

## **Food Marketing as a Pedagogical Act: Teaching Women to Consume 'Skinny'**

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Women are taught that if they 'eat right,' 'exercise right,' and have enough 'will-power' they can achieve an idealized thin body. I have been engaged in an ethnography of pro-eating disorder communities ('pro-ana' and 'pro-mia', pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia), eating disorder communities, and media and every-day representations of women's bodies for the last three years. This paper describes the 'safe versus fear/binge food' videos made by girls who identify as having an eating disorder. Bloggers (both pro-eating disorder and otherwise) report consuming processed diet-foods, labeled as 'fat-free,' 'sugar-free' and 'calorie-free,' which I define as 'diet pseudo-foods.' My findings led me to interrogate the popular branding and marketing of products with the word 'skinny.' From a feminist postmodern perspective, I draw upon concepts from critical perspectives in food studies in order to contextualize disordered eating within a broader food culture that insidiously sells and glamorizes skinny. I deconstruct how skinny and diet labels are harmful discourses that individualize food choice responsibility, and teach women that self-worth is a waist-line measurement. Food marketing is a pedagogical act that disseminates lessons that perpetuate a 'skinny girl' pedagogy. These lessons damage women's relationships to food/eating, to their bodies, and to their understandings of self.

**KEYWORDS:** Eating disorders, Feminist postmodernism, Food studies, Healthism, Pedagogy, Pro-ana, Skinny food, Social justice, Social media, Virtual methods.

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## EATING DISORDER COMMUNITIES ONLINE

In Western culture, we are inundated with messages that tell us that if women 'eat right,' 'exercise right,' and have enough 'will-power,' they can achieve the idealized thin female body that is routinely depicted and celebrated in our society. In tandem with popular culture's celebration of feminine thinness, there are hundreds of online forums where individuals and communities of people, particularly girls and women, refer to themselves or their eating disorders, as 'pro-ana' and 'pro-mia' (pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia, which I will refer to as 'pro-ana/mia' for the duration of the paper) (Brotsky and Giles, 2007). Pro-ana/mia communities are online social groups of predominately girls and young women who discuss and support individuals with eating disorders in ways that medical and mental health professionals do not approve (Schott and Langan, 2015).

For the past three years (2012-2015), I have been actively engaged in an ethnography of pro-ana/mia communities, eating disorder communities, and media and every-day representations of women's bodies (I explain my ethnographic methods in the methodology section of this article). On pro-ana/mia and eating disorder forums, contributors frequently share weight-loss and exercise tips, 'thinspiration' slogans, images and videos, and their 'safe' versus 'binge' or 'fear' foods. Online space, especially social media websites like YouTube, are places where young women and girls speak openly about their problems with eating and body image. The website [www.youtube.ca](http://www.youtube.ca), founded in February 2005, 'allows billions of people to discover, watch and share originally-created videos' (<http://www.youtube.com/yt/about/>). YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small; 'more than 1 billion unique users visit YouTube each month' (<http://www.youtube.com/yt/jobs/>). There are hundreds of thousands of videos about pro-ana/mia and eating disorders on YouTube (as found when typing keywords into the YouTube search engine).

In medical circles, eating disorders are considered serious mental illnesses and it is frequently cited that people with eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnosis (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2015). The media sensationally and matter-of-factly simplifies the complex pro-ana/mia culture and continues to paint those involved with the disordered eating culture as dangerous and/or

disgusting mentally ill young women in need of expert intervention. Media portrayals and calls for censorship of pro-ana/mia have been strongly backed by medical and mental health professionals (Schott and Langan, 2015). Eating disorders have been broadly understood as an individual psychological problem and have been responded to by individual-level treatments such as individual counseling, therapy, hospitalization, and specialized treatment programs, or group assistance, such as group therapy, support groups and self-help groups (NEDIC, 2015, <http://www.nedic.ca/give-get-help/help-you>). Pro-ana/mia is not simply a mental illness that stems from individual-level pathologies. Many, if not most women in Western culture 'struggle' with 'body acceptance' (Bordo, 2003). For example, Knapton (2013: 467) argues that the criticism and anger directed towards pro-ana/mia members is unwarranted, stating that:

it is clear that the pro-anorexic beliefs that anorexia is desirable, beneficial for one's body and mind, and increases one's value in society are not a huge step away from the readily-voiced Western beliefs that thinness is a desirable, beneficial and value-enhancing attribute for women.

Striving to achieve a 'skinny body' can be understood as a rational choice in a society that privileges thinness, congratulates weight-loss, and marginalizes fat (Schott and Langan, 2015). My work aims to contextualize pro-ana/mia and disordered eating ideologies and practices within the broader socio-cultural landscapes that the practices are embedded within. Western socio-cultural landscapes are marked by food injustices that are maintained and perpetuated through gendered discourses that individualize food choice responsibility. Deflecting blame away from individual women and girls in regards to food choices is an integral part of larger food justice efforts. After being exposed to the relatively new area of scholarship, critical perspectives in food studies, I am now armed with more conceptual tools that I use in this paper to further redirect the discussion about pro-ana/mia, and eating disorders in general, away from the pathologizing of individuals. My two main objectives are to demonstrate how broader food injustices are connected to eating disorders, and to contribute to food justice efforts by challenging the pathologization of individual women and girls.

## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN FOOD STUDIES

Drawing upon concepts from critical perspectives in food studies, this paper seeks to critically explore the complicated relationship between aggressive food marketing and the individualizing of food choice responsibility by interrogating the current foodscape: 'the food environment; the range of places where food can be purchased and consumed' (Koc, Sumner and Winson, 2012: 385). Rather than focusing on individual deficits that lead to pro-ana/mia interactions online and disordered eating in general, I will contend that the aggressive and female-targeted marketing of 'diet-food' products, such as those branded with the label 'skinny' are contributing to damaging women's relationships with food and their bodies. Specifically, I will argue that skinny food labels are a discourse that communicates insidious messages that contribute to damaging women's relationships to their bodies, their self-identity, and food/eating. In line with this argument, I contend that, marketing skinny food products is a pedagogical act that provides lessons that teach women to shrink their bodies through consuming less fat, less sugar, less calories and smaller portion sizes. These lessons are deeply layered with both implicit and explicit messages that tell women that skinny is better, and should be strived for in order to increase their social status and self-worth.

In order to support my claims that marketing skinny branded food products is a damaging pedagogical act, I will theorize from a feminist postmodernist food justice lens. After quickly providing an introduction to feminist postmodernism, I will describe the four major sets of concepts from critical perspectives in food that this paper will be drawing on: 1. neoliberalism, nutritionism, healthism and anti-obesity discourses; 2. pseudo-foods, corporate concentration and mass marketing, 3. food labels as discourse, and 4. eating as a pedagogical act. Next, I will briefly explain the ethnographic methods employed for data collection. After the methodology sections, I will provide the three major sets of findings that look at: 1. Safe versus fear/binge foods within the eating disorder community, 2. pro-ana/mia and food, and 3. the blogging and media buzz about skinny-branded food products. In the discussion section that follows, I will extend Anthony Winson's (2012) problematizing of 'pseudo-foods' by explaining my use of the label 'diet pseudo-foods.' I will explore questions that look at how the power of the food label 'skinny' shapes our understandings of, and relationships with, food/eating, our bodies, and our self-identities. The paper will end with the argument that skinny food marketing is a damaging pedagogical act.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Feminist postmodern food justice lens*

This paper is theorized from a feminist postmodern food justice lens that interrogates gender oppression and inequality in relation to the marketing of food and the body. I align myself with feminist scholars like Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2006) who argue that eating disorders are markers of social problems, not just individual psychiatric disturbances (also see Bordo, 2003; Malson and Burns, 2009; Wood, 2008). Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2006: 208) contend that eating disorders, and disordered eating, are 'also culturally-induced diseases promoted partly by economic and social institutions that profit from "the cult of thinness" promoted by mass media.' The diet-food and weight loss industry is well aware of the profit to be gained at the expense of the mental health of women. Women who are struggling with body image and/or disordered eating consume more products, benefiting capitalism (Avakian and Haber, 2005), with enormous profits that are reflected in the \$32 billion of diet industry sales worldwide (NEDIC, 2015). Neoliberal capitalist success is intertwined in a vicious cycle with the oppression and insecurity of women; the more women hate their bodies, the more products they consume in an attempt to love themselves. Although this paper focuses on examining gender in relation to food and the body, I recognize that people have much more complex, multi-faceted identities that intersect with gender, such as class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. I have chosen, for the scope of this paper, to focus on 'women' because food marketers have chosen to most blatantly target and exploit the social category of 'woman' in relation to diet-foods and body image issues. For example, many advertisements directly state that they are communicating to 'women.'

A basic tenant of the postmodern perspective is the rejection of notions of objective truth, instead, truths are socially constructed. Capital T, 'Truth' is understood to be privileged 'discursive distinctions' made by those with authority and power, such as scientists and doctors (Henry and Milovanovic, 1999: 5). The distinctions that determine the Truth 'are conceptual and...made through communication, particularly, but not exclusively, written or spoken language, referred to by postmodernists as "*discourse*" (Manning 1998)' (as referenced by Henry and Milovanovic 1999: 5, italicized in original). Feminist postmodernists emphasize the ways that male-dominated discourses allow the social control of, and power over, women's bodies and voices (Bordo, 2003; Wood, 2008),

which is why feminists Malson and Burns (2009, 1) have argued that disordered eating 'can only be adequately understood within the context of the oppressive gender ideologies and inequalities in gender power-relations operating in (western/ised) patriarchal cultures.' I am arguing, throughout this paper, that the oppressive context described by Malson and Burns (2009) is inclusive of our contemporary foodscape.

