You Are What You Eat: Social Media's Influence on Health and Beauty Practices for Young LatinX Women

Anaís Martínez Castañeda

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You Are What You Eat: Social Media's Influence on Health and Beauty Practices for Young LatinX Women

by

Anaís Martínez Castañeda

Submitted To Scripps College In Partial Fulfillment Of The Degree Of Bachelor Of Arts

Professor Gabriela Morales

Professor Carla Macal

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Quiero dedicar esta tesis a mi familia. No estaría aquí sin todos sus esfuerzos, sacrificios, y el cariño que comparten a través de la comida. Para mis abuelitas, cocinar enchiladas y tacos contigo me ha ayudado a crear una comprensión fundamental del amor y mi identidad. Gracias por los dichos y las historias que han compartido conmigo en la cocina. Con cada plato que preparó y consumo, llevo tu conocimiento consigo para siempre.

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Introduction

The curtido dripped down to my plate from the revuelta bathed in salsa roja from a local Salvadorian restaurant in the city of Pomona – a neighboring city of Claremont, where my friend Aly and I attend school. Aly stopped in between bites to share how her parents’ ideas about her body made her more vulnerable to social media’s body and diet image pressures:

The relationship my parents have with my body affected the way I let social media influence the way I see my body and diet. In high school, they would comment on my body a lot and call me fat. That affected the way that I viewed food and how I consumed media surrounding food. I consumed this idea of what's the healthiest stuff to eat. I would try to eat that, but at the end of the night, I would binge. There was no healthy relationship with food at the time. The media was influential because of what my parents and other people were telling me when I wasn't even fat. I was a normal-sized girl who was pretty athletic and just had to eat a lot of food with the miles I was running. I consumed a lot of media that perpetuated the idea that certain things were healthier than others. And then sometimes I do fall into disordered eating thinking ‘I shouldn't eat that, it's bad for me.’ At the end of the day, I remind myself that I like the taste of food and food makes me happy. Especially with cultural food. It’s so connected to my identity and comfort.

Aly, a first-generation Honduran American, reflected on how her parents promoted thinness as a health standard – a perspective she internalized even more when she started using social media. These body standards made Aly more susceptible to disordered eating practices. While her negative eating practices are not as harmful as before, sometimes she catches herself following a similar line of thinking, promoted on social media, to avoid certain foods to achieve
a slimmer body. However, she reminds herself that eating is more significant than just looking a certain way; it is also important to sustain joy and her connections to Honduran culture.

“You are what you eat” is a common saying in the U.S. that affirms a relationship between food and body: the food one consumes will impact one’s identity, well-being, and beauty. However, if we are what we eat, what does it mean when someone rejects food from their cultural heritage, as Aly did? If we are what we eat, then how does consuming foods tied to our heritage influence our ideas about cultural identity? The conventional use of the phrase, “You are what you eat,” lacks consideration for how young LatinX women consume foods from their family’s homeland to nurture cultural identity. Breaking down such nuances is essential for understanding the ways social media pressures young LatinX women to conform to white-centric body standards and has consequences, not only for our well-being but for the acceptance of cultural identity.

This thesis argues that the performance of whiteness on social media not only perpetuates unsustainable body-image and diet standards for young LatinX women but also manipulates their perception of identity and ethnic foods. On social media platforms, whiteness is often performed through curated images and narratives that promote particular body types and dietary practices associated with mainstream beauty standards that garner high engagement. My interlocutors, influenced by these representations in their teenage years, internalized such messaging and often strived to imitate these performances through surveillance of their bodies and diets that hindered connections with foods they used to enjoy at home. In light of the mental and physical effects of these pressures, many of my interlocutors are now intentionally trying to connect with ethnic foods that challenge hegemonic ideas of health. By reclaiming their culinary traditions, they
resist the homogenizing influence of social media and assert agency over their identities and well-being.

The dominant cultural ideals of whiteness are shaped and perpetuated through the performance of whiteness on social media. As Bell Hooks (1992) argues, whiteness operates as a normative standard while nonconforming identities are marginalized. Social media, defined as technologies that mediate information and social connection, differs from traditional mass media by prioritizing sociality in their design and usage and encompassing platform-based interactions (Calhoun, 2023), fostering communication and interactivity between small and large-scale users, allowing people to engage with people they know in real life as well as influencers and brands. These dynamics create a space that reinforces whiteness. Furthermore, my interviews revealed a growing trend on social media platforms wherein thinness is increasingly identified as "wellness" rather than solely beauty. Like health-themed magazines, social media often propagate that health is linked to physical appearance, reinforcing mainstream norms that are difficult to attain (Metzl, 2010). Nevertheless, this portrayal of wellness continues to resonate with established connections between beauty and whiteness, underscoring the enduring entwining of race and aesthetic norms in online environments.

