TikTok's "What I Eat In A Day": Controlling the Female Body Through Media

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Abstract

The following essay centers around the TikTok #WhatIEatInADay trend. It is a historical and cultural analysis of the ways that the trend perpetuates diet culture messages from past mediums while introducing new trends that are unique to the digital age. The scope of research is American mass media targeting women from the early twentieth century to the present-day. Etiquette books, newspaper articles, advertisements, and magazines were used for the historical portion of the essay. TikTok was used to gather trend analytics and to provide details about user engagement. The purpose of the research is to expose the ways that diet culture messages in mass media have evolved over the past century, influencing the way that women engage with the content.

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Introduction

American mass media has been rife with diet culture since the early twentieth century. Diet culture refers to the dominant messages that we receive about food and our bodies. Namely, that thinness is indicative of one's health and morality, that weight loss is always something to strive for, and that certain foods exist within a binary of "good" and "bad" or "healthy" and "unhealthy." These messages about food and diet are relayed through every social institution, including religion, education, mass media, and family relationships. In the media, food content teaches us not only how to cook recipes step-by-step, but also the composition of a good meal, how you should look, and how to identify a healthy individual based on their body size (Eltink and Bröer 2024, 2). Health is often presented as an objective concept, defined by medical professionals and existing without bias. On the contrary, health is deeply rooted in privilege and power (Contois 2020, 15). As a powerful tool for spreading cultural messages, food and diet media shape the way that we think about our bodies and health.

At the forefront of our current media landscape is TikTok, the most recent social media platform to gain a worldwide audience. TikTok reinforces well-established diet culture messages of the past – equating food and diet to one's morality, enforcing a narrow standard of health, and positioning diet as a way of achieving "ideal" femininity. TikTok has also introduced new trends that are unique to the medium, such as the centering of "everyday" female bodies, the active role of the user in creating and spreading messages about food, and the intrusive nature of the platform. To assess how diet and food media have evolved with the advent of TikTok while retaining trends from previous mediums, I draw from etiquette books, newspaper articles, advertisements, and magazines in my analysis. My focus remains on American media targeting women from the early twentieth century to the present-day digital age.

TikTok & The Rise of "What I Eat In A Day"

TikTok was launched internationally in 2016 and has amassed 1 billion monthly active users globally (Woodward 2024). TikTok is a short-form video-sharing app characterized by its powerful algorithm and addictive "For You Page" (FYP). The FYP is a string of seemingly endless videos based on the user's perceived interests. A TikTok video can range from a few seconds to 10 minutes long. Typically creators have only a few seconds to grab the viewer's attention, feeding on the short attention span of Gen Z. In just 8 years, TikTok has become one of the most popular and widely downloaded social media platforms in the world. It has the longest average session length of any social media platform, making it extremely powerful in terms of engaging and retaining a global audience (Woodward 2024). TikTok has transformed the digital marketing industry and has surpassed Instagram as a top social media platform among teens (Anderson, et al. 2023). According to the Pew Research Center, around six-in-ten teens ages 13 to 17 (63%) and six-in-ten U.S. adults under 30 (62%) say that they use TikTok as of April 2024 (Eddy 2024).

TikTok reached a staggering level of popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the world was forced into lockdown, Gen Z turned to TikTok as a form of entertainment amid the chaos. Quarantine created an environment of social isolation and boredom. Many took to TikTok and discussed their goals of a quarantine "glow up," the newest self-improvement project. Many planned to shed weight and return to the world a new and "healthier" person. The "What I Eat In A Day" (or WIEIAD) trend was popularized first on YouTube during the late 2010s but quickly transitioned to TikTok as the app rose to fame during the pandemic. Creators film aesthetic videos (see **Figure 1**) as a digital meal diary, relaying everything that they ate that day and often including their workout routines. Many WIEIAD videos begin with a "body check" introduction – a shot of the creator posing in front of the camera to show their physique. The body check indicates a clear jump from the food that they eat in a day to the "results," or the diet's effect on their weight.

