

#WhatIEatInADay *As A Fat Person Not on A Diet: Eating Online as Feminist Performative Symbolic Resistance

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Abstract: In this essay, I examine how eating operates as a feminist rhetorical act using digital food diaries as a case study. Tracing digital food diaries tagged with the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson, I argue that when employed by fat vloggers, eating operates as performative symbolic resistance (PSR). Drawing from Alicia K. Hatcher's PSR analytical framework, I examine how fat bodies, embodied eating, and online visibility work together to push back against normative diet narratives and take up space online to promote a feminist agenda. This work builds on scholarship in feminist food rhetorics, critical eating studies, and fat studies to expand our definitions of feminist activism online. Through this analysis, I argue that eating is a rhetorical act which changes depending on the body and place in which it happens.

Keywords: [food rhetoric](#), [eating](#), [anti-fatness](#), [spatial whiteness](#), [social media](#)

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“To be fat and feminine and any race in ‘America’ is disruptive, and in a lived politics sort of way, makes one who dares to be such, especially if unapologetic, kind of an instant feminist. Ultimately, being constructed as fat (and, accordingly, ugly in many cases) and feminine means that one is walking, breathing, and eating against the grain; one exists in spite of, as spectacle, for many.”

There is no attribution to the epigraph quote; it should read:

-Krystal A. Smalls, *Fat, Black, and Ugly*

Introduction

I cannot remember a time in my life when I didn't think about my weight or what I ate. As a child these things were inescapable to me. SlimFast was a staple in my family's fridge. In our bathroom sat a collection of magazines like *Woman's Day* always offering confusing messages of how to lose weight alongside recipes for cakes and holiday treats. Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers advertisements played on our living room tv. A scale sat in my closet. My grandmother regularly announced her diets by sharing at Sunday lunches that *she had quit bread!* It seemed like every month my mom had a new diet to try—cabbage soup, Special K, HCG... Weight and womanhood were inextricably tied together for me; dieting was just another rite of passage.

I was around twelve when I started my own self-designated diet, prompted by a group of girls sharing their weights during reading class. Around fifteen I was invited by my school's gym teacher to join his “weight loss club”—an alternative for kids he felt were “struggling” during regular exercises in class. Our task was to lose one pound each week, which would be recorded by weighing ourselves in at the start of class in front of our peers. Diligently, I recorded my food intake in a journal and lost weight through a restrictive calorie deficit that I adopted off and on in the following decade. As I got older, fitness and weight loss media changed, and magazines gave way to Instagram sponsorships; diet culture changed to “wellness” culture and diaries changed to calorie tracking apps. Yet, in all these shifts one thing stayed the same: the pressure to

be *smaller* by eating *less*.

I share my story in this introduction because like many women, the conflict between food and weight happens daily. I am bombarded online by diet content only exacerbated by my demographics and algorithms shaped by my research around food. At some points I've felt like a fraud presenting on how food has been used to liberate women when there have been many times in my life when I have hated food for how it made me feel about myself...trapped between myself, a scale, and a dinner plate.

As Melissa A. Goldthwaite (2017) shared in her introduction to *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*,

Messages surrounding food—its availability, its preparation, its consumption, its role in the lives of individuals, families, and cultures—are multiple and conflicting. Food is sustenance and poison, fuel and temptation, home culture and one of the most memorable introductions to new cultures and places. Preparing food is drudgery and joy, duty, and delight (p. 2).

As she points out, just as much as these messages can shape us, they can also be reflected on, questioned, critiqued, and changed (Goldthwaite, 2017, p. 2). I also find hope that in all the confusion and mixed messages about food and gender there is space for resistance, healing, and moving forward. I share these stories because I want to position how I come to this work and why it matters to me. Feminism can be contradictory and present challenges, but I believe it also provides space to question these contradictions and sort through them to find meaning. If “who is speaking and who is silenced” is a core feminist issue, as Vicki Tolar Collins (1999) has argued, then who is allowed to eat freely and who is not is equally of concern for feminist scholars whose work explores issues of gender, materiality, embodiment, and food (p. 545). Though mundane, the reinforcement and resistance of gendered eating practices is a feminist issue in need of greater attention.

Within this essay, I examine how eating operates as a feminist rhetorical act using digital food diaries as a case study. Tracing digital food diaries tagged with the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson, I argue that when employed by fat vloggers, eating operates as performative symbolic resistance (PSR). As explained by Alicia K. Hatcher (2021), PSR is an ideal tool for rhetoricians to analyze activism by focusing on “what occurs when people use their bodies and spaces and places to engage in resistant acts” (p. 19). Using PSR’s analytical framework of *who, what, when, where, how, why, and intentionality*, I examine how fat bodies, embodied eating, and online visibility work together to push back against normative, diet narratives and take up space online to promote a feminist agenda. This work builds on scholarship in feminist food rhetorics, critical eating studies, and fat studies to expand our definitions of feminist activism online. Through this analysis, I argue that eating is a rhetorical act which changes depending on the body and place in which it happens.

While food artifacts such as cookbooks have been explored as a women’s rhetorical tool (Dubisar, 2016; Mastrangelo, 2020; Moeller and Frost, 2016), eating itself as a feminist act is still underexplored. Examining digital food diaries created by fat vloggers reveals the ways that everyday acts such as eating *become* feminist by the body they are enacted through. When enacted by fat bodies, unapologetic eating online can operate as a radical form of survival and resistance against colonial structures that value some bodies over others. Author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) has argued that political and economic systems encourage self-hate through body shame, resulting in living day to day life in a state of constant fear (p. 52). She calls

this state “body terrorism” which she defined as:

A hideous tower whose primary support beam is the belief that there is a hierarchy of bodies. We uphold the system by internalizing this hierarchy and using it to situate our own value and worth in the world. When our personal value is dependent on the lesser value of other bodies, radical self-love is unachievable” (Taylor, 2018, p. 58).

Examining the ways that self-hatred can be reinforced or resisted in genres such as digital food diaries can help us to understand how eating becomes transformative. With emphasis on the descriptor—*radical*—self-love in this context is not merely about self-esteem. It is political, anti-racist, and feminist because it pushes back against violent colonial hierarchies that value some bodies over others.

