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Exploring How Weight Cyclers Negotiate Weight-Related Cultural Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Although conflicting rhetoric around body image—namely the "thin is best" mentality and the body positivity movement—exists in the U.S., the ways in which these competing discourses surface and interact within dieters' communication has not been comprehensively examined. Thus, utilizing Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 to conduct an in-depth analysis of 38 interviews, our study sought to uncover how weight discourses are negotiated by individuals who have reported weight cycling. Participants voiced two overarching discourses: the discourse of body acceptance and the discourse of the superiority of thinness. We found that synchronic interplay was present in participants' talk, where they negated, countered, or entertained these centered discourses. Our findings help elucidate the nuanced feelings toward weight present in society and highlight the power of weight-related messaging. In doing so, this study aims to provide insights into how weight-related discourses are experienced, communicated, and resisted in everyday interactions, offering a richer understanding of how interpersonal and societal forces intersect in shaping body image and health behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Weight cycling; relational dialectics theory; contrapuntal analysis; dieting

Americans live in a culture laden with competing rhetoric around body size. Since the late 1880s, thinness has been the U.S. beauty standard (Brownell, 1991; Farrell, 2011; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). For men, fatness represents "a loss of strength and virility, a threat to their masculinity" (Farrell, 2011, p. 128). For women and minorities, fatness is even less acceptable, serving as a barrier to achieving respect, equal rights, and economic success (Farrell, 2011). Thin and muscular body ideals are transmitted by the media (especially social media; Farrell, 2011; McComb & Mills, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022; Willis & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). For example, the Fitspiration trend on social media praises not only thin, but toned bodies, privileging attractiveness and appearance-related standards over health and well-being practices (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Pan & Peña, 2017). Interpersonal communication can also shape and reinforce people's attitudes about their weight (e.g., Arroyo et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 1999) and affect health outcomes (Pearl et al., 2015). For instance, body talk or discussions surrounding one's own or others' weight can increase depression and lower body satisfaction (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012). Even complimentary

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or affirming weight-related comments from peers can negatively affect body image (Reno & McNamee, 2015).

These unrealistic thin standards are not just culturally prevalent; they carry tangible health consequences. Although most Americans are classified being overweight or obese (Fryar et al., 2021), weight bias remains widespread. This bias can create chronic psychological stress, fueling negative mental health outcomes, such as body dysmorphia, anxiety, and depression (Pearl et al., 2015; Romo, 2016; Tomiyama et al., 2018). Even after losing weight, many people fear residual stigma, leading them to conceal their former status to avoid negative judgments (Fee & Nusbaumer, 2012; Latner et al., 2012). Weight-related stigma can be so powerful that it drives many into yo-yo dieting cycles in the hope of achieving an "acceptable" appearance (Nordmo et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that societal pressures around body image do not affect all individuals equally. Factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background influence how people experience and respond to body image ideals, leading to diverse experiences and health impacts (Farrell, 2011; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). For example, disordered eating thoughts and behaviors may take on a unique presentation among men compared with women (Klimek et al., 2017). Older adults may face specific pressures related to age-related changes in appearance, while different cultural groups may have varying norms and ideals around body size (Robertson et al., 2014).

In part to combat this stigma, opposing rhetoric has emerged to counter the longstanding thin-is-best mentality, asserting that America's beauty standards are unrealistic, oppressive, and toxic (Thompson et al., 1999). For instance, a focus on body positivity and fat acceptance, as well as health at any size, have emerged as counters to dominant body image messaging. These alternative framings of beauty standards seek to promote self-love at any size, shape, or appearance (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Positive body image can be characterized by appreciating one's body, feeling unconditional acceptance from others, engaging in self-care through healthy behaviors, filtering information in a protective manner, radiating inner positivity outwardly, and conceptualizing beauty broadly (Wood-Barcalow 2010). This can be difficult, however, in the age of social media, where spending more time online can increase body image concerns (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Saunders & Eatin, 2018). Additionally, the online body-positivity trend "love your body" may actually reinforce the idea that women should inherently hate their bodies rather than encouraging women to truly be happy (Tiggemann et al., 2020). Similarly, researchers argue that some body positive social media influencers continue to sexualize and standardize women's bodies, reinforcing existing damaging beauty standards (e.g., Schettino et al., 2023.; Cohen et al., 2019; Vendemia et al., 2021). Furthermore, new weight loss drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy are challenging the body positivity movement by perpetuating anti-fat bias (e.g., Rascoe & Al-Shalchi, 2023). Thus, Americans, perhaps now more than ever, are caught between a push and pull of body positivity and the thinness ideal.