As of September 2024, the TikTok #WhatIEatInADay has amassed 1.8 million videos posted, and the corresponding abbreviation #WIEIAD has 550.3K videos. The vast reach of this trend makes it a rich site for analysis, particularly in terms of the largely young and female audience consuming these videos. The trend reveals the timeless nature of diet culture messages while introducing trends unique to TikTok as a medium.

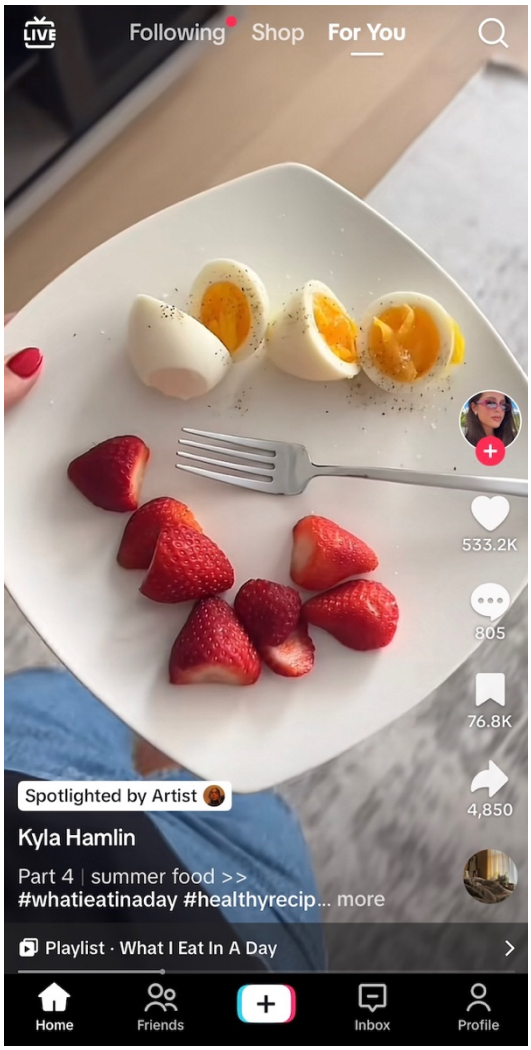


Figure 1. #WhatIEatInADay on TikTok (2024)

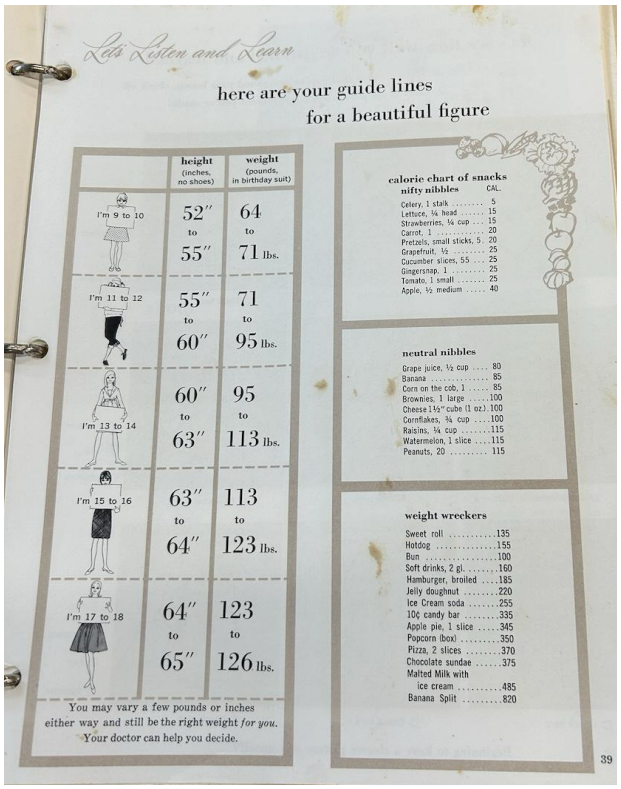
Representations of Diet in 20th Century American Mass Media

