What You Eat Is Who You Are (Online):
"What I Eat In A Day" Videos on TikTok and What They Tell Us About The Digital Self

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes “What I Eat In A Day” (WIEIAD) videos on the platform TikTok. WIEIAD content involves individuals documenting and sharing what it is they consume in a day, and is often employed by lifestyle, food, and health influencers or bloggers. On TikTok, these videos are increasingly being created by average users without large followings or microcelebrity.

This thesis attempts to answer the questions of: 1) How are notions of ‘thinspiration’ and the ideal body being replicated and challenged on TikTok through the production of What I Eat In A Day Content? 2) What are the motivations behind the creation of What I Eat In A Day Videos by female-identifying users on TikTok? 3) Finally, how do attitudes of consumption of WIEIAD videos formed in the vein of self-presentation impact producers’ conceptions of the self?

I employ a mixed methods analysis including in-depth interviews, surveys, and critical discourse analysis to answer these questions. In addition, I conduct an Actor Network Theory analysis of the structure and engrained mechanics of TikTok in order to unpack how the “for you page” harnesses attention from users through intrapersonal socialization and customization.

My analysis focuses on a class of WIEIAD TikToks which I classify as “unruly”. As such, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which feedback and attention that individuals receive from making WIEIAD content is less dependent on the actual food being showcased, but discerned based on the aesthetics of the producer.

In accordance with previous feminist cultural theorists, I argue that neoliberalism pushes us to take on affective ideology that prioritizes perfection, constant self-work, and aestheticized performances. When individuals perform in ways that demonstrate otherwise, the freedom of the body becomes a threat to the body politic. These notions are complicated and dependent on the bodies which are performing. In each case of what someone eats in a day, whether “healthy” or “unhealthy”, unruly or not -- how the audience reacts very little has to do with qualified or objective knowledge on health and nutrition. To be in a larger body and free is seen as dangerous; To be in a thinner body and free is seen as fascinating.

With the increasing power and popularity of TikTok, it is of the utmost importance we take this phenomenon and produced self-representations seriously. Although some might see the existence of these videos as signaling vanity, craving attention, silliness -- they have real world repercussions on how we see our own selves and bodies and the relationships we have with food.

Keywords: Digital Studies, Food Cultures, TikTok, Body Image, Platform Studies. Media Bodies, Feminist Cultural Studies

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CH 1: INTRODUCTION:

Food is a basic necessity for survival that has taken on diverse but significant cultural and social meaning throughout its preparation, consumption, and sharing. The production of food-related content has been a topic of inquiry within media studies with analysis in regards to the performativity of health, fitness, affluence, and self-expression (Stover 2014, Boztepe & Berg 2020, Lebesco & Peter 2018). With the democratization of media tools with which individuals can self-produce content, the documentation and production of food-related media have expanded the ability and prevalence of sharing what we eat. This has in turn complicated ramifications for who we are, or at least how we present ourselves in the digital ecosphere.

In terms of the bodies we feed, notions of the ideal female body have been represented and reproduced in media regularly throughout different popular mediums. With the advent of the internet, and subsequently social media, there has been an increased diversification of identity representations as media users become producers of their own desired representations – and yet, an idealized feminine body is still at the forefront of popular culture media representations.

A well-established body of work demonstrates the positive correlation between thin or sexualized depictions of feminine bodies in media and detrimental psychological risks and physical harm to adolescent girls and women alike (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Vendima and DeAndrea, 2018). Recent research has focused on how new media might replicate, intensify, or mitigate these detrimental effects, and has found similar relationships between depictions and internalization of thinness on social media (Hogue and Mills, 2017).

A consistent finding is that viewing physically idealized social media profiles and content results in more negative body image compared to viewing less attractive photographs and

content (Hogue and Mills, 2017). These findings on the impact of the reproduction of ideal bodies within media lead to important questions on how self-presentation and identity formation through food has evolved within the platformization of social interaction based on commodified systems, like social media.

A lasting and prevalent form of food-related content and self-presentation is "What I Eat In A Day" videos. This type of content generally involves individuals documenting and sharing what it is they consume in a day, and is often employed by lifestyle, food, and health influencers or bloggers. The genre has roots that trace back to food diaries within "Pro Ana" or eating disorder communities on Tumblr and continued to rise to prominence through video-based media on YouTube and various visually-based iterations on Instagram.

Recently, this phenomenon of food documentation has appeared on the platform TikTok. TikTok is an app-based video-sharing platform that became available for worldwide use in 2018. Its videos are between 3 and 60 seconds long, and the platform features a unique and vast set of video editing and animation tools, surpassing the capabilities of predated applications like Vine. As of October 2020, TikTok surpassed over 2 million mobile downloads worldwide (Carmen, 2020). Of those users, 32.5% are between the ages of 10 and 19, and over half of all users are under the age of 25[1]. While TikTok users are made up of a lot of younger individuals, taking on a reputation as a "kids and teens" app, there are quite a lot of users who are adults.

What is unique about the platform is its ephemeral nature; TikTok relies on a "for you page" (fyp) which compiles and presents videos tailored for each user using a proprietary algorithm. Video recommendations are based on users' activity and are generated depending on what videos and/or users they have previously liked, interacted with, or searched for (Rangaiah,

[1] https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/

2020). Using algorithms to curate content especially for users has become increasingly popular in recent years: "By coding relationships between people, things, and ideas, [social media platforms] produce algorithms on the basis of detailed and intimate knowledge of people's everyday desires and likes," (Van Dijck, 2013). TikTok has search capabilities for users and hashtags, but the nature of content creation and posting practices makes searching for specific videos highly improbable and difficult.

While there are influencers and "TikTok stars," virality on the platform is rather democratized and random as anyone's video could gain traction based on its prominence and dissemination through the fyp. From experience, using the app feels spontaneous and cursory. Of all the videos on the app, these are ones presented to me at this specific moment in time. Over the last three years, particularly as individuals were put in lockdown due to the global pandemic in spring 2020, TikTok has come to fill the void and free time of users' lives. As of February 2021, TikTok has been downloaded over 200 million times in the United States[2] and its revenue for 2020 in the United States alone was over $500 million[3].

Given this understanding of our contemporary social media environment, "What I Eat In A Day" videos on TikTok offer a contemporary case study to forward analysis of continual points of contention for women in society and how they chose to feed and present themselves. The persistence of WIEIAD videos across platforms signals that they are rife for analysis in an updated context. In addition, the prominence of TikTok's cultural impact within the social media ecosystem signals that placing analysis of both phenomena in conjunction with one another serves as a fruitful lens for contemporary study of the relationship between food diaries and diet

[2] https://wallaroomedia.com/blog/social-media/tiktok-statistics/
[3] https://www.theinformation.com/articles/tiktoks-u-s-revenues-expected-to-hit-500-million-this-year

culture on social media. In addition, unpacking why exactly WIEIAD videos have had such a hold on our self-produced media practices lends itself to unearthing prominent discourses around food and the body for females. The aim of this thesis is thus to analyze the phenomenon of "What I Eat In A Day'' videos in relation to how notions of the "ideal" body are being replicated and challenged through the production of such content. In doing so, the main focus is on identifying and analyzing discourses and counterdiscourses on "ideal" health and food consumption produced through video-based social media. Guiding questions for such research are:

- How are notions of 'thinspiration' and the ideal body being replicated and challenged on TikTok through the production of What I Eat In A Day Content?
- What are the motivations behind the creation of What I Eat In A Day Videos by female-identifying users on TikTok?
- And finally, how do attitudes of consumption of WIEIAD videos formed in the vein of self-presentation impact producers' conceptions of the self?

By focusing on the production side of WIEIAD TikToks, I hope to take a step back from analyzing the bonafide social media influencer to instead focus on how and why average users on the platform are bringing this type of content to TikTok. As mentioned, anything can go viral, therefore, the everyday user is worthy of attention in an academic sense as well. I am particularly interested in the content creation aspect of these videos due to the potential for food-related self-presentations to affect the construction and formation of creators' identities with regard to morality. Individual users willingly subject themselves to praise, scrutiny, and mere attention to their food choices, which can be an inherently vulnerable experience. The aspects of

everydayness, self-presentation, and online performance these videos utilize prove for an interesting area of research in relation to discourses and counterdiscourses of the "ideal" body & lifestyle and health & food.

Analytical Framework

I situate my analysis in the theoretical tradition of cultural studies, which assumes that culture creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power. I focus on literature that has created a feminist intervention within this framework. Given that lifestyle choices and food consumption have increasingly become a cultural identity marker for the self in presentation, particularly within digital spaces, media that are resistant to normative presentations of the ideal body are often cast as immoral, excessive, or irresponsible (Fiske, 2011). For example, a TikTok that depicts a full day of eating exclusively fast food or omitting fruits and vegetables often garners critical comments and judgment. On the opposite side of the spectrum, media that display and reinforce normative ideals of "healthy" and the ideal body may also be susceptible to criticism or concern in the sense that they can be too healthy, too extreme. This often brings to light concerns of health risks or disordered patterns in terms of eating and restriction. In rather extreme cases, creators often restrict or turn off viewers' commenting capabilities, signaling both recognition and silencing of judgment and criticism. Following analysis of body politic in relation to social control, as formulated by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978), I implement similar commentary on contemporary forms of content (WIEIAD TikToks) which demonstrate "freedom", rebellion, and/or conformity in regards to food consumption. In addition, I employ the idea of the "unruly" woman as theorized by Kathleen

Rowe Karlyn to examine the experiences of women who make WIEIAD content that strays from the ideal.

Critique of presentation of the self, and the body, through food-related content, becomes more nuanced when incorporating a perspective that analyzes postfeminist neoliberal discourses that highlight the prevalence of self-maintenance, self-monitoring, and performance of hegemonic ideals in relation to women and their bodies (Riley et al 2018). Given this cultural orientation, my analysis is also informed by feminist cultural theory such as Rosalind Gill's critique of neoliberalism and feminist work (2007), Sarah Banet-Weiser's analysis of popular feminism and consumerism (1999, 2018), and Judith Butler's work on gender performance to round out discussions of identity and self-presentation (1989).

This research also introduces a platform analysis of TikTok which contributes to the field of Media Studies by situating the app in contemporary conversations around new media and the commodification of the self through neoliberal social media corporations. Van Dijck's work composes a research framework that acknowledges the mutually constitutive nature of social practices and technological affordances (2013, 2018). This framework particularly emphasizes the intertwined and nuanced relations between media, sociality, and profitability; together these serve as a useful site for understanding dynamics of privacy and vulnerability that come about during a TikTok creation process. In addition, my study can be situated in relation to the subfield of platform studies.

Particularly because TikTok's fyp is so overtly and explicitly algorithmic, it brings new dynamics of mediating and manipulating outreach potentials and engagement, with users learning to "hack" or forward the reach of their content. According to Van Dijck in her work on understanding the culture around online social networks:

> "Likability is not a virtue attributed consciously by a person to a thing or idea but is the result of an algorithmic computation derived from instant clicks on the like button. However, there is no quality assessment built into these buttons; online qualification indiscriminately accumulates acclamation and applause, and, by implication, depreciation, and disapproval," (Van Dijck, 13, 2013).

As such, the content that rises to virality is not based on value-judgments or morality, but due to what people find interesting, fascinating, grotesque, or in need of unsolicited commentary.

The function of the fyp has greater implications for the growth or shuttering of specific discourses in relation to WIEIAD content and audiences. A user who interacts with any type of specific content regularly will thus be exposed and presented with related content, perpetuating the consumption and thus the production of certain TikTok trends and their discourses. In this way, WIEIAD content that draws concern for the producer (warranted or not) leads to the perpetuation of more of these types of videos. Or, on the contrary, WIEIAD content that tries to forward narratives around intuitive eating or body positivity may be reproduced within pockets of communities in search of comfort on the platform.

To extend the approach of analyzing TikTok's economic and political interests, Light et. Al's walkthrough method will also be employed whereby step-by-step observation and documentation of the app's screens, features, and flows enables examination of its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references. Apps are important objects of study because they reflect cultural values and "bring multiple actors including users, developers and advertisers into an interaction space and communicate meanings that shape our everyday practices" (Light, Burgess, Duguay 2018). By utilizing a framework of feminist cultural theory, platform studies, and the walkthrough method, the subsequent analysis will help determine helpful and harmful discourses within the social media landscape towards positive body image or negative associations with food/exercise.

What is “What I Eat In A Day” and Why TikTok?

What I Eat In A Day videos exist as tools to spread information on health, fitness, and nutrition. They can be humorous bits or symbolic projects to inspire others — either to lose weight or to recover from some existing woe with eating (or not eating). In a sense, it is difficult to divide the types of WIEIAD videos, because the genre is less nuanced. While there are varying visual elements and intended or stated goals, the format and medium of a TikTok video leaves for particular reads and types of WIEIADs because of mechanical boundaries. A 60-second video glosses over large swaths of the experiential aspects of what it is to eat in a day. Some of these videos aim to demystify the effort and craft that goes into such attainment of beauty, but in the same sense, the format of a TikTok does not give the latitude to actually show what living day-to-day and eating day-to-day in specific ways feels like — or the labor that exists around the production of these videos.

Genres of WIEIAD videos are divided by things like the camera shots: Does the creator show themselves or not? Do they include shots of them eating? Is the food shown stylized or plated? Are there voiceovers or caloric values listed? Is the individual eating a high volume of food? A note on this last point though — we cannot tell how many calories are in something or make up someone’s day from a WIEIAD video. We cannot tell if this is a factual recount or record of what the individual ate. We cannot tell anything about the body or lifestyle of the individual unless that information is given to us, and that is subject to scrutiny as well. As such, other divisions of health and “correctness” are merely perceived and cannot be accurately discerned from the viewer.

As an avid TikTok user and with a history of complicated relationships with food, it was no surprise that I began to frequently encounter WIEIAD content on the platform. What struck

me, though, were the different takes and approaches to the typical presentation of public food diaries of this nature. There is a weighty share of videos where a thin, young, college-aged female ate mostly vegetables, perhaps including clear caloric values, which ultimately leads to the reproduction of discourses valorizing the "ideal body". This echoes earlier findings on the analysis of "health blogs," fitness content on Instagram, and body presentation on social media (Boepple and Thompson 2014, Mills et al. 2017). In contrast, though, there is WIEIAD content which pushes back against a normative presentation of food consumption, either in a carnivalesque manner, through a direct critique of hegemonic standards, in a humorous way, or through the insertion of less represented identities and thus produces diverse counterdiscourse to normative ideals.

For example, one user posted a TikTok that included her eating half a bagel with blueberry cream cheese, an order of small McDonald's fries, and "that's it." Whereas in the next swipe on the fyp there is a video of internet celebrity Trisha Paytas[4] consuming: an iced coffee, a bagel sandwich, 2 donuts, McDonald's chicken nuggets and fries, a "big ass" cheese croissant, chocolate mousse and apple juice, and finally a full steak dinner with mac and cheese and mashed potatoes. In the next swipe, a young woman documents a day of food, consuming 4 large coffees, four cigarettes, a tofu scramble, a monster energy drink, and vegan mac and cheese.

In a different vein, I have also encountered a subsect of these videos which serve an accountability function for individuals recovering from an eating disorder, demonstrating their struggles and accomplishments to gain more positive relationships with food. The disparity between these representations of eating habits is fascinating and diverse, with some garnering concern, disgust, amusement, amazement, or inspiration.

[4] https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJHcfaQn/

What is difficult when watching WIEIADs and discerning what is right and wrong, correct and incorrect, is that unlike exercise, hair color, or clothing styles — food is something each of us MUST consume and there is no way around it. It is the dieters, the binge-eaters, and the anorexic's horrifying truth. Unlike heroin or tobacco, or even coffee, the addiction to food is not an addiction but a physiological and biological need each of us has. What becomes difficult is that every single body is different, with different lifestyles, activity levels, deficiencies, capacities, etc. What is good for the hen is not always good for the flock because that hen maybe has a gluten intolerance or a sensitivity to red meat. As such, the genre of WIEIAD videos proves interesting because they bring such a mundane aspect of life to the forefront and do so in ways restricted by the platform on which they appear.

In one sense, WIEAD videos epitomize the idea of the purely backstage, as every time someone goes to put a bite of their food in their mouth, they must first pull their phone out and record it. But in another sense, this genre does pull iterations that are highly planned, stylized, and edited to look nearly perfect. As such, WIEIAD videos draw mundane aspects from everyday life and bring them to the foreground for comment, critique, and feedback. And a lot of these videos garner lots of attention because they are either alarmingly unhealthy (in different ways), aestheticized and inspirational as an unachievable perfection, or attention-grabbing because they break the mold of our preconceptions of what kinds of people should eat in specific ways.

