

# **That Girl Trend: Investigating Popular Representations of Health & Wellness on TikTok**

## **1. Introduction**

Interest surrounding health and wellness has increased significantly in recent years and is being described as 'the rise of wellness culture', saturating many corners of the internet, especially on social media (Chan, 2020). In this social media space, a sub-feature has evolved since April 2021, primarily on YouTube and TikTok called the 'that girl' trend (Arshad, 2021). That Girl does not refer to a particular type of person, it encapsulates a sense of online aspiration, that incorporates a set of rules, values and behaviours, which when combined embody a wellness archetype to achieve 'that girl' status (Porter, 2021). Wellness then, in this sense, is confined to this strict set of parameters. During its rise to popularity, the trend has come under increasing criticism. Arshad (2021) depicts that this trend received backlash for disseminating a narrow version of what wellness can look like in reality (Arshad, 2021). This is due to the repetitive nature of the content displayed in these videos, which Arshad (2021) suggested tends to represent a version of wellness that is synonymous with class privilege. Porter (2021) goes further and describes these videos as damaging due to the racial bias they implicitly present and the reinforcement of long-held Eurocentric beauty standards:

There's generally only one type of person represented in them: a slim, conventionally attractive, usually wealthy, white woman (Porter, 2021).

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the characteristics of health and wellness online, through the 'that girl' trend, to identify to what extent sociocultural and economic divides are reflected in digital production. This will be achieved by carrying out a quantitative content analysis of 60 videos on TikTok which are part of the #thatgirl trend. The report will be structured as follows, the next section will provide a review of relevant literature, the third section will discuss the methodology. The fourth; results, and fifth, a discussion of findings and limitations.

## **1. Literature Review**

The global wellness market grown by 12.8% between 2018-2020, turning it into a \$4.75 trillion industry to date (Chan, 2020; Wellness Creative Co, 2022). Contributions to this observed growth were analyzed collaboratively by the Wellness Hub and Linkfluence (2020), in their yearlong empirical study of semantic queries, regarding how wellness is discussed and distributed on social media (Wellness Hub and Linkfluence, 2020). Their research found between 2018-2019 mentions of wellness online experienced a steady growth, with an increase of 22% in the US (Wellness Hub and

Linkfluence, 2020). Discussions about health generated 210 million conversations on the English, French and Chinese social web, with wellness accounts contributing to 85 million, equivalent to 40% of the conversation (Wellness Hub and Linkfluence, 2020).

While these statistics provide a clear indication of growth in this area overall and are therefore purposeful for this research, the report is limited by its focus on countries. The fundamental prospect of wellness is the idea of being 'well' both physically and mentally, leaving room for interpretation on how to achieve this (Dukes, 2016). Therefore, conversations around wellness are contextual in nature and are inconsistent in cross country analysis. The Wellness Hub and Linkfluence (2020) identified this variation, in France wellness is primarily a lifestyle and health issue, and farming is key, whereas, in the US, beauty, technology and startups possess a larger role in the wellness ecosystem (Wellness Hub, Linkfluence, 2020). It becomes clear then, with such inconsistencies, to measure the characteristics of wellness on TikTok through the #thatgirl trend, this study must investigate the occurrences within each video to identify similarities/differences and consider the influence of businesses in the analysis of digital production on TikTok. This will enable the research to identify to what extent digital production within this trend follows a particular pattern and therefore has the potential to disseminate a narrow version of wellness, influenced by the geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors of the content creator.

The influence of socioeconomic and cultural factors has been widely discussed in correlation to health inequality (Abel, 2008). Steinbach (2009) and Eni-Otolu (2016) defined that; a socioeconomic gradient exists in relation to health inequality and has been apparent globally since its recording, over 150 years ago. Furthermore, poorer health and health choices are found to be more consistent the lower the social class of an individual, while a surplus in income has been identified as a relative factor for improved health and healthy behaviours, increasing at each level of social hierarchy (Kamphuis et al., 2015). Economic capital can only partly explain this phenomenon, further research suggests a link exists between health and sociocultural factors, emphasizing that this disparity is a result of complex differences in the social circumstances between the low and high social classes (Pampel et al., 2010). Through the process of socialization, the dispositions and behaviours of an individual tend to be conditioned within each social class and generation (Kamphuis et al., 2015). The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses this concept in relation to health and lifestyle choice, suggesting that these are subject to class association (Kamphuis, et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 1984). Kamphuis (2015) observes, in relation to Bourdieu, that high-socioeconomic groups classify themselves from low-socioeconomic groups through their judgement of 'taste' for lifestyle

