



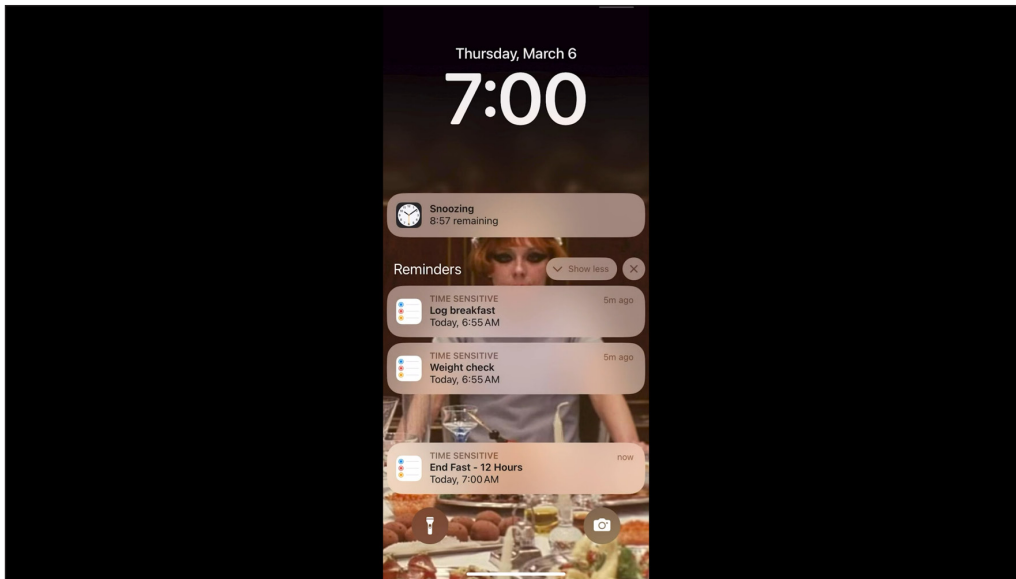
LIVEFED: A Doomscroll Documentary

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A doomscroll documentary tracing the flow of digital diet culture through converging media and platforms across the smartphone interface.





Creators' Statement

Meriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word “FEED” as follows:

- (1): to give food to
- (2): to furnish something essential to the development, sustenance, maintenance, or operation of
- (3): to supply for use or consumption
- (4): to consume food (see EAT)
- (5): to PREY —used with on, upon, or off
- (6): food for livestock
- (7): to become nourished or satisfied or sustained as if by food
- (8): to become channeled or directed
- (9): the act or process of feeding a signal (such as an audio or video transmission) to a station for broadcast
- (10): to move into a machine or opening in order to be used or processed
- (11): an Internet service in which updates from electronic information sources (such as blogs or social media accounts) are presented in a continuous stream

As teenagers in the 2010s, we grew up alongside newly created social media platforms—Instagram, YouTube, SnapChat, Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit, Quora, Pinterest, and Vine, to name just a few. We accessed these platforms in the isolation of our smartphones:

interactive digital screens that were not regulated by content moderation or seen by anyone we knew in real life. Immersed in these screens, we became entrenched within a media ecosystem that would dramatically shape our relationships with and understandings of our bodies and food. We became obsessed with numbers, closely monitoring the shapes of our bodies and daily caloric consumption and expenditure. Without adequate nutrition, the brain becomes obsessed with food, as we know from the men who participated in the famed Minnesota Starvation Experiment, which studied the physical and psychological effects of caloric deprivation. They became obsessed with food, passing the hours between meals scouring cookbooks and commiserating over their cravings (Keys et al. 1950).

The smartphone, with its endless array of apps and excess of moving image media, offers a new place to channel this obsession. Our goal in making this video essay was to capture the inescapable frenzied chaos of diet culture online as a means to capture the all-encompassing feeling of hunger and dieting. As the smartphone user moves across platforms and interfaces, she is constantly confronted by food and encouraged to lose weight, living in a state of perpetual distraction.

