

# Skinny Secrets: Promoting The "Less Is More" Ideology In Women's Diet Books

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SKINNY SECRETS:  
PROMOTING THE “LESS IS MORE” IDEOLOGY IN WOMEN’S DIET BOOKS

by

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ABSTRACT  
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This thesis uses textual analysis to explore and analyze messages in six popular women’s diet self-help books published between 2005 and 2012. This work is grounded in feminist theory and discusses the ways in which women’s diet books encourage readers to think about women and weight loss. Findings of the study indicate that women’s diet books do three things: first, they discourage women from dieting, while simultaneously promoting diet-like strategies for them to follow; second, they create and reinforce a “naturally thin” ideal for women; third, they use empowerment rhetoric to place the responsibility and burden of weight loss on the individual reader. Overall, the insights derived from this study contribute to feminist scholarship on issues regarding women and weight, literature on self-help books, and the larger cultural discourse about women and weight loss.

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## INTRODUCTION

ANY WOMAN WHO'S EVER BEEN OVERWEIGHT KNOWS: the “fat girl” label sticks in your mind, regardless of how much weight you lose. That’s what Lisa Delaney thought, too. Twenty years ago, at 5’4” and 185 pounds, Delaney was despondent over diets that never worked and disappointed by her dull job and lack of love life. Fortunately, a late-night epiphany involving a half-gallon of ice cream convinced her that becoming a former fat girl-in body and spirit-was the key to creating a life she loved. Today, seventy pounds lighter, Lisa is an award-winning journalist, she’s married to a man she loves, and she wears a size two (*Secrets of a Former Fat Girl*, 2007).

Read the back of any women’s diet book and you will find a similar message—a woman’s status and worth, is strongly, if not undeniably, linked to her weight. As a “fat girl,” she is, according to diet books, likely to be disappointed by her job, disappointed by her lack of attention from men, and, most importantly, disappointed in herself. Her free time is spent fearing clothing and social events, hating herself and her body, and frequently indulging in pints of ice cream. Conversely, as a skinny woman, she is likely to be an accomplished professional, happily married, and self-confident. As an overweight woman, she is constantly haunted by a negative self-image, but when she becomes skinny, she thinks of herself and her body in positive ways. As an overweight woman, she is all-around flawed, but as a skinny woman, she is perfect.

Messages like the one above about women and weight loss are prevalent in today’s self-help genre. This thesis uses textual analysis to explore and analyze the messages in women’s diet self-help books about women, their weight, and their lives. My hope is that this thesis offers insight into and understanding of the story behind women’s diet books, and that it contributes to the scholarly conversation about women and weight in the media.

This work is grounded in feminist thought. In this thesis, I argue that women's diet books send a message to women that in order to be content, prosperous in business, and happily married with children—everything that society deems “successful” for women—they must be skinny. Thus, women's diet books promote the ideology that weight loss is a woman's vehicle to success and that less really is more for women. Scholars argue that, in an effort to reach this ideal, many women in America have developed unhealthy eating behaviors (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Harrison, 1997; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Stice, 1998; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Harrison, 2006). Media studies focus on images of and messages about women in advertising, magazines and popular culture (Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998; Bishop, 2001; Kilbourne, 1999; Dworkin and Wachs, 2004); however, few scholars have focused on messages about women in diet, self-help books. My thesis addresses this gap in research.

### *Rationale*

Feminist scholars point to the importance of examining issues regarding women and weight, specifically the thin ideal in media. They note the following three ideas: one, a woman's concern about her weight is often due to inequality of the sexes; two, women are easily manipulated to model themselves after the thin ideal in hopes of attracting men; three, women are concerned about their weight because of emotional issues and feelings of insecurity that are created and enforced by a cultural subscription to the thin ideal (Wolf, 1991, 1992; Bordo, 1993, 2003; Orbach, 1994; Dolan and Gitzinger, 1994; Berg and Rosencrans, 2000; Stinson, 2001; Martin, 2007).



Additionally, the self-help industry, and self-help diet books in particular, prove important to study for the following reasons: first, the self-help industry is a multi-billion dollar industry in America, reaching a wide audience by offering advice on everything from relationships to weight loss and diet (Lidner, 2009); second, the term “self-help” effectively appeals to Americans, especially women, by drawing on cultural beliefs in manifest destiny, the American dream and individualism (Rosen, 1976; Starker, 1989; McGee, 2005; Lindner, 2009); third, self-help diet books in particular appeal to American women because they are inexpensive, easily accessible and less embarrassing to purchase and read than seeking professional help about dieting or weight loss might be (Concepcion and Watkins, 2008).

Finally, the current conversation on weight loss in the media provides an additional rationale for scholarly analysis of women’s diet books. Americans, especially American women, are constantly bombarded by messages in the media about what it means to be fit, healthy, and thin. It is nearly impossible to flip through a magazine without reading a headline about weight loss, or watch television without seeing an advertisement on the latest and greatest weight loss supplement, diet, or workout plan. Just this summer, *Live With Kelly*, a popular, national morning talk show, hosted a weeklong segment on diet books. This constant media discussion about how women can lose weight and maintain a healthy weight makes this topic an important cultural narrative worth thoughtful exploration and warrants a focused examination of mediated messages targeting women and their weight.

### *Personal Interest*

This thesis was sparked by my personal interest in women's diet, self-help books and my conversations with others about these books. Speaking from personal experience, I turned to diet books as a freshman in college at Loyola University in Chicago. Some of the girls in my dorm had the book *Skinny Bitch* and recommended I read it. At the time, I was focused on avoiding gaining the freshman fifteen, and thought that the book could offer me helpful dietary advice and weight loss tips. That winter break, I took *Skinny Bitch* with me to Florida on a family vacation and read it on the beach and by the pool. As I will explain in my analysis, *Skinny Bitch* preaches a vegan lifestyle. I have never been a huge meat eater and I thought it would do my self-esteem and waistline good if I adopted the recommendations from the gorgeous, skinny and self-proclaimed happy authors in the book.

I spent our family vacation ordering salads without meat, without cheese, and dressing on the side. I ate only fruit for breakfast and quietly ordered vegan meals for dinner, as my family indulged in fresh fish, shrimp and seafood from the Gulf of Mexico. I followed the *Skinny Bitch* diet and felt good about it for approximately two weeks, until I had an intense craving for a cheeseburger and caved. That ended my vegan diet quickly, but sparked my interest in diet books. Six years and six diet books later, I am still at the same weight as when I was a freshman in college; however, I have a new curiosity about weight loss messages in the media. This curiosity led me to diet, self-help books as a medium for scholarly analysis.

### *Research Question*

Based on my own experience with diet books and my conversations with others about these books, I came to realize that diet books define and create a thin ideal for women that encourages the “less is more” ideology. This is problematic because it reduces the value of women to their weight, and has the potential to significantly harm a reader’s self-image, whether she ends up losing weight, or not. This experience sparked my interest in diet books and led me to the question: *What are the messages in diet, self-help books about women, their weight, and their lives?*

In this thesis, I define women’s diet, self-help books as diet books that promote weight loss written for women by women. Six books are analyzed in this study. All six were found in the “Diet” section of a local Barnes&Noble bookstore. It is worth noting that in addition to dietary advice, all of the books include suggestions for how women can improve themselves and their lives. Because of this, I have classified the books as “diet, self-help books.” Moving forward, I will refer to the books as “diet, self-help books,” “diet books,” and “the books.”

### *Preview of Thesis*

As will be shown in the following chapters, I begin this thesis with a review of the relevant literature. This includes: scholarship on media representation of women as it relates to food, dieting, and weight loss; scholarship on the self-help industry, specifically self-help books, and feminist scholarship of messages found in self-help and advice literature. Next, I discuss my theoretical foundation, feminism. I describe feminism and I review feminist scholarship involving women and weight. Then, I provide a detailed

description of my methodology—textual analysis, as well as the procedure used, and the chosen texts analyzed in this thesis. Following my chapter on theory and methodology, I turn to my findings and interpretation of the books analyzed in this thesis. This includes a discussion of three themes that I call: *The I'm Not Dieting Diet*, *Naturally Thin Is In*, and *Achieving the Ideal: It's Up to You*. Finally, I present a chapter on conclusions in which I provide a brief summary of the preceding chapters, discuss my contributions to scholarship, describe the limitations of this study, and present implications for future research.

## CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This thesis examines women's diet, self-help books for messages about women, their weight, and their lives. As noted earlier, feminist scholars point to the importance of examining issues regarding women and weight, specially the thin ideal in the media (Wolf, 1991, 1992; Bordo, 1993, 2003; Orbach, 1994; Dolan and Gitzinger, 1994; Berg and Rosencrans, 2000; Stinson, 2001; Martin 2007). Additionally, diet self-help books deserve scholarly analysis because of their prevalence and popularity with American women (U.S. Market for Self-Improvement Products & Services, 2006). In particular, diet self-help books appeal to American women because they are inexpensive, easily accessible and less embarrassing to purchase and read than seeking professional help about dieting is considered to be (Concepcion and Watkins, 2008). This study asks the question: *What are the messages in women's diet self-help books about women, their weight, and their lives?* In order to answer the research question, this study must be situated in a larger context.

### *Women, Food, and Dieting in the Media*

While few scholars have studied the representation of women in diet, self-help books, many have analyzed representations of women, as they relate to food, dieting, and weight loss in advertisements, magazines, and fictional literature (Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998; Bishop, 2001; Kilbourne, 1999; Younger, 2003, Dworkin and Wachs, 2004).

### *Women and Food in Advertising*

Jean Kilbourne examined images of women and food in advertising in her 1999 book, *Deadly Persuasion*. She found five ways in which advertising portrays women and food. First, advertising encourages women to have indulgent relationships with food. Second, advertising encourages women to use food as coping mechanisms by consistently showing women eating and indulging in food when they are upset. As Kilbourne noted “Advertisers often offer food as a way to repress anger, resentment, and hurt feelings” (1999, p. 110). They are able to do this, according to Kilbourne, because of the vast amount of money spent on psychological research in advertising. “They know that many people, especially women, use food to help us deal with loneliness and disappointment and also as a way to connect” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 111). Third, Kilbourne (1999) argued that advertising reinforces gendered stereotypes of women as nurturing mothers and housewives who prepare food for their husbands and children by consistently portraying women gathering, preparing and serving food. Fourth, Kilbourne (1999) found advertisements to be a contributing factor to a “cultural climate in which relationships are constantly trivialized and we are encouraged to connect via consumption” (1999, p. 112). Finally, Kilbourne (1999) argues that advertisements often present women as being in love with food and are often pictured indulging in food. In short, food advertisements encourage women to fall in love with food consumption.

Kilbourne (1999) argued this is problematic because “when food is sex, eating becomes a moral issue—and thinness becomes the equivalent of virginity. The ‘good girl’ today is the thin girl, the one who keeps her appetite for food (and power, sex, and equality) under control” (1999, p. 115). Thus, women are encouraged to take on the

domestic role of purchasing food, preparing food and serving it to loved ones. Women must not only prepare food for others, but they must also control their own appetites so that they can lose weight or maintain a thin figure. By defining the “good” girl as a thin girl, advertising often diminishes a woman’s worth to her weight. Because the “good girl today is the thin girl” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 115), it is implied that the overweight girl is inherently flawed. Therefore, when thin is good, overweight or heavy becomes bad.

### *Women and Weight in Magazines*

Other scholars have studied representations of women in magazines as they relate to food, dieting and weight loss (Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998; Bishop, 2001; Dworkin and Wachs, 2004). Through their textual analysis of two magazines, Eskes, Duncan and Miller (1998) found that women’s fitness magazines use ideology to “possibly seduce readers to interpret a text in such a way that they adhere to traditional notions of beauty, health, and femininity” (p. 327). Their analysis revealed that women’s fitness texts equate physical health with beauty and that fitness texts use the language of empowerment to maintain and reinforce a gendered, feminine stereotype. Conversely, in his analysis of how women’s magazines cover eating disorders, Ronald Bishop (2001) found that the narrative surrounding magazine coverage of anorexic women characterizes women with eating disorders as “victims” who are “trapped by their selfishness and perfectionism, while stunned family members and peers stand by, watching as the disease suddenly takes hold” (p. 221). This narrative encourages readers to view women with anorexia as selfish. It places the blame, power, and responsibility on the individual suffering from anorexia while ignoring other cultural or societal influences that may be at play.

Dworkin and Wachs (2004) conducted a textual analysis of *Shape Fit Pregnancy* from 1997 to 2003 for discourse regarding the role of fitness in a new mother's life. Similarly to Eskes, Duncan and Miller (1998), Dworkin and Wachs (2004) drew on "empowerment discourse derived from feminist gains...while paradoxically (re)inscribing women to the privatized realm of bodily practices, domesticity, and family values" (p. 610). The authors discovered themes including: "start training for labor," "getting your body back," and "the required intersection of a second shift of household labor/child care with a third shift of fitness" (p. 614). These themes underscore the implied importance of women's bodies performing and looking a certain way in order for them to be perceived as being successful as mothers. In their conclusion, Dworkin and Wachs (2004) found that fitness texts encourage hegemonic representation of women that is problematic because it empowers white, heterosexual, stay-at-home moms while it suppresses other women. Additionally, this rhetoric encourages readers to think successful mothers are mothers who are thin, mothers who exercise, and mothers who eat in ways that allow them to maintain a thin figure. Women are diminished to their weight, instead of being celebrated for their achievements, like motherhood.

#### *Women and Weight in Fictional Literature*

Messages about women and weight are also found in young adult literature. Younger (2003) conducted a narrative analysis regarding female sexuality and "the power of being thin" in young adult fiction between 1975 and 1999 (p. 45). In this textual analysis, Younger (2003) revealed an "imbedded link between body image, weight, and sexuality: thinner young women are portrayed as powerful and in control, while larger women are depicted as sexually passive and irresponsible" (p. 45). Younger (2003)



described the “power of being thin” as a social status and prestige for skinny characters. She argued that young adult literature encourages readers to think about “thin characters” as powerful and “fat characters” as out of control (Younger, 2003, p. 47). This is similar to Kilbourne’s idea that advertising often equates good with thin and bad with fat. Readers of young adult fiction are encouraged to respect, admire and idolize thin characters while ignoring, or downplaying the role of heavier characters. Younger (2003) argued “Just as magazines, television, and films perpetuate and reinforce an idealized standard of beauty, popular Young Adult literature of the last twenty-five years has often perpetuated an unrealistic beauty ideal” (p. 54). The billion-dollar self-help industry has also contributed to this unrealistic ideal.