This study focuses on weight stigma as the primary cultural force shaping how dieters navigate competing discourses of body positivity and dieting culture. While much research examines the role of media in shaping body image and the negative impacts of weight stigma, there is limited exploration of how interpersonal communication can mitigate or exacerbate these effects for dieters who experience weight cycling. (Robinson, 2013). Understanding these discourses may create more generative conversations and more positive health outcomes (O'Hara, 2018). Despite the acknowledgment of weight stigma and the emergence of body positivity movements, there is little empirical focus on the lived experiences of individuals engaged in weight cycling—particularly how they talk about and make sense of their experiences within the context of societal pressures and interpersonal interactions. While body positivity movements have sought to resist harmful narratives about weight and self-worth, they often coexist with deeply ingrained dieting

culture, which reinforces societal ideals of thinness. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide critical insights into how weight-related discourses are experienced, communicated, and resisted in everyday interactions, offering a richer understanding of how interpersonal and societal forces intersect in shaping body image and health behaviors.

We first overview our theoretical framework, Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011), which is useful for elucidating tensions inherent within interpersonal communication, before presenting the results of our qualitative study. Understanding the ways in which discourses are centered or eschewed informs how meaning is constituted in talk and is especially important in the context of yo-yo dieting, a topic that can greatly influence health and well-being.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) 2.0

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011) approaches the study of communication from a dialogic perspective, meaning communication is positioned as the creation and recreation of identities, relationships, and the wider social context in which we live (Suter & Seurer, 2017). In its re-articulation, RDT 2.0 examines discursive struggles within interactions, rather than focusing on contradictions between people's competing desires or needs. In daily life, we are surrounded by countless cultural discourses that influence how we make sense of our actions, identities, and decisions. These multiple discourses may contradict, compete and struggle with one another in any given moment (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Indeed, many of our daily interactions are characterized by this multivocality that can lead to uncertainty about how to manage decisions about health and relationships. For example, in the case of diabetes management, researchers (O'Hara, 2018) found that discourses of personal control over one's circumstance, rational science, as well as helplessness and shame competed within patient/physician dyads. In focusing on the role of discourses in our talk, Baxter (2011) relies on two central concepts: the utterance chain and the centripetal-centrifugal struggle.

Utterance Chain

RDT 2.0 moves our focus from "an isolated sequence of words uttered by a speaker … to an utterance chain in which multiple discourses … can be identified" (Baxter, 2011, p. 18). Specifically, RDT 2.0 examines the counterpoints of various discourses embedded directly or indirectly within a chain of speech communion. This utterance chain describes the relationship between social-level discourse and relational discourses, emphasizing that every individual utterance is part of a wider dialogue (Baxter, 2011). Within RDT, every utterance exists within a larger utterance chain, where each utterance is connected to past and anticipated utterances (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). In other words, utterances are communicative events where multiple discourses come into being, rather than separate, isolated occurrences. Four links of the chain are categorized along temporal (e.g., already-vs. not-yet-spoken utterances) as well as cultural and relational (e.g., distal and proximal) dimensions. By using RDT, scholars can more deeply understand how people create, legitimate, or reject cultural-level discourses in the talk. The various ways these four types of discourses collide with one another form unique patterns of meaning across interactions (Baxter, 2011), an interplay that Baxter described as a centripetal-centrifugal struggle.

Centripetal-Centrifugal Struggle

The centripetal-centrifugal struggle captures the notion that discourses often do not hold equal weight. A centripetal discourse encompasses what people consider normative perspectives and worldviews (Baxter, 2011). However, when a discourse is positioned within a less powerful position, it takes the centrifugal role, assuming a marginalized role and categorized as unnatural and non-normative (Suter & Seurer, 2017). While power is often articulated as either existing between individuals or social groups, power in RDT is placed within the discourses themselves. Thus, meaning is created from the various ways dominant (i.e., centripetal) and marginalized (i.e., centrifugal) discourses interact or interplay with one another as they vie for a dominant position in people's everyday interactions (Baxter, 2011). Important with RDT 2.0, is the concept of interplay, or the relationship between the discourses. Discursive interplay can take several forms, but is most often polemic (Baxter et al., 2012). In polemical interplay, some discourses are privileged while other discourses are resisted or marginalized (Baxter, 2011). Baxter (2011) emphasized three polemic practices through which such struggles take shape: negating, countering, and entertaining. Relational-level talk can *negate* social-level discourses when one discourse works to displace an existing discourse by rejecting it. Relational-level talk can also *counter* cultural discourses, which is a type of disclaiming and occurs when a discursive position replaces an alternative discursive position that would have been expected. A third marker of interplay is *entertaining*, which occurs when talk positions a discourse as only one possibility among many, making them complementary rather than competitive.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) 2.0 provides a critical framework for analyzing how individuals make sense of their experiences through competing discourses. Weight stigma is not simply a matter of individual perception but is shaped through broader cultural narratives that position weight, health, and self-worth in often contradictory ways. RDT 2.0 is uniquely useful for this study because it allows for an examination of how weight cyclers navigate these discursive tensions—between dominant dieting culture and resistance movements like body positivity, between personal agency and societal pressures, and between health-related messaging and moralized understandings of weight. By applying RDT 2.0, this study will explore how weight cyclers engage with, resist, and reinterpret weight-related discourses in ways that reflect broader cultural struggles over body image, identity, and well-being. Thus, using the lens of RDT, this investigation explored the following research questions:

RQ1: What discourses do individuals voice as they talk about their experiences of yo-yo dieting?