In recent years, dieting has gone out of fashion. As discussed by author and fat-acceptance activist Aubrey Gordon (2020), dieting has a failure rate upwards of ninety percent, with most dieters losing some weight in the short term only to gain back more due to metabolic damage and binge eating. However, with the increasingly ubiquitous use of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic and GLP1s, there is an erasure of the cultural progress against anti-fat bias and weight stigma by re-emphasizing obesity as a disease and thus a problem that needs to be solved. Additionally, the BMI metric still reigns supreme as an evaluator of health, despite its scientific debunking, which many of the so-called “wellness” apps in this documentary foreground. This presents a complex relationship between our bodies and our digital interface, wherein dieting is *passé* but the pressure to achieve and maintain a thin body pervades.

Lucia Soriano (2024) describes the gendered labor that goes into maintaining a ‘normal’ body, understanding normalcy not as a natural condition but rather “what a given population is expected to be and do” (Titchkosky qtd. in Soriano 2024: 2). Within American culture in the twenty-first century, thinness is equated with normalcy, and those not embodying thinness are meant to be in a constant state of working toward it. Soriano identifies the ways in which neoliberal rationality has produced “a consensus within the citizenry that women have the freedom to transform their bodies whenever they choose, through dieting or cosmetic surgery” (2024: 76). In keeping with market-based neoliberal logic, changing the body is something that can be achieved through choice and the purchasing of a new product, from unregulated supplements (one

current trend is a peach-mango-flavored yerba-mate tea powder for \$39.99 described by influencers as “nature’s Ozempic”) to at-home Pilates boards to low-calorie cookies.

In addition to material products, digital purchases promise to aid in weight loss, like a barcode-scanner upgrade feature on MyFitnessPal or an app that will use the phone camera to calculate calories on a plate based on shoddy “AI” technologies. (A lack of reliability is seen in our video when the calories calculated in the food logged manually on MyFitnessPal differ greatly from the number of calories calculated by an app connected to the phone camera.) These apps allow us to imagine complex metabolic processes reduced to whole numbers, based on the data we freely provide and feed into its interface. A performance of self-surveillance that results in clear cut values and qualifiers of health that give the illusion of a *true* form of self-regulation. An illusory sense of control feeds the user to continue the obsessive scroll. Our anonymous unnamed user stands in for the many who have experienced this nausea of self-surveillance. In the absence of food, the phone’s continuous stream of interfaces to track, tally, log, count, like, save, scroll gives our user a kind of satiety of mind, and body. Eternal consumption. A never-ending interface to feed an obsessive hunger. (Live)fed at last.

Our video was formally inspired by Occitane Lacurie’s “xena’s body” (2024). In her video, Lacurie sought to replicate what Leo Goldsmith describes as the “vertiginous spiral of ‘doomscrolling,’” wherein phone users are “swept up in the whirlwind of often horrifying media content coming to us through our various screens” (Ahwesh and Goldsmith 2023: 183). The term ‘doomscroll’ gained popularity in 2020, when a flurry of national and global crises confined many to their homes with little to do but scroll endlessly through bad news. In the five years since, doomscrolling has become ubiquitous in daily life as a mode of engaging with online and social media cultures. The idea of doomscrolling has expanded beyond its original focus on current events and now references a daily activity.

Lacurie’s work helped orient our formal decision with regard to the use of the smartphone interface. After questioning how to best illustrate the pervasive and suffocating nature of diet culture online, we ultimately felt that this small intimate screen that is often treated as a digital appendage in trans-humanist thought would best ground our argument. Diet culture invites a continuous tracking and compartmentalizing of the body, wherein the body itself ultimately becomes data. This creates a new kind of virtual body or virtual *self* that is divorced from the actual context of the corporeal, the body itself becomes abstracted through the constancy of this data dysmorphia that is unique to the smartphone interface. Additionally, many of the clips used in this piece originated on TikTok, a mode of creation native to the

smartphone. Rather than excavating and extracting clips from their current digital platforms and compiling them into a more cinematic form, a mode that Lého Galibert-Lainé (2020) describes as “netnographic cinema,” we opted for this hybrid version of desktop documentary form. This helped support our aim of moving beyond the content produced and consumed within diet culture and thinking about how these media objects function within a constantly changing network of virtual infrastructures, “invit[ing] a reflection on the influence of frames and graphic interfaces on the meaning of online media” (2020: 62).