I argue that social media is a key site for performing whiteness. Scholar Bryant Alexander (2018) draws on Judith Butler’s theory of gender as not an inherent trait but rather a social construct that individuals perform through repeated actions and behaviors, asserting that race, culture, and whiteness similarly operate as performances enacted through societal norms and expectations (Alexander, 2018). By understanding race, culture, and whiteness as performative constructs, I critically examine how these identities are enacted and reinforced on social media platforms through exercise routines and the consumption of certain foods. These
performative practices contribute to the maintenance of body and diet standards that privilege whiteness and marginalize young LatinX women.

In the context of social media's diet culture, the performance of whiteness becomes intertwined with the pursuit of social status through health and wellness. Both social media influencers and users who conform to these norms and practices frequently receive validation and affirmation of their worth within social relationships (Alexander, 2018). By showcasing their adherence to specific diets, exercise routines, and beauty standards, they signal their alignment with dominant cultural discourses that prioritize whiteness and thinness as the normative ideal. For example, dietary practices that emphasize organic foods and specific diets like keto can be seen as performing whiteness, as they align with dominant cultural narratives about health and wellness that are often shaped by white middle and upper-class perspectives. Diets are iterative bodily practices. Hence, social media provides a specific kind of space for "doing" and "making" whiteness through repetitive body practice. However, it's also important to acknowledge that some individuals of color may engage in "passing," where they strategically adopt the trappings of white diet culture to gain social acceptance or access to certain privileges (Alexander, 2019, 10-11). This “passing” can involve selectively curating one's routine to align with dominant cultural norms, even if it means suppressing aspects of one's racial or cultural identity. Butler’s concept of performativity emphasizes that the enactment of identity is not necessarily a conscious or deliberate choice but rather an assimilation of societal norms (Alexander, 2018). Social media influencers perform whiteness on their platforms, while users internalize some of these ideas and perform whiteness in their body practices and dietary habits. For example, my interlocutors adopted specific dietary regimens or exercise routines promoted on social media without fully considering the underlying cultural biases and assumptions embedded within these
performances of whiteness. My interlocutor’s “passing” is not an intentional attempt to be “white-passing,” but rather an effort to align themselves with characteristics and values deemed socially acceptable and valued by dominant messaging. My thesis does not critique these performances but acknowledges the influences and consequences of their actions in reproducing whiteness in an attempt to mitigate the inequalities they face.

Performing whiteness through diet also intersects with the ways that whiteness operates within LatinX communities. Latinidad can erase the existence of racial hierarchies within LatinX communities, creating a lack of acknowledgment for the ways anti-Black racism exists in Latin America, itself a white-centric construct that excludes African diasporic spaces and Indigeneity (Flores, 2021). Unpacking the Black and Indigenous marginalization that exists within LatinX communities that enable colorism and racial hierarchies sets up an understanding of the ways young LatinX women are influenced to follow white-centric body and diet standards that inherently marginalize nonconforming bodies. The internalization of white-centric standards within LatinX communities ignores the racial diversity that influences and exists in LatinX culture, complicating the ways young LatinX women may process social media’s body and diet messaging. Carmen Alvaro Jarrín’s study of plastic surgery in Brazil highlights how beauty and thinness are sites where racial hierarchies are played out within Latin America. Jarrin argues that beauty is a form of capital that influences one’s social value (Jarrin, 2017). Beautification is positioned as an opportunity to redeem individuals lower in the aesthetic hierarchy, who are typically considered poor, ugly, and dark-skinned (Jarrin, 2017). Jarrin argues that beauty is a political regime because it “produces forms of affect that condense race, class, and gender inequalities onto and through the body, generating an aesthetic hierarchy” that individuals feel inclined to follow even if the process of beautification is a burden (Jarrin, 2017,4). In the
transnational context, my interlocutors inadvertently highlighted how these hierarchies persisted and were transmuted, as they unconsciously perceived their bodies and dietary practices as inferior to the white-centric beauty and wellness ideals promoted on social media. The internalization may exacerbate the racial hierarchy that exists within Latinidad. As a result, LatinX women are affected by white diet culture both because of their marginalized ethnic position in the United States and also because this diet culture continues to be a site of racial formation and hierarchization within the Latinidad construct.