As a feminist postmodernist, my primary theoretical tool is to analyze data through what Derrida (1970; 1981) calls 'deconstruction,' which has been explained by Henry and Milovanovic 1999: 5, italics in original) as the exposing of 'the socially constructed nature of privileged knowledge through what is called "*critique*"...: a continuous process of challenge to those who claim to know or hold the truth.' Along with the theoretical tools of deconstruction and critique, I draw on concepts from critical perspectives in food studies in order to demonstrate how the marketing of skinny labeled food products is a form of food injustice.

### ***1. Neoliberalism, nutritionism, healthism and anti-obesity discourses***

Neoliberalism, the dominant global ideology of the elite, our ruling institutions and the industrial food system, is defined by Koc, Sumner and Winson (2012: 387) as: 'a political ideology and practice that emphasizes the withdrawal of government from services that promote the health and well-being of communities of citizens; these needs would be met through individual responsibility and for-profit, commercial services.' Neoliberalism is also the ideology that has fueled two powerful paradigms that have shaped the way we understand and relate to food: 'nutritionism' and 'healthism'. Nutritionism is a way of understanding humans' relationships with food as simply a measurement of calories/nutrients in and out, which suggests that as long as we choose the right foods at the right amounts we will be healthy (Brady, Gingras and Power, 2012). Healthism is the ideology that was born from nutritionism's reductionist ways of thinking about food and the health of bodies, framing individuals as matter-of-factly responsible for their own individual health.

The 'health is in your hands' mentality of healthism discourses has been critiqued by critical feminist food scholars as being inappropriately reductionistic, dangerously moralistic and generally lacking reflexivity (Brady, Gingras and Power, 2012). Brady, Gingras and Power (2012: 124) explain that:

healthism and nutritionism have enabled a neo-liberal form of self-governance, in which “proper” citizens are expected to govern their own choices and everyday practices in conformity with the latest health and nutrition information about which choices and practices are healthy (Guthman and Dupuis 2006; LeBesco 2010; Lupton 1995).

Healthism and nutritionism essentially communicate that if an individual does not make the 'right' food choices they are not responsibly taking care of their health. Another example of how nutritionism and healthism are moralizing is that the purveyors of nutritionism and healthism, including well-meaning feminists, posit that mothers are responsible for the nutrition of their family. Based on this belief, social activist and public health efforts to decrease obesity often target low-income minority women, resulting in unintentional moralizing that reflects intersectional forms of marginalization (sizism, sexism, racism and classism) (Brady, Gingras and Power, 2012; Kirkland, 2011). If a mother does not know the latest health and nutrition information, or does not have access to healthy foods, and 'chooses' to feed her family 'bad' food, she is seen within the neoliberal regime as a bad mother who is responsible for any health issues her family may have.

The panic over the supposed 'obesity epidemic' is also grounded in the taken-for-granted logic of healthism and nutritionism. Anti-obesity claims support the contemporary focus on weight loss and the demonizing of fat. Kirkland (2011) provides well-supported arguments that challenge the basic premises that fuel the 'war on obesity:' 1) people are fat because of what they eat and how much they exercise, 2) being fat is unhealthy and 3) people are fatter than ever before. Body weight is determined by more than just food choice and exercise, health can be achieved at many body sizes, and increases in 'obesity' are largely a result of lowering the body mass index (BMI) scale (Kirkland, 2011). Anti-obesity initiatives and scholarship promote the socially constructed superiority of elite healthy eating and lifestyle habits while perpetuating the inferiority of the choices made by marginalized others (Kirkland, 2011). These processes contribute to 'skinny privilege' and the success of 'skinny marketing.'

Critiques of nutritionism, healthism and anti-obesity discourses help explain why people, in Western culture and increasingly globally, who are considered 'fat' or 'obese' are accredited with negative social and moral failings that define them as people who are lacking self-control, social responsibility, and competence (Brewis et al., 2011). Yet, Brady,

Gingras and Power (2012: 126) contend that neoliberal practices are to blame because 'neoliberalism both produces the problem of obesity (through encouraging over-consumption) and labels obesity as a social problem that individuals must solve by making "proper" choices, especially in the marketplace.' Aligning my theorizing with critical feminist food scholars, like Brady, Gingras and Power (2012) and feminist scholar Kirkland (2011), I understand people's relationship with eating and health as much more than simply healthy versus unhealthy food choices. Instead, I understand the act of eating as involving a complex relationship between nutrients, culture, affordability/accessibility, the media, environmental sustainability, identity-construction, and other dynamic factors (also see Beagan and Chapman, 2012).

