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Diets, Detoxes and Discipline: Body Surveillance and Postfeminist Biopedagogy on TikTok

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**Abstract**

Video sharing social media app TikTok has seen a recent explosion in popularity, especially among its largest Western demographic, young women and girls. Drawing upon Foucaultian and feminist theory, this thesis explores TikTok as an emerging social platform and digital space where feminized bodies are discursively constructed as "projects" requiring ongoing surveillance and labour. Through a feminist critical discourse analysis of 60 user-generated TikTok videos, I argue that TikTok reinforces the healthist and postfeminist body standards which relegate feminized bodies into a state of constant improvement through self-surveillance, discipline and weight loss. TikTok's users share various diet and detox strategies to aide in this pursuit of thinness, producing a postfeminist biopedagogy (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019) which informs users both how to achieve a successful feminine body and what that body looks like. TikTok's body discourse therefore harmfully contributes to the ongoing oppression of fat and feminized bodies, dictating the parameters of acceptable femininity which exclude fat bodies and dismiss feminized bodies as aestheticized objects.

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## Chapter One - Introduction

In recent years, the video sharing social media app TikTok has seen exponential growth, especially since it merged with competing app Musical.ly in 2018. As of September 2020, TikTok has amassed over 800 million monthly active users, making it the 7th most used app in the world (Iqbal, 2020). While TikTok can be accessed with a web browser, it is primarily formatted for and meant to be accessed through its free smartphone app. Users must create an account in order to upload their own content and access their personalized and algorithmically organized "For You" page, which is the primary destination through which TikTok content is consumed. The For You page allows for endless scrolling through TikToks, which are selected based on a user's known information, a TikTok's popularity and past engagement on the app, and organized through an opaque algorithm. Users can "like," share and comment on the TikToks they encounter as well as "follow" other creators on the app. Content from followed users is organized on a separate "Following" page, so content on the For You page can come from any user.

Due to its relatively newfound popularity, scholarship on TikTok is limited, however it has undoubtedly become the preeminent platform for digital youth culture and expression. TikTok's largest user base in the United States is young women, with 60% of users aged 16-24 and female identified users outnumbering male identified users 2:1 (Alper et al., 2019; Iqbal, 2020). Particularly in the stay-at-home age of COVID-19, TikTok has become a prominent platform through which to practice and observe girlhood and femininity (Kennedy, 2020). This demographic is of special interest to feminist media studies scholars studying the new ways in

which young women and girls are engaging with or challenging traditional femininity and patriarchal systems of power.

TikTok has faced backlash over some of the content it hosts due to the perceived vulnerabilities of its young users. Particular concern has been raised over content which promotes disordered eating practices (Lewis, 2020; Newman, 2020; Wilson, 2020). In response, TikTok ramped up moderation, banning search terms such as "proana," "anorexia" and "thinspo" and explicitly prohibiting "content that depicts, promotes, normalizes, or glorifies eating disorders or other dangerous weight loss behaviors" (TikTok, 2020). Despite these efforts, content which exists in the "grey area" between healthy and disordered eating still thrives on the app. Instead of the terms which have become shorthand for anorexia, this content uses a language of "diets" and "detoxes" to conceal potentially harmful disciplinary practices and sensibilities. TikTok is especially harmful grounds for this type of content due to its participatory nature, which encourages not only consumption, but imitation through the use of viral "sounds" and challenges. Videos demonstrating calorie restriction, body checks and weight loss transformations are rampant on TikTok, and appear to proposition users to try these practices themselves and share their results (Lewis, 2020)

My first hand experiences as a young woman on TikTok inspired me to focus my honours research on this topic. As someone who has struggled with food restriction and body image, I was disheartened by the amount of potentially triggering diet culture and weight loss content I would see on the app. The goal of my research is to investigate content on TikTok related to physical health and dieting in order to reveal what discourses it circulates about feminized bodies. My primary research question is: How is the thin feminine body as a "project"

(Brumberg, 1998) discursively constructed and represented on TikTok? Through my analysis, I argue that TikTok reinforces the diet culture present in other forms of media which privileges the thin body as the epitome of good health and morality (Chastain, 2019). TikTok's flavour of diet culture is especially gendered, with the majority of the app's health related content concerned with policing the female body and defining the parameters of acceptable femininity. Through particular technological affordances, TikTok constructs a postfeminist healthism discourse which promotes self-surveillance and discipline as the primary strategies through which women are expected to meet the standards of thin feminine beauty.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research project employs a theoretical framework that incorporates Foucauldian theories on discourse and biopower as well as poststructuralist and intersectional feminist theory. In this section I provide an overview of each theoretical tradition and describe how they are used in my research.

*Discourse & Biopower*

Post-structural theorist Michel Foucault describes discourse as the production of knowledge - about a certain topic, at a specific historical moment - through language (Hall, 1997). The power of discourse lies in its ability to produce knowledge that can then be used to categorize and judge social behaviours, shaping how social subjects govern themselves and others (Storey, 2015). Foucault was especially interested in this relationship between knowledge and power, arguing that knowledge is always a form of power in that it affords not only an

assumed authority over "truth," but the ability to dictate what is true and therefore, what is real (Hall, 1997). According to Foucault (1980), "[w]e are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (p. 93). Discourse has the power to produce what Foucault called "regimes of truth" - the rules by which we live and govern society which are not necessarily "true" but are treated as such and therefore become true (Storey, 2015).

However, discourse is not an oppressive tool of social control, because to Foucault power is decentralized - it does not operate from the top down. Foucault (1980) describes power as "something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain [...] employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (p. 98). Power operates circularly through surveillance, wherein citizens surveil each other and themselves constantly and discipline themselves and others according to their adherence to social scripts (Storey, 2015). While the threats of discipline and judgement from peers shape everyday behaviours, Foucault does not frame power as something repressive. Rather, the mechanisms of power and the discourses it creates are so ingrained in society that they become naturalized, even pleasant and desirable (Ferreira et al., 2015). Foucaultian power is best understood as a productive force with the ability to produce knowledge, discourse, and therefore, reality (Hall, 1997; Storey, 2015).

At the centre of the struggle between different forms of power and knowledge is the body - the site where the regulation and discipline prescribed by discursive regimes is most visible (Hall, 1997). Foucault's concept of biopower, introduced first in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (1976) and expanded upon in his later works, explores the body as a site of discursive control. According to Foucault, biopower is a form of power that is inflicted on the

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body, emerging as a result of the need to control populations in early modernity (Ferreira et al., 2015; Kelly, 2013). Rather than deciding who lives or dies, biopower manifests as control over the way citizens live life and what bodies and behaviours are deemed acceptable or not. Under biopower, citizens are rendered dependent on "the nurturing welfare state" (Kelly, 2013, p. 102) and disciplinary institutions are given control over bodies through monitoring, categorization and intervention.

The neoliberal individualism which emerged under industrial capitalism brought biopower to its full potential, as the individual bodies of citizens were rendered both productive apparatuses and active consumers, meant to function as efficient economic machines (Cisney & Morar, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2015). To use Foucault's (1980) own words,

> "[biopower] is a mechanism of power which permits time and labour, rather than wealth and commodities, to be extracted from bodies. It is a type of power which is constantly exercised by means of surveillance rather than in a discontinuous manner by means of a system of levies or obligations distributed over time. It presupposes a tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign." (p. 104)

Biopower exerts control over citizen's individual bodies as a means of controlling the population as a whole. It functions on the micro level as discipline informed by the norms established by institutional powers and on the macro level as the observance and regulation of the health of overall society (Cisney & Morar, 2015). This can be seen in nationwide goals related to the health of the population (for example, the so-called "obesity epidemic") being applied to the individual bodies of citizens (weight loss, diet, exercise, etc.) (Kelly, 2013). Biopower conflates

"good health" with good citizenship, making it the responsibility of both the state and the citizens to maintain a sense of well-being in the population (Kelly, 2013).

Today, biopower manifests as the many rules and regulations by which we are meant to govern our bodies - how much to exercise, how much to eat, how often to visit the doctor - as well as the strategies we apply and products we consume in order to discipline ourselves into meeting the definition of a good, healthy biocitizens. In this digital age, the imperatives of biopower are also exercised on social media, as it is becoming a primary location for health information and advice as well as the preeminent site for the surveillance of bodies and behaviours (Goodyear, Armour & Wood, 2018). Discourse and biopower are valuable theoretical tools for this research as they allow for an analysis of how discursive messages on TikTok construct social truths about feminized bodies, and how TikTok's body discourse has power over the real world disciplinary behaviours and attitudes of its users.

*Post-structural & Intersectional Feminisms*

This research is also informed by feminist theory and praxis. Feminism understands gender as "an ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively" (Lazar, 2007, p. 146). Feminist thinkers and scholars critique the gender hierarchy and question the socially constructed link between biological sex and gender, as well as the perceived "naturalness" of sex itself (Butler, 1993). Feminist theory questions the discursive regimes of gender which render individuals gendered subjects, rejecting the essentialism which posits "an underlying essence of womanness, an essence contained in bodies and expressed in culture" (Ferguson, 1993 qtd. in

Davies & Gannon, 2014, p. 76). The ultimate goal of feminist politics and research is social change, accomplished by challenging and exposing the structures of oppression and gender ideologies which have become hegemonic (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Feminist post-structural theories work alongside Foucaultian discourse as they both "[serve] to denaturalize what seems 'natural' and to interrupt essentialist thought" (Davies & Gannon, 2014, p. 77). Feminism interrogates the discourses related to femininity, sexuality and maternity which pervasively impact women's social status and lived experiences. Judith Butler (1988) famously theorized of gender as a performative act, saying "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (p. 527). Performing gender functions to humanize individuals within contemporary culture, and failing to perform one's gender properly results in social scrutiny and even punishment (Butler, 1988). In my analysis of TikTok I draw from post-structural feminist theories such as Butler's performativity to analyze the gendered expectations and ideals as presented by feminine bodies on the app.

Another feminist concept shaping this research is intersectionality, a term which articulates how multiple marginalized identities can intersect to create multiple forms of oppression to be experienced by one individual (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality originated from Black feminist theories of race and gender, seeking to address the way singular conceptions of identity negatively impacted legal, academic and activist understandings of oppression and privilege (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Intersectional feminism allows for acknowledgement of not only gender-based oppression, but of how race, class, sexuality and ability converge with gender to shape each woman's social position and lived experience. While

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this research focuses on gender ideologies, taking an intersectional approach will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how TikTok's body discourse constructs and affects women of various identities.

**Methodology**

*Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*

My research methodology utilizes a social constructionist approach to discourse analysis, which recognizes our understanding of the world as historically and culturally relative, constructed through social processes rather than material reality. Discourse analysis as method draws upon the Foucaultian criticism of objective "truth" juxtaposing the falsehoods of ideology to analyze how texts produce the knowledge and truths which construct the world (Gill, 2018). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) expands upon these research imperatives to expose "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" and inequality (van Dijck, 2016, p. 249). CDA focuses on the discursive strategies of the elite as a means to understand social issues, expose prevailing systems of oppression and instigate social change (van Dijck, 2016). I utilize CDA to engage with the systems of power which govern TikTok, the knowledge produced by its content, and ways in which that knowledge serves to further oppress or uplift marginalized bodies. CDA aligns with my research purpose by interrogating the relationships between discourse, power and social inequality and how a discourse functions to challenge or maintain the status quo (van Dijck, 2016).

My methodological approach also adopts a feminist perspective, seeking to expose how the gender hierarchies and power asymmetries perpetuated by popular discourse construct and

legitimize the patriarchal social system. A feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) manifests

through an interrogation of how "gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are

discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and

communities" (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). According to Michelle Lazar (2007), the need for an

explicitly *feminist* CDA exists because gender operates in more pervasive and complex ways

than other systems of oppression, and while CDA takes inspiration from feminist critique, not all

CDAs operate with a feminist politics. FCDA carries the activist imperative with the goal of

social change, while being motivated by the need to dismantle the patriarchal social order which

serves to advance men as a social group and disempower or erase women as a social group

(Lazar, 2007). My FCDA of TikTok content pays special attention to gender issues to investigate

how the app's body discourse constructs a version of femininity coherent with existing systems

of patriarchal power.


