Judging Books By Their Covers: Diet Culture Rhetoric Within College Student Communities

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ABSTRACT

This research takes a qualitative and mixed methods approach to exploring diet culture rhetoric through a rhetorical analysis and a food medicalization lens as it manifests on diet book covers. A rhetorical analysis of the front and back covers of twelve diet books was used to identify patterns of rhetoric and imagery. This was applied to ten semi-structured interviews of students on the University of Wisconsin La Crosse campus. The rhetoric from these were compared to the rhetoric of the diet books to determine if there were similarities or differences, and furthermore, if a relationship existed between them. The research has shown that while a clear causation between the diet book rhetoric and the rhetoric of the students wasn't supported, they indicated connections to the larger world of diet rhetoric which included social media, television, and other media. This supports the idea that diet culture rhetoric is constantly evolving to appeal to younger generations.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where we are surrounded by marketing ploys calling for us to spend our money in certain ways, we have gradually become more aware of the ways we are manipulated by the media, whether through TV, books, magazines, or social media. This includes the diet industry, which profits off of selling solutions to problems it invented. Through the advancement of science, activism, and trial and error, almost all fad diets have gone out of style as quickly as they came in, adding to the graveyard of failed diet industry schemes. However, can they really be considered failures if the industry is operating exactly how it aimed to? The Scarsdale Diet turns into the Atkins Diet, which turns into Paleo, Keto, and the Whole 30. Diets are meant to fail, and when they do, there's always a reliable scapegoat: the consumer. After that, they rebrand and sell the next solution. Understanding the ways they sell these solutions can help us be less vulnerable to their tactics and stop wasting our money, sweat, and tears in order to play into a system of anti-fatness that ultimately hurts everyone. "Magic bullet" solutions, biohacking, anti-fatness, and food medicalization are just a few of the popular forms of rhetoric that appear on diet books, which as the traditional form of diet media, I chose to focus on. Despite what we know about diets as an isolated concept, we cannot discuss them without also discussing their ties to anti-fatness, food medicalization, misogyny, and self optimization, which are all explored in the literature of the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in this field covers many of the broad topics involved in my research, such as the prevalence of dieting among young people. *The Rhetoric of Food as Medicine: Introduction to Special Issue on the Rhetoric of Food and Health* lays the foundation for explaining why diet rhetoric thrives by pointing out how food has been medicalized, pushing the idea that individuals can take complete control over their health and bodies by buying into false claims about the power of singular foods to cure and prevent illness(Hanganu-Bresch, 112-115). Hanganu-Bresch also includes an important concept called healthism, which was coined by Richard Crawford. This is a philosophy popular in the Western middle classes that prescribes lifestyle changes disguised as empowerment in order to reach peak health(117). This gives a lot of context for the studies of specific demographics and their relationships with food and exercise that followed. It will also give my analysis context here at UWL as I further explore the rhetoric of these concepts as they appear on popular diet book covers.

In a study of young girls and healthism by Sheryl Laura Park, interviews with various students indicate a link between health, control, and body image. The response of one student shows,

> An outward bodily acceptance may be linked to the projection of fatness and lack of exercise onto irresponsible 'others'...Responsibility for health is strongly individualized in this excerpt suggesting that extra weight is a sign of personal failure…the normalization of healthism behaviors establishes a context wherein those who do not conform to its requirements become stigmatized and held to blame for their lack of responsible behaviors(485).

This desire and belief in control can be seen in college students as well. In interviews with students about chronic illness in a study by Grace Spencer et al, their narratives "described how they sought to take back control over their bodies and manage their health condition in particular ways to reduce its impacts on their ability to 'live a normal life'(371). This was done not on a whim, but by using academic knowledge of their bodies and through the influence of dominant health discourses(371). While this has to do with chronic illness in general, the related idea of the "quantified self" is used to apply similar concepts to calorie counting.

The Quantified Self metaphor was applied to calorie tracking by Gabija Didžiokaitė et al. She describes the goals of QS as the "pursuit of *transparency* and *self-optimization*"(1473). Through interviews with users of My Fitness Pal, a calorie tracking app, it was found that many users only understood the fundamentals of the app and of calorie tracking in general. "Although MFP allows users to customise these goals by entering their own calorie/nutrient limits, our participants usually followed the calorie and nutrient limit offered by the technology…our participants simply thought that this was the best way to lose it. This is illustrated by Emily, who when asked why she decided that 1400 calories were the right limit, explained, 'Because that's what it tells me'"(1478). While this is not an indicator of the thirst for knowledge and obsession with biohacking that I am interested in, it still indicates a trust in the dominant health discourse being circulated, with My Fitness Pal being a widely used and "credible" app. Similar to diet books, it uses a formulaic method that would "work for anyone." The concept of biohacking circulates in the same spaces as the Quantified Self as it is often referred to as "do it yourself biology." *Biohacking: the next scientific revolution?* describes it as "the technological academic and industrial settings for the purposes of self-improvement, innovation, art, and political expression. Encompassing everything from dieting to the genetic engineering of bacteria…"(Dong, 10). The combination of the Quantified Self and biohacking paints a picture of the body being a machine you can hack if you just understand the coding. Many influencers and peddlers of fad diets tend to use biohacking language, claiming there is one "key" to hacking yourself. My research reveals how this language appears in other ways on book covers. Oftentimes it has to do with eating certain foods and avoiding others entirely, labeling them as clean or as junk.

A popular association with diets is the idea of clean eating. In an article, *Is #cleaneating a healthy or harmful dietary strategy? Perceptions of clean eating and association with disordered eating among young adults*, strong evidence shows that undergraduate students don't share exactly the same definitions of clean eating, though the same concepts were being hinted at: pure, whole, and raw foods are positive, and 'junk food,' fats, sugar, and calories are negative (Ambwani et al. 10). The study then drew a connection between clean eating and related diet rhetoric and ON by stating that the most prevalent reason among participants for taking on clean eating habits were '"to be healthier,' 'for weight loss,' and to feel in control of their diet'"(11). As these are the same ideas that diet books tend to peddle, my research will be able to use this as a jumping off point and expand on the impact of this rhetoric.

Although not always explicitly stated, you cannot discuss diet rhetoric without discussing fatphobia, which "also known as anti-fat, is the explicit bias of overweight individuals that is rooted in a sense of blame and presumed moral failing"("Fatphobia"). Our culture has linked the two and it is difficult to sort out the pervasive ways they impact our views of health. Several books have unpacked the origins of fatness as a negative indicator of health. *Fat Shame* describes the ways that perceptions of fatness and health have shifted with culture throughout time, and in the 19th Century, it began to be linked with consumerism and the nouveau riche (40). In addition, it was a way to control women during first wave feminism, because dictating what proper women look like strategically gives and takes away respect to certain types of women (53). Other books similarly argue that linking fatness with health is just another way to control women (*What's Wrong With Fat?).* Thus, the inaccurate claim that health=physical appearance is driven by cultural values rather than science. Even with studies that show correlation between obesity and health issues, there is a tendency to oversimplify the matter to fit our cultural framing of obesity; fat is bad (*What's Wrong With Fat? P. 17).* This also occurs with the BMI.

Oversimplification also negatively impacts our understanding of the BMI, or Body Mass Index, which is known to not indicate anything about body composition because it makes a generalization of health based on weight and height. The article *Commentary: Origins and evolution of body mass index (BMI): continuing saga* discusses how the BMI originated from a Belgian mathematician, Adolphe Quetelet, who was interested in characterizing the "average man." Ancel Keys developed this concept of using weight, height, and age to discuss health in a 1972

article, giving the BMI its name and promoting its application to individuals. Keys and Quetelet did not factor in advanced age, women, children, or ethnic groups(Blackburn). Quetelet's focus on the "average man" demonstrates how the BMI is unfit to be used on an individual basis. When the weight markers were lowered, suddenly those who were considered a normal weight before were labeled obese or overweight in an instant (*What's Wrong With Fat? P. 8).* This oversimplification of what it means to be fat, and who is considered fat does nothing to tell us about the actual health of a person. A study by Lindo Bacon on two groups that were either taught restrictive eating or how to be healthier by listening to your body and engaging in joyful movement shows that health markers like cholesterol and blood pressure were not connected to weight. The first group lost weight initially, but many failed to stick with the program, many regained the weight, and the health markers were not improved. The second group didn't lose weight, but all stuck with the program and their health markers improved (*What's Wrong With Fat? P. 12).* Hearkening back to the idea of controlling women, equating thinness and femininity and oversimplifying obesity as a health marker leads to catastrophization as a profit making strategy.

