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Performances of Eating Disorders on TikTok—A Case of Hysterical Modes of Externalization

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of videos on the social media platform TikTok show individuals who allegedly have or are recovering from an eating disorder. The videos depict particular performances and aestheticisations of eating disorders which are analyzed in detail in this article through an interdisciplinary perspective of psychoanalysis as well as media and communication studies. This analytical perspective focusses upon the dialectic of content and aesthetic form, while also taking into account the technical features of the platform. The guiding question is whether eating disorders can be analyzed using the psychoanalytic concept of hysteria which is applied to further unpack common qualities of the videos around performances of reinterpreting and remodeling of inner and psychosocial reality as a pseudo-solution of conflicts. We argue that eating disorders staged and performed in the videos by the young women can be regarded as different forms of externalization in hysterical modes: attempting triangulation; repeating and acting out; representing a punishing super-ego. We conclude that hysteria remains a vital and critical concept for understanding contemporary representations of the body in the context of mental health on digital platforms.

1 | Eating Disorders on TikTok

With the emergence of private homepages, fora and particularly social media platforms on the internet, the representation and discussion of mental health issues such as eating disorders, and associated recovery processes, has clearly expanded into the realm of the digital (Eriksson Krutrök 2021). This article responds to the evidence of growing content production related to mental health on the social media platform TikTok in general, and specifically to the increasing number of videos portraying eating disorders, namely *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa* (Benzel et al. 2024).

TikTok, as a relatively new platform, was launched in 2018 and has seen expansive user growth among young people in particular in recent years. It has enormous reach and influence. Around half of its users are 10–29 years old (Kennedy 2020). TikTok is a platform for sharing short videos which range between a few seconds to a few minutes in length. Sharing images and videos representing the body and gender is a common practice for young people online. In sharing their eating disorders on social media, they communicate lived experiences (e.g., documenting someone's daily food intake, fitness routines or other everyday practices) in a meaningful way. What is also significant about TikTok is that the platform is particularly used by women and girls (Kennedy 2020). It specially "invites and rewards" (Kennedy 2020, 1070) the production of content that turns girls' traditional private spaces, such as bedrooms, into public spaces and potentially into "viral spectacles" (ibid).

Eating disorder videos on the platform have often been seen as ethically "problematic" as they depict varying degrees of thinness and fitness which can be dangerous for the health of creators and viewers (Herrick et al. 2021; Pryde and Prichard 2022). While the platform's user guidelines prohibit content "depicting, promoting, normalizing or glorifying activities that could lead to suicide, self-harm, or disordered eating," TikTok allows users to share "their personal experiences with these issues as a safe way to raise awareness generally and find community support" (TikTok Community and Guidelines 2023). Nonetheless, the topic constitutes a gray area and it is unclear where TikTok draws the line between raising awareness and glamorizing eating disorders. A video, for instance, allegedly depicting the recovery process from an eating disorder may be seen as supportive, triggering or seducing to others who suffer from an eating disorder or broadly speaking may have issues with their body image.

Rather than approaching this topic as one of inherent danger or technological determinism, this article focusses on changing forms and sites of eating disorder representations on social media. Contemporary eating disorder performances on TikTok partially depend on the specific features of the platform and lead to a variety of new tensions, ambivalences and contradictions in the depiction of eating disorders and body representations.

Against this background, we employ an interdisciplinary perspective of psychoanalysis and media theory (Johanssen, 2019) to examine the question whether representations of eating disorders on TikTok can be understood through the concept of hysteria, specifically through the notion of the "hysterical mode" (Mentzos 2006) which is discussed on p. 9 of this article.[1] In psychoanalysis, hysteria is often characterized by its attempts to deal with psychical conflicts through the dynamics of performance, deception and other defensive maneuvers as we discuss below. The analyzed videos feature performativity and an aestheticisation of eating disorders and therefore encourage examination through the lens of hysteria. We approach this topic in an open and compassionate manner by regarding TikTok as a dynamic site of power and cultural production where new meanings and representations are co-produced, in tension with or hindered by the complex entanglement of users, content and platform features. After a brief introduction of the concept of hysteria, we present, analyze and discuss three different TikTok videos that depict experiences of having or recovering from an eating disorder.

2 | Hysteria and Psychoanalysis

Hysteria has a much longer history than before Charcot isolated it as a distinct condition in 1870. Perhaps the central and initial building block of psychoanalysis, hysteria has undergone much debate and revision since Freud's first discussion of the term in 1888. In an early definition, Freud wrote of "hysterical symptoms as the effects and residues of excitations which have acted upon the nervous system as traumas" (Freud 1955c, 146). In this section, we present a brief and by no means exhaustive mapping of how the concept has evolved. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed review or overview of hysteria.

Broadly speaking, it designates both a personality type and a variety of symptom formations. "Its manifestations—dramatic, physical, and affective—may be viewed as an attempt to express and symbolize a psychosexual conflict and, at the same time, to defend against acknowledging that conflict. Symptoms range from mental anxiety and phobia to the physical signs of conversion disorder" (Schaeffer 2005, 772). Hysteria may have fallen out of fashion as a grand concept within psychoanalysis and may have been reworked into "clearer" or more "serious" descriptors and concepts. Since the introduction of DSM-IV, hysteria has been largely absent from clinical classifying manuals and systems and instead been replaced by dissociative disorder, conversion disorder or histrionic personality disorder (Schaeffer 2005). Küchenhoff isolates three broad conceptualizations of hysteria that have historically (and continue to be) existed: hysteria as an oedipal disorder, hysteria as a continued attachment to the primary object, and hysteria as a disturbed relationship with both the primary and oedipal object (2002, 227). Others present different categorizations of hysteria involving the (failed) resolution of conflicts, be they oedipal, oral or narcissistic (cf. Akhtar 1992, 2009; Küchenhoff 2002; Guttman 2006). "But" perhaps, as Showalter puts it, "hysteria has not died. It has simply been relabeled for a new era" (1997, 4).