Feminist acts of radical self-love, however, come at a cost. Like many activists, fat vloggers who participate in digital food diaries risk opening themselves up to conflict through harassment, trolling, and hypervisibility online. While privileged bodies are able to “slip in and out of visibility and invisibility easily and when it is convenient for them,” marginalized bodies in online spaces are often simultaneously dismissed and ridiculed simply for being present (Gailey, 2023, p.20). The risk of violence towards fat women online increases even further for BIPOC women who are already hyper(in)visible in digital spaces and whose bodies are already criticized online as “deviant, ugly, disgusting, or weird” (Johansson, 2021, p. 115). By continuing to take up space in a platform populated by “normative” (i.e. white, thin) bodies and moralized diets, fat vloggers engage in a symbolic performance of activism. The act of recording and uploading a food diary online comes at great risk to fat people and deserves serious attention from scholars.

The Rhetorics of Eating: A Feminist Approach

Feminist rhetoricians have long been interested in food and cooking as a site of women’s rhetorical practices. Scholars such as Rosalyn Collings Eves (2005) and Carrie Helms Tippen (2017) have shown how cookbooks can be used within recovery work and feminist historiography. Others such Lisa Mastrangelo (2015) and Amy Mecklenburg-Faenger (2018) have explored how community cookbooks represent shared identities and women’s cultural rhetorics. Scholars like Elizabeth J. Fleitz (2010) and Jamie White-Farnham (2012) have argued that recipes operate as a form of literacy that women use and remix for a variety of purposes. Lastly, landmark collections such as Goldthwaite’s (2017) *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics* have firmly demonstrated the breadth and depth of work within the field with investigations into topics such as the senses and embodiment within recipes (Cognard-Black), commodification of women’s imagery within food packaging (Salas), and construction of gender in diet books (Ingalls).

With all these various approaches, we have come to what many call a “feminist food rhetoric”—a method of approaching the field of food studies from a feminist rhetorical standpoint. As Abby M. Dubisar (2015) explains, a feminist food rhetoric builds on critical food studies by “bringing to the conversation rhetorical standpoints that show how food discourses subvert, complicate, and strengthen dominant understandings of gender in persuasive ways” (p. 119). For scholars interested in examining food artifacts as tools for activism, this approach recognizes that genres like cookbooks might be liberating for some, but not all. Technical communication scholars Marie E. Moeller and Erin A. Frost (2016) warned that as a technology, cookbooks

are not always used for subversion (p. 1). Their examination of cookbooks calls for a wider understanding of cooking texts beyond just the content of the page, but also “their situation in space and time” which “produces understandings of what women are or what they should be” (Moeller & Frost, 2016, p. 5). They show that cookbooks must be situated within the specific contexts of their production, rather than lumped together as one liberatory unified genre. Amy Mecklenburg-Faenger (2018) has shared similar concerns over the tendency for the field of feminist rhetorics to categorize cookbooks as feel-good spaces. She argued that food artifacts such as women’s community cookbooks masquerade as harmless community rhetorics while perpetuating harmful ideologies of white supremacy (p. 229). Food and cooking rhetorics are complex technologies with potential to be both liberatory and oppressive. Just because a genre has been used persuasively by women, does not make it feminist.

I expand on the existing scholarship on cookbooks, recipes, and imagery within rhetorical studies by examining eating as a rhetorical practice within online spaces. Like Moeller and Frost, I argue that eating must be situated within the specific contexts of space, time, and importantly—the body. By focusing on how the body frames rhetorical understandings of eating, this essay brings rhetorical studies into conversation with the interdisciplinary field of critical eating studies. As explained by Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2012), critical eating studies “shift food studies attention away from the *what* of food to the *how* of eating” by recognizing eating as an act which is raced, classed, and gendered (p. 11). Under this framework, the focus is on the embodied, performative act of eating rather than just on food or food texts, which shifts greater attention to the body engaging in the act. Allison Hayes-Conroy & Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008) noted that “eating – due to its sensual, visceral nature – is a strategic place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power” (p. 462).

This understanding of eating as a site of knowledge is foregrounded in the most recent work by Jennifer Lin LeMesurier (2023) whose monograph *Inscrutable Eating* argued that narratives around race are bound up with processes of the body (p. 18). She has identified eating as a vulnerable practice which is overlaid with beliefs about the right and wrong way to inhabit a body and perform its identities” (LeMesurier, 2023, p. x). Critical eating studies help to extend current conversations around food, feminism, and rhetoric to focus more explicitly on eating from an intersectional framework. An examination of eating as a distinctly feminist rhetorical practice then might ask how eating itself can, to borrow from Dubisar (2018): “subvert, complicate, and strengthen dominant understandings of gender in persuasive ways” (p. 119). Examining digital food diaries through a critical eating lens considers how eating is rhetorically shaped through power structures and is bound up in beliefs about the right and wrong way to inhabit a body in online spaces. In the following section, I will explore how eating within digital food diaries both reinforces and subverts normative understandings of gender in online spaces.

Subverting the Genre: Gender Performance & Resistance within Digital Food Diaries

#WhatIEatInADay videos are a style of vlogging that operate as a digital food diary by recording everything that a person eats in a day. Shared across social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, their popularity has skyrocketed in the past few years as a form of lifestyle content, although

authors like Noël Duan note that food diaries, especially those of celebrities, have been popular in the media for a long time. In these videos, users (most often thin, white women), vlog their daily intake, promising to provide a real look into what they eat that day. The videos range from professional recordings of celebrity diets such as *Harper's BAZAAR*'s (2020) Food Diaries series to first-person vlogs from social media users. A key feature of this genre is that they present an “authentic” account of what someone actually eats in a day. Many critics, however, have argued that these videos are performative, curated, and harmful to users who struggle with disordered eating and body image issues (Paul, 2021).



Figure 1 Harper's BAZAAR's Food Diary of Kylie Jenner (11 million views as of 2024).

For this project, I focused on TikTok because of its increased popularity as a food media platform and the popularity of digital food diaries on the platform. I examined videos on TikTok using the hashtags:

- #WhatIEatInADay and corresponding hashtags #wieiad; #EatWithMe; #WhatIEat
- #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPersonNotOnADiet and corresponding hashtags; #WhatIEatInADayAsAFat; #RealisticWhatIEatInADay; #wieiadfatty; #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatty

Over the course of three years (2022-2025), I explored the top results of the hashtags approximately every four months using the “trending” tab. Over time, more hashtags were added based on suggested content and trending key terms. TikTok’s search results also include videos that do not explicitly list the hashtag but use key terms in the video description or audio. I provide a more in-depth discussion of this platform feature in the later section “Challenges, Consequences, and Limitations.” What is discussed in this essay is based on my own personal experience of the hashtags from my account. TikTok utilizes highly personalized algorithms and content suggestions based on browser data, cookies, and previously viewed content. Additionally, it restricts the ability to view content without an account login. To account for this skewed dataset, I have analyzed the examples discussed in this essay alongside historical scholarship on weight bias and fat narratives over time as well as research on health and online wellness culture. This constellation helps to paint a fuller picture of how digital food diaries operate within a culture of anti-fat bias online and the ways that individual users resist this bias through their own content creation.

