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Between Calorie Counting and "Eating for the Soul": Mapping the Contradictory Dietary Landscape of TikTok for 13-Year-Old Girls

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Abstract

Social media algorithms play a pivotal role in shaping children's and adolescents' dietary perceptions, yet existing research largely relies on active hashtag searches, which do not capture the algorithmically curated user experience. Adopting a naturalistic ethnographic approach, this study maps the dietary content delivered to simulated accounts of 13-year-old girls on TikTok's "For You" page. Through a thematic interpretive analysis of 300 algorithmically recommended videos, the study identifies a fragmented dietary landscape defined by five conflicting discourses: (1) Information, promoting a simplistic, calorie- or protein-centric view of nutrition; (2) Inspiration, framing diet and weight loss as an aspirational lifestyle; (3) Feel-Good, glorifying emotional hedonism and indulgence; (4) Struggle, depicting the relationship with food as an ongoing battle; and (5) Disorder, highlighting the psychological distress of eating. The findings demonstrate that algorithmically curated feeds may expose young users to a contradictory discursive environment in which the body is simultaneously constructed as an object requiring continuous optimization and as a site of unrestrained emotional indulgence. Navigating this tension is complicated by idealized portrayals of success alongside the lived reality of dietary failure, thus creating fertile ground for the normalization of disordered eating patterns. By mapping these fragmented narratives, the study conceptualizes the digital foodscape on adolescent girls' TikTok accounts as a media environment characterized by persistent dietary paradoxes.

Keywords: TikTok; social media; diet; nutrition; eating behavior; eating disorder; adolescent girls

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Introduction

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as a prominent health communication ecosystem, exemplified by the #MedTok phenomenon, in which creators and healthcare professionals disseminate health-related content to vast audiences (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024; Rosen et al., 2024). This proliferation of health messaging is a particularly pertinent issue for children and adolescents, whose developmental stage makes them especially vulnerable due to their less-developed media and health literacy. The structure of TikTok further exacerbates this vulnerability: Its recommendation algorithm delivers content automatically via personalized feeds, without requiring explicit keyword or hashtag queries. Thus, mere viewing is sufficient for exposure to complex messaging.

While research has so far focused on overtly extreme content, such as pro-eating disorders messages, there is a significant gap in understanding the spectrum of "normative" videos and the full assemblage of messages reaching young users. Furthermore, prevailing research predominantly relies on active hashtag searches, sampling videos via specific tags such as #WhatIEatInADay, #weightloss, or #BEDrecovery (e.g., see Davis et al., 2023; Greene & Norling, 2023; Minadeo & Pope, 2022), which fail to capture the algorithmically curated user experience. Adopting a naturalistic ethnographic approach, the present study addresses this gap by mapping the range of nutrition-, diet-, and eating-related messages that girls who claim to be 13 years old might encounter while scrolling through the TikTok "For You" page.

The Digital Landscape of Dietary Discourses

A substantial body of research explores the digital media landscapes that construct children's and adolescents' worldviews regarding food, nutrition, eating, and dieting. Scholarly inquiry has concentrated on two primary, yet contrasting, domains: (1) representations of body image and "diet culture," and their link to disordered eating (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016); and (2) the promotion of ultra-processed, energy-dense, nutrient-poor ("junk") foods and their link to pediatric obesity (e.g., Lafontaine et al., 2025; Potvin Kent et al., 2024). Taken together, these distinct lines of inquiry provide a necessary framework for comprehending the complex and often contradictory dietary messages that young people navigate online.

For decades, traditional media have been shown to portray vast representations of the thin-ideal, dieting, and disordered eating (e.g., Huang et al., 2021). Social media platforms have amplified this, containing a high level of appearance and diet-related content that is easily accessible to young users (Chung et al., 2021). Platforms are saturated with accounts promoting weight loss, inviting social comparisons to fit, idealized, and often unrealistic imagery (Chung et al., 2021; Harriger et al., 2022). Historically, research focused on *thinspiration* content, which idealizes severe dieting and extreme weight loss through images of anorexic models (Wick & Harriger, 2018).

A more recent trend is *fitspiration* (i.e., a combination of fitness and inspiration). While originally intended to combat thinspiration by promoting a healthy lifestyle and empowerment, fitspiration content often portrays distressing themes, including rigid dietary rules and guilt over lapses into unhealthy eating (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Within this trend, the *What I Eat in a Day* (WIEIAD) genre "food diary" format, where creators film or describe everything they consume, has become particularly popular. Typically created by non-credentialed influencers and emphasizing aesthetics and stylized meals, these videos predominantly promote diet culture veiled as "health" or "wellness," often featuring restrictive eating and small portions (Davis et al., 2023).

Social media also offer counter-narratives, though their prevalence is ambiguous. Eating Disorder (ED) recovery content is prevalent, with creators sharing personal experiences and educational content, often using "gallows humor" (Herrick et al., 2021; Kells et al., 2025). However, studies reveal that the boundaries between recovery messaging and disordered content on TikTok are frequently blurred (Griffiths et al., 2026). Pro-recovery content may promote diet culture and potentially create a toxic environment for individuals seeking recovery support (Greene & Norling, 2023). Furthermore, this content, while well-intentioned, can become imitative and focus on the disorder's own struggles (Benzel et al., 2025).

Finally, *body-positivity* formats have emerged to challenge thin ideals and foster acceptance of all bodies (Sastre, 2014). This trend translates into a rejection of restrictive food rules, encouraging users to dissociate food choices from weight-loss goals and to consume all foods without guilt. While some studies found that #fatspiration posts promote fat acceptance more frequently, a content analysis conducted of #bodypositivity videos on TikTok shows that they often portray unrealistic beauty ideals, and lack explicit positive body image messaging (Harriger et al., 2023). Aligning with these principles, *Anti-diet* and *Intuitive eating* content have also emerged as critiques of diet culture (Greene & Norling, 2023), but these narratives are often co-opted and remain far less prevalent than the harmful messaging they seek to challenge (Raiter et al., 2023).

In stark contrast to the vast proliferation of food restriction images, social media platforms also provide an environment conducive to unhealthy eating habits and "junk food" consumption. Studies reveal an overwhelming prevalence of messages promoting ultra-processed, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and sugar-sweetened beverages (e.g., Lafontaine et al., 2025; Meyerding & Marpert, 2023). This exposure is driven by sophisticated marketing, in which brands encourage users to become "unofficial brand ambassadors" and use influencers, including child influencers, as role models for consumption (Brooks et al., 2022; De Veirman et al., 2019; Potvin

Kent et al., 2024). Exposure to this influencer-driven marketing has been shown to significantly increase children's immediate caloric intake, alter their brand preferences, and normalize poor dietary habits (Coates et al., 2019).