As discussed above, fatness has character traits attached to it, and fatness is framed by culture. It is a simple step to create moral panic over fatness when it is made into a caricature. Several books argue that catastrophizing fatness through claims of its contribution to global warming, tax burdens, shorter life spans, and medical expenses results in demonizing the people themselves, not their fatness (*What's Wrong With Fat? P. 21, Fatshame P. 9).* This generates profit for the diet industry because when you pathologize something, making it into a problem, and then present a solution, people will spend money to "fix" it.

This problem and solution market is where diet and weight loss companies, and often the celebrities who endorse them, make their money from fear. *Fat Shame* points out that "our national "war on fat" has created a colossal health and diet industry closely enmeshed with government agencies. Profit motives for our sixty-billion-dollar diet industries and fat stigma have become so entangled that it has become difficult, perhaps impossible, to even entertain the possibility that we are fighting the "wrong war." In a profit-driven, consumer society, diet product manufacturers, pharmaceutical corporations, the advertising industry, and medical practitioners all benefit financially from fat stigma"(14). For example, the magazine *Business Week* said that by 1969, Weight Watchers' gross revenues were $5.5 million, which was part of a $200 million annual 'waistline industry. "$50 million spent on exercise machines and gadgets and "multi-millions on diet foods, diet advice, slimming sessions at expensive spas and at thousands of health clubs" (*No Fat Chicks,* 61). Furthermore, the magazine estimated that the industry was the fastest growing segment of the food industry(63). This hinges on the fact that results for the majority of the population are unattainable.

No Fat Chicks identifies the goals of marketers as making the body standards at such low weights that it would be impossible to attain for the majority of the population, but something to strive for for women who were able to purchase the products they were selling(73). They call this the "billion-dollar brainwash," and it peddles three lies. "(1) that fatness is the worst cultural catastrophe possible for women; (2) that obesity *must* be voluntary because slenderness is available to all who pursue is with sufficient diligence and money; and (3) that the sole cause of excess weight is therefore despicable self-indulgence….brainwashing the entire population to accept these lies unquestioningly…guarantees that women *of all sizes* will frantically spend money on products that promise escape from that punishment"(76-77). One of these products was, and are, diet books. *No Fat Chicks* reports that by 1995 there were 700+ weight loss related books(81). Diet industry companies often have celebrity representatives to further brainwash women, as having "proof" of its success helps obscure blatant misinformation.

While there is little to no evidence that cleanses work in the way they are marketed, they are highly attractive in a couple ways. One, they are endorsed by celebrities who are meant to represent the way we want to look. They market feelings, such as happiness, feeling lighter, fresh, etc. Walter Willett, professor of epidemiology and chair of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health speculates that this is combined with the desire to "take a break" from the overeating that Americans are used to(*Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?* 23). Indeed, celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow advertise their products as a response to indulgence, like over the holidays. In this way, weight loss products are not always advertised as weight loss products. It can be an unsaid goal or end result. Cleanses are meant to detox your body, or flush out your system. But the real goal is acute starvation that results in a lower number on the scale(Caulfield). Looking closely at the way celebrities engage with diet culture makes it easier to understand how profit, weight loss and fat phobia, and the way we think about food are linked.

The connections within the literature show how you cannot discuss diet culture without also discussing fatness, which leads to the way metaphors of fatness, femininity, and social class play into these systems. Tied up in that is biohacking rhetoric and the medicalization of food, which loops us right back around into fad diets and diet culture. My research attempts to host an open discussion about any and all of these issues by providing the media to my interviewees and letting them bring their own thoughts to the table. Once again, I aim to investigate levels of

awareness around these topics in order to promote awareness, which is the first step to understanding and overcoming the ways diet rhetoric harms us.

METHODS

My research centers around two questions: how does diet culture rhetoric appear in the genre of diet books? And how do the marketing tactics of these diet books influence the consumer? This research gained IRB approval and combines a rhetorical analysis of 12 diet book front and back covers [Appendix A] with the rhetorical analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews of students on the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse campus. This campus is a mid-sized public institution with 10,337 students from 2021-2022. It is an urban campus in southwestern Wisconsin known for its exercise and sports science program among others. Set within bluffs, marshes, and numerous biking and hiking trails, physical activity is popular here. It is worth noting that it is a predominantly white institution as well. The books were selected by searching through the most popular titles in the health and nutrition section of Amazon. They were vetted based on general categories of diets, such as keto, anti-inflammatory or antioxidants, low sugar, and titles relating to obesity. I analyzed all text, imagery, and design choices for each front and back cover, and formed loose patterns that shaped my interview questions [Appendix B].

I did a snowball sampling method of finding interviewees to get a wider range of responses on campus. All identified as women, and are kept confidential. I asked two questions about their views on health and how it impacts their habits, and then introduced front and back covers of three of the twelve books I analyzed. After viewing them for the first time on the spot, I asked for their impressions of the text, imagery, and design choices, as well as how it impacted their views of their bodies. After collecting and spot transcribing the interviews, I compared the rhetoric of the interviews to my own analysis of the books to see if there were similarities or differences. I took note of what surprised me and if the interviewees engaged with any food medicalization rhetoric(agreed, disagreed, or commented on it in general), biohacking rhetoric, or fat phobia.

I chose to conduct interviews as my data because I wanted more conversational and organic responses from my participants. Rather than releasing a survey, where they are limited by scales such as “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” or perhaps feel intimidated by the task of summarizing their opinions in written form, I wanted to give them the freedom to speak casually about the covers. I also thought that interviewing face to face would create a friendly, safe environment where they felt comfortable to say what they truly thought without word or time limits. Because of this choice, I collected numerous minutes and pages of data that gave me valuable insight into the way consumers interact with diet culture rhetoric on book covers.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

There were several themes prevalent in the rhetoric of the twelve diet books analyzed. The first were the use of buzzwords in the titles, which were meant to capture the reader’s attention, combined with the use of large or bolded font. The title *Fast. Feast. Repeat.*(See Figure 1)*,* for example, takes up half the page. It uses red, black, and blue font to contrast against the white background, and is also in all caps. The text itself is loaded with cultural meaning. With the rise in popularity of intermittent fasting, the word “fast” is being used to trigger preconceived notions about intermittent fasting. For me personally, it made me think of the idea of only eating from 12-8, being hungry, and food cravings. Even if it is controversial, with some believing it works and others not, the book works to capitalize on its relevance and persuade you to look at the rest of the cover out of curiosity. Likewise, two other titles, *The Obesity Code*(See Figure 2) and *The Obesity Fix*(See Figure 3) capitalize on the cultural schema of obesity. Having been considered an epidemic for decades, and with fatphobia being stitched into the fabric of our country, this word on its own does a lot of rhetorical work for the authors to tell the audience what it’s about. When the books are already in the nutrition section, this further contextualizes the subject to be negative, perhaps scientific, as it is obesity and not fat being used, and worth paying attention to. Fatphobia has framed obesity as a problem people need to be worried about, in themselves and others(*What’s Wrong With Fat? P. 21, Fatshame P. 9)*. The book *Metabolical*(See Figure 4) operates similarly, though slightly less effectively. “Metabolical” seems to be a play on the words “metabolism” and “diabolical,” so for someone who picks that up, that is telling the reader perhaps that there is something insidious about metabolism. Or not necessarily metabolism, but that its frequent companions in casual conversation: weight loss and weight gain, are negative in some way. This is similar to the dark noose imagery on *The Case Against Sugar*(See Figure 5). *Metabolical* is presented scientifically, with its classy serif font establishing itself as professional and humble in a way. A provider of information and nothing more. The book is now considered scientific because its play on words in the title is unrecognizable to anyone not already knowledgeable in the nutrition or anatomy field, and therefore, more trustworthy. The rhetoric of biohacking is also

used in many of the titles and cover text, but for biohacking rhetoric to work, the book must convince the reader that all other diets aren't effective, or that they're lying to you.