## ***2. Pseudo-foods, corporate concentration and mass marketing***

Anthony Winson (2012) defines pseudo-foods as 'edible products' that are high in fat, sugar, salt and calories, while simultaneously not containing substantial amounts of proteins, minerals and vitamins, making the edible products very low in nutrients. The term pseudo-foods is not merely another term for junk food, but is also a word to characterize much of the processed foods in our grocery stores that are marketed as 'healthy,' including many frozen dairy products, juice beverages and pre-sweetened cereals (Winson, 2012). I am arguing that another major distinction between junk foods and pseudo-foods is the deception behind the marketing of the edible commodities. Junk foods, such as candy bars and chips, are not being marketed as 'good for you.' However, pseudo-foods like pre-sweetened cereals are packaged with labels that highlight the vitamins that the product has been fortified with tricking some consumers into not considering the cereal to be a junk food, but instead as part of a healthy and nutritious breakfast.

The reason why there are so many processed edible pseudo-foods in our supermarkets is because these food commodities have the highest margin, simply making corporations the most money (Winson, 2012). Corporate concentration of the food industry, the control of food production and marketing by a small number of multinational food manufacturers, also allows pseudo-foods to overwhelm our grocery stores. Smaller businesses that want to compete, especially with non-processed foods, have to win shelf space from the corporate giants who can almost always out bid them. For example, in 2006 PepsiCo sold \$35 billion worth of product around the world (*Advertising Age*, 2007: 75 as



cited by Winson, 2012), which allows them to buy prime shelf space. Corporate concentration is intense; in 2005, the author of the book *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating*, Jane Goodall (2006) reported that 'ten multinational corporations now control over half the world's food supply' (as cited by Sumner, 2008: 356). Not only can corporate giants, like PepsiCo, control grocery store shelves, they can dominate in mass marketing because they can afford the premium costs for advertising and media time (Winson, 2012). Winson (2012: 191) reported that:

According to Marion Nestle, of the astounding \$33 billion spent by food companies on all their promotional campaigns by 2000, almost 70 per cent was spent on convenience foods, candy, and snacks, alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, and desserts, whereas just 2.2 percent was for fruits, vegetables, grains or beans (2002: 22).

Not only do corporate food giants control the mass marketing space, they are choosing to market primarily pseudo-foods. Understanding this current food landscape, defined by corporate concentration and mass marketing, can allow one to start challenging the basic premise of healthism - that individuals are entirely responsible for making healthy food choices.

### ***3. Food labels as discourse***

Food labels are: 'mandatory or voluntary messages on food packaging that serve as a communicative tool between manufacturers and consumers' (Koc, Sumner and Winson, 2012: 384). Knezevic (2012: 248) argues that food labels are a form of discourse because 'the symbolic power of labels shapes our discourse on food and hence our understanding of it.' Knezevic (2012) explains how food labels do not hold the industrial food system accountable, but instead food labels are helpful tools that are used by manufacturers to communicate to the consumer about their products in the most favorable way. For example, labels on Kraft processed cheese slices highlight how much calcium they contain and other products have various strategic labels that suggest their product is 'healthy' when they are arguably not (Knezevic, 2012). One powerful message communicated to consumers through food labels is that healthy eating is an individual responsibility (Knezevic, 2012). This dominant discourse about healthy eating and individual responsibility allows the food companies within the industrial food system, and our

government, to remain unaccountable. Health problems are seen as a result of bad food choices and not as symptomatic of an unhealthy food system, making healthism a discourse that protects the industrial food system, and our government, from blame and public outcry for change.

#### ***4. Eating as a pedagogical act***

Jennifer Sumner (2008: 355) has contended that 'food is far more than a biological necessity,' arguing that 'eating has been as much about culture as it has been about biology.' Recognizing the cultural aspects of eating provides the platform for Sumner's argument that 'eating can be understood as a pedagogical act,' making food a catalyst for various forms of learning (2008: 355). Sumner recognizes that food can be used as both a positive and a negative vehicle for learning; we can (un)learn sustainability and unsustainability through eating.

Beagan and Chapman (2012) have argued that you learn, construct and display various facets of your social identity through purchasing, preparing and eating food. Specifically, 'food practices are one of the ways people "produce" and portray their social identities as men and women, teens and adults, and members of ethnic, racial and class groups' (Beagan and Chapman, 2012: 136). For example, healthism discourse has shaped the way we understand ourselves as healthy and *responsible* people. Another more specific example is how organic foods have become a status symbol (Guthman, 2003) because only higher socio-economic classes of people can typically afford to pay their premium prices. Essentially organic becomes a designer food label. Therefore, purchasing and eating organic foods intersects with both producing and portraying social status and class identity. Knezevic (2012: 255) has argued that the status symbol of organic foods makes organic food 'desirable for more than just its nutritional value.' Constructing and communicating one's identity is an integral part of how eating is a pedagogical act; we learn and teach others about ourselves through food practices.

