Nothing Tastes as Good as Noom Feels: Neoliberalism, Diet Culture, and Digital Advertising

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Content Warning: This thesis contains explicit mention of weight loss, eating disorders, and metrics pertaining to body weight, caloric intake, and BMI. Reader discretion is advised.

If you or someone you know is struggling with disordered eating or a related issue, please consider reaching out to one of the resources below:

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)
nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)
1 (888) 375-7767 | anad.org

National Alliance for Eating Disorders:
1 (866) 662-1235 | allianceforeatingdisorders.com

National Suicide Prevention Hotline:
Call or text 988 | 988lifeline.org

University of Virginia Eating Disorders Consultation and Treatment Team (Students)
studenthealth.virginia.edu/eating-disorders-consultation-and-treatment-team

ABSTRACT

Noom leads the weight loss services industry in digital ad spend and has garnered more than 50 million app downloads worldwide since its release in 2016. That said, formal research on the company has yet to expand outside a clinical setting. In this thesis, I adopt a mixed methods approach informed by grounded theory to analyze Noom's digital marketing strategy. I first conduct a critical discourse analysis of Noom's paid materials on Google and Meta, followed by a walkthrough of the company's flagship sign-up quiz. I argue Noom uses a combination of contradiction and basic persuasive techniques to define itself primarily by what it is not, leaving it up to users to decide what they think Noom is. All advertisements direct users to the same place: the company's flagship sign-up quiz. The quiz not only prolongs the period of non-definition but justifies data collection and creates the illusion of informed consumption. Noom, through its different marketing materials, idealizes a certain kind of user: the neoliberal subject.

KEYWORDS: advertising, biopower, dieting, diet culture, healthism, neoliberalism, noom

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I used to think it impossible to care about something enough to miss it. I'll miss UVA Media Studies a lot. All my love, xx.

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INTRODUCTION

I'm Mrs. "She's too big, now she's too thin."
– Britney Spears in *Piece of Me* (2007)

For most of my life, I've had a hard time seeing my body as anything other than flawed. The reflections I saw in the mirror, or a passing car window, were nothing more than reminders of the parts I had yet to fix. I wore small clothes, but never the smallest. I'd lost weight, but never enough to disappear. I felt I failed when I existed as I was, but failed too when trying to fit in. The same people who expressed worry over my health because I was overweight kept silent as I starved myself. Rather than ask if something was wrong when my weight dwindled, they would reward me with compliments I didn't ask for. My shrinking was always celebrated–my body always available for comment.

My interests in the theories backing this paper are rooted in personal experience– from learning to hate the body I was in, to developing an eating disorder (ED), and now deconstructing internalized diet culture through the process of recovery. I want to illustrate my journey through a handful of vignettes.

It was in the fourth grade that a friend in my Odyssey of the Mind group pointed out that when she had her arms bent at her sides, her stomach didn't extend much past the middle of her forearm. Others did it too, commenting that theirs "only reached" so far. When I did the same, my stomach went past my wrists. I felt really uncomfortable. I hoped no one else saw.

A similar feeling would creep up when shopping for new clothes. Some stores only stocked my size online…if they stocked it at all. One trendy store in particular carried clothes deemed "one size fits all." I knew better than to shop there.

My mom acted carefully in how she talked about her body around me and made sure not to comment on my weight, even when doctors pressured her to do so. There were still small things that I noticed, like her always sitting with a pillow on her lap or saying there were certain clothes she could never wear. She had a scale in her bathroom that had these little markers you could use to track multiple people; I would step on it sometimes, but I didn't know what the numbers meant. I asked for one for the bathroom I shared with my brother, but she said no.

The topic of weight came up whenever I went to the doctor. After telling me the number, the doctors would contextualize it by comparing me to others, telling me that I weighed more than 90% of people my age and height. I didn't always know what that meant, but it sounded bad. At a certain point, I figured it was up to me to try to make them less upset. I would make sure not to have snacks in the days leading up to an appointment and tried my hardest to skip meals. After doing that long enough, they stopped talking about my weight.

I started to feel like I needed to know the number between appointments, too. Thankfully, my brother had saved up his money from his summer job to buy our family a Wii, and sometime later the whole *Wii Fit* setup. *Wii Fit* was one of the few games I could play during the week, so I played it a lot. I remember the excitement of learning there was going to be a follow-up game because I hadn't been as dedicated as I wanted to be with the original; I figured new activities would get me back on track. The follow-up game came out in the fall of 2009– the year I turned eight. On both games' home screens, my family's Miis would line up next to each other under a graph charting our BMIs. My Mii was the shortest, and roundest. My mom kept her account locked with a passcode. I tracked my weight through the game for years, until I heard that its scale wasn't that accurate.

After that, I needed a new way of making sure I was disciplined, since I no longer had a scale I could trust. I started making a mental list of rules I needed to abide by. I did my best to mirror how I saw others talk about food and exercise– this food is a good food, this one bad. A good person exercises, a bad person doesn't. I would save up the money I got from my grandparents on holidays to buy fitness trackers and other equipment to help keep weight off. When my numbers plateaued, I'd always wished that some past version of myself had taken the time to save a little more money, so I could've gotten something more sophisticated.

From what I'd seen on TV and in magazines, the real key to losing weight was calories– just eat fewer than you burn, and the number will go down. I downloaded MyFitnessPal on my iPod in eighth grade and started logging what I ate. I got stressed when switching to gummy vitamins because I wasn't sure if the app would let me key them in, and I didn't want to miss something. Soon thereafter, I started high school, which meant the start of high school sports. My tried-and-true method of skipping as many meals as possible wouldn't cut it if I had to get up early for field hockey practice. So, I started to eat sometimes. Just so I wouldn't get sick. It was nice, though, to have a break. It had all been so exhausting.

I felt I had things under control, eating-wise, for a couple of years. I saw ED as a thing of the past, going as far as to tell people that I *used* to be anorexic. That was, until a big breakup at the start of my second year of college. Surrounded by stressors without much of a support system, I found myself turning to what made me feel in control years prior– bodily obsession. Not only did I restrict myself, but I over-exercised too. I would go to the gym multiple times a day between Zoom classes. When the gym closed on occasion because of COVID-19 outbreaks, I would watch exercise videos in my dorm. I started hearing of this new app that explicitly was *not* a diet: Noom. It was supposedly about feeling more in control over your relationship with your body. A podcast I liked at the time mentioned that the app focused on psychology and was overall a positive experience. To my surprise, after doing the sign-up quiz, it didn't seem to be about intuitive eating or body neutrality at all. I answered the questions truthfully– saying I often worried about my weight and felt I needed a change. Noom recommended I start restricting

again, saying I could be at my goal weight within a matter of months. For some reason, I just couldn't get myself to pay for it. I closed the tab. I figured if I was still thinking about Noom in a few days, maybe it would be worth the investment.

Something did happen a few days later, but it wasn't Noom. I don't remember how I ended up where I did, but I found myself on my university's "Eating Disorders Consultation and Treatment Team" webpage. I scheduled an appointment over the phone and met with a doctor and have been on the journey to recovery ever since. There have been plenty of bumps along the way– from the school's dietician explaining exactly how many calories I burn in a day, to workplace fitness challenges, and the painful physical symptoms that come with starting to feed your body. For the first year of recovery, too, I was still tracking steps with my Fitbit and attending multiple hour-long Peloton classes a week; I was still scheduling my life around ED. Now, almost three years later, things are a lot better. I still have my off weeks and make a point to set boundaries around metrics when talking with new friends or doctors. What has yet to change, though, is the number of Noom ads filling my social media feeds. The more I see, the angrier I get, not only at Noom, but at myself. How could I have been so blind as to miss that it was just another diet? What was it about Noom that made it so easy for me to dismiss its basis in restriction? I needed to figure out what it was that made Noom different from all the dieting companies I had seen in the past. Its product was the same as any other calorie logger, and yet I had somehow convinced myself otherwise. Why? Because of the unique way the company brands itself online.

Dieting, BMI, and "Health"

Before explaining the diet industry, I first want to outline a few key terms and ideas that are central to this project. Dieting has long been framed as more of a medical intervention than an aesthetic one. Those with fatphobic biases have used this narrative to disguise their disgust as concern– they comment on size not because of its immorality, but because they "just care about your health." Social norms pressure individuals of all sizes to shrink their bodies by any means necessary.[1] The cultural endorsement of restriction prevails despite evidence that continuous dieting causes more harm than good, that there has yet to be a diet proven effective in maintaining long-term weight loss, and that fatness itself is not interchangeable with unhealthiness.[2]

Normal

Fatphobia and diet culture depend on the promotion of the "normal" body. The term normal is loaded. Disability studies scholar and professor Lennard Davis has written extensively on the topic, asserting that normality is anything but natural. Our idea of what is normal has been constructed and is historically specific. According to Davis, norms arise out of a drive for

[1]Arthurs and Grimshaw, *Women's Bodies*, 96.
[2] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments."

progress and industrialization, which has been shaped by the ideologies of those in positions of power.[3] He explains the difference between norms and ideals by saying that a norm "implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm."[4] Though arbitrary, these norms are inescapable. Almost every area of contemporary life has been quantified and averaged.[5] What we now consider "normal" has largely been shaped by 19th and 20th-century "science" based in eugenics and American exceptionalism, which sought to erase disabled bodies, and other forms deemed "deviant."[6] "If individual citizens are not fit," writes Davis, "then the national body will not be fit."[7] That is, the burden of national pride fell on individuals' ability to discipline themselves. Because the fat body is perceived as undisciplined, so too does it exist outside the norm. Related to this obsession with regulating the body is the social model of disability, which posits that bodies marked by physical difference are considered ideologically different and, as a result, have been subjected to prejudiced treatment due to characteristics outside their control.[8]

Fatness, Health, and Morality

For the purposes of this paper, I make use of the term "fat" to describe, not to judge, following the fat studies tradition of seeing the term as neutral. I use it to challenge the assumption that fatness is negative.

In using the term in this way, I do not mean to deny the continued prevalence of anti-fat bias. Fatphobia has permeated culture for centuries, dating back to Judeo-Christian culture's "moral injunctions against sloth and gluttony."[9] Anthropologist and professor Susan Greenhalgh explains this kind of stigma by stating, "to be fat in America is to be ugly, disgusting, inferior, and unworthy of friendship or romance [...] a personal and moral failure."[10] She echoes the sentiment expressed by political scientist J. Eric Oliver, who explains that we tend "to think of weight as a barometer of a person's character" because of the assumption that people are fat only out of laziness or an inability to care for themselves.[11] This kind of bias is not only socially damaging, but medically, for practitioners seem to have an inability to look at anything other than a patient's fatness when administering treatment– so much so that they miss things that could have been prevented because they thought it impossible for anything but fatness to be the problem. Fat activist, author, and host of the podcast *Maintenance Phase*, Aubrey Gordon explains this as part of "the project of creating and reinforcing an outgroup status and making people believe that it is objective, that it is scientific, that it is beyond reproach, and that it is

[3] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 49.
[4] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 29.
[5] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 23.
[6] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 35.
[7] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 36.
[8] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 49.
[9] Metzl and Kirkland, *Against Health*, 75.
[10] Greenhalgh, *Fat-Talk Nation*, 76.
[11] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 6.

natural for you to feel like fat people are lazy and gross, because that's what science tells you they are."[12] The science Aubrey is referring to is that of the body mass index (BMI)– a metric that has historically been used by eugenicists, insurance companies, and pharmaceutical manufacturers for control and profit.[13]

I would like to add here that fat liberation requires more than acknowledging that fatness does not preclude health. Using that logic alone still positions health as a moral obligation– as what determines a person's value. A person is not "bad" or less than because they are unhealthy. Thinking as much ignores the breadth of individuals denied access to the term– especially those with disabilities. In fact, "health under capitalism is an impossibility," argue the authors of *Health Communism*. "This fantasy of individual health under the political-economic conditions of capitalism only ever exists as a state one cannot be, to which one must always strive," they add.[14] Placing health as the arbiter of an individual's worth serves the interests of capitalism, for it necessitates continued labor. By calling out certain bodies as unhealthy, institutions "seamlessly construct certain bodies as desirable while regulating others as obscene."[15] Informed by the writing of disability studies scholars, this work seeks to challenge the idea that health is always positive and understands that requiring health under a system where it can never be guaranteed benefits only the powerful.

The Body Mass Index (BMI)

Returning to the notion of "BMI"– BMI is a simple calculation. It is someone's weight in kilograms divided by the square of their height in meters. Nothing else is considered. Though held up as neutral and scientific, the utility of this metric has been shaped by ideologies, as has most anything held up as culturally significant. BMI divides populations into subgroups (e.g., "normal," "overweight," and "obese") based on the aforementioned ratio between height and weight. These subgroups, interestingly, are not natural; they have shifted with time and historically have been used by the insurance industry to implement higher premiums.[16] In critiquing the work of the founder of BMI, Adolphe Quetelet, Davis calls out the paradoxical nature of thinking that pushing bodies towards what is the average will somehow make populations better, writing that "the inevitable rule of statistics is that all phenomena will always conform to a bell curve."[17] Oliver builds on this idea to say that BMI is a proxy indicator that "conflates an associated trait with its underlying cause," and skews practitioners' focus away from real medical problems.[18] This focus on weight dominates public discussions of health, despite the lack of evidence that exists showing that someone who loses weight to become a

[12] Michael Hobbes and Aubrey Gordon, "Is Being Fat Bad For You?"
[13] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 5.
[14] Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, *Health Communism*, xi
[15] Metzl and Kirkland, *Against Health*, 3.
[16] Michael Hobbes and Aubrey Gordon, "The Body Mass Index."
[17] Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 30.
[18] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 6.

specific size appropriates the health benefits associated with someone who naturally exists at that same weight. [19]

Regarding this paper's use of the language of BMI, I again want to call on Aubrey Gordon, who explained in an episode of *Maintenance Phase*, "I'm going to use the terms overweight and obesity, not because I love them, but because they are the terms for the BMI categories, and all of this obesity rate stuff is decided based on the BMI."[20] I use terms like "obese" not because I believe the categories to be valid or meaningful, but because they are how the materials I look at describe fat bodies.

Dieting

If someone's BMI is higher than what would be considered normal for their height, they are encouraged to diet. The idea comes from the understanding that someone's weight is the result of the relationship between calorie input and output– if someone eats less than they burn, their weight will decrease, as will their risk of disease. That said, "there is little support for the notion that diets lead to lasting weight loss or health benefits."[21] In fact, studies looking at the long-term outcomes of dietary restriction have found that "one third to two thirds of dieters regain more weight than they lost on their diets," and that there exists no "consistent evidence that dieting results in significant health improvements."[22] Though a diet may lead to short-term weight loss, "these losses are not maintained."[23] Not only that, but dieting has been shown to damage the body. The term "weight cycling" refers to the "repeated loss and regain of weight" that happens when dieting; weight cycling has been linked to increased mortality from cardiovascular disease, as well as increased risk of stroke, diabetes, and immunity problems.[24] Dieting does not reduce the risk of diseases associated with fatness; if anything, it increases it.

Eating Disorders vs. Disordered Eating

Lastly, for this section, I want to explain the difference between an eating disorder and disordered eating, or a disordered relationship with food. I do not use the terms interchangeably and differentiate between the two with purpose. An eating disorder (ED) is something specific and diagnosable, the behaviors of which are defined by the DSM-5. Disordered eating describes behaviors in line with the diagnostic criteria (e.g., restriction, purging, binging), but which does not meet the formal definition– be that because of frequency, duration, or some other factor.[25] The National Eating Disorders Association explains this by saying, "not all disordered eating develops into a diagnosable eating disorder. However, disordered eating is a risk factor in the

[19] Michael Hobbes and Aubrey Gordon, "Is Being Fat Bad For You?"
[20] Michael Hobbes and Aubrey Gordon, "The Obesity Epidemic."
[21] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments," 220.
[22] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments," 220.
[23] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments," 221.
[24] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments," 230.
[25] Dennis, "Disordered Eating vs. Eating Disorders."

development of an eating disorder."[26] Around 9% of Americans will have an eating disorder in their lifetime, but far more will exhibit disordered eating behaviors.[27] Just because someone does not have an eating disorder does not mean that they are unaffected by diet culture. Anyone can exhibit disordered eating. Now that I have defined these terms, it is important to explore what they mean within the context of the dieting and weight loss services industry.