### *Self-Help Industry*

In 2008, Americans spent \$11 billion on self-help books, CDs, programs, and tapes focusing on everything from relationship advice to diet and weight loss instruction. That is 13.6% more money than Americans spent on self-help merchandise on diet and weight loss in 2005, revealing a growing interest in the self-help industry (Lindner, 2009). Self-help is not a new phenomenon for Americans, but one that can be traced to our Puritan founders (Starker, 1989). Samuel Smiles, a Scottish reformer first coined the term “self-help” in 1859. He stressed the idea that one’s destiny can be achieved through hard work and determination (Jarvis, 1997). This is an ideal that remains true in American culture and one that many scholars believe adds to the appeal of self-help products (Rosen, 1976; Starker, 1989; McGee, 2005; Lindner, 2009). Another reason that self-help books are popular among Americans is that they are far less expensive than professional psychological help and are readily accessible to the public online or in stores

(Bergsma, 2008). Self-help books allow for private consumption and appeal to readers because they are instructional, informational, and entertaining (Starker, 1989).

### *Self-Help Books*

In a culture that values independence and individualism, self-help books provide an inexpensive and socially acceptable form of advice gathering without the stigma of seeking professional therapy (Simonds, 1989; Starker, 1992). Americans read and use self-help books to improve themselves as individuals, and as participants in relationships (Zimmerman, Holm and Haddock, 2001, 2001). Self-help books often contain messages about how men and women should act, as well as messages about female identity and gender stereotypes. The self-help genre is so prevalent that psychologist Steven Starker labels it in a “firm part of the fabric of American society” (Starker, 1989, p. 2). Overall, Americans refer to self-help books for advice on love, career, finances, diet, and nutrition.

With many women yearning to lose weight, self-help books—specifically women’s diet and weight loss self-help books—are increasingly popular (Concepcion and Watkins, 2008). This becomes apparent if you step into a Barnes & Noble, or search for a diet book on Amazon.com. It seems that every few months, a new book targeting women and their desire to lose weight appears on the shelves. The diet industry in America is extremely lucrative. In fact, the diet industry as a whole spends nearly \$33 billion on various diet and weight loss products, including diet books (Kruger, Galuska, Serdula, & Jones, 2004). Of the \$693 million spent on self-help books in 2005, most were purchased by middle-aged, upper-and middle-class women, and most of those books were about dieting (The U.S. Market For Self-Improvement Products & Services, 2006). Since

women consult self-help books for advice on dieting and weight loss, a textual analysis of these books offers a unique perspective on what it means to be a woman concerned about her weight, while adding to the current scholarship on women and weight loss.

While limited research on the messages in women's diet, self-help books exists, much scholarship has been done on self-help books in general. The vast majority of this research examines the advice offered regarding gaining and improving heterosexual, romantic relationships while ignoring other topics of self-help books (DeFrancisco and O'Connor, 1995; Zimmerman, Holm, and Haddock, 2001). As will be shown below, other research explores self-help books from a rhetorical perspective by evaluating the author's use of language and various rhetorical strategies (Coyle and Grodin, 1993; Grodin, 1995).

#### *Feminist Analyses of Self-Help Books*

Ebben (1995) argued that messages in popular women's self-help books reflect the larger cultural discourses of medicine and religion, and are used to suppress women in similar ways as religious rhetoric. Ebben (1995) stated that the self-help genre labels women's unhappiness as "dysfunctional," and blames the individual reader for her problem, while ignoring cultural or societal structures that may play a role. Therefore, according to Ebben (1995), self-help texts contribute little if anything to social justices, specifically women's rights.

Having said that, Ebben (1995) does not believe the self-help genre should be ignored as a medium for scholarly investigation. Instead, she argues for more self-help texts written by feminists from a feminist theoretical perspective. Such self-help texts would address both the individual and society as factors worth examining, as opposed to

self-help literature in popular culture that consistently blames the individual for her problems. Ebben believes that self-help texts need to include advice for readers that considers cultural and socioeconomic factors such as: cultural norms, political structures, and social frames when addressing the issues these books seek to alleviate.

Other feminist scholars suggest that there is a masculine undertone to the self-help genre that is supported by a masculine model of independence in American culture (Fauldi, 1991; Grodin, 1991; Ehrenreich and English, 1979). More specifically, Ehrenreich and English (1979) argued that the context of self-help texts suggests that “feminine” is unhealthy and “masculine” is healthy and desirable. Additionally, they argued that self-help texts support a backlash against feminism by encouraging readers to think about themselves and their situations from a masculine perspective.

Other scholarship focuses on the ways in which women read and use self-help books. Specifically, Grodin (1991) found that the meaning readers make from self-help texts reflects the dichotomy of autonomy/connection that women often struggle with in contemporary culture. According to Grodin (1991), women who read self-help books often feel as if they have the support of other women who have had similar experiences, but they also feel alone because of the emphasis on independence in these self-help books. Because women seek self-help texts to cope with everyday struggles, Grodin (1991) stated that women are disappointed by the refusal of the genre to address issues related to autonomy/connection.

Grodin (1991) referred to self-help texts as “stories without endings,” explaining that self-help texts often begin with the diagnosis of a particular problem, continue with a narrative about overcoming that problem, but stop short of actually resolving the

problem. While many self-help texts claim to offer answers and solutions for people with problems, few actually fulfill this function. Additionally, Grodin's analysis revealed that there is more than one way to read a self-help book. She found that some readers read the books cover to cover, others skim chapters and some read a little of the beginning of a book, a little of the middle of a book, and a little of the end of a book (Grodin, 1991).

Finally, Grodin (1991) noted that women do not expect to find the "answer" from self-help texts. Although women seek self-help texts for advice on relationships, money, career, life, diet, and exercise, they do not believe wholeheartedly that they will find simple answers to complicated problems in self-help books. Instead, female readers take what they can from self-help books and leave the rest. Readers in Grodin's (1991) study were quick to point out that if they took away even one sentence or phrase from the self-help book, they felt it was worth the expense and the effort of reading it. Therefore, according to Grodin (1991), women do not necessarily expect to be saved by self-help texts. Instead, female readers use self-help books as a way to learn about possible solutions to their problems such as: relationship problems, financial problems, or weight loss problems.

Other scholars have studied self-help texts for messages about power. Weiss (1995) reviewed self-help books written for mothers in post-war 1940s. Her findings suggest a narrative that promoted male dominance over women in the same way that it promoted white U.S. dominance over foreigners.

bell hooks (1995) analyzed feminist self-help books and is one of few scholars to write her own self-help book for Black women suffering from mental health issues. hooks (1995) argued self-help books devalue women and encourage female readers to get

healthy so that they can better serve men. These messages inspired hooks to write her own self-help book for women that included feminist thought and ideology.

Stinson (2001) is one of the few feminist scholars to focus her research on commercial weight loss self-help groups that target women. Her research explored the ideology behind popular self-help products and why self-help approaches may resonate well with women who are trying to lose weight. Stinson focuses her research on women who use self-help books within the larger context of self-help weight loss groups, not the self-help books themselves. It is important to note that Stinson does not attempt to fully understand or decode the messages in women's diet books. She writes "Feminist themes are not absent in the media, but they are mediated, co-opted, and juxtaposed with clearly antifeminist themes" (2001, p. 197). She argued these antifeminist themes, such as societal expectations of beauty, are manifested in popular culture images and representations of women, such as advertisements and self-help weight loss groups.

Kissling (1995) is the only scholar to focus on the images found in weight loss self-help texts. She examined the rhetorical construction of women's bodies, and the relationship between mind and body in popular celebrity diet and fitness self-help books from the 1980s and 1990s. Her analysis revealed the following three themes: "celebrity fitness books present contradictory advice about the mind/body relationship, associate self-esteem with beauty, and conflate the relationships among health, fitness, and beauty" (p. 210). Kissling (1995) found that the theme of "mind/body relationships" consistently occurs in self-help texts when "diet books portray the body as an object that must be controlled, or even as an enemy that must be avoided" (p. 210). The theme of self-esteem and beauty encourages women to use attractiveness as the sole criterion of self-worth.

“Collectively, these celebrity books advance the position that women not only do but should derive their self-esteem from their looks. Exercising and working out, then, are motivated primarily by vanity” (p. 213). Kissling described her final theme of health, fitness, and beauty as:

The relationship between looks and self-esteem is further complicated by the conflation of beauty, health, and fitness in these texts. Beauty is achieved through health and physical fitness, mental and physical health come from beauty.... These texts consistently promote exercise and diet as the true paths to beauty and health. Thin equals health; health equals beauty. The reverse is clearly implied but not stated: fat equals unattractive, unattractive equals pathological (1995, p. 214).

Kissling concludes that, “like other self-help texts, celebrity diet books locate women’s unhappiness within themselves” (p. 215). Women are placed with the responsibility of creating happiness for themselves, while the authors ignore the societal and cultural structures that exist regarding women and weight.

In sum, feminist analyses of self-help books are critical of the genre. Schilling and Fuehrer (1993) argue, “Ultimately, [according to the self-help genre] all of women’s needs can be satisfied through consumption in the marketplace, i.e. buying another self-help book. Obviously, no [feminist] revolution will begin in the self-help sections of our local book stores” (p. 421). Others see a potential for social change in feminist self-help books (hooks 1995). As a collective, feminists criticize the self-help genre for de-contextualization, meaning blaming the individual for her issues without considering larger, societal problems, and for embracing strategies for fixing the problem that too-often ignore social and economic situations (Schilling and Fuehrer, 1993; hooks, 1995). Yet it also reveals a gap in that it does not attempt to address or analyze messages in popular women’s diet self-help books published between 2005 and 2012. As noted above,

Kissling (1995) is the only feminist scholar to study celebrity weight loss books. The limited scholarship on women's diet books results in my research question: *What are the messages in women's diet self-help books about women, their weight, and their lives?* In order to answer my research question, I will draw on existing feminist scholarship about the female body and textual analysis, both of which are the subject of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

### *Theoretical Framework*

Feminism is both a theoretical framework and a social movement that promotes equality of the sexes. Feminist scholarship uses various definitions of feminism including, but not limited to: liberal feminism, social feminism, and radical feminism (Hinds, Phoenix and Stacey, 1992). Feminist theory is used as a lens to study topics such as: work, class, family, popular culture, human sexuality, and central to this thesis, the female body (Irigaray, 1974; Sawicki, 1991; Haslanger, Tuana, and O'Connor, 2011). Since this study deals with women and their bodies, I have chosen feminism as my specific theoretical framework.

Feminist thinkers believe in independent women who make their own choices and who are not subservient to men, but equal (Epstein, 1992; Kirp, Yudolf, and Franks 1986, 2004). Feminist scholars argue for political, social and cultural structures that promote women's rights and opportunities for equality in the public sphere. This includes freedom for women to eat what they want, when they want, and how they want, without pressure from a larger culture that favors men.

Feminists who study mediated images of women consider gender roles, stereotypes, and the role of media in promoting equality of the sexes. My analysis is based on feminist scholarship about women's bodies. Previous feminist scholarship identified cultural pressures on women to present approved, disciplined bodies. Undisciplined bodies, such as unattractive or overweight bodies are consistently mocked, criticized and unrepresented in the media. Sawicki (1991) interprets Foucault through a

feminist lens, in which she describes “the body as a target and vehicle of modern disciplinary practices” (p. 95). The female body is attacked, enhanced, and objectified through societal practices and a cultural subscription to the thin ideal. Additionally, Irigaray (1985) writes about the profound impact that disciplining the female body has on individuals and our culture, specifically how women are only valued for their bodies while men are valued for their accomplishments, professions and sense of humor among other attributes. Irigaray (1985) also writes about the objectification of women’s bodies: “To get back to justice of the ‘sense of justice,’ one might wonder how woman could possibly acquire it since she is included in the exchange market as only a commodity” (p. 118). Feminists argue for equality of the sexes and equal justice for both men and women. Feminist scholars recognize the injustice placed on women by our society in the treatment of women as objects of desire for the heterosexual, hegemonic male gaze.

*Feminist and Cultural Studies Scholarship on Women and Weight*

A woman’s weight has been a widely researched topic for feminist scholars (Wolf, 1991; Dolan and Gitzinger, 1994; Orbach, 1994; Bordo, 1993, 2003; Berg and Rosencrans, 2001; Stinson, 2001; Martin, 2007). Orbach (1994) attributed women’s weight issues to societal structures that encourage the thin aesthetic. She explains: “Fat is a social disease, and fat is a feminist issue. Fat is not about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, asserting and rage. It is a response to the inequality of the sexes” (Orbach, 1994, p. 6). While this is not a list of reasons that directly cause fat on a woman’s body, Orbach suggested that a woman’s concern about her weight is often due to societal issues such as the ones listed above. Men, then play a crucial role, as women are concerned

about being thin not only for themselves and their own self-esteem, but also for their ability to attract a man.

While not a feminist, cultural studies scholar, John Berger (1973) points to many of the same issues. Berger argued that the pressure women feel to get skinny and stay skinny can be seen in the dynamic between men and women: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves” (Berger, 1973, p. 47). Thus, physical appearance and social acceptance are directly linked for women (Wooley and Wooley, 1985). Additionally, Berger (1973) mentions the importance placed on envy and glamour by advertisements targeted at women. Not only does advertising reinforce a society that encourages women to be beautiful for men, but it also elevates glamour and status to the point that women are encouraged to be envious of women who are seen as more glamorous or of a higher status. Because society encourages women to see themselves as “candidates for men” (Orbach, 1994, p.8), women are easily manipulated to model themselves after the thin ideal in hopes of finding a husband. Therefore, it is no surprise that many women feel pressure to maintain a thin weight not only for their own self-confidence, but also to gain attention from men and acceptance in a society that equates female beauty and female success with skinniness.

Bordo (2003) extended Orbach’s work, arguing that when a woman develops an eating disorder, it is often in response to emotional issues and feelings of insecurity that are created and enforced by a cultural subscription to the thin ideal. Bordo (2003) argued that anorexia nervosa is partially, if not always seen as, “a defense against the

“femaleness” of the body and a punishment of its desires” (p. 8). In this explanation, eating disorders are a response to societal pressures placed on women. Women are upset by their discrimination, and they suppress their need for food in an attempt to be accepted by and successful in society.

Bordo (2003) also recognized a duality of spirit/body that often appears in cultural narratives about women. She argued that the overarching cultural narrative about women and weight often presents a woman’s body as one entity and her spirit as another. Bordo (2003) credits this dichotomy to our “dualistic heritage: the view that human existence is bifurcated into two realms or substances: the bodily or material, on the one hand; the mental or spiritual, on the other” (2003, p. 144). For Bordo (2003), the mind and spirit are viewed as separate from the body. Bordo (2003) argues that historically, women have been encouraged to think of their bodies in the following three ways: the body as alien, the body as confining and limiting, and the body as enemy. Bordo stated, “While the body is experienced as alien and outside, the soul or will is described as being trapped or confined” (2003, p. 147), encouraging women to create conflict between their bodies and spirits or their bodies and minds. This imagery is relevant to the issues involving women and weight today in that it encourages women to think of their body and mind as two separate entities, and the body as something that their mind and spirit can and should control. Thus reinforcing a cultural subscription to the thin ideal that supports and encourages a disciplined female body that appeals to the male gaze.

Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht (1994) made note of the “superwoman syndrome” that has emerged in media representations of women. Today, women are expected to wear multiple hats and hold numerous roles. Not only are they supposed to be successful

in the domestic realm, but they also must be successful in their careers and personal lives. “A woman is expected to be a mother, have a career, be a dutiful wife, an exciting mistress, be romantic but also be independent – and stay in control of all of this” (Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht, 1994, p. 5). In addition to the “superwoman syndrome,” girls and young women are often taught to fulfill other people’s needs over their own (Orbach, 1986; Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht, 1994). Subsequently, women are under a lot of pressure to be perfect, and they often express their anxieties through unhealthy eating habits. This so-called food abuse “leads to distressing feelings of guilt, shame and disgust, thereby setting up a vicious cycle of negative emotions” (Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht, 1994, p. 7). Similarly, women often are encouraged to feel guilty or shameful about indulging in food and overeating. Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht (1994) write:

It cannot be completely coincidental that trends of idealization of thinness in the 1920’s and 1960’s developed in parallel with the emancipation of women and sexual liberation in the West. These changes in the socio-political position of women have come at a time when our society has become more affluent. Standards of living have improved rapidly, food is in abundance and less people do physical labor. There is plenty of evidence that women and men have grown fatter over the last decades. Only in such a social situation where over-consumption is possible, or even too easy, can slimming become seen as a luxury and a desirable activity (p. 4).

This point about affluence and over consumption should not be taken lightly. There is little doubt that if our society was not as advanced as it is, we would not be discussing these issues, or researching them; however, food is abundant and many American women now have the luxury to eat whatever they want, whenever they want. Because of that, weight loss has become a major concern and topic of conversation among Americans, particularly women. Conversely, it is worth mentioning that low-income women may be overweight due to the inability to purchase quality food such as

fruits and vegetables because they are often more expensive than highly processed foods. Some women have weight situations that are not linked to plenty, but linked to insufficiency that is often associated with low income and lack of nutritional education. Thus, it should come as no surprise that American women place a lot of importance on dieting and losing weight.

Twenty-one years ago, in 1991, feminist scholar Naomi Wolf wrote *The Beauty Myth*, wherein she provided insight into images of beauty and their influences on modern-day women. She wrote: “thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal” (Wolf, 1991, p. 10). Instead of focusing their energy and efforts on becoming intelligent, accomplished, loving mothers, sisters, friends, or wives, women are obsessed with losing weight and keeping it off. Sixteen years after Wolf’s work, feminist Courtney Martin (2007) published her book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* in which she reviewed the issues involving women and weight in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She pointed to the severity of the issue in the following quote:

Eating disorders affect more than 7 million American girls and women, and up to 70 million people globally. In 1995, 34 percent of high-school-aged girls in the U.S. thought they were overweight. Today, 90 percent do. Over half of young women between the ages of 18-25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat, and two thirds surveyed would rather be mean or stupid. The single group of teenagers most likely to consider or attempt suicide is girls who worry that they are overweight (Martin, 2007, p. 1).

In summary, maintaining a healthy weight is vital to a long and productive life; however, obsessing about one’s weight to the point of self-destruction is not. Yet, as Martin (2007) noted, that is what millions of American women are currently doing. This

obsession can and does result in negative body image, low self-esteem, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, and obesity (Berg and Rosencrans, 2000).

### *Methodology*

#### *Textual Analysis*

Textual analysis is a research methodology used in media studies and communication research. It provides insight into our culture, our lives and our world. Simply defined, textual analysis “is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Textual analysis is unique in that it allows texts to be analyzed and interpreted for various meanings in an attempt to better understand our experiences as humans.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1975) defined texts as: “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense” (p. 17). In other words, texts are signs and symbols that provide insight into cultural understanding and the human experience. Songs, television programs, magazines, and books are among texts used by qualitative scholars in their research. According to Furisch (2009), textual analysis has the unique ability to further explore cultural norms and ideologies that create our social realities. “The question is not how accurately does the text reflect reality but what version of reality is normalized and as a consequence, how emancipatory or hegemonic is the text” (Furisch, 2009, p. 246).

I chose textual analysis as my method, because of its ability to provide insight into the messages about women and weight loss in popular diet self-help books. I am also interested in how those messages contribute to the larger conversation on women and weight. For these reasons, a textual analysis of women's weight loss self-help books makes sense. "Only independent textual analysis can elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content" (Fursich, 2009, p. 239). Qualitative researchers understand that text is situated within the larger cultural context (Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1957). A textual analysis is unique because of the researchers' ability to analyze the encoder's intentions and the decoder's interpretations (Fursich, 2009).

A feminist critique of self-help literature affirms that word choice and communication patterns used in self-help books mirror prejudices against women in our culture (Kissling, 1995; Penelope, 1990; Spender, 1985). A feminist approach also argues that exploration of texts and language is a critical element for social change (Kissling, 1995; Penelope, 1990). These assumptions shaped and informed my analysis of women's weight loss self-help texts for messages about women and weight.

Following in the footsteps of Dworkin and Wachs (2004), I analyzed the diet books for themes regarding fitness, women, weight and their lives. As Eskes, Duncan and Miller (1998) stated, "Language means both ideas found within language itself and specific words and phrases used to communicate these ideas" (p. 323). Following their advice, I read the texts for language that mentioned or implied women and their relationship to "notions of femininity," "passivity," "dependence on men," and "objects of beauty" (Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998, p. 323). I also examined the visuals in the



texts, because, as Eskes, Duncan and Miller (1998) argued, “the visual often is just as loaded with ideology about health and beauty as written discourse and can be read as text” (p. 323). Similarly to Bishop (2010), I analyzed the texts for key words, phrases, and sentences that speak to women and their relationships with other people. I read the texts for messages in the texts about women and their friends, as well as for messages in the texts about women and their families, and women and their romantic interests. Lastly, following Younger (2003), I looked for evidence from the text that indicate or imply an “imbedded link between body image, weight, and sexuality” (p. 47). I also read the text for words, sentences and phrases that encourage readers to think about “thin characters” versus “fat characters” in specific ways (Younger, 2003, p. 47). I also used feminist critiques of self-help literature as a foundation for this thesis by analyzing the six books for messages that indicate a cultural subscription to the thin ideal.

### *Procedure*

I examined six different women’s diet, self-help books published between 2005 and 2012. All of the books were published in the last eight years, and two of the books were published in 2012. To insure variety in the texts, I chose a mix of books, some written by laypersons and some by health professionals. The books analyzed in this study are: *Skinny Bitch* (2005), *Secrets of a Former Fat Girl* (2007), *French Women Don’t Get Fat* (2007), *Naturally Thin* (2009), *SASS Yourself Slim* (2012), and *I Can Make You Hot!* (2012). These books were chosen for the following four reasons: 1) they specifically target women who are interested in losing weight and focus their content on weight loss pursuits, 2) they were published in the last eight years, 3) they are readily available for purchase online such as Amazon.com or in national book store chains such as

Barnes&Noble, and 4) they were all written for women and are marketed to women. I purchased all of the texts from a local Barnes&Noble where I found them on display in the “Diet” section of the store. The “Diet” section of Barnes&Noble is interesting for several reasons. Many of the book covers are designed with graphics of measuring tapes, skinny silhouettes, and brightly colored text promising advice for potential consumers who want to “conquer cravings, drop pounds and lose inches” (Sass, 2012, cover.) I spent a considerable amount of time in this section, looking for books and reading excerpts from them. Every time that I was in the “Diet” section, I was surrounded by women, of all ages, and all weights, reading covers and scouring the shelves for the book that promised the most dramatic results.

In addition to the diet books that I chose for this analysis, there were also approximately seven rows and two shelves full of other, similar diet books. The major difference to note between the books that I selected and the others is that all of my chosen texts specifically targeted women. All of the chosen books signify that they are written for women by their pink covers, images of women on the covers, and catchy, female-focused titles. All promise readers a lifetime of happiness and success from getting skinny and staying skinny. They promise to provide readers with tips on how to reach the thin ideal, and reasons that they should want to. While the chosen texts are similar in key respects, they are also very different. For instance while five out of the six diet books promote a “healthy, natural diet” based on portion control, the book *Skinny Bitch* promotes a vegan diet. Key similarities will be discussed below, but they include an overall message that weight loss is a woman’s vehicle to success. Below is an explanation of each of the texts that I analyzed.

*Chosen Texts*

*Skinny Bitch: A no-nonsense, tough-love guide for savvy girls who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous!* (2005) is a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller.

Authors Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin have built a diet empire out of their 2005 hit, *Skinny Bitch*. They now have *Skinny Bitch Bun in the Oven* (2008) for pregnant women, *Skinny Bitch in the Kitch* (2007) a recipe book, *Skinny Bitchin'* (2008) a weight loss journal, and *Skinny Bastard* (2009) for men. Amy Joy Lanou, Ph.D., senior nutrition scientist, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine offers a review of the book:

Skinny Bitch dishes up scientifically sound information that will change your health and your life. Its 'in-your-face' approach is at once engaging and humorous, and belies its serious and well-researched underbelly. It's the spark that will start your personal revolution. Pick it up. Read every last word. Healthy and skinny you will be.

Both authors are self-proclaimed vegans. Rory Reedman is a former Ford Models agent and Kim Barnouin is a former model with a Masters of Science in Holistic Nutrition. Although the two wrote *Skinny Bitch* in 2005, it did not gain popularity until 2007 when Victoria Beckham was spotted in public with a copy of the book (Rich, 2007).

*Secrets of a Former Fat Girl: How to Lose Two, Four (or More!) Dress Sizes – And Find Yourself Along the Way* (2007) is rated a 4 out of 5 on Barnes&Nobel's Customer Reviews. The *Seattle Times* called the book, "Realistic, smart and exquisitely funny tips for . . . keeping the weight off for good" (para. 6). Author, Lisa Delaney has built a career around being a self-proclaimed "former fat girl" (Delaney, 2007, Cover). She now has a blog, website, and book dedicated to helping other women achieve "former fat girl status" (Delaney, 2007, Cover).

*French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure* (2007) by Mireille Guiliano is a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller and an international success, with 37 international editions in publication. Guiliano also wrote *The French Women Don't Get Fat Cookbook* (2010) and *French Women For All Seasons* (2006). Her website, [Frenchwomendontgetfat.com](http://Frenchwomendontgetfat.com) is a compliment to the book and provides tips for women on food and wine, style, well-being and more.

*Naturally Thin: Unleash Your Skinnygirl and Free Yourself from a Lifetime of Dieting* is one of several *New York Times* Bestsellers by reality television star, Bethenny Frankel. A review of the book for WebMD that reads:

If you want to give up calorie counting, eat whatever foods you want, drink margaritas, and free yourself from a lifetime of dieting, this book may be for you. Best known as the outspoken socialite star of Bravo's *Real Housewives of New York*, author Bethenny Frankel claims to have the secrets in *Naturally Thin: Unleash Your Skinnygirl and Free Yourself from a Lifetime of Dieting* (Zelman, 2012, para. 1).

Frankel is a celebrity natural foods chef, author, reality television star, and businesswoman. She also wrote *The Skinnygirl Rules For Getting and Staying Naturally Thin* (2009) and *The Skinnygirl Dish: Easy Recipes For Your Naturally Thin Life* (2009) which contribute to Frankel's collection of diet advice books.

The fifth book in this study, *Sass Yourself Slim: Conquer Cravings, Drop Pounds and Lose Inches* (2012) and was written by Cynthia Sass MPH (Master of Public Health), RD (Registered Dietitian). It is a *New York Times* Bestseller and claims to help readers "Lose up to 8 LBS. in the First Five Days!" (cover page). Sass' goal is to help readers achieve a "Yes" moment. "The zipper on your skinny jeans slides up effortlessly; you discover that you can wear a clingy dress or a skirt without Spanx; you walk down the beach or slide into the pool free from a coverup or oversize tee; you don't panic and

reach for a towel when your husband walks in on you getting out of the shower” (p. 1). Those are “yes” moments, according to Sass and those are the moments that she is going to help the reader achieve by reading her book and implementing her suggestions.

The sixth book is *I Can Make You Hot: The Supermodel Diet* (2012). This book was front and center in the “Diet Books” display case at Barnes&Noble and quickly caught my attention with its brightly colored cover. Kelly Killoren Bensimon, a supermodel and reality television star, is the author. Kelly defines what it means to be a “hot!” woman and she also provides advice for women readers who are hoping to lose a few pounds. Kelly writes, “In this book I’m going to clue you in on all the tricks I’ve learned from a variety of experts that I use myself. I want you to be the best you—happy, attractive, shapely, interested, interesting, and, most of all, feeling smokin’ HOT” (p. 2).

Women deal with an enormous amount of cultural pressure to get thin and stay thin, which sets an expectation and reality about what it means to be a successful and happy woman. These messages are common in today’s media and deserve further analysis. I now turn to my findings and interpretation of the books.

## CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

My analysis of women's diet books revealed three themes about women, weight, and their lives. The first theme, *The I'm Not Dieting Diet*, explores how the six diet books examined in this study encourage women to stop dieting, and to think about food in diet-like ways. The theme has two subthemes: *Death by Diet* and *Diet-Like Rules*. The second theme, *Naturally Thin Is In*, reveals how the diet books define the ideal woman, and is broken down into three subthemes: *Author As Ideal*, *The Naturally Thin Ideal* and *Happiness Equals Skinniness*. The final theme, *Achieving The Ideal: It's Up To You*, is about how the six diet books equate self-fulfillment with weight loss. This theme also has three subthemes: *Effortless Control*, *Selfish Versus Selfless*, and *It's Up To You*.

As will be shown below, the three major themes work to create an overarching narrative that defines the ideal woman as thin, and reinforces a cultural subscription to the thin ideal. When taken together, the overall message of the diet self-help books is: women should aspire to be thin, women should stop dieting, women should achieve thinness naturally—without effort, and women should take responsibility for their weight and consciously work on achieving a thin body. The implicit message is that if women do all of these things, they will be envied by other women, loved and adored by men, and, ultimately, successful at home, in the workplace, and in life. Collectively, the authors of the six chosen texts contribute to, and reinforce the ideal that women should achieve thinness and beauty in order to gain the attention and approval of men.

*Theme One: The I'm Not Dieting Diet*

The *I'm Not Dieting Diet* theme present in the women's diet books studied here discourages readers from dieting, yet encourages readers to follow diet-like rules. The *I'm Not Dieting Diet* consists of two subthemes: *Death by Diet* and *Diet-Like Rules*. As will be seen below the *Death by Diet* subtheme encourages women to stop dieting. However, women are then encouraged to adopt the diet-like strategies, suggestions, and guidelines. Although all six of the chosen books for this study were found in the "Diet" section of a local Barnes & Noble bookstore, the authors of the books consistently attempted to differentiate their books from other "diet" books. This is most likely done because of the negative connotation associated with dieting in our culture. There are essentially a few, commonsense ways to lose weight, but those do not make money or generate profit. To make money, authors have to claim some new magic. The magic, so to speak, in the diet books analyzed here is that women do not have to and should not diet to lose weight; instead they simply must achieve a slim figure naturally through calculated portion control. Ironically, while the authors go to great lengths to not label their books as "diet" books, Barnes&Noble clearly does.

