over the age of 18 are still susceptible to the disordered eating behaviors promoted in these posts. Therefore, though the regulation is a step in the right direction, the controversy that launched the regulation exposes the immense power that weight loss promotions, specifically Kim Kardashian’s FTC posts, play in body image, satisfaction, and discipling behaviors.

The Flat Tummy Co. (FTC) celebrity sponsorship is primarily led by Kim Kardashian West. This chapter focuses on a selection of four Kim Kardashian Flat Tummy Co. Instagram posts. Kim’s promotions feature notable amounts of exposed skin—two feature waist-up photos of Kim in leggings and sports bras,¹¹⁴ and one features a full-body photo of her in bikini briefs and a matching crop top.¹¹⁵ The fourth photo is a close up on Kim's face, stretching about four inches below her collar bones, including her left hand, which covers any trace of a strap or sleeve.¹¹⁶ Kim's clothing draws

114. Kim Kardashian West (@Kimkardashian), #ad Fuelling up with my @flattummyco meal replacement shake before getting my workout done today. You guys need to do yourselves a favor and get on these Shakes..., Instagram, March 20, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BgkAznclyTt/>; Kim Kardashian West, (@Kimkardashian), #ad You guys all know I looove @flattummyco shakes. I've just restarted them (it's Day 2 today) and I'm already feeling so good. We had a huuuuge Christmas this..., Instagram, January 2, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsJsNcOnFDP/>.

115. Kim Kardashian West, (@Kimkardashian), #ad Little update for you guys. I'm on Day 9 of my Shake It Baby program from @flattummyco and I'm actually feeling so good. We had a massive Christmas this year... Instagram, January 9, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdv3pJAFVN6/>.

116. Kim Kardashian West, (@Kimkardashian), Lollipop iOS emoji, Instagram, May 15, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bi0NTablmo4/>.

attention to her slim, hourglass figure.

Kim's promotions focus on maintaining a preferred shape. Three of her posts feature the Flat Tummy Co. diet supplement shakes, and the other promotes their unique (and highly criticized) product, hunger suppressant lollipops. All shake captions begin with the hashtag "#ad," but this was a later development after the Advertising Standards Authority charged the United Kingdom "TV personality" Sophie Kasaei with unclear and dangerous health claims for her Flat Tummy Tea posts.¹¹⁷ Kim's FTC posts mention the title and the day on which she is cleansing. Additionally, these posts detail "a 20% off sale going on right now,"¹¹⁸ and urge followers to "check these guys [FTC] out"¹¹⁹ while the sale lasts. Her arguments are always some derivative of "these shakes make me instantly skinny, so now I feel great," which correspond with the overarching discursive formation and illustrate Flat Tummy Co's method of convincing people that their current body is in need of a change. The photo featuring Kim with a lollipop has no words in its caption and does not contain the #ad prefix. Instead, it is just a colorful lollipop emoji, and the FTC account is simply tagged in the photo.

The Kardashian Flat Tummy Co. partnership on Instagram is a clear example of the contemporary adaptations of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. By suggesting that the iconic Kardashian physique is the product of non-FDA approved meal replacement shakes and "detox" teas, Kim's sponsored posts encourage viewers to

117. "ASA Ruling on Nomad Choice Pty Ltd t/a Flat Tummy Tea," *Advertising Standards Authority*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/nomad-choice-pty-ltd-a17-383983.html>.

118. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

119. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Fuelling up with my."

enforce their own docility by whatever means necessary. Therefore, identifying Burke's dramatisic cycle within Kim Kardashian's FTC Instagram posts brings to light the themes of repression, "individual" willpower, and desirability central to the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. Further, the study of guilt induction and redemption strategies constitutes the True Womanhood traits of purity and submissiveness inherent in weight loss discourse. Finally, analysis of Kim Kardashian's sponsored Instagram posts provides insight into the contemporary mode and adaptations of the longstanding discursive formation of femininity and weight loss.

Kardashian Curves and the Hierarchy of Desire

The hierarchy in the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss orders bodies from most to least desirable. Applying Burke's process of guilt, purification, and redemption to this text displays the motivations and constraints of desire woven within this hazardous "perfect" hierarchy. As detailed in Burke's book *The Rhetoric of Religion*, the perceived perfect hierarchy is inevitably tainted by guilt. With this in mind, his definition of "perfect" is not equivalent to "good" or "ethical." In fact, he states that his goal was to "widen the concept of perfection to the point where we can also use the term ironically."¹²⁰ Therefore, the social order in which this redemptive narrative resides can be far removed from social perfection; it is only necessary that the people within the order believe it to be just and correct.

The visual adherence to the discursive formation's restrictions (i.e. weight loss) is presented through this ordering of bodies according to which are deemed more pure.

Aubrey Gordon (@YrFatFriend), the once-anonymous fat liberationist and body-politics

120. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 18.

activist describes this pervasive body order well in their 2018 article, noting that it is an “uncontested belief that thin people are superior to fat people in nearly every way. After all, they must be smart enough to understand thermodynamics and dietetics; moral enough to understand their obligation to remain thin; have the strength of will and character to stick to a plan; exhibit the determination to work out every day. Even if they have always been thin. Even if they don’t do any of those things.”¹²¹ Those with thin bodies clearly have been redeemed; however, the celebration of adherence obscures the means employed to obtain this result. This convenient ignorance enables the celebration of unhealthy and disordered eating behaviors, while also casting unjustified shame onto those who may never obtain the ideal body type. Moreover, ignoring the means in favor of the results places people with access to cosmetic alterations as more desirable than the rest in the hierarchy of bodies. Kim Kardashian’s Instagram posts uphold and exploit this social paradigm while also exemplifying this end-over-means celebration in the discursive formation.

Perfected bodies and desires

Kim’s body type was a facet of the Kardashian brand’s desirability, and KUWTK developed a large fan base at an unprecedented speed in part because it capitalized on shifting of body norms. At the time the show was introduced, American youth fashion was in the depths of its low-waisted jeans, crop-top camisole, rib-protruding love of skinny, boyish bodies. These conventional beauty standards favored white women, casting bodies of racial minorities as undesirable, or hypersexualized and dehumanized.

121. “I’m body positive as long as you’re not obese,” *Medium*, February 12, 2018, <https://medium.com/@thefatshadow/im-body-positive-as-long-as-you-re-not-obese-225c7ee7e652>.

In the context of Black figures, Gabrielle Donaldson's work traces the early 2000's "rise of famous white women turned into icons who have established, expanded, and maintained their foothold in the realm of popular culture through the commandeering and manipulation of the curvaceous aesthetic."¹²² Donaldson's research points out how this shift was led by women like the Kardashians who, "possessing a combination of Eurocentric features such as long straight hair, light or white skin tones, and the heavily vilified curvaceous aesthetic such as curvy hips, thick lips, ample bosoms and large behinds," were suddenly considered "at the precipice of desire, and achievement in the realm of popular culture."¹²³ As a privileged person with Eurocentric features and a full figure, Kim both fueled and profited off of the discursive formation's shift of appropriated acceptability, all while gaining in popularity.

Capitalizing on this cultural shift, Kim Kardashian made her figure her claim to fame and the icon of the Kardashian empire. A plethora of examples display Kim's overt appropriation of Black bodies and culture, though in the context of this thesis her cosmetic surgery is the most salient. Since *KUWTK* first aired in 2007, Kim Kardashian has utilized facial fillers and body alterations to create a more European face shape and to significantly emphasize her curvaceous figure. She intentionally fed into and exaggerated the discursive formation's body hierarchy, obtaining what is now known as the social-media-coined "slim-thicc" figure. Further, Kim profited from her cosmetically altered and appropriated body to gain money, followers, and influence. The clearest example of

122. Gabriella A. Donaldson, "Keep that Same Energy Sis': An Exploration of Black Women's Use of Offline Resistance Strategies," Thesis, (Georgia State University: 2020), 12.

123. Donaldson, "Keep that Same Energy Sis,'" 13.

this is her KK Body II fragrance which is sold in an opaque white container in the shape of her head-less, leg-less, Kardashian curves. This bottle, in partnership with Kim's notorious internet-breaking 2014 Hottentot photo,¹²⁴ demonstrate both her blatant commandeering of the Black physique and her reliance on this slim-thicc figure to acquire, hold, and monetize public attention.

With the Kardashian curves ascendant in the body hierarchy and established as highly profitable, Kim's partnership with FTC was destined to succeed. Even the company's most basic branding method, its title, reinforces the hierarchy of flat tummies and thick, or voluptuous, everything-elses. Since the FTC brand seeks to exploit the body-system by offering viewers the "ability" to look like the Kardashians, Kim does not have to work very hard in her Instagram posts. Kim's shake photos feature her in well-lit rooms, wearing fitted crop tops, and leggings or joggers cinched at the narrowest part of her waist.¹²⁵ She is flexing in these posts, highlighting the definitive markings of abdominal muscles and holding her arms up and out of the way to brandish her stomach's inward profile.¹²⁶ In one hand, she holds the FTC shake; in the other, she holds either the mix pouch, her phone, or the milk she used to mix it with. These items evoke a sense of action, implying that she is engaging with the product. The images thereby convey the narrative that she relies on these shakes to maintain her iconic figure's position at the top of the body hierarchy.

124. Bethonie Butler, "Yes, those Kim Kardashian photos are about race," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/11/21/yes-those-kim-kardashian-photos-are-about-race/>.

125. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Fuelling up with my."

126. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Fuelling up with my."

Kim's suggestion of her dependence on FTC products is also depicted in subtle nonverbal messages of a two-fold desire. First, Kim's photos depict desire through their emphasis on the restrictive norms that divide the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors within the discursive formation. Two of the four selected photos show Kim Kardashian engaging in unacceptable eating behaviors. In one photo, Kim dons high-cut bikini briefs and a cropped tank top, standing in a stainless steel kitchen.¹²⁷ Her head is tilted back as she holds what looks to be a shake to her mouth.¹²⁸ This combination of pose, attire, and setting resemble the common cheat-act of sneaking a late-night snack.¹²⁹ The late-night-snack photo therefore displays the acceptable yet repressive concept of indulging in cheat-meals. Similarly, Kim's post promoting FTC's highly controversial hunger-suppressant lollipops also depicts a cheat-act.¹³⁰ The photo utilized in this post is a close-up of Kim's full-glam face, her left hand holding the red lollipop in her puckered lips as she makes eye contact with the camera.¹³¹ Here Kim's pose depicts the cheat-act of engaging with unacceptable food, candy. Upon first glance, both photos suggest that even Kim Kardashian succumbs to her cravings of appetite. These poses evoke in viewers memories of their own cheat-acts. Both photos therefore remind viewers of their inherent and untamed desires of appetite. By first prompting viewers to acknowledge their uncontrolled desires, Kim's strategic posing makes her accessible and credible to

127. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

128. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

129. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

130. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

131. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

viewers, while priming them for a wave of guilt in her reinforcement of restrictive norms.

After briefly reminding viewers of their unbridled appetite desires, Kim Kardashian's photos then discursively enforce the hierarchy's divisions of good and bad behavior. The late-night-snack and lollipop photos utilize subtle nonverbal strategies to reify viewer appetite repression. In the first photo, the presumably unacceptable late-night-shake is revealed to be a form of self-discipline. The photo is able to briefly hide the contents of the shake since it is in a clear, commonplace glass with no identifying features.¹³² Upon further examination of the photo though, the viewer then notices the FTC branding displayed on the bright pink FTC shake mix packaging that is placed behind Kim's right hip.¹³³ The photo therefore suggests that Kim's indulgence in a late night shake is actually her enjoyment of a restrictive dieting product. Additionally, the lollipop photo does not reveal any apparent FTC branding. Not even the caption defines the type of lollipop she is eating, it is simply a colorful lollipop emoji.¹³⁴ Yet upon tapping the photo, viewers see that Kim has tagged @flattummyco as the red lollipop. With further photo interaction, viewers learn that Kim Kardashian is not enjoying a treat, but actually showcasing her self-controlling methods of hunger-suppression. The poses that initially reminded viewers of their uncontrolled desires now suddenly, and more intimately, reinforce repressive norms. Kim's subtle nonverbal strategies therefore reinforce the body hierarchy both by illustrating unacceptable appetite desires and depicting desire restriction as the standard method of self-discipline.

132. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

133. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

134. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

Second, Kim's posts depict the hierarchy's desire through her expression of sexuality. In the late-night-snack photo, Kim Kardashian is wearing commonly sexualized and revealing clothes: bikini briefs and a crop top. Her stance highlights her iconic physique: pushing her chest toward the camera, flexing her abdominal muscles, leaning her hips to the right and back. This pose draws attention to her exaggerated curves and flat stomach.¹³⁵ In the lollipop photo, Kim's clothing is not apparent yet her slimness is. The photo is a close up of her face, cropped about 2 inches below her collarbone, showing only skin and no trace of a shirt collar.¹³⁶ Her exposed collarbone mimics the bone-protruding ideals of slimness, furthering Kim's brandishing of her docile body. Additionally, the photo extends to what viewers would assume to be her left shoulder, yet her left hand covers her shoulder, and therefore covers any semblance of a shirt strap or sleeve.¹³⁷ The lack of evident clothing conveys a sexual tone which is further underscored in her lollipop eating pose: pursed lips, lollipop in mouth, maintained eye contact with the camera.¹³⁸ In both photos, Kim's expression of her sexuality through her wardrobe options, photo cropping, and bodily stance evoke the desires of her viewers. This conjuring of desires then reminds viewers of the high regard allotted to bodies that exhibit successful repression and self-discipline. To a greater extent, these photos exemplify the discursive formation's implicit rule of sexual expression in accordance with participant docility: a woman who is able to display her self-discipline in the form of

135. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

136. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

137. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

138. Kim Kardashian West, "Lollipop iOS emoji."

a slimmer body is allowed to express and emphasize her desirability. In the case of Kim Kardashian, this expression of desirability manifests in an expression of sexuality.

Overall, both the late-night-snack and lollipop photos reinforce the discursive formation's body hierarchy through a two-fold depiction of desire that both shames desires of appetite and celebrates the desirability of docile bodies.

Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts emphasize the contemporary slim-thicc body hierarchy through desire. Because she capitalized on cultural beauty shifts, Kim's mere visual presence and accessibility on Instagram reminds viewers of the preferred docile body. Kim's photos establish the body hierarchy through its structuring around two forms of desire. First, the posts provoke the repressed desires of her viewers by enacting unacceptable behaviors, such as late-night-snacks and eating candy, only to reinforce the restrictive norms through FTC shakes and hunger-suppressant lollipops. Second, Kim expresses her sexuality through precise posing, flexing, and wardrobe choices. These sexualizing methods remind viewers that docile bodies are worthy of desire and therefore allowed to express their desirability. Kim Kardashian's photos therefore reestablish the slim-thicc body hierarchy through depictions of desire, inherently provoking viewer guilt and self-discipline in response.

Individualized guilt

Highlighting good and desirable behaviors and bodies on Instagram also implies the bad and undesirable, which inevitably provokes guilt in viewers. Instagram notably can induce guilt; as Brown and Tiggemann's study revealed, women who viewed photos of attractive celebrities on Instagram felt immediate body dissatisfaction.¹³⁹ Through the

139. Zoe Brown and Marika Tiggemann. "Attractive Celebrity and Peer Images on Instagram: Effect on

lens of Burke's dramatisitic cycles, this celebration of attractive celebrity bodies on Instagram can be interpreted as reinforcement of the hierarchy which induces viewer guilt concerning their relative position in it. In accordance with Foucault's repressive hypothesis, the attractive celebrity images act as a repressive discourse which provokes viewer confession and re-dedication. Kim Kardashian's induction of guilt through visuals and text therefore embody the repressive nature of hierarchical discourse on Instagram and subsequent methods of viewer redemption.

While Kim's photos convey the perfect hierarchy that denigrates the value of bodies that are not slim-thicc, her captions are the clearest induction of guilt in these Instagram posts. The three captions utilize a guilt-laden context and directly call out the viewer by emphasizing an assumed expectation of constant striving to achieve the slim-thicc body ideal that reflects the restrictive norms of good weight loss behavior in the discursive formation's hierarchy. In the first few days of 2018, and again in 2019, Kim claimed that the Kardashians had "huuuuge Christmas[es]...and between that, New years and everything inbetween [sic]"¹⁴⁰ which left Kim feeling "like it was impossible to fit in [her] regular work outs and eat healthy."¹⁴¹ By implying that seasonal celebrations got in the way of her attempt to stay on top of the body hierarchy, Kim intimates that a consistent and time-consuming workout routine is a must for any self-respecting person. In blaming special life activities for her lack of striving, Kim prioritizes the fixation on

Women's Mood and Body Image," *Body Image* 19, (2016): 37–43. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007.

140. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad You guys all know."

141. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

figure over family, rest, and enjoyment. Additionally, her post in March of 2018 stated, “Fuelling [sic] up with my @flattummyco meal replacement shake before getting my workout done today,”¹⁴² which constitutes the normalization of constant self-discipline through a workout routine. In Foucauldian language, this prioritization reinforces the repression of desire. This discursive enactment of repression highlights the viewer’s inability to adhere to the restrictions when they choose family and celebration over self-discipline. The repressive nature of the discursive formation implies that unchecked desires spiral out into irrevocable actions and bodies. So by shifting one’s focus away from constant self-subjugation for even a special event or celebration, a person shows an untenable lack of control within the discursive formation and they are shamed. Therefore, Kim Kardashian's assumption of constant weight management induces guilt in her viewers by insinuating that they should constantly be disciplining themselves to obtain a desirable slim-thicc, docile body.

Her posts also usher in the negative by reminding viewers of their wrongful appetites and food engagement desires. Kim’s captions state, “You guys need to do yourselves a favor and get on these shakes”¹⁴³ and “trust me, you’re going to want to check [FTC shakes] out.”¹⁴⁴ In utilizing the second person pronoun “you,” viewers are pulled directly into the guilt. They are reminded of the hierarchy, its repressive expectations, and their failing role in the maintenance of both. Kim’s captions have salience in their direct and individual recognition of the viewer. *You* and your body are

142. Kim Kardashian West, “#ad Fuelling up with my.”

143. Kim Kardashian West, “#ad Fuelling up with my.”

144. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad You guys all know.”

not nearly as desirable as the Kardashian curves. *You* are not self-disciplined enough to have the positive regard of your peers. Please do *yourself* a favor by accepting your shame. Then *you* must do the hierarchy a favor by more effectively self-surveilling and self-disciplining yourself. Kim's explicit challenge through the use of "you" ensures the culpability of her followers and scapegoats her viewers. Since she has fully submitted to the disciplining of the discursive formation, she must cast her hierarchically induced shame onto those who do not fit into the slim-thicc hierarchy. Kim's viewers do not look like her and should therefore feel an internalized disdain for their inability to effectively discipline their body. Kim Kardashian's assumption of self-disciplining habits and utilization of the first-person pronoun "you" fortifies the discursive formation's repressive norms and scapegoats viewers for their failures.

Purity through Submission

Kim's captions target her viewers by claiming that their subordinate position in the hierarchy is shameful and entirely due to their own faulty agency. Therefore, the viewer must accept their sin of disregarding the discursive formation's restrictions, decide to "die to self," and choose to follow the redemptive path modeled by Kim. If the viewer previously held a high or neutral regard for their own body, their mortification must come in the recognition of their own lack. They must accept disgust toward their bodies and enter into a state of body dissatisfaction. Since many young females already reside in this state, the next component of mortification is a distrust of personal agency, or willpower.

Prior to reading Kim's posts, viewers may have thought they could climb the body hierarchy through their own willpower and strength, but their inability to physically

achieve a body like hers now is a problem. In order to properly mortify herself, the reader of the posts must not only think poorly of their body but also recognize their own shameful inability to adhere to the restrictive norms that must be confessed. This individual confession typically is expressed in everyday discourse, but sometimes also takes place on Instagram through personal posts and comments. Much like the confession modeled in Kim's post, the viewer's confession must contain a public denouncement or mocking of one's own body in addition to an acceptance of their own moral deficits. Kim Kardashian's scapegoating therefore requires individual acceptance of blame and catalyzes the self-submission of individuals to the formation's repressive norms.

After successfully creating body dissatisfaction in her viewers, Kim Kardashian's posts then offer a quick method of visible self-discipline: Take control of your agency with FTC meal replacement shakes and lollipops. With these products, the viewer is able to "get [their] tummy back to flat"¹⁴⁵ and reach some sense of satisfaction in knowing their body is on its way to becoming like Kim's, or at least on its way to becoming acceptable. By submitting their bodies to the constant self-discipline articulated in Kim's captions, the viewer can be redeemed to at least regain entrance into the discursive community. Since the formation celebrates ends over means, however, the physical appearance of submission is required to gain any significant position in the discursive formation. FTC products claim to provide a quick path to social redemption. By purchasing and using the FTC products, viewers therefore are able to feel a sense of power by giving themselves "a tummy makeover"¹⁴⁶ in as little as two days while

145. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Little update."

146. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad You guys all know;" Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Fuelling up with my."

increasing their adherence to standards for docile bodies. Kim's posts suggest that FTC products are a simple means of redemption within the body hierarchy as they will make your body desirable almost instantly. Therefore, the redemption Kim Kardashian offers through FTC products is accomplished by adopting unhealthy and disordered eating behaviors as the means for purifying the self and gaining high social regard within the discursive formation.

Individuals who submit to the body hierarchy and its repressive norms are only momentarily redeemed by the use of FTC products. Through mortification, Kim Kardashian's followers humiliate themselves in the hierarchy, enacting victimage within the social order and in response to Kim's scapegoating. The body dissatisfaction, confession, and rededication to the repressive norms is received positively within the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss, but the momentary social regard is an illusory liberation. Rather, it is a symptom of the turning inward of one's own power to produce a desirable docile body. The discursive community only grants positive regard to participants who are able to prove their adherence to the repressive norms through a physical changing of their body. While FTC claims that its products will produce visible results, its quick-fix nature leads to inevitable failure that induces further guilt reinforced by social media posts like Kim's and which require a greater victimage in response. The heightened enactment of victimage may result in more obsessive weight loss behaviors, the use of alternative fad dieting products, and the supplementary scapegoating of others. Overall, Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts play a significant role in the continuance and growth of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. Kim's posts effectively uphold this hierarchy through desire and repression, scapegoating

viewers into confession and mortification, and offering a means of redemption that inevitably fails. Furthermore, partaking in the perpetual redemption of dieting enacts the feminine characteristics of purity and submission.

Conclusion

The application of Burke's dramatisic cycle reveals the repressive influence of Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts. Kim's reinforcement of the slim-thicc body hierarchy through a two-fold desire induces guilt within viewers. This guilt must be redeemed through either mortification or scapegoating. In mortifying oneself, the viewer must confess her wrongdoings, recognize her lack of willpower, and rededicate herself to maintaining the body hierarchy through increasingly intensified methods of weight loss. Kim offers FTC products as a hastened redemption strategy, therefore justifying the discursive formation's celebration of ends over means and promoting disordered eating behaviors. A viewer's successful completion of this weight loss journey cleanses her of the impurities of her personal desires. Additionally, it increases her docility by turning her power inward to enforce self-disciplining and self-surveilling norms. In enacting the symbolic redemption of weight loss, viewers also practice the purification and bodily submission of True Womanhood. Therefore, the application of Burke's dramatisic cycle reveals how Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts discursively reproduce the hazardous conflation of feminine purity and submission with weight loss behaviors.