The Diet Industry

IBIS World, a provider of American economic data, defines the weight loss services (WLS) industry as that sector of the economy "offer[ing] medical services to clients and assist[ing] them with losing or maintaining a desired weight" be that through counseling, exercise, or bodily measurement.[28] This almost $4 billion industry includes more than 1,000 businesses and generates hundreds of millions of dollars in profit annually. The majority of that profit (65%) stems from digital subscriptions.[29] It follows, then, that digital strategies are important to businesses in the WLS sector.

Companies like Medifast and Nutrisystem lead the industry in revenue but fall short when it comes to advertising spend.[30] Golo, according to data from August 2023, leads in that regard, with $16 million in media spend for that month alone. Close behind was Noom at $11 million, then Weight Watchers at $7.8 million. Though neither the top earner nor top spender, Noom leads specifically in *digital* ad spend. 85% of Noom's media spend from that same period was spent on digital advertising, in comparison to Weight Watchers' still sizable 51% and Golo's 14%.[31] That is to say, there is no better subject of study than Noom when looking into digital diet marketing.

Noom brands itself as a "wellness" company, offering its users liberation from the confines of weight cycling and traditional dieting through a subscription to its service. Founded in 2008 with the intent of selling fitness equipment, the company has since pivoted its focus towards psychology, as signaled by the hiring of Andreas Michaelides as "chief of psychology" in 2014.[32] The company's corresponding mobile app launched two years later in 2016.[33] With more than 50 million app downloads, Noom has become one of the leading fitness and sports apps worldwide.[34] The company's growth has been quite substantial, with revenue increasing around $200 million per year since 2019.[35] Despite its growing popularity, academics have yet to

[26] Dennis, "Disordered Eating vs. Eating Disorders."
[27] "Eating Disorder Statistics."
[28] Fine, "At a Glance - 81219A Weight Loss Services in the US," 5.
[29] Fine, "At a Glance - 81219A Weight Loss Services in the US," 12.
[30] Fine, "At a Glance - 81219A Weight Loss Services in the US," 10.
[31] "Major Review for Fitness and Diet Programs," 4.
[32] Bettencourt et al., "The 'New You' Business," 79-80.
[33]Melton, "Weight Loss App Noom Quadruples Revenue Again, This Time To $237 Million."
[34] Court, "A Weight Loss Program by Any Other Name Is Still a Diet."
[35] Court, "A Weight Loss Program by Any Other Name Is Still a Diet."

critique the business as a cultural product. MyFitnessPal, Weight Watchers, Fitbit, and a number of other products in the space have garnered their fair share of criticism for predatory marketing, but research on Noom has yet to expand outside a clinical setting. This paper fills this gap by taking Noom as a case study.

Research Goals and Methods

This work adopts a mixed methods approach, informed by grounded theory, to analyze Noom's digital marketing strategies, both in its advertisements and its corresponding app. Going into this project, I was curious specifically about Noom's branding because I had never paid for a subscription myself, and yet still had such a vivid idea of what Noom's product was. I was interested more in seeing what I would find than in answering a set research question, which led me to a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, pioneered by Strauss and Glaser in 1967, challenges the more traditional, linear model of research.[36] Instead of going into a project with preconceived notions, grounded theorists follow where the research takes them.[37] Conclusions are "derived inductively through the systematic collection and analysis of data pertaining to a phenomenon."[38] Researchers "trust in discovery of a problem" by following the themes generated by their data instead of a research question.[39] With grounded theory, you follow where the data leads, which means data sources are especially important. As someone who works in digital advertising, I knew I would have a leg up in analyzing the company's paid placements. I also knew that I wanted to walk through the quiz I took right before starting recovery. Thus, to collect data, I first conducted a critical discourse analysis of the advertisements on Google and Meta, and later a walkthrough of the sign-up process, both of which I outline below and explain in more detail in later chapters.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis, or CDA, is a methodological approach focused on looking at the relationship that exists between language and power, looking not only at the texts themselves, but their historical contexts and ideologies.[40] More specifically, it involves looking at "how macro-level social relations are enacted at the micro-level of a text to produce a range of intersecting, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting ideologies."[41] It is not enough to look at the language of a text; to fully analyze the meaning of a message, you also need to consider who serves to benefit from its delivery, and what ideas shaped its rhetoric.[42] Researchers using CDA pay attention both to the "social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text" as well as those "within which individuals or groups […] create meanings in their

[36] Flick, "Background: Approaches and Philosophies of Grounded Theory," 5.
[37] Flick, "Background: Approaches and Philosophies of Grounded Theory," 5.
[38] Bowen, "Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts," 13.
[39] Bowen, "Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts," 13; Glaser, "Getting Started," 5.
[40] Wodak, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*.
[41] Pienaar and Bekker, "The Body as a Site of Struggle," 541.
[42] Wodak, "What CDA Is About – A Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Developments," 12.

interactions with texts."[43] In short, CDA involves assembling a corpus of materials and subsequently closely reading the texts therein to identify recurring themes relating to power, dominance, discrimination, and control.[44] The method has been used frequently to analyze diet culture. A group of Canadian researchers, for example, used CDA to look at how women's health magazines portrayed "good health" and the connection between health and appearance. The team compiled a number of articles from three women's health magazines, closely read the texts, and then used CDA to "identify discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies."[45] I use CDA primarily in my first chapter to look at Noom's advertisements, and switch to using the walkthrough method in my second to look at Noom's app.

The Walkthrough Method

The mass adoption of smartphone technology in recent years has led to exponential growth in the number of consumer-facing apps. This surge poses methodological challenges for interested researchers.[46] One prominent issue is that of access; researchers have limited, at best, access to the code structuring the apps they research.[47] The walkthrough method– the product of iterative workshopping by authors Light, Burgess, Duguay, and their students– takes advantage of what researchers *do* have access to and works backward from there to build an argument. The method involves quite literally walking through each step of the use of a particular app, paying attention to its screens, activities, and requirements as the researcher signs up for, plays around with, and discontinues their use of the app in question.[48] This critical approach combines the tracing of technological systems from science and technology studies (STS) with the symbolic analysis associated with critical theory.[49]

Co-creator of the method, Ben Light, provides an example of the method in practice by looking at Ashley Madison, a dating app for those interested in starting affairs.[50] Light explicitly mentions that he was less focused on the implications of his findings than he was on "showing the utility and versatility of the walkthrough."[51] To Light, a critical reading of an app reveals narratives that would otherwise go unnoticed by shifting focus toward how the app generates income and structures interactivity.[52] Once more, the walkthrough entails documenting an app's functionality through a multistep process: examining the expected usage environment, conducting a technical walkthrough, and assessing evidence of any unexpected practices.[53] Light starts his walkthrough by noting the date and operating system of his device, later detailing his

[43] Wodak, "What CDA Is About – A Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Developments," 4.
[44] Wodak, "What CDA Is About – A Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Developments," 3.
[45] Beijbom, Fabricius, and O'Doherty, "Women's Health Magazines and Postfeminist Healthism," 8.
[46] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 884.
[47] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 884-885.
[48] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 883,885.
[49] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 881.
[50] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 31–42.
[51] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 33.
[52] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 32-33.
[53] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 33.

process of interacting with its iTunes listing, scrolling through its images, installing the app, granting permissions, and exploring its purchasing mechanisms.[54] The method is particularly useful for studying mundane software, which Light defines as those apps that extend "beyond the desktop and out into the world via a mobile device" and which "appify and enable […] everyday practices."[55] Much like Ashley Madison, Noom is mundane, appifying the practice of dietary restriction instead of infidelity.

Looking Ahead

The following chapters take Noom as a case study to explore modern day diet culture, looking specifically at how the company portrays itself online. In the first chapter, I conduct a close textual and critical discourse analysis of Noom's paid materials on both Google and Meta to determine the company's digital marketing strategy, which I describe as definition through non-definition. All the ads lead users to the company's flagship sign-up quiz, which I explore in the second chapter using the walkthrough method. The quiz, I argue, operates primarily as a waiting room to promote data collection, and intensify connection with the service. In the third chapter, I combine my findings from the previous two to piece together Noom's ideal user and theorize Noom as a technology of power masquerading as a technology of the self by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault.[56] Finally, in the conclusion, I connect Noom to the neoliberalization of society, wherein responsibilities that were once the state's have shifted to the private sector. I end by outlining potential avenues for future research.

[54] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 35-39.
[55] Light, "Ashley Madison: An Introduction to the Walkthrough Method," 32.
[56] Foucault et al., "Technologies of the Self."

CHAPTER 1:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Noom's Digital Advertisements

"You, feeling something. That's what sells."
– Don Draper, Mad Men[57]

Introduction

At its core, marketing is simple. It is about seduction. It is about persuasion. It is the means by which some entity– be that an individual, organization, company, or otherwise– makes itself known to consumers. The term "advertising" refers specifically to *paid* marketing– the materials that companies pay to host elsewhere.[58] Unlike owned or earned media, paid media affords marketers the ability to reach outside their existing audience without having to relinquish control over their image.

In this chapter, I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Noom's advertising materials on search and social platforms, specifically Google and Meta.[59] I first provide a brief overview of the nature of the paid search and paid social landscapes to establish context. I then detail my audit of Noom's content on both platforms through their respective ad libraries, closely reading the ads' messages. I sometimes refer to specific ads as placements; the terms are largely interchangeable within the industry. From there, I use my observations to explain the strategies Noom uses across its different advertisements. Through my analysis, I find that the company uses basic rhetorical appeals to define itself not by what it *is*, but by what it *is not*. It is up to the audience to decide what it is they want Noom to be. By directing interested viewers to the company's sign-up quiz, instead of its user interface, Noom prolongs this period of omission. Individuals do not know what it is they are buying until after they subscribe. This ambiguity, I argue, is purposeful–showcasing Noom's product earlier on would prove its service derivative. To successfully market a product that already exists within the marketplace, Noom chooses to disguise itself as anything but what it is: a calorie counter encouraging disordered eating.

The Nature of Digital Advertising

Historically speaking, the advertising industry has developed alongside mass media technologies. With the printing press came penny papers. The radio? Single sponsorships. The television? Commercials. Advertisers follow audiences, and audiences follow innovation. The widespread adoption of smartphones and social media, for example, has launched advertising into cyberspace, with digital now accounting for more than 78% of ad revenue in the United States.[60] Within the digital realm, it is search and social that dominate advertising budgets, each making

[57] "For Those Who Think Young."
[58] "Marketing vs. Advertising."
[59] Wodak, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*.
[60] Interactive Advertising Bureau, "Advertising Expenditure in the U.S. by Medium 2023."

up around 40% of global internet ad spend.[61] The heavy spend across these two channels showcases the importance of search and social placements to digital advertisers, meaning the content therein is particularly worthy of analysis.

Paid Search on Google

Paid search, sometimes called search engine marketing (SEM), refers to the placements that advertisers pay to display on search engines in response to specific queries. Advertisers place bids on keywords or phrases relating to either their brand or that of competitors (known as competitor keywords). Search placements pair best with campaigns aiming to increase sales, leads, and website traffic. Through search, advertisers can tap into a pool of highly interested customers at a critical point in their journey.

Google leads the paid search space, earning more than $230 billion in advertising revenue in 2023.[62] The platform offers advertisers a number of different ad formats to choose from. Responsive search ads (RSAs), for instance, are a dynamic variation of traditional search ads. Advertisers supply Google a number of headlines and descriptions they wish to serve interested customers. They may run thousands of these at a time. The platform then mixes the headlines and descriptions up when displaying the content to users to avoid redundancy and increase performance, optimizing campaigns based on a specified goal.

Paid Social on Meta

Paid social differs slightly from search, largely because it relies on the information social platforms collect from users to target placements. Advertisers can target audiences by age, gender, location, interests, and any number of other pieces of demographic data collected by the platform. Additionally, paid social placements are more proactive, bringing ads to users via their social feeds instead of waiting on users to seek information out on their own.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp, is the leading paid social platform, earning over $130 billion in advertising revenue in 2023.[63] Within Meta's ad management tool, advertisers can choose to either boost existing content or create new ads from scratch to run across any number of Meta's platforms. According to one of Meta's certification study guides, single-image or video ads are the most popular and versatile format.[64] Single-image ads are made up of multiple parts, as seen in Figure 1– namely primary text, headlines, and link descriptions, in addition to the actual ad images, also referred to as creative. The primary text is the first part of a single image ad that Meta users see; it is the paragraph of

[61] Zenith, "Internet Advertising Spending Worldwide from 2007 to 2024, by Format (in Million U.S. Dollars)."
[62] Alphabet, "Advertising revenue of Google from 2001 to 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars)."
[63] Meta Platforms, "Annual Advertising Revenue of Meta Platforms Worldwide from 2009 to 2023 (in Million U.S. Dollars)."
[64] "Digital Marketing Associate Study Guide," 33.

text above the image and is usually the longest component. Headlines are the bolded text underneath the image, and link descriptions are the small piece of text underneath headlines that explain what an ad links to. Both Google and Meta house their ads within their own ad libraries, which I will explain next.

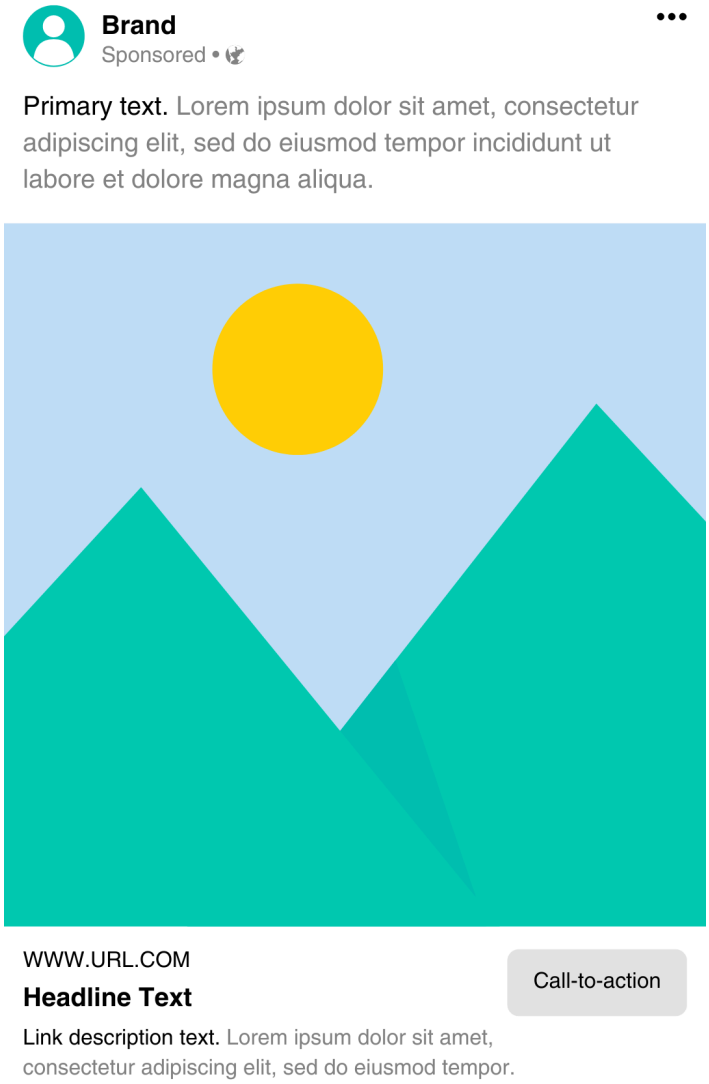

FIGURE 1: META AD MOCKUP

Data Collection and Methodology

Campaign information like budget and target audience are only accessible by those users the brand itself has approved. Outside in-house teams and associated agencies, this kind of information is largely inaccessible. That said, both Google and Meta maintain queryable ad

libraries that catalog the placements brands run on their platforms. These libraries serve as the primary sources for my analysis. The Meta ads were easier to navigate, with the library's layout mirroring the platform's ad management system. The Google ads, on the other hand, were less intuitive and far more robust.