#### ***Grounded virtual liquid ethnography***

I refer to my data collection method as a 'grounded virtual liquid ethnography' that draws on the work of grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz (2006), virtual ethnographer Christine Hine (2005; 2011) and developers of the liquid ethnographic method, Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2008). Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that allows

the data, and emerging analyses, to shape every stage of the research project (Charmaz, 2006). The virtual ethnographic strategy described by Hine (2005: 84) involves web surfing and following hypertext links, while understanding that online spaces are 'increasingly the site of the exercise of power by the elite.' Liquid ethnography is described by Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2008: 182) as a method that is 'attuned to the dynamics of destabilized, transitory communities; ethnography immersed in the ongoing interplay of images; ethnography comfortable with the shifting boundaries between research, research subjects, and cultural activism.' Liquid ethnography is a complementary ethnographic strategy that is well suited for the online environment, especially when observing destabilized, transitory communities like pro-ana/mia and eating disorder social networks. For the past three years, I have been web surfing and following hypertext links about pro-ana/mia, eating disorders in general and discussions about, and imagery of, women's bodies online (See Schott and Langan, 2015 for a more detailed explanation of 'grounded virtual liquid ethnography').

Through my ethnographic engagement, I noticed that there were dozens of 'safe' and 'fear/binge' food video blogs on YouTube that reported what girls with eating disorders felt safe eating and what they feared eating. For this paper, I collected approximately 25 YouTube 'safe' and 'fear/binge' food videos to specifically analyze. What I noticed was that many of the safe food products reported were highly processed foods marketed for being 'low/no fat,' 'low/no calories' and 'low/no sugar.' Diet beverages, especially Diet Coke, were overwhelmingly reported as safe foods. When I was searching for Diet Coke's relationship with the eating disorder community I came across information about Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi's marketing of the 'skinny can.' After I came across the 'skinny can' branding, I dove into the online blogosphere, media reports and major organizations' websites searching for what is being talked about in regards to using the word 'skinny' as a way to market food products.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section, I will present three major ethnographic findings that I discovered while immersed in the online world of disordered eating. First, I will describe a specific type of eating disorder video blog that is made for, and posted on, YouTube by girls identified as having an eating disorder. These video blogs are titled using the words 'safe foods,' 'fear foods' and 'binge foods.' Next, I will briefly discuss the way the pro-

ana/mia culture presents their relationships with food. The last finding section illustrates our skinny saturated food landscape and provides many examples of food products that are labeled with the word 'skinny.' I report on how online bloggers, organizations, and the media have responded to the insidious labeling and marketing of skinny-branded food products.

### *Eating disorder 'safe' and 'fear/binge' food video blogs*

During my online ethnography of pro-ana/mia websites, I noticed that a lot of the food that was reportedly being consumed by those within the pro-eating disorder community were highly processed foods labeled as 'fat free,' 'sugar-free,' and 'calorie-free.' I noticed that an overwhelming number of girls self-reported drinking Diet Coke or other diet soda or drink products, such as zero calorie Crystal Light. Brown and Keel (2013: 265) report that 'excessive diet soda intake is common in eating disorders', finding that individuals with a DSM diagnosed eating disorder consume considerably more diet soda than their non-eating disorder control group. This quantitative scientific study is aligned with my qualitative ethnographic findings.

I decided to collect approximately 25 safe vs. binge/fear food YouTube videos of girls identifying as having an eating disorder, some of whom identified as pro-ana/mia, but many did not in this sample. Safe foods are foods that the girls with eating disorders report feeling safe eating without being triggered to engage in disordered eating behaviours, such as fasting, bingeing, purging, abusing laxatives and compulsive exercising. 'Fear' and/or 'binge' foods are food products that girls who have eating disorders explain they are afraid to eat, due to either their perceived potential to cause weight gain or trigger binge eating. In many of the videos, the girls actually show you each food product on the screen as they list each food. Many of the girls state that they recognize that some of their 'safe' vs. 'fear/binge' foods do not make 'logical sense'. A lot of the safe foods are highly processed diet foods, but most girls also list vegetables, particularly lettuce, and some fruits, especially apples, as safe foods. Almost all of the 'fear/binge' foods would be considered pseudo-foods by Winson's (2012) definition. Within the comment sections of the YouTube videos, I have observed food choice advice being shared, such as the avoidance of nuts that have oils, sugars and salts on them, packaged fruit cups and lean cuisine frozen dinners. Many of the young girls making specifically pro-ana/mia videos report eating foods that they think are 'healthy,' but others online viciously mock them

in the comment section, often calling them stupid and naïve. I would conclude that the eating disorder and pro-ana/mia foods presented online are highly contradicting, saddening and chalk full of chemicals.

### ***Pro-Ana/Mia and food***

The pro-ana/mia community has certain 'thinspiration quotes', slogans that inspire the extreme pursuit of thinness and disordered eating. Two pro-ana/mia Diet Coke slogans are: 'Coffee, smokes and cold Diet Cokes that's what pretty girls are made of' and 'Chemicals over calories for me thanks' with a picture of Diet Coke. Within the pro-ana/mia community there are also food pyramids which include their basic food groups to be: water, Diet Coke, coffee and cigarettes, sugar/calorie free products, and food at the top of the pyramid indicated to be used sparingly.

