Spring 5-20-2022

# Alimentary Politics and Algorithms: The Spread of Information about “Healthy” Eating and Diet on TikTok

Sara Pierce

# Alimentary Politics and Algorithms:
# The Spread of Information about "Healthy" Eating and Diet on TikTok

Sara Pierce
Senior Honors Thesis
Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis

Committee:
Thesis Advisor: Anna Jacobsen, Ph.D.
Rebecca Lester: Ph.D., MSW, LCSW
Talia Dan-Cohen: Ph.D.

# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the anthropology department for giving me the opportunity to conduct this research, and to The Office of Undergraduate Research and the W.H.R. Rivers program for providing me with the means to pursue it.

I would first like to thank Dr. Anna Jacobsen for all of her support and mentorship throughout this entire process. You helped me get through so many challenges, from IRB approval to constantly changing the structure of the thesis. I am so grateful for all of your assistance and mentorship.

Thank you to Dr. E.A. Quinn, Dr. Rebecca Lester, and Dr. Talia Dan-Cohen for reading my work and offering their thoughts and suggestions.

Thank you to Arianna Parkhideh, Rithvik Ramesh, and the entire thesis cohort for acting as moral support and reassuring me that I was not alone in struggling with this process. Having such a great group of people to work with and get advice from was incredibly helpful.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to speak with me about TikTok over the course of this research. I appreciate all of you sharing your experiences and opinions with me, even when you thought your descriptions of content might make you sound crazy.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family, who put up with my constant worrying about this project, and will be extremely happy to hear that I am finally finished with it. I am so grateful to have had your support at every step along the way.

# Glossary

**CC**: Closed captioning, but is used generally to mean transcription of the audio in any form

**Creator fund**: Program through which popular users are compensated by TikTok for views

**CW**: Content warning

**DM**: Direct message

**Duet**: Feature wherein the user's video appears next to the original video

**ED**: Eating Disorder

**Fyp**: For you page, the page with algorithmically generated content

**IG**: Instagram

**Linktree**: A landing page with all of a user/company's relevant links

**MyFitnessPal**: An app commonly used to track calories

**Shadowban**: When the app/algorithm deprioritizes/hides your content

**Side:** A term expressing membership in a group on TikTok, or that users see specific types of content

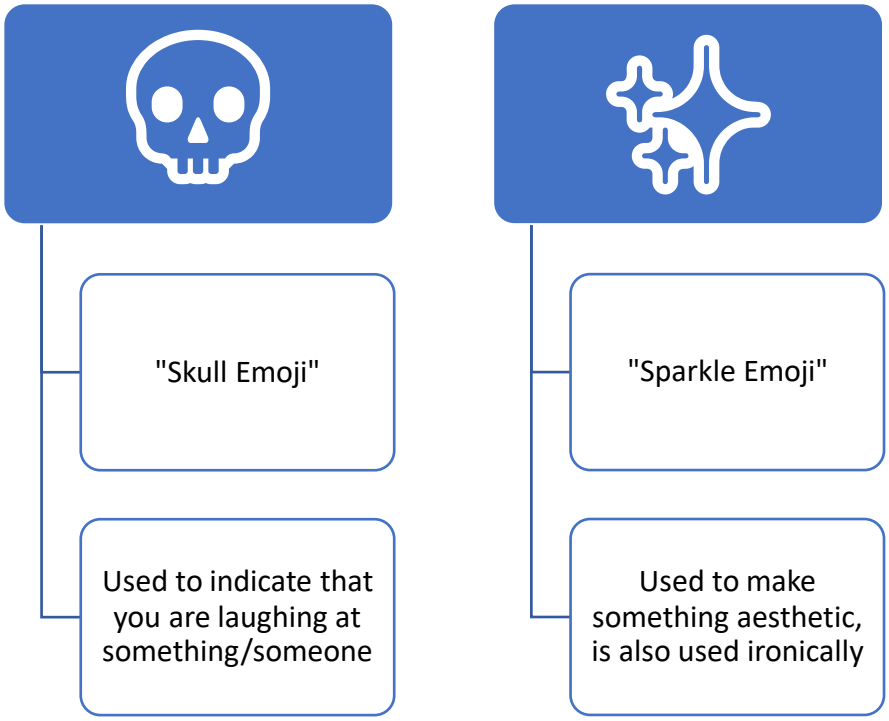
**Sticker:** Graphic placed on top of clip on TikTok, can be an icon/picture, but is usually text, especially as used here*

**Stitch**: Feature wherein the user's video appears after a clip from the original video

**TW**: Trigger warning

*Until TikTok rolled out captions, some people manually inserted captions using "stickers". People typically called words typed onto the videos in this way "captions" or "text", not stickers (which is the name of the button on TikTok), but for clarity, "caption" in this thesis refers to the caption of the video, and "sticker" is used to refer to these words that appear on the video.

## Emoji Dictionary



# Content Warning

This thesis includes descriptions of content and discussions related to fitness, diet, and body shape that could be harmful or triggering.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

**June 29th, 2021**

> *Between oat recipes, cooking videos, and daily routines, I saw quite the video. It is a stitch. "If you workout because you want your body to look a certain way, you don't care about health, you are fatphobic". It cuts to the second creator "Yeah…why would I want to be fat?". "Bills, Bills, Bills" by Destiny's Child is playing. The video starts over. Surely, people must be disagreeing in the comments. The creator has pinned her own comment "this is me personally, idc about other peoples bodies. only mine lmao & Connors obviously". The comments, for the most part, agree with the creator. They say things like "seriously that's the point of working out". One even says "I am fatphobic and proud". There is some pushback in the replies to some of these comments, but the conversation inspired in those arguments takes an even darker turn. While some commentors push back, noting that not all overweight people are unhealthy, and that many factors play a role in weight (like genetics), others provide much different views, like "Fatphobia is a good thing don't let anyone tell u different". In the replies to other comments, people express similar sentiments, and are quick to claim that they either only care how they look or that being fat is unhealthy so it should be discouraged, if not outright shamed. I am aware that this sounds like I may have found a weird rabbit hole of particularly rude discourse, but this is not that. This video had 809,400 likes and 4.6 million views when I saw it, which was the day after it was posted. The video that she stitched was on an ED recovery account. That original creator mentions in another video that she turned off comments because the comments people were leaving would be harmful to the people who usually watch her videos. Unfortunately, that only made matters worse, as turning off the comments is seen as a signal that you are wrong. One commentor on the stitch even wrote "She knows she be saying some bs that's why all her comments turned off".*

I open with the fieldnotes excerpt above not just to demonstrate the jarring nature of some of the content I observed, but also to underline the sense of urgency and seriousness with which I write about TikTok and TikTok content throughout this thesis. While TikTok is often discussed as amusing or frivolous, it is my intention to take it seriously—I do not think it is possible to view the types of narratives and content observed in this research, like the video described above, as anything but alarmingly important. This is a study of TikTok, but that does not mean that it is in essence lighthearted or unimportant. I observed content related to diet, nutrition, fitness, and weight loss—not dances or pranks. This is a description of subcommunities

and content that have the potential to do emotional and mental harm, and to directly influence viewers' perceptions of themselves and of the world.

Since content on TikTok surfaces algorithmically, a user can quickly become inundated with videos related to one topic. It can become almost inescapable. Because of the ways in which I demonstrated interest in certain topics, which are discussed in more detail later, my feed was saturated with content related to "healthy" eating, fitness, nutrition, diet, and weight loss. This inundation with related content and the algorithm's quick response to interest in these topics drive my sense of the urgency related to this type of content on this platform. I did not seek out the video described above. Rather, the algorithm played it for me based on what it assumed my interests to be—and, ostensibly, it did so for 4.6 million other people. These people, too, may have had their feeds saturated to varying degrees with similar types of content, which is deeply concerning given existing research about the influence of social media on the development of problematic ideas and behaviors related to fitness, body image, and nutrition.

Extensive research explores the association of social media content and platforms with eating disorders. Higher use of social networking sites is associated with lower body image scores and total time on social networking sites is associated with eating disorder symptoms (Santarossa and Woodruff 2017). Additionally, higher use of Instagram is correlated to increased rates of Orthorexia Nervosa (Turner and Lefevre 2017). Turner and Lefevre hypothesize that some of the factors that contribute to this effect are the "image-focused nature of Instagram" and the ways in which the nature of the app "may lead to users believing a behaviour is more prevalent or normal than is actually the case, and may lead to perceived social pressures to conform to such behaviours." (Turner and Lefevre 2017, 282) TikTok's video-based nature and the algorithm's tendency to show people more content like that with which they have previously

engaged suggest that TikTok will have, or is already having, similar effects. As a result, TikTok merits attention and focus in terms of the content and messages related to fitness and healthy eating to which its users are exposed.

There is increasing concern in news stories about TikTok as a site of potentially problematic diet and nutrition content (Dickson 2020; Blades 2020). This is a pressing issue, particularly due to the scale of its audience. Estimates place the number of active users on the platform at more than 1 billion worldwide, including 138 million in the US. Approximately 32.5% of active users in the US (just short of 45 million people) are between the ages of 10 and 19, and an additional 29.5% are between 20 and 29 (Doyle 2022). TikTok, then, is a social media platform that reaches many young Americans, who are also at risk of developing unhealthy thoughts or behaviors related to food or eating[1].This combination of factors makes TikTok particularly relevant in discussions of social media content and its effects and makes content related to fitness and healthy eating important subjects of further study. We cannot begin to deal with the effects of this content until we understand what it actually is and how it is spreading. To begin to do so, I focused on subcommunities and types of content that are fairly popular, and that at least do not directly promote disordered eating. This more casual messaging has more reach and has the potential to casually alter and reinforce existing ideas about nutrition, weight, and fitness.

Nutrition and healthy eating are not neutral, as they have been made into moral activities central to "good" personhood in modern communities, particularly in the United States. The idea that healthy eating is a moral activity has a long history in the US. For example, it was associated with wartime preparedness during World War II (Biltekoff 2013). Moral citizenship involved

[1] The onset of eating disorders is most common in people aged 12-24 ("Eating Disorder Facts l CEDC | Bulimia & Anorexia & Binge Eating Facts" n.d.).

proper care and control over the body as an act of national defense and patriotism. This imperative to "eat right" was further cemented by anti-obesity campaigns in the late 90s and early 2000s that emphasized the necessity of taking individual control over your own health and body in order to win the "war on obesity" (Biltekoff 2013). Nutrition has, as a result, been described as a form of social control, particularly in a Foucauldian sense (Coveney 1999). This element of control is heavily discussed in feminist scholarship in terms of nutrition as a form of social control over women and their bodies (Bordo 1993). Nutrition and fitness have also been discussed as being used to reinforce social and economic hierarchies and maintain privileged statuses (Hejtmanek 2020; Biltekoff 2013). As a result of all of these elements, nutrition is not just about food. Alimentary politics imbue nutrition and diet with social and moral meanings. As Biltekoff explains, "dietary advice conveys messages about what to eat that are at the same time lessons in how to be a good eater and a good person." (Biltekoff 2013, 6) On TikTok, these lessons are taught repeatedly. As users swipe through their feeds, sometimes for hours on end, these messages are clear and the logic motivating them is obvious, as the creator in the vignette points out by incredulously asking "why would I want to be fat?".

For all of these reasons, the spread of diet and nutrition content and communities needs to be studied. The challenge is in studying content and trends that are moving so quickly. Videos are frequently only a few seconds long. Trends can cycle in months, weeks, and days. The pace at which all of this content is produced and consumed is dizzying, and at times, overwhelming. An hour on TikTok could involve watching more than a thousand videos. Research, however, is slow. Of course, it is unnecessary to study every trend happening on this app, but that does not mean that we can ignore the platform entirely. Young people are consuming large amounts of this content while nobody is watching. This ethnography attempts to capture some of the

moments in which this knowledge spread and the ways in which it did so. Excerpts of fieldnotes are included in order to make this "unconventional" community visible, and in order to counteract the temporary and momentary nature of TikTok content. That is, fieldnotes are included to prevent the moments described from slipping away, and as a way of allowing us to witness and understand the interactions that ground this analysis.

In the following thesis, I begin with an overview of information necessary to orient the examples discussed in time and "place," and to understand the terminology used to describe them. Then, I discuss the main types of content observed, to place this content and these processes in their appropriate "communities" within the app. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which interacting with the app affects people and personhood, focusing on the ways in which community and identity are invoked. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which knowledge is produced, the mechanisms that attempt to regulate that knowledge, and the ways in which authority is demonstrated in this "unconventional" community. Chapter 4 explores boundaries, looking at the rules that seem to exist in these communities and when the rules do not have to be followed. The conclusion discusses how knowledge of these processes can aid in combatting the spread of potentially harmful or incorrect information and content, and it points to important directions for future research.

## TikTok Basics

The location of this research is not in a physical place – it is on an app. While it may seem like an unconventional location in which to conduct ethnographic research, it is only unconventional if we expect communities to be bound by space and physical location. Definitions of community have shifted from limited understandings that describe small groups (Redfield 1955) to theories that incorporate imagined communities within nation-states (B.

Anderson 2006), but these modern definitions of community are still not adequate. Communities are not necessarily bound together by physical space or even nationality, particularly in this moment of digital technology and online life. Recent scholarship (c.f. Boellstorff 2020; Pearce 2011; Nardi 2010) pushes for broader conceptualizations of space, community, and sociality that include "virtual worlds", but even these theories do not go far enough, as they limit community and place to virtual spaces that include an imitation of physical place. Sociality and sense of community are not always bound by this type of space, whether virtual or physical. I believe that in this research we can see the need to have more methodological and theoretical flexibility in how we understand how and where community is constructed, to include a space in which dynamic, dizzyingly fast-moving and changing virtual communities are producing identity, personhood, belonging, and cultural expectations of behavior—all of the hallmarks of classic anthropological and ethnographic work. Our definitions need to move as quickly as our interactions, shifting to incorporate new forms of sociality as rapidly as we find and adopt them. Toward that end, I suggest that we start with the assumption that this is a social world, even if it is not a physical world or a virtual imitation of one, and adjust the theory afterwards. To begin, then, just as in an ethnography based in a physical community, we need to orient the content in time, space, and local customs/dynamics. Exploring the social dynamics and interactions described later requires understanding cultural terms and having a basic understanding of the "location" in which they unfold. This section provides that basic information, describing necessary cultural terms needed to understand future discussions, important features of the platform and how it works, and a "map" of the virtual location in which research was conducted.

The TikTok app has video content. Meaning is conveyed in videos, captions, and sounds. Videos may have their own audios and/or added sounds. Certain sounds convey meanings or are

used for particular modes of storytelling or types of videos, but any important examples of the meanings or uses of sounds used in examples in this thesis are described as they arise.

Unlike on other platforms, most content that you see on TikTok is selected by the algorithm. The algorithm, not the user, chooses videos. On YouTube, you at least click on a video or allow it to auto-play. On TikTok, the choice is not to *start* a video, but rather to *leave* or *stop* the video. You can quickly scroll past it, you can click not interested, you can like it, you can comment on it, you can save it, you can send it to someone via direct message, you can share it via link, you can post it to another platform, or you can follow the creator. All of these actions, however, are not available to you until after the algorithm has already chosen to show you the video.

There are two main places where users see content, both of which are patterned by the algorithm. The first is the "for you page" (fyp)[2], where videos surface algorithmically. The second is the "following page," where videos of creators the user follows surface algorithmically. From a video, users can click on the sound to see other videos with the same sound, or on the profile to see the user's other videos and their bio. Some users have things linked to their bios[3], usually through Linktree[4].

Videos can be uploaded to or recorded in the app. The platform has two "special" video features, called *duets* and *stitches*. Duets involve a video occurring at the same time as another video. Stitches involve a clip of another video being played for a few seconds before the creator starts speaking. The video described in the opening vignette was a stitch, which allowed the

[2] See glossary.
[3] A bio refers to the space on a user's profile in which they can type information.
[4] Linktree is a sort of landing page with all of a user/company's relevant links.

second creator to show viewers the claim she was addressing. Creators can also *go live* on TikTok.

People openly discuss group identity and personal identity on the app, typically by describing themselves as being on certain *sides* of TikTok. This terminology reflects users' understanding that TikTok is multifaceted. Since sides of TikTok contain different types and forms of content, sometimes participating in a side of TikTok does not correlate to identifying as part of the associated social group. I use "sides" of TikTok as both a facet of social identity and of content type, as it is not possible to separate the two entirely, and this is often the way the term is used by people who use the platform. Sides are also forms of community, as they often involve common knowledge or experiences and implicit rules and norms. Sides are best understood in this respect as subcommunities.

## Motivations

To understand some of the discussion about what is happening, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of how creators make money on the app, as these financial incentives influence creators' actions. Routes to monetization for creators include the Creator Fund[5], sponsored videos/ads, selling merchandise, commission for products purchased from their links/with their codes, and more. In part due to the ways in which creators are compensated, creators are driven to increase engagement. The most common forms of measuring engagement are in views, likes, comments, and followers. As a result, engagement does not have to be positive to benefit creators. The amorphous goal of increasing engagement motivates many

[5] TikTok directly pays some popular creators through "The Creator Fund".

actions on the app. There is a desire to be seen and have content pushed to others, both for monetary reasons and for other reasons.

**Participant Observation in this Unconventional "Place"**

In designing this project, a key question was what it would mean to be a participant in this community, where interactions often take the form of liking, commenting, watching, or swiping. In this setting, watching videos and reading comments *is* participation, as those are key forms of social engagement. In fact, my IRB recognized watching videos in this way, as they determined that each video I watched should count as a person I observed. This blurring between data/people and the platform as a tool/as a community is partially caused by the ways in which users experience interactions on the platform as being with others, which depends heavily on a perception of authenticity that is necessary for online content to represent individuals.

It is not easy to define the boundaries between participation and observation or between data and people in online communities. Many studies of social media investigate social media as something that affects other (offline) interactions or processes (Alwadi 2014; Al-Rawi and Groshek 2015), or consider the content to be data rather than people, affecting the process (or necessity) of obtaining IRB clearance. Discussions about how to define participation in online settings will become more relevant as online communities become more heavily researched, as inconsistent norms for digital ethnography and other online social science research present challenges for ensuring ethics and understanding best practices. They can also constrict useful forms of research because of a desire to not overstep in unfamiliar territory. In this thesis, I argue that observing content is a form of social interaction, that watching content and reading comments is observing social interactions within and between subcommunities and a larger community, and that technology (TikTok) is not a tool in sociality, but a site of it.

Another conceptual issue in this project was how to define the boundaries of who is an insider. On the one hand, as someone who regularly uses TikTok, I consider myself to be a participant in a larger TikTok community, which would make this project a sort of anthropology of self/home. On the other hand, I do not regularly participate in the types of subcommunities described, making me an outsider. As a result, I was both an insider and an outsider, simultaneously seen as inside or outside of the community, on the margins of being almost a participant and trying to participate, observing something I was so close to living. It is from this place, as an insider-outsider, that I approached this research. Recent anthropological literature debates the merits of native anthropology (c.f. Abu-Lughod 2008), and points to some advantages of an anthropology of self or home (E. Anderson 2021), like helping researchers orient themselves in communities and allowing them to partially rely on existing knowledge of terminology and norms. Similarly, in addition to being familiar with the basic features of the platform, I was very aware of, and intentional about, the ways in which I was interacting with the platform and with the algorithm.

The algorithm's presence and power are undeniable, and in any story about TikTok, it plays a central role. Speaking about the algorithm in the passive voice is not only bad storytelling, but is also an inaccurate description of what is happening. Recent scholarship suggests that it is important to recognize social media platforms as agentic (Eaton 2016). When I scrolled on the app, I made choices, but the algorithm made just as many, if not more, so it does not make sense to speak of TikTok or the algorithm as lacking agency. I use active voice for the algorithm and personify it to recognize its agency and to reflect the way users often described it. My data and interviews suggest that people are aware that the algorithm is pulling the strings[6],

[6] This tendency has recently been described elsewhere (Bhandari and Bimo 2022), supporting this interpretation.

and they occasionally pull back. The algorithm is a central character in this research, potentially even more central than the user. Given its control and agency, the algorithm is not a "what", but a "who" in this context.

In seeking out relevant content and attempting to participate in and observe the relevant communities, I also communicated with the algorithm, attempting to influence the videos that it showed me. In this sense, the algorithm was someone with whom I interacted in my research. The ways in which I interacted with the algorithm are described in more detail in the methods section. The algorithm is well known for being fine-tuned to users' interests and lives, and, according to reports related to some internal company documents, is designed to keep people engaged (Smith 2021). The algorithm is the subject of many think pieces about TikTok's damagingly addictive nature (Koetsier 2020; Pierce 2021), its tendency to push people towards more extreme content and feed people into rabbit holes (W.S.J. Staff, 2021), and other related topics.

