

Sacred Heart University

The Need for Transparency in Diet Programs and their Marketing Campaigns

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The Issue with Fad Diets Marketing Schemes

Fad diets began to make their first appearance in society in the mid 1800's as a way for people to lose weight and attain a desired figure. While the number of diet programs have increased exponentially over the years, obesity still remains a major topic of concern and problem that Americans of all ages face. Adults, teenagers, and even children fall victim to obesity. While the media preaches that certain fad diet programs and dietary supplements are quick fixes to losing the weight, there is not a high level of transparency that is communicated through these messages. There is a lack of conversation regarding the possible negative effects that following a specific diet regimen cause. Social media markets these products and diets as an easy, sustainable way to help overweight individuals or anyone looking to lose a few pounds get a step closer to attaining a healthier lifestyle. Little do consumers realize the detrimental effects that these dietary programs and supplements have on their overall health and wellness. While there have been actions taken against diet companies and social media companies to hold them accountable for promoting a product or supplement that does not have the consumers best interest in mind, there is still much room for further improvement. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) needs to enforce transparency among fad diet programs when marketing to consumers by requiring them to state if they align with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Dietary Guidelines, because they are often marketed to the public in an unclear way that can be detrimental to consumer's health and wellness.

Emergence of Fad Diets

How did the market for fad diets emerge in the first place? When Americans moved from the cities to the suburbs after WWII, they started walking and moving around less, and their physiques took a toll. As a result, females started exercising more in order to remain desirable

and beautiful for their spouses, and dieting became prevalent among women in the 1960's (Hampton). "The most successful propagator of women's dieting was Weight Watchers. Dieting and mechanized exercise equipment offered women shortcuts to the body they desired" (Hampton). Ever since, following a diet and exercise routine has been an important and a routine act in many American lives to this day.

While Americans are aware of their desired body types, many Americans still struggle to attain their physique desires. Americans are consistently trying new fad diets and supplements that claim to aid in weight loss, yet the end results from these diets and products never seem to last. The weight loss industry is a \$66 billion dollar industry, and one of the most advertised, according to the U.S. Weight Loss & Diet Control Market (Johnson). When examining the hundreds of weight loss programs and supplements on the market, it is interesting to see the similar messaging behind these products and programs. Almost all diet programs claim that followers of the diet gain real, lasting results, when in reality the results are temporary, and the behaviors and tactics that aided in losing the weight are simply not sustainable. The diet programs in this industry market their products and programs in a way that creates unrealistic expectations for consumers. The methods and instructions can also be misunderstood and even taken to extreme levels, which can cause disordered eating habits that create lasting impacts on one's physical, mental, and overall health.

Fad Diets & The Media's Role in their Popularity

A fad diet is a diet that promises weight loss or other health advantages. These advantages and claims are not supported by scientific facts; they are also most often considered to be very restrictive. Boston Medical Center said that of the estimated "45 million Americans who go on a diet annually, 50% of them use fad diets" (Johnson). Some popular fad diets include

the South Beach Diet, the Atkins Diet, Weight Watchers, the Zone Diet, the Ketogenic Diet, the Juicing Diet, just to name a few, and they most often involve unhealthy, unbalanced eating plans. They “gain their recognition and popularity through media efforts, including bestselling books or a heavy rotation by public relations teams” (Johnson). Along with the promises of fast weight loss, these diets promise great physical health as well. The designers of these diets “try to convince people with pseudoscientific arguments despite not being based on established scientific results. Celebrities, as well as health professionals, are usually public supporters of the fad diets, which makes the fad diets even more attractive to consumers who are looking to lose weight in a quick manner” (Ignacio 91). Celebrities and medical professionals are individuals that the everyday American looks up to. When companies and diet programs promote the success stories and recommendations from individuals of power and status like celebrities and medical professionals, it is a strategy to override the little science backing the program and gain popularity, exposure, and interest among consumers.