attributes (Kamphuis, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984). Taste, for Bourdieu (1984) functions as a 'sense to one's place in society

*Guiding the occupants of a given place in a social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position (Bourdieu, 1984, p.496).*

This somewhat, unconscious, anticipation of social meaning and value (Bourdieu, 1984) placement is relational to this study, to understanding the criticisms it has faced with greater clarity, regarding the assumption of displayed class privilege. Arshad's (2021) article about the 'that girl' trend exposes this

*Whenever you search up 'that girl' videos on TikTok, you'll find a certain pattern; for example, the healthy eating aspect of being that girl is exemplified by avocado toasts or lattes with nondairy milk – food that are synonymous to privilege (Arshad, 2021).*

The classification displayed of certain foods or drinks as a specific 'taste' for higher socioeconomic groups is what Bourdieu referred to as defining one's implicit sense of self in society and the guide towards practices or goods which are appropriate to their social class (Bourdieu 1984). Taste then, is symbolic in nature and manifests itself through an individual's ability to sense or intuit what is befitting to them, given the position they occupy in the social space (Bourdieu, 1984). That is not to disregard the economic value placed on such food, but that there is a latent symbolism attached to specific objects and behaviours defined to social class. This is highlighted in (Pampel et al., 2010) study on socioeconomic disparities in health, they found certain behaviors, such as smoking, and lack of exercise were associated with lower socioeconomic groups. Smoking involves expenditure of capital and would imply a surplus of such which is limited in these groups, while forms of exercise such as running or walking cost little (Pampel et al., 2010). These behaviours agree with the previous literature and further disregard the assumption that economic capital is the only driver for unhealthy behaviours, highlighting the practicality of this research (Pampel et al., 2010).

## **2. Hypotheses**

In reflection of the literature review, this research will hypothesize:

1. The 'that girl' trend manifests as a version of health and wellness on social media, which is embodied into the videos by idealizing a westernized lifestyle, associated with high socioeconomic and status.

2. Businesses have harnessed the rise of the wellness online, by aligning their values with fractions of the 'that girl' trend, to promote their products on social media through influencer sponsorship.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample

An anonymous TikTok account was created in attempt to eliminate algorithmic bias from the study due to TikTok's recommendation system, which customizes each users feed to consider what you do and do not find interesting (Memon, 2022). The sample was then collected on TikTok over the course of a single day, the data collection method was established following prior research in the area and recognized techniques (Basch et al., 2022; Neuendorf, 2002). The population under observation is any video on the platform which contained the hashtag #thatgirl, which returned over 800 million views (Arshad, 2021). This was then used to develop the sampling frame; the discover function was used on TikTok to search for the hashtag #thatgirl, a sample of the first 60 videos was then collected. The data was collected and coded by the single researcher in the project. To select a sub-sample for an inductive approach in the creation of a coding scheme, a random number generator was used to select to select a 10% sub-sample (Basch et al., 2022). The coding scheme was then tested by an external reviewer to test for inter-rater reliability. Cohen's kappa and percentage agreement were both used; (% of agreement = 96.7) ( $k = 0.81$ ), indicating almost perfect agreement in both reviewers of the data (Chen, 2019).

#### 3.2 Coding scheme

The codebook was developed through the sub-sample, an identification of video characteristics was observed, and a list was generated for each video, these characteristics were then compared to each other and chosen on the basis of their occurrence in each video. This resulted in 7 units of code, which identified the occurrence of certain behaviours, habits, or items. Each of these variables were coded as 0 (absent) or 1 (present) to determine their existence in a video (Li et al., 2021). A further 3 units were developed in correspondence to the literature and to determine popularity and variation, these include: number of likes, skin tone and video sentiment. Full details of the coding scheme are displayed in the codebook below.

