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# 'I wanted to share with you some of my healthy habits': YouTubers' staging of health-related practices

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**ABSTRACT**

Professional YouTubers have become highly popular in producing video content through self-mediation. **Objective.** The present article aimed to study ways in which lifestyle YouTubers construct health practices in their videos within the YouTube media culture. **Design.** We conducted a narrative and visual analysis across a selection of 15 videos. **Results**. Results showed that YouTubers' practices and recommendations for a better life were structured around three themes: Eating to live well; Exercising to live well; Resting to live well and, a fourth cross-cutting theme on Practices aimed at self-development to achieve health and happiness. YouTubers were mainly female presenting, as well as middle/upper-class and white appearing. An overall optimistic tone characterised their health stories, as they delivered personal experiences of success on becoming healthy, happy, and better persons, while encouraging viewers to act similarly. Our findings suggested that YouTubers actively contribute to construct unprecedented definitions of health, enhanced by the social media culture and broader societal logics of healthism and postfeminism. **Conclusion.** Our study constitutes an original contribution to critical health psychology by examining some of the paradoxes raised by social media influencers like YouTubers regarding health and wellbeing.

YouTube is a social media that provides a virtual space where video content constitutes the main means for communicating. This platform has become an attractive hub for products' placement and advertising (Arthurs et al., 2018). Underpinned by the 'attention economy' business model, YouTube's marketing and technological affordances have given rise to forms of labor, such as that of 'Professional YouTubers'(García-Rapp, 2017; Senft, 2013). Having grown into popular figures in the past decades, their main aim consists of attracting the attention of virtual audiences to gain visibility for commercial purposes (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Raun, 2018; Thomson, 2017). YouTubers' professional activity – and success – is thus constructed upon unprecedented forms of communication that are deemed to be 'intimate' and 'personal', based on self-mediation and self-presentation (Khamis et al., 2017). In fact, they stage their own persona by regularly documenting on video their everyday

practices and share with viewers their thoughts, feelings, and practices (Abidin, 2015; Raun, 2018). YouTubers are keen on developing a reputation of 'honesty' (Khamis et al., 2017; Raun, 2018) since they define themselves as ordinary 'authentic' people able to provide information on a specific topic by being self-reflective and based on their personal experience (Marshall, 2010; Marwick, 2015). They also provide recommendations and advice regarding activities, services or products oriented by a commercial purpose, namely product placement (Abidin, 2015). The filmed content is edited, produced, and uploaded to a personal YouTube channel, hosted by the platform, according to predefined categories, such as beauty, lifestyle, gaming, or humor (Thomson, 2017). In addition, this verbal and visual content follows trends that are specific to the platform and sometimes suggested by the audience (e.g. challenges, pranks, hauls, vlogs, etc.). According to certain authors (Abidin, 2015; Senft, 2008), YouTubers may grow into media 'influencers' or 'Internet microcelebrities' by monetising their everyday lives, personal experiences, body and self-image through different personal social media channels and platforms.

In recent years, the lifestyle YouTube category has become increasingly popular (Carrotte et al., 2015). In these videos, YouTubers often document on their own health-related daily routines, everyday practices, and health behaviour to portray health and healthy lifestyles (Khamis et al., 2017). This video content is staged and performed by YouTubers themselves, mainly in indoor settings presented as their private homes. Such content also encourages viewers to engage in specific health-related practices and body work to 'become healthy'. Regular exercise, healthy eating, and detox diets are dominant leitmotifs (Carrotte et al., 2017). Recent work (Baker & Rojek, 2020) has argued that YouTubers devoted to the lifestyle category are evolving to become key agents of new forms of lay knowledge regarding health, even though this knowledge is neither scientific-based, nor produced by health experts. Moreover, wellbeing has grown into a highly popular related topic, where targeted information, practices, and recommendations to lead a 'happy life' are shared by lifestyle YouTubers (Khamis et al., 2017).

This YouTube media culture echoes the dominant role that health has played in advanced capitalist societies over the past decades (Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006). Being no longer taken for granted nor perceived as the mere absence of illness, health is henceforth understood as a state of subjective wellbeing that relates to the satisfaction of an array of needs stemming from different realms, such as the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual (Marks et al., 2018). In this context, 'good health' is defined as a condition to be achieved and maintained through individual efforts (Cockerham, 2014). Certain critical authors have referred to this 'new pervasive health consciousness' at societal level as 'healthism' (Turrini, 2015, p. 16). For instance, Crawford (1980) conceptualised healthism as a sociocultural trend according to which 'good health' becomes a life purpose to be achieved through self-care, healthy lifestyles, and practices regarding wellness promotion (Crawford, 1977; Turrini, 2015). By focusing on lifestyle and behavior change, healthism seems particularly pervasive within consumption societies underpinned by individualistic approaches to health (Crawford, 2006). For instance, healthism seems facilitated by the continuing growth of a commercial culture composed of health services and products, where health promotion and illness prevention play an increasingly important part, and where

individuals are strongly encouraged to become self-responsible regarding their health and wellbeing through specific behaviours (e.g., exercising regularly, eating healthily, etc.) (Crawford, 2004). This specific definition of healthism differs from Zola's (1972) earlier conceptualization of healthism, where pervasiveness of medicine becomes a form of social control.