While #WhatIEatInADay videos may not explicitly give advice on how or what to eat, returning to Moeller and Frost, they operate as a form of technology that produces particular narratives and ideas about women and projects authority to those watching. Search results for #WhatIEatInADay on TikTok return thousands of videos, most of which feature thumbnails of young, thin, white women's bodies (rather than just food). Titles like "What I eat in a day as a model," "What I eat in a day as a nutritionist," and "What I eat in a day *just a normal girl," contribute to the assumption that what a user eats is tied to their identity.

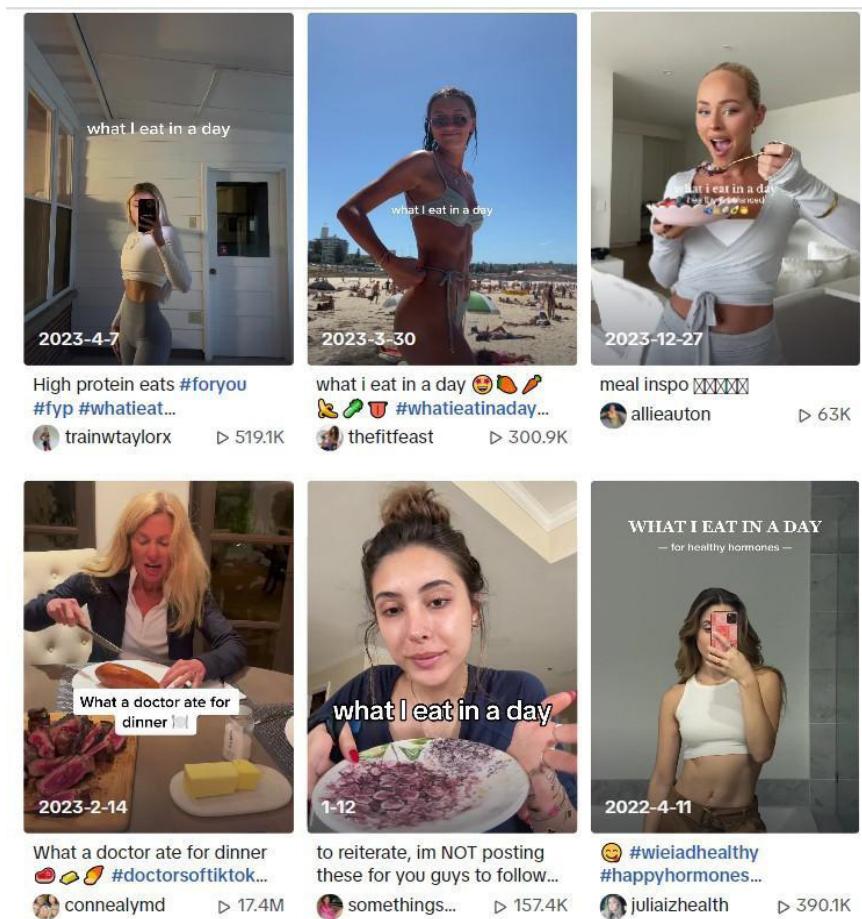


Figure 2 A Screenshot of TikTok's Search Results for #WhatIEatInADay.

Many videos follow the traditional food diary genre by sharing nutritional advice, calorie information, or weight loss statistics. The underlying assumption is not just that people want to know *what* someone eats, but that they will learn to eat in a way that will perform the identity of that particular poster. Here, the body and not the food itself is central to the interpretation of eating. Although digital food diaries center food as the subject, the act of eating is being rhetorically shaped and interpreted through the identity of the person recording the video and internalized by the viewer. This underlying logic explains how digital food diaries reinforce narratives about weight, gender, and diet even when the eating practices displayed are considered "unhealthy." So long as the person eating on screen performs their identity correctly, it doesn't really matter *what* they eat.

As a counter to these videos, many users have uploaded their own vlogs with a disclaimer: #WhatIEatInADay *As a fat person not on a diet. Fat vloggers who participate in this trend specifically counter the criticisms of digital food diaries as inauthentic, consumerist, and normative. Exploring the hashtag brings videos

and images not just of food, but of fat people eating on camera all pointedly telling the viewer that they are not interested in dieting. In terms of structure and content, many videos tagged #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson are nearly identical to those of thin users with similar poses, camera angles, or video style. I argue that where they are subversive is in their use of the body.



Figure 3 #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson Results from TikTok..

Many resistant acts by women explored by rhetoricians often flip the script by utilizing traditional women's genres to advocate for radical ideas. Consider for example how suffragists utilized cookbooks to advocate for women's rights (Mastrangelo, 2020) or how women organizations such as CODEPINK use "cookbooks" to advocate for peace (Dubisar, 2016). Digital food diaries operate similarly by taking a genre traditionally used for restrictive eating and flipping it to push back against diet norms. How #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson differs is in the embodiment of the author on screen. Whereas women suffragists were able to successfully utilize cookbook genres to advocate for change, they were successful because they visibly embodied what a good wife and mother looked like and used cookbooks to reinforce this "quiet" feminine imagery. In contrast, because fat vloggers do not fit the normative image online, their use of digital food diaries does not operate the same. Although digital food diaries are also a "quiet" form of activism, fat bodies always perform as "loud." The act of eating is being rhetorically shaped, not by food itself, but by bodies eating.

Cooking is a feminized act that can reinforce the image of the "good" woman but *eating* for the fat person reinforces the image of the "bad" fat person. Fat studies scholars define the "bad" fat person as a fat person who unapologetically eats. They do not give excuses for their size (such as medical histories), apologize for their habits, or discuss their efforts to diet or lose weight (Pausé, 2015). Instead of shame, the "bad" fat person embraces eating publicly. Lindy West, author of *Shrill*, explained that fat people are expected to perform a "public penance" and when they insist on living a happy public life and staying fat are met with hostility (Valenti, 2018). By eating online, rather than just presenting food images or creating a private log, fat vloggers resist expected norms of how a fat person should behave. Instead of utilizing a food diary to restrictively eat, fat vloggers disrupt normative discourses around fatness, food, and obesity.

