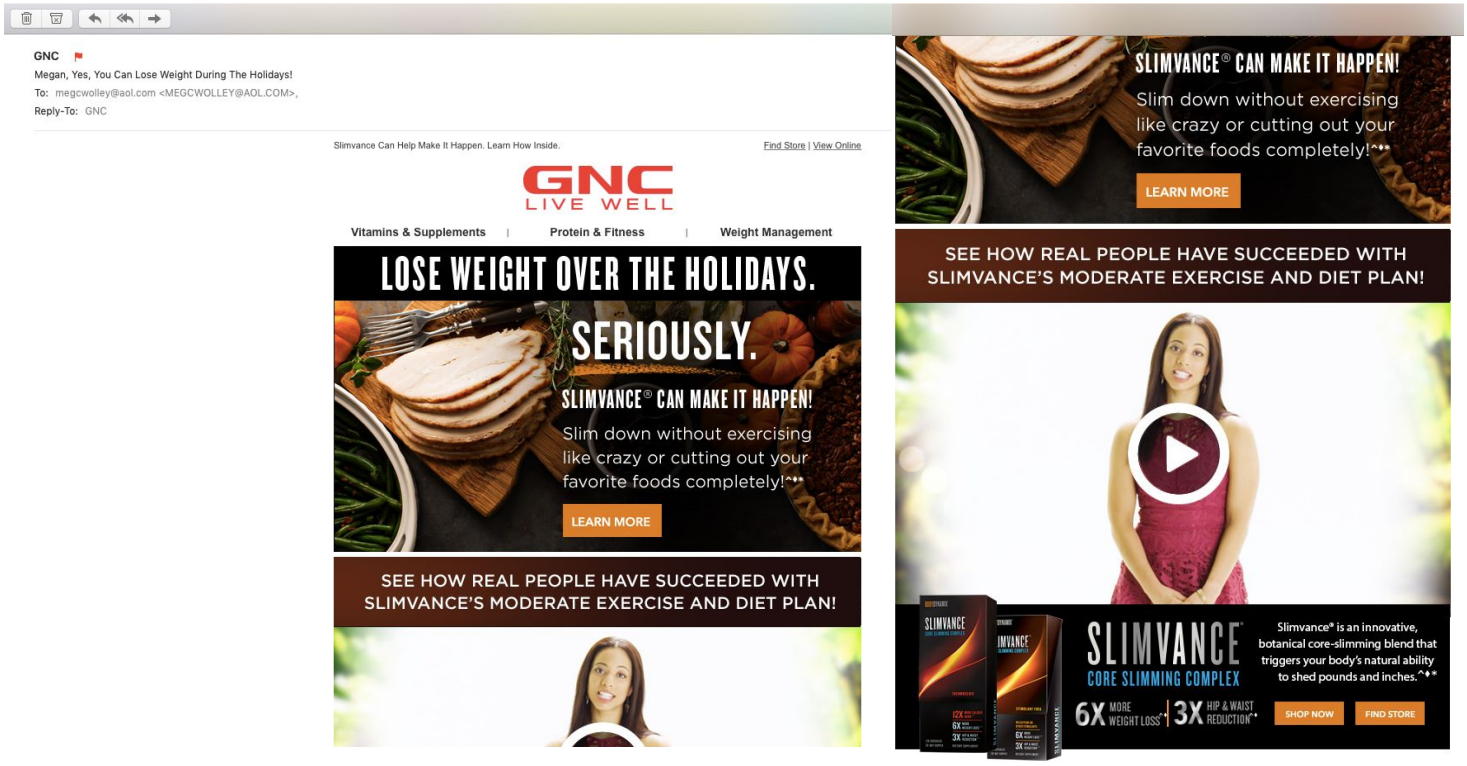
# Live Well: A Food Ethnography

With the growing rates of obesity in America, diet and nutrition companies have flourished. These companies market towards young to middle aged, able-bodied people who seek out secret cures for their struggles with weight loss and/or muscle gain. The popularity of these industries, which mainly sell artificially created foods that lack well-rounded nutrition, represent the larger issues of disconnection with food in the country. We have lost traditions that tie food to a sense of belonging, community, family, energy, joy. Thus, large diet and nutrition companies market to these demographics about how to achieve an ideal body. These ideal bodies are considered to emulate health and strength. In this essay, I will focus on how GNC markets themselves as having natural weight loss solutions for the general public, despite most of their products being manufactured in a laboratory.