*Data Collection*

TikToks as digital texts exist in the form of short videos up to 60 seconds in length. Users

on TikTok can choose to edit their videos using the in-app editing tools - adding text, images,

filters and effects - as well as changing the clip's audio to be any of the "sounds" available on the

app. The objects of my analysis are 60 TikToks, analyzed for their visual, audial and textual

components, as well as the caption and any hashtags assigned to them by their producer. My data

was gathered directly through the TikTok app, where I created a new account in an effort to make

the data collection as neutral as possible and avoid the algorithmic influences of my personal

account. The parameters of my data collection were two separate search terms - "diet" and

"detox" - from which I collected 30 TikToks each. These videos were retrieved using the search function within the TikTok app and collecting the top 30 TikToks found under the "videos" tab. This tab appears to be algorithmically organized rather than being based only on the popularity of the videos, since different users searching the same word will result in a slightly different organization of videos under the tab. However, the videos within the tab and especially those closest to the top are highly viewed and engaged with, with viewership numbers averaging in the millions.

I chose to gather data from the "videos" tab as opposed to the "hashtags" feature commonly used in past social media research because TikTok only allows for content under a given hashtag to be viewed by popularity. This means that videos that are not necessarily related to the usual content of a hashtag, but are pushed to the top of the page for having the most views/ "likes." In addition, hashtags are limiting in that they depend on the producer of the content to label it under the appropriate hashtag in order for it to be found by the researcher (Gerrard, 2018). The videos tab includes TikToks which include the searched term as a hashtag, but also those that just include the word in their caption or use different hashtags related to the searched term. For example, searching "diet" results in videos including #diet, as well as those with #diettips, #dietculture, #ketodiet and those which include the word diet, dieting or diets in their caption. Using the video tab to gather data will then result in a more diverse sample which is not limited by a single hashtag. It will also allow for consideration of what videos TikTok assigns as being representative of the search term and how they are algorithmically organized.

Another important choice in my research was to use the search terms "diet" and "detox." These terms were chosen because of their associations with physical health and self-

improvement - usually involving the pursuit to lose weight or otherwise "improve" the body in some way - as well as their ability to subvert TikTok's censorship of content related to disordered eating. While "diet" and "detox" have similar connotations, the term "detox" is representative of a recent shift in popular health discourse which positions diet, exercise and living a healthy lifestyle as a means to achieve a general sense of wellbeing rather than to explicitly lose weight (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Kjær, 2018; O'Neill, 2020). Nevertheless, detox content tends to promote similar narratives around food and fatness to diet content. Analyzing the content from these two different terms allowed me to uncover how each employed similar visual language and discursive strategies in their presentation of a neoliberal healthism discourse, giving me a more holistic understanding of this discourse's presence on TikTok.

Once I had my 60 TikToks selected, I proceeded to download each one where downloading was enabled by the producer. From the sample, one video under "diet" and six videos under "detox" were unavailable for download. Downloading a TikTok creates a video file which includes the username of the producer, but not the caption or hashtags. Before beginning formal analysis, six TikToks from the sample were removed from TikTok and no longer accessible through the app. While I had all of the removed TikToks downloaded, I was unable to access their captions or hashtags, and therefore those components were unavailable for consideration in the analysis. The sample of TikToks were compiled into a document including producers' usernames, captions, hashtags (where available) and detailed notes on the visual and audio components of each text. These notes were consulted to identify three distinct discursive themes found to have a patterned presence throughout the sample. For the purposes of anonymity, all of the usernames mentioned in this thesis have been changed from their original

form. The pseudonym usernames were changed so the original could not be identified but the spirit of the username remained. For example, if an original username had been "@journeyto120lbs," I would change it to something like "@becoming125pounds."

*Research Limitations*

Along with the challenges that come with performing research online, such as losing access to certain content when removed by its producer, this research also has certain limitations. First, due to the chosen method of analysis and relatively short time frame of this project, the sample size is somewhat small. In addition, while the popularity of the TikToks in the sample does indicate that they are appearing on the For You Pages of many users, the method of data collection through search terms is not totally indicative of the way actual TikTok users encounter content on the app. Finally, the nature of this analysis required that assumptions of gender and race be made on the basis of user's online presentations, and it is possible for these assumptions to be inaccurate. Certain aspects of user's identities, such as sexuality, ability and age, could not be discerned based on their TikTok presence alone and therefore could not be factored into this analysis.

**Thesis Outline**

In the following chapter, I establish the academic context for this research with a literature review of past scholarship on social media, healthism and postfeminism. In the third chapter, I perform a discursive analysis of my sampled TikToks, finding three distinct themes: (1) The toxic body, (2) Body as evidence and (3) DIY dieting. These themes reveal the ways in

which TikTok discursively constructs and represents feminine bodies as projects. In the final chapter, I provide a brief conclusion to the project, arguing that TikTok presents diet and detox practices as effective body management strategies for women's pursuit of the ideal thin body, and suggesting how these findings could be expanded upon with further research on TikTok.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter situates my research among an existing body of scholarship on social media and gendered health ideologies and practices. I begin with a brief inquiry into the history of social media analysis as discussed by new media scholars, focusing on critical perspectives. The second section delves into how "healthism" manifests both online and offline, as well as the scholarly discussions around how it impacts fat people and women in particular. Finally, I finish with a section on postfeminist understandings of the body, the scholarship surrounding pro-ana digital cultures and how the languages of postfeminism and pro-ana persist online.

**Critical Approaches to Social Media**

Since the arrival of Web 2.0 at the turn of the 21st century, the lives and interactions of everyday people have become increasingly organized by the Internet and social media on both the personal and professional level (van Dijck, 2013). The early days of social media were informed by an idealistic discourse of connectivity and community, which promised to bring people together with a new participatory culture (van Dijck, 2013). While there is potential to build connections through social media engagement, participation is inevitably controlled by and must operate within the governing systems of the platforms (Gillespie, 2010). The proliferation and popularity of social media has prompted widespread attention from scholars, who tend to question their supposed neutrality and utopian spirit in favour of a more critical perspective on their control over ideas and information.

New media conglomerates like Facebook and Google have become woven into the very fabric of culture and society, creating a virtual monopoly on cultural discussion online (Gillespie,

2010). Scholars have raised concerns over this power which, left unchecked, gives these

companies unprecedented control over the online spread of information and interaction as well as

influence over individual's ideas and values (boyd, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). This influence is all

the more salient given the promised neutrality of social media platforms and search engines,

which are informed not by soulless code, but the ideological and commercial objectives of the

corporations and individuals behind them (Gillespie, 2010; Noble, 2018).

According to Tarleton Gillespie (2010), the very term "platform" holds discursive power

and reveals how these sites want to present themselves in the new media landscape. The label of

platform, "emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and

egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 350).

It enhances the implied sense of neutrality, downplaying the role of the company operating the

site in favour of highlighting the user-generated content which it hosts (Gillespie, 2010). In

addition, platforms have a commercial imperative, making space for users to share themselves as

well as for advertisers to sell to them as part of the wider attention economy (boyd, 2010;

Gillespie, 2010). Ultimately, Gillespie (2010) contends that while the term platform implies

difference from traditional mass media through its claims to empower the individual, the

platforms themselves operate under similarly political and commercially driven agendas.

Media scholar danah boyd (2010) describes social media as facilitating "networked

publics," a framework which allows for an understanding of both the digital space occupied by

the public and constructed by the network, as well as "the imagined collective that emerges as a

result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39). Like Gillespie's (2010)

politicization of platforms, boyd (2010) does not frame networked publics as ideologically

neutral. Rather, boyd (2010) alleges that, "networked publics appear to reproduce many of the biases that exist in other publics [...] including social stratification around race, gender, sexuality, and age" (p. 54). While networked publics are inhabited largely by user-generated content, the behaviour of users is shaped by the digital environments they occupy, meaning the owners and creators of the networks are not free from criticism.

boyd (2010) identifies four characteristics of networked publics which structure user engagement: persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2017) classify these characteristics as high level platform affordances, affecting the social structure and sociality of the network, as opposed to low level affordances, which manifest as features and communicative practices. Platform affordances are identified as the "perceived range of possible actions linked to [the] features of the platform" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 235). Affordances both shape user interaction and are shaped by user interaction, allowing users to influence the technology through their behaviour (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). This interactivity can be seen in boyd's (2010) concept of scalability, where the user base, rather than the producer, determines what content goes viral. Another way that many social media sites afford personalization is through the use of algorithmically organized feeds, which evaluate content based on the user's available data and past interactions. The algorithm functions as a "hidden affordance," informed by user behaviour as well as the platform's strategies to maximize user engagement and time spent on the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2017).

Algorithms themselves have received widespread academic attention because of their ability to affect both the information available on and the dominant usage of social media (Gillespie, 2014; Noble, 2018). Algorithms are afforded the power to decide what content is

important and relevant to a given user, and through that process produce and certify knowledge (Gillespie, 2014). The criteria an algorithm uses to determine the relevance of the content it filters is opaque to those affected by it, with the parameters of "relevance" defined by the platform (Gillespie, 2014). Like the platforms themselves, their algorithms are marked by an assumed objectivity and trustworthiness, however this is what Gillespie (2014) calls "a carefully crafted fiction" (p. 179). Algorithms are not only designed with the maintenance of user participation in mind, but also the political and economic imperatives of the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Gillespie, 2014).

In her book *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Noble (2018) describes the ways in which discrimination is embedded within the technologies which increasingly govern our everyday lives, including the algorithms which organize everything from search engines results to social media feeds. Noble (2018) engages with the critical scholarship on algorithms, refuting the fantasy of algorithmic neutrality and discussing how they are ingrained with the values and beliefs of the designers and corporations behind them. In her research, Noble (2018) uses Google search to demonstrate how algorithms reinforce hegemonic ideas and identities. For example, a Google image search for the word "beautiful" results in photos of almost exclusively thin, blonde white women, reflecting and reinforcing existing standards of Westernized feminine beauty while also rendering racialized women invisible (Noble, 2018). This demonstrates the ideological power of algorithms to be what Gillespie (2014) calls "invisibly exclusionary" (pp. 171-172), and exemplifies the need for critical analysis of digital platforms and their algorithmic logic.

**Healthism & Neoliberal Wellness**

One consequence of the increasing individualization emblematic of neoliberal Western society is a heightened focus on the body as a site to be perfected through personal action and control (Appleyard, 1994). The cultural phenomena of diet and fitness as acts of self-improvement has received widespread scholarly attention across several disciplines. Much of this scholarship draws upon Robert Crawford's (1980) concept of "healthism," which he defines as "the preoccupation with personal health as a primary - often the primary - focus for the definition and achievement of well-being" (p. 368). Crawford (1980) developed this theory based on his observations of a growing national preoccupation with personal health and wellness. He observed that healthism was becoming a dominant ideology contributing to the existing social order by framing sickness and disease as primarily the responsibility of the individual.

This language of personal responsibility is harmful because it ignores the social constraints which impact individual health outcomes and only aggravates existing social inequalities (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Crawford, 1980). Healthism frames good health as a positive moral virtue to be actively and relentlessly pursued, and sickness as the deviancy which results from failing in that pursuit (Appleyard, 1994; Crawford, 1980). Health becomes what Crawford (1980) calls a "super value" (p. 382), controlled predominantly by the individual and symptomatic in their behaviours, attitudes and emotions. The ideological power of healthism lies in its ability to both define and problematize "bad" health, while also presenting the disciplinary practices essential to its treatment (Crawford, 1980).

A predominant strategy in the discipline of the body is to control the amount and frequency of food consumed through dieting. Diet practices and the industry that has exploded around them has been explored by several scholars. Susan Bordo (2004) identifies the diet as a key area where the double bind of consumer capitalism is present; as producers, we must be in control of our desires and cravings to maximize productivity, but as consumers we are encouraged to indulge at every impulse. The balance between these opposing expressions of restriction and satisfaction is elusive and complicates the discourses around dieting. In her study of popular online diet plans, Katrine Meldgaard Kjær (2019) found a recent shift in the discourse from dieting to lose weight to dieting to "feel good." However, the promised sense of wellbeing that comes with the diet depends on "not only individual, continual self-transformation but also the formation of collectives from which some bodies must necessarily be excluded" (Kjær, 2019, p. 702). These diets operate through healthism to construct productive, "healthy" bodies which are differentiated from the non-dieting, unhappy, unproductive and unhealthy "Other" (Kjær, 2019).