Another popular genre is *Mukbang*—an "eating broadcast" that originated in South Korea and involves filming oneself eating, often in very large quantities (Kang et al., 2020). Indeed, content analyses of Mukbang videos have revealed harmful messages, predominantly featuring thin individuals overeating large amounts of food (Wu et al., 2025), which is presented as normal and without negative consequences (Kircaburun et al., 2021). The potential effect of such content is particularly concerning for young and vulnerable audiences. Recent research among children and adolescents indicates that increased exposure to *Mukbang* videos is directly associated with poorer dietary behaviors, including higher intake of fast food, sweets, and late-night snacks (Jang et al., 2024).

Young users navigating between these contradictory media landscapes can be understood through Restraint Theory and Dual-Process Models of eating behavior. While restraint theory highlights the chronic cognitive effort required to suppress hunger in pursuit of a thin ideal (Polivy & Herman, 1985), dual-process models emphasize the ongoing tension between reflective self-control and automatic hedonic impulses (Hofmann et al., 2009). When social media environments simultaneously promote restrictive eating and glorify indulgence, they can trigger an intense goal conflict (Stroebe et al., 2010) between weight regulation and eating enjoyment. This structural conflict can heighten intrusive food rumination and preoccupation with eating—a phenomenon discussed as "food noise"—thereby elevating psychological distress among users (Hayashi et al., 2023).

Dietary Narratives Amplified on TikTok

While the socio-cultural discourses surrounding nutrition on digital media were consolidating prior to TikTok, research indicates that these phenomena are now being substantially amplified on the platform (Pryde et al., 2024). TikTok is a favorite and uniquely engaging platform among children and adolescents (Ofcom, 2026), and its specific technical features may increase the problematic effects of this content. Unlike platforms reliant on user social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, TikTok's "For You" page (FYP) pushes a stream of videos uniquely personalized for each user by an algorithm. Alarmingly, by exposing viewers to more content similar to what they have previously engaged with, this personalized feed may become increasingly extreme, including videos explicitly promoting severe caloric restriction or dangerous weight-loss methods (Harriger et al., 2022). Accordingly, Griffiths et al. (2024), analyzing 1.03 million videos delivered to individuals with eating disorders, revealed that TikTok's personalization process can significantly amplify ED symptoms by creating a potent feedback loop of targeted exposure (Dondzilo et al., 2024).

The TikTok algorithm, which prioritizes engagement over accuracy, has facilitated the proliferation of nutrition misinformation (Zeng et al., 2025). Qualitative studies typically analyzed popular videos sourced via specific, researcher-selected hashtags (e.g., Munro et al., 2024; Pryde et al., 2024; Raiter et al., 2023). They show that popular #fitspiration and #HealthyLifestyle content often contains inaccurate or unsafe information, reinforces negative body image and restrictive eating, and promotes unsubstantiated weight-loss products (Pryde et al., 2024; Raffoul et al., 2024; Raiter et al., 2023). Nutrition information on the platform primarily comes from self-proclaimed "experts" or creators sharing their personal experiences (Munro et al., 2024). Thus, a study by Minadeo and Pope (2022) analyzing 1,000 TikTok videos from 10 popular nutrition-, food-, and weight-related hashtags found that only 1.4% of videos were created by registered dietitians. Similarly, a study of 250 TikTok videos related to various nutrition hashtags found that 55% of nutrition videos did not provide evidence-based information, and only 36% were completely accurate (Zeng et al., 2025).

Taken together, a substantial body of research has investigated digital media content related to nutrition, eating behaviors, weight loss, and dieting. However, a primary research gap is that existing literature provides limited indication of the specific content assemblages that reach the youngest users (specifically, 13-year-olds) via algorithmic curation. This absence is particularly acute given TikTok's immense popularity among young demographics; approximately 63% of teens (ages 13–17) actively use the platform, with usage being particularly prevalent among teenage girls (Anderson et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite 13 being the minimum permitted age, evidence suggests a substantial presence of even younger audiences; a recent UK regulatory report found that 72% of children aged 8–12 access major platforms such as TikTok (Ofcom, 2026).

Notably, TikTok's ecosystem of algorithmic amplification and misinformation is especially concerning for this vulnerable audience. Adolescents are uniquely susceptible to body image and eating concerns, as well as unhealthy food marketing messages (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Hosokawa et al., 2023). This vulnerability is

compounded by their tendency to perceive influencers as credible (De Veirman et al., 2019). Consequently, while studies have focused on dietary content in general, it is of paramount importance to gain information about the specific content available to accounts registered by the youngest users.

Furthermore, existing scholarship is characterized by methodological limitations regarding the type and scope of content analyzed. The vast majority of studies focus on predefined, specific formats, such as thinspiration, fitspiration, or *Mukbang* videos. Consequently, there is a lack of broad-based research offering a holistic perspective on the platform's dietary landscape. Furthermore, due to the dominance of quantitative approaches in the field, there is a pressing need to deepen our understanding through qualitative interpretive research. Such an approach is vital for capturing the richness, complexity, and potential contradictions characterizing the digital environments where young users navigate and construct their worldviews on health, nutrition, weight management, and eating.

An additional gap concerns the prevailing reliance on the *a priori* selection of specific hashtags (e.g., #healthylifestyle, #weightloss, #WIEIAD). This approach has significant limitations, as hashtags are assigned by creators and do not always correlate directly with the video's content (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Relying on them necessarily excludes other relevant content, so the full scope of the platform's dietary landscape cannot be captured. Moreover, a methodology centered on hashtag search may not adequately represent the algorithmically curated experience of a teenage user. Since young users' primary mode of viewing TikTok videos involves routine scrolling through the algorithmically curated FYP (Brookbank, 2025), current research strategies cannot adequately capture the actual content stream delivered to these accounts.

To our knowledge, no qualitative studies have yet tracked the dietary content to which the youngest female users—such as those identifying as 13 years old—are exposed via this algorithm-driven experience. Given these combined gaps, there is limited understanding of the messages young girls might encounter on TikTok, particularly when they are not intentionally searching for such content. Adopting a naturalistic ethnographic approach, the present study aims to address this gap by examining the nutrition-, diet-, eating-, and weight-related messages that young girls might be exposed to on TikTok.

Methods

Data Collection

Three new TikTok user accounts were created, each with fabricated profiles indicating a 13-year-old female (the platform's minimum age requirement). To suppress bias from prior or external activities, the option to link the accounts to other social media, contact lists, or databases was declined. The accounts operated strictly under "Restricted Mode"—an official safety setting that simulates the safer viewing experience recommended for minors. This setting was manually activated for the account created in 2023, whereas for the accounts created in 2024 and 2025, it was automatically applied by the platform. Operating strictly under "Restricted Mode" and platform age limitations not only simulated the recommended viewing experience for a 13-year-old girl but also provided a naturalistic test of how effectively the platform's safeguards protect young audiences from potentially harmful dietary content.