IV. ANALYZING WW'S 2018-2019 REBRANDING CAMPAIGN VIDEOS

Discursive formations adapt and expand through increased and varied discourses. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the direct correlation between discourse and constraint. He notes that discursive growth is not just an extension of one set of rules, but a “loosened and diversified” set of restrictions.¹⁴⁷ In the case of sexuality, increased discussion surrounding sexual repression led to an exponential increase of specific sexual rules and expectations. Foucault conceptualizes this restrictive augmentation “as a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them.”¹⁴⁸ Sexual restriction began as a repression of morality within religious contexts. Yet as discourses on sex emerged within other facets of culture, sexuality soon became a concern of economic and governmental utility, prompting increased restriction through legislation.

Similarly, the increased discourses about weight loss within diversified communities/disciplines has altered the meaning of weight loss. In many instances, much like the discourses on sex, adherence to weight loss norms signifies an artificial morality and purity. As discourses on weight loss and femininity began to emanate from what Foucault terms “a dispersion of centers,”¹⁴⁹ the enactment of dieting and weight loss gained a dimension of utility. In light of modern feminist, body positive, and wellness norms, proponents of dieting sought to rebrand weight loss as an effective tool for female

147. Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 315.

148. Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” 315.

149. Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” 315.

empowerment, all the while continuing to grow the discursive formation's "restrictive economy"¹⁵⁰ through traditional dieting repression. This shift into weight loss's utility reframed traditional guilt-laden messages of the weight loss industry from failures of the audience's body to the audience's failure to adhere to progressive feminine ideals.

Originally, the discursive formation focused on the moral failings and necessary humiliation of non-docile bodies. Wellness culture's adoption of body positive and feminist philosophies actively counters the weight loss industry's shame-based methods. Therefore, the evolved discursive formation centers its repressive norms on the utility of weight loss in the adherence to modern feminine ideals. This adapted discourse therefore suggests that weight loss is a necessary tool in a woman's journey to "liberation."

The interwoven lens of Burke's dramaturgic cycles and Foucault's repressive hypothesis reveal how the evolved discursive formation creates a social order that highly regards modern women who "have it all" (i.e. have a job, family, desirable body, youth, etc.). By reminding viewers of their perceived inability to "have it all," the repressive norms induce guilt that can only be resolved through increased devotion to weight loss. In co-opting desirable wellness symbols, the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss crafts restrictions that adhere to cultural norms while still selling traditional weight loss and gender expectations.

Weight Watchers' 2018 rebranding into WW, "Wellness that Works," exemplifies the contemporary adaptation of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. In shifting from simple morality claims to suggesting that weight loss contributes to individualized social change, the evolved formation is able to extend its traditional

150. Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," 312.

rhetorics of guilt, purification, and redemption. Therefore, by co-opting symbols of modern wellness, WW's 2018 rebranding campaign videos continue the discursive formation's conflation of feminine domesticity, piety, and submissiveness with weight loss, all under the guise of wellness culture.

Context and Artifact Descriptions

Weight Watchers began in the 1960s when Jean Nidetch started hosting weight-loss meetings in her local community.¹⁵¹ These meetings quickly grew in popularity, transforming into a legitimate business that then blossomed into one of the most prominent and longstanding dieting programs in the United States. At its peak, Weight Watchers programs centered around a point system in which members were given a daily allowance to spend and track on food eaten. They could earn points through workouts and met weekly to discuss the trials and tribulations of these pursuits. The company's mission statement centered on their science-based¹⁵² and approachable methods of weight loss. WW claims that up to "one million people"¹⁵³ across the globe currently partake in these meetings. A year before rebranding, their core demographic was "90% female, with an average age of 38."¹⁵⁴ They historically target middle-aged women, utilizing traditional ideas of domesticity, piety, and submissiveness in their marketing campaigns

151. "History & Philosophy," WW, Accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.weightwatchers.com/about/his/history.aspx>.

152. "WW Scientific Advisory Board," WW, Accessed October 7, 2020, <https://www.weightwatchers.com/us/science-center/scientific-advisory-board>.

153. WW, "History & Philosophy."

154. Rina Raphael, "How Weight Watchers Transformed Itself Into a Lifestyle Brand," *Fast Company*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40500280/how-weight-watchers-transformed-itself-into-a-lifestyle-brand>.

to create and maintain this demographic. Despite Weight Watchers' longstanding history within the weight loss industry, their traditional weight loss marketing strategies could not withstand the critique of 21st century body positivity and wellness norms.

Contemporary wellness culture rides the coattails of the body-positivity movement. The body-positivity movement initially began "as a tenet of the fat acceptance movement in the 1960s"¹⁵⁵ and found a resurgence on social media in reaction to the prominence of photo-shopped and fitness-focused content online. This movement's subversive mission was to love bodies that were "widely reviled and discriminated against" in "constant cultural messaging."¹⁵⁶ In response to body positivity's resurgence online, brands began co-opting this language as a marketing tactic, reducing the movement's philosophy into an aesthetic of thin-centric self-love that disregards systematic forms of sizeism and fatphobia. Concurrently, concepts of "wellness" were ushered into the American conscious and subsequently commercialized. Although the Global Wellness Institute "defines wellness as the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to holistic health,"¹⁵⁷ the "4.5 trillion"¹⁵⁸ dollar industry that built up around the concept of wellness blurred its meaning. Now companies like Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop sell wellness as a luxury aesthetic centered around snake-

155. Amanda Mull, "Body Positivity Is a Scam," *Vox*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/5/17236212/body-positivity-scam-dove-campaign-ads>.

156. Mull, "Body Positivity Is a."

157. "Wellness Definitions," *Global Wellness Institute*, Accessed March 28, 2020, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/wellness-economy-definitions/>.

158. "Wellness Industry Statistics & Facts," *Global Wellness Institute*, Accessed March 28, 2020, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/press-room/statistics-and-facts/>.

oil products.¹⁵⁹ Primarily marketed to young women, wellness culture also has adopted relatively progressive notions of gender expectations. This modern iteration of wellness culture adapts traditional notions of femininity and weight loss by valuing individualized health and growth over the achievement of a prescribed, desirable body. The adoption of wellness culture in American popular culture therefore pushed leaders in the weight loss industry to adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. Because they no longer could explicitly portray womanhood as an unhealthy striving towards a docile body, weight loss companies turned to selling bodily repression and internalized guilt as an effective strategy to achieve progressive wellness milestones.

In 2018, Weight Watchers changed its name to WW and adopted the slogan “Wellness that Works” to signify a new wellness-centered direction for their company. Mindy Grossman, WW’s new CEO, claimed that this shift was an attempt to “create a world where wellness is accessible to all, not just the few.”¹⁶⁰ After a 3-year drop in stocks and membership,¹⁶¹ the attempt to democratize wellness was a veiled grasp for profits.¹⁶² The sudden and poorly managed brand roll-out catalyzed another 34% stock plummet.¹⁶³ To loyal stakeholders, historically female, this rebrand “dilute[d]” Weight

159. Tara Burton, “The Rebranded Weight Watchers is Bringing Wellness to the Masses,” *Vox*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/2/17923656/weight-watchers-ww-rebrand-wellness-culture-masses-trickle-down>.

160. Allyson Chiu, “The New Weight Watchers is All about ‘Wellness.’ Critics Say it’s ‘Diet Culture’ in Disguise,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/09/25/weight-watchers-rebrands-critics-say-its-another-disguise-for-the-diet-culture/>.

161. Taffy Brodesser-Akner, “Losing It in the Anti-Dieting Age,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/magazine/weight-watchers-oprah-losing-it-in-the-anti-dieting-age.html?auth=login-google>.

162. Burton, “Bringing Wellness to the Masses.”

163. Dan Avi, “The Weight Watchers Rebrand Points To the Risk Of Chasing Trends,” *Forbes*, April 11,

Watchers' rich 55-year championing of weight loss programs.¹⁶⁴ Further, it seemed to lack foresight and strategy. WW's new campaign "cramm[ed together] too many scattered claims"¹⁶⁵ in attempting to straddle the line between weight loss promotions and body positivity, and appeared tone-deaf to the expanding ideas about gender roles. Despite their major oversights, WW eventually showed signs of growth with the adoption of celebrity endorsements, a new social media platform, and several company partnerships. Additionally, in shifting to include wellness-centered branding, WW managed to expand its age range to include "women in their 20s and 30s,"¹⁶⁶ in addition to their older brand-loyalists. Weight Watchers' clumsy rebrand and eventual success therefore illustrates how the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss evolved by co-opting and commercializing contemporary wellness discourses.

Even with its recovery, Weight Watchers' rebrand incited concerns and backlash from the body positive and body liberationist communities. This negative response was recorded in major news articles across the country. A journalist from *NBC* called out the business for being "built...around fat-shaming" and "profiting off of people's poor body image."¹⁶⁷ *The Washington Post* highlighted blogs and personal stories of women who

2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avidan/2019/04/11/the-weight-watchers-rebrand-points-to-the-risk-of-chasing-trends/#863edf42ddc0>.

164. Avi, "The Weight Watchers Rebrand."

165. Avi, "The Weight Watchers Rebrand."

166. Raphael, "How Weight Watchers Transformed."

167. Erika Kendall, "Weight Watchers' Rebranding Won't Help Save the Company That Built Business Around Fat-Shaming," *NBC News*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/weight-watchers-rebranding-won-t-help-save-company-built-its-ncna913041>.

had developed and sustained eating disorders through the use of Weight Watchers.¹⁶⁸ Some critics even chose to study what this rebrand meant for the health industry as a whole, revealing the classist nature, and WW's exploitation, of "wellness as a personal obligation."¹⁶⁹ In global news, *the BBC* held up WW's rebrand as a cautionary tale by critiquing along with many others the shift to wellness claims as undermining the company's longstanding credibility in a fast-paced "industry of fads."¹⁷⁰ Although WW now identified itself as a wellness company, body liberationists highlighted its extension of traditional and hazardous weight loss claims. WW continued to sell their services in a way that induced guilt and obsessive behaviors among its female participants. Therefore, Weight Watchers' rebranding into WW highlights how the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss expanded to encompass wellness culture.

After losing hundreds of thousands of members to the declining interest in traditional weight loss diets, WW's attempt to return to prominence was manifested in its wellness rebranding campaign called "For Every Body" and its subsequent #WellnessThatWorks "Success Stories" in 2018 and 2019. These videos were created in partnership with the Ad Agency *Anomaly* and the Production Company *PrettyBird*.¹⁷¹ Directed by Max Malkin and produced by Travy Hauser and Suzanne Hargrove, the videos center upon actual WW members, occasionally featuring celebrity endorsers like

168. Chiu, "'Diet Culture' in Disguise."

169. Burton, "Bringing Wellness to the Masses."

170. Dearbail Jordan, "What's Gone Wrong at Weight Watchers?," *BBC News*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-47392730>.

171. "WW 'For Every Body' by Anomaly," *Campaign US*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.campaignlive.com/article/ww-for-every-body-anomaly/1521920>.

Oprah Winfrey, Kate Hudson, DJ Kahled, and Robbie Williams. The three videos chosen for analysis highlight WW's appropriation of wellness's relational health, self-love, and progressive femininity symbols to suggest that weight loss is the enactment of true, modern womanhood.