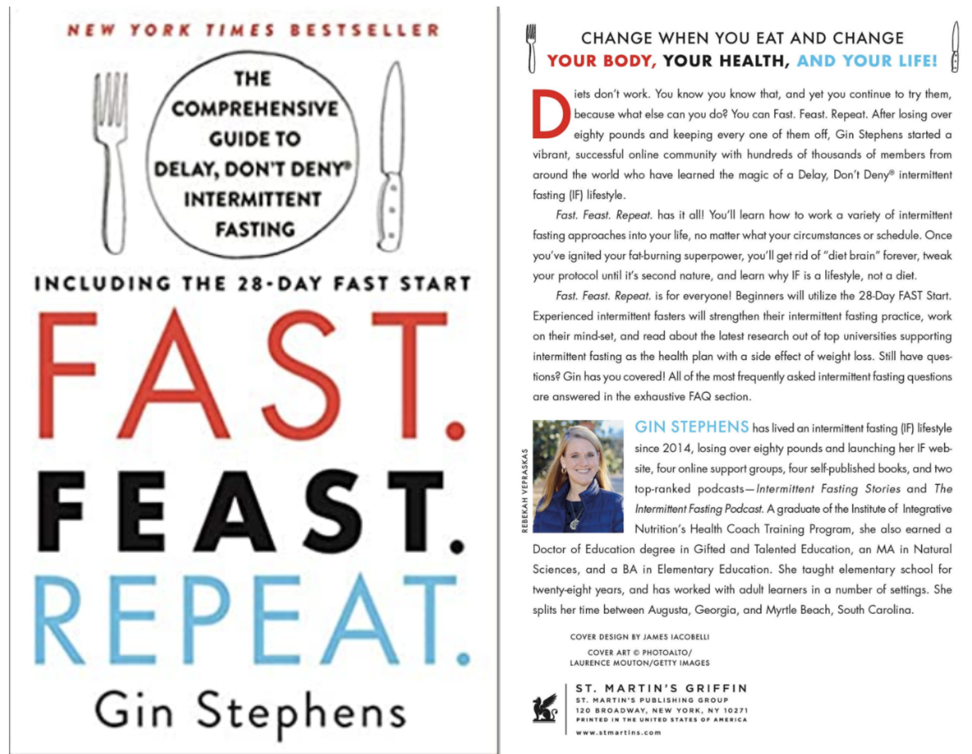

Figure 1. Front and back covers of *Fast. Feast. Repeat.*

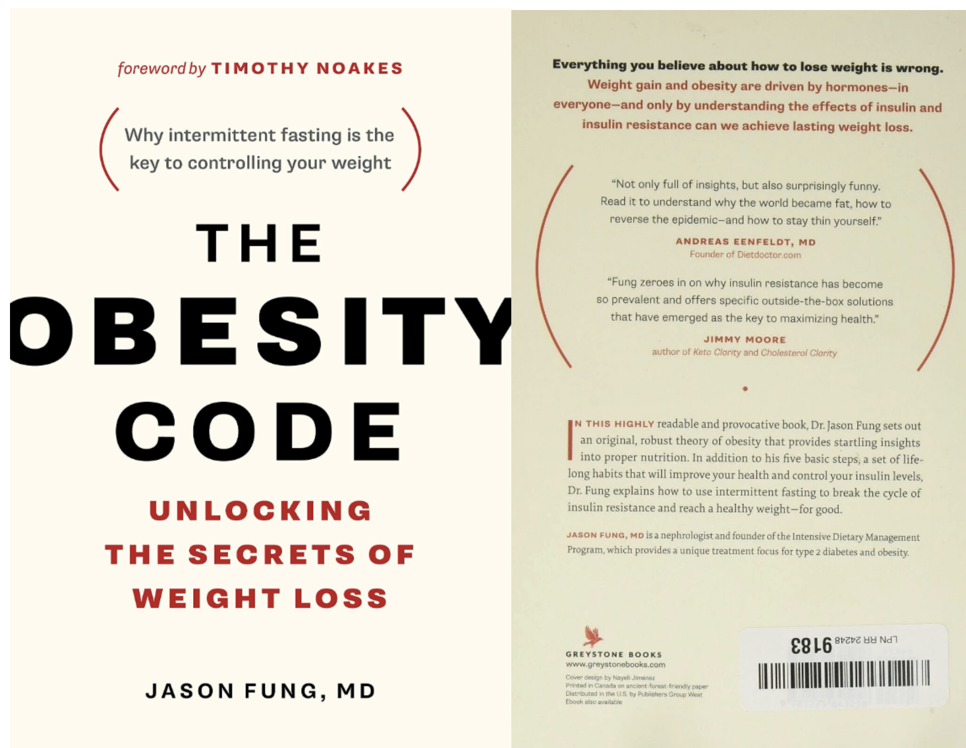

Figure 2. Front and back covers of *The Obesity Code*

Figure 3. Front and back covers of *The Obesity Fix*

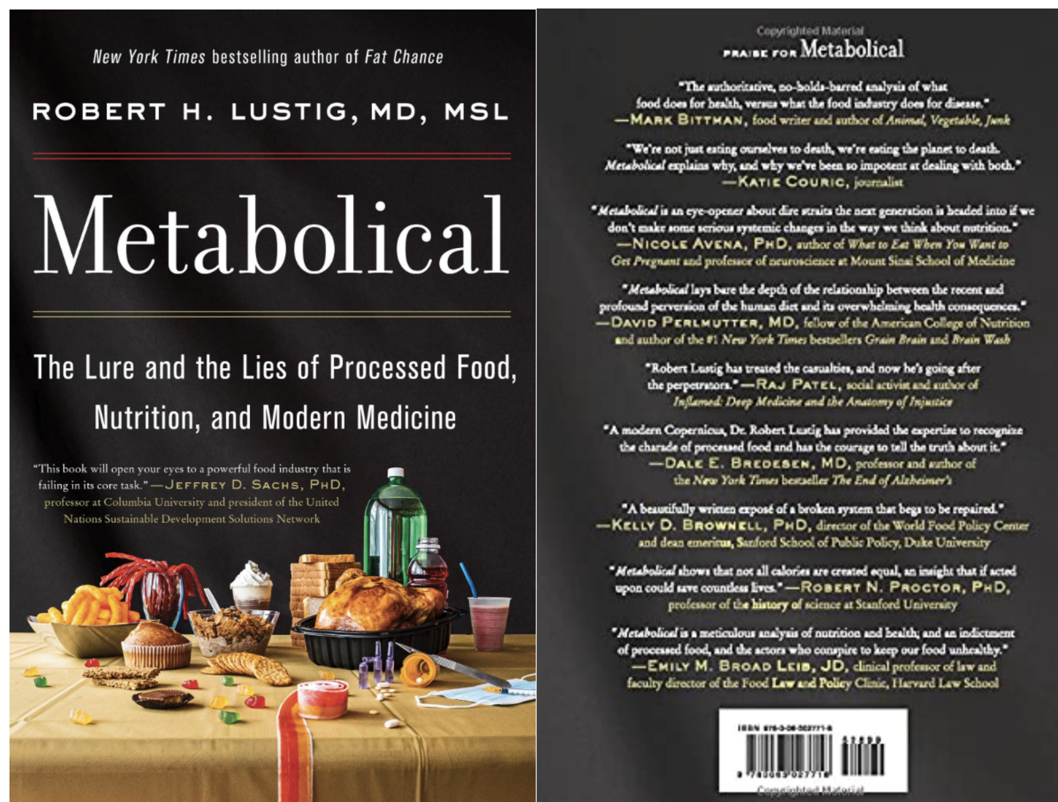

Figure 4. Front and back covers of *Metabolical*

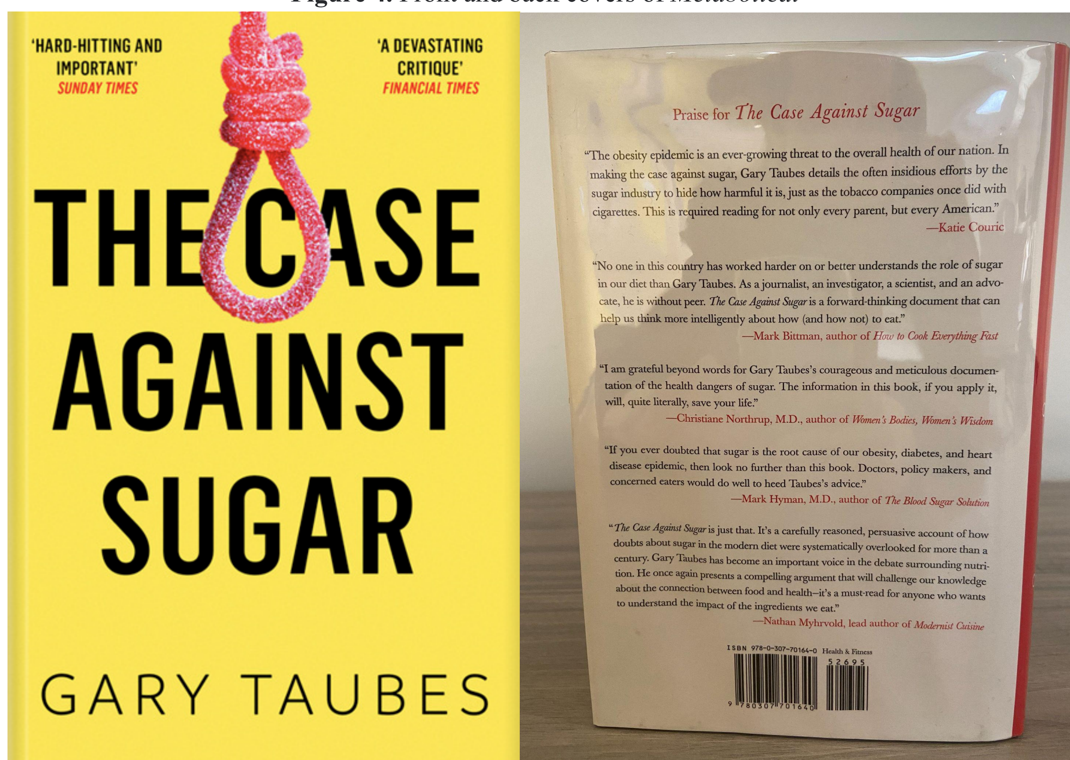

Figure 5. Front and back covers of *The Case Against Sugar*

Biohacking fits well with diet books rhetoric because it champions the idea that knowledge is power. If you can just understand every mechanism of your body, you can manipulate it to get the results you want. Fad diets flourish precisely because they don't work. When one diet fails, another can point to it and say it didn't work because they didn't do it right, or they didn't have all the facts. They take advantage of people's desperation to try anything, and tell them that they're the one with the missing piece of information. It is the search for novelty that drives this.