Even in the middle of this seemingly chaotic space where everything moves quickly and the algorithm can send people spiraling into new topics daily, content related to diet and healthy eating still emerged. Beneath the layers of content that allow us to see TikTok as merely entertaining or as somewhat silly, there are still mountains of other content that have deeper implications and affect the views and lives of those that watch them. Conspiracy theories, niche subcommunities, diet content, political debates, and everything in between all linger below this ever-changing deeply watchable deluge of algorithmically surfacing content. It is in this place, where norms, content, trends, key players, and the structure of the place itself were constantly changing, that this research was conducted. It is also important to orient this research in time. I carried out most of the observations and interviews during the summer of 2021.

## Methods

The methods used in this project were approved by the Human Research Protection Office at Washington University in St. Louis. There were two main components of the research. The first was semi-structured interviews with TikTok users about a range of topics, including who could be trusted on TikTok/how they knew if something was true, descriptions of relevant sides of TikTok, and how things they saw on TikTok influenced their choices and actions. Participants were recruited by word of mouth and snowball sampling. Most interviewees identified as female. Participants also had varying ranges of involvement with the relevant content. Due to restrictions involved in recruiting participants, participants did not directly identify themselves as being part of the communities in question or as frequently seeing the content described. As a result, interviews are not centered in the discussions in the following chapters, although they are occasionally referenced.

The second component was the observation of relevant TikTok content. In addition to being a regular user with my own account, I created an account specifically for this project, and attempted to influence the algorithm to recommend videos related to the topic by demonstrating an interest in healthy eating and fitness. Demonstrating relevant interests to the algorithm was an ongoing process. For clarity, I have included an edited section of my fieldnotes from June 14th, 2021 describing my initial steps on the app.

**June 14th, 2021**

> *The transition to FoodTok was a little jarring. I started following some of the creators (I searched for Janelle first, because I remember her from a while ago). I checked a few hashtags/phrases to find a few accounts to start with. I tried #keto, #plantbased, and healthyfood. I may try looking through #fitness and a few other places. I'm watching the tags on the videos to see if there are more places I should look. Of course, the algorithm does its job. After I followed a few of the relevant creators, my fyp started to reflect an interest in food and healthy eating. As I followed more of the creators who popped up because of the algorithm, the food videos quickly became more and more frequent. The algorithm picks up on what will make you keep scrolling, keep swiping, keep watching,*

> *and keep engaging. That's what it is designed to do. The problem I am worried about is that I can artificially pigeon-hole myself really quickly by only engaging with certain videos. I may need to broaden my interests to include fitness, health, food, meal prep, and recipes in general. Otherwise, it may get too specific.*

As time went on, I continued to demonstrate interest in related content to the algorithm by interacting with relevant videos and skipping more generic videos that were unrelated to the topic. After several weeks of watching and interacting with relevant content, almost all of the videos on my fyp were about healthy eating, working out, the gym, athletic clothes, fitness, wellness, diet, weight loss, fat loss, nutrition, cooking, and so on. Additionally, at several points throughout the research, I sought out more information by clicking on specific hashtags and watching videos under them, searching for more generic fitness/diet videos if I felt the algorithm was taking me on a tangent away from the communities of interest, searching for creators mentioned by interviewees, or searching for specific topics that I felt were missing from my notes.

I only observed publicly available videos. I occasionally saved videos for reference. I did not record the usernames of creators unless the creator was an identifiable public figure or a brand. I did not record the usernames of commenters[7], and no screenshots of interactions in the comments were taken, so discussions of comments appear without usernames, and are based on partial transcriptions of comment sections from my fieldnotes. These transcriptions include spelling and grammar errors, and emojis that were important to the tone of comments[8], but could have slight errors due to my inability to review their accuracy. When comment sections are described, original comments appear in quotes. Replies appear with dashes underneath the

[7] [user] or @[user] indicates that a comment tagged someone else. "user" is used in place of the username tagged.
[8] Most emojis were omitted. See "Emoji Dictionary" for more information about the tone implications of relevant emojis.

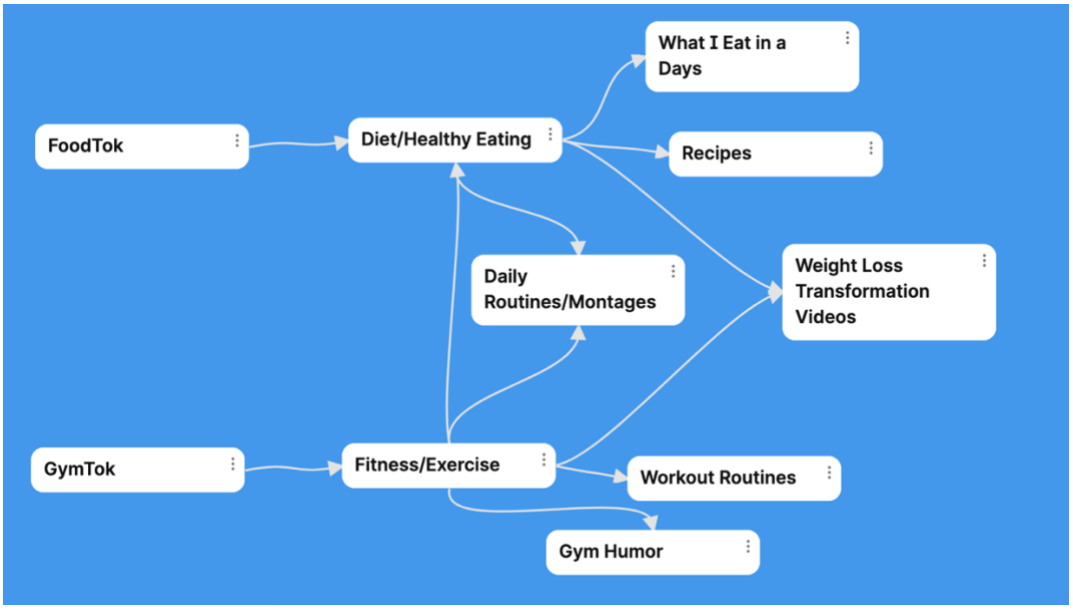
comments. Replies to replies just appear somewhere underneath the main comment, as this is how they appear on the app. This may be confusing, as character limits and non-chronological comments make discussions hard to follow, but the "messiness" of comment sections is key to understanding the social processes and interactions described. Some replies and comments are omitted for relevance and redundance. Additionally, in some instances, rather than detailing interactions in the comment sections, I summarize them. Some excerpts of fieldnotes have been condensed for clarity and relevance.

## Key Types of Content

Several of the main types of content observed fall under the umbrella of "FoodTok", the side of TikTok focused on food. While FoodTok does not focus exclusively on healthy foods, it did heavily overlap with some fitness communities during this research. Many recipes were presented as healthy or adhered to certain diets, even if this was not overtly stated. Some of the recipe videos had overt references to weight loss/managing weight or calorie intake, or specific diets like plant-based, vegan, keto, or low carb. Others were less overtly about weight loss or did not directly name a specific diet. Even when healthy eating was not defined, a definition was often implied. A lot of these "healthy recipes" involved vegetables and other colorful foods. Cooking ASMR[9] videos typically allowed you to physically see the cooking take place and allowed you to hear the sounds associated with cooking (noises of something being cut, eggs being cracked, oil sizzling, etc). "What I Eat in a Day" videos showed all the food (and usually also all the drinks) that a person consumed in a day (or at least creators claim they do).

[9] ASMR stands for "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response". Due to the lack of use of the full phrase, only the acronym is used here.

Other types of content observed included additional sorts of montage-type content, such as daily routines, as well as content that was directly about weight loss, workout routine videos, and videos more loosely about fitness/exercise. The video described in the opening vignette does not belong neatly to a category of video that I intentionally observed. Rather, the algorithm placed it into my feed because of its proximity and relatedness to the interests I did demonstrate. These sets of content overlapped extensively, as "sides" of TikTok are not discrete. The boundaries are somewhat messy and people often cross genres/sides. For example, after posting videos about workouts, or after appearing fit in a video, some creators were asked to post workout routines or what I eat in a days. These videos were a point of intersection between fitness creators, some healthy FoodTok creators, lifestyle creators, and creators who posted about beauty or modeling. These types of content are not all-encompassing and are not separate from one another. This diagram serves as a rough "map" of the locations (sides of TikTok) in which observations were conducted, either intentionally (sought out directly by me) or unintentionally (given to me by the algorithm).



# Chapter 2: TikTok and People

Descriptions of TikTok content taken from fieldnotes are heavily centered in the following chapters, as the observation of content and social interactions on the platform drives the focus of the analysis. To situate the analysis and the discussion of the things happening on the platform, it is necessary to consider the platform's role, especially its role in the lives of its users and in the social sphere more generally. Through both interview data and content/platform observations, this chapter outlines the ways in which TikTok can and cannot be separated from people's "real lives" and includes a discussion about how to conceptualize TikTok's place in the public/private divide. In addition to considering the ways in which people interact with TikTok content, this chapter considers the ways in which interacting with TikTok content can affect people. This discussion is presented within the context of existing discourses about nutrition and identity/morality.

The framework explored in this chapter is important to the rest of this analysis, as it provides an explanation of some of the ways in which content and the ideas within it were presented to users. In the following chapters, the specific ways in which knowledge was created, truth was decided upon, and boundaries were created are discussed in detail. Before that discussion, though, it is important to understand the extent to which TikTok content, especially this content about nutrition/healthy eating, presented itself as integral to personhood, and had the potential to affect people. These things did not just follow people "off the app" and seep into real life. Rather, the app and the interactions occurring on it became a part of socialization, identity formation, and the life that some users experienced. Understanding the role of this content through a discussion of some relevant social theory and examples of discourses and features of the app is necessary both to underline the importance of the content users see on the app and to

continue with discussions about other social processes occurring on the app, such as fact-checking and self-policing of content, which are discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4.

## Blur

TikTok is a place for public performance. However, it is also a place for the construction of identities and communities and for everyday tasks like socializing, making money, sharing information and updates with friends, and exchanging knowledge. The element of performance involved does not prevent it from being inherently social. Some literature about the ways people perform identity on different social media platforms builds on Goffman's theory of adjusted selves (Thomas et al. 2017). Performance is a key aspect of social interactions more generally, so it should not be used as a reason to exclude TikTok from being a place of socialization, as the two are not mutually exclusive.

Along those lines, I have come to believe that it is not fully possible to separate TikTok from some form of "real life". This is based on interviews, observations of how people interact with TikTok, and my own experiences with TikTok. The social theory I draw on argues that online interactions are not in a trade-off with in-person interactions, as they provide discussion topics for social interactions, supporting this interpretation (Schroeder 2018). The theory also suggests that social media interactions only count as social when they are mutual or "aimed at an intimate sphere in which personal relations are affirmed." (Schroeder 2018, 94) However, this theory does not adequately describe the forms of social interaction taking place on TikTok. Even though TikTok may involve an "audience" and may be characterized as one-way communication under a traditional definition, it is not always perceived that way, as watching, commenting, and liking are seen as forms of engagement with the creator. Additionally, as will be explored later, people imagine themselves to be part of social interactions and communities on the app, creating

other “spheres” of community in which they can be social, even without communicating with people they know in “real life”. This suggests that these rules proposed by social theorists about which online activities are “social” may not be accurate, as users experience or define interactions in ways that differ from the traditional models, which are based on extensions of rules constructed before the advent of the internet that attempt to encapsulate new media experiences. However, TikTok is too far outside of the bounds of these “rules” to be adequately described with these models. Its use differs too much from other forms of online media.

The ways in which people use TikTok blur the lines between real life and TikTok as a public space for performance, as the divide between what is private and what is public is broken, or at least appears to be broken, in the name of “authenticity”. Additionally, the lines between on the app and off the app are artificial and superficial. Decisions about music, movies, entertainment, clothing, style, and more are influenced by TikTok, both by causing individuals to try certain things and by shaping the culture as a whole. Something might be a TikTok trend at first, but then it quickly becomes a trend generally, as TikTok has so much influence on culture. The more time I spent on the app, the more the lines between what is “off the app” and what is “TikTok” seemed to evaporate, as the songs playing on the radio were driven by TikTok, culture was driven by TikTok, and conversations were dominated by things related to TikTok content. TikTok does not exist in a bubble, and its effects seep into all other aspects of life, and into all other forms of social media. Even without downloading the TikTok app, people come across TikToks on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and news segments. It also cannot necessarily be viewed as a platform outside of real life, especially when so much of what is “real life” is happening online on various platforms. If “real life” is made up only of things that happen offline, then it does not encompass the large part of many peoples’ lives that is spent on

Zoom, Facetime, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other online platforms, where a large portion of socialization is currently taking place.

Even outside of the influence of TikTok on some sort of "real" life, there is a dimension of social life that takes place on TikTok, as people form and explore identities, curate personal styles, make and interact with friends, experience culture and world events, learn ways of speaking and mannerisms, and so on. Viewing all of the social interactions and identity-building that happen on this platform as "outside" or separate from real life does not make sense in the current landscape of online living. Also, fundamentally, many aspects of the way TikTok is used shatter the illusion of a division between TikTok as an artificial public platform and a real or private life. We must reimagine the public private divide, identity, community, and socialization to understand what is happening on this platform, as some of the theory is insufficient in describing it.

## TikTok Lives

Sometimes, when users *go live* on TikTok, there is a strange shattering of the wall between public performance and private life that would be expected on many social media platforms. The "live" invites viewers into the person's real life, and much of the illusion of performance or a difference between a public presentation of content and a private life that is outside of social media or virtual spaces is eliminated. TikTok content, of course, is a form of performance, and making it is an act of constructing a presentation that will be visible to the public. However, this is not the case in lives, where the line between public and private is often so blurry that it does not exist. When people are on live, viewers can comment, ask questions, and send gifts. Lives can be carefully constructed to not reveal things that are part of private life.

However, they often present themselves as being a window into private life, or they might actually be a window into a more private life.

**June 16th, 2021**

> *I came across an interesting account. The whole time that she cooks she stares at the camera in… an interesting way. She makes an odd face, and all of her stickers with text say "with ease" after describing the next step in the recipe. The video has 1.3 million views. I think I have seen a duet of her on my other account in the past. It looks vaguely familiar. I follow her and see that she is currently live. She is talking about how lamps are expensive. There is some discussion about kittens happening. She is now talking about cat litter. I don't know what's going on, I just got here. She's folding laundry while she talks. The phone is propped up on something, maybe a table. She leans in to look at the comments while she keeps telling her story. It feels like you're on facetime with a friend, as she nonchalantly chats to the camera, occasionally looking at the comments and questions that fly by. Somebody asked about her reusable straws. She saw that one, and is now explaining it while she's walking across the room with the phone. The phone is propped up somewhere else now. She says she needs to organize her closet, and she asks google to play a song (I think she said "Sugar Lane"). "Hey google, turn the volume up one". She keeps going. She reads the questions out loud as she answers them. "Best advice that I've ever received… I don't know bestie". There are 189 viewers right now. I'm bored. Maybe it's time to go. "Hey google, play the same song again". There's a noise next to me. "Playing some music on Spotify". Wait a minute, that wasn't from my phone. I look up from my phone and this laptop, and stop typing for a second. "Hey google, off". Back to the live. She triggered my google home. Like a lot of college students, I have a google home mini, which was free because I have Spotify premium (with the student discount of course). This is a digression. What is she talking about? She's in law school, apparently. "I don't have a job besides TikTok and Youtube" she says, still putting clothes on hangers. She's talking about how her parents pay for her apartment. She's about to go tan on the roof. Interesting, but I'm bored. Time to go. I click the x. Back to scrolling.*

Watching this "live" could be viewed as an activity outside the bounds of regular life. It is, arguably, not a real-life activity. However, watching the live caused a change in my immediate physical environment. That did seem jarring to me at the time, as though it had crossed some type of line in terms of the content affecting my life, but it is an illustration of larger tendencies. Regardless of whether TikToks are causing voice-activated devices to turn on around people, they are shaping their environments and how they understand them. When a recipe I saw on TikTok influences what I buy at the grocery store, or when I buy a book I saw on

the app, it is still changing my surroundings, just not as abruptly. Lives, in general, challenge the existence of a boundary between the app and "real life". They also, as in the following example, challenge the idea that there is truly a boundary between the public and the private.

**June 23rd, 2021**

> *A woman was live, talking about where she was going for dinner later. She was trying to choose an outfit. Eventually, she flipped her murphy bed up into the wall, revealing that the bottom was a huge mirror that now reflected most of the room. She left the room to try on the outfits and came back into frame for advice. There was music playing. The music was coming from the tv, which was obvious because the reflections of the music videos playing on the tv were visible in the mirror. She had a hard time choosing an outfit, and the chat was not making it easy, because people were very divided. It felt like being on facetime with a friend who called for outfit advice, except at one point during the whole scenario there were 3,000 people watching. When she was out of the frame, people just talked in the chat, commenting on which outfits they liked, the way the bed turned into a mirror, the music selection, etc. as they waited for her to come back. People did comment that she was taking too long to change. Over the course of the video, people are also sending her likes and gifts, which I believe result in her making money. People were also following her throughout the live. Anyways, she eventually decided on a bodysuit with black jeans. Some of the commenters were disappointed, but many were satisfied, as she seemed much more confident when she had tried on that outfit. She also, while discussing her options, saw a comment asking about the tapestry on the wall behind her, and she told everyone that she had purchased it online, and told them what to search to find it (to the best of her recollection).*

The live offers, or pretends to offer, a view into a creator's personal life as they often multi-task, doing regular "private" home activities like choosing outfits, putting on makeup, folding laundry, or making food. If TikTok is a virtual public space, then it is also a place where the types of activities that are fit for occurring in public (rather than private) spaces can be redefined, and the boundary between these two dimensions of life is renegotiated and moved in real-time as users' expectations change and are changed based on the interactions they have and witness on the app. This allows TikTok content to reach farther, demonstrating expectations for "private" actions, and intimately shaping personal identity. The lack of a boundary encourages users to share more openly and take advice more seriously.

This division between public and private is also blurred as creators use spam accounts, on which they offer less filtered presentations of themselves than they do on their main accounts. They may post less polished content, rambling videos, ideas about content to see what their fans prefer, questions about whether to post something on Instagram, a higher volume of videos (so that they do not "spam" their main accounts by posting too often), or videos that they do not necessarily want as many people to see. The spam account is arguably more private than the main account, but it is often still public. The spam accounts are "more private", but it is still difficult to consider them as private spaces when millions of people might see the videos posted on them.

Regardless, TikTok blurs the boundaries that are typically used in describing things as public or private, performance or sociality, and virtual/artificial or in-person/real. This is consistent with De Kosnik's writing about new media and performance as described by Goffman, as she asserts that "In fact, it is the ongoing blending of front stage and backstage, the public posting online of one's ostensibly private life, that constitutes a great deal of the appeal of social media performance; hence, Pearson argues, in social media use, the metaphorical wall sepa- rating private and public is made of glass, transparent and meant to be seen through." (De Kosnik 2019, 13) In the case of TikTok, there are not merely glass walls that pretend to offer views into the private. Often, the divide is so nonexistent that it is as if the glass has been shattered. On this platform, views of the private, or performances that pretend to be views of the private, are not just presented to the viewer as though they are being permitted to look in through a glass wall. Rather, they are presented as if there is no wall, and the viewer is fully immersed in the house. The lack of distinction between online life and real life is important in this analysis, as

it allowed for TikTok to become vitally important as a place where life and socialization occur, which permitted TikTok to affect identity formation and community building.

These identities and communities are not separate from "real" socialization, even though some theory suggests that the internet merely mediates sociality. In the context of this research, conducted during a pandemic during which many users of the app moved social interactions, school, and work online, the internet was not a diversion or a small fraction of the social, but a key part of it. It was also relevant to social interactions in ways other than providing material for discussions. Online identity and community not only exist, but also cannot be fully separated from other forms of identity and community when "real life" is online, and when the platform in question has so profoundly blurred the distinction between the two. These online interactions *are* "real life". Theories about socialization, identity formation, and communication need to take into account the ways that current online activity and social media platform evolution have transformed these things, as some of the theory cannot adequately describe what is happening. As one anthropologist noted in 2010, "We must (re)imagine (that is, spin off, readapt and not re-imagine as true, or use unchanged) old understandings of the social world, social process, and social places." (Peake 2010) The blurring of these lines is important because it is part of what makes the ideas and knowledge about healthy eating that are created and spread on the platform very potent, as content on the app affects people's actions, choices, and thoughts. Their influence is increased by the ways in which they are wrapped into important things like identity and community. When theory fails to adequately describe the ways in which these interactions and forces are real, it fails to account for the power of this content, and, in some cases, its dangers.