Eating as Performative Symbolic Resistance

By creating digital food diaries, I argue that fat vloggers engage in performative symbolic resistance (PSR). Alicia K. Hatcher theorizes PSR as “what occurs when bodies, infrastructures, and political struggles meet” (para. 2). Drawing from scholarship in performance studies and performativity, Hatcher develops PSR as a language and analytical tool to describe how people use their body to engage in protest and identifies five characteristics which she argues PSR acts share,

1. The act must be performed by a member of/members of a marginalized community.
2. The act can be a verbal or non-verbal act.
3. The/A marginalized body must be used to both symbolize an embodied resistance and engage in the performance of a symbolic act.
4. The act must be performed in a white-dominant space or place for the purposes of transforming the meaning of the space, allowing it to become a symbol of resistance.
5. The act must be intentional, performed with a specific goal or purpose in mind.

When combined, these criteria form what Hatcher (2023) refers to as the “PSR Puzzle,” an analytical tool used by researchers to determine acts of PSR. As shown in the diagram below, the pieces of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *how*, *why*, and *intentionality* work together to form an act of PSR and distinguish it from other forms of activism.



Figure 4: PSR Puzzle. Image includes a puzzle diagram which labels puzzle pieces who, what, when, where, how, why, and intentionality (Hatcher, 2021, p. 10)

While Hatcher (2021) theorized PSR through the activism of Black athletes within physical sporting events, she notes that it is a flexible framework that can be used to analyze spaces both physical and virtual (p. 12) and can to some extent be used to “analyze the resistant acts of marginalized populations generally” (p. 100). Like other examples discussed by Hatcher (ACT UP, Standing Rock, and BLM), the digital food diaries discussed here make use of physical, marginalized (re: fat, BIPOC, women, non-binary) bodies for resistance in white-dominant online spaces. As I will go into further details in the following section, PSR is particularly useful for critically examining digital food diaries because it can be used to highlight the link between racism and anti-fatness in America and the violence towards marginalized bodies that results from this history. PSR’s additional attention to how acts respond to specific crises and moments in time is valuable

for a study of digital food diaries that respond to platforms that glorify disordered eating and weight loss content. These factors give meaning to acts of eating online and are necessary to fully understand how they operate rhetorically. In the following section I utilize Hatcher's theory of PSR to examine specific components of #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson to establish it as a feminist rhetorical act.

Digital Landscapes: TikTok, Diet Culture, and the Hypervisible Fat Body (When + Where)

In this section I examine the role that space, place, and time play in the act of eating. Using the concept of kairos, Hatcher argues that protests are about taking advantage of an opportunity at a particular time within a white-dominant space in order to resist. Because marginalized bodies are not represented within the space they protest, they lean into their hypervisibility—effectively making their body's location a key part of the argument. In order to demonstrate the hypervisibility of marginalized fat bodies online, I first argue that digital spaces like TikTok are white-dominant. Modern social media spaces embody diet cultures which perpetuate historical intertwined visual images of whiteness and thinness as representative of femininity.

Hatcher (2023) defined a white-dominant space as “an environment—either physical or virtual—that has historically been controlled by and served white Americans and it is characterized by the existence of an audience in the form of a public” (para. 6). Michael Warner has identified publics in spaces that unite strangers and is constituted through attention (Warner, 2002, pp. 56-57). TikTok clearly meets the criteria of publics because it unites strangers online via attention to user-created content. Thus established, to better understand how social media sites such as TikTok are white-dominant, we turn to the history of fatness in America.

While a fat person can be any race or gender, fatness as a concept is bound up in narratives and beliefs about race, gender, and class. Fatness is a loose identity that has changed definitions over time, and hence, the idea of fat bodies as unfeminine or undesirable is more recent. Fat phobia in the West, according to sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019), stems directly from the transatlantic slave trade and Protestant religious ideologies during the early nineteenth century. Fatness, she argued, became stigmatized as black and sinful, and white women were directed to become slender as a result. She has noted the importance of understanding “the slender ideal” and “fat phobia” as two intertwined, raced developments. She states,

The fear of the imagined “fat black woman” was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women. This is critical, since most analyses of race and aesthetics describe the experiences of either black people (and other people of color) or white people (Strings, 2019, p. 6).

We cannot understand fatness in America or the implied social contracts of how fat people are expected to behave without acknowledging that fat stigmatization is historically rooted in control of women via demonization of Black women. These ideologies further developed a power system that ranked bodies in a hierarchy (to return to Taylor's (2018) theory of body terrorism). The promotion of thinness online, then, can be understood as an extension of colonization and racism that has negative effects on women across different backgrounds and races, but which disproportionately affects BIPOC women. Researchers like Karen Wilkes (2021) explained that digital media specifically promotes the pursuit of thinness because “visual language

of these ideals stands in for white femininity" (p. 9). TikTok can be understood as a white-dominant space, because it reinforces dangerous diet cultures which are rooted in racism while centering whiteness visually through its content.

Careful analysis of spatial design can help us to see how white-dominant discourses of fat phobia and slender ideals shape social media spaces. Jessica Enoch (2019) explained,

Human actors create space not only through design and material composition but also through the rules and expectations for the space, the presence or absence of bodies and objects within the space, the activities that happen within the space, and the symbolic representation of it (pp. 10-11).

In physical spaces we can easily identify the structural designs that indicate that fatness is not welcome—seats on airplanes, weight limits, narrow door frames, booths, or tight classroom chairs. Within digital spaces these types of structural designs can be harder to “see” because digital infrastructures are often hidden from users. This is why attention to visibility (who is present and who is absent) as well as activities (behavior that is praised or berated) can be useful for understanding how digital spaces are produced and the ways that white-dominant norms of thinness and fat phobia are reinforced.

It is not just that spaces like TikTok have instances of sexism, racism, or fat phobia, but rather that social media sites are designed to encourage that behavior. One investigative report shared internal TikTok documentation that outlined new rules for algorithms on the site. Within these documents were policies to de-prioritize uploads by users who were considered “less attractive,” including individuals with “abnormal body shape, chubby, obvious beer belly, obese” (Biddle et al., 2020, para. 8). In the policy document the reason stated was that “if the character’s appearance...is not good, the video will be much less attractive” (Biddle et al., 2020, para. 7). While these types of policies do not remove videos made by fat users, it does demonstrate how algorithms within platforms promote content based on appearance. Algorithmic design has a huge impact on spaces like TikTok, because unlike some social media sites, the default page on the app, labeled “for you,” is curated based on algorithms rather than just accounts or hashtags followed.