*Death by Diet*

The first subtheme in *The I'm Not Dieting Diet* theme is *Death by Diet*. It focuses on the efforts to which women's diet books encourage readers to stop dieting. This is the longest theme and one that showed up repeatedly throughout the analysis.

The authors begin by explaining the ways in which their books are not diet books. For example, Frankel (2009) writes "this book isn't about a diet" (p. 28). Freedman and

Barnouin (2005) explicitly state “This is not a diet” (p. 14). The cover of Guiliano’s (2007) book *French Women Don’t Get Fat* reads “Stylish, convincing, wise, funny, and just in time: the ultimate non-diet book, which could radically change the way you think and live – now with more recipes.” Sass (2012) promotes this idea in her explanation of how she came up with the name of her book. “In thinking about what to call this book, the word diet didn’t even come close to encompassing what you’ll find in these pages. What you will find is a complete set of simple and satisfying solutions” (p. 4). All six books’ authors stress that their books are more than diet books; they really are self-help books. They are also about convincing the reader that dieting is bad.

The authors argue that dieting is bad by linking dieting to words with negative connotations and implications. The authors present readers with admonitions such as “No more diets. Do you understand me? Stop dieting now” (Frankel, 2009, p. 20). Guiliano (2007) suggests the key to weight loss is a balanced life in which women “don’t diet” (cover.) Delaney (2007) takes a more nuanced approach. She writes “Dieting might seem easy, as simple as scratching out things on your grocery list and replacing them with stuff that doesn’t have high-fructose corn syrup, partially hydrogenated oils, and rendered animal fat at the top of their ingredient lists. But it is such a negative, spirit-sucking way to live” (p. 18). In short, women should stop dieting if they want to lose weight; however, the authors also suggest women think about foods in diet-like ways.

For example, Frankel (2009) states that dieting is “self-destructive” and “torture” (p. 2), indicating that dieting is more harmful than beneficial. She writes that dieting is “ridiculous and obsessive” (Frankel, 2009, p. 7), encouraging readers to associate dieting with foolishness and neurotic behavior. Sass (2012) refers to dieting as a “vicious cycle”



(p. 7) that involves a nasty and hurtful cycle of starting a new diet, straying from the diet, and gaining excess weight. Additionally, (Sass, 2012) describes dieting as “extreme” (p. 19), emphasizing the obsessive nature of people who diet. Bensimon (2012) also takes a severe approach, explaining to readers that dieting equals “Die with a T” (p. 39), thus encouraging women to associate dieting with loss of life and loss of spirit. Similarly, Delaney (2007) states that dieting is “negative” and “spirit-sucking” (p. 18), again associating dieting with a negative and lifeless existence. Guiliano (2007) uses the term “unsustainable extremism” (p. 6) to explain the unmaintainable and unrealistic nature of diets.

Further textual evidence for the *Death by Diet* subtheme is seen on the book covers and in chapter titles. Frankel (2009) titles her book *Naturally Thin: Unleash Your Skinnygirl and Free Yourself from a Lifetime of Dieting* suggesting to readers that they need to release themselves from their diets because dieting is bad. Guiliano (2007) prints in yellow bold font “DON’T DIET” on the back of her cover, and Delaney (2007) enlightens readers with “Secret #1: Forget Dieting” (p. 1). In this case, one really can judge a book by its cover, as similar messages of “stop dieting” occur over and over in the books.

Three of the books devote entire chapters to encouraging women to stop dieting (Delaney, 2007; Bensimon, 2012; Sass, 2012). Delaney’s (2007) first chapter, “Forget Dieting” (pgs. 1-40) encourages “fat girls” to concentrate their efforts on exercise, as opposed to controlling their diets (p. 4). She reflects on her transition from “Fat Girl to Former Fat Girl” (p. 17) and explains that exercise (not dieting) gave her the power she needed to believe in herself (Delaney, 2007). She writes “Think of exercise as the first

chapter of your success story, because it will help you build a stockpile of personal power and steer you for the rest of the journey ahead. The making-better-food choices bit will come later” (p. 19). Therefore, instead of promoting a specific diet, Delaney (2007) promotes an active lifestyle that is first and foremost focused on exercise. Delaney (2007) believes that the “making-better-food choices,” her form of a diet, will come after the reader has adopted an exercise routine (p. 19). Overall, the authors emphasize a negative connotation to the word “diet.”

Like Delaney (2007), Bensimon (2012) devotes an entire chapter of her book to this subtheme of *Stop Dieting*. Entitled “Diet = DIE with a T” (pgs. 39-74), Bensimon equates dieting literally with death, supporting the notion that women should stop dieting because it sucks the joy and life out of people. Bensimon (2012) writes “I don’t believe in diets; diets are for people who want to get skinny. I want you to be happy” (p. 39), thereby linking happiness with weight loss. Finding happiness through weight loss, according to Bensimon, is a more noble pursuit than dieting because dieting is vain and leads to a skinny body. While this is true, a deeper reading of Bensimon’s book reveals that her book is more about weight loss and dieting than it is about achieving a healthy lifestyle. This trend of marketing diet books as healthy lifestyle books seems to be an important distinction for the authors to make. With buzzwords like “natural,” “healthy,” “low fat,” and “organic” flooding the media and marketplace, it is not surprising that authors of diet books market their books accordingly. Not only are these books about dieting, and eating, they are about achieving a “healthy” lifestyle, attitude, and way of eating.

To further support her point, “DIET = ‘Die with a T’” Bensimon (2012, p. 39) includes a “HOT tip” in the book in which she lists several diets that do not work (p. 42).

Bensimon writes

The alcohol diet does *not* work.... The Graham cracker diet does *not* work.... A vegetarian diet with no starch and no protein does not work.... The tapeworm diet does *not* work. Instead of making you thin, it makes you dead.... Liquid diets do *not* work. They don’t teach you how to eat well; they just teach you how to not eat.... Strict diets of any kind do not work (2012, pgs. 42-43).

By showing her disdain for dieting through this list, Bensimon makes it clear to readers that they should stop dieting. This is reinforced by the use of the phrase “does not work” after every diet on the list, further conveying the idea that diets are ineffective.

Similar to Delaney (2007) and Bensimon (2012), Sass (2012) dedicates a chapter of her book to messages that promote an end to dieting. Entitled, “S.A.S.S. Yourself Slim: Freedom from Diet Chaos” (pgs. 9-27), Sass writes “I’ve laid out a concise prescription that, in just thirty days, has the power to profoundly change the way you look and feel, and free you from diet chaos” (p. 9). Her choice of the word “Freedom” (p. 9) indicates to readers that diets are a form of slavery, captivity and oppression. Women who diet are chained to dieting and need to break free. By promising freedom, Sass promotes the idea that her readers will experience liberty, independence and nonconformity. Yet, as will be shown in the next section, Sass (2012) as do the other authors in this study, promotes a diet-like “concise prescription” for women to follow in order to lose weight (p. 9).

While only three of the six books devote entire chapters to promoting an end to dieting, all six of the books consistently refer to diets as terrible things to endure. They describe “diet hell” as a place where women continually obsess about food, calories, and

measurements without seeing results (Frankel, 2009, p. 2). This hell, according to Frankel (2009) includes being “shackled to diets” implying diet as prison (p. 2). Other authors convey this sense of endurance by empathizing with readers who have failed on diets. Bensimon (2012) conveys the idea of dieting as a terrible experience when she writes “I’ve been on crash diets; I’ve been on juice fasts; I’ve tried to get through the day eating nothing more than an apple. I can tell you from personal experience that none of those options are healthy-and they don’t work” (p. 44). Moreover, Frankel (2009) refers to her old, dieting self as that “annoying person,” who consistently asked for “skim milk and sugar-free sweetener” in her coffee (p. 44), supporting the idea that diets are extreme and unsustainable reinforcing the link between dieting and death, or dieting and sacrifice.

Delaney (2007) took a similar strategy to that of Frankel (2009) and Bensimon (2012) describing dieting as losing weight the “‘no’ way – no dessert, no bread, no butter, no, no, no” (pgs. 6-7), thereby reinforcing the notion of dieting as sacrifice or dieting as death. Delaney suggests that when someone is consistently thinking about what they cannot eat, they start to feel bad about themselves and in a way, lose out on life. Frankel (2009) labels diet the “four letter word” (p. 39). Thus, according to these authors, to be on a diet is excessive, annoying, extreme, unmanageable, and synonymous with death.

Dieting is also referred to as a “vicious cycle” (Sass, 2012, p. 7). This phrase reflects the belief that diets do not work because they limit people, causing them to overeat and gain more weight. This reinforces the subtheme *Death by Diet* by explaining to readers that diets fail, which causes them to feel upset, unmotivated and discouraged to continue dieting. This sentiment is echoed throughout the books. Frankel (2009) writes dieting “negatively alters your metabolism” (p. 33), causing excess weight gain. Guiliano

(2007) agrees with Frankel (2009), explaining that when you diet, “you will in all likelihood not only regain the ones [pounds] you have lost, but add a few more besides” (p. 33). Thus, dieting is bad because it backfires. Sass (2012) refers to this as “diet chaos” the erratic cycle most dieters find they’ve been trapped in for years, if not decades” (p. 9). People who diet, therefore, are often “trapped” by different diets, hopping from one diet to the next without achieving the desired results. Thus, in the *Death by Diet* subtheme, readers are encouraged to view diets as life sucking and jail-like.

The authors also discourage readers from dieting by linking dieting to irritability and “binge eating” (Bensimon, 2012, p. 41). Sass (2012) echoes this notion when she quotes Selena Shepps, a woman featured in her book. “I alternated my unhealthy habits with just about every diet out there, but they always left me tired, hungry, unsatisfied, moody, anxious, and disappointed” (Sass, 2012, p. 18). By using such phrases, Sass, and the other authors like her, encourages women to associate feelings of anxiety, disappointment, loss of satisfaction, irritability, extreme hunger and moodiness with diets.

To further promote the idea that diets are bad, the authors of these diet, self-help books promote the idea that dieting backfires because control is given to the diet, or to the person who invented the diet. Therefore, the dieter feels apathetic and helpless. This idea is best expressed by Frankel (2009):

The problem with diets is that they give you the idea that someone else is controlling you: a famous guy tells a famous girl what to eat; or a diet plan somebody wrote for you tells you how many cups of this and how many tablespoons of that you can eat. Frankly, this let you off the hook. If you are on a diet, the diet controls you, so when things go wrong, you can blame the diet. If you are on a diet, you don’t have to take responsibility for your own life. The diet tells you what to do, and if it doesn’t work, you hate the diet; the diet failed; you are the victim. Even as you feel guilty

and blame yourself for your inner weakness, deep down, you don't feel that you've ever been the one at the steering wheel. The diet has been driving. You're just along for the ride. And that's no way to live your life (p. 8).

In the above quote, Frankel explains to readers why their past dieting attempts have failed. She situates dieting as a problem and encourages women to stop counting calories and measuring their portions. She empathizes with readers and places the blame for failed weight loss attempts on other diets. Placing the blame and shame on individual women who are trying to lose weight, while ignoring other cultural and societal factors that might be adding to the issue is a practice that feminist scholars have noted. In fact, Ebben (1995) believes this to be true of most self-help books in general. Ebben (1995) argued that the self-help genre labels women's unhappiness as "dysfunctional," and blames the individual reader for her problem, while ignoring cultural or societal structures that may play a role. Therefore, according to Ebben (1995), self-help texts contribute little if anything to societal reform. As we see in the above quote, Frankel (2009) does just that. And I understand why. In order for diet books and self-help books to sell, there has to be a demand for them in the marketplace. This demand is created by a cultural subscription to the thin ideal and an overarching societal belief that women should be skinny and beautiful, and that skinny, beautiful women are happier and more successful than other women. Authors of self-help books have to place the blame on the reader or other diet gurus, so that they can position their books as the "answer" to readers' problems. In the case of diet, self-help books, the authors have to at least partially blame the reader for her weight struggles so that they feel in charge and like they can do something about their weight issues. While this may sell a lot of books, it does little to advance our cultural understanding of health, nor does it contribute to a society

that values women for more than their weight. Additionally, as Ebben (1995) explains, contributes little if anything to societal reform.

Freedman and Barnouin (2005) agree with Frankel and refer to this relinquish of control. “We have been so brainwashed by fad diets, magazine articles, and advertising that we have forgotten how to think for ourselves” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, Introduction). The difference between Frankel (2009) and Freedman and Barnouin is that Frankel blames the diet, whereas Freedman and Barnouin blame the media and the diet industry. All three authors argue diets are useless because they do not work; they are harmful because they usually lead to more weight gain and they are ineffective because they place control outside of the person who wants to lose weight.

There is no lasting glory in rapid weight loss. That’s what diets offer: a fast (weeks, not months) round of misery for temporary results. If you believe you can shed pounds quickly by force of will and deprivation, you will in all likelihood not only regain the ones you have lost, but add a few more besides. (This is the origin of the expression yo-yo dieting)” (Guiliano, 2007, p. 33).

In sum, the *Death by Diet* subtheme encourages women to stop dieting not only because it does not work, but also because it is miserable and causes more harm than good. Dieting is seen as a temporary fix and an ignorant approach to successful weight loss. While these authors encourage readers to stop dieting, they simultaneously encourage women to adopt diet-like strategies in an attempt to achieve their ideal weight. As will be shown below, instead of subscribing to rigid diets that eliminate entire food groups, readers are told to adopt a more natural mindset regarding their food and life. Instead of promoting specific diets, the authors encourage readers to follow their recommended diet-like rules.

### *Diet-Like Rules*

The second subtheme, *Diet Like Rules* reflects the idea that women's diet books provide readers with diet-like strategies to implement in their lives. While all six of the books take different approaches to helping women lose weight, they all encourage women to follow the authors' rules and implement their suggestions. When taken together, these recommendations encourage women to think and act like they are on a diet without actually calling it a diet. This is problematic because it is disingenuous to readers. Personally, I picked up diet self-help books to learn about weight loss, nutrition, and healthy eating. It is my assumption that other women do the same. Unfortunately, these texts do not promote an overview to nutrition or healthy eating as they claim. Instead, they attempt to enlighten women on a get skinny quick fix camouflaged as "healthy eating." By that, I mean the authors demonize dieting because it is self-sacrificing and instead promote their tricks to lose weight as being easy and effortless, while minimizing the fact they are telling readers to engage in self-sacrifice. At first, in these books, self-sacrifice is a bad thing. But when it is the particular variety of self-sacrifice promoted by the author, it suddenly has a positive connotation and is easy. Readers are encouraged to think of themselves as determined and hard working if they can maintain the author's eating plan, which is not called a diet, but which is, in fact, the author's diet.