## Identity

TikTok can influence people's perceptions and performances of their identities. This can happen in many ways, as TikTok has been recognized as potentially helping people to realize that they actually identify as LGBTQ+ (Jennings 2021; Turetsky 2021), for example. However, just as content may help people come to terms with their own identities, it can also influence the formation of personalities and identities, including in ways that may have negative consequences. The following discussion is an example of one way in which healthy eating and fitness were discussed in ways that may have influenced people's perceptions or explanations of their own identities. This example is not all-encompassing. It is just one example of a discourse involving identity and healthy eating that I observed during the time in which I was conducting my fieldwork. Several interviewees had not heard of it. Like all things on the app, it was not a universal experience. It is provided as an example of a broader trend, which is that these ideas about healthy eating and fitness were being wrapped into perceptions and performances of personhood and morality.

## That Girl

A large portion of the fitness and diet-related content involved heavily aesthetic pictures and videos. The use of social media to glamorize everyday life and to present curated visual displays of an ideal lifestyle is not new, nor is it specific to TikTok. However, TikTok allows this type of content to flourish in new ways, particularly because of the way that the algorithm latches onto interests and the way that culture and meaning spread on the app. One specific brand of this aesthetic montage content involved something that users often called being "*that girl*". Typically, "that girl" appeared between sparkle emojis or quotation marks, which allowed it to indicate a specific lifestyle and a specific meaning instead of indicating a reference to a specific

individual[10]. I use asterisks in the place of the emojis, but an image of the emoji is available in the emoji dictionary. The lifestyle tended to involve fitness, frequent workouts, healthy eating, and things that might be categorized as self-care (like yoga, mindfulness, meditation, or reading). It also tended to involve waking up early and going to sleep early (clocks were sometimes visible or times were included). *That girl* was healthy, fit, organized, clean, and productive, and she stuck to a daily routine. This sort of "advertisement" of *that girl* as an identity achievable partially through diet is consistent with other literature that finds diets advertised to women as a means of self-transformation and improvement (Contois 2017), even though in this case there were several other elements central to becoming *that girl*. The gendered aspect of this message about healthy eating being central to personhood is characteristic of diet messaging more broadly.

Reflecting this upbeat and optimistic aim of being or becoming an ideal version of yourself, videos that referenced being or becoming *that girl* were often daily routine videos or montages set to calm indie music or upbeat pop music. Alternatively, references to being or becoming *that girl* were often motivational videos.

**June 19th, 2021**

> *Swipe. The sound is "Dinero". A woman is lifting weights. The sticker says "I always looked up to the girls that worked out and lived a healthy active lifestyle…". The clip switches, she's in a sports bra in front of a mirror. The sticker says "…So I became that girl" as that clip plays and then a few clips of avocado toast and a treadmill fly by. The hashtags are #weightloss #motivation #inspirational #fittok and #gymtok.*

Food was often bright and colorful, rooms tended to be decorated in a sort of minimalistic style, and everything was nice and looked picture-perfect. Videos were sometimes presented as

[10] It is important to note that *that girl* as a category occurred at the same time as/slightly after the "hot girl summer" trend.

"day x of trying to be/becoming *that girl*", and then showed clips as the creator attempted to live this "healthier" lifestyle and/or recreate the aesthetics of these videos.

**August 5th, 2021**

> *"HOW I PLAN ON BEING "that" girl THIS SUMMER". 1. wake up early (clip of laptop with clock screen on comforter and her moving the comforter to get out of bed) 2. move my body (video of her shadow while she walks, then clip of her feet walking, then clip of her doing a leg workout, I think fire hydrants) 3. fuel my body w/good food (clip of pouring a smoothie, clip of aesthetic foods like toast with peanut butter, chocolate and banana) 4. as well as honor my cravings (clips of cookies and ice cream) 5. stay hydrated (clip of pouring water into a glass cup with a rounded top with slices of lemon in it) 6. read/journal (clips of bookshelf, a page of a book, and a journal). The audio is "love you like a love song". The caption is "all summer long (lightning bolt emoji)" followed by a string of hashtags "#GossipGirlHere #thatgirl #healthyroutine #healthygirlsummer #healthylifestyle #healthandwellness #productiveroutine". In the comments, she reassures people that she does work full time, and this doesn't take all of her time, and is doable. Everything is very aesthetic. Every surface is like white and clean. Anyways, the video has 53,700 likes and 413,100 views. It's old. It was posted on July 10th.*

*That girl* was both an image and a way of living, and the difference between these two aspects of the identity was sometimes directly noted by people on the app. For example, I once saw a video that said "POV: you're becoming "that girl" just not very aesthetic". There were clips of her cleaning, exercising, and eating foods like peanut butter toast. Some people in the comment section were having a discussion about how "that girl" videos with the typical aesthetic were only achievable for people with high incomes. The lifestyle elements, like eating healthily, working out, cleaning, and taking care of yourself, could be separated from the performance elements, notably the heavily idealized aesthetic quality of the videos. Of course, this video was also performing a sort of presentation of self, but it was not precisely performing the idealized *that girl* aesthetic, just the idealized lifestyle elements. Regardless, on the fitness side of TikTok, *that girl* had specific meanings about both elements and was a recognized and agreed upon style of person and video. While there was sometimes critical reflection about the concept and its attainability, it still existed as a trope, trend, and sort of identity that some female creators

claimed, distanced themselves from, and performed. Even as users were aware that this may have been an unattainable goal, it could still have affected their behaviors and the sorts of lifestyles/actions/habits that they viewed as ideal.

Interestingly, aside from the content of the videos, the format of the videos could influence people. All of the heavily aesthetic content, including content associated with being *that girl*, can be viewed as causing people to live differently, not just through the instructions about healthy eating and lifestyle traits, but also through the montage format itself. If we consider the medium as the message, as McLuhan suggests (McLuhan 1964), then these videos also transmit information about the proper way to live and exist, which is in a way that allows you to be watched. The message is then partially to live in a way that is montage-ready, and to exist in ways that are photographable and match specific aesthetics. This encourages individuals to consider how an outsider would see or watch their lives. In this way, these new forms of nutrition messaging could create a new virtual form of the "panopticon" described by Foucault (Foucault 1995), as people may anticipate or imagine being constantly watched or surveilled. Nutrition discourse, here, was not just exerting control over women's bodies. Instructions about how to be a "good or moral eater" were partially about appearance and aesthetics, not just of bodies, but also of food. Notably, I did not see an equivalent form of identity/style that was popular for men, although it is possible that something similar existed and the algorithm did not show it to me because of my gender.

### The Gym Bro

While *that girl* was someone that people wanted to be, there was another identity that people typically described as characteristic of people they hated. It is also an example of the way that healthy eating/fitness were presented as central to identity, even though it differed from the

previous example in that it often had a negative connotation. This was a way of viewing the other rather than the self, but it still involved the use of healthy eating/diet as a core part of identity. "Gym bros" were the opposite of what people wanted to be or wanted to be associated with. Their advice was bad, they were rude, and you did not want to be around them. Depending on who you believed, they either promoted healthy living or over-exercising. Their culture was either about staying healthy and being your best self or about promoting and normalizing eating disorders among men. The gym bro, just like *that girl*, spent a lot of time at the gym, focused on the types of foods that he ate, and had a routine where fitness and physical activity played a central role. His whole personality was wrapped up in the gym, fitness, and his body (which, arguably, is not a difference from *that girl*, but that is a digression, and an argument for another time[11]). He put down others that did not subscribe to the same values he did, and he judged other people in the gym and/or others' bodies. He was overly confident about his knowledge of nutrition, fitness, exercise, and health, and pushed others to be just like him, spouting his bad talking points to anyone who would listen, and even those who would not. In many ways, the gym bro was the epitome of an overly masculine, misogynistic caricature of what men interested in fitness were like.

However, the gym bro was not entirely fictional. Men could be dismissed in comment sections and videos for being "gym bros" who did not know what they were talking about, were pushing ideas based only on physical appearance rather than health, or were promoting harmful ideas about body image, weight, eating, or nutrition. Whether men distanced themselves from being gym bros is something about which I am not sure. However, I do know that fitness content that was very popular sometimes involved displaying behaviors/ideas that were not associated

[11] The types of gendered analyses needed to explore the different reactions to these two identities are beyond the scope of this thesis.

with the “gym bro” attitude. For example, there were several very popular videos of male fitness influencers trying the workouts women at their gyms did and commenting about how difficult/impossible they were. This rejection of the insistence on the superior strength and fitness of men was a signal that they were not gym bros, for which they were rewarded with likes, views, and many supportive comments. The videos I saw that appeared to embody the gym bro mindset, anecdotally, did not appear to be watched by women. The profile pictures in the comments tended to appear to be men, and the words “dude” and “bro” were thrown around frequently between users in the comment sections, unlike in other comment sections of a lot of fitness/nutrition/exercise content, where many commenters seemed to be female. While the gym bro may have been an identity that men aspired to, it was one for which women frequently expressed disdain.

It is entirely possible that men also distanced themselves from this particular identity. In fact, when a male interviewee was asked about gym bros, he was unfamiliar with the term, and when I described the traits attributed to gym bros in the content I had seen, he indicated that that was not what the men he watched were like. Rather, he described male fitness communities on the app disliking a different category of person, who insulted people who were just starting out and tore others down rather than being helpful and understanding that everyone started somewhere. The types of identities that people claim or that they attribute to the problematic other on the app are a potential area for further investigation. As evidenced by this exchange with the interviewee, the examples provided here are not at all comprehensive, and may not be widely known outside of the side of TikTok that I was observing. These descriptions are merely examples of what was happening in one particular place on the app at this particular point in time. This does not make them trivial, though, as this type of content plays into existing ideas

about the ties between nutrition and identity, citizenship, and morality. It also increases focus on foods and healthy eating, which can have negative consequences. Because ideas about healthy eating are wrapped into identity, they cannot be described as fads, as they will affect people for longer than the "trend" lasts. Even without giving specific information about what a healthy diet is, these discourses reinforced the idea that eating healthily is a key part of personhood, identity, and morality, and invited viewers to view the way that they eat as key to a way of being, increasing their focus on (and potentially obsessions with) eating healthily. A concern that one interviewee had about diet-related content on TikTok was that the algorithm could quickly latch onto it, and people could see video after video focused on eating healthily, which might lead to an unhealthy obsession. This is entirely possible. I easily got to a point on my account where most of the videos I watched were related to healthy eating—as were many of the ads. I regularly scrolled through video after video of healthy eating/fitness content, interrupted by ads for things like workout clothing, "athletic greens", "macro butter", workout apps, and even scales (one of which could supposedly calculate BMI). While I was intentionally seeking out this content, the potential of a slight interest to cascade into an obsession with the assistance of the algorithm, particularly as these videos help centralize healthy eating in ideas about personhood, identity, and, as will be discussed next, community, is certainly not trivial, even if these two specific examples of identity being described in terms of healthy eating/fitness are.

## Community

Identity is not the only thing being constructed on TikTok. Community is also imagined and built on the app. Just as there are some agreed upon categories of types of people, like *that girl* and the gym bro, there are agreed upon niche subcommunities that may or may not get along with each other. Just as people define their own identities and perform selfhood in terms of

these identities, people also define themselves according to inclusion in or distance from certain subcultures.

People build community on TikTok in many ways. Sometimes, this is through shared identities or experiences[12] and other times it is related to shared interests[13]. Community is established and built in many ways, and people reject or accept membership in certain communities/identities constantly. FoodTok usually seemed to have a positive reputation, but "DietTok/Diet TikTok" might have been more controversial. GymTok and FitnessTok functioned as sort of interest-based sides of TikTok, but also did involve construction of identity. Like other sides of TikTok, these communities can become insular, as they place people in echo chambers/bubbles of people with similar interests or opinions.

The negative reputation of diet TikTok was evident in that multiple interviewees initially claimed not to have seen content related to diet, and then, for example, later specified that they were on "Gym TikTok" and not "Diet TikTok". Gym TikTok was an acceptable interest-based side of TikTok to claim association with, while Diet TikTok tended to involve an interest that was less socially acceptable or desirable. The interviewees in question did identify as female, which may have played a role in their denial of involvement in Diet TikTok, as the self-policing[14] against harmful diet language and harmful diet ideas is more likely to have reached them. Some did report seeing videos like "what I eat in a days" or recipe videos following various diets when asked directly, despite their assertions that they did not intentionally seek out such content or participate in the associated sides of TikTok.

[12] Jew Tok, Ex-Mormon TikTok, ED Recovery TikTok
[13] BookTok, Politics/Political TikTok, Fan Culture Sides of TikTok
[14] Self-policing is discussed at length in the chapter about boundaries.

While some people distanced themselves from Diet TikTok as a community, others within fitness/gym/health/diet TikTok distanced themselves from what they viewed as the more harmful sub-communities, which were also undesirable, and did not place themselves inside of the community that was causing problems. For example, women made comments about problems caused by "gym bros" who were part of a different identity group, and thus did not belong to their communities. People that posted about diet or healthy eating would also separate themselves from pro-ana content, which they criticized. They also sometimes pointed to themselves as separate from harmful ways of thinking by excluding calorie counts, using trigger warnings, mentioning phrases like "intuitive eating" or "mindful eating", focusing on "fat loss" rather than "weight loss", or making claims that certain foods/diets made them "feel better/more energized/healthier" or other claims that served as proxies for "weight loss", a trend that has been noted elsewhere in relation to strategies used by wellness brands (Gordon and Hobbes 2021). In this way, communities were frequently used not just for a sense of belonging and for social ties, but also as a defense mechanism against criticism, as other, more problematic, less careful, worse, or generally disliked subcommunities took the blame for harmful trends, regardless of whether the whole group of subcommunities was truly to blame.

The constantly shifting boundaries of identities and communities allowed for people to position themselves as "on the right side" or as "one of the good ones", since there was always a different group/person/type of person that was doing something more harmful than they were, and since the people watching their content typically belonged to the same community as them, making viewers unlikely to criticize them, and likely to agree with their assessments that other communities were harmful. For example, some of the more extreme fitness communities believed that they were right to be fatphobic and to aggressively message about weight loss, as

the other subcultures were just “making excuses” for lazy fat people, were not telling the truth, were being bribed by someone, were oversensitive, etc., while many more mainstream creators blamed gym bro/fitness bro culture for encouraging calorie counting, promoting misinformation about nutrition, oversimplifying weight loss, stigmatizing people by blaming them for their lack of weight loss, and otherwise promoting diet culture and disordered eating. This is not described here to frame TikTok communities as dangerous entities, but rather to contextualize how people were interacting on the app, and how discussions about healthy eating/disordered eating happened. An understanding of how these subcommunities blamed one another for their perceived negative effects is important to understanding the social landscape of TikTok, but community on TikTok is much more than just a device for deflecting blame. These distinctions between different identities and communities could be part of what allowed creators to feel that they were not responsible for negative outcomes and users to feel that they were not at risk of negative outcomes. If problematic or “less responsible” content was happening on “another side” or in “another community”, then people not in that community/on that side of TikTok were not at risk of seeing it and being affected by it, and the people creating content on that side/in that community were responsible for it. The endless number of subcommunities, and the continual existence of some ever-more-problematic/careless “other” allowed creators and users to feel that they were not involved with or responsible for content that was negative, and thus could not be associated with or blamed for negative outcomes that are discussed in relation to TikTok.

Community was also often built across platforms through TikTok. While communities may have come together based on algorithmic suggestions and associations, and through repeated interaction based on following specific creators/topics or watching certain kinds of videos, these communities could be stabilized and made less dependent on the algorithm. Users

might have followed one another and communicated via direct messaging or in comment sections. They might have exchanged contact information or connected on other platforms (like Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter). However, on the fitness/diet side of TikTok, community was often intentionally created and sold by creators. Several recipe books and meal prep guides that I saw linked to the bios of creators had notes that purchasing them included access to a Facebook group of other people who had purchased the item. I did not join any such group, as my IRB clearance did not allow for cross-platform interaction. However, they were frequently included as ways to have accountability for sticking to a plan, talk to other like-minded people, get help from the creator who made the resource in question, or otherwise find community support.

Sometimes, community was held together more loosely, but the idea of a community doing something together was directly invoked. This occasionally involved creators asking people to "cook with me", "get ready with me", or "meal prep with me", when what they meant was *watch* me cook, get ready, or meal prep. Other times, this happened on a live, where people could comment in real time. On TikTok, watching someone was a way of being "with" someone, as it involved witnessing their lives, seeing what their days were like, or understanding how they lived/behaved/acted/talked. In this way, even watching TikToks could be a method of building community and relationships, as watching someone was redefined as an inherently social action, or even as an interaction, challenging theoretical modes that deem these sorts of public social media posts to be one-sided interactions.

The idea of a community was also invoked occasionally with fitness trends/videos, as creators asked people to try challenges with them. Then, as the creator posted updates each day, people were invited to comment on the videos, encouraging them to keep going. Viewers could also share their own progress with the creator. While this interaction is clearly lopsided, and the

community in question had a social structure that is not similar to one that would exist off the app, this is still a form of community building, especially as the social lives of users migrated online. This type of discussion was present in fitness challenge trends, especially videos about "75 hard".

**July 14th, 2021**

> *Today the content was the type of stuff I usually see. I have been seeing people doing 75 hard. It's a challenge that works well for TikTok, the focus is on this daily routine and what you eat, so the type of content fits into the sorts of things people post on the app related to diet/weight loss/fitness generally. Also, it's part of the whole authenticity thing. "I'm just a regular person, trying to do this challenge, we'll see what happens, follow along!" Also, they encourage followers to try with them so they can "do it together". The community aspect of it all is important. Anyways, I missed the first 75 hard trend, but I think there's a wave of it going on now.*

**July 19th, 2021**

> *Another interesting one. The stickers say "6 MONTHS CHALLENGE" "*We start August the 1st*", "-No PO*RN", "-Cold showers", "Wake up before 8 AM", "Drink only water", "Train 5-6x a week", "No cheat days", "Take risks", "Eat only healthy foods", "My goal is to build a strong community of ambitious people, thank you all for 225k already! KEEP GRINDING!". The caption is "Who's ready?!". This is a male creator. The top comments are joking about giving up after the first rule. Others are more serious. The video has 250,300 likes and 1.8 million views. The audio is some sort of discordant noise, I can't identify it and the audio isn't labeled in a helpful way.*

**July 25th, 2021**

> *I saw a video about "75 soft". According to the audio, it's "like the 75 hard but for people who don't have the time for two 45 minute workouts a day". The rules are "eat well and only drink on social occasions", "train for 45 minutes everyday. 75 days, no days off, with one day as active recovery every week", "drink three liters of water a day", and "read 10 pages a day of any book". The video is clips of a woman training, making food, drinking water, and showing a book. It has 373,400 likes and 2.3 million views.*

In the last example, a separate community was being established. The people participating in "75 soft" also wanted to focus on fitness and healthy living, but they had busier lives. They had a lifestyle that did not permit 75 hard, but they still wanted the other aspects of accountability and community associated with the challenge, so they formed their own label, challenge, and community. Just like in the video about being *that girl* without the aesthetic, 75

soft claimed to offer a similar identity or set of behaviors that was more attainable. This is not to say that these things are all negative or all inherently harmful. 75 soft, as described in this video, involved making time for some forms of self-care and leaving time for exercise, mostly. It could be argued that imagined community is used here to allow people to visualize themselves as part of a sort of attainable healthy lifestyle that leaves space for the rest of their lives. That may not be bad. Additionally, there are several areas of TikTok in which communities attempt to help one another through difficulties related to their shared experiences. One of the main places that this happened in relation to diet/fitness/food content is ED Recovery TikTok, where users often attempt to help and encourage each one another in the process of recovery. Even when users were not fully in an ED recovery space or may not have identified as being in that community, there was some level of support that often occurred, as people who shared similar experiences with one another in the comments sometimes had exchanges that seem almost support-group-like. Community-building on TikTok was not purely negative, and it was not uniform. It is certainly not my intent to portray the ability of people to find online community, real or imagined, on TikTok as harmful, when, in many cases, it may have been helpful.

Instead, my intention is to demonstrate that these processes – identity building and community building – are happening on the app, which, when coupled with discourses about healthy eating and ways of being healthy/fit, requires attention, as it can amplify the effects of these discourses. When these processes are occurring, content about healthy eating can be very powerful and can affect users strongly, as, for example, eating disorders emerge in intersubjective relationships (R. Lester 2019). Since TikTok is a place in which these intersubjective relationships are developed, and in which these processes occur extremely

quickly and frequently, it merits serious attention as a site of social analysis, not just as a tool that affects other social sites.