From the moment she wakes up, our fictional protagonist faces an onslaught of notifications and reminders related to her food intake and body shape. As she moves across platforms, she encounters a perpetual stream of numerical, pictorial, and sonic data reinforcing the diet mindset. Scrolling through TikTok, she encounters a jarring blend of weight-loss tips and wellness/self-empowerment influencers. She panics at the thought of eating at The Cheesecake Factory with a friend, desperately scrolling through their Skinnylicious menu for low-calorie options before canceling the plans, resulting in further social isolation and digital entrenchment. Filming these moments within the interface of the iPhone grounds these practices in the ubiquity of everyday life.

Our project is firmly rooted in present media ecosystems. In her history of anorexia nervosa, Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1988) notes the dramatic spike in public awareness of eating disorders between the 1960s and 1980s. This period marked changes in attitudes about food and weight, alongside the rise of industrialized food systems, print and video advertising, and the standardization of clothing sizes. For those who have not personally interacted with these platforms, our video may come across at varying points as overwhelming, superficial, and/or comedic, such as calculating the precise calories in a third of a banana. For others, our video will reflect an intimate reality. In either case, our goal was to move beyond a representation of disordered eating that reifies and fetishizes thinness, for example, the slew of Lifetime movies such as *The Best Little Girl in the World* (Sam O’Steen, 1981), *For the Love of Nancy* (Paul Schneider, 1994), *A Secret Between Friends* (James Contner, 1996), *Perfect Body* (Douglas Barr, 1997), *Sharing the Secret* (Katt Shea, 2000), all depicting a white female adolescent protagonist who, over the course of the film, develops an eating disorder as a means to gain control, transforms her already thin body into an emaciated body, and ultimately chooses recovery following a near death experience). We position our video in opposition to the many “exposé[s] on the horrors of eating disorders” described by Roxane Gay, a viewing experience that leaves her “full of longing and [...] full of envy and so much of my envy is terrible” (2017: 190). In other words, we did not want to produce more thinspo (i.e., harmful images of thinness) in our critique of thinspo.

We were also moved by Lacurie’s critical engagement with and discussion of menstruation, a topic women are generally encouraged to keep private. Our experience of doomscrolling through diet media is not unique; anecdotally, we know that many women privately engage in similar rituals related to food and dieting. Relatively little scholarship exists on the convergent nature of diet culture media. These practices rely on shameful internal mechanisms that take place on a private interface. Rather than producing a more conventional piece of written scholarship, our video essay seeks to capture an affective experience of scrolling and self-monitoring. The video is not only an archive of a set of user generated content across YouTube, TikTok, etc., but also a preservation of the digital infrastructures upon which these media are (re) distributed. The interfaces of these apps are constantly in flux, subjected to updates and developments to both the aesthetic presentation and the operating software. Part of our critical engagement with these interfaces of diet culture involves a revealing of these private inner machinations and the obsessive thinking that keeps us beholden to them. In performing this doomscroll, we hope to pierce through the digital bubble that keeps so many of us stuck in the perpetual quest to monitor, log, consume, and shrink.

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Biographies

Charlotte Scurlock is a PhD student in Film and Media Studies with a certificate in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. She holds an MA in Cinema and Media Studies from the University of Southern California. Her research explores methods of cinematic collage through analog and digital technologies in experimental, documentary, and essay filmmaking practices.

Julia Rose Camus is a PhD student in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She holds a BA in Cinema and Media Studies and Anthropology from the University of Chicago, an MA in Cinema and Media Studies from USC. Her dissertation research considers corporeal imaging in film and digital media. In addition to her academic work, she is also a photographer and media artist, and more of her work can be found on her portfolio www.juliarosecamus.com.