All women's diet books in this study encourage women to think of dieting as bad and begin by explaining the ways in which their books are not diet books. For example, Frankel (2009) writes "this book isn't about a diet: (p.28). Freedman and Barnouin (2005) explicitly state "This is not a diet" (p. 14). The cover of Guiliano's (2007) book



*French Women Don't Get Fat* reads “Stylish, convincing, wise, funny, and just in time: the ultimate non-diet book, which could radically change the way you think and live – now with more recipes.” Sass (2012) promotes this idea in her explanation of how she came up with the name of her book. “In thinking about what to call this book, the word diet didn’t even come close to encompassing what you’ll find in these pages. What you will find is a complete set of simple and satisfying solutions” (p.4).

The authors encourage readers to view the book’s non-diet advice as good, thus worthy of adoption.

The authors further distance themselves from the “diet” idea referring to their suggestions as “rules,” (Frankel, 2009, p. 19; Bensimon, 2012, p. 119; Sass, 2012, p. 11) “guides,” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, cover) “secrets,” (Delaney, 2007, p. 40) and “tricks” (Guiliano, 2007, p. 4). For example, the book *Skinny Bitch* (2005) promises to deliver readers “A no-nonsense, tough-love guide for savvy girls who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous!” (cover). This “guide” includes adopting a vegan diet. Conversely, Delaney (2007) refers to her suggestions as “secrets” (p. 40). Guiliano (2007) provides a list of “French rules” for women to follow (p. 9). She calls these “a system” and “collection of well-honed tricks” (p. 4). Frankel (2009), Bensimon (2012), and Sass (2012) also encourage readers to follow their “rules.” Whether the authors label their advice as a “guide” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, Cover), “secrets” (Delaney, 2007, p. 40), “tricks” (Guiliano, 2007, p. 4) or “rules” (Frankel, 2009, p. 19; Bensimon, 2012, p. 119; Sass, 2012, p. 11), they all encourage women to think and act in diet-like ways. To further explain how women’s diet books discourage dieting, while encouraging diet-like rules, a description of these rules is provided below.

Freedman and Barnouin (2005) state that their book, *Skinny Bitch* “is not a diet” (p. 10). Instead, they insist that it “is a way of life. A way to enjoy food. A way to feel healthy, clean, energized and pure” (p. 10). Nevertheless, Freedman and Barnouin (2005) encourage readers to adopt a vegan *diet*. They include pages of recipes, sample menus and lists of acceptable and unacceptable foods in their book. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) tell readers what they should eat and what they should not eat. “So you shouldn’t eat cows, chickens, pigs, fish, milk, cheese, or eggs. So what the hell should you eat? Pretty much everything else: fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 52). This dietary advice repeatedly shows up throughout the book. In addition to listing acceptable foods, Freedman and Barnouin also tell readers when to eat. They suggest waiting to eat “until you’re truly hungry” (p. 142), indicating that readers probably eat even when they are not hungry. Freedman and Barnouin tell readers they have been “brainwashed” with other diet plans, but encourage readers to adopt a vegan lifestyle. Cutting out animal products from one’s diet, eating specific foods for specific meals, and encouraging women to eat when they are truly hungry are all examples of what I call *diet-like rules*.

Much like Freedman and Barnouin (2005), Delaney (2007) shares her weight loss advice with personal examples and stories from her past. She recommends replacing fattening food with fruits and vegetables. “Since veggies were the only thing I could let loose on, they became my staple. I started eating carrots the way I used to eat popcorn.... They became my snack of choice, anytime, anywhere” (p. 136). Another diet-like rule that Delaney (2007) mentions is “Become an illusionist” (p. 144). By that she means “trick yourself into thinking you’re eating more than you are” (p. 145). To accomplish

this, she suggests eating from a salad plate instead of a dinner plate, eating mostly vegetables at every meal, and avoiding “High Density” food like “regular crackers, cookies, chocolate, frostings, nuts, butter, and full-fat condiments like mayonnaise” (pgs. 144-145). Even though Delaney (2007) encourages women to “Forget Dieting” (pgs. 1-39), suggestions like the ones mentioned above indicate that her book really is about dieting. As stated earlier, this is problematic because it is disingenuous and in some sense, false advertising. If women want to learn about healthy eating that does not involve dieting, they need to look further than the self-help section of the bookstore.

Like Delaney (2007), Guiliano (2007) believes in trickery. In fact, she tells readers that to “fool yourself” is one of the “most basic of French rules” (p. 9). Guiliano’s readers are encouraged to drink a lot of water, fill up on vegetables and eat smaller portions. “The trick is to manage and gratify your appetites, while determining how, when, and what to reduce” (p. 9). To achieve this, Guiliano (2007) includes sample recipes for women to follow. While she believes “assessing yourself as an individual rather than following a diet” is key to weight loss success, she does explain that “there are some elements that apply to all cases: a little more walking, a little more water” (pgs. 57-58).

In sum, all of the books support *The I’m Not Dieting Diet* theme by discouraging readers from dieting while encouraging women to live as if they are on a diet. Frankel (2009) is the most vocal about her aversion to dieting. She goes so far as to encourage readers to “Banish the word *diet* from your house! Kids should never have to hear this four-letter word” (Frankel, 2009, p. 39). It bears noting that the word “diet” refers to the food a person habitually eats. In fact, “diet” is synonymous with food, nourishment, nutrition, regimen and supply. Yet, the authors in this study place a negative connotation

on the word “dieting,” associating it with restriction, limitation and self-sacrifice. Instead, because, “life is too short to waste obsessing over fat grams or carb grams or never, ever exceeding 1,200 calories a day” (Frankel, 2009, p. 7), the ideal woman, according to these self-help texts, achieves her thin figure effortlessly, without formally dieting. The ideal woman in this narrative does not diet; she is like the authors of diet books who do not diet. Enter the “naturally thin” ideal (Frankel, 2009).

This notion of the “naturally” thin ideal meshes with the idea that women are supposed to be everything to everyone and achieve this “superwoman” status naturally. Here, the authors use the word naturally as a synonym for effortless and organic. They explain that it is better to achieve weight loss through portion control and exercise—both natural activities than it is through over-the-counter weight loss supplements or extreme diets that are, as they write, the opposite of natural. Dolan and Gitzinger-Albrecht (1994) describes this as the ‘Superwoman’ syndrome. They argue that there is a societal expectation for women to be good mothers, career professionals, wives, and community members. As will be shown below, the authors of these books argue women are required to be all of these things, as well as skinny and that women should appear to be achieving this all naturally and effortlessly without much difficulty or exertion.

#### *Theme Two: Naturally Thin Is In*

The second theme, *Naturally Thin Is In*, is connected to the first, *The I’m Not Dieting Diet*. Taken together, they promote the idea that women should achieve ideal weight naturally, without formally dieting. *Naturally Thin Is In* consists of three subthemes: *Author as Ideal*, *Naturally Thin Ideal*, and *Happiness Equals Skinniness*.

#### *Author as Ideal*

In all six books, the authors present themselves as the ideal in several ways. First, the authors associate themselves with the ideal women they create in their books. Second, the authors encourage women to eat and live like the ideal authors do. Third, the authors establish themselves as powerful possessors of weight loss secrets. Finally, the authors describe their own lives as being nearly perfect illustrating for readers their high status.

The titles alone paint a clear picture of who the ideal woman is: a skinny bitch, a former fat girl, a French woman, a hot woman, a naturally thin woman, and a sassy woman. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) position themselves as “Skinny Bitches,” and encourage women to follow in their vegan footsteps. Delaney (2012) promotes her “size 2” waistline and fun-loving personality, insisting that readers will become happy like her if they achieve “Former Fat Girl Status” (p. 58). Guiliano (2007) claims the ideal is found in women from her native France and Bensimon (2012) suggests women eat, live and shop like as she does. Frankel (2012) refers to herself as a “naturally thin person,” linking herself with the ideal that she has created (p. 267). Finally, Sass (2012) named her book after herself, *S.A.S.S. Yourself Slim*. Taken together, these messages indicate that the authors of women’s diet books set themselves up as being ideal women and as aspirational goals for readers.

Perhaps the best example of this is seen on in *Skinny Bitch* (2005). The back cover reads

Authors Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin are your new smart-mouthed girlfriends who won’t mince words and will finally tell you the truth about what you’re feeding yourself. And they’ll guide you on making intelligent and educated decisions about food. They may be bitches, but they are Skinny Bitches. And you’ll be too after you get with the program and start eating right (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005).

Not only do these authors make “intelligent and educated decisions about food,” they are the readers “girlfriends” who will “guide” them down the path to weight loss success (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, cover). The above quote also insinuates that a woman is allowed, if not encouraged, to strive to be bitchy. For example, the back cover of *Skinny Bitch* reads “They may be bitches, but they are Skinny Bitches” (Back Cover). The use of the word bitch does not carry a positive connotation but nonetheless the authors are claiming it, as if it does. While it was probably chosen as the title to be catchy and clever, it is worth noting that the word “bitch” is usually seen as derogatory, portraying a woman as mean and nasty. The phrase “skinny bitch” connotes jealousy and hatred. Thus, skinniness is created as the marker of success for women. Additionally, a woman’s personality and the way she treats others is downplayed. Instead, the focus is on her weight. This is problematic because it diminishes the value of a woman to her weight only and elevates bitchiness, which indicates immaturity and selfishness to an attribute.

Delaney (2007) makes it clear that readers should strive to be like her. In an example of the “superwoman syndrome,” she writes “I’m the girl in the size 2 jeans with the ten marathon medals hanging on the wall, the girl who cracks the joke that gets the whole room laughing, the girl who never goes without her daily chocolate fix and looks as if she doesn’t know the meaning of the word *diet*” (2007, p. 2). Women are encouraged to be physically fit, athletic, funny, sociable, indulgent (but not too indulgent), and anti-diet; and should achieve this skinniness without dieting.

Guiliano (2007) establishes herself as an ideal woman by promoting her French diet and French lifestyle to readers. She explains “French women do as I do: they eat as they like and don’t get fat” (p. 3). Bensimon (2012) encourages readers to follow

“Kelly’s Cardinal Rules” (p. 22) that helped her achieve her ideal status. Kelly (2012) also encourages readers to listen to “Kelly’s Playlist” (p. 32), buy “KKB’s Beauty Must Haves” (p. 118), and eat Kelly’s favorite foods. Clearly, Bensimon (2012) wants readers to adopt her lifestyle and view her as the ideal woman.

It is equally clear from the cover of *Naturally Thin* that ideal women are “naturally thin” (Frankel, 2009). Throughout the book, Frankel encourages readers to think “naturally thin thoughts” (p. 47) and eat as a “naturally thin person eats” (p. 267). Frankel refers to herself as a “naturally thin person” (p. 267) and provides readers with a three-week account of what she eats. All the while, she reminds readers that her book is not about dieting, “this isn’t a meal plan for you. It’s just here to show you how one naturally thin person eats, and to give you inspiration as you decide how you-as a fellow naturally thin person will balance your own account each day” (Frankel, 2009, p. 267). Sass (2012) provides a similar example when she explains why she named her book after herself.

Throughout the years many people have told me, ‘I love your last name.’ I think it’s because the word sass evokes such a positive feeling. To me the word sass brings to mind energy, confidence, and enjoyment of life. It’s hard to even say sass out loud without smiling, standing up a little straighter, or even striking a pose. I feel like that name has been a real gift to me. Connecting to my sass has bolstered my resilience through some tough times, allowed me to maintain a sense of humor about myself and about life, and it’s acted as a memorable thread throughout my career (Sass, 2012, p. 3).

The woman who has “sass” is established as the ideal woman readers should aspire to emulate. The above quotes and paraphrases demonstrate how the authors of the books in this study present themselves as knowing the secrets to successful weight loss, thereby endowing themselves with power over the reader. The authors know what the

reader does not. The authors achieve what the readers cannot achieve—at least, without the authors' help.

The authors present themselves as powerful, because they know weight loss secrets and because they have successfully achieved weight loss. Frankel (2009) explains her “mission to democratize health” (p. 19) and justifies her position as an authority figure: “I cook for celebrities and advise my friends about healthy eating...They don't belong to some secret ‘thin club’ that you don't belong to. You belong to this club, too. You just haven't filled out your membership card yet” (p. 19). Similarly, Bensimon (2012) says “I'm going to be sharing with you how to do what I do, and I can guarantee that if you follow my plan you *will* be *smokin' HOT* from your head to your toes and from your heart to your skin, inside and out!” (p. 11). Guiliano (2007) establishes her power by asking “Okay, so what are the secrets of French women? How do we account for all those middle-aged women with the figures of twenty-five-year-olds strolling the boulevards of Paris?” (p. 7). She answers with her “collection of well-honed tricks” (p. 4) and “observations” (p. 8). Sass (2012) takes a different approach, claiming her authorities based on the lessons she learned from her twenty years of experience as a dietitian. In all of these examples, the authors elevate themselves to ideal status over the authors because of their membership to the “thin club” (Frankel, 2009, p. 19).

With power often comes status. Thus, it is not surprising that several of the authors consistently mention their celebrity status in their books. Guiliano (2007) refers to herself as the “high-ranking woman on staff” at her place of work, Champagne House of Veuve Clicquot. She writes “Today I am CEO and director of Champagne Veuve Clicquot, part of the luxury-goods group LVMH” (p. 5). Frankel (2009) and Bensimon



(2012) make a point to name-drop all of their celebrity friends. Bensimon (2012) begins her book with an acknowledgments section, thanking her famous friends Jill Zarin, Steve Cohen, Christian Barcellos, Tim Gun, and Andy Cohen, among others. Her foreword is written by her famous friend, Russell Simmons and includes memories of the two of them at her house in the Hamptons. Similarly, Frankel (2009) has sections of her book called “Celebrity Secrets” in which she shares stories about her celebrity friends, such as Paris Hilton and Charles Barclay. In her recipe for Banana Oatmeal Chocolate Chip Cookies, Frankel includes a story about her friends Susan Sarandon and Sheryl Crow. Instead of promoting healthy eating, or educating readers about nutrition, Bensimon uses her book as a platform to elevate her status and her celebrity persona. This is not unique to Bensimon—in fact, many of the authors use similar approaches.

Expensive status products such as Chanel and Ferrari are also mentioned throughout the books. Guiliano (2007) writes “Your eating and living habits are by now tailored to your tastes and metabolism, so like a classic Chanel suit, they should last you forever with minor alterations over the years (p. 11). Likewise, Bensimon (2012) compares a woman’s body to a Ferrari stating, “I always say that your body is like a Ferrari, and exercising is like tuning up your engine so that it runs well for as long as you’re on the go” (Bensimon, 2012, p. 26). Here, Bensimon is not only objectifying a woman’s body but she is actually equating it with a machine that is stereotypically equated with masculine desires and patriarchal expectations of women and womens’ appearances. Later in her book she offers other luxury car brands for readers to compare themselves to, in case they do not connect with Ferrari. She writes “I’ve already said that you need to treat your body like a Ferari, but maybe you prefer an Aston Martin, a

Corvette, or even a Bentley. Whatever luxury car of your choice, if you treat it well, it will increase in value; if you treat it like a bargain rental car, it's just going to wear out" (Bensimon, 2012, p. 41). Here again, women are linked to objects that are associated with masculinity and power. As Orbach (1994) notes, our society encourages women to see themselves as "candidates for men" (p. 8). This is seen repeatedly throughout the texts, where women are once again encouraged to look beautiful and thin for men, or at least as good as a car that men would love.