Obesity Rates & Fad Diets Both on the Rise

With the amount of fad diets that are marketed to American consumers, it is disturbing that the overweight and obesity rates in American are actually increasing. The number of Americans who are considered to be obese and overweight are continuously rising because Americans are not eating the proper foods and nutrients recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Dietary Guidelines. They are also often consuming much larger portion sizes than recommended. Also, many foods that are less expensive are also low in nutritional value. Overall, these poor eating patterns, including eating too much or not enough of certain nutrients, are causing negative effects on American’s health. In fact, “about half of all American adults—117 million people—have one or more preventable, chronic diseases, many of

which are related to poor quality eating patterns and physical inactivity. Rates of these chronic, diet-related diseases continue to rise, and they come not only with increased health risks, but also at high cost” (“Current Dietary Guidelines” 9). It is evident that poor eating choices and patterns are linked to chronic diseases, and even though the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines are available and intended to be used by Americans to guide them in consuming a healthy diet, they are not taking advantage of these guidelines and their health is at risk. “The prevalence of overweight and obesity has risen and remained high for the past 25 years, while Healthy Eating Index (HEI) scores, a measure of how food choices align with the Dietary Guidelines, have remained low” (“Current Dietary Guidelines” 23). This shows that while the obesity rates are on the rise in America, the healthy and appropriate food intake recommended for Americans remains low.

So what exactly are the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines?

The United States Department of Agriculture has a set of Dietary Guidelines, based on medical and scientific knowledge, that is designed to help individuals of all ages consume a healthy diet. The information throughout the Dietary Guidelines are also used as the basis when “developing Federal food, nutrition, and health policies and programs” (“Current Dietary Guidelines” 13). The general public, media, businesses, the food industry, and State and local governments are additional audiences of the Dietary Guidelines. The guidelines emphasize that a healthy eating pattern is not a rigid plan and guideline. Instead, the guidelines should be looked at as a framework that is adaptable, making Americans realize that they can still enjoy foods they want, all while following the guidelines. A portion of the Dietary Guidelines consist of five overarching guidelines that encourage healthy eating patterns:

- 1.) Follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan.
- 2.) Focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount.

- 3.) Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake.
- 4.) Shift to healthier food and beverage choices.
- 5.) Support healthy eating patterns for all.

Within these guidelines and healthy eating patterns, the USDA also recommends a variety of vegetables from all subgroups, whole fruits, grains (at least half of which are whole), fat-free or low fat dairy, oils, and a variety of protein foods (“Current Dietary Guidelines” 34). All of these recommendations are interconnected, which is why they should be applied to American’s daily lives and eating patterns in their entirety. These guidelines should be implemented in the foundation for all diets because they are designed to have Americans health and best interest in mind.

The Deceiving Marketing Strategies

While the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines should be taken into account when creating a diet or recommending a certain way of eating, they are unfortunately not. Instead, companies create the programs and diets that they want based on their own principles and hope to gain a following. There are different strategies that companies use to their market diets and products in an appealing and desirable way to the consumers. According to a report published by the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, “Marketers employ strategies to build relationships between consumers and products or services through associations with a brand to increase awareness, loyalty, purchases, and sales” (Englund). Consumers often are under the impression that by buying a certain popular, trendy product or by following a certain diet program, they will be a part of the in crowd. Alan Levinovitz, a published author, and professor at James Madison University, told the *Science of Us* that “Aligning yourself with a popular way of eating gives you

a sense of belonging” (Dahl). People like to feel like they belong, so when they see a famous celebrity or person of status support a diet or brand on social media, consumers are more likely to join in, resulting in a bandwagon effect marketing strategy. When companies have a strong social media presence, it puts them in a good position to implement the bandwagon effect. Often, influencers or brand ambassadors for diet supplements, programs, and companies share promotional information or a discount code to consumers. Dr. Nicola Davies says these actions “inspire a desire to win or purchase the same product in a new group of people, who then share the promotion. The result is that more people are exposed, and more customers are willing to purchase the product. A bandwagon and a snowball effect in one” (Davies). As a consumer, seeing the products used and advertised on social media especially by people of status encourages them to purchase the product or service, while working in the companies favor.

