WEEKEND *NOURISHMENT*

CULTURE

The scrolling stomachache

HOW THE INTERNET'S IMPACTS ON OUR EATING HABITS PROMOTE MISINFORMATION

// BY BEATRICE BARILLA

My suitemate flops onto the dining hall's wooden bench and sighs at her typical cafeteria breakfast: "I hate eggs, but they're the only protein they have. I just went to the gym. I need protein!" She shoves a forkful of the plain, lukewarm yellow fluff into her mouth.

It's hard to navigate college, and life in general, without daily reminders of the Internet's grip on eating culture. Online food trends form a body of content that feeds into our own insecurities. My suitemate's eggs are just one example of the protein-craze that saturates the food industry, and more personally, my Instagram algorithm. Let's take a look at some highlights of my recent bed rot episodes:

Cottage cheese, Greek yogurt and grilled chicken breast are the hallmarks of a trendy recipe. A healthy one. And "healthy" has become skinny. Want ice cream without the guilt (because you should obviously feel guilty if you eat ice cream)? Add cottage cheese! Whip out that Ninja Creami and toss in a scoop of your favorite no-sugar-added-oreo-cheesecake-explosion-protein powder! It will be just like ice cream! Scroll.

Liv Schmidt teaches me the skinny way to eat a croissant, and by that she means ripping it apart and taking little nibbles. Scroll.

Sweet treats of the night: 0 percent fat yogurt bowl, microwaved protein bar, Drizzilicious: "just 90 calories for 21 pieces!" On trying the latter — a mini rice cake with a dusting of sweetness and a drizzle of guiltlessness — my friend announces that they were good, but they were like eating air. The new goal of food isn't to provide energy, but to satisfy your hunger with the least number of calories and the best combination of macros.

Another distorted relationship with food appears in mukbang videos. In these videos, mass amounts of food — often those deemed unhealthy or guilty — are eaten in one sitting. Some derive enjoyment from watching others eat in excess what they deny themselves, while others watch because of the spectacle. Either way, food transcends a source of energy, instead existing on a pedestal or as a means of monetization. Diving back into my For You page, we find exhibit A:

"Crumbl of the week!" Crumbl, a cookie company, is the embodiment of consumerism in Internet food culture. They boast a shifting weekly menu that hosts brand crossovers and celebrity appearances, clever marketing through online reviewers and mukbangers and a nutrition label that sparks heated controversy. Let's go capitalism! Weekly reviewers devour the giant cookies in their car seats, some finishing all six flavors with a glass — or jug — of milk. Taking a peek into the comments section, we see some drooling over the lineup, some ranting about the raw-dough consistency of their most recent Crumbl "cookie" and others in attack mode. "Don't you know those have like 1,000 calories in them?" declares a peeved mukbang cynic. Crumbl benefits from this discourse, charging a not-so-sweet $30 for a six-pack. This array of responses illustrates the effect of the Internet on our interactions with food: is it something to find pleasure in, or something to feel guilty about?



ILLUSTRATION BY SEBASTIAN WOODS

If macros and mukbangs are the pillars of social media food culture, gut health is another plate at the same table. Let's take a last gander into the internet marketing trends for gut health.

In voyaging across the treacherous ocean of my Reels, I would be remiss in leaving out the Internet's drink of choice: matcha. Matcha does it all: perceived health benefits, pastel color, flavor profile subject to debate. I must admit my status as a matcha enjoyer for the sake of journalistic integrity, but I have to acknowledge its place in the online food realm. Scroll.

Colorful marketing strikes again, this time in the form of Alix Earle in a bikini perfectly perched on a pool floatie and caressing her drink of choice: Poppi. It's soda, but it's prebiotic! You can "love soda again!" Scroll.

Various women sporting Lululemon sets that happen to perfectly reveal a set of sculpted abs clutch their chia water, their celery juice, their jars of sea moss. But do these concoctions actually improve our health? Will drinking chia water make us look like her? Unlikely.

All the TikToks and Instagram Reels and Youtube Shorts that we see online are perfectly poised marketing tools, not substantiated promises of health and happiness. We should take them with a grain of salt.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

SkinnyTok: It's effortless, right?

// BY MARIEM IQBAL

"Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels."

It's a phrase repeated over and over again and an idea lurking almost everywhere we look: Grandmas exclaim "look how chubby!" while pinching your cheeks. Bright ads of supermodels playing pickleball while seemingly not breaking a sweat grace our screens. In the grocery store aisle, magazine headlines scream "SHE'S A WHALE!" and signs warn "A moment on the lips, forever on the hips". There seems to be no end to aphorisms about food.

But recently, a new phrase seems to be emerging: "Nothing tastes as good as being this effortless feels." I am, of course, referring to the motto of Liv Schmidt, the bona fide queen of SkinnyTok.

A quick refresher for those lucky enough to be uninitiated: Liv Schmidt and her peer creators have made a living posting on social media encouraging young people, especially young girls, to eat as little as possible. Dear reader, I am aware that there is, of course, a difference between fitness inspiration content and videos that border on promoting eating disorders, but I am also aware that that line — which Schmidt treads daily — is as thin as she is. How could I not think so when she posts videos showing off hunger-hacks like "a decaf unsweetened cappuccino with a splash of milk kills the craving without the calories" and telling people to "get up, drink a ton of water, go to the office bathroom and do like 10 squats, because that's better than going and grabbing an office vending machine candy bar"?