Code	Meaning	Explanation
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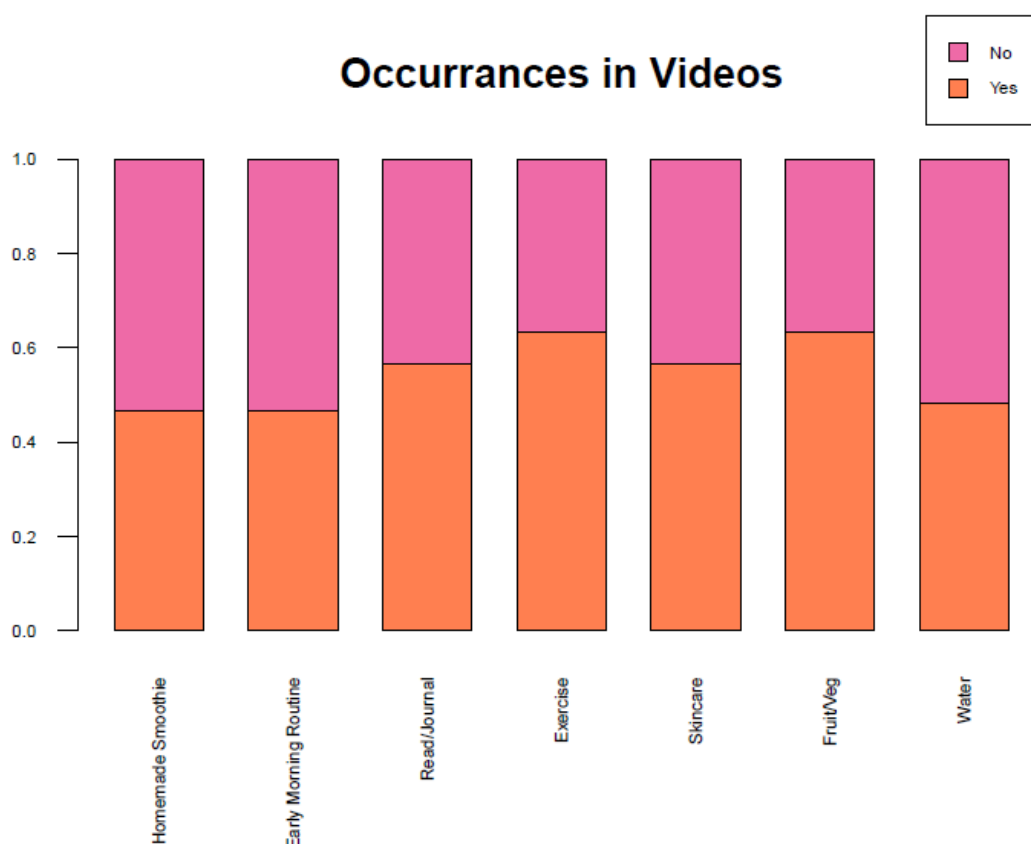
<b>Homemade smoothie [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence of a homemade smoothie	Video that contains an image or clip of either making or drinking/eating a smoothie at home. If bought e.g., in takeaway cup do not include.
<b>Early morning routine [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the indication of an early morning routine	Video containing an early morning routine e.g. waking up early, time indicated on laptop/clock etc, or making bed.
<b>Read/journal [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence of an individual reading and/or journal	The individual is reading or journaling or suggests to do so
<b>Exercise [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence of exercise	The individual engages in exercise or indicates as such e.g., the occurrence of gym-wear, exercise equipment.
<b>Skincare [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence of a skincare routine or products	The individual has a skincare routine or video identifies importance of skincare/occurrence of skincare products
<b>Fresh fruit/vegetables [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence of fresh fruit and/or vegetables	Either an image or clip of fresh fruits and vegetables in the video. Frozen fruit or vegetables should not be included.
<b>Water [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Video containing the occurrence water	Video contains individual drinking water or presence of water bottles. Importance placed on drinking water.
<b>Likes [No = 0, Yes = 1]</b>	Number of likes in each video	Number of likes in each individual video.
<b>Video_type (HL/PP/BL)</b>	Describes the video meaning	Healthy Lifestyle (HL) = video that only advocate for health. Promoting Products (PP) = Advertisement for businesses - specified in video caption. Balanced Lifestyle (BL) engaging in both healthy and unhealthy lifestyle choices