Although TikTok is a newer social site, preliminary studies on the app have indicated that overwhelmingly diet culture dominates the app within content related to health, food, and appearance. Diet culture is a term used to describe the systems of belief that promote thinness through moralized and medicalized discourses around eating, food, and weight. While these narratives are presented as scientific fact, they are historically rooted in a history of racism that used weight as a means of demonizing Black women in order to argue for racial superiority (Strings and Bacon, 2020). Today, these narratives are promoted through the argument that weight equals health and that eating behaviors are directly linked to the two (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022, p. 4). This link between health and weight has historically been used as a means of surveillance, exclusion, and violence towards BIPOC bodies while uplifting others.

Spaces like TikTok are rhetorically produced through repeated content, images, and interactions that reinforce diet culture. Research studies have found that health and nutrition related content on TikTok often focuses on weight loss and body objectification (Raiter et al 2023) and weight normative views of health rath-

er than size inclusive content (Minadeo & Pope, 2022, p. 6). These trends have also impacted the app's technical structure. For example, in early 2025 the app introduced a "chubby filter" which used AI to alter user images to appear fatter. It was subsequently removed in March 2025 after many criticized the filter's use in body shaming and weight loss content (Ronald, 2025). TikTok's proliferation of diet culture is so dangerous and popular that in June 2025 the platform had to outright ban the hashtag #SkinnyTok due to its promotion of eating disorder content (Riddle, 2025). Today, any searches for #SkinnyTok result in a link to resources for finding support (as seen in Fig. 4 below).

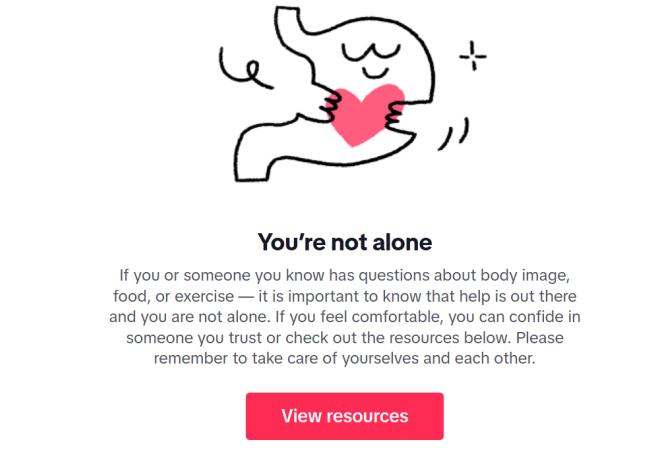


Figure 5: Screenshot of a failed search for #SkinnyTok.

Mapping out the digital landscape of spaces like TikTok demonstrates how visible a fat body is when eating online. Fat users who subvert popular hashtags like #WhatIEatInADay are able to utilize genres which previously have been used to suppress fatness in order to advocate for change. The hypervisibility of fat users in #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson is a key part of changing digital spaces to embrace fatness by visually filling people's feed with images of fat bodies eating. Hashtags take advantage of trends online, giving fat activists momentum and access to virtual spaces that might otherwise be closed to fat people. Further, unlike platforms like YouTube which usually need to be clicked in order to view, videos on TikTok are fast, short, and play automatically when on screen, making them more difficult to avoid when scrolling. Although this design feature often leads to the promotion of diet culture content, it can mean that body positive videos that do break through algorithms end up being seen by users who otherwise wouldn't engage.

***A Fat Person Not on A Diet: Coming out as Fat (Who + What)**

Within this section I turn to the "who" and "what" portion of the PSR puzzle to analyze how fat, as an identity, frames eating as a feminist action. Within PSR, Hatcher argues that individuals perform an act that connects the protester to a collective marginalized identity. Identity in this way is understood as both the way the protester performs identity as well as how their body is read by others. Acts of PSR differ from allyship because protesters must embody the identity they are fighting on behalf of.

Users who engage in #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson identify as fat, a collective identity which is oppressed and marginalized in both online spaces, the media, and most importantly, through systemic bias in

healthcare. Although the definitions and boundaries of fatness as a social construct change over time, they are always racial and gendered. Through the paradigm of the “imagined fat black woman,” white women are disciplined to be thin in order to avoid fatness and hence, Blackness (Strings, 2019). The concept of fatness as an unhealthy or even unattractive feature is rooted in the belief that Black women are *too much*, “deviant,” “excessive” (Smalls, 2021, p. 13). Margaret Robinson (2019) noted that this same colonial logic was used to justify assimilation of indigenous women whose bodies were considered “too big, out of control, and getting larger” (p. 25). While fat or fatness can be self-identified (such as the users in this study) and/or “read” onto the body, these readings are always enmeshed with beliefs about which bodies matter and which bodies need intervention. Because fatness is a social construction, the definitions and boundaries of who is considered fat change over time in order to fit new agendas and purposes. As explained by Stefanie A. Jones, “the term ‘fat’ pushes the limits of definitional boundaries in its looseness; because it can be used to critique any imagined difference from the social ideal” (Jones, 2014, p. 33). If fatness can be read onto *anybody*, then how can we determine whether a person’s eating is performative symbolic resistance?

While fat bodies generally share characteristics of being outside normative understandings of “thin” and by default white—self-identification as fat points to a user’s connection with shared collectives. Here, the use of the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson alongside other popular hashtags like #PlusSize, #Fat-Liberation, or #AntiDiet, work to mark the body as fat and establish a connection with others. Like normative digital food diaries which label videos with identities such as “as a model” or “just a normal girl,” many digital food diaries under the collective hashtag point not just to fatness, but to a dismissal of dieting or an embrace of happiness. Consider for example one video by a user on TikTok who starts her food diary with, “What I eat in a day as a FAT person who’s not trying to lose weight” (@sylviathegnomad). Other users like @twotabbytarot label her videos with “What I eat as a happy, fat woman.” These types of captions indicate to the audience that fat users are aware of how their body is read and the expectations for how it should behave. As Hatcher (2025) noted in her essay, “Embodying Resistance,” acts within PSR result from a “cultural collective understanding—born out of lived and embodied experiences” (Hatcher, 2025, p. 115). These types of statements indicate that fat users have a cultural collective understanding of how they are expected to behave, which is developed out of their lived experiences as fat people. By telling the audience they are not interested in dieting they push back on beliefs and expected behaviors by embracing both their body and their actions. These statements wouldn’t make sense to users if fat bodies weren’t expected to diet or be unhappy.