Freedman and Barnouin (2005) take a different approach, encouraging women to buy organic food even if it is expensive. They write "Don't be a cheap asshole. Yeah, yeah, yeah, organic produce is usually more expensive than conventional produce. But we spend countless dollars on clothes, jewelry, manicures...and other bullshit" (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 179). This quote insinuates that good health and high status are prerequisites for living the perfect life. By discussing clothes, jewelry and manicures—all items that are relatively expensive, Freedman and Barnouin (2005) imply that economic status and power come with being skinny.

In these books, money and status are highly emphasized. In our celebrity-obsessed culture, it is not surprising that the authors would try to align themselves with celebrities. The authors also try to equate thinness with status, wealth, and fame. They are selling a lifestyle, not a diet. Additionally, the authors are thoughtful and strategic about the brands they mention in their books. They choose expensive, internationally recognized brands that connote power, prestige and wealth and promote the idea that women are like objects (e.g. cars) that can be consumed.

*The Naturally Thin Ideal*

Drawing from Frankel (2009), not only is the ideal woman thin; she is “naturally thin.” In this second subtheme, the ideal woman achieves her thin physique and slender waistline effortlessly and organically without dieting. As will be discussed below, it is the flawed woman who struggles with her weight. The ideal woman understands that diets are controlling and ineffective, therefore she does not diet. Instead, as will be shown, the ideal woman eats an all-natural diet, she exercises naturally and effortlessly, and controls her portions. As a result, others envy this ideal woman because her weight appears to be naturally achieved.

Two of the authors in this study use the word “natural” to describe the ideal woman (Frankel, 2009; Bensimon, 2012). Frankel (2009) titles her book “Naturally Thin,” devoting it to “every girl who wants to be naturally thin” (p. v). This dedication clearly promotes a naturally thin ideal. Similarly, Bensimon (2012) encourages women to aspire to be “naturally skinny” (p. 4). She writes “Is skinny hot? Naturally skinny is hot. Starving yourself in order to change your natural body type in order to get skinny is *not* hot” (Bensimon, 2012, p. 4). Thus, according to the text, the ideal woman is naturally thin. She is thin, but not too thin and her weight is achieved without dieting because thinness achieved by dieting is not hot.

Additionally, the authors promote the idea that the ideal woman eats an all-natural diet (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005; Delaney, 2007; Guiliano, 2007; Frankel, 2009; Sass, 2012). Sass (2012) encourages readers to adopt her plan that “features fresh, whole, natural, unprocessed, and organic foods to help you quickly and efficiently achieve the body of your dreams” (p.5). Readers are encouraged to eat foods that are “all-natural,”

with “natural flavoring,” and without “artificial sweeteners” (Sass, 2012, p. 32). Similarly, Freedman and Barnouin (2005) encourage women to eat organic, natural food and avoid heavily processed foods and beverages, referring to soda as “liquid Satan” (p. 13). They encourage readers to “say goodbye to soda and hello to a sweet ass!” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 15). Here, the term “sweet ass” implies more than a small derrière. It encourages women to achieve skinniness so that they will be appear desirable and sexy to men. Guiliano (2007) encourages her readers to prepare their food naturally, instead of relying on store-bought foods, or restaurant foods with unknown and fattening ingredients. She explains that ideal French women “love to shop [for] and prepare food” (p. 35). In fact, “it’s a deeply natural love, one that is erased in many other cultures” (p. 35). The authors also encourage readers to exercise. However, as will be shown, they promote the idea that exercise is also “natural,” ignoring the commitment, dedication, time and money it often takes.

The “naturally thin” woman balances her food intake with exercise. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) promote the idea of exercise and demean the reader at the same time when they state: “give up the notion that you can be sedentary and still lose weight. You need to exercise, you lazy shit” (2005, p. 20). Bensimon (2012) suggests “exercise is all about being energized, happy, and healthy; it isn’t about being skinny. But if you’re concerned about your weight, exercise will help you there, too” (p. 26). At the same time she encourages readers to think that exercise should be effortless when she states, “don’t call it working out because exercise shouldn’t be work!” (p. 26). Similarly, Guiliano (2007) does this by associating her prescribed daily walks with “freedom of thought” (p. 210). She explains walking “can be a special kind of indulgence, these moments when one

becomes aware of really existing, as the images, information, and other sensations the world tries to press upon us all recede” (210). Thus exercising and walking is joyful and incorporated into the ideal woman’s daily routine. As Frankel (2009) suggests “find exercise that feels more like fun than like work, even if it’s just walking or biking to and from your job” (p. 135). Collectively these texts make losing weight and maintaining a thin weight sound easy, effortless, natural and fun. By doing that, not only do they downplay the hard work, time and dedication that goes into a weight loss plan, but they also make it seem like there is something wrong with you if you don’t enjoy exercise and working out.

The authors note that there is a fine line between natural exercise and excessive exercise. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) encourage women to start with twenty minutes of cardiovascular exercise a day, five days a week. Afterall, “You want to be a Skinny Bitch, not a scrawny bitch” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 20). Messages like this encourage a preference to a toned, female body over one that is too skinny, or scrawny indicating a fine line between the thin ideal and a woman who is “too thin.” Or, as Frankel (2009) states “over-exercising can actually be counterproductive.... it can become an obsession, setting you on a figurative treadmill where you exercise, overeat, exercise, overeat. You have to find balance in your life” (p. 133). Therefore, natural and fun exercise is recommended for readers in order to achieve status as an ideal woman. While it is refreshing that this narrative promotes a healthy and balanced approach to fitness and dieting, it overlooks the dedication and self-sacrifice that it often takes to achieve an ideal body.

Finally, the naturally thin woman allows herself whatever food she wants, but in small portions. She eats small portions of fattening foods, but does not deny herself any food. Denial of food is the essence of dieting. The naturally thin woman does not diet. Bensimon (2012) suggests cooking miniature-sized foods as a “great way to gain portion control!” (p. 167). These mini foods include “mini hot dogs,” “mini quiches,” and “mini sliders” (Bensimon, 2012, p. 167). Guiliano (2009) believes “less is more” and explains “there can be an almost ecstatic enjoyment in a single piece of fine dark chocolate that a dozen Snickers bars can never give you” (p. 32). Frankel (2009) takes portion control seriously, suggesting women adopt her habits of eating salads without croutons, scooping out the inside of her bagels and eating only three to four bites of meat. These examples demonstrate how the authors encourage women to manage portion control and eat small portions of food, thus encouraging women to sacrifice some food and time to achieve this ideal. They also promote the idea that women should control themselves by reigning in what they eat. Feminist scholars such as Orbach, Kilbourne, Stinson and Martin argue that a woman’s weight issues are a response to how women are treated and seen by men in our culture. Women often develop eating disorders (overeating or under eating) in an attempt to gain success, status, confidence, and acceptance. The idea that a woman who is in control is a thin woman who is attractive to men is supported by the diet, self-help books examined in this analysis, thereby supporting a culture that encourages women to look beautiful, maintain a thin figure, and appear to achieve that happily, effortlessly and naturally for men.

According to the diet books in this study, as women practice these methods, they attain status and thinness and become objects of envy. Frankel (2009) states, “You will

be one of those people you wished you could be in high school. You will be one of those people that others look at and wonder, ‘How does she stay so thin?’” (p. 3). Freedman and Barnouin (2005) take a similar approach, telling readers how to act once they become “Skinny Bitches.” They write “Soon, you’ll notice people (especially men) flocking to the new you....Even if you are being very non-judgmental, people may feel threatened by your righteousness” (p. 186). Quotes such as these encourage readers to aspire to be naturally thin, not only for themselves but also for the approval of others. As John Berger (1973) notes in *Ways of Seeing*, society encourages men to “act” and women to “appear” (p. 47). Not only do women aspire to look good to gain the attention of men, but they also gain status based on how other women look at them. Additionally, Berger (1973) mentions envy and glamor, stating that the cultural narrative promoted by advertisements often encourages women to buy certain products under the promise that those products will make them more glamorous and envied by other women. The same is seen in fitness texts. Not only do these texts push a narrative on women that being skinny is natural and effortless, and that men prefer thin women, they also argue that women will be more glamorous when they are skinnier and more envied by other woman—hence the use of the word “bitch.”

### *Happiness Equals Skinniness*

In this third subtheme of *Naturally Thin is In*, authors of women’s diet books link happiness with skinniness. For example, the cover of *Skinny Bitch* states “If you can’t take one more day of self-loathing, you’re ready to hear the truth.” In an attempt to motivate readers to loose weight and become “skinny bitches,” Freedman and Barnouin (2005) urge readers to think about themselves and their bodies in certain ways. Women

who are underweight are positioned as happy, confident and successful. Conversely, overweight women are often described as being depressed, anxious, or upset with their weight. As mentioned earlier, a body of literature on body image and weight exists that describes a correlation between self-esteem and weight. More specifically, physical appearance and social acceptance are directly linked for women (Wooley and Wooley, 1985).

In the diet, self-help books analyzed in this study, readers are encouraged to make these connections by associating feelings of anxiousness, depression, and self-loathing with being overweight. For example, Frankel (2009) writes, “I can’t believe how much of my life I’ve wasted feeling anxious, depressed, antisocial, and – after binging on something – full of self-loathing because my jeans were too tight” (p. 6). Guiliano (2007) encourages readers to make connections between a woman’s self-esteem and her weight when she explains how she felt as an overweight teenager. “I hated myself every minute of the day...those were blurry days of crying myself to sleep and zipping past all mirrors” (Guiliano, 2007, p. 19). Delaney (2007) also supports this link between self-esteem and weight by describing her thoughts and feelings as a fat girl. “I was ashamed of my appetite, my driving need to stuff myself with anything and everything. But even more than that, I was ashamed of the powerlessness that kept me from saying ‘enough,’ that held me back from fully revealing the person I was inside” (p. xiii). Equally, authors encouraged readers to love themselves once they have shed their excess, unwanted pounds. “Now that you love yourself...wear sexy clothes” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 190). The implication here is that women feel bad about themselves when they are heavy, and good about themselves when they are skinny. Additionally, the authors



indicate that women who are overweight are less desirable, if not undesirable, compared to skinny women.

Overall, by claiming that women often feel “bitter” and “awkward” (Guiliano, 2007, p. 19) when they are overweight, and full of “confidence and bliss” (Sass, 2012, p. 1) when they are thin, the authors encourage women to associate positive emotions with thin women and negative emotions with overweight women. Messages such as these equate self-esteem with weight and encourage women to do so as well. As scholars have noted, this equation is problematic for women (Wooley and Wooley, 1985; Berg and Rosencrans, 2000) because it promotes a culture that values skinniness. This cultural value comes at the price of overweight women, who are told they will never be as happy as skinny women until they lose weight. The self-help texts analyzed here make it clear to readers that as a woman, you are much more desirable skinny than you are overweight. This is both degrading to overweight women and misleading. These authors are attempting to sell books through the promise that readers will lose weight and gain self-esteem. To do this, they use scar tactics that imply if the reader does not follow the authors instructions, she will not only fail at losing weight, but also at achieving happiness. Next, they use rhetoric to convince readers to lose weight.

### *Theme Three: Achieving The Ideal: It's Up To You*

My third and final theme, *Achieving The Ideal: It's Up To You*, explores how the authors of women's diet, self-help books use rhetoric to indicate that the choice, blame, and responsibility of achieving weight loss is on the readers. While it is the smallest, in terms of pages, of the three themes, it nonetheless completes the argument these authors

are making. That self-help weight loss books suggest that women should aspire to be thin and they should take disciplined approaches to lose weight and maintain a thin physique.

*Losing Weight is Effortless.* Authors of women's diet, self-help books in this research insist that losing weight is effortless. They make it a point to stress how "very simple" (Bensimon, 2012, p. 10) and "incredibly easy" (Sass, 2012, p. 90) their weight loss plans are to follow. In fact, "simple" seems to be the word of choice. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) present readers with a "simple formula" for achieving weight loss. Similarly, Frankel (2009) vows that if readers follow her "ten simple rules," they will begin to see "how easy it is to be naturally thin" (p. 14). Sass (2012) insists her plan is "as simple as a five-piece puzzle, and once you have it down, you can follow it anytime, anywhere, whether you're at home, at a restaurant, or on vacation" (p. 90). Thus, readers are encouraged to believe that losing weight is and should be both effortless and simple.

Bensimon (2012) tells readers that losing weight is as easy as following her three rules: "1. Exercise every day. No excuses. 2. Make healthy food choices and eat well six days a week. 3. Make Sunday your Funday and eat whatever you want" (p. 10). She also promises that, "it's not going to be unpleasant. It's going to be fun, enlightening, even delicious" (Frankel, 2009, p. 16). Delaney (2007) takes a slightly different approach. She explains how easy losing weight can be by presenting herself as the ideal example, and by consistently motivating readers through messages such as *if I can do it, you can do it*. "Believe me when I say that you can do it. I know you can. I'll be with you all the way. Because if I could leave the past behind—with its broken chairs and stolen cookies and midnight McDonalds—you can, too" (Delaney, 2007, p. xviii). Here, Delaney implies to

the reader that she is her friend, that the two of them (reader and author) are in this together.

Guiliano (2007) suggests women who want to lose weight just need to simply add “a little more walking” and “a little more water” to their lives (p. 58). She encourages women to “enjoy the ride” of weight loss: “Three months of hard-core dieting might well be enough to crush any woman’s spirit, but three months of discovering new things and getting to know your body better is a kindness to yourself that will continue to be repaid for years to come” (p. 59). By presenting her weight loss strategies in a positive light, Guiliano (2007) contributes to the idea that losing weight is effortless. Anyone who has dieted understands that dieting is not effortless. In fact, it often takes much effort. This notion that Guiliano (2007) presents that dieting is easy and enjoyable is not only disingenuous, but it also adds to the confusing and conflicting messages in the media about women, weight loss and their lives. In fact, the authors contribute to the confusion by telling women how terrible dieting is and why they should stop dieting, while also explaining to women that losing weight is enjoyable and something that women should do to reward themselves.

*Losing Weight Takes Control.* The self-help books juxtapose the argument that losing weight is simple, with messages that indicate losing weight also takes control. This is best exemplified by Frankel (2009) who stresses that women take control of their diets, and in-turn their lives.

Notice that I *don't* say you are going to need willpower. I say *control* because that's exactly what I mean. You are your own person. You are in control of what you do. You have the power. It's your body, your life, your mind, *your food*. You have control over what you choose to do and how you choose to act (Frankel, 2009, p. 8).