Of course, TikTok is not the only platform where identity, community, and healthy eating are presented as intertwined. These trends about morality, identity, and healthy eating have been happening since long before the internet existed. Blaming TikTok as a platform or the content as a set of media for larger ongoing social processes is not right and is not the goal of this thesis. We should not treat TikTok as a scapegoat or blame its young creators for reproducing processes that have been occurring off the app for years. The app is just facilitating those processes at a rapid rate and the ideas are coming from decentralized places (rather than the centralized locations of previous nutrition messaging). The way the app functions and is used is contributing to the effectiveness of this, but the platform itself is not generating these ideas or processes. In other words, TikTok did not create alimentary politics, but its algorithm helps these ideas spread. Several of the features of TikTok, including the endless depth of subcommunities, extreme variety in content available, and difficult to track origins of ideas/sources, are contributing to the difficulty in tracking, monitoring, or controlling the content on the app. However, understanding what is happening on the app and how is important in terms of correcting misinformation, knowing how to view or discuss social media in the future, and dealing with the direct consequences of exposure to this content and these ideas.

# Chapter 3: Authority, Credibility, and Trust

This chapter explores how knowledge and truth are developed and debated in the relevant communities on the app. It begins with a discussion about the influence of money on creators' actions and content, which is relevant to how people perceive creators' statements as "authentic", "credible", or "trustworthy". It then delves into the different ways that creators possess or demonstrate authority while looking into some of the complex dynamics involved in authority in these communities that do not follow traditional "top-down" information patterns. Then, arguments over what is true/what knowledge is correct are investigated as being part of an internal "fact-checking" mechanism that is carried out be users. This fact-checking is widespread, and is a key part of how knowledge is constructed on the app. The complexities of authority and fact-checking are demonstrated through examples from fieldnotes about content on the app and through comments made by interviewees about evaluating whether someone is correct or something is true.

## Selling

Many videos were selling (or helping sell) something. This is important because selling both relied on and affected authority. Sometimes, this selling was overt. Creators or videos may have been sponsored, which they disclosed by putting #ad or #sponsored in the caption. Also, sponsored videos typically appeared with a grey box that said "sponsored" on the app. However, sometimes creators were simply sent products for free, which they then discussed. Aeropostale, for example, sent popular creators boxes of its clothing, allowing the creators to record and post "haul" videos with their products, which helped drive a surge in interest in and purchases of their "tiny tops" (Parisi 2021). Products were constantly being sold or promoted on the app, whether the creators were being compensated for their promotion or not. Much of the time, selling took

place in creators' bios. For example, one creator's bio was "Realistic Nutrition Coach/Grab my Recipe Book/Apply for my coaching[15]". Another creator's bio was "Food is meant to be enjoyed ! College guy studying Nutrition". There was a link to use his discount code on musclupbars.com. It appeared in other ways, though. It sometimes appeared in the video itself, either as the focus of the video or more subtly, like a casual product placement.

**June 15th, 2021**

> *The first video I saw when I switched to this account was mini banana pancakes. The audio is the modified version of "Watermelon Sugar" (watermelon sugar hi, baby do you want to be mine) by Harry Styles. There is no recipe. Just a quick set of clips that are visually appealing. The caption says "mini banana pancakes (sparkle emoji shopping cart emoji) on our serving dishes. Visit our website (link in bio)". I went to the website. It has a lot of recipes, but that isn't what they're selling. That's how they get you onto the website. They're selling pans, cutting boards, serving trays, etc. Most of their videos are of them making food using things on their website. The captions say things like "follow for more recipes". Some of the videos are more direct about using their products than others. The video I just saw has 1.7 million views. The comments say things like "where are those dishes from?!", "omg making this tomorrow thanks", "where u get that bowl", "I have to make these next time I make breakfast it's looks so simple", "I'm making that tomorrow morning", "I would try that!!!". It looks like people here are buying what they're selling (the recipe, and, maybe, the serving dish).*

**June 17th, 2021**

> *While I got ready to sleep, I saw a video that was fairly interesting. It was a video of someone making a sandwich. The sandwich looked really good, and the video was very calming. I looked at the account name and it was a brand. What were they selling? Chips. I watched the video again, and confirmed that there is a clip of the chips being opened and poured onto the plate. I hadn't even noticed.*

**June 20th, 2021**

> *A what I eat in a day to "Good 4 u" by Olivia Rodrigo. The opening clip of the creator has her in a matching sports bra and leggings. The seller of said outfit is tagged in the comments. The rest of the video is clips of the food, as promised, although there is a clip of her stomach that says "bloat" on it.*

Sometimes, creators were selling things that they had created, rather than promoting other products.

[15] In descriptions of bios, "/" is used to signify a line break.

**June 21st, 2021**

*A man talking about weight loss versus fat loss. According to him, for weight loss you should do a lot of cardio, slash your calories, and stop eating carbs. He does say that if you do this, you will likely gain all the weight again. To lose fat, you should weight train 3-4 times per week, do a small calorie deficit, and eat more protein. Apparently, this will make you look lean, give you more energy, and strengthen your metabolism. A sampling of some of the top comments: "I just wanna be skinny", "I wanna lose both", "I wanna be a skinny legend but carbs are my only source of happiness", "Do you have any good apps that can help me stay on top of myself?!". Don't worry, he does. He replied "I like my own app ClubBloom (maybe a little biased) but MyFitnessPal is great for food- the app Stacked is great for workouts!".*

**June 21st, 2021**

*I got a cooking video. It's a reply to a comment (can you make something that's really simple but also really low calorie). The caption includes that there is a link to his cookbook in his bio. I went to see what kind of book it is, and the follower count catches me off guard. 1.6 million is more than I usually see for videos like this. The bio says (among other things) "Get my cookbook for ONLY £7.50" with a link in the next line. He is currently live. He seems to be making pancakes. Actually, it might be crepes. He Clarifies that they will be "Crepe style pancakes". I'm not interested in watching the people in the comments argue about the difference between pancakes and crepes. I click on the link to see what he's selling. The cookbook is called "500 or Less". It's an Ebook, and purchase includes access to a private facebook group, 30 recipes, links to video tutorials of the recipes, that all the meals are added to MyFitnessPal so that you can track them, tips on losing/gaining/maintaining weight, meal prep tips, tips on managing food cravings/binge eating, and tips on staying motivated. He also sells a sauce and aprons. There are a few other "Eco Products" sold as well.*

Nutrition and wellness content was often selling all kinds of products – cookbooks, supplements, foods, and clothes. This is consistent with trends noted in larger "alternative wellness" and nutrition movements (Lau 2000) .

## Trust and Sponsorship

While selling relied on some form of authority, it also affected the credibility and authority of the creator who was selling or appeared to be selling something. Importantly, people were less likely to believe or trust creators if they thought that the creator was being paid to promote a product or say a specific thing. People trusted creators more if they thought they were not being compensated for their views.

**June 24th, 2021**

> *A woman is talking about solving her issues with bloating. She's talking about a product that has helped her (bloomnu). There is no #ad. The first comment I see when I open the comment section is "Is this your genuine opinion or an ad? I NEED to know".*

One interviewee said that she thought that the fitness content might be more focused on selling things/sponsorships than other areas of the app were. This might have been true. As described above, there was a lot of selling. Additionally, an interviewee mentioned that a main factor in determining whether to trust something a creator said was whether they were paid to say it.

One of the most important ways of maintaining credibility was through authenticity. Authenticity has been highlighted as a necessity for food celebrities in general (Johnston and Goodman 2015), and was certainly necessary for nutrition or fitness creators on TikTok. While some creators had authority, many creators relied heavily on another quality for engagement and trust—authenticity. Without authenticity, anything a creator posted was not credible, even if the creator theoretically had authority. Importantly, authority in the traditional sense was optional, as people did not need "authority" to speak about their own personal experiences or opinions. Essentially, every creator had authority over their own experiences, unless they could not be trusted to be telling the truth. Usually, this corruption of trust occurred through some form of monetization. Authority was very complex, as was authenticity, but the selling aspect affected authenticity heavily. Sometimes, creators that were selling something or were sponsored by a brand could still be trusted, provided that the perception was that they were being authentic in their support of the product. Compensation could be acceptable, but not if it seemed to be leading to inauthenticity. It also casted an immediate shadow of doubt. However, TikTok introduced a feature that allowed advertisers to pay to promote videos after they had already been made,

which causes them to have an indication that they are sponsored (Hutchinson 2021)[16]. This did not necessarily interfere with authenticity, since the creator, at least in theory, had already made the video with their views in it before the brand got involved with compensation and monetization. Since this began, it has become a little less clear which content was created after money was involved and which was not. This blurring between paid promotion and actual opinions has resulted in "authenticity" and credibility becoming less clear, as it is more difficult to identify who was paid to say something and who was paid for having said something. Also, it is possible to be paid to say something that you believe in. So, while monetization does decrease trust, authority, and credibility, it is not as clean of a break as some people suggested when asked.

"Money" in the larger sense was also used in discussions suggesting that authorities could not be trusted, as they were being bribed, were lying for financial gain, or were somehow profiting off of others' misfortune. Discussions about who makes money and how were sometimes evoked in what we might call "extreme" claims about the health of certain foods, whether doctors or dietitians could be trusted or knew what they were talking about, and what the "medical establishment" promoted versus what was true. The effects of money, monetization, and selling on trust are probably not surprising, as they are also characteristic of other health and wellness spaces, where phrases like "what medicine is hiding" and "what doctors don't what you to know" are used. Wellness movements have been linked to distrust of power, industry, and the establishment more broadly as a result of their overlap with far-right conspiracy theories (Wiseman 2021). On TikTok, too, money played a significant role in these complex issues of who could be trusted, who knew the truth, and who was telling the truth, so it does not make

[16] TikTok also announced the feature on "TikTok for Business" (TikTok For Business Editorial Team 2021).

sense to discuss authority on TikTok without addressing money, which influenced so much of what happened on TikTok, especially on the fitness/diet side of TikTok, so heavily. That being said, monetization was not the only factor involved in creating trust, credibility, or authority, and to say that it was the sole arbiter of what was true, credible, or authentic would be an over-simplification of the processes of the creation of these things.

## Authority

Creators on TikTok used many tactics to assert authority about subjects. For example, creators cited sources verbally, greenscreened[17] relevant news articles behind them, or stated their qualifications. On the sides of TikTok where fitness and diet were discussed, there were several ways that people asserted authority. For several types of videos, visual elements were used to demonstrate authority. Before showing how to make a healthy recipe, for example, a male-identifying creator would often appear shirtless in the first frame of a video, and a female-identifying creator would often appear in leggings and a crop top or sports bra. Before a weight loss tips video, before and after images would often be shown. Before a workout routine, an image of the creator or some progress pictures would often be shown. These types of visual appeals to authority were common, especially when creators framed their advice as "what worked for them" and not just general advice. This framing fit in with the desire for "authentic" influencers.

Other creators made claims to authority by either verbally stating a qualification, mentioning it in a sticker on the video, or including it in their bios. For example, many fitness influencers included that they were certified personal trainers or nutritionists in their bios.

[17] The "Greenscreen" effect allows users to upload a photo to serve as the background of a video.

Dietitians tended to say that they were dietitians when they were attempting to "fact-check" claims on the app. Medical Doctors (MDs) similarly used their titles to assert authority. MDs sometimes relied on visual cues to demonstrate authority, for example by wearing scrubs and/or having stethoscopes around their necks. However, using titles to assert authority was not always effective. There are many different titles, and it was not always clear who should be trusted. Some people occasionally pointed out that it is not that difficult to be certified as a personal trainer, so creators who used that title as a source of authority should not be blindly trusted. Others occasionally pointed out that while nutritionists and dietitians sound like the same thing, they are entirely different, and dietitians have more strict qualifications. Other claims to authority included less conventional titles, like "holistic nutritionist", "holistic skincare expert", "culinary medicine specialist", and many others. These claims to authority did not always work, as some contested the relevance, expertise, or motivations of these individuals. For example, after a dietitian attempted to fact-check a video about foods to avoid (5 things I would NEVER eat as a holistic nutritionist), the people in the replies got into an argument about how much authority the dietitian had. Some people discussed that she had more education on the subject than the nutritionist, but others indicated that her motivation was bad because she profited off of people being unhealthy, so she might be lying. Some also commented about how a degree did not mean that she was automatically right, that there were many reasons someone might become a nutritionist instead of a dietitian, and that education did not always equate to intelligence. They also argued that dietitians did not have a monopoly on the truth. Other times, though, these appeals to authority were successful, as people turned to popular dietitians for "fact or cap"[18] style videos about current food/fitness trends, but this was not always the case.

[18] Fact or Cap videos claim to test whether something is true (fact) or false (cap).

Interviewees mentioned a variety of ways that contributed to their evaluation of whether something was true or whether someone should be trusted to speak about a topic. Forms of demonstrating authority that interviewees mentioned included stating titles/qualifications, citing sources (verbally, in the comments, or by using the greenscreen effect to show the source behind them), saying things that were consistent with information that they already knew, and not having people correcting them in the comments. Some also mentioned potentially searching the internet for information about claims they were curious about to see if they could find sources corroborating a statement. Overall, authority was complicated, but users were not passive, and described using a variety of signals, cues, and strategies to evaluate someone's authority or a statement's factualness. Several other types of authority, aside from these more formal/traditional kinds, also played a role.

## Appearance as Authority

Appearing thin, fit, or otherwise ideal gave a person authority, even if they did not attempt to exercise it. This is one of the reasons that despite people's attempts to separate fitness/gym content from content about diet, these things can never be fully separated. Fitness/gym influencers who looked fit/thin were asked questions about what they ate, just like people who posted recipe videos were asked about what they did in a day. Appearance was both authority and experience, so anyone with an "ideal" appearance could attempt to assert authority by sharing their experiences, with varying degrees of success.

**June 19th, 2021**

> *A girl stands in the frame in a bikini. "Favorite Crime" by Olivia Rodrigo is playing, the sticker says "What I EAT IN A DAY TO FUEL + NOURISH MY BODY social eating edition". The caption and a sticker say that there is a meal plan subscription link in her bio. We have #givemeglo and #ad. Givemeglo is the name of the account. The bio has the link as promised. It's $20 per month, and apparently it includes a weekly grocery list, a weekly meal plan, and nutrition guidance. "SIGN UP AND SEE EXACTLY WHAT ALAY*

*EATS IN A DAY!". She also has links to some discounts on activewear and blender bombs. I click on another video on her account that looks similar to the one I just watched. The sounds is "Knock Knock" by Mac Miller. She stands there in the same bikini. It may actually be the same clip. The sticker says "WANT TO START EATING HEALTHY BUT DON'T KNOW HOW?" The clips switch to videos of colorful fruits and vegetables/food, then her smiling. The sticker says "LET ME SHOW YOU. JOIN THE GIVE ME GLO NUTRITION SUBSCRIPTION LINK IN BIO". This appeal to authority is common. She is fit and thin, let her tell you how to eat healthily.*

## You Cannot Look Like Me: An Attempt to Reject Authority

The following example explores the extent to which appearance could be a form of authority, as the creator recognized the power of appearance directly. To understand the following example, a little bit of background information about a trend/popular sound that was spreading at the time is necessary. The sound in question is from *Cars.* It goes "and remember, with a little bit of rust-eez", and then the next part, "and an insane amount of luck", sounds like it is said quietly out of the side of someone's mouth. Then, it goes back to speaking in a normal way for "you too can look like me. Ka-Chow". Videos that used this sound relied on the assumption that whatever is attributed to the "and an insane amount of luck" part is a secret or something that people do not want you to know/want to admit. This example includes several comments that are troubling, but it is analytically interesting. Portions of comment threads are included as the discussion is particularly revealing. Comments appear in quotes, and replies are separated by dashes.

**July 27th, 2021**

*I also saw a video of a thin woman. It has the "and remember with a little bit of rust-eez" audio. The text on the screen says "And remember with a little bit of genetics". She points to the next sticker with both hands "That's literally it.. it's just genetics". She mouths along to the audio the whole time. "Don't let anybody sell you a 'model body' diet or workout plan". The audio says "you too can look like me" as the sticker says "Kendall Jenner doesn't have that body from diet or exercise". "Ka-Chow" goes with "Learn to love the skin you're in". She's wearing what appears to be a bikini with a skirt wrap over the bottoms. The caption is "This is NOT me gloating or try to show off my body, just being realistic why I don't post workout/eating content… cuz I would be selling you a lie (sparkle emoji)".This video has 171,100 likes and 1.6 million views. The*

*comments seem supportive, although there are a few that are upset at other people missing the point. I'll scroll to see if I can find the people in question.*

*"children always comment "workout routine??" on model bodies bc they think that any workout/diet plan will transform them whe it's mostly genetics :(".*
*-I mean i'm pretty sure you can build your genes and glutes by doing a sort of focused bodybuilding*
*-You can't change your bone structure to look like that*
*-she very obviously does not body build though to add volume to specific areas. Asking for a workout routine from someone who*
*-built up weight in certain areas is different from saying you can workout to achieve a body caused by bone structures*

*"bro why r people pressed ab this she is so right. some ppl can never HEALTHILY be that skinny bc that's not what their body was made to look like"*

*"for those who clearly don't get it (which i see being mostly guys) of course you can lose weight and build muscle through working out that's not what-*
*--she's saying. it's that figure and frame are typically genetics. let's say someone with a rectuangular frame wants to lose weight. she can for sure-*
*--get lean muscle and lose weight but if she's looking to get that curvy hourglass figure she most likely will not because of her genetics. another-*

*"I was fat now I'm slim, diet and exercise, genetics just means u don't need to put in the hard work, the enables lack oif accountability"*
*-Her point is her body type just isn't achievable or realistic for a lot of people. You can be skinny and look nothing like her.*
*-Not long legs but you'd be surprised how good u look slim*
*-I'm fairly certain that's completely false, I was a tank didn't look fat big frame lost 30kg I'm a bean stalk*
*-of my bones won't chance and I won't ever get that petit model look. And trust me, I have dismorphya and an E.D. I tried it all, but it gets to*
*-a point where you can't get smaller without putting your health in risk. Yes, you can look you best, but your structure and you shouldn't want to*
*-you can't get any of the things i just listed with exercise and diet. most women can't get a thing gap in a healthy way anyways.*
*-I don't have those things but I wasted the best part of my life being a fat unaccountable pig. (original commentor)*
*-She's talking about the bones structure*

*"nah lol… I don't understand why people always assume everything is genetics when you are just in a calorie deficit. I'm not criticizing anybody-*
*-Yes obvi u can loose weight but u can't change ur bone structure and rib cage.*
*-Rib cage you can with hypropressive exercise*
*-U can tone ur abs obviously but u can't change the shape of ur skeleton without surgery.*
*-lol no*

*-You don't know what you're talking about lol, you cannot change if you have a wide ribcage with exercise*
*-People get their ribs removed it's so dangerous*
*-Yeah Ik but non-surgically I meant. Is the procedure dangerous? Or is it just cos ribs r meant to protect ur organs lol*
*-The bottom one is ok to remove but the others protect ur organs and yea I think it's a dangerous procedure*
*-Yeah that's what I assumed, ty x*
*-It is absolutely dangerous to remove your ribs, your ribs protect your lungs which are very delicate without which for even a sec you die.*
*-literally like you can lose weight but no one can just make you look like a model over night*

*Some comments are commenting that this just made them more unhappy, or are irritated that she is "gate-keeping" by not telling them what she eats or how she exercises. Others are grateful to her for saying this. It's a mixed bag. There are a few men in the comments receiving a lot of backlash from women.*

There was a discussion happening in this exchange about what is and is not achievable through diet and exercise, but that is not the point. The creator acknowledged that she had been asked for "what I eat in a day" videos or for exercise routines, but did not post them because it would be dishonest, as she knew that they were not the reason that she looked the way she did, and she did not wish to sell the idea that her look was achievable to anyone who followed her advice to her (presumably young female) viewers. There was an argument happening, but nobody was disputing that she had the power to "sell" this type of content because her appearance gave her the authority to do so. The argument was about whether she should and whether it was achievable for others. This example is strange, because it is rare to see someone refuse to sell something that they could sell, refuse to post content that they know would do well, or refuse to claim authority/trust that others are clearly prepared to give them, especially when there is little that they could do that would destroy the authority/trust in question, meaning that there is little risk of losing that power. However, it also demonstrates something that is very important—some of these issues were being discussed on the app. Users and creators were aware

of some of these dynamics, and they were directly criticizing them, as the creator in this example was.

There were also several other dynamics at play in this case. For example, there was a gendered response to the men who commented that this was an oversimplification or was untrue. Additionally, some of the men were commenting things that were very harsh. These comments were jarring, as this type of discussion was generally outside the bounds of what I normally saw on TikTok, as it fell into the category of things that might receive backlash for promoting negative body images, dangerous dieting, or disordered eating. The gendered differences in who was allowed to talk about these things, what they were allowed to say, and who was seen as speaking too broadly without enough knowledge were all at play.

