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## **Is TikTok really “For You?”: Addressing TikTok’s Negative Effects on Body Image Perception**

### **Writer’s Memo:**

*A million different issues are facing our world today. However, strangely enough, finding a “current issue or problem” to write about was a challenge. My initial thought was to write about air quality or pollution in San Luis Obispo. Although those issues are critical, they have yet to affect my well-being directly. I wanted to write about something that I have personally experienced. I find it easier to advocate for change on a subject I am passionate about. My whole life, I have struggled with body image issues. I have noticed that my insecurities have only been perpetuated by social media, more specifically by TikTok. I firmly believe in the importance of this topic and the importance of addressing body image issues. Although this essay was uncomfortable for me to write at times, it was also therapeutic to share my thoughts and experiences. In my research, I found that I am not alone. Women everywhere have fallen victim to social media’s unreasonable body expectations. Although this should not be normalized, it is comforting to know that I am not going through it alone.*

Five hours and fifty-four minutes. Five hours and fifty-four minutes was the amount of time I spent watching TikTok last week. Five hours and fifty-four minutes was the amount of time I spent scrolling through videos of picture-perfect women. I watched thin women in bikinis dance in front of their camera. Under those videos alike, I saw comments stating, “I’m not

hungry anymore” or, “guess I’m not eating today.” I watched multiple “#What I Eat In a Day Challenge” videos that depicted women showing off their 500 calorie diet. I listened to the trending sound of a girl shrieking, “so you think I’m skinny?” and watched the thousands of videos made under that sound of people displaying unhealthy relationships with food. Five hours and fifty-four minutes was the amount of time I spent last week feeling insecure about my body. Every time I open TikTok, I am reminded that I am not thin, nor am I tall. I feel shameful for eating and for not working out enough. Five hours and fifty-four minutes is an alarming amount of time. Unfortunately, this is the reality for people everywhere. As the nation’s leading app, TikTok is at the forefront of social media. Although this app provides fun and entertainment, it has also perpetuated issues with body image.

Why should you care about my story? What makes my experience different, or worthy of a paper? Nothing. There is nothing unique about my story or my experience, which is exactly why it needs to be shared. My story is the exact same story as your friend, your daughter, or even yourself. With over one billion users worldwide, TikTok has an immense influence on people everywhere. This app’s reputation of promoting unhealthy body standards and harmful weight loss methods is an urgent problem that needs addressing. Presently, TikTok’s terms of service state they “...remove content that may encourage or normalize acts that are likely to lead to physical self-inflicted injury. Content that promotes eating habits that are likely to cause adverse health outcomes is also not allowed on the platform.” The app has also taken steps to ban specific hashtags, ads, and users who promote anorexia. Unfortunately, these efforts are not enough. This approach to filtering out harmful videos must include more than just mere bans. Thus I propose TikTok allow users to customize what appears on their “For You” page. By allowing users to control what emerges on their screen, we eliminate the risk of potential

triggers. This way, users can ban videos of women showing off their rib cages and thigh gaps, not just videos under the obvious, “#anorexia.”