RQ2: In which ways, if any, do discourses interplay in individuals' talk about yo-yo dieting?

Method

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), we interviewed individuals over the age of 18 who admitted to yo-yo dieting, which we characterized as intentionally losing and regaining 11 or more pounds at least once, consistent with previous weight cycling research (e.g., Luo et al., 2007; Popkess-Vawter et al., 1998). Participants were recruited through flyers near the authors' Southeastern university, posts on social media pages, and snowball sampling. Participants registered for the study by scanning a QR code, which generated an electronic Google form. After registration, participants were contacted to participate in a one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with an

electronic consent form to review that stated, they could stop the interview or skip any uncomfortable questions if they began experiencing psychological distress.

Participants

Participants included 39 people who identified as weight cyclers. The audio quality of one of the interviews was too poor to render it usable, leaving us with 38 participants. Interviews were recorded and took place over Zoom with both cameras off to maximize privacy. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 92 minutes (M = 56 minutes). We used the auto generated Zoom transcript as a starting point but listened to each interview to fully edit the transcripts and ensure accuracy. Participants received a $15 Amazon gift card as an incentive. We interviewed 25 females and 13 males, ranging from 18 to70 years old (M = 26, SD = 13.6), all of whom identified as cisgender. The majority of participants (n = 25; 66%) were Caucasian, with four participants identifying as Asian, two each as African American, Middle Eastern, Indian, Hispanic, and one as other. At the time of the interviews, 20 participants (roughly 53%) were in a romantic relationship, and four (roughly 11%) had children. The vast majority of interviewees were students (n = 28; 74%) with other occupations including researchers/managers (n = 3), educators (n = 2), and one each working in a nonprofit, as an engineer, in health care, and advertising, and as a retired lawyer. Highest levels of education included: doctorate degree (n = 2), master's degree (n = 3), undergraduate degree (n = 5), currently in graduate school (n = 3), and currently in college (n = 25). All but four were living in North Carolina at the time of the study (with one interviewee living in California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Utah respectively). Twelve participants cycled between 15-30 pounds, 14 participants cycled between 30-50 pounds and eight participants cycled between 50-90 pounds. Four declined to provide precise weight loss.

Procedure

After securing participants' consent, we asked them to confirm that they had intentionally lost and regained at least 11 pounds at least once in their life. We then asked them to choose a pseudonym and answer several demographic questions before using a semi-structured interview guide to probe interviewees about their weight cycling experiences. A sample of these questions included: What tensions exist between wanting to lose weight and staying healthy? To what extent did social media play a role in wanting to lose weight? How has your weight impacted your perception of others' weight?

Data Analysis

We did not enter the study with a preexisting framework but took an emic approach, allowing meaning to emerge from participants' voices (Blumer, 1986). Following our initial debriefing as a research team, we selected Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (RDT; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011) as a fitting theoretical lens. RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) provides a valuable lens for the present study because it prioritizes the relationship between social and personal communication by reminding us 'there is no such thing as culture-free interpersonal communication' (Baxter, 2011, p. 53). Integral to an RDT 2.0-framed analysis is an investigation of discourses (Baxter, 2011). Understanding the cultural discourses allows researchers to make the interpersonal talk occurring at the relational-level intelligible. Drawing from Baxter's (2011) methods for RDT 2.0-framed research, we engaged in contrapuntal analysis, which is an analysis method focused on exploring the interplay of interpersonal discourses (i.e., points of view [Baxter,

2011]). The primary question that guides a contrapuntal analysis is, “What are the competing discourses in the text, and how is meaning constructed through their interplay?” (Baxter, 2011, p. 152). Such analysis begins with a thematic analysis in order to determine the discourses present in the data (Baxter, 2011).

Our approach to thematic analysis (TA) aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2019, 2021) *reflexive TA*. Using Braun and Clarke’s reflexive TA as a foundation, we engaged in a recursive coding process, iteratively coding and revisiting the data to enhance interpretive depth. In doing so, we focused on how participants expressed relational tensions or ambivalence in their language. We found themes such as "thinness ideal," "body acceptance," and "toxicity of diet culture" central within the transcripts, with coding decisions guided by how these themes interacted and conflicted within each participant’s narrative. Through constant comparison and iterative coding, we focused on how participants’ voices reflected, resisted, or reconciled these competing discourses, in line with the dialectical process described in RDT 2.0. To ensure reflexivity, we discussed our coding decisions and questioned our assumptions, particularly in areas where participants showed support for body positivity for others but hesitated to apply it to themselves. This approach is not intended to be fixed or prescriptive. Rather, reflexive TA highlights the researcher’s role in meaning creation. Once preliminary codes were established, we used an iterative approach to consolidate our preliminary codes into broader themes, continually revisiting the data to ensure that the themes captured the nuances of participants' experiences. For example, themes like "the superiority of thinness" and "perception of diet culture as toxic" emerged as overarching categories that encapsulated multiple codes.