In my research, the more I thought about these TikToks, the more questions I began to have. First, why even why make a video of this kind? What does the process of filming and editing this content look like – Feel like? How accurate are these representations of an individual's regular eating habits? What was it like to have other users engage and brazenly

comment on the habits presented—on personal eating choices and ways of life? While much has been done to analyze audience uptake and perception of media, engaging with content producers on social media produces challenges of access that are difficult to mediate. For example, many celebrities or influencers have managers or mostly spam-filled email accounts researchers must toil through. Although with TikTok's relative egalitarian nature and elements of candor in video production, I believe it serves as a fruitful site for engaging with content creators to understand better the process and experience behind the production behind WIEIAD content.

As an exercise, at one point in my research, I made a string of my own WIEIAD videos to see what it felt like. It did lead me to make conscious decisions about the frequency, type, and amount of food I was filming and adding to the video. For example, I was too shy to actually show myself biting into food, but found myself still including selfie shots at some points. These TikToks performed rather well against my normal offhand content and led to a brief bump in engagement across a few of the recent videos after. Interestingly, watching the videos back, I realized how similar in content and aesthetic my videos turned out.

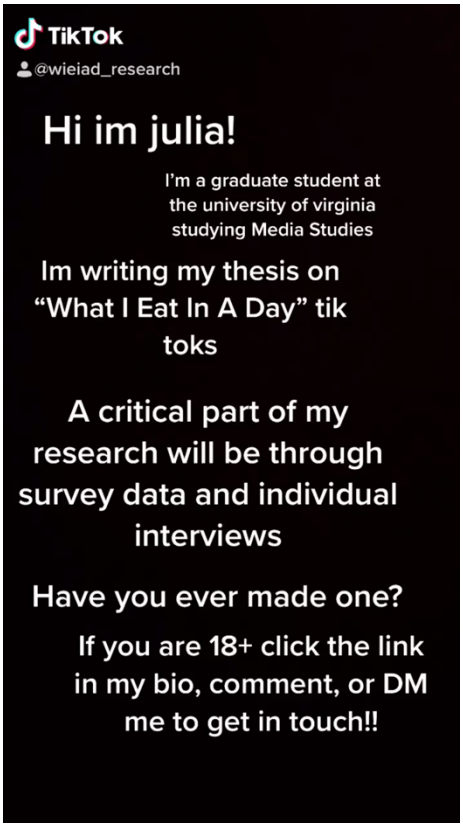
I tried to plate my food nicer. I incorporated more vegetables. Instead of including the exact amount of the food I was eating, I would just share a snippet of what it looked like rather than divulge how much of the item I actually ate. In addition, there were days where I had a glass of wine with dinner on a Tuesday and felt like it was inappropriate for me to share this on the internet. I began to instinctually see the process of food consumption through the lens of my iPhone camera. What became apparent to me was that from engaging with this content, I too had internalized the ideals of what these videos looked like and felt like — and was trying to emulate these norms. Moving from this understanding of what WIEIAD videos are, we can then understand a specific subsection that I analyze later, of the "unruly."

Methods

This study conducts analysis through a multifaceted approach which includes analysis of audiovisual TikTok content and participant data collected through surveys and in-depth interviews with producers of WIEIAD videos. This corpus is then analyzed through a critical discourse analysis of thematic content surrounding body and body maintenance, disordered eating, and humor. Critical discourse analysis is the study of 'language-in-use' (Streeter 2013). CDA is a powerful tool used to understand how power is conveyed through language, highlight who gets to speak and who does not speak, and expose structural inequalities and dominance. Language is often intimately tied to power and ideology through hidden, buried, or taken-for-granted machinations.

In September I began to save and archive any videos in relation to WIEIAD content encountered on my personal TikTok account. During the course of this project's development, I created a separate researcher TikTok account to draw this type of content from the algorithm, as well as promote outreach materials and engage with potential participants. In addition, some videos were pulled through regular searches of hashtags on TikTok, including "WIEIAD", "whatieatinaday", "food blog", and related iterations. As I compiled a sufficient data set of TikToks (around 500), they were sorted and coded for themes of "ideal, healthy" eating as well as humor and markers of resistance that signal a push back against "normal" or "healthy" eating. In addition, notation on the theme of comments on such videos was recorded to gather reactions from viewers, to examine how feedback on videos could potentially impact content creators.

In terms of participant data, the criteria for participation included being over the age of 18, a user of TikTok, and familiarity and experience with the creation of WIEIAD videos. To gather participant data, I created a survey through Qualtrics and disseminated it through calls for participants on my personal social media, DMs sent on TikTok to creators, and through text-based TikToks created and shared by the aforementioned research account. In addition, content producers of WIEIAD videos were contacted through comments on videos to query if they would like to participate in my study.



Survey answers were collected and analyzed similarly to the process described above, and participants were contacted to propose the possibility of participating in an in-depth interview. Initially, however, I offered potential participants the options of either the survey or interview or both. The survey and interview protocols were quite similar in that they inquired about users' personal history with TikTok, daily use and habits, experience and frequency of creating WIEIAD content, reactions to comments from videos, motivations to make such videos, the process behind content creation, the accuracy of depicted eating habits, etc. In addition, more holistic questions on relationships between food and reflections of selfhood were proposed as well as questions about attitudes towards the phenomenon of WIEIAD content more broadly.

In total, I spoke in-depth with 6 different content creators and received a total of 40 survey responses – to various degrees of completion. Interviews were conducted over Zoom during late 2020 and early 2021.

Moving Forward

With the oversaturation of food, fitness, health, and diet content on social media, the way we depict ourselves and our lives matter to who we are or want to be. The very nature of WIEIAD videos seems to inherently suggest that if you eat like this, you can look like this. While this is obviously not true – bodies come in different shapes and sizes, are constantly changing, functioning at different capacities, etc. – the fascination with the choices individuals make and patterns of consumption persist. The idea of a "normal" body or "normal" way of eating is false, as norms are imposed upon us and we are socialized to conform. When we don't, we risk exclusion, judgment, hyperfocus, or even awe. WIEAD TikToks can function as makeshift educational tools for "healthy" eating choices, objects of fascination for seemingly perverse habits, or simply a format to make a clever joke.

While TikTok is best known for its humorous content, with dancing challenges and cultivated memes, videos that present a troublesome hyperfocus on the body and consumption persist, as they do across many social media platforms. In addition, TikTok is a relatively new platform that has yet to be properly unpacked or analyzed within the academic field. Despite an uncertain future in the wake of calls to ban the app in the United States due to its association with China, TikTok's use and integration into the cultural sphere thus far has proven significant enough to examine it on its own terms. The apps we use and create also reflect who we are and, while we shape them through our own use, they shape us in the process of using them.

Furthermore, if what we eat is who we are, then how we demonstrate to others what we consume curates a perception of identity that does not exist in a value-neutral vacuum. Self-branding and self-promotion are inherently flawed under the nuances of neoliberalism social constructions, which dictate the individualized and self-propagated path of optimized "success" is closely tied to work ethic and self-control in both presentation and practice. People on social media already partake in communities and develop patterns on what content they consume, but the importance is the type of communities and content borne out of them. In the highly algorithmic and mediated sphere of TikTok's ecosystem, this proves truer and truer each day.

What is important is to study how and why these videos are continuing to be made and how the process of making such videos impacts one's self-identity. From this, we can begin to tease out how WIEIAD content can be used as a means to promote discourses of acceptance and build judgment-free spaces. Given the range of possible effects social media use has on its users, I plan to conduct this analysis to help forward existing bodies of work calling for greater media literacies in relation to social media content around food, health, and the body.

CH:2 What Is TikTok?

It is important to unpack TikTok as a platform because it is not only a new form of social media but a platform that is shaping engagement between users and content differently than its predecessors. While it does consist of some familiar mechanisms, TikTok itself is a new kind of platform which has radically shifted the social media landscape and pushed its competitors to take on new forms of content. For example, Netflix has recently launched a "fast laughs feed," incorporating short clips between 30-60 seconds in a vertical-style layout reminiscent of TikTok.

Similarly, YouTube has rearranged the look of their mobile app to forward the "create button" to Instagram and TikTok[5].

TikTok is a social media platform that rose to prominence in the United States since its launch in 2016. It was formed out of its predecessor, Musically, and is owned by the Chinese-based company, ByteDance. It is a video-based app where users can make and post clips ranging from 15 seconds to one minute. Its interface features unique editing capabilities, filters, and the ability to record, create, or add background music and sounds. The platform proves markedly different from previous social networking platforms for a slew of reasons: in its mechanical affordances, how monetization is ingrained into the platform, its engaging nature and incredible knack for keeping a user's attention, and the ease of how virality takes place and is achieved.

To speak briefly to the point of engagingness, TikTok is so different from all of the other social media platforms particularly because of its ability to be so attention-grabbing. TikTok itself has produced videos featuring popular creators which serve to encourage mindfulness about one's time spent on the app. They go along the lines of: "Hey! You've been scrolling for a while, maybe take a break, grab a snack and some water and then come back!" Or "It's late these videos will still be here in the morning, maybe go get some rest". What social media platforms have you heard of that purposefully release content that advocates for you to *stop* using the app, even briefly?

Technology is not neutral, "but rather a mediating and productive force" and as such, it is important to look at the specific ways platforms are encoded, assembled, and organized to understand the social programming driving these spaces (Bucher, 2012, 480). Similar to previous work in the STS field, I argue that it is a necessity to take stock of the human and nonhuman

[5] https://mashable.com/article/netflix-fast-laughs/

actors ingrained within the network of TikTok. As such, literature from platform studies allows us to fully appreciate the ways in which these encoded mechanics shape user engagement with content and the process of producing content on the app itself. These understandings also help to illuminate the motivations behind the encoded agendas of its creators. Pairing the horizontal analysis of Actor Network Theory with platform critique coming from authors like Van Dijck, understanding TikTok in this way will yield deeper insights into the experiences of my participants discussed in later chapters.

In addition, something I want to emphasize is the authenticness and intimacy of TikTok, which I argue is a unique and key feature of the platform, in part driving its success at entertaining audiences in a sustained manner. This authenticity and intimacy are crafted through an entwined mix of technical affordances and platform culture to produce a unique sociotechnic environment. As such, this chapter shall review the network of actors that make up TikTok, the designed affordances of the platform, and how these factors impact the culture of virality and authenticity on the platform.

Actor Network Theory:

Social interaction online can be explained through culturalist understandings, but cannot be fully understood without acknowledgment to dynamic technical elements in which they take place. Within online spaces, it is important to pay particular attention to the agency of mechanical functions as well. For example, Tuerlings argues that political economy and cultural studies can make use of ANT's concepts without the need to wholly uproot their respective theoretical assumptions (2013).

This paper embraces this call to action in regards to the heterogeneous and symmetric approach ANT lends to help contribute to the literature of contemporary social networking sites

to analyze points and positions of power. In this way, ANT and the Walkthrough method introduced by Burgess and Light offer useful frameworks for making sense of the burgeoning social networking site TikTok. The super symmetrical, epistemological basis of ANT allows for important insights into the ways in which user behavior is shaped by the TikTok FYP algorithm and vice versa. As Sismondo points out, humans and nonhumans are bound up with each other – thus features of one side cannot be understood without the other (2004). They can then only be understood through a concerted effort to bring both into an analytical view.

The use of Light et al's walkthrough method was informed firstly by everyday use of the app and a technical walkthrough of the process of creating an account and subsequently content. As I have been a user of TikTok for about a year before this study, continued use of the app was not only expected but purposefully shaped in ways to support my research. For example, to the detriment of my own schedule, I have used TikTok daily for roughly 2 hours, sometimes more. This was in part purposeful, as I deleted other social media apps from my phone and accidental in that I am a fond and regular user of the platform. In addition, a separate research account was created and maintained for outreach purposes and corpus collection.

Authors Bhandari and Bimo have also conducted a walkthrough of TikTok and concluded:

> "TikTok is designed in a way that encourages users to interact most heavily with two alternative entities: 1. A trending algorithm that presents users with videos ostensibly catered to their personal tastes and interests, and 2. With their own content and self-representations. This results in a model of public presentation that is most heavily informed by and directed toward the individual instead of an 'audience'." (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020)

These two entities are brought to the foreword of the app as when individuals first open it, they are directed to the "for you" page (fyp). In addition, the bottom portion of the screen centers the "create" button, which leads users to the recording portion of the app. While watching videos, if

a user clicks on a sound the bottom of the screen features an oval push-button call to action that reads "Use this sound" as it slightly wiggles back and forth. TikTok also has a "duet" feature in which users can record themselves reacting to a video, picture in picture, as to add their own take to certain content. These factors highlight the very self-oriented nature of the app, constantly nudging users to create their own content.

In terms of watching videos, the fyp explicitly reiterates this interaction with the self by curating very specific content for each user. The concept of agency posits that an actor is defined by an element in a network that influences or provokes an action by someone or something else (Bucher, 2012, 481; Latour 2005). Given this understanding, the fyp can be considered a crucial element of the process of engagement on TikTok. Currently, researchers do not have access to the internal mechanisms or literature which describe and lay out a full understanding of how the fyp algorithm actually works. Although there have been attempts to make sense or optimize one's content following noticed trends and patterns — this information is kept extremely privy to the parent company.

These two forwarded features of content creation and interaction with the fyp combine to highlight the “intrapersonal” aspect of the app, rather than interpersonal emphasis in a social network. The for *you* page itself emphasizes the individual over the community. Bhandari and Bimo argue that this has formed “a very different conception of what it means to be social” in an online space (2020). This intrapersonal engagement is done through content creation and heavy interaction with the fyp, which is carefully tailored to users’ likes and preferences. As described in the TikTok Apple App Store preview: “Watch endless amounts of videos customized specifically for you. A personalized video feed based on what you watch, like, and share. TikTok

offers you real, interesting, and fun videos that will make your day."[6] Bytedance's verbiage about TikTok emphasizes expressing yourself, interacting with your favorite music, and customization specific to you.

Bhandari and Bimo build off of earlier theories on the "networked self" (Papacharissi, 2011) to propose the model of an "algorithmized self" that "understands the self as deriving primarily from a reflexive engagement with previous self-representations rather than with one's social connections":

> "The user is forced to negotiate identity not by connecting to the outside world through the mechanism of the machine, but rather by engaging with 'machinized' selves: the curated algorithm that presents their interests, personality, and identity to them, and the original content they create that is processed by the machine that is TikTok. In TikTok, the boundaries between user and platform are intentionally blurred; here more than ever do we see a restless machine, one with as much of a "life" as its human user." (Bhandari and Bimo)

Using TikTok can thus be seen as a form of self-expression, but also as self-introspection. For example, it is a common joke on the app to comment on the ways in which videos can appear so specific to the user: "TikTok really said for YOU." This push to guide individual engagement towards content creation and the fyp thus interact to help produce the unique and engaging environment of TikTok.

The focus on the individual and quickly-created content lends itself to a "backstage" and behind-the-scenes feel in videos. For example, TikTok stars like @victoriaparisf post 14-20 times a day in a manner that reimagines vlogging[7]. Victoria has nearly 1 million followers, garnered from documenting her life in New York City, where she isn't producing highly involved

[6] https://apps.apple.com/us/app/id835599320
[7] Vlogging (video blogging) is the practice by which influencers detail their daily lives, most commonly seen on platforms like YouTube.

montages or stylized selfies (although she occasionally does). Instead, she hits records and rants to the camera or spends a minute rushing to demonstrate how she makes her morning coffee. Or, she props her phone against a light pole then does a "fit check"[8] in the middle of a sidewalk. Even with the affordances in terms of high-tech filters, adding text to videos, carefully placing and timing stickers, a lot of TikToks have the feeling that it took as quickly to make as it does to watch it.

In a similar sense, the push to get users to create content merely adds to the huge trove of videos the fyp has at its disposal to show to other users. This very backstage feel is promoted by the ease of content creation and taken up by users who share their own content from their own positionalities. Thus, more self-representations are produced for other users to relate to. As one of my participants commented: “I think because the app has such a wide variety of content options, as well as diverse individuals making videos, it makes it a lot easier to feel comfortable posting videos, as opposed to an app like Instagram where it’s a whole ordeal to post something” (P1). The “ordeal” referenced here is the polished, filtered and heavily posed feel of Instagram posts, which present an idealized and perfected self. The democratization of self-representations with media technology has then been expanded through TikTok, which only serves to benefit from more people creating content that other people can relate to. This content then finds the correct audiences through the fyp and helps to keep the flow of engagement on the platform.

