

“Lose Like a Man”: Gender and the Constraints of Self-Making in Weight Watchers Online

Abstract: Offering online programs that target men and women separately, Weight Watchers communicates, represents, and manipulates gender in its program marketing and materials. In this article, I demonstrate how Weight Watchers engages aspects of hegemonic masculinity as they endeavor to construct “masculine” versus “feminine” dieting through contrasting depictions of food, the body, and technology use. By analyzing the difference in the weight loss experiences that Weight Watchers Online promises, I argue that limited types of self are made available to women and men. Weight Watchers portrays female dieters on a difficult but actualizing and empowering journey toward a new

and better self. Conversely, Weight Watchers depicts male clients losing weight easily, even effortlessly, but retaining a stable and immutable masculine selfhood throughout the process. This constraint upon self-making exposes how patriarchy subordinates even the men assumed to profit the most from its power, as the male weight loss promise withholds transformative potentials.

Keywords: gender, masculinity, Weight Watchers, weight loss, dieting

“Inside every overweight woman is a woman she knows she can be.”
 “Really, I just want to be a better version of myself.”
 “It’s never too late to start anew.”
 “Weight Watchers changed my life.”

THE DIET INDUSTRY CONVINCINGLY FEEDS consumers not only weight loss programs and products, but also promises like the ones called out above.¹ These vows of personal transformation assure dieters that weight loss forges a path to a new and better version of oneself. Despite the near total failure rate of diets—indeed, more and more obesity research indicates that long-term weight loss is next to impossible to achieve (Gaesser 2009; Fothergill et al. 2016)—the diet industry exerts a strong hold on Americans. In a country that boasts more than 100 million dieters, the commercial diet industry churns out approximately \$60 billion in revenue annually (PRWeb 2013, 2014). A nexus of discourses on food, bodies, health, and cultural ideals, dieting encapsulates the paradoxes and conflicts at the core of American identity: abundance and restriction, freedom and containment, aspirations and expectations. Indeed, anxiety about food and eating—as exemplified through dieting—has been characterized as a quintessentially American and middle-class preoccupation (Biltekoff 2013; Guthman 2014; de la Peña 2010; Stearns 2002). Furthermore, neoliberal edicts strongly promote the pillars of self-improvement and personal responsibility, elevating “good health” to a “super-value” and

venerated characteristic of good citizenship (Crawford 2006). Analyzing the public faces of commercial diet programs teases apart a segment of American identity, not through what we eat, but through what we aspire so vehemently to limit and avoid.

A leading player in the commercial weight loss industry since 1963, Weight Watchers expanded its product portfolio into cyberspace with the new millennium, launching Weight Watchers Online in 2001. Featuring online tools and downloadable apps, the online program exists within the relative anonymity of the internet, divorced from the in-person weigh-ins, group meetings, and tangible resources that characterize the traditional Weight Watchers program—and the face-to-face social support credited for the program’s success (Dansinger et al. 2005).

The new millennium ushered in another shift at Weight Watchers. Although 90 percent of the program’s clients had historically been female, Weight Watchers expanded into the “under-tapped niche market” of male dieters (PRWeb 2013). In 2007, Weight Watchers followed Nutrisystem’s lead, which began Nutrisystem for Men in 2005, and created Weight Watchers Online for Men, a program “customized just for guys” (Schultz 2011). The company reported a 28 percent increase in male subscribers between 2006 and 2007 (Newman 2008) and hungered for more. In 2011, Weight Watchers heavily promoted Weight Watchers Online for Men with a \$10 million campaign, including commercials aired during the NBA and NHL playoffs that

year (Schultz 2011). Invoking the spirit of sport and the cachet of celebrity, ads featured former professional basketball player Charles Barkley as a spokesman.²

With digital products designed to target male and female clients separately, Weight Watchers Online communicates, represents, and manipulates gender in its program pitch. Unsurprisingly, Weight Watchers upholds a strict gender binary, reinscribing traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. Weight Watchers also attempts in specific ways to counter the cultural construction of dieting as feminine. According to the boundaries set by hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), male dieting is taboo and transgressive (Bentley 2005; De Souza and Ciclitira 2005; Gough 2007). As a result, Weight Watchers forcefully engages aspects of hegemonic masculinity in their men's program in order to "masculinize" and "de-feminize" dieting.