While Frankel (2009) suggests women use *control*, Delaney (2007) uses the word “willpower” to explain how “fat girls” can successfully make the transition to “former fat girls” (p. 58). Similarly, Bensimon (2012) stresses a daily commitment to exercise. She explains how she eats well and works out “every single day to fight the force of gravity” (p. 32). These messages indicate not only a negative association with weight gain, but also with aging. Frankel tells readers “If you want to be HOT, you have to exercise every day” (p. 27). Sass (2012) mentions the difficulty involved in weight loss. “The truth is that any change is difficult, and changing your diet is one of the most challenging tasks anyone can take on” (Sass, 2012, p. 283). And, Guiliano (2009) explains “there is a discipline” to losing weight (p. 10).

Freedman and Barnouin (2005) explain the dedication needed to follow a diet-plan as something “worth fighting for” (p. 116). They tell readers “You can continue plodding along in your life feeling like you’re not living up to your glorious potential or you can dedicate yourself to creating the life you want” (p. 116). Thus, hard work and dedication are necessary in creating the ideal life. That is, one where the reader is healthy and skinny, and subsequently powerful with a great deal of social status.

Another message from the authors of women’s diet, self-help books is that they (the authors) are perfect and thin. This is a common theme in Benimon’s book in which she uses herself as an example of the ideal woman by explaining, “I was born blessed with long, lean legs, but I work very hard to keep them looking the way they do. I’m tall, but I could just as easily have long, large legs. And long and large is not hot. Unfortunately I can’t give you my legs. But I can help you be the best you can be” (Benimon, 2012, p. 33). In other words, Bensimon tells the reader that they cannot

possibly meet her standards, but she will help them try to match her ideal body. Here, Bensimon presents an unrealistic expectation of the ideal woman and the ideal female body that is often portrayed in advertisements and magazines. The authors of these diet books have to sell their books, therefore, it is important that they make achieving this ideal possible with seemingly successful and easy to follow instructions for how to lose weight. Thus, it makes sense that Bensimon would tell readers that she will help them “be the best [they] can be” (2012, p. 33).

In the *Effortless Control* subtheme, the authors of diet books position their weight loss tips as simple, if the readers have a strong desire to lose weight. After the authors establish themselves as the ideal, telling readers not to diet but how to achieve thinness naturally by labeling dieting “healthy eating” or “healthy living.” In theme two, the authors sell the thin ideal, more specifically the naturally thin ideal. Here, in theme three, the authors tell the readers it is up to them to lose weight and effectively shift the blame back to the reader, should they fail at losing weight. From an economic standpoint, this makes sense. The authors first must establish themselves as credible authorities on diet and weight loss. One way to do this is by telling personal stories of how they successfully lost weight and now work to maintain a thin weight. Then, because dieting has a negative connotation in our society because of failure rates associated with dieting, the authors work to separate their diet books from other diet books on the shelf. Next, because dieting is an integral part of weight loss, the authors tell readers how to diet in effortless and easy ways, but argue that it is not dieting. Finally, the authors stress the importance of dedication and commitment to readers’ weight loss attempts in case the readers fail,

then they cannot blame the books for their failed weight loss. Not only does this result in profits for the authors of diet books, but for the diet industry, as well.

As stated earlier, feminist scholars take issue with society placing blame and expectations of weight loss on the individual woman while ignoring societal and cultural factors that might contribute to a woman's struggle with her weight. Martin, Orbach and Wolf argue the disciplined female body is a response to a culture that does not promote equality of the sexes, but that favors men over women. The diet books analyzed in this study ignore variables such as genetics, social and cultural pressure, and interpersonal relationships as potential factors in a woman's struggle with her weight.

The last subtheme, *Selfish Versus Selfless* completes the picture by explaining how women's diet books encourage women to be selfish in their weight loss pursuits, while maintaining a selfless attitude towards others. Orbach (1994) articulates this conundrum well in the following quotation:

The current aesthetic of thinness forces cruel pressures on the individual women. Few women are naturally thin, or indeed naturally any size. We are a variety of sizes. But the thin aesthetic...has put women in the impossible position of feeling that they must curb their appetites and their food intake. They must do this at the same time that they feed others and express their caring and concern for them through the food they prepare and serve. In other words, women absorb a powerfully contradictory message vis a vis food and eating. It is good for others, harmful to the woman herself; full of love and nurturance for others, full of self-indulgence to herself (pgs. xx-xxi).

As will be shown below, women's diet books encourage women to be selfish in terms of self-care and selfless with everything else.

*Selfish Versus Selfless.* In this second subtheme for *Achieving the Ideal: It's Up to You*, evidence from the text suggests the authors of the six diet books present

contradictory advice for readers. They encourage women to be selfish and selfless at the same time, while aspiring to achieve the thin ideal.

One of the most common messages is that readers must be selfish with their time, and put themselves first in order to successfully achieve weight loss. This can be seen in Frankel's (2009) assertion that "To be naturally thin, you have to be a little selfish, but the result will benefit everyone you know and love" (p. 101). Sass (2012) refers to this notion of selfishness as "self-caretaking" (p. 8). Delaney encourages women to "quit being a martyr" (2007, p. 103). She states:

My psychologist friend Alice Domar, Ph.D., has a much nicer term for it: self-sacrificer. The theory is that you really do have the time you need to do right by your body and your mind. But I say that because of your Fat Girl programming, you don't feel worthy of the top spot on your to-do list. Your name is inked in, typeset, right there at the bottom. So, naturally, everyone else and everything else defaults to a position ahead of you (Delaney, 2007, p. 103).

Freedman and Barnouin (2005) continue this trend when they explain to the readers that "You are worthless to your colleagues, friends, and family if you do not value yourself enough to take excellent care of *you*. Yes, you have to put yourself before your friends, parents, boyfriend, husband, and even your children" (p. 118). They insist that this selfishness "won't make you a bad daughter or wife or mother; it will make you a less resentful, more confident, interesting, beautiful, patient, tolerant, and fun person to be around. Your bright, shining light will give everyone around you the permission and inspiration to shine more brightly" (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 118).

As the above quotes indicate, the authors assume women are inherently selfless, and need to be told to behave otherwise. While these messages of self-caretaking may seem empowering to women, they are quite the opposite when coupled with messages

about serving others. Once the authors of diet books encourage women to be selfish, they explain how women will be better equipped to serve others once they take care of their own weight. For example, Bensimon (2012) argues, “To feel good about yourself, you need to take care of yourself. That isn’t selfish; it’s what you deserve! Once you feel your hottest, you’ll be able to give your best to family and friends” (p. 22). The idea here is that when women are skinny, they are better mothers, daughters, friends, wives, employees, bosses, and individuals.

After the diet books encourage women to take control of their diets, be selfish with their time, and make a commitment to losing weight and becoming “naturally thin” (Frankel, 2009), the authors make a point to encourage women to adopt selfless behaviors and values.

Now that you’re a Skinny Bitch, don’t turn into a skinny bitch. We conceived of the title, *Skinny Bitch*, to get attention and sell books. We just wanted to spread our message far and wide and thought *Skinny Bitch* was a good way to do it. But we are not bitches, and we have no desire to promote bitchiness. There is nothing uglier than a pretty woman who is nasty. If you look great, you should feel good about yourself and be happy. Instead of fixating on the last five pounds you want to lose, celebrate the five you already lost. Progress, not perfection. Don’t be insecure or competitive or feel threatened by women who are thinner or prettier than you. Be happy for them; it will make you look better. Smile a lot, give compliments out whenever you can, and be nice to everyone. You’ll just keep getting prettier and prettier and skinnier and skinner” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, p. 186).

Messages like the one above suggest that women must be both skinny and kind. Feminist scholars agree that this is an expectation of “good” women in our society to be both thin and caring (Stinson, 2001; Martin, 2007). Frankel (2009) and Bensimon (2012) encourage readers to act selflessly and share their food with others. According to Frankel (2009) “The sharing contributes to the feeling of being on a date and nobody feels



deprived, but when you add it up, each person actually eats a lot less than they might have. This is the SkinnyGirl mentality” (p. 81). Bensimon (2012) seconds this notion, suggesting to readers “that if there’s something you really want, share it with someone. You don’t have to eat the whole thing by yourself” (p. 132). This may become confusing to readers who want to be selfless, but feel that the only way they can achieve their weight loss goals is by being selfish. In other words, the authors are encouraging women to deny themselves food under the guise of sharing with others and being selfless. Delaney (2007) explains that when she was a “fat girl,” she was too selfless and always put others’ needs above her own. To overcome this urge to constantly please others, Delaney (2007) created “INO [it’s not an option]” as a personal mantra (p. 87). She writes:

INO [it’s not an option] gives you a way of saying no to the people and responsibilities you automatically put ahead of yourself and your own needs. It gives you permission to put yourself first, an essential step toward Former Fat Girlhood. Using it as a tool, you can rearrange your priorities and elevate yourself to the proper position on your to-do list: the top (Delaney, 2007, p. 87-88).

Feminist scholars like Jean Kilbourne, Suzie Orbach, Naomi Wolf, and Courtney Martin, note our society places an enormous amount of importance on a woman’s appearance, especially her weight. Women’s diet books profit on this cultural expectation for women to be thin. If there was not a demand for diet products in the marketplace, we would not have nearly as many “diet” books or merchandise on the shelves as we do. While diet books reinforce this cultural expectation. They also place the burden, responsibility, and expectation for women to lose weight and achieve the ideal thin

physique on the individual reader. This is important for the success of diet books, because it allows for the creation and production of more diet books.

*It's Up to You.* In this final subtheme of *Achieving the Ideal*, women's diet books place the responsibility and burden of losing weight on the individual. As Frankel (2009) states "Food doesn't just fall onto your body and make you fat; you are the one who makes the decision to eat it—and eat more and more and more of it" (p. 64). As is evidenced by this quote, the diet books analyzed in this study encourage readers to think of weight loss as an individual issue. Freedman and Barnouin (2005) urge readers to take responsibility for their diets and weight, because other people do not care and will not. They encourage readers to question government agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration. According to Freedman and Barnouin (2005) "government agencies don't give a shit about your health" (p. 92). The authors encourage readers to educate themselves about the food they eat. To do this, they suggest women "read the ingredients and completely ignore all the other gibber jabber bullshit the government calls for on the packaging. Fuck them. Trust no one. Get skinny" (p. 109). This may seem harsh, but the point here is clear. A woman's weight loss success is up to her. Sass (2012) agrees:

You can't control many of the things that impact your life, but you can control your relationship with your body—and that means you can control your weight, how you feel, and, to a large extent, your health....No matter what else is going on, taking charge of your body makes you feel like you can conquer the world (p. 8).

The individual reader is then placed with both the responsibility and the burden of losing weight. Bensimon (2012), who lists healthy and slimming meal plans in her book, writes "There are always fast options that won't make you fat. It's just up to you to choose them" (p. 69). Frankel (2009) stresses the individual's responsibility to lose

weight in her second rule. “Rule 2 actually encapsulates a concept I want you to think very carefully about as you read this chapter. This is something you might not have thought about before....Are you ready? OK, here it is: *you are the only one responsible for what you put into your mouth*” (p. 33). Another motivational message from Bensimon (2012) reads “Stay positive and move forward. This is your last try at today. Yesterday may not have been great, but, today is better—you just need to see it that way. The choice [to lose weight] is up to you” (p. 40). Freedman and Barnouin (2012) present similar encouraging messages to their readers, and end their book with the following message:

You *can* change your life. You *can* have the body you want for the rest of your life. You *can* enjoy healthy foods. All you have to do is follow a simple formula, and be willing to delay gratification for a few months. A few months. That’s it. Then you can enjoy a new body for the *rest of your life*. Don’t be a pussy. You have all the nutritional information you need to become a Skinny Bitch. The rest is up to you (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005, pgs. 115-116).

As the above quotes illustrate, the overarching message in women’s diet, self-help books is that the reader can change her life and get skinny, if she wants to. She does not have to rely on anyone else. Her life is in her hands now. If the reader wants to get skinny, she should follow the book’s tips and just do it. This may be motivational to some, but a deeper analysis of the text reveals issues with these seemingly motivational messages because they disregard societal and cultural forces that place all of the blame on the individual. Additionally, the above message reinforces roller coaster or yo-yo dieting, where people who diet loose weight on a diet and then gain it back plus some when they stop dieting, by implying women can quit eating as recommended.

In summary, the authors fail to take into account important factors such as: socioeconomic class, health, interpersonal relationships with family and friends,

government regulations and suggestions about dietary advice, and powerful messages in the media about what women should and should not eat. Instead, messages in diet, self-help books stress heterosexual norms of the ideal female body which should be viewed as an object of desire while blaming the individual, female reader, if she fails to meet this thin ideal.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

“Less is more.” This famous phrase by minimalist designer, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe takes on new meaning in today’s diet obsessed media. Not only are women taught to lose weight, but they are taught that weight loss means they will gain happiness, success, a loving man, a happy family, glamour, money, and status. Scholarship surrounding women and weight is both relevant and timely considering the strong desire many American women have to lose weight.

As feminist scholar, Courtney Martin vividly explains:

Eating disorders affect more than 7 million American girls and women, and up to 70 million people globally. In 1995, 34 percent of high-school-aged girls in the U.S. thought they were overweight. Today, 90 percent do. Over half of young women between the ages of 18-25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat, and two thirds surveyed would rather be mean or stupid. The single group of teenagers most likely to consider or attempt suicide is girls who worry that they are overweight (Martin, 2007, p. 1).

My findings reveal six overall points: First, authors of the six women’s diet books examined in this study prefer to market their books as self-help books, advice texts, and healthy lifestyle books instead of diet books. The authors do this because diets have a bad connotation in our culture and are often linked to yo-yo dieting and failed dieting attempts. Yet, the bookstores market these texts as diet books. This sheds light on the disingenuous nature of the diet industry and the ultimate goal of authors of women’s diet books that is to sell books, lots of them, and make money.

Second, the authors demonize past diets and other diet books, encouraging the reader to think negatively of diets. Ironically, after the authors do this, they encourage

readers to follow their diet, or “healthy eating” plan. This is interesting because it exposes the twisted and often confusing rhetoric used in popular self-help texts about dieting.

Third, that the authors label diets as strict, severe and self-sacrificing, but when they speak of the control necessary to follow their diets, that discipline becomes noble and desirable.

Fourth, the authors use their personal dieting history as an example for readers. While this may appear motivational, it is often presented in a more egocentric and narcissistic manner than a helpful one. The ideal is then presented as the author and readers are encouraged to aspire to be like her because she is the perfect-smart, healthy, happy, glamorous, fashionable, wealthy, loved by a man, envied by other women, and most importantly, skinny.

Fifth, the authors then encourage women to think of their weight as the ultimate vehicle to success. This idea encourages women to place a strong amount of importance on being skinny over other more noble pursuits of success such as working on their career, community service, family responsibilities and caring for their health.