I observed a GNC store in Hadley, Massachusetts, for approximately thirty minutes. In my time there, a single worker (a large, buff man), said only one sentence to me: “Do you need help finding anything?” It was a kind sentiment, a one-liner that most food and clothing stores practice with each new customer. There was no further conversation, just his eyes following me around as I browsed. As for the set-up of the store, it almost resembled a laboratory: white walls, clean and organized shelves, bright lights. At the entrance of the store, there were shelves of protein-infused cookies, brownies, bars, muffins, peanut butter, and more. Towards the back of the store, the walls are lined with BEYOND RAW Products, with a large sign that read “GET MASSIVE, GO MOLECULAR.” This play on words comes across as sportive, but it also represents the overall theme of the store: to lose weight and gain muscle using their products.

This is also seen with other GNC products, such as “Slimvance:” a weight loss substance that boasts about their customers losing dozens of pounds in just a month. No where in the store is there information about how to maintain a balanced diet, exercise tips, etc. The only information provided is about their products, and that they work if one is trying to lose weight or gain muscle.

Many products in the store are reminiscent of baked goods, but are infused with protein and low in sugar. These products include cookies, brownies, various nut butters, and muffins. These foods are marketed as being “healthier” than traditional sweets, because they use sugar alcohol instead of sugar, or have increased fiber and protein. Sugar alcohols, according to healthline.com, “are not artificial sweeteners. They are partially resistant to digestion — though certain sugar alcohols, such as maltitol, may cause a slight rise in blood sugar levels. While they are well tolerated, high amounts of some sugar alcohols, such as sorbitol, may cause bloating and diarrhea.” These sugar substitutes are not necessarily bad for one’s health, but diet companies use them in order to market their products as being healthier than the processed sugars found in traditional sweets from bakeries or our own mothers’ kitchens. These products suggest the possibility of continuing to eat food that is tasty while maintaining a diet, courtesy of GNC. It communicates that GNC shoppers do not have to sacrifice their taste preferences, but rather substitute traditional food they enjoy for their products.




Even online, GNC has a strong presence. The particular email pictured, sent to all subscribers on GNC'S mailing list, is meant to encourage using their products during the holidays to lose weight. The holidays are traditionally a chance to spend time with family, eating and enjoying traditional food. By using this marketing ploy to encourage GNC shoppers to retreat from these traditions, they can increase their sales. Through this marketing technique, GNC is encouraging users to stray from their holiday eating traditions to continue on their weight loss journey, courtesy of more GNC products.

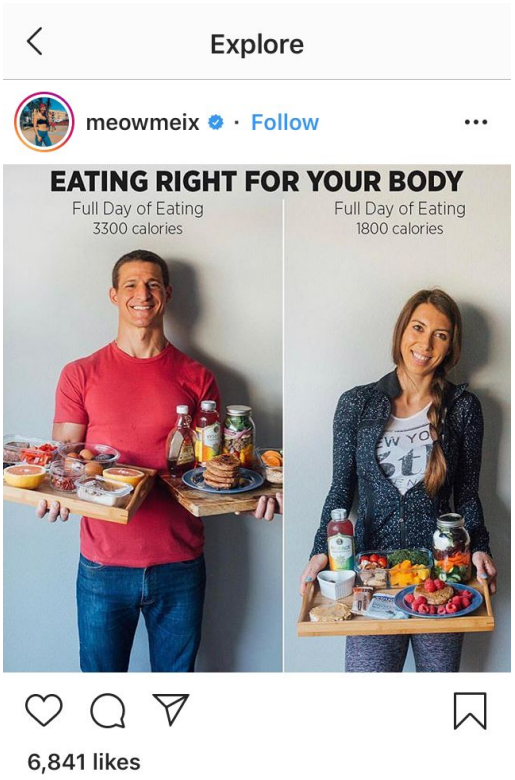
Besides e-mails, GNC also has a frequently-updated website that includes articles about diets trends, fitness tips, and advertisements for their own products. Some examples of these diets include the ketogenic diet, which I will focus on in particular to represent the larger food literacies communicated on the GNC website. The ketogenic diet, or keto, is the practice of