In this article, I demonstrate how Weight Watchers constructs "masculine" versus "feminine" dieting through contrasting depictions of food, the body, and technology use. For women, weight loss technologies—such as Weight Watchers points tracking apps—are intended to further the emotional, psychological, and highly internalized project of self-discipline. This discipline fuels the pursuit of idealized thinness, which purportedly transforms the body and the self. Weight Watchers portrays female dieters on a difficult but actualizing and empowering journey toward a new and better self. For men, however, Weight Watchers portrays the same dieting technology as keeping the work of weight loss at arm's length. Weight Watchers depicts male clients losing weight easily, even effortlessly, and retaining a stable and immutable masculine selfhood throughout the process. By analyzing the difference in the weight loss experiences that Weight Watchers Online promises, I argue that limited types of self are made available to women and men. This constraint upon self-making exposes how patriarchy subordinates even the men assumed to profit the most from its power, as the male weight loss promise withholds transformative potentials.

Methods: Interpreting Gender and the Foodscape

To investigate the gendered distinctions put forth by Weight Watchers Online, I conducted a side-by-side comparison of the "How Does It Work" videos for the "female" and "male" programs, which were featured on each program's website homepage.³ Each approximately 90 seconds long and following the same overall narrative, these two short videos provide compact sources of evidence, well suited to a comparative approach. I supplemented my readings of the videos with

analysis of the additional text and images featured on each of the Weight Watchers homepages. These videos distill the Weight Watchers Online program, as they summarize the plan, its attributes, and its tools, as well as the Weight Watchers promise and point of view. In these videos, Weight Watchers also constructs its own boundaries and possibilities for femininities and masculinities through depictions of food, the body, the process of weight loss, and the use of digital technologies. As Susan Bordo (1993: 110) argued in her analysis of food advertisements, these videos are cultural representations that do not just describe gender; rather, through the construction of strict binaries, they culturally reproduce gender ideology, difference, and inequality.

To interpret gender within the videos, I applied the tools of critical discourse analysis, a method that provides a multidisciplinary view of how text, verbal exchange, and other communicative events influence social structures and power relations (van Dijk 1993). I use critical discourse analysis to assess the words, tone, and style used in these videos when communicating with men and women about dieting, food, bodies, and the self. I also position these discourses within the foodscape that each video depicts and alludes to. Building from Appadurai's "scapes," the foodscape is a concept that not only depicts the material realities of the global food system, but also engages relational and dynamic networks of power (Johnson and Goodman 2015). The foodscape concept analyzes together and at once food culture, political economy, representation, mediation, space, and environment. Josée Johnston and Michael Goodman (2015: 209) argue that food media plays a significant role in both framing and mediating the foodscape:

Foodscape mediation is, therefore, a fraught and multifaceted process. It equally contains the expressions of social resistance and acceptances. It crosses the realms of the mind, unconscious tastes, desires, and visceral embodiments with those of socially constructed ideals of fit bodies, optimal health, good taste, and responsible consumers.

In this article, I use the foodscape concept to further contextualize and extend the theoretical reach of critical discourse analysis, as the foodscape situates text, words, and language in space, in time, in culture, and within dynamic hierarchies. Using these methods, I endeavor to identify and interpret the relationships of power within Weight Watchers' gendered promises, as depicted in these online videos.

Background: The Gendering of Dieting, the Body, and Technology

This analysis engages literatures addressing gender and its intersections with dieting, the body, and technology. Taking

their theoretical foundation from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), scholars have applied his concepts of self-surveillance, panopticonism, gaze, confession, and the potential for resistance to the study of dieting and bodies. Much of this scholarship on dieting has focused on women and femininities. Past feminist scholarship has explored how dieting enforces patriarchal power, exerts control, and conducts surveillance over women's bodies (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Stinson 2001; Heyes 2006). The female dieter is simultaneously a subject and subjected in the pursuit of socially mandated thinness. In his history of diets, Hillel Schwartz draws connections between gender, fatness, and dieting, as he argues that fat men have been represented as gluttons and monsters, fat women as patients and freaks. Turn-of-the-century diet programs operationalized these conceptions in gendered terms: "Campaigns directed at men have been framed as adventures, romances that will provoke an immediate change in the world: physical prowess, political action, business success. Campaigns directed at women have been framed as rituals of watchfulness in response to external threats" (1986: 18).