Review by Samantha Close, DePaul University

Watching this piece is like drinking from a firehose—in all senses of the words. It deploys the desktop documentary form (via a phone screen) extremely effectively to capture the overwhelming barrage of cultural imperatives around eating, exercising, and body “care.” The neoliberal dimension to this barrage comes through clearly as we realize that so many of the videos are product endorsements or reviews and see the protagonist comparing costs for Ozempic across different possible suppliers. The videographic form here exemplifies an updated experience of media flow, one in which we go from watching things (be they original social media video or clips cannibalized from TV and film) to doing things (logging calorie counts, texting with friends) and back again seamlessly. This is surprisingly seldom discussed in written studies, which very often focus on a single media platform rather than the converged experience of social media use. Seeing the same ideas repeated from so many mouths, on so many different platforms, and in so many different styles argues powerfully that what we are seeing is the result of hegemonic currents rather than any particular interface or subculture.

One of the most effective choices in the work is withholding any images of the fictional protagonist, such that viewers are prevented from making any judgments about their bodies (though we do see data about the protagonist, this only highlights how the corporeal becomes the digital and vice-versa). This choice recalls Proctor's (2019) audiographic work “Am I Pretty?” in which she arranged a complex audioscape of teenage girls asking the titular question, denying us the image precisely to highlight how “I couldn't help but have always, in the back of my mind, a sense of my own

appraisal of their appearance.” Scurlock and Camus similarly challenge us to be aware of how we imagine the protagonist and the way those imaginings are driven, at least in part, by the same cultural imperatives that bring us the material of the video.

Moving the desktop documentary to the 9:16 phone screen is also powerful. The fact that it is still a video takes control of the content out of our hands—unlike our own phones, we cannot direct the media stream here and are just as “livefed” as the protagonist, meaning that even those who are immersed in diet culture (which is many of us, as the statement and work both suggest) may experience the work as a revelation. This draws attention to the way our digital worlds are curated by not only hegemonic culture but also algorithms, questioning how much agency we truly have, even in a neoliberal world that fetishizes choice.

Reference

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Review by Occitane Lacurie, Université Paris 1

The ominous title “LIVEFED” condensates a pun based on a strange coincidence: in the Internet lingo, a feed designates the virtual paper roll on which one neverendingly wears out one’s thumb and eyeballs, while outside the screen, feed is rather related to the digestive system.

In diet and fitness culture, these two meanings converge in a single metabolic system that manages to link food, body, and attention economy. This cyborg organism could borrow the very intimately known name of *self-consciousness*, a feeling which grows within female teenage bodies alongside hormonal levels and the psycho-social nostalgia for the time when none of this fat arithmetic mattered.

Julia Rose Camus and Charlotte Scurlock’s video essay shows how self-consciousness becomes a feedback loop—pun intended—in the algorithmic age. While doomscrolling tends to disincarnate its user, images of diet and fitness culture operate the exact opposite movement by bringing back its subject within their imperfect body. Two contradictory feeds, or timelines, are at work in “LIVEFED”: videos that seem to launch by themselves, without any logic or user intervention, and apps into which the user pours her personal data, hoping to change her body.

Soon, the playful graphic design of the apps and actual food merge in dreadful embedded videos. An influencer on her cheat-meal day raves about a terrifying donut with an artificially colorful glazing replicating a cartoonish strawberry. Two people

stand, only wearing their underwear, in what seems to be a television show which turns their daily caloric intake into an emetic real-life data visualization of wasted food. As matter and diagrams blur together, the Faustian relationship between the character and her phone spirals out of control when her friend tries to invite her to dinner. At this point, it is hard to determine if the doomscroller is nauseated by her self-consciousness or by the digital force-feeding she just has been subjected to. As a viewer, our own attention span is saturated by this visual glut, making us unable to follow the user's activities on the apps and the sickening videos playing in a corner of the screen.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