These strategies that companies use to market their programs throughout the media, specifically social media, seem to be successful on the surface. These food marketing strategies result in attracting more people to join in on the diet or buy the products, which is the ultimate goal for these programs. A report published by the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* discussed the effects that these food marketing strategies have on consumer’s health and it stated that the marketing practices have in fact contributed to unhealthy dietary patterns. The journal suggests that the strategies that are used by industry actors to market and communicate these diets and ways of eating to consumers should be “leveraged and applied to promote consumer demand for healthy food and beverage products that support healthy eating patterns recommended by Dietary Guidelines for Americans” (England). Implementing a new strategy when marketing food that promotes products and eating patterns recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans will help gain support for following a healthy diet and eating pattern.

When seeing a diet marketed in the media, especially one backed and followed by people of status or fame, it encourages others to join in. But, if the program does not follow the key recommendations from the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and these professionals still continue to support and promote the use of the program and diet, then ethically that decision is up to them, and the way consumers interpret the intentions of the diet is at stake.

These followers of fad diets and programs also are led to believe that they must buy the recommended products and supplements from these diets or companies in order to increase and maximize their weight loss. Once the weight loss is achieved, most share their success stories online. This cycle of dieting, buying the products, losing the weight, and sharing the success of weight loss is seen quite often, especially on social media, and consumers become obsessed with seeing results. If you saw a post on social media where someone shared their weight loss journey and raved about the results, wouldn't you want to try too to achieve similar results? The sneaky thing about learning about a diet on social media is the fact that it may not be scientifically safe for consumers to follow, and the people who are achieving these results may be taking matters to the extreme. Dieticians and experts say that influencers and celebrities that are promoting these diets on social media and promoting healthy, clean eating patterns has led to a rise in orthorexia, which is when people develop obsessive thoughts about what they eat (Howie). This rise in orthorexia that is causing consumers to suffer is due to the compulsive behaviors these influencers practice, like reading labels, eliminating whole food groups, etc.

Overall, the way that diet programs market themselves to the public through the media is clearly an issue that our society faces today. Americans are being manipulated into starting these programs, without fully knowing and being made aware of the negative effects the diet can have on one's health and has had on others. There is a food well-being model (FWB Model) that is

used to identify the different influences that cultures, economics, the environment and policy factors have on the everyday consumer's attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and beliefs related to food socialization, food marketing, and food literacy (Englund). Marketing environments over the past 2 decades have rarely supported the food well-being model; Instead, marketing efforts regarding diets have supported and promoted energy-dense and nutrient poor processed foods, energy dense meaning foods high in calories and nutrient poor meaning foods low in nutrients. Eating patterns like this that are marketed to consumers are likely more convenient, less expensive, and more economical. If the diets do promote foods that are lower in calories, they often recommend patterns that do not meet recommended nutrient requirements. If these marketing approaches supported the FWB Model as well as aligned with the USDA's Dietary Guidelines and encouraged healthy consumption of food and nutrients, there would be a greater influence on consumers diet-related behaviors and support the consumers ultimate health.

Knowing that specific marketing campaigns used to promote diet programs and brands prove to be an effective strategy for these programs, there needs to be more transparency when marketing these campaigns. Promoting components of a healthy dietary pattern suggested by the United States Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines and stating in what ways the program meets or falls short of these recommendations is necessary. Also, publicly reporting the goals that the program strives to achieve should be enforced and made necessary so that accountability can be held if speculation on intentions should occur. When looking to develop a new diet and create a new marketing campaign to market the diet, it is important to consider how brands and marketing strategies truly impact and influence consumers emotions, behaviors, and cognitions around food.