These gendered constructions of dieting continue to the present day, due in part to dominant constellations of masculinity, which frame dieting as supremely feminine. "Hegemonic masculinity" is defined as the currently accepted and normative form of masculinity that secures men's dominant position, while subordinating all women and any men who are not heterosexual, white, and middle class (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). In contemporary Western societies, the idealized masculine character is typically "a White, middle-class, breadwinning man" who is "strong, competent, in control, competitive, assertive (if not aggressive), rational/instrumental, and oriented toward the public rather than the private sphere" (Grindstaff and West 2011: 860). Nutrition and health knowledge, healthy eating, concern for weight, and weight loss are each considered feminine and in conflict with hegemonic masculinity (Courtenay 2000). Because of this, when commercial diet programs market their products to men, they must refute the claim that "real men don't diet" (Gough 2007).

The cultural construction of gender also affects social perception of bodies, particularly fat bodies. Fat studies scholars assert that contemporary negative assumptions about fatness—as well as fat stigma and its resulting material and ideological oppressions—are rooted in a historically specific and socially constructed view of the fat body as a social malignancy (Brazier and LeBesco 2001; Farrell 2011; Hill 2011; Kulick and Meneley 2005; LeBesco 2004; Rothblum and Solovay 2009). These forces judge women's bodies more severely than men's, based

on stringent notions of ideal beauty and motherhood (Bergman 2009; Van Amsterdam 2013). In his study of men and dieting, Lee F. Monaghan complements the work of feminist fat studies scholars, arguing that fat oppression is real and that, in our current historical moment, it affects female bodies the most. It also affects fat male bodies, which are coded as feminine and emblematic of "failed manhood" (2008: 6). Based on such assumptions, male dieting is further denigrated as "an admission of that failure" (Mallyon et al. 2010).

This "failure" is due in part to shifts in the cultural construction of ideal body types for men and women, which are linked to similarly idealized notions of productive citizenship. Women have long been oppressed by the Western ideal of slimmness and their bodies objectified in the media. The hegemonic ideal of a chiseled, muscular form—which emerged in the late nineteenth century (Green 1986; Schwartz 1986)—remains dominant for men, particularly the muscles frequently featured in the media, such as abdominals, pectorals, and biceps (Hoyt and Kogan 2001). Men have typically been less critical of their own bodies than women. As Susan Bordo demonstrated in *The Male Body* (1999) and others have studied (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Labre 2005), men's bodies are increasingly treated in similarly objectified ways. Scholarship on identity and embodiment argues that like the female body, the male body is "a new (identity) project in high/late/postmodernity," a consumerist context in which the body takes on a symbolic value (in Bourdieu's terms) for its exteriority, for what it looks like (Gill 2005). This emphasis on appearances directs an objectifying gaze that is turned upon both female and male bodies. Analyses of popular magazines from the mid- to late twentieth century indicate an increase in the number of images featuring semi-naked men, putting an ideal masculine form on display for all to see, judge, and covet (Pope et al. 2000; Stibbe 2004; Hatton and Trautner 2011).

Relatedly, male body image concerns appear to have begun increasing in the latter half of the twentieth century (Garner 1997). From Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* and *Rocky* to former Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator*, the "hard body" action movie hero infiltrated popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s. These films and stars linked depictions of rugged masculinity to a specific, idealized male body (Jeffords 1993), themes that still reign at the box office. In the most recent wave of superhero films, the muscular male form is front, center, and in body-centric costume. Social pressure to conform to this ideal male body type has further increased as actors like Chris Pratt and Paul Rudd have achieved them—changes characterized as "the latest bro-next-door to transform into a man of steel" (Stein 2015). Furthermore, among U.S. college-aged study subjects, men

and women have been found to experience similar rates of body dissatisfaction, as high as 95 percent of both men and women (Mishkind et al. 1986).

These concerns have drawn scholarly attention, yielding new concepts, terms, and areas of study that explore men and their relationship to their bodies, such as the Adonis Complex (Pope et al. 2000), muscle dysmorphia (Baghurst 2012; Mitchell et al. 2016), and orthorexia nervosa, which is defined as “a maniacal obsession for healthy foods” (Donini et al. 2013; Brytek-Matera et al. 2015). Michael Kimmel, who is widely recognized as a leading expert on the study of men and masculinities, aptly summarizes these trends: “I don’t think there’s ever been a time when men have been more preoccupied with their bodies than today” (Newman 2008). Although women remain disproportionately oppressed by body ideals and social standards of physical beauty, these trends indicate that men’s bodies are increasingly scrutinized as well—and that men experience, to some degree, similar dissatisfaction and distress. While dieting is culturally normative for women, “a noteworthy portion of men” also diet to combat body dissatisfaction (Markey and Markey 2005: 528).