Despite the fact that they often internalized social media messaging, my interlocutors also came to reaffirm their connections to LatinX food and identity. Engaging in cultural practices, like culinary traditions, is vital for one’s understanding and expression of identity, offering an alternative to the performances of whiteness on social media that asserts LatinX identities. Enrique Salmón writes that individuals and communities use symbols such as food to affirm and construct our identity and where we come from (Salmón, 2012). Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino’s exploration of the performing arts as a cultural practice further emphasizes how communities utilize performance to establish and assert their collective identities, navigating and negotiating societal norms and expectations (Turino, 2008). Building on these works, I highlight how food as a vehicle for identity and affirming community is not limited to consumption but includes preparation, making, sharing of recipes, and socialization in the kitchen (Abarca, 2016; Méndez-Negrete, 2016). While these culinary traditions offer avenues for communal belonging and identity formation that can resist the homogenization of Latinidad, they also serve as sites where complex performances unfold. Dominant narratives within Latinidad perpetuate a hierarchy that marginalizes traditional Indigenous and Afro-LatinX foodways, reinforcing racial erasure and diminishing the cultural significance of marginalized communities. However, for
LatinX individuals, engaging in LatinX culinary practices is not merely a simple act of cultural reaffirmation; it is a nuanced performance through which they assert their distinct identities and navigate societal expectations (Pilcher, 1998). While little to no research reveals how disordered eating practices that decrease the consumption of LatinX cultural foods can influence one’s acceptance of cultural identity, confidence in ethnic identity has been proven to act as a buffer to thin body image pressures (Schooler, Lowry & Biesen, 2012). Necessarily, my research underscores the significance of young LatinX women grounding themselves in their ethnic lineage through engagements with ethnic foods, highlighting these practices as strategies to maintain well-being and cultural identity.

Centering my struggle navigating social media’s diet and body image pressures as a starting point for theory created an opportunity to heal my relationship with food and reconnect with my abuelita. Growing up, the eating practices I observed on social media often excluded LatinX cultural foods or presented lower-calorie alternatives for traditional LatinX ingredients, leading me to believe Mexican food was not part of a “healthy” diet. I thought, “If only I were not Mexican, I would be skinny.” I carried this phrase like a heavy weight for two years as I struggled to maintain a healthy relationship with the food my abuelita made me—food that sustained her connection to her home in Tlaltenango, Zacatecas, while attempting to fit into the “ideal” thin body standard. I adopted eating practices that I observed white social media content creators promote in an attempt to assimilate into social media’s body and diet standards. Without recognizing the unhealthy eating habits I was developing, I began to refuse the food my abuelita would put on the table. I would opt for a lower-calorie meal advertised on social media or no food. When I successfully avoided the temptation to enjoy Mexican dishes, I felt accomplished in my sense of self-control. Alternatively, if I ever indulged, I was consumed with guilt. I was
emotionally, mentally, and physically drained from constantly body-checking and surveilling the food I was consuming to conform to white-centric health and beauty standards. As I began to distance myself from the Mexican cultural foods that signified my abuelita’s care for me and ancestral knowledge that has survived generations, I rejected my Mexican identity. Once I observed how social media encouraged this detachment, I reframed my consumption of Mexican foods as sustaining joy and connection to my ancestral traditions instead of focusing on social media’s hegemonic ideals that helped evolve a healthier relationship with food, body, and identity. In highlighting how my personal experiences underscore my approach, I illustrate that I am not entering this conversation from a neutral standpoint.