Freud initially understood hysteria as a set of symptoms, most of which were somatically manifested. His work with Breuer in the 1890s led him to consider hysteria as symptom formations resulting from lived sexual trauma (Breuer & Freud [1893] 1955). Already at that point in time, Freud established hysteria as a symptom whose cause had been repressed. Later, Freud would also regard oedipal and sexual fantasies as causing hysteria in his "seduction theory" (Freud [1894] 1955b). Ultimately, hysteria, and how it is enacted, figures as a substitute for what has been repressed and is transformed into something somatic (Guttman 2006, 187)—a process he termed "conversion" (Freud [1894] 1955a, 49). In other words, a psychical conflict is symbolically expressed through bodily symptoms, such as an eating disorder (Walker 2015).

As Guttman notes, contemporaries of Freud began shifting away from the links between hysteria and conversion toward the idea of the hysterical character. Drawing on Freud's work on character types, Wittels, Reich, Fenichel and others posited a set of hysterical character traits, among them "a compulsive need to be loved and admired; intense feelings of inadequacy, which may be conscious or unconscious; a strong dependency on the approval of others for self-esteem; a powerful capacity for dramatization and somatic compliance and a tendency to repress aggressive feelings or attitudes, or to act them out in concealed ways" (Marmor 1953, 6.7–658). Fenichel argued that there is a relationship between hysterical characters and body image as hysteria is often "seen in types of persons whose body seems 'alien' to them" and "who are inhibited both in respect to motility and sensation, and have generally speaking no proper relationship with their own body" (1932, 162).

From the 1970s onwards, some clinicians considered hysteria a personality disorder rather than a symptom condition (see e.g., Laplanche 1974). For André Green, conversion is not central to hysteria and instead hysteria is shaped by sexuality and fears of

loss or abandonment. Unlike in the early Freud, hysteria is no longer considered as a repression of sexuality; instead sexuality is embraced by hysterics but often experienced as frustrating or unsatisfactory (Khan 1975). Lionells (1984) has argued that hysteria constitutes a particular form of aggression in which "anger is expressed as protest against the disruption of a relationship" (634). Similar to Mentzos, Lionells writes that "hysteria is a form of interaction regardless of its intrapsychic existence [...]" that is fixated on "approval-seeking as its primary mode of interaction" (1986, 572) and accompanied by a confused identity.

Lacan (2007) coined the concept of the "discourse of the hysteric" as part of his theory of the five discourses.[2] The discourse of the hysteric is characterized by doubt against what was once an all-powerful master or symbolic authority. What is repressed in the unconscious is none other than the object-cause of desire (*a*) itself, a remainder that takes the form of "if-only": "If only I could be more beautiful, disciplined, caring, hard-working, vigilant, etc." This remainder announces itself in the form of a symptom. The hysteric's primary mode of questioning is one of self-doubt in position to the master: "What am I? Why am I the thing that you say that I am? What do you see in me?"

Lacan stressed the relational and social dynamics of the discourse of the hysteric which refer both to the imaginary figure of the big Other and the figure of the actual (lower case) other subject/s. "Hysteria needs a stage and every hysterical performance is an acting-out addressed to the Other" (Verhaeghe and Trenson 2015, 155).

Hysteria has been historically problematically designated as a "female" illness (Mitchell 1974), yet it is seen by many clinicians and scholars alike as a response to the conflictual and ambivalent experiences in relation to the female-coded body that women (and men alike) are shaped by and respond to in patriarchy. The experience of having a body and becoming a sexed body within adolescence is of particular relevance here.

> Am I a man? Am I a woman? How is sexual identity assumed? How represented? These are the hysterical questions as Freud developed them out of the matrix of psychic bisexuality, as well as the central questions of psychoanalysis.
>
> (Kahane 1985, 22)

The questions, Kahane names, stay with the individual throughout their life to different degrees, but adolescence is a period in which questions and experience of sexual and gender identity are intensely felt and negotiated by the subject. Adolescence designates the phase of fundamental bodily transformation from child to adult (King 2001). The growth of the genital body is exciting and frightening in equal measure and a new balance between self and other(s) is called for. Adolescence is therefore regularly accompanied by a to-and-fro between (internal and external) states of dependence, weakness, fragility and also omnipotence, confidence and the knowledge of being seen and desired, in sexual and non-sexual terms. The individual is faced with existential questions about their identity, desirability and that of others around them. Hysterical dynamics

are unavoidable in adolescence since they may be legitimately regarded as attempts at solutions or compromise formations during a period of intense upheaval and a dramatically transforming object world (Rupprecht-Schampera 1995). At the end of adolescence, hysterical modes of relating and acting are ideally left behind because the changes the individual has undergone have been psychically integrated. Adolescence is characterized by experimentation, which contains or buffers the transformative processes, providing a space where limits and borders can be tested or transgressed (King 2001).

Eating disorders have often been viewed as a particular expression of hysterical dynamics in adolescence and beyond (Borossa 1997, 66; Showalter 1997, 20; Bollas 1999, 51). "Before it was redesignated as *anorexia nervosa*, anorexia was called "anorexia hysterica"—eating disorders are widely observed as a prevalent feature of hysteria.", writes Mitchell (2000, 25). In both, the "body remains Other, the site of an unexplained and pervasive misery." (Leader 2016, 31). As a psychosocial condition, eating disorders are shaped by socio-cultural dynamics and many have argued that they are influenced by hegemonic beauty ideals portrayed in the Western media. Writing in the 1980s, Susie Orbach similarly drew a connection between hysteria and anorexia:

> Anorexia nervosa—self starvation—is both a serious mental illness affecting thousands upon thousands of women, and a metaphor for our age. Like the psychological symptom of hysteria that Freud described so well in the late nineteenth century Vienna, anorexia nervosa is a dramatic expression of the internal compromise wrought by Western women in the 1980s in their attempt to negotiate their passions in a time of extraordinary confusion.
>
> (Orbach 1986, 24)

Bemporad et al. (1988, 96) have argued that "both hysteria and anorexia can be seen as representations of the clash between normal female development and the contradictory demands of an unhealthy and pathogenic female social ideal." Yet, unlike thinkers such as Borossa, Bollas or Mitchell, Bemporad et al. note that there are differences between hysterical and anorexic modes of behavior. "The charming and fragile hysteric would find the anorexic's abstention from food terribly masochistic, while in the contrary situation, the iron-willed anorexic would harshly judge the hysteric's self-indulgence as an appalling lack of discipline" (ibid., 97). However, ultimately, both have common characteristics that revolve around an indifference to the dysfunctional body and a desire to attract others' attention, but hysteria and anorexia are not one and the same. In the clinic, such patients often exhibit seductive and manipulative behavior. They pretend to go along with treatment goals and advice, while in reality going against them.[3] "Like hysteria, anorexia appears to be the pursuit of an ideal to egregious lengths and in the service of escaping from the anxiety of selflessness. There is an undeniable social sanction and interpersonal reward for the anorexic in the early stages of illness. This may be the first time that the future anorexic sees herself as admired, respected and able to control these sources of gratification" (ibid., 101). Such

dynamics may change over the course of anorexia as the individual's relationship to food can change over time from one of illusionary mastery to one of cruelty in terms of monitoring weight, calories, etc.