Commercial weight loss programs have sought to profit from these shifting male body ideals and increasing discontent, but it was the emergence of an online program that facilitated Weight Watchers’ attempt to garner male subscribers. Fearing men would not attend in-person meetings in significant numbers, Weight Watchers Online for Men assures subscribers that the online message boards are “men only,” seeking to masculinize the Weight Watchers experience through excluding women spatially and conceptually. Weight Watchers Online also largely frames weight loss as an individualized experience mediated by digital tools. For example, the Weight Watchers Online homepage invites dieters to “Lose weight completely online,” as if the work and results of weight loss occur within a suspended, cyber reality. In the Weight Watchers Online for Men video that I analyze in this article, a male dieter confesses that he thought “Weight Watchers was just for the ladies,” but then he “got the trusted plan, completely online, customized just for guys.” This pivot from Weight Watchers as derisively “feminine” to acceptably “masculine” depends upon the anonymity and strict gender binary that the online program endorses.

Armed with online tools and apps that can be downloaded to smartphones and tablets, Weight Watchers Online subscribers engage in a relatively new system of digitized weight loss that is significantly more mobile than previous iterations. When they launched, online programs were positioned to grow and overtake more traditional diet programs; traditional program sales were flat in 2012, while online programs grew by 8 percent. Notably, Weight Watchers’ 1.7 million paid subscribers led the

pack, generating \$504 million in revenue (PRWeb 2013). Combining aspects of its traditional in-person program and digital weight loss tools, Weight Watchers Online exists between two worlds of commercial diet programming.

Weight Watchers’ foray into the online space demonstrates how technology increasingly shapes elements of everyday life. It also mirrors broader trends in digital health care and wellness. This landscape has changed significantly with the rising popularity of biometric self-tracking devices like the FitBit, which was released in 2008.⁴ Deborah Lupton examines self-tracking devices and practices from various theoretical perspectives, including “concepts of technological bodily enhancement and techno-utopian visions of the perfect(ible) body, healthism and personal responsibility, visualization and bodily display and the allure and power of metrics inherent in the use of these devices” (Lupton 2013: 395). While dieting—with Weight Watchers or otherwise—has always endorsed and enhanced bodily surveillance, self-tracking devices “direct the gaze directly at the body. They privilege an intense focus on and highly detailed knowledge of the body” (Lupton 2013: 396). Employing a comparative historical approach, Kate Crawford, Jessa Lingel, and Tero Karppi explore similar phenomena. They investigate how the weight scale, which first emerged in the late nineteenth century, and twenty-first-century wearable, self-tracking devices both promise self-knowledge and require self-discipline (2015: 480). Conceptually straddling the analogue and the digital, Weight Watchers Online also demonstrates the continuity and paradox between surveillance, self-discipline, self-knowledge, and self-improvement. This expansion in voluntary self-surveillance exerts control over the shape, size, and supposed healthfulness of bodies. It also produces constructions of gender and negotiations of power.

Reading the Videos: How Does (Gender) Work?

These two “How Does It Work” videos present the success stories of Bonnie and Dan, who are presented as actual Weight Watchers Online users (Figure 1). A young woman dressed fashionably in a sleeveless, V-neck, black dress and coral-colored necklace, Bonnie explains in a soft-spoken voice the Weight Watchers Online program to female consumers. With his hair shaved short on the sides in typical military style, Dan is smartly dressed in a gray sweater and dark-wash jeans as he discusses the program’s components for men with confident posturing and an assertive tone. As model Weight Watchers participants, Bonnie and Dan embody a specific subjectivity that is white, middle class, heterosexual, youthful, able, and attractive. They have achieved a weight status to which viewers are expected to aspire; they exhibit a dedication to self-improvement that viewers are

