9 Wellness TikTok

Morning Routines, Eating Well, and Getting Ready to Be "That Girl"

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In April 2021, the TikTok trend now known as "#ThatGirl" began to dominate the subcultures of the app focused on beauty, lifestyle, study habits, and healthy eating. Videos uploaded to the platform that feature this hashtag—usually with at least one other hashtag such as #SelfcareTikTok, #HealthyLifestyle, #MorningRoutine, #DailyBlog or #MiniBlog, #Motivation, #Productivity, or #Aesthetic—foreground the habits that "high-achieving" women in their 20s and 30s suggest are foundational to their personal and professional success. Content creators who embrace the #ThatGirl aesthetic effectively produce video collages devoted to the pursuit of a systematic lifestyle before, during, and after the 9-5 workday or school day. By editing together various one-second and five-second video clips of their daily activities and combining them with self-reflections and "mood" appropriate music, these creators develop step-by-step templates for "wellness" that their viewers are encouraged to adopt to start their respective wellness journey.

Consistent across these videos is the creator's emphasis that achieving wellness occurs through carefully assembling and following a manicured morning routine that gradually translates to "becoming that girl." As writers for the popular press have observed, these videos are structured as mini vlogs of daily routines that follow a formula: wake up as early as 5 a.m.; put on a "matching set" of workout clothes to go to the gym or work out from home; prepare a colorful but modest, healthy breakfast; hydrate with lemon water while also drinking a matcha; apply name brand body-care products in the shower and hang eucalyptus leaves from the showerhead; follow a skincare regimen comprised of products with minimalist packaging and ingredients; change into a matching "lounge set" or color-coordinated work attire; light a candle while writing in a copy of *The Five-Minute Journal*; and

grab a "treat" at a coffee shop while walking or driving to a corporate job or university class.[1]

Morning routine videos are filmed in bright lighting, are enhanced by a sunrise, and typically feature cohesive, "neutral" tones such as all-white or grey bedding, workout clothes, and room décor. Some TikTok profiles supplement these hyper-productive morning routines with soothing nighttime routines at either the end of a daily vlog (e.g., a "day to night" vlog), or upload them as stand-alone posts (e.g., night-time routines). In contrast to the morning routine, nighttime routine videos are dimly lit by bedroom string lights, often include a sunset, and show creators running a bath, watching a movie, reading a book, making dinner, or lighting name brand candles or incense after getting home from work. The wellness pursued by #ThatGirl is ultimately designed to uphold productivity as an idealized form of empowerment, evidenced by how morning routine posts outnumber nighttime routines posted under the hashtag, and by how content creators perform rest in their content rather than actually resting (i.e., turning off their phone and disconnecting from social media).

This chapter considers how the #ThatGirl trend on TikTok derives its influence in part by converging elements from the beauty, lifestyle, study habit, and healthy eating subgenres on the platform, which culminates in the creation of a multifaceted Wellness TikTok subculture. By incorporating self-improvement strategies from each of these subgenres into their online self-production, content creators who post #ThatGirl videos generate and endorse an informal, multistep "wellness plan" that facilitates the average woman's transformation into her optimal self at home and at work. These videos imply that the morning routine is a universal formula for success that can be customized to suit any woman's lifestyle so long as she puts in the effort necessary to achieve her goals. However, this essay argues that the aspirational lifestyle of habit-tracking, healthy eating, and self-care mediated through #ThatGirl videos on TikTok ascribes to white supremacist views of beauty and productivity by idealizing the "look" of wellness as that of a woman who is laboring at all times—for her job and for her body—and who is young, white or white-passing, thin, able-bodied, cisgender, and whose gender performance abides by heteronormative expectations of femininity. Through brief textual analysis of how motivational speeches, attention to time, and "productive" habits play "on a loop" in these videos, this chapter demonstrates how the #ThatGirl trend contributes to mainstream beauty pressures by instructing girls and women to perceive of time off as an opportunity to optimize rather than rest.