To date, there is scarce research in health psychology on ways in which health-related practices are constructed in YouTube by lifestyle YouTubers through specific verbal and visual video content, and how such constructions relate to healthism. This is of particular interest due to the massive expansion of YouTubers as social media influencers, and their huge popularity among younger generations. Given these gaps in the literature, the present study aimed to analyse health-related content staged by lifestyle YouTubers in YouTube by framing it in terms of social practices (Blue et al., 2016; Meier et al., 2018; Shove & Warde, 2002) from a critical perspective in health psychology (del Rio Carral & Lyons, 2020; Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006). This perspective was appropriate to conceptualise YouTubers' multi-modal video content by focusing on staged health-related practices as embodied and socially shared and understood within a given community through different forms of language (del Rio Carral & Lyons, 2020; Hargreaves, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002). Thus, our framework allowed us to take into account bodies, identities, and materialities by analysing meanings attached to YouTubers' staged practices (e.g. physical appearance, objects, tools, spaces, settings, as well as visual styles used in the videos) (del Rio Carral & Lyons, 2020; Hargreaves, 2011). In addition, this perspective was adopted to contextualise staged health-related practices within the YouTube media culture and broader discourses, such as healthism and postfeminism. Our approach led to the implementation of a qualitative multi-method design that targeted *what* verbal and visual content was presented and *how* such content was constructed.

## Methodology

YouTube is a unique research field, that overturns the traditional relationship between researchers and the research material. In contrast with studies where videos are produced by researchers to record social interactions, YouTubers' productions are readily available data. These videos are recorded by the YouTubers (and their sometimes their teams) for their audience. As such, this is not the study of phenomena as they are happening in 'naturally occurring spaces', (Schnettler, 2013) but rather one of productions that YouTubers make to be consumed by specific platform users. Thus, there is a fundamental performative component in YouTubers' work, as well as a series of compositional, aesthetic, marketing, and content decisions that YouTubers' take when uploading their videos to their personal channel.

In line with our framework and the multi-modality of our topic of investigation, our methodological approach was qualitative, informed by a socio-constructionist perspective (Burr, 2015). It aimed to explore meanings attached to YouTubers' staged practices, by focusing on the story-telling dimension of the YouTube video content (Chou et al., 2011; Dreon et al., 2011; Schuman et al., 2019), both through verbal and visual forms of language. To do so, we developed a qualitative methodology aimed at analysing meanings associated to what was said in the videos and how it was

said, as well as what was visually shown and how it was shown. This qualitative methodology was part of a broader study, and was therefore articulated within a multi-method design published recently (del Rio Carral et al., 2021).

## Recruitment, data collection and ethics

Given the research aims and our focus on professional YouTubers, the present study targeted copyright (as opposed to creative commons license ('About CC Licenses', n.d.), CCL) health-related videos from lifestyle professional YouTubers. It was approved by the Ethics Commission of the the University of Lausanne (Project number C_SSP_012021_00001). Our recruitment and data collection procedures were conducted by implementing two subsequent steps as represented in Figure 1 and detailed below.

First, we focused on health promotion, illness prevention and health-related practices videos. All videos were English-speaking videos, given the popularity of this language in social media and the keywords used to select them. Keywords were defined collectively among the three authors of the present article, based on an array of words related to health promotion, illness prevention, and health behaviours. Our list was progressively adapted upon conducting the search in YouTube. Some examples of the list of keywords are: Healthy living, Healthy lifestyle, Health behaviours, Healthy habits, and Health and wellbeing. The data collector (third author) typed each keyword on the YouTube research bar and opened in a new tab the first relevant video. She collected information about the video (views, title, health promotion or illness prevention) and the YouTuber (channel's name, number of subscribers, country, appearing gender, age, and race) on a separated file. She did not use her personal YouTube account in conducting this search. This first recruitment and data collection procedures led to the constitution of a pool of 80 videos published by 80 different lifestyle YouTubers.

For the second procedure, a minimum of 100 K Youtubers' subscribers was set as a baseline threshold indicating popularity. To do so, we followed YouTube governance criteria which defines 'elite' YouTuber channels starting at 100 K subscribers (Rieder et al., 2020). This second procedure led to a definition of 50 YouTubers, whose videos were investigated by implementing a mixed methods design in the
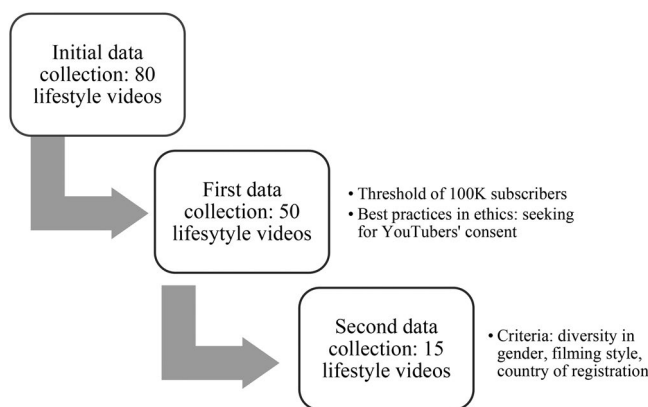


**Figure 1.** Graphic explaining recruitment and data collection procedures.

broader study (del Rio Carral et al., 2021). From an ethical standpoint and best practices' perspective (British Psychological Society, 2017), YouTubers were informed by email on our study's aims. Protection of their identities was also guaranteed by ensuring identity coding and paraphrasing of their material. YouTubers could explicitly respond to withdraw from the study, and two did so. It is important to note that, due to copyright reasons, the use of direct quotes and images in any publication was avoided. The legal context in the country where our study was conducted (Switzerland) allowed for the reproduction of copyright material for research purposes (Loi fédérale sur le droit d'auteur et les droits voisins, 1992). Nonetheless, to our knowledge, this was exclusive to the Swiss context and did not give us the right to reproduce or share such data.