Food and diet media largely existed in textbooks and cookbooks during the early twentieth century, accessible to the wealthy. Gradually, this content was disseminated to the general public through newspaper articles and advertisements. Etiquette books of the early twentieth century associated dieting with moral superiority and even drew on religious ideals from Protestantism. Gluttony was a sin that the media frequently drew upon in their encouragement of dieting. In 1960, Lesley Blanch published a highly subversive anti-diet article in *Vogue*. Blanch exposed the way dieting had taken on the significance of a religious movement, noting how fat became one of the deadly sins (Blanch 1960, 54). In her concluding remarks, Blanch wondered if this "New Puritanism" of dieting "will eventually condemn cookery books as obscene literature" (Blanch 1960, 60). The binaries between vice and virtue, nature and modernity,

thinness and fatness, and good food and bad food, appeared in food media during World War I and reappeared during times of war, moral panic, or cultural anxiety. Weight loss took on a spiritual significance, one that has persisted a century later. Women were not just losing weight; they were embarking on a "difficult but actualizing and empowering journey toward not just idealized thinness but a new and better self" (Contois 2020, 100). A *Ladies' Home Journal* article from 1995 titled "Lost and Found" discussed the weight loss journey of six women. "What did they find?" the author quips… "self-esteem, success, and yes, it's better to be thin – and blond" (Lampert 1995, 165). The spiritual significance of dieting presented in mass media positioned the female body as increasingly divorced from the mind.

Leading up to America's entry into World War I, food media presented dieting as an act of patriotism and a way to demonstrate good citizenship. Rationing was encouraged to limit meat and wheat consumption in support of American troops. Food restriction and thinness became an overtly patriotic act, and fat became "the enemy." Newspaper articles were riddled with guilt and shame surrounding food. Journalists accused the reader of being "a slacker, a shirker, a fat and sugar profiteer, ergo a pro-German; in fine, a traitor" if they did not give up food and "gluttony" to support their country (Barry 1917). According to journalists during World War I, citizens were "cheating" the government if they did not show restraint in their diet (Barry 1917). Over a century later, we are experiencing a similar moral judgment in food media. Wellness culture on TikTok links the self with the health of the body, solidifying its association with "responsible" and "good" citizenship (Topham and Smith 2023, 686).

Upon entry into World War II, the American ethos surrounding dieting took on a similar patriotic and moral basis as it had in World War I. Like America's foreign enemies, the body became something to conquer. When dieting, women were told to either "go in to win battle or stay out," as one hostess guide described it (*The Complete Hostess* 1929, 17). A thin figure could only be won through the "right of conquest" (("Display Ad 12 – No Title" 1925). Even amid a violent world war, fatness was identified as one of the biggest threats to the American woman. The *New York Times* ran stories warning women about war-time weight gain. "You must still guard your weight carefully – during rationing – to avoid putting on many pounds of ugly fat," said one *New York Times* ad (("Display Ad 84 – No Title 1943). A similar discourse took place on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many women grew fearful of gaining the "quarantine 15," causing an influx of diet and workout content. In posting "What I Eat In A Day" videos on TikTok, American women assume the same illusion of power and control that they did during a global crisis like


Let's Listen and Learn

here are your guide lines for a beautiful figure

	height (inches, no shoes)	weight (pounds, in birthday suit)
I'm 9 to 10	52″ to 55″	64 to 71 lbs.
I'm 11 to 12	55″ to 60″	71 to 95 lbs.
I'm 13 to 14	60″ to 63″	95 to 113 lbs.
I'm 15 to 16	63″ to 64″	113 to 123 lbs.
I'm 17 to 18	64″ to 65″	123 to 126 lbs.

You may vary a few pounds or inches either way and still be the right weight *for you*. Your doctor can help you decide.

calorie chart of snacks

nifty nibbles CAL.
Celery, 1 stalk 5
Lettuce, ¼ head 15
Strawberries, ¼ cup ... 15
Carrot, 1 20
Pretzels, small sticks, 5 . 20
Grapefruit, ½ 25
Cucumber slices, 55 25
Gingersnap, 1 25
Tomato, 1 small 25
Apple, ½ medium 40

neutral nibbles
Grape juice, ½ cup 80
Banana 85
Corn on the cob, 1 85
Brownies, 1 large 100
Cheese 1½" cube (1 oz).100
Cornflakes, ¾ cup 100
Raisins, ¼ cup 115
Watermelon, 1 slice 115
Peanuts, 20 115

weight wreckers
Sweet roll 135
Hotdog 155
Bun 100
Soft drinks, 2 gl. 160
Hamburger, broiled 185
Jelly doughnut 220
Ice Cream soda 255
10¢ candy bar 335
Apple pie, 1 slice 345
Popcorn (box) 350
Pizza, 2 slices 370
Chocolate sundae 375
Malted Milk with ice cream 485
Banana Split 820