Fast. Feast. Repeat.(Figure 1) is a good example of how diet books set themselves apart from one another, because it goes against what people believe is the core value of dieting: restriction. In the title itself, the word feast is bolded and it makes the reader rethink what they know about intermittent fasting. And just that juxtaposition, between fast and feast, the reader's attention is grabbed because they shouldn't work together. Fasting is about restriction, not eating. Logically, feasting shouldn't have any place in that process. But the book tells the reader that this diet is different, and that even if you tried intermittent fasting before and it didn't work, that's because you didn't try it their way. This is shown in the quotes on the back cover, "delay don't deny," "diets don't work," "IF is a lifestyle, not a diet," and "you'll get rid of diet brain forever." The author clearly understands the stigma surrounding diets, but also understands how they function and continue to profit. As long as fatphobia exists, diets will continue to make money despite people knowing they probably don't work. They dangle the carrot of knowledge in front of the reader with slight differences that distance them from other diets. By saying "lifestyle," it isn't even acknowledged as a diet. The term "diet" is a buzzword that evokes a lot of distrust in people, so many books leave the term out of their marketing entirely. Marketing books as scientific stores of information is an effective way to target the desire for novelty.

The relationship between people and diet books is interesting because as the examples above demonstrate, it's a stereotype that diets don't work. But the numbers don't lie either, and we can't help but try them every time they are repackaged in a new, attractive, seemingly credible way. *The Obesity Code* does this by asserting, "Everything you believe about how to lose weight is wrong." Similarly, *Stay Off My Operating Table*(See Figure 6) and *Metabolical*(Figure 4) both capitalize on the idea that the diet industry lies to consumers. The former lists a review that states, "I recommend this book to anyone who is sick of being lied to by self-styled fitness gurus and professional dieticians who don't know the first thing about being fit or healthy." The term "self-styled" indicates a distrust for those without a certain level of ethos in the field, and furthermore, a distrust for anyone not an expert in the field. *Metabolical* uses rhetoric like "charade," "actors who conjure" and "lure and lies," to achieve the same

reactions from readers: distrust, doubt, and fear. This is the most explicit example of how discarding old information in favor of the new is attractive to readers. It draws a connection between new information and success.

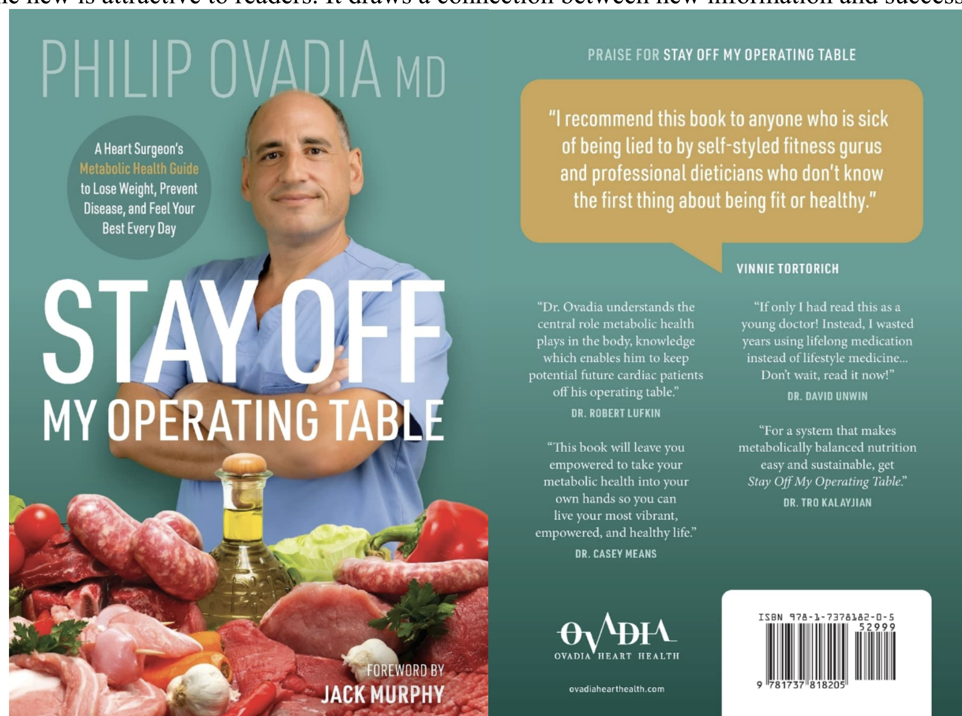

Figure 6. Front and back covers of *Stay Off My Operating Table*

Equating novelty and success is done subtly in other books by highlighting the status of the authors. Half of the books had MD or Dr listed in reference to contributors, reviewers, or authors. In addition, language such as "groundbreaking," "revolutionary new science," "trailblazer," "pioneer," "game changing," "eye-opener," "lays bare" and "courage to tell the truth" is listed on many of these books to assert them as new and better science. Whether this is true or not, the reader is forever drawn in by promises of finding the answers to the problems diet companies invented to profit off of. The use of MD and Dr labels, and general trust in science work to make the simplification of our bodies into a "magic bullet" method more believable.

Studies have shown that obesity and weight are very complicated concepts with many factors involved(*What's Wrong With Fat? P. 12)*. This makes the goals of diet companies difficult, as they need to sell to a population with unique bodies, issues, and genetic influences. Simplifying the body, and subsequently simplifying the problem, into a two-dimensional equation(typically one factor to the problem, and the solution) allows for a silver bullet solution to be marketed. The tactics used to support this are similar across all the books, no matter the solution they offer. "Magic," "fat burning superpower," "Weight gain and obesity are driven by hormones- in everyone" "anyone at any age and athletic level can follow," "Your endurance, energy, and recovery will skyrocket," "will give you the tools you need" and "results can't be argued with" are some examples of how the success of the books are presented as statements. The results are marketed as a guarantee for everyone, no matter their background. This is similar to the trend of labeling certain foods as "superfoods," as if on their own, they can act as the remedy for your ailments. This is a component of biohacking rhetoric because it's the simplification of the body that allows us to believe we can manipulate it like a machine.

Biohacking language is used in the front and back cover blurbs, but it first appears in many of the titles. *The Obesity Fix*(Figure 3)*, The Obesity Code*(Figure 2)*,* and *The Keto Code*(See Figure 7) all use obvious examples of biohacking rhetoric. "Fix" and "code" are part of a world of language that thrives on creating a problem and then profiting off of presenting a solution. By combining the words "obesity" and "fix," it uses the meaning triggered in "obesity," as explained above, and drums up anxiety in the reader. It presents it as a problem. Putting "fix" after it is then creating a solution. It reminds the reader that obesity is something they should be scared of, but to not worry about it, because if they buy the book, its contents hold the answer. The use of the word "code" operates in a similar way, but by shrouding the subject in mystery. "Code" is a word used to evoke curiosity or awe. It typically describes something that is too difficult for most people to understand or solve. It is another word for a secret message. Again,

it presents a problem that the reader can't solve, but they can, with a very special vault of information that you can only obtain by buying the book. In this way, "code" refers to the human body as a machine to be hacked and controlled. This appears in the other text on the covers as well.