The data collection was conducted sequentially and longitudinally to account for the platform's changing trends. A new, separate account was created and used for 10 days in 2023, 2024, and 2025, with approximately 10-month intervals between phases. For each of these three distinct collection periods, data were collected by scrolling through publicly available TikTok videos on the account's FYP. This allowed the algorithm to guide the data collection. The stopping rule was governed by a fixed quota to ensure methodological uniformity: scrolling continued on each account's FYP until 100 relevant videos were downloaded, yielding a total purposive sample of 300 videos.

To ensure comparability across accounts, a consistent naturalistic seeding protocol was applied during each phase's opening hours. The researcher routinely scrolled the default FYP—which initially featured generic trending content—without utilizing the active search function. The first diet- or nutrition-related video that appeared naturally was watched in full and downloaded. This signaling triggered a progressively personalized stream of dietary content, from which we continued to download relevant videos for subsequent analysis. Notably, downloading a video represents a strong positive engagement signal within TikTok's recommendation system, arguably stronger than a full watch or a like, as it indicates high user interest and intent to retain or share content.

Thus, while our naturalistic design did not involve active keyword or hashtag searches, repeatedly downloading relevant videos simulated the trajectory of an adolescent user who demonstrates clear, ongoing engagement with dietary content that appears in her feed, rather than being a strictly passive scroller.

While precise algorithmic entry points varied, the overarching dynamic remained consistent. For example, on the 2023 account, initial engagement with a dietetic cooking video subsequently populated the FYP with content on lean cooking and weight loss, which, after a few days, evolved into videos discussing food struggles and recovery. Similarly, on the 2024 and 2025 accounts, seeding the algorithm with viral food trends ("Come eat with me" and "Dubai Chocolate" videos) quickly populated the feed with eating-centric content, which then progressively expanded to encompass cooking, healthy diet, weight loss, and food struggles. Notably, while TikTok's surface-level trends shifted rapidly, this longitudinal approach revealed that the core underlying messages remained stable across the three years (see Table 1).

To maintain the naturalistic integrity of this process, the first author screened every video the algorithm presented. Videos irrelevant to the study's focus were scrolled past to allow the feed to progress. If a video provided an initial indication of relevance, it was viewed in its entirety; if it met the inclusion criteria, it was downloaded for analysis. Inclusion criteria were any visual, audio, or textual references to: (1) information about nutrition, healthy eating, recommended intake, or weight/fat loss methods; (2) perceptions about food and its roles in health, wellness, body-toning, or physical/emotional states; and (3) experiences and perceptions of eating behaviors and eating disorders. To clarify these criteria, a cooking or recipe video was included in the sample only if it contained explicit references to the food's nutritional values, health properties, or other dietary aspects.

Data Analysis

A thematic, interpretive approach was employed to identify key categories and patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, over 100 codes were generated using ATLAS.ti, drawing both on existing literature (e.g., calorie management, lifestyle, anti–eating disorder narratives) and inductively from the data (e.g., protein-centric discourse, self-deception, vegetable-eating hacks). Given the absence of a sufficiently comprehensive existing framework, a preliminary categorization was developed a priori, comprising three main categories: (1) weight management (e.g., diet mentality, lifestyle-oriented approaches, and intuitive eating); (2) food-related messages (e.g., food as a means of promoting health, shaping the body, or regulating emotions and physical states); and (3) body image and eating disorders (e.g., thinspiration/fitspiration and pro-ED content; body positivity, anti-ED, recovery-oriented content, and the normalization of eating disorder experiences).

The 300 TikTok videos were systematically viewed and transcribed, capturing all audio, on-screen text, captions, and song lyrics. Relevant visual elements—such as facial expressions, gestures, activities, food representations, and creators' appearance —were also documented. Body types of content creators were categorized as either the thin-ideal (e.g., slender or low body mass) or the fit-ideal (e.g., lean with visible muscle definition), following Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018). Aesthetic presentation was coded as "model-looking" (e.g., professional-grade grooming and trendy styling) or "plain-looking" (e.g., naturalistic, unpolished state with no makeup) based on Harriger et al.'s (2023) conceptualization of Western beauty ideals.

The videos were first reviewed multiple times and annotated according to the predefined categories. Next, the annotations were jointly examined to identify broader patterns related to nutrition, eating, and dieting. Finally, the coded data were cross-analyzed, resulting in five overarching themes, each reflecting distinct meanings ascribed to dietary content: (1) information; (2) inspiration; (3) a source of positive affect (i.e., "feel-good"); (4) a site of struggle; and (5) eating disorder. Specifically, during the analytical coding process, content referencing eating disorders—whether framed as active struggle or recovery—was grouped under a single overarching theme (Theme 5). This methodological decision reflects the narrative architecture of TikTok videos, which frequently merge active suffering and recovery into a single, interconnected storytelling genre (e.g., recounting past pathology to contextualize present recovery). In these personal narratives, the presence of ED symptomatology and struggle remains focal in both sub-themes.

Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity, and Analytical Rigor

Both authors are experienced female scholars with strong academic backgrounds in sociology, media, and children's studies. In addition, the first author holds a degree in nutritional sciences. This interdisciplinary expertise informed the study's analytical lens, enabling a multifaceted interpretation of social structures, nutritional claims,

and media dynamics. The authors adopted an exploratory stance, seeking to engage with the data without preconceived assumptions. This approach was supported by the study's design, which aimed to map the broader TikTok's "dietary landscape"—encompassing diverse food- and eating-related content—rather than focusing narrowly on dieting or weight-loss messages.

As is common in qualitative research, the first author served as the sole analyst, and no additional coders were involved. While this approach may introduce potential bias, it is also grounded in the understanding that the qualitative researcher functions as the primary "instrument" of analysis, enabling close engagement with the data and nuanced interpretation of its meanings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). To ensure that the thematic framework was clearly defined and consistently applicable, both authors collaboratively developed and refined the thematic categories by jointly defining each theme and discussing representative examples. They then independently classified a pilot sample of 30 videos, assigning each to a dominant thematic category. Independent classification resulted in identical thematic assignments for all 30 videos. This pilot procedure was intended to verify the clarity and consistent application of the thematic framework prior to the subsequent interpretive analysis.

Results

As illustrated in Table 1, the descriptive thematic counts reveal that the core normative discourses surrounding diet and food (Themes 1–4) remained stable and consistently prevalent across the three years. The most notable thematic shift observed was a marked downward trend in Theme 5 (Disorder), which decreased from 32 instances in 2023 to just 7 in 2025. This decline may reflect TikTok's evolving platform safety mechanisms and increasingly algorithmic moderation of explicitly eating-disorder-related content over time. However, while safeguards have improved at filtering out overt pathological narratives, the underlying normative discourses that construct the contradictory and disempowering dietary landscape (Themes 1–4) remain uninterrupted by these same safety measures. These raw counts describe only this purposively sampled corpus; they serve to map this specific thematic landscape and are not statistical prevalence estimates of the broader platform.