The three videos within the series examined in this chapter are posted on the "WW formerly Weight Watchers" YouTube channel. The first is the flagship ad, titled "WW | For Every Body | Winter 2019." Released on December 30, 2018, the video is an introduction to the new WW brand. At just one minute in length, the video alternates among eight WW members and 2 celebrities who are presented in the ad as being in the process of achieving a goal. The people featured have a wider array of body sizes than typical of past Weight Watchers ads. The video is backed with Lizzo's song "Worship Me" and contains no environmental sounds. Instead, the clips are linked together with centered, white text which names the person featured, briefly describes their changing goals, and highlights the number of pounds they have lost. For example, a clip of a man running is overlaid with the text "Josh jogs, -28 lbs."¹⁷² The clip then cuts to Josh bent over with his hands on his knees as the text tacks on the word "sometimes" to the phrase "Josh jogs." The alteration of goal descriptions portrays a more relaxed and realistic depiction of weight loss compared to their previous transformation-centered ads. The video ends with a fast-paced sequence of member names overlaying a shot of a couple driving a jeep across the crest of a mountain. The driving scene pans up slightly and

172. "WW | For Every Body | Winter 2019," WW formerly Weight Watchers, December 30, 2018, video, 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQVtf3SJLpI>.

culminates with the phrase “Every body has a reason to get healthy,”¹⁷³ quickly followed by a blue screen emblazoned with the new WW logo. WW’s video “For Every Body” illustrates the foundational ways that the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss co-opts and exploits wellness symbols.

The second video, titled “Sara & Patrick WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks,” was released just one day before Valentine's Day in 2019.¹⁷⁴ The 43-second video focuses on a young couple by featuring clips of them pushing their baby’s stroller, making meals, eating together, and in a home interview. The video ends with close ups of what appear to be an engagement photo and a family Christmas card. The audio is a voice-over that consists primarily of the husband’s voice with occasional remarks from the wife. The ad’s written textual overlay acts as a commentator on their story. This text begins by showing how much weight Sara and Patrick have each lost, but as their story develops, the text shares what the couple “gained” in the process: more family time, a new love of cooking, and delicious date nights. By focusing on Sara and Patrick’s heterosexual relationship, WW’s second ad offers insight into the ways feminine piety, domesticity, and desirability are upheld in wellness-centric weight loss advertisements.

The third video analyzed is titled “Whitney WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks.” Whitney’s story focuses on a mom whose “wellness” pursuit is

173. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:52.

174. “Sara & Patrick WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks,” WW formerly Weight Watchers, February 13, 2019, video, 0:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsAYMcVqCYI&list=PLpCc4EcTNAkYqP4aks9yvN2OfuxkN3Bm&index=4>.

catalyzed and sustained by her dedication to the family. To reference the youthful wellness push, WW's selection of Whitney emphasizes her modernity: She is hip, sporting blue hair, doing yoga with her child, and emphasizing her love of avocado toast. The visual images are accompanied by Whitney's voice telling her story. The video also is overlaid with animated written text, similar to Sara and Patrick's video. The text begins by displaying Whitney's 26-pound weight loss and continues to describe how she "gained more energy" and "a plant-based lifestyle"¹⁷⁵ with WW. Whitney's mom-based persona illustrates WW's adaption of feminine domesticity and piety within contemporary wellness culture and weight loss advertising.

Weight Loss is For Every (Female's) Body

WW launched its rebrand with its ad titled "WW | For Every Body | Winter 2019." This video quickly jumps between clips of eight everyday WW members, as well as celebrities Oprah Winfrey and Kate Hudson, that show them reaching particular health milestones or performing wellness behaviors. "For Every Body" is a fast-paced, one-minute video saturated with brief storylines and complicated by on-screen textual descriptors. These quick-moving facets result in unclear "scattered claims" that jump between seemingly contrasting ideas like "weight loss, fitness, ...young beautiful bodies," and body positivity, wellness, and both progressive and traditional gender depictions.¹⁷⁶ A close reading of every claim would take multiple studies, so this analysis

175. "Whitney WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks," WW formerly Weight Watchers, February 20, 2019, video, 0:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1ALREOX3YQ&list=PLpCc4EcTNAkYqP4aks9yvjiN2OfuxkN3Bm&index=9>.

176. Avi, "The Weight Watchers Rebrand."

focuses on trends in gender depictions and the video's overarching claim that "Every body has a reason to get healthy."¹⁷⁷

The video begins in a house, displaying a woman running down the stairs and out the door in jogging clothes, then jumps to a woman sitting cross-legged on the hood of a car, with her eyes closed. This is where the text begins. White text appears in the center of the frame that reads "Celine meditates" in bold letters. In a smaller font below this line, the text reads "-23 lbs."¹⁷⁸ The text disappears, and the clip then jumps to a close up on her face as her hand reaches up to scratch her nose, breaking her "perfect" meditation. "Sorta"¹⁷⁹ in bold white letters appears in the center of the frame. This is the start of the interplay of textual descriptions and visual depictions that populate the video. In the rapid series of clips, nine others are framed by the white text. Of the ten total people that are named with the overlaid white text, six are women. For the purposes of this thesis, only the depictions of women will be analyzed to home in on WW's expectations of feminine enactment. Out of the six named women, the text only displays the amount of weight lost by four of them. The two women excused from this divulgence are the celebrities Oprah Winfrey and Kate Hudson. Throughout the video, the use of overlaid text clarifies both the activities depicted in the commercial as well as each individual's wellness goal.

After Celine's clip, the audience is briefly introduced to two male members then to Kate Hudson, who is shown jumping on a trampoline with her male children. The

177. WW, "For Every Body," 0:52.

178. WW, "For Every Body," 0:04.

179. WW, "For Every Body," 0:06.

overlaid text reads, “Kate can keep up with these guys.”¹⁸⁰ Next, Kendra is shown singing enthusiastically on a theatrical stage. Her text reads, “Kendra discovered her voice” with “-83 lbs”¹⁸¹ in smaller text below. Kendra is followed by a male, who is followed by Oprah Winfrey, who “got a new ride”¹⁸² and is seen joyfully riding a bike. Samantha is then shown standing on a dock, removing what appears to be a swimsuit cover. The camera then jumps to a shot in which Samantha is sitting on the edge of the dock, confidently sporting a blue polka-dot bikini. Her text reads, “Samantha got a new power suit,” underscored by “-11 lbs.”¹⁸³ Another male is shown, followed by Melanie, a middle-aged woman who is established in a close-up shot of her face. She is wearing a black helmet and aviator sunglasses, with the wind blowing behind her. The scene then jumps to a clip of Melanie speeding across the screen on a black motorcycle. Her written text reads, “Melanie ditched the minivan” and “-48 lbs.”¹⁸⁴ The six women in WW’s “For Every Body” ad represent relatively progressive depictions of femininity. The women are shown doing a variety of activities both within and outside of the traditional domestic bounds of true womanhood, such as playing athletically with their kids, singing on a stage, and driving a motorcycle. With this variety of feminine depictions, WW’s flagship advertisement appeals to the female empowerment notions of wellness culture while still engaging with their older, more traditional audience. The duality of WW’s wellness

180. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:22.

181. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:25.

182. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:32.

183. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:35.

184. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:41.

marketing strategy therefore highlights the evolution of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss into contemporary discourses.

In addition to illustrating a progressive range of feminine activities, WW's "For Every Body" video employs two particular symbols of contemporary wellness culture. The first co-opted symbol of wellness is shown in the ad's beginning scenes: Celine's use of meditation. According to the Global Wellness Summit, meditation, alongside "a healthy diet and exercise," is "one of the three pillars of wellbeing."¹⁸⁵ Further, in correspondence with the rise in contemporary wellness culture, the CDC found meditation "the fastest-growing health trend in America"¹⁸⁶ in 2017. It is important to note that while leaders in the wellness industry claim to be experts on the subject of meditation, they have largely appropriated, whitewashed, and merchandized the practice from Eastern cultures.¹⁸⁷ This sanitized version of meditation has become a symbol of wellness in American culture. In the WW video, Celine, a woman of Asian descent, is seen meditating on the hood of an old truck, on the coast of an ocean, at sunset. Her "sorta"¹⁸⁸ attempt at meditation provides WW's initial establishment of their wellness rebrand. Through Celine's seated pose and cultural heritage, WW, rather problematically, associates themselves with the trendiest and most exploitative activity in wellness culture. Additionally, their emphasis on her nose-scratch points to WW's untraditional relaxing of

185. Beth McGroarty, "Meditation Goes Plural," *Global Wellness Summit*, 2019, <https://www.globalwellnesssummit.com/2019-global-wellness-trends/meditation-goes-plural/>.

186. McGroarty, "Meditation Goes Plural."

187. Ankita Roa, "To Some, Mindfulness Feels Too Whitewashed to Embrace," *Vice*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbkzdz/mindfulness-apps-whitewashed-spirituality>.

188. WW, "For Every Body," 0:06.

restrictive rules and explicit guilt induction. Instead of Weight Watcher's usual enforcing of a strict diet, exercise, and mental program, Celine's meditation slip-up shows that the new WW allows room for mistakes and individualized strategies. Overall, WW's depiction of Celine's meditation at the start of their clip sequence exhibits the shifting of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss into this "relaxed" appropriation of wellness culture.

"For Every Body" also co-opts the self-love notions of wellness culture in the depiction of Samantha. As the third to last person in the sequence, Samantha is shown removing her swimsuit coverup and sitting in a bikini on the side of a dock. In the dock scene, the camera is angled to look up at her from what one could assume is water height.¹⁸⁹ This camera angle signifies admiration by suggesting the viewer is lower than the person on screen, evoking the viewer to admire Samantha's confidence in her "power suit."¹⁹⁰ Moreover, Samantha is leaning back on her arms and smiling up and to the left with a pose that expresses pride in her body which deviates from the norms of thinness. She evinces few signs of muscle tone and her body has a relatively average shape that defies the usual depictions by Weight Watchers and in other media of super-slim women in swimsuits. This "new power suit"¹⁹¹ evokes the body-positive principles adopted into contemporary wellness culture. By portraying a larger woman who is feeling happy and powerful in a swimsuit, WW moves away from traditional shaming tactics and replaces them with celebration of holistic progress. Samantha's depiction connects wellness

189. WW, "For Every Body," 0:35.

190. WW, "For Every Body," 0:35.

191. WW, "For Every Body," 0:35.

culture and WW's dieting plan, furthering the discursive formation's evolution into acceptable modern discourses. By co-opting symbols of female empowerment, meditation, and body-positivity, WW is able to rebrand themselves as a wellness company despite their continued promotion of repressive weight loss habits.

With the commercial's tagline at revealed at its end, WW's "For Every Body" is able to evince progressive health practices, while still selling weight loss as the means to success. After the fast-paced sequence of WW member clips, the commercial ends with a shot of a mountain road. A couple rides across the screen in a jeep towing several mountain bikes. The centered white written text appears along the center line of the road reading, "Every body has a reason to get healthy."¹⁹² At second 53 in a 60-second ad, this line offers an explanation for the prior scenes. Semiotic scholars refer to meaning development in sequence as a text's syntag.¹⁹³ The syntagmatic structuring, in "For Every Body" that places this tagline at the end of the video functions to rewrite the previous scenes. The phrase shapes the earlier textual descriptors that previously seemed progressive into "reason[s] to get healthy." This slogan in association with the textual emphasis on the number of pounds lost undercuts WW's seemingly progressive rebrand by reinforcing their longstanding promotion of weight loss to achieve health, or in this case weight loss to achieve wellness. WW's reasons to get healthy are therefore synonymous with reasons to lose weight. Celine's reason to lose weight is to find inner peace; Kendra's is to find her voice; Samantha's is to feel confident in a swimsuit, and so on. The syntag and subtle display of pounds-lost in this WW video therefore forward the

192. WW, "For Every Body," 0:53.

193. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 4th Edition, (London: Sage, 2016), 120.

belief that women need to lose weight to be true women.