Rachel O'Neill (2020) finds a similar healthism discourse in her study of the Deliciously Ella diet, which frames healthy eating as a liberating and enjoyable choice, while still requiring hard work, dedication and disposable income. It is the individual's responsibility to not only carefully monitor their diet and engage in healthful eating, but to enjoy doing it. This supposed "anti-diet" rhetoric of enjoying food is still constrained by restrictions on which foods are worthy of enjoyment (O'Neill, 2020). Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston (2015) call this new diet discourse, characterized by a focus on empowerment and health over vanity and restriction, the

"do-diet." The do-diet operates under the neoliberal imperatives of freedom and choice as well as

self-control by encouraging the practice of "choosing health" (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). While

it uses empowering language, Cairns and Johnston (2015) argue that "the do-diet reframes

dietary restrictions as positive choices, while maintaining an emphasis on body discipline, expert

knowledge, and self-control" (p. 153).

These disciplinary diet discourses frame good health as essential to good citizenship, and

the resulting transformation of both the external body and internal attitude as technologies of that

citizenship (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). This healthist construction of the

"good" citizen necessitates an opposing "bad" citizen, which manifests in the discourse as the fat

body (Stoll, 2019). Fatness is associated with the failure to properly discipline and control the

body, and therefore "signifies the classed failures of neoliberalism" (Winch, 2016, p. 898). While

do-diet discourses do not necessitate explicit weight loss goals, they do frame the fat body as

deviant for failing to be properly monitored and controlled (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Kjær,

2019). Under healthism, it is the sole duty of the individual to regulate the body and exercise

control to avoid fatness at any cost.

*Fatphobia and the Medicalization of Fat Bodies*

Fat studies is a growing and diverse field which critically examines cultural notions of

"fatness" and the experiences of fat people. Several fat studies scholars draw from healthism in

their analyses of how fatness and fat bodies are represented and discussed in society (LeBesco,

2010; Stoll, 2019). The debates over the causes of obesity and the extent to which obesity and

fatness result in negative health outcomes are highly contentious. Fat studies scholars tend to

resist the framing of obesity as a risky behaviour or a disease in favour of a more intersectional approach which frames fat people as a class worthy of protection from discrimination and oppression (Saguy & Riley, 2005). I will be drawing from these perspectives for the purposes of my research.

The repudiation and medicalization of fatness became widespread in Western culture by the turn of the 20th century, as fat bodies became increasingly associated with the working class, immigrants and so-called "inferior" races (Stoll, 2019; Winch, 2016). Thinness became synonymous with good citizenship and civilization, while the fat body was shunned at nearly every social and institutional level (LeBesco, 2010; Stoll, 2019). Fatness became constructed as a bodily trait worthy of disgust, mockery, disappointment and, perhaps most predominantly, fear (Winch, 2016). The spread of the so-called "fat panic" found rhetorical success not only because it resonated with larger social anxieties around the poor, but also because it aligned with religious moral crusades against the perceived sloth and gluttony of the lower class (LeBesco, 2010). The treatment for the problem of the increasing weight of the population, eventually labeled the "obesity epidemic," emerged not as the responsibility of governments or social services, but of the individuals who had succumbed to the moral corruption of fatness (LeBesco, 2010; Stoll, 2019).

Under the individualistic gaze of healthism and neoliberalism, fatness is seen as an individual failure by rejection of the moral obligation to maintain good health and economic capital (LeBesco, 2010; Winch, 2016). To be fat is to lack the disciplinary characteristics required to conform to the dominant neoliberal ideal of upward mobility through "hard work" (Bordo, 2004). In 2013, the American Medical Association categorized obesity as a disease in

response to the rising panic of the obesity epidemic (LeBesco, 2010; Stoll, 2019). This pathologization of obesity (a category which itself is socially constructed), means that fat bodies become morally obligated to seek treatment to fix what is considered to be medically wrong with them (Stoll, 2019). The most commonly prescribed obesity treatment is weight loss through dieting, furthering the healthism discourse of individual responsibility (LeBesco, 2010). The medicalization of fatness, promoted by healthism and the discourse of the obesity epidemic, is used to justify the punishment of those whose bodies fail to meet the standards of the good neoliberal citizen.

The moral panic and neoliberal ideologies around fatness have made the shame and discrimination of fat people widespread and largely socially accepted (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Stoll, 2019). Laurie Stoll (2019) argues that fatness is a social justice issue which has not received proper scholarly attention because it is an identity which is incorrectly associated with choice. Research has indicated that fat people are discriminated against for their weight in multiple areas including employment, education, media, politics and medicine (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Stoll, 2019). The pathologization and Othering of fat bodies has significant social consequences and is therefore worthy of further research and scholarly attention, particularly in regards to how it is a gendered issue (Winch, 2016). The effects of fatphobia are especially harmful to women, who suffer significantly more weight-based discrimination than men due to the more limiting standards of thin feminine beauty (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011).

*Gendered Healthism*

Analyzing healthism from a gendered perspective is crucial because health and the body are largely socially coded as feminine (Bordo, 2004; Cairns & Johnston, 2015). While healthism is far reaching and impacts a wide variety of people, its effects are especially relevant to women, whose bodily control is seen as an essential part of their labour in a neoliberal economy (Winch, 2016). The performance of proper femininity is dependent not only on effective discipline of the body, but on the appearance of being carefree, nonrestrictive and an active participant in consumer culture (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Gill, 2007). Cairns and Johnston (2015) dub this complex balancing act "*calibration*—a practice wherein women actively manage their relationship to the extremes of self-control and consumer indulgence in an effort to perform acceptable middle-class femininities" (p. 154, emphasis original). Through this endless and elusive pursuit of proper femininity, women's bodies become what Bordo (2004) calls "docile bodies - bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, [and] 'improvement'" (p. 166).

The rhetoric of "taking your health into your own hands" emerged alongside the rise of wellness and holistic health, which has been taken up largely by women in response to the failure of medical institutions to take their experiences and pain seriously (O'Neill, 2020). Women are encouraged to be more than active participants in their health, and rather are framed as being the sole guarantor of their own well-being. These gendered expectations place harsher healthist assumptions upon women and expose them to the disciplinary gaze of not only government or medical institutions, but each other. Alison Winch (2016) calls this phenomena the "gynaeopticon," wherein women surveil each other under a controlling gaze to cultivate

belonging and interpellate normative policing of the body. While research has shown women are critically aware of the body image pressures placed upon them, they nonetheless internalize the ideal of feminine thinness and participate in the gynaeopticon by inflicting moralizing judgements of the body on themselves and other women (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Winch, 2016).

*Digital Biopedagogies*

The imperatives of neoliberal healthism are perpetuated not only on the interpersonal and institutional levels, but also through digital technologies. Social media, fitness apps and wearable tracking devices like the Fitbit all function to reinforce healthism and teach users how to be good biocitizens (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017). These technologies have become popular tools to aid in the control of the body, normalizing intense self-monitoring and reinforcing healthism discourse (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017). Digital technologies have also become dominant in the spread of biopedagogies, which Carla Rice (2015) defines as the "normalizing and moralizing instructions for life" (p. 387). Biopedagogies construct truth and meaning as it pertains to the body, dictating which behaviours are acceptable and defining the parameters of healthy citizenship (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017).

Social media has become particularly salient in the spread of biopedagogy as more people - especially young people - turn to their favourite apps for health information and advice (Goodyear et al., 2018). A study by Victoria Goodyear et al. (2018) found that a majority (53%) of young people have used social media to actively look for health-related information, and that the biopedagogies they encountered influenced their health assumptions and behaviours. The

presence and effects of digital biopedagogies warrant further investigation, as they tend to reinforce healthism and disciplinary body regimes (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017; Goodyear et al., 2018).

**The Postfeminist Body**

Feminist media studies scholar Rosalind Gill (2007) describes postfeminism as a sensibility, deeply entrenched in neoliberal ideology, which manifests in representations of the feminine in media texts. Postfeminism often appears to engage with feminism through a shared language of empowerment and choice, while simultaneously dismantling any feminist politics by presenting feminism as redundant and unnecessary (McRobbie, 2004). Therefore, postfeminism allows for celebration of "girl power" and sexual freedom, while ignoring the systemic inequalities and discrimination that women still face, especially those with intersecting disadvantaged identities (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). According to Gill (2017), postfeminism in the 2010s and beyond has become hegemonic and evolved into a more subversive and obscured form of gendered neoliberalism.

One of the most predominant features of postfeminism is what Gill (2007) calls "femininity as bodily property," which casts the possession of a "sexy body" as essential to a woman's identity and value. Gill (2007) contends that, "the body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, discipline and remodelling" (p. 149). Postfeminsm reframes conformity to the strict standards of thin feminine beauty through this constant monitoring as expressions of "empowerment, choice and, self-worth" (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 159). The reach of these postfeminist body projects has only

extended over time, with new areas of the body being problematized and new demographics

being targeted as consumers of beauty products (Gill, 2017). The postfeminist body is subject to

scrutiny for its shape, size, muscularity, clothing and makeup, and all these things must be

closely monitored and maintained without the appearance of "trying too hard" (Gill, 2007).

Cairns and Johnston (2015) find these postfeminist sensibilities in diet discourses which present

themselves as empowering choices made in the interest of health over sheer vanity, but

nonetheless encourage conformity to the ideal of feminine thinness through deliberate

disciplinary practices.


*Postfeminist Technologies*

The advent of digital technology and social media has provided new avenues for

postfeminism to manifest and new strategies for women to manage their body projects (Rich,

2018). Digital technology facilitates the monitoring and evaluation of the body through the

adoption of fitness trackers, calorie counters, beauty apps and social comparison on social media

(Gill, 2017; Rich, 2018). Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill (2017) analyze beauty apps as a

technology of gender which encourages digital self-monitoring and discipline, arguing they

function as postfeminist surveillance. Additionally, Maria José Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019)

identify the presence of postfeminist biopedagogy on social media which "instructs and regulates

girls' bodies and health subjectivities through a language of choice, empowerment and health

although, at the same time, framing exercise as disciplined work to achieve the normative body"

(p. 651). Postfeminist biopedagogies inform women of the inadequacies of their bodies and

compel them to work to fix them, reinforcing healthism's individualized onus of obedience to proper health choices and practices (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019).

*Pro-ana as Gender Distress*

The ultimate manifestation of the healthist and postfeminist directives of discipline and surveillance of the feminine body can be found in the experiences and representations of anorexia nervosa. Anorexia is a highly gendered eating disorder - 90% of those affected are women - which has been growing alongside the increasing social focus on and worship of thinness (Bordo, 2004). Bordo (2004) identifies anorexia as not only indicative of a culture which highly values slender femininity, but of a female population characterized by rising fear and disdain of traditional womanhood. The desire for anorexics to eliminate the physical characteristics exhibitive of their gender - curves, hips, thighs, breasts - is driven not solely by a thin ideal, but by protest against the limitations of female domesticity (Bordo, 2004). Of course, anorexia fails to liberate those afflicted from the constraints of traditional femininity. As Bordo (2004) puts it, "paradoxically - and often tragically - these pathologies of female protest [...] actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them" (p. 159).

As was the case with many dispersed and largely concealed groups, the Internet allowed for anorexics to come together online, building community among traditionally stigmatized individuals while also rendering the anorexic body increasingly visible (Holmes, 2017). The emerging "pro-ana" (pro-anorexia) blogs and social media collectives have attracted extensive scholarly attention and analysis. Research indicates that most pro-ana community members participate as a way to obtain social support and express themselves where they cannot in real

life (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Tong et al., 2013). However, as indicated by the inclusion of "pro," pro-ana communities do not come together with the expressed goal of recovery, but rather use their platforms to share weight loss tips and support each other through the stress of concealing their disorder from friends and family (Brotsky & Giles, 2007). Pro-ana members present their eating disorder as a lifestyle choice, reflective of what Connie Musolino et al. (2015) identify as the "postfeminist sensibility that brings together the concepts of choice, healthism and neoliberal notions of responsibility that depoliticises health and place responsibility on the individual" (p. 3).