Many fat scholars call this performance “coming out” because of how the act queers fat embodiment and rejects normative standards for how to eat, behave, and act online. This form of “coming out” acts as a destigmatizing strategy that affirms fatness and reclaims the term as a neutral identity rather than an insult (Saguy and Ward, 2011, p. 2). Fat activist and scholar, Cat Pausé (2015, para. 3) explained that because fatness is an identity in which the person is held responsible for the stigma (i.e.: *you’re only being bullied because you choose to stay fat; you could receive better healthcare if you lost weight*), then they often are expected to manage their identity via passing, withdrawing, or covering themselves. A fourth option, “coming out,” disrupts these stigmas by rejecting demands made to change, lose weight, hide, or stay silent. Fat people who “come out” perform fatness “wrong” because they act in resistance to expectations.

Coming out as “fat” or “obese” performs fatness publicly without shame. Videos tagged with #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson are less about what individuals eat, and more about showing individuals eating without shame, an act which isn’t expected for fat people and can result in violence, hostility, and bullying within social media spaces. Fat users who share digital food diaries demonstrate an understanding of fat struggles, and an expectation of hostility as can be seen in the disclaimers or context they provide. For example, one video states, “if you don’t like fat people eating scroll” (@simplyshay30). Disclaimers such as these recognize that fat people are aware that the act of eating as a fat person is not considered an acceptable behavior online, that simply engaging in the behavior will anger others. Returning to the PSR puzzle, these acts demonstrate a resistance “against established expectations for how bodies are expected to *exist* and *behave* in public space” (Hatcher, 2025, p. 120).

Digital rhetoric scholars have noted that online spaces punish marked or marginalized bodies simply for existing, an understanding reflected by users (Clinnin & Manthey, 2019, p. 31). One user states, “This is what I eat in a day as a fat girl that is literally just existing” (@tonsablush). Fat people understand their behavior will elicit comments even if they are “literally just existing.” Simultaneously these declarations also recognize *eating* as a daily practice needed for existence but read differently depending on who is eating. This language recognizes that fat users not only understand their marginalization within white-dominant social media spaces, but also that their behavior is considered political regardless of what they are doing. Because eating is directly connected to the stigma around weight, eating online can be seen as an embodied performance which resists what is expected of fat users.

Intentional Eating: Coalitions of Anti-Diet Movement (Intentionality+Why)

Overall, #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson works to symbolically push back against diet culture and the belief that fat people should be stigmatized for eating publicly. Utilizing TikTok as a platform, fat vloggers lean into their hypervisibility within a space that has not been designed for them and promotes openly hostile content against fat bodies. In this section I situate these acts within broader anti-diet movements in order to demonstrate the intentionality of digital food diaries as a form of activism. Hatcher (2021) has defined intentionality as:

A consciousness/mental state—simultaneously self-referential and group-oriented—that arises when a person from a marginalized population (subject) pays attention to systems contributing to their marginalization (objects). It is a purpose-driven, action-oriented concept concerned with how marginalized populations try to make sense of their environment while simultaneously forming and engaging in approaches designed to critique and change the world in which they live for the betterment of those with whom they share a common group consciousness (p. 76).

While users may be eating, recording, and uploading individually, many do so intentionally as part of a collective movement to destigmatize fatness and transform the way people eat and talk about food. This decades-long collective movement has become even more critical at a time in which weight loss drugs are on the rise and social media glorifies disordered eating to wider audiences—particularly young children online.

The anti-diet movement is a counter movement against food and weight myths that equate health to

weight and is connected to other movements such as fat acceptance, fat liberation, and health at every size.¹ The coalition of the anti-diet movement include feminists, fat activists, and healthcare professionals who recognize that dieting is a cultural practice which has reinforced harmful norms about food and women's bodies (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022, p. 2). Many fat vloggers who participate in digital food diaries demonstrate an intentional alignment with the anti-diet movement by utilizing a range of hashtags and captions which resist and push back against moralizing eating such as #AntiDiet, #FatLiberation, #FoodIsLove, #AntiDietCulture, and #FoodFreedom. These hashtags contextualize eating performances with specific messages.

Anti-diet intentionality can also be seen in the way that users frame their digital food diaries by explicitly asking or reminding viewers that they are not interested in weight loss advice. For example, one user explains during her video, "as a reminder I'm not looking for any guidance or advice" (@stephhello77). These types of statements acknowledge that by eating as a fat person, users anticipate getting unsolicited weight loss advice or guidance on how to start a diet. Scholars note that these types of reactions to fat people eating (diet advice) are a direct result of the ways that weight has been coded as "health." Tanisha Jemma Rose Spratt (2021) explains that "This shaming language is rooted in healthist discourse that promotes a 'facts over feelings' approach to excess weight, whereby any attempt to positively recognise bodies that are deemed medically unhealthy is deemed both morally wrong and potentially harmful" (p. 95). Understood through colonial lenses, bodies that mirror white-dominant ideals (i.e.: white, thin) deserve body autonomy, whereas women whose bodies are in excess require intervention (Robinson, 2019, p. 20). Anti-diet protesters recognize that intervention via unsolicited diet advice is prompted by the very act of existing and eating on screen as a fat person and combat this by shutting diet talk down. Across digital food diaries statements like, "I don't care about dieting" or "What I eat in a day as a fatty that doesn't care about being skinny" demonstrate a rejection of diet culture both through clear language as well as their commitment to continue eating, recording, and existing online.

Users who participate in the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson engage with principles of fat acceptance, particularly destigmatization of the word "fat." The goal of destigmatizing "fatness" is to divorce fatness from an idea of moral weakness or failed citizenship and instead use the word as a descriptor of body difference (McPhail & Orsini, 2021, p. 1398). The hashtag #WhatIEatAsAFatPerson demonstrates intentionality by reclaiming the word fat in the hashtag as a descriptor for the person. Embracing the word fat has been noted as a critical strategy both for the fat acceptance movement as well as fat people who are working to build self-acceptance and self-esteem (Rose Spratt, 2021, p. 92). Examples of fat acceptance can be seen throughout digital food diaries observed beyond just hashtag uses. One user, for example, begins her video with her body on screen eating and smiling stating,

What I eat in a day as a fat person healing my relationship with food. Did I say ugly person?
No. Did I say stupid person? No. I did not call myself anything other than fat, which I am. Even though I appreciate it you do not have to comment you are not fat you're beautiful, because I am fat (@sisiuwu)

1 There are some debates on whether Health at Every Size is aligned with goals of fat liberation, however many do consider this movement as part of an overall goal towards destigmatizing fatness.