For Meta, I manually logged the information for each of the Noom ads– both active and inactive. I searched for all ads run by the official Noom account, across all languages, platforms, and media types from the earliest date available (May 7, 2018) until the day I collected my data (November 29, 2023). I copied the headlines, primary texts, descriptions, and calls-to-action directly from the library into a spreadsheet, and then created an additional three columns to record qualitative information (static or video, creative copy, and creative calls-to-action). During the aforementioned timeframe, Noom ran 144 static placements and 45 videos, totaling 189 single-image or video ads. Of the 189, 4 were inactive, meaning 185 of the 189 ads Noom had ever run on Meta were active on the day of data collection.

I had to use Google Chrome to sort through Google's Ads Transparency Center because certain elements were blocked by my version of Firefox. It is common in the industry to hear that Google products work best with each other, so I was not surprised that I had to make some accommodations. After finding the Noom page within the Center, I used a Chrome Extension called AdScanner by PPC Ad Editor to scrape the headlines and descriptions for the different RSAs.[65] The tool allowed me to scrape data from far more ads than I would have on my own, and also accounted for the different headlines associated with each RSA. With the help of the extension, I collected information on more than 1,000 responsive text ads. Though there were more ads available to analyze, I could not get much deeper into the library without crashing my browser. I worried that my inability to capture all of Noom's Google ads would limit the scope of my analysis. That said, after deconstructing the different lines of copy, and accounting for variations in punctuation, I found there were only around 200 unique statements across the more than 2,200 pieces of copy. I had reached what qualitative scholars call saturation–the point where further data collection would be unnecessary.[66]

My goal with both libraries was to compile a list of the different messages Noom uses to market itself to customers to identify the company's advertising strategy. I chose not to focus on the frequency of the different messages largely because I did not have access to the size of the Meta audiences, and because there was no way to know which copy appeared most often in the different RSAs.

Before explaining my findings, I want to note a few problematic details surrounding Noom's paid placements. Two of the four inactive Meta ads "ran without a required disclaimer," and

[65] Somlith, "AdScanner by PPC Ad Editor."
[66] Saunders et al., "Saturation in Qualitative Research."

were taken down by the platform 9 days after activation. Additionally, two active ads were hidden from my view until I logged into a Meta account to verify I was over 18. A similar thing happened on Google. I was curious what kind of content would warrant such special treatment. What messaging did Noom deem worthy of age restriction? To my surprise, the content I unlocked following verification was no different from what I had already seen. Again, this warning message only showed for a handful of ads across the two platforms. I took this to mean the other ads were available for all ages to view. It is possible the ads themselves targeted only specific age ranges, but it is nonetheless interesting to know that so few had explicitly prevented minors from viewing the content. The fact that some were age restricted, while others with nearly identical messaging were not, shows that the company is aware of the functionality, but does not care for consistency. Following my scraping of these different ads and the accompanying disclaimers within the ad libraries, I identified a number of core themes which define the company's marketing strategy. These themes include appeals to credibility, emotions, metrics, and a disregard for contradiction.

Strategic Analysis of Noom's Digital Advertising Materials

I argue that Noom's advertising strategy is indirect. The messaging of its paid search and social placements makes use of negative definitions and the most basic of persuasive techniques– ethos, pathos, and logos. By defining itself by what it is not, instead of what it actually is, Noom maintains plausible deniability over the danger of its claims. Not only that, but the ambiguity of its messages allows the company to blame audiences for any inconsistencies they may find. Yes, the claims in some ads directly go against the claims of others, but that does not matter. The company, according to its ads, is an authority on health, whose teachings rely on proven science and psychology to deliver personalized plans. So what if one ad contradicts another? Noom, audiences are told, is a trustworthy company grounded in research and concerned with helping individuals manage their feelings. The problem is that Noom refuses to admit to what it is selling: that its users must have the goal of losing weight and must do so by reducing their caloric intake. Repeated mention of the newness of its product, and its basis in research, leads audiences to believe that the company has found something other than what already exists– other than eating less to weigh less. The company's refusal to define itself enables this line of thinking, which Noom only strikes down after individuals have subscribed. In the following sections I demonstrate this argument through specific analyses of the use of ethos, pathos, logos, and contradiction used across the different Google and Meta ads.

Chewing on Credibility: Noom's Ethos

Ethos is the rhetorical appeal concerned with trust and authority– building up the reputation of the speaker while tearing down that of its competitors. Noom establishes its credibility within its ads by connecting itself to reputable public health agencies, though fails to detail what that connection means. The company further boosts its reputation by lowering the reputations of its competitors, defining itself more by what it is not than what it is. Media scholar Stuart Hall

writes on the role ideology plays in mediated messages using the terms encoding and decoding, arguing that a text has both the encoded meaning producers inject into a text, and the decoded meaning audiences take out of it.[67] Noom encodes its texts but only vaguely. It leaves the text of its ads open, not closed, to place the onus of meaning making unto decoders. Noom skirts responsibility for its claims up until the point of subscription, when it is often too late for interested parties to back out.

The company's credibility is supported, in part, through connections to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). RSA headlines mention that Noom has been "reviewed by the CDC," and that it is one of the "CDC's DPP-Recognized Program[s]." Other headlines continue to use the terms "reviewed" and "recognized" as Noom name-drops the CDC. What does review mean here? Peer review? Merit review? Simply acknowledgement by the CDC? The specifics of what being reviewed or recognized by the CDC means is left up to interpretation, though sounds good on its face. "DPP" is another term left unexplained, though with a few Google searches, I was able to find it refers to the National Diabetes Prevention Program, which the CDC describes as "a partnership of public and private organizations working to prevent or delay type 2 diabetes."[68] I could not find any proof of a relationship between Noom and the CDC outside the DPP, which is peculiar considering that messages praising the company's partnership with the CDC exist outside a diabetes prevention context. Headlines like "weight loss + clinical support" further associate the company with medical professionals, though again, what that clinical support entails is conveniently left out of the ads.

In addition to its propping up of its reputation by aligning itself with the medical field, Noom also condemns competing diet plans and weight loss service providers. The ads do so explicitly through the use of competitor keywords in its RSAs, and implicitly in its single-image placements. The competitor keyword strategy is a means to an end rather than an end itself– the end being definition through non-definition. One RSA headline, for example, reads "upgrade from J. Craig," using shorthand to refer to the frozen meal company Jenny Craig. The word "upgrade" assumes both that the target audience is subscribed to Jenny Craig, and that they are dissatisfied with their experience to the point that they can imagine something better. Noom is vague with its mention of competitors with the Meta placements, likely because targeting on the platform is based on audience rather than keyword. With Noom, there is "no tediously counting points," nor "overpriced, frozen meals," or "weekly weigh-ins." The note on point counting is a reference to Weight Watchers, while mention of meals is a dig at companies like Atkins and the aforementioned Jenny Craig. Most, if not all, diet programs encourage weigh-ins to track progress. Though Noom might not require its users to participate in the exact practices mentioned in the advertisements, it certainly encourages similar ones. Instead of point counting, it uses a color-coding system based on caloric density and sets an intake limit for each color.[69]

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[67] Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*.
[68] "National Diabetes Prevention Program | Diabetes | CDC."; "Press Release."
[69] "What Do the Green, Yellow, and Orange Food Color Categories Mean?"

Instead of weekly weigh-ins, the app encourages daily weigh-ins in the morning with a paired scale.[70] Branding off that, though, would not boost the company's reputation, nor would it denigrate that of its competitors.

Noom uses a similar strategy in another collection of ads by using the term "just" in place of "no" to allow for more nuance in its messaging. Noom is "more than just logging meals." With Noom, "you won't just lose weight." Such language simultaneously frames alternative methods as too simplistic, while also, again, capitalizing on the imaginative power of its audience. The choice of the word "just" shows that in some way, Noom *is* about logging meals, despite the aforementioned claim that there is no point counting involved. "It's not about counting calories, it's about making real changes." Again, this assumes there exists some predisposition to equate dieting with counting calories. What these "real changes" are outside of logging calories is left unanswered.

This strategy of referencing the faults of its competitors includes not just competing companies, but alternative meal plans as well. Though not technically competitors because plans are not attached to specific companies, these alternatives are nonetheless a threat to Noom's market share. "Mediterranean diet alternative," reads one RSA headline, accompanied by the description "The secret? Science." The ad explains neither the alternative to the Mediterranean diet that Noom offers, nor the science behind the secret. Not only is there an alternative, but one more rooted in fact. Noom ads also target keto– the practice of forcing one's body into ketosis to burn fat. "Considering going keto?" asks one headline, accompanied by the description, "find out how Noom can help you reach your weight loss goals." The pairing here calls on individuals interested in losing weight using keto, suggesting that if individuals are purely interested in it for losing weight, Noom offers the same thing but better. Furthermore, the headline "Keto vs. Noom" paired with the description that there is "no more restrictive eating" makes it seem as though one is more limiting than the other, with Noom the more freeing option.

To account for all possible alternatives, there are also a number of ads that promote Noom as an alternative to non-dieting. This is more common amongst the Meta ads, which, like the indirect callouts, makes sense because of the targeting affordances of the platform. The primary text for one Meta ad reads, "Losing weight on your own = 🤷‍♀️ Losing 2x more weight with Noom = 🔥🔥🔥." The emojis here are common within the Meta ads, likely because they are both eye-catching and open for interpretation. The message implies that users will feel less lost and more empowered on their weight loss journey if they subscribe to Noom.

Noom carries this encouragement throughout its other ads with claims like, "you can do it with Noom" and that "you can do this" by "just Nooming"– all implying that there are multiple ways to lose weight, yes, but that it is through the ease of Noom that individuals will find the most

[70] "How Often Should I Be Weighing In?"

success. These broad comparisons continue with messages like "same old habits crash dieting stress & anxiety vs free mental health course," doubling down on the dichotomy between what is not Noom and what is. It's the "easier, smarter weight loss program," which furthers the binary between Noom and alternatives by positioning other weight loss programs as harder and dumber in comparison. Through Noom, users can get "better results." Better, in this case, meaning more weight loss. The messaging ignores the dangers of excessive or ongoing dieting– a concerning message given that eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates of any psychiatric illness.[71] This fact, though, seems lost on Noom, as there are plenty more lines of copy endorsing this "more is better" ideology. Individuals can quite literally "lose more weight with Noom." In acknowledging that "losing weight is work" and subsequently explaining that "Noom makes it easier," the ads make it seem that Noom understands the struggles associated with losing weight, and is thankfully there to help with faster weight loss because of its experience, despite the fact that Noom is not a person and does not know what it is like to try to lose weight.

To summarize Noom's use of ethos in its advertising, Noom's placements across Meta and Google position the company as an authority within the weight loss space both because of its connections to an established public health organization, and because its competitors are comparatively worse. At no point in this group of ads does the company explain what its product is outside a promise for weight loss that is different from alternatives. The level of difference that actually exists between Noom and its competitors is hard to delineate– purposefully so. By defining itself solely by what it is *not*, Noom never has to admit to what it is. This strategy renders contradictions meaningless in a way, because the most the ads do is imply. It gives audiences free rein to fantasize a weight loss plan that is not like those they have seen before– that doesn't use a rigid point system or require weekly weigh-ins. Beyond this use of ethos, Noom also grounds itself in pathos, manipulating audiences' emotions to further encourage use of its product.

Fueling on Feelings: Noom's Pathos

Pathos is the rhetorical appeal concerned with belief and sensibility– drawing on audiences' emotions to manipulate them into feeling a certain way. Noom uses a combination of bandwagoning and testimonials to convince its audience that failure to use its product will mean getting left behind. The ads also try to connect to audiences through repeated mention of the word "your" and praise for the level of personalization possible with its plan.

Bandwagoning refers to the practice of creating demand by calling out the number of people already consuming a given product or service, preying on individuals' fears of missing out.[72] The practice serves as proof of the viability of a product in that others have had success with the product; audiences should use Noom because it has already worked for others. The copy in the

[71] "Eating Disorder Statistics."
[72] Leibenstein, "Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumers' Demand," 189.

different advertisements invites the audience to “join the millions of people changing their lives with Noom,” to “join half a million regular people learning to push past plateaus and tame temptation.” The pattern continues as Noom says it is “trusted by millions, worldwide.” Missing here, as is common across the different ads, is an explanation of what those claims mean. Who do those millions represent? What is it that they trust? What exactly is helping them change their lives? What plateaus are they pushing through? How long have they used Noom? How helpful have they found the product? One RSA implies that by subscribing to Noom, the audience can “see why 66% saw lasting weight loss.” The time frame of those 66% of people’s weight loss is not specified, nor is there an explanation of what happened to the other 34%. It sounds like a lot of people lost weight using Noom, though, so why not check it out?

There is another collection of ads, both on Google and Meta, that work to ground these claims in lived experiences through testimonials. An individual named Sarah celebrates Noom’s flexibility in saying, “this is the only thing that works despite having no time on my hands.” Another two women, Debbie and Sue, praise Noom for the weight it has helped them lose. “I’m 30 lbs lighter! It’s been life-changing,” says Debbie. “With Noom, I’ve lost half my body weight and I feel half my age,” adds Sue. Neither woman seems concerned with the amount of weight they have lost. The two take weight loss as universally positive. It is unclear whether the testimonials here come from real people, as the quotes are attributed to first names, and the images use only animated figures. As with the bandwagoning, it’s unclear how long it took said women to reach those goals. Missing too is mention of whether they have experienced physical symptoms because of their restriction.

Pathos also appears through the different placements’ repeated use of the word “your.” The term hails the viewer of the ad, calling on them to change their lifestyle. The word shows Noom’s focus on the individual. Some examples include lines like “your fresh start” and “start your weight loss journey with Noom.” The company is offering users the chance to change their lives because of Noom– that Noom will act as their guide, provided the individual takes ownership of their journey. Dissatisfied with your experience? Try harder. Noom, a credible company, has given you the tools needed to enact change, so failure to generate results can only be your fault.

This kind of language introduces the personalized aspect of Noom’s approach. Its plans are “built for your life.” Messages like “Noom adapts to you” make the program feel almost sentient– that it just has a way of understanding. Its plans are “tailor-made for your success.” Success, implicitly, means weight loss. Noom works for anybody because, as the ads claim, it takes each person’s experiences into consideration when creating their plan– a plan which ultimately prescribes calorie deficits as the answer to whatever problem a person is facing. The program helps work “towards your goals at any age,” meaning that age is also not a reason to skip out. It “fits into your lifestyle seamlessly” and is “change that works for any lifestyle.” Unlike other weight loss methods, Noom allows you to “lose weight on your schedule.” That is to say that

scheduling conflicts and existing stressors needn't prevent you from losing weight. "With Noom, any time can be weight loss season," reads one piece of copy. The company holds out its hand, waiting for the individual to decide to lose weight, as it says, "when you're ready, Noom's ready to help you lose weight." Holidays, in particular, are of no excuse, for "no matter what's on your plate this holiday season… achieve weight loss that lasts with Noom." Users are told it is up to them to choose when they want to lose weight, but that they nonetheless need to choose a time.

Noom's heavy emphasis on personalization speaks to its privileging of the neoliberal self. The term "neoliberalism" refers to "a set of economic and political policies and ideologies favoring corporatism, privatization of public enterprises, and the reduction of state power and intervention," wherein responsibilities are placed largely unto individuals.[73] Noom's adherence to neoliberal individualism is made no clearer than by the line, "with Noom, weight loss is personal." The claim here, that weight loss is something personal, is presented as empowering and rebellious. Prefacing it with the phrase "with Noom" implies that without Noom, weight loss would not be personal, despite the fact that weight loss is always specific to a person because it is about that individual's body. Its high touch approach means that users can "get personalized support every step of the way." What that personalized support entails, again, is left up to the individual's imagination.

Noom's commitment to customization is powerful, as explained with lines like "that's the power of our personalized approach." Placements across both platforms lead with this– that Noom is a "customized 16-week plan," a "16-week personalized course" equipped with a "personal coach" to provide "1-on-1 coaching [that] will help you meet your weight loss goals." At no point is personalization explained. Audiences must determine what they think personalization means, which Noom likely prefers because users are only able to realize their ideas' misalignment with Noom's actual product after subscribing. The advertisements the company runs rely on the idea that the company cares for the individual user. These broad claims are supported not only by the aforementioned appeals to emotions and credibility, but by actual statistics.