The potentially dangerous character of pro-ana communities and content has led to debate over its censorship. Several social media platforms have elected to ban content related to disordered eating, however such restrictions may prevent the positive impact of community building around eating disorder recovery (Branley & Covey, 2017). In addition, pro-ana content persists on social media despite imposed restrictions, as users simply resort to obscure hashtags and coded language (Cobb, 2017). The case against outright banning pro-ana content online is further supported by the fact that it is not the only (or likely even the largest) contributing factor to the increase in anorexia. According to Ging & Garvey (2018), social media's "visualisation and mainstreaming of pro-ana may serve to normalise disordered eating, [but] these features also work to reveal the normality of body dissatisfaction in young women's lives as well as to contextualise food restriction as part of broader patterns of 'gender distress'" (p. 1182). Rather than triggering the development of anorexia, online pro-ana content makes visible the gender distress and disciplinary strategies which are already prevalent in the lives of young women (Ging & Garvey, 2018).

*Thinspiration & Fitspiration*

"Thinspiration" or "thinspo" content is characteristic of pro-ana's visual language, recognizable for its fixation on extremely thin bodies, framed and fragmented to focus on specific areas like the hips, thighs, ribs or pelvis (Winch, 2016). Winch (2016) calls attention to the erotic nature of thinspo images, which eroticize not the sexual appeal of the body but the pleasure in controlling the body, and "highlight the heroism of controlling the sexual sites where fat is typically found" (p. 905). These are the images most strongly associated with pro-ana and eating disorders, making them the frequent target for censorship on platforms which have taken a hard stance against such content. Pinterest, a site so overrun with thinspo images it earned the nickname "Thinterest," made the move to ban thinspiration and other pro-ana content. However, research from Jennifer Lewallen and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz (2016) found that such content was still present, just under a new name and rhetorical imperative: "fitspiration." The presence of explicit thinspiration images online has dwindled as fitspiration has exploded, however they both encourage conformation to standardized thinness/fitness through bodily discipline (Cobb, 2017).

Gemma Cobb (2017) argues that pro-ana content continues to thrive (disguised as fitspiration) despite platform regulations by invoking a discourse of health while still promoting disordered behaviours. The fitspiration slogan of "strong is the new skinny" appears on the surface to resist the focus on appearance and weight present in thinspiration, however it uses the same rhetorical strategies to encourage individual labour toward a new body ideal that is both thin and toned (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). In fact, some research has indicated that consumption of fitspiration content can negatively affect women's body image through social comparison and increase their intentions to engage in extreme weight loss behaviours (Lewallen

& Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Fitspiration is also highly participatory, encouraging women to share their own fitness progress, transformations and goals and compelling them to participate in "neoliberalizing agendas of bodily self-regulation" through affective force (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2020, p. 14). Causality aside, the popularity of fitspiration content does reflect how highly normalized discipline of the body and healthism discourses have become (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019;  Rich, 2018).

**Conclusion: Turning to TikTok**

This literature review established the academic context in which I will be performing my research, focusing on how healthism, neoliberalism and postfeminism are perpetuated through digital technology. The foundational critical social media research will be crucial to my analysis of TikTok, an app relatively new to the world's stage with little academic attention given to it thus far. The field of study in relation to healthism and postfeminism, especially in digital environments, will also be critical to my understanding of how these ideologies operate through TikTok's platform. In addition, past research on digital diet cultures, pro-ana, thinspiration and fitspiration will be extremely useful to draw upon as I anticipate TikTok users to engage in similar visual and rhetorical language. As I move forward with my analysis, this literature will provide me with the foundations for both socio-technical critiques of TikTok as a digital platform and theory for the analysis of the gendered body discourses it presents.

<u>**Chapter 3 - Results and Discussion**</u>

TikTok's diet and detox content does much more than harmlessly advocate for "better" health; it contributes to the healthist and postfeminist discourses of women's bodies and dictates specific strategies for an audience of young women and girls to manage their body projects. In this chapter, I will discursively analyze the TikToks from my data set and discuss the recurring three themes regarding health, gender and the body. First, I will discuss how TikTok frames the feminine body as toxic and in need of constant monitoring, measuring and control. Second, I will demonstrate how the visual language of TikTok frames and fragments the body as evidence of successful or unsuccessful execution of this control. Lastly, I will discuss how the use of a DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic contributes to the saliency of TikTok's diet/detox discourse, bonding users through the shared pursuit of a thin feminine body.

**The Toxic Body**

Common throughout my sample of TikToks is a framing of the body as something inherently broken and in need of fixing through deliberate and constant work. While diet TikToks vary from detox TikToks in the strategies offered, they share both a common language and a common goal. As my analysis will reveal, on TikTok the "toxic" aspect of the body, which must be cleansed or expelled through the various proposed strategies, emerges clearly as fat. TikTok's diet/detox content offers solutions to a toxic body plagued by fat, juxtaposed by the thin body as the ideal encompassing good health, conventional beauty and social acceptance. However, even thin bodies are not immune from the toxicity of fat, requiring consistent labour through self-

surveillance and control over one's diet to combat the harmful effects of fat and maintain their trim physique.

This discourse manifests not only through the language used by content creators, but the visuals which are inherent to TikTok as a platform. Recurring visual motifs include scales, mirrors, body checks and the presentation of meals or drinks. These visuals are frequently accompanied by text or audio which include words like "calories," "weight," "pounds," "energy" and "metabolism," or language which problematizes specific areas of the body, including phrases like "lose the muffin top" and "flat belly juice." In addition, several TikToks shared recipes which promise to reduce bloating, or the appearance of an inflated stomach. Together, the visuals, text and audio of TikTok's content shapes a clear message that fatness is the problem with the body, and that it must be avoided, or if necessary, fixed.

The messaging of the body as toxic is intensely gendered as a result of TikTok's largely feminized diet/detox content and audience. From my sixty video sample, only seven videos appear to be produced by men, and of those only three engaged in a body discourse relevant to this study. The audience also appears to be largely composed of women, as the content caters and speaks to a feminized audience. For example, user @rebeccashaw's video sharing a recipe for a drink to supposedly help with bloating, captioned "Ladies totally feel me….bloating sucks. This drink really helped" (see Figure 4). Here she directly appeals to a female audience with "ladies," also implying that bloating and its physical effects are inherently feminine problems which do not affect men the same way.

In another example, user @alanadelacruz shared a video of her recipe for "stripper water," a detox drink that is "supposed to boost your metabolism and make your [cat emoji]

smell good" (referring to female genitalia while working around TikTok censorship). Here the creator not only clearly addresses an assumed female audience, but also demonstrates the work required for that audience to "detoxify" parts of themselves which are strongly associated with feminine sexuality. Similarly, another TikTok from user @shanicestacey4 shares a recipe for a "vaginal detox and weight loss" drink. These TikToks imply that the default or "un-worked-on" vaginas are at best unsuitable, and at worst toxic. Both videos also reference weight loss, clearly gendering detox and weight loss practices as part of women's larger social responsibility to strive for thinness and heterosexual desirability.

TikTok's body discourse aligns with Rosalind Gill's (2007) principles of postfeminist self-surveillance and discipline, wherein "bodily shape, size, muscle tone, attire, sexual practice, [...] etc. are rendered into 'problems' that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labour" (p. 155). Women are responsible for managing their unruly bodies - fighting fat, preventing bloating and controlling the toxicity of their genitals. On TikTok, the male body, if referenced at all, is not framed in the same moralizing way. I therefore argue that it is the female body in particular that is framed as toxic and in need of consistent work, and that the very elements of this toxicity stems from that which is socially coded as feminine - not only female genitalia, but the body and fatness itself.

The diet content found on TikTok represents the attitudes women are expected to hold about their bodies and demonstrates the labour and discipline required to achieve a normative, feminine body free of "toxic" fat. One example of this self-disciplinary attitude comes from user @itslaurajames, who posted a video of her "Pictures that stop me from late night snacking," including the hashtag "#diettips" (Figure 1). The video consists of a slideshow of various images

of unappetizing foods meant to curb the viewers appetite through disgust. This disciplinary strategy functions to control the appetite and combat the risk of fat that comes with consuming an excess of food through "late night snacking," an activity depicted as almost sinful. The female appetite is framed as something destructive, requiring discipline to resist temptation as "[w]omen are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses" (Bordo, 2004, p. 112). The TikTok informs its audience that late night snacking falls outside the realm of acceptable feminine consumption.

Another particularly troubling example comes from user @sydneymikaylaaa, who shared a video of herself, a young girl, standing in her bedroom with the text "omg ur [sic] stomach is so flat, whats [sic] the diet?" (Figure 1). She wears a white crop top revealing her slender frame and flat stomach, allowing the viewer to take in her body before cutting to a montage of various stock images representing her "diet." Among these images are a pack of gum, a glass of water, ice cubes, tea and the periodic square for oxygen, implying her secret to staying thin is not eating at all. The caption, "I don't mean to come for anyones neck lol," alludes to the truth of her strategy - that no one wants to admit it, but her restrictive method is the most effective way to stay thin. This TikTok presents extreme discipline of the diet as necessary to control the body, and not only achieve but maintain a flat stomach. The inclusion of the hashtags "#diet" and "#healthyliving" normalize extreme restriction as part of women's regular self-disciplinary behaviours, aligning with the postfeminist logic that women's bodies are in need of constant and careful monitoring, even extreme discipline, to be deemed healthy or acceptable.
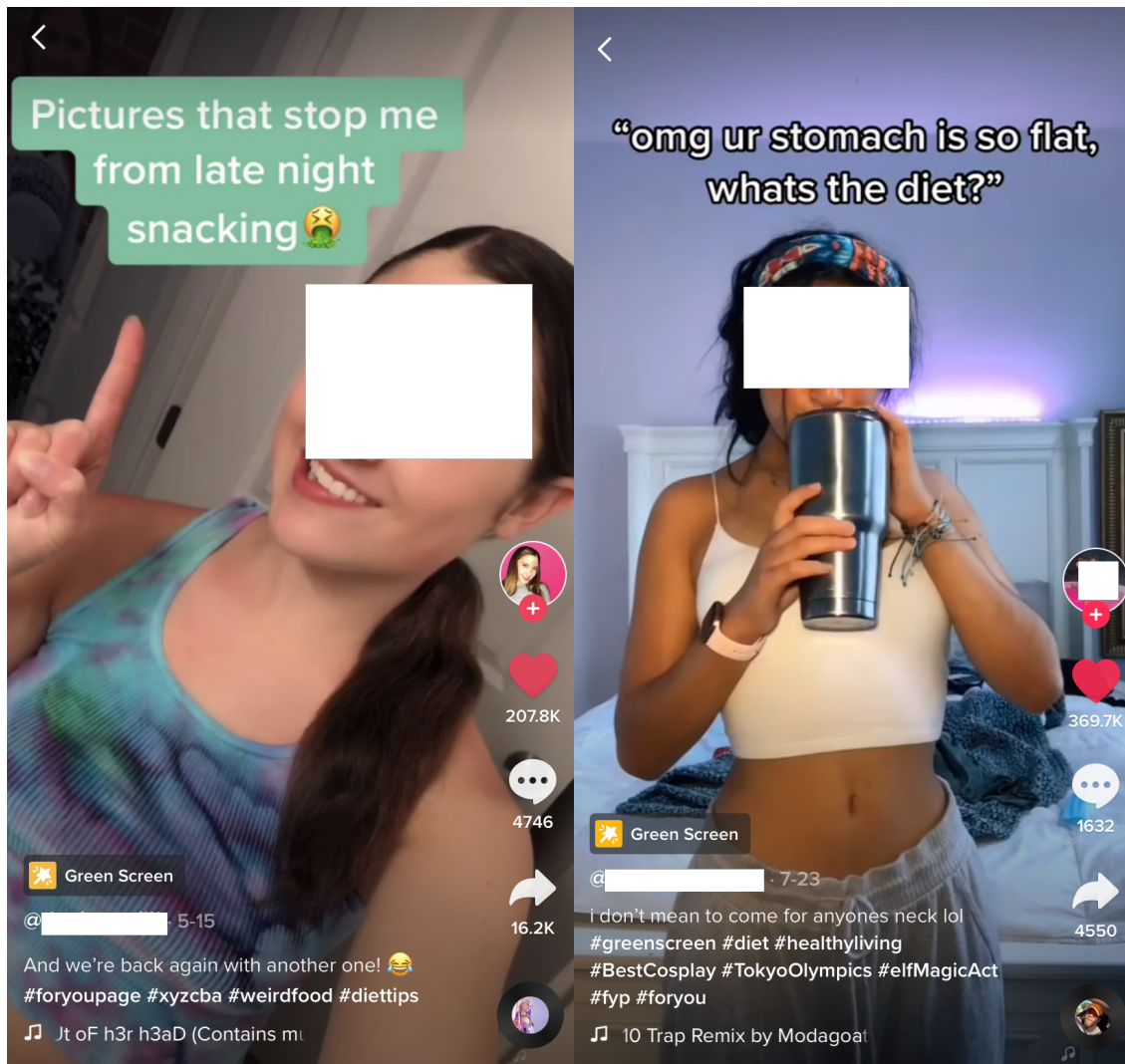
***Figure 1.*** **TikToks demonstrating disciplinary diet strategies, from @itslaurajames (left) and @sydneymikaylaaa (right).**

The toxic body discourse is furthered by TikTok's detox content, where users share recipes for drinks and smoothies with promises of various physical or aesthetic benefits. While not every detox video makes direct reference to weight loss, the drinks' purposes are made clear through more subtle language, such as making the drinker "more energetic" or "speeding up the metabolism." As past research has found, these claims have become analogous to weight loss in recent health discourse, where a slow metabolism or lack of energy is associated with fatness

(Kjær, 2019). The detox as it is presented on TikTok then becomes another disciplinary strategy used to dispel the body of fat and avoid the appearance of the body being unenergetic or toxic.