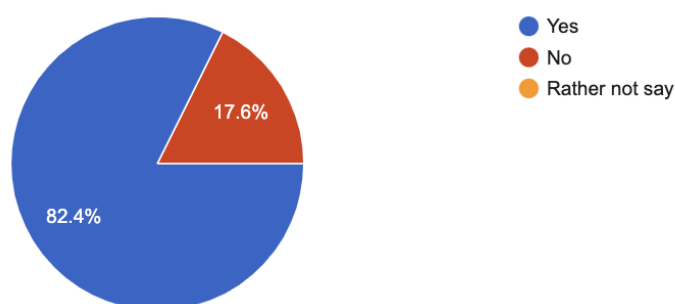
Throughout history, there has been an unhealthy expectation set for women's bodies. In earlier years, magazines and print ads would depict unrealistic body sizes and proportions. Today, social media is the primary perpetrator of pushing these standards. Since the beginning of social media, dangerous and disturbing eating trends have surfaced. “Thinspiration,” or “Thinspo” for short, was the trend that garnered a wave of posts and blogs on sites like Tumblr, Pinterest, and MySpace. “Thinspiration” later evolved to “Fitspiration,” which preserved the same ideals of flat stomachs, thigh gaps, and visible ribs. According to the study conducted by The Journal of Eating Disorders, titled, *Fitspiration and Thinspiration: a Comparison Across Three Social Networking Sites*, “fitspiration endorses problematic attitudes towards fitness, body image, and restrictive eating in pursuit of a fit-and-thin body ideals.” The trend had extreme manifestations, such as pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia blogs. With the introduction of TikTok, this damaging culture of self-hatred and the normalization of disordered eating has only surged in popularity. According to Mashable, a news source focused on technological reporting, “The tag #flatstomach has 44.2 million views. The tags #proana and #thinspo [short for ‘thinspiration’]...have 2.1 million views and 446,000 views...” and these numbers continue to grow every day. TikTok is ridden with videos and trends glamorizing eating disorders and anorexia. But what makes this platform more dangerous than the predecessors Tumblr and MySpace?

Although TikTok is not the first platform to push these ideals, it is the largest. Because of TikTok's outreach, more people have fallen victim to developing eating disorders and unhealthy habits. According to a study published by the US National Library of Medicine titled *The*

*Association between Social Media Use and Eating Concerns among US Young Adults*, social media's influence caused a prevalence of "subclinical" eating disorders. "Subclinical" disorders go undiagnosed; however, they still manifest as unhealthy relationships with food that may lead to a clinically diagnosed eating disorder. The study directly states that there is "... a strong and consistent association between social media use and eating concerns in a nationally representative sample of young adults aged 19 to 32 years." This study was published in May of 2016, before the launch of TikTok in September of 2016. According to Sensor Tower, a data analytics firm, TikTok was the most downloaded non-gaming app worldwide in 2020, "with more than 800 million users - 41% of those users between the age of 16 and 24." Therefore, it is only logical to assume these findings have not only remained prevalent but have also increased with the establishment of TikTok. Because of this app's fast-growing and colossal platform, more people than ever before have been exposed to videos encouraging unhealthy eating habits. Therefore, more people have fallen victim to developing eating disorders because of TikTok. According to a recent interview conducted by Sarah Kaufman, a social newsgathering reporter at NBC, "Seven women in their teens and 20s told NBC News that the content they viewed on TikTok had pushed them to fixate more on their diets and exercise regimens to a dangerous extent." I conducted my own investigation of the negative effect TikTok has on young people: out of the thirty-four people who participated in my online survey, over 80% felt that TikTok aided their body insecurities.

Has a TikTok ever made you feel insecure about your own body?

34 responses



Furthermore, 47% of those surveyed felt that TikTok promotes unhealthy eating habits. But again, what makes TikTok more dangerous than other social media apps? Why should we worry most about TikTok?