eating high-fat and protein, while restricting sugar and carbohydrate intake. Many foods are allowed when following this diet, such as meats, seafood, nuts, oils and fats, but more foods are restricted. This includes dairy, sugar, starch, even *fruits.* This particular diet allows the free consumption of oils, fats, and red meats, but not *fruit.* These fad diets can sometimes work for certain people depending on gender, metabolic rate, body composition, age, level of activity, among other contributing factors. However, these diets are designed to be so strict and restricting, that once a person begins eating "normally" again, they gain the weight back quicker than they lost it. The media promotion is surrounded with scientific evidence behind the diet, explaining how this particular distribution of macronutrients promotes a state of "ketosis" in the body, which heightens metabolic rate and burns more fat. The article concludes with GNC products that fit into the strict guidelines of the ketogenic diet. Although this appears like educating the public on a rigid, restricting diet that will help shed extra pesky pounds, it is symbolic of our misguided food habits and the large diet companies that market towards this demographic. The "eat this, not that" narrative is not unique to just large diet companies, but companies such as GNC utilize the rising obesity rates in the United States by marketing their own products as solutions.

We also see these food issues repeated in GNC advertisements. The pictured ads are representative of the diet industry's concepts of having ideal bodies, emulating health, fitness, and happiness. Women are small, skinny but with some muscle mass, while men are shown as muscular with little body fat. These gendered differences have been prevalent for generations: men as the strong breadwinners and women as the obedient housewives, for instance. Even products produced by GNC boast effects of "getting massive," such as their new line of Beyond Raw products. The models are young, attractive, and able-bodied, suggesting that these are the body types that are welcome to shop at GNC. I, however, was faced with an uncomfortable silence when entering the store.

Diet ads have shifted over generations. In fact, many diet ads were marketed towards weight gain for women. Women with more fat content were seen as desirable, as it represented a level of wealth they have in order to acquire more whole foods. As our country shifted to fast foods, weight trends changed. In light of the rising obesity rates in America, diet and nutrition companies have flourished by selling apparent "miracle cures" that seem too good to be true. Some examples include Atkins, Weight Watchers, ketogenic diet, and hundreds more. These diet trends cycle out every few years, but they always echo the same claim: *you should lose weight.*

The influence of large diet companies can be seen in our society, and particularly on social media. Because we have lost traditions that tie food to a sense of belonging, community, family, energy, joy, large diet and nutrition companies can provide them with simple solutions to achieve an ideal body. These ideal bodies are considered to emulate health and strength. Yet, diets such as the latter mentioned restrict our connections with food in order to achieve ideal bodies. We see these misguided values in social media posts, particularly within the fitness

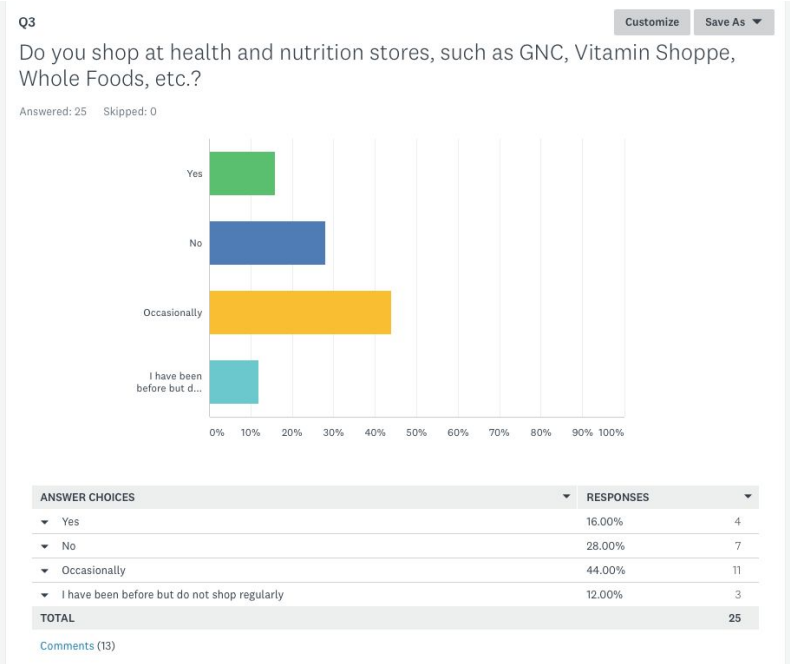




community. These pictures suggest that women are meant to eat less than men, which resembles the bodies depicted in GNC advertisements, featuring young and fit models. The women are usually thin with some muscle mass, while the men are larger and stronger. Posed photographs like these become popular on social media platforms such as Instagram. With this unhealthy mindset, self-proclaimed healthy lifestyle gurus become the guides young people may turn to now that we have lost track of traditional eating habits that our families and ancestors built and passed down.