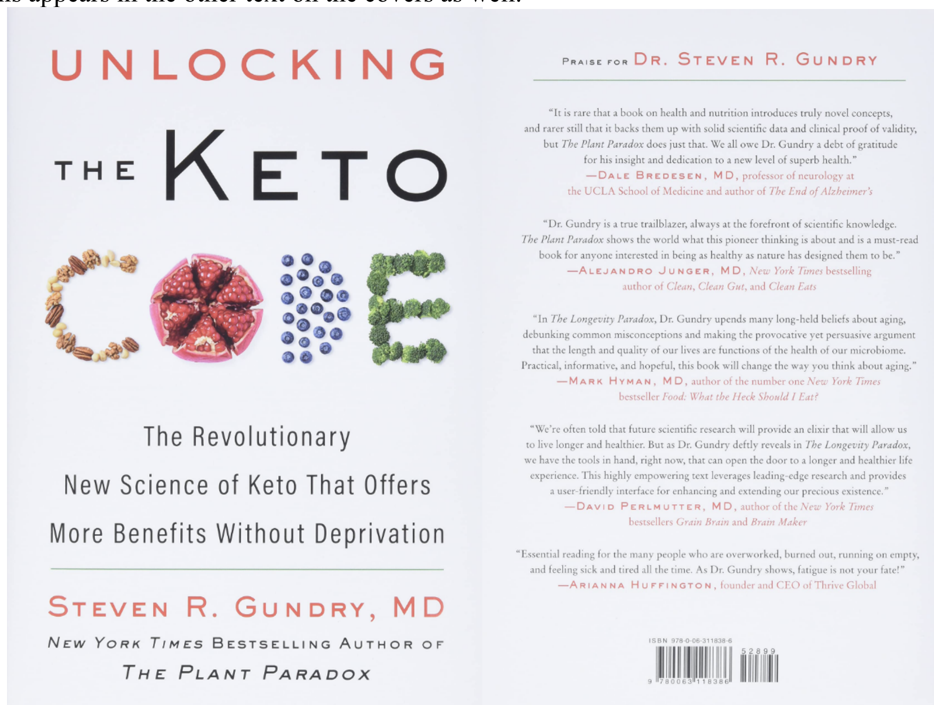

Figure 7. Front and back covers of *The Keto Code*

Biohacking language can be elusive and difficult to identify. Sometimes it doesn't appear as explicitly as "code," "secret," or "fix," but still associates the body with machines. *Fast. Feast. Repeat.*(Figure 1) for example, simplifies the diet process down to three steps. To get the results you want, you just have to get into the routine of doing those three things, over and over and over. There isn't anything wrong with having a routine, but in the context of dieting, this can be insidious when the human body is treated like a robot that can be calibrated to do three things perfectly(until it can't) to achieve exactly what the book promises(until it doesn't work). Other examples are "automate your meals" from *Intermittent Fasting for Women + Anti-Inflammatory Diet*(See Figure 8)*,* "the key to maximizing health" and "five basic steps" from *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2), "lose weight and gain energy" and "master of your body" from *The Obesity Fix*(Figure 3), "reset diet," "reboot," "sound formula" and "build a fitter, leaner, healthier body" from *The Keto Reset Diet*(See Figure 9), "powering your engine" from *The Plant Based Athlete*(See Figure 10), "give you the tools" and "seize control" from *Sugar Detox for Beginners*(See Figure 11) or "ultimate life hacker" and "priming" from *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(See Figure 12). All of this rhetoric indicates that the body is a rogue machine that you have to understand before you can recalibrate it. You work to get all the "bugs" out so it performs the way you want it to. This thrives in diet culture because it pushes the sentiment that firstly, there are issues with your body. Secondly, those issues are preventing you from being your true or fully realized self. And thirdly, that if you understand the machine, you can eradicate those "bugs" and "reboot" your system. By simplifying your body to a machine metaphor, diet companies can sell you a simple solution that operates like a User's Manual or a troubleshooting guide. A subsection of this biohacking rhetoric I noticed was what I group together as optimization rhetoric.

Figure 8. Front and back covers of *Intermittent Fasting for Women + Anti-Inflammatory Diet*