39

Figure 2. *Sears School for Young Charmers* (1965)

World War II. Part of women's wartime duties was to maintain their figure, and with it, the reputation of America as a strong and united nation. The media's representation of the female body as a warfront persisted, as evidenced in a 1982 *Ladies' Home Journal* article titled, "How to Win the Battle of the Bulge." Women were not just manipulating their bodies; they were at war with them.

The 1950s and 60s spurred a new era of self-surveillance for women's diets in the media. Sears published a guide called the *Sears School for Young Charmers* in 1965, which detailed how young girls could demonstrate their morality by shaping their bodies to fit Western standards of beauty. According to Sears, "It takes work to create the beautiful body lines that spell success" (*Sears School for Young Charmers* 1965, 20). Not only were thin women presented as "successful" and morally superior, but the guide also situated foods within a moral hierarchy. One page of the guide's "Eating for Good Health" section (see **Figure 2**) listed the ideal body weight of young girls, accompanied by a list of foods and their calorie counts. The list ranged from "nifty nibbles" to "weight wreckers" (*Sears School for Young Charmers* 1965, 39). The food and diet media in America throughout the twentieth century reinforced this superiority of thin bodies and low-calorie foods, a trend that has manifested in the TikTok "What I Eat In A Day" trend today.

Upon entry into American society from the Progressive Era to today, girls face intense scrutiny – how they walk, speak, eat, and dress is surveilled. "Whatever she does, or is, or doesn't do, or is not, she is under the searchlight of the mothers of other girls, and of other girls themselves" (*Etiquette for Americans* 1909, 198). The *Sears School for Young Charmers* (1965) instructed young girls in the art of self-surveillance. They were taught to analyze their physical assets "(and glorify them!)" and their physical flaws "(camouflage those!)" (*Sears School for Young Charmers* 1965, 1). An entire section was devoted to the "correct" way a young lady should eat to maintain a thin figure. The guide stressed the active role that girls must take in manipulating their bodies to perform femininity correctly. To be feminine was to be thin. The chart of ideal body measurements encouraged a constant state of self-surveillance, and food was reduced to its caloric composition – a tool to manipulate the body's appearance. In the digital age, we have a new searchlight by which we surveil ourselves – social media. The "body checks" at the beginning of WIEIAD videos reflect this practice of self-surveillance.

Health is a concept that seems objective, defined most often by those in the medical and scientific communities. However, it can be better understood as a moral discourse that evolves from a shared set of cultural values and beliefs (Eltink and Bröer 2024, 2). Diet and food media heavily influence our concept of health. A narrow standard of health is evident in food and diet media from the past. In 1971 *Vogue* published a beauty and health article that listed everything that "health eaters" eat in a day. The article instructed readers to "look at the rabbits" for how they should eat. The "health eaters" in question included dancers and models, extremely thin women who were very active and had low-calorie diets. The article's representation of thin women as ideal "healthy eaters," directly associated health with thinness. This narrow standard of health is reflected today in TikTok's WIEIAD videos. The videos tagged with #HealthyEating include 678.9K videos as of September 2024, and 7 of the top 10 videos under the hashtag show a thin white woman as the figurehead. Like the "health eaters" of 1970s *Vogue*, thin white creators are granted credibility because "slimness is read as an indication that an influencer is 'looking after' their

health…[the] credibility is not conferred through the qualifications they possess, but rather the body they inhabit" (Topham and Smith 2023, 685-686).