One of the big questions Pollan poses in "Big Organic" is "whether the logic of an industrial food chain can be reconciled to the logic of the natural systems on which organic agriculture has tried to model itself. Put another way, is industrial organic ultimately a contradiction in terms?" (161). By joining the organic and non-GMO movement, GNC is

reaching out to a wider audience who might avoid their products based on the fact they are a large company who uses unnatural ingredients. However, even their "natural" products contradict themselves in this way; is it possible for companies like GNC to be industrial organic with their new line of non-GMO products that claim weight-loss results? Some of these new products include "Beyond Raw, Raw Elements" and "Earth Genius," which are created and manufactured by GNC. These products claims to be "going back to basics" by using natural ingredients in their supplements and powders. I acquired a brochure about GNC's Earth Genius products, which echoes Pollan's point about how "wordy labels, point-of-purchase brochures, and certification schemes are supposed to make an obscure and complicated food chain more legible to the consumer" (136). The Earth Genius brochure included easily understandable descriptions of each product, such as "smart," "from the ground up," "soothing botanicals," "energizing," "superfoods," "non-GMO" and dozens more. These words are meant to make the complicated science of the products more intelligible to customers. They see these buzzwords, and GNC achieves their goal of spreading their food literacies to a wide demographic.

A theme of GNC is "food as fuel." Their products can include buzzwords such as Power Crunch Protein Energy Bar, The Iconic Cookie, Bite Fuel Protein Granola Trail Mix, etc. These names connect their products with eating for energy, while not giving up the tasty foods we love. GNC is marketing towards lovers of food, suggesting that eating their products will give them the sustainable energy they can also acquire from whole, natural foods. Much like with their Earth Genius products, GNC uses these buzzwords to associate their products with a healthy lifestyle. Even their slogan is "Live Well;" not just eat well, but live a lifestyle shaped and produced by GNC.




I conducted a short survey of people aged 18-65, asking their experience with GNC and personal eating habits. Most people associate GNC with protein powder, supplements, eating healthy, and vitamins. I also asked what "eating healthy" meant to the survey takers. Many of the responses were along the same lines: Eating a balanced diet, trying not to eat food that is too processed, restricting food intake, eating fruits and vegetables, fueling one's body, the food pyramid, etc. The majority of responders still said they "occasionally" shop at nutrition stores, but many said they do not or have only been a few times. In addition, I asked what has shaped responders eating habits. Again, the answers were along the same lines: parental guidance, school, online research, dietary restrictions, schedule, stress, affordability, cravings, etc. The number of contributing factors that go into shaping our own eating habits is enough to negate familiar traditions that have been passed down. It is also interesting that answers of what responders associate with "eating healthy" do not exactly coexist with what they associate GNC with. Eating healthy does not include supplements, vitamins, or protein powders, but rather balance, eating fruits and vegetables, and feuling one's body. This also reverberates back to the literacies shared through the GNC website, and particularly in the ketogenic diet article, which specifies that fruits are off-limits. Although this is a small-scale survey, it represents the larger

issue that big diet industries such as GNC are purposely disconnecting society with what their traditional beliefs of eating healthy are.

These diet companies flourish in a society where disordered eating is common. At any given point in time, 1% of young women and 0.1% of young men will meet diagnostic criteria for bulimia nervosa, while 0.3-0.4% of young women and 0.1% of young men will suffer from anorexia nervosa. A 2007 study, published in Biological Psychiatry, found that 3.5% of women and 2.0% of men had binge eating disorder during their life. This makes BED more than three times more common than anorexia and bulimia combined (NEDA). According to The State of Obesity, "Adult obesity rates increased in Iowa, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and South Carolina between 2016 and 2017, and remained stable in the rest of states. The adult obesity rate was at or above 35% in seven states and at least 30% in 29 states. West Virginia has the highest adult obesity rate at 38.1% and Colorado has the lowest at 22.6%." Instagram fitness posts and GNC advertisements are not doing anything productive to solve these issues, other than market their products towards these demographics with the intentions of selling fad diets to people with histories of disordered eating.

These issues highlight how fad diets and diet advertisements, products, and industries use society's disconnect from food to feed on our insecurities in order to make a profit. These issues are highlighted with the exclusive environment of GNC stores, the marketing of e-mails and online ads, companies providing scientific data as to why their fad diets work, what bodies we should and should not have, social media posts outlining what we should and should not be eating, and our own perceptions of what eating healthy means. These issues are just byproducts

of the larger societal issue that we have lost our traditional ties with food, cooking, and balanced diets.

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