One of the participants I spoke to had been on TikTok when it was still Musically. Commenting on the nature of virality and general random attainment of it, P1 said:

> "Musically was a lot more formal, it was extremely difficult to get on the for you page. It used to be called the featured page and all of the videos had hundreds of thousands of likes. Now on TikTok, videos are put on anybodys for you pages of anyone who TikTok

[8] “Fit check” is a term for showing one’s outfit of the day (OOTD).

> thinks that your video will interest. This makes it a lot easier to connect with a group of people who are interested in the content that you're making."

TikTok has proven to be a very different environment when it comes to the distribution of videos through the fyp, where even videos with zero likes or comments can pop up on someone's feed.

Bucher writes about how users forge connections via online platforms, which themselves also contribute to the formation of such social connections, by guiding users to other users and content. Bucher proposes the concept of "algorithmic friendship" in which software and algorithms are an active component within the networks of sociality on social media platforms (481). In this way, the randomness in the distribution of videos and intimate settings of TikTok is reinforced through the fyp to guide users into certain pockets and communities, whether they originally identified as a member of one or not.

In support of these ideas, two of the common themes that emerged when speaking with content creators throughout my study was first, how TikTok is primarily a platform where individuals engage with strangers, rather than replicate their existing social structure, and second, the odd nature of vitality which occurs on the app.

Starting with the first point, there has been an emphasis on the ways in which social media platforms replicate or make visible social connections. Although, when I spoke to TikTok users a majority of their mutuals and followers were not individuals they knew in real life. Many did not share or link their TikTok accounts across platforms but would connect their Instagram accounts to their TikTok profiles. That way, they could gain Instagram followers *from* TikTok, rather than vice versa. TikTok allows you to follow individuals, and like content, but the fyp gives you no options to select what content it shows you. You can react to videos by either pressing “Not Interested” on a video, or by reporting content you find disturbing/upsetting, but it finds videos just “for you” through data mining rather than set preferences. This mechanism has

led to an interesting practice of commenting on videos to “stay on this side of TikTok” and thus engage in more of the content users prefer to see.

In regards to the second commonality, many of the individuals I spoke to who garnered high amounts of engagement did so on videos that they either made in an offhand manner or did not expect to actually go viral. For example, P3 noted:

> "I don't know, it was so weird because I was like... Of all things, like sometimes I've made a TikTok and it's taken me like two or three days to make it … that took me from 7 am to 8 pm to film, so an entire day and the editing, the timing, the texts, right, all of that. That's taken a lot of time. And this just took... This literally took me like two minutes to film the whole thing, and it was very off the whim, it was not like, 'Hey, I'm gonna film me talking about my dinner', it was just, 'you know what I'm gonna make, a TikTok about this 'cause it'd be cool'. I was like, Yeah, I mean, it's cool to see it, but I didn't understand that it was like 14000 new followers type cool."

Because the for you page is so individualized and seemingly random, it is hard to predict which videos will garner attention. When one posts on TikTok it is with the recognition that anyone could see it, but because interaction takes place mostly between strangers, this perception lends itself to individuals embracing the very backstage feel of performances on the app. In addition, videos that take off and become viral can do so for any reason whether in terms of negative or positive motivations.

The idea of virality occurring unintentionally and with unforeseen reactions will be discussed in later chapters.

How TikTok Makes Money

The basic principle of "web 2.0 platforms" is the massive trove of collected personal data of platform users which is then evaluated, marketed, and used for targeted advertising: "Social media activities such as creating profiles, sharing ideas, uploading or watching videos, enable the collection, analysis and sale of personal data by commercial web platforms" (Allmer, 2015).

TikTok proves to be no different, but its uncanny ability to "know" their users is in part one of the unique aspects which make the app so entertaining.

A unique feature of TikTok is the ways in which monetization is integrated into the platform. Introduced in July of 2020, TikTok has a “Creator Fund” which content creators have access to join once they hit 100,000 followers. In the press release, ByteDance announced that "we want[ed] to show our appreciation to our brilliant creator community by rewarding them for their incredible TikTok videos and creativity. We want all creators to have the opportunity to earn money doing what they love and turn their passion into a livelihood.”[9] The factors which impact how much one makes from a video as a part of the creator fund is influenced by several different elements, "including the number of views and the authenticity of those views, the level of engagement on the content, as well as making sure content is in line with our Community Guidelines and Terms of Service.”

Once a part of the Creator fund, creators also have access to the "creator marketplace" where brands can reach out to them through TikTok for sponsored content. In addition, there is educational material of which helps content creators learn how to make better videos, mostly for the companies and brands that reach out to them. One of the main tips includes making content that users watch all the way through, thus encouraging creators to be scrupulous and intentional in the ways they edit their videos if they do so at all.

The larger distinction here between TikTok and other social media platforms is that TikTok pays content creators directly through the Creator Fund themselves, rather than relying on businesses and ad opportunities to find and forge deals with creators. While this type of business transaction does take place on the platform, the idea of the creator fund is to try and

[9] https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-gb/tiktok-creator-fund-your-questions-answered

form a system wherein creators do not need to depend on this previously traditional brand deal-influencer-style transaction. The extent to which the goal of enabling creators to turn their "passion into a livelihood" has been met is currently debated among popular press sources, but the ethos and attempt to create such a system proves markedly different nonetheless.

In addition, as a platform TikTok still holds traits characteristics of its predecessors in terms of the selling and monetization of personal data. As Van Dijck writes on the culture of online social connection: "Some observe that the selling of privacy may be mistakenly viewed as the natural consequence of users' eagerness to connect and promote the self, rather than being understood as the corollary of a political economy deeply rooted in audience commoditization" (Van Dijck, 18). Ultimately, the engineered nature of focusing on the individual, providing specific content, and engaging users so effectively is not for entertainment purposes – it is to glean the by-product of behavioral and profiling data (Van Dijck, 17). As such the non-discriminatory nature of the fyp in terms of what content it provides to users opens up a system wherein engagement – regardless of positive or negative associations rules all. Echoed by Van Dijck: "there is no quality assessment built into these buttons; online qualification indiscriminately accumulates acclamation and applause, and, by implication, depreciation, and disapproval" (Van Dijck, 13). In a culture where the organization of social exchange is staked on neoliberal economic principles, the notion of likability characterizes online interactions as superficial and non-critical, for the sake of engagement.

Given this basis for understanding how TikTok works and what makes it distinct from other contemporary social media platforms, the next chapter will focus on setting an understanding for how I have theoretically come to make sense of WIEIAD videos at large.

CH 3: Theorizing the Online Self and the Digital Female Body

Although TikTok's "What I Eat In A Day'' videos are a relatively new phenomenon, the ways in which they draw attention to women's relationships with food are reminiscent of many other media tropes and content genres rooted in idealized notions of the feminine body. Accordingly, if we are to fully understand the depth of WIEIAD videos' particular cultural impact, it is important to first lay out a framework for understanding how to approach these specific media texts.

The advent of WIEIAD videos presents a complex lexicon of personal branding, self-presentation, and performance, but also catharsis, voyeurism, and self-surveillance. To properly contextualize what I mean by this, I present feminist literature on the body and self-surveillance and also review foundational pieces on the presentation of the self with particular emphasis on doing so in digital spaces. From here we can unpack the ways in which online performance and identity have been further complicated by postmodernism, feminism, and media pluralism. This line of inquiry is essential for understanding why WIEAD videos continue to be produced and consumed in platforms such as TikTok.

I situate my analysis in the theoretical tradition of cultural studies, in which culture creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power. With this standpoint, I have focused on literature that has created a feminist intervention within this framework, to properly contextualize this contemporary media form of TikTok with pre-existing scholarly critique. The aim of this chapter is thus to survey the ways in which previous authors have brought attention to conceptions of the self and presentation, the female body, and media in order to later understand how WIEIAD TikToks serve as symbolic markers concerning femininity, consumption, and the body.

On quite a “macro” level, the self, itself, is a socially constructed artifact constituted through the interactive and iterative process of socialization and reflexivity. These selves are then further remade and adjusted through the act of performance which is social interaction; we perform in everyday conversations with a friend, with each tweet we send, and while “paying attention” to a work meeting. Given the dynamic and performative nature of identity, pluralized and multiplied to an even greater degree with the advent of social media, what we chose to share and represent in such digital spaces are encoded with their own cultural meanings as well.

Further, against a backdrop of neoliberalism and postfeminist discourse, if what we eat is who we are, how we demonstrate to others what we consume curates a perception of identity that does not exist in a value-neutral vacuum. Long-standing, yet continually evolving perceptions of "healthy" as well as various culturally-dictated benchmarks for the appropriateness of different patterns of consumption have developed around women, their bodies, and what they do with them and persisted into the current cultural sphere – both online and off. The use of the word "healthy" here is not to signal nutritionally or scientifically supported ideations on a well-rounded diet. Instead, it is a social construction based mainly on aesthetics rather than evidence-based research.

Self-presentation and thus self-branding and promotion – as we know them – are inherently flawed social constructions championed by neoliberalism and contemporary consumer culture. Neoliberalism can be broadly defined as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). These constructions dictate the individualized and self-propagated path of optimized "success" as tied closely to work ethic and self-control, in both

presentation and practice. In the present moment, we inhabit a digital ecosphere that is closely tied to our everyday practices, particularly in terms of consumption habits and providing lenses for the ways in which we view ourselves and others. We are more online than ever and thus have endless spaces to consume and produce content ourselves.

As such, these ideals of perfection, competition, and curated performance have become deeply embedded in our everyday lives and therefore now appear somewhat mundane and taken for granted. That being said, to understand how culture and society shape us as individuals, it is important to contemplate theories of the self, presentation, and discipline impinged upon the female body. In doing so we can trace how these socially constructed expectations are taken up and reproduced by the content creator as an individual.

While my work provides new research in a specific context (WIEIAD videos on TikTok), previous scholars have held similar conversations for a long time. Dually with the dense and high-level discussions of the self and cultural norms, it is easy to feel disconnected from the individual experience – to forget that "the selves" which I refer to map onto the individual experiences of everyday people. Thus, I aim to emulate the balance previous feminist and media scholars have brought to the field of research in terms of being a person and recognizing, empathizing with my informants and subjects, but also have a critical eye for the larger structural forces which guide us down certain paths for how we live our lives.

To accomplish this previously and briefly laid out theoretical tracing, I first focus on the “self” as an entry point into a discussion of how we have come to understand identity and thus identity performance. I then discuss how these ideas can be transposed onto our current social media landscape. Next, I discuss feminist literature which connects theories on the body and the

self. And finally, I provide a brief overview of findings that relate to social media texts dealing with the body and how they can prove harmful or helpful to notions of the self-guide us

What Is the Self, Where Does It Come From, and What Do We Do With It?

In the sociological tradition, the self is a symbolic project wherein individuals are actively and creatively participating in society in reference to their identity, others, and society as a whole. English sociologist Anthony Giddens understands the self as a non-fixed entity, which is actively constructed as individuals incorporate and modify knowledge that influences their sense of personal identity (Elliot, 11). Similarly, in *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead places a great emphasis on language being the pivotal connection between understanding ourselves reflexively and thus others, through the communication of symbols. He writes that because "our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also" (164). People learn meanings behind symbols and thus learn how to exercise their capacity for thought; we understand norms and standards and interact with them and others to make sense of ourselves and our society.

Importantly, the self is neither the sum total of past experiences nor the soaking in of experiences. Instead, it is how you respond to all those interactions with not only other people but the generalized other and how you interact with symbolic gestures (processing of the mind). The "generalized other" can be understood as the general notion that a person has of the common expectations that others have about actions and thoughts within a specific society (Mead, xxvii). These processes of the mind are partitioned for Mead into the "I" and the "Me" (Mead, 174). The former being the spontaneous and impulsive aspects of identity, while the latter serves as the reflexive parts of our identities which evaluate the social interactions based on social and cultural

contexts. We are dually embracing creativity and spontaneity, while also aiming to temper these drives within socially prescribed boundaries. This helps to explain that innate urge users feel to creatively express themselves by taking part in a TikTok trend, like WIEIAD videos, but try to do so in a way that is within the expected boundaries for performance.

Giddens focuses more on the process of interaction, lumping individual acts into the category of either taken for granted and routinized (practical) or an act requiring reflection and a deeper sense of agency (discursive)[10]. His understanding of how individuals are informed by "the generalized other" is useful here in understanding the ways in which self-presentation is performed in a discursive manner. These discursive practices are often concerned with individual image and bodily attractiveness – a never-ending performance in the heavily image-based environments of social media platforms.

In a contemporary context, the idea of a generalized other becomes key to understanding not only the fundamental shaping of the self, but to understand the nature of the imagined other, to who we must perform, and perform properly. The same is seen in that ominous and omnipresent entity that is the (potential) viewership of the online audience. Privacy and anonymity notwithstanding, to post to a profile on social media is to subject oneself to the (potential) viewership of the masses. In spaces like the TikTok “for you page” and Instagram “explore feed”, where spontaneity and the element of potential virality underlie basic mechanical functions, this generalized other has taken on its own social and cultural contexts on which to evaluate.

[10] Giddens’ work goes a step further from Mead’s in the sense that he argues there is more to the formation and understanding of the self than collective attitudes, and in advocating for a broader focus on the reflexive workings of our identities. He writes: “Self Identity is not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biography,” (Giddens, 53).

In quite a predictive way, these authors cautioned that in a post-traditional society, there is an increasing concern with identity image and bodily attractiveness, which has led not to a closing of the self, but an opening out of identity and an increased penchant for different identity expressions. But with the increased propensity for agency, came the loosening of explicit and formal paths for which the creation of these identities were to follow. Giddens' theories have held true and are complicated by the rise of social media as a new means of presenting the self. Theorizing further on Giddens' work and writing about "the networked self" Kreiss says:

> "...contemporary communication and media scholars have charted the rise of 'cultures of connectivity,' 'networked sociality,' and 'connective action.' Taken as a whole, these accounts generally are premised on the idea of individuated reflexive selves, where people actively construct their identities, and continually do so, in an era marked by the decline of traditions, institutions, and locales" (Kreiss, 16).

As such, in a post-traditional order, the self is a project in which individuals are free to construct and reconstruct their identities based on cultural surroundings. In western contexts, this cultural surrounding is deeply marked by neoliberal ideology, which as mentioned focuses on the self as a project in the pursuit of perfection. This will be touched on again later, but for now, it is important to understand how this "opening up" has impacted the ways we take those selves and perform them.

According to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, as performers we both knowingly and unknowingly give off impressions of ourselves, assuring that what people see in us and how they see the situation is precisely how one has planned with entering the interaction. These constructions of performances take so much planning that in turn eliminate any "true self": "The

self he would like to be and which, in the end, becomes second nature, his ‘truer’ self,” (Goffman, 19).

Given this notion of how the self arises through performance, Foucault's work discusses how discipline (like the self-discipline of pursuing perfection) impinges upon individual bodies through the cultural discourses that permeate society. These discourses are crucial for understanding gender and sexuality, which Foucault sees as a set of ritualized acts that conform to discursive expectations of society. In this instance, power works through knowledge formed by hegemonic institutions which shape scientific discourse and thus the paradigms for understanding ourselves and our selves in relation to society (Elliot, 104).

In the same vein, femininity and gender norms are largely a matter of construction. The push for women’s liberation and freedom of choice has presented new opportunities for who women can be. At the same time, without such rigid expectations that come from traditional institutions like church, family, etc. individuals must seek outwards, for example towards media, to temper their performance according to the generalized other.

Writing on the anxieties that fuel disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, Bordo's analysis on the ways in which these pathologies are extremely logical given the way women are expected to perform according to hegemonic ideals, proves useful in understanding these mechanisms; "We learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required," (Bordo, 170). Bordo's work serves as a reminder that these learned rules happen in and through media, to further contribute to the standards and constructions to which we must align our performances.

Within the formation of the self is an understanding of the self as the body. The same logic of the tension between the "I" and the "Me" applies here in that "cultural practices, far from

exerting their power against spontaneous needs, ‘basic’ pleasures or instincts, or ‘fundamental’ structures of body experience, are already and always inscribed” (Bordo, 142). Our bodies, despite being materially composed of flesh and blood, are constituted and understood through culture. Similarly, Mary Douglas argues that “the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo, 165; Douglas, 1966).

While Foucault falls short of offering a nuanced discussion on the taking up of gender in regards to sexuality, Butler's work emphasizes the performative nature of social beings. She moves to fill previous gaps in how self-presentation and understanding the self are deeply complicated by gender. In focusing on performance, she argues that we do not hold a specific gender that is fixed and essential, but we just perform in ways that align with cultural discourses (Butler, 1990). In this sense, there is no self, just a multitude of selves that congeal to form an identity or person across performances. This is a bit similar, but different from what Goffman would suggest, in that Goffman's idea of impression management presupposes a deeper level of awareness for our performances to meet the expectations of society.