My research focuses on fifteen young LatinX women within the age range of 18-23. Conversations with LatinX women from this age range allow me to relate to my interlocutors and establish mutuality as a 21-year-old Mexican-American woman. Because my interviews evoke vulnerable conversations, I refer to my participants using pseudonyms they chose to ensure confidentiality. All my interlocutors, apart from two, are from The Claremont Colleges, an undergraduate consortium that caters to a predominantly white and affluent student body. As LatinX women from low-income and middle-class backgrounds, our conversations revealed how our marginalized positionality in white-dominated spaces, such as the consortium, played a role in our body image and diet pressures on top of social media’s white-centric messaging. Inspired by pláticas, a Chicana/Latina feminista conversational methodology, my interviews allowed me to develop a mutual relationship with my interlocutors by sharing my connections and motivations to the topic and their responses. The horizontal approach to conducting research challenges white-centric methodologies that emphasize neutrality in research by serving as a pedagogical praxis of love for marginalized identities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2023). Platicas-
*talks* in English- are practiced in the kitchen with LatinX communities through storytelling, unveiling *testimonios*, exchanging personal and political ideas, and sharing food recipes over a shared meal (Abarca, 2016; Carmona et al., 2021). Thus, *pláticas* are essential for establishing community and knowledge production, while being fed acts as the metaphorical embodiment of knowledge (Carmona et al., 2021). Because my research addressed how food is essential for fostering belonging and identity for LatinX women, I shared a meal with my participants during the interview to emulate the knowledge production *pláticas* fosters.

In the first section of the thesis, “Performances of Whiteness on Social Media,” I present how social media’s messaging conflates whiteness with wellness and beauty and how my interlocutors engaged with performances of whiteness online. In the second section, “Manifestations of Surveillance,” I unpack how my interlocutors internalized this messaging, leading them to monitor their bodies and eating practices to imitate the performances of whiteness they observed online. In the last section, “Eating Identity,” I explore how my interlocutors reevaluated their social media engagement and reconnected with food from home to reaffirm their LatinX identities.

*Performances of Whiteness on Social Media*

My interlocutors discussed the importance of eating ancestral dishes to foster ethnic identity and social relationships. All of my participants identified *arroz y frijoles* as staples in their households. Considering the regional diversity of Latin America, my interlocutors also shared *plátanos, pozole, tortillas, and baleadas* as dishes unique to their family’s home country. However, when my interlocutors first gained access to smartphone technology and social media, it altered their engagements with LatinX culinary practices; they felt pressured to perform
whiteness in ways that erased racial diversity, ethnic foods, and essential connections to home. In an attempt to conform to the diets and physical appearances of those popular on social media, my interlocutors identified a lack of representation of Latin American foods, lack of financial accessibility, and social media’s interactivity to all contribute to narratives conflating whiteness with wellness and beauty on social media.

For my interlocutors who grew up with negative body talk with family or in other social spheres, their concerns about body image started very early on and were quickly amplified by social media engagement. Others recalled that their concerns about body image and internalization of social media messaging began as soon as they had access to a phone, and they ranged from middle school to high school age. Additionally, my discussions with my interlocutors revealed how queer identities can be particularly vulnerable to these presentations of whiteness as they struggle to feel comfortable in their bodies and identities. The early exposure of young LatinX women to social media's influence on body image and diet practices exacerbated existing concerns about their social value. It hindered the fostering of connections through ethnic food practices, highlighting the need to examine the intersectionality of digital media pressures and ethnic identity.

The social media content my interlocutors engaged in often replicated dominant messaging about body and diet. Most of my interlocutors did not intentionally search for content on diet on social media, but when they did, it was often to find easy recipes. One participant shared that if they intentionally searched for how to cook Mexican dishes, they found older Mexican content creators who often excluded their bodies from the videos they made teaching dishes. These videos were often recorded from a high angle, featuring only the dish's preparation, and typically did not have high engagement via likes and comments. In contrast, diet-related
content that was not representative of ethnic recipes was created by thin, fair-skinned individuals who made their bodies visible in the preparation and consumption of dishes. Social media algorithms showed them content that circulated beauty and wellness ideals practiced mainly by white and thin individuals, promoting dietary lifestyles that are costly or exclude ethnic foods, signifying a performance of whiteness through food and body practices. The higher engagement this content received indicated its success and popularity; these markers of success encouraged the association between the body and diet content with significant social value. Since these eating practices by thin white content creators had many shared features, social media’s algorithm presented a dominant standard that my interlocutors unconsciously internalized. Many of my interlocutors, in retrospect, felt that they were pressured to move away from connections with family and LatinX culinary practices and unconsciously perform whiteness themselves because of what they encountered on social media.