From this pool of YouTubers, we selected 15 videos for the present qualitative study, aiming at a diversity in health content (e.g. health routines, practices, topics); YouTubers' gender identities; filming styles (e.g. voice over, face cam, and illustration of health practices), and countries of registration. Data collection took place between March and June 2020. YouTubers' socio-demographic information is extremely hard to collect, as it is often not reported (Baker & Rojek, 2020). Additionally, YouTubers from this simple did not explicitly refer to their gender, race, ethnicity nor socioeconomic status in their personal profile or in their videos. While such information may be particularly challenging to gather in the context of YouTube videos, and more broadly social media, information on the personal identity may be conveyed via different means. For instance, from a 'visible identities' perspective, social positionalities can be enacted through visible bodily signs, social norms, aesthetics and practices (Alcoff, 2005). In our study, we came about a rather homogeneous composition on YouTubers' social positionalities, despite our efforts to diversify the sample of videos. Based on YouTubers' self-presentation and visible identities (Alcoff, 2005), the majority of can be described as overall: female presenting, able bodied, white appearing, young, middle/upper-class appearing and registered in countries in Western Europe (United Kingdom and Netherlands), North America (USA and Canada), and Australia. At the risk of making assumptions on YouTubers identities, it was relevant for our analyses to integrate their visible characteristics, especially given the lack of representation concerning other social positionalities and identities.

## Data analysis

Our methods of analysis aimed to address *what* was being said in lifestyle YouTubers' videos and *how* it was said, verbally and visually.

Verbal content of videos was obtained from the close captions (automatically generated subtitles) made available by the YouTube platform. In parallel, each video was watched repeatedly by the three authors. We adjusted a narrative analysis method inspired by Murray (2003) to examine what was said in the videos and how it was said. Indeed, lifestyle YouTubers' video content can be investigated as 'stories' with a beginning, middle and end. In such stories, YouTubers played the main characters and used a specific narrative tone. Based upon Murray (2003), three dimensions – personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural – were further examined.

The visual stance focused on the analysis of meanings attached to images and shots, as we identified that visual indicators were systematically included in each video to enhance the storytelling. For example, each video introduced a new chapter or sub-story by using specific visual content and style (e.g. title of the video section, change of colours, change of setting). Given these characteristics, the visual stance was explored by conducting an inductive thematic analysis across the videos focusing on what health-related content was displayed in each shot (Gleeson, 2011). A specific analytical grid adapted from existing digital and visual approaches allowed to complete such analysis by examining how the style was constructed in each shot through meanings via the display of specific objects, environments and materialities (Knoblauch, 2009; Norris, 2012). Due to copyright protection of YouTubers' non-CCL verbal and visual material, we used fictitious names, paraphrased their accounts, and illustrated the visual content through drawings.

## Results

YouTubers talked about health by referring to practices, information, and recommendations on how to lead healthy lives. This verbal content was staged and illustrated through an array of actions, objects, tools, and settings. Main topics examined included how to eat, exercise, and rest to live healthily. Engaging in self-development was additionally identified as a cross-cutting theme underpinning these topics.

In the selected videos, YouTubers presented themselves as the main characters of their stories. Both, the verbal and visual stances participated to co-construct meanings of health practices and content. These stances were inextricably enmeshed to create specific narratives that were aimed at an audience of YouTube viewers and users. Our analyses and interpretations on video content are therefore described through the intertwinement of both verbal and visual stances.

### Overarching narrative structures: progressive logic and optimistic tone

The selection of videos concerned health promotion, illness prevention, and health behaviours. Risk practices such as smoking, alcohol/drug consumption or unhealthy food habits were hardly ever mentioned. When it was the case, unhealthy habits were condemned or referred to briefly as a starting point to engage in behaviour change (e.g. 'I used to be a lazy person who ate a lot of junk food').

The narrative analysis of the verbal stance across this selection led us to qualify all YouTubers' accounts as optimistic, systematically following progressive plots towards a 'better health' and a 'better self', in which the main characters – the YouTubers – presented themselves as empowered individuals. The general story or 'overarching plot' concerned YouTubers' personal journey towards a healthier lifestyle. This structure was identifiable from the initial video sections, where YouTubers encouraged their viewers to start implementing 'good', new habits to then be able to transition towards a healthier life.

YouTubers suggested that the implementation of targeted, simple, behavioural changes would ensure a promised result (i.e. to look, feel and be like the main character in the videos). According to them, this individual behaviour change would allow viewers to become a 'better version' of themselves.

Our visual analyses pointed out that the visual content and style participated to construct the meanings attached to the verbal stance. Indeed, the visual component across our video selection did not only support, but also emphasise the optimistic logic. This logic was constructed by specific types of images that were bright coloured and filtered, portraying exclusively female presenting, young, mainly white appearing, middle/upper class, and able-bodied YouTubers who talked about their health, well-being, body, and identity while performing a specific health-related activity in seemingly effortless ways (e.g. cooking, exercising, sleeping, meditating, cleaning the house). The surrounding environment was composed of ordered, tidy, and sober indoor settings, described as their private housing. This setting was used by YouTubers to stress a certain 'intimacy' and 'authenticity' (e.g. 'I am showing you my everyday life private space').

### *Overarching narrative dimensions: the personal, the interpersonal, and the sociocultural*

To motivate their audiences, YouTubers strongly referred to the *personal dimension* based on their own experiences to explain that, in the past, they used to be unhealthy, 'lazy' and less knowledgeable persons. Story chapters or micro-narratives composing each story presented concrete steps followed to move towards healthier lives, said to have been achieved by consistent behaviour change across appropriate food intake, regular sports, and adequate resting habits. The visual stance enhanced this personal narrative dimension, as YouTubers appeared mainly alone. Through illustration shots, they performed the recommended health practice. When performing such practices (e.g. eating, drinking a 'smoothie'), YouTubers looked off camera. This format contributed to underline another form of 'authenticity', meaning that they were filmed in the 'spontaneous' implementation of a health practice that was part of their everyday life. Here, the indoor environment and settings were ground for action, where YouTubers interacted with objects, tools, and (few) characters, such as a white, male, able-bodied appearing person presented as the partner, suggesting heteronormative relationships.