In a further shift from definitions of hysteria that foreground substantial or essential qualities, Yarom (2005) has coined the term the "matrix of hysteria" as a manifestation of gender-related conflicts between individuals. She comments that terms like "hysteria" or "hysterical" are often still being used to characterize a patient in their totality. Instead, she emphasizes "states of mind, characteristics, processes and solutions, rather than psychological structures" (2005, 3) that reveal hysterical dynamics or modes. Mentzos has similarly coined the concept of the "hysterical mode" which he defines as an "unconscious characteristic staging which "aims" at a quasi-change in self-perception and the perception of the situation". It designates a "'staged' reinterpretation, reshaping, remodeling of inner and psychosocial reality" as a pseudo-solution (Mentzos 2006, 101, our translation[4]). For Mentzos, the hysterical mode does not refer to a specific conflict, trauma, or external circumstances, but a reaction and processing which relates to particular conflicts and forms of suffering. The body is a dramatic means of expression in such cases. Psychic tensions and conflicts are transformed into embodied expressions.

Hysteria remains a difficult to grasp and, for some, vague and insufficient concept that "defies definition" (Veith 1965, 1). It, "like the unconscious itself, has a way of keeping its secrets" (Borossa 1997, 7). We regard this conceptual openness as useful for examining its status vis-à-vis the representation of eating disorders on a social media platform. Additionally, we wanted to explore to what extent those with an eating disorder who show themselves and, above all, their bodies on TikTok present hysterical dynamics that are worthy of analysis. The aim of the article is to explore hysteria's usefulness as a concept and how it may conceptually change in relation to the digital representation of eating disorder videos.

3 | Methodology

This particular analysis of experienced eating disorders - or the recovery therefrom—in TikTok videos is not based on qualitative interview data. Instead, eating disorder videos on TikTok are understood idiosyncratically as self-presentations with a logic of their own due to the platform's features, which includes but also goes beyond the intention of the users. We followed an inductive procedure. We collected, watched and analyzed a large number of videos first and subsequently decided to draw on hysteria as a concept for theoretically contextualizing the findings.

The analysis of eating disorder representations was carried out in conjunction with a focus on the platform's features and structure, for example the opportunity that other users had to "like" a video or to comment on it. The videos were analyzed in detail with a focus on the dialectic of content and aesthetic form: What they depict, as well as the setting and actions shown in each video. Furthermore, the specific features of the platform

like stylistic elements (length, editing, cuts, repetition, slowed down or sped up scenes) as well as structural elements of the platform (e.g., features, shared audio, overlaid text, filters) were also examined. The specific relation between content and aesthetic forms as well as platform features creates different and new variants of representations of eating disorders.

Analysis of the videos was carried out in the following way. The manifest content of the video was first described in detail followed by analysis of its aesthetic composition and lastly by examination of salient aspects of the platform features. The uploading of the videos on a social media platform and the potential interaction with other users was regarded as an instance of interaction and included in the analysis. With the aim of reconstructing not only manifest but also latent content, the video scenes, understood here as well as interactions with other users, were interpreted in terms of Alfred Lorenzer's "scenic understanding" (1986) as possible forms of expression of psychical dynamics and worlds of experience (Froggett and Hollway 2010; Krüger 2017).

The three selected videos were public and available on the platform and part of the sample of a pilot study which took place between 01 February to 31 April 2023. A TikTok account was first created by a research assistant after which videos related to eating disorders were searched through terms like "ED," "Eating" and "Eating food." Misspelt hashtags were also included such as: "#eat-ingproblems" or "#edrec0very." As the data collection progressed, eating disorder content often automatically appeared on the research assistant's "For You Page," TikTok's recommendation page available for every user. After a first set of videos were found, additional videos were selected seeking minimum and maximum contrast of what they depicted in order to reach a diversity of videos in terms of the content (Benzel et al. 2024).

The analysis of the videos will be presented and described in detail. For the protection of the young women, no identifying information (such as screenshots, video links or titles, account names, or specific video attributes) that could potentially allow one to access these videos will be supplied.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Video 1

This young woman's account has more than 6000 followers. She describes herself in her bio as "On a healing journey," affirms she has an eating disorder, addiction, depression and anxiety. She has uploaded hundreds of videos which apparently depict her recovery from an eating disorder over time. One exemplary video, which had more than 14,000 likes and 200 comments at the time of writing, shows her in the foreground. In terms of the formal characteristics, she wears a pink, sleeveless top which shows her arms, cleavage and necklace. Her left earring is visible, as are parts of gray shorts or a skirt. Her hair is tied and flows over her left shoulder. Her skin is immaculately clean, shiny and her pink lips are accentuated, possibly through lipgloss. Her eyebrows are neat and her eyelashes are accentuated too. There is a contrast between

her appearance and the dark background which consists of a radiator, windowsill and large frame window which looks out into total darkness. The video was therefore possibly shot during the night. This is the main setting of the 52-s-long clip. The TikToker alters the camera angle a few times and there are a total of five cuts/scenes in the clip which show little variation. The only audio comes from a sped-up snippet from the chorus of the song "Angel by the Wings" from popular singer Sia which repeats the words "You can do anything" multiple times. The video is also overlaid with text, which we will describe shortly. The clip consists of scenes in which the girl looks intensely at the camera. Even though she sometimes closes her eyes or changes focus, her gaze fixates on the viewer and is the most striking feature for us. The text of the video consists of two phrases, one stays the same and the other changes with each scene: "EDs are very d€adly [deadly] diseases that can k1ll [kill] you no matter weight". The alternating text reads:

> Some rly [really] serious ED symptoms—plz [please] reach out for help asap of [sic] you have any of these.
>
> You begin to feel like it's easier not to eat than to eat.
>
> You get a sense of comfort/ 'h1gh' [high] from controlling your body and food intake.
>
> You sacrifice everything else to follow your diet/ exercise rules and feel addicted to following them.
>
> You dislike feeling full and feel guilty if you do.