Idealized Internet Girlhoods: From YouTuber Self-brands to Going Viral on TikTok

The aspirational, daily vlog format of Wellness TikTok takes cues from the videos produced by beauty and wellness "gurus" in the beauty, lifestyle, and wellness communities on YouTube in the late 2000s, all of which contributed to the social media influencer boom on Instagram in the 2010s that preceded TikTok's gradual surge in popularity in the United States starting in 2018. In their "how-to" instructional videos and "a day in the life" vlogs, content creators known as "YouTubers" instruct their viewers on requested topics such as creating a makeup look, developing a personal style, decorating their home, shopping on a budget, improving their performance at work, and preparing meals. As celebrity studies scholars have argued in their analyses of social media influencers as micro-celebrity practitioners, YouTubers and Instagram influencers invest time in creating an online self or public persona that initially mimics elements of traditional celebrity branding before proceeding to develop new, original forms of self-presentation on the Internet.[2] The popularity of these creators and the longevity of their careers are predicated on what media and girlhood studies scholar Emma Maguire describes as the perceived authenticity of the YouTuber's "automedial self," or the self-representations they put forth in their videos and supplement with other online activity like tweets and blog posts that circulate through social media over time.[3] To initiate and sustain audience engagement with their content in the form of likes and comments on posts, video shares, channel subscriptions, and profile "follows," YouTubers and Instagram influencers refine what media and girlhood studies scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser terms "the post-feminist self-brand": a process by which the girl creator purportedly achieves a sense of empowerment as she "authorizes herself to be consumed through her own self-production" of an identity through online spaces like YouTube.[4] In keeping with Maguire and Banet-Weiser, what becomes clear is how the self-brand makes publicly visible the girl self and commodifies her into a product that can be "branded, managed, and distributed within a cultural marketplace,"[5] which consumers gain access to through their own automedial selves on platforms like Instagram or Facebook.[6]

The development of a self-brand, which remains conducive to achieving "Instafame" through YouTube and Instagram, however, does not translate to TikTok due to the app's trend-based design. Social media studies scholar Crystal Abidin argues that TikTokers are often not curating a persona as a requisite for engagement, "but

instead are actively and very quickly adapting from the latest trends and viral practices on TikTok, to attempt varieties of styles—across hashtags, keywords, filters, audio memes, narrative memes—to aim for the For You Page, or the 'golden ticket' that would allow one to gain an immense number of followers overnight."[7] That is, TikTokers can reallocate the time typically spent by content creators on self-brand curation to focus instead on the creative labor of incorporating trending sounds, dances, terms, and aesthetics into the videos they produce as often as possible to increase the chances that their videos are seen by the public. Media scholar Andrea Ruehlicke emphasizes the significance of TikTok's trend-based design in that "the app drops the user into an always playing stream" of content on the "For You Page" (also known as the "FYP"), which limits user-direction beyond liking a video, following a creator, or swiping past the video if uninterested or done watching.[8] According to Ruehlicke, "belonging" to a community on TikTok differs from other social media platforms in that the user must consciously devote time to engaging with videos—that is, providing the algorithm with enough user data—and "demonstrate the correct interests to be read as belonging to a variety of TikTok spaces."[9] Without doing so, what is considered more "niche" content is unlikely to appear on a user's For You Page unless it is already trending and automatically moved to this page. Social media scholars Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo argue that this design makes TikTok unique in that it creates an "algorithmized self" of "intra rather than interpersonal connection," based on its trending algorithm, which is advertised as custom to each profile, and the individual's respective content creation on the platform. By contrast, other forms of social media give way to a "networked self" in which an online self is generated through engagement with their social circle (i.e., Instagram followers or Facebook friends).[10]

Although TikTok as a platform has effectively generated the potential of social media stardom through viral trends and challenges rather than self-brands, the platform functions as what theater and performance studies scholar Trevor Boffone terms a "white space" that has given way to "The D'Amelio Effect." As he writes elsewhere and in Chapter 1 of this collection, "The D'Amelio Effect" recognizes how white TikTokers, particularly white teenage girls like Charli D'Amelio or young white women like Addison Rae, rise to prominence on the platform by copying, appropriating, and profiting from the creative labor of Black teenage girls, who by contrast receive little to no credit for their work.[11] After dancing the #RenegadeChallenge that was choreographed and created by Jalaiah Harmon, D'Amelio's career

skyrocketed from social media fame to legacy media opportunities like reality television and a Super Bowl commercial. The mainstream success of D'Amelio exemplifies how, according to Boffone, TikTok as a platform "promotes whiteness while obfuscating Blackness and the cultural contributions of the Black artists who sing these songs and the Black dancers who choreograph the corresponding dance challenges."[12] Similarly, media and girlhood studies scholar Melanie Kennedy argues that Charli D'Amelio's dominance as the most-followed TikToker is reflective of how "algorithmic suppression and spectacularisation render some girlhoods hypervisible and others hidden in the shadows."[13] More specifically, she contends that D'Amelio's meteoric rise on the platform is a "continuation" of how normative girlhood is foregrounded in celebrity culture, and how the cultural site of the girl's bedroom contributes to the "spectacular mundanity" that renders girls like D'Amelio "goofy and relatable" to their audience.