For the pro-ana/mia community, food is framed as an evil enemy, as something that one must overcome or is at war with. Some of the thinspiration quotes used by the pro-ana/mia community include: 'nothing tastes as good as skinny feels'; 'Because everything looks better on skinny girls'; 'Rome wasn't built in a day. Don't give up.'; 'Be strong and get skinny'; 'Food does not control you'; 'Discipline...is just choosing between what you want now and what you want most'; and the list could go on. As you may have noticed, although disturbing, many of these thinspiration slogans are a strong reflection of the healthism discourse that often conflates health with a small body size, and expresses neoliberal values such as: self-control, discipline, strength, will-power, and overall drive for perfectionism.

### ***The skinny saturated foodscape***

Grocery stores around the world are filled with food products that highlight, through strategic labeling, that the food inside the packaging is 'low fat' or 'fat free,' 'low calorie' or 'calorie free,' and 'no added sugar' or 'sugar-free,' and now some are branded with the label 'skinny' as well. The former star of the popular television show *Real Housewives of New York*, and self-described healthy eating expert, Bethenny Frankel, launched her line of *Skinnygirl* alcoholic beverages that target weight-conscious female consumers. The cartoon cocktail waitress, whose head is larger than her waist, is the *Skinnygirl* logo for the lower-calorie liquor brand. In 2011, the Huffington Post reported that the grocery store Whole Foods pulled *Skinnygirl* liquors off their shelves after they found out that the ingredients within the bottles were not what they had been

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claimed to be - natural. The president and CEO of the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), Lynn Grefe, has been quoted across online newspapers and internet blogs strongly disapproving Skinnygirl products because of the skinny message it is sending to women and young girls. E! News (Macatee, 2014) online quoted Grefe stating:

We can say with certainty that the obsession with skinny in the news, diets and product marketing—such as Frankel's Skinny Girl cocktail brand—is over the top and pushing our young people to develop poor body image, fat shaming, and dangerous dieting behaviors in an attempt to meet these unrealistic goals.

Despite Whole Foods and NEDA's lack of approval, in 2012 \$11.8 million worth of Skinnygirl liquor products were sold in Canada (Krashinsky, 2013: *The Globe and Mail*). Now, customers can find the Skinnygirl brand, and its thinner-than-Barbie logo, on other consumable products such as supplements, cleanses, and what are referred to as 'nutritional bars' (Krashinsky, 2013). Consumers can purchase a variety of 'skinny' branded food products such as: *Skinny Buns*, whole wheat hamburger buns; *Skinny Pop* popcorn; *Skinny Chef* marinades; *Skinny Water* beverages; *Skinny Lattes* coffee drinks, *Dr. Joey's Skinny Chews* and *Skinny Cow* ice creams. There are also many products branded with the word 'thin' and 'lean,' such as *Mr. Christie's Thinsations* 100 calorie snack packs and bars, and the popular frozen dinners *Lean Cuisines*. Lots of these skinny labeled food products have weight loss and body ideal imagery, such as tape measures and thin female bodies, on their packaging. The social news and entertainment company, *BuzzFeed*, posted an article called: '8 "Skinny" Foods That Nutritionists Says Are Actually Bad For Your Diet' (Shanker, 2014), quoting nutritionist, health and wellness experts, coming to the conclusion that most of these experts argue that the 'Skinny' label is a 'clever marketing trick' for products that 'contain more chemicals than real food' (Stephanie Middleberg, nutritionist, health and wellness expert). Many independent 'health/fitness' bloggers warn their readers not to eat 'skinny' food products. For example, one online blogger points out that the Skinny Cow vanilla ice cream sandwich made by Nestle®, 'a nutrient dead "Frankenfood",' has a label that misleadingly highlights 'good' qualities (only 140 calories, 1.5 grams of fat and 3 grams of fiber), but on the smaller mandatory label on the back it reveals that the product has 33 ingredients, many of which are chemicals, not to mention an extremely

small serving size that skews the front label information (<http://mybsbe.com/skinny-cow-ice-cream-scam-dont-eat-this/>)

In 2011, PepsiCo Inc. introduced its new 'skinny' Diet Pepsi can, which the company said was made 'in celebration of beautiful, confident women' (Leung, 2011: *The Globe and Mail*; Skidmore, 2011: *NBC News*). Throughout the marketing campaign the new skinny Diet Pepsi can has been referred to by Pepsi Co Inc. as being: 'slim, attractive'; 'taller, sassier'; and 'the perfect complement to today's most stylish looks' (Leung, 2011; Skidmore, 2011). The new 'skinny' can made its debut at New York's Fashion Week events (Leung, 2011; Skidmore, 2011) and soon after advertisements for the new skinny can appeared with the slogans 'get the skinny?' and 'runway ready.' Wency Leung (2011), from the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, reports that 'critics view the "taller, sassier" packaging as a warped message that reinforces stereotypes about women and body image.' Many critiques online highlight with outrage that PepsiCo's marketing strategies are conflating 'skinny' with 'beautiful' and 'confident women.' Among these critics is the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) who announced on their website that Pepsi Co's marketing of the 'skinny can' is offensive. The president and CEO of NEDA, Lynn Grefe (2011), expresses that: 'It is painful that a major fortune 500 company needs to denigrate the majority of women in this country to sell their products.' Further, Grefe (2011) stated that 'PepsiCo's comments are both thoughtless and irresponsible,' stressing that their decision to launch the product during Fashion week underscores what NEDA believes to be shameful and dangerous marketing practices.