In this process, we began to see the relational and cultural-level discourses emerge. Using these discourses, we reanalyzed the complete data set and confirmed their validity. We then worked to identify and interpret discursive competition. We examined how discourses of thinness and body acceptance were positioned against each other, highlighting moments of ambivalence or resistance in participants' language. Baxter (2011) articulated that utterances create the potential for alternatives by entertaining possibilities through words like “it might be” or “it’s possible that.” Words such as “but,” “surprisingly,” and “though” serve as markers of countering, while phrases like “no” or “it’s not like that” indicate negating. These markers signal competition between discourses, though they are not exhaustive. We noted linguistic markers, including phrases that indicated tension (e.g., "on the one hand… but on the other," "part of me feels…") and by considering the broader cultural understandings surrounding body image and dieting. RDT scholars (e.g Alvarez et al., 2023; Harrigan et al., 2021; Malhotra et al., 2022) also explain that the text should be examined for suggestions of the presence of a marginalized discourse, an alternative to a dominant discourse, or a rejection of the dominant discourse. By linking RDT 2.0 to the process of identifying and interpreting discursive competition, we aimed to provide deeper insight into how weight stigma operates not only as an individual experience but also as a relational and cultural process shaped by conflicting societal messages.

To maintain credibility and trustworthiness, we maintained detailed notes and outlines, generating an audit trail that allowed us to illustrate our categories and relationships through participants’ voices. We convened bi-weekly to discuss our individual interpretations and resolve any disagreements through open dialogue, referencing specific excerpts to guide our discussions. If consensus could not be achieved, the team agreed to revisit the transcripts until a satisfactory resolution was found. This process was documented in meeting notes, enhancing transparency.
We used in-vivo coding (Charmaz, 2006) to capture participants’ language directly, ensuring that our themes remained grounded in participants' own words. This process involved highlighting and clustering specific phrases and expressions that exemplified each theme, refining these themes through in-depth team discussions. During peer debriefing sessions (Tracy, 2010), we further

scrutinized our thematic categories, using feedback from team members to refine and validate our interpretations. We solicited feedback and collaboratively refined our interpretations. This process ensured that our analysis was reflective and enriched by multiple perspectives.

Findings

Our first goal was to understand the discourses that animated the participants' talk surrounding their experiences of yo-yo dieting. Across the data, and consistent with U.S. culture, participants articulated one overarching discursive struggle: "the superiority of thinness" versus "body acceptance." For sake of clarity, we discuss these discourses separately, with the understanding that they did not exist in isolation from one another. These discourses, or systems of meaning, were in continuous competition to be the centered or privileged discourse (Baxter, 2011).

The Discourse of the Superiority of Thinness

The discourse of the superiority of thinness invokes several taken-for-granted assumptions about the body, including that caloric deprivation in pursuit of thinness is normal and natural, that thin bodies are inherently more worthy and admirable, and that striving for a thin body will lead to a more fulfilling life. Those drawing on the discourses of the superiority of thinness used the centripetal position to center yo-yo dieting as innocuous and inevitable. Within the discourse of the superiority of thinness, a thin and toned body was a perfect body. Larger bodies were stigmatized as lazy and lacking willpower, in addition to being "unhealthy." Thus, striving for thinness was naturalized, as thin bodies were inherently more worthy, beautiful and successful than larger bodies. Within this discourse, fat was the worst possible fate, which normalized seeking thinness at any cost. As Gaga, 67, stated: "Thin is best." Ava, 18, explained: "I remember being 14, and like everyone's calling me fat I was just like, Oh, I don't want to be fat like. Nobody wants to be fat."

A large underlying component of this discourse was that the body should be a source of constant self-improvement. By cultural standards, "improve" means to be slimmer, to build more muscle, to be more toned and to restrict more calories. Yo-yo dieting is often fueled by the potential to improve. As Bobby, 21, described: "What kind of physique could I have if I kept lifting? It is always possible to look leaner and just shredded, have more muscle development." Michael, 30, detailed: "A healthy body looks more pleasing to the eye than someone who is overweight. I looked in the mirror, and I'm like I can't stand this person like I can like, I need to fix this." Cole, 20, explained: "I didn't like the way I looked, I knew that I could have looked better." Participants articulated the ways in which bodies should be a source of relentless critique personally and relationally. In other words, this discourse naturalized that one should never be satisfied with their body, eventually breeding feelings of unworthiness and disdain for one's self. Patrick, 23, reflected: "I feel self-hatred, I just kind of hated myself. If I were to gain more weight and see a higher number on the scale I would think wow I'm being really lazy." The discourse of the superiority of thinness is built on the pervasive notion that thin people are happier. In striving for thinness, not only did bodies change form, but the quality of their lives improved from weight loss. Sarah, 25, reflected how difficult it was to resist the pervasive notion that life would be better at a small size:

> I have a hard time getting out of this mindset that when I'm thinner, I will be able to do this. I will be deserving of that. I will achieve this thing, and allowing myself to experience life while being at the weight I'm at is a bit difficult.