Munching on Metrics: Noom's Logos

Logos is the rhetorical appeal concerned with logic and reasoning– referencing facts and figures to make messages appear like common sense. Noom backs up its credibility and empathy by dedicating itself to science and psychology. Additionally, Noom offers up its proven method in the form of course packs users can add to their existing subscriptions. The logic here comes from the fact that users are sold the possibility of sustained weight loss *after* Noom, unlike alternatives which would require consistent maintenance.

Noom ad after Noom ad preaches the company's commitment to science. Even the splash image on its research page states, "Noom is grounded in science. It's at the heart of everything we

[73] Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture*, 2.

do."[74] Audiences are led to believe that, unlike other companies, Noom prioritizes science. The exact science, of course, is left unexplained, leaving audiences to assume that it must be good science, because why promote bad science? The appeals to scientific authority here seem to imply that something being scientific is evidence enough that it is ethical, despite the large number of unethical things that have been done in the name of science. The repeated positioning of Noom's reliance on science as a differentiator from competitors speaks to the presumption of science as credible, value-neutral, and authoritative.[75] In preaching its connection to science, Noom makes it seem as though it adheres to some set of ethical standards as would be common for a reputable research institution.

The ads, through their frequent mention of science, make it seem like Noom's scientific information is proprietary. A surprising number of ads make use of the word "secret"– "Noom's secret? Brainpower, not willpower." "The secret? Science." "Noom's secret is psychology." This implies that the information backing the Noom program has not been seen before– that it must be more than only eating certain foods or making sure to not eat over a certain amount of food. The claim that it is a "game-changing way to lose the weight and keep it off" drives home the same point. Competitors mustn't use science or psychology because it's Noom's secret. Ironic here is the fact that in paying to serve these ads, Noom has forfeited any semblance of secrecy. In fact, as mentioned in the previous section, millions of individuals seem to know this exclusive information.

The reliance on psychology, in particular, focuses intervention on the individual, blaming their minds for failing to control their bodies. The reason someone can't lose weight is because of something wrong with their brain– something that, luckily, Noom can fix. "We use psychology to teach you how to get healthier," "psychology is the key to lasting weight loss," "Noom's psychology-based approach is built for everyone who's ready to lose weight," "Noom uses psychology to help you build new habits to crush your goals," "backed by psychology," "psychology is the key to lasting weight loss," "lose weight […] with just 10 minutes of Noom's psychology a day," the list goes on. The program Noom sells has been "designed by psychologists." As with its other claims, what psychological ideas it uses is not specified. Psychology is nothing more than the science of the mind– it is the study of what is happening inside someone's brain. It is not a harbinger of morality, but a state of being. Psychology (the topic, not the field) is neither good nor bad, it just is. The American Psychiatric Association's official diagnostic manual for mental illnesses and disorders, for example, defines the criteria for a number of eating disorders (e.g., anorexia, bulimia).[76] Eating disorders are psychological too. There is a societal understanding that eating disorders are dangerous. Their being psychological serves as proof that something being based on psychology does not make it safe. As someone

[74] "Research."
[75] Mandel and Tetlock, "Debunking the Myth of Value-Neutral Virginity."
[76] American Psychiatric Association, *Feeding and Eating Disorders*.

with a history of disordered eating, I can attest to the fact that if you berate your mind long enough, you can convince yourself to stop eating. Yes, it is psychological, but it is also unsafe.

These connections to science are not pulled out of thin air, the ads claim, for they are "based on a study over 12 weeks of active Noom users." The ads themselves do not link to said study, but the footer of Noom's website does.[77] It took me only a few minutes to conclude that Noom greatly misrepresents the findings of the linked *Nature* article. The study explains the "problem" of obesity through metrics developed outside a health context, uses highly specific data, and has no control group.[78] There is no mention of external validity, meaning that its findings are specific, and should not be extrapolated to say that all individuals who use Noom for any amount of time can expect consistent weight loss. A number of other studies are available on the company website but follow the same trend of oversimplified claims. One article is titled "Can sense of smell impact health and weight?" in a big, bold font. Noom meets the lofty title with a summary saying that, "a recent study showed that mice who've lost their sense of smell had a faster metabolism, better fat-burning, and lower obesity than mice with normal noses."[79] What users are to take from a study on mice without a sense of smell, I can't say. The advertisements use mention of scientific studies alone to show that there is logical reason to support the company, though leave out that the relevance and actual application of the different studies' findings are questionable.

The validity of said science becomes even harder to believe when looking at the attention to detail put into the actual ads. One image of the app's UX shows calorie counts that don't add up. A Black Friday ad presents Noom as generous, for it has chosen to extend its sale. This ad, though, was the first mention of the sale on the platform. The copy within another ad read that the sale would end on November 27, 2023, but that very ad was still running when I conducted my audit on November 29, showing a commitment to artificial scarcity. One of my favorite ads to critique is another Black Friday promotion saying that new and returning users could get 12 months for the cost of 6, claiming that that was a "72%" savings. There is no mention of what either price is, and neither I nor my colleagues could figure out how to crunch the pricing for any existing plan to get that 72% number. Small critiques, I acknowledge, but they nonetheless show a lack of attention to detail, and an assumption that viewers would not look close enough at the ads to notice. I noticed. Outside this inattention, I also noticed blatant hypocrisy, as Noom claimed itself to be a diet that was somehow not a diet.

[77] "Noom: Stop dieting. Get life-long results"
[78] Chin et al., "Successful Weight Reduction and Maintenance by Using a Smartphone Application in Those with Overweight and Obesity."
[79] "Research."

Schrödinger's Diet: Noom's Contradictions

The most obvious contradictions within Noom's advertisements are within the ads explicitly mentioning dieting. Somehow, according to its ads, Noom both is and is not a diet. This paradox is akin to Schrödinger's cat– the thought experiment which suggests that a cat in a box with a potentially lethal element is simultaneously alive and dead until it is observed. Noom is Schrödinger's diet. According to Merriam-Webster, a diet refers to "a regimen of eating and drinking sparingly so as to reduce one's weight."[80] Using that definition, it seems clear that Noom is a diet. That said, the title of the homepage reads "Stop dieting. Get lifelong results." This is the same webpage directed to by ads encouraging users to take advantage of Noom's "healthy diet plan." By saying both things, the company can target those averse to the idea of dieting while still attracting those customers who are looking for exactly that.

Some ads acknowledge the limitations of dieting, saying that "most diets aren't effective or safe." The word "most" here allows Noom to spread doubt around the idea of dieting and align itself with the feminist position of refusing diet culture, while also leaving room for possible alternatives. Another line intensifies the critique of diets, reading "there's a reason diets don't work." That makes it seem as though no form of dieting– that is, restrictive eating–could lead to sustained weight loss. The messaging only gets more explicitly anti-diet from there:

- "No dieting needed"
- "Noom isn't a diet"
- "Diets don't work, Noom does."
- "Learn how Noom helps you stop dieting"
- "Ditch the diets and get results that last."

All of these lines of copy and more serve to separate Noom from the stigma of dieting. Some are even oxymorons, like "no more restrictive dieting" when, as mentioned above, dieting is explicitly restrictive. Noom even incidentally discredits itself by acknowledging that the reason "your diet" didn't work was "because restrictive eating is built to fail." Another group of ads acknowledges the dangers of weight cycling in condemning what they refer to as "yo-yo dieting."

The anti-diet culture position targets those who have been unable to maintain weight loss with other diets, individuals with a history of disordered eating, and those who, if they knew something was a diet, would choose not to engage with it. This perspective, though, is immediately challenged by the other ads the company pays to run on search and social channels. The company runs search ads with headlines like "start fresh w/ a Noom Diet Plan," "get a diet coach" and "start this summer with a healthy diet plan." Not only that, some promote Noom as "a better way to diet." The language here explicitly admits that Noom *is* in fact a diet. Even if I were to entertain the claims that it was not a diet, what, then, would it be? The messaging is clear

[80] "Diet."

in saying that Noom is meant for weight loss, and also says not to "put all the pressure on your workout," and that users can "lose weight, no sweat." If not changing output, the only thing left in the weight loss equation is to change input. The rhetoric tells users they can buy the fantasy of thinness without having to give up anything– that they can quite literally "lose weight without giving up your favorite foods" and "eat what you love with Noom," all the while being able to "lose 10 lbs in 10 weeks." The ability to lose weight without having to work out or change dietary habits sounds magical. Even when describing what it is, Noom still cannot manage to clearly define what it sells. What Noom is selling, in fact, remains a secret long after users click through an ad to the company's landing page.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I conducted a close textual and discourse analysis of the paid materials Noom runs on both Google and Meta. Through my analysis of the company's paid search and social placements, I identified a clear strategy– one that uses ethos, pathos, logos, and contradiction to define Noom more by what it is not instead of what it is. The combination of the three basic rhetorical appeals with Noom's refusal to admit the truth of its product makes it hard to disagree with its messaging. Like a horoscope, Noom provides mystical aphorisms for listeners to decrypt. By establishing itself as an authority, discrediting any alternatives, projecting insecurity and exclusion, and defending itself with vague allusions to science, Noom positions itself atop of a weight loss solutions hierarchy, which it then justifies through veiled references to psychology. The ambiguity over what the company is marketing is purposeful, for it expands the pool of potential customers. This is because Noom is selling users the ability to deny what they are buying: a disordered eating how-to. Noom is focused less on immediate conversions than it is directing traffic to its sign-up quiz, which I explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2:
A Walkthrough of Noom's Sign-Up Process

Introduction

There's a change happening in your body. You've been noticing it for a while– that something feels different– and you finally get around to finding a new doctor to discuss it with.

Time passes, and it's time for your appointment. Upon arrival… the space is a lot more overstimulating than you had expected. Why is that kid crying so loudly? Isn't there someplace to sit that isn't next to the person with the loud cough? Amidst the chaos, you find your way to the front desk and give your information. The administrator asks you to fill out a few forms, explaining they will "only take a second." You take what is a far thicker packet than was promised, and find a spot to sit and wait.

You're making your way through the packet, and the questions start feeling repetitive. The information on the pages is so dense that you cannot differentiate between what is required and what is optional. All you can do is make your best guess.

After waiting around for what feels like hours, and watching as people who came long after you check out, a nurse calls you back. You hand the doctor your forms, and they barely take a glance at what you wrote. Frustrated and impatient, you forget to ask the questions you prepared. The doctor prescribes what sounds like a temporary fix, and promises that a follow-up appointment will provide more answers, which you can schedule at the front. Checking out, you hand your card over and barely listen to what they tell you about the cost. Once you get home, you try what the doctor recommended, but find it isn't different from what you had been doing. Also, looking back at the bill, you realize you paid hundreds of dollars more than you intended to. All this work only to feel that nothing has changed.

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I paint this narrative with purpose, because Noom's sign-up quiz operates similarly. It is a waiting room. It is a holding area. It is a place primarily for data collection in an environment users perceive as safe for disclosing health concerns and emotions. The different sections of the quiz disorient the user, changing topic and format without reason, and without a definitive end point. What was presented in the ads as taking no more than five minutes ends up taking far longer. With each question, the progress bar at the top of the screen barely moves. It is impossible to locate yourself within the system. Like filling out forms in the doctor's office, users feel overwhelmed, and offer up whatever information they can in the hopes that it will improve their treatment.

In this chapter, I conduct a step-by-step walkthrough of Noom's sign-up process, focusing specifically on its flagship sign-up quiz. I first explain the relevance of the quiz mechanic to

Noom's digital advertising strategy. I then provide an overview of the walkthrough method before conducting one myself.[81] A traditional walkthrough would involve three steps– registration, everyday use, and discontinuation, but I perform only the first. I do this because I care about the quiz as a marketing tool, not the app as a product. I explore the app store listing, download the app, and take the quiz. The screens of the quiz change in tone and topic frequently to disorient users, mirroring the kind of "now…this" transitions common in news programs.[82] Noom does this because, as I argue, the quiz operates as a waiting room to prolong the period of non-definition; it is a place for sedation rather than action.

Advertising the Quiz

The location an ad directs its users to is just as important as its message. The click-through URL, as it is called within Meta and Google's ad management systems, is the place advertisers want audiences to go after seeing an ad. It is the first piece of content a user sees that is completely within the brand's control.

Hard as it may be to identify the exact product Noom is paying to advertise, it is extremely easy to determine the ads' target destination. Every click-through URL I found led back to Noom's sign-up quiz. Whether the original URLs have since been redirected to the quiz to avoid error pages, Noom, or an agency acting on its behalf, nonetheless made the active decision to direct present-day users to that page. This is because the quiz, to Noom, is universal. No matter the messaging that brought a user to the site, chances are they need to sign up, which is done by first taking the quiz; the quiz is required to create an account. Messages like "free quiz to see if you qualify," "take this free 5-minute quiz," and "women can't believe this quiz is actually right" flood search and social placements alike. The terse syntax, combined with the lack of explanation of what comes after the quiz, makes the copy read more like a command than it does a suggestion. Additionally, lines like "2x the weight loss, one quiz" and "yes, this 5min quiz can show you what your body actually needs to lose weight" make it seem that the quiz itself is what results in weight loss, rather than the continued use of a Noom subscription.

To prevent deep contemplation over its offerings, ads promoting the quiz tend to use urgent language to make barriers to entry appear extremely low. Not only is the quiz presented as free, but users are told to "hurry!" and "get [their] plan here" to "learn more now." The ads tell users they can only lose weight with Noom, and the only way to use Noom is by first taking its quiz. Though there is a desktop version of the quiz, the design is mobile-first, mimicking the mechanics of the app. Apps are a non-traditional text, and thus require non-traditional methodologies (like the walkthrough) to study their content, which I detail next.

[81] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method."
[82] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Data Collection and Methodology

To analyze Noom's sign-up quiz, I conducted the first step of Light, Burgess, and Duguay's walkthrough method.[83] A technical walkthrough involves "systematically and forensically" signing up for, engaging with, and deleting the chosen app.[84] I limit the scope of this study to registration because I am more interested in how users come to understand Noom through its branding than I am the actual service. I also, admittedly, did not want to pay Noom to re-trigger my ED.

I conducted my formal walkthrough of the official Noom app on the afternoon of December 10, 2023. I used my iPhone 12, which I verified was running the latest operating system available to me at the time, iOS 17.1.2. I screen-recorded my entire process, and later transcribed my commentary to use for analysis. I started by first finding Noom on the App Store, exploring its listing, scrolling through the featured images, reading the description, and noting any relevant disclaimers. From there, I downloaded the app, and took the quiz. I went as far as I could without having to subscribe. I have since completed a number of informal walkthroughs to supplement my initial findings, changing certain answers to see if the app would respond differently.

I divide my formal walkthrough into three separate parts– a discussion of the App Store listing, interactions with the app before the quiz, and finally the quiz itself. Using my observations from the walkthrough, I argue that the quiz serves as an extension of Noom's marketing strategy of definition through non-definition. It is a waiting room of sorts; the quiz creates the illusion of education and personalization to encourage information sharing and ultimately subscription without having to reveal the simplicity of Noom's service.

Exploring the App Store

To start my walkthrough, I first searched for Noom on the App Store. Noom is the first organic search result but is not always the first listing. The top spot is normally a paid ad, which is awarded based on an auction between Noom and its competitors.

The app is titled not just Noom, but "Noom: Healthy Weight Loss." The subtitle reads, "lose weight with psychology." The text mirrors the rhetoric of the search and social ads which presented Noom as a safer way to lose weight. There is also heavy emphasis placed on the role psychology plays in Noom's product, and again, little explanation as to what those psychological aspects are.

As for the more basic information within the listing, the app requires iOS 15.6 or later to operate on iPhone or iPod touch. Despite the advertisements' incessant preaching of Noom's being for

[83] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method."
[84] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 881.

all, the all in question only includes those with devices released after the iPhone 7.[85] Also, the listing claims Noom takes up 348 megabytes of space; on my phone, I found it took up 1.46 gigabytes, which felt misleading.