That is, while white girl and women TikTokers can achieve popularity by appropriating and performing to Black creators' original sounds, dances, and aesthetics, Black girl and women TikTokers as trend-making cultural producers remain undervalued despite their contributions. The viral hashtag #BamaRushTok, which dominated the platform in August 2021 and followed young women as they rushed sororities at the University of Alabama, also reinforces this trend. Among the most popular videos uploaded with this hashtag were #ootd, or Outfit of the Day, during which one or more aspiring sorority sisters would model an itemized breakdown of what she was wearing and where she had purchased it. Among the many white women contributing content to #BamaRush was a single, mixed-race woman named Makayla Culpepper (@whatwouldjimmybuffettdo) whose #ootd videos for rush made her the undeniable "star" of the hashtag. Both her mediated personality and presence as a non-white girl in the #BamaRush space were celebrated by viewers who commented on these posts that Culpepper was "the most real" of any of the girls posting about rush. However, she was unexpectedly dropped from sororities over a video of her underage drinking, which prompted many users to question if Culpepper's mixed-race identity and heightened popularity compared to white women on #BamaRushTok was the actual reason for her dismissal.[14] That is, even when Black creators temporarily experience visibility or popularity in viral TikTok hashtags, platform-based or external intervention make it notably more difficult for a Black creator or creator of color to sustain career longevity and "earn" mainstream support that white creators often automatically receive.

Becoming "That Girl" by Example: Self-motivation, Habit-tracking, and Scheduled Time

The viral #ThatGirl trend, which has more than 1.3 billion views, is Wellness TikTok's most recognizable trending hashtag, and through its reverence for a white, cis-hetero-patriarchal beauty ideal that envisions a route to empowerment through optimizing one's productivity at home and at work, exemplifies what Boffone characterizes as how "TikTok is designed to uphold whiteness as not just the norm, but as something aspirational."[15] While the "The D'Amelio Effect" is on full-display as white girl and women creators rise to prominence through appropriating Black creators' cultural production under viral hashtags such as #RenegadeChallenge and #BamaRushTok, the #ThatGirl trend dominates Wellness TikTok as another subset of "relatable" girlhood, one that also relies on the bedroom as a cultural site of identity construction and online public performance. More so than these other spaces, however, the #ThatGirl trend explicitly foregrounds the home in the creator's content as the site that makes tangible her systematic approach to perfection (i.e., spaces where she can project her fitness videos on the wall, lay out her yoga mat, and prepare her meals), and in doing so, idealizes thin, white girls and women as a universally desirable beauty ideal that all should aspire toward.

The pursuit of an aspirational #ThatGirl look and lifestyle through an organized series of routines framed as "self-care" resembles the self-brand logic that propelled beauty and wellness gurus and Instagram influencers to the forefront of social media from the late 2000s onward, even as TikTok as a platform has strayed from this formula for success. As girl and women creators film their morning routines from their bedroom and suggest home décor/organization to be a contributor to their success, they develop credibility as a wellness cultural producer by using recognizable elements from YouTube and Instagram such as makeup and skincare collections, color-coded wardrobes, and perfectly organized kitchens to facilitate their wellness journeys. Importantly, media scholar Florencia García-Rapp details at-length in her study of beauty YouTuber Bubzbeauty how online communities like beauty YouTube are comprised of both a commercial sphere featuring "content-oriented videos and market-oriented videos" such as tutorials and product reviews, as well as a community sphere consisting of "relational and motivational" videos such as vlogs and self-help guides.[16] Creators on Wellness TikTok merge elements of the commercial and community spheres through the #ThatGirl trend by producing videos in which they edit together a series of brief video clips that

document each step of their morning routine, overlay them with either written or spoken motivations in first- or second-person address, and include background music that matches the pacing of the edit.

In some videos, the motivation is concise and delivered through the post description, as in the case of a video uploaded by @virgohabits on May 27, 2021, which features the caption "new day, new opportunity #5amclub #MorningRoutine #Productivity #ThatGirl ib: @vanessatiiu." The video itself is more detailed, as it is visually bookended by a MacBook laptop showing the start time of 5:30 a.m. and the end time of 8:00 a.m. as the video cycles through clips "on a loop" of the creator getting out of bed and looking in a floor-length mirror, journaling, working out, changing clothes, preparing breakfast, and starting her work for the day. These video clips are supplemented by brief, written descriptions on each part of the content creator's morning routine, which are overlayed on the related video clip to produce a series of instructions that read, "THAT girl morning routine," "wake up early," "make bed," "workout set," "journal + plan," "yoga + pilates," "lounge set," "healthy breakfast," "work + study."