From the perspective of scenic understanding, the video caused a sense of ambivalence and different reactions and associations among us, the observers: One of us felt deeply touched and affected by it. The video seems to convey a sense of sincerity, seriousness, rawness, sadness, helplessness that is in stark contrast to its uplifting song with the repeated lyrics "you can do anything" and the main textual message of the video which emphasizes the dangerous and possibly deadly consequences of eating disorders. To the other researcher, the video felt more calculated and performed, given that it was most likely rehearsed, repeated and, above all, edited, before being uploaded as a polished, finished product to the platform. This researcher felt that the intense gaze of the woman conveyed a seriousness that somehow also appeared to border on the sadistic and cruel. Fixating the viewer in a particular position gave one the impression of a desire for control. This was reinforced by some of the scenes of the video in which the phone's camera is positioned slightly lower than the TikToker's face and she literally looks down on the viewer as if demeaning them. One of us associated a powerful, dominant parental figure with that scene and felt like a child who had failed to fulfill expectations or done something wrong which intensely displeased a parent. This impression was reinforced to one of us in the next scene where the woman is seen closing her eyes and ever so slightly shaking her head as if in disbelief or disappointment with another's actions.

The video could be seen as an externalization of its creator and reflect a wish on her part to see herself or an earlier version of herself, to look back and represent herself in a particular way, to document her recovery, how she apparently came to be in control of her body, emotions and sense of self. Looked at from this standpoint, the video can be seen as a kind of mirror for the young woman to see herself and how others would see her in full control of her body, something humans can only ever partially achieve. In its performed struggle with control, the video exemplifies an ambivalence common in hysteria (Mitchell 2000, 57).

Just as ambivalence is a characteristic feature of hysteria, so is a particular relationship to language. This can be further unpacked through hysteria. If we only look at the video and music without the overlaid text, what is striking is the absence of language in its spoken form. The woman's mouth remains tightly shut throughout and the only parts of her body that show any movement are the eyes and the neck which tilts the head. The body speaks. "The hysteric regresses from his position in language to a place still only on its borders. This is to a version of "performative" language, where words and speech are used to act, to get what is wanted, to say what is strongly felt." (Mitchell 2000, 209), Juliet Mitchell notes. For Mitchell, language in this context "*does* something" rather than being "a presentation" of something (ibid., italics in original) in the conventional sense.[5]

At first glance, it would seem that no words or speech are produced here. The woman is speechless and all that really speaks are her eyes and her gaze. This underscores the performative and hysterical nature of the video. One could read the visual elements just discussed as hysterical demands to others to *see* the woman: "Can't you see me for who I am?," "Is this what you want?." While the woman may seem thin, she appears not underweight or dangerously thin and therefore may be recovering or have recovered from an eating disorder.

Yet, the analysis is further complicated if we take the features of the platform and specifically the overlaid text, quoted earlier, into account that runs throughout the video in the form of bold white letters. They introduce a further layer of complexity. The hysteric "divides herself between the fitful being caught up in her body-theater and a 'detached … onlooker'" (Khan 1983, n.p., quoted in Bollas 1999, 116). Similarly, there may be a particular desire for those on TikTok with eating disorders to see themselves and their recovery journey in the video form, which should also be witnessed, liked and commented on by others. In the case of this TikToker, she can be observed replying to many of the thousands of comments she has received on her videos. She assumes the role of an expert or caring parental figure, who passes on her knowledge to others. We return to this point in the Discussion section. The overlaid text displays an acute awareness of the dangers of eating disorders and seeks to warn others. This critical dimension is shown in many of the videos we have examined. This is also due to the fact that TikTok removes any video that outrightly glamorizes an eating disorder and encourages videos that "raise awareness" (Benzel et al. 2024). We can introduce more videos at this stage to further analyze the scenes.

4.2 | Video 2

The next two videos show performed struggles between the ego and super-ego that revolve around dynamics of withholding and

providing or punishment and reward. The reward may take the form of eating as part of a recovery process, which is ultimately not shown in the two videos, or support from others on the platform through comments and likes. The first video has more than 25,000 likes and about 70 comments. The account has more than 9000 followers. The following text is displayed throughout the 9-s-long video: "POV: you're my ed team watching me attempt to gaslight you yet again." In other words, "Point of view: you are my eating disorder team, watching me attempt to manipulate you yet again." The video shows a young woman in the foreground; in the background bedsheets, a large cloth or rug on the wall, which depicts an esoteric-looking image, and some leaves from a plant are visible. As a very common TikTok feature, the video does not transmit the girl's voice but shows her mimicking or lip-syncing to an existing audio which is a dialog from the popular Hollywood comedy movie Bridesmaids (2011):

Helen: "You're not sick?"

Annie: "No."

Helen: "No?"

Annie: "In fact, Helen, I'm hungry and I wish, I had a snack."

The young woman exhibits a serious look at the camera throughout the scene and performs the two characters of the film through changing body language, gesticulating with her arms, pointing her fingers, and raising her eyebrows during the last line.