## Weight Loss as Authority

Sometimes, authority was gained by showing that the creators themselves had successfully lost weight. This weight loss was sometimes visually shown (through before and after pictures) or demonstrated through the use of numbers (number of pounds lost or starting weight and ending weight). Because of the use of photos to demonstrate weight loss, sometimes appearance also contributed to the authority of someone who mentioned weight loss. Additionally, since people generally had authority over their own personal experiences, sharing what they did to lose weight was often tolerated if it was phrased as "this is what I did" and not "this is what you/everyone should do".

**June 19th, 2021**

> *Here we go. "Healthy dessert I ate to lose 100 pounds in 4 months". It is apparently cut up apples covered in cinnamon that have been in the air fryer. The video has 1.1 million views. The audio is "Paparazzi" by Kim Dracula. Aggressive. Hang on. 100 pounds in 4 months is like 8 pounds a week. Her bio says "Former binge eater (new line) NOT a dietician (new line) Follow my insta (new line) See youTube!!". She clarifies in the comments "THE REC AMOUNT IS 2lb WEEK. I used to binge 3-6k cal a DAY. Went*

*down to 1350 and did cardio. My metabolism just responded and I lose the weight". People are arguing in the comments. 8 lb per week is causing people to tell her to take down the video and stop spreading misinformation or dangerous ideas about weight loss. Someone says "I'm sorry did you say 100 pds in four months?! Teach me". People are extremely angry at each other in the comments, saying that others don't know what they're talking about. Some are saying that people who are overweight can drop a lot of weight quickly. Some people want more tips, because she lost the weight more quickly than they are losing weight, and they want to know her secrets. This comment section is a mess. Almost every one of her videos starts with (food) that helped me lose 100 pounds in 4 months". That seems to be the claim to authority. Almost every video has some mention of the 100 pounds in 4 months.*

This video caught my attention fairly quickly. The numbers being thrown around were large, and they were the type that sometimes caused backlash. There was some of that happening here, but there was a countering of that logic, as people argued that it technically was not over a line because this case had attributes that made it different from the cases in which the rule applied. Some people, of course, were ignoring that discussion completely. Looking at the one video was concerning, but going to her profile and seeing every video have a similar formatting was more alarming. This was intentional and repetitive. She seemed to know that those numbers would get people's attention (either for positive or negative reasons). Unfortunately, on TikTok, all engagement might help the creator. This is not to say that everyone watching that video was involved in arguing about the actual medical reality of how many pounds it is safe to lose per week. People may never have even opened the comment section. Many people just wanted information from her because that was convincing. How had she done it? How had she lost weight so much faster than they could? There were all kinds of reactions to the video, and there were so many different reasons for which people might have watched it. It demonstrated, however, an understanding trend. Having successfully lost weight is, in and of itself, a qualification that gives creators authority—authority which this creator was quick to claim. In

some cases, this authority is not just claimed for engagement as in the above example, but also in order to advertise merchandise, as in the following example.

**June 21st, 2021**

> *A video with photos of a weight loss transformation of a couple which is attributed to eating healthy. The creator explains (through photo montages and stickers) that she started sharing her recipes to help others, and now she is excited to announce that she is selling a paperback cookbook. The video has 949,100 views. The audio is "Better" by Khalid. I go look at what she's promoting. The "Eat Better" cookbook is $20, as is the "Be Better" Nutrition guide. The Live Better Bundle (which includes both) is $35.*

Here, the creator attempted to leverage her experience with weight loss as a form of authority to sell a cookbook. She knew that this made her qualified to share, especially since she was sharing recipes that she made while losing weight, which fell into the category of sharing "her experience". Here, weight loss as authority and credibility through authenticity (she was sharing her experiences and claimed to want to help others) were combined as a marketing strategy.

**July 26th, 2021**

> *Another video of note was one that had "healthy snack ideas from someone who lost 115lbs in 10 months". The snacks were veggies and hummus, yogurt and berries, oat bites, chocolate covered bananas, jerky, hard boiled eggs, cucumber salad with vinegar, mango and tajin, and kale chips. The video has 1.3 million likes and 4.5 million views. The creator's bio is "weight loss hacks & motivation". This is by far her most popular video.*

In this case, numbers rather than images served as the demonstration of authority. The weight loss was what made the food content worth watching, as it was the reason her ideas mattered or might have been of use to the viewer. Past success gave creators authority on the subject of how to lose weight, and their advice may have been even more useful than that of traditional authority figures, as the element of personal experience made them more credible and trustworthy than "experts" who gave generic weight loss advice.

**August 6th, 2021**

> *I also got a video of "What I buy at Costco to stay in a calorie deficit". She shows some items she likes. She does say "I'm not a nutritionist BUT I used to look like this… now I look like this" (shows weight loss photos). The video has 277,500 likes and 2.1 million views. Interestingly, the caption is "Tictok took down my vid on how to calculate your calories Another one will be up soon! #caloriedeficit #weightlossjourney #costcobuys #weightloss". The commenters are irritated that some people are saying she looked better in the first picture. They say things like "Those people saying she looks better in first picture are rude. She put in a lot of hard work and dedication to look how she is now." (liked by creator) and "Am I the only one who thinks she looks better in the first pic?" She didn't do this for you lmao it doesn't matter what you think". Whatever video she was going to repost is not up yet.*

In this example, the creator acknowledged that she did not have authority in the traditional sense. She acknowledged that she was not someone who had "the truth" or who had extensive training. She knew that she could not make broad claims about how healthy eating worked or how people could lose weight. Maybe this statement made her more believable and trustworthy, because she did not fit into the archetype of people that others tended to ignore/distrust. She did not make broad claims, she did not assert that other "experts" were wrong, and she did not attempt to directly give nutritional advice to others. She did not seem to be talking confidently about things she was uninformed or misinformed about, unlike a gym bro. After all, how could she not know about her own experience? This is the type of content that snuck through the mechanisms, which I call fact-checking and self-policing, that users used to "regulate" content, which are discussed later. It does so because of the specific ways in which it gains authority and avoids making claims that are easy to dispute.

Understanding authority is relevant in several ways. First, it is relevant for creators who are attempting to correct misinformation about nutrition or spread awareness about eating disorders. Understanding how knowledge spreads in these communities is important because you cannot overwrite that knowledge without engaging with the ways in which it is presented and spread. Additionally, understanding how authority works effectively is important to those who

attempt to assert it. For example, if dietitians have a negative reputation that detracts from their authority in certain subcommunities, starting every fact-checking comment with "as a registered dietitian…" might not be a good strategy. Further, understanding how these ideas are spreading could be important to people who work in related fields, as understanding the ideas and social pressures faced by individuals is very relevant, and an understanding of someone's experiences, the information they have taken in about relevant topics, or their social reality, including what is good/acceptable/necessary/expected, would be incomplete without taking into account this social space, especially as TikTok is part of people's lived social experiences in communities, and is involved in their development of identity.

## Fact-checking

While TikTok did not hold itself responsible for ensuring the truth of videos[19], many users tried to hold one another accountable, and attempted to establish what counted as true. Knowledge was discussed, decided, and created all over the place on the app, but there were several key locations in which truth was evaluated or questioned.

The comments were frequently a place where people expressed disagreement with the claims in a video. As such, many interviewees mentioned checking the comment section to see what others were saying as a key step in determining whether to trust a video. The comments do serve as a place to see others' reactions to the content, which makes them an important place for truth to be asserted, debated, and determined. Sometimes, the "fact-checking" in the comments was not too serious, and just involved pointing out something odd in the video.

**July 29th, 2021**

> *I saw a video with exercises side by side with diagrams of how they supposedly change the shape of your body, but one of the animations makes absolutely no sense, which*

[19] This is expressly stated in Section 7 of the Terms of Service ("Terms of Service | TikTok" 2019).

*people point out in the comments. It had quite a few views though. It has 717,300 likes and 25.5 million views.*

Other times, the fact-checking in the comments was much more serious and occurred with much more anger.

**June 17th, 2021**

*Following my expression of interest in the videos making these claims yesterday, the algorithm seems to be serving me content with other bold claims. I saw a video claiming that fruits and vegetables "are essentially the only foods our body is designed to eat". He claims that after beginning to eat other foods, including meat and grains, and to cook food, our health and life expectancy have declined. He is advocating for eating only fruits and vegetables, which will "heal so many illnesses" and "regain that childlike energy and vitality that all of us long for". The comments are not supportive. He has crossed some sort of line. "You think our life expectancy has declined ever since we started cooking meat?". "Humans have been eating meat for 2 million years!". "Stop spreading misinformation!". One comment, in all lowercase, just says "this is false". "In fact, prehistoric people hunted. Meat is a product consumed for millions of years, long before the modern world was formed." That's a pretty complete argument for a TikTok comment. "So much inane bullshit in one minute. Impressive". The creator is in the replies of some of these comments. Someone asked why we have canines, then, and he says "Our canines are almost insignificant, check out gorillas, MUCH bigger canines and they just eat leaves and fruits". He also encourages people to google comparative anatomy of frugivores and look at the images themselves. Another comment he has chosen to reply to is "'Our life expectancy has declined since' we just forgot about medicine? literally humans were naturally designed to live up till 40 years max…". The reply is "medicine just prolongs death in most cases, and suppresses symptoms, but rarely they really cure anything". The comments are not supportive. These are really wild claims, even for an app that doesn't really monitor content. "Clearly you have ZERO knowledge about medicine or nutrition". Some of the comments are agreeing that they feel better on plant based diets, or are asking for the recipe for his salad dressing. The comment section is much less supportive than others I have seen, though. This video only has 19,600 views. Also, even though many of his videos have tens of thousands (or hundreds of thousands) of views, he only has 6065 followers.*

This video was one of the first videos on which I saw significant pushback. Other videos had some people in the comments disagreeing, but this one received way more negative comments. There was a line somewhere, and this video had crossed it. As I continued watching more TikTok content, I saw several examples of videos that received strong pushback as fact-checking occurred in the comments. I also saw several instances in which the opinions of the

people doing the fact-checking were not unanimous. Fact-checking involved agreeing on what the facts were, which was something that viewers did not often do. Frequently, fact-checking was more complicated than in that example, as authority over the facts was disputed. For instance, the following example involved a complication in fact-checking, in that gender played a role in who was viewed as having the necessary knowledge to assert facts.

**July 13th, 2021**

> *A man posted a video. Right at the beginning, the sticker says "LADIES, IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING TO GROW YOUR GLUTES , Stop doing these (he's doing some sort of banded kickback)… & try this full glute workout". The video has 193,900 likes and 1.7 million views. The pinned comment is "What's up with all the hate why don't y'all just try the workout". Based on other comments, people are upset about sumo deadlifts. Some comments say things like "I went straight to the comments after I saw the sumo deadlifts & y'all did not disappoint", "Sumo isn't glutesssss", "Sumo isn't glutes thooo", "Sumos don't hit glutes!!!!", etc. Others disagree, including the creator. Some more comments: "men are still telling us to do sumo deadlifts", "On god everyone on tiktok swears their pt's, like we know you go on google before you comment anything". The creator replied "Straight copy and paste one another". Another comment says "the comments are so back and forth people agreeing and disagreeing on everything I DON'T KNOW WHATS RIGHT LMAO". Someone replied "It's because this came from a man if it was a woman they'd all be the same.". TikTok has put a warning on the bottom of the video (The actions in this video are performed by professionals or supervised by professionals. Do not attempt). Someone pointed this out in the comments, and the creator replied "Tik tok tryna scare you guys from lifting weights". Also, it's a little ironic of him to reply the way he does about everyone thinking they're an expert and claiming to be pts when his bio is "22/IC Health Sciences Pre Med – Chemistry/ EMT". The duets and stitches are off, and saving is disabled. I'm not liking the video, because like many of the women in the comments, I found it frustrating. Anyways, once I swipe, it will be gone. I'm ok with that. The audio was a sound I've never heard that contains music from No Guidance (feat. Drake) by Chris Brown. That's probably why I haven't heard it. The Chris Brown song should've been a red flag.*

The response to this video was gendered, but it also demonstrated some important things. The creator was upset that everyone had decided (because someone said it somewhere) that sumo deadlifts are not good for the glutes, but that is exactly how knowledge production works. He was also irritated that people were googling things to check whether they were accurate. He was upset that people were believing random people who claimed to have authority, while asking

them to believe that he knew how to design a workout. He was irritated that people would believe anyone they saw, but then also mad that they tried to fact-check things on the internet to correct people that might be wrong. The dismissal of the responses and criticisms of women in the comments likely increased the amount of disagreement people were expressing. Also, people may have wanted that disagreement to be present in the comments because people often check the comments to see if the response is positive or negative in order to gauge whether they might want to try something. This was demonstrated by the commenter who was frustrated because the comments did not come to a consensus, so it was unclear who was right. As the commenter indicated, an absence of disagreement in the comment section of a video or in the replies to a comment could be taken as an indication that someone/something was correct. Additionally, as discussed in the identity section, there was a general disdain for men who were perceived to be claiming authority that they did not have or to be promoting incorrect ideas about healthy eating/fitness. This may not have been present in all communities, but it was at least mildly prevalent in the communities that produced the content observed in this time period.

## GymTok and Gender dynamics

As previously discussed, "the gym bro" represented many aspects of male behavior that women strongly disliked. As a result, behavior that seemed "gym-bro like" was generally met with pushback and disgust from women. Some of these men were criticized as not credible, harmful, unknowledgeable, or incorrect by female creators, and videos of female creators criticizing them were not uncommon. Responses to suggestions or criticisms were frequently very gendered, as men who criticized women could be viewed as condescending or otherwise gym-bro like, resulting in resistance from women. On the other hand, male creators who were viewed as appreciating or respecting female expertise or the strength of women were rewarded

for these traits and were met with support. As a result, authority could be gained or lost based on perceived closeness to being a gym bro or gym bro-like.

**July 20th, 2021**

> *I also saw an interesting video about fat loss. It's a video reply to the comment "is it different for men and women to lose weight or is it the same way". The creator says "if you're a woman and you're trying to lose weight, watch this because I'm gonna help you out. First of all, do men lose fat easier than women? Yep! So stop listening to men who give generic fat loss advice and imply that it's the same". She then goes on to talk about hormone cycles, saying "let's talk about science for a second". She then talks about how to use the cycles to your advantage. The pinned comment is her comment "Anyone struggling to reach your health goals – hire me! I do coaching. Go to my site or reach out anytime! We'll set you up on a personalized calorie/ deficit then I'll be here to answer questions/adjust as you reach out as needed". The comments are asking for more information, and asking things like "So, what do I look for when I no longer have a cycle because of an IUD?", "how does being on the pill effect weightloss?", "how would that work with pcos cuz I don't menstrate so there is no way to tell what phase I am in", etc. This video has 107,600 likes and 532,600 views. The creator's bio has links to sign up for coaching and to buy various supplements (collagen, trebiotics for gut health, energy drinks with "nootropics, vitamins, & minerals"). The website also has links for things like joining her "facebook accountability group".*

Fact-checking, as a result, was affected by other factors, like credibility, which could have been affected by gender, as in the previous example. It was also impacted not just by the perceptions of the people conducting it, but also by who was in the pool of people that could potentially fact-check the content, which was largely determined by the algorithm. Fact-checking was often more prevalent on videos that had larger numbers of views. This makes logical sense, as a higher number of viewers results in a higher probability that somebody who disagrees sees the content and decides to comment on it. It is also important to note that not everybody watched videos with the same intentions. Some people watched videos to hate them or to criticize them. Not everyone that saw a video believed it, and not everyone that believed it intended to act on it.

## Unfriendly Fire: Fact-checking Popular Videos

As mentioned above, fact-checking frequently occurred in response to videos with more views. In these cases, fact-checking often occurred with anger, or even vitriol. Often, rather than simply arguing with creators, people mocked them. The tone, however, does not change that the creators were being corrected and criticized. The following examples are provided to demonstrate the ways in which fact-checking played out in comment sections of more popular videos, the tone of some of the comments doing the fact-checking, and the sorts of claims that provoked this type of "aggressive" fact-checking response.

**June 28th, 2021**

> *I started swiping again. I watched a video about oatmilk. The voiceover said "we spent a lot of time going through the different oat milk brands. I'm going to show you some clean options and ones to avoid". He then goes through the oatmilks while showing clips of oatmilk in a grocery store. The sound in the background is "Good 4 u" by Olivia Rodrigo. Apparently, canola oil and rapeseed oil are unclean. The top comment on the video is "Ima just stick to the cheapest". Many of the other comments are asking about other oatmilk brands that were not included in the video. This video has 242,500 likes. That many people are interested in drinking clean oatmilk? Why do people hate canola oil? He said it was "highly processed and inflammatory". The video has 1.6 million views. The account's bio says "We teach you the TRUTH about ingredients". This account has 612,100 followers. They have several other videos with more than a million views. A video about refined vs unrefined salt 3.1 million views (sound: "Dynamite" by BTS). People are not happy in the comments "can you please cite your sources?", "Tell me u don't know about nutrition, without telling me you don't know about nutrition", and many comments are criticizing him for saying you should avoid salt with iodine added. The top 3 almond milk brands has 1.1 million views. A video about Gatorade has 2.3 million. A video about pasta has 1.2 million. Between the more successful videos, there are videos with tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of views. A video about eggs has 11.4 million views. Frozen pizza: 2.6 million. This may seem like a deep dive on this account. It isn't. They post a lot of videos. I've only gone back to April 30th. Generally, the comments on this account are mixed. On the more viral videos, they're less supportive, which makes sense, as the more popular videos are shown to a broader group of people, rather than just their followers and people who regularly engage with this type of content.*

**June 30th, 2021**

> *A guy talking about corruption. "Alright fam. What I'm about to show you is pretty disturbing. As you can see here on this box of cheerios, it has the seal of approval from the American Heart Association. Now over 20 million people die every single year from*

*heart disease and eating foods like that is a big reason why. Cheerios have also been found to have unhealthy levels of glyphosate which has been directly linked to cancer. You're probably wondering 'how does this even happen?' And it's because General Mills and other big food companies pay the American Heart Association millions of dollars every year to promote their toxic products. These are the same products that actually cause heart disease and other chronic illnesses, and that's not all. And you can see that this toxic product (I can't believe it's not Butter) also has the seal of approval from the American Heart Association and the second ingredient is soybean oil, and you already know that soybean oil is one of the worst things for your heart and your brain. Stay woke, fam". Throughout the video, there are clips of him talking to the camera while walking through the grocery store, holding the products he is talking about, showing the ingredients, and talking in front of screenshots of articles that are greenscreened behind him. The video has 99,800 likes and 774,600 views. The comments are not that supportive. "I had a plate of ice cubes for dinner. Hope that was ok", "My grandfather is 97 he eats Cheerios every morning Oh no we have to save him." Also, people do not like his demeanor/style. Others agree with him. It's not a comment section that agrees with each other.*

Interestingly, since the comments were a place where fact-checking and backlash frequently occurred, turning the comments off was viewed as a sort of admission of being incorrect. If the comments were off, that frequently served as a red flag to users, as it indicated that there was some sort of argument that had happened or that the creator was being criticized heavily. A reference to this idea was even present in the excerpt with which I began this thesis. Additionally, I eventually caught myself using the same logic, as in the following example.

**June 24th, 2021**

*"For over twenty years, I have prescribed papaya for heartburn". He speaks softly and gently, as we watch him cut a papaya and scrape the seeds into a cup. "but some physicians, who they work for pharmaceutical industries, they have presecribed zantac, and then patient who listen to that, which is, by the way, FDA approved at the time, they been exposed to (I don't know what he said, and the captions are off), and they have cancer right now, and that is the reason they pulled the zantac." We never see anything other than his hands as he makes his papaya seed smoothie. The comments are off. I wonder what happened here. Hang on, this isn't his audio. The original audio goes on to talk about how natural treatments don't have side effects, and "papaya seeds are effective to kill all the parasites like hookworm, tapeworm, and pinworms from your intestine, so never trash the seeds". The video I saw that used the sound has 1.4 million views. His other videos don't have the comments off. I imagine there was some backlash to that video once that many people saw it.*

Fact-checking was also sometimes a group effort. This sometimes meant that a group of people were arguing with others who they perceived as incorrect in the comments. Other times, it meant that users were working together to put together the "facts" so that something could be fact-checked. In the following example, users worked together to figure out what was happening and criticize a creator and a video.