Participants reported being oversaturated with messages, from social media, friends, and family, that an ideal/thin body type equated with worthiness and desirability.

The Discourse of Body Acceptance

Reflecting body positivity (e.g., Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Wood-Barcalow, 2010), the discourse of body acceptance, on the other hand, promoted the acceptance and celebration of all body types and sizes. As Gaga stated: "We need to see all different kinds of people, colors of people, genders, sizes, it's a beautiful thing what's going on now in this world." Jill, 25, added: "You don't need to change your body for anyone or anything." Discourses of body acceptance sought to challenge and dismantle unattainable standards that idealize thinness, breed insecurity, and promote never-enoughness. As Saoirse, 23, emphasized: "There is nothing wrong with being fat, there's nothing inherently bad about it. There's not. You're not morally bad or morally corrupt." Discourses of body acceptance affirm that you are enough as you are and that losing weight is not a panacea of life's problems. As Charlotte, 20, described:

> You are just as good as they are. We're all different, and we're meant to be different. and that's what's beautiful about the world. No one is going to be exactly the same and I just have a great appreciation for so much diversity within my life.

While thinness emerged as a cultural mandate, the discourse of body acceptance promoted the idea that individuals should not be striving toward a smaller size and that others' bodies should not be open for comments. As Jane, 39, emphasized: "I just don't comment on people's bodies, people actually don't have a problem commenting on your body when you're smaller." The discourse of body acceptance attempted to separate one's weight from their worth as a person. As Ava explained:

> You aren't your weight, like you are not that crazy decimal number. That's not what you are like, you have so much else. You have hobbies. You have favorite colors, favorite foods. Favorite this favorite that, and to put yourself in just like a number box, is it's just it's not worth it.

Rather than relentlessly stress about not losing a few pounds, Scarlett, 19, stated: "If these jeans don't fit, I could just get a bigger size jeans, that's okay." Where discourses of the superiority of thinness promoted constant self-critique, the discourses of body acceptance were best captured by Bee's, 20, assertion that "I've made peace where I'm at right now."

Interplay of Discourses in Participants' Talk

Our second goal was to understand what forms of interplay among competing discourses were present as participants talked about their experiences yo-yo dieting. The positioning of discourses took shape in the participants' talk as synchronic interplay, which arises when both discourses are invoked for the purpose of negating, countering, or entertaining the dominant discourse (Baxter, 2011). Overwhelmingly, interviewees attempted to position the discourse of "thinness is everything" as an impossible ideal but struggled to fully favor the discourse of body acceptance.

Negating

Negating serves to deny a discourse or argue for its irrelevance (Baxter, 2011). In doing so, negating, either directly or indirectly, references a discourse in order to reject it. Negating occurred in this sample when participants mentioned elements of the discourse of the superiority of thinness to question its legitimacy and instead center the discourse of body acceptance. Negating commonly appeared in participants' talk in two ways: (a) calling out diet culture as toxic and (b) reflecting on experience in a thin body.

Calling out Diet Culture as Toxic

In calling out diet culture as toxic, participants attempted to displace the supposed inherent naturalness of seeking thinness at all costs by explicitly pointing to the ways in which diet culture is dangerous, backwards, disordered, and fake. Michael shared how he would "count my calories to the calorie -every teaspoon and tablespoon." In reflecting on her own eating behaviors, Marsha, 20, clarified: "It wasn't just disordered eating, it was an eating disorder." Bee reflected on her own patterns as she reflected on her behavior around food: "I'd do this thing where if I ate a bar and it was a 100 calories, I would do jumping jacks till I burned 100 calories." Scarlett explained: "I'm not a size 2 anymore because I'm not a prepubescent child" which indirectly implies that it was not natural for women to have the bodies of girls. Morgan, 23, shared coming to this realization of how dangerous and toxic diet-culture was in her own eating disorder recovery:

> I was like big on eating disorder tumblr when I was in middle school. I definitely felt pressure to look a certain way. Even when I was in eating disorder treatment, I felt pressure to like, be like skinny enough to like deserve to be there. One of the other girls there, she was a lot worse off than I was, she told me "I wish I was as skinny as you." She was clearly delusional. She actually passed away a few years later, but it was just like one of the things that showed me, I actually have to get better because this is really dangerous.

Participants negated the superiority of thinness by negating its legitimacy, calling it an "illusion" and "fake." Scarlett described realizing "people are using filters or altering their body, they're not being truthful, they just want to sell something or promote themselves." Jade, 22, said that because of how ingrained the link was between thinness and a fulfilling life, she told herself: "What I'm seeing isn't reality, and it takes time to unlearn these really toxic, backwards mindsets." Jake, 21, argued: "It's a bunch of malarkey: There's always kind of just bullshit behind all of it. Like YouTube workout videos saying hit this [amount of weight lifted] and that and that you'll look like this."