The syntag and overlaid text in “For Every Body” undercuts WW’s alignment with progressive feminine ideals, while the participant visuals and stories still allow the company to profit off of their wellness aesthetic. Typically, visual depictions of women doing nontraditional things aid in the modern expansion of femininity in popular media. Melanie riding a motorcycle and Kate “keeping up with the guys”¹⁹⁴ could be signs of societal progress. Yet in the context of this WW video when these activities are framed as reasons to lose weight, any notion of progress collapses. The suggestion that weight loss is a prerequisite for any notable feminine achievement is a key characteristic of the repressive marketing strategies in the weight loss industry. This conflation furthers the idea that a woman’s appearance and desirability should be prioritized over her personal triumphs, thereby implying that accomplishments are nullified without audience engagement with WW’s weight loss programs. WW’s exploitation of wellness symbols exemplifies the paradoxical marketing of weight loss products under the guise of wellness. This evolution of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss establishes progressive femininity as the desirable cultural standard, all the while insisting that docility through weight loss is the only way to acceptably adhere to this wellness trend.

Every Body has a Feminine Reason to Lose Weight

As the flagship ad of WW’s rebranding campaign, “For Every Body” focuses on selling WW’s overarching themes, aesthetic, and uses. The commercials that followed highlight and illustrate the specifics of Weight Watchers’ venture into wellness. In a

194. WW, “For Every Body,” 0:22.

series of videos called “Weight Watchers | Success Stories,” WW features the weight loss stories of a couple named Sara and Patrick, as well that of a young mom named Whitney. Released after “For Every Body,” these videos function as deeper anecdotal explanations of WW’s wellness claim that “every body has a reason to get healthy.”¹⁹⁵ The success stories utilize a mix of modern wellness symbols and classic weight loss strategies to suggest that WW’s rebranding is a significant shift into holistic health trends. This contradictory blend of old and new health discourses reveals the continuity of longstanding restrictive norms from the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. WW’s Success Stories therefore co-opt common wellness symbols such as relational health, youthfulness, and progressive femininity to reestablish the discursive formation’s restrictive norms surrounding feminine domesticity, purity, submissiveness, and desirability. Moreover, in light of WW’s “For Every Body” tagline, the success stories normalize problematic reasons for women to lose weight.

Sara & Patrick’s Relational Reason

“Sara & Patrick’s WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks” was posted just a day before Valentine’s day, which likely was not a coincidence because the ad is centered around the young couple’s romantic pursuit through WW. A white text overlay is used in this video, aligned in a way that frames two diagonal corners, with bold action words, and emphasizing the last one or two words of each phrase in green. The text acts as a commentator to their story, first appearing in the establishing shot of the couple pushing their baby’s stroller by detailing how much weight they each lost. By beginning the video with a textual emphasis on weight loss, Sara and Patrick’s wellness journey is framed as a

195. WW, “For Every Body,” 00:53.

story about weight loss. As the video reveals this story, the text relates what they “gained” in the process: “more family time,”¹⁹⁶ “a new love of cooking,”¹⁹⁷ and “delicious date nights.”¹⁹⁸ This “gained” phrasing is also utilized in Patrick’s opening line in which he states that “since joining WW [they]’ve really gained more control over [their] wellness.”¹⁹⁹

This video connects to wellness through its depiction of a romantic relationship. The connection between interpersonal relationships and personal health is a relatively new and positive pillar within wellness marketing. Because discourse on relationships in regard to health is a recent phenomenon, however, even unhealthy portrayals of romance are able to harken back to contemporary wellness culture. For example, there are numerous trending wellness couples who openly shame their partner’s eating/weight loss behaviors online, but because both partners are thin, desirable, and presumably “healthy” people, these verbal harassments are also accepted as healthy and normalized. Therefore, WW’s focus on Sara and Patrick’s seemingly pleasant relationship links to the wellness aesthetic, while its gender disparity and assumptions conveys traditional notions of feminine piety, submission, and domesticity within weight loss.

“Sara & Patrick WW Success Story” also indirectly links the pursuit of romance and weight loss by overlaying visual symbols of romance with vague narration. Similar to the meanings established through the syntag in the “For Every Body” video, Sara and

196. WW, “Sara & Patrick,” 0:06.

197. WW, “Sara & Patrick,” 0:14.

198. WW, “Sara & Patrick,” 0:20.

199. WW, “Sara & Patrick,” 0:02-3.

Patrick's story grows in its depth of meaning during the last 10 seconds of clips. This key sequence begins with a close-up shot of the couples' intertwined left hands. The overall color of the shot is peachy tones, contrasted by the glistening silver of their wedding rings. This highlighting of the rings is backed by Patrick's narration which states, "We're never gonna be perfect."²⁰⁰ The shot then cuts to a close-up scene of the couple happily looking into one another's eyes, pushing their baby's stroller, with their hands touching on the handle. Here, Patrick's voiceover says, "but every day we have a chance to get a little closer."²⁰¹ On the word closer, the shot quickly jumps through two scenes of them pushing the stroller: The first is a close-up of Sara leaning her head on Patrick's shoulder, and the second shot is from behind, revealing Patrick putting his arm around Sara. Patrick finishes his sentence after these scenes with the phrase "and just try to be better."²⁰² The video overlays visual cues of romance and closeness with language that suggests a striving for perfection and greater intimacy. Patrick's vague narration and the visual symbols of romance insinuate a social order of desirability and intimacy, which compels Sara, Patrick, and the viewers to improve their relational wellness by striving to achieve the perfect weight.

Additionally, the video ends with vague narration that further suggests that the couple's "reason for getting healthy"²⁰³ is the continuance of their romance. Immediately following Patrick's statement about getting close to perfect, the video jumps to a home

200. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:23.

201. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:26-8.

202. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:28.

203. WW, "For Every Body," 00:53.

interview setting. The scene provides a close-up of Patrick's face, though it also shows the edge of Sara's face in the bottom right corner with her eyes looking up at Patrick. Patrick states, "I want to make sure that this lasts a lifetime."²⁰⁴ On the word "this," the scene cuts to a framed photo of a younger Sara and Patrick kissing. The unclear antecedent of "this" suggests that Patrick is referring to the visual: a romantic photo of Sara and Patrick. The vague language and strategic visual allows viewers to replace "this" with Sara and Patrick's relationship. The video's visual substitution continues the idea that the couple must maintain and improve their desirability through weight loss so that their relationship can "last a lifetime."²⁰⁵

Patrick's explicit stating of the couple's devotion to perfection exemplifies Burke's description of how the perfect hierarchy continually must be reestablished. In this case, the perfect hierarchy that is described by Patrick places thin, desirable, and consequently intimate couples in high regard. This structuring of desire therefore induces guilt in women who may not feel they excel in romantic pursuits or their own desirability. Further, the implication of weight loss as a means to obtain closeness suggests that self-disciplining and self-surveilling weight loss behaviors are the necessary means of redemption because these actions create a desirable, docile body and reinforce the formation's traditional repressive norms.

"Sara & Patrick WW Success Story" upholds feminine submission through its framing of weight loss as a requisite to be a participant in a romance. By situating weight loss as a necessary step in obtaining romance, WW appeals to wellness culture's pillar of

204. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:30.

205. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:30.

relational health while reinforcing the discursive formation's repressive norms of appetite and social desire. Through visual and audio symbols, WW's ad suggests that weight loss is a prerequisite of romance, intimacy, and perfect love. WW therefore suggests that repressing one's appetite desires (i.e. losing weight) redeems a woman and makes her more desirable, particularly to men. This relinquishing of agency to create a highly regarded docile body mimics the dramatic cycles analyzed in chapter three. Whereas Kim Kardashian's docility allowed her to express her desirability through her sexuality, WW's allocation of desirability-expression appeals to the more traditional and conservative values of their customer base. Sara's bodily submission and docility not only gains her male desire, but grants her permission to publicly revel in her romance in ways not permitted to women who do not submit to the disciplinary norms. Much like Foucault's description of illusory liberation in his repressive hypothesis, the submission of one partner to the bodily standards of the other becomes a constraining form of self-subjugation particularly because these bodily standards largely are defined by the knowledge and desires presented to them by the beauty, fashion, and dieting industries. This means that not only are Sara and Patrick submitting to one another's views of bodily perfection, Sarah is also subject to the repressive norms of female beauty standards. Overall, WW exploits wellness's symbol of relational health to sell weight loss as a means of obtaining romantic desire. This exploitation illustrates the continuance of the discursive formation's repressive and traditional feminine norms, despite its shift into wellness discourse.

“Sara & Patrick's WW Success Story” also depicts female submission through domesticity and piety. Sara's only verbal contribution, 4 seconds of audio compared to

Patrick's 28 seconds, details how joining WW has made her "think about food differently"²⁰⁶ and has caused her to be "more adventurous"²⁰⁷ in her recipe choices. These are paired with scenes of her preparing food and Patrick eating it. In one scene, Sara even feeds Patrick. By limiting Sara's contributions to comments about food preparation, the WW video implies that what Sara really gained was a more domestic role in the household. Submission to the formation's repressive norms reified Sara's traditionally feminine role of homemaker within the domestic sphere. In an extension of Sara's domesticity, the couple's explicit "reason for getting healthy"²⁰⁸ also implies her motherly upkeep of familial values. After Patrick makes the statement about this "lasting a lifetime," the next shot settles on a framed picture of the couple and their son. Patrick continues his earlier statement that he wants wellness "because I want my son to see me at my best."²⁰⁹ Beyond the implied romance of the earlier scenes, there is no mention of Sara's reasoning. Her wants are subsumed by the desires of her husband, and even further, his desired relationship with his male child. Sara loses weight because Patrick wants to look good for his son.

Sara's reason for losing weight also is articulated as a way to bolster her traditionally pious nature by positively influencing her husband and child. While piety in the Cult of True Womanhood referred to studying Christianity to increase a woman's

206. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 00:08.

207. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 00:13.

208. WW, "For Every Body," 00:53.

209. WW, "Sara & Patrick," 0:32.

ability to bring “an erring man back to Christ,”²¹⁰ in the wellness paradigm a woman’s piety manifests in her influential adherence to the body hierarchy. Alongside domesticity, a true woman’s piety allows her to “do the inculcating of virtue”²¹¹ for her children to properly form “the infant mind as yet untainted by contact with evil.”²¹² Therefore, a true woman in the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss must model, justify, and instill self-disciplining and self-surveilling behaviors within her family. Therefore, by suggesting that Sara “get[s] healthy” to positively influence the men in her life, WW reinforces the conflation of weight loss with the feminine enactment of domesticity and piety.

WW’s depiction of weight loss as a romantic pursuit enables the reification of traditional feminine traits within contemporary diet culture. Through vague narration, visual symbols of romance, and depictions of Sara in a serving position, the WW video reinforces the idea that self-subjugation produces social and romantic desirability. Next, by limiting Sara’s verbal contributions to her description of her improved role in the kitchen, WW implies that weight loss and domesticity are mutually dependent. Finally, WW’s subsuming of Sara’s goals within those of her husband reveals the enactment of feminine piety within weight loss norms. The success story of Sara and Patrick illustrates the precarious evolution of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss into contemporary wellness culture through the exploitation of relational health themes.

210. Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 153.

211. Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood.”171.

212. Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,”172.

Whitney's Motherly Reason

The third video is titled “Whitney WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks.” Posted to YouTube in February 2019 the week after Sara and Patrick’s tale, this video highlights traditional feminine notions of domesticity. Whitney’s story focuses on a mom whose “wellness” pursuit is catalyzed and sustained by her dedication to her family. She is hip, sporting blue hair, doing yoga with her child, Instagramming her food, and emphasizing her love of avocado toast. The video is framed by Whitney’s voice telling her story, and is overlaid with animated written text similar to that in Sara and Patrick’s story. The text overlay begins by noting her 26-pound weight loss, which again suggests that wellness and weight loss are synonymous. The text continues to describe how Whitney has “gained more energy”²¹³ and “a plant-based lifestyle”²¹⁴ through her wellness/weight loss journey. Whitney is young and relevant, pandering to the millennial-driven wave of wellness, yet her reasoning reveals adherence to traditional ideals of motherliness and the domestic sphere. In light of her traditional and modern depictions of femininity, Whitney’s story demonstrates the women-can-have-it-all concept of progressive wellness, but only if they undergo weight loss to achieve this perfected womanhood. Women who do not meet Whitney’s perfected standard of behavior are therefore overcome by guilt and must devote themselves to the redemptive enactment of weight loss.