Within this statement, @sisiiuwu demonstrates an understanding of the stigmatization of fat as well as her own reclamation of the word as a neutral descriptor for her body. She recognizes that fat is often used as an insult and instead directs the viewer to rethink their reactions or potential comments. While most videos that utilize the hashtag point to an acceptance of the word fat as a descriptor for their identity, statements like @sisiiuwu's point to an intentional usage of the word showcasing how the video works to redefine what "fat" means.

In reflecting on the "why" and intentionality of these digital food diaries, it's important to remember what is at stake for fat bodies. Studies have shown that in the US by age 9, 50% of girls have considered restricting food. The risk for eating disorders is even higher for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals in comparison to white and cisgender, heterosexual people (Montgomery and The Collaboratory for Health Justice). The likelihood of eating disorders and self-harm has been shown to be more linked to individual body dissatisfaction and *perceived* body size in teens rather than actual weight or BMI (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Young girls have been documented as being more at risk for suicidal ideation as a result of perceiving themselves as overweight (Baiden et al. 345). In adults, weight stigma in health settings creates barriers for women that have been reported to lower their likelihood of regular doctor's visits resulting in delayed screenings and exams which lead to early treatment and cancer prevention (Amy et al., 2006). These exigencies indicate that bias, stigmatization, and diet culture both on and offline systemically harm marginalized communities. Acts of PSR by fat vloggers attempt to intervene in systems which continually put their lives at risk through the pursuit of thinness.

Challenges, Consequences, and Limitations

Like many acts of activism, the goal of PSR and the importance of the inclusion of "intentionality" in the puzzle is that there is an effort made by the activist to be heard by those in power to eventually lead to social reforms (Hatcher, 2021, 89). As Hatcher (2021) notes, these changes can often only be seen in retrospect, so it's challenging to know if these goals are met (p. 90). Given the current changes in public health funding, rapid social media changes, and the rise and popularity of weight loss drugs (such as GLP-1)—it may be some time before we can look back and ask if social reforms around fatphobia and diet culture have been enacted. Within this section, however, I want to briefly look at some of the challenges of the trend #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson to resist in real-time as well as its impact on the research process.

Algorithms & Visibility

As noted in previous sections on TikTok's infrastructure, much of the platform's design and algorithms are hidden from users and change quickly. As a researcher, these changes created challenges because search results using the hashtag term did not always provide accurate results and frequently changed from day to day. In previous studies of hashtags, I've utilized programming packages to scrape associated posts containing identified keywords and was able to easily collect chronological public tweets containing a singular hashtag (Gill & Akkad). However, TikTok's design and searches are not set up for easy scraping or transparent search results. Unlike other platforms that offer filters to show search results containing only specific key-

words with certain date ranges, TikTok displays search results based on hashtags, key terms, video content, and captions. Additionally, these searches require an account login using your interests and cookies to shape results.² For example, a recent search for the hashtag returned a video from the user @no.food.rules with the caption, “everything I ate and WHY.” Although the user does not identify as fat or use the hashtag, the video likely was shown in search results because it used hashtags commonly associated with the trend: #intuitive-eating #foodfreedom #nondiet. The content of the video might be similar to those of fat vloggers because the user shows herself eating unapologetically and identifies with hashtags associated with anti-diet culture. However, more attention to other components of the PSR puzzle (who, intentionality + why) illustrates how the content fails to resist. The user visibly embodies a privileged identity on the platform (thin, white) and does not convey intentions for activism. Instead, most of her content links back to meal guides and weight loss tools. These types of results illustrate the drawbacks of activism on social media spaces like TikTok, which reward users with high follower counts who make use of popular trends regardless of their intentions. For activists, this means that many videos by fat vloggers may not actually reach wider audiences or be visible to the public. Even if a vlogger was attempting to lean into their hypervisibility within a white-dominant space, this goal requires the user to be seen which might be impossible if their content is suppressed due to newness of account or a low number of followers.

Co-Opting Fatness

While TikTok algorithms limit the visibility of activist videos, users themselves also create challenges for representing fatness online. Because of the current status quo of fatness as a health descriptor, some videos in search results for #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson demonstrated co-opting of the word fat. For example, the user @trindalyn begins her video with “what I eat in a day as a fatty.” In contrast to most of her other food diaries on her channel in which she self-identifies as a “skinny legend,” this one shows a day when she “over-did it and overindulged” by *gasp* eating some ice cream, three Oreos, and a handful of chocolate chips (@trinadaly).

² The algorithms that shape search results on TikTok is not very transparent and frequently change during app updates. These assumptions are based on my usage of the app, search results, and the information currently available from TikTok itself as well as platform users.

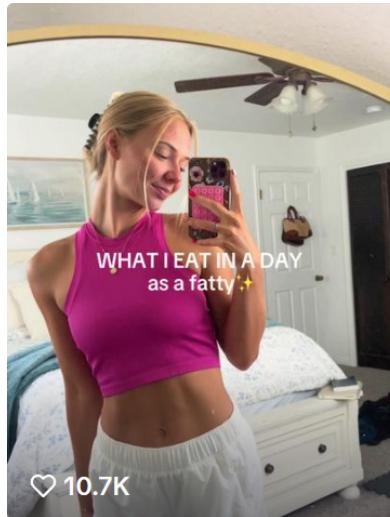


Figure 6: What I Eat in a Day video from @trindalyn.