Representations of Diet on TikTok

TikTok is the most recent social media platform to manifest the culture of dieting in its food content. TikTok "What I Eat In A Day" videos perpetuate diet culture trends in American mass media from the early twentieth century. Thinness and dieting are indicators of moral superiority, women learn to self-surveil their diets and bodies, and a narrow standard of health is represented. However, TikTok has also introduced new trends that are unique to the medium. These new trends include the representation of "everyday" female bodies, the active role of the user in creating and spreading messages about food, and the intrusive nature of the platform.

In the past, celebrity testimonials and aspirational bodies of famous supermodels filled the pages of magazines, newspapers, books, and in television advertisements. There was a clear disconnect between the star-studded pages of mass media and reality. The use of photoshop in mass media was widely documented and acknowledged. Editing could slim, smooth, and take away any blemish or hint of cellulite, and feminists often called out the media for its unrealistic standards of beauty pushed onto women. TikTok has created a new environment that appears to be representative of the "normal" and "real" female body. Gurtala and Fardouly's research findings discuss how, despite the widespread use of beauty filters on videos, it is possible that users find short-form videos like TikToks to be more realistic and less edited, making the diets and bodies presented seem more "achievable" and "real" (Gurtala and Fardouly 2023, 192). In the digital age, short-form video content creates an illusion of these diets and bodies as real, healthy, and achievable, if only the consumer has the willpower to commit to it.

With past mediums such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, the media landscape was made up predominantly of one-way communication. American mass media from the early twentieth century resisted a "talking back" to the text – one that exists now in the form of likes, comments, and shares. The digital age has created a whole new media landscape in which users are "active" consumers, directly engaging with content. A new level of intrusiveness has also been introduced. While women of the past may have been able to turn off their televisions or close their magazines, social media has infiltrated the lives of young women. TikTok allows "the ease of accessing harmful eating disorder-promoting content, the pervasiveness of personalized 'for you page' algorithms, and the explosion of weight loss trends that inspire extreme fitness or thinness" (Dane and Bhatia 2023, 4). As a major source of entertainment, many women on TikTok who encounter WIEIAD videos may not have sought them out. The powerful FYP and algorithm have created an unyielding and intrusive media environment, one that feels impossible to escape. TikTok WIEIAD videos create an environment for women not only to post what they eat in a day for self-surveillance purposes, but also to open themselves up to the judgment, praise, or criticism of the masses. The comment sections of WIEIAD videos offer a glimpse into the public's concept of what is "healthy" and what makes a woman's diet (and by extension, that woman) "good."

Take, for example, the comment section of a self-identifying fat woman's WIEIAD. *This was all before 10 am*, one comment reads. *Thought the video will never end… girl u know that food can kill you right? u should take care of yourself... you live a sad existence*. Meanwhile, the comment sections of thin women's WIEIAD videos praise the "health" and "perfection" of the creator. *as a wannabe model ur an idol of mine!!! can i be u… im trying to be like this… Wow, the inspo I needed*. The comment sections of WIEIAD videos reinforce "ingrained understandings that certain (clean) ways of eating produce certain bodies, which form a crucial part of the criteria for the 'desirable woman' and a healthy citizen" (Topham and Smith 2023, 692).

The actual creators are not the only ones who experience an emotional response from these videos. Many TikTok users consume these videos without ever posting one themselves, though they are left with a lasting impression. Comparison is inevitable when viewing WIEIAD videos. Many videos are marked by a "disclaimer" at the beginning – the creator states that their diet is simply what works for them, and that there is no need for the audience to compare their own diets to what they see. However, as Topham and Smith argue, the disclaimers seem "ultimately futile, as social media operates according to an intrinsic logic of comparison" (Topham and Smith 2023, 684). The active role that the user adopts through social media platforms like TikTok also makes them the mediators of our food and diet culture. Users can submit to the dominant diet culture by praising thin creators and encouraging restriction. However, they also have the power to challenge diet culture by uplifting creators who advocate for body acceptance. TikTok gives users the power to influence culture, even those who do not post WIEIAD videos themselves. Their responses through likes, comments, and shares drive the way that we think about women's diets and bodies.