Similarly, in a video uploaded by @wellnesswithshreya on October 5, 2021, the caption "Morning routines that get me excited for my 9–5s #MorningRoutine, #ThatGirl, #wfh, #Motivation, #Productivity" is displayed beneath a video set to an excerpt from the *Gossip Girl* theme as clips of her morning routine play on-screen. While this vlog does not include small details such as written descriptions overlayed on each video clip, it demonstrates a more casual approach to #ThatGirl by visualizing how some creators rely on video clips of journaling, grabbing coffee before work, and making their bed to convey their daily commitment to balance and wellness. In other videos, the motivation is delivered through audio, as in the case of a video uploaded by @annasjournal on September 27, 2021, but similarly relies on video clips to show by example how to practice a wellness routine. The video opens with text that reads "productive morning routine" and features hashtags that include #MondayMotivation, #MorningRoutine, and #HealthyLifestyle. It features an audio clip set to instrumental music of lifestyle YouTuber Emma Chamberlain stating, "The second that you stop getting in your own way, and you're kind to yourself, and you're graceful with yourself, it's crazy to see how you blossom." As the audio plays, the content creator is shown waking up, changing into workout clothes, following the "Trainingsplan" organized on her MacBook laptop, showering, making breakfast, making coffee, and sitting down to eat.

In mini vlogs like these and others uploaded with #ThatGirl tagged, the comment sections feature other users posting compliments about

the creator's appearance, requesting more information on where to purchase items shown in the video, and asking for recommendations on how to get started on their own wellness journey. These comment sections reflect how it is through the content creator's embodiment of the #ThatGirl aesthetic, and the repetitive, normalized framing of thin white bodies as the optimal beauty ideal to aspire toward, that other girls and women are compelled to participate in the trend of producing and regulating their wellness. What remains insidious about this version of relatable girlhood, however, is the suggestion that the only obstacle to achieving the aesthetic is the user's lack of dedication or effort toward curating the diet, exercise plan, wardrobe, and schedule necessary to become #ThatGirl in her own right. That is, rather than problematize or disrupt how whiteness and thin bodies are codified as perfect symbols of wellness in diet culture and mainstream media, the #ThatGirl trend reinforces it by generating a social pressure for all girls and women to perceive of their online self as incomplete without adhering to this aesthetic.

Notes

1 See Sahar Arshad, "What Does It Mean to Be 'That Girl'?" *Bustle*, August 11, 2021, https://www.bustle.com/life/what-does-that-girl-mean-tiktok-viral-trend; Michelle Santiago Cortés, "Who Is 'That Girl'? She's All of Us", *Refinery* 29, July 30, 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/07/10606927/that-girl-tiktok-gen-z-trend; Emma Gillman, "'That Girl' Is Everywhere Right Now. Here's Why I Find Her Toxic.'," *Mama Mia*, October 7, 2021, https://www.mamamia.com.au/that-girl-tiktok-trend/; Shamani Joshi, "I Tried to Be TikTok's 'That Girl' for a Week," *Vice*, September 9, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/5db8ek/tiktok-youtube-viral-trend-that-girl-internet-genz-challenge; Ruchira Sharma, "Who Is 'That Girl' & Why Is TikTok Obsessed with Her?" *Refinery* 29, July 10, 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/07/10551994/tiktok-obsession-with-that-girl; Heather Wake, "Romanticizing? Or False Advertising? What's Really behind TikTok's 'That Girl' Trend," *Upworthy*, October 5, 2021, https://www.upworthy.com/tiktok--that-girl-trends, and Hannah Yasharoff, "What TikTok's Viral 'That Girl' Trend Isn't Showing You – and Why That Matters," *USA Today*, October 1, 2021, https://news.yahoo.com/tiktoks-viral-girl-trend-isnt-120042853.html.
2 See Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff, "From Celebrity to Influencer: Tracing the Diffusion of Celebrity Value across the Data Stream," in *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 194–212; Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, "Self-Branding, 'Micro-Celebrity' and the Rise of Social Media Influencers," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016): 191–208; P. David Marshall, "The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media," *Celebrity*

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 3 Emma Maguire, "Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles," *Biography* 38, no. 1, (2015), 73–75.
 4 Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube," in *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2011), 277–294.
 5 Ibid., 286.
 6 Maguire, "Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles," 75.
 7 Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 80.
 8 Andrea Ruehlicke, "All the Content, Just for You: TikTok and Personalization," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture* 27, no. 1 (2020), https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/10/content-just-for-you/.
 9 Ibid.
10 Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, "TikTok and the 'Algorithmized Self': A New Model of Online Interaction," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2020): 1–3. https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/issue/view/679; https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/11172/9856
11 Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.
12 Trevor Boffone, "The D'Amelio Effect: TikTok, Charli D'Amelio, and the Construction of Whiteness," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone (New York: Routledge, 2022), 7. See also Boffone, *Renegades.*
13 Melanie Kennedy. "'If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now': TikTok Celebrity, Girls and the Coronavirus Crisis," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 6 (2020): 1073.
14 Dante Silva, "#BamaRushTok Has Taken Over," *Paper*, August 18, 2021, https://www.papermag.com/alabama-rush-tiktok-2654710069.html?rebelltitem=14#rebelltitem14.
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16 Florencia García-Rapp, "Popularity markers on YouTube's Attention Economy: The Case of Bubzbeauty," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 236.