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Harmful “Body-Checking” Trends Have Come to TikTok

By Breona Couloote and Ibtasam Elmaliki

A thin, dark-haired girl stands in her bedroom showing off her bloated stomach. Audio screams over her video, “You skinny bitches are evil and you need to be destroyed!” Then she transitions to another clip, one where her flat stomach has returned. “And them big fat bitches will burn in hell,” plays the rest of the sound.

The contradictory messages of this post by @supercoollibragirl—which has gotten two million views and more than 300,000 likes since it was went up last year—are the subject of debate among its more than 4000 commenters, who argue about its intent: Is the young woman humblebragging about her thinness? Or putting herself down for being fat? Some say they love her “confidence” and “yall are just jealous she looks great.” Others reassure her that “she’s allowed to have her own insecurities.” Then there’s an overall consensus of wanting “this trend to be buried.”

But what is this trend?

It’s one of the many so-called “body-checking” trends that have plagued social media sites for years, and now can be seen on TikTok. A body-checking trend is one where users draw attention to the size and shape of their bodies, usually as a way to show off their thinness. In one of the most infamous body-checking trends from 2013, people stood with their knees together to show they were skinny enough to have a “thigh gap.” Tumblr and Instagram became notorious as sites riddled with posts that glamorized anorexia and disordered eating in years past. And now, #bodychecking has reached 5.5 million views on TikTok.

But what is interesting about TikTok’s new wave of body-checking trends is that they often try to mask what they’re really about, burying their message in irony and sly humor. Tonally, it’s very Gen Z, which accounts for 60 percent of TikTok’s users, who are between the ages of 16 and 24. These are young people who have come of age in the midst of the body positivity movement, and who are more likely to have been educated—by parents, schools or content they see online—that an over-emphasis on thinness is unhealthy and can be physically and emotionally damaging. And so body-checking on TikTok has morphed into “I’m not really talking about how skinny I am, even though I am.”

History repeats itself and old trends have resurfaced to a fresher and naive audience on TikTok. In a video with over 44,000 likes, and over 500,000 views, @jules.lo demonstrates the trend of standing a certain way to make yourself appear to have a high gap, and look thinner. She makes the video in order to criticize it and let younger audiences know the tricks behind the camera. A lot of users are happy someone has finally called it out, and “it’s so obvious when people are body checking.” One user admits, “it gets rid of my hip dips.” But not all of them are on the same page, some comments denying any ill intentions behind, calling it “just posing.”

The problem of social media’s impact on young people’s body image blew up in the news in 2021 with the revelations of the Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen, a former product manager for the company. Among the thousands of documents Haugen turned over to the *Wall Street Journal* were some revealing Facebook’s own internal research on the effect of

Instagram—which Facebook acquired in 2012 for \$1 billion—on the body image of teenage girls. “Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse,” said a leaked presentation slide. Facebook knew that Instagram was making eating disorders and suicidal ideation worse in teenage girls, Haugen told *60 Minutes*.

These revelations confirmed what other researchers had known for years. As far back as 2014, a study conducted by researchers at Florida State University—*Do you “like” my photo? Facebook use maintains eating disorder risk.*—showed the correlation between negative body image and Facebook usership. The study reported that adolescent girls who had Facebook accounts were associated with greater “thin ideal internalization, body surveillance, and drive for thinness.”

“The amount of likes and views being visible is also a huge issue because it is a quantifiable measure of how your content is liked and approved,” says Annalise Mabe, a co-author of the study, now a health writer. “And if we continue to post our bodies and ourselves and wait for others to either approve or disapprove, we’re allowing people to weigh in on our self-worth, based on an image or video.”

No similar study has been done yet on TikTok, which gained popularity in the U.S. only in 2018, with usership skyrocketing during the pandemic. “I would imagine TikTok is definitely worse,” Mabe says, “because Facebook was designed a bit differently with the feed not to generally focus all the attention on photos. But now we have Instagram and Tik Tok, where we’re dealing primarily with images and videos.”

TikTok can be as harmful as other sites in how it encourages body-checking, says Indy Atkinson, 21, a TikTok content creator with more than 78,000 followers and over three million likes on her @cometkiddo account, where she tries to warn young women and girls of the negative side of the app. “There are a lot of videos where people will be body-checking or posting videos where they’re showing their bodies off to get comments saying how skinny they are,” Atkinson says. “That can definitely be harmful and it does something for their self-esteem...and it encourages them to eat less.”

One of the most popular body-checking themes on TikTok is “thinspo,” another term for “thinspiration,” or inspiration for being thin. Faced with the growing interest in this controversial social media subject, TikTok has prohibited the hashtag #thinspo, redirecting users who search it to an eating disorder helpline. However, users have found ways around it, by using code words which enable them to discuss eating disorders and how getting and staying thin can be achieved.

Hashtags such as #thinþø and #thinspho are ways users are able to spread thinspo content without TikTok removing or flagging their accounts. #thinþø stands at over 300,000 views, making it one of the biggest hashtags on the app.

“[What I eat in a day](#)” videos are another popular aspect of thinspo culture on TikTok. These videos feature very thin girls eating very little and telling others that’s how they stay thin—often by drinking protein shakes and other drinks instead of eating meals.

In addition, there are [videos](#) on how to burn extra calories, with unreliable advice such as chewing ice and eating spicy foods as ways to boost the metabolism. Such videos are often flooded with comments in which users offer more unhealthy and unverified tricks for weight

loss. Some users suggest eating just 500 calories-per-day and excessive gum-chewing as a way to burn calories. In [one video](#), a teen lists diet foods; a commenter says “thanks for the shopping list.”