The context of the original Bridesmaids scene may be useful to provide here; it depicts the main characters in a bridal store as they accompany the bride-to-be trying on a wedding dress. They are suddenly affected by food poisoning, manifested by vomiting and diarrhea. The comic effect derives from the transgression or violation of "perfect" or stereotypical notions of femininity (beauty, cleanliness, marriage) which are disturbed through screaming, "dirt" and chaotic scenes. The dynamics between Annie and Helen, the film's bridesmaids and rivals who compete for their friendship and recognition of bride-to-be Lilian, are shown in the above scene. While Annie is shown as feeling unwell, she disavows such feelings in order not to appear weak or embarrassing in front of her rival. The scene continues with Helen handing Annie some almonds as a snack and Helen very slowly eating one. The audio track is commonly used on TikTok to describe in an amusing manner moments in which individuals have lied how they really felt about something or went along with a situation even if they actually felt uncomfortable doing so, for instance another video is accompanied by the text "me going into work at 7.30 like I wasn't giving the dance floor my best moves at 2a.m.." It is therefore safe to assume that users know the context of the original scene. While the audio track is used as a "meme" in a wide variety of contexts on TikTok, the underlying messages of the Bridesmaids scene which revolve around the epitome display of heteronormative femininity (the clean, perfect bride and her bridesmaids) in contrast with the graphic dynamics of eating and expelling food may have particularly resonated with someone with an eating disorder.

A complex struggle between ego and super-ego is conveyed in a double manner in this video, through the audio clip which features the two women in dialog and through the girl in the video mimicking the voices in combination with the explanatory text. The video could be scenically interpreted as representing a dialog between her and her "ed team," staff at a treatment facility or hospital, who monitor her food intake and weight. The viewer is made to witness a scene which is characterized as an attempt at gaslighting or manipulating. The scene could also be read as an internal conflict between ego and super-ego around eating and not eating. Yet, what is most striking about the combination of the audio track's original context and the video's themes of an eating disorder and the "ed team" is its emphasis on gaslighting, manipulation and deception. After all, the girl's real performed feelings are *not* wanting to eat and pretending to be hungry for the sake of her team leaving her alone. On one level, such narratives are in line with how the hysteric is described by Juliet Mitchell as "creative but seducing, lying, someone for whom death has no meaning, transmitting jealousy and causing chaos wherever they go" (2000, 38). After all, pretending to be hungry while not desiring to eat could have particular health consequences in this context. The video is a performance of deception for the sake of the other: "hysterics do not simply identify with the other person; instead, they identify with what the other person desires (or, more accurately, what they imagine the other person desires)" (2000, 57), as Mitchell argues. In a sense, the video is thus about "[s]elf-pleasuring fantasies of self-sufficiency [that] are crucial" (2000, 157) for hysterical dynamics. It constitutes a hysterical performance where an audience is implicated, whether they like it or not. The video's performance of manipulation and deception can furthermore be characterized as *perverse*.

Mitchell has pointed to the possible relationship between perversion and hysteria as perversion being "the enactment" of the hysterical fantasy (2000, 131). The fantasy of deception, whether believable or not, is enacted in the video. To us, the video and particularly its combination of the audio, point-of-view shot, the woman's body language and theme, felt invasive, intrusive and uncomfortable at first glance. There seemed to be a split, not just between the TikToker's performed and (to her) "real" intentions, but in her very persona through the use of two other people's voices. Who really is this young woman? Through being addressed as "you" and as allegedly occupying the "point of view" of the "ed team", the viewer is made to be part of what Ruth Stein has called the "perverse pact" (Stein 2005, p. 776):

> Two features common to both sexual and non-sexual perverse relations are (1) the *seductive* and *bribing* aspects of perversion, and (2) its *means-ends reversal*, that is, the turning of the means into an end in itself, and the bending of a purported end into a means for something else, i.e., a hidden agenda.
>
> (Stein 2005, 781, italics in original)

The viewer is let in on the apparent fact that the TikToker is manipulating their ED team and whether the manipulation is successful or not remains unresolved. This disclosure of a lie (through the performance) creates a shared reality between the

user and viewers whereby both are made to witness an act of manipulation which in reality the "ed team" may or may not have understood as one. This creation of a shared, alternate reality through hysterical performance constitutes, according to Stein, a core element of the perverse relationship as one of "two accomplices, a mutual agreement woven of complex, twisted relations and excited games, embedded in multilayered degrees of awareness and obliviousness" (Stein 2005, 787). Perversion, thus, is a "contract signed against reality" (793) which the viewer is implicated in.

While the video we discuss does not display latent or manifest aspects of sexuality, it conveys a form of seduction, or perhaps capture, of the viewer who is made to play along a perverse game of deception of the other. The video conveyed a fake sense of intimacy, camaraderie and closeness and left us feeling powerless and caught in the clutches of another's hysterical mode which roped us into a different sense of reality.

4.3 | Video 3

The third video is only 5 seconds long and has more than 9000 likes and 30 comments. The TikToker has more than 25,000 followers. The viewer sees her eating what may be a piece of pastry. She picks it up from a plate and moves it toward her mouth. It almost reaches her mouth, she hesitates and pauses, then moves it down toward the plate while looking up at the camera/viewer with a sense of surprise, her eyes wide open, staring at the viewer. An image of a startled deer in the headlights comes to mind. The text reads: "POV: your €D [ED] voice when you are trying to eat something." This ED voice is performed through an audio track which is the most significant aspect of the video; a snippet from a documentary in which the famous British broadcaster David Attenborough says: "Here we have one of the most hungry and lazy creatures of the planet." The combination of audio, text and video can be interpreted as constituting the performance of a sadistic super-ego, or ED voice as the young woman calls it, that attacks the ego for eating. The video feels similarly intimate and raw as the one we just discussed. It conveys a sense of the woman being caught in the act of eating and responding with (performed) feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment and shock. The video exhibits a mode of intense, perverse, public self-shaming, -humiliation and -degradation. It also conveys a sense of humor which felt misplaced to us. The girl (sarcastically) equates herself to a hungry and lazy animal. It felt destructive and hopeless on one level. The video is a theatrical escalation of common inter- and intrapersonal struggles in eating disorders. Both videos portray perverse dynamics of guilt, granting/withholding punishment and reward which reveal the complex struggles the young women may suffer from.