Table 1. *Thematic Distribution of Dietary Content Across the Data Collection Periods.*

Account's year	Theme 1: Information	Theme 2: Inspiration	Theme 3: Feel Good	Theme 4: Struggle	Theme 5: Disorder
2023	40	17	12	13	31
2024	46	16	13	18	17
2025	39	19	20	19	7
Total	125	52	45	50	55

Note. The total number of thematic codes in each year slightly exceeds the 100 videos collected per account, as 27 videos aligned with two themes.

Dietary Landscape as Information: A Didactic and Scientific-Like Approach to Eating

The theme of "Dietary Landscape as Information" was the most represented across all data collection phases, with 125 of 300 analyzed videos providing nutritional "facts," tips, or recommendations. In these videos, diet and eating are framed as topics grounded in either common knowledge or personal experience, covering a wide array of issues from weight loss and calorie management to specific macronutrient consumption. Notably, the vast majority of these videos lacked scientific evidence—that is, the creators did not cite or provide empirical studies, references, or other scientific sources to substantiate their dietary claims. The only exceptions were three videos: two produced by a male presenter identifying as a "Doctor of Naturopathy," and another video created by a nutritional consultant who presented a personal blood glucose reading as "proof". Interestingly, while most of this content focuses on weight loss and body toning, only 13 out of 125 informational videos address broader health outcomes such as disease prevention or proper digestion. This informational discourse is characterized by two primary, often overlapping, narratives: "It's all about calorie deficit" and "Eat a lot of protein."

"It's All About Calorie Deficit": The Primacy of Calorie-Centric Discourse

A recurring pattern observed across the platform is an overwhelming focus on calorie deficit as the singular, most important factor for weight loss. This calorie-centric discourse pervades most informational videos, which focus on counting, calculating, and comparing the caloric content of various foods and meals. A persistent message in

these videos is that one can consume any type of food as long as a calorie deficit is maintained. For example, in a “100 Days of toning up” video that utilizes a close-up visual of pizza, the creator states, “At the end of the day, what determines if you gain or lose weight is the calorie balance. As long as you don’t exceed it, you can eat everything.” This emphasis often disregards the nutritional composition of food. Similarly, an overweight teenage girl appearing in an unpolished state films herself consuming large portions of spaghetti and a burger, captioning the video: “me enjoying my 'unhealthy' dinner w/ no guilt bc as long as I'm in a calorie deficit I'll still lose weight at the end of the day.”

This calorie-focused perspective often leads to the spread of incomplete or misleading information. Videos frequently recommend a lower-calorie option even if it is nutritionally inferior. For instance, one video presented quinoa and refined pasta as nutritionally equivalent because of their similar calorie counts, ignoring quinoa’s superior protein, fiber, and mineral profile. In a similar vein, three videos created by young fitness trainers in their early or mid-20s suggested that a serving of Nutella is nutritionally on par with an avocado because of their comparable calorie content. Such messages, typically delivered in an assertive and authoritative tone, may mislead viewers into believing that highly processed, high-sugar foods are equivalent to whole foods.

“Eat a Lot of Protein”: The Importance of High Protein Intake

A parallel, equally reductive focus exists on protein intake, with 49 of 125 informational videos centering on this single macronutrient. These videos primarily promote protein for its role in weight loss and muscle building, a discourse particularly prevalent among fitness creators who provide specific numerical recommendations for daily consumption. A lean female in her early 20s with visible muscle definition, training in a gym to upbeat music, declares, “You have to eat a lot of protein if you want to grow,” with a caption that reads, “Me after 150 grams of protein per day.” Similarly, another female presenter in her early 20s, claiming to have lost 10 kg, advises consuming protein in grams equivalent to twice one’s body mass in kilograms. Notably, while sports nutrition guidelines recommend higher protein intakes (1.2–2.0 g/kg/day) for active individuals to support muscle adaptation (Thomas et al., 2016), these TikTok recommendations are indiscriminately delivered to a general audience. Furthermore, the established Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of 0.8 g/kg/day serves merely as a baseline floor to prevent deficiency in sedentary individuals (Institute of Medicine, 2005). Yet many creator prescriptions far exceed this baseline, often reaching or exceeding the upper threshold, even for competitive athletes.

The discourse also promotes high-protein recipes and products. In a dynamic and aesthetically curated video, an athletic male creator in his early 20s demonstrates a stir-fry dish containing 70 grams of protein. In another, a lean teenage girl exclaims with excitement upon receiving a box of protein bars for her birthday: “29 grams of protein and 150 calories! I’m shocked!” The caption reads, “OMG, by far the best gift I ever received.” This elation over processed items, based solely on high protein and low-calorie content, demonstrates a reductive approach and may mislead viewers by promoting processed foods and oversimplifying complex dietary needs.

The informative nature of this content is amplified by a presentation style that lends it an air of scientific credibility. Creators often adopt a business-like, assertive tone and use visual aids such as calculators, food scales, and color-coded checkmarks (e.g., “✓” versus “X”) to make their advice appear well-founded and credible. Although the overwhelming majority of this nutritional advice is provided by laypersons lacking clear professional credentials, the convincing, data-driven presentation may lead young viewers to infer that these simplified dietary strategies are legitimate.

Dietary Landscape as Inspiration: Cultivating Wellness Through Aspirational Narratives

Beyond providing information, food-related videos on TikTok often aim to inspire, framing weight loss and wellness as part of a happy, fulfilling life. This theme is primarily articulated through two genres: personal testimonials of transformation and the “What I Eat in a Day” (WIEIAD) format. These videos employ personal narratives and carefully curated visuals to motivate viewers by modeling a journey toward a desired lifestyle.

Personal Testimonials of Transformation

A collection of 25 testimonials from creators sharing their personal weight-loss journeys follows a compelling and common narrative arc. They typically begin by establishing a relatable past of poor habits and failed attempts.

A lean, makeup-wearing young woman in her early to mid-20s, claiming to have lost nearly 20 kg of weight, admitted, "I tried all sorts of diets… Nothing helped me; at the end of each diet I'd go and shovel down half the refrigerator." This initial vulnerability is followed by a narrative of perseverance and eventual success. The same creator, framing her success as a victory over personal skepticism, assures viewers she was once a "total couch potato" and enthusiastically presents her transformation as proof that "It is possible because I did it." Similarly, a mid-sized teenage boy recalled a time when he was "Shrek" and "pig," starting his morning with a Diet Coke and pastries, but now follows a routine of drinking a lot of water and working out.