ILLUSTRATION BY RANA ROOSEVELT

Logically, I can identify her rhetoric and see through the fallacy. Ah yes, honor your body and hunger cravings by ... taking appetite suppressants. Totally makes sense, yep. Ideally, I would scoff, toss it all out of my mind and scroll to the next thing. Yet even as I criticize them, a part of me still mentally files these tips away for later reference, a response to a society in which women's bodies are an evergreen topic of conversation and critique.

In the same video when Schmidt shares her lovely coffee order, she informs her viewers that "chic girls don't raid or order the whole entire bar menu. They sip a chic, elegant cappuccino ... a splash of milk feels indulgent, but it's really just discipline disguised as luxury."

This is a consistent theme: being skinny is equated to being rich, to being luxurious, to the It Girl — trademark pending — lifestyle. These influencers aren't selling diets; they're selling a lifestyle. They're saying, for a small fee, you too, can be like me! Doesn't seem so effortless to me.

Schmidt's online coaching platform, The Skinni Societe, claims that the lifestyle she promotes "isn't restriction," but rather "taste." The Societe has taken great steps to distance themselves from the "loadedness" of skinny with a "y," specifying that skinni with an "i" is instead a "mindset."

They are also careful to emphasize that Schmidt does not encourage or promote disordered eating. It's funny to read that, as though writing those words does anything to truly negate the effect of Schmidt's content on impressionable young people. The Skinni Societe claims they have undergone a "rebirth." In September 2024, her account was banned by TikTok as a result of a Wall Street Journal profile highlighting allegations that Schmidt's content is harmful.

Whether or not Schmidt promotes disordered eating is a judgement I'll leave to the professionals. What I am interested in, however, is how distinctly out of place her content feels. I swear it feels like it was just yesterday that we were bumping "All About That Bass" and miming along to Lizzo's flute solos. Now, the Kardashians are dissolving their alleged filler and removing their, again alleged, Brazilian butt lifts, and every second person is getting buccal fat removal.

The very conversation that Schmidt is entertaining would have led to a slew of #livschmidtisoverparty posts back in 2018.

Is this phenomenon just a return of the fashion cycle back to the early aughts "heroin chic," when we treated our bodies as if they were clothes to be altered? Is it a direct response to the body positivity movement of the 2010s, which never truly went deep enough and was only corporately embraced — the body-centered version of companies rolling out the discounted rainbow socks for Pride? Is it tied to the accessibility of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic and GLP-1? Is it the sudden online ubiquity of domesticity-loving housewives, 'trad-wives,' and the conservative call for a return to traditional values? Is it a secret fifth thing?

Kate Moss has recently distanced herself from the infamous quote that opens this piece. In the world we inhabit, in which trends dictate our lives and anything about anyone can be posted at any time, there's no way to know if she really means that. The body positivity movement to her may have just been a trend, and renouncing her previous claims may have simply been a way to avoid being canceled.

It's so easy nowadays to lead a double life. Your Instagram story and posts are your idealized reality: the beautiful, carefree, glimmering version of yourself that is accompanied by your adoring friends all while the newest trending audio plays over it. Behind the scenes, you text the group chat and pore over every picture, asking "do I look fat in this?"

I'm not judging. I'm guilty of it too. If it's true for us, I wonder what it means for Schmidt and others who have built their brands off of having the 'ideal' body. Is she hungry? Hungry to feel desired and wanted? Hungry to build her empire? Is she physically hungry? Does she think about food, and how to avoid it, morning, noon and night? Unless the content of her TikToks switches, I won't ever know.

Schmidt is just one person in an endless parade of people who have decided it's their place to comment on women's bodies. The difference is, in our new internet landscape, those comments are hard to escape. Almost everything we do is online: our work, our communication, our doomscrolling solace. While our technology has advanced, our society has not matched its pace.

Everyday the internet is inundated with edited pictures of perfect people with perfect bodies, spilling their secrets to good looks. You could try to go analog: flip through Cosmopolitan, see the newest crash diet and put it away. Turn on the TV and there's an ad for a GLP-1. Turn it off and pick up your phone. Begin scrolling and you might stumble upon it: #SkinnyTok.

When I first encountered the hashtag, I was up late on my couch after another day of pretending to be a productive student. Mindlessly munching on my favorite Trader Joe's Taki knock-offs, I scrolled through recipes of brown butter chocolate chip cookies, which turned into cottage cheese high-protein dessert swaps, which turned into workout motivation, before the algorithm dropped me into #SkinnyTok. I found myself unwittingly down the rabbit hole, always a swipe away from a video of someone whisper-yelling affirmations to work out, eat less, walk more. I put away the Trader Joe's chip bag.

It's unclear to me where to go from here. It is not Schmidt or other women like her who created this cultural obsession with beauty and thinness to begin with, yet they are vehement proponents and a crucial part of the narrative's perpetuation. Maybe that's the real problem: not that Schmidt exists, but that we keep making space for her — not just online, but in our minds. She tells us skinny is effortless. But it's not. What's effortless is the way we keep coming back to the same ideal, again and again, dressing it up in new faces, new fonts, new hashtags. Skinny with a "y" or an "i" — the hunger feels the same.

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