However, there was a sense of care and love in both videos being presented as authentic and sincere insofar as raw emotional states were revealed (gaslighting the ED team, being shocked at being called lazy and hungry by the super-ego). Those forms of self-representation may be responded to with empathy by other users. Yet, those states ultimately seemed sadistic and cruel. In perversion, the self can be "invented, manipulated, used and abused, ravaged and discarded, cherished and idealized, symbiotically identified with and deanimated all at once" (Khan 1979, 26), as Masut Khan writes. This is often done by another person (the pervert) to a partner, but it can also be done by someone toward themselves. This form of sadism (or sadomasochism) makes the videos seem exhibitionistic and the viewers like voyeurs who are made to see something they normally do not see.

However, there is a second aspect to both videos which goes beyond perversion and hysteria. Both videos may constitute hysterical performances, but they can also be seen as going beyond those dynamics. They do not capture reality as such, but are performances or reenactments of scenes of previous lived experience which seem of importance to the TikTokers. They thereby establish a distance between lived experience and eating disorders and present creative reflections. They portray an opening up, a coming clean, a confession of particular scenes (deceiving others about wanting to eat and the internal struggles between eating/not eating). Although such dynamics could be seen as fake and manipulative, there is authenticity, vulnerability and playfulness in both videos which could be read as seeking reassurance, recognition, help and understanding from others on TikTok. It is the combination of audio, text, video and user comments that transports such dynamics. The videos transport dynamics and feelings into the public realm which are normally often hidden or confined to the private sphere. The comments on both videos reflect this: "I gaslit too hard nd [and] they discharged me 💀?," "Real," "i used to do that then i realized hey maybe i actually need help," exemplary comments on the gaslight video read. "THIS?😭," "wish this wasnt me but oh here we are," "I wanna eat rn [right now] but my head tells me no," some comments on the second video read. The fact that the individuals reveal particular conflicts and struggles may be significant. That we are made to witness such struggles and are made to be part of an "ED team" in one video could be seen as establishing an intimate connection on the platform. The girl's admission that we are watching her "attempt" to "gaslight" us "yet again" underscores that level of sincerity, closeness and honesty. There may thus be moments present that come closer to integrating the ego and super-ego or to resolving its dynamics. This act occurs on a public platform and a level of comfort or recognition can perhaps be provided through the supportive comments. Yet, we do not mean to dismiss our earlier discussion of hysteria and maintain that both moments of hysteria (as well as perversion) and a distance toward it are simultaneously present in many of the videos we watched.

5 | Discussion

While the three videos we have analyzed in detail consist of specific forms of representation, they also share common qualities. They depict eating disorders and recovery processes, while it remains unverifiable to what extent those are actually underway. The videos constitute performances linked to bodily change (i.e., losing and gaining weight) and specifically forms of suffering. They are meaningful performances of lived experience (Benzel et al. 2024). The videos all name the struggle of eating and not eating that is so central to eating disorders. They also

show others' expectations of eating directed at them and the pressure this puts the individuals under. While other social media platforms and online fora have seen eating disorder content for many years, the specific representation of short and often highly aestheticized videos on TikTok is relatively new and presents a new form of representation that was largely absent before. We have argued that the three videos can be understood through the concept of hysteria. In responding to our research question set out in the Introduction, there is merit in conceptualizing the videos through this concept because of their intense qualities of performance, aestheticisation, editing, as well as usage of text and music. While the videos depict raw and unfiltered lived experiences and forms of suffering, there was something staged, impenetrable, calculated and cold about them which bordered on the deceptive and which we have therefore conceptualized as hysterical. Such hysterical modes opened up a relationality for us which placed us, as researchers, in close proximity and in a para-social relationship with the creators. "Hysteria involves a relationship—one cannot be a hysteric on one's own.", Mitchell (2000, 59) writes. The fact that those videos are uploaded on the most popular social media platform of our time is noteworthy. In being uploaded, often hidden and tabooed lived experiences are represented and can be commented on, liked and shared by other users. Hysteria "always engages the other, inducing a reciprocity or a refusal. If the other refuses to participate in the free flow of mutual identification (the *folie a deux*), then the hysteric demands to be a spectacle only something one can look at or observe" (Mitchell 2000, 59). While hysteria itself is not shown here but hysterical modes of its representation, potential online relationships are opened up, even and perhaps especially if there is an element of refusal or if a video has not received enough likes or comments as far as the creator is concerned. The videos make for hysterical spectacles and events thrown on a global stage for everyone to see. Christopher Bollas notes about the hysteric's performance:

> In the art of transforming the self into an event the hysteric sets the stage for the personification of absent others, even enlisting passers-by to perform unknown roles in the unfolding drama. This creates a special mood, composed of surprise, uncertain expectation and anxiety, as it is not clear how this living theatre—or agitprop—will turn out. Who will appear? Who is being called up? And in what company?
>
> (Bollas 1999, 126)

In that sense, the hysterical mode may be amplified and intensified in being represented in a TikTok video. Yet, a level of uncertainty always remains because how a video may be received by others only reveals itself once it has been uploaded online. There is an additional layer to the hysterical mode and the videos constitute a desire for recognition and being seen by others—something many psychoanalytic scholars of social media have named as a general driving force for users today (Balick 2014; Flisfeder 2021; Johanssen and Krüger 2022; Krüger 2024). In the context of eating disorders, such a desire acquires a particular currency and perhaps urgency. TikTok has opened up a great increase in communication and discussion of

mental health issues among its young user base. In uploading eating disorder videos, TikTokers may experience validation and support of their lived experiences and suffering and can provide the same in turn to others, as we have discussed in relation to the first video where the creator provided many supportive comments to users who had commented on her video. While we maintain that the hysterical mode is a key concept for understanding the dynamics we have analyzed here, the videos also go beyond hysteria proper as another layer is introduced through them.