The *interpersonal dimension* was an integrative part of YouTubers' videos narrative constructions by explicitly engaging their viewers. For instance, this dimension was defined by pieces of advice such as: the importance of hydration and balanced diet; the impact of positive thoughts and routinised behaviours. A causal logic was systematically raised to support such advice (e.g. 'if your body is not hydrated, your cognitive performances will decrease'; 'if you are having negative thoughts, they will have a negative impact on your quality of life'). Systematically, a moral finale was employed (e.g. 'if you do not take care of your living space, you will not feel good'). Here, YouTubers embodied the role of a knowledgeable reference to their viewers and were the 'living proof' of the advice's relevance, following their accounts. Product placement was introduced through a direct weblink in each video, associated to symbols and 'emojis' that invited viewers to click. This suggested that health and wellbeing, as embodied by YouTubers, could be achieved by viewers by putting into practice their advice and by acquiring the products advertised in the videos.

Importantly, the analyses of the personal and interpersonal dimensions highlighted a *sociocultural narrative dimension*, referring to broader cultural values, social structures,

and sociocultural discourses (Murray, 2003). The analysis of this dimension raised an important paradox regarding YouTubers relationship with viewers, concerning the double role of friend and expert that they embodied. Indeed, all YouTubers encouraged their audiences to make individual choices of change as good health could be achieved by anyone, from their perspective. They aimed to identify with viewers by creating an illusion of 'authenticity' through verbal and visual content (e.g. lay people portraying their 'real' life, who may encounter difficulties, can be at times 'lazy' or 'sad', or can 'aspire' to a better life). However, this message was paradoxically articulated from a socioeconomically and racially privileged locations or positionalities. Our verbal and visual analyses suggested a white middle or upper- class position of privilege. This social positionality seemed to play a beneficial role in providing the necessary socio-material resources to engage in health-protective behaviour. However, neither YouTubers' living conditions (e.g. environmental, economic, social) nor the role of such conditions in personal health were mentioned, as if taken-for-granted. By stressing the value of self-responsibility through behavioural and psychological factors, and minimising the role of structural determinants of health, YouTubers' stories were aligned with healthism and YouTube's commercial affordances facilitated by capitalism.

From a sociocultural stance, YouTubers' health stories were mainly enacted by female presenting characters through practices, identities, objects, and settings. Their verbal and visual narratives unanimously concerned individual labour upon the body and the self. Therefore, the healthist logic was inextricably linked with postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2016; Riley et al., 2018), defined as a set of discourses inciting women in particular to undertake continuous self and body labour to earn a higher social status and power (Gill, 2007). Enmeshed with healthism, postfeminism overemphasises the roles of individual empowerment, individual responsibility and self-improvement particularly in female health, identities and bodies (Riley et al., 2018).

### Main themes describing YouTubers' staged health-related practices

Beyond these overarching characteristics, the analysis of health practices staged by YouTubers led to the definition of three main themes: a) *Eating to live well, b) Exercising to live well* and, *c) Resting to live well*, as well as a cross-cutting theme on *d) Practices aimed at self-development to achieve health and happiness*. The section below presents each theme in detail to examine *what* health content was staged and *how* the latter was constructed. Again, the verbal and visual stances were closely related.

### a) Eating to Live Well: Food Preparation & Nutrition

Verbal and visual descriptions around practices of cooking and eating were omnipresent across videos. Graphic shots showed YouTubers performing different stages of food preparation, such as washing and chopping vegetables, turning on the stove, mixing ingredients in food processors, and displaying the outcome (e.g. a colourful dish). Image 1 and Image 2 below illustrate the kind of visual language characterising the videos analysed.

Displayed settings included clean, spacious, and bright kitchens, with contemporary and minimal pastel colour furniture. Food preparation showed ingredients such as greeneries, fruits, seeds, and whole grains, considered across videos as healthy

products, and appealing to Western, middle- and upper-class viewers, sharing similar ethos and financial capabilities.

Organic and unprocessed fresh food ingredients were strongly associated to a healthy lifestyle. In this sense, viewers were warned against purchasing readily prepared meals. Foods with a high amount of sugar and fat were rarely displayed during food preparation, and, when mentioned, they were condemned. Taking the time to engage with cooking was a highly praised mindset by YouTubers, as they addressed organisation tricks and meal planning schedules to their audience. These recommendations suggested that viewers had the resources (e.g. time, material setting, money) to reproduce the portrayed cooking and eating practices.

Furthermore, verbal and visual stances referred to Western food culture discourses, according to which behavioural self-management and goal setting correspond to widespread notions for nutrition and wellbeing (Ozhiganova & Валентиновна, 2018). For example, Gaby described her previous self as someone living on important dietary restrictions, consequently craving for what she considered unhealthy 'junk food' (e.g. sweets, desserts, etc.). Allowing herself for sporadic desserts – she argued – helped her adopt a more balanced approach to her diet. The assumption underlying YouTubers' accounts and visuals was that their audiences – that is, lay people – would be rather tempted by 'junk-food' than 'healthy' eating, and that the latter would represent a challenge to viewers.



**Image 1.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'healthy' food preparation, in this case a smoothie with fresh fruit and vegetables.



**Image 2.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'healthy' cooking and eating, presenting the final dish after preparation.

In contrast with traditional forms of expertise in this field (e.g. dieticians, doctors, nutritionists, and other health professionals), YouTubers underlined the personal, experiential dimension through their narratives, adopting an approachable, 'intimate' posture toward viewers. For instance, Diana explained how after having been diagnosed with a chronic disease, she had decided to change her lifestyle completely by making 'unhealthy' food unavailable to her. While her past self would often consume unhealthy food, she had taken the habit of preparing ready-to-grasp snacks to avoid falling into the junk-food temptation. The underpinning message was clear cut: '*If 'I'* [the YouTuber] *was able to do it, then 'you'* [the viewer] *can do it too'*.

### b) Exercising to Live Well: Physical Activity

Another predominant theme involved sport and physical activity. YouTubers talked about the importance of regular, physical exercising and bodily movement as a fundamental physical need and a key ingredient for a healthier, but also happier life. Images here below illustrate the type of visual content on exercising that we analysed across our video selection.