<b>Skin_tone (F/M/D)</b>	Describes the skin tone of individual in video with three options	Fair (F) = Fair skin tone. Medium (M) = Medium skin tone. Dark (D) = Dark skin tone.
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#### 4. Findings

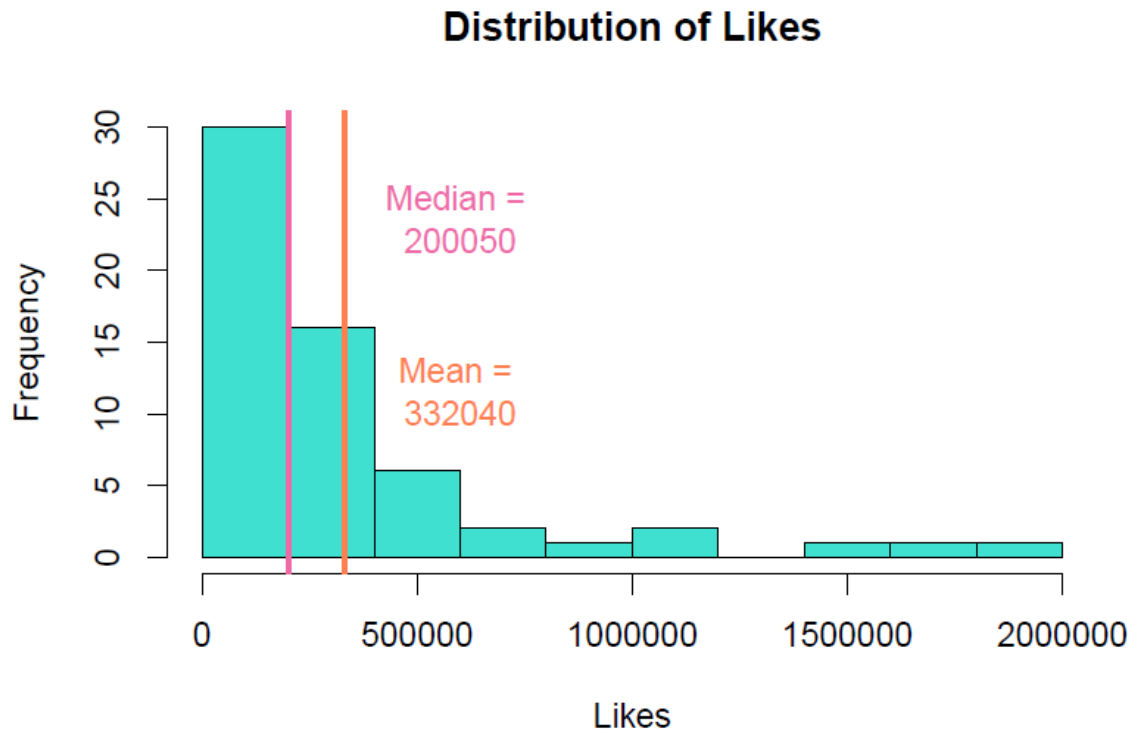
The bar chart below (Figure 1) shows the occurrences of each prominent behavior, activity or item displayed in all the videos.

*Figure 1: Distribution of all dichotomous variables in the dataset.*



Exercise and fresh fruits/vegetables resulted in equally the highest occurrence (63%), 95% CI [0.5, 0.75] reveal that there is a 5% chance the true proportion of content creators within the ‘That Girl’ trend who exercise or eat fresh fruit and vegetables will be less than (50%) or greater than (75%). There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the occurrence of fresh fruit/vegetables and exercise in the videos  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.78, p = 0.02$ , highlighting that if a creator eats fresh fruits and vegetables then they are also more likely to exercise.