The young women objectify themselves through their video creations. They turn their bodies into objects and thereby externalize and represent them. Mitchell and other psychoanalysts have stressed the absent body and absent subject position for the hysteric:

> Shocked by something, the hysteric has no position from which he can see himself. His antics are a performance to get the other's attention but he has no idea how they look to others; transposed to speech, he talks to get what he wants, but has no idea of how what he says is perceived by others—he cannot see himself from another's perspective.
>
> (Mitchell 2000, 268)

While the videos may certainly serve to attract others' attention, they nonetheless may be seen as *attempts* by the TikTokers to see themselves and specifically their bodies. It is useful to further quote Mitchell here, when she writes:

> The hysterical body is, quintessentially, the absent or missing body, even though, as I have maintained, it is the terror of the body going absent that drives the hysteria. The absent body is one that is unrepresentable to the subject. Therein lies a double paradox: there is no more excessively present body than that of the hysteric (in hysteria the body is always acting and thereby expressing something); however, it is exactly this bodily excess which is dependent on its subjective absence.
>
> (Mitchell 2000, 2.1–22)

A similar paradox may also be at play in the videos. They are actual and real forms of representation: of making the body present and visible, for the self and others. This is significant because clinicians and scholars have stressed the difficulty by those who suffer from an eating disorder of having a good enough image of their own body. "Because persons with FEDs [feeding and eating disorders] cannot have an experience of their own body from within or coenesthetically, they need to apprehend their own body from outside through the gaze of the Other" (Mancini and Esposito 2021, 2523). Eating disorders are characterized by

> a difficulty in mentalising the body experience; and we believe that this is one of the main reasons why these kinds of virtual communities emerge, where the

> conflict is played out on the body, which is shown, hidden and 'disembodied' in different ways.
>
> (Margherita and Gargiulo 2018, 348)

Many with eating disorders often report "extreme dissatisfaction with their appearance" and struggle "with authenticity and a search for identity" (Maiese 2023, 2). Therefore, the videos are also very careful, crafted and creative attempts at finding a solution to the above issue. The videos are competent as well as creative and intelligent combinations of moving images, music and text in a highly aesthetic manner. The creators' repetitive self-representations on TikTok may be seen as attempts at coming to terms with their bodies and externalizing who they are and what they look like through videos which are for themselves and for everyone else to be publicly seen. The split between having a body and not feeling to have the "right" body (image) is perhaps being attempted to be addressed through such practices which constitute the arrival at a different sense of the body. The attempts can be seen as trying to reflect on, symbolize and to engage with the body from a distance. In the following, we argue that this attempt may take three forms of dynamics of externalization which can be distinct or overlapping.

1. Going beyond the hysterical mode and attempting triangulation.

2. Repeating and acting out the hysterical mode.

3. Presenting a punishing super-ego.

We discuss each in turn below.

1. Whereas eating disorders themselves can be characterized by the dyadic position in which the individual is in a particular (non)-relationship to their body, the action of producing and uploading a video constitutes a momentary break or rupturing of the dyad. In meticulously crafting, scripting and editing videos, the young women may go beyond a mere enactment of the hysterical mode as a third element is introduced through the platform and the comments and likes by other users which often show deep levels of support and care. The videos show scenes in which women occupy both a position outside and inside the self. They represent performances of particular scenes and experiences and thereby may see themselves through the eyes of another once the finished video has been uploaded and is commented on. While hysterical elements are present in the videos we have discussed in this article, there are also other elements: warnings against eating disorders in video 1, revealing the gaslighting in video 2, the revealing of the "ED voice" in video 3. A sense of agency is presented. Mitchell has argued that the "hysteric is an author in search of her characters; for it is the display of the artist herself that dominates the picture" (2000, 345) but the situation is more complex here because the young women occupy multiple and different subject positions in the same video often aided by the use of overlaid text which introduces another element: the warnings in video 1, the revelation of gaslighting in video 2, the struggle between the ED voice and wanting to eat in video 3. This is

also brought into being by the platform itself and its functions that users regularly use: overlaying text over videos; the use of hashtags, audio memes and music; as well as filters. The crafting of often highly stylized, choreographed and elaborate videos, particularly when making use of music creates a distance between the young women and their conditions which makes them more "real" for themselves through externalization and representation and fictionalizes them at the same time. It is safe to assume that the videos are uploaded in the hope of receiving supportive comments and gaining likes and visibility. There is a will on the part of the creators to show themselves to "their" community (and perhaps even a global audience of all TikTok users). The complex ensemble of TikTok's interface, the scenic elements of the video, its added components (music, voiceover, overlaid text, cuts and effects) make for a contradictory experience of watching the videos and reading the user comments which may resemble the struggle and contradictions of having or recovering from an eating disorder. This itself is a creative effort.

2. However, we have stressed throughout the analysis that hysterical elements remain present in the videos and therefore the question is to what extent the scenes are mere performances and deceptions of the viewer and constitute yet another case of hysterical acting out. This remains impossible to fully answer, but there may be an overlap between a desire to move beyond hysteria and remaining caught up in the hysterical mode. A sense of unease and a lingering question remained for us in this context, particularly when considering the features and dynamics of TikTok itself as a platform and how they shape the very structure of a video. As mentioned in the Introduction, TikTok is a memetic platform which heavily rests on and encourages dynamics of repetition, imitation, citation, adaptation and copying (Benzel et al. 2024). It is an affective and emotionally-driven platform which algorithmically rewards the dramatic aestheticisation of lived experiences. This is a structural element that can be observed for many videos where videos mimic or copy each other and use similar scenic elements of portraying an eating disorder (Benzel et al. 2024). In this vein, the platform would encourage and reward a compulsion to repeat and act out the hysterical mode over and over again through different videos. We can underscore this by the fact that all creators whose videos we examined in this article have built an identity around having (or recovering) from an eating disorder. For instance, the creator of video 1 describes herself in her profile as: "On a healing journey" with "an ED, addiction, depression and anxiety." They have become influencers or stars of their own symptoms and the question remains to what extent the creation of a public ED or recovery identity leaves them trapped in the hysterical mode. This is further underscored if we quote Lionells once more who argues that hysteria is fixated on "approval-seeking as its primary mode of interaction" (1986, 572). As any other social media platform, TikTok exemplifies the way that platforms cater to such approval-seeking desires, without ever truly fulfilling them (Flisfeder 2021).

3. Linked to the above two points, what is also striking about the videos is the way how a cruel and punishing super-ego is implicitly represented. This is both linked to the display of attempts at showing latent conflicts and a never-ending repetition of the hysterical mode. The videos thus constitute sadistic enactments of the discourse of the hysteric in the Lacanian sense where constant complaints are uttered and it is hoped that someone affirms the hysteric's identity once and for all. The videos never present such a solution. There is no (desire for a) final closure or healing depicted. Instead, the represented efforts are never good enough and something remains missing. In that sense, the videos may remain what they are: digital representations which show particular scenes of externalized fantasies.