**July 19th, 2021**

> *I saw a video with the "how does this (Cup of Coffee audio) turn into this (Cut my life into pieces, this is my last resort" audio to show a set of before and after weight loss photos. The sticker said "Will my ex regret cheating?". The caption was "Sisters, my secret to weight loss is in the link on my homepage #weightlossprogress #weightlossjourney #weightloss #homepage #buylinkinbio". It had 1.1 million likes and 17.8 million views. The top comment was "No wonder he left you bro he just straight up saved your life". She replied with a video, the caption of which was "I don't think he is worthy of me now the tips for #weightloss are in bio on my homepage #buylinkinbio #weightloss". The next comment that appears is "He didn't save her life She saved herself, she did THAT!". The creator replied with a video "Sisters, my secret to #weightloss is on my homepage (hashtags)". Someone did point out later in the comments "the second girl isn't you cause she's on my Instagram". In the replies, people are sleuthing. Eventually, someone figures it out "Elise rose she's a rep for Katyas brand". The account has a bunch of similar videos that also seem to feature weight loss photos that seem to be entirely different people. The bio is "my secret to weight loss is here/No diet! No surgery!". There is no link right now, but based on some of the videos (she has duetted some of the transformation videos with videos of making tea), it seems to be a weight loss tea of some form. There are also a bunch of teacup emojis all over the place.*

Users were clearly not passive, as they did things like check for disagreement or the presence of fact-checking. Moreover, they were sometimes involved in the fact-checking themselves, arguing about what was true or disputing claims in comment sections. Fact-checking was a way in which users worked together to produce (or deconstruct) knowledge, as facts were established collectively through various iterations of these arguments in comment sections.

As previously mentioned, there were multiple places in which fact-checking occurred. Comments were not the only site where it took place. Fact-checking also took place in certain kinds of videos, particularly in duets and stitches.

## Fact-checking Videos

Sometimes, creators made videos wherein they attempted to dispel myths and misinformation or correct other creators. They did this in duets, stiches, or their own videos.

**August 17th, 2021**

*A dietitian doing a duet. The sticker says "Hey Im Abbey Sharp – your no (poop emoji) dietitian". She has duetted a what I eat in a day and is criticizing it for not including carbs or fat, a lunch, or enough calories. The caption is "#duet with [user] Repeat after me: 750 calories is a meal, not a day of food! #whatieatinaday #dietitian #nutritionist". People in the comments say that this account is a pro ana account. A popular TikTok teacher has commented "Just reported so many of their videos for dangerous acts (promotes ED), I pray she gets help. Recovery is worth it.". This video has 58,500 likes and 893,000 views. The original video has 6030 likes and 275,600 views. This duet may have been bad because it brought more views to the video. Anyways, the comments on the original video are not supportive, and urge her to not post things like this and to get help.*

**July 29th, 2021**

*An interesting video. The caption "Some fitness hot takes that I've learned (the hard way) over the past 4 years." Some of the takes in question are "ab exercises will NOT make your waist smaller", "many fitness influencers have a BBL and they're lying to you", "just because someone has a nice physique doesn't mean they know what they're talking about", "If someone is not a registered dietician, they should not be giving you a meal plan", "if you're a woman, training upper body will not make you look like a bulky man", "if you want to lose weight, go in a caloric deficit", "if you want to gain weight, go in a caloric surplus", "you really only need 3 or 4 compound movements to make significant leg gains", "waist trainers don't work", "BFR bands cannot grow your glutes", "the fit teas that the kardashians sell you- they only temporarily work because they have laxatives in them that make you shit out all your weight", "a lot of personal training certifications are pretty easy to get, so don't blindly trust someone just because they have their cert", "supplements are not regulated by the FDA". This creator posts a lot about current fitness trends. She doesn't have that many followers, but she seems pretty in tune with the broader fitness trends on this app. I follow her. She has 30,000 followers.*

Not all fact-checking videos were equal. Sometimes, these videos were criticized because they brought more attention to the "bad" videos that they stitched/duetted. Other times, they had significantly fewer views than the "bad" content. They sometimes also seemed to be made in ways that seemed careless or ineffective.

**July 1st, 2021**

*"5 insane fitness facts I bet you didn't know, from a registered dietitian". "Drinking coffee 1st thing in the morning on an empty stomach burns more calories throughout your entire day", "grapefruit juice isn't only good for hydration but also for burning belly fat", "having one tablespoon of olive oil before drinking alcohol can prevent the alcohol from turning into fat", "drinking one cup of water plus 1 teaspoon of cinnamon in that water before bed will speed up your metabolism overnight". Oh no. The appeal to authority is one that is usually effective. This video has 925,300 likes. This is a little distressing. The dietitians on TikTok are usually debunking these myths, not spreading them, so people tend to trust them. I almost scroll away, but I guess I'll see what tip 5 is. "Don't believe everything you see on the internet. This is how misinformation spreads. If you believed any of those made-up facts… follow me for the truth about weight loss and fitness". The comments say things like "not me about to do the olive oil one until I saw the end", "i rlly saved this before the end", "I believed it lol", "I trusted you", "Kinda butthurt I was ab to try all of these :/", "i was getting up to put cinnamon in water", "*remove from favorites", "I was about to make a cup of coffee-", "i was rlly gonna get the cinnamon", "Damn it I was about to go get the cinnamon!", "I was really liking the coffee one", "*goes to delete video*", "This probably did more harm than good for those who didn't watch till the end", "I was already typing my rant!! Glad it took long enough to hear the end", "I was like 'there's no way she's an actual dietician' glad I stuck to the end", "i liked then unliked", "I was like wait a second…this doesn't sound like what the other tiktok dietitians say", "I was like I'm on the wrong side of Tiktok- the end saved it lol", "You realize people don't finish videos right. You just added to the problem". There are 6711 comments. The video has 5.4 million views. I like what dietitians on this app do generally, but this one troubled me because of how far into the video you had to get to find out she was lying. The rest of her videos are similar to what I see other dietitians posting. She has some debunking videos, she reviews some of the health recipes (benefits and drawbacks), she shares her own recipes, she answers people's questions, etc. She has 230,100 followers.*

Clearly, fact-checking did not have a minor influence. It was a key mechanism through which knowledge was constructed and disputed on the platform. It was messy, as most mechanisms of uncovering truth are, and it was affected by all kinds of other factors that are also complex—for example, it was moderated by the effects of gender on credibility and trust, by who was perceived to have authority or ulterior motives, and by the features of the platform itself that facilitated or complicated fact-checking. For example, stitches and duets facilitated fact-checking, but the non-chronological order of comments and replies made fact-checking more complicated, as arguments or longer explanations were hard to follow, particularly due to the

character limit in comments. These complexities support the idea that TikTok is its own community with unique social structures and types of interactions, and thus it merits being studied as its own social world.

Understanding effective and ineffective appeals to authority and how users expected to ascertain what is true is important for those with a stake in "correcting misinformation" or disseminating health information in these communities. Understanding these social dynamics is necessary to improve future outcomes. Other forces in the production of knowledge, just like those discussed in this section, have implications for these efforts. The next major force in the production of knowledge to be discussed, self-policing, is one such force. Interestingly, self-policing overlapped with some of these other dynamics, like fact-checking. Sometimes, comments or interactions bordered on the edge of both. Several examples mentioned already may arguably fall into either category, as there is some overlap between both the things they took issue with and their effects.

# Chapter 4: Creating and Enforcing Boundaries

Just as users attempted to regulate truth by "fact-checking" inaccurate claims, they also attempted to regulate the acceptability of certain kinds of content or claims. This section explores the boundaries that seemed to exist in the communities observed, mainly through instances in which users attempted to enforce boundaries by pushing back against certain ideas. As is often the case, rules were most clearly observed when they were being broken or contested. I refer to this regulation of acceptable content as "self-policing", as it was performed by users and relied on community social norms, not on an outside force (like the platform's content regulation) controlling the community/users. This regulation seemed to be carried out solely by the users, with little to no assistance from the platform. Additionally, it often took place in some of the same places as fact-checking (in comment sections, duets, and stitches). Interestingly, this self-policing seemed to contradict popular narratives about TikTok being a free-for-all where anything goes, as users at least attempted to hold each other accountable for following "the rules" that were set not by some outside entity, but by the users themselves. What these boundaries were, what the results of crossing them were, and the inconsistencies and limits of them are explored in the (sometimes lengthy) excerpts of fieldnotes contained in this section.

Understanding the potentially harmful ideas on TikTok requires understanding what is and is not happening on the app. Not acknowledging the complexity of the social systems involved makes statements inaccurate, and makes discussions ineffective, as users are quick to identify when someone sounds like they do not understand the app or what is happening on it. For public health messages/other warnings related to this content/the platform to be effective, they have to be rooted in what is actually happening. Otherwise, they can easily be dismissed as out of touch with reality or as written by someone who has no understanding of social media or TikTok.

**Self-policing**

In addition to fact-checking, there was another form of moderation that users on this side of TikTok engaged in, which is best described as self-policing. Rather than just checking whether facts were accurate, this process involved holding one another accountable for not posting harmful or potentially harmful content. Here, it was danger that mattered, not just truth. Additionally, intent did not typically matter, as self-policing was focused on eliminating content or ideas that could have negative impacts. On this side of TikTok, self-policing almost always occurred in terms of criticizing content, ideas, or creators that might encourage disordered eating or other unhealthy ideas/behaviors.

Users set the boundaries for the types of content that were acceptable, enforcing a set of "rules" that was stricter than TikTok's content moderation standards. Frequently, content that was seen to cross a boundary in relation to the promotion of unhealthy diets or disordered eating was heavily criticized by users in the comments. Users enforced a set of community expectations that was more rigid than that which the platform itself required. As such, the boundaries of what needed to be policed were set by community norms, and the extent to which they were followed depended on the particular group of users watching and posting the content, as some groups may have associated less with the groups setting those norms. As a result, the self-policing on the app was sometimes unclear, temporary, unreliable, and messy, as there was no written set of rules, and some subcommunities may have had different opinions about what was allowed. This was typically evident when videos ended up with enough views (generally at least one million) that people with varying opinions saw them. The more people that watched a video, the more likely it was that the content had been shown to people outside of the subcommunity that typically viewed or posted it, where other people may have had different views of what was acceptable.

Additionally, since self-policing occurred as a result of the potential impact of content, more popular videos were larger threats, and were more in need of policing, as they could affect more people, and thus do more harm than other videos, which may have been equally bad, but less popular, and thus, less harmful.

This self-policing could happen on a very small scale. For example, in the comment section of a video of a teenage girl showing that she had her own section in her family's kitchen because she was trying to eat differently (more "healthily") than the rest of her family, many people were agreeing and relating to the creator's experiences. One commenter crossed a boundary, though, and wrote "don't forget the only one who weighs their food in grams". The replies to this comment were not that supportive and mentioned that this might have been behavior related to an eating disorder. The weighing of food set off a signal to some that this crossed the line between acceptable forms of dieting, thinking about food, or monitoring food and forms that were disordered and pathological.

In other instances, though, these boundaries were contested, which complicated this self-policing. In the following example, commenters discussed the same action that resulted in self-policing in the example described above—weighing food. However, in this instance, the people who were viewing the video did not agree about boundaries. This led to a lot of arguments and confusion, as is evident in the fieldnote excerpt below. Some replies and comments are omitted for clarity. Additionally, there is some narration between comments to demonstrate how I, as a user, attempted to understand what had happened in the comment section before I came across it.

**July 12th, 2021**

> *It has the Italian Restaurant Music audio. The sticker says "Pov: you're having lunch with a fitness pal mf". The caption is "Buddy measures everything #Fitnesspal #fitness #diet". The first clip is the creator making a mildly judgmental/confused face, clearly looking at someone else out of the frame. It's quickly followed by clips of the fitness pal friend that are quickly recognizable. He's measuring the amount of food he eats,*

*weighing the amounts of certain things (and putting some back into the container), scanning the barcodes on various things (hummus, milk). There's a second clip of the creator looking at him. The comments are where it gets wild. There is apparently an argument going on here because some people have started commenting about how this could be disordered eating, and others strongly disagree. It is important to remember that TikTok comment sections are placed in an order that is not chronological, so you just have to start reading and guess at what has happened here. The first comment is "Leave me alone ty", which has 13,300 likes.*

*"The same people hating on tracking macros are the same people asking 'how are you so in shape but you're eating icecream and pizza'". The creator liked this comment. This comment has 9122 likes (and 73 replies).*
*-50% of it be genetics*
*-You sound dumb genetics got nothing to do with how you track your macros*
*-No*
*-Genetics has nothing to do with tracking macros*
*-Genetics classic excuse for wimps and fat people*
*-The excuses never stop when you can't stay dedicated and work your ass off*
*-If you have a slow metabolism you just have to eat more to get your daily energy meaning you can eat more without gaining weight*
*-They aren't saying genetics has to do w tracking macros, they are saying genetics has to do w your metabolism*

*"Worst time of my life" has 12,900 likes.*

*Now we might actually know what's going on, because the next comment is "that's an ED sorry to break it to yall" which clocks in at 3972 likes. There are 316 replies.*
*-He's literally just tracking what he's eating. That's literally healthy*
*-It's not healthy. Makes you see food as a number, and something you're hyper aware of. Instead of just eating intuitively*
*-Or maybe if u scrolled his page a little, you'd see hie's into fitness and is tracking his calories and macros to make sure he reaches his goal (liked by creator)*
*-If u want to mindlessly consume things without thinking about it that's fine, but ppl are also allowed to be aware of what they're eating*
*-I think they mean to eat a healthy and balanced diet without tracking Bc calorie counting can become very toxic, I've lost 50 pounds eating like this*
*-That's orthorexia mate*
*-All that and he still looks basic You can "track" them without being OCD about it*
*-Yea…most fitness people have hidden eating disorders dumbass*
*-Unlike everyone else overeating and getting heart attacks at age 40?*
*-LMAO this is textbook orthorexia*
*-wtf*
*-You only Eat food for energy ffs?! Its healthy. Everyone should track their food. Look at all the obesity around the world. Smh*
*-That's the result for some people but others it works out perfectly fine to track what your eating and lose weight in a safe way*

*-And I'm saying while he does that he's training his brain to always view food as numbers on a scale which can lead to having an eating disorder*
*-If you have to measure out some chicken/rice on a scale just so you can have lunch, that's a problem. Just have a bowl when you're hungry & be done*
*-I promise you people who don't track calories are more holistically healthy than people that measure every piece of food they eat*
*-it becomes unhealthy when you go under the number of required calories, it's not an Ed to watch what you eat you literally get put on diets by doctors*
*-Yes but majority of people track calories to go under to lose weight. Diets almost never work sustainably, that's why it's best to eat intuitively*
*-There's different levels. When you track literally every grain of rice and you're thinking about it all day. That's a problem*
*-Bro what. You shouldn't speak on this. All he's doing is tracking his what he eats to reach a goal. It's common in the fitness industry becauseitworks*
*-Not everyone is a weak 14 year old girl that cares about what everyone else thinks smh. He's doing it for himself*
*-no, I experienced this first hand*
*-That literally means you MADE it into an eating disorder, Counting calories isn't an ED, not everyone lets it get out of control. You're responsible*
*-than that was on you, people are just tracking their intake.. not everyone has the same goals*
*-Just cause you did this and had an Ed, doesn't mean that everyone who does that has an Ed*

*"Its excessive but wouldn't considered it an ED. Not everything needs to be labeled and demonized" (liked by creator). This comment has 2304 likes.*
*-This is literally orthorexia.*
*-No it's not, are people not allowed to track to lose weight, gain weight or other health reasons?*
*-This would only become orthorexia if it damages their well-being, this guy looks happy to do this*
*-That's how it starts out, love.*
*-Doesn't mean it'll end that way.*
*-Orthorexia means people restrict to only consume clean foods they prepare, this guy is only counting calories*
*-Orthorexia is the obsession of eating healthy which includes but is not limited to counting calories, weighing food, tracking nutrition, etc.*
*-It's not about eating healthy, you described a general ED. Orthorexia (I have it) is specifically about clean eating. this man is eating garbage*
*-No it's not*
*-The key factor is obsession with eating healthy, but the other factors are also included.*

It took a moment of scrolling to find enough context to understand the argument, but once it was uncovered, it was revealing. The arguments in this comment section revealed two

diametrically opposed views about counting calories and how food relates to health. This lack of agreement over the relationship between this type of calorie counting and health contributed to a lack of agreement about boundaries, which then allowed this argument to unfold. When I watched the video, there were 6,332 comments involved. The video had 332,400 likes and 2.4 million views. There was no consensus about whether or not this type of eating crossed the line between acceptable and pathological. Many users attributed this to the set of individuals on the other side of the argument being a fundamentally different group/community of people with different identities (gym bros or, conversely, people who were "soft"). They both accused the other of being wrong, acknowledging that their groups had different views about what the rules should have been. Importantly, as well, in these examples, users did not just interact with the videos they saw, they interacted on/at the videos, communicating with other people who were brought to the same "place" by the algorithm, even when those people came from what they perceived to be different communities. This supports the ideas described earlier, in that complex social groups and constant social interactions are taking place on this app, even if the types of interactions and the types of communities challenge our notions of what is social and our theories about how socialization works. TikTok, and the videos on it, are sites of social interaction.

In terms of the negative consequences of these social interactions on individuals, one of the more concerning things was that the debates about self-policing and where the lines were often went downhill, as in this example, as they sometimes provoked arguments or discourses that might have been more harmful than the original content. In this example, some commenters with eating disorders were heavily criticized and even shamed by others when they attempted to intervene in discussions they viewed as harmful. Not only did the burden of protecting others

from harm fall on users, but the users may have experienced negative consequences for having intervened, presenting real challenges to a reliance on this self-policing. Importantly, this was not an isolated incident. Arguments about self-policing in which the boundaries were contested often unfolded in concerning ways, as in the following example.

**August 2nd, 2021**

*I saw a video with the Doja Cat audio. The sticker said "started taking bloating pills for my digestive issues and now I can wear low rise jeans :)". There is no caption. In the video, she's wearing a cropped tank top and pulls her sweatpants down and her jaw drops when she sees how it looks. She screams in excitement (but there is no sound). The pinned comment is the creator saying "And no it doesn't make you lose weight I would never promote that". The next comment is a string of emojis (credit card, credit card, explosion thing, credit card, credit card, explosion thing[20]) followed by "what pill". The creator replied with a video showing the item in question so others can find it. The next comment is "not "now you can," it should be "now your confident enough to"". The creator replied "Yes". Another comment "!!!! if you are taking these pills please make sure to be drinking a lot fo water!!! these dehydrate you!!!! this is a dangerous combo for summer". The creator replied "Yes!". The next comment is the creator, "I posted the before and after!". Here, you see some of the regulation in action. The pinned comment suggests that promoting weight loss pills is over a line that she would not cross. The comments about dehydration indicate that people are caring for one another and encouraging one another to not put themselves at risk. I scroll down a bit to an interesting conversation. "Y'all do anything but work out (skull emoji) @user @user"*
*-Bloating literally has nothing to do with workout out or fitness idiot*
*-She said she takes the bloating pills to look skinny so she can wear low rise jeans*
*-Therefore, she's taking the pills to be skinny.*
*-Halfway there but can't be solved by working out. It's from the digestive system. Use Google.*
*-I'm sweetie I take them cuz im in Ed recovery and have bloating issues and digestive issues.*

*This video has 236,500 likes and 1.7 million views. Most of the comments are interested in what the pills are, asking when she will post/comment to let people know. It seems that there was a delay, such that the video was circulating for a while before she made the video reply saying what the pills were. She only has 11,000 followers, so she likely wasn't expecting this video to get the kind of attention it did.*

[20] This combination of emojis is a reference to hitting a credit card on a table and means that the user wants to buy something.

In this example, users encouraged people to be careful and to not hurt themselves by misusing the pills, which can be read as a form of community care, even as potentially harmful ideas about "excuses" for working out and desires to look thin appeared. Additionally, some users argued about whether working out would be a better way to accomplish the goal, which, according to some commenters, was appearing thin. In this instance, the problem seemed to be the goal and the premise of the video. In others, the self-policing was focused on one detail, or was triggered by one small thing in the video, as in the next example.

**July 2nd, 2021**

> *"This is a full day of eating as a fashion model who's actually trying to gain a bit of weight because I think it'll make me feel better". The clips go by after a shot of her modeling. Lemon water, egg and cheese sandwich on a bagel, oat milk latte, apple, 4 pieces of pizza, vegetable ramen, salted caramel oatmilk pop, Gatorade, banana ice cream with chocolate chips, popcorn, and lucky charms. The comments are supportive. Some mention being happy to be reminded that it's ok to eat, some want recipes for the ice cream, many like that she's focused on how she feels. There's some argument about lemon water, which apparently is involved in some weight loss programs. The audio under the voiceover is a modified version of "All Eyes on Me" by Bo Burnham, which is a bit of a weird vibe for this video, but ok. The video has 2.0 million views and 522,500 likes. It was posted 19 hours ago.*

Here, lemon water caused pushback, as it was a signifier of an involvement with unhealthy/dangerous weight loss plans. Just like in this example with the lemon water, other details of videos could spark self-policing.

