

Clickbait or Clinical: The Science We Skip

Jenna McHale

Department of English, Anoka-Ramsey Community College

ENGL 1121: College Reading and Critical Writing

Prof. Chris McCarthy

April 11, 2025

Like many people, I get most of my health advice from social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. It's easily accessible and typically persuasive- when there are hundreds of people with “perfect bodies” giving you a step-by-step tutorial on how to look just like them, why wouldn’t you believe them? That train of thought is the exact reason why so much misinformation surrounding physical health and wellness is perceived as fact. Have you ever felt like maybe it’s a little unrealistic that you should drink a gallon of water a day, one hour of intense cardio minimum, 100+ grams of protein, 30+ grams of fiber, 1200 or less calories, cut out sugar and carbs, go to the gym *and* still have the time and energy to do everything else in your life? That’s because it is. It’s easy to fall victim to believing that everyone’s doing something, when the videos you watch are tailored perfectly to your preferences- it makes these unrealistic lifestyles seem more common than they are. The health ideals perpetrated by social media, specifically TikTok, have negative and draining effects on not only your body, but also your mental health. It’s incredibly detrimental for young audiences to be ingesting the idea that you have to do everything to this extreme perfectionism if you want to be attractive and fit. These trends, such as rapid weight loss diets, untested supplements, extreme workout regimes, processed food consumption and body “detoxes” have led to low self-esteem and improperly fueled bodies, which can have long-term effects. The increasing frequency of mental illness over the last few years hasn’t been out of nowhere- it’s a direct result of decreasing self-esteem and increasing unrealistic expectations.

One of the most common myths regarding health advice on TikTok is that you can lose weight quickly through extreme diets. These drastic “diets” often promote unhealthy practices that are not good for your body. Skinny is not necessarily healthy, and I think that’s a fact that has somehow gotten overlooked when considering your body’s health and food consumption. A few diets that I’ve seen trending this last year have been “fruit only” diets, “no sugar” diets, “no

carbs” diets, and extreme calorie deficits. The problem with these diets is it cuts out a lot of nutrients and food groups that your body needs to thrive, such as carbs. According to Mayo Clinic staff, “Carbohydrates break down into a source of energy for the body, especially the brain. They also add fiber to the diet which helps protect against some diseases. And in some cases, carbs can help manage weight” (Mayo Clinic, 2025). Carbs play an essential role in not only body and brain function, but also in protecting your body against diseases and managing your weight. Carbs give you the energy you need every day, and it’s important to not cut them out of your diet because TikTok tells you they cause weight gain. Calorie deficits have also had a large emphasis on TikTok this year, with influencers making videos of “what they eat in a day” for viewers to use as a template. The problem with this is that everyone’s body is different, and how many calories you need for an effective calorie deficit is very different than what someone else needs, thus you can’t use someone else’s template for your own body. Additionally, extreme calorie deficits can actually be incredibly dangerous. Studies have shown that extreme or continuous calorie deficits not only slow your metabolism (which can result in weight gain) but impact your fertility. Therefore, it’s important if you’re going on an extreme weight loss journey to contact your doctor or a nutritionist, who can aid you in your goals while making sure you’re remaining healthy. You can also follow the CDC’s guidelines, such as their MyPlate, to make sure you’re getting the proper nutrients your body needs while reaching your goals.

Another myth that has gained traction this year is the ingestion of largely unregulated supplements to aid your diets. Supplements first rose in popularity synonymously with calorie deficits, as when you don’t eat the proper amount and variety of nutrients you need your body can become ill and fatigued. Thus, the need for supplements increased. I’m sure many of you, if you have TikTok, have seen “Coconut Cult”, where it’s advertised that one spoonful a day will flatten your stomach, or Bloom Greens, which has similar effects. The fact about dietary

supplements is that many of them are unnecessary and advertised as a “cure all” substance, when most supplements are largely unregulated. According to a staff writer from the American Medical Association: “Unlike prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications, dietary supplements are not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for safety and efficacy” (AMA, 2022). The positive effects of these supplements are largely exaggerated, with their promised effects (such as no bloating or a flat stomach) are deemed permissible as marketing, not as science. You also have to be careful when taking supplements that they aren’t interacting with prescription medications dangerously. A researcher at John Hopkins University states: “The researchers concluded that multivitamins don’t reduce the risk for heart disease, cancer, cognitive decline (such as memory loss and slowed-down thinking) or an early death” (John Hopkins Medicine, 2025). Most doctors deem vitamins and other dietary supplements to be virtually useless if you’re eating a mostly balanced and well-rounded diet. As previously suggested to talk to your doctor about going on any extreme diets, such as no carbs, the same applies to supplement ingestion. Doctors have studied medicine for long periods of time and grow their beliefs and knowledge based on science and research. Thus, the same conclusion can be drawn- talk to your doctor.

Another myth perpetrated by social media is that you need to have an intense, time-consuming exercise regime to be able to achieve your health and fitness goals. Many of us have seen some of these trends from “Gymfluencers”, such as an hour on the Stairmaster every day after a workout, or 3+ hour workouts that you’re supposed to do daily. This seems pretty unrealistic, right? Most people don’t have enough time or energy in a day to be able to meet these rigorous expectations, and thus it leads to a feeling “less than” or helpless. The fact is that you don’t need to spend 2-3 hours a day working out to be healthy. Author Katie Mather describes Gymfluencer Ben Carpenter’s take on the cardio trend of “Incline Walks” where a