Finally, the authors present weight loss (their suggested way) as effortless and completely natural. Yet, there is nothing natural in ordering a steak and only eating three bites as some of the authors suggest. Nor does it seem natural to eat three cups of raspberries a day and stop exercising. Not only are these suggestions unrealistic, they are also unhealthy.

The six women’s diet self-help books analyzed in this study both resist and reinscribe a cultural subscription to the thin ideal. As explored in the preceding chapters, scholars note the prevalence of the thin ideal in the media, as well as the problems

associated with a cultural belief in the thin ideal. As the research shows, this cultural subscription to the thin ideal is not only prevalent in television, magazines, advertisements, and other pop culture media, but also in women's diet, self-help books.

Dittmar and Howard (2004) write "The cultural ideal of female beauty portrayed in the media has become increasingly synonymous with ultra-thinness" (p. 769). In fact, female models in the media are often considered 20% underweight by medical standards (Spitzar, Henderson, and Zivian, 1999). This thin ideal is important to study, because physical appearance plays a central role in the ways in which women view themselves (Mazur, 1986; Stice and Shaw, 1994), as well as view their success in society (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein and Rodin, 1986). By linking a woman's full potential with a thin body and light weight, the six women's diet books analyzed in this study encourage women to believe in the cultural subscription to the thin ideal and to think in ways that reinforce this idea. Women recognize the thin ideal in the media, and often reference it as one of the most important, if not the most important, influences on their desire to be thin (Irving, 1990; Levit, 1997). The books in this study also recognize this ideal and further promote it under the guise of a non-diet diet book.

As noted earlier, not only is the ideal woman thin, but her ability to achieve thinness and remain thin communicates that she is in control and disciplined (Bordo, 1993; McKinley, 1999). She is in control of her body and control of what she does, eats, how she exercises, and ultimately, her weight; therefore it is assumed that she is in control of her life. We see this in the self-help books analyzed here. The self-help books equate women of power and status with thinness and women who are out of control and less polished with being overweight. As Kilbourne notes "cultivating a thinner body

offers some hope of control to a young woman with a poor self-image and overwhelming personal problems that have no easy solutions” (1999, p. 132). The six women’s diet self-help books analyzed here reinforce this idea by promoting the belief that the reader can control her weight, and if she does not, it is her fault.

Feminist scholars such as Courtney Martin note problems associated with a cultural subscription to the thin ideal. Martin writes:

If you [as a woman] are beautiful, we have concluded, you can construct the perfect life—even if you are not brilliant, well-educated, or courageous—because the world will offer itself up to you. By contrast, if you are overweight—even if you are brilliant, dynamic, funny, and dedicated—you have no chance at the perfect life. Thinness and beauty are the prerequisite for perfection, which to my generation appears to be the only road to happiness (Martin, 2007, p. 16).

The authors of women’s diet self-help books in this study almost perfectly match Martin’s assertion noted above. The focus then is shifted from eating healthy to have a strong and productive body to eating healthy to be skinny and achieve success. This narrative is problematic because it encourages women to control and manipulate their bodies for the male gaze. It is clear from the six diet books analyzed in this study that collectively, diet books are less about providing legitimate, nutritional information and more about supporting a society that values skinny and beautiful women more than not-so-skinny and beautiful women.

### *Interpretation*

In Sawicki’s analysis of Foucault, she writes “Disciplining power is exercised on the body and soul of individuals. It increases the power of individuals at the same time as it renders them more docile” (Sawicki, 1991, p. 22). I argue that the narrative of women’s diet books is presented as another example of how disciplining power is exercised on the



body and soul of individuals, women in particular. Not only does the rhetoric in women's diet books encourage women to lose weight to achieve their personal goals, but it also "renders them more docile" to use Sawicki's terms (2009, p. 22), in that it reduces women's power to their ability to control their weight. Thus, the diet books diminish a woman's worth and cultural value to how much she weighs, encouraging her to focus on and pay attention to her appearance above other social, economic, and cultural pursuits.

Taken together, these messages create a cultural narrative about women that normalizes a societal belief that skinny women are somehow better and more deserving of success, love, and attention than overweight women. This, in effect, grants skinny women certain privileges such as sexual power, status, and heterosexual love, and suppresses overweight women through the underlying principle that overweight women do not deserve success because they have not worked hard enough for it.

This discourse promotes a focus and attention to the female body and devalues her achievements, personality, career success, spirit, and love of family. For the individual woman, this creates an unbalanced view of self and encourages her to value her body, and weight, more than her spirit, health, or intelligence. She is repeatedly trained through this narrative that her weight control will bring her success or failure, not her education, work or autonomy. It is not surprising then, that women in this culture often suffer from one unhealthy extreme or another such as: anorexia nervosa, bulimia or obesity. This cultural narrative is extremely powerful, especially when considering the multi-billion dollar diet industry that exists and profits on people's anxieties and insecurities about their weight, specifically those of women. The authors of these diet books are good examples of this practice. They profit off of women's insecurities and

anxieties about their weight, which the authors help create with their first diet books, then the authors publish and offer a second book, website, or article written as a supplement or complimentary piece to their diet secrets, all for a fee. When women are consistently encouraged to think that their value in our culture is based on how they look, they are not equal to men, but can become second-class citizens focused only on achieving a thin body instead of other accomplishments.

These books would be beneficial if they offered women sound nutritional advice without the overarching message that women achieve success through weight loss in specific and calculated ways. When a woman is told or encouraged to meticulously analyze every bite of food that goes into her mouth, food becomes much more than a source of nutrients, but a way to control and discipline the female body. A woman focused on controlling her body is not paying attention to the world around her. Thus, instead of being an active member of the community, she is “docile” at best and non-existent at worse.

Society has a specific definition of the ideal woman, one that she can never quite achieve. Women’s diet books authors contribute to this unobtainable, unrealistic ideal by encouraging women to discipline their bodies through limited food choices and behaviors where the mark of success is never clear. According to the books, the perfect woman must be thin, but not scrawny. She should be toned, but not bulky. She can eat chocolate, but not too much chocolate and only dark chocolate. She can order a steak, but she wouldn’t dare finish it. She should always be on a diet, but not obsessive about it. Sure, she can order dessert, but only if she eats two bites and gives the rest to her date. He’ll like that, men love a woman who shares. She never forgets to work out, but she doesn’t

spend too much time in the gym, she doesn't want it to control her life. If she skips a workout, there is no need to worry. She will just starve herself on a detox diet for a few days and she's back to her "healthy" weight in no time. See, being skinny is easy!

Focusing on her own weight is not enough, as women are also told to consider their families' health and weight when preparing food for others. The ideal woman is told to prepare food that's healthy but not too healthy. The food is lean, but not too lean. It tastes good, but not so good that her family overindulges when eating it. These rigid guidelines presented to women carry over into other parts of their lives. For example, in our culture the perfect woman is smart, but not too smart. She is assertive, but not aggressive. Above all, she is beautiful and thin.

This is problematic because it encourages women to spend their lives fixated on their weight as their main priority and everything else as secondary. It suppresses women because it does not allow for diversity or multiple definitions or views of who women are, rather it allows for one narrow definition of the ideal woman as a skinny woman, who is not too skinny. This rhetoric has lasting political ramifications because it encourages women to solve their problems through consumption—not of food, but of more dietary advice, hopefully in the form of another diet book. Additionally, this cultural narrative encourages society to only value women for their bodies. In regards to feminist notions of equality, this is serious. When women are encouraged to focus on their bodies first, they are not focusing on whether or not women are receiving equal pay for equal work. In fact, women are not even encouraged to think about their work as valuable because they are consistently fed this message that a woman's body is her value—her only value.

Women are not the only ones who learn that our society only values women for their bodies; men learn it too. For example, within weeks of entering the professional world, I experienced several examples of this unequal treatment of women. One of the male customers I deal with on a daily basis found my rapport on the phone pleasing and asked me to send him a picture of me with my weight, height and age. He did not ask about my personal interests, accomplishments or education. He did not care to inquire about my hobbies or relationships. He wanted to know about my physical body. While some may consider this a unique situation, sexual harassment towards women happens on a daily basis. As this example illustrates, we have created a culture that values men for their accomplishments and women for their looks. Is this the message we want to teach our children? What about the little girls in our country that consistently hear this message? Should we tell them, if you are skinny you'll be successful and if you're fat, well, "sorry, hun!" I think not. The messages in this study are much more nuanced and subtle. But, taken together, and in conjunction with the larger cultural narrative about women and weight in general, we come to understand that women are appreciated, loved and valued for their looks, specifically their weight instead of their accomplishments, values, talents and intellect. If we are to live in a society that truly values equality and diversity, we need to start creating media that promotes those ideas. We must also consider body types, along with sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic class, and gender when striving for a culture that values diversity.

This ideology that less is more for women is not unique to women's diet and health self-help books. In fact, messages like the ones listed above are common in other media channels such as magazines, television, social media outlets, and advertising

campaigns, making the issues surrounding women and weight loss extremely prevalent in the public sphere.

It bears noting that media representation of the perfect woman continually portrays this unrealistic and unattainable ideal. In fact, just in the last few days of writing this conclusion, I have observed several advertising campaigns that build on this notion of “less is more” for women. For example, Special K cereal launched the “what will you gain when you loose” campaign encouraging women to purchase and consume Special K products in an effort to loose weight and gain...fill in the blank ([specialk.com](http://specialk.com)). Similarly, Jenny Craig’s slogan “Feel like new. Feel like you” implies that women must improve their bodies to feel confident and good about themselves (Dominus, 2012). The brand of diet products and frozen meals Healthy Choice, also embodies this exact ideology with their current slogan “Don’t diet, live healthy” (Newman, 2012).

While living a healthy life is a noble pursuit and one worth striving for, the ironic juxtaposition of dieting and diet product here is interesting. Diet products that serve the diet industry are now trying to camouflage their identity by marketing diet products as “healthy” products, much as the diet books analyzed in this study are marketed as non-diet, “healthy eating” self-help books. Additionally, it is worth noting that both Special K and Jenny Craig promote “get skinny quick” schemes that promote skinniness over health. For example, the Special K diet encourages women to eat highly processed and refined Special K foods for breakfast, snack, and lunch with a low-fat dinner option. Similarly, on the Jenny Craig diet, no food is off limit. Women really can have their cake and eat it too. While Jenny Craig’s portion control plan leads to weight loss and weight maintenance, it does not promote a healthy, *natural* diet of fruits, vegetables, lean protein

and whole grains. The above messages taken in conjunction with the narrative in women's diet books serve to illustrate my main finding that less weight really is more success for women. Kibourne is right in her assertion that the diet industry deserves further research and attention from the academy.

Stuart Hall (1992) explains that a central component to textual analysis is the silences in the text. Certain, important messages are missing from these books. The authors do not include messages of self-worth, acceptance and love. They do not promote diverse bodies or appearances, and they do not value women for anything but their bodies. Authors of self-help diet books do not encode praise for women and their accomplishments. Instead, they praise women who are thin, ridicule women who are too thin or too fat, and tell all women that if they can't discipline their own bodies, then their lives are failures. This should not be surprising as other media also fail to recognize women for more than their looks. Examples of this are shown in the documentary, *Miss Representation* (2011) in the media portrayals of both Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice who are ridiculed and criticized far more than their male counterparts for their appearance.

My own decoding of these texts has changed through this analysis. As noted in the introduction, I approached these books whole-heartedly, accepting the messages I was given – the dominant perspective offered by the authors. After completing this analysis, I must admit to a negotiated perspective. Instead of accepting the messages in the text, I began to question them and analyze their underlying assumptions. I came to find that the only dietary advice offered in the majority of these books is portion control (with the exception of *Skinny Bitch* that offers a vegan diet.) Additionally, I found that the authors

were more interested in promoting a nearly impossible thin ideal for women than they were about helping women get healthy. This idea that women are only valued in our society for their bodies is one that does not work to promote women's rights or equality of the sexes. In fact, it does just the opposite. In the end, I have found that my own perspective as a young woman interested in diet and health has been both helpful and limiting to this work. This was helpful in my analysis because I was able to bring my own experiences with dieting to the analysis, which was helpful in my overall findings because I understand first hand how persuasive messages about weight, success, and happiness from these books can be. It possible people of different ages, genders and race will bring a different perspective to the readings.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Kilbourne (1999) provides insight into the diet industry:

The dieter, even more than the addict, is the ideal consumer. She (most dieters are women) will spend a lot on food and then spend even more to lose weight—and the cycle never stops. Sales of low-fat frozen yogurt soar, but so do sales of high-fat premium ice cream. The diet industry, which includes diet drugs and other products, diet workshops and books, health spas, and more, has tripled in recent years, increasing from a \$10 billion to a \$36 billion-a-year industry. No one loses, especially the dieter (although she doesn't win either) (p. 123).

As Kilbourne notes, most dieters fail at losing weight. Therefore, it is no surprise that authors of women's diet books often attempt to label their diet books as "non-diet" books (Guiliano, 2007, back cover). As long as the diet industry continues to produce annual profits in the billions, we will continue to see a marketplace flooded with diet books and diet products. As shown by this thesis, women's diet books contain messages

about women, weight loss and their lives that both resist and re-inscribe a cultural subscription to the thin ideal.

It is my hope that scholars continue to analyze the messages in women's diet, self-help books. While this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the overall narrative behind women's diet books, it does not provide insight on the ways in which women make meaning from the dietary advice presented in these books. Therefore, future research involving interviews with women who read diet books is recommended. As the media continues to bombard women with messages about what it means to be healthy, fit, and thin, additional scholarship on diet advice in the media is both suggested and encouraged.

This thesis reveals an undeniable link between a woman's pursuit to lose weight and the strong value our culture places on the thin ideal for women. The diet industry has become extremely lucrative by selling the perfect life. Diet books do more than promote specific diets, they use weight loss to sell happiness, success, and status. This means big bucks for the authors of women's diet and self-help books, but the cultural implications are far reaching. If we are going to become a healthier nation with strong women who are both mentally and physically healthy, we need to move away from this "empowerment" rhetoric and start learning the facts about diet and exercise. For starters, I suggest the *China Study* by Dr. T. Colin Campbell (2006). While the book is not as entertaining, or catchy as some of the books analyzed in this thesis, it presents nutritional information in a straightforward and legitimate manner. We need more scientifically based nutritional rhetoric in the media that focuses more on associating healthy foods with healthy bodies than associating low-fat foods with skinny bodies.



In conclusion, women's diet, self-help books are less about dietary advice and messages of self-help than they are about reinforcing a cultural subscription to the thin ideal for women. If women want to learn about weight loss advice, dietary suggestions, or fitness tips, they should avoid the diet section of their local Barnes & Nobel and instead seek unbiased advice rooted in scholarly research and proven dietary advice. Additionally, if we as a culture are to achieve equality of men and women, we need to start demanding, producing, and consuming media that represents and values women in the same way it represents and values men.

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