Congress's Stance on Social Media Regulation

It is evident that the weight loss industry has continuously grown year after year. In a *New York Times* article, Senator Ron Wyden claimed that “The growth is being prompted by claim-whatever-you-want medical advertising. To promote competition within the health-care industry, the Reagan Administration adapted a hands-off policy, in regulation. The Government agencies that should be ensuring the authenticity of these claims are looking the other way (O’Neill). This industry growth is due in part to the hands-off approach and policy that is in place. Congress realizes that social media platforms have a tendency to push and publish bias and misinformation surrounding multiple topics. Recently bias towards certain political parties on social media has been brought to Congress’s attention. The leaders of Facebook and Twitter had to testify in front of Congress about how the companies handle incorrect or misleading advertisements, specifically in regard to politics. While the leaders of these social media companies have been facing scrutiny about the harmful content and spreading of disinformation on their platforms, they have reacted "by placing warning labels near content with false and damaging information. But the measures they implemented were often inconsistent, belated, and accompanied by unforeseen consequences” (Padelli). So, while misinformation and bias surrounding politics is clearly seen on social media platforms and Congress is investigating, misinformation surrounding the weight loss and diet industry is also a topic on Congress’s radar and a topic of concern for these social media companies.

Social Media Platforms Regulation Efforts

Social media companies are also aware that harmful information can be published on their platforms, and the content that is being posted can have dangerous effects on society which

is why actions have been taken to reduce the spread of harmful information and inappropriate content. Facebook, which owns Instagram, reported that they have over 35,000 people worldwide working to improve the security and safety of the site and remove inappropriate content, including nudity and sexual activity, harassment, bullying, fake accounts, spam, suicide, self-injury, etc. (Reality Check Team). Unfortunately, the marketing of diet programs and supplements on social media sites are not considered in this harmful information category, but they should be considered especially when looking to remove inappropriate content. False, non-transparent information is being marketed and promoted about these diets, supplements, and programs. Diet companies, influencers, and ambassadors post and spread information about the programs and supplements and only share possible positive outcomes, while excluding the negatives. This misinforms and deceives consumers, and as a result people's health are at risk.

Overabundance of Information & Algorithms Used

Not only is there misinformation surrounding diets and supplements, but there is also an overabundance of information on social media platforms regarding diets, supplements, perfect physiques, etc. When users are looking up diets, weight loss plans, etc., the media sites take note and put algorithms in place, which continues to push more and more of the same type of content (Fox). This content takes over user's whole feeds and limits exposure to other views and information. These systems in place that police social media have consequences on people's health. This issue of policing social media content is seen in many instances. Recently, social media has been known to influence and interfere with the U.S. presidential election and spreading fake news. Pushing certain information constantly can be harmful because it causes users to constantly be exposed to different dieting methods, supplements, and perfect body types, which can cause people to compare themselves and affect their mental health and personal body

image (Fox). This overabundance of information and content surrounding the diet industry on social media raises popularity and awareness for these fad diets, supplements, and programs.

A Proposed Solution to Regulate the Conversation

The Forum of Information and Democracy is a nonprofit organization that published a report offering 250 recommendations for governments and digital platforms on how to end the informational chaos caused by social media and other online platforms that pose threats to democracies. The report suggests that social networks should “display a correction to every single person who was exposed to misinformation, if independent fact-checkers identify a story as false, and implement circuit breakers so that newly viral content is temporarily stopped from spreading while it is fact-checked” (Fox). The report suggests that “banning or limiting micro-targeting could reduce the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Micro-targeting can be dangerous not only because it invades the user’s privacy but because the information provided is shaped for the targeted audience” (“Policy Framework for Working Group on Infodemics”). When information surrounding diets and supplements are specifically targeting a certain user on social media in a consistent manner, there is a higher chance that the user will believe, follow, or incorporate that information into their lives.

FDA Efforts to Enforce Transparency

There have been efforts taken by the FDA to enforce transparency among diet supplements and products on the market. While the FDA does not have the responsibility to ensure or approve that a dietary supplement product is safe before it is marketed to consumers, the department does have the responsibility to show that a dietary supplement is unsafe *after* the dietary products are marketed, and then actions to remove the product from the market can then

be taken (Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition). The FDA, the Department of Justice, and other partners have “pursued civil and criminal cases against more than 100 makers and marketers of dietary supplements” in order “to unveil new tools to increase awareness of the risks unlawful dietary supplements pose to consumers” (“Justice Department and Federal Partners Announce Enforcement Actions of Dietary Supplement Cases”). The FDA recognizes that there is a lack of transparency surrounding diet supplements, which is why they have taken legal actions against the makers and marketers of these dietary supplements.