Image 3 shows a female, white, and middle-upper- class presenting YouTuber exercising at her private home using professional weights and specific material and tools deemed necessary to perform this social practice (e.g. clothes, tennis shoes). Image 4 was inspired by video content of other YouTubers who performed yoga postures in (private) outdoor spaces, also dressed in specific clean and seemingly new clothing commonly used in Western societies to do yoga (e.g. cropped top with matching leggings) and using a particular kind of yoga mat, with bright colours, and usually sold in Western department stores.

In one of the videos, Mandy praised the benefits of exercising everyday. She stated that humans were not born to be static, and that body movement was a condition for wellbeing. This YouTuber's view suggests that physical activity is part of the 'human nature', and that, consequently, it can be easily implemented as a daily habit by any viewer. It also infers that exercising constitutes a 'need' for being healthy and happy.

Mandy's accounts on her experienced benefits of regular physical activity and exercise participate to the optimistic narrative tone of the video. This was reinforced by the visual stance portraying Mandy's body as presumably slim, white, fit, strong,
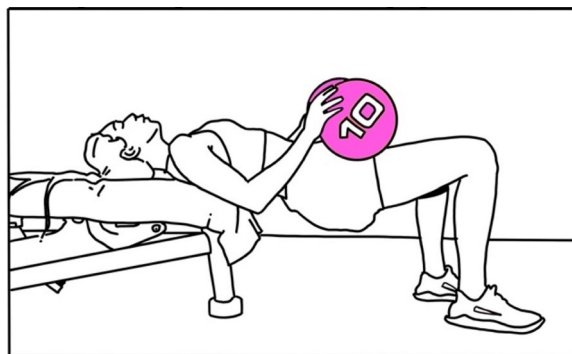


**Image 3.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'exercising to live well' where a YouTuber performs exercising with weights.
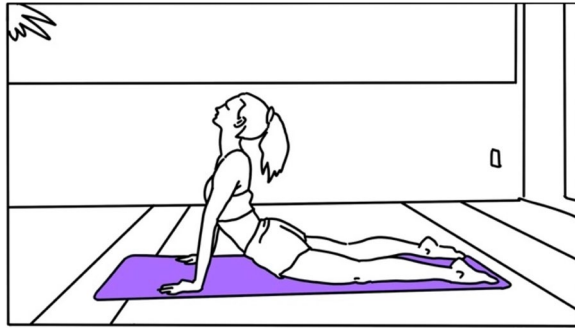
**Image 4.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'exercising to live well' where a 20 YouTuber is doing a yoga posture.

and abled. The imperative to engage in physical activity refers to a broader social discourse of what healthy bodies should look like in Western societies. Associated with Mandy's narrative tone, her message acquires a positive value by attaching to this discourse specific affects, those of happiness and joy. Together, the circulation of this kind of discourse and affects may encourage women to engage in specific forms of body labour (Bailey et al., 2021; Winch, 2015), guided by the expectation of becoming rewarded as 'good' persons and citizens by engaging in attempts to reach this ideal (Bailey et al., 2021)

Further, this narrow view on physical activity shows how healthism (Crawford, 1980) and postfeminism were enmeshed in meanings attached by lifestyle YouTubers to staged practices. In their videos, the responsibility for staying healthy and 'fit' was placed on the (female) individual, deemed to engage in the appropriate practices. Such logic was accentuated by Mandy's argument on the biological 'nature' of exercising and moving. From this perspective, structural and contextual barriers to the adoption of such practice were entirely overlooked, as well as the sociocultural embeddedness of regular physical activity and exercising.

Other YouTubers argued that too much exercise could be harmful and affect health negatively. Through the mobilisation of the interpersonal narrative dimension, they warned against the negative repercussions of 'over-exercising' and were urged to adopt a gentle and balanced approach to movement. Finding what 'works for you' was a key motto across our video selection. This interpersonal dimension drew upon social discourses that highlight freedom of choice at individual level.

Motivation for sport and movement were key elements in YouTubers' accounts on health. As they described their past selves as inactive, 'lazy', and overall unhealthy, they then introduced their 'own' behavioural solution and explained how rigorous exercise positively changed their life. From an interpersonal narrative dimension (Murray, 2003), YouTubers assumed that their viewers were not yet regularly exercising but that they aspired to change their behaviour. For instance, YouTuber Sidney advised their viewers on how to maintain physical exercising during vacation, implicitly underlying the value of never interrupting the exercising habit. Another YouTuber provided several examples on how to increase the training intensity, implicitly showing the desirability for high-impact physical exercise. Through their advice, YouTubers presented

themselves as 'living' examples of self-development concerning exercising, implicitly leading to health and happiness. Finally, video content on exercising involved a narrow array of physical activities portrayed as individual, such as running, yoga, and indoor training. Team sports, collective physical activities or other kinds of sports in outdoor environments (e.g. climbing, playing ball) were neither displayed, nor discussed. This consideration is important, because it is a clear example of how only certain images – in this case, specific ideals on exercising activities – come to be associated with health and wellbeing.

### c) Resting to Live Well: Sleep and Tech-Free Moments

YouTubers referred to the essential role of rest as a condition to live healthily. According to the narrative stance, rest was defined by the need to adopt two main habits in everyday life: that of getting eight hours of sleep every night and that of taking regular 'breaks'. Disconnecting from technology before going to bed was a predominant recommendation across our video selection, as well as staying away from 'blue lights' stemming from technological devices (smartphone screens, laptops, etc.). Visually, the video content consisted of illustration shots showing YouTubers preparing their bedtime, closing the curtains of a private bedroom (where they mostly slept alone), often lighting up a candle or turning on an essential oil diffuser. Images presented below highlight typical scenes analysed in this third theme. Image 5 constitutes a close shot of a YouTuber using essential oils while talking about the importance of rest to stay healthy, and Image 6 one shows a YouTuber resting her eyes closed, thus apparently 'unaware' of the camera.