Notably, these narratives may emphasize not just physical change but also the cognitive and psychological aspects of the journey, underscoring the importance of self-belief and of framing healthy eating and weight loss as a fight that requires "blood and sweat." A female creator in her mid-20s shares that she failed for years "because I had no faith in myself," but ultimately succeeded by learning to believe in herself. In an energetic, enthusiastic tone, she elaborates to instill motivation and faith in viewers, saying, "I believe in you that you can, and never, never give up on yourself." To enhance their authenticity, creators highlight hardships, including relapses, reinforcing the message that success is attainable. This may make the creators seem more accessible and their advice more credible, as they are presented as relatable peers rather than distant professionals.

A key element of this genre is the visual "Before and After" comparison, such as creators stretching the waistbands of oversized old pants. These visuals, often accompanied by expressions of shock and awe (e.g., "OMG, this is so surreal… I'm shocked at myself"), reinforce the power of the transformation. The inspirational tone is often amplified by uplifting, fast-paced pop music, which strengthens the association between weight loss and positive emotions such as vitality and happiness.

What I Eat in a Day

The WIEIAD format (27 videos) also frames diet as inspirational, but through two distinct approaches. The archetypal "good life" model is created by teenage or early-20s female creators, usually with a well-groomed, model-like appearance and a lean, athletic build, who portray their daily eating and exercise routines as a model for wellness. While the content is primarily based on simple, everyday, relatively healthy food choices, it is often meticulously curated and aesthetically presented with well-lit, styled shots. The content is made compelling through dynamic editing and upbeat music, with fast-paced clips of food and exercise. Set to songs with sometimes empowering lyrics like Sia's "The Greatest" ("'Cause I, I, I got stamina"), these videos reinforce the aspirational lifestyle being modeled. This combination associates specific dietary habits with feelings of joy and elation.

In stark contrast, a smaller subset of WIEIAD videos presents the "slip" version, documenting an unpolished, "off-the-rails" day of eating. One voice-over of a young woman describes, "How I managed to eat 4,000 calories in one day: welcome to a day of eating that got out of control." These videos feature raw depictions of overeating, with messy, half-eaten items and food consumed straight from the packaging. The primary message is one of normalization. Delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, several creators reassure viewers that a poor eating day is not catastrophic. A male creator in his early 30s, describing a day of "an aggressive breakdown involving gummies and chocolate," emphasizes that while the slip will temporarily slow his weight loss, it is not a reason to abandon his overall progress, framing the lapse as a normal part of the journey.

WIEIAD videos thus create a clear contrast between the "good life" model and the "slip" version. On the "good days", the verbal, visual, and audio elements of videos work together to motivate, stimulate, and evoke positive feelings of vitality and elation. Conversely, on "slip days", all content, visual, and audio cues are used to normalize and lighten up the situation and reduce the emotional impact. Both the idealized and realistic versions frame food as inspirational—either by presenting a wellness lifestyle to emulate or by self-compassionately facing dietary challenges and relapses.

Dietary Landscape as "Feel-Good": Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Eating

Beyond its informational and inspirational roles, food is framed as a vehicle for emotional well-being. This theme, present in 45 videos, is articulated through two main ideas: food as a source of profound joy and pleasure, and food as a strategy for comfort and emotional regulation. These messages position eating not just as a physiological necessity but as a key strategy for managing one's inner emotional state.

Eating as a Source of Joy and Pleasure

The analysis identified 20 videos that associate the consumption of food, particularly high-sugar, high-fat, and ultra-processed foods, with intense pleasure and delight. This is communicated through exaggerated facial expressions (e.g., wide smiles, widened eyes, and dropping jaws), celebratory body gestures, and auditory cues (e.g., fast-paced speech and repeated exclamations of "wow"). A core tenet of this sub-theme is the normalization of consuming palatable foods, even if they are perceived as "unhealthy." Indulgence is justified with phrases like "It's worth it" and "We only live once," framing enjoyment as the primary determinant in food selection. One mid-sized creator in her mid-30s, choosing a chocolate bar over dates, authoritatively declares, "I choose Kinder because it's my daily treat. It's for my soul. And this [date] is not." This establishes a clear distinction between eating for physical health and eating for emotional gratification, with the latter being glorified.

This sentiment is often expressed with defiance: in a dynamic clip, a meticulously makeup-wearing and lean-figured female creator in her mid-20s responds to warnings about her soda consumption by making an angry face and saying, "F*** you," set to an aggressive rap track. Likewise, another lean, model-looking female creator in her early 20s, with a highly stylized and well-groomed appearance, is featured eating a variety of fat- or sugar-rich foods at restaurants, captioning, "Life is short, eat what you crave!" This dynamic clip, set to an upbeat song and the lyrics "I love to eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat," powerfully links indulgence to a "cool" and carefree attitude.

The glorification of taste is particularly evident in the Come eat with me genre, where creators use sensory superlatives to associate indulgence with self-care and happiness. For instance, a young, mid-sized male transforms from diet-induced sadness to extreme elation upon receiving Nutella, while a plus-size teenage boy surrounded by takeout containers shouts: "Wow, wow, wow. What is all this goodness entering my body now?" He then encourages viewers to "eat as much as you want… do what makes your heart feel good." These narratives sometimes integrate anti-diet and body positivity messages, presenting unrestricted eating as an act of self-love and body autonomy. Prominent plus-size influencers illustrate this defiance by mockingly rejecting the desire to be thinner or asserting their appetite through forceful proclamations like, "This is my body, this is my weight, this is how I eat, like a Tibetan beast." Through assertive body language and tone, these messages reframe eating as an act of defiance against traditional health or appearance ideals.

Eating as a Strategy for Comfort and Emotional Regulation

Furthermore, food is sometimes presented as a strategy for emotional regulation and comfort. A recurring motif found in 13 videos is the association between consuming sweets, refined carbohydrates, and processed snacks and coping with emotional distress. The frustrated mood of a meticulously makeup-wearing and lean-figured mid-20s female creator instantly shifts to tranquil happiness after her partner gives her fast food and cookies, an effect reinforced by soothing lullaby music. The connection is sometimes stated explicitly, with creators declaring that "Food is comforting" or that ice cream "really helps my mood in a magical way." The curative power of food is further emphasized by a glamorously dressed reality show contestant in her late 20s who characterizes sweet items as a healing aid: "I ate what made me feel good… This is what my soul needs, this is what will heal me."

This use of food extends to alleviating physical pain, particularly menstrual discomfort. For example, a lean, teenage female creator with professional-grade grooming and styling eats an enormous "Dubai" chocolate bar with the caption, "I'm on my period 😥," while another video, titled "When you're on that day of the month," humorously depicts a woman roaring menacingly at her spouse until she is appeased with a snack. These examples suggest that food is a valid solution for both physical and emotional distress, with sugary foods possessing an almost "magical" power. While only a few videos present a counter-narrative (e.g., a "vicious cycle" of distress and overeating), the majority normalize this behavior as a legitimate and acceptable strategy for self-care and emotional regulation.