6 | Conclusion

In this article, we introduced an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective on representations of eating disorders on the popular short video social media platform TikTok. Drawing on psychoanalysis and work from media and communication studies, we presented empirical case studies of three videos in detail. The focus on the psychoanalytic concept of hysteria allows for a further understanding of the contemporary practice of creating videos that deal with eating disorders and related aspects which are then uploaded to a social media platform. Designating the videos as being in a complex relationship with the hysterical mode, allows for a perspective on changing bodies, the performative, and dynamics of placing the body on a global "stage" (i.e., TikTok). Hysteria remains a vital and fruitful concept for examining and conceptualizing the themes discussed in this article. Future clinical and non-clinical scholarship could incorporate a focus on the dynamics and logics of both eating disorders and social media platforms, in our case TikTok, because they are so intrinsically entangled. While, as mentioned, other psychoanalytic concepts may be used to interpret the phenomena discussed here, we maintain that hysteria—and specifically the concept of the hysterical mode—allows for an analytic complexity that other concepts do not because of its focus on ambivalence, performance, desire for approval and recognition, individual and cultural dynamics, and the complex relationship between fantasy and (psychic) reality.

We provided an exemplary analysis of a small number of videos and there are other cases and dynamics when it comes to the representation of eating disorders on TikTok which future research could analyze. Further empirical content analyses and qualitative interviews with those suffering from or having recovered from an eating disorder as well as specifically clinical case studies could be conducted. Those could consider further key aspects we have been unable to discuss in this article, such as the role of the thousands of user comments that often accompany a video; the role of shame and the other's (imagined and actual) gaze in externalizing and performing eating disorders; the role of TikTok in shaping the representations of eating disorders and what individuals regard as helpful and stabilizing as well as destructive aspects and features of the platform.

The increasing representation of mental health issues, eating disorders among them, on TikTok presents dynamic psychosocial change for patients, clinicians, academics and the general public. While hysteria may be seen as a limiting, arresting or even debilitating form of suffering, its performative aspects and particularly how they are expressed on TikTok also constitute a cultural, creative attempt at arriving at a solution and triangulation which makes use of digital technology, as we have discussed. This makes TikTok a significant cultural technique and site of our time for the ambivalent representation and negotiation of mental health. This notion of creativity, however ambivalent and complex it may be, is noteworthy.

The videos' ambivalent nature may be particularly unique to the subject matter but also applies to TikTok's aesthetics and features on a more general level. Virtually all TikTok videos use the different features we have discussed in this article. The platform has been rightfully labeled as "viral" and "memetic" by scholars. Its combination of seemingly disparate and unconnected elements is worthy of further discussion. Videos 2 and 3 both use external voices which are superimposed on the individuals who move their lips in an effort to appear as if they are the ones talking—a very common practice on TikTok generally. This could be described as an instance of symbolization, whereby something comes to stand in for something else, similar to Freudian dream theory. Many videos feel dreamy or dream-like in their creative usage of techniques of pastiche, collage and associative mixing of different elements. Freud famously argued that dreams consist of specific structuring dynamics which make up the dream and its manifest and latent content: representation, symbolization, condensation, displacement. These dynamics were to varying degrees also present within the content of the analyzed videos and are also highly present across the platform. There may be a particular connection between the hysterical mode and the dream, as Schaeffer notes:

> In psychoanalytic theory, a hysterical crisis might be thought of as the embodiment of a dream. Its symptoms included the same mechanisms of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and disguise through censorship. Hysteria expressed a conflict that, incapable of being elaborated mentally, is translated in altogether enigmatic fashion into physical symptoms. The associative method of psychoanalysis could be used to identify the fantasies and symbolic pathways within it. (Schaeffer 2005, 773)

Bernheimer similarly writes about Freud's links between hysteria and dreams:

> The key is the similarity between the formation of dreams and of symptoms, both being generated through the mechanisms of condensation and displacement and both functioning as wish fulfillments. "The dream pattern is capable of the most general application" he told Fliess in January 1899, "and the key to hysteria as well reality lies in dreams" (SE 1:276). (Bernheimer 1985, 17)

TikTok thereby functions, metaphorically speaking, as a dreamscape which facilitates and structures—as well as censors—particular "dreams" which remain in line with its community guidelines. As such "dreams" will likely continue and evolve, hysteria is far from dead and has perhaps indeed, to quote Showalter again, "been relabeled for a new era" (1997, 4) of performative, hysterical representations on social media.

Acknowledgments

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] The videos could also be analyzed through concepts such as borderline, narcissism, trauma, multiple states theory or dissociation. However, it is the aim of this article to explore the applicability of hysteria as an analytical concept when it comes to representations on TikTok.

[2] Lacan (2007) named five discourses as particular forms of symbolic organisation and structuring of reality: the Discourse of the Hysteric, the Discourse of the Master, the Discourse of the Analyst, the Discourse of the University and the Discourse of Capitalism.

[3] Anorexia has also been considered by psychiatrists as a symptom of borderline personality disorder and by structural (particularly the early Lacan) psychoanalysts as a manifestation of a perverse structure.

[4] "Dieser Modus, diese Art der Abwehr und Kompensation, ist insofern ein spezifischer, weil er auf einer unbewussten charakteristischen Inszenierung basiert, die auf eine Quasiveränderung der Selbstwahrnehmung und der Wahrnehmung der Situation » abzielt « . Das Wort » quasi « soll andeuten, dass es sich nicht um echte, endgültige, gravierende Verzerrungen und Veränderungen der Identität oder der Selbstrepräsentanz handelt (wie z. B. bei der Psychose oder in der Perversion oder bei echten psychosomatischen Erkrankungen im engeren Sinne), sondern eben nur um » inszenierte « Umdeutungen, Umformungen, Umgestaltungen der inneren und psychosozialen Realität." (Mentzos 2006, 101). Original quote reproduced in full here to provide context.

[5] See also Freud's original conceptualisation of hysteria as conversion (Freud [1894] 1955a).

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