variety of randomly selected speeds, inclines and duration are selected by fitness influencers and perpetrated as “the best cardio for fat loss”: “Carpenter pointed out that this is a recurring trend on TikTok — people filming themselves walking on treadmills, selecting a random incline and speed and then pairing it to a trending TikTok sound so it goes viral” (Mather, 2023). The fact that influencers themselves are recognizing and calling out the redundancy behind the widespread myths surrounding exercise regimes highlights the disparity between opinion and science. Another instance of this was the Chloe Ting ab workouts during 2020 that many young girls fell victim to, myself included. It depicted an hour plus of ab workouts every day for two weeks that promised to give you abs and shrink your waist by several inches. Author Madeline Galassi, who participated in the “two-week shred”, concludes: “Do I have a six-pack? No. Do I look like the before-and-after photos people tag her in? No. I look the same as when I started...” (Galassi, 2021). This is significant because the Chloe Ting Ab Challenge was one of the first times fitness became *really* prevalent on social media, and regardless of how it was disproven, people still believed in it. False and misleading information is easily spreadable but difficult to stop once it’s begun. Next time you want to try a new workout routine, it’s important to check the legitimacy of it and tweak the exercises to fit into your own schedule. The reality is you don’t need to exercise for hours every day to maintain a healthy physique. The combination of a healthy lifestyle, balanced diet, and consistent workouts is scientifically proven to be beneficial for your body.

Another trend that’s been circulating on TikTok is the villanization of processed foods. Influencers highlight that a primary cause for weight gain and body fat is the consumption of processed foods and refined ingredients. They promote far more expensive alternatives, and the reality is, especially in current times, that many people cannot afford that. While processed foods agreeably aren’t the healthiest options, it’s what’s realistic for most people. Again, this is where

the concept of balance comes into play. If you're balancing processed foods with whole foods and choosing healthy alternatives when you can, you're going to be fine. Author Amos Zeeberg of 'Open Mind' writes an essay regarding the true impacts of processed food consumption: "The field of nutrition has a long history of overreacting to contemporary research trends, and we risk making the same mistake now with processing. 'We've had that issue in the past, as with low-fat recommendations' that later turned out to be counterproductive, says Duane Mellor, a dietitian at Aston University in England" (Zeeberg, 2024). A common issue with social media is the tendency to jump to conclusions due to our ever persistent need to seek answers and understanding, even if we don't know what we're talking about. Processed foods cannot be proven to be directly linked to weight gain or other health problems, however it's often given the blame anyways. While it is likely that processed foods aren't the healthiest choice, experts urge people to not cut them out of their diet completely- largely due to expenses and the general unrealistic notion of doing so.

Most importantly, these improbable expectations and standards are causing low self-esteem and are damaging not only to our physical bodies, but also our mental health. It's scary that eating disorders and harmful workout routines and standards have become popularized. It is not safe to only eat fruit for a month, nor to eat under 1000 calories a day if you're not directly working with a doctor or nutritionist. Promoting the "perfect body" and then giving a nearly impossible to follow step-by-step to achieve it is incredibly detrimental to young minds and confidence levels. It has been proven in study after study that social media has negatively impacted the mental health and self-confidence in young people, and a main reason of this is because of how easy it is to compare yourself to others and point out your own flaws and insecurities.

Ultimately, almost anything to an extreme or obsessive extent is not good for you, including working out and dieting. Balance needs to be the centerfold of our lifestyles in order to truly be healthy. Listening to doctors and science is also incredibly important, just as is doing your own research before blindly contributing to the spread of false information. Everyone knows not to believe everything you read online, but that seems to have been lost in translation when it comes to the fitness and health community, simply because when you see someone with abs speaking from personal experience, it feels like all the evidence for them to be true and logical is right in front of you. Balance is not a lesson that can be learned overnight, but by building good habits and continuous practice it is achievable. My own health and fitness have always been something I've struggled with, as I'm sure many other young girls can relate to. It's hard not to feel guilty when eating something with sugar in it or skipping cardio on a day I'm not feeling well. The most important lesson that I'm still trying to learn is balance and listening to my body. Next time you're getting ready to try out the latest health fad on TikTok, take a few minutes to find out the science behind it.

References

Galassi, M. (2021, June 9). I Tried Chloe Ting's 2-Week Shred- Here's What I Thought. *The Everygirl*. <https://theeverygirl.com/chloe-ting-2-week-shred/>

John Hopkins University. (2025). Is There Really Any Benefit to Multivitamins? *John Hopkins Medicine*. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/is-there-really-any-benefit-to-multivitamins>

Mayo Clinic Staff. (2025, January 24). Carbohydrates: How Carbs Fit Into a Healthy Lifestyle.

Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/carbohydrates/art-20045705>

Mather, K. (2023, June 16). Fitness Coach Debunks Popular Diet and Workout Myths on Tiktok: 'It Can Actually Have a Negative Effect'. *In The Know | Yahoo.*

https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/fitness-coach-debunks-popular-diet-and-workout-myths-on-tiktok-it-can-actually-have-a-negative-effect-203004757.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAABJVvubgnknkrns5C8GPg4roEmjrB3nfzQJ9seM-hjeBbOLZ_bgZRZIuYJJ3JMtc_kZDzT9OMYFmehOa_KlyycQc0PxelBZni2uDdkD5NP-NzS9CTHJIkeyy1yKLjUF_4kfPFm3YuxSmRdl7YVeVsGbqSYd2Gm-xtC6QV0KW79

Staff News Writer. (2022, May 11). Dietary Supplements: Underregulated, Unknown and Maybe Unsafe. *American Medical Association.* <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/dietary-supplements-underregulated-unknown-and-maybe-unsafe>

Zeeberg, A. (2024, April 26). The Processed Food Fight. *Open Mind.*

https://www.openmindmag.org/articles/the-processed-food-fight?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw2N2_BhCAARIsAK4pEkW2DLIAN5YKUzXhcZ4AY7y6txrWx-ttObV-3xAnRDvrYMtPkh3KawYaAnP1EALw_wcB