Dietary Landscape as a Struggle: The Conflictual Relationship With Eating

A fourth theme across the analyzed videos characterizes the relationship with food and eating as a conflictual struggle or a battle. Certain foods are depicted as having the power to control mood, while individuals are often portrayed as powerless to resist them. This narrative of an internal battle manifests in two primary forms: the struggle to consume healthy food and the struggle to avoid overconsuming unhealthy food.

The Struggle to Consume Healthy Food

The struggle to eat healthy is detailed in 19 videos that associate nutritious or "diet" food with an unpleasant, repulsive taste. Healthy foods, particularly vegetables, are framed as unappealing and difficult to consume. One creator in her early 20s, well-groomed with curated aesthetics, states her goal is "not to eat stinky diet food all day," while a polished female teenager looks at a salad and declares, "Ugh, salad, blahhh. We don't like healthy stuff!" The consumption of these foods is linked to misery and suffering. In a humorous video, a thin young guy in his early to mid-20s screams, dramatically and disgustedly, "I can't do this!" as he tries to eat green leaves. This choice is presented as a sacrifice, as in a video where a frustrated late 20s woman looking at an apple says, "I'm starving, and all I have in my refrigerator is healthy food. I hate who I was two days ago at the store." The struggle to eat healthily is often amplified through creators' cynicism, dramatic facial expressions, and exaggerated body gestures.

The perceived unpalatability of healthy food is so pronounced that some videos present "hacks," such as a TikTok trend in which creators smell a tasty food (e.g., hamburger or chocolate) while eating vegetables. One video features a man sticking a French fry to his nose while eating broccoli, while a mid-30s model-like-looking woman is shown intensely and loudly sniffing a chocolate bar to manage to eat a salad. Often using humorous cartoon background music, these videos normalize the idea that nutritious food requires tricks in order to be consumed.

The Struggle to Avoid Overconsuming Unhealthy Food

Concurrently, a set of 31 videos portrays the struggle to avoid eating unhealthy or "fattening" foods. These videos humorously explore the internal conflict of resisting temptation. In one, a lean-figured teenage girl working at an ice cream parlor battles the urge to eat chocolate syrup, with a soundtrack of voices shouting "Don't do it!" before she ultimately succumbs. The intense stress of this struggle is vividly portrayed in a video in which a young male in his mid-20s begs his girlfriend to stop sending him pictures of tempting snacks while he is on a tone-up diet, because "I can't pass these tests." To amplify the conflict, creators often use dramatic sound effects (e.g., tension-building audio or humorous cartoon soundtracks), high-volume exclamations (such as distressed shouts), and exaggerated bodily gestures (e.g., holding one's head in despair or extending a defensive "stop" hand motion, often accompanied by facial expressions of intense longing, inner turmoil, misery, or self-irony).

An even more extreme manifestation is the delegation of authority over one's eating. Several videos depict individuals voluntarily relinquishing their autonomy, suggesting they are incapable of self-regulation. A polished influencer in her mid-20s enthusiastically recommends asking a friend for permission before eating unhealthy items because "he'll probably say no." In a video titled "My friend is helping me with my diet**,**" a mid-sized female creator in her mid-20s asks her female friend if she can have cake, only to be told, "No!... Because you're round and fat." This stark contrast between the creator's normal-weight physique and the harsh labeling from her peer not only reinforces the extreme thin ideal but also the notion that individuals are so helpless in front of certain foods that they require external censorship.

While these struggles are often conveyed with humor, possibly to soften embarrassment, a contrasting melancholic approach is also evident. Several testimonial-style videos convey the pain and frustration of a continuous battle with food. Playing a slow, mournful soundtrack, one video shows a mid-sized male in his mid-20s eating from a snack bag, appearing downcast, lost, and desperate. Guilt is another emotion conveyed in these videos, with several creators expressing regret after overeating. This emotion is amplified through melancholic music, as a lean, polished influencer dramatically apologizes to her "Salad Bar theme" after eating a large chocolate bar, saying, "My heart isn't at peace with what I just did." Whether presented humorously or melancholically, these videos consistently portray the relationship with food as a difficult, complex, and often painful struggle.

Dietary Landscape as a Disorder: The Psychological Battleground of ED

While no explicit pro-eating disorder content was identified, likely due to platform moderation, 55 videos address issues related to disordered eating. This content, originating almost exclusively from adolescent girls and young women in early to mid-20s coping with or in recovery from an ED, can be categorized into two distinct yet related messages: food as a source of fear, aversion, and misery; and food as an expression of self-compassion and recovery. While these two sub-themes may possess opposing therapeutic intentions, they are analytically united

by their shared discursive root in the pathologization of eating. Whether food is framed as a source of misery or a tool for restoration, the underlying representation remains one of internal conflict and psychological ordeal.

Eating as a Source of Fear, Aversion, and Misery

A central finding across 32 videos is the profound fear of food and the associated apprehension of weight gain. Creators document their struggle with normal eating patterns, with this fear manifesting in their direct responses to food. In a video of a thin-looking teenager, the caption reads, "When you gave up food again because you're scared of the weight," while another illustrates her internal battle with nervous gestures and eye rolling, and the caption: "You know you're skinny and you can eat this, right?" The fear is often presented as a psychological ordeal. An inner dialogue of a thin meticulously-groomed teenage girl creator, is captioned: "Just because you ate normally today doesn't mean you'll gain weight," followed by a male voiceover reassuring her, "You need to know that whatever you do, it's not your fault," to which she responds, "I know, but I don't always know, you know?"

This fear frequently escalates into a deep-seated aversion, turning eating into an act of suffering and hate. Outright hostility towards food is expressed in a video captioned, "If I had to talk about hate, I'd talk about food and how it makes me feel," where "hate" and "food" are highlighted in red. The profound discomfort is captured in several videos where thin teenage girls are seen eating with expressions of misery, indicating they are forcing themselves. One creator in her early 20s even shares tips to reduce misery, such as watching a show as a distraction to finish a plate, and portrays eating as so painful that it requires coping mechanisms.

These videos also illuminate the internal conflict of recovery, revealing ambivalence toward letting go of an illness that has become part of one's identity. A teenage girl creator melancholically lip-syncs to the lyrics, "Don't know what I'm supposed to do, haunted by the ghost of you," with a caption clarifying she doesn't know whether to "give up the eating disorder or give up myself." Another teenage creator expresses her love-hate relationship with "Ana" (anorexia) with the lyrics, "I never needed you like I do right now, I never hated you like I do right now."