Linked in the App Store are the developer's website and the company's privacy policy. The developer link directs to Noom's homepage, which immediately asked me to grant cookie permission to "improve your experience, personalise your content and ads, and analyse site usage."[86] Missing is a clear explanation of how Noom handles user data. The privacy policy is similar, focusing on the benefits of information sharing without making clear the risks users take to attain those. "The information we collect depends on how you interact with us […] and the choices you make," says the policy.[87] Any data collected is for the purposes of helping Noom "enhance your experience and enjoyment," "respond to your questions," "send you information," and "communicate with you about new services, offers, promotions, rewards."[88] Mike Markel, Director of Technical Communication at Boise State, explains this kind of language as an attempt at appearing utilitarian. Reading the policy, "you would conclude that the reason businesses collect visitors' personal information is both simple and obvious. Companies do it to help visitors."[89] Markel continues to say that "businesses do not state that the reason they collect personal information is to enhance their revenues."[90]

Noom does exactly this, using empowerment to obscure its profiting off user data, and admitting to what it does not do instead of calling out what it does. Noom "does not sell or share the personal information of children or teens," which shows some consideration for privacy; that is, until realizing the app only lets users declare their age as 18 or older, meaning that the information collected by the app never falls under the category of data that the company doesn't sell. I bring this up to explain that the quiz, though presented as aiding in personalization, helps Noom extract data it could not otherwise have collected through a more traditional sign-up process.

Speaking of age, Noom is rated 12+ on the App Store. I expected a rating of at least 18+ because of the app's focus on weight loss and restriction. I wondered if it was possible the highest rating available on the App Store was 12+, holding out hope that Noom did not target children. A search into Apple's reference materials on age ratings showed that Noom was, in fact, deliberately deciding to allow minors access to its app. Apple does require age ratings, but gives developers flexibility in setting them.[91] Apple's website explains, "[i]f your app's age rating is 12+ or lower but you believe its content may not be suitable for users under 17, you can

[85] "iOS 15"; "iOS 16 and iPadOS 16 Are Compatible with These Devices."
[86] "Noom: Stop dieting. Get life-long results."
[87] "Noom Privacy Policy - Noom."
[88] "Noom Privacy Policy - Noom."
[89] Markel, "The Rhetoric of Misdirection in Corporate Privacy-Policy Statements."
[90] Markel, "The Rhetoric of Misdirection in Corporate Privacy-Policy Statements," 200.
[91] "Age Ratings."

manually select Restrict to 17+."[92] I would go so far as to say that the content should not be available to minors at all, but content with such a rating "can't be sold in Apple stores."[93] To exclude minors would mean deleting Noom from the App Store entirely. The 12+ rating is explained on Noom's listing as being because of "Infrequent/Mild Medical/Treatment Information."[94] An app rated for ages 17+ would have "Frequent or intense medical or treatment-focused content."[95] The difference between what is considered frequent versus infrequent appears arbitrary, though it's hard to believe that a program promoting calorie counting, meal restriction, and which now prescribes GLP-1 medication, would qualify as infrequently mentioning medical information. There is no excuse for automation or ignorance here. The decision to set such a low age rating was an active one.

These kinds of technical specifications are available quite clearly within the app's listing but are easily overlooked by interested users who instead focus on branded content like photos and descriptions. Both carry on the messaging of the paid placements, sharing that Noom "uses psychology to help you lose weight and keep it off" because it helps users "understand [their] food choices with psychology." The similarities continue with comparisons to competitors, appeals to credibility, and incorrect calculations. Different, though, is the inclusion of pictures of the app's UX and a more explicit focus on quantification.

"Any program can tell you to eat less and move more. Noom is different," starts the description. There is no mention of how Noom is different, likely because it is not. Noom's main function is providing feedback to food logging, telling users to eat more or less of certain foods, and celebrating when a user eats fewer calories than their goal. Those few users who may be skeptical to the claims need only to download the app to "[d]iscover why Noom has been featured in the New York Times, WebMD, People, Shape, Forbes, and more." The words "discover why" imply that there is a natural and logical rationale behind Noom's inclusion in big-name publications; hidden is the fact that not all endorsements are organic or meaningful. Press outlets have entire sections of their business dedicated to curating sponsored content. Mention alone shows nothing more than a sizable marketing budget.

The attention to detail, and assumption of inept readers, continues throughout the rest of the branded content through misrepresented and miscalculated metrics. One image shows that a user is on track to hit their 2,000-calorie goal for the day, as represented by the small text "good" written above the 1,850 calories they had logged; it is unclear if "good" here is because the person is under their goal, or if it was prompted by something else. There is no illustration of how the app responds to someone logging more than their set goal. Using caloric intake alone to judge someone's weight fluctuation assumes a certain level of precision in nutritional labeling

[92] "Set an App Age Rating."
[93] "Age Ratings."
[94] "Noom: Healthy Weight Loss."
[95] "Age Ratings."

that just is not realistic. Per the FDA's nutrition labeling guidelines, a food item's labels are considered compliant even if they deviate by up to 20% from the actual content, meaning it is entirely possible that someone who logged 1,850 calories actually ate over their 2,000-calorie goal.[96] Noom skips over this fact to avoid calling attention to the flaws of its system, and the potential for users to not lose weight even if doing exactly as they have been told. Additionally, some images show far smaller calorie caps, with one as low as 1,380 calories. No matter an individual's height or body composition, that is a concerning number. According to an article hosted on Harvard's Health Publishing website, "calorie intake should not fall below 1,200 a day in women or 1,500 a day in men, except under the supervision of a health professional."[97] The 1,380-calorie goal is, at best, borderline starvation. There is a very real possibility that the number of calories a user thinks they have eaten is far different, which matters when Noom's formula for weight loss is simply eating less than you burn. Also, the use of numbers in tandem with repeated claims to Noom as something "healthy" ignores the risks that come with consuming so few calories.

Noom skirts criticism of being too rudimentary in its categorization of foods through its color scale. The idea that "no foods are off limits" is technically true, in that users can eat whatever they want, but cannot do so without judgment. The UX in one photo shows that green foods are accompanied by a message reading "great choice– enjoy!" while yellow reads "eat moderate portions," and orange "limit your portions." Noom explains that despite the cultural connotations of the different colors, "[i]t's important to remember that "orange" doesn't mean bad and "green" doesn't mean good," just that "[o]range foods can raise a 'red flag' for foods that contain a lot of calories […] you need to be more mindful of how much 'orange' food you're eating."[98] In an app that judges performance based on lack of consumption, it follows that users would consider something having more calories to be bad.

Similar to some paid placements, the numbers on the color scale do not add up; the person only logged one green food– a 210-calorie banana– for the day, yet the progress bar still reads 1,850. Likely a design oversight, it shows a level of inattention incompatible with claims of scientific credibility. Furthermore, the use of the color scale alongside regular calorie logging makes it confusing to know which metric users should prioritize. If a user logged 1,600 calories worth of red foods, but had an 1,850-calorie goal, would they be rewarded or condemned? The marketing materials leading users to this part of the listing continuously emphasize the app's basis in science, but a closer look at the numbers Noom uses to support said claims show that it is not as attuned to detail as it wants users to believe. With all that said, I now turn to a discussion of the app itself.

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[96] "Guidance for Industry."
[97] "Calorie Counting Made Easy."
[98] "What Do the Green, Yellow, and Orange Food Color Categories Mean?"

Launching the App

To download the app, I had to enter my Apple ID password, which is standard procedure even for a free app. After waiting for the software to load, it was time to explore.

The first screen users see is a loading page with a pulsating orange sparkle, which then turns to a login page. Before engaging with any actual content, I was met with a pop-up asking for permission to send notifications; there was no mention of frequency or content, only that "notifications may include alerts, sounds, and icon badges." After dismissing that, I was taken to a screen showing two individuals climbing over an unmarked graph trending upwards. There were no axes or titles, making the takeaway unclear, but nonetheless showing some connection between Noom and science. I was given the choice between two buttons: "get started" and "log in." Seeing as I didn't have an existing account, I opted for the first, which gave the options to either create a login using an email and password, or to connect using an existing Apple or Facebook account.[99] Hidden at the bottom of the screen, in miniscule font, is the disclaimer that "by proceeding, you acknowledge that you have accepted our Terms of Use and Privacy Policy." The policy, remember, admits (through omission) to selling user data. I was not required to check a box or scroll through any amount of a policy page. I could have easily missed the mention had I not looked for it, for the boxes I had to fill were exclusively on the top half of the screen. The text here, and throughout the rest of the quiz, is thin and hard to read, which requires a lot of squinting, and could make it hard for those with vision impairments to use the app.

From there, Noom told me "let's get started!" which made it seem that Noom and I were creating something together. I was then told "Welcome to Noom!" and asked to verify my email address, given the choice to either "open my inbox" or "resend email." Hidden in the top right corner is the option to skip the verification process. It being separate from the other action buttons, and its lack of outlining or shading, made it easy to miss that verification was optional. There was little feedback response from the button push for resending the email, so it was unclear to me whether the app received my press. When I clicked to skip, Noom asked "are you sure?" in bold text. "Verifying your email is highly recommended," it said, though it did not explain why. I could either "go back" which was written in bold, blue text, or "skip" which was thin and red. This style of pop-up is common on iPhone, with the blue normally being to confirm an action, and red to undo.

After confirming that I wanted to skip, Noom told me it was time to "personalize your Noom plan!" to help Noom "get to know you better so we can create the perfect plan for you!" Again, Noom stresses collaboration, using words like "we" to make Noom and I into a team working towards a common goal. I was given the option to "start," which was confusing considering screens earlier I was told that we had gotten started. I figured pressing the button would finally

[99] When conducting my walkthrough, I made a point not to use my personal information to make an account. I made use of a temporary email address and used the password my iPhone suggested to me to make my account.

take me to the quiz, which it did, but not before one last pop-up asking for cookie permission. "We use cookies to improve your experience, personalise your content and ads, and analyse site usage. By clicking 'OK', you agree to the use of cookies," it read. There was a large, teal button at the bottom reading "OK," and a far smaller link to a page labeled "manage cookies." Cookie permissions are managed by a third-party website, OneTrust, which has its own terms of service and privacy permissions. According to OneTrust's LinkedIn profile, the company is headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, which made the use of British English within the pop-up particularly strange.[100] At this point, I had little idea what I had agreed to sharing, or where that information would be stored. After dismissing those last pop-ups, it was time for the quiz.

Taking the Quiz

The quiz, according to a progress bar at the top of the screen, is divided into seven equal sections. In reality, though, the sections are lopsided, and interrupted frequently by what I refer to as "intertitles"– the screens breaking up the different sections. Across the seven sections, there are 13 intertitles, some of which include multiple screens. Also included are a number of gamified mechanics, including a section where users are instructed to swipe left or right on a given statement, and a knowledge test. I describe this process linearly to emphasize the wide range of information thrown at users throughout the sign-up process, touching specifically on personalization, therapeutic language, obscured opt-outs, gamification, psychology, and pacing.

Demographic information and personalization

The first section of the quiz, titled "DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE," asks users a number of questions about their bodies, goals, and lifestyles. Starting the quiz in this way supports the idea promoted in the marketing materials that Noom is personalized. The first question, "What is your weight loss goal?" asks the user to quantify what they are wanting out of the Noom experience (see Figure 2). The answers list multiple ranges of pounds to lose "for good," echoing the sentiment from the different advertisements that Noom is a permanent weight loss solution.

[100] "OneTrust: About | LinkedIn."

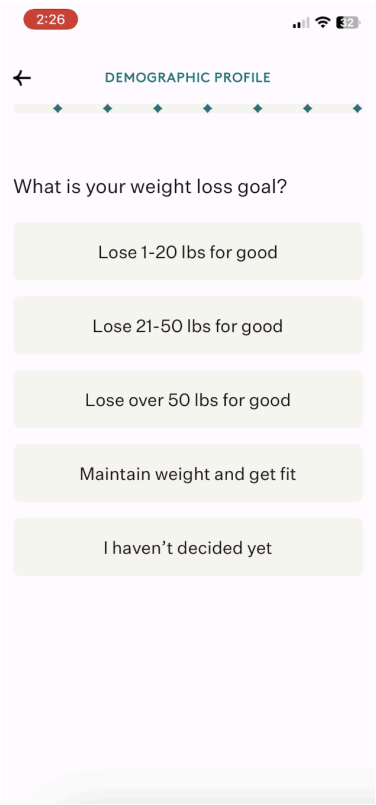

FIGURE 2: SCREENSHOT OF STANDARD QUESTION

From there, the questions pivot to sex and gender. On sex, users are given the choice between male, female, and intersex, but regardless have to provide that information. Noom justifies the question with a note on the role hormones play in metabolisms; seeing as people assigned the same sex at birth can have drastically different levels of testosterone and estrogen, a blood test would be a better indicator, but that would require actions outside the app. Additionally, it is unclear what this means for people who take hormones, or who have had different gender-affirming procedures. The gender identity question has more options, but notably does not note the relevance of the answer to the Noom experience. It pairs the two questions together– one justified and the other not– to take advantage of users' assumption that everything the quiz asks will be relevant.

It then asked if I was pregnant or nursing, and for my age. The minimum age was 18, contradicting the rating on the App Store of 12+, and giving the company plausible deniability over having users under age 18.

I then needed to enter a height, weight, and answer a series of lifestyle questions. I entered the average height and weight for American women my age according to the CDC, which meant 5'3 and 171 pounds.[101] The questions asked about employment, relationship status, urbanity,

[101] "Body Measurements."

parenthood, and medical risks, which were justified with vague claims to the impact that "routines" have on weight. At first, the prompts seemed like they were responding to my earlier answers, with some starting with "as a woman in your 20s." My informal walkthroughs showed this was superficial, for the questions do not change in topic, only wording. If I said that I was an older man, the prompts started with "as a man in your 50s." Later in the quiz, Noom asks "when do you feel the urge to grab a snack?" to which I said "never." The next question then asked, "what typically triggers your urge to snack and nibble," even though I had just answered that I did not snack. The so-called "customized" plans were the same each time, no matter the gender, weight, or lifestyle I entered. Personalization appeared to be nothing more than the occasional pronoun change, and the inclusion of a question about pregnancy if I answered my sex was female.

Therapeutic language and EDs

Noom, when asking a user's weight, says that "we don't mean to pry" and is simply asking so that it "can build a plan that's right for you." Repeated use of the word "we" in this context mirrors the advertisements in the first chapter, wherein the company positions itself as a caring individual, rather than a programmed chatbot. After users enter their weight, Noom thanks them for sharing the information, noting "that's an important and hard first step." The response hails users as uncomfortable with discussing their weight, even when using an app specifically meant to track it. The question on height was met with no such gratitude.

It is only after the basic demographic questions that Noom finally asks about eating disorders. The question "do you have an active diagnosis of an eating disorder (e.g., bulimia, anorexia, or similar diagnosis)?" is an attempt at showing Noom to be caring. The question, though, is purposely vague. It does not describe what is meant by the word "active," which would have been useful considering that no such terminology exists in describing EDs in the DSM-5. If the question is of treatment versus presence of a disorder, Noom could have modeled it off one of the questions in the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) screening tool which asks whether individuals are "currently in treatment for an eating disorder" with the options of "yes," "no," or "not currently, but I have been in the past."[102] Noom's version of the question fails to account for the fact that eating disorders are something individuals can easily hide from professionals or that it takes a certain amount of economic privilege to see someone specifically for an ED. Speaking from personal experience, an eating disorder diagnosis is something you have to want to get, and to do that, you have to want to change the behavior. With this in mind, I took the question as a way of Noom allowing those with a past of disordered eating to continue using the app, provided they did not see it as an active problem.