Participants also called out the language used to describe how different bodies are treated when posting pictures. As Scarlett shared: "When the skinny person posts something… 'You're gorgeous,' and then like for like bigger women, it's like, 'Oh, you're so brave for posting this', and I think that altered language is really weird." Finally, interviewees described how viewing the body as a site of continual self-improvement would put them in a relentless cycle of yo-yo dieting and voiced how there was no "arriving" at a perfect weight. As Sara, 21, highlighted: "Every time I lose weight, it's comments like *wow you're so skinny*, and after I eat it's like *wow you're so fat, you need to lose more.* Nothing is ever enough."

Reflecting on Personal Experience in a Thin Body

As yo-yo dieters, participants experienced several cycles of weight fluctuation and used their own personal experience of obtaining a thinner body to directly challenge the premise that a thin body inherently entailed a happier, more fulfilling life. As Michael described: "Am I shredded? Am I five percent body fat? No, absolutely not. Do I want to be there? No, because when I was at 10% body fat in 2019, I was pretty miserable." Jill similarly reflected: "The smallest version of myself is not the best version of myself." In reflecting upon their personal experience, participants brought authenticity and conviction in attempting to marginalize the power of the superiority of thinness. Indeed, interviewees argued that those who believed their quality of life would shift dramatically if only they took up less space or were more muscular needed to recognize this as an illusion. As Jade asserted: "I would say like nine times out of 10, I promise that your brain's lying to you." In the process of negating, participants would often respond to the dominant assumption that thinness brought happiness, reject it, and assert that they were actually extremely unhappy in that body. As Rachel, 23, explained:

> Sometimes I'll look through like old pictures of like when I was really skinny. I'll be like Wow! I think I look so good, like I kind of want to look like that again. But then I remember to talk to myself and be like you were so miserable back then. I'm happy with where I am right now.

Focusing solely on weight as a determinant of happiness was not only misleading but also not representative of several interviewees' personal truth. As Charlotte described:

> I look back at pictures of myself in high school when I was like 140-150 pounds and I remember how in those moments I hated myself and I thought I was so fat and ugly, and now at 200 pounds, and I'm feeling a little bit better about myself than I did then, because how you perceive your body is really doesn't have anything to do with what weight you are at.

Overall, participants detailed how happiness was complex and depended much more heavily on relationships, having a sense of purpose, life circumstances, and mental well-being than on weighing a certain number.

Countering

Countering occurred in participants' voices when they acknowledged the legitimacy of some components of the discourse of the superiority of thinness, particularly the power it held to influence self-worth, while attempting to validate and give power to the discourse of body acceptance. We found two forms of countering: (a) engaging in strategic consumption of social media, and (b) embracing intuitive eating and exercise.

Engaging in Strategic Consumption of Social Media

Countering came, in large part, when participants reflected on the power of social media to influence how they perceived themselves. Indeed, participants voiced the harm of being oversaturated by images promoting thin bodies, workouts, and diets. In doing so, they acknowledged that social media was often filled with messages that promoted unhealthy behavior or mindsets around food, which could be extremely triggering to their own feelings of self-worth and dieting behavior. However, interviewees countered that strategic use of social media helped them seek out accounts that cultivated a sense of body acceptance rather than promoting thinness at any cost. As Marsha voiced: "If I gain it or lose it now, it will never be as bad now because I

know myself now and I know my triggers and I realize when something is starting to bother me more." Beth, 18, explained: "When it comes to social media, I have started to follow people that are more body positive or just watching things that are about like the importance of loving yourself." Sarah similarly echoed that in her own life:

> I try to unfollow all of the influencers, who promoted thinness as the thing, and tried to follow some people who were a bit bigger, and I definitely think that's helped. It was like I think the beginning of me being able to understand that I wasn't alone, and that there were other people that were okay with where they were."

As Jill explained:

> I think that has helped a lot like I'll follow like fashion accounts, but of people with my body type. Because for the longest time I would follow fashion accounts, but they'd be like size zero size two and then, when I put on those clothes they don't look like that. So I just think representation of different body types were the [most] helpful for me personally.

Emphasizing that Thin is not Synonymous with Healthy

Overwhelmingly, participants admitted they did not want to lose weight for health reasons but rather positioned health as a cover for weight loss that was instead sought after for aesthetic reasons. As Saoirse admitted: "I did it because I want to look hot, but I told everyone I did it for my health." One way participants attempted to counter the discourse of the superiority of thinness in their talk was by emphasizing that thin bodies were not synonymous with healthy bodies. While participants had much experience caught in a yo-yo cycle of striving toward a certain number of the scale, Saoirse argued that in terms of health, "those numbers meant nothing." Rose, 22, explained: "I had to stop associating eating healthy with weight loss, because whenever I would want to lose weight, I would say okay so I'm just going to eat healthy." Some participants who were athletes highlighted how food was fuel and that their thinnest selves were a source of limitation and lost opportunities on the field. Luna, 18, reflected on how restricting her calories impacted her athletic performance as a softball player:

> I was a power hitter. I was 3 and 4 in the line up, so mass was important. And when I lost that weight I would move down because I couldn't hit as far. I'd also get so incredibly tired during practices, because I was like low on carbs, I was also under-eating. So it didn't help.