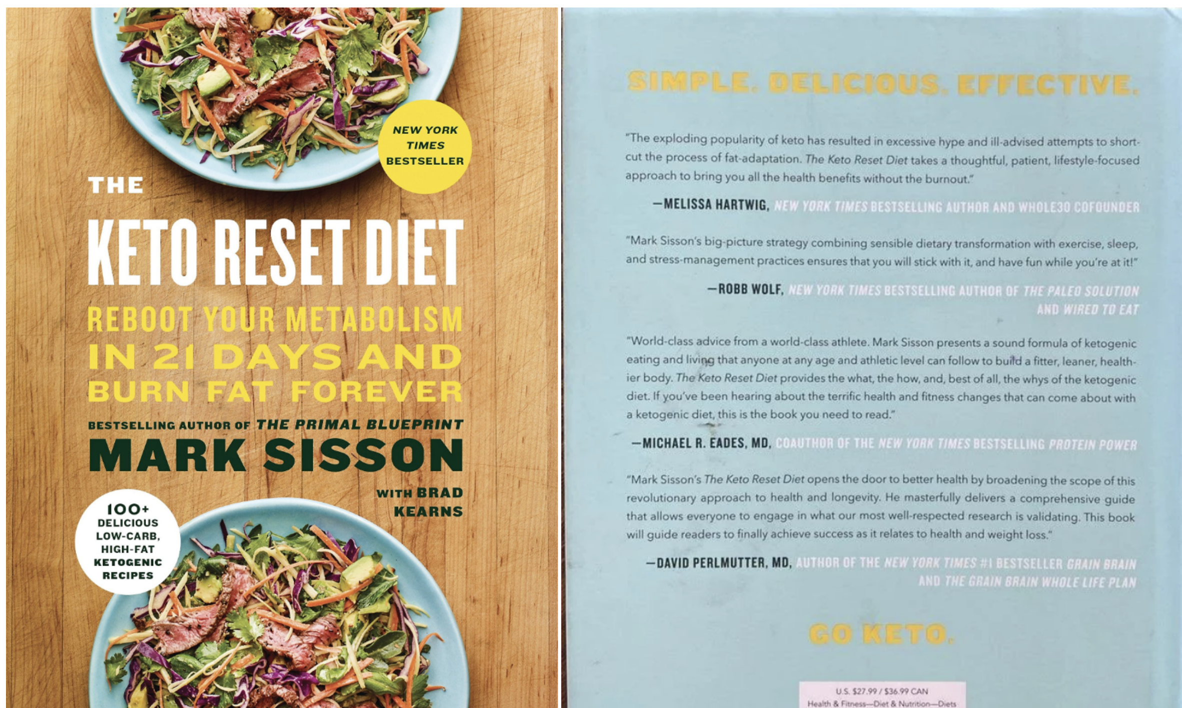

Figure 9. Front and back covers of *The Keto Reset Diet*

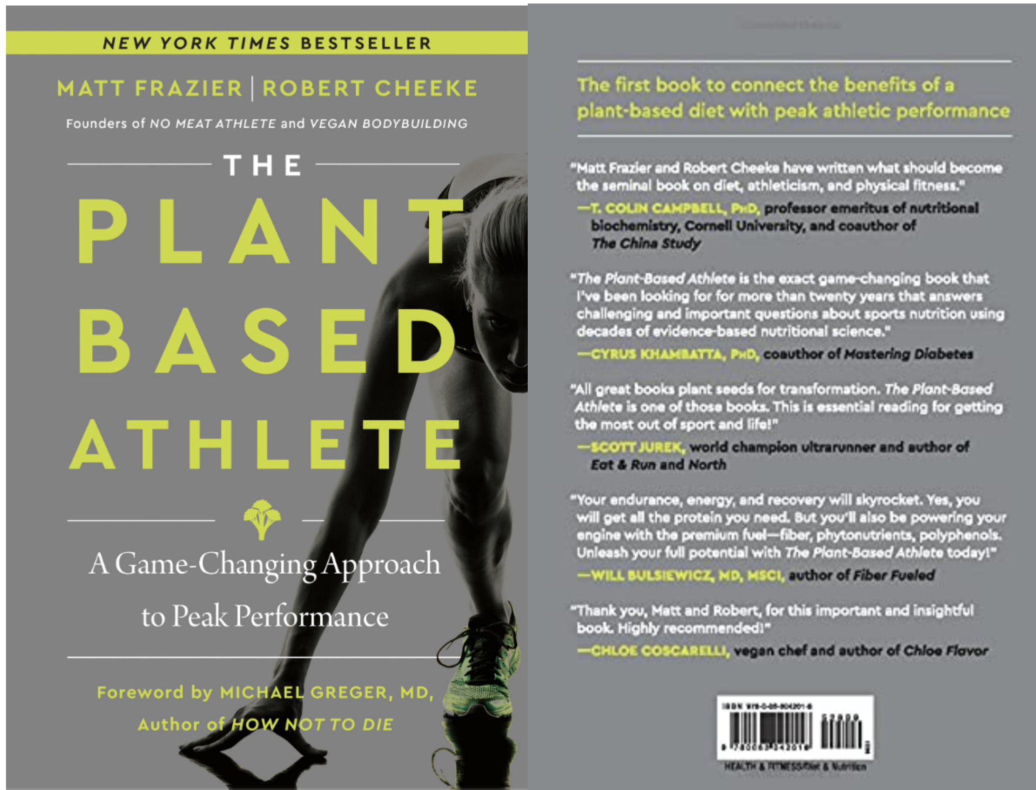

Figure 10. Front and back covers of *The Plant Based Athlete*

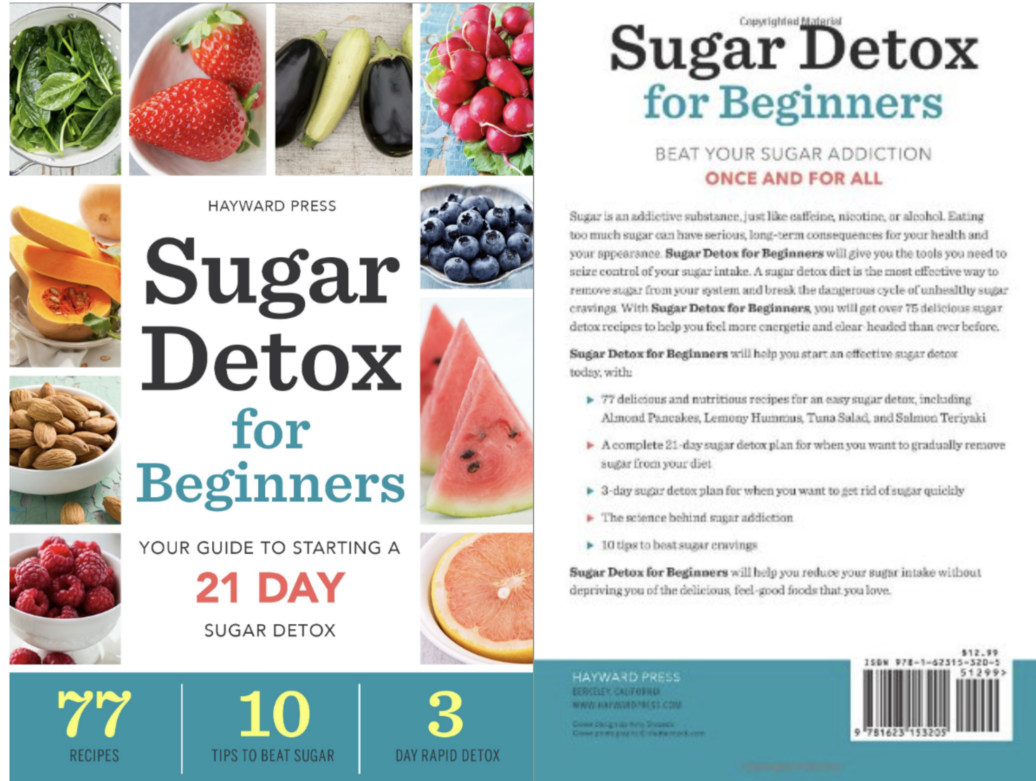

Figure 11. Front and back covers of *Sugar Detox for Beginners*

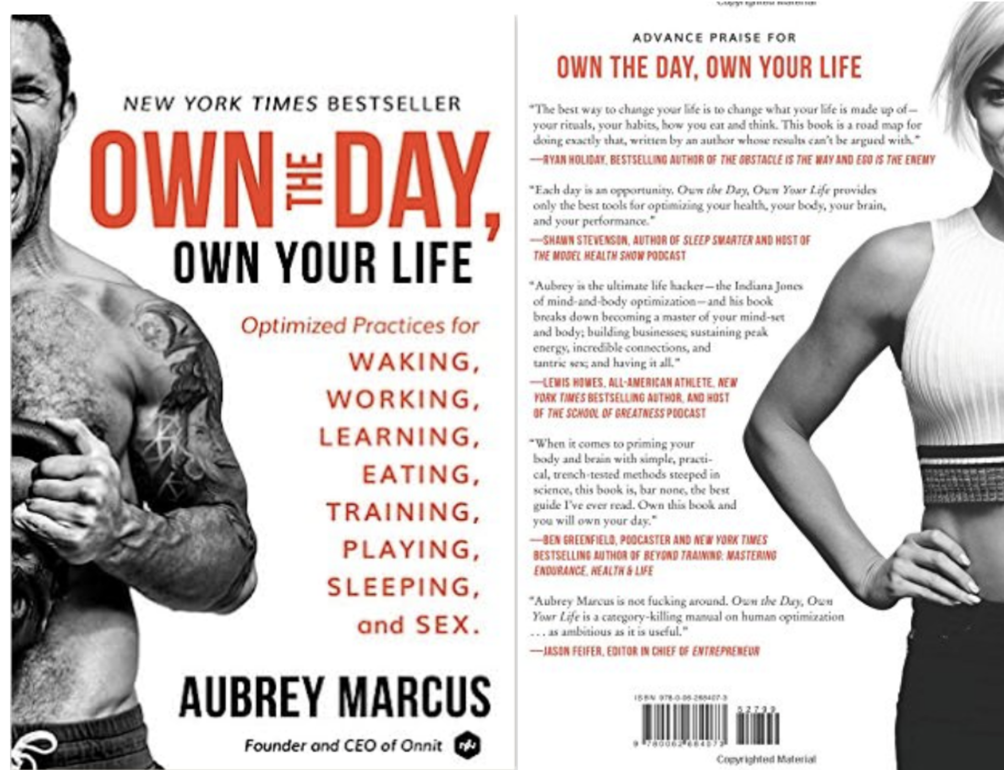

Figure 12. Front and back covers of *Own the Day, Own Your Life*

Optimization rhetoric is related to biohacking in the sense that it likens the body to a machine, often ascribing unrealistic expectations for it. A slight difference I observed is that optimization language not only associates the body with machines, but it also judges its value based on its performance. The main example of this was found in *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12). The front and back mentions a form of the word "optimize" four times. The list of activities, "waking, working, learning, eating, training, playing, sleeping and sex" are listed vertically one after the other, mimicking a list of tasks you may put on a to-do list. A list of commands for your body to complete. Combined with the word "optimized," this indicates that there is no area of your life that cannot be 100%. Even while unconscious, there are things you must be aware of so you can control yourself. This level of self surveillance and productivity makes a lot of sense in the work culture of the United States, where screens are now monitored to see what sites you visit while on company time, you are encouraged to work outside your 9-5s in order to climb the corporate ladder, and any minute not spent "bettering" some aspect of your life is time wasted. In a society that prides itself on pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and making millionaires from the ground up, we are obsessed with achieving our full potential. Diet culture helps to move the finish line by changing the facts and techniques needed to get there.

Own the Day, Own Your Life(Figure 12) recommends a complete life upheaval, down to "your rituals, your habits, how you eat and think." They advertise their method of budgeting time as each day being an "opportunity" in one review. The opportunity to, as they describe, "having it all." They include personal optimization of mind and body, as well as work optimization and having great sex. The review even refers to the author as the "Indiana Jones" of optimization. The idea of having it all is a clever marketing tactic that profits off of American social norms of turning every waking moment into an opportunity for productivity. Terms they use like "own," "tools," "peak" and "priming" all align with this idea of control that biohacking promotes. Control tends to be used in conjunction with weight loss, even when it's not explicit. For example, *Own the Day, Own Your Life* doesn't say anything about body types or weight loss, but the people on the front and back covers meant to represent the ideals they are promoting are perfectly toned and muscled. Inadvertently, they are giving a visual demonstration of what you look like if you "own your life." The connection between control and body size is traced through all of the covers, even when it's subtle.

A few examples of language that connects body weight or composition to self discipline(biohacking) are "conquer weight loss forever" from *Intermittent Fasting for Women + Anti-Inflammatory Diet*(Figure 8), "controlling your weight" and "read to understand why the world became fat" from *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2),

and “master of your body and fat loss” from *The Obesity Fix*(Figure 3). The language is empowering and sets obesity or a certain body size up as the enemy, or even a wild beast. You must “tame” it, “control” it, and “conquer” it. Your body is the bad guy, and you can vanquish it if you just buy the book and learn to manage it. The review about how the world became fat is especially interesting, because “became” indicates that there was choice involved. There was a transformation, which can be undone. This hearkens back to the idea that fat people just let themselves become fat, and in a society that prides itself on the delusion of independence and self-control, this is unacceptable. Many participants noticed these same patterns that I did.