There was something especially sinister about this part of the quiz. If the user presses no, the quiz carries onto the next question seamlessly. If they click yes, the app displays a small message

[102] "Eating Disorder Screening Tool."

reading, “Thank you for sharing. We know this can be sensitive. Please confirm that your answer is correct.” That is, it asks users to double-check what I imagine was a deliberate choice. Once confirmed, the app displays a message that “Noom is not currently designed to support those with an active eating disorder,” with a button telling users to “Go back to home.” I was able to re-enter the quiz after pressing the button and proceed through the same demographic questions before landing on the warning page once more. As an experiment, I force closed the app. I reopened it to find all my answers saved as I had entered them, except for the ED question. My answer, which was yes, was instead saved as a no, meaning I could carry through to the rest of the quiz. Noom’s active attempts to get me to change my answer, so that I could continue through its system, showed that the question was meant more as a defense against accusations of enabling disordered eating than it was out of concern for its potential to trigger.

This lack of consideration for the risks of dieting continues in a later section with the question, “what is your ideal weight that you want to reach?” Below the text is a recommended weight range of between 107 pounds and 141 pounds. I compared this to a BMI chart from the American Cancer Society, which said that 107 pounds was the lowest someone who was the height I entered (5’3”) could be before being considered underweight.[103] When I set a goal of 100 pounds, which is underweight, Noom told me “Great!” and that “we’re excited to help you hit your goals.” When I set a goal of 90 pounds, however, Noom told me it was sorry, and that it was “not currently designed to reach the entered goal weight” because the CDC would consider that weight underweight. Why, then, did it let me enter 100 pounds? Also, the word “currently” is scary here, as it was in the ED section, for it leaves the door open for some future point where users could use Noom with the goal of becoming underweight. I want to emphasize that if a user enters a weight that Noom deems too low, they can keep editing the number pound by pound until the app lets them proceed. I imagine that this function does little to dissuade users from wanting to reach that low weight. I figure it would only encourage them to not tell Noom if they started to near the number, all the while continuing to use its dieting plan. I have a hard time imagining that Noom’s attempts at discouraging disordered eating have any material impact on those using the service to drastically decrease their weight. Again, it actively encourages users to adapt the platform to their disordered needs in a way that allows Noom to claim ignorance. Though the language is at times therapeutic, it is not coming from a place of care, but rather a place of plausible deniability.

Health insurance and optional information

Following the discussion of eating disorders and weight, the quiz asks users about their health insurance provider. The design of this page differs from the previous and does not show the seven-section progress bar. At the top of the page, Noom admits that there is not presently a benefit to providing insurance information: “We ask this question because you may become eligible to use Noom, sponsored by a health insurance provider, in the future. The provider name

[103] “Body Mass Index (BMI) Calculator.”

is necessary to evaluate your eligibility. If we find that you are eligible we'll reach out to you so that you don't miss the great news." The words "great news" sound positive, while the phrase "so that you don't miss" preys on individuals' fears of missing out. Like the transition from the question on sex to that of gender identity, the quiz relies on the obvious relevance of the former to justify the latter.

Here, Noom lists a range of providers, including "other," above the button users need to press to proceed. Hidden below that button, and below the fold, is the choice "prefer not to answer." Seeing as I had no reason to tell Noom my insurance information, I pressed the hidden option, which turned the text red. I figured I had done something wrong, but then the next screen loaded. The hidden button is yet another example of Noom placing skip buttons in unintuitive locations on purpose to make it difficult for users to know when information is optional. A similar thing happens later on when Noom asks who of my friends and family I "feel most comfortable talking to about weight loss?" I was told to enter the information of my "accountability buddy" so Noom could send them a "free short course to equip [them] with the key skills needed to support you." The question does not ask *if* I want to nominate someone, but *who*, pressuring me to provide another email address for them to send emails to.

After the insurance question, I was directed back to the standard part of the quiz to answer questions about priorities and stressors. By this point, the progress bar was only one fifth of the way full. It was here that Noom asked if I was "currently taking a GLP-1 medication like Wegovy, Ozempic, Mounjaro, Trulicity to help with your weight loss?" The quiz waits until section five to ask about diabetes. I figured the question of medication was primarily meant to see if it was worth Noom's while to target the user for its new Noom Med service, which prescribes GLP-1 medication off-label for weight loss.

Gamification

It is at this point that the format of the quiz changes drastically as it switches from the standard sign-up quiz format to that of the "Behavioral Profile Quiz" seen in Figure 4. Gamification, put simply, refers to the use of game mechanics in non-gaming contexts, often to increase engagement and encourage loyalty.[104] This section is meant to help Noom identify "what kind of weight loss approach will work best for you!" The only option available to me was "start your quiz." The title is a "quiz" in the same way that a magazine asking about your personality traits would, presenting users with ten statements for them to finish using a modified Likert scale. Specifically, the quiz tells users to "drag the slider towards the statement you agree with most" and that if they connect with both, "choose the one you agree with more," and if neither fit, to "choose the one you're closest to agreeing with." Users are not allowed to disagree, meaning they in some way have to conform to the ideologies of the different statements. The gamified mechanism disguises the forcing of a binary.

[104] Ciuchita et al., "It Is Really Not a Game," 5.

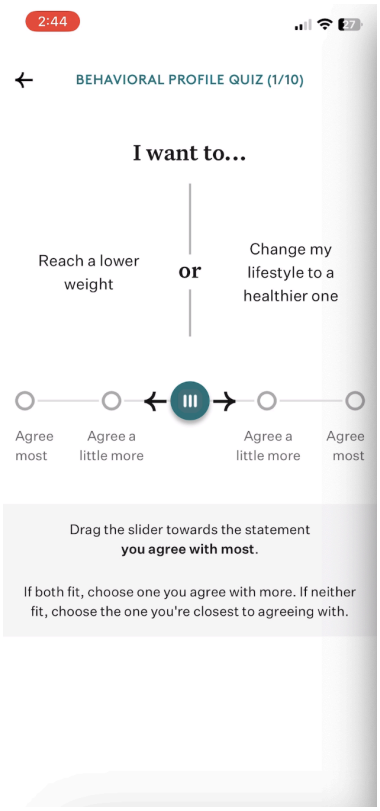

FIGURE 3: SCREENSHOT OF BEHAVIORAL QUIZ QUESTION

Statement pairings like "I think about my weight…all the time or only when prompted by something else" and "I would love my body…the same no matter my weight or more if I were to achieve my weight goal" are eerily similar to the kinds of questions professionals ask during ED screenings. The NEDA screening tool, for example, asks "how much more or less do you feel you worry about your weight and body shape than other people your age?" and "compared to other things in your life, how important is your weight to you?"[105] The questions are not the same, but they get at the same idea– a hyperfixation on weight– showing yet again that Noom's care for those with an inclination towards disordered eating is surface level at best.

Following my completion of all ten statements, Noom started "analyzing [my] profile" to tell me what exact behavior profile I matched up with. I was told I was "an intelligent influencer," because I "make effort look easy. But structure and support will help you know you're on track, and positive self-image and reinforcement will keep you moving towards your goals." Noom complimented me, but nonetheless confirmed that I needed its service. My behavior profile was not mentioned again. I was sent back to the traditional quiz format to answer how long it had been since I was at my "ideal weight" before being sent into another gamified experience.

[105] "Eating Disorder Screening Tool."

If we can think of the previous game as borrowing from a personality test, we can think of the next as taking from a dating app. I was told to swipe right or left on a number of statements depending on if I agreed with them or not, much like a user would do on an app like Tinder or Bumble. The forced binary of swiping left or right left little room for nuance. I was briefly interrupted with questions about my schedule, workload, dietary habits, and restrictions before returning to the swiping once again.

Each statement in the swiping section was accompanied by a collage. One of a group of small children on a picnic blanket underneath two giant pieces of broccoli, another storm clouds edited atop a woman walking, another of numerous fruits in the shape of gears. Following the brief interruption, the photos get weirder. In one, a man rides atop a fried egg unicycle whilst juggling four chicken wings. The final, shown in Figure 5, is the most confusing. Above the statement "I usually clear my plate even if I'm already feeling full" is a man in overalls using a human-sized fork to shovel up spaghetti and meatballs as he stands next to a wet floor sign. The message I took away from this was that food is something of waste, and that food consumption in general is a bad thing. On the whole, the images are largely unclear in their message outside the repeated use of food imagery, which contradicts the app's prevailing message of dietary restriction.

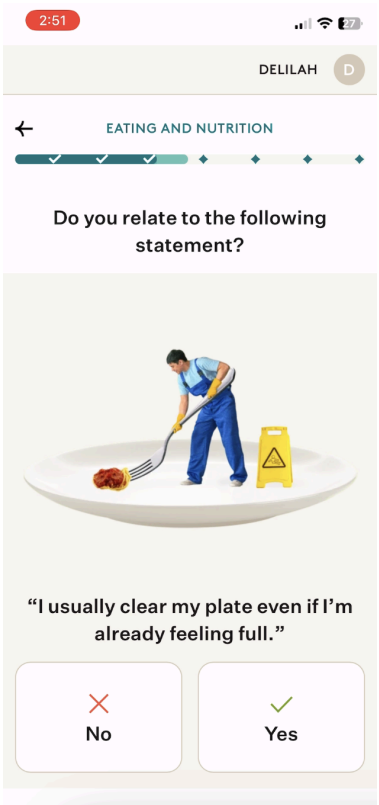

FIGURE 5: SCREENSHOT OF SWIPE QUESTION

Psychology

The quiz returns yet again to the traditional format to ask about physical limitations and injuries, gym memberships, other app subscriptions, and smart scales. This was seemingly part of the previous section that came before the personality quiz and swiping. From there, Noom directed me to the final section: "UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR CHANGE," which includes the first mention of psychological ideas outside of the word "psychology" itself. "Noom uses techniques based in behavioral therapy to help you achieve sustained weight loss. When it comes to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy you are: an expert, curious, or uncertain?" In choosing "expert," Noom responds "great, you should know what we're all about. Let's see if we can show you something new." It gave me the opportunity to acknowledge my potential knowledge on the subject, only to lower me back down, assuming it had psychological ideas that I had yet to learn about in my more than six years of work with professional therapists. From there, the questions ask about self-confidence, and how I imagine my life when at a "happy weight," repeatedly using the word happy as an emotion that I have yet to attain, and which is dependent exclusively on weight.

I figured, now that the seventh section was done, that I had finished. Noom, though, had other plans, asking me to nominate someone from my network one last time, and to share where I had heard about Noom. After pressing "create my account," the screen displays a number of categories loading up to 100% and tells me to "sit tight" as they build my "perfect plan based on millions of data points from successful Noom users." Throughout the loading screen, Noom continued to ask questions– questions which would have been relevant earlier on, like whether my family has a history of heart disease. As I answered the pop-ups, the percentages increased, and the text at the top of the screen changed from "analyzing demographic profile," to "cross-checking with user database" to "matching behavior trends," "charting best fit plan," and "predicting future results." The changes made it feel like someone was on the other side of the screen actively using my information to construct a personalized plan; the end result, across all my different walkthroughs, was a calorie deficit plan.

My personalized plan was "reserved" for me for the next fifteen minutes, else it would expire, showing that Noom still felt it necessary to incentivize its services by creating artificial scarcity. I waited fifteen minutes to see what would happen. When there were only five minutes remaining, there was a pop-up screen asking if I was "still there?" because they "want you to have the most up-to-date personalized plan, so we'd hate for you to have to start over." There is an emotional appeal linking my inaction to this other entity's wellbeing, pressuring me to act. Once time expired, I was taken to the start of the quiz to retake it. Had I not let time run out, the next step would have been to enter my credit card information, thus I ended my walkthrough.

Intertitles and pacing

The advertisements market the quiz as taking less than five minutes; my walkthrough took over an hour, granted I spent more time than the average user because I was paying close attention to the different screens. It is still hard to imagine how someone could read all of the quiz's content in less than five minutes, let alone interact and reflect. The promise of a short duration, combined with the evenly spaced sections on the progress bar, string users along without a clear end point. Some sections are only questions, while others are broken up by gamified experiences and intertitles. The 13 intertitles serve to share information relating to Noom without having to show what Noom is. They increase in frequency throughout, keeping content interesting enough for users to carry on.

FIGURE 4: SCREENSHOT OF INTERTITLE

The first intertitle comes after the ED question, sharing that the user is "in good hands," and that they are "not alone" because Noom has "helped 3,627,436 people lose weight." A small footnote explains the statistic as representing the number of Noom users who had lost at least 2% of their original body weight as of October 2021. For reference, 2% of the weight I entered is around three pounds, meaning that I could expect to go from 171 pounds to 168, which may not change my dress size, let alone my BMI category. The intertitles continue to show graphs, cite medical journals, quote testimonials, and encourage the sharing of friends' contact information. The

graphs and charts are seldom marked, with one unlabeled bar chart showing that Noom is "2x 🎉" the weight loss of "on your own." What that emoji means, or what data was used as a reference, is, as always, unexplained.

The thirteenth intertitle is a game of its own– this time testing user knowledge so that Noom can better "understand how you already think about weight loss so we can personalize your course." It presents three hypotheticals that, once answered, will tailor users' Noom experience.

1. The first asks "Let's say you're reaching for a snack, which is the healthier choice? Grapes or raisins." As an aside on personalization, I told Noom earlier in the process that I do not snack. Noom responds to my input by saying "Best Answer: Grapes" because "Grapes are the smarter snack." The question asked which was healthier, but the answer explained which was smarter, saying specifically that grapes' higher water content will "help you feel full faster." That is to say, the grape is not smarter because of its nutritional value, but because it will convince users to eat less than they otherwise would have. This "life hack" as Noom calls it "is explained by the principles of caloric density." The logic here sounds a lot like that of an eating disorder patient, in that the focus is on eating as little as possible. The grape feels more filling not because it has more nutrients, but because it physically takes up more space, meaning that users can trick their bodies into thinking they have been fed more than they have.
2. The second asks "How can mindful eating help you?" with the options "lose more weight," "increase your self-awareness," or "both." The best answer, Noom says, is both, because "mindful eating is the practice of eating with intention and attention" and that it "slows you down" which is good because "you eat fewer calories and make healthier food choices." Over and over, Noom claims it is not a restrictive diet, yet praises the act of slowing down eating so you eat fewer calories, which is essentially restriction.
3. The third and final hypothetical asks, "when is the best time to weigh yourself?" with the answers "first thing after you wake– before you've consumed anything" or "once you've eaten your last meal of the day." The best answer, this time, is at the start of the day because "weight can fluctuate daily based on the food we eat," and thus that "it's best to weigh yourself at the same time, on the same scale, every day on an empty stomach." As with the other two hypothetical, the statement validates disordered eating behaviors by encouraging nano-surveillance on the body. Whether someone weighs their body in the afternoon, their body still weighs that amount. Noom encourages this because it is likely the smallest number the user will see during the day, and thus the number most likely to support the utility of Noom's product.

The other intertitles show the artificial nature of Noom's promised timeline. At the start of the quiz, Noom told me a date a few months in the future I could expect to reach my goal weight by, and as the quiz went on, it shortened that time period. "Based on your answers, we predict you can hit your weight loss goal a little sooner," Noom told me, followed by a note saying, "tell us a

bit about your habits and behavior so we can determine if you can reach your goal sooner." If the timeline is so subject to change, why not wait until the end of the quiz to show it? Because it reinforces the notion that Noom is reacting to user inputs, and that the amount of information a user shares determines the rate of weight loss. Noom needs to position itself as the arbiter of validation for users, deciding the pace that an individual makes progress, even though that is something outside the company's control. Early on, I specified that speed was not a primary concern of mine, but the app nonetheless pushed up the timeline. At the start of the quiz, Noom predicted I would hit the weight loss goal by September 3, 2024, and by the end, I was told June 2, 2024– three months earlier than the initial date. Noom does this to build investment and excitement of the potential possibilities, making the possibility more and sooner and better.

Now…This: Conclusion

Noom uses the quiz structure, despite the risk for drop-off, so it can sedate users. It encourages information sharing and subscription under users' assumption that they are doing their research. The quiz operates as a waiting room– a place where individuals divulge personal information in the hopes of gaining informed treatment that never comes. It congregates those interested enough in the promises of the advertisements into some secondary location where they can be more discreetly surveilled. The flippant changes in format and subject across the different sections make it so users cannot differentiate between what it is they are required to do and what is optional. Noom quite literally rewards users for their disclosure through the shortening of an artificial timeline.