Both authors, however, do agree upon the idea that we need to study culture and social performance. Butler emphasizes this to a greater degree, as one of the main ideas of her work is that when looking at how gender and desire are performed and directed it is often heavily situational and forged within an oppressive cultural binary. While Butler's work has mostly to do with gender, the idea that there is no "true self" but rather an amalgamation of individual performances which congeal into an "identity" also proves crucial when discussing the self online in disembodied spaces. For example, each social performance in different real-life social

settings is accordingly tailored. In the same vein, each performance on different social media platforms (a different online social setting) necessitates their own tailored performance as well. To what extent online performances translate to an offline understanding of the self is beyond the scope of this paper, but the line of inquiry remains in the realm of understanding the self and self-performance in these varied spaces.

All in all, these fundamental understandings of the self and how it is formed have become increasingly complicated by the advent of new forms of sociality. Now we are not only shaped and performing within the traditional spheres of school, family, work, etc. – but also in the contexts of online spaces. The generalized other has expanded to include the millions of unknown, geographically dispersed individuals who are citizens of the web. Within an online context where the constant production and reproduction of self and performance occur at much higher frequencies, to much larger audiences, I argue the role and expansiveness of the generalized other has multiplied immensely. We are consuming and producing content at such a rate which makes for an even more intensified and intrusive self-preoccupation with maintenance and curation of our performed selves.

The Self Online:

The previous section is devoted to presenting a basic understanding of the theoretical foundations for how the field of sociology has theorized on the self. Such an understanding is an important step in unpacking how we can use this basis of knowledge to analyze how the digital mediums in which we present ourselves impact such a process. With the multiplicity of media and thus social spheres in which individuals can perform within and draw from, society today is much different than how previous authors at the cusp of post-traditional society conceived of it. While their work holds mostly true in our digital landscape, an understanding of how these social

networking sites are structured – and how various ideologies become ingrained within them – sheds light on how we can today contextualize earlier theories in contemporary online social spaces.

These foundational works provide a reference on where the self comes from, the societal and cultural factors that impact its formation, and how it impacts presentations and understandings of the self. With the growth of media technology and social media, these ideas have become more complicated. Mass media have provided new forms of sociality and self-presentation which offer a broader range of tools for expression than, for example, what Goffman had to draw upon with face-to-face interaction. In addition, the idea of the generalized other has shifted from small forms of sociality to much larger forms of potential viewership of one's presentation of the self. Whether it be an Instagram selfie or a half-minded tweet, the sociality of the internet has developed its own and various series of standards and norms.

Before discussing how social media has created new spaces for self-presentation and sociality, we must first define and establish how contemporary authors have approached such digital platforms. Boyd and Ellison define social network sites as: "as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system," (211). Work has been done in relation to understanding the histories of different social networking sites and how the construction of friendships transfers into online spaces (Donath & boyd 2004).

Given this understanding, Thomas Allmer's work on critical social theory and digital media serves to contextualize the current dichotomy between individual expression and social connection, and the commodification of human social activity through corporate social media

platforms. Allmer argues that the internet is a techno-social system that consists of technological infrastructure and human actors: “It is a mutual shaping of technology on the one hand and society on the other hand, in which technologies and human beings are connected in a complex way, produce and reproduce each other, and have relative autonomy,” (53). There is a dual flow between how sociality is impacted by these networks and how they represent socialization for individuals in the process of the formation of the self. Boyd & Ellison’s work lines up with this sentiment as they write: “Networked practices mirror, support, and alter known everyday practices, especially with respect to how people present (and hide) aspects of themselves and connect with others,” (boyd & Ellison, 224).

In a demonstration of how networked spaces and practices are altering our understandings of ourselves and self-representations, Mill et. Al offers insight into how this process has played out in the 21st century in regards to perceptions of beauty and body image. They offer a review of the role of social media in impacting society’s perception of beauty and delve into the emerging area of research that examines interactions between social media and self-presentation strategies on body image. In terms of idealized and perfected body image these authors write:

> "The mass media play a critical role in people's self-image by informing and reflecting what people consider to be beautiful or attractive. Often termed the 'thin ideal', they communicate the way people believe they should look to be attractive and desirable to others" (Mills, 145).

Furthermore, their work suggests that a great number of individuals seek out idealized images via the media, rather than solely acting as passive consumers: “Contemporary media platforms are changing how people internalize beauty ideals, how they try to control how other people see them, and how they get feedback from others about how they look” (151).

In addition, the authors bring up important gaps in literature on how new capabilities of the networked era impact the presentation of the self: "It is not yet known whether self-presentation strategies like photo enhancement actually improve body image and appearance self-esteem (by allowing users to present an idealized version of themselves to others) or whether they worsen appearance concerns because they perpetuate an evaluation of and focus on physical appearance," (152). The findings from Mills' work support the frameworks for understanding social media and presentation as theorized by Allmer and boyd & Ellison.

Given this, we can see mass media as increasingly a function of the “generalized other” proposed by Mead, becoming a growing source for impacting how we understand ourselves and who we should be. There is evidence to support this as “Judith Donath extends signaling theory to explain different tactics SNS users adopt to reduce social costs while managing trust and identity. She argues that the construction and maintenance of relations on SNSs is akin to ‘social grooming’,” (Mills, 224; Donath, 2004). Social grooming here is referring to the process of socialization by which individuals learn to understand what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate in social settings. Accordingly, there is evidence to support the notion that digital social spheres carry the same process of socialization in interaction, along with their own specific elements of appropriate social interaction complicated by the specific platform.

For example, the ways in which these digitally mediated spaces necessitate a higher awareness of the information we give off in performances, due to safety, serves as an evolution of previous understandings of identity formation in new contexts. The formation of the self in an era of social networking presents new challenges of how we understand our bodies and body image in accordance to social norms. Particularly because the representations which we engage in can be the lofty depictions of celebrities, but are more often presentations arising from social

peers: “One of the unique aspects of social media, versus traditional media, is that they are made up of communication with peers and/or public figures. It is the elements of interactivity and connectedness that make social media distinct from other media forms and rife with opportunities for users to perceive, compare, and internalize standards of beauty,” (Mills, 152).

This process rings incredibly similar to how Mead writes of the reflexive process of the "Me", or how Goffman describes the process of an authentic performance with impression management. We as users and performers on social media absorb and reproduce the standards which are presented to us in these spaces. These standards are communicated through celebrities and influencers, but also our peers and our social circles in real life which have been translated online. The performances we then produce according to notions of outward expectations and ideals are thus deemed successful or unsuccessful based on the degree to which they can be perceived as authentic and believable. These performances are evaluated through tangible and numeric benchmarks: likes, favorites, friends lists, followers, etc. Therefore, the mechanisms for how the self is formed and understood have not dramatically changed, and instead have only expanded and reproduced as the opportunity for self-presentation has expanded in online spaces. Patterns of kinship, performance, and understanding of our bodies have migrated to online spaces, which themselves are engendered with sets of norms and expectations.

I have made a theoretical move here to a) demonstrate how the self has been historically understood, b) describe contemporary digital spaces such as social media platforms that emulate the social environments on which theories of the self are based, and c) describes the ways in which these traditional notions have been altered and expanded by the contemporary digital social scene. The next section is devoted to presenting a more nuanced understanding of how these digital online self-formations and presentations are impacted by cultural shifts unique to

the 21st century. In this way, neoliberal critique and feminist cultural studies will allow us to understand what specific presentations of the self by women online reflect about society at large.

The Digital Female Body & Expectations Today

Given the previous demonstration of the ways in which social media has altered and self-formation and presentations, this subsection will be devoted to presenting an understanding of the ways in which these performances are complicated by gender.
Specifically, critiques of neoliberalism, post-feminism, and dynamics of internet celebrity help round out the framework necessary to understand the significance and context of WIEAD videos.

To begin, twenty-first-century neoliberalism has succeeded to emphasize competitiveness, individualism, and irrational ideals of the perfectible self (Curran and Hill, 2016, 4). In this sense, consumerist and neoliberal ideology has encouraged a narcissistic western culture preoccupied with gratification and self-oriented improvement/reinvention. This can be seen in the burgeoning 72-billion-dollar diet industry, which is constantly churning out new products for weight loss, body maintenance, etc.[11]. From the 1980s onward, neoliberal governance in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom has emphasized competitive individualism, and people have responded by agitating to perfect themselves and their lifestyles (Curran and Hill, 2016, p. 2).

If we factor in our earlier understandings of how the self comes to be, there is an increasing level of expected perfection demanded by others and ourselves – particularly in terms of the body and bodily maintenance. The ways in which our bodies often look and how we

11 https://www.researchandmarkets.com/search.asp?q=The+US+weight+loss+and+diet+control+market

present them are already always encoded with cultural meanings, unfair or not. Combine this with the neoliberal backdrop which posits individual woes and the need for optimization as deeply important, yet personal goals – it becomes apparent that the socially dominant contexts in which we understand ourselves, reinvent and regurgitate performances is deeply tied to a discourse of thinness, standardization, and misconceived notions of "health".

For example, writing about "Postfeminist Media Culture ", Rosalind Gill points out how the performance of femininity as tied to self-discipline and surveillance has interacted with media and the neoliberal paradigm in new ways. The increased intensity of self-surveillance, the extensiveness of such surveillance into new spheres of intimate conduct, and the focus on the necessity for reinvention of the psychological interior life of the woman (155):

> "What is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism. At the heart of both is the notion of the 'choice biography' and the contemporary injunction to render one's life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however, constrained one actually might be" (Gill, 154).

In addition to the ways in which Bordo highlights the gendered distinctions between advertisements that involve food, and either men or women – McRobbie points out the striking and uneven distribution of quasi-therapeutic discourses, "it appears that the ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism is feminine" (156). The feminine body is thereby explicitly regulated to meet cultural expectations of improvement and dieting in relation to external regulation. "Female bodies become docile bodies, whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'. Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress – we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused

on self-modification" (Bordo, 166). Thus, we can see the ways in which culture has shaped women to be insecure bodies, constantly partaking in self-monitorization and physical "improvement" due to this way of seeing themselves and others (Bordo, 57).

Not only are women "centripetally focused" on their appearances and performances, neoliberalism and the ideological baggage it enforces is in part effective through affective means. Gill and Kanai discuss the ways in which through media like reality tv, lifestyle content, and "small media" such as social media, the psychic register ties to neoliberalism is increasingly becoming a central means of governing and producing individual's desires, investments, and attachments (Gill and Kanai, 2018, 319). Women are conditioned to want this perfected lifestyle and to believe that once it is achieved, fulfillment and happiness will follow suit. These pursuits are coded as therapeutic and "self-help" when in actuality they lead to more dissatisfaction of one's current state (either bodily or mentally): "Therapeutic narratives of self-transformation disconnect emotional labor from obligation and re-intensify its necessity by framing it as voluntarily taken on for the self in varied personal domains of life" (Gill and Kanai, 320).

As such, neoliberal values continued to be taken on in these affective dimensions of ideology to engrain themselves deeper into everyday practices, life, and performance. This is how one becomes their best self – which is a necessity to be a fully functioning and successful member of a society that is globalized, neoliberal, and capitalist. Ideals of discipline, self-transformation, and perfection within performances thus constitute "common sense" and inform our self-representations off and online.

When we do not perform in these prescribed and expected ways, we open ourselves up to judgment and critique and thus take on labels concerning laziness, unruliness, sloppiness. In the pursuit of a perfect self under capitalism which requires a certain set of conspicuously consumed

products, lifestyle choices and food consumption have increasingly become a cultural identity marker for the self in presentation. This is particularly evident within digital spaces, wherein image-based platforms evoke certain aesthetics informed by cultural ideals. Media that is resistant to normative presentations of an ideal body are then often posited as "immoral, excessive, or irresponsible" (Fiske 2010). This idea will be unpacked in the next chapter, which explores the experiences of participants that have been deemed "unruly" – but for now, it is important to understand how this "common sense" of online performance in accordance with ideology is taken up and reproduced.

In that vein of inquiry, how *do* we perform in online spaces in proper ways according to the aforementioned ideological standards? This can be most evidently seen in the sphere of microcelebrity, a trend wherein people attempt to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies, such as videos and social media (Marwick, 2013). Users now have the increasing ability to negotiate and control their public persona online and access tools "with which to become famous" (Turner, 2014). As such, individuals cultivate small-scale followings based on authenticity, intimacy, accessibility, believability, and emulatability (Abidin, 2016).

The idea of microcelebrity itself can be seen as a symptom of our move from a sphere of representational media (tv, print, etc.) to presentational media wherein the democratization of media technologies allows individuals to control their self-presentation (Marshall, 2010). A key feature of this type of “lifestyle” performance and the followings which it cultivates is the documentation of trivial and mundane aspects of everyday life (i.e., outfits of the day, what I eat in a day, my night-time routine, etc.). Influencers produce “filler content” in an attempt to carefully portray snippets of the “backstage”, as such content creators cannot just be authentic, but must perform authenticity in accordance with the norms of one’s online community (Abidin,

2017). Therefore, microcelebrity can then be understood as having the quality of everyday ordinariness meet at the intersection of the attention economy, where mundane aspects of life perceived as authentic are actually calculated productions of entertainment (Abidin, 2015).

Thus, the ideological notions of how individuals should self-regulate and perform are harnessed to present the feminine body in accordance with these ideals, in an "intimate" and "authentic" setting of self-produced lifestyle media. In this ecosystem A woman with an ideal body can share workout, eating, and life routines to garner attention and followers as those who consume such media are desperate to achieve such a level of perfection. This attention is translated into likes, clicks, and followers which hold monetary value within the attention economy. Described above are how postfeminist and neoliberal ideals, along with the workings of social media celebrity act in conjunction to produce norms and "common sense" behavior within these environments.

Why Do These Concepts Matter?

Given the understanding of the self, its formation, presentation, and thus the rules they are guided by, it is important to circle back to the idea of media representations impacting this process. WIEIAD videos consistently feature idealized performances of the small, toned, light-skinned, and thin female eating just the right amount of just the right food. A repeated finding from the recent review of literature on social media is that viewing physically idealized social networking site profiles and content results in more negative body image compared to viewing less attractive photographs and content (Smith et. Al., 2013; Mingoa, 2017; Hogue and Mills, 2017; Ferguson et al., 2013). A positive association between the extent of use of SNSs and the extent of internalization of a thin ideal has also been found and reconfirmed across multiple

studies. The positive effect indicates that more use of SNSs is associated with significantly higher internalization of a thin ideal (Mingoa, 2017).

Similarly, in a study on exposure, more frequent use of image-centric social media was associated with more frequent exposures to both thinspiration and fitspiration. In turn, these exposures were associated with more frequent physical appearance comparisons, and through these comparisons, more severe eating disorder symptoms (Griffith et al., 2018). Therefore, there are concrete findings to demonstrate the ways in which certain types of media consumption impact the process of self-understanding, and thus impact later performances given by individuals.

In another vein, a similar performance of "health" or fitness may be curated and presented as doing good and guiding women towards their healthier and happier lives, but can often be just as toxic as explicit Pro Eating Disorder content. Recent research into "fitspiration" content on social media has delved into comparing thematic elements between more "health-forward" and seemingly correct information and traditional "Pro-Ana" thinspiration. Findings have demonstrated that although generally more positive overall, fitspiration content conveys similar unhealthy messages and promotes disordered eating habits similar to those found in thinspiration and ProAna content (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Content analyses of fitspiration suggest that a thin and toned body is idealized, that appearance-based motives for exercise are emphasized, and that extreme and excessive behaviors are sometimes encouraged (Boepple et al., 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). The similarities between discourses of fitspiration and thinspiration across platforms have been acknowledged in contemporary literature, and ultimately support the idea that more coded and less obvious ED-triggering or enabling content is present.

This also proved to be the case in a content analysis of "Healthy Living Blogs", in that they contained a variety of messages and information that indicate they may be potentially problematic for individuals viewing and interacting with the content in the sites. Much of the content analyzed emphasized appearance, thin appearance ideals, and disordered messages about food/nutrition. This study shows that, although health blogs are not as incendiary as pro-eating disorders sites, they contain content that may be detrimental to individuals at risk of or already dealing with eating disorder symptoms. However, the fact that these blogs seem less egregious than pro-eating disorder sites may make them even more problematic, as they may reach a wider audience and serve to normalize disordered behavior (Boepple and Thompson, 2014).