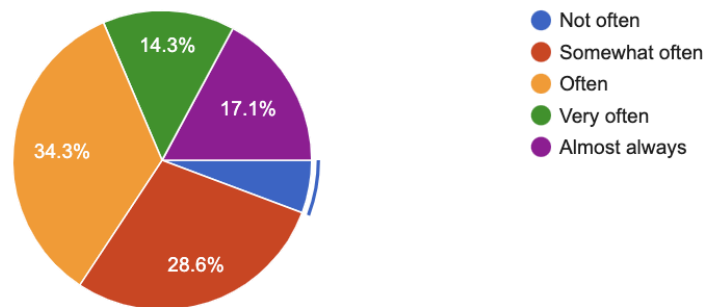
What makes TikTok unique is its “For You” page. The “For You” page is a limitless feed of videos recommended by an algorithm based on the user's past interactions. Unlike Instagram or Facebook, where the home page is comprised of posts by people users follow, TikTok’s homepage features posts from anyone, not just people you follow. In other words, TikTok users are completely surprised by the videos that pop-up on their feed. Thus, users are often surprised by videos displaying disordered eating behavior. These videos can be very triggering to someone who is struggling or has struggled with eating disorders. To make matters worse, the “For You” page tracks user behavior. According to TikTok's terms of service, the “For You” page “... provides [users] with ... videos to show you based on what the Service determines could be interesting for you.” If a user interacts with a post promoting unhealthy habits, suddenly, their page will be rife with similar posts. Additionally, if users interact with a post of a woman in a bikini, their entire feed will suddenly become a loop of unattainable body standards. The sporadic nature of the app is what makes it more dangerous than its other social media counterparts. Users have no say in which posts are presented on their feed; they also have no warning of posts that may appear triggering to them. Even though the TikTok community guidelines state that the app bans videos that “promote eating habits that are likely to cause health issues,” content that promotes pro-anorexia and encourages dangerous weight loss behaviors is still abundant. Ysabel Gerrard, a lecturer in digital media and society at the University of Sheffield, said: “It takes little more than 30 seconds to find a pro-eating disorder

account on TikTok...” (Guardian et al.). According to the survey I conducted, 93% of people saw videos addressing food and health on their “For You” page:

How often do you see TikTok's addressing food/health? (thinspo, what I eat in a day, workout routines, etc.)



35 responses



This survey proves that there is an issue with TikTok’s current algorithm and filtering system. If TikTok truly filters out “harmful videos,” why are posts concerning health and eating still overflowing on the “For You” page? Is it because these TikToks are not under the obvious hashtag “#anorexia?” TikTok must invoke change. Videos of unqualified people sharing what they eat in a day, or extremely thin women showing off their physique perpetuate many people’s body insecurity issues. I encourage TikTok to allow users to ban certain categories of videos from their “For You” page. This way, users could ban any and all videos that appear triggering to them, not just hashtags and posts that appear triggering to TikTok.

People may argue that it is the responsibility of the users to protect themselves, not the app. I agree that people should not download TikTok if they have severe eating disorders; however, I also agree that TikTok should be held accountable for the unhealthy messages it promotes. TikTok has tried to fix the dangerous videos of unhealthy eating by simply banning hashtags and banning weight-loss ads. Though this action does not go unrecognized, there is still

more to be done. According to researcher Ysabel Gerrard, this is not enough. She states, “...there are some more things that TikTok urgently needs to do to make the platform even safer” (Guardian et al. ). The majority of TikTok users are young. According to Statista, “as of June 2020, users in their teens accounted for 32.5 percent of TikTok's active user accounts in the United States.” Young people are at the highest risk for developing eating disorders and unhealthy relationships with food. Although there is no legal obligation for TikTok to protect its users, there is a moral obligation. TikTok is at the forefront of social media platforms. The impact this app has is immense. TikTok needs to protect its users by giving them control over their “For You” page. This simple act could save millions of lives and reduce the risk of young people developing eating disorders.

TikTok is a dangerous app. The “For You” page is littered with harmful and even dangerous messages. Huge strides have been made to see health and bodies in a much more nuanced and holistic way. It would be saddening to watch people revert to old ways of glamorizing unrealistic body standards because of this app. If you notice that things you see online affect how you view your own body, take care in prioritizing the restoration of your own mental health. Zero hours and zero minutes was the amount of time I spent on TikTok this week. After researching what TikTok has done to my self-image, I deleted the app. I have always struggled with body image issues, and I now refuse to let this app perpetuate and profit off my insecurities. I will only consider redownloading the app if I am given control over what appears on my screen. Until then, I will spend zero hours and zero minutes letting TikTok ruin my self-image, and I encourage you to do the same.

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