**July 13th, 2021**

> *A weight loss before and after with comments that are a mess. The audio was a sound I don't recognize of someone talking. It says "imagine that" at the end as she shows her current appearance to the camera. It has 2 million likes and 7.5 million views. Something has happened in the comments. The pinned comment is the creator "I just posted a video on what I did to lose weight!". People are asking for this in other comments, asking about how she did it, what she eats in a day, exercise routines, etc. The third comment I see is also the creator "I am not promoting bulimia and have since removed the video about the tea, leave me alone". People in the replies to this comment are, of course, asking about the tea. Other people have gone ahead and told them what the tea is and where they can find it. Some people are mad at them for doing so, and there's an argument happening. The creator replied to a comment asking for what she eats in a day with a video. The comments are off, which is not a good sign. I think it's because of the*

*amount of food in the video. This video has 55,400 likes and 576,900 views. She has another video reply to a comment on the original video ("plsss make a vid on what you did for however long it took"). She talks about going on walks, drinking more than 100 ounces of water everyday, staying in a calorie deficit, doing yoga, etc. She does say that you can't target fat spots, so "to the people asking how I got my lower stomach to be flat, it's just losing weight all over that takes the fat away at certain places". This video has 339,600 views and 55,000 likes. The comments are still on. The video recommended using a specific website to tell you how many calories to eat per day to lose weight. This is the subject of many of the comments.*
*"it won't let me do my age bc of the 15-18. I'm 13"*
*The replies to this comment discourage this person.*
*-if you are that young, you should look for a prediatric(?) or calculate your imc to see if you actually can.*
*-i go to med school and focus on kids development(but not an English speaker tbh lol)*
*-cause if you arein a good development rate, loosing too much pounds can affect your physical and psychiatric development*
*-Yead I'd rather do light workouts and take walks n stuff at my age just to burn a bit of fat but not do it because I don't wanna ruin my body later on*
*-any tips to lose stomach fat and arm fat by the armpits for 11-13 year olds?*
*-don't compare yourself to people older than you, and remember that you are no where near done growing and developing yet!*
*-don't worry about losing weight don't….ok? eat a balanced diet, stay active and focus on FEELING healthy vs looking a certain way*
*-What I do is put 15 and add a few hundred calories into what it says*
*-Don't do this stuff at 14*
*-13**
*-bestie pls don't worry about your weight rn. you're young. i regret stressing about my size so young. just live*
**This discussion continues, but a few people are commenting encouraging the young commentor to stop focusing on changing her body, and to stop focusing so much on losing weight/dieting.*

Filling in the blanks based on the information present, there seem to have been several steps of self-policing. The video about the tea likely received backlash for the tea's association with bulimia, leading to her taking it down. The what I eat in a day likely received backlash because it did not appear to be enough food to be healthy, leading to her turning off the comments, but not deleting the video. This is a common critique of what I eat in a day videos, both on the app, through this self-policing, and off of it, in news articles (Kato 2020; Byrne 2021). She may not have deleted the video because she did not believe it was actually a problem,

unlike the tea video. Additionally, the tea video may have been removed because people were reporting it and the creator did not want her account to be banned. This is all speculation, but these two things clearly sparked backlash. There was also self-policing in the comments of the video about the calorie calculator, as younger commentors were encouraged not to use the tool or worry about losing weight. As demonstrated in these examples, self-policing often unfolded messily, and had unintended consequences, as it could provoke arguments or the sharing of opinions that may have been harmful. Additionally, the non-chronological nature of comment sections often made it difficult to understand what had happened. Unlike listening to an argument happening in-person, here, understanding a disagreement required a sort of backwards reasoning to identify what had happened "before you arrived", and who was replying to who about what. Adding to this uncertainty, it was often unclear what the specific boundaries being crossed were. That being said, there were a few things that tended to cause the self-policing to emerge.

Things that tended to trigger the self-policing were mentions of eating less than 1,200 calories per day, losing more than 2-3 pounds per week, and skipping meals. In the example above, the age of the commenters also triggered the self-policing. Numbers often served as the sign of content or comments that were in need of policing, perhaps because numbers can easily serve as boundaries. Interestingly, some of these numerical "triggers" of self-policing seem to be similar to recommendations about "safe weight loss"[21], suggesting that even beyond general stated desires to not promote unsafe behaviors, people may have been taking direct action to try to prevent harmful ideas from spreading. The rules may have been influenced by health messaging about "safe" weight loss or the prevention of problematic behaviors related to diet and

[21] Common advice includes not eating fewer than 1200 calories a day (Zelman 2014) and not losing more than 1-2 pounds per week ("Is It Bad to Lose Weight Too Quickly?" 2017).

exercise. Then, ineffective self-policing and disputes about rules demonstrate the shortcomings of awareness campaigns that have led to the creation of this somewhat standardized set of rules that users seemed to be enforcing. An interesting question for future research would be the extent to which these unspoken rules represent conventional or popular wisdom about preventing eating disorders or unhealthy forms of weight loss, and where users who enforce these boundaries acquired this information, as this might be a way to develop future plans for influencing social norms or distributing important messages on social media. It is also possible that these rules did not develop as a result of such campaigns, but the similarities between the discourses used in that setting and the "rules" being enforced by the users on TikTok is certainly interesting. It also suggests that since the "rules" are informed by larger cultural forces and a consensus about what is and is not harmful, if these things could be altered, users would similarly enforce different boundaries/rules, and regulate content accordingly. Decreasing the amount of harmful content would likely require engaging users in regulating it—which first requires them to identify and recognize it as harmful. An important area of future effort could be changing these cultural and general perceptions about what is harmful/bad, both generally and with key "influencers" in these online communities, rather than dismissing the platform and its users as problematic. Additionally, we should be concerned that a reliance on this form of internal regulation may not be sustainable, as it requires users (who may also be blamed for content being harmful) to risk negative consequences in order to carry it out. Recognizing the efforts and, in some cases, sacrifices, of these users is a necessary prerequisite to any attempt to improve the situation on the platform.

As discussed above, users often seemed to have good intentions. They tried to enforce these rules and they often tried to help people who crossed the boundaries. Rather than always

responding with anger, they occasionally responded with compassion, urging people who were crossing boundaries to get help. This was part of a larger social trend in these communities, which I refer to as internal support.

## Internal Support

Since users were identifying content that might have been pathological in this self-policing, they sometimes attempted to support one another through their difficulties. The following example involved a creator responding to a comment about the number of calories someone consumed. In the video, the creator carried out a sort of policing, explaining that this commenter had crossed a line and that this was not acceptable. However, rather than simply displaying anger and blaming this person, the creator was sad and concerned. He encouraged the commentor to get help.

**July 30th, 2021**

> *I did get a video that is a response to a comment (lol i eat like 75 a day tfff). The creator says "lol I eat like 75 a day. Calories? You eat 75 calories a day? Do you think that's funny? It's not a flex, it's a full blown eating disorder. You need help. And I mean that, genuinely. Look, I work with mostly women, and I understand there's an incredible amount of societal pressure for women to be thin in this world, and I'm really really sorry that you feel like the only way to reach that point is to starve yourself skinny. I don't have any advice to give you. That is far beyond my level of expertise, but I'm putting this out there because I know…" he hesitates and collects his thoughts… "that you're not the only one 75% of women in this country suffer from disordered eating and eating disorders, so I'm gonna link some good resources in the comments for those of you who might be struggling and I hope you can use one of them to find the help that you need". By the end of the video, he is visibly crying. There are tears in his eyes. The caption is "Reply to [user] I had an ED in high school so this upsets me. Sorry for the emotion. #edawareness #mentalhealth". The video has 23,000 likes and 87,800 views. The comments are very supportive of this video and his message. This is a fitness influencer with 513,400 followers.*

Sometimes, this internal support occurred on videos that directly mentioned unhealthy ideas or criticized diet culture.

**July 16th, 2021**

*I also saw a video with 688,400 views and 125,500 likes. The audio starts with "I know I told you that I ate, but um" and then switches to a stripped down version of "Scars to your Beautiful" by Alessia Cara with piano. The caption is "Making this really made me realize how much I lost in the process – she was so happy at 145 #edawareness #foryou". The video is a montage of photos of her with the accompanying weight written on top of each photo. You watch as her weight drops from 145 to 108 pounds. The top comment is "why doesn't not eating not work for me". The replies are confusing (as they tend to be). Some people are talking about how they thought the same thing, but it was body dysmorphia. People are talking about how they developed Eds but still never looked the way they wanted to, and went through so much for nothing. Others talk about how not eating causes you to gain weight. Like in some other comment sections, there is some talking about experiences happening here.*

*Other comments say things like "the fact that ppl on the outside probably think youre doing so much better after losing the weight :( stay strong u got this", "I went from 138 to 114 in 7 weeks once. I was miserable. Everyone around me said I've never looked better. I feel you. It gets better", and "i went from 190 to 170 and everyone was like omg you look so health!! so I kept going and lost another 20 and everyone kept saying how good I looked (reply) it's hard to stop when everyone is telling you how good you look". The creator is replying throughout the comment section saying things like "Being skinny does not always equal happiness love, you are beautiful just the way you are. Your weight will never define that". She also commented "There are so many beautiful girls relating to this you are all so strong. never let the numbers on a scale define you, you are worth so much more".*

**August 11th, 2021**

*The videos today were pretty typical. I did get another video with the 3 looks Bo Burnham audio*[22]*. This one was "The 3 Stages of 1200 Calorie Fat Loss Diets". "Welcome to the Internet" was "I'm going to eat so clean", Restriction (while he shovels lettuce into his mouth), "I can't stop thinking about food" as he looks at the open fridge, and "just one small snack it's OK" as he pours a bag of chips directly into his mouth. "Look Who's Inside Again" was "why can't I stop" as he held multiple snacks and ate something out of his hand. "Jeff Bezos" was "I'll just do cardio to burn off all that food" as he aggressively used a stationary bike. The pinned comment is the creator saying "If you struggle with an eating disorder, please reach out. I can't specifically help you but I can refer you to someone who can". People in the comments are saying that they're eating various numbers of calories below 1200. That's why the pinned comment is what it is, I think. Other people in the comments urge them to eat more as it is unhealthy, they are starving themselves, etc. Anyways, the video has 17,600 likes and 158,600 views.*

[22] This audio involves several layers of internet culture that are not discussed here. Videos with this type of audio show three different things/moods/looks. In this case, they were demarcated by three Bo Burnham songs from *Inside*. The songs are "Welcome to the Internet", "Look Who's Inside Again", and either "Bezos 1" or "Bezos 2".

While this internal support could be helpful, and often involved creators pointing people in the direction of people with more traditional forms of "authority" or to relevant resources, it was concerning in some instances. For example, a creator whose bio said he was a psych DNP posted a video about signs of body dysmorphia, but then was nowhere to be found in the comment section, where various commenters were discussing their difficulties with feeling like they did not deserve to eat, body dysmorphia, hating the way they looked, and so on. The commenters were attempting to help one another, but the creator (the doctor) was nowhere to be found. He created a space where this discussion would clearly happen, and then left the resulting discussion to occur with no guidance. There was no mention of next steps or seeking help in the video, the caption, or any comment that he had pinned, liked, or written. There were teenagers in the comments trying to help each other with eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Meanwhile, the caption of the video was "For those struggling with with body dysmorphia, eating dis0rders, & low self esteem…. Keep going (trophy emoji) #bdd #bodydysmorphia #keepgoing". Nowhere did he even mention treatment or seeking help. While the internal support provided by other commenters may have been good, it is also concerning that it was left to stand alone as the only response, especially when it was accompanied by the absence of the authority figure who started the discussion, or any authority figure at all. Just as in self-policing, a key concern is that the burden of this sort of "protecting" work fell to users, who may have had varying amounts of knowledge about how to help others or where to point people who needed help. Overall, though, internal support did exist as a form of community care. When content, comments, or statements were self-policed, the creators/commentors were sometimes simultaneously supported or encouraged to get help. This self-regulation and internal support were not mutually exclusive. Sometimes both were happening at once, which is why several examples used in this chapter

may seem like they could have easily fit in another section. While not everyone who experienced this self-policing was met with support or as much compassion as in some instances, this internal support did exist for people who were self-policed or for people who identified similar struggles to things pointed out in videos directed at people who were experiencing disordered eating, body dysmorphia, or were in recovery (which were "outside the bounds" of behavior more generally, as they were pathological). However, the existence and extent of this policing and support was not uniform.

## The Absence of Self-Policing and Support

There were places where these mechanisms of care through self-policing and support were absent. One of the main places in which the policing seemed to disappear was in weight loss content posted by individuals who either were or are plus-sized. The content was not self-policed when the person was viewed as having needed/currently needing to lose weight for health reasons. Then, it was legitimate weight loss, and did not need to be policed (unless they were losing it in an illegitimate way). This "legitimate" weight loss was not policed in the same way that similar content posted by other people would have been. Additionally, there were many instances in which the self-policing was completely absent, and people were blatantly fat-shaming others in the comments. I saw several videos where commentors became irritated with criticism, claimed that losing weight was not that complicated, that fat people were just lazy, and that other people were giving them excuses.

**July 28th, 2021**

> *A video that I know I don't want to open the comment section of. The audio is the "Opportunity" song. It's a video of a plus-size model posing for a shoot. The caption is "Changing Minds. @sportsillustratedswim let's redefine beauty together.". It has 75,300 likes and 918,800 views. The creator has 7.9 million followers. It was posted eleven hours ago.*

*Here are some examples of comments*
*"Y'all making fun of her while she is making $$$ on these"*
**skip replies*
*-Exactly. She can afford to dress her future kids in ANYTHING aside from whatever tf your kid is wearing in your pfp. We love to see it*
*-she don't have a future with the way she's going*
*-Yes but I can walk up a flight of stairs without coming inches away from death. So who's really winning here?*
*-She made 30 bucks max from this video*
*-Well at least she's gonna be wealthy for the next 7 years she has left*
*-Probably 5 cents*
*-Great she can use the money towards her copays for insulin I hear it's expensive*
*-Why is this on my fyp*

*"you all say how beautiful she is until u see her walking down the aisle of a airplane towards the seat next to ya.."*
*-She's making money off your hate yk?*
*-Yes I do, but idrc care how much money She makes, doesn't effect me*
*-You think a plane could take off with her on it*
*-I'd say more like 7months*
*-(three skull emojis, spaced out)*
*-Omg so funny I remember when I was 10. look up Lipedema and gain some empathy*

*Finally, after a few more, we get a pivot in the comment section.*
*"some of y'all never learnt the phrase "treat others how you would want to be treated" and it shows."*
*-I'd tell myself to take better care of myself if I looked like that so…*
*-okay good for you, then take care of yourself.*
*-What does it even matter to you. People need to get a life*
*-Same to you bestie (sparkle emoji)*
*-I would like for others to be honest with me.*
*-If I looked like this I hope my friends would bully me till I cry and can't take it anymore.*
*-that's fucking sad and pathetic that you have that type of mindset tbh*
*-honestly very much disrespect*
*-If was I would love to be treated with heat*
*-she is treating herself poorly tho*

*Anyways, we've pivoted back. People are defending her, saying it's a medical condition.*

*People are arguing in the comments. I look at her account. The second most recent video has 1.7 million views. The comments are even more mean. They're talking like she's not a real person, like she won't see it, like it doesn't matter. They even imply that she deserves it because otherwise she will not know that she should lose weight. Some of them even outright say so.*

On the surface, there was a desire to not promote disordered eating or harmful ideas, but that desire was not enough to stop people from blatantly fat-shaming and writing hate comments about people who appeared to be "too far" outside the bounds. Anecdotally, the awareness of the promotion of eating disorders tended to be more common among female creators, who were often asked to consider the effects their content may have had on young girls. Comment sections that seemed more male-dominated were often more fatphobic and more aggressive. I even saw men be blatantly fatphobic to themselves in videos, something that women rarely did. Additionally, some men frequently insisted that counting calories and tracking macros in a detailed fashion was not disordered eating because they were doing it to reach their fitness goals, not because of an eating disorder. While much of the content aimed at women was concerning, there was at least some marginal form of policing occurring on that content to prevent it from overtly promoting disordered eating. Additionally, many times, videos made by women mentioned fat loss rather than weight loss, which resulted in less backlash because it was more directly about health and less about appearance, or it at least claimed to be. The self-policing/ED awareness was sometimes so effective that creators put "TW: Calorie Counting" at the beginning of videos. Meanwhile, my limited experience during this project indicated that this policing might have been largely absent among male creators and in content targeting men. The absence of the same type of awareness or concern about the promotion of disordered eating in this content is deeply concerning and should be investigated in future research.

Just as fact-checking was less likely for more extreme content (until it got to a point where the claims were so outlandish that people were frequently duetting videos to counter or mock them), self-policing also became less prevalent in more extreme subcommunities about weight loss, fitness, and diet. Pro-ana content or really extreme content was typically self-

policed, just as extreme misinformation was fact-checked. The content between the more mainstream self-policed content and the absurdly extreme self-policed content is where self-policing may have often been absent, and dissent was less visible in the comment sections. This was particularly concerning given that one method people used to determine whether a creator was correct was checking the comments for disagreement. The absence of any sort of backlash, whether it be fact-checking or self-policing, could have been interpreted as a sign that the creator was correct, and not "bad" in that they were promoting dangerous or problematic ideas or behaviors.

## Platform Policing

While most of the policing was performed by users, it would be inaccurate to say that the platform was completely uninvolved in self-policing and moderation. TikTok is known for having fairly relaxed content moderation standards. However, the community guidelines do explicitly ban content promoting disordered eating ("TikTok Community Guidelines" 2022). TikTok has banned "pro-ana" content, but this ban was ineffective, as users found ways to work around it by, for example, misspelling hashtags[23] (Bhardwaj 2020). Even when the platform had these policies in place, they were not necessarily effective or helpful, and it often was not clear that they existed when scrolling through the app. I only knew about them because I was asked to read the terms of service and community guidelines during the IRB process.

I did not often perceive the platform to be moderating content, so it was surprising to me when I happened upon it. This happened when I found a slight attempt at moderation from

[23] This type of "evasion" of TikTok's moderation was common, as users misspelled things to evade censorship.

TikTok while exploring some of the hashtags commonly used by creators to see if some hashtags were more dominated by male creators, whom I had not been seeing very frequently.

**July 1st, 2021**

> *#caloriedeficit has a message at the top. "At TikTok, while we value creative expression, our foremost priority is keeping users safe. If you or someone you know are experiencing concerns around body image, food, or exercise – it's important to know that you are not alone. If helpful, you can confide in someone you trust. We also encourage you to contact the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Helping to get support, information, and treatment options at http://nationaleatingdisorders.org/helpline or text 'NEDA' to 741741 for 24/7 crisis support. It can make all the difference. Please remember to take care of yourselves and each other" I had to expand the warning to read the whole thing. That's great, but why is it on this hashtag specifically? It comes up on both #caloriedeifict and #caloricdeficit, but not #weightloss, #diethelp #diethacks or #anabolic. I think caloriedeficit may be the more popular hashtag. It has 2.2 billion views. Caloricdeficit has 152.8 million views. #weightloss has 28.4 billion views, though. This is interesting. I definitely think there might be a gender difference in the type of tags. Also, just to wrap up this observation, #anabolic has 123.7 million views.*

While this was slightly inconsistent, considering the types of tags that caused the warning to appear, it was also a strange place to put the warnings. Other warnings, like the dangerous acts/performed by professionals warning and the COVID-19 information warning, appeared as banners on the bottom of the screen as the videos played. Why did this one not appear on the videos themselves, but on the hashtags? Most people do not frequently look through tags like this, so the warning was almost hidden. I never saw a banner saying that the actions in the video were dangerous or should be supervised by professionals on a diet or weight loss video. The platform, even when it took steps like this, often did not do so effectively.

## The Algorithm Policing Itself

I tried to stay away from ED recovery spaces on TikTok, but it was easy to end up seeing ED recovery content. If you watched enough weight loss/fitness/diet content, you likely saw it. In some ways, maybe that is a good thing, that the algorithm starts to warn you that you may be headed down a bad path. In other ways, it is a little concerning. One of the ways that the

algorithm works is that it shows you content with which people it has identified as having similar interests to you have engaged (Matsakis 2020). Given that information, this trend reveals that the algorithm has identified common interests with ED recovery content, and it is some of this really popular content about diet, weight loss, and fitness. Moreover, it implies that the algorithm may have also been accidentally doing the opposite—that is, it may have showed diet, weight loss, and fitness content to users who engaged with ED recovery content.