I feel the need to bring up eating disorders here because it is an almost unavoidable topic when it comes to analyzing women, food, media, and our bodies. Within my work, wherein eating disorders are addressed, I am trying to emulate the feminist/cultural paradigm which has the utmost commitment "to taking the perceptions of women seriously and to the necessity of systemic social analysis" (Bordo, 54). Eating disorders are so pervasive across large swaths of society and are only recently being fully discussed, spoken about by clinicians and feminists alike, and given the proper amount of awareness and advocacy. The nature of What I Eat In A Day content itself is rooted in the dark corners of ProAna blogs and Tumblr journals which included media performances of life-sucking and painful illness.

Now, this isn't the case for all forms of WIEIAD videos, and I am not arguing all content related to women and the body is inherently toxic. In fact, the opposite has proven true with, for example, "ED Recovery What I Eat In A Day'' videos in which individuals share their "fear foods'' and dietician prescribed meal plans in order to bring awareness and provide relatable content for sufferers of eating problems. There can be media representations and performances

that deal with the body in a positive and productive manner which does not encourage a thin ideal – or a specific body type at all. Participants I spoke to commented that watching these types of WIEIADs helped them find comfort, normalization of their own eating habits, and online communities focused on enjoying food intuitively rather than in a restrictive manner.

In addition, recent scholarly research has also attempted to find means of promoting positive discourses around the body and body image in terms of acceptance and freedom. A content analysis of body-positive accounts on Instagram has contributed to the clarification of body-positive content, as well as highlighted points of overlap and distinction from academic principles of positive body image and other appearance-focused social media content (Cohen et al., 2019). The findings of a study on the exposure of parodies of thin-ideal images provide preliminary support for the use of humorous, parody images for improving body satisfaction and positive mood in young women. This study adds to a small but growing body of research highlighting potentially positive effects of social media (Slater, Colem and Fardouly, 2019). So, while there are media texts that contribute to these cultural notions and norms which are patently negative, there is still hope for resistance through the same mechanisms in the online sphere.

In summary, my analysis here suggests that an understanding of cultural frameworks and hegemonic ideals surrounding docile bodies demonstrates that this type of research necessitates a careful balance between examining the individual subject and their content as a researcher, but approaching the overall topic with empathy. In following McRobbie's call to action, I want to dispel the idea of a "static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point" (2004). Instead, my work utilizes postmodern and feminist cultural studies perspectives to inquire on the ways in which female bodies and our performances with them can and are being utilized and performed with. In the tradition of feminist analysis, I too see no firm boundary

between disorder and stability, only varying degrees of disorder, some of which prove more "functional" than others (Bordo, 61). For example, as with the healthy living blogs discussed before, displaying and upholding disordered eating patterns in the name of health does not make starvation and restriction any less dangerous. What it does do is serve to aid the individuals who engage in such behavior achieve and maintain idealized bodies and lifestyles.

In terms of the constant focus on the judgment of women, "no transgression is seemingly too small to be picked over and picked apart by paparazzi photographers and writers. The tone of comments is frequently excoriating" (Gill, 2007). In analyzing and picking apart hundreds of WIEIAD videos created by women of so many ages, there is an oddness to the judgment such research necessitates. A judgment that is coming from a critical theoretical distance – but is also coming from my own situated knowledge of the ways in which eating disorders and the toxic logic that accompany them function and play out in everyday life. It is not my goal to villainize or demonize content producers who are attempting to help other people align their bodies and lives with the cultural constructs that so carefully dictate what we should want, what we should strive for: thin, fit, optimized versions of ourselves. While participation in the creation of this content can be observed as contributing to a system of self-inflicted scrutiny of bodily transgressions, I would like to re-emphasize the point that within this research there is a careful balance between researcher and empathy, critique, and inquiry. No body exists neutrally, untouched by the expansive and historically-persistent process of meaning-making. The research conducted in this study includes examining and analyzing a particular set of TikTok creators and their content – a lot of whom I have come across in my own personal everyday media use. I do not aim to critique them individually, but instead highlight the cultural structures which guide

people to perform in certain ways. This is more a reflection of media trends, social norms – not the value, morality, or worthiness of an individual's performance.

Given this chapter's guide to understanding the self, where it comes from, and how it has been shaped in current digital culture to perform in specific ways, the next chapter will mobilize these theories to demonstrate how these forces combine when digital performances do not meet cultural expectations. To survey and critically analyze every form of WIEIAD videos is beyond the scope of this project. As such I aim to spend the next chapter unpacking instances of WIEIADs which I will classify as the "unruly".

CH 4: WIEIAD – The Unruly

This chapter aims to unpack a subset of WIEIAD videos that can be labeled as "Unruly". These videos are characterized by "odd" eating styles, large quantities of food, unorthodox combinations of foods or preparation styles, atypical eating times or techniques, etc. This category is most notably marked by its constitution as "unruly" due to outward opinions. Normalcy is of course a construct, particularly concerning food and eating habits as everybody is different and everybody has different needs. While the items being consumed draw attention, fascination, and judgment these reactions are notably impacted by who exactly is performing the consumption.

This chapter analyzes three main cases of TikToks which can be considered "unruly". The first is a case study of internet celebrity Trisha Paytas; a media icon most known for her brand of rather troll-like and food-focused content. The following cases are informed by two in-depth interviews with participants, focused on their experiences receiving negative feedback on

their WIEIAD videos. Both are young 20-something women who have relatively consistent and hearty followings not based around WIEIAD content.

The two interviewees' experiences serve as dichotomies against each other, mainly in regards to the response to their videos, their eating habits, and also their physical appearance. For example, P1 is a heavier set girl who has posted 2 WIEIAD videos in which she eats three well-rounded meals, but received brutal backlash and cyberbullying. Whereas P2 is a rather thin, tall, and slender individual who was baited into creating a WIEIAD video after posting a TikTok wherein she spoke of her "candy addiction". While still receiving a majority of negative comments, most of the responses to P2 were of concern and fascination rather than malice on the appearance of her body, as with P1.

Through each of these cases, I demonstrate the ways in which different styles of eating are translated, mediated, and responded to depending on the body of the individual who is producing the content. Irrelevant of the actual food being consumed – the judgments and reactions to these TikToks are drawn off of the individual rather than the food itself. Of course, types of food have their own association with judgments and values, but what is being reflected in feedback from the viewers is wholly dependent on what the actual individual looks like. The responses of commenters and viewers push this content into the unruly category, rather than the video itself. Yes – it may seem outrageous to eat 5 jalapenos as a snack[12], but the severity and tone of responses or judgment is time and time again reflected by the makeup of the individual's body and not the consumption itself.

At a fundamental level, the idea that women are mostly judged on their looks underlies a lot of the other categories of WIEIAD videos, particularly those that are aspirational or

[12] Example pulled from an actual TikTok

archetypal. While this idea appears in other categories of WIEIAD videos, it proves most prominent in this spectrum of the "grotesque", "carnivalesque", or extra-ordinary: the unruly. Of all of the TikToks sampled over the course of my research, many fall into similar categories of content, form, sounds used, food eaten, responses, etc. Of course, there are the classic "I am a thin model and I barely eat" versions of WIEIAD. The prominence and popularity of these idealized depictions are unsurprising given previous research on how individuals seek out and enjoy idealistic content because of the perfection they so badly crave.

What is more interesting, at least to me, are either the average or very much non-cookie cutter versions of WIEAD, which are and come to be equally as popular. Why is it that individuals are so fascinated with a 20-year-old who can eat over 3000 calories a day? Or a young woman who can put away 4 sushi rolls in one sitting? Why do these versions garner so much engagement that can be very negative? To answer these questions the cases examined in this chapter will illustrate larger ideals about women, body image, and digital performance at larger. The main TikToks examined in this chapter serve not as extremely unique cases, but examples of much broader characteristics within the WIEIAD genre and "unruly" category as a whole. In addition, as I was limited in access on which content creators would speak with me, the last two cases serve as insights into the actual process of making content, and their videos also happen to illustrate some of the points on forms within the WIEIAD genre which I gathered through content analysis.

To fully unpack the ways in which the appearance of a TikTok creator sways audience feedback within the entire genre of WIEIAD TikToks is beyond the scope of this specific study. I believe though, that the sphere of the unruly best emphasizes this point, and coincidentally I

had the most access to creators whose videos fell within this sphere, thus making it the foci of my arguments.

What is “Unruly”?

To begin, I would like to outline some defining features of the rather "unruly" TikToks featured in this section. What so many WIEIAD videos have in common is the inclusion of eating shots. There are clips of the actual food to be consumed often followed by the individual consuming the food, one bite shot at a time. The amount of actual eating shots differs throughout different TikToks, but an interesting finding is that the more food that was being consumed often was coupled with a higher frequency of eating shots. In this sense of "unruly", these shots of eating are often repeated and prolonged when compared to aspirational or inspirational-flavored WIEIAD videos.

In the case of high quantities of foods being consumed, some viewers may label it as "transgressive and nauseating" but for others, it may also be a form of catharsis as there is a freedom and enjoyment of unbridled consumption (Abidin, 2016). On one side of the spectrum, for individuals who restrict themselves, consuming this type of media can be particularly satiating as these clips serve a voyeuristic function as the viewer may be actively restricting their own food intake. Conversely, individuals who restrict may also avoid this content because it triggers a personal hunger and incites a very natural and human yearn to eat. The videos which I came across which were very restrictive often either had very limited eating shots or none at all. Typically, the food was stylized to a much higher degree and the focus was the food itself and numerical values associated with calories or macros, rather than the act of consumption.

Another finding is that at a very normalized level, it can be comforting or exhilarating for individuals to witness this jouissance of the enjoyment of food by women. We exist in a culture

that encourages and expects discipline, restriction, and carefully curated levels of self-control around food by women. The ways in which different comment sections have reacted to videos with high frequencies of explicit eating shots will be further unpacked in later portions of this chapter. For now – this idea is well illustrated by a comment from one of my informants on the ways in which WIEIAD videos have allowed her and her viewers to accept their natural hunger and need for food: "I think a lot of people make them (myself included) to normalize eating and having an appetite because diet culture makes us feel like we're not supposed to eat or listen to our bodies. A lot of my followers find comfort in my WIEIAD's because they are non-restrictive, and also enjoy the variety of food I make." (P4)

Moving back in regards to unruliness in terms of high quantities of food, the idea that overindulgence or indulgence at all must be limited for women is a prevalent and ever-present concern. In Bordo's analysis of food commercials, she demonstrates that ideologically women are conditioned to believe indulgence must be earned, and only engaged in sparingly (Bordo, 1993). Indulging in food for women is an act that takes place in secret, behind closed doors. Food consumption itself for women must be engaged in with piety, and bashfulness. Indulgence is a reward that must be carefully monitored and limited lest one become an over-indulgent, out-of-control subject. If one does demonstrate unabashed freedom in relation to food, it is thus transposed onto the other facets of her life; it signals an inability to keep a home, job, romantic relationship, or overall lifestyle in order.

In one sense, WIEIAD videos are themselves reactionary in that they bring consumption of food by women to the forefront of our attention. In a Gramscian sense, women are always already made subjects to social norms and quotas for performance and self-presentation. This reproduction of subjugation in the online sphere opens up a space of either celebration,

fascination, comfort, or harsh judgment – depending on who is eating and how. Take a comparison of 1) a size 2, blonde, college student who rises at 5 am each morning to blend a green smoothie versus 2) a larger woman who eats cookies and fast food with no regrets versus 3) a medium-sized girl posting "WIEIAD in eating disorder recovery" content. I could pull multiple TikToks which are examples of each of these categories and the audiences and responses which they garner would be dramatically different.

Even more, the cultural judgment of self-control and surveillance is dually complicated when a high quantity of food is consumed in a WIEIAD video by a large or larger body. This is when the discourse of appropriateness shifts into the space of pure unruliness in the sense of harsh and critical judgment by the online generalized other. Fiske writes that the struggle for control over meanings and pleasures of the body is crucial because it is in and through the body where social constraints are most convincingly represented as the individual – where politics and the norms we learn so cleverly disguise themselves as human nature (Fiske, 57). Of course, eating every day and consuming fruits and vegetables ARE human nature, in that this is scientifically proven to be necessary to our functioning. But who decided along the way that veganism, green juices, “cleanses”, and detoxes were also “necessary”?

The answer would of course be a combination of the diet and health industry which makes billions a year within our neoliberal capitalist society. In the wake of neoliberalism taking control of societal norms and expectations, such an industry depends on the imposed human task to turn inwards and make ourselves eternal projects in pursuit of an unattainable self-formed through *appropriate* consumption. Writing about blood sports in 1982, and not the over-commercialized and highly individualized society in which we exist today, Fiske notes how the pleasures of the individual body become and thus constitute a threat to the body politic:

> "Such a threat becomes particularly terrifying when the pleasures are indulged in to excess, that is when they exceed the norms proposed as proper and natural by those with social control when they escape social discipline, and, thus, when allied with class interests, acquire a radical or subversive potential" (61)

What happens when we do not move our bodies or attempt perfection in these prescribed ways is the status of unruliness. Such evasion by the subordinate of hegemonic prescriptions, in turn, constitutes a reminder of "both how fragile social control is and how it is resented" (Fiske, 56). The idea of not performing perfect health and wellness, or not even attempting to do so is seen as dangerous – it beckons judgment and criticism and thinly veiled fatphobic comments which are made under the guise of concern for one's health.

As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn writes of the unruly woman, she is associated with both beauty and monstrosity and she dwells close to the grotesque (11); “Because human bodies bear the traces of social structures, they can be read in terms of the aesthetic. The ‘grotesque body’ exaggerates its processes, bulges, orifice whereas the static monumental classical body conceals them” (33). The bodily transgression that occurs through an unruly woman is thus also a transgression of hegemonic ideology, which can either evoke ambivalence, or delight, or fear.

In a similar sense, part of the fascination and attention these "unruly" WIEIAD videos garner is the demonstration of a "jouissance": "it occurs at the moment of fracture when culture breaks down into nature and exists in that unstable border between the two" (Fiske, 76). It is the moment of bodily pleasure that escapes and thus threatens social control, and thus the various apparatuses of disciplinary control must be created to control it. In this sense, the existence and persistence of the diet industry amidst the varied and broad types of bodies that exist in the world continually pushes us to strive and aim for the ideal. As previously described, neoliberalism pushes us to take on an affective ideology that prioritizes perfection, constant self-work, and

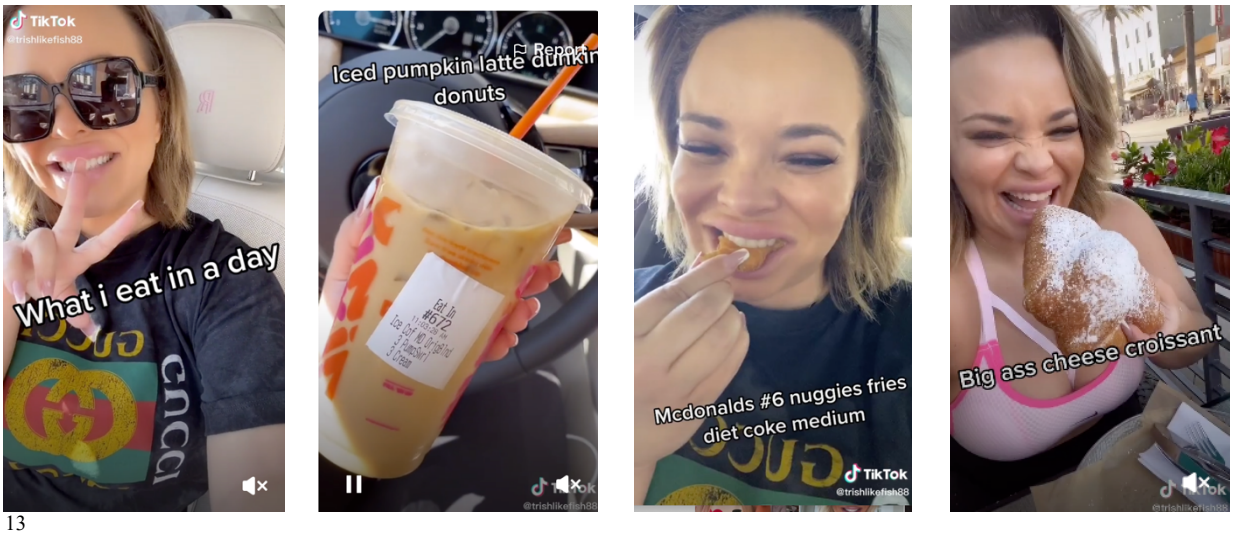
aestheticized performances. When we perform in ways that demonstrate otherwise, the freedom of the body becomes a threat to the body politic.