Some of TikTok's detox content makes their weight loss purpose abundantly clear. User @health_journey shares her recipe for what is described in the caption as a "weight loss drink," accompanied by hashtags like "#detox" and "#detoxdrink" as well as "#weightloss" (Figure 2). She starts the video with a familiar shot of a scale, the text reads "how to make the drink that made me go from this" before cutting to another scale image, the number 14 pounds lower, "to this [...] in 2 weeks." The weight loss purpose of the drink is made obvious through not only the explicit language in the caption and hashtags but the imagery of the scale.

Other videos in TikTok's detox ecosystem do not directly reference the supposed weight loss benefits of their recipes, such as user @lucy_jones_nutrition's smoothie recipe video (Figure 2). Text at the beginning reads "Dietitian's [sic] favourite green smoothie" as the video goes on to demonstrate the process of making and pouring the drink into a glass. The text and username evoke a sense of authority or expertise, signaling to viewers that the content is trustworthy and situates the detox as a legitimate health practice. While the video itself makes no mention of weight loss or the purpose of the drink (beyond "detoxing") in either its audio or text, the hashtag "#weightloss" is included within the caption, clearly targeting users with weight loss goals. The audience associates the consumption of the drink with the pursuit of a "healthy" body - socially understood as the thin body - rendering "detox" synonymous with "lose weight" and fat the abject part of the body eliminated by the magic of green smoothies.
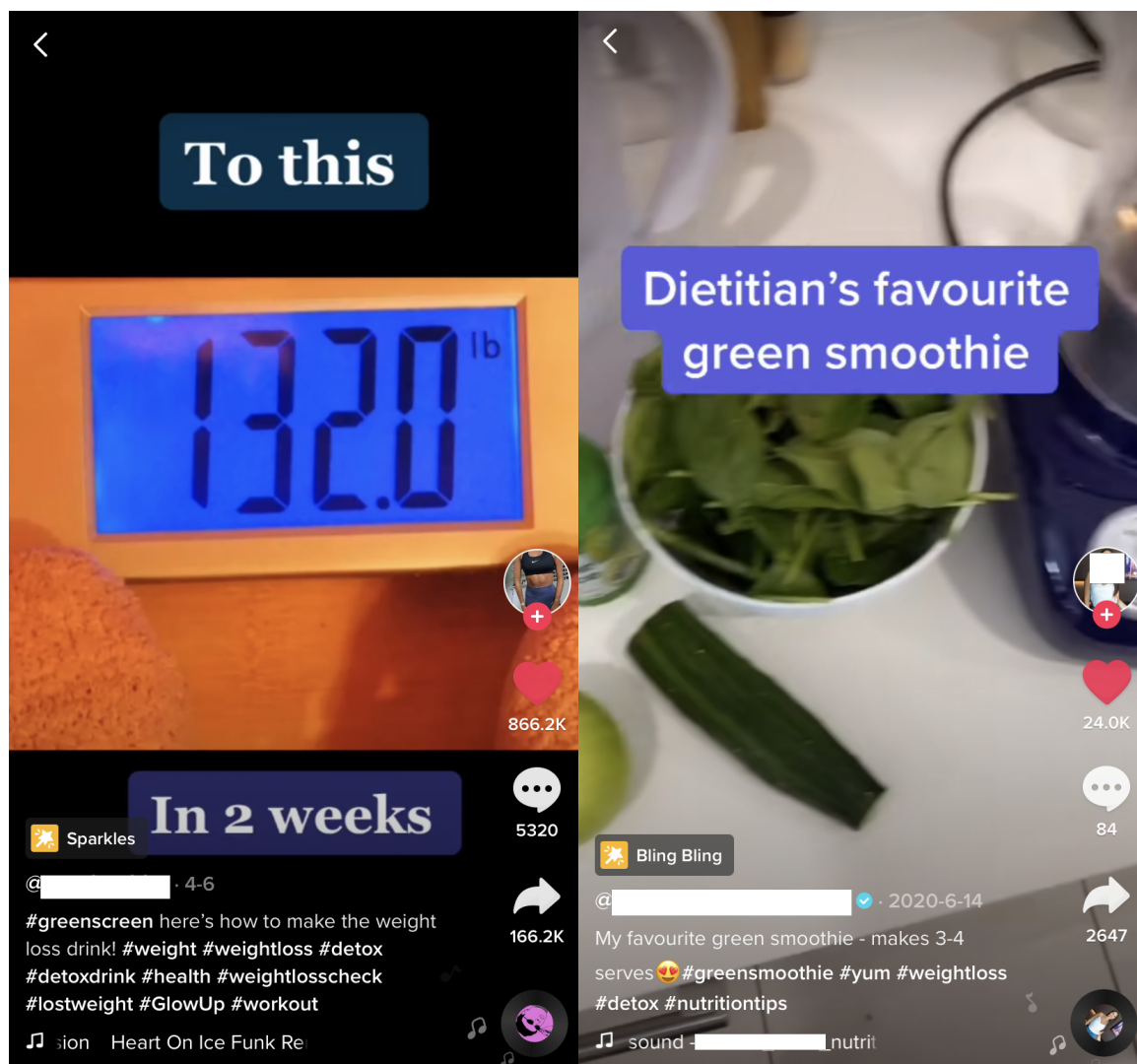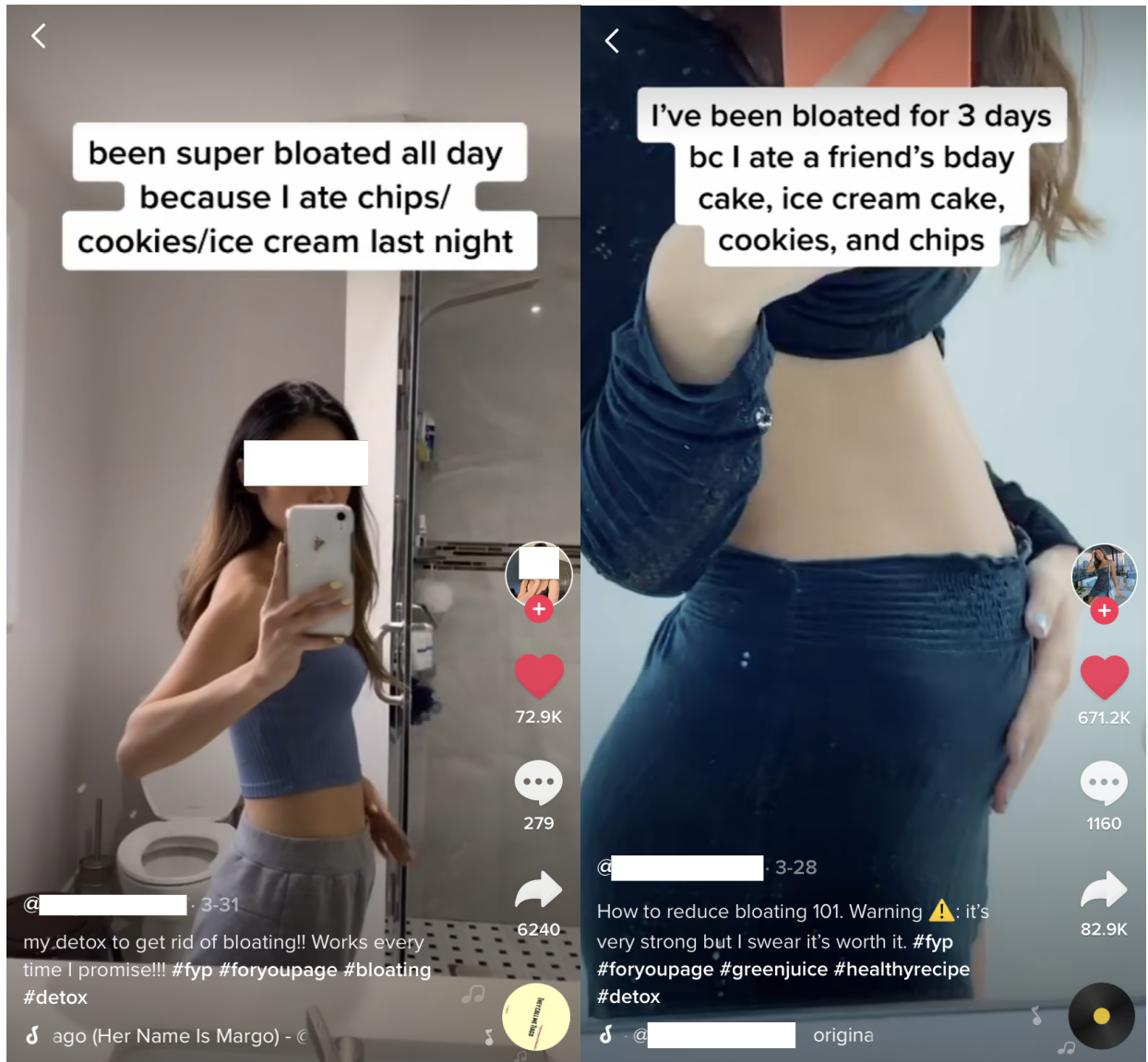
***Figure 2.*** **Detox TikToks demonstrating weight loss strategies, from @health_journey (left) and @lucy_jones_nutrition (right).**

I will finish with a final example that encapsulates TikTok's construction of the causes and symptoms of a toxic body and the actions required to rectify it. User @oliviaren shares a detox recipe with the caption, "my detox to get rid of bloating!! Works every time I promise!!!" (Figure 3). She starts the video with a clip of herself in the mirror, posing to show a side profile of her body. She is quite slender, demonstrating the flatness of her stomach before extending it and patting it with her hand to emphasize the "bloat" which requires fixing. The text over this clip reads "been super bloated all day because I ate chips/cookies/ice cream last night," before cutting

to a shot of a blender with new text, "here's my solution." She shows the process and ingredients required to make the drink before posing with the finished product alongside the text "it's super strong but I swear it works every time (no more bloating!!!!)"



*Figure 3.* **TikToks demonstrating the visuals and language associated with bloating, from @oliviaren (left) and @itsjennfallwell (right).**

In this video, the detox drink is presented as a treatment for bloating, which on TikTok is framed as a sign or symptom of fatness. The desire to be rid of the bloating is not presented as due to the uncomfortable feeling or other side effects, but the appearance of a larger stomach.

@oliviaren's TikTok and others like it place emphasis on the bloated stomach as a "problem area" through similar visual motifs: posing in the mirror, extending the stomach, patting it with the hand (Figure 3). The focus on the stomach is noteworthy as it is the part of the body most often repudiated and scrutinized as representing fatness and indulgence. In Susan Bordo's (2004) words, "the part of the obese anatomy most often targeted for vicious attack, and most despised by the obese themselves is the stomach, symbol of consumption" (p. 202).