Embracing intuitive eating and exercise

Where the discourse of the superiority of thinness normalized restrictive eating and encouraged individuals to ignore their hunger and fullness cues, participants argued that there was no one-size-fits-all approach to health and wellness. Instead, they countered that while eating healthy and working out was important, they needed to re-learn how to tune into and trust their body's natural hunger cues as well as our emotions around food and exercise. As Rose explained: "How I broke this cycle was just by not sticking to a specific diet plan, not being too strict and following crazy fad diets. Just go with the flow and not put that much pressure on ourselves." Marty, 21, advised: "Integrate certain things into your everyday life, like developing habits that are healthy, and also sustainable rather than being so strict." Rather than focusing their goals on hitting an ideal number, participants instead reframed their mindset to focus on strength. As Scarlett explained: "I want to be strong instead of a number kind of goal."

Participants explained they had to retrain themselves to strive for nourishment over thinness. Jade recalled realizing that happiness was not the continual quest for a certain body type and "how liberating it was to eat whenever I want to. Like if I wanted to eat pasta at 9 p.m. or at 3 in the morning" and "I'm not like counting calories, and like I'm not over exercising. I'm just trying to eat a little bit more healthier, but without really restricting myself." Some participants rejected an all or nothing restriction, arguing that it was okay to give themselves permission to eat a variety of foods without guilt or shame, but in moderation. As Jim, 20, 12xplainned: "I think eating was probably the main thing that I'd struggle with like just eating candy and stuff like that…eat them in like… moderation." As opposed to the rigidity of diet culture, several participants argued that body acceptance also meant embracing self-compassion and being gentle with yourself, as opposed to self-critical. Acknowledging that because diet culture was so ingrained in U.S. culture, it was a formidable struggle to counter, Kaylee, 21, explained:

> It took me like a long time to get here. But I'm at a place where I can honor my hunger and my satiety, so when I'm hungry, I eat. I stop eating when I'm not hungry anymore, and I allow myself to eat like anything I want which feels really good.

Entertaining

Entertaining is a form of synchronic interplay in which multiple discursive alternatives are each given voice. In other words, it is where more than one truth is recognized. Entertaining emerged in the voices of participants' talk when they described support for body positivity but their hesitancy to embrace it for themselves. As Adam, 28, stated: "I love it [body positivity] for other people I hate it for myself." Valerie, 18, similarly echoed that body acceptance in other people is fine, but that it is not for her: "I mean, if you're chubby, if you're overweight, that's fine. Do what you want to do. It's just not okay for me. To be happier in my own skin, I would prefer if I was not overweight." Wendy, 70, simultaneously validated the discourse of body acceptance while admitting that, for her personally, heavier weights were unacceptable: "I just think that people need to be accepted for how their body just naturally is. But in terms of weight, you could say that I'm being prejudiced, but I truly believe that I don't believe in accepting obesity." Marty similarly echoed the sentiment of celebrating body differences while experiencing dissonance surrounding accepting obesity because of its perceived health consequences:

> I feel like I have mixed feelings. I definitely appreciate the movement, I think that everybody should feel comfortable with how they look, no matter how they look. There's kind of two sides to that sort of thing, I feel like there's a certain side where it's like promoting, being bigger, like being bigger statistically, will make you die sooner…like America's kind of obesity epidemic is pretty alarming. Some of the health risks should be taken more seriously than they might be.

The power of the discourse of the superiority of thinness was so strong that theoretically, participants wanted to accept all bodies. However, in actuality, they could not condone accepting bodies of a larger size in their daily lives. For instance, while George, 19, argued that "no one should bully you about being fat or tell you to lose weight," he simultaneously argued: "In terms of saying fat is okay, that's biologically not true, right?" This statement reflects the complex and often contradictory way participants attempted to recognize multiple truths personally and relationally.

Discussion

Through in-depth interviews of 38 self-professed weight cyclers, we uncovered that participants articulated two main discourses–the superiority of thinness and body acceptance. Participants' voices speak to the importance of dismantling oppressive discourses of thinness and explaining why we hold so tightly to them, in spite of how unattainable thinness is for most people. Consistent with U.S. society, which still strongly favors thinness even in the face of shifting rhetoric and cultural norms, interviewees acknowledged unrealistic cultural body standards yet grappled with truly embracing body acceptance and positivity. The interplay between these discourses manifested through negating (*calling out diet culture as toxic, reflecting on personal experience in a thin body*), countering (*emphasizing that thin is not synonymous with healthy, embracing intuitive eating*), and entertaining (*acknowledging support for body positivity for others while not embracing it for themselves*).