These notions are complicated and dependent on the bodies which are performing. In each case of what someone eats in a day, whether "healthy" or "unhealthy", unruly or not – how the audience reacts very little has to do with qualified or objective knowledge on health and nutrition. To be in a larger body and free is seen as dangerous; To be in a thinner body and free is seen as fascinating. The following cases examined demonstrate the workings of this observed logic.

@trishlikefish88: The Case of Trisha

32-year-old American media personality, Trisha Paytas sits in her iconic pink Rolls Royce, the camera pointed at her face in a selfie fashion. Her smile is as bodacious and bubbly as her Marilyn Monroe-hued hair. She dons a Gucci t-shirt, a makeup-free face, and large black sunglasses. Posted on August 8th of 2020, this "What I Eat In A Day" TikTok, with 360.6k likes, 4878 comments, and 3508 shares is just one of many amidst Trisha's very active TikTok account. The caption: "I love these TikToks #whatieatinaday [female shrug emoji] #eating #mukbang". The sound used is the "Mario sound" one familiar to the WIEIAD format, which plays various clips of Mario mainline soundtracks. The items featured goes as following as captioned on the screen by Trisha herself:

- Iced pumpkin latte dunkin donuts
- Egg bacon bagel dunkin donuts
- Apple cider donut
- McDonalds #6 nuggies fries diet coke medium
- Big ass cheese croissant
- Chocolate mousse + apple juice
- Filet mignon, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes from BOA



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Of note is the large size of the various items, as well as the rather high quantity of food she records herself consuming. In the comments is a slurry of reactions: either thanking her for not promoting starvation, body shaming her fuller figure, expressing disgust at the quantity of food, vocalizing concerns over Trisha's health, or attempts to dispel shaming "even if" Trisha is "problematic". While this day of eating is rather laden with fast food and sweets, the attention and critique wielded are not uncommon for the internet celebrity. What is noticeable when looking at the comment section of this video as a whole is the contestation between a) "this is good because she's not starving herself" b) "this is a terrible example and she's fat and she's a bad person" and c) "okay this isn't the best but she's a person don't body shame even if she has done problematic things". The problematic actions in reference here are stunts like "coming out" as a chicken nugget, caricaturing as a Japanese pop star "Trishii" in yellow face, outing a previous boyfriend without his consent, etc.[14].

13
https://www.tiktok.com/@trishlikefish88/video/6866415874266516741?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6911748553665873413&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0

14 https://www.intheknow.com/post/trisha-paytas-controversy/

Trisha has existed in the internet media sphere since the early days of YouTube when she first started her channel, blndsundoll4mj, in 2007. Over her different stints on YouTube, on Reality Television, on social media, in her over 30 imbd credits[15] -- what has persisted is her ability to attract a crowd – to gain attention. I begin this chapter with Trisha Paytas because she epitomizes so much of our contemporary internet culture in one sometimes problematic, yet subversive botox-filled package. She aligns well with Rowe's conception of the unruly woman: her speech is a bit excessive in a valley girl-esque tone, she is often laughing and making jokes refusing to take herself or others too seriously, she has and does work in the sex industry. These markers are not to shame or speak of Trisha in a judgmental tone associated with labeling a woman unruly, but highlight that public persona does actually hold these qualities (30). L

A confessed troll, she wields the uncanny ability to say and do and perform in ways that keep eyes on her. And in the sphere of the internet where eyeballs and clicks and engagement rule all, Trisha has managed to stay relevant and turn this knack into monetary gain. She has openly admitted to "dumbing [her]self down" in order to attract clicks, like when she posted a YouTube video in 2015, "Do Dogs Even Have Brains?". Her ability to perform and present different versions of herself within different online platforms signals an awareness of that generalized other; A keen awareness that can predict and manipulate the reactions and thus the attention of a potential audience.

Through her rise and fall as either labeled problematic, empowering, silly – the attention and feedback of which Trisha's videos garner are in part dependent on what the status of the masses' judgment of her is at the moment in time. For example, in a more recent TikTok, the comments were starkly different. Firstly, this recent video follows the format of Trish's previous

[15] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2705535/?ref_=nmnw_hd

WIEIAD videos (as well as so many others); with each shot of food she features, the next features her biting into the food. In this particular TikTok, she is wearing a self-described "glam joker" look, as on this day she was filming an episode of a podcast she participates in which regularly features themed costumes between the two hosts. The caption is: "What I Eat In A Day Intuitive Eating #whatieatinaday #intuitiveeating".

The voiceover in which she describes each item of food goes as follows:

- Peanut Butter and Banana Toasted Bagel, It was really good
- Then my sister gave me some of her quesadilla before I headed out to film the podcast
- Then our ritual every Monday is to go to Starbucks and get a caramel Frappuccino (venti sized) it's kind of my splurge every week
- Then Moses made shawarma and pita bread, it's the best comfort food my tummy was so happy
- I came home and cooked for my YouTube Channel, I followed a cheesecake factory jambalaya recipe And it was an 8 out of 10
- These smore mochis are everything, chef's kiss I don't really like mochi that much but smores I crave
- I was craving a second dessert so I ate it an M&M ice cream sandwich
- And then I finished this off with a bud light seltzer lemonade – peach – it makes me sleep really hard

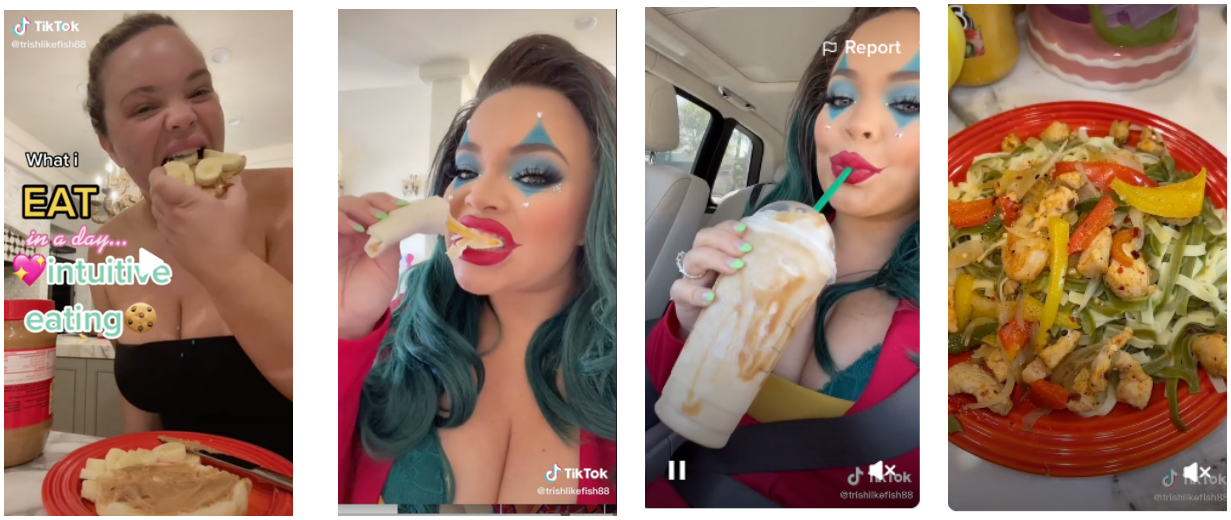
Trisha's voice in this video is also hushed and rather soothing, in a way reminiscent of ASMR. In a way, the viewer is experiencing this slice of Trisha's personal life. These food diaries are the backstage to other frontstage online performances, like the Podcast she co-hosts on YouTube or her top-grossing OnlyFans account. Trisha has made WIEIAD videos before on other platforms, but they mostly revolved around bits or viral trends[16]. One of her most viewed videos were "What I Eat In A Day On My Period", a series where she would mukbang[17] junk food. Compared to the more stylized and overtly

[17] Mukbang: an online audiovisual broadcast in which a host consumes various quantities of food while interacting with the audience

performed YouTube videos, these TikToks display the more mundane and regular aspect of Trisha's life.

In this second video the comments mostly revolved around: "Trish you're so pretty", "MY queen", "Trisha breathes and I'm fascinated she's so beautiful", "'I was craving a second dessert so i ate it' that means a lot to me who is re learning that i can eat what i want so thank you trust (uwu emoji)". Although there was a rather popularly liked (yet now deleted) comment of: "I'm sorry I'm all for intuitive eating, but let's not confuse intuitive eating with healthy eating..this stuff is all so bad for you in the long run". What ensued was a back and forth on the negativity surrounding the initial judgment on what "intuitive eating" really stands for. While the comments were on the whole positive, this video was also posted around a time in which Trisha had been currying rather good favor in her career.

[18]



In late March and early April of 2021, Trisha was heralded for her efforts to call out other YouTubers who have been acting in rather unsightly and criminal ways. Most notably, David Doberick and his "vlog squad" came under fire after allegations of a situation involving sexual

[18] https://www.tiktok.com/@trishlikefish88/video/6943227371554213125?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

assault. On the podcast cohosts with Ethan Klein, *Frenemies*, she essentially exposed and drew attention to the situation[19]. The larger point here is to demonstrate that a) Trisha is being actively judged according to her being "canceled" or not and b) this judgment is also dependent on her actual appearance and body size which is mediated through her position as problematic or not.

Following the latter point; More importantly to the conversation of WIEIAD culture is that Trisha is not and has ever been "skinny" or conventionally small, unlike many of her peers in the internet influencer community. She has made a name through mukbangs, eating shows, and confessionals that feature her crying on her kitchen floor. Much of her YouTube content is centered around food and eating: eating all pink foods for 24 hours, Mukbang on my period parts 1,2, and 3, What I Eat In A Day, etc. And with this content has come not only her not-thin body but an unabashed claiming of her fat body. For example, in 2005 she released one of her many songs: Fat Chicks which feature iconic lines such as "Fat: Fabulous and Tasty" and "I'm no stick figure, and that's okay. I'm beautiful in my own way". In an interview regarding this released video, she said "I could do a video doing my makeup or vlogging my day with friends, and I know half of my comments section will be about my weight"[20].

While Trisha is an internet personality with a history of purposefully creating and posting content that strives for virality, her position as a heavier woman who eats large amounts of food

[19] There's a lot wrapped up here because Trisha used to be romantically involved with Jason Nash, one of the key members of the vlog squad. After they split there were a bunch of events in which Trisha acted quite terribly i.e., driving into Jason's garage while intoxicated. All of David/Jason's fans attacked her and she also posted some problematic content, like videos including brown face -- so she was drawing a lot of negative attention, being canceled, etc. BUT through it all, she was vocal about how David and his vlog squad were enabling dangerous behavior, and now a few years later as this sexual assault scandal has come to light a lot of people are now giving her praise.

[20] https://www.businessinsider.com/fat-chicks-by-trisha-paytas-body-empowerment-anthem-2015-5?r=US&IR=T

emulates that of the unruly, the frowned upon, the fascinating. There is a duality here of facing stigmatization because of her appearance and lifestyle, but also embracing such attention which albeit may be negative, is attention nonetheless. This sense of unruliness is then translated, mediated, or embraced in various ways by content consumers and is thus tempered by the digital-generalized-other's critique or praise. What is different in the case of Trisha's WIEIAD videos is that while she does capitalize on the attention given to her *seemingly* exaggerated lifestyle, these videos are meant to be, and as far as we can tell, wholly accurate. In fact, on the first episode of the Frenemies podcast, in a tangent, she references what she ate on this first WIEIAD, which lined up almost exactly with what she included in her TikTok[21].

Fiske asserts that "if beauty has been harnessed as a metaphor for the socially dominant, then ugliness metaphorically expresses the experience and the resistance of the subordinate" (Fiske, 81). Of course, Fiske is speaking quite literally and frankly here; Trisha is not ugly, but she is also not the conventional idealized thin woman as presented through the hegemonic expectations of popular media representations. The "grotesque" (here being a foil to the thin-ideal) body is both what must be "repressed" yet is impossible to repress (Fiske, 81). Trisha receives and has received hate comments on her body in response to any media she posts, but at the same time, that negativity still propels her career forward.

Trisha's demonstrated and documented diet of fast food and sweets evokes a response of fascination, envy, judgment. Crystal Abidin has recently theorized on how we can make sense of these performances of "grotesque" and one proposed understanding is that of the "visceral

[21] 30:00 in Frenemies #1: "One day we went to dunkin and got breakfast sandwiches and donuts, then for lunch we went to McDonalds and he had chicken McNuggets and a chicken sandwich, what did we have for dinner that day? *looks around* oh! We had boa steakhouse with Mac and Cheese and mashed potatoes. And we have like dessert for every meal" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mtblz3KPYT0&ab_channel=H3Podcast

camp". It is the aesthetic of "playful, anti-serious visual displays and theatrics which are exaggerated and outlandish, carefully curated to convey atypical taste and overwhelming to the point of ridicule and primitive gawking" (Abidin, 2016). Further – the idea of carnivalesque commerce posits that in the state of frenzied opportunity in the attention economy, there is a suspension of the atypical hierarchy of hegemonic celebrity, where attention is redistributed to allow a space of negotiation for seemingly marginal actors to partake in the market (Abidin, 2016). This understanding works well for Trisha's distinct brand of internet celebrity, as she's been a content creator and in the media sphere for over a decade but doesn't quite fit the mold of traditional Hollywood celebrity.

WIEIAD content is not what has made Trisha a celebrity, but it does serve as a format in which she has managed to use performance in an ordinary fashion to keep and sustain engagement within the internet sphere. Through her previous demonstrated awareness of the mechanics of virality, we can assume that she understands the power her body has to gain attention, and thus the ways in which she feeds her body is sure to draw in attention as well.

In contrast to Trisha's 5.5 million followers, a smaller account, X1 boasts around 54k followers and 1.7M likes. X1's account has garnered somewhat similar attention in a slightly different vein of unruliness. This New Zealand-based creator is in her 20s, a student, an athlete, and also eats with rather high veracity, according to her TikTok. I came across her through her "What I Eat In A Day hungover Edition" TikTok posted in October of 2020. This was the first WIEIAD she posted since her first video in April and garnered roughly 740k views, 70k likes, and over 1000 comments. The caption with the posted TikTok is "Eating is just so much fun #fyp #foryou #foryoupage #eating #whatiatetoday". The food featured as described through her captions goes as follows:

- 9:40 – Crumpet with butter
- 9:41 – Another crumpet with jam
- 10:05 – Toastie with cheese [a grilled cheese]
- 10:08 – Another cheese toastie with egg
- 10:10 – A fried egg
- 10:10 – Another cheese toastie
- 10:15 – A piece of cake
- 13:30 – Large fries
- 13:34 – Serious angus burger
- 13:40 – 10 x Mcbites
- 13:50 – Half a bag of doritos and dip
- 18:30 – Footlong garlic bread chicken sub
- 18:50 – Vanilla coke (No sugar) bc health crying laughing emoji
- 18:45 – Other half of my sub
- 19:01 – Chocolate molten cake with soft serve
- 19:30 – Half a block of fruit and nut chocolate
- 19:40 – 2 x garlic cheese pizzas
- 20:30 – Time for some zzzz's

What is notable is first, the very high quantity of food she is eating, but more importantly the types of comments her video garnered. Nearly all of them took a tone of fascination and amazement that she was a) able to eat so much and b) able to eat so much while hungover. "Am impressed !! I'm a puker tho", "You can put it away little lady [smiley face with hearts emoji] #hero", "if you can eat the next day you didn't drink enough [crying laughing emoji]", "There's two types of hangovers, the nausea-can't leave bed one, and the bottomless pit of hunger one" (4507 likes). She later posted a "What I Eat On A Day of Being Healthy" which received significantly less views, comments, and likes (121.8k, 7, 3261). One comment remarking "this is less interesting to watch than your hungover one".

The presentation here of jouissance is embraced as fascinating and humorous because although X1 has an athletic and tall build, she is still a relatively slender and conventionally attractive individual. The tone of freedom in relation to food here is taken as funny and cool, not concerning and disgusting. While X1 does not have as large or a consistent following as Trisha,

the two cases here serve as foils in how the act of eating and eating a lot, is mediated and embraced or judged dependent on the actual physical makeup of the individual.

The Case of P1: Bullied and "Unbelievable"

In contrast to the rather positive experiences listed above, the following two cases demonstrate the ways in which these realms of food, females, and presentation of eating draw quite negative and toxic attention. These next two cases also serve as foils for various reasons: the types of food consumed, the difference in bodies, the purpose behind making the WIEAD videos, and the reactions garnered from their posts. They both are similar in that neither creator makes WIEIADs as a part of their normal published content.