ANALYSIS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Once again, the identities of the interviewees are confidential, and will be referred to by letters A-J. The first two questions were “what does health mean to you and what does it look like?” and “how would you describe the relationship between health and your body?” These two questions gave context to the questions that followed, which centered around the diet book covers, because it gave me an impression of how they think about health and food. Something I learned to clarify before the interviews that made a huge difference between the first round of interviews I did, which I discarded, and this round, is my insistence that the answer to the question “what does health look like” be entirely authentic. I learned to dig deeper on the responses to that question because I found a common theme throughout the interviews of how their personal image of health differs from what they grew up picturing, or what they continue to picture despite their best efforts today. This was the case for seven of the interviewees. They made a distinction between how society views health and how they aim to or already do view health. Some even expressed shame over grappling with this distinction, like participant B, who said, “To be completely honest, and I hate this, when I think of health I always think of the typical sports illustrated magazines where it’s the perfect gleaming tanned toned body.” This was an example of a pattern that manifested in other questions. College women on this campus are aware of the deceit of diet culture and Western society as a whole, which teaches us that skinny=healthy, or being muscled=healthy.

Every single participant discussed health as a holistic concept, or at the very least, mentioned characteristics that didn’t have to do with appearance or purely physical health. Mental health specifically was brought up in seven interviews, and four participants brought up how health looks different for everyone. Participant B argued, “different people have different definitions of health…everyone has a different ‘good health’ for themselves,” and Participant G explains, “as I’ve grown up, or over the last few years of college, the image has changed-of health. Like before, obviously, it was skinny…and the last couple years it’s changed…especially mentally, because you don’t see someone’s health even if they’re skinny. They could not be healthy on the inside.” This was especially interesting to hear, because it conflicts with the rhetoric I was reading consistently in my analysis of the diet books. With the exception of two of them, the magic bullet claims of the books sold the idea that changing your eating habits or body size would make you happier and change your whole life for the better. Many participants were not swayed by this idea, and indicated that they believe the balance of multiple factors was a better sign of health, like Participant J, who described mental health, physical health, and wellness as the three most important parts of being healthy, and argued that if you are suffering in one, you will suffer in all. Participant F used the word “balance” to describe the same concept. These core concepts of health being holistic and looking different for everyone seemed to guide the participants’ responses to the three diet book covers I showed them, which were *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2), *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12) and *Metabolical*(Figure 4).

Each participant was asked their initial thoughts on the covers and what stood out to them the most when given each cover one at a time. For *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2), many picked up on the impact of the ideograph of “obesity” and interpreted it negatively, as I did. All ten of them said that “obesity” was the most eye-catching part of the cover, and some explained how that could impact a potential reader, or even themselves. Participant F notices the same marketing tactic towards a specific audience just like I did, describing “obesity” as “the biggest word on the biggest word on the page,” and saying, “It almost seems like if someone was quote unquote obese, whatever that means, and by whatever standard that is set…if they looked at this and saw this, they’d probably feel pretty bad and go ‘oh, well I need to buy that book’ and feel guilty about it.” Participant B also identifies negative feelings towards that word, saying “The word obesity is such an ugly word, and it kind of goes back to being young, and the WiiFit days, and the ‘you are obese’...Obesity…I think that’s what they’re trying to do. It’s big, it’s bold, it’s in your face.” Even if the participants didn’t recognize this tactic specifically as an ideograph, they are noticing it affecting them in exactly the way that the book is meant to affect them. The ideograph of “obesity” is doing symbolic work for the author in evoking guilt, insecurity, and past experiences with fatphobia in order to generate profit. This insecurity was a pattern across all three covers in response to several questions. No matter what medical history the participants had, *The Obesity Code* inspired a lot of insecurity and doubt in them.

The participants were able to distinguish between doubt they had themselves, but also an understanding of the insecurities that could arise in those who identify as obese or overweight. For *The Obesity Code* Figure 2), Participant B says she "internalizes" the rhetoric, Participant H says that it makes her "question" her body, Participant G says that those who are insecure about their appearance could be "triggered" by the word "obesity." Similarly, Participant D says that while she is thin herself and wouldn't pay much attention to the word "obesity," "if I was slightly overweight, I might pay attention to that because I'm already insecure." Despite this, an interesting alternate response to this was from Participant F, who says the rhetoric "would make someone thin feel bad too, cause it also is like telling me 'oh, you need to stay thin.'" The literature and these analyses demonstrate consistently that the obsession with control, from external and internal pressures, continues to drain the wallets, confidence, and autonomy from women, and dumps it into an industry that couldn't care less if the product they're selling actually works. As *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12) treads further into biohacking territory, a different set of insecurities arose.

Own the Day, Own Your Life(Figure 12) seemed to be more popular because it focused less on weight loss and more on optimization. However, this rhetoric can be just as insidious in a culture that obsesses about productivity. Six participants said it made them feel negatively about themselves, with some using the words "lazy," "insecure," "defeated," and specifically, Participants A and D saying they feel "behind" on life. These descriptors were in response to several factors of this cover: the figures, the word choice, and the setup. The figures were what stood out the most to the majority of the participants, especially the male figure on the front, who was noted to be "in your face," "angry," "jacked," "intimidating," "skinny." This was of less concern to the female participants, who in general identified more with the female figure on the back. Several participants observed the differences between the man and the woman and determined them to be sexist. Participant A explained, "it puts the image out there that if you're a dude, you can be shredded and jacked, and that's how you'll be happy, and if you're super aggressive…for the lady, you'll be toned, but not too bulky, cause guys don't like that, and you have to be smiling, you can't be screaming, because that's not ladylike." Later, she confesses that the figures make her feel badly about herself, "because that dude is super jacked and the lady is super toned…they both definitely look super healthy…in general I don't have my life together. So 'own your life', I'm like, I don't have that, I should get this book." Participant B points out specific aspects of the woman that emphasizes the level of control expected of those who "own their life."

> It's really highlighting her arms and she has great arms. And if I'm gonna be completely honest, it's that thing where you grow up and you don't want to be too muscly…but you still want to have them, and she's at that perfect amount of just enough muscle where it's still in the public's eye feminine…She's got nice nails, she's got a cute outfit…it's that confident pose, knowing you look good and you look toned.

That same participant describes spending money on expensive workout sets that reminded her of the woman, saying that they made her think she'd want to work out more, but it didn't work. There was a tone of guilt there that the product she paid for didn't end up changing her in the way they promised. Participant A shared similar feelings, saying it "appeals to the side of me that's like 'do this easy solution and your life will be fixed'...I feel like a lot of people fantasize about getting their lives together." These are all hints of biohacking and an obsession with control and these personal accounts makes it clear how these diet books profit off of insecurity. They would not make money if someone actually became confident because of the product, or got the results that they wanted, because then there wouldn't be a market. These books need to work only for a tiny margin of people who are committed to spending every dollar and spare moment trying to get there, and then trying to maintain the results. And that's if they have the genetics necessary to get there. They may not state that you need to look a certain way to be healthy, but they were intentional about the figures they used to represent their rhetoric. As Participant C states, "It makes me feel like I need to look like these people if I want to be happy, and healthy, and living my best life." Heading into the least inflammatory cover, according to the majority of participants, *Metabolical*(Figure 4) preyed on insecurities over the relationship between food and health.

Something I found to be interesting was how the participants' beliefs of body size rejected the standards diet culture promotes, but traces of diet culture's standards for food emerged in their responses to *Metabolical*(Figure 4). Much of the negative feelings were evoked by the spread of "junk food" on the front cover. There were a variety of responses to the food, with some acknowledging it as unhealthy, others saying it's normal, and some saying it's unhealthy, but okay in moderation. Despite these differences, the majority of participants expressed shame over eating them regularly. Participant D said, "This whole thing is just everything in my kitchen that I eat…I eat all of this food all the time. My roommates tell me I'm a sugar fiend, I eat snacks all the time. If I eat healthy food it's because they made it, so it doesn't make me feel great." Participant A said, "It makes me feel like I should be doing more to be healthy," and described it as making her feel like "a sack of American grease." She even commented on

how she was rethinking the sugary coffee she was drinking during the interview. She also brought up how the food is spread out in a messy way, which she found to reflect the "disorganized" way she eats. This was impactful for me because it helped me identify negative feelings I had while analyzing that cover on my own.