Whitney’s story overtly depicts a pious, domestic mother. Within her first spoken

213. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:04.

214. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:19.

line, Whitney states “Joining WW has definitely influenced me as a mom,”²¹⁵ explicitly noting that motherhood is her “reason to get healthy.”²¹⁶ Whitney’s domesticity is both the catalyzing and sustaining force of her weight loss journey. In gaining more energy, she “is able to exercise way more [than she] used to”²¹⁷ and, more importantly, share this exercise time with her daughter. At this point in the voiceover narration, clips of Whitney and her young daughter doing yoga overwhelm the screen. From a low camera angle, Whitney’s daughter looks up at her in admiration, copying her different yoga poses, eventually even being helped up by her mother’s hand, embracing and leaning back with laughter. Throughout these clips, Whitney’s narration emphasizes her concern for her daughter’s wellness. She states, “I feel like I’m giving her a valuable tool that she can carry with her throughout her life.”²¹⁸ The “valuable tool” is presumably her devotion to yoga, but in the context of the video this statement also implies dieting or engagement with WW’s weight loss program. This passing on of self-surveying and self-disciplining weight loss behaviors to the next generation therefore echoes the pious mother persona previously constituted in Sara and Patrick’s story. The sharing of repressive weight loss behaviors also vividly mirrors how female body dysmorphia and eating disorders are passed by women from generation to generation. Whitney’s pious nature, as shown in her dedication to her daughter, extends into her family unit as a whole.

At the end of the commercial, Whitney shares the biggest lesson and subsequently

215. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:01.

216. WW, “For Every Body,” 00:53.

217. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0.06.

218. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:11-5.

biggest “reason to get healthy.”²¹⁹ As the camera pans up on a collage of family photos, Whitney says, “My biggest lesson has been there is nothing more valuable than being healthy for my family.”²²⁰ The scene ends on shot of a family photo of Whitney, her male partner, and their two children. The top of the photo is outlined in large colorful letter stickers that read “MINE.”²²¹ This calculated overlapping of audio with visuals furthers the implication that Whitney’s family serves both as her reason for submission and success at achieving weight loss. She expresses that she not only must enact a proper healthy femininity through weight loss, but also imbue these principals in her family. The video’s emphasis on Whitney’s dedication to her familial responsibilities exemplifies the conflation of piety, domesticity, and weight loss in the discursive formation.

In addition to being a pious mom, Whitney expresses how WW allows her to be an effective lady of the house. The yoga scene, mentioned earlier, is followed by clips of Whitney preparing a breakfast of avocado toast. Her voiceover shares that she “need[s] to get the kids to school, so [avocado toast is] just something that’s quick and easy and it’s delicious and healthy.”²²² Although the video reveals that she has a participating male partner, as in Sara’s story the acts of cooking and childcare are depicted as the woman’s responsibility and therefore represent Welter’s domestic sphere. Whitney’s success story appropriates this very traditional trait of femininity, but broadens its appeal to its desired millennial audience through an emphasis on youthfulness.

219. WW, “For Every Body,” 00:53.

220. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:31.

221. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:33

222. WW, “Whitney Success Story,” 0:25-8.

WW compensates for its evocation of traditional domesticity with progressive symbols of femininity and youth. Whitney's femininity is associated with the trendiness of youth culture. Some of the youthful symbols are subtle, like her tattoo that is only revealed in a quick clip of a yoga pose.²²³ Additionally, Whitney wears popular styles of fitness clothing, which she throws a cardigan over in the food preparation scenes to create an athleisure look. Other youth symbols are direct, like Whitney's trendy bright blue hair. The commercial also places a major emphasis on her infatuation with avocado toast. As a staple item in youthful wellness culture, avocado toast is a marker of millennial pride.²²⁴ Whitney is shown taking photos of her avocado toast,²²⁵ which mimics the act of millennial Instagram "foodies" who post photos of their food on social media. Because contemporary wellness culture is centered on achieving youthfulness, Whitney's trendy appearance and behaviors visually associate WW's traditional weight loss strategies and domesticity with wellness and cultural progress.

To bridge the gap between domesticity, piety, and youthfulness, WW depicts Whitney as a woman who has it all, subsequently inducing guilt in women who are less submissive to the discursive formation. This depiction of modern femininity warped into wellness culture pushes women to be able to achieve financially and/or achieve in their adoption of modern aesthetics. Whitney's progressive femininity therefore primarily is depicted through her belongings. The setting of this video is presumably Whitney's

223. WW, "Whitney Success Story," 0:10.

224. Margaret Lin, "The Avocado Toast Homeownership Meme, Explained," *Curbed*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.curbed.com/2018/5/15/17345156/avocado-toast-millennials-cant-afford-homes-tim-gurner>.

225. WW, "Whitney Success Story," 0:27.

house, which is two stories with a fireplace and contemporary, well-kept furniture. The house has a big living room with adequate space for two people to do yoga, as well as a large kitchen with matching stainless steel amenities and a massive kitchen island. Although Whitney's house is depicted as her only realm of power in this ad, the wealth and trendiness that it implies make her lifestyle desirable to viewers. Additionally, Whitney has a massive diamond wedding ring²²⁶ and gold jewelry, as well as the free time to dedicate to wellness activities with her child. In her yoga scenes, her daughter appears to admire her, eager to learn from Whitney's pious teachings. This is echoed by her family's apparent happiness in the still images at the end of the ad. As a whole, Whitney's success story models a woman who is successful at traditional tasks of piety and domesticity, who has a grateful and happy family, and who adorns symbols of financial and/or aesthetic success. She is depicted as a woman who has it all which makes her lifestyle, habits and product use desirable to the WW audience.

By portraying Whitney as a renaissance woman, WW is able to construct a social order of modern womanhood. A desirable woman is shown to be a successful wife and mother who has the time and means to devote to maintaining a trendy style and keeping a slim figure. Whitney's WW success story therefore induces guilt in the female viewers who do not measure up to this standard. Whitney's alignment with WW's services suggests that weight loss is the means by which viewers can enact true, modern womanhood. Engagement with WW's self-disciplining behaviors allows viewers to practice their pious and domestic traits with their family: Learning WW's meal prepping

226. WW, "Whitney Success Story," 0:17.

strategies eases the childcare and household tasks, and becoming a desirable woman will increase romantic intimacy and therefore secure their ability to “have it all.” By suggesting all of these traits are the result of weight loss, Whitney’s story is able to promote self-subjugation to traditional weight loss behaviors as the clear means to redemption. Ultimately, WW’s appropriation of wellness’s progressive femininity and youthfulness paves the way for the discursive formation of femininity and wellness to conflate piety, domesticity, and weight loss in a way that is palatable to modern women.

Conclusion

Discursive formations shift and evolve to incorporate symbols from well-regarded discourses in culture. The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss appropriates symbols of wellness to maintain and expand repressive gender and weight loss norms. WW’s rebranding videos illustrate the extension of traditional femininity into progressive ideas of gender, body-positivity, and health. WW’s “For Every Body” establishes these major themes through its depiction of meditation, self-love, and female empowerment while implying that the prerequisite for feminine success is self-subjugation through self-disciplining and self-surveilling behaviors of weight loss. This enactment of feminine submission is extended into the subsequent “WW Success Stories.” Sara and Patrick’s success story exploits the wellness-entered emphasis on relational health to advance the desirability norms of weight loss and docile bodies. Additionally, their video constitutes weight loss as a means for enacting feminine domesticity and piety. Whitney’s story echoes these feminine traits, utilizing wellness symbols of youth and have-it-all motherhood to reinforce the discursive formation’s restrictive rules for both contemporary and traditional women. Both success stories induce guilt by depicting

Sara's and Whitney's lifestyles as aspirational, therefore reminding viewers of their poor social standing and inability to move up in the formation's hierarchy without proper submission. These WW videos revert back to traditional weight loss marketing strategies by offering self-subjugation through mortification as the necessary means of body and feminine redemption. Overall, the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss conflates true womanhood and weight loss in contemporary diet ads through the compositional and conceptual appropriation of modern wellness symbols.

V. CONCLUSION

The discursive formation of femininity and weight loss evokes self-subjugation through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public discourses. The formation conflates weight loss behaviors with the characteristics of Welter's Cult of True Womanhood. Purity largely is enacted in the cleansing of "bad" food desires or engagement through confession, mortification, and/or scapegoating. Submissiveness is therefore inherent in engaging in weight loss behaviors because these behaviors require women to actively, and publicly, submit to the repressive norms of the formation. Piety is exhibited in the fervent study of and adherence to the restrictive norms as well as the act of fostering this loyalty in those for whom the woman feels responsible. These pious behaviors seep into the conflation of domesticity with weight loss, as family members are the primary site of instilling self-disciplining and surveilling behaviors. Moreover, weight loss commonly becomes a means of prioritizing and upholding familial and household tasks as the good of the family is both the catalyst for and sustaining strength of a woman's self-subjugation. By fusing weight loss activities with traditional expectations of femininity, the discursive formation produces and celebrates docile, feminine bodies.

Analyzing Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts alongside WW's rebranding campaign videos reveals the expansion of this discursive formation within popular cultural texts. Kim Kardashian's posts highlight the ways in which the formation adapts to and thrives within contemporary media, new body norms, and younger target populations. WW's rebranding campaign illustrates the formation's transformation into modern health discourses by extending traditional repressive norms into behaviors more palatable to younger audiences. Together, these texts highlight an array of audiences,

cultural norms, and mediums that weight loss discourses must navigate to promote body docility as a necessary enactment of True Womanhood. This chapter draws conclusions from these three points of comparison to map out the span of contemporary weight loss strategies. This chapter provides a means of tracking the evolving formation by identifying how the weight loss industry targets new audiences, manipulates progressive desires, and exploits online media to sell their product. These points of comparison in turn reveal tools that audiences can use to expose and counter the repressive messages of the formation. The chapter concludes by suggesting the development of True Womanhood-centered media literacy programs to empower participants to resist contemporary restrictive discourses of gender and weight loss.

Across the Spectrum of Contemporary Weight Loss Promotions

Flat Tummy Co. and WW's ads shed light on a variety of promotional strategies. Kim Kardashian and FTC target "women in their 20s"²²⁷ primarily through Instagram. WW's longstanding history as Weight Watchers built them a core demographic of "90% female, with [a customer] average age of 38,"²²⁸ which they then attempted to broaden to include "women in their 20s and 30s,"²²⁹ through their 2018-2019 rebrand. Although both companies seek to target younger customers today, their differing pasts highlight a variety of contemporary weight loss adaptations. FTC's relative newness allowed them to

227. Anna Borges, "Okay, Wait – Controversy Aside: How the Hell Do Flat Tummy Shakes Even Work?," *Cosmopolitan*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/a27182030/flat-tummy-shakes/#:~:text=The%20Polmears%20credit%20the%20brand's,%2C%20however%2C%20Flat%20Tummy%20Co>

228. Rina Raphael, "How Weight Watchers Transformed Itself Into a Lifestyle Brand," *Fast Company*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40500280/how-weight-watchers-transformed-itself-into-a-lifestyle-brand>.

229. Raphael, "How Weight Watchers Transformed."

adapt their messages to body-positivity and women's empowerment from the start. On the other hand, WW's longstanding history within the weight loss industry requires a calculated co-opting of modern symbols in an attempt to align themselves with relevant wellness culture, while still maintaining their loyal customers. Therefore, FTC and WW's contemporary messaging provides unique points of comparison, particularly concerning their strategic engagement with desire and gender expectations.