The element of consumption further associates bloating to fatness, not only through the symbolism of the stomach, but as the cause of both conditions. In her video, @oliviaren lists the foods she ate ("chips/cookies/ice cream") as the reason for her bloating, just as another user, @itsjennfallwell, cites her overconsumption of "a friend's bday [sic] cake, ice cream cake, cookies, and chips" (Figure 3). Similar to fatness, bloating is constructed as the consequence of overconsumption and a lack of discipline over one's diet, physically manifesting in the stomach. Presenting the bloated body in the bathroom - a location associated with women's disordered eating practices like purging - establishes the detox as another private disciplinary practice employed to avoid fatness after a "binge." After such a slip in discipline, a detox is required to cleanse the body of fat, or any appearance of it.

The discourse of the toxic body operates through healthism and postfeminism to legitimize fatphobia, particularly targeted toward feminized bodies. The appearance of being in control of one's body has become increasingly culturally important, as through healthism the body has come to represent not only the health but the moral, spiritual and emotional state of the individual (Bordo, 2006). Robert Crawford (1980) describes how the proliferation of healthism has resulted in everyday behaviours and attitudes becoming increasingly defined as deviant or

unhealthy. This manifests on TikTok as behaviours such as late night snacking, eating birthday cake or bloating become problems requiring solutions. Just as healthism both defines deviancy and provides the solution (Crawford, 1980), TikTok both describes the state and behaviours of a toxic body and presents the disciplinary strategies required to fix it. These strategies vary in their intensity, but all function as means to control the body and avoid the symptoms of fatness.

The appearance of controlling and fighting against fat through active pursuit of weight loss, calorie counting or detoxing has been socially constructed as an essential part of women's labour (Winch, 2016). Although not all TikToks directly repudiate fatness, their focus on control of one's diet similarly engages in an obesity discourse which characterizes fatness as the uncontained appetite (Kjær, 2019). TikTok reinforces women's moral obligation to maintain a thin, sexy physique by emphasizing the threat of being perceived as the fat, unhealthy, toxic Other if the body is mismanaged. Through this discourse, TikTok functions as a technology of postfeminism, enlightening women and girls who have failed in the feminine mission of bodily control and who can only be saved through education on the proper methods of self-discipline and surveillance.

**Body as Evidence**

TikTok users demonstrate the successful management of their body projects through direct presentation of the body itself. A large portion of videos from both the diet and detox samples begin with shots of the user's body, posed in front of the camera or in a mirror. The thin, toned body is presented as evidence of a user's authority to give health information and advice as well as evidence of their successful performance of femininity through body discipline. Carried

over from the theme of the toxic body is a focus on the stomach area as the location most representative of a person's overall health and wellbeing, as the bare stomach is almost always on display when users present their bodies. Rather than showing the number on the scale or sharing their measurements, users need only the visual of a flat stomach to demonstrate their success as feminine subjects.

Since TikTok is a video platform, users tend to present their bodies in motion, rotating to demonstrate abdominal definition or moving from front to side, mugshot style, to show that they appear thin from all angles. The medium of video allows for these seemingly more authentic presentations free from manipulative posing or editing, affording more credible evidence of the body's thinness than a photo can provide. However, thin bodies are still presented in a way that mimics the visual language of classic thinspiration images. Similar characteristics include showing skin, focusing on the stomach and fragmenting the body (Winch, 2016). Disembodied torsos are so prominent on TikTok they seem to have become an essential part of the visual language of the app's diet and fitness content. The process of presenting the thin body as evidence rarely includes showing the face, framing the video in such a way that heads are not included (Figure 4) or faces obscured (Figure 5). The framing emphasizes the stomach and its lack of fat, while also fragmenting the body of the woman or girl behind the lens so she transcends status as an individual person and becomes a symbolic object (Mulvey, 1975).

Like the subjects of thinspiration images, TikTok users fragment themselves to highlight the successful control of the body, catering not to a sexual male gaze but the aspirational gaze of other women, where "looking at sexy bodies becomes a means to transform one's own body into an ideal" (Winch, 2016, p. 906). Opening with footage of a toned body places the audience in a

position more receptive to the subsequent information and advice, not only by providing evidence of its effectiveness but by invoking a sense of desire in the viewer, urging them to work toward the presented ideal. The TikTok producer displays her thin, fit body at the start of her video just as magazines put thin, beautiful women on their covers. It gives the content inside a sense of credibility as well as urgency, reminding the viewer of their failure to be that thin, fit or beautiful while subsequently informing them just how they can be fixed.



*Figure 4.* **TikToks resembling thinspiration through the fragmentation of thin bodies.**

The fragmentation of thin bodies and the use of body as evidence manifests in TikTok's diet and detox content in similar ways. One example from the diet set is a TikTok from @imheatherjo, who shares her "What [I] eat in a day as an elite model in quarantine edition" (Figure 5). She begins the video posing in the mirror, wearing a short crop top and jeans, exposing her midriff while blocking her face with her phone. As her face is not visible, the viewer's attention is drawn to the slenderness of her arms and the definition of her stomach. The text over this clip emphasizes her slender body, rather than her face, as the reason for her "elite" status as a model, a profession where representing feminine ideals is essential. The video goes on to include clips of all her meals, listing every ingredient and its quantity in text boxes, so the viewer can emulate her diet to work toward her ideal body. The intended gaze is the same as the gaze intended for the cover girls of women's health magazines or images on thinspiration blogs - a gaze which celebrates and longs for thinness.

Since the average user is no "elite model," TikTok allows the aspirational gaze to also be set upon everyday women and girls. This can be seen in an example from user @carriefabian4 in her video sharing a "detox that will give you a flat stomach in 30 days!" (Figure 5). She opens the video with a shot similar to that used by @imheatherjo: posed in a mirror, phone blocking her face, her shirt lifted to show off her toned stomach. The stomach is emphasized both visually as the only exposed part of her body, and textually in the text box promising a "flat stomach." This video exemplifies a phenomenon on TikTok where diets and detoxes are not presented as practices done in the name of health with bonus aesthetic benefits, but as efforts where thinness is the primary intended goal. @carriefabian4 is trusted as a source of reliable weight loss information not because she is a professional model or possesses any nutrition credentials, but

solely because she possesses the sexy, desirable, feminine body the viewer is meant to covet. Her body, in particular the flatness of her stomach, serves as evidence of her credibility and success in preventing the appearance of fat.
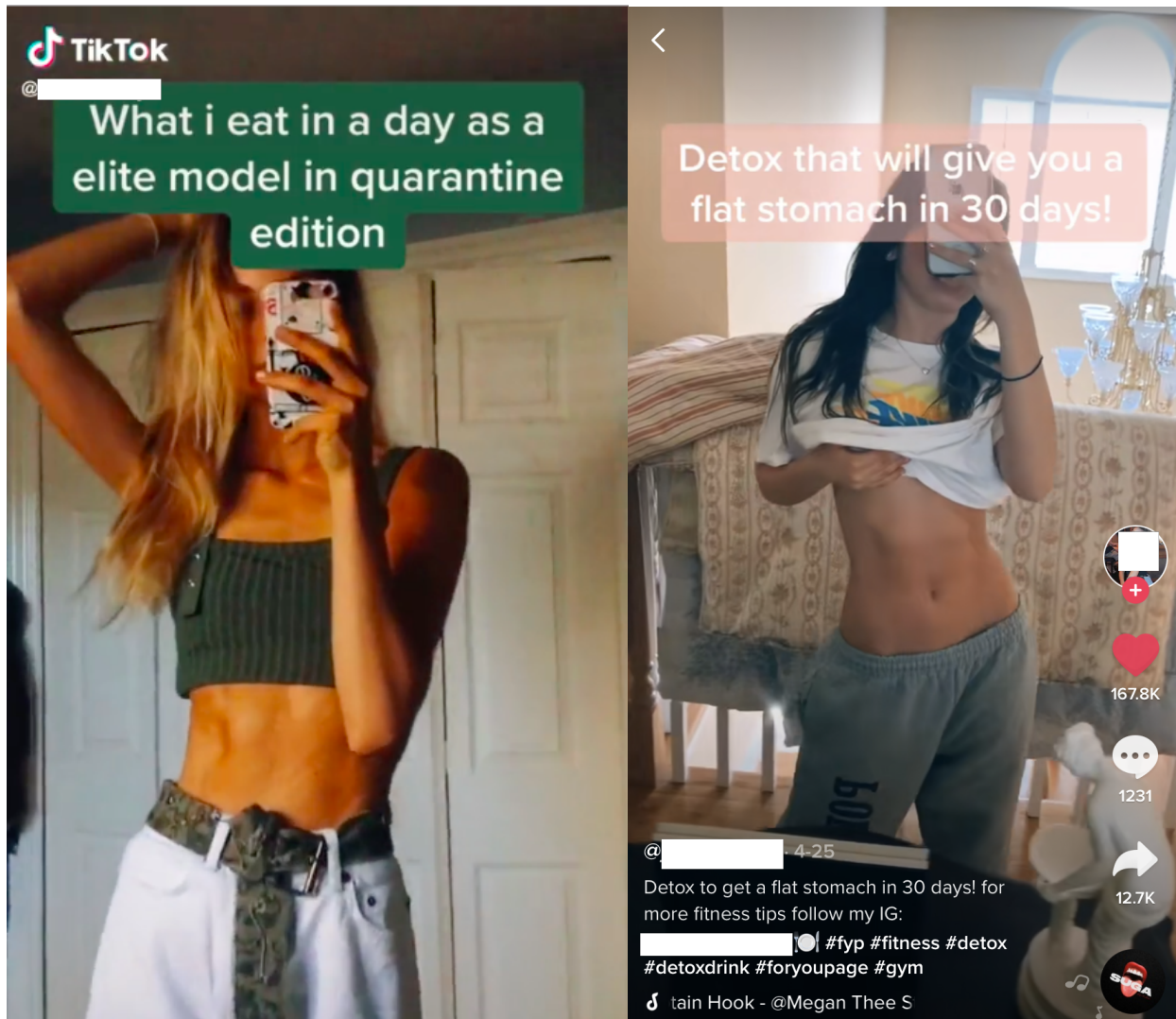


*Figure 5.* **TikToks presenting thin bodies as evidence from @imheatherjo (left) and @carriefabian4 (right).**

While the majority of TikToks presenting the body as evidence include thin bodies, a small number of users who did not possess the "ideal thin body" engaged with this theme. However, rather than providing strategies or advice, TikToks from these users seem to serve as documentation of their individual weight loss efforts. I will hereafter refer to this genre of

TikToks as produced by "fat users," not to universalize or degrade the subjects, but to differentiate their content from that of the previously described "thin users." Like thin users, fat users begin by presenting their body to the camera, stomach deliberately exposed, but differ in that they follow with clips of exercise or documentations of weight and measurements. Interestingly, both the practice of exercise and recording weight were uncommon in presentations of thin bodies as evidence. Since their bodies alone do not provide sufficient evidence that they are working on themselves, fat users include the more active visual to demonstrate their dedication to their body project. See user @destinylush's TikTok documenting her attempt at the "Chloe Ting Summer Shredding Challenge," a weight loss exercise challenge (Figure 6). It opens with a shot of herself in the mirror wearing a sports bra to expose her stomach. She goes on to film herself on the scale, showing her weight with the text "Day 1." The last few clips are of her exercising and visibly sweating.

TikToks including bodies with fat necessitate the inclusion of demonstrations of effort, like that of @destinylush, in order to prove the work the user is putting in to "fix" themselves. This requirement along with the inclusion of the scale speaks to an enhanced surveillance of fat bodies. While a thin user merely shows their body, fat users share details of their weight and, in another instance, their specific measurements (Figure 6). This allows the user to theoretically show their numbers decreasing in subsequent videos as evidence of their success, because unlike thin bodies, fat bodies on their own cannot serve as evidence of successful adherence to the feminine principles of control. Fat users appear to require the inclusion of additional "proof" to demonstrate commitment to their body project, as they do not possess the thin body traditionally emblematic of a disciplined or successful woman.