YouTubers presented themselves as wearing pyjamas, slippers, and other comfortable clothes. These images were usually preceded by extreme close ups of YouTubers' hands while turning off their phones and/or computers. Rest was also portrayed by images of landscapes, signifying calm environments. Shots over the sky, beaches, sea-line sunsets, flowers and leaves were displayed to enhance meanings constructed through YouTubers' accounts of their newly found sense of wellbeing. Ironically, resting practices were presented within a broader context of social and economic productivity and performance, as YouTubers' personal goal was to feel regenerated and rested enough to better face everyday life challenges.
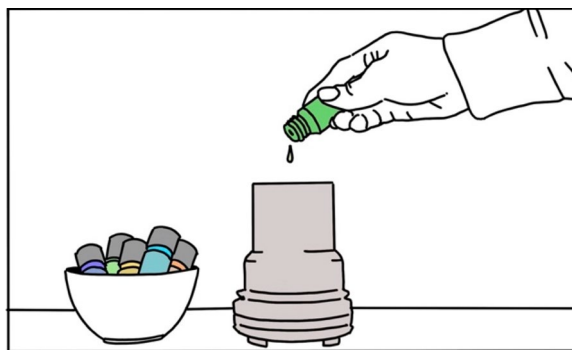


**Image 5.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'resting to live well' where a YouTuber shows that she uses essential oils to relax.

**Image 6.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos on 'resting to live well' where a YouTuber shows herself with her eyes closed.

Most exclusively experience-based, YouTubers' accounts underlined the (positive) promised results of their recommendations. This personal narrative dimension was intertwined with the interpersonal dimension. For instance, Oana explained to her viewers that turning off all screens several hours before going to bed had helped her against the strong headaches she had been suffering from in the past. Another YouTuber argued on the importance of ensuring eight hours of sleep every night through specific practices that were encouraged, such as that of sacrificing television watching, as to reach a new and better sense of concentration and an improved state of wellbeing.

This theme referred to broader values of capitalism, such as productivity and performance, as YouTubers judged contemporary Western lifestyles as stressful. The main source of stress underlined was that of their living in an hyperconnected (digital) world, which prevented them from properly relaxing and letting go of ongoing physical and psychological tensions. By adopting this discourse, YouTubers assumed that their viewers would have access to similar life conditions, which would enable them to constantly engage – like YouTubers themselves – in digital technologies and online activities (e.g. studying, working, entertainment, shopping, etc.). Based on this assumption, YouTubers considered it important for their health and that of their viewers to be involved across a range of 'offline' health practices, defined as 'tech-free'. Paradoxically, YouTubers resting practices involved the use of digital tools such as mobile phone apps, suggesting that technology remained indispensable to 'rest well'. Also, the video content presented an array of practices inspired by non-Western philosophies. These included meditation and yoga, as well as health solutions from Chinese traditional medicine (e.g. acupuncture) to recover from a 'stressful' Western lifestyle. Here, we recognised a common trope across contemporary Western discourses: that of reinterpreting non-Western ancient philosophies as means to individually empower people by helping them regain happiness and health (Kaushal, 2020).

### d) Practices Aimed at Self-Development to Achieve Health and Happiness

The range of practices recommended by YouTubers were underpinned by a cross-cutting theme that referred to a desirable way of being to achieve health and wellbeing: that of self-development. The latter was mainly defined by self-improvement, to be implemented through goal setting, individual motivation, and the adoption of a

positive mindset. In their videos, YouTubers talked about the imperative of 'reconnecting with the self' to feel healthy and happy. This personal process was defined through specific practices besides eating, exercising, and resting to live well. They included journaling, writing to-do lists, spending time in a green environment, and meditating. Visually, meanings on self-development were constructed through different types of shots and content. Through discourse shots, YouTubers talked to their viewers on the benefits of adopting such logic, by presenting themselves as smiling, happy, smart-looking women in bright, sober, clean indoor settings. Also, during illustration shots, YouTubers performed individual self-care practices (e.g. meditating, writing lists of goals to be achieved), in their private living rooms or bedrooms. Furthermore, nature-shots over a sunset or the sky were used as images that enhanced accounts on personal growth, optimism, and resilience, usually with a soft music in the background.

Images below serve to illustrate how YouTubers staged this theme. Image 7 shows one of them writing down a to-do list on goals to be achieved for self-development. Image 8 one shows a YouTuber while meditating in her own private living room using earphones, while listening to an app or podcast, while explaining the importance of 'tech-free' moments to reconnect with oneself.

Mindfulness in meditation, eating, and exercising were constructed as means to reach wellbeing by allowing for a deeper connection with the self. These recommended practices seem to draw upon other non-Western cultures. For example, Clara advised viewers to prioritise their time according to personal goals, to avoid feeling guilty and disappointed with themselves. Also, YouTuber Patricia argued that negative thoughts lead to lower self-esteem, and she then invited viewers to nourish their minds with positive thoughts to achieve better mental health.

Moreover, self-development was associated to the recommendation of adopting a positive mind and to the visualisation of positive life outcomes. This was said to be achieved by nurturing the mind with success-oriented words and imageries. Other recommendations included daily scheduling and result-oriented life-planning, which were presented as tools to better succeed in implementing healthy eating, exercising, and resting. YouTubers referred to self-development as an ongoing process to increase performance, productivity, and individual success by aiming to be healthier and



**Image 7.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos regarding self-developmentpresenting a YouTuber while she writes a 'gratitude journal'.
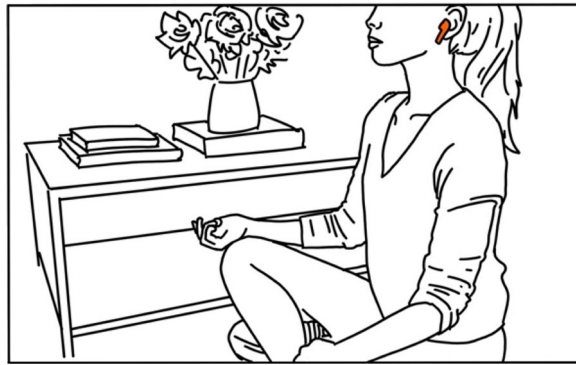
**Image 8.** Illustration inspired on YouTubers' videos regarding self-development 22 portraying a YouTuber while meditating.

happier persons. According to this logic, wellbeing was synonym of happiness and constructed as a result to expect from self-development.