In 2013, Diet Pepsi's major competitor Diet Coke came out with their version of a skinnier can: Diet Coke in a new 'sleek' can promoted by the young sleek Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift is a 7-time Grammy winning country/pop superstar who has broken multiple youngest-ever woman musical achievements (<http://www.taylorswift.com/about>). Gabriel Beltrone (2013) wrote a rather cheeky article for *Adweek*, a self-described 'leading source of news for marketing, media and advertising professionals' (<http://www.adweek.com/about-us>), titled 'Diet Coke's Taylor Swift Can is Sleek and Skinny, and You Could be Too: Limited - edition Thinness.' Beltrone says in the article:

Hi, tween girls who may have body-image issues and also like listening to Taylor Swift. Diet Coke is launching a new, limited-edition "Sleek Can." It's thinner and more glamorous than those plain old cans, and naturally, it's covered all over in Taylor Swift's

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autograph. It also features a quote, in script, which reads, "If you're lucky enough to be different, don't ever change." Except it's Diet Coke, so the whole point is kind of to change, to drink Diet Coke and become slim and shiny, like Swift. Way more so than if you drank from Diet Pepsi's "Skinny Can" from Fashion Week a couple of years back.

Taylor Swifts' slogan 'Stay Extraordinary' is featured on Diet Coke's advertising coupled with other slogans such as: 'What to drink on your way to the top.'; 'Some of us were destined for the red carpet'; and 'Pairs well with going places.' In January 2015, the executive director of the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, Dr. Michael Jacobson, wrote an open letter to Taylor Swift urging her to discontinue endorsing Diet Coke because it contains the artificial sweetener aspartame. Jacobson explains that although the Food and Drug Administration considers aspartame to be safe, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest is not convinced of its safety because three major studies conducted at a prominent laboratory found that aspartame caused cancer in rats and mice, explaining that 'Scientists generally accept that if a chemical causes cancer in lab animals it likely increases the risk of cancer in humans.' Before explaining that Taylor Swift has the ability to be choosy with what products she has on her 'otherwise admirable portfolio,' Jacobson stresses that her:

endorsement carries great weight with [her] millions of young fans. To the extent that [her] endorsement encourages them to begin drinking Diet Coke, or to drink more, [her] endorsement is likely increasing [her] fans' risk of cancer. Even if the increase in risk is small, we question whether [she] would want to lend [her] name, image, and reputation to any product linked to any increased risk of cancer.

Elsewhere Jacobson is quoted saying that celebrities 'shouldn't use their influence, especially their influence over children, to market junk foods' (<http://www.cspinet.org/new/201501161.html>). In order to publicize the Centre for Science in the Public Interest's concerns that Taylor Swift is endorsing Diet Coke, the organization is using the hashtag #ShakeOffAspartame, a word play based on Swift's song 'Shake It Off,' which has more than 670 million views on YouTube (<http://www.cspinet.org/new/201501161.html>). There is a larger body of research, and powerful organizations such as the Canadian Cancer



Society, that definitively claim that 'aspartame (also known as Nutrasweet) does not cause cancer' (<http://www.cancer.ca/en/prevention-and-screening/be-aware/cancer-myths-and-controversies/food-additives-and-cancer/?region=on>). Regardless of the safety of aspartame and other artificial sweeteners, it is still very concerning that so many young people are choosing to consume chemicals as a way to reduce their calorie intake, instead of more nutrient rich foods.

## **DISCUSSION**

My theorizing about pro-ana/mia always aims to embed disordered eating within our broader socio-political landscape. Engaging with concepts from critical perspectives in food studies has allowed me to think about disordered eating ideologies and practices within a neoliberal foodscape that is controlled by a few major corporate players, and laced with insidious 'skinny' and 'diet' messages and imagery that leads to food injustice.