Audience

Kim Kardashian's Flat Tummy Co. sponsored Instagram posts easily navigate online millennial culture. Founded in 2013 and acquired by Synergy CHC Corp in 2015, FTC established itself through messages that could maneuver through the rise of body-positivity, women's empowerment, and the new slim-thicc beauty standard. FTC's marketing discourse "mirrors the contemporary, empowerment-washed lingo of the now-omnipresent faux-feminist [style of] branding."²³⁰ The company is immersed in symbols of youth and modern femininity: drenching every promotional in "millennial pink," referring to their customers as "'babes' or 'girls,'" and "emphasizing autonomy and decision-making" in their product pitches.²³¹ They even regularly hire millennial icons, like Kim Kardashian, to endorse their product. FTC's exceptionally millennial/Gen Z-centric strategies signify the sustained prominence of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. Kim Kardashian's use of guilt induction, product-based purification, and celebration of body docility exemplifies the formation's expansive

230. Emma Hope Allwood, "How an Instagram Diet Brand Uses Girl Power to Sell Hunger," *Dazed*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/40658/1/flat-tummy-co-tea-diet-lollipops-instagram-marketing-fake-empowerment-feminism>.

231. Allwood, "Girl Power to Sell Hunger."

conflation of traditional purity and submissiveness with weight loss. Both the company and endorser are explicitly aligned with progressive millennial culture, yet they cannot help but default to old-school weight loss marketing strategies. Kim and FTC's reliance on repression messages therefore shows that the formation is so deeply entrenched in gender and health discourse that exhuming its hold will take significant time and effort.

Conversely, Weight Watchers feigns denouncement of traditional repressive marketing to gain entry into contemporary wellness culture. Previously Weight Watchers thrived off of shame-based scapegoating, communal confession, and before-and-after pictures, but within the contemporary emergence of body positive feminists and holistic health philosophies, the company's mission and values became unfashionable. WW's rebranding exemplifies how the strategic appropriation of wellness symbols functions to distance weight loss companies from their problematic past while still adhering to the discursive formation's traditional repression. Therefore, WW's rebranding campaign illustrates the ways in which the giants of the weight loss industry navigate the thin line between empowering wellness ideas and repressive weight loss messaging.

Together, WW and FTC's contemporary promotions reveal how the discursive formation diversifies to encompass changing gender and body norms. FTC and WW's target audiences overlap at the millennial age range. Both companies seek to win over this young and progressive generation to build industry relevance and a loyal customer base. Yet, given that the two companies work within different contextual histories, FTC and WW utilize distinctive marketing strategies to achieve similar goals. This is evidenced by each promotion's depiction of desire and desirability.

Diversified Desire

Whereas traditional weight loss marketing celebrated skinny bodies, modern beauty discourses celebrate the “slim-thicc” figure. FTC has played into this new norm from the start, strategically choosing their company name “Flat Tummy Co.” to reflect this beauty standard. Their appropriation of the slim-thicc body norm also is evidenced in FTC’s choice of Kim Kardashian as a celebrity endorser. Kim Kardashian is one of the leading proponents of “the commandeering and manipulation of the curvaceous aesthetic.”²³² Through cosmetic alteration Kim emphasized and merchandized her Eurocentric features and full-figure to create a desirable and docile body that few can actually attain. Kim Kardashian’s FTC promotions therefore adapted the hierarchy of the discursive formation by prioritizing the slim-thicc bodily desires of younger generations, thus expanding and diversifying the formation’s biopower.

FTC’s appropriation of millennial desires extends through body type and into acceptable expressions of docile bodies, particularly exhibiting desirability through sexuality. Modern feminist discourses advocate for female independence and self-love, framing sexual posts as acts of female empowerment. In following this trend, Kim’s posts emphasize her sexuality through suggestive poses, curated clothing options, and her notoriously sexual past. Yet each expression of sexuality is underscored with the repression of appetite desires and engagement with acceptable weight loss behaviors (meal replacement shake and hunger suppressant lollipop). Kim Kardashian’s FTC sponsored Instagram posts therefore constitute an image of modern female empowerment

232. Gabriella A. Donaldson, ““Keep that Same Energy Sis’: An Exploration of Black Women’s Use of Offline Resistance Strategies,” Thesis, (Georgia State University: 2020), 12.

while also defining sexual expression as a reward for docility. Alongside the post's redemptive cycle, this dual messaging of desirability demonstrates feminine submissiveness and purification as a prerequisite for acceptable sexuality. Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored posts exemplify how adoption of cultural norms of slim-thicc body ideals and empowered sexuality can diversify the restrictive norms of desire. As a result the illusory liberation of desirability is enhanced through the traditional enactment of docility.

WW's appropriation of contemporary desires takes a different form, but leads to the same docility. Weight Watchers has a history of targeting housewives. WW's rebrand therefore had to continue its positive portrayal of domesticity and piety to keep their loyal customers interested, yet expand to include contemporary progressive ideas of femininity. WW did this by focusing on the desires for a have-it-all lifestyle. Whitney's success story and WW's "For Every Body" video evince this discursive evolution in their presentation of both traditional and nontraditional feminine activities. "For Every Body" displays women playing with their children and also "ditching the minivan"²³³ for a motorcycle. Whitney's story centers on a trendy and youthful woman whose family clearly admires her. Both videos exhibit an aspirational female lifestyle, one that allows women to excel in their domestic and pious pursuits, while also being empowered to expand beyond traditional feminine expectations. Yet both videos also suggest that weight loss is a necessary step in obtaining the have-it-all lifestyle, and therefore illustrate how discourse restructures the social order according to desirable female bodies and lifestyles.

233. "WW | For Every Body | Winter 2019," WW formerly Weight Watchers, December 30, 2018, video, 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQVtf3SjLpI>, 0:42.

Moreover, WW's rebranding adapted their portrayal of allotted desirability to fit the have-it-all lifestyle. In co-opting wellness culture's emphasis on relational health, WW was able to construe romance as the ultimate expression of desirability. Sara and Patrick's success story emphasizes this shift as their video centers on their development of intimacy through weight loss. This emphasis on romance encompasses the traditional domestic desires of successful marriage and subsequent motherhood, while also expanding to include a message of feminine attractiveness and desirability. In "Sara and Patrick WW Success Story," the brandishing of romantic relationships as the result of adherence to restrictive norms bolsters the idea that repression and docility is necessary to obtain a desirable position within the discursive formation. WW's centering on the desire to have-it-all and achieve romantic desirability epitomizes the evolution of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. In portraying both traditional and progressive ideas of feminine desire, proponents of the discursive formation are able to craft repressive messages that bridges the gap between generational expectations, smoothly integrating traditional restrictions into contemporary health discourses.

While expressions of romance and sexuality differ in their portrayal of lifestyle/gender goals, they both ultimately seek to flaunt the newfound attractiveness and desire provoked by feminine docility. FTC and WW's ads exemplify the discursive formation's diversification of desire and desirability to appeal to modern and traditional notions of femininity. Further, the companies' different strategies lead to the same end: promoting weight loss as a mandatory step to acquiring the desire of your peers.

The Role of Communication Medium in Guilt Induction

WW's "For Every Body" first aired on television "during a broadcast of *Star*

Wars: The Force Awakens on ITV,”²³⁴ though celebrity endorser, Robbie Williams, tweeted it out four days prior. This promotion of videos both online and on television is a relatively new trend in corporate commercials. Given that WW’s rebranding campaign occurred largely in early 2019, these videos subsequently are most commonly accessed through online platforms like YouTube. Viewers may engage with WW’s “For Every Body” and success story videos due to algorithm suggestions, targeted online marketing, direct searches, or more. WW’s choice of an online video medium therefore offers a unique insight into audience engagement with the discursive formation.

WW’s three-fold use of compositional strategies highlights the increased power of narrative in the normalization of repression. One of the defining differences between Kim Kardashian’s and WW’s weight loss promotions is WW’s use of moving images and sound. This visual and audial form of messaging enables WW to subtly advance their agenda through three modes: images, audio, and overlaid text. Sara and Patrick’s success story primarily illustrates the advantage of this choice of medium through its use of vague narrative language alongside romantic visual symbols. In using an unclear antecedent to words like “this,” Patrick’s narration is able to tell a story of wellness goals, while the visuals tell a story of romantic intimacy. Whitney’s success story utilizes the image and visual combination to place the emphasis on Whitney’s domestic persona. For example, the video pans over Whitney’s family photo collage while she discusses her

234. Stephen Lepitak, “WW Releases First Global Campaign Since Rebrand Featuring Ambassador Robbie Williams,” *The Drum*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2018/12/27/ww-releases-first-global-campaign-rebrand-featuring-ambassador-robbie-williams>.

biggest lesson learned.²³⁵ On the other hand, the audio and image correlation in “For Every Body” emphasizes WW’s newfound wellness aesthetic. By overlaying Lizzo’s body-positive song “Worship Me” on top of images like meditation and a woman driving a motorcycle, WW stresses that it is a wellness-based and female-empowering brand. WW’s strategic use of images in accordance with specific audio messaging allows their rebrand to speak to both traditional and contemporary norms. Sara and Patrick’s audio promotes relational health in the context of wellness, while the visuals sell traditional romantic intimacy. Whitney’s audio speaks largely to her pious, motherly wants, and her images underscore this feminine trait as her defining feature. The trendy music and visuals in “For Every Body” bolster the brand’s cultural relevancy. By employing specific moving visual images alongside curated audio, WW’s rebranding campaign videos enhance their wellness-centric aesthetic while also adhering to traditional restrictive themes within the discursive formation.

Additionally, all three videos tell a story of weight loss through overlaid text. Both success stories begin with text that details the number of pounds each individual has lost through WW. Similarly, the establishing shots of all non-celebrity members in “For Every Body” exhibit each person’s weight loss as well. This weight-loss messaging is echoed throughout the videos. The overlaid text in WW’s success stories describe what the members gained as they lost weight: romantic, trendy, and healthier lifestyles. In “For Every Body,” the text characterizes each clip’s featured activity and displays the

235. “Whitney WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks,” WW formerly Weight Watchers, February 20, 2019, video, 0:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1ALREOX3YQ&list=PLpCc4EcTNAkYqP4aks9yvjN2OfuxkN3Bm&index=9>, 0:29-33.

campaign's slogan, which redefines each activity as a reason to lose weight. By detailing member weight loss and describing their positive attainments, WW's use of overlaid text tells a third story about the benefits and motivation of weight loss. This video strategy most clearly matches the repressive marketing strategies of WW's previous weight loss brand. Yet, within the audial and visual stories, WW's videos primarily display a progressive, wellness-inspired philosophy. The three-fold narrative potential of video presents a unique mechanism of cultural meaning making. Through audio, text overlays, and moving images, WW's campaign illustrates how the use of videos can heighten the normalization of self-disciplining and surveilling behaviors under the guise of modern wellness ideals. The video medium therefore allows proponents of the discursive formation to evolve repressive rules to induce guilt in a culturally palatable way.

Kim Kardashian and FTC's use of Instagram exemplifies how the discursive formation evolved into social media because it offers a unique space in which discursive formations thrive. At its core, social media is a form of willing surveillance. People post updates on their lives, goals, and needs with the explicit purpose of other people seeing these messages. Being positively, or sometimes provocatively, surveyed is depicted numerically through likes, comments, and followers. This simulates the guard's watchtower in Bentham's Panopticon, producing physical self-subjugation. The cultivation of an online persona largely alters the behaviors of users. Social media users begin to participate in particular activities or adopt trending beliefs so they can post content that will be highly regarded by their peers and could even potentially result in life changes like increased income, notoriety, or prospects. Social media therefore acts as an optimal space for a participants to ensure their self-subjugation properly adheres to the

repressive norms of the of discursive formations and results in positive social regard. This means that proponents of weight loss therefore are able to exploit the inherent surveillance of social media to evolve and normalize user repression.