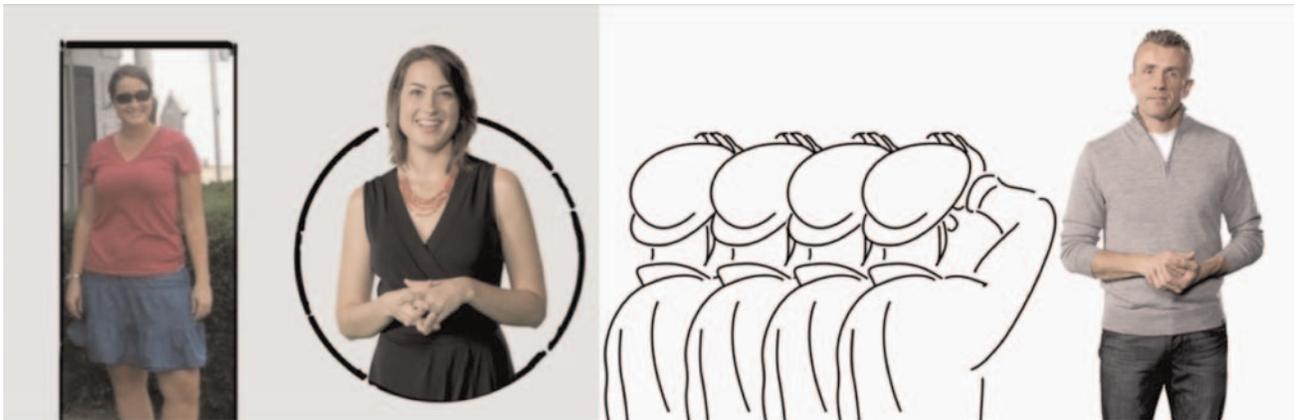


FIGURE 1: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.

expected to replicate. Bonnie and Dan enact “successful” performances of both normative gender (Butler 2006) and fitness, which are ever-increasing requirements within neoliberal contexts, where bodies are read as evidence—or not—of self-sufficient and productive citizenship (Biltekoff 2013; Guthman 2011).

Both Bonnie and Dan lost significant weight on Weight Watchers; Bonnie lost forty-seven pounds, Dan sixty-seven pounds. These videos depict the meaning of weight loss differently for each of them, however. At the beginning of the video, Bonnie, a self-proclaimed “Texas girl,” shares the screen with her “before” photo and attributes her weight gain to family gatherings marked by lots of fattening food (Figure 1). Prompted by personal concerns for her health and weight, Bonnie signed up for Weight Watchers Online. While Bonnie engages in the self-reflective work endorsed by the Weight Watchers approach, Dan does not. Instead, he states that he was a sergeant in the military who “could have been honorably discharged [for] barely meeting the fitness requirements.” Dan joined Weight Watchers not to transform himself both inside and out, as Bonnie did, but to salvage his career by changing his body. As such, Dan’s motivation to lose weight is made to appear more legitimate than Bonnie’s, and his “masculine” weight loss to connote enhanced importance. While the video depicts Bonnie as a woman who ate too much and then worried about the personal health consequences, Dan’s weight loss is depicted as central to his career success, and as a military sergeant, to the health of the nation state as well.

Word choice reinforces the orientation of male weight loss outside of the self. Dan talks of “losing *the* weight” (italics added), while Bonnie speaks of “*my* health,” “*my* weight,” and “*my* weight loss” (italics added). Dan does not address his role in gaining weight; he does not adopt the mantle of personal

responsibility that Weight Watchers requires. Dan does not mention, for example, wanting to be there for his children, feeling guilty, or suffering low self-esteem. Engaging the distance that “the” produces, Dan does not speak of fatness, weight, or weight loss in terms that relate to his identity and sense of self. In this way, these Weight Watchers videos articulate social beliefs that fatness diminishes selfhood and obscures gender, resulting in out-of-control women and failed, effeminate men. For dieters, weight loss is constructed as a disciplined act that “will eventually demarcate them as intelligible men and women” (Bosc 2014: 69). Within these constructions of “masculine” and “feminine” fatness and ideal bodies, Dan purposefully distances himself from his previously fat body as he adheres to hegemonic masculinity.

At the end of his video, Dan claims, “I’ve become an officer and a role model for my men,” now that he has lost weight and is on track to run a marathon. The video again frames Dan’s weight within a professional capacity, orienting his body—and its purported fat disability and thin ability—toward the masculinized, public sphere. In this space, his weight loss connotes achievement, complete with a professional promotion, accolades, self-confidence, and leadership status. On the other hand, Bonnie’s weight loss is about how she feels about herself. After losing weight, Bonnie says, “Now I’m hiking, I’m biking, I’m dancing. But mostly, I’m more comfortable with myself than I’ve ever been.” Bonnie also acknowledges her former fat self again. At the end of the video, she appears beside another “before” photo to which she says, “This used to be me. I transformed my life with Weight Watchers Online and I’ve never looked back and I know that you can too” (Figure 2). Dan never appears in the same frame as his fat body. While Dan does say, “Weight Watchers changed my life,” the male program video



FIGURE 2: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.



FIGURE 3: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.

concludes by focusing on his continual progress, embodied in his ongoing fitness journey. The final frames of the video show Dan in exercise clothes crossing a finish line (Figure 2).