## Discussion

This study aimed to analyse ways in which professional YouTubers' staged health-related practices in a selection of YouTube videos classified under the lifestyle category, within the fields of health promotion and illness prevention. This topic was explored from a critical perspective in health psychology, by conceptualising health video content in terms of social practices, which allowed us to study their embodied and sociocultural embeddedness through a focus on meanings (Blue et al., 2016; Chamberlain & Lyons, 2020). We implemented a qualitative methodology, involving a narrative and visual approach to examine 'what' health-related video content was constructed and 'how' this content was constructed.

Overall, the communication style adopted by YouTubers was based on authenticity and intimacy to establish a horizontal relationship, as argued in the literature (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Thomson, 2017). At the same time, YouTubers enacted an ideal of 'healthy individuals' and presented themselves as inspiring personas. As Tiggemann and colleagues have suggested recently (2020), they embodied a role model identity. YouTubers presented themselves as lifestyle experts by offering behavioural solutions to help viewers adhere to healthier practices as part of their everyday routine (Baker & Rojek, 2020). This position was neither associated to that of health professionals, psychologists, nor that of scientific experts, which confirms previous findings (Baker & Rojek, 2020). In this sense, our study confirmed what some have referred to as 'self-celebrification' in YouTubers' *mise en scene*, through which their expertise is constructed (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

The videos analysed mainly focused on health promotion and illness prevention. YouTubers never mentioned being ill, going to the doctor, or doing screenings for illness prevention. The videos analysed portrayed practices aimed at staying healthy or rather, at becoming healthier, to the detriment of risk behaviours. Given the major aim among YouTubers of gaining visibility in YouTube (Abidin, 2016b), the 'attention economy' principles may contribute to orient health content presented on their

videos. For instance, YouTube does not allow for the monetisation of videos concerning risk behaviours (e.g. alcohol and drug consumption, smoking) (Bishop, 2018; Burgess, 2012; Törhönen et al., 2019).

Our study underlined that YouTubers have become important agents in the production of an unprecedented 'pop' culture of health and wellbeing (Baker & Rojek, 2020). However, this culture was constructed through highly specific verbal and visual content and style. Based on our findings, we argue that the meanings around health practices in the social media culture constructed by YouTubers, fail to elaborate on the multiplicity, complexity, and diversity of health-related experiences. Specifically, they ignore the sociocultural and environmental dimensions of health and illness (Marks et al., 2018; Willig, 2001).

Our analyses on personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural narrative dimensions of their videos raised a paradox. While YouTubers aimed at establishing a relationship with their audiences based on 'authenticity' and 'simplicity', they constructed such relationship from visible identities suggesting socioeconomic and racial position of privilege, as well as presenting abled-bodies (Alcoff, 2005). Their video content largely overlooked environmental, structural and institutional determinants of health, nevertheless considered extensively in systemic approaches to health (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1991). This finding suggests that YouTubers' staged practices, facilitated by a particular social media culture, aesthetic, and content – create an illusion of simplicity in health behaviour change while contributing to implicitly construct gendered, white appearing, able-bodied, and middle-upper class presenting ideals of health.

Our analyses shed light upon ways in which healthism – as conceptualised by Crawford (1980) – is shaping health in the social media. Health was staged as a purpose to be achieved through four main themes: eating to live well, 'exercising to live well', 'resting to live well', and 'self-development to live healthier and happier'. All themes emphasised behaviour change through empowerment and implied self-responsibility. This view is inspired by popular understandings of health behaviour change, namely, cognitive-behavioural approaches. It is coherent with individualistic values characterising contemporary Western societies (Gergen, 2015), by overemphasising rationality through individual choice, goal setting, individual motivation and self-efficacy. As highlighted in our analysis, this form of healthism was enhanced through visible identities (Alcoff, 2005) – such as physical appearance and surrounding materialities. For instance, indoor activities shown on exercising to live well represented an indicator of the commodification of sports in advanced capitalist societies, requiring specific tools, objects, clothes, and settings. Additionally, YouTubers' staging of such activities overlooked any form of body disability. Social media content as represented by YouTubers thus participates to reinforce hegemonic body, lifestyle, and health ideals that can affect and orient practices among those who cannot achieve them (Bailey et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2021).

Healthism was also constructed through YouTubers' staging of self-care practices aimed at health promotion inspired by non-Western philosophies. For example, finding balance was a present trope in 'eating to live well', associated to the Buddhist philosophy (Monteiro et al., 2015). This perspective has been pervasively appropriated and adapted in Western societies with regard to health and wellbeing over the recent

decades (Wilson, in McMahan & Braun, 2017). Furthermore, practices aimed at staying healthy like meditation and yoga seem reinterpreted within the social media culture in the light of societal values of individual performance and productivity.