Notably, many of these videos rely on non-verbal communication rather than spoken content. The challenges of ED are often conveyed through facial expressions (e.g., profound sadness, fighting back tears, or eye-rolling), body gestures (e.g., withdrawn postures or curling up in bed), and graphical text overlays (e.g., enlarging the word "calories" in red in the caption "When food was food and not calories"). The ED experience is also intensified through the use of musical elements. Creators tend to use slow, ballad-style melodies and specific song segments, whose lyrics articulate their emotions and psychological distress, such as the line "Oh, I love it and I hate it at the same time" (from "Daylight" by David Kushner) and the line "I'll try not to starve myself, just because you're mad at me" (from "TV" by Billie Eilish).

While the majority of videos conveyed distress, a small but distinct set of deviant cases complicated the narrative by utilizing humor and playful mischief to depict the clinical experience of the eating disorder ward. For instance, one "Expectation vs. Reality" video showcased hospitalized teen girls laughing, hugging, dancing, and exercising together, contrasting the perceived misery of treatment. Another depicted two very thin adolescent girls smiling and sticking their tongues with a caption describing a mischievous attempt to film: "When we wanted to do a TikTok under supervision, but the nurse caught us standing." Rather than conveying distress, these few videos employ humorous or ironic play to lighten the gravity of the illness, presenting the hospital experience through an entertainment lens.

Eating as an Expression of Self-Compassion and Recovery

In contrast to this narrative of suffering, a distinct category of videos adopts an explicit *anti-ana* approach, aiming to raise awareness of the illness's severe consequences while offering a counter-narrative of self-compassion and recovery. These creators articulate the dreadful nature of EDs, serving as a cautionary message. A lean, model-looking, meticulously hair-styled female creator in her late 20s describes anorexia as being "a breathing person in a dying body," while an extremely thin mid-20s female creator with visible bony structures, sobbing in a hospital ward, pleads, "Please don't be like me; there's no suffering like this." These accounts directly communicate the devastating physical and emotional toll of the disorder.

This counter-narrative reframes food as a tool for healing and self-love. Creators document themselves eating while sharing empowering messages of body positivity. A mid-sized, unpolished-looking female creator in her early 20s, recovering from anorexia, states that her goal is to encourage others to embrace their bodies and asserts:

"You are worthy at any size, no matter how much you weigh." The narrative of recovery is often powerfully conveyed through an inverted "Before and After" contrast. Here, the "before" depicts the misery of being underweight, while the "after" showcases the joy of a healthy weight and a positive relationship with food. One video contrasts images of an unhappy, underweight teenager on a feeding tube with footage of the same girl smiling and joyful a few years later, with a caption advising, "Don't waste the meaning of your life worrying about your body." These two narratives, one of profound suffering and the other of hopeful recovery, collectively illustrate the complex and deeply psychological relationship with food experienced by individuals navigating eating disorders.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the five constructed themes, which frame the eating and diet-related contents as information, inspiration, feel-good, struggle, and disorder, are conceptually linked. Together, they create a potentially harmful, contradictory discursive environment for young users, framing food and eating as a source of control, emotional solace, aesthetic aspiration, and profound conflict. The most significant tension identified is the simultaneous promotion of two opposed approaches to eating: quantified oversimplification and unrestrained emotional hedonism. The dietary landscape as information theme promotes an oversimplified view of nutrition. This theme, characterized by messages of "calorie deficit" and "high protein", reduces nutrition to simple arithmetic. Often presented with a semblance of scientific credibility by laypersons, this approach frames the body as a machine to be optimized by meeting specific numerical targets. These findings align with broader evidence highlighting the prevalence of unreliable dietary information on social media, where nutrition is highly susceptible to misinformation (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021) and a vast majority of TikTok posts lack scientific backing or professional credentials (Zeng et al., 2025).

This simplistic, calorie-centric messaging is doubly problematic. First, it may mislead young users into believing that consuming ultra-processed, energy-dense foods is acceptable as long as a caloric limit is met. The problematic nature of these messages becomes even more concerning when considering the pervasive marketing of unhealthy food to children and adolescents (Bozzola et al., 2022; Meyerding & Marpert, 2023). Second, it also reinforces what Kagie (2018) describes as "diet mentality", which is a known risk factor for negative health consequences and EDs in young girls (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006).

In sharp contrast to the information theme, the feel-good theme counters this logic, promoting a therapeutic and hedonistic model. This theme constructs a digital environment in which the consumption of highly palatable, energy-dense foods is actively celebrated and framed as essential for "the soul" and overall emotional well-being. By portraying indulgence as a legitimate form of self-care and a cure for physical or emotional distress, this narrative reinforces the maladaptive strategy of emotional eating (Macht & Simons, 2010). This is alarming because emotional eating provides only a fleeting sense of relief without addressing the underlying psychological triggers. Consequently, it often traps individuals in a vicious cycle: the temporary comfort obtained from highly palatable foods is rapidly followed by negative psychological outcomes, such as shame, guilt, and a distressing sense of loss of control (Wong & Qian, 2016). This negative effect, in turn, can prompt further emotional eating episodes, ultimately elevating the risk of developing binge eating behaviors (Gibson, 2006).

Notably, not only do these narratives pose individual risks, but they may also, together, place young users in a state of perpetual conflict. This dynamic reflects attitudinal ambivalence, defined in psychological literature as simultaneously holding strong positive and negative evaluations toward an attitude object or behavior (Sparks et al., 2001). This conflict seems further complicated by the messages of inspiration and struggle. The inspiration theme presents two success models: the "good life" WIEIAD and the transformation testimonial. In particular, the WIEIAD genre presents a carefully curated, aestheticized picture of near-perfect, controlled eating. However, this model, similar to what Davis et al. (2023) termed "lifestyle," reinforces an unattainable ideal. In fact, studies confirm that exposure to WIEIAD videos is linked to increased body dissatisfaction, greater intentions to diet, and an elevation in ED cognitions and urges (Galway & Gammage, 2025).

Conversely, the struggle theme captures the predominant lived experience of ongoing conflict. This theme presents a world in which the relationship with food is highly challenging, conveying disempowering notions of an uncontrollable battle. This loss of agency is articulated in two ways: the struggle to consume "healthy" food (particularly vegetables, framed as repulsive) and the struggle to resist "unhealthy" food (framed as tempting). By framing eating as an uncontrollable battle, this content normalizes chaotic eating and chronic dietary struggles—

behaviors aligned with "dieting" and "unhealthy weight-control behaviors" that, over time, predict binge eating and weight gain in adolescents (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). Furthermore, while humor fosters relatability, it also risks normalizing significant distress (Herrick et al., 2021). Rather than presenting struggle as a problematic symptom of diet culture, this content models chaotic eating and disempowering dietary battles as normative aspects of daily life.