Although their video depicts eating performatively on screen, we can see in the breakdown below how it fails to use their body to engage in PSR:

1. **Who:** @trindalyn frequently uses her platform to promote content which prioritizes thinness, weight-loss, and her identity as a “skinny legend”
2. **What:** Her food diary moralizes minor food consumption as shameful overindulgences
3. **When:** Her content is presented as a “balance” (one “bad” day of eating compared to her other “good” days) and perpetuates current narratives of wellness culture rather than anti-fat resistance.
4. **Where:** Her post leans into the ideals of TikTok’s white-dominant platform while co-opting trending language around fatness.
5. **Why + Intentionality:** Her content reinforces diet culture and the promotion of thinness rather than challenging anti-fat systems. Other hashtags used in the post such as #caloriedeficit, #gymmotivation, and #realisticwhatIeatinaday indicate that fatness results from personal choices around food and exercise

Another form of co-opting on TikTok utilizes the app’s stitching and dueting features. These in-app tools allow users to take clips of original videos and create their own response. These responses, often from health influencers, respond to user’s eating habits with their own opinions. For example, in one video by weight-loss trainer @sarahinallsizes, she begins her video with a clip of a digital food diary which features the self-identified fat user @adigutierrezxoxo. After playing part of the clip, she begins talking about how she, as a former fat person, wishes she could still eat like the woman in the video and misses being oblivious to calories and nutrition (@sarahinallsizes). In another video, a fitness coach (@provingapointfitness) reviews a different video from @adigutierrezxoxo by estimating the calories and macros of the food she eats. While his video

doesn't critique her eating habits, the response clearly co-opts the message by recontextualizing it with diet culture and anti-fat narratives—all to redirect viewers to his own fitness services. Because fat users can be tagged in videos that stitch them, they also become exposed to comments, calorie tracking, or other diet content without their consent. For example, in the latter example, many users replied accusing the original video creator of lying about what she eats, under the premise that she couldn't be fat if she ate healthy food. Even though these types of videos do not include the hashtag, their use of the phrasing in their captions or clips from activist users redirect audiences toward diet content and potentially lead to bullying and harassment. They co-opt the language and labor of fat users to reinforce anti-fat narratives.

Trauma, Health, and Effects on the Body

Throughout the examples in this essay, we have seen how algorithmic platforms like TikTok promote toxic diet content which can have negative impacts on fat users. Participating in digital food diaries can offer a transformative experience, but its reliance on the embodied act of eating can also create negative effects on the body and the health of the user. Consider for example, one popular fat activist online, @yourcottagecorewhore, a non-binary Black content creator who posts about eating disorder recovery. Their videos use their body to engage in PSR, as seen in the breakdown below:

1. **Who:** @yourcottagecorewhore is a non-binary, Black self-identified fat user who frequently brings attention to fatphobia and anti-fat bias and its impacts on health.
2. **What:** Their digital food diaries center eating as a form of resistance
3. **When:** Their posts contextualize anti-fatness within the current moment by discussing systemic issues and technologies such as fitness apps, BMI, treatment centers, and social media trends
4. **Where:** They post on TikTok, a white-dominant space hostile towards fat bodies
5. **Why + Intentionality:** Their content clearly identifies recovery and healing from anti-fatness and eating disorders as their intention. They also utilize other hashtags and common anti-diet messages such as #fatliberation, #foodfreedomjourney, #antidiet, and #healing

Yet, their videos also show the realistic side of content creating when your body is central to the resistance. Frequently their videos discuss how what is shown on social media doesn't always match what is happening and that their journey towards food freedom has come with setbacks and relapses. In one of their last digital food diaries in 2021 they shared in the comments, “i love ya'll sm than you'll ever know & this lil community we have, but it's not fair to ya'll or me to post content like this until i get better <3” (@yourcottagecorewhore).



Figure 7: What I Eat in a Day video from @yourcottagecorewhore.

In addition to showcasing the side-effects of eating on the body, this post also illustrates the relationship between the content creator and the public audiences who engage with digital food diaries. The comment about fairness to both parties recognizes that their content impacts both their bodies and others' and shouldn't be shared when it's not healthy for either. Over time @yourcottagecorewhore's content has become less frequent and new content hasn't been released since 2024. Whether for personal reasons or health, the toll of creating eating-based content has real effects on fat users which can make PSR a challenge long-term.

Hope: Towards Fat Liberation

Within the introduction of this essay, I noted that the realities of body terrorism often place marginalized bodies in a state of fear resulting in internalized hatred and shame. Acts like eating become a means to survive and resist in digital spaces that argue that one's body is unworthy of space, unfit for food, and undeserving of love. To eat on screen is to make a choice that one's body becomes part of the message tied to gender norms, diet narratives, and colonial histories. While food genres have proliferated in social media spaces, we cannot ignore that to post about food without hate or backlash is a privilege unavailable to bodies that perform loud. Careful analysis, however, has demonstrated that fat vloggers not only know these risks but exploit their loudness for feminist aims.

Hatcher (2023) notes that intentionality on the part of the activist is not just about performing with a goal but is also an invitation. For example, when discussing Colin Kaepernick's act of kneeling silently as an act of protest she states, "These were hopeful acts performed as both an ideological stance and an invitation—and at times, even a plea—for members of a public to 1) recognize the voice(s) embedded within the silence and 2) engage in the act of rhetorical listening" (Hatcher, 2023, para. 18). Protests are invitations that require us, as members of the public and scholars, to listen.

My first engagement with #WhatIEatInADay videos was not as a researcher, but as an internet user and

as a woman who has experienced body-image issues and internalized fatphobia most of my life. Rhetorical listening didn't just mean writing this essay to center the problem. Listening also meant dealing with my own personal eating habits. Reading through hate comments and remembering my own memories and hateful feelings around food... Listening meant doing the work of understanding the ties between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness and thinking about how I, as a white scholar, can engage with these topics ethically. Rhetorical listening meant actually trying to engage in the real message of digital food diaries by letting myself eat when I was hungry and letting go of guilt. It also meant being kind to myself about the calorie app still on my phone and the scale still in my bathroom. Digital and food scholarship, like most feminist work, is intertwined with our daily lives. Like the PSR puzzle, we cannot simply isolate one piece.

Digital food diaries are complex and contradictory; they can be playful, angry, loud, sad, and even silly but through my examination of them, I also noted hope. When users tell viewers that fat doesn't mean ugly or remind them not to offer diet advice, they demonstrate a willingness to educate. They are hopeful that viewers will listen and learn to react differently. While it was often painful to read negative comments from users that bullied, fat shamed, or berated TikTokers for their eating choices, I also saw comments from users who were inspired by their bravery, their eating, and their willingness to take up space. Eating online is not just performative; it is transformative. By continually eating and posting, users on TikTok embrace their bodies and show others that existing in a fat body isn't a punishment. They deserve to take up space and eat just as much as anyone else.

Biography

Kelli R. Gill (she/her) is a rhetoric and composition scholar and currently serves as an Assistant Professor at Montana State University. Drawing from material and cultural rhetorics, her work explores the intersections between food, culture, and power. She is also the creator and manager of the scholarly website foodrhetoric.com.

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