As a fat woman, I have subconsciously been monitoring my habits for as long as I can remember. I suck my stomach in naturally now, even when no one is watching. I am mindful of how loud my footsteps are, and I am constantly thinking about how graceful I look when I move, exercise, and above all, when I eat. I chew with my mouth closed not because it's polite, but because from a young age I have been aware of the associations between fat people and animals. Fat people are supposed to be uncoordinated. They are supposed to eat uncontrollably and quickly. They are supposed to bumble through the world with no idea of how disgusting they look. It even extended to scent, as I am remembered in high school by friends as being obsessive about how good I smelled, carrying several sticks of deodorant and two bottles of perfume in my backpack that I would coat myself with twice an hour. I took pride in what I viewed as defying my nature. The symbolism of animals in fat phobia can be elusive in everyday habits, and it surprised me to realize how powerful metaphors are in our lives, including my own. Hearing about Participant A's observations of the graphic design choices of *Metabolical*(Figure 4) reminded me of how subtle fat phobia and diet rhetoric can appear in the media. There was another response from Participant B that triggered personal experiences with fat phobia and self monitoring. She described liking and eating a treat after a meal as a "dirty little secret," because of the negative stigma associated with junk food. This is a common experience I've had and have heard from other fat people, as it is considered shameful to like sweets or other unhealthy foods. You are cheered on for eating vegetables, and for me, admitting I enjoy junk food is again, giving into my nature as a fat person. It's confirming that I am just like the stereotypes about that community. It is worth mentioning that this is common rhetoric in diets, where you have "cheat days," and screw ups are meant to be shameful, hidden ordeals. Liking what we have been told is unhealthy is considered a weakness and a character flaw. The topics of sugar addiction and obesity in America seem to have given rise to discussions of control, which manifested in interesting ways in these interviews.

A few participants were confused by the presence of medical equipment in the imagery of *Metabolical*(Figure 4), and while the subtitle explains that the book will address modern medicine, they drew some interesting connections between the equipment and the food. A couple thought that by putting the food and the medical symbolism together, it was making statements about junk food. Participant G said, "It shows that to them, food is an addiction, like we think of drugs." What I think is important to draw from this is that the common thread I have been observing again and again is the idea of control, and the shame that comes from a perceived lack of it. Control is a key aspect of biohacking, which was prevalent in responses to *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2) and *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12)*,* even if participants weren't aware of it.

The idea that biohacking uses specific rhetoric like "code," "key," "secret," "reboot," etc, was not lost on many participants, but they didn't identify it as biohacking. Participants A, G and J were confused by the title *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2)*,* saying it was "strange," or they didn't understand what it meant. This could indicate an intentional choice on the part of the author or publishers in order to shroud obesity in mystery, which is similar to traits of biohacking language where the body is a complex enigma meant to be dissected. Being intentionally vague and treating it like a secret is part of biohacking rhetoric that some participants clearly identified. Others had their own interpretations. Participant F said, "It's basically saying 'oh you need to be fixed'...the code is the key word here, like saying 'let's fix you.'" Her observation of the word "fix" is indicative of her understanding that the diet industry creates problems so they can sell solutions. This was a shared opinion of all the participants, who agreed that diets are not helpful.

RESULTS

The results of this study indicate that 100% of participants were familiar with the rhetoric and design styles of the three books, even if they weren't familiar with the books themselves. 80% voiced negative opinions or skepticism about the accuracy and motivations of these diets. This was at least partially due to the demographic of my interviewees, who all identified as women. 30% expressed negative experiences about the impact of diet culture rhetoric, and 60% reported negative feelings about themselves in response to the diet culture rhetoric on the covers, specifically *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12).

70% connected the diet culture rhetoric to anti-fatness and misogyny's influence on the beauty and body standards put on female identifying people, even if they had not been impacted in a significant way. This understanding of the complexities and ulterior motives behind the diet industry support the finding that 100% of the participants discussed health as a holistic concept, bringing up factors besides physical appearance to describe it. 70% specifically mentioned mental health as an aspect of health, and 40% believed that health looks different for

everyone. Despite this, 70% reported that they still fight against the view of health that society taught them, which is based on physical appearance, and the view of health they believe in now.

None of the participants could identify biohacking by name, and while 60% were skeptical of biohacking rhetoric, which were found on *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2) and *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12), 40% were not, and 20% even said it made them feel optimistic and confident. Though my sample size was small, their complex responses told me much about their complex relationships with diet culture.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the diet industry being so prevalent in the early 2000s in the form of books did not resonate with this demographic of college age students. I suspect this is due to the introduction of social media and the growing awareness of the inaccuracy of diets. I also suspect that the diet industry has discovered new ways to appeal to a younger audience. I originally wanted to center this research around diet culture as it exists on TikTok, but it became too difficult to select material. This doesn't change the fact that diet culture exists everywhere, and 100% of participants have seen this material elsewhere, whether on TV, magazines, or on bookstore shelves. Subsequently, their awareness of diet culture as a market and a profit driven industry was proved to be very nuanced. Every single one of them recognized the rhetoric on these covers as the tactics they are in some way, shape, or form. The extent of their understanding was varied.

The results about the participants' opinions given what I knew about their demographic(all female identifying), clarified their skepticism about diet rhetoric. Many of them had observed or experienced the negative effects of diet culture as women existing in an oppressive society that seeks to control them. This was shown in their responses about how their view of health differs from society's view. How thin is healthy for women, and muscled is healthy for men. How they feel pressure from magazines and other media such as Wii Fit, The Biggest Loser, workout programs on TV, and from models. I saw traces of activism discussed in the lit review in their interviews, like how some believe health looks different for everyone, and health at every size works to advocate for fat people living holistic lifestyles. The diet industry operates on promoting "magic bullet" solutions in different variations, over and over. I saw skepticism of this from every single participant.

At this stage in the 21st Century, I believe that college age students are more likely to be skeptical of the more obvious tactics of diet rhetoric. These women are from different social circles and walks of life, and all recognized the rhetoric on these three covers as tactics of manipulation in some way. Not all recognized the same things, but their reactions to the "magic bullet" solutions were very universal. None of them believed that there is one thing that every person should pay attention to in order to be "healthy." They all believed health is more complicated than being skinny or just eating healthy, or just working out. Subsequently, the tactics used by, say, *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2), which used insulin and hormone levels to peddle their solution, weren't convincing for these students. That being said, their relationships to biohacking as a tactic were more complicated.

Biohacking rhetoric was most prevalent on *The Obesity Code*(Figure 2) and *Own the Day, Own Your Life*(Figure 12). These covers had language referring to the body as a machine, as code, as a secret, and language about optimizing your body and your life. I did not label this rhetoric as biohacking to avoid influencing the responses of my participants. That being said, none of them labeled the rhetoric on these covers as biohacking. The 60% who were skeptical of it however, saw it as a tactic of diet rhetoric. They were able to personally identify the ways it could make people feel, or how it made them feel individually, which was often insecurity. To me, the 40% who didn't see biohacking rhetoric as a tactic, and the 20% who bought into it, indicated that diet culture continues to evolve so as to sell itself to a younger audience. Though I cannot prove this, I suspect that the personable, relatable, and convenient aspects of social media makes diet culture more believable and consumable for young people. Seeing someone's face as they support a product that is supposed to make you lose weight easily, or fix your hormones, or balance your gut health, etc, I suspect adds a level of ethos to the media that isn't as effective in book form. This is part of what made this research difficult, and what I recommend as a way to advance this research in the future.

LIMITATIONS

I had several limitations to this research that would ideally be remedied in the future with more ideal circumstances. The limits on my timeline for this research only allowed me to interview ten participants. Getting more of a range of people would give researchers a better idea of how different genders interact with diet culture, as well as different heritages, ages, and races. I believed that to broaden my research to include more demographics, but to be unable to address the complexities this would introduce, would be irresponsible and ineffective. That being said, my research only focused on white female identified people from ages 18-22.

Expanding the research to include social media is an endeavor I wish I had been able to take on. This demographic in particular has a much richer relationship with diet culture in social media such as Instagram and TikTok than they do with that rhetoric in books. This is an aspect of the research that would illuminate much more nuance in the way that diet culture evolves to appeal to a younger audience.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that college students who identify as female from the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse have very nuanced relationships with diet rhetoric. In general, they noticed many of the same tactics that I did, including biohacking rhetoric, "magic bullet" rhetoric, and anti-fat rhetoric. The participants all viewed health as more holistic, bringing up mental health, the ideas of health at every size, and emotional health. However, diet rhetoric is pervasive, and constantly evolves to profit off of the insecurities of others. Subsequently, biohacking was recognized as a tactic by 60% of participants, but continues to seduce those on social media, which is a worthwhile and rich form of media to study diet culture in. Overall, this research proves that as young generations learn more about nutrition and the tactics of diet culture, the industry adapts and repackages itself to prey on the insecurities of those it wants to make money off of.

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APPENDIX

1. What does health mean to you? What does it look like?
2. How would you describe your relationship between health and your body?
3. What are your initial thoughts about the text and images on these covers?
4. What do you think is most eye-catching about these covers?
5. How does the word choice make you feel about your body?

   1. Is it familiar to you?
   2. If yes, where have you heard/seen this rhetoric before?
6. How does the imagery make you feel about your body?
   1. Is it familiar to you?
   2. If yes, where have you heard/seen this rhetoric before?