My interlocutors identified similar diet and body content across their various social media platforms. They distinguished common social media platforms as having an algorithm with white-dominated content: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, and Twitter. The digital content not only featured cooking recipes but also exhibited trends related to consumption. Most notably, a majority of my interlocutors have identified “What I Eat in a Day” videos. This trend documents the meals one eats in a day, often created by women with a thin, toned body who make fitness or lifestyle content. Due to the popularity of this trend, these videos are often algorithmically prompted to show up on my interlocutors’ feeds. With consistent engagement with diet-related videos, the algorithm continues to circulate related content. Although the content of these videos is primarily focused on meals, the content creator’s body is simultaneously highlighted, representing the result of the promoted dietary lifestyle. While most
of these women tend to be white, LatinX creators with similar thin and lighter skin features have created similar content, sidelining LatinX women with darker complexions and different body types, thus reinforcing associations between whiteness and wellness.

Image 1: Screenshot of TikTok “What I Eat in A Day Video” from @meet_madeleine

Image 2: Screenshot of TikTok “What I Eat in a Day” Video from @trainwtaylorx
This repetitive eating pattern presented by social media content creators with similar physical features caused my interlocutors to associate consuming certain ‘healthy’ meals with a thin body shape. For instance, one of my interlocutors described the meals this trend circulated, such as yogurt bowls, healthy smoothies, and chicken and rice. These videos reinforced a relationship between the food one consumes and how one can maintain physical results. Even if creators do not always state that this is what they eat to lose weight, maintain body weight, or recover from disordered eating practices, the physical appearance of the creator is foregrounded.
in the video, causing viewers to assume that to look like the creators they observe, they must follow a similar diet. As a result, my interlocutors shared how the diets portrayed on social media caused them to believe that they must eat a certain way to follow a white-centric model of beauty and health.

Many interlocutors discussed thin, wellness, and beauty standards as “just how it is.” This recognition underscores the normalization of thinness equated with whiteness and beauty, so hegemonic that it becomes difficult to ignore. This normalization perpetuates harmful practices among young LatinX women striving to conform to these standards, exacerbating the marginalization and oppression of nonconforming identities. Sociologist Thomas Lemke reflected on the insidious nature of racism in justifying exclusion and violence under the guise of societal improvement. He asserts that “racism facilitates a dynamic relationship with the disappearance of another. It furnishes the ideological foundation for identifying, excluding, combating, and even murdering others, all in the name of improving life” (Lemke 2011, 42). This quote provides a foundation for understanding how racial ideologies present on social media operate as a structuring power that enables the racial erasure of ethnic dishes in the conceptualization of “healthy” and “ideal” ways of living. A hierarchy is established, placing lifestyles that perpetuate whiteness as superior to nonconforming practices.

Social media videos maintained racial hierarchies by associating whiteness with ideals of wellness by limiting the representation of diverse body types and dietary practices. Social media influencers’ advertising of healthy eating often excluded LatinX culinary staples, which led many of my interlocutors, like Samantha – a junior at the Claremont Colleges and second-generation Mexican and Puerto Rican American Latina, to consistently observe the promotion of diets that prioritized white-centric foods and aesthetics. In light of this, the diets
she observed where thin, white social media creators posted online were performances of whiteness that linked wellness and aesthetics. She shared that social media presented pasta and bread as healthy carbs instead of tortillas in Latin American dishes she consumed at home. This led her to believe that “the only way to be skinny was to eat like a white person.” Even if an individual isn’t white, social media taught Samantha that dietary practices that excluded ethnic dishes were necessary to achieve thinness. This message illustrates that the performance of race is not innate but is constructed and reinforced through repeated actions and representations of food and body in social media.

Furthermore, the binary nature of defining what counts as a "healthy carb" versus an “unhealthy” one reinforces racial and aesthetic hierarchies by privileging certain dietary choices associated with whiteness while marginalizing others tied to diverse ethnic backgrounds. This process is exacerbated by social media platforms that amplify and perpetuate white-centric beauty and wellness standards, thereby creating a link between whiteness and wellness in the minds of young LatinX women like Samantha. This not only perpetuates the exclusion of LatinX identities from mainstream beauty and wellness narratives but also reinforces the hegemonic power dynamics inherent in social media representations of health and beauty.