Beginning with P1, she is a 20 something young woman living in the southern US, she has been on TikTok since its introduction and used its predecessor Musically. P1's account has roughly 9k followers and has garnered around 840k likes in total. Of her account, she said that she has some videos that do better than others, which include the two WIEIAD videos she's posted, and those related to specific niches like tv shows, which get a lot of traffic from fan groups. These TV shows are mostly related to different animes and illustrated dramas. As such the two WIEIAD videos on her account are very unlike her usual content. She said that she has seen a lot of WIEIAD videos and usually they "make [her] feel good, because they are really good at giving [her] meal ideas as well as making [her] feel more comfortable about what [she] eats".

In relation to why she decided to make one she said: "it was probably because I enjoyed watching mukbangs when I was younger. I think there's just something interesting about watching what other people eat, I don't know what the appeal is exactly though". In her own production of such content, what started as an attempt to put a fun spin on the WIEIAD trend

became a playground for rather hateful discourse on the appropriateness of the amount of food she was eating. She made her first WIEAD video with the bent of "a busy student" trying to fit a regular eating schedule amid her jam-packed schedule; "However the main point of my video was lost and people in my common section only focused on what I was eating, I got a lot of hate primarily from men."

Under really any circumstance, it would not be necessary or appropriate to mention that P1 is not a conventionally skinny individual according to the popular media idealized thin standard but to properly contextualize the responses she received I feel I should make note of it. This next portion of how these comments played out is best described in her own words:

> "I received almost 3000 comments, which is more than I usually receive. In the video I was eating high calorie food items at low quantities, so many in my comments said that I was not eating enough, and others said I was lying about how much I actually ate. Some of the most liked comments on my video we're : 'but if it was a skinny girl y'all wouldn't be saying all this', 'bruh that's no even a lot of food', 'Girl eat', and 'LMAOOOOOO CAPPP'. There were also a lot of comments in the general ballpark of 'where's part 6?', these comments were all insinuating that I actually ate much more that day, so much of the fact that it should've been a six part series rather than just one video. The comments that bothered me personally the most were these ones: 'I thought she had the chubby dog filter on lol', 'That's on heart failure', 'Lol don't lie come on', 'I thought you had the face stretch filter on 😂😂😂', 'U would look hot asf if u lost like 30 pounds', 'you'd be so pretty if you weren't so fat omg', 'grease monger', and 'I had half a mcgriddle and a gatorade. And im a lineman'."

These comments were all copied directly from the video, which has now been deleted. The video was left up for a week or two, as the creator believed the comments would slow down or stop eventually – but they did not. When I asked why she didn't just turn off the comments she responded:

> "I sort of felt like it was dishonest to turn off the comments, because it was like pretending that they weren't there. And I knew that if I disabled the comments and left the video up, I would keep thinking about the comments even though I couldn't see them. But if I deleted the video it was sort of out of sight out of mind."

What is distinct about her experience is the “invasive judgmental”-ness of the comments in which she received. Not only had she experienced purely derogatory attacks on her physical attractiveness, but also intense questioning on the validity of her video:

> “I have no reason to lie about what I eat. If I didn’t want people to know what I eat, I just wouldn’t have posted the video in the first place. I knew that I was opening myself up to people commenting on the foods that I eat by posting the video, but the invasive judgmental comments were kind of unnecessary. And a lot of the comments referred to me as ‘she’, so it felt like they weren’t even trying to talk to me, they were just trying to say bad things about me to other people in the comments. It sort of felt the same as being gossiped about”

When I asked her how the response to this first WIEIAD differed from the type of responses to her more regular content she responded:

> “I have never gotten a negative comment about my appearance on any other video that I have posted. At least not any that are significant enough for me to remember. I have only gotten positive comments about my appearance on my other videos.”

If there were disagreements on her other posts, it was mostly about third-party things, like the plot point in a show or a character, not the actual character of her as a person.

This conversation about the creator within the comment section of her video is a direct example of that generalized other – judging, evaluating, and emboldened by the onslaught of negativity and anonymity. If one individual had commented something cruel amidst some of the other complementary comments, it would stick out in an unsightly way. But among a dog pile of hate comments, one person's insult joins the loud critique of the masses and can hide amongst the swarm. The propensity for comment sections to become hotbeds for intense negativity is well documented (Erbewein, 2019; Murthy and Shawma, 2019; Quandt, 2019) – but on TikTok the prevalence of such dogpiling serves to reinforce a system wherein engagement pushes content to the front of users' for you pages. This only serves to beget more engagement. And when such forces are acting within a system where content is carefully tailored for user enjoyment, it is not

surprising that once a few male commentors began leaving hateful messages, P1's video was shown to more men interested in leaving similar takes[22].

In this way, the hate P1 received serves to illustrate my earlier idea of the digital generalized other. P1 used this same "Mario sound" referenced earlier, showed her nicely plated and rather healthy food was aware of the norms of WIEIAD videos. Yet – because her body is not ideally thin, the audience felt it was okay to judge the quantity and quality of her food as well as the validity of this video as a testament to what she actually ate on that day. The notion of the digital generalized other functions to dually inform users on how they should self present on websites, but also serves to inform consumers of content (oftentimes one and the same) what to expect of certain bodies and presentations.

While the toxicity of commenting culture has been explored elsewhere, P1's experience led me to wonder why it is in the realm of lifestyle and eating diaries where individuals feel so candid and brazen in their opinions – and why users are drawn to share their opinions in the first place. Why do we feel so comfortable attacking people in this way, in these spaces? Is it because this is an obviously less stylized and/or overt display of a performance? Is there something about the mundaneness of it – Is it the raw authenticity of it that permits such judgment and hatred? When I asked P1 what she thought, she noted:

> "Food is something that's universal to all people, so when you post a video that's food-related everybody has an opinion on it. However, when you post videos that are related to specific smaller groups of people, they are usually only focused on the topic that you are talking about, not your appearance."

[22] P1 disclosed to me that the individuals who left these comments were male, as she went through them at the time of the event. I personally have not seen this specific TikTok, but she was able to go back and send me direct quotes from the comment section.

P1 faced these attacks on her integrity, yet on the other hand, women who similarly post picturesque Instagram-ready meals in their WIEIAD videos are met with full validation, open arms, and excitement as forms of inspiration. Ironically, these are the performances that are so carefully crafted and curated.

Despite her rather harrowing initial experience, P1 did decide to make another WIEIAD TikTok (posted Oct. 2020), except with the preface of "What I Eat In A Day … I made one of these not too long ago and it got a lot of hate so I deleted it, but I am making another one because I don't want negativity to control me like that". The food presented with captioning goes as follows:

- 2 pieces avocado toast w bagel seasoning + Cold brew w pumpkin spice creamer
- Water #1
- 3 Turkey wraps w avocado, cheese, lettuce, and mustard
- Water #2
- Bai pineapple coconut water
- 2 mini garlic knots + bakes ziti
- Cherry crumble
- Water #3 and #4

This go around, her WIEIAD only received 300 comments, a majority of which were overly positive. The only exception being that “people found a new thing to hit on, the fact that [she] used a plastic water bottle”. What is interesting is that while the two videos received dramatically different comments, they had roughly the same calorie count and amount of food. In fact, this is how P1 says she truly eats. P1 commented:

> “A lot of comments were telling me to stop wasting plastic, but most of the videos were saying that it was good that I was promoting eating a healthy amount of food, even though amount wise, I ate the same quantity of food and both of my videos”.

Almost all participants I talked to noted how routinized their eating habits were to their lifestyles and habits. When recording WIEAIDs, perhaps they'd "make it look nicer", but it did not change the actual eating style or amount. P1 also regularly makes WIEIAD videos and saves

them to her draft, for her own cataloged journal entry. In this way, she's able to look over them and confirm that she's eating around the same amount of food regularly.

The internet, and particularly the TikTok fyp algorithm works off of interaction. And the spontaneity of the fyp and the algorithm push conflict to our attention.

> "I had no idea that the videos were going to do well, I was really surprised about it, in that sense I'm grateful for the hate comments. I don't think the algorithm necessarily had anything to do with the video doing well, they do boost a lot of those types of videos because a lot of people watch them though. I think the hate comments are what made the video do well, because when someone comments something hateful other people flock to defend the video creator and then the fight in the comments entices even more people to interact with the video." (p1)

Even on a much smaller scale than Trisha's videos, the same logic of any engagement is good engagement arises from this mostly negative experience. What is interesting is that both P1 and P2, which I will detail in just a moment, were ultimately not only okay but grateful for the intrusive comments. As expressed above, P1 was surprised by the engagement and the negativity she received on her video, but because they gave her video so much traction "in that sense [she is] grateful for the hate comments". Below I detail the case of P2, who also received negative comments of a different brand, in terms of her being too thin. Ultimately these cases demonstrate that at the end of the day, the negativity encountered brought more traction to their pages and allowed them to pick up a few more followers, likes, and engagement with the content they cared more about.

<u>The Case of P2: Deemed Disordered</u>

The case of P2 proves similar in that WIEIAD videos are very unlike her normal content. Originally from the Midwest and in her early 20s, P2 is a thinner girl currently attending flight school on the southeastern coast. She has over 200k followers and close to 8 million likes on her account. She doesn't necessarily have a distinct theme or realm of content that can be attributed

to her page, but her videos are typically humorous and have a tongue-in-cheek tone. P2 had experienced and been acquainted with virality on the platform well before her WIEIAD video, which only served as another case in which she garnered a lot of attention.

Her first brush with virality on TikTok occurred when she posted a video of her moving her bed into her closet. Soon after a video of her flying a plane to a frozen lake in Alaska where she went ice skating gathered hundreds of thousands of views. After that, she posted a video about her pet cat which she found in a ditch, which also received a lot of attention. Over a few months P2 was snowballing; the average levels of engagement across her videos began to rise as she increasingly learned how to produce content that would optimize the power of the TikTok algorithm.

I began following P2 on my personal account after her ice-skating video and was able to witness and follow along as she gained followers, likes, and access to the creator fund. One afternoon she posted an offhand TikTok of her rather unusual "candy addiction" which she indulged in by ordering candy in bulk off of Amazon. She received a lot of comments that were curious and fascinated to see if she was telling the truth, or if this was a bit.

One of the top comments, which received close to 9k likes, requested “GURL pls do a what I eat in a day!!”. She video responded to this comment with a short clip of her pouring candy from an Oooze Tube (liquid sour candy) straight into her mouth, with the caption “that’s it that’s all I eat in a day [Heart smiley emoji, kissy face emoji]”. The other comments on this video were discussing the health of her teeth, asking if she had diabetes – marveling over how she was able to stay thin, yet eat so much candy. One said: “Tell me you have disordered eating without telling me you have disordered eating”. Lainie replied with a video that was along the

lines of “I eat whatever I want without really thinking about it too much. This is just what that is lol.”

In addition to these other tongue in cheek response video, P2 posted another response video based on a comment that said: "Now imagine if she was fat...what would y'all be saying". In it she says:

> “So I’ve actually been getting a lot of comments like this and you guys are absolutely correct. I was able to post that video about how much candy I eat and get mostly positive results BECAUSE I’m skinny. Thin privilege is real and more people need to recognize that. If I was overweight everyone would be in the comments saying ‘oh my god this is so unhealthy you need to get healthy, why are you guys encouraging her?’ And while i did get some of those comments most of them were positive and the top comments are all people being positive as well. People like to act like they’re caring about your health but at the end of the day it has more to do with what you look like than how healthy you actually are.”

A few days later she posted: “the much requested ‘what I eat in a day’,” with the food and captions as follows:

- 1:30 am nutella toast
- Post nutella toast glass of milk
- 12:00 taki meat sticks?
    - These are disgusting
- 1:30 pm ooze tube spoon
- 2:30 entire can of altoids
    - My mouth burns so much what have i done
- 5:00 pm pop rocks
- 6:30pm: ramen (the noodles were too long) *cuts noodles with scissors*
- 8:00 pm: candy sticks lol im a walrus

Some of the top comments include: “if ur reading this: do not eat like this. It is so unhealthy. Do not think this is good” (8895), “she not living she surviving” (7800), “is ..,,,, anything ? okay at home?” (3306), “how are you alive maam” (758). As she has never and would not normally post this type of lifestyle and food-based content I asked her a few questions about the process and her reaction to responses to her video:

> "[It] was difficult because some of my eating habits are bad and they're really inconsistent, and so I was gonna just make one over a three-day period so that you could maybe draw an average from that. But that didn't work out. … I did get a lot of backlash on my video, all my comments are just people like, 'you need help', 'this is unhealthy' … I don't have an eating disorder or anything like that, I just didn't happen to eat very much that day … I was very authentic with it, and I just decided to do a 24-hour period, and that's why the first one is at one am, 'cause I was awake at one am and I wanted some toast – And then from there, I just kinda ate whatever wanted to... that's how I eat normally, I eat what I want when i want and it doesn't always happen to be healthy."

What I gathered from our conversation is that while P2 enjoys being a tad combative, or troll-like when it comes to her videos, she had a distinct awareness of the staged and rather hollow culture around "typical" or archetypal WIEIAD content. This familiarity with and resistance to the mainstream led to her strong attempt to actually be authentic and truthful in her version of a WIEAD video.

> "I feel like a lot of people who make those videos prep for it, and they're gonna make sure that they cook for the day, and they're gonna make sure that they're being healthy and that they're prepared and all this stuff, and I just...I'm not like that. I can't do that. You can see that there's a lot of people who you're like, 'Oh no, you don't eat this every day, you don't wake up and spend an hour making this Instagram ready-Breakfast every morning like that. You don't *do* that'."

This sentiment was echoed by another informant I spoke to, but with more of an emphasis on the ways in which these representations of perfection and restriction can be very triggering for individuals with a history of eating disorders:

> "The videos I find concerning are the WIEIAD's with only one (not that large) main meal as regardless of your size, that's not enough to sustain you throughout the day. It's shown me that disordered eating really is very common. It worries me because as someone who has suffered from eating disorders in the past, my ED brain very quickly made me feel guilty about eating more than them. So I worry that a lot of impressionable young people are feeling the same way." (P4)

Despite a recognition that her eating habits aren't necessarily healthy and anticipating comments on it, P2 proceeded to make her WIEIAD video anyway and tried her best to be accurate to her

actual lifestyle. When I asked her what it felt like to receive so many comments either accusing her of having an eating disorder or heading towards diabetes she said:

> "I don't mind it at all. I made like $130 off of that video, probably just from the Creator fund, I think – I enjoy it. I like when my videos get more views. If something that I post blows up and I don't like it, then I shouldn't have posted it in the first place."

I spoke to her in-depth about this point, and I do genuinely believe that she was unphased by this experience. In our discussion, she proved confident in herself, aware that she doesn't have the best eating style, but also uninterested in defending herself or combating these negative comments.

What is distinct about P2 in comparison with the other content creatures I spoke to was her awareness and purposeful content planning around the FYP. She spoke quite in-depth and passionately about the ways in which TikTok as a platform proved different from other social media sites today. For example, in monetization, authenticness, customization for consuming content, etc. P2 said, "it's the place to be". In addition, while not garnering as large of a following as Trisha Paytas or other TikTok stars, P2 shows a clear understanding, manipulation, and almost troll-like approach to the FYP in that she purposefully makes incendiary or enticing content to gather attention. In a very self-aware way, she leverages her positionality as a thinner white woman – with a sense of humor – to gather attention and perform in unexpected ways.

> "What's great about TikTok is that … the videos I put a lot of thought into and the videos I try to really make good, aren't the ones that get views. It's weird, you know, I got over a million views on the video of me explaining how much candy I eat -- I posted with literally no editing at all, and it was just a response video. And it got really big and I didn't expect that."

Conclusion:

Throughout the cases described in this chapter, the overlying theme is that the appearance of the creators had more to do with the responses they garnered rather than the actual content

itself. In each example, female creators are presenting and performing in unexpected ways which deviate from the aestheticized norms we are conditioned to expect.

In Trisha's case, she was able to receive positive feedback, despite actively breaking the mold of the thin ideal. The praise Trisha finds, though, is not because of explicitly disregarding beauty norms/standards. More so, it arises from her ability to garner attention through troll-like behavior and her ability to curry favor by advocating for mental health awareness as well as issues surrounding sexual assault. Her fans and critics ebb and flow due to her history of problematic behavior – despite this, her body and her star power continue to draw attention. Overall, while Trisha does perform in these self-aware and troll-like ways, her consumption can in general be seen as "unruly."

Conversely, P2's rather healthy display of consumption was disregarded entirely because of her body. P2 is a regular young woman who just wanted to participate in a trend, and instead experienced the toxicity of comment sections in two major ways: through explicitly cruel language and fake positivity. This experience came about not because of the substance of her WIEAD, but because of the way that she looks. In fact, her WIEIAD was most closely aligned with that of the archetypal version of these videos: three meals with fruit, vegetables, protein, healthy fats, and not too many carbs. She aestheticized her meals similar to that of the ideal WIEIAD, but because her body wasn't the ideal, she was discredited and judged.