Flat Tummy Co.'s sponsoring of Kim Kardashian's Instagram posts merchandizes the slim-thicc hierarchy. Kim Kardashian's body alterations and appropriation placed her as the ascendant of the slim-thicc body hierarchy, which is most evident in her Instagram presence. As the seventh most followed user on Instagram,²³⁶ Kim's account illustrates the numerical expression of desire built into social media. Further, her posts boast an average 3 million likes and 26 thousand comments each.²³⁷ The consistent engagement with Kim's Instagram account constitutes the high regard granted to those who display the most body docility. Viewers of Kim Kardashian's posts are consistently reminded of the social order within the discursive formation and their poor standing in comparison.

In addition to the numerical desire, the intimate contextualization of Kim's Instagram posts increases guilt induction. Social media allows any user to gain an unprecedented connection to their cultural idols. Previously, an attractive facet of celebrity was how fame elevated people into a seemingly unapproachable social level. The onset of social media ostensibly collapsed this assumed social distance by providing fans with access to the intimate parts of celebrity lives. Much like KUWTK offered a rare glimpse into the normalcy of billionaires,²³⁸ contemporary social media platforms simulate close,

236. Profile statistics from <https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/kimkardashian> as of September 17, 2020.

237. Profile statistics from <https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/kimkardashian> as of September 17, 2020.

238. Amy Choick, "Keeping Up With the Kardashian Cash Flow: Are Kourtney, Khloe, Kendall and Kylie America's Savviest C.E.O.s?," *New York Times*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/style/kardashians-interview.html>.

almost friendly, online observation. Kim Kardashian’s Instagram posts or stories now appear alongside posts of your loved ones. Not only does this strengthen fan perceptions of their intimate relationships with celebrities, it exponentially increases the influence that the social elite have on the everyday person. Because of this false intimacy, Kim Kardashian’s promotion of the slim-thicc body hierarchy and the subsequent guilt in viewers become significantly more salient. The power of this social media platform is exemplified in Brown and Tiggemann’s finding that women who viewed photos of attractive celebrities on Instagram felt immediate body dissatisfaction.²³⁹ The cultivated intimacy of celebrities on social media makes their privileged physiques and habits appear normal and expected to the onlooker, catalyzing immediate guilt concerning their relative position.

FTC’s sponsoring of Kim Kardashian’s Instagram posts escalate and merchandize her pre-established guilt induction. The Kardashians’ curated FTC posts dangerously imply that their physiques are the result of FTC products. In alignment with Burke’s dramatic cycle, Kim’s FTC sponsored posts model mortification behaviors visually and in their captions. Implications of consistent workout routines, late-night meal replacement shakes, and hunger suppressant lollipops not only reinforce repressive norms, but provide examples of how viewers should behave. The salience of these messages is advanced further in how the posts quantify desire and their intimate contextualization. Additionally, Kim’s posts explicitly target the viewer by using the second-person pronoun “you.” By referring directly to the viewer in a social space that implies an (one-sided) intimate

239. Zoe Brown and Marika Tiggemann. “Attractive Celebrity and Peer Images on Instagram: Effect on Women’s Mood and Body Image,” *Body Image* 19, (2016): 37–43. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007.

relationship, Kim's posts are able to scapegoat viewers. Kim Kardashian's statements like "You guys need to do yourselves a favor and get on these shakes"²⁴⁰ and "trust me, you're going to want to check [FTC shakes] out"²⁴¹ administer shame and humiliation directly and personally to the viewers. Additionally, "you" statements utilize the presumed relationship of social media connections to reify the surveillance inherent to discursive formations, intensifying methods of self-surveillance and discipline.

Overall, Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts epitomize the evolution of the discursive formation within social media spaces. The quantifiable desire, intimate hierarchical reminder, and inherent surveillance of social media is optimized for the cultivation and expansion of biopower within users. The exploitation of social media alongside the deceptive three-fold narrations of video offer important insights into the developmental methods of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. This medium manipulation partnered with the exploitation of contemporary feminine desires allows proponents of weight loss to target young and vulnerable audiences by normalizing traditional weight loss repression and expanding the formation's biopower further within the discursive formation. Weight loss companies will continue to enhance their marketing strategies to ensure industry relevance. For example, WW has already launched its own weight-loss centric social media app,²⁴² in addition to offering free

240. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad Fuelling up with my."

241. Kim Kardashian West, "#ad You guys all know."

242. "Digital: Online Only Weight Watchers Plan," *WW*, Accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.weightwatchers.com/us/plans/onlineplus>.

memberships to teens “ages 13 to 17.”²⁴³ Despite company intentions, the growth of popular cultural weight loss messages through advanced advertisements fortifies the repressive norms, and subsequent permanence, of the discursive formation.

Countering the Discursive Formation

Given the longstanding history of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss, today’s audiences are relatively unaware of their constant self-subjugation. As defined in Chapter two, the discursive formation exists on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural levels. People are born into the formation’s restrictive cultural norms which are discursively passed down through generations. They then willingly partake in these inherited self-subjugating behaviors due to a lack of critical reflection. The shaming of participant deviance is well established in interpersonal and cultural discourses. If a woman improperly adheres to the repressive norms, she almost immediately is scapegoated and humiliated. Her shameful place in the social order is framed as the result of her own failings of gender enactment and body docility, requiring a hastened rededication to the hierarchy and self-subjugation. This leaves little room, time, or energy left to spend on critiquing the social order itself, in addition to the underlying fear of provoking communal scapegoating. If all a woman has even been taught is that her value is intrinsically attached to her weight, it makes sense that she would devote all her focus on the unending cycle of dieting. Even if she is unable to produce an adequately docile body, at least her faithful weight loss behaviors validate her identity as a true woman.

243. Angelica LaVito, “Weight Watchers Shares Rocket Higher on Plan to Rebrand, Target \$2 Billion in Sales by 2020,” *CNBC*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/07/weight-watchers-will-offer-teens-as-young-as-13-free-memberships.html>.

As the discursive formation continues to evolve, its mechanisms become more elusive. This expansion occurs primarily in the diversification of repressive norms.²⁴⁴ WW's rebranding campaign demonstrates the formation's discursive expansion into wellness culture. The analysis of these videos identifies the compositional methods through which this growth occurs and becomes palatable to contemporary viewers: a three-fold narrative of images, overlaid text, and audio, alongside the appropriation of popular wellness symbols. Kim Kardashian's FTC sponsored Instagram posts illustrate the evolution of the discursive formation according to the changing of body norms. The analysis of these posts exposes the endorsement, posing, styling, and language strategies employed to effectively adapt to the slim-thicc hierarchy and the current social media landscape. In each case, the texts primarily emphasize the definition of desire in the relevant hierarchy, inducing guilt and inciting symbolic victimage among female viewers. The proponents of the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss utilize "small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion,"²⁴⁵ making it increasingly more difficult for participants to distance themselves from the discursive community or its values.

One of the most effective strategies for resisting the discursive formation is through the creation and employment of contemporary media literacy programs. Media literacy is the development of critical thinking skills to aid in an individual's reading of,

244. Michel Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 315.

245. Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 183.

and subsequent engagement with, media texts. The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), states that “reducing negative risk factors, like body dissatisfaction, depression, or basing self-esteem on appearance”²⁴⁶ are significant methods of eating disorder prevention. NEDA has since developed and promoted “Get REAL! About Media and Body Image, A Digital Media Literacy Toolkit”²⁴⁷ to encourage participants “to think critically about the body image messages”²⁴⁸ they engage with every day. This toolkit provides an emphasis on thoughtfully reading messages by “advertisers, and celebrities who perpetuate unhealthy retouched body images in photos and products they endorse”²⁴⁹ as well as thinking about messages the participant creates and shares online. Media literacy programs like NEDAs counteract the secrecy of weight loss’ discursive formation and provide participants with opportunities to examine and oppose the repressive structures.

The development of media literacy programs regarding popular cultural messages of gender and dieting could reduce the biopower within the discursive formation of femininity and weight loss. While it is common for body image media literacy curriculums to address the gender dynamics of weight loss advertising, a program focused on the conflation of True Womanhood and weight loss behaviors could offer significant insight to media consumers. Participants not only could critique the messages

246 “Prevention,” NationalEatingDisorders.org, NEDA, Accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/prevention>.

247. “Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Tool Kit,” *NEDA*, Accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/Toolkits/GetRealToolkit.pdf>.

248. *NEDA*, “Get REAL!”

249. *NEDA*, “Get REAL!”

that sell them diet products, but also the messages that constrain feminine expression within dieting behaviors. By addressing the feminine nuances of weight loss messaging, participants and advocates could more deeply understand the role that gender-identity plays in self-disciplining and self-surveilling diet behaviors. Moreover, by empowering participants to critically analyze gendered-weight loss texts, programs like these could provide a substantial foundation for understanding the association between females and eating disorders, as well as ways to counteract the lack of support received by males with eating disorders.²⁵⁰

In alignment with the insights from this thesis, these True Womanhood weight loss media literacy programs could help participants identify the compositional and conceptual strategies of the ever changing formation. Specifically, individuals could be taught to recognize the industry's use of several rhetorical tactics, including: traditional female characteristics; conflicting overlaid narratives through audio, images, and/or text; hollow appropriation of wellness symbols and female empowerment; visual and linguistic constructions of body hierarchies; the cultivation and merchandizing of illegitimate social media intimacy; and the portrayal of docility as desirably feminine. Additionally, leaders in the body-positive and fat-liberationist communities could publicly call out the weight loss industry's deceptive depictions of gender within weight loss, and work to expand public understandings of femininity beyond self-disciplining behaviors. Further, by stripping weight loss of its feminine connotations, these leaders could create opportunities for males and gender non-conforming people to recognize their own unhealthy habits outside of the judgment of traditional gender norms. Overall, educating

250. NEDA, "Statistics & Research."

people through True Womanhood weight loss media literacy programs could train participants to see the repressive mechanisms that encourage self-subjugation. In illuminating the baseless reasoning for the formations restrictive norms, participants can resist the interpersonal and cultural methods of guilt induction, ultimately dismantling the secrecy upon which the discursive formation is built and maintained.

APPENDIX



Kardashian West, Kim (@Kimkardashian). #ad Fuelling up with my @flattummyco meal replacement shake before getting my workout done today. You guys need to do yourselves a favor and get on these Shakes.... Instagram, March 20, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BgkAznclyTt/>.



Kardashian West, Kim (@Kimkardashian). #ad Little update for you guys. I'm on Day 9 of my Shake It Baby program from @flattummyco and I'm actually feeling so good. We had a massive Christmas this.... Instagram, January 9, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdv3pJAFVN6/>.



Kardashian West, Kim. (@Kimkardashian). #ad You guys all know I looove @flattummyco shakes. I've just restarted them (it's Day 2 today) and I'm already feeling so good. We had a huuuuge Christmas this.... Instagram, January 2, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsJsNcOnFDP/>.



Kardashian West, Kim. (@Kimkardashian). Lollipop iOS emoji. Instagram, May 15, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bi0NTablmo4/>.



“WW | For Every Body | Winter 2019.” WW formerly Weight Watchers. December 30, 2018, video, 1:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQVtf3SJLpI>. 0:35.



“Sara & Patrick WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks.” WW formerly Weight Watchers. February 13, 2019, video, 0:43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsAYMcVqCYI&list=PLpCc4EcTNAkYqP4aks9yvJN2OfuxkN3Bm&index=4>. 0:04.



“Whitney WW Success Story | #WellnessThatWorks.” WW formerly Weight Watchers. February 20, 2019, video, 0:42. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1ALREOX3YQ&list=PLpCc4EcTNAkYqP4aks9yvJN2OfuxkN3Bm&index=9>. 0:19.

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