*Figure 6.* **TikToks from fat users presenting their body (@destinylush, left) and measurements (another user, right).**

Despite this, fat users still opt to show their bodies and, similar to representations of thin bodies, present the exposed stomach as a focal point. These images serve to contrast their bodies to those of the thin users with flat stomachs as a way to illustrate their need to employ the labour they go on to demonstrate. However, unlike thin users, fat users do not fragment themselves. Every TikTok in the sample which included a fat body always included their face. Showing the entire face allows the viewer to better connect and relate to the TikTok's producer, especially as they show themselves in pursuit of a thin, normative body - a pursuit many women would relate to. But viewers are also reminded that fat bodies are unacceptable, differentiated visually from

the thin ideal, and require work to be fixed. On TikTok, the fat body is not framed as an aspirational object, but rather as a "before," promising to work on themselves until they become the aspirational "afters" worthy of the gaze.

The presentation of bodies as evidence on TikTok constructs the healthy, feminine body as thin, young and predominantly white. While there is a small amount of diversity in body size, larger bodies were not represented as successful or desirable, and older, non-white bodies were rendered invisible. Because proper control of the body is linked to the proper performance of femininity, women who do not meet the strict standards of feminine beauty and thinness as presented on TikTok are deemed to have failed, not just as sexual subjects, but as citizens (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Gill, 2007). The exclusion of certain bodies from representations of the dieting or detoxing body frames those bodies as lacking traits of idealized femininity, and therefore failing the neoliberal duties of their gender. TikTok constructs the flat stomach, seemingly possessed only by thin, young, white women, as a symbol of the body in control - over fat, cravings, impulses and indulgences - and of a successful body, indicating a successful, fulfilling life.

Like thinspiration images, thin bodies on TikTok "are situated within an aspirational body-control network so that the gaze is conditioned 'to-be-like' or 'to-become'" (Winch, 2016, p. 905). Searching the terms "diet" or "detox" on TikTok not only brings up weight loss strategies but presents the idealized body to be worked toward with those strategies. The presence of this discourse on TikTok demonstrates how real world sexism, racism and fatphobia become embedded into the architecture of technology (Noble, 2018). The algorithm presents users searching for diet/detox information with bodies it determines most representative of those terms

- thin, white, female bodies - effectively showing users which bodies to aspire towards and which bodies are still "to-be-worked-on." The theme of body as evidence demonstrates how the glorification of the thin, white feminine body - present in traditional media such as film, television and magazines - remains salient in new media technologies like TikTok. With thinness presented as the ultimate manifestation of feminine power and good citizenship, women and girls on TikTok are interpellated into a collective pursuing control over and possession of a thin, toned body.

**DIY Dieting**

The visual language and algorithmic affordances of TikTok encourage participation both on and off the app, instructing users to attempt the shared strategies themselves or create their own content to contribute to the network. A user does not even have to be actively looking for diet/detox content to come across it, as the algorithmically organized "For You" page caters content for each individual user. This gives TikTok power over who is shown what content and therefore, who is exposed to diet/detox content and the body discourses that come with it. Through its technical affordances and engagement imperatives, TikTok creates a surveillance network of dieting/detoxing female bodies. Participation in this network becomes part of women's self-disciplinary labour, as users learn from and share strategies with others in the network. The resulting networked public of dieting/detoxing women is composed of an "imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (boyd, 2010, p. 39), bonding in their shared pursuit of thinness through bodily control.

I argue that TikTok interpellates users into its disciplinary body network using what I call the "do it yourself (DIY) aesthetic." This manifests in the visual language and instructional nature common among TikToks in both the diet and detox sample. The DIY aesthetic is characterized as amateur looking, usually recorded in a domestic space like a home kitchen, bathroom or bedroom, using simple ingredients, appliances and equipment. The shots are recorded point of view (POV) style, with voiceover or text instructions, rarely showing the face of the producer behind the camera. The exclusion of the producer's face allows the viewer to better project themselves onto the content, seeing how simply the disciplinary strategy is being presented, and imagine incorporating it into their own life. As illustrated previously in this analysis, the producers and audience of TikTok's diet/detox content is predominantly feminized, but it is also largely individualized, with the producers making their videos alone and the viewers presumably watching alone. TikTok's DIY aesthetic makes visible the more intimate aspects of women's body management - such as the preparing of low-calorie recipes or home workout routines - and brings the viewer into the private sphere of the home.

The strategies shared within the network use the familiar language of diets to clearly establish their weight loss purposes. Recipes often include calorie counts and "what I eat in a day" videos include specific quantities for easy replication and incorporation into a calorie limited diet (Figure 7). Viewers are incentivized to replicate the strategies they see based on the producer's endorsement, seen in captions such as "what [I] eat in a day [...] lost 15kg" or "This detox juice made me lose 5kg [in] just 1 week." The way a meal tastes is rarely a factor used to encourage others to try it; rather, it is the food's perceived health value or contributions to weight loss goals that make it worthwhile. The higher the weight loss claimed by the producer, or the

fewer the calories in the meal or day, the more valuable the TikTok is to the network. However, this content is not targeted toward only those seeking weight loss information, but anyone using the app. Many of the sampled TikToks included hashtags such as "#foryoupage" or "#fyp" in an attempt to get the TikTok featured on the For You page and in front of as many eyes as possible, normalizing the presented diet/detox behaviours as part of women's regular disciplinary responsibilities.



*Figure 7.* **TikToks sharing the specific calorie counts of meals.**

For example, user @myhealthylife uses the DIY aesthetic for her "what I eat in day"

TikTok showcasing her 1400 calorie a day diet (Figure 8). She shows the POV process of

assembling each meal before presenting the finished product to the camera, explaining the

content of each dish in voiceover. For dessert, she shows the camera her choice of a yogurt cup

and explains she loves them "because they're less in sugar." The video's informative position

within TikTok's body surveillance network is established using the familiar language of

restriction, including "#diet" in the caption and indicating her total calories both consumed

through food and burned through exercise. @myhealthylife, notably a verified user (as indicated

by the blue check), presents her routine for the gaze of the network, modelling the behaviour of a

so-called "healthy life" marked by the postfeminist principles of self-surveillance and control.

TikTok's body surveillance network, characterized by the features outlined above,

functions through what Alison Winch (2016) calls the "gynaeopticon," "where the controlling

gaze is female, and the many women watch the many women [...] control is devolved among

systems or networks of the policing gaze" (p. 901). Users participate in mutual surveillance via

TikTok, using it as a tool for both advice and accountability. The resulting networked public is

decidedly gendered, composed of women surveilling each other's bodies and behaviours based

on how well they conform to the imperatives of discipline and control. Like on other social

media platforms, the postfeminist gaze persists on TikTok, inflicted not by mass media but the

judgmental gaze of female peers (Gill, 2017). In a culture where women's value is intrinsically

tied to their desirability as heterosexual subjects, participation in the gynaeopticon becomes an

essential part of the feminine mission to be sexy and therefore, successful. TikTok's body

surveillance network interpellates users into a collective which bonds in the shared pursuit of

heteronormative femininity through thinness, "situating themselves against that which they define as abject: fat" (Winch, 2016, p. 903).
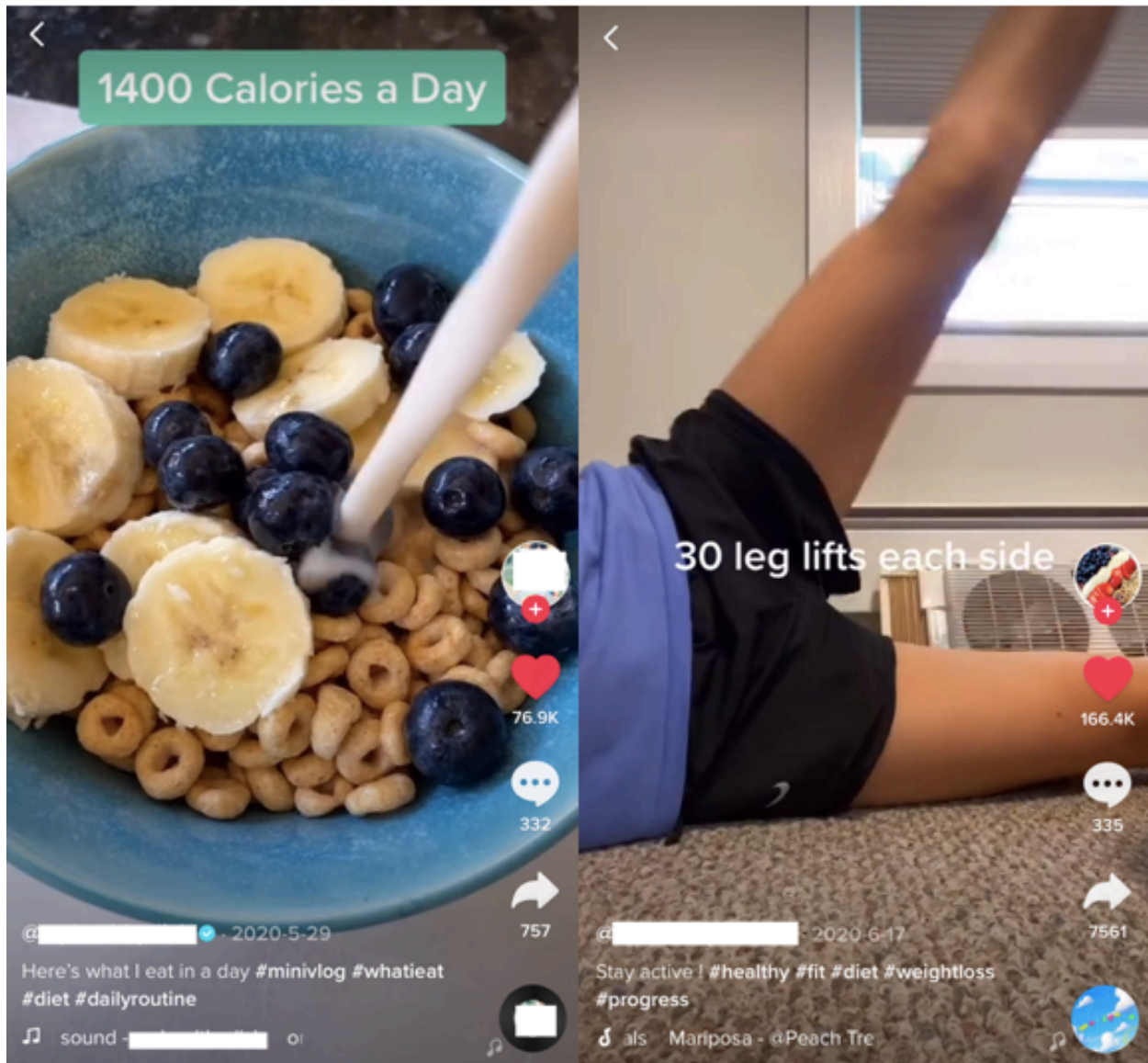


***Figure 8.* TikToks demonstrating the DIY aesthetic from @myhealthylife (left) and @gettingfit2020 (right).**

The DIY aesthetic serves two functions within TikTok's gynaeopticon. First, it models behaviours to be easily replicated by others within the network, and second, it exposes the usually private aspects of one's body project to the moralizing gaze of peers. This combination of modelling and exposing can be seen in a number of TikToks from the sample. In an example

showcasing discipline beyond diet, user @gettingfit2020 employs the DIY aesthetic to share her home workout routine (Figure 8). This TikTok uses the amateur style, instructional presentation and disciplinary language characteristic of the DIY aesthetic to both model and expose the producer's self-disciplinary behaviour. She begins the video with a shot of her torso, her head cut out of the frame, wearing a sports bra revealing her bare stomach and slim body. A text box reads "Day 33." Following this display of body as evidence, she goes into a workout, demonstrating each move as text tells the viewer the name of the move and the prescribed repetitions. She films the routine on a carpeted floor in a home, fragmented so we see only the centre of her body, her head and feet cut out. The captions reads "Stay active !" with the hashtags "#healthy," "#fit," "#diet," "#weightloss" and "#progress." @gettingfit2020 contributes to the collection of self-disciplinary strategies within the network, while also presenting herself to be scrutinized by the gynaeoptic gaze. She shares the specific movements and repetitions of her workout for easy replication, and presents herself completing them - every day for at least 33 days - to be judged or validated by other disciplinary bodies.