I would like to expand Winson's (2012) concept of 'pseudo-food' beyond high fat, high sugar, and high salt products. Our market is now flooded with what I will refer to as 'diet pseudo-foods,' which are fat-free or low fat, sugar-free or low sugar, and calorie-free or low calorie, food-like chemical substances. Diet pseudo-foods have deceptive labeling that communicates to customers that they are 'healthy,' and a 'smart choice,' but often contain more chemicals than nutritional value. I have found that young women and girls with eating disorders are buying into diet pseudo-foods, and fearing pseudo-foods. I think that this observation, in combination with the female-directed marketing of these products, highlights some very troubling concerns about our current foodscape and food (in)justice. This apparent problem is exponentially magnified when one reflects on eating disorder/weight-loss statistics: people with anorexia have the highest mortality rate of anyone with a mental illness (Sullivan, 2002); in a study of a sample size of approximately five thousand teenagers, 50% of girls and 33% of boys were found to engage in fasting, vomiting, laxatives, skipping meals, and/or smoking, in order to control their weight (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007); five year old girls have been found to associate the word diet with food restriction, weight-loss and thinness (Abramovitz and Birch, 2000); 'adolescent girls who diet are at a 324% greater risk for obesity than those who do not diet' (Stice et al., 1999 as referenced by NEDIC, 2015); and 'dieting for weight loss is often associated with weight gain, due to the increased

incidence of binge-eating' (Field et al., 2003as referenced by NEDIC, 2015).

I am contending that the labels on diet pseudo-foods, especially those branded with the word skinny, are a discourse that is communicating to women various lessons about their bodies and their identities that shape how they understand and relate to food/eating. First, there is a clear conflation of health and body size that is being perpetuated through these labels. Research shows that health can be achieved in a variety of sizes and shapes (Lelwica, Hoglund and McNallie, 2009), yet the skinny label and weight-loss imagery is often branded on foods that are marketed as 'healthy.' Further, the discussions online that quote nutrition experts, at the very least, provides reason to question the 'healthiness' of diet pseudo-food products.

Skinny discourses also teach women that skinny is the ultimate status symbol for women. Like Guthman's (2003) analysis of organic foods as a status symbol that marks socio-economic class, achieving skinny for women is one of the most praised statuses in Western culture, and increasingly globally. Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi's skinny can advertisement campaigns insidiously conflate skinny and dieting with female success, style, social status, beauty, confidence and upward mobility. Corporate elites can afford to pay for prime advertisement space/time, and for celebrities to endorse their products, like Taylor Swift who endorses Diet Coke. Taylor Swift has told millions of young girls that Diet Coke is 'what to drink on your way to the top' and that it 'pairs well with going places' and Diet Pepsi tells their customers that the Diet Pepsi Skinny can was made 'in celebration of beautiful, confident women.' Although these messages are not as blatant as the advertisement for Skinny Water with the caption 'SKINNY ALWAYS GETS THE ATTENTION,' the messages through strategic associations are distastefully palpable. It has been argued that 'thinness, associated with higher social class (power, resource, and opportunity) in North America, is often a women's ticket to upward mobility (Shultz, 1979)' (as referenced by Root, 1990: 526; also see Kirkland, 2011). Further, weight stigma has been found to negatively impact women's employment potential, educational outcomes, romantic relationships, and physical and mental health (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2011). For example, 'being fat is associated with lower incomes, especially for white women, with fat highly educated white women making about 30 percent less money than their thinner counterparts (Brownell et al. 2005)' (as referenced by Kirkland, 2011). Advertisements, like those for Diet Coke and Diet

Pepsi's skinny cans, are disseminating the conflation of thinness and social status through these subtle, yet dangerous marketing campaigns.

The purpose of the quest for thinness, as described by pro-ana/mia girls is to 'feel small for him' (pro-ana/mia thinspiration quote), and such thinking perpetuates inequality in gender relations - not only is she catering to what she thinks *he* needs, but she is also engaged in body modification that will ensure that she is, in a sense, inferior, by taking up less physical, and social, space than he does. The aggressive and abusive marketing of diet and skinny food products to women who have been taught to be weight conscious, reinforces and strengthens the lesson that women should actively strive to shrink their bodies so that they take up less physical and social space. All of these lessons about women's bodies have been made possible, to this widely-adopted extent, through the backing of the taken-for-granted truths perpetuated through nutritionism and healthism discourses. These lessons shape how women understand themselves; good neoliberal women are successful, stylish, beautiful, confident, and 'going places' because they have self-control, will-power, strength and are responsible 'healthy' eaters; successful neoliberal women are skinny.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Through contextualizing disordered eating ideologies and practices within a foodscape that sells and glamorizes skinny, I have deflected blame, and deficit-labeling, away from individuals and redirected it towards broader food injustice. My analyses of skinny and diet food marketing has contended that skinny and diet labels are harmful discourses that teach women to shrink their bodies, and that self-worth is a waist-line measurement; these harmful discourses represent food injustice. These analyses have led me to propose that food marketing is a pedagogical act that disseminates lessons about bodies on a mass scale. The 'skinny girl' pedagogy that is being disseminated through food marketing is damaging women's relationships to food/eating, to their bodies, and to their understandings of self. Instead of problematizing individual women labeled with an eating disorder we need to interrogate and dismantle damaging food and body pedagogies, such as those being perpetuated through the marketing of diet pseudo-food.

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