I call on the work of Neil Postman to explain the rationale of the flippant changes in tone and topic throughout the quiz.[106] Postman uses the phrase "now…this" to refer to the fragmented nature of news programs, which jump from story to story with complete disregard for a topic's severity, leaving little room for reflection. There is an illusion, Postman argues, of gaining knowledge from this process, even if insights are ephemeral.[107] In the case of Noom, the longer a user spends taking the quiz, the more topics they explore, and the more information they feel they are learning. By the end, they feel they have done their research. This is despite the fact that a user can reach the point of subscription knowing just as much about the practice of Noom as they did from the ad that led them to the quiz in the first place. The breadth of topics covered explains enough about Noom to justify subscription, but not so much as to unveil what Noom actually is, continuing the trend of definition through non-definition explained in the previous chapter.

One review on the App Store summarizes my thoughts on the sign-up process quite succinctly: "ridiculous long survey before revealing the pricing."[108] Ultimately, Noom does not care about

[106] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.
[107] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.
[108] pmaddo908, "horrible on boarding Process."

the answers to its quiz; it cares that the quiz was taken. The process of answering all the questions supports the advertisements' claims of personalization. That said, the personalized cure is the same no matter the response because each user comes to Noom with the same problem: the assumption that their bodies are the wrong size, and that that needs to change. The next chapter builds on my findings to construct the identity of Noom's ideal user and argues that Noom exists as a technology of power masquerading as a technology of the self.

CHAPTER 3:
Biopower and Noom's Ideal (Neoliberal) User

Introduction

Noom's subscription-based business model relies on the company's ability to create consistent demand for its product long after users realize that their subscription affords them a calorie log, not a revolutionary formula for weight loss. It must take on a reserved approach in regard to weight loss not because of the risks associated with large shifts in weight, but because once a user reaches their goal, they no longer need Noom. At the same time, users still need to feel they are making some amount of progress because of Noom's presence in their life. To reconcile this, Noom places the point of completion beyond its users' reach, idealizing an impossible to maintain form.

In this chapter, I build upon my findings from the previous to argue Noom exists as a technology of power masquerading as a technology of the self.[109] It seeks to covertly shape its users into docile subjects who problematize themselves to the point that they think it necessary to find validation and education from an entity outside themselves. I start by explaining the relationship that exists between neoliberalism and the body, touching on self-tracking, the thin ideal, and healthism to contextualize my argument. I briefly introduce Foucault's four technologies before explaining the ways Noom represents specifically a neoliberal turn in the realm of biopower.

The Body Under Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a governmentality which shapes how individuals think of themselves and their governance. Under neoliberalism, individuals must make market principles the motivation of their lives to the point that they feel themselves solely responsible for solving all of the world's problems.[110] Larger institutions, through this lens, are blameless.[111] The neoliberal subject, then, is someone concerned with individualism and surveillance, quantifying themselves for the purposes of evaluating their performance of the neoliberal ideal.

Deborah Lupton examines the relationship that exists between neoliberalism in the body by looking at the rise in self-tracking technology. The term "self-tracking" describes knowingly and routinely monitoring the body to generate metrics.[112] Tracking culture is distinctly capitalist, for it involves gamifying surveillance to "enhance the notion that the ideal self is productive and efficient."[113] The individual uses their metrics to gauge their sense of self and ultimately reorient their lifestyle towards the ideal dictated by their devices.[114] Participation in self-tracking appears

[109] Foucault et al., "Technologies of the Self."
[110] Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture*, 2.
[111] Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture*, 4.
[112] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 46.
[113] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 68.
[114] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 69.

voluntary, as it is up to the individual's discretion to use the devices, but is largely shaped by outside ideologies. Lupton asserts that the notion of self-improvement promoted by such devices ultimately serves the interests of those in power because individuals start to believe that it is obedience to an entity outside themselves that will validate their existence.[115] The numbers technology tells us about ourselves have become more important than our emotions or lived experiences in terms of evaluating our lives.[116]

Throughout her exploration, Lupton makes continued reference to Michel Foucault's idea of biopower. Biopower, according to Foucault, is a form of power that seeks to regulate human life at both individual and societal levels by managing the body subtly through societal norms.[117] It relies not on express condemnation or punishment but on the "promotion of self-regulation and self-management" embedded within policies and media texts.[118] Individuals are disciplined not by force, but by established norms that individuals have been pressured to live by.[119] By directing thought and desire itself, biopower shapes our actions.

Biopower, with its focus on regulation and labor, promotes a specific bodily form as ideal– one that is largely unattainable if not already attained. The ideal body, at least in western cultures, has been very strictly defined: toned, lightly muscled, and gleaming.[120] This emphasis on the hard body creates the illusion that the body can be controlled, and that mastery of said control brings with it control over the entire lived experience. Cultural scholar Diane Negra, in her work critiquing postfeminism, argues that we increasingly cope with the anxieties of contemporary culture by way of obsession over the perfected self.[121] For that coping mechanism to last, we must see the body as an ongoing project which we will never complete, but which we can grow closer to through exercise and dieting.[122]

Similar to biopower in shaping the thin ideal is "healthism," a term coined by critical studies scholar Robert Crawford to describe the rising preoccupation with a moral understanding of health.[123] Crawford explains that the term "health" in itself has become a "super value, a metaphor for all that is good in life."[124] More and more of what we consume, he says, is framed as aiding in the elevation of our health.[125] "[I]t is something for which people should constantly

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[115] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 50.
[116] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 3.
[117] Taylor, "Biopower," 41-45.
[118] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 52.
[119] Taylor, "Biopower," 41; 46.
[120] Arthurs and Grimshaw, *Women's Bodies*, 5.
[121] Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*.
[122] Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 119.
[123] Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life."
[124] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire," 91; Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," 366-368.
[125] Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," 366.

strive" and has become a "marker of one's moral worth."[126] It has become the job of the individual "to resist culture, advertising, institutional and environmental constraints, disease agents, or simply lazy, or poor, personal habits."[127] Through this lens, fat bodies are not deviant because of their incoherence with biopower's demand for labor, but because they are unhealthy. The thin body, then, is idealized because it is the ultimate sign of self-control and well-being.[128] By situating the problem at the level of the individual, healthism promotes an illusion of control which distracts us away from enacting the kind of structural change that would actually materially change our lives.[129] Philosopher Lisa H. Schwartzman writes on healthism from a feminist perspective, looking at the connection between the historic suppression of womanly desire and present-day attitudes surrounding the female appetite.[130] In seeing food as a "deeply personal matter" subject to the decisions of the individual, we ignore the "myriad of ways that culture, class, race, and gender affect eating practices," and instead see body size as a matter of personal choice.[131] Structural changes become "very difficult to envision," which then justifies the continuation of whatever biopower wants."[132]

Feminist scholars have critiqued advertisements from the early 2000s for taking this kind of bodily discipline and fatphobia too far, citing the rise in eating disorders and a decline in self-confidence. Advertisers have since responded by inundating the media landscape with messages preaching the importance of body-positivity that could be mistaken as progress. Cultural critic Rosalind Gill, alongside co-author Shani Orgad, argue that although these messages calling on people to "be more confident" and "love their bodies" feel empowering, they actually position the individual as the perpetrator of their own unhappiness and inequality.[133] This new-age culture of confidence "position[s] [confidence] as a choice and a commodity […] something one can pledge as if it were entirely a matter of will."[134] The two argue that encouraging a woman to feel more confident in herself does not free her from patriarchal power structures so much as it uses neoliberal logic and positive psychology to individualize her struggles and condition her to take on additional emotional labor and self-surveillance.[135] As progressive as these messages may feel, they nonetheless uphold neoliberalism by problematizing the individual and ignoring the role of institutions. In talking about power, it is important to consider the different ways we come to understand our subjectivity.

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[126] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire," 91.
[127] Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," 368.
[128] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire," 91.
[129] Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," 369-370.
[130] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire."
[131] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire," 2-4.
[132] Schwartzman, "Appetites, Disorder, and Desire," 5-6.
[133] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, 5.
[134] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, 35.
[135] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, 145.

Foucault's Technologies

In many ways, Noom is both a technology of the self and a technology of power. Foucault details four types of technologies through which people have learned about themselves, the human condition, and their role in society.[136] According to him, there are:

1. Technologies of production– the tools that humans use to make things, like machines in a factory.
2. Technologies of sign systems– the symbols humans use to communicate meaning, like language.
3. Technologies of power– the systems which control human activity, like governments. These "determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject."[137]
4. Technologies of the self– the ways humans work to improve themselves or reach certain goals, like exercise. These "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[138]

To Foucault, a technology of power describes the tools institutions use to control populations, whereas a technology of the self are the tools an individual uses to transform themselves. The difference here comes primarily from the direction of power, with one top down and the other bottom up. Feminist political theorist Rachel Sanders applies this idea to the discussion of digital self-tracking devices (DSTDs).[139] Sanders argues that such technologies "expand individuals' capacity for self-knowledge and self-care" while at the same time "facilitat[ing] unprecedented levels of biometric surveillance, extend[ing] the regulatory mechanisms of both public health and fashion/beauty authorities, and enabl[ing] increasingly rigorous body projects devoted to the attainment of normative femininity."[140] From this, she asserts not that DSTDs and the like are technologies of power, but rather technologies of the self, because it is through DSTDs that individuals negotiate their "bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" in the hopes of crafting themselves into some specific kind of person.[141] In distinctly separating these from technologies of power, Sanders ignores the role of ideology in shaping what it is we negotiate ourselves to be.

Self-tracking is not so much a means to enact change as it is to log it. The kind of person we use self-tracking to monitor and accelerate towards is shaped by outside factors. What we think of as voluntary is at times constructed. It may be a choice, but not a choice made in a vacuum.

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[136] Foucault et al., "Technologies of the Self," 17-18.
[137] Foucault et al., "Technologies of the Self," 18.
[138] Foucault et al., "Technologies of the Self," 18.
[139] Sanders, "Self-Tracking in the Digital Era."
[140] Sanders, "Self-Tracking in the Digital Era," 36.
[141] Sanders, "Self-Tracking in the Digital Era," 39.

Looking only at the potential DSTDs have for encouraging agency ignores the fact that they reinforce diet culture all the same. I find Sanders' argument compelling but feel she does not take it far enough. Self-tracking technologies are both technologies of the self and technologies of power. To explain this, I now apply the concept of neoliberal biopower to the case of Noom.

Noom's Neoliberal Subject

British sociologist Nikolas Rose makes use of Foucault's ideas to describe how power operates now, under neoliberalism. Rose writes that "neoliberal-era biopower governs at a distance;" "it indirectly shapes its subjects' conduct by authorizing expert knowledge that articulate norms of healthy lifestyle and embodiment, and by constituting subjects as both free and responsible individuals who voluntarily conduct themselves in accordance with those norms."[142] Power, to Rose, does not come from the state, but from the processes of autonomous individuals that have been conditioned to align with political authorities. Calculative technologies work to provide individuals a way to orient themselves with where they are and where they should be, working as a kind of micro-government. Individuals, in this way, "can be governed through their freedom to choose."[143]

Noom masks itself as a technology of the self by using the promise of neoliberal biopower within its marketing materials to obscure its intentions. The content is important because, as I have argued, users are given very little information on what Noom's service actually is until they are bound to a subscription. Noom, through its advertisements and sign-up quiz, repeatedly encourages and justifies the neoliberal focus on the flawed individual. The user judges their adherence to the ideal by engaging in self-surveillance and quantification. Ultimately, Noom wants its users to be the ideal neoliberal subject: individualistic and surveilling.

Individualistic

Dieting is largely an individual process. After all, it is motivated by a desire to change your own body. Noom's heavy emphasis on psychology expands upon the traditional problematizing of the individual body to problematize the mind. To Noom, bodily flaws are the result of mental flaws, meaning the remedy must be mental too. Its advertisements and quiz focus almost entirely on the individual, targeting users by profile characteristics or queries. The quiz, with its slew of questions asking about lifestyle habits, does the same. In doing so, Noom obscures the other factors that influence someone's size– biological, genetic, cultural, political, or otherwise. Though an acknowledgement of the external factors may aid in an individual's self-confidence, Noom's focus entirely on the internal makes that a moot point. Within its already individualistic ads and sign-up process, Noom tells users that dissatisfaction with their size is their fault, and that fixing that is their responsibility. The user is hailed as being so flawed, that personal work

[142] Sanders, "Self-Tracking in the Digital Era," 40.
[143] Rose and Miller, "Political Power beyond the State," 201.

would not be enough to fix the problem of their weight. Lucky for them, Noom's ideology can supplement their deficiency.

Your fault

Noom repeatedly praises users for a preoccupation with the self, implying that it is logical for individuals to be so focused on their faults. The messaging positions everything as the fault of the individual in order to justify continued subscription to its service. This leaves the door open for individuals struggling in the future to stay with Noom even if they have hit their goal weight in case they fail again. In neoliberal fashion, Noom assumes a progress narrative. The project of the body is never done, the labor has no end point, there is always room for improvement.

Messages like "help yourself change," "change your habits," "learn how to change your behavior," "master [your] habits," "build healthier habits," "get on a path to a healthier you," and "empower yourself to build better choices," all assume the habits a user is currently practicing need changing. "Can't seem to lose weight?" places blame on the individual. The preconceived notion of a problematic mental state continues with calls in the advertisements for individuals to use Noom to "ditch the doubt" and "crush your thought distortion." The messages may feel empowering on their face in positing a future where the individual was not riddled with anxiety, when they nonetheless hail users as mentally flawed. When asked to identify the types of barriers users feel are keeping them from hitting their goal weight, users can choose between two options: "external (e.g., temptations around me)" or "internal (e.g., bad habits, low energy)." The examples of what is external, though, are internal too– either an inability to resist temptation, or the active decision to practice "bad habits." Ultimately, the rhetoric positions the individual as the perpetrator of their own dissatisfaction.[144]

In describing a statistic during the signup process, the app tells users that Noom "us[es] data from real Noom users" to "predict when you'll hit your target weight if you follow your custom plan and adopt a healthy lifestyle." The quote predicates weight loss entirely on users' commitment to their Noom plan, leaving no room for them to blame Noom. If the user hits their goal weight, it is because of Noom, and if they fail, it is because they did not use Noom enough. The language also assumes that the user's lifestyle could not already be considered "healthy." The hailing of an unhealthy state continues as questions like "Which [lifestyle] best describes you?" Users can choose from three options: "my diet and activity need a lot of work," "I have some healthy habits," and "I mostly eat well and stay active." There is no option for those who feel they consistently eat well and stay active. If the individual had the right habits, they would not be at a size where they would want to lose weight. It is impossible, in Noom's eyes, for a fat person to already practice "healthy" habits– that would undermine the product's entire selling proposition. Additionally, Noom does not allow its users to express discontent. When asking how

[144] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, 5.

confident I was in reaching my goal weight by July 8, 2024, I was given only the options “I believe I can do it!” “I’m uncertain, but willing to try!” and “I’m still really unsure.” I could not show complete rejection; uncertain was as skeptical as Noom allowed me to be.

Noom continues to place blame on individuals by moralizing emotions. After determining their behavioral profile, Noom asks users to “build on your behavioral profile by understanding what a happy weight might look like for you.” Rather than describe a given weight as healthy, the question asks about happiness, connecting weight loss not only to medicine but to emotionality. Another question tells users to select all that apply in their completion of the sentence: “When I’m at a happy weight, I’d love to…” with the options “eat more mindfully,” “enjoy all foods guilt-free,” “feel empowered to make healthy choices,” “think less about food overall,” “worry less about my body overall,” and “other.” The question assumes that individuals can only detach themselves from a hyperfixation on eating and the body by reaching a certain weight lower than their current one. Dismantling diet culture, to Noom, comes not from challenging its ideas, but embracing them.

Your responsibility

Noom embraces the neoliberal ideal of personal responsibility. In Noom’s eyes, it is the individual’s fault that they are fat, and thus their responsibility to change it. Noom places the burden of labor on individuals not only to define what it is they think Noom is, and to recognize that it is their fault that they need to use a product like Noom, but to actually make a change. Placing the onus on the user provides an illusion of control, which Noom quite literally admits to by telling individuals to “control what you can.” They are led to think that if they take ownership of their fatness, and do the steps it takes to become thinner, that change will come, assuming that someone is fat only out of laziness or apathy.