Figure 2. Distribution of Likes.



The histogram above reveals a right-skewed distribution of the number of likes in each video, most videos have less than 500,000 likes, with the typical values of ( $M = 332040$ ,  $MDN = 200050$ ). The mean is greater than the median which tells us the distribution is skewed by high values, there are 3 videos that generated a considerably larger number of likes  $\leq 1500000$ . The table below captures the characteristics of the three outliers with high engagement rates. Videos which promote a healthy lifestyle received the highest number of likes in a single video, accounting for the top two outliers, while promoting products reflected the third highest number of likes for a single video, highlighting how advertising on TikTok through such trends can harness engagement rates for such products.

Variables	Outlier 1	Outlier 2	Outlier 3
Homemade smoothie	No	No	No
Early morning routine	No	Yes	Yes
Read/Journal	No	Yes	Yes
Exercise	No	Yes	Yes
Skincare	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fresh fruit/veg	No	Yes	Yes
Water	No	Yes	Yes
Likes	1500000	1800000	1900000
Video type	Promoting Products	Healthy Lifestyle	Healthy Lifestyle
Skin tone	Fair	Medium	Fair

Figure 3. Distribution of Skin Tone

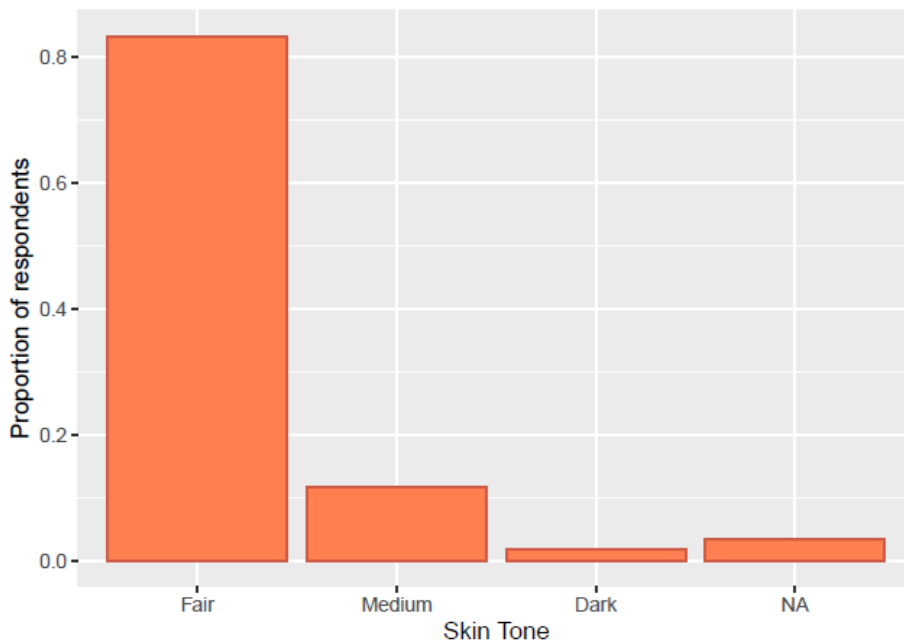


Figure 3 identifies that content creators with a fair skin tone made up the majority (83%) of the sample, compared to medium skin tone (11%) and dark skin tone (1%). NA values are included as they indicate a video where no person was shown, which has a higher proportion within the dataset than creators with dark skin, (3%) compared with (1%).

This reflects what has been discussed in the literature, that these videos tend to be biased towards white female digital producers and therefore partially support the hypotheses, that these videos reflect a narrow version of wellness, due to the lack of representation for individuals with a medium to dark skin tone, highlighting a racial disparity within this trend.