Implementing USDA Dietary Guidelines

While it may seem like following a diet program is the only way to lose weight and maintain a healthy lifestyle, it is certainly not. The United States Department of Agriculture has Dietary Guidelines in place to help Americans make healthy food and lifestyle choices on a daily basis. When diets use methods that go against these dietary guidelines, the consumers best interest and health are not the top priority in mind.

The USDA Dietary Guidelines include key recommendations for healthy eating patterns, in which diet programs should be required to promote and advertise whether the program meets or does not meet these recommendations. The guidelines include following a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan. This emphasizes that all food and beverage choices matter, so choosing a healthy eating patterns with an appropriate calorie level intake will help maintain and achieve a healthy body weight, ensure necessary nutrients are consumed, and reduce the risk of chronic disease. If a diet program promotes and supports the recommended dietary components, it is a strong sign that the diet will have optimal benefits of the consumer in mind.

When learning about a new diet, it is important to take note of where the diet was being advertised. Diet trends, especially promoted on social media, including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, can promote unhealthy eating habits and poor diet practices (Skitzki). People on social media can easily scroll through their feeds and “see posts from accounts dedicated to selling diet solution products or sharing diets secrets. Celebrities and Instagram influencers also share trends that include juice cleanses and cutting out food groups like sugars or carbohydrates” (Skitzhi). While it is quite common and normalized to take advice from strangers on social media regarding weight loss tips and tricks, it is important to take the advice with a grain of salt and caution. Different techniques work for different people, so while say dramatically cutting calories and eliminating carbs from a diet may help one person lose weight, it may cause serious health issues for someone else. Another factor to consider when discovering a diet program or trend on social media is the unrealistic expectations that are set for the followers of the diet. Social media marketing regarding diets promote unrealistic lifestyles for consumers. According to an article published by Shape.com in January 2018, the article explains that many of the diets and trends glorified on social media, “are not as healthy as they seem. Not only are these trends unhealthy, but they are also potentially harmful. Limited food group diets and limited nutrient diets cannot be lived on long-term” (Skitzki). When a food group is completely eliminated from a diet and dramatic changes in eating behaviors and lifestyle changes are glamorized, consumers may not be aware of the real consequences and impacts that these changes can have on their health. Overall, the use of social media marketing of diets trends can create unrealistic expectations and body image issues among consumers and cause negative health implications.

Conclusion

It is evident that there is a lack of transparency among diets, diet programs, and diet supplements and products when marketing to the media and public. Many people struggle to accept the fact that the program, supplement, or diet that they started did not work *not* because it was simply unrealistic. Instead, people assume that it did not work for them because they were not strong enough to resist temptations. The restrictiveness of fad diets causes a yo-yo effect, where the consumer eats what the diet recommended for a certain amount of time, but then goes right back to the original way they ate because it is too difficult and unattainable. Losing weight is possible while following the USDA's Dietary Guidelines. But when users start fad diets and go off the diet for some time and return to their previous eating patterns, the weight re-appears, the cycle continues, and the next new diet that claims it is "proven to work" is started.

To end this continuous cycle of following a fad diet, seeing results, losing those results, all while acquiring negative health consequences, companies and programs should be required to be 100% transparent when marketing these products. It should be made necessary to state all the "rules" and recommendations that the diet requires, and effectively communicate through the marketing campaigns how this way of eating aligns or misaligns with the United States Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. By enforcing transparency when communicating these messages online, consumers will be less likely to be manipulated by the surface level positive results that these programs and products preach. Instead, they will be exposed to the positive and negative effects that the diet has had on others health, wellness, and quality of life.

In our society, consumers have the power to make their own decisions and form their own opinions, but with a lack of transparency in the diet industry, judgement is blurred and often

ambiguous. By implementing a requirement forcing current and future diet campaigns to state where they align or do not align with the USDA's Dietary Guidelines, public trust will increase surrounding this industry. American's will be more aware of where the diet program, product, and eating regimen meets or falls short of the government recommendations regarding diet patterns, and their expectations will be better managed before deciding whether or not to start a new diet or buy and consume new products.

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