Repeated use of the word “your” to describe the Noom experience continues this trend. “Start your journey,” “master your triggers,” “restart your brain,” “work with your body’s needs.” The message “set your timeline, see your plan, start your calorie budget” places the entire process within the realm of individual ownership. The “Start your quiz” button shows that the content is not Noom’s, but the user’s from the start. “This is your plan” it says as users proceed through the different questions. Around halfway through the quiz, Noom asks users for their “preferred first name” which it then displays in the top right corner of the screen alongside a circular profile icon with the user’s first initial. The act quite literally symbolizes that the individual is the owner of the content on the screen.

Noom’s ideology

The individual, as mentioned above, is at fault, and is responsible for making changes in their life to remedy their wrongdoings. That said, because the individual has been so irresponsible as to exist in a fat body, they cannot be trusted to do the work on their own. This is

where Noom comes in; it positions itself as an entity for individuals to look up to. Its primary selling proposition is its commitment to education, as demonstrated by the fact that every Meta ad uses the "learn more" call-to-action button despite the tens of other options available on the platform.

Throughout its ads, the company uses words traditionally associated with pedagogy to continue the association. It taunts its numerous course packs that teach individuals to learn to "understand cravings." Noom responded to my skepticism of its plan by saying, "We're really glad you shared," explaining that my "concerns are normal, but the good news? Noom's curriculum digs into what works (and what doesn't) for you." The curriculum in question are notes about the importance of eating less than you burn. The company justifies its educator role through its repeated claims of being "powered by science." Its "real psychology" is taught through the "daily articles that focus on learning, not dieting" that Noom "give[s]" to its users. The word "give" ignores the fact that users pay for the service. Users are led to believe that it is through strong dedication to Noom that they can find control, which does not free users from the confines of diet culture so much as it nominates a new ruler.

Surveilling

It is not enough to be individualistic. The ideal Noom user must also surveil themselves and others. Neoliberal biopower relies on the self-governance of its subjects, which those with power can only gauge by the subjects' admissions of performance. Calls to monitor the self are present across all the parts of Noom's branding that I looked at. When explaining the results of the quiz, Noom says, "Don't worry if you mess up. We will be there every step of the way." What is meant to sound comforting sounds quite panoptic considering that users are told to log their weight, meals, water intake, activity, pulse, blood pressure, and glucose every day. When telling the app your every move, it literally is there every step.

Self-monitoring

Noom leaves no metric unacknowledged; no part of the body is free from the burden of quantification. It promotes monitoring as an integral part of the weight loss process because numbers physically represent the health of the body.

According to the photos on the App Store, Noom's food logging system is "simple." Logging food is as easy as scanning the barcode of the packaging your food came in. The image does explain that to use this feature, users need to enable camera permissions but mentions that users only need to press "allow" to do this, breezing over the fact that in doing so, users are granting the app access to their camera.

Noom also affords users the ability to manually log their weight and water intake, and pair their app with devices like step trackers and glucometers (which users need to purchase themselves) to

measure pulse, step count, blood pressure, and glucose. If that were not enough, there is also the ability to "Track More Progress." Also, users can "[c]onnect with Health App," the pre-installed app that comes on Apple devices, to "[help] yourself stay on top of trends in your activity." Users can already stay on top of activity trends through the Health App itself; upon launch, the health app explains that "[t]his app brings your health information together in one place. You can see important changes or alerts, get insights from your data, and learn about essential topics."[145] Noom presents the connection as offering insights otherwise unavailable to users when Health App does that on its own. Yes, there are times when the app needs additional permissions to collect user data, but all of that access is for the benefit of the user.

Connectivity is further encouraged with calls for users to "connect your devices to track all your activity in one place," a feature which, again, is available within the pre-installed Health App and the corresponding apps for the listed devices like Fitbit and Garmin. Outside connective tracking, the app encourages users to use their "water tracking feature to help [them] stay hydrated." The "feature" for tracking water, presented as a unique perk, requires the user to manually log the number of cups of water the user drinks throughout the day. This is something several free apps already offer, and which is possible to do using a pen and paper. For Noom to discipline its users, though, it requires access to every available metric.

Peer-monitoring

Noom is intimately concerned with watching, but its watchful eye only sees so much. It further encourages surveillance by enabling sousveillance. Both terms refer to some form of observation, with surveillance describing top-down watching and sousveillance the idea of people watching each other.[146] The quiz repeatedly calls on users to nominate others in their lives, and the App Store listing promotes the sociality of Noom by speaking of an embedded social network and the ability for users to chat with "health coaches."

One intertitle, headlined "social circle," explains that "your weight loss journey can be influenced by the people closest to you, including family members and friends." Users can read that influence as either positive or negative. After pressing next, Noom asks if I feel "comfortable sharing your health goals with family or friends?" A similar question later on asks the same thing, "who do you feel most comfortable talking to about weight loss?" Health goals and weight loss, in this way, or seen as interchangeable. The "accountability buddy" intertitle turns this hypothetical support individual into a real person, saying that "Noomers with support systems can lose weight 32% faster" because "accountability is critical for long-term weight loss." In this same section, I was asked "who would you like to nominate as your accountability buddy?" I was prompted to enter their name and email address. The question does not ask *if* I want to nominate someone, but *who*, assuming that of course there is someone I would want to

[145] "iOS - Health."
[146] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 133.

add to Noom's mailing list. The skip button, like others in the quiz, is hidden below the fold, visible only after I had entered someone's email and scrolled down. Whether I entered someone's information, Noom still asked me at the end of the quiz if I wanted to "gift 2 free weeks of Noom to a friend or family member?" to help me stay accountable. At no point was I asked to consider whether the family member or friend I had in mind would feel comfortable having their personal information shared with a dieting company.

What is most important to Noom is the user taking the quiz. The reason Noom asks for information about others is to add them to some database the company runs to encourage them to create their own account and start their own weight loss journey. By correlating the size of one's Noom network with success, Noom maintains the idea that the individual naturally has some tendency towards failure and requires some intervening force to counteract that. The continued pressure to identify people in real life to depend on shows a certain lack of confidence on Noom's part for the power of its "curriculum."

Failure to nominate someone does not free users from the burden of sousveillance because the Noom app allows users to connect with "[c]ircles of community members who share [their] interests." What those interests are exactly is unclear, though I doubt the communities in the app center around hobbies like solving the crossword or taking up knitting. Also, a number of platforms already exist for individuals to talk about niche interests, but Noom wants control of every aspect of its users lives, so it calls on users to collapse yet another part of their existence into something Noomable. Additionally, the App Store listing explains that Noom's users have access to a "health coach for personal coaching sessions." As an aside, the title of "health coach" requires no licensure or education. One app store review even alleges that these coaches are bots, not real people, writing that "They have switched from live coaching to a 'ai' chatbot coach."[147] I was unable to find information online confirming the allegation, but its presence within the review section shows that there is some amount of concern over the sentience of the advertised coaches.

One could argue that calls to include others in the weight loss process show that the Noom user is not necessarily individualistic, but that is not true. In fact, as scholar Brad Millington argues, health and fitness apps deliberately market a kind of networked individualism; they enable the simultaneous pursuit of self-improvement and social networking.[148] Apps do this primarily to hide the individual nature of the product by encouraging users to form communities around their tracking.[149]

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[147] billballad, "Disapointed."
[148] Millington, "Smartphone Apps and the Mobile Privatization of Health and Fitness," 481; 486.
[149] Millington, "Smartphone Apps and the Mobile Privatization of Health and Fitness," 481; 486.

Conclusion

Biopower is central to Noom's business model, as is common with services relating to quantification, for "[d]igital devices are able to extend the capacities of the body by supplying data that can then be used to display the body's limits […] and allow users to employ these data to work upon themselves."[150] It is through scrutiny of the body's existence that Noom can justify its service and continue to charge users for subscriptions. Ultimately, Noom conceptualizes the ideal user as everybody– everybody, that is, who is concerned primarily with the self and their surveillance. Users do not have the ideal body, nor will they ever, but with enough time using Noom's psychology, they may get close. I would like to add here that Noom differentiates itself from competitors within its description on the App Store with its new "maintenance mode" feature "for those who have reached their goal weight but want to maintain it." That one sentence shows that even if individuals somehow manage to reach their goal weight, that is not enough to warrant cancellation. The demand for control over every aspect of its users' lives– physical, social, and mental– shows that tracking technologies like Noom are not just technologies of the self, as Sanders argues, but also technologies of power. Noom uses neoliberal biopower, primarily through its focus on individualism and surveillance, to subjugate its users and convince them of their independence. The messaging in the ads and quiz alike tell users that it is only by tying their sense of self-worth to the values of a private company and its metrics that they can liberate themselves. Noom wants its users to think of themselves as independent to cover the company's true intention of necessitating continued subscription to its service.

[150] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 53.

CONCLUSION

Noom, in both its marketing materials and sign-up quiz, has presented itself as an industry disruptor. The truth is Noom is no different from its competitors; if anything, it is worse, because it refuses to admit what it is. At least Weight Watchers and MyFitnessPal are upfront about their commitment to restriction. The company covers its pursuit of profit by feigning concern for the health of the public; its altruism feels less altruistic when you consider that it is only willing to do so in exchange for a hefty price ($70 per month). If the company truly cared about health, why use weight as the primary metric? Why focus on body size at all when the science shows that there are more important factors to consider when gauging health risk?[151] The success of the company depends entirely on individuals' continued perception of themselves as flawed. To see their minds and bodies as such, individuals must have a physical representation of their faults, thus the focus on body size. Noom sells the promise of some future tomorrow where the individual will finally be skinny enough to be happy, when that day will never come. Health and the ideal body are always changing because their basis is not in proven fact, but in what serves the interests of those in power. Its insistence on the quantification of every aspect of users' lives serves technopolitical ends as Noom attempts to position itself as the operating system of our lives, increasingly conditioning its users to take orders from technology rather than themselves.[152]

Claims that Noom is "the modern way to create long-term, sustainable weight loss," are in some respects true, but not in the way the company thinks. Modernity, as British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines it, is marked largely by doubt and aversion to risk, specifically in relation to lifestyle decisions.[153] What Noom sees as a selling point is more of an admission to the company's insistence on denigrating the confidence of its users to create subscribers for life.

The company's appropriation of the project of public health serves as an example of the neoliberal shift that has been happening within American society for decades. What was once a service provided by the state has since become the responsibility of private companies. Decades before her work on quantification, Deborah Lupton studied public health, focusing specifically on the kinds of promotional materials used by the state to govern its population.[154] She explains that "public health promotion" was a term "generally used to describe specific activities directed at particular goals, with a strong focus on the 'rational' management of populations' health."[155] The primary goal of these kinds of texts was behavior change through education.[156] She builds upon Crawford's understanding of healthism to say that health has become more than just a state of being. We have turned away from the understanding that health is the opposite of disease to

[151] Mann et al., "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments."
[152] Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 212.
[153] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 3-5.
[154] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*.
[155] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 51.
[156] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 56-57.

instead associate it with the performance of normative lifestyle choices.[157] Health has become "a yardstick of accomplishment and proper living;" it is an obligation to which individuals must strive to achieve.[158] With this, individuals have started to impose upon themselves "the regulations of public health, particularly through the techniques of self-surveillance and bodily control encouraged by the imperatives of health promotion."[159] Now, decades after Lupton's writing, public health is managed less by the state than it is by companies like Noom. Public health is, by definition, a public good, and yet the public has little say over what we would like to define health as.[160]

Noom targets users primarily through the use of digital advertisements on Google and Meta. The ads use the basic rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, whilst paying little attention to potential contradictions, to define itself primarily by what it is not. Every ad directs users to the same place: the company's flagship sign-up quiz. The quiz operates as a waiting room to sedate users to the point that they feel they have no choice but to offer up personal information. Questions and screens change in format and tone frequently in order to disorient the user, all for the purposes of creating an illusion of information gathering whilst prolonging the period of non-admission. The messaging in both the ads and the subsequent quiz work to shape an ideal user: the neoliberal subject. Noom uses biopower to privilege individualism and surveillance, marketing itself as a technology of the self to cover for the fact that it is also a technology of power. In a true neoliberal fashion, Noom has privatized public health.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Noom is a US-based company, and I looked only at the ads the company runs on its US accounts, meaning that my findings are extremely specific to American culture. Additionally, the beauty standards I criticize the company for upholding are Eurocentric; self-help and self-improvement content on the whole privilege the white, heterosexual body.[161] Future research could delve into how the content of Noom's advertising reinforces biases surrounding race, sexuality, and class.

There is also room to look at what Noom's neoliberalism says about our understanding of gender, especially considering the gendered nature of the dieting space. What does its focus on psychology mean for the perceived feebleness of the female mind? I was initially hoping to use Noom as a case study to explore theories relating to gender, labor, and digitization, but ultimately found that to fall outside the scope of this paper. Noom, through its focus on suppressing desire, mirrors patriarchal ideals, which warrants a feminist critique. I find the field of scholarship which sees domestic and creative work as work all the same, no matter its compensation, to be of particular relevance to discussions on dieting.

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[157] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 51.
[158] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 4.
[159] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 76.
[160] Lupton, *The Imperative of Health*, 111.
[161] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, 59.

Communications scholar Brooke Erin Duffy's work on aspirations, emotional labor, and positive psychology within a digital context speak to the agency that technology has increasingly offered women in terms of finding work outside the confines of the masculine office space, but which have also required increased levels of internalized discipline.[162] Duffy coined the term "aspirational labor" to refer to the "highly gendered, forward-looking, and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity" that happens on digital platforms.[163] Dieting is similar in that it promises the possibility of some future reward in exchange for punishment in the present. It connects to Kuehn and Corrigan's idea of "hope labor"– the work we do in the hopes of earning some unspecified future reward.[164] These kinds of ideas "shift workers' focus from the present to the future."[165]

Lastly, I want to touch on the fact that gamification, in itself, is not unique to Noom. Plenty of companies have embedded gamified mechanics into their platforms and applications to encourage continued engagement, and to distract users away from the fact that they are willingly sharing personal information for someone else to sell in exchange for very little. That said, Noom is one of only a handful of companies I have seen using gamification as its primary marketing tool. More specifically, Noom sells its quiz as a way for users to learn about themselves, despite the fact that the insights the quiz offers are just reflections of the things users tell it.[166] Upon my investigation of the Noom app, I found myself wondering if other academics had written on the sign-up quiz as a marketing tool. To my surprise, I could only find work on the kinds of personality quizzes women's magazines have included between articles. That work is still relevant to the conversation; scholar Amy Patnee, for example, writes on the ways personality quizzes "naturalize the 'rules of femininity'" by placing women into certain boxes.[167] Similar to Noom, they appear to offer readers a certain level of agency in giving them the power to select the answer most similar to them, when, in reality, it is the publication who is in control because it is the publication who decides what questions to ask and which answers to offer.[168]

Like I said, I was hoping to find work writing on the use of the quiz mechanic in marketing materials, but to no avail. I found the repetitive pushing for users to engage with a quiz before knowing much about the program they are interacting with to speak to the potential quizzes have in incentivizing information sharing. In recent years, I've noticed this quiz strategy most often in the promotion of beauty products, which often target female customers. Direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands like Function of Beauty and Curology, and subscription boxes like Ipsy, support claims to personalization by citing their respective engaging sign-up quizzes.

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[162] Duffy, "The Romance of Work."
[163] Duffy, "The Romance of Work," 442.
[164] Duffy, "The Romance of Work," 453.
[165] Duffy, "The Romance of Work," 453.
[166] Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 3.
[167] Pattee, "When in Doubt, Choose 'B.,'" 194.
[168] Pattee, "When in Doubt, Choose 'B.,'" 204.

Despite its limitations, this work contributes to the field of scholarship which seeks to dismantle diet culture through its critique of the digital footprint of one of the WLS industry's leading digital advertisers. Noom shows that diet companies are responding to increased concern over the risks associated with disordered eating by concealing their product instead of adapting their offering, because what matters most to Noom is wealth, not health.

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