The interactive nature of TikTok and the centering of "everyday" bodies create a powerful site for comparison, one that had not existed to this extent in past mediums. According to Gurtala and Fardouly, social media platforms like TikTok "regularly attracts scrutiny to the female body, thereby providing increased opportunities for women to be both objectified and engage in self-objectification" (Gurtala and Fardouly 2023, 191). TikTok WIEIAD videos are a new form of self-surveillance, even for users who do not post videos themselves. Self-surveillance begins as soon as the video appears on a user's FYP. As they watch the video, whether for 3 seconds or for one minute, the content leaves an impression. The user may begin to recount what *they* ate that day. Was it more than the creator? *I'm so jealous that this fills you up*, one TikTok comment reads. Was it less than the creator? *Bro I feel so jealous of fast metabolism people… I feel bad even after eating 1 plate*. Did they "do" better or worse than the creator? *What am I doing wrong…*Who is healthier? Who is thinner? *How is your life so perfect...*

Emotional responses are evident in TikTok WIEIAD comments as users assess their diets in relation to the creator. As David and Ezan state, "digital platforms contribute, through the posts of internet users, to the development of food literacy based on a coconstruction of knowledge" (David and Ezan 2023, 183). The active role that consumers take on in the digital age allows the public to shape dominant ideas about food, health, and how the female body should look. TikTok "What I Eat In A Day" videos have the potential to either disrupt dominant diet culture through subversive content, or reinforce traditional ideas about dieting, thinness, and health from the past.

Conclusion

Even when women "correctly" perform femininity and submit to dieting, they are frequently met with condescension in mass media. In a 1972 *Harper's Bazaar* article, a prominent Manhattan diet doctor stated that most women who diet have "either ego or vanity problems" and that they are simply trying to shed "ego fat" (Klemesrud 1972, 58). He regards these "frantic" women with disdain. The article exposed the contradictions in food and diet media – women are taught that thinness is something to strive for but are publicly mocked when they seek it. When women try to lose weight, they are accused of being vain and egotistical, even promoting eating disorders. When women choose to rebel and not diet, they are accused of having no self-restraint or concern for their health. A similar attitude appears in the current news coverage of TikTok "What I Eat In A Day" videos. Journalists often degrade the low-calorie days of eating that young women post, and they denounce the "pro-eating disorder" content. As harmful as these videos can be in their reinforcement of diet culture, the young women who post them are frequently scapegoated by those in power. Emmeline Cline discusses this tendency in her book *Dead Weight: Essays on Hunger and Harm* – "By stirring up a moral panic about [pro-eating disorder] communities, casting a teenage girl as patient zero of a social contagion, the cultural arbiters who forged the standard she's worshipping evade responsibility" (Clein 2024, 138). Rather than blaming the toxic culture that has created a need for women to restrict and obsess over their bodies, they are the ones who are blamed. Journalists today often have a very narrow and negative view of TikTok and its food media content. Although there are many harmful WIEIAD videos, TikTok is also a place where women who struggle with food and their bodies can feel seen. The app is made up of vibrant subcultures such as the eating disorder recovery community, body positivity community, and fat liberationists who post subversive content to the #WhatIEatInADay. The coverage of #WhatIEatInADay often infantilizes the young women who post videos, making them out to be malevolent and naïve girls who are feeding on other girls' insecurities, rather than women who are in pain (Clein 2024, 145).

Dieting, weight loss, and body image talk are ways that young girls socialize and form bonds with each other. In the 1960s, magazines such as *Calling All Girls* encouraged preteens to join "support groups" like TOPS ("Take Off Pounds Sensibly") and Weight Watchers. For girls as young as 10 who consider themselves overweight, TOPS provided a space to come together in shared "misery," making it easier for everyone to fight the same "temptations" (*Calling All Girls* 1963). From a young age, womanhood is defined by this shared struggle against our bodies. Carole Counihan conducts a historical analysis in her 1998 work, *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*. She states that "Medieval women strive for holiness through fasting, Victorian girls seek the wasting and weakness associated with social and spiritual superiority, and modern women strive for thinness… but all are seeking perfection in the value system of their culture" (Counihan and Kaplan 1998, 108). Despite its very recent development, TikTok and the "What I Eat In A Day" trend are a manifestation of this timeless desire for thinness and perfection.

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