While Bonnie and Dan use the same digital tools, the videos depict them gaining and losing weight differently. Bonnie and Dan appear throughout the foodscape—at restaurants, in food stores, and at home—interacting with food in ways that invoke conventional definitions of gender. For example, both Bonnie and Dan use “cheat sheets,” which are designed to help dieters make “point-conscious” decisions when eating out. But they use the tool in stereotypically gendered settings and to select foods that align with gender norms and expectations.

Conventional notions of gender create hierarchies of flavors, tastes, foods, and ways of eating. Masculinity maps onto spicy, hearty, and savory flavors and foods, as well as large portions consumed with gusto; while femininity marks dainty, light, and sweet flavors and foods, eaten in small

portions with restraint (Kiefer, Rathmanner, and Kunze 2005; Wardle et al. 2004). Weight Watchers Online for Men repeats such stereotypes with explicit references to foods that match “masculine” preferences and appetites. A section on the website is titled, “You can eat that. And that. And that.” Alongside images of hot dogs, chicken wings, mac and cheese, ice cream sandwiches, and steak kabobs, the text assures male dieters, “Seriously—*no* food is off-limits. You can eat anything you want. You’ll just learn to do it a whole lot smarter.”

In the video, Dan also eats out at a stereotypically masculine location—a sports bar, filled with round, high-top tables, backless stools, and flat screen TVs. Conversely, Bonnie dines at a more formal, sit-down restaurant, with large, rectangular tables and plush booths (Figure 3). Dan uses cheat sheets to order “masculine” comestibles: tacos and pizza. The video does not depict Dan making what would be considered “healthy” dietary choices. Rather, he uses the program to track what he eats and “stay on plan” in order to lose weight. The plan, these



FIGURE 4: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.



FIGURE 5: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.

foods, and these ways of eating portray Dan maintaining an uninterrupted lifestyle and a consistent masculinity while on Weight Watchers. He curtails neither his social life nor the foods he likes to eat—Dan does not order a salad when watching the game with friends. Bonnie, on the other hand, uses cheat sheets to order more feminized and health-conscious fare: a pink-hued cocktail and a plate of whole-wheat spaghetti, lightly dressed with a red sauce and green vegetables. Her selections reinforce how Weight Watchers depicts female dieters engaged in the self-discipline of dieting, which requires altering eating habits as part of the dieting process. Following the rules of dieting and of gender normativity, Bonnie does not order a pizza.

Bonnie and Dan also use the barcode scanner on their smartphones—a tool that scans food products to determine their Weight Watchers “Points Plus” value—in gendered ways and spaces. Dan uses it to purchase a snack—in this case, a bag of chips at a convenience store—so that he “can stay on plan” while “on the go.” Bonnie, however, uses the barcode

scanner at the supermarket to learn the point value of a box of whole-wheat pasta (Figure 4). Again, these videos construct a gendered division between “healthy” (feminine) and “unhealthy” (masculine) food choices. Furthermore, Dan uses the barcode scanner within a public environment in which he is independent, busy, and in motion. Conversely, Bonnie uses the same tool in the supermarket, a site that since its inception has been framed as a feminized space, even “a housewife’s paradise” (Deutsch 2010). Unlike Dan, who uses the tool while “on the go,” Bonnie’s video seamlessly transports her from the supermarket aisle to a kitchen, spatially reinforcing the enduring, feminized character of food shopping and preparation (Cairns and Johnston 2015).

Furthermore, while Bonnie discusses cooking and recipe tools in a kitchen, Dan never mentions these tools or appears in such a space. Instead, he uses the grilling cheat sheet to prepare one of his favorite foods (porterhouse steak) outdoors (Figure 5). These program videos uphold traditional gender