Healthism was also defined in our study through overarching optimistic narrative logics and progressive tones in YouTubers' stories. Interestingly, all videos were enacted by female presenting and white appearing YouTubers, despite our efforts to diversify the research sample. This is possibly due to the fact that lifestyle YouTubers who are influencers are mainly females (Carrotte et al., 2015). Our results pointed out that these YouTubers' video content participates to the expansion of moral imperatives around body and identity work. Healthist expectations and prescriptions strongly overlapped with postfeminism, as they were enacted by female presenting persons, and were addressed at female viewers, who were namely encouraged to engage in health-trajectories (del Rio Carral & Lyons, 2020; Riley et al., 2019). Abidin (2016b) had described the process of 'visibility labour' through which mainly female Internet celebrities engaged in work on their physical appearance, self-presentation, and self-staging to increase their popularity (Abidin, 2015). In our study, this process seems to echo postfeminism and its complex interactions with healthism. The themes of eating, exercising, and resting to live well – all underpinned by self-development logics – suggested the need for women to achieve certain ways of 'being', beyond the behavioural dimension.

Following this perspective, females – and specifically, white, middle-upper class females – promote and are more likely to engage in self-care, self-improvement, and the quest for personal 'authenticity'. In our study, this process implied continuous individual physical and psychological labour defined by a multiplicity of practices inspired from: cognitive and behavioural principles, positive psychology, and the appropriation of other cultures.

All health narratives analysed were rooted upon the premises of a positive life-philosophy where their self was governed by a success-oriented mindset (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Feldman et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2004). Failures, obstacles, and difficulties were systematically overlooked, while wellbeing was deemed to be achieved by following individual preferences (Diener, 1984, 2012).

In this sense, YouTubers' video content suggested several norms and scripts to be followed in order to achieve happiness (Skeggs, 2004). Our analyses highlighted that YouTubers' videos prescribed certain things, tools, settings, practices, and identities to be healthier *and* happier. We draw upon Ahmed's germinal work on 'the promise of happiness' to interpret this finding through the performative feature of this promise in relation to health more particularly, as this moral discourse is producing new sets of norms facilitated by the social media culture (Ahmed, 2010).

Based on our results, we argue that lifestyle YouTubers are shaping a new moral economy of health rooted in healthism (Turrini, 2015) and based upon self-displaying practices. This new trend is furthermore gendered and, stemming from social positionalities of racial and socioeconomic privilege. The set of health-related practices constructed by female YouTubers overemphasised the psychological and behavioural realms to the detriment of social structures and other socioeconomic dimensions that play a role in health and wellbeing (Illouz & Cabanas, 2018), This commodification of identity and emotions alongside the expansion of services and goods had been

underlined in previous work (2008). Yet, aligned with healthism, the promise of happiness through healthy practices appears as an unquestioned life goal, reinforced by a postfeminist social media culture. In this sense, lifestyle YouTubers' stories on health contribute to reproduce hegemonic femininities that may reinforce the economic power of white, middle-upper class women to the detriment of marginalised groups and identities (Riley et al., 2017).

Our analyses indicated that personal success among female YouTubers was not only defined by their professional career, as typically promoted in postfeminist discourses on 'top girl' (Chowdhury et al., 2020; Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019) and 'top woman' identities (del Rio Carral & Lyons, 2020). In YouTubers' videos, success was associated to the goal of achieving happiness through the constant engagement in specific health-related practices. Such finding provided a nuanced prescription that was dominant in the analysed videos, and that enhances another kind of postfeminism. This may extend to other social media cultures, given that social media influencers are often active across different platforms, as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter or TikTok (Abidin, 2016a).

Beyond its contribution to the field of health psychology, our study has some limitations. Findings may be oriented by the fact that this research was conducted by female researchers only, as YouTube's technical affordances may have guided our video selection. It would be interesting to further investigate the topic by considering social minorities, with other researchers, in other languages and geographical contexts. A second limitation regards the selection of keywords used, which may have overlooked the selection of video content on living with chronic illness. A third limitation concerns the complexity of YouTubers' digital material and the need to further refine our theoretical and methodological approach.

Despite these limitations, our study constitutes a first exploratory step for future research in critical health psychology. Specifically, YouTubers health and lifestyle videos deserve closer attention regarding their potential repercussions on mental and physical health among viewers, namely young females (Carrotte et al., 2015). For example, further research that considers biopedagogies and affect would be interesting to frame YouTubers' role as experts in their instruction of healthist and moralising recommendations towards their audiences (Bailey et al., 2021; Harwood, 2009). In a healthist era, health may become source of motivation but also a constraining burden given the expansion of a commercial culture of health-related services and products (Crawford, 1980, 2006), reinforced by social media platforms. Female social media users are likely to be more concerned with this burden, as they evolve in a context dominated by postfeminist sensibilities (Elias et al., 2017; Riley et al., 2019), and the quest for happiness (Ahmed, 2010). As others have argued, these sociocultural discourses influences ways in which women may act and feel, as well as how they may define themselves (Abidin, 2016a). Aligning with such sensibilities contributes to being positioned as a 'good' person, whereas those who do not or, rather, cannot, may feel excluded or having 'failed' (Gill et al., 2017).

Growing aware of meanings on lifestyle content staged in YouTubers' videos seems crucial to understand how notions of health and wellbeing are shaped in the social media in relation to broader capitalist systems and how alternative countercultures may resist through different narratives. As critical health psychologists in a rapidly

evolving digitalized social world, we argue on the necessity to further reflect upon how we may position ourselves towards this rapidly evolving topic of investigation, given the implications of this complex phenomenon for research and practice.

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## Disclosure statement

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## Data availability statement

Considering legal obligations regarding identity protection on the qualitative and quantitative analyses that we have conducted, plus the use of copyright videos for which we do not have the rights to distribute, we have decided and agreed as a team not to share the data on any repository for other potential researchers/users. There are 2 fundamental reasons: 1. Copyright videos (and derivatives - this 'derivatives' includes the analyses (output data) following the input data) cannot be shared due to copyright law. 2. Furthermore, the identity of all users must be protected and their identity coded. Furthermore, the identity of all users must be protected and their anonymity guaranteed. Search engines are potentially capable of re-identifying individuals given quotes or snapshots. Due to these factors, and in order to comply to the existing legal and institutional data privacy frameworks, it is not possible to share any output data.

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