Figure 4. Distribution of Video Type

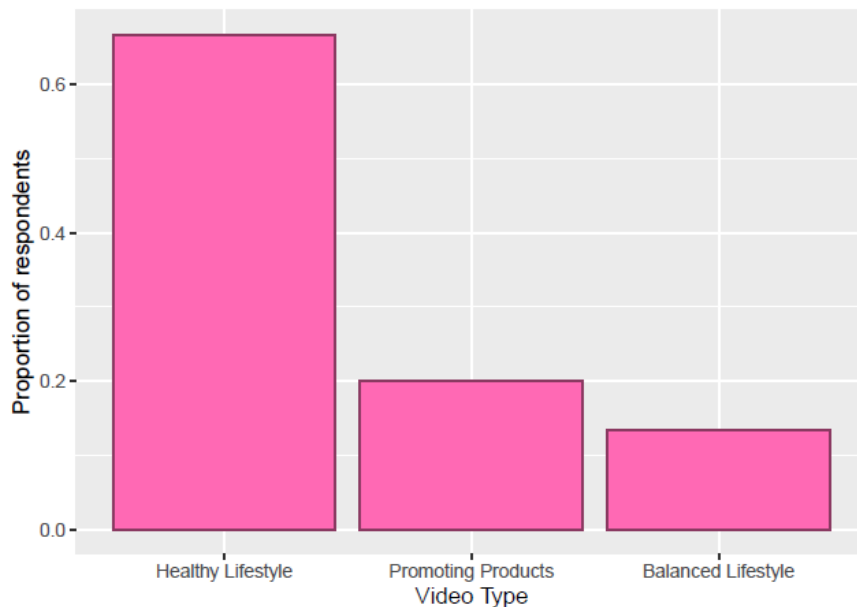
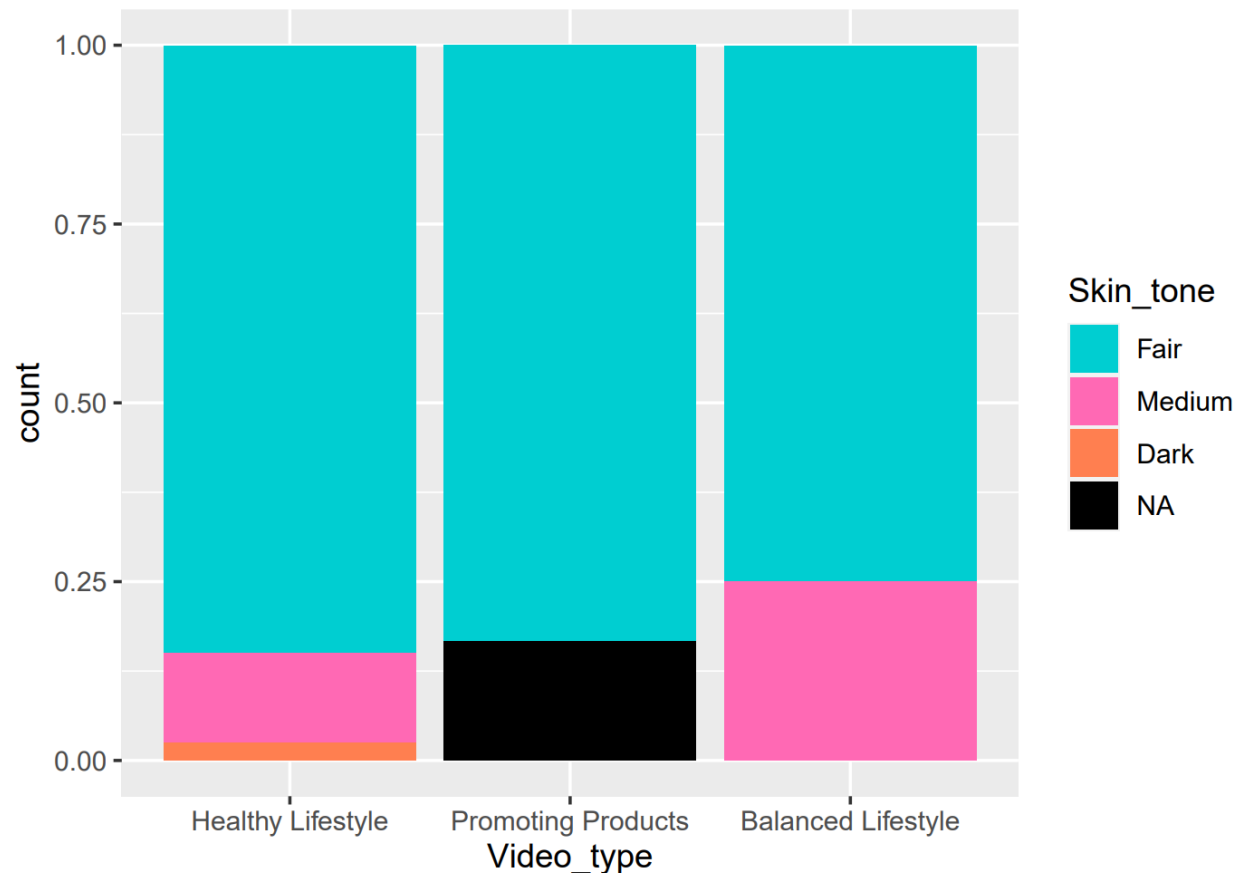