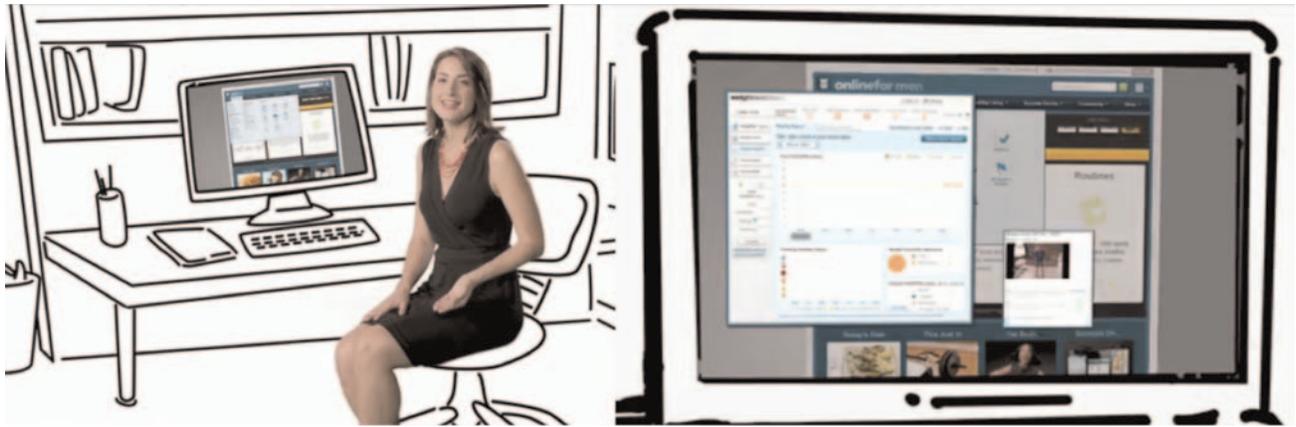


FIGURE 6: IMAGE FROM WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/WOMEN (2013) AND WWW.WEIGHTWATCHERS.COM/MEN (2016) VIDEOS.

divides between public and private spaces, as well as the feminized nature of food preparation. Cooking contains women within the kitchen, a space that men purportedly do not enter, except peripherally as Dan grills a steak outdoors. In this way, Weight Watchers reinforces the perception of cooking as “one of the most identifiable performative traits of femininity” (Parasecoli 2005: 30).

Bonnie and Dan also discuss these weight loss tools in entirely different terms. With a degree of glee, Dan says, “The tools are kind of like a video game.” For men, weight loss tools are part of a game, creating distance between the work, effort, and self-discipline of weight loss. Bonnie, however, engages with these tools intensely, a connection that the video again depicts spatially. The video depicts Bonnie literally seated at a desk before a computer as if at work, actively interacting with the weight loss effort being measured, tracked, and visualized on the screen (Figure 6). Conversely, Dan is completely off screen when the video illustrates these tools; a laptop computer screen simply animates the tools to his voiceover.

Discussion: Deconstructing Gendered Weight Loss Promises

Comparing side by side the dialogue, images, foods, and environments—as well as the ways of eating and using technology—depicted in these program videos demonstrates how Weight Watchers manipulates traditional notions of gender in order to distinguish these programs and to define the process of dieting along gender lines. These videos also reveal the different potential selves Weight Watchers promises. For women, Weight Watchers promises a transformed self and the opportunity to start life afresh in a thin body that purportedly reflects a woman’s inner hopes and desires. Feminist scholars, such as

Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993), have written extensively on the destructive consequences of the Foucauldian surveillance and constant self-discipline that commercial weight loss programs require of women in the pursuit of a transformed self. Fat studies scholars deepen these critiques, demonstrating how weight loss promises foundationally reinforce negative portrayals and assumptions regarding fat bodies, particularly for women (Brazier and LeBesco 2001; Farrell 2011; Hill 2011; Kulick and Meneley 2005; LeBesco 2004; Rothblum and Solovay 2009). And even if weight loss yields a transformed self, it is conscribed to a particular type of potential womanhood that is subordinate; one with a curtailed autonomy and agency that is only powerful when thin.

Various scholars have argued, however, that discourses of beauty not only discipline women, but also afford female subjects agency (Peiss 2011; Cahill 2003; Brand 2000; Vester 2010). Pushing these critiques in a new direction in her article, “Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers,” Cressida Heyes explores how weight loss dieting also cultivates disciplined technologies of the self that are enabling and positively productive. She argues that dieting engenders new skills and ways for mastering, knowing, and caring for the self. While she agrees with feminist analyses that the rhetoric of Weight Watchers cultivates female “docile bodies,” she also argues that “the process of transformation itself invents new capacities and invites reflection on a ... self that is not yet known” (2006: 141).

Weight Watchers excludes this process of transformation, this yet-to-be-imagined self, and this set of new capacities and skills from the male weight loss promise. While men keeping the therapeutic work of dieting at arm’s length may prove psychologically protective, it also reveals how patriarchy traps and limits masculine selfhoods. It allows little space for the potentially empowering and actualizing effects of personal

change. To embark on such a process requires destabilizing the masculine subject, conceding space for improvement, admitting vulnerability, and relinquishing power—all actions in conflict with hegemonic masculinity, as currently crystallized.