Indy Atkinson has firsthand experience of this: her battle with her negative body image started at age 14. She says she was first introduced to thinspo in 2014 on Tumblr, where the concept originated. She says her feed was flooded with images of perfect bodies, and she sought out how to get hers to look the same way.

“For me, especially, it was kind of the idea of wanting to be clean,” Atkinson says. “Like if there's nothing in your stomach, you're a clean person. I kind of just resorted to being obsessive over body image, because it felt like I had control.”

In a 2019 study published in the scientific journal, *Body Image*, researchers found that using humor as a coping mechanism on social media may result in “cognitive distraction.” This reduces the negative impact of being exposed to triggering content surrounding body image on these platforms, according to the study.

On TikTok, however, the comic bent of body-checking trends is used as a coded way for users to reveal their anorexia, and to keep the site from shutting down their accounts. In one video by @daisyerollinup that got over a million views, the thin girl side-eyes the camera, with overlaid text saying, “How did you lose 75 pounds??? Give us your secrets.”

Users automatically know what she’s alluding to, acknowledging it in the comments: “Literally I just starved,” one comment says; and another: “I don’t work out, I just have an ED.”

Amanda Frothingham, a dietician in New York City, makes TikTok videos designed to help teens identify the signs and habits of eating disorders. She also critiques diet culture and gives tips to her nearly 19,000 followers on how to have a more normal relationship with food.

Frothingham says she noted the obsession with food and calorie-counting on TikTok, and fears that the app is helping to normalize this unhealthy focus. “A lot of times people think, Oh, I'm just obsessed with food, or I just really love eating, or I'm just really obsessed with being healthy,” she says. “And it's when that obsession takes over their life that it becomes more disordered than just a healthy habit.”

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders reports that nine percent of the United States population, about 28.8 million Americans, will have an eating disorder in their lifetime. For teen girls, suffering from eating disorders may contribute to the amount of social media accounts they use, according to a study published by *International Journal of Eating Disorders* in 2019. In the study, a large number of social media accounts were associated with higher disordered eating scores among teens. And girls with Snapchat and Tumblr accounts were more likely to suffer from disordered eating behaviors.

Alex West, 22, has made videos warning TikTok users about the dangers of body-checking trends. “There’s such a romanization of not getting better,” West says. “A lot of people want to have a reason for why they’re feeling a certain way, and being able to be like, Well I have an eating disorder, that’s why XYZ happened to me. Also, [there is] not wanting to get better because if you do get better you’re not part of a community anymore.”

West has also used Tumblr in the past, and says she finds that thinspo causes more damage on TikTok because of the video format, which has tools for editing the appearance of bodies. Now that technology is advancing, videos can be heavily edited, tricking users into thinking that filters are real.

“Video used to be the way to prove that you were real,” West says. “It’s almost more harmful, because we’re so accustomed to photos being edited, but not videos.”

Exposing digital posing, a 2019 study conducted by Australian researchers found that, in fact, it doesn’t make a difference if social media influencers include self-disclaimers on their edited photos. These distorted images did not appear less realistic to users, nor did women compare themselves less to these images than the same images without self-disclaimers.

Other accounts on TikTok, similar to West’s, warn users about edits, and fake beauty and body standards. There is a large body positivity movement on the app which to some extent counteracts the negative impact of thinspo. In the [majority of the videos](#) where users express distress with their bodies, waves of compliments reassure them that there is nothing wrong with their appearance.

But despite the positivity, the format of the app brings limitations. Unlike Tumblr, where there were long blog posts discussing issues, TikTok only allows for very short video clips, of a maximum of three minutes, to explain very serious topics. The comments are the only way to create discussion.

Frothingham believes the body positivity movement stems from a good place, but it has limitations. “I would love to love every part of my body,” she says, “but we’re humans, and we’re gonna have bad days. Our body image is going to change all the time. So I teach more from an approach of body acceptance versus body positivity—accepting that there are going to be days when we don’t like what we see in the mirror.”

Victoria Goddard, 22, a Black TikTok creator, is also not completely sold on the body positivity movement one sees on the app. “You’ll see people in the comments [saying things] like, you’re so great for posting that, you’re beautiful, I love your confidence. I can never do that. And it’s almost like a backhanded compliment,” Goddard says. “So I think people are overly trying to be positive in the way that’s fake, which is going right back to what you’re trying to stray away from.”

Other creators have also criticized body positivity for being inauthentic, as well, and plus size users have called it out as a [disguise for fatphobia](#). And for Black TikTok creators like Goddard, who don’t get as much traction, the wave of body positivity is not accommodating.

“When I see that my complexion is the only reason my content is not doing as well as somebody that’s doing the exact same thing as me, it gets discouraging,” Goddard says. “And then you see other videos of other Black creators talking about how they don’t want to be doing this anymore. They’re not being pushed and getting the encouragement everyone else is getting.”

The 2021 study *The Double Consciousness Body Image Scale: A body image assessment centering the experiences of Black women* reported that Black women in the US experience double the pressure when it comes to their bodies, as they are expected to adhere to both

Eurocentric and Black beauty standards. Over 70% of Black women agreed to feeling pressure to have light skin, and a different curl pattern.

On the other hand, again, there are communities on TikTok where users can find support for their body image issues. “It's not okay to keep those things buried,” Goddard says, “because it's always going to come out, whether it's 10 years down the line or 10 minutes. So it's important to find a community.”

Researcher and health writer, Mabe, tries to actively change her own algorithm, and suggests young users do the same by diversifying their feeds.

“I will try to actively engage in content that does not have bodies or faces in it. Maybe like peaceful scenes or quotes, or pictures of cute cats or animals because I really want to balance the content that's being delivered to me.”

Those suffering from ED and other issues related to negative body image can find support from the National Eating Disorders helpline at 800-931-2237.