The tension between these conflicting narratives—specifically the pressure for quantified control versus the glorification of emotional indulgence—creates a contradictory discursive environment that may actively cultivate attitudinal ambivalence toward food and eating. When users are continuously torn between hedonic approach tendencies and the cognitive effort of dietary restraint (Polivy & Herman, 1985), this chronic ambivalence triggers decision-making distress, guilt, and disordered eating behaviors (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008). This can activate a "goal conflict" (Stroebe et al., 2010) between weight regulation and hedonic enjoyment within Dual-Process Models of eating behavior (Hofmann et al., 2009). For adolescent girls, who are already at a developmentally vulnerable stage regarding body image and dietary concerns (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006), being continuously exposed to paradoxically opposing appraisals of food normalizes attitudinal ambivalence that may undermine agency and heighten dietary distress (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008).

Furthermore, relentless algorithmic delivery of these paradoxical discourses cultivates a digital environment that resonates with "food noise"—defined as constant, intrusive thoughts and a chronic preoccupation with food (Hayashi et al., 2023). Notably, discussions surrounding this phenomenon have become prominent within the TikTok ecosystem itself (Hayashi et al., 2026). While our qualitative data cannot measure effects, it is plausible that for adolescent girls scrolling through their FYP, continuous exposure to visual food cues alongside contradictory eating rules can transform the feed into a cognitive echo chamber. Such a contradictory discursive environment could intensify intrusive thoughts and chronic preoccupation with food, consistent with the theme of struggle in our study.

These conflicting messages create fertile ground for the disorder theme, which represents the pathologized extreme of TikTok's dietary landscape. This theme illustrates the possible psychological toll of internalizing such contradictory representations. Its content, whether created by those actively suffering from the illness or those in recovery, reflects the struggle taken to its limit until food becomes an adversary and a source of fear and misery. Analytically, while recovery messages and depictions of suffering possess opposing therapeutic intentions, they are analyzed here within a single theme for two primary reasons. First, they share a discursive root: the pathologization of the eating experience as a source of profound psychological distress. Second, in the TikTok ecosystem, the boundary between these supposedly opposite narratives is often blurred, as recovery videos frequently interweave supportive messaging with disordered cognitions (Griffiths et al., 2026).

This landscape is further complicated by the presence of deviant cases—such as videos featuring playful mischief, synchronized dances, and ironic "gallows humor" within clinical settings. While serving as a coping mechanism for creators, it may inadvertently normalize and even romanticize the ED and hospital experience, further blurring the lines between a medical crisis and social play. Consequently, while not subject to platform banning, exposure to the "disorder" theme can have a paradoxical effect that carries significant risks for young viewers. These concerns align with clinical findings where frequent engagement with TikTok recovery content was associated with decreased self-esteem and worsened body image among adolescents with ED (Pruccoli et al., 2022).

While public concern has rightly focused on distinctly extreme content, this study highlights the prevalence of seemingly "normative," "well-intended," or humorous content. Crucially, a noteworthy finding is that this entire assemblage of contradicting dietary messaging reached accounts operating under "Restricted Mode" and automated age-based safety filters. While automated platform safeguards should be credited with effectively filtering out explicitly graphic or banned material (such as overt pro-eating-disorder content), they appear ill-equipped to address *discursive* complexities. As filters target severe policy violations, they naturally overlook nuanced, everyday narratives, such as calorie reductionism, normative food battles, and indulgent overeating. Consequently, while TikTok's safety filters successfully shield minors from extreme content, they do not prevent exposure to a highly contradictory and disempowering dietary environment.

It is paramount to emphasize that all analyzed videos appeared on the FYP without any active hashtag searches or keyword queries. However, because our methodology involved downloading relevant videos—a strong algorithmic signal of user interest—our observations reflect the rapid algorithmic response to positive engagement. Consequently, while a user does not need to actively search for dietary content, once she signals a clear interest in such videos, the recommendation system may quickly expose her to a complex and

contradictory set of dietary imperatives. Viewed without adult mediation during a vulnerable developmental stage, this algorithmically driven foodscape may have significant long-term implications regarding how children form perceptions of food, eating, and health.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This study has critical implications. First, there is a pressing need for a push-driven approach to TikTok and similar platforms to integrate Safety-by-Design principles into their algorithmic architectures (eSafety Commissioner, 2026). As our longitudinal data demonstrate, while platform moderation has successfully reduced exposure to explicit ED content, the underlying contradictory discourses remain pervasive. Therefore, rather than simply applying reactive, keyword-based filters to explicit pathology, platforms should bear the responsibility of preventing the amplification of contradictory, disempowering dietary environments to minors' accounts in the first place.

Second, educational interventions should move beyond generic media literacy to address the emotional and disempowering messages defining this landscape. We recognize that implementing new, gender-sensitive curricula poses logistical challenges for schools (Truman et al., 2023). Furthermore, evidence remains mixed on whether such interventions shift actual eating behaviors rather than merely knowledge and attitudes (Kaiser et al., 2024; Sarraj et al., 2025). Therefore, we propose a tailored framework that uses guided co-viewing and "feed-mapping" exercises as a hypothesis to test. By exposing the feed as an algorithmic construct rather than a dietary reality, future studies can evaluate whether algorithmic literacy empowers young viewers. Ultimately, empirical inquiry should determine if framing dietary struggles as a logical response to conflicting digital demands—rather than personal failures—can alleviate psychological distress and reduce disordered eating patterns.

This study has several limitations. Based on content analysis, it cannot determine the actual affective impact on users. Furthermore, while this naturalistic approach aimed to simulate a user experience, the inherently personalized algorithmic feed means these findings are not universally representative. Additionally, as no direct empirical comparator currently exists for this specific longitudinal and naturalistic methodology, the prominence of the themes should be assessed only relative to this purposive sample of 300 videos, rather than as a representative distribution of the platform at large. It must also be assumed that the researchers' engagement with the content, likely more focused than that of a typical 13-year-old girl, uniquely shaped the streams of content. Future research is therefore needed to quantify the prevalence of these contradictory messages on TikTok. More urgently, reception studies are required to explore how young adolescents perceive, navigate, and are affected by this digital foodscape.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex and highly contradictory digital foodscape delivered to young girls on TikTok. Using a naturalistic ethnographic approach, the findings reveal that the algorithmic FYP frequently positions adolescents in a tension between diet-culture mandates, food struggles, and unrestrained hedonic indulgence. Navigating this environment creates a context conducive to attitudinal ambivalence and the normalization of unhealthy, disordered eating patterns. As algorithms continue to play a primary role in adolescents' health and body perceptions, fostering critical literacy and safeguarding their digital dietary environment remain vital and urgent public health imperatives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of AI Services

The authors declare they have used AI services, specifically Gemini, for grammar correction, language editing, and style refinement. They carefully reviewed all suggestions from this service to ensure the original meaning and factual accuracy were preserved.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article due to ethical and copyright considerations.

Authors' Contribution

Michal Yaron: conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing—original draft. **Nelly Elias:** conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing—review & editing.

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