Because of this, Bonnie glows with the exhilaration of successful weight loss to and a newfound sense of self, while Dan must demonstrate how his changed body now yields productive accomplishments, such as a career promotion and new athletic abilities. The conventional boundaries of masculinity prohibit Dan from experiencing weight loss as a process in which he can work on his relationship with himself. Self-reflection, intimacy, and understanding are portrayed as off-limits. Instead, Dan must maintain his original, immutable masculinity throughout the process of losing weight and changing his body. This inflexibility reveals the ways that patriarchy not only oppresses women's bodies by idealizing thinness and scorning fat bodies, but also male selfhoods within the context of weight loss. This is due in part to socially constructed expectations for male character that devalue and discourage food and health-related knowledge and practices (Courtenay 2000; Gough 2007). In this way, the strictures of hegemonic masculinity limit the potential of gender. This study of Weight Watchers' promises demonstrates that cultural constructions of "successfully" feminine and masculine bodies are not only relational and co-constituted, but also mutually oppressive to men of all masculinities, to women, and to all those who resist gender normativity.

Conclusion: Defining Lose Like a Man

While women have long been targeted by the weight loss industry, Weight Watchers created its online men's program only a decade ago and promoted it aggressively with a multi-million-dollar campaign in recent years. As the weight loss industry expands its reach and cultural influence, these market changes incite new questions: What is suitably masculine? How do "real men" act? What is a masculine body? What are masculine ways of shaping and caring for the body? Or for mastering and knowing it? The work of weight loss engages these questions, and their answers have the potential to influence how men shape their own selfhoods within the increasingly technological landscape of American life. Engaging both food and the body, weight loss shapes definitions of masculinity and femininity, as well as gendered arrangements of power.

In their marketing, Weight Watchers Online for Men employs the tagline, "Lose like a man." The videos analyzed in this article define what "losing like a man" means. While reality weight loss TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* depict men experiencing the emotions of weight loss, Weight Watchers' men do not engage in the self-help process of reflecting upon

weight gain. Dan never discusses how or why he gained weight nor shares the frame with a "before" photo of his previously fat body. Men are not expected to employ self-discipline to adopt "healthier" eating habits, as Dan eats burgers, beer, pizza, tacos, and steak—foods that also evoke masculinity, as well as unrestricted dietary choices. Men are not expected to cook, an activity deemed women's work that encroaches upon masculinity. Men do not lose weight to transform themselves or become more comfortable within the bodies that they inhabit. The work of male weight loss is external to the self—oriented around public life, professional advancement, and athletic achievement. This is the script for how Weight Watchers has extended its weight loss promise to a new "niche market." Given the diet industry's capitalist motivations and the near total failure rate of diets, weight loss promises are rarely realized (Campos 2004; Fraser 1998; Gaesser 2009). Weight Watchers' construction of "masculine" weight loss demonstrates another terrain upon which dieting fails. 

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NOTES

1. Each of these Weight Watchers promises comes verbatim from the following Weight Watchers media: "If Not Now, When? | Oprah & Weight Watchers," *Weight Watchers YouTube Channel*, December 30, 2015, https://youtu.be/sjp57d6pL_c; Weight Watchers commercial, which ran during *The Daily Rundown* on MSNBC on February 12, 2013, archived at https://archive.org/details/MSNBC_20130212_140000_The_Daily_Rundown#start/1380/end/1440; "A Whole New Life," *Weight Watchers Website*, www.weightwatchers.com/success/art/index.aspx?SuccessStoryId=16491&sc=17; "Jessica Simpson for Weight Watchers," *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/29yUo6uyKwo>. Dan also says, "Weight Watchers Online for Men changed my life," in the video that I analyze throughout this article.
2. For a full analysis of the Weight Watchers campaign with Charles Barkley, see Parasecoli 2016.
3. I began this study and comparison in November 2013. As of fall 2016, the Weight Watchers Online for Men "How Does It Work" video still appears on the program website (www.weightwatchers.com/men), but the "women's" version no longer appears at www.weightwatchers.com, as the program has been since redesigned and revitalized, as is typical for Weight Watchers, e.g., Weight Watchers Online is now Weight Watchers Online*Plus*. Interestingly, the recent changes at Weight Watchers—including Oprah Winfrey's purchase of 10 percent of the company's stock in 2015 and subsequent promotion linked to the Oprah brand—have not altered the Men's program, which appears much the same as it did in 2013 when I began this study.

4. Fitbits have also been incorporated into the newest iteration of the Weight Watchers program. Weight Watchers members can sync their tracking device data to their Weight Watchers account.

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