TikTok itself encourages user participation in the body surveillance network through its technical affordances such as liking, commenting and its unique "sounds" feature. The sounds feature allows the audio of any uploaded TikTok to be easily duplicated and used in the creation of another TikTok by a separate user. This results in several of the app's viral trends and challenges revolving around an audio clip or song, appropriated by each user to soundtrack their content. TikTok indicates the sound being used in each video a user sees, including whether it is original audio or not, and users can tap on a sound to see a collection of other TikToks made using that same sound sorted by popularity. For example, one TikTok in the sample from user

@kelixrey documents the process of following the recipe for a "#dietdrink" described in another user's sound (Figure 9). The sound consists of a woman's voice describing "an easy and effective recipe to lose weight, not gain the Corona-fifteen and help boost your immune system." The video begins with text boxes telling us "im [sic] going to try it for 2 weeks [...] my current weight is: 146," going on to utilize the DIY aesthetic to document the POV process of assembling the drink according to the sound's instructions. The TikTok ends with a shot of the finished drink in a mug displayed to the camera. @kelixrey provides her commentary with another text box that says, "and its [sic] actually NOT gross [heart emoji] enjoy."

This example demonstrates the ways in which the DIY aesthetic works with TikTok's affordances to both model and expose behaviours for the gynaeoptic gaze. The original creator of the sound models the behaviour to be replicated by other users, who in turn expose themselves as they attempt it. The sound usually includes an endorsement of the strategy by its creator - for example, the sound used by @kelixrey claims to have "been doing it for 6 weeks and lost 21 pounds so far" - juxtaposed against the commentary from the video's creator. Whereas the sound shares an "easy and effective" weight loss strategy that has already provided the creator with supposed results, the video documents another user applying the strategy of the sound as a disciplinary method to achieve the normative thin body promised by its creator. This can be seen in @kelixrey's TikTok, as she shares her current weight and captions her video "[I]'ll do a 2 week update," promising to both continue exposing herself to the surveillance of the network and contributing to the weight loss information it provides.
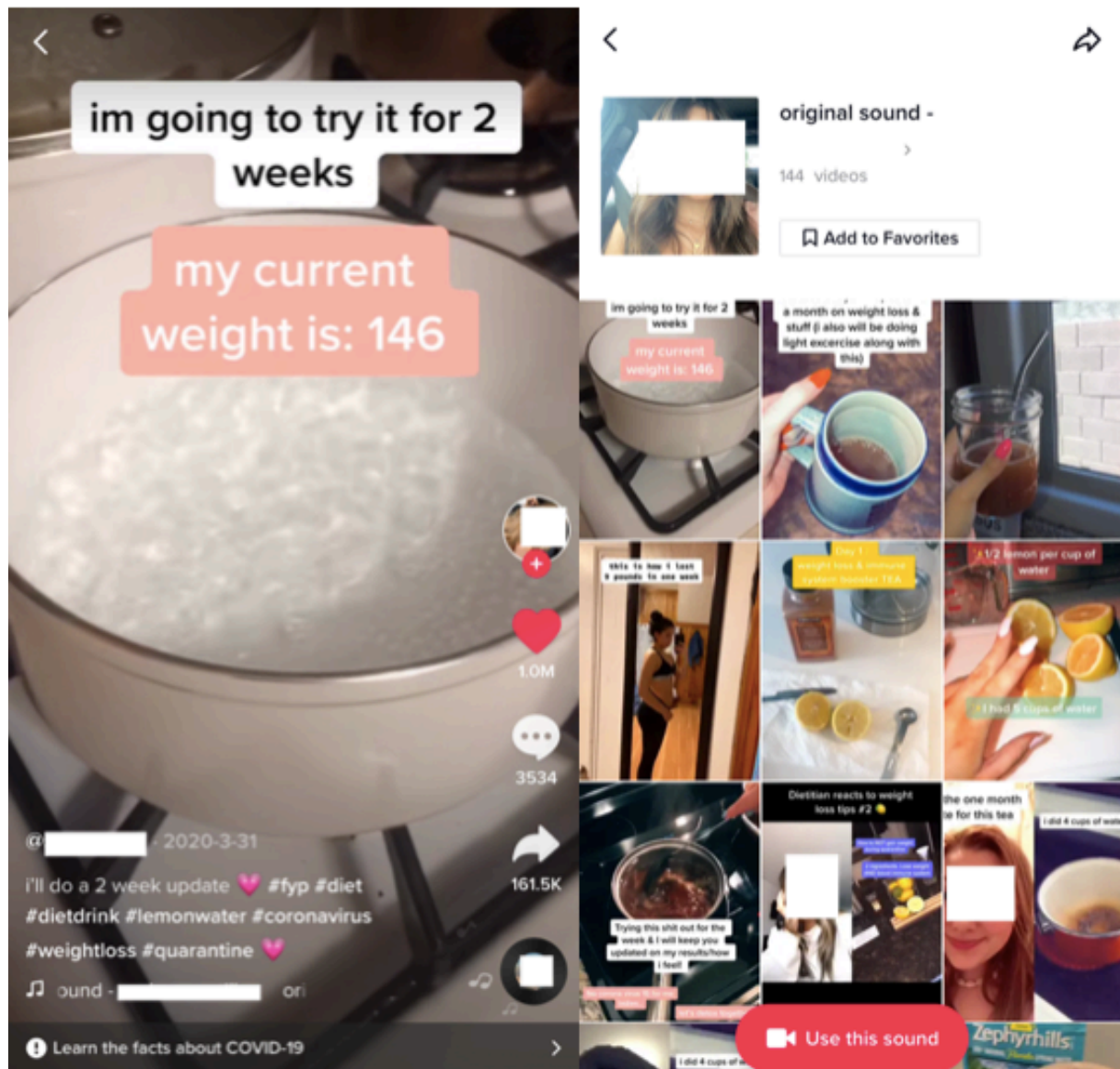
*Figure 9.* **TikTok from @kelixrey following another user's sound (left) and the page showing other TikToks from a variety of users using the same sound (right).**

Tapping on the sound for this TikTok reveals that it has been used 144 times, with the majority documenting the process of attempting the recipe similarly to @kelixrey's video, which is the sound's top result (Figure 9). The bottom of the sound's page prompts the user with a button to "Use this sound," which if tapped on leads to a recording screen with the audio already incorporated, so any recorded clips will be soundtracked by the sound. In this context, "using the sound" is analogous to "losing the weight," encouraging users to apply the presented strategy to

themselves and share their results. This sort of public participation through posting is compelled by a desire to be recognized as a body actively aspiring and working toward the slender feminine ideal, and "to be legible as a 'successful' feminine subject" (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2020, p.10). As Kjær (2019) writes, dieting as an affective practice creates communities by "align[ing] (some) bodies in a shared pursuit of happiness—based on both a turning towards and a turning away" (p. 712). On TikTok, participating in the network brings one closer to the body celebrated within the network, bonding users both in the shared pursuit of thinness and rejection of fatness.

The DIY aesthetic further encourages participation in TikTok's body surveillance network and engagement with its disciplinary diets by constructing the "successful feminine body" as achievable by anyone, ignoring how intersectional identities beyond weight conflict with feminine standards of beauty. As described by Cairns and Johnston (2015), "[t]he slender feminine ideal is normalized as a white, middle-class and heterosexual body, erasing structural inequities that shape the embodied lives of women" (p. 158). It is noteworthy that the visual language of the DIY aesthetic excludes faces, rendering the body and race of the creator often indiscernible, unless they present themselves as modelling the ideal they represent - thin, white and young. TikTok compels women to work on the body and self while ignoring the intersectional inequalities they face, framing thinness as the one-size-fits-all solution for the unhappy or undesirable body.

This thesis contributes to the body of new media research and scholarship on social media biopedagogies and digital postfeminisms. The goal of this research was to identify the ways in which TikTok discursively constructs feminized bodies as projects and critique how this discourse functions to further subjugate women and girls. Through my analysis of TikTok's diet and detox content, I argue that TikTok perpetuates pervasive neoliberal postfeminist logics, encouraging women to regard their bodies as projects which require constant work in order to be deemed desirable feminine subjects. TikTok reinforces the postfeminist assumptions of embodied femininity, framing the successful, sexy body as the most important aspect of feminine identity (Gill, 2007). The goal of this ongoing work - the "perfect" feminine body - is constructed on TikTok as thin, young and predominantly white. However, no woman is exempt from the labour they are expected to engage in to achieve or otherwise maintain this ideal. This discourse manifests on TikTok through its platform affordances and feminine peer surveillance network.

My analysis identified three distinct themes present in TikTok's feminine body discourse. First, the theme of the "toxic body" found that TikTok presented the successful performance of femininity as based on the ability to control and suppress the presence or appearance of fatness. TikTok frames female bodies and appetites as highly volatile, requiring suppression and control through various detoxifying strategies to rid the body of "toxic" fat or avoid the fattening effects of certain foods or behaviours. The second theme, "body as evidence," found that users employed the visual nature of TikTok to demonstrate their successful feminine performance and bodily control. Users adopt thinspiration imagery - fragmenting thin bodies into aspirational

objects - alongside fitspiration language to establish their authority to provide health information and advice and encourage viewers to participate in strategic body discipline.

The final theme, "DIY dieting," defines TikTok's DIY aesthetic and how it functions to interpellate users into a gyneaoptic network of dieting feminine bodies. TikTok engages with the "gynaeopticon" (Winch, 2016) by affording mutual body surveillance, encouraging female users to judge each other and themselves, based on how well they meet the standards of normative femininity, by viewing and posting content on the app. TikTok's amateur aesthetic presents the ideal thin body as achievable by anyone, sharing strategies and demonstrations among the app's predominantly female users who utilize the network to hold themselves and each other accountable in managing their body projects. Thinness is paradoxically presented as the solution to an oppressed body and key to social acceptance, ignoring the actual structural inequalities and intersectional identities shaping women's everyday lives.

My sample suggests that body management through food restriction, detoxing or exercising is presented on TikTok as the responsibility of all women, regardless of size, to avoid the appearance of fat – which is coded as a sign of failed femininity. A biopedagogy emerges which dictates both how to properly regulate the body and what a normative, healthy body looks like (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). However, the ideal feminine body is forever a moving target, requiring consistent labour in order to be maintained and constant awareness of the latest trends and regulative strategies for its continual success. Ascribing all aspects of feminine success and acceptability to the body undermines women's social and political participation, further relegating them to the private domain of body management as to not take up too much public space (Bordo, 2006). While TikTok promises to "prioritize safety, diversity, inclusion, and

authenticity" (TikTok, 2020), I contend that instead the platform upholds the status quo and reinforces the oppression of both fat and feminized bodies through the visibility of the diet and detox videos I have analyzed in this thesis. The assumed neutrality of TikTok's algorithm renders its body discourse all the more pervasive and potentially harmful, as TikTok invisibly produces knowledge around women's bodies and determines who is exposed to it on their For You page.

These findings are congruent with past research which has found that women's regulation of the diet and body is framed through a lens of postfeminist empowerment and control (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Rich, 2018). However, rather than requiring constant discipline while appearing carefree about appearances (Gill, 2007), postfeminist bodies on TikTok do not shy away from centering aesthetics as the primary goal of their efforts. Thinness and weight loss are more than just subtext veiled by health related language; they are often presented as the explicit goal through an emphasis on "flat stomachs" and direct references to weight and the scale. TikTok users are unashamed in their vanity, aspiring toward a thin body for seemingly no reason other than the personal and social validation it would give them. Removing the guise of "health" from the body discourse may have harmful consequences, as it allows for objectively unhealthy practices such as disordered eating to become viable strategies through which to achieve thinness by any means necessary.

Due to the limitations of undergraduate honours level research, this thesis provided analysis of only a small sample of TikTok content as representative of the wider discourses present on the app. Further research including larger sample sizes, additional search terms and analysis of audience reception is required to develop a more nuanced understanding of how feminine bodies are discursively constructed on TikTok, and the potential real world effects of

this "new" body discourse which explicitly centres thinness. Future scholarship should also further explore the roles of whiteness and heterosexuality in TikTok's construction of the ideal feminine body. TikTok is quickly becoming one of the most used apps in the world, especially among young women, making it an essential location for feminist new media scholars to understand how digital expressions of modern girlhood and femininity are shaping the lived experiences of women and girls today.

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