**June 24th, 2021**

> *I have started getting more videos that have different viewpoints. Is TikTok worried about me? "I don't know who needs to hear this right now, but your life is way too short to be tracking every single bite of food you take, every single meal, every single snack, tracking every single calorie, there's just no point". He continues on. The caption is "some comments on my video today inspired me to makes this, food is fuel never forget that #footok #edawareness". His bio is "Food is meant to be enjoyed ! College guy studying Nutrition". There's a link to use his discount code on musclupbars.com. I think I found the video he's referring to. The audio is "Happier" by Olivia Rodrigo. It's a video of his face, and the sticker says "What have you eaten so far today?" The caption says "if your answer is nothing go eat something". In the comments, he discourages people who say things like "um…yea, anyways, next question!" and "wish my answer was nothing :/". That video has 34,000 views. The one that I saw first has 26,800 views. He has 41,000 likes. He didn't use an original audio on the video. The audio is Good 4 u, but I think it's turned all the way down.*

All of these elements point to the reality that TikTok is its own complex social world. The forces at play in regulating content were much more complicated and varied than news headlines about TikTok would suggest. These social support mechanisms and social control mechanisms did exist, which is important in painting an accurate portrayal of what occurs on TikTok, rather than just depicting it as a complete free-for-all of problematic content. Even if things are sliding through or avoiding these forces, users might not characterize the content that way, as they may experience the content as being regulated, particularly because of the "not my side of TikTok/not my community" shifting of blame. Understanding these complexities is important, because it allows for the possibility of creating positive change in the future by

leveraging existing social norms and processes, and points to the need for better ways to protect users who may be “allies” in preventing problematic behavior or messaging.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

Throughout this research, several key themes emerged. The first is that, like any social system, TikTok is complex and varied. The people that use it do so for a variety of reasons, and each community has its own standards, rules, and interests. As a result, criticisms of the content and the platform must take into account that they may not be universal—just as the social "rules" I observed may not exist in all subcommunities, the harmful elements described in news pieces or even in this writing may not exist in all subcommunities, and it is important to not paint the platform, all of its various communities, users, and creators, as a monolith. That is not productive, and treating TikTok as a scapegoat for wider societal problems—like harmful diet messaging, fatphobia, racism, or misinformation—is not very productive either. Addressing these issues on the platform requires engaging with the social elements of how it works and recognizing (and taking advantage of) the nuances of these interactions and dynamics.

While there is much to worry about in terms of who had authority, who did not, and the kinds of information or misinformation spreading on the app, it is inaccurate to paint users as passive sponges who absorbed every idea they heard as true. Rather, interviewees described having strategies to evaluate the truthfulness of statements or the authority of creators. Moreover, the dynamics of authority and credibility were observed as ideas were challenged in comment sections, duets, and stitches. Addressing misinformation on the app requires understanding the existing processes that already attempt to do so. Looking to the future, communicators should be looking to work with people and with platforms to change the "rules" people are enforcing, to use the mechanisms through which users expect to see corrections, and to engage with the platform in ways that are conducive to reaching users. Other places for attention might be ways in which the platform itself could be changed to better facilitate fact-checking or self-policing,

equipping community members with tools to help them carry out tasks they are already attempting to do.

This is not to say that the content observed was not concerning. There were several alarming aspects that merit further attention. For example, while people may have been quick to point out or distance themselves from certain ideas or claims, this content was evading some of the things that served as red flags. For instance, the use of terms like fat loss instead of weight loss, and the use of claims related to "feeling better" or having clearer skin allowed some content to discuss diet without explicitly discussing weight loss, which might have prevented creators from receiving backlash or pushback. Additionally, as some content, like the content described in Chapter 2, avoided making direct claims or promoting specific ways of eating healthily, ideas were able to spread casually, without being evaluated or interrogated. This sort of under-the-surface spread of ideas about healthy eating, fitness, and the good life is concerning, but its vagueness makes it difficult to consider how to effectively react to its harmful effects. At the very least, though, it is important to be aware of it, because efforts to combat harmful ideas cannot function without understanding what ideas people are actually being exposed to and how.

Another consequence of the ideas described in this thesis is that TikTok content has real effects on health. Social media tends to promote eating disorders, and many of the features of TikTok, like the amount of content consumed, the ways in which the algorithm can help users spiral into obsessions with specific topics, and the creation of high frequencies of new intersubjective relationships, could facilitate these processes even more efficiently. This is particularly concerning given the challenges in fact-checking incorrect claims and policing harmful content described in Chapters 3 and 4. The content described poses definite dangers in terms of increasing focus on eating healthily, making nutrition or diet central to identity and a

sense of belonging in a community, and repeatedly exposing users to harmful or negative ideas. Given the ways in which harmful messaging emerged, especially in response to discussions that attempted to correct for problematic statements, there should be a lot of concern about both the effects of this content on users and the ways in which the burden of correcting problems fell on the users themselves, rather than on the platform, "authority" figures, or professionals. Supporting these users should be a key priority in any attempt to improve the regulation of content or address its consequences.

Overall, this research points to a strong need for in-depth, serious analysis of TikTok and the ideas spreading on it. Even in this relatively brief exploration of social rules and mechanisms in a few areas of the app, complex social rules emerged, and specific concerning elements, like the ways in which these ideas were tied to identity and community, were identified. Clearly, TikTok should not be dismissed, and the information about diet spreading on it should not be considered to just be re-incarnations of fad diets and trends common on other platforms. What is happening is much more complex than that, and it has the potential to seriously affect the way that TikTok users view food, healthy eating, exercise, and fitness. These effects will likely linger long after the app loses popularity among young people, making understanding what they are and what their effects are a pressing issue. Additionally, more broadly, the social dynamics and use of the app seem to be much more complicated than what is described in popular media, which tends to focus on specific harmful "trends". The ways that people engage with this content, and the ways that users are creating these social norms and rules also might re-emerge on other social media platforms in the future. Understanding them now could be important to making sure that people are ready to analyze, discuss, and respond to misinformation or harmful ideas on future social media platforms that function in similar ways.

There are several specific topics concerning TikTok that future research should investigate. The influence of TikTok on eating disorders is an area of concern that has been noted in popular media frequently, particularly due to existing literature about other social media platforms and eating disorders. In-depth analysis of what is happening in more extreme sub-communities, like pro-ED communities, could be important, as this research focused on a broader category of content that is fairly popular on the app, and more extreme or smaller communities may have different (or a lack of) rules about what is acceptable, who has authority, and how to determine what is true. Another key area for future exploration is content more commonly viewed by men, which I likely did not see because the app had access to information about my gender. Eating disorder prevalence in men has been a growing concern (Wei et al. 2021; Kumar 2021; Marsh 2017), and given some of the observations in this research, wherein content targeting men appeared to be more aggressive and less internally regulated, this content should be of concern, particularly in terms of promoting unhealthy or disordered thoughts or behaviors.

In general, much of the information about health, fitness, diet, or how to be a good person should be concerning, as TikTok has a large amount of influence on individuals, as discussed in Chapter 2. The spread of these ideas needs to be investigated in depth, rather than solely in think pieces. Additionally, the ways in which users interact with the platform are very important, as they may demonstrate larger trends about how young people use social media and engage with online content that may outlast the platform itself. Research needs to investigate both the social world inside the app and, simultaneously, the ways in which it seeps into and overlaps with other social worlds, preferably by using mixed research methods. Further, these explorations should fuel us to revisit theories related to socialization and media, as some theory may be outdated

because of the ways that technology and social media have impacted everyday life and the ways that people interact with these platforms.

Additionally, this research pointed to a strong need to view TikTok and other "non-traditional" sites as whole cultures to avoid missing important interactions and social processes. One of the reasons that the content and messaging described in this thesis was so potent was that it happened in intersubjective relationships, emerging in communities and through social interactions. As we have seen, TikTok can function as its own cultural and social world. This has important implications, as cultures define socially acceptable forms of expressing distress through disease categories. Some scholarship points to the ways in which this is true for biomedicine's descriptions of mental health conditions (Watters 2010). Importantly, recent news articles and research point to TikTok as the cause of an increase in the number of adolescents displaying tic disorders, and in some cases, even having the same tics (Olvera et al. 2021; Cummins 2021). While the research does not explicitly describe it this way, this is evidence of TikTok having the power to influence socially accepted and expected forms of displaying distress. This furthers the idea that TikTok is a culture and a community, as it can contribute to sorts of "cultural idioms of distress" or "culture-bound syndromes". This supports the argument that TikTok merits attention not just as a site of the spread of harmful ideas, but also as a set of cultural and social worlds, making it capable of strongly influencing its users.

Furthermore, research needs to stop being significantly behind new media and technology. It also needs to avoid the tendency to dismiss unconventional interactions or new technology as outside of or tangentially affecting social worlds. People's social worlds not only include virtual spaces, but often exist in them. As described in this thesis, digital communities and digital worlds have their own rules and expectations. They are also not self-contained. One

of the challenges of studying TikTok is that it is not separate from "in-person" interactions or from other platforms. We need to recognize digital spaces, and study them as communities, rather than as tools that affect "real world" communities, but we also need to maintain enough flexibility to consider the ways in which these digital communities are interconnected, can spread across platforms, and can seep into/merge with in-person life. Anthropology must be flexible enough to study communities as they emerge and in the ways that they currently exist, rather than relying on outdated theory that artificially constrains definitions of sociality and community. It also needs to be flexible enough to meet the challenges of these ever-shifting means of social engagement and be prepared not just to extend current understandings of social processes and social theory to apply to them, but also to re-imagine them based on these new forms of community that are pushing the limits of how we imagine ourselves to be interconnected.

Additionally, researchers, funders, and reviewing agencies need to come together to devise new strategies that permit effective and ethical research in other digital communities. Inconsistencies in terms of whether online content should be considered data or people[24], policies about recruitment through social media, and the ways in which digital ethnographers can interact with content or users on different platforms not only inhibit collaboration between researchers and comparisons between projects, but also risk ignoring potential ethical concerns due to confusion. Inconsistencies also complicate and delay approval processes because of the lack of a common understanding of what is permissible. Delays are particularly troubling in this context, given that social media platforms and content move quickly, and research is already struggling to keep up with them. To ensure that future research can be conducted efficiently and ethically, we

[24] This has been noted in some literature about methodologies (J. N. Lester 2020).

need to seriously consider how digital research should be conducted when we are considering online interactions to be social interactions and digital spaces to be communities. Observing social interactions requires methodological and ethical considerations that differ from observing content in its more limited definition, and this difference must be addressed.

Understanding TikTok as a cultural and social world, as I argue we must, has implications for many disciplines. For public health and health communications, it means that addressing misinformation requires engaging with community leaders and community norms, rather than assuming that they are the same as they have been in the past. It also means that working through existing networks of information requires working through existing mechanisms like self-policing and fact-checking, and equipping users with the necessary tools (like resources, information, or platform features) to carry out these tasks. For anthropology, it means considering and studying new types of community, and re-imagining what ethnography looks like. For social science more broadly, it means rethinking and re-theorizing assumptions about sociality and community. While these adjustments and changes may seem overwhelming or difficult, they should not be ignored. The consequences of failing to meet the challenge of studying and understanding these new types of social worlds are profound. There is so much that would be missed. It is time to stop running away from new developments and stop slowly straggling behind them. Instead, we need to speed up to catch up to these developments and changes, such that we can respond to problems identified in these virtual spaces and work towards correcting them.

# References


Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2008. "'Writing against Culture.'" In *The Cultural Geography Reader*. Routledge.

Al-Rawi, Ahmed, and Jacob Groshek. 2015. "Arab Iranians and Their Social Media Use." *CyberOrient* 9 (2): 33–64. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.cyo2.20150902.0003.

Alwadi, Nada. 2014. "Social Media As an Opportunity to Bahraini Women." *CyberOrient* 8 (1): 140–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.cyo2.20140801.0007.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01609.

Anderson, Esther. 2021. "Positionality, Privilege, and Possibility: The Ethnographer 'at Home' as an Uncomfortable Insider." *Anthropology and Humanism* 46 (2): 212–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12326.

Bhandari, Aparajita, and Sara Bimo. 2022. "Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media." *Social Media + Society* 8 (1): 20563051221086240. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241.

Bhardwaj, Naina. 2020. "TikTok Videos That Promote Anorexia Are Misspelling Common Hashtags to Beat the 'pro-Ana' Ban." Insider. December 27, 2020. https://www.insider.com/tiktok-bans-six-accounts-posting-eating-disorder-content.

Biltekoff, Charlotte. 2013. *Eating Right in America : The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Blades, Nicole. 2020. "We Need To Talk About TikTok's Dangerous Diet Culture." Delish. October 30, 2020. https://www.delish.com/food/a34463526/tiktok-disordered-eating-dangerous-trends/.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2020. "The Ability of Place: Digital Topographies of the Virtual Human on Ethnographia Island." *Current Anthropology* 61 (S21): S109–22. https://doi.org/10.1086/704924.

Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight : Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press.

Byrne, Christine. 2021. "'What I Eat In a Day' Videos Are Going Viral on TikTok-Here's Why They're So Problematic." Health.Com. January 27, 2021. https://www.health.com/mind-body/what-i-eat-in-a-day-tiktok-problematic.

Contois, Emily. 2017. "'Lose Like a Man': Gender and the Constraints of Self-Making in Weight Watchers Online." *Gastronomica* 17 (1): 33–43.

Coveney, John. 1999. "Food, Morals and Meaning." In *Food, Morals & Meaning*, 1–1. Taylor & Francis Ltd / Books. http://libproxy.wustl.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=16884980&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Cummins, Eleanor. 2021. "TikTok Tics Are a Symptom of a Much Bigger Problem." The Verge. November 12, 2021. https://www.theverge.com/2021/11/12/22772157/tiktok-tics-suggestible-distress-teens.

De Kosnik, Abigail. 2019. "Is Twitter a Stage?:: Theories of Social Media Platforms as Performance Spaces." In *#identity*, edited by Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman, 20–36. Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation. University of Michigan Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9md.5.

Dickson, EJ. 2020. “Why Is TikTok Advertising Dangerous Fasting Diets to Teenage Girls? - Rolling Stone.” Rolling Stone. July 22, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/what-is-intermittent-fasting-tiktok-ads-1031931/.

Doyle, Brandon. 2022. “TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Mar 2022 Update].” *Wallaroo Media* (blog). March 8, 2022. https://wallaroomedia.com/blog/social-media/tiktok-statistics/.

“Eating Disorder Facts l CEDC | Bulimia & Anorexia & Binge Eating Facts.” n.d. *Cambridge Eating Disorder Center* (blog). Accessed March 17, 2022. https://www.eatingdisordercenter.org/facts-figures/.

Eaton, Paul William. 2016. “CHAPTER TWELVE: Multiple Materiality Across Distributed Social Media.” *Counterpoints* 501: 165–78.

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage.

Gordon, Aubrey, and Michael Hobbes. 2021. *Halo Top Ice Cream*. Podcast. Maintenance Phase.

Hejtmanek, Katie Rose. 2020. “Fitness Fanatics: Exercise as Answer to Pending Zombie Apocalypse in Contemporary America.” *American Anthropologist* 122 (4): 864–75. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13462.

Hutchinson, Andrew. 2021. “TikTok Launches New ‘Spark’ Ads Which Enabled Brands to Tap into Trending Organic Content.” Social Media Today. July 20, 2021. https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/tiktok-launches-new-spark-ads-which-enabled-brands-to-tap-into-trending-o/603671/.

“Is It Bad to Lose Weight Too Quickly?” 2017. Healthline. October 29, 2017. https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/losing-weight-too-fast.

Jennings, Rebecca. 2021. “How TikTok Became a Haven for Queer and Questioning Kids.” Vox. August 3, 2021. https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22606245/tiktok-queer-fluid-bisexuality-nonbinary-filter.

Johnston, Josée, and Michael Goodman. 2015. “Spectacular Foodscapes: Food Celebrities and the Politics of Lifestyle Mediation in an Age of Inequality.” *Food Culture and Society An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 18 (April). https://doi.org/10.2752/175174415X14180391604369.

Kato, Brooke. 2020. “This Dangerous TikTok Trend Could Lead to Eating Disorders, Experts Say.” *New York Post* (blog). July 31, 2020. https://nypost.com/2020/07/31/this-dangerous-tiktok-trend-could-lead-to-eating-disorders/.

Koetsier, John. 2020. “Digital Crack Cocaine: The Science Behind TikTok’s Success.” Forbes. January 18, 2020. https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2020/01/18/digital-crack-cocaine-the-science-behind-tiktoks-success/.

Kumar, Naveen. 2021. “Eating Disorders in Men: Underdiagnosed and Undertreated.” Healthline. November 23, 2021. https://www.healthline.com/health/eating-disorders/eating-disorders-in-men.

Lau, Kimberly. 2000. *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lester, Jessica Nina. 2020. “Going Digital in Ethnography: Navigating the Ethical Tensions and Productive Possibilities.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 20 (5): 414–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708620936995.

Lester, Rebecca. 2019. *Famished: Eating Disorders and Failed Care in America*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Marsh, Sarah. 2017. “Eating Disorders in Men Rise by 70% in NHS Figures.” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2017, sec. Society. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jul/31/eating-disorders-in-men-rise-by-70-in-nhs-figures.
Matsakis, Louise. 2020. “How TikTok’s ‘For You’ Algorithm Actually Works.” *Wired*, June 18, 2020. https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-finally-explains-for-you-algorithm-works/.
McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. “The Medium Is the Message.” In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill. https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf.
Nardi, Bonnie A. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. University of Michigan Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9nw.
Olvera, Caroline, Glenn T. Stebbins, Christopher G. Goetz, and Katie Kompoliti. 2021. “TikTok Tics: A Pandemic Within a Pandemic.” *Movement Disorders Clinical Practice* 8 (8): 1200–1205. https://doi.org/10.1002/mdc3.13316.
Parisi, Danny. 2021. “How Aeropostale Went from Bankrupt Mall Store to Trending TikTok Brand in 5 Years.” *Glossy* (blog). June 29, 2021. https://www.glossy.co/fashion/how-aeropostale-went-from-bankrupt-mall-store-to-trending-tiktok-brand-in-5-years/.
Peake, Bryce. 2010. “Memory, Mediascapes, and Temporal Circulation in Urban Space; or How Landscapes Were Never as Linear as We Thought They Weren’t.” *Student Anthropologist* 2 (1): 5–8. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.sda2.20100201.0001.
Pearce, Celia. 2011. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. MIT Press.
Pierce, R. J. 2021. “TikTok Is As Addictive As Gambling, According to a Sociologist.” Tech Times. September 22, 2021. https://www.techtimes.com/articles/265687/20210922/tiktok-videos-really-get-you-hooked-by-tricking-your-brain-sociologist.htm.
Redfield, Robert. 1955. *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Santarossa, Sara, and Sarah J. Woodruff. 2017. “#SocialMedia: Exploring the Relationship of Social Networking Sites on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Eating Disorders.” *Social Media + Society* 3 (2): 2056305117704407. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117704407.
Schroeder, Ralph. 2018. “The Internet in Everyday Life I: Sociability.” In *Social Theory after the Internet*, 82–100. Media, Technology, and Globalization. UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxdr.7.
Smith, Ben. 2021. “How TikTok Reads Your Mind.” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2021, sec. Business. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/business/media/tiktok-algorithm.html.
“Terms of Service | TikTok.” 2019. February 2019. https://www.tiktok.com/legal/terms-of-service?lang=en.
Thomas, Lisa, Pam Briggs, Andrew Hart, and Finola Kerrigan. 2017. “Understanding Social Media and Identity Work in Young People Transitioning to University.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 76 (November): 541–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.021.
“TikTok Community Guidelines.” 2022. February 2022. https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en#33.
TikTok For Business Editorial Team. 2021. “Introducing Spark Ads: An Authentic Way for Brands to Elevate Native, Popular Content.” TikTok For Business. July 20, 2021.

https://us.tiktok.com/business/en/blog/spark-ads-authentic-way-brands-elevate-native-popular-content.
Turetsky, Emma. 2021. “TikTok Made Me Gay.” The Cut. August 27, 2021. https://www.thecut.com/2021/08/tiktok-helped-me-come-out-gay-lesbian.html.
Turner, Pixie G., and Carmen E. Lefevre. 2017. “Instagram Use Is Linked to Increased Symptoms of Orthorexia Nervosa.” *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* 22 (2): 277–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-017-0364-2.
W. S. J. Staff. 2021. “Inside TikTok’s Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation.” *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2021, sec. Tech. https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-algorithm-video-investigation-11626877477.
Watters, Ethan. 2010. *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*. Free Press.
Wei, Boyu, Patrycja Klimek, Jamie-Lee Pennesi, and Aaron J. Blashill. 2021. “Perceptual and Attitudinal Body Image, Disordered Eating, and Muscle-Building Behavior in College Men.” *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 22 (1): 156–65. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000290.
Wiseman, Eva. 2021. “The Dark Side of Wellness: The Overlap between Spiritual Thinking and Far-Right Conspiracies.” *The Guardian*, October 17, 2021, sec. Life and style. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/17/eva-wiseman-conspirituality-the-dark-side-of-wellness-how-it-all-got-so-toxic.
Zelman, Kathleen M. 2014. “Things You Should Never Do to Lose Weight.” WebMD. April 5, 2014. https://www.webmd.com/diet/obesity/features/lose-weight-dangers.