Figure 4 shows the distribution of videos in the sample, lifestyle choice was overwhelmingly the most commonly occurring (66%), while promoting products (20%) and balanced lifestyle (13%) received significantly less in comparison. This further supports the hypotheses, the chart clearly shows a lack of variance



between the videos, with 'Healthy Lifestyle' receiving the highest proportion, indicating that most videos are similar in nature and therefore have the potential to disseminate a narrow version of what health and wellness looks like in reality.

Figure 5. Representation of skin tone in videos.



The stacked bar chart above shows that individuals with a fair skin tone represent the largest proportion in each video type overall: (85%) in healthy lifestyle, promoting products (83%) and balanced lifestyle (75%). A Mann-Whitney U Test was applied as the appropriate way to measure a relationship between ordinal and nonmail variables (Statistic Solutions, 2022), which identified a significant relationship between skin tone and video type ( $p < 0.02$ ). Individuals with a medium skin tone were represented the highest in 'Balanced lifestyle' (25%) in comparison to the other video types, indicating further that this trend may reflect a narrow version of wellness, due to the lack of representation in health orientated videos in comparison to those advocating for balance.

Figure 6. Linear Regression Model

Column1	term	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value
1	(Intercept)	1	0.26726124	3.7416574	0.0004323
2	Fair	-0.8	0.27255406	-2.935198	0.0048266
3	Medium	-1	0.30304576	-3.299832	0.0016863
4	Dark	-1	0.46291005	-2.160247	0.0350484

A linear regression model was fitted to test the relationship between skin tone and video, with video type, coding into dummy variable, using 'promoting products' as the binary dependent variable and fair skin as the main predictor. The table shows that there is statistically significant negative relationship regarding the likelihood of being selected for a video, decreasing significantly for medium and dark skin tones. However, a coefficient of 1 or -1 are very unlikely to occur in social research, it is clear then from the graph above that while the model is correct, as no-one with medium or dark skin tone were found in this study to promote products, this is not a useful way to interpret these results.

## 5. Discussion and limits

This study sought to investigate the characteristics of the 'That Girl' trend on TikTok, through a quantitative content analysis of 60 videos. The study found that the main drivers of this trend are individuals with a fair skin tone, who make up (83%) of the sample, this is in line with the literature, where Porter (2021) suggests implicit racial bias is represented in the trend. The videos tend to follow a similar pattern, with (66%) of videos advocating for a healthy lifestyle change to become 'That Girl' is necessary. These findings support the hypotheses, however, due to a lack of detail in results, which are primarily due to time constraints and the limitation of one researcher in this study. This study cannot determine if it supports the hypotheses fully, instead it has provided clear signals that this trend does perpetuate a narrow version of wellness, although to find out the complexities of such will require further research into this area. Furthermore, this study has identified that while businesses presented a small proportion of the sample (20%), a promoting product video was found to be one of the significant outliers with high engagement rates (1.5million likes), this supports the second hypotheses, but again not fully, it indicates how businesses can use trends successfully to endorse their products on social media. Overall, this research has provided

insight into the biases of this trend and therefore can provide a framework to further research in this area.

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