P1’s experience demonstrates the toll this kind of attention can have on a user. While P1 still regularly makes WIEIADs, she never posts them because: “If I had only gotten hate comments, or only gotten positive comments, I feel like I would’ve kept posting these types of videos. But it’s really exhausting when the comment section under a video is fighting over what opinion to have.” In her second WIEIAD, the comments were mostly positive, because she

prefaced the video with a warning of how badly she had been scorned before: “People seem to be less inclined to leave hate comments if you say that they previously hurt you.” P1’s case thus exemplifies how this type of content and the attention it is given can so easily slip into a realm that has nothing to do with WIEIAD as a genre. This slippage into cyberbullying is in part aided by the non-discriminatory ordering of the fyp.

On the other side of this spectrum is P3, who was baited into making WIEIAD content, and did so with the explicit acknowledgment she would probably get engagement, albeit for negative reasons. Ultimately, she made money off of her video and boosted her account within the TikTok ecosphere. P2 understood before her WIEAD what the norms and expectations were for this type of content and the work that is typically required to make them. She tried to capture an average day of her eating, as she was aware that her "normal" eating habits are sporadic and perhaps not the healthiest. She also anticipated that she would probably gain feedback with a negative tone as she does eat a lot of candy. The reaction she garnered of concern and accusations of disorder were expected in the sense that P2 anticipated critique, but not of this brand. On the whole, the reactions garnered did not impact P2 on an emotional level, and she took the opportunity to comment on the ways in which her status as a thin woman warped outside perspectives. It is in this way that P2 demonstrates some of the self-aware troll-like behaviors observed from microcelebrities like Trisha. By displaying an awareness of what grabs attention and how to manipulate the algorithm to work in one's favor, she demonstrates part of the intertwined process of social interaction formed by users both human and nonhuman.

These cases serve to demonstrate how the mundane aspects of these videos draw people in, as with the mechanisms of microcelebrity. WIEIADs are an easy and seemingly trivial space to compare ourselves to other users, and other users to hegemonic ideals around physical

appearance, lifestyle, and motivations. As such, the performed digital self must agitate themselves to curate these backstage experiences into acceptable content. When they do not, the anonymity and insulation of the online sphere create a sense of freedom for which individuals can express their opinions, regardless if they are warranted or appropriate.

While I have showcased some cases of internet bullies and trolls, some people comment out of genuine concern, or anger, or with a virtuous motivation in earnest. Particularly in the case of responding to a WIEAD that displays disordered behavior, it is a double bind of encouraging an individual to seek help, but invading a very sensitive region of a person's lifestyle. These comments of concern seem to crop up frequently on TikTok particularly because of the backstage nature of the app. The ease of content creation matched with the encouragement to turn inwards throughout its intrapersonal nature, combined to form an online space that encourages and rewards vulnerability and authenticity.

In summary, there is a recognized and shared set of norms, expectations, and standards for how to perform the ideal digital self, particularly in relation to genres like WIEAD videos. Yet, if we do not fit the aestheticized expectations given to us, we cannot be successful in the ways that we want. Fitting the appropriate aesthetic in the case of WIEIAD oftentimes has to do with the physical appearance and stylization of the food itself. Simultaneously WIEIAD continues to persist as an incredibly popular format on TikTok, each version garnering different types of attention in either positive or negative ways. In some cases, any attention can be considered success, but for others, the attention serves to curb the range of produced self-representations, as users are groomed to understand that they cannot fit into certain, expected molds.

The uptake or disavowal of pre-existing societal expectations and the post-feminist, neoliberal subject through digital performances are magnified in the realm of WIEAD. In addition, these logics are particularly exaggerated on a platform like TikTok, which explicitly tries to garner engagement from specific groups of people, and takes the democratization of self-produced content to an extreme. TikTok purposefully gives individuals with low or average followings and likes the opportunity to appear on the FYP in an attempt to help that content find a user who will engage with it. TikTok is a programmable platform that is not neutral, but a mediating force that thrives off of user participation — any participation.

In the cases above, participation is harnessed in either harmful ways to harass individuals online, offer hollow niceness, or warn with words of concern. In some cases, the comments are so veracious they speak about the creator as if they did not produce this video and are not bearing witness to the very comments being made about them, only to be referred to in the third person. This form of engagement is also unique to TikTok in the sense that with this particular detachment and dehumanization of a creator, videos often go viral *because* of the comment sections. As discussed, the nature of the fyp does not discriminate on the basis of content and instead is based on engagement. As such, wildfires take off in comment sections as videos are funneled to users who will engage in either positive and negative ways which feed into TikTok's overall goal of collecting user data.

Aside from the cases above, I have also spoken with participants who testify to the idea that this participation can also be used to help form communities that promote positivity in terms of bodily acceptance and actively try to unravel conventional beauty norms. The next chapter will thus serve as a way to culminate all of the ideas presented through this paper and demonstrate some of the more positive cases of WIEIADs on TikTok.

CH 5: CONCLUSION:

> "One of the most important times in a girl's life is when she's 14, 15, 16 years old, and she's developing and she's her most vulnerable, and so growing up in a toxic environment at my most vulnerable, I'd say that...That really hurt me … deep down, I was bruised and it gave me this misconception of what I was supposed to look like." (P3)

> "Everyone's different. Some people use [WIEIAD] to harm themselves, some use them for health motivation. It all depends on each individual consuming the media and each individual creating it." (P5)

When I started this project, it was about this weird brand of videos I kept encountering over the course of my life online. These videos fascinated me, scared me, or would just make me feel bad about myself —and I knew other people felt the same way too. I had also just spent the summer at my parents' house— in the middle of a global pandemic—bored out of my mind. TikTok was a place I could turn to for jokes, and laughs, and information.

When I started seeing WIEIAD on TikTok I was not surprised, but it felt a lot different than the highly produced videos I grew up watching on YouTube. The randomness and vulnerability on the app was refreshing — very unlike the stuffy Instagram feed or squabbling echo chamber that is Twitter. Better yet, this algorithm would somehow show me videos just *for me* — things I didn't even know about myself.

WIEIAD videos and TikTok both come with their own set of nuanced experiences, problems, communities, and potentials – but WIEIAD on TikTok represents a certain moment in time and distinct space of the internet that can be isolated to speak to the expectations and experiences of women in this new online sphere. These videos can be upsetting, funny, or weird, but also just normal.

During the course of my research, I've gathered hundreds—and maybe even a thousand—of WIEIAD videos. Of this massive pile of different videos, there are probably hundreds of

individuals under the age of 18 who are not only consuming but being compelled to produce these videos. One individual who comes to mind is an underclassman in high school who I've been keeping up with periodically since late summer 2020. Her entire page is dedicated to WIEAD videos and she has been making them since August of 2020. In total, she has 479.4k likes and 5070 followers. Every couple of weeks, she gets a bump of engagement, going up from her usual average in the mid-thousands to 20 thousand.

Frankly— she's really small, she barely eats, and it is upsetting to watch. It's startling how she captions her videos "being made to gain"[23], yet still eats less than 1000 calories most days. She shows shots of measly portions of food, and then the leftovers after, of what she didn't finish (because there are always leftovers). On the more popular videos, she has hundreds of people telling her "this isn't enough," "eat more," or using intimate affective phrases like "babe I promise real peanut butter is better than pb2[24]!" Other comments are trying their best to support her: "proud of you, I know it's hard <3," "u did so good today keep going <3," and "Im really proud you got this xx."

Users who follow her or come across her page go back and forth in arguments either defending her lifestyle, condemning her for not taking recovery seriously and producing content that so blatantly demonstrates disorder, or defending her because she's "trying her best." What is interesting is that despite all of these concerned and relatively negative engagement, this user has never once turned off her comments and rarely engages with her commentators. I come across her videos and wonder what she could possibly be going through, if her parents know she makes this content, or what she thinks about all these concerned strangers on the internet.

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[23] The use of "being made to gain" signals that she is being put through anorexia recovery and or treatment against her own will.

[24] A powdered peanut butter replacement that has less fat and calories.

I am a 22-year-old woman who has sought treatment for an eating disorder, read feminist literature up to my eyeballs, and have tried my hardest to be conscious and resistant to the ways in which society tells how we should look, act, and treat ourselves. Still, witnessing this type of content really upsets me. Now – imagine other girls her age and younger; In fact, 32.5% of TikTok's approximately one billion users are between the ages of 10 and 19[25].

In the spirit of P3's quote above, we should take these videos and topics seriously because younger and younger users are gaining access to social media and are growing up in these spaces. Therefore, it is imperative that we a) examine these spaces to understand where they come from and how they work, and then b) be more responsible about what we post and reward with attention. I have attempted to forward this first goal of taking seemingly trivial spaces seriously, by implementing earlier literature from sociology and cultural studies to demonstrate how these online spaces replicate and expand the available opportunities for social interaction, and thus self-formation. In addition, I have helped explain what TikTok is and how it proves different from its predecessors, through its mechanisms that support vulnerability and easily achieved virality.

Women's health magazines, models in high and popular fashion, and representations on sitcoms have all emulated versions of the ideal feminine body in restrictive and harmful ways. Research on spaces like Tumblr, health blogs, and fitness Instagram accounts show us time and time again there is a lot of nuance to how the body and food are presented and represented on social media (and media at large). These presentations impact our relationships with our own bodies, food, and fitness in either helpful or harmful ways. TikTok is increasingly becoming a

[25] https://wallaroomedia.com/blog/social-media/tiktok-statistics/

place like early Tumblr (Pro Ana, food journaling, body checking, etc.)— known cases where an online community turned into an ugly echo chamber user are still scarred by.

In our social media landscape, we have the power to control and create our own self-presentations and representations on social media that have been democratized to platforms like TikTok. Yet in these spaces, we reproduce and continue to emulate these restrictive epistemologies for understanding our bodies and how to care for them.

This reproduction is in part because of culture but also gets amplified by how TikTok actually works. It functions off of pure attention and engagement; the FYP has no moral high ground or prerogative to curb these kinds of behaviors. What TikTok's algorithm is designed to do is take what is getting engagement and show it to more people; to keep track of the groupings and preferences of the individual and show them what other people like them "like" too. This is how the pockets of proAna content, body checking trend do-ers, and weight loss tip gurus all end up in these ugly and harmful communities. Users can report content on TikTok that "promotes eating disorders", but this type of thinking is nearly impossible to curb. These epistemologies are also incredibly difficult to rid because, at a very basic level, women are encouraged to hold disordered patterns, to strive for thinness, to constantly be self-improving. When women perform in ways that do not uphold these values, they are met with judgment, fascination, or malice. As with different cases illustrated throughout this paper, criticism of content or creators is still attention which is then funneled into the fyp algorithm which profits off of more and more engagement.

I have been able to describe what WIEAD videos are, how TikTok works, and the “unruly” characterizations of women who are performing and presenting in seemingly authentic ways. In terms of the actual idealized WIEIAD content, I was not able to go too in-depth with

this point, but there are lots of scholars who are working to make sense of these self-representations of the ideal and perfection. Studies in psychology and hard sciences aim to understand how media tools like photoshop, FaceTune, and Instagram pictures are conditioning us to imagine our body images (Muenter, 2019; Fagan, 2020). These types of studies are important because reproducing the same, idealized versions of ourselves in online spaces is only contributing to these social habits.

The underlying judgments being made in these videos affect everyday people/ users (content creators). We understand and form ourselves out of the social information and situations we interact in. The prioritization of appearances, aesthetics, and highly controllable experiences promotes an unattainable form of perfection in real life. As consumers we learn from the media we encounter in these spaces, that's why so many of these videos end up looking generally the same across different types. What matter is that you can reproduce an aesthetic and an image that can be that of the ideal. No one can really know if you follow it or not, just like we cannot discern whether the information we are being shown is something we can trust or not.

Ultimately, a lot of producers of this content are just trying to do their best with what they're given, as we have grown up and are growing up consuming it. If we are taught to aestheticize and restrict, then these are the things we strive for; the perfection and idealization Gill and Kanai talk about. We can't blame people for falling into the traps that have been set for them. Ultimately, the diet industry and the mechanisms which propel it forward help toxic ideals thrive in spaces like social media, which run off of attention, aspirations, and the fundamental drive neoliberalism has equipped us with to be our "best selves."

Given this ability to negotiate online environments, the large question relates to finding solutions or strategies to seek out positive spaces. What forms of media can we promote and

reproduce to avoid falling into these spaces of restriction, scrutiny, comparison, idealizations? Can these videos do anything to promote positive relationships with food and the body?

With all participants I spoke with, there was an awareness of the dark sides of TikTok in relation to food, but also the more lighthearted and truly inspirational sides. For example, "WIEIAD for ed recovery" videos typically include far fewer triggers, more content warnings, less calorie counting, and a lack of body checks.

> "Making these videos helps me to eat well and on time. I also just love food and cooking, so the videos force me to get up and make amazing meals when I'm lacking in motivation and feeling down. I also see a lot of conversation about how fat people are fat because we're lazy and unhealthy and I'm not, so I thought posting videos of the nourishing, balanced variety of food I eat would help portray the message that being fat isn't always a choice. Some people are just fat, no matter how much we eat or exercise." (P4)

> "My relationship with food is still in the recovery process, but I will say, that after being in recovery for a year, I am able to eat when I am hungry without panic or tears because I get to record it and post a video out of it instead of JUST eating it and stewing in sadness. I still think about food 24/7 and worry about it, but I am able to have regular meals every day BECAUSE I look forward to the video it'll make later. No longer is food about eating, it's about getting healthier and sharing that with others who are trying to recover as well." (P5)

To an extent, we can try to tailor these spaces to be positive and demonstrate healthy relationships with food and our bodies. From the users I spoke to, there is the demonstrated ability to insulate or manipulate the algorithm to keep oneself within communities that support healthy and positive relationships with food (not being afraid of food, not restricting, but nourishing your body). The informants discussed accomplishing this through hashtag uses and filtering of comments, to various degrees of success. For example, a creator of "WIEIAD as a fat woman" uses specific hashtags and blocks comments to insulate herself within a community that reacts positively to her content. And a curator of "WIEIAD in ed recovery" TikToks sometimes purposefully situates herself in ProAna communities, using hashtags, to try and expose those

who are suffering to seek treatments. This demonstration of media literacy offers a hopeful solution for curbing triggering, restrictive WIEIADs which promote unhealthy associations with food and the body.

If TikTok is a system wherein engagement rules all and attention can be directly translated into monetary gain, how can we reward representations of healthy and positive associations with our bodies and how we nourish them? P2 made $150 off of individuals commenting on her consumption of candy, but what about spaces where there is a positive conversation, accountability, comfort, and motivation occurring in relation to healthy relationships with food? The WIEIAD format can be harnessed to create these spaces which advocate for just being yourself and nourishing your body in however way you choose without judgment. Once you understand how content creation and dissemination work, how neoliberal/patriarchal prescriptions for "normal" work, and pull back the curtain, it is an emperor's robe situation. You can free yourself from the demands placed upon you.

Lastly, I'd like to discuss what this project and collecting these videos has done to my own TikTok FYP and well-being. Honestly, TikTok has turned into an unpleasurable experience and I am excited to wipe my slate clean in terms of my FYP and to stop seeing these kinds of videos. Along with WIEAD comes toxic content which advocates for restriction, thin bodies, and tips to lose weight. On my personal account, which I sometimes use to send videos I come across to my research account — this small action has completely warped my FYP algorithm. I am flooded with content that tells me I need to be thinner, need to work out more, need to try harder to be better in all aspects of my life, and it is exhausting.

And yet, I am unsure if I will leave TikTok anytime soon or ever. Everything is pleasurable and catered to the user. Even when I am faced with triggering content in the next

swipe on my fyp I get a meme that makes me chuckle or a recipe I want to try out. The clips are perfectly timed at 15-60 seconds and keep you swiping endlessly and pulled deeper. And the vulnerability and authenticity in the space make it just – it's like getting lost in your own little world. Ultimately, I am a young woman interested in my health, I like food tutorials and fashion tips, and with this comes the ever-present ideals I have spent so much of this paper discussing. I will always be shown something like WIEIAD in one form or another. Of course, I can try my hardest to avoid them instead of engaging, but no matter how many times I press "not interested", this content still pops up.

Because of this, I wonder if perhaps the overall solution is that we need to stop making this content. Much like the workings of post-feminism and neoliberalism, in that individual actions are the path to success and freedom, critiquing individual TikToks does not rid the platform or social media at large of the more harmful content. As such, future research needs to look into how we can harness what online spaces and mechanisms for digital selves we have to figure out how to escape this endless cycle.

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