Understanding the interplay between discourses allows us to better conceptualize the ways differing weight messages can cause nuanced feelings and unattainable expectations regarding weight. Participants actively located and relocated themselves within taken-for-granted assumptions of the perfect body, often constructing themselves as falling short. In doing so, they demonstrated the difficulty of challenging centuries-old narratives about beauty, happiness, and success as tied to a specific body. Discordant discourses shed light on the ways in which individuals balance and negotiate these messages in their daily lives and how yo-yo dieting is likely perpetuated and sustained, as at points interviewees seemed able to break away from cultural norms by accepting their body but later detailed succumbing to social and interpersonal pressure to be thin, sought to lose weight, could not sustain often rapid weight loss, and invariably regained weight, causing them to frequently feel shame and stigma and continuing the cycle.

Implications

Relational dialectics theory is particularly useful for exploring yo-yo dieting. By identifying and unpacking competing discourses, RDT illustrates the complexity of how individuals who have weight cycled encounter and negotiate challenges within the multiple layers of societal expectations (distal sites), interactions with family and friends (proximal sites), and their own individual identities. The power within the superiority of thinness functioned to reinforce individual responsibility and alignment with normalized body ideals and constructions of health. Feelings of failure when participants were unable to attain these ideas hold powerful implications for individual and relational well-being and undergird how the perpetuation of the superiority of thinness continues to damage our self-worth. While participants were critical of diet culture and the pressure to relentlessly improve and critique their bodies, it is impossible for individuals themselves to single-handedly dismantle culturally sanctioned, systemic knowledge that promotes fatphobia. Instead, this requires broader questioning of the ways we privilege certain understandings in our families, schools, doctor offices, and in our media.

This study showcases the negative impact these competing discourses can have on mental health, as participants showed great concern for addressing diet culture as toxic, yet this acknowledgment remained secondary to the thin ideal discourse. In this way, our study showcases how broader cultural tensions surrounding weight are voiced at a microlevel and how, while it may be difficult to change broader social norms around weight, at an individual, interpersonal level, friends and families could be intentional about talking with one another or socializing children about talking about weight and health and food and bodies in a healthy way. After all, our investigation underscores how powerful weight-related comments are, especially in a society that

still privileges unrealistic body standards for both men and women. It is difficult to silence broader cultural scripts, but they can be chipped away through interpersonal communication.

Our research also extends previous work (e.g., Campos, 2006), suggesting that fear of being fat has less to do with health concerns than it does with the way fat bodies are perceived. While, in more recent decades, researchers have observed a shift away from the thin ideal and towards the athletic ideal as a "healthier" alternative (Thompson et al., 2004), many participants in the present study used the cover of "health" when seeking to lose weight for aesthetic reasons. Consistent with previous research (Liechty et al., 2006), participants highlight how body ideals are often internalized within our family and peer groups, as well as in our consumption of media. Participants emphasized the importance of strategic consumption of social media, as they described being inundated with exposure to unrealistic and edited images. While there are many benefits to the use of social media, such as peer support, information sharing, and connection, participants highlight how social media can reinforce and normalize disordered eating.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the cultural discourses of individuals who have engaged in yo-yo dieting, several limitations should be considered. First, the majority of participants were white women, showcasing a lack of diversity. This limits the generalizability of the findings and may not represent the weight cycling experiences of individuals from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Second, despite our participants' age range from 18 to70 years old, the average age was 26. This age group is more likely to use and be more influenced by social media platforms, which could impact their perceptions and behaviors related to yo-yo dieting. The findings may not fully capture the experiences of older adults or those less exposed to social media. Additionally, this study did not collect socioeconomic data from participants. Factors such as income level, education, and employment status may impact individuals' experience with dieting behaviors. Finally, this study relied on self-reported data, and it is possible participants may have underrepresented or misrepresented their experiences with yo-yo dieting due to social stigma or bias.

Future research could further unpack America's unique cultural moment, as a new class of weight-loss drugs highlights the precarious progress of body acceptance. On the one hand, these drugs could ideally foster our recognition of metabolism and appetite as biological facts and not "moral" choices (Tolentino, 2023), but simultaneously "harden our intolerance of fat" (Rosen, 2023). While participants in this study struggled to fully embrace body acceptance, there were moments when they called out diet culture as dangerous, backwards, disordered, and fake. This critique illustrates a potential shift in tone and attitude toward thinness-at-all-costs ideals. However, in an era of highly medicalized weight loss shepherded by drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy, new tensions emerge that may threaten or disrupt delicate progress toward body acceptance.

Future research could benefit from specific longitudinal studies examining how cultural discourses around body image and weight fluctuate over time, particularly in response to medical advancements and media portrayal of weight-loss drugs. For example, a longitudinal design could investigate how exposure to such discourses in media and personal circles influences body image, self-acceptance, and mental health across years, providing a deeper look at evolving tensions and acceptance in lived experiences. Additionally, future studies might explore cross-sectional comparisons by age or generational cohort to understand how younger and older adults internalize and navigate these discourses differently. Finally, future research could involve mixed-methods studies that not only quantify the relationship between weight cycling, dieting behaviors, and mental health outcomes but also capture experiences of these cycles in detail. This approach would

allow researchers to explore potential associations between the frequency or intensity of weight cycling and the severity of psychological outcomes like anxiety, depression, or body dissatisfaction.

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