The binary framings pervasive in social media's labeling of body practices and dietary norms serve as central mechanisms for constructing and reinforcing racial and aesthetic hierarchies. My interlocutors observed how social media often labeled body practices in binary terms to assign value: good versus bad, healthy versus unhealthy, thin versus fat, and beautiful versus unpleasing. Social media’s exclusion of Latin American dishes and diverse body types correlates whiteness with good/healthy and thin/beautiful, establishing a hierarchical relationship between lifestyles and positioning the practices of young LatinX women as inferior. Within this
framework, practices labeled as “good” or “healthy” on social media position the “right” way of living as the “white” way. Therefore, binary pairs to label dietary practices, lifestyles, and aesthetics can be a racialized tool embedded in social media that shapes perceptions of beauty and health wherein whiteness becomes synonymous with upward social mobility.

Another participant, Luna, a first-generation non-binary Mexican and Ecuadorian American, gave me insight into how social media’s content and messaging can inadvertently influence perceptions of diet and body. Luna is a senior at the Claremont Colleges, where they observe that white skinny queer students are adored and “worshiped.” Being in a space that idolizes white-centric queerness has caused additional roadblocks to coming to terms with their own queer identity. Queer social media influencers on their feed often mirrored narrow ideas of queerness that emphasized whiteness and thinness, and notably, “organic” and “healthy” dietary practices that excluded foods from Latin America. For Luna, the limited queer representation both online and offline perpetuated the idea that consuming certain foods can help perform their queer identity and health. In turn, they would conform to the queer identities that had a strong social media presence that received high appraisal and mirrored the queer majority at the Claremont Colleges. They discussed how the food white-queer influencers advertised created an association between certain dietary practices and health:

In terms of white, queer influencers, a lot of them were advertising organic foods and meal prep companies that deliver food to your house. The advertisements were constant, constant, constant. And I’m like, hmm, maybe I should get that to look like them instead of learning how to make food. And with the white queer influencers, I don’t see the curvy body type. I see more flat chests, and I feel really insecure.
Luna describes their interpretation of social media’s ‘healthy’ diet as focused on organic food and meal-prepping, such as non-GMO processed foods and HelloFresh. Health is defined by the food one consumes and how it is visibly observable, making health a key mode of performing whiteness on social media. The consumption of organic foods and the use of meal-prep delivery services became ways of enacting “right” ways to perform health online. Such body practices on social media became implicitly bound up with whiteness and white queerness. The link between whiteness, wellness, and socially valued constructions of queerness emphasizes how dominant messaging and influential figures within queer communities promote specific dietary practices and beauty standards associated with whiteness as indicators of health and well-being. Consequently, individuals like Luna may face pressure to adhere to these norms to appear healthy and attractive in both queer and mainstream contexts, presenting intricate obstacles in their journey to navigate their queer identity amidst societal standards influenced by whiteness and wellness ideals. Moreover, the association of organic foods and meal prep services with health and wellness, perpetuated by social media influencers predominantly embodying white queerness, reinforces a narrative that these practices are not only desirable but also necessary for "normal" health. Jonathan Metzl's use of Irving Zola’s framework highlights how constructions of health can be normative, as Zola critiques the "socio-political consequences of medical influence," suggesting that mainstream conceptions of health are socially constructed and influenced by power dynamics (Metzl, 2010). This perspective elucidates how social media’s health norms favor individuals associated with whiteness and, in Luna’s case, white queerness. Social media platforms racialize dietary practices as white by predominantly featuring white influencers and promoting them online, constructing a narrative where health and wellness are synonymous with whiteness, and subtly excluding ethnic dietary traditions. The practices that
Luna engaged with at home did not replicate these “right” performances of health and queerness, causing a disconnect with identity, family, and food consumed at home.

In retrospect, Luna points out the advertised content of food, like meal prep delivery services, as selling health and thinness. Because one’s appearance or health is viewed as a product of what someone eats, seeing white queer influencers advertise dietary practices was correlated with eating to affirm a queer identity. Luna views their body as a vessel to express and embody queerness but has struggled to feel validated in their appearance when white and thin individuals are accepted as the model queers on and off social media. For Luna, there’s not only a limited representation of LatinX creators and diet but a limited representation of what queerness looks like, worsening their insecurity in their queer identity. Individualized consumer practices depend on an impoverished relationship with food and one’s body (Sikka, 2019), enabling the advertisement of organic foods and meal-prep services to capitalize off of Luna’s alienated relationship with queerness. An accepted queer identity was sold to Luna as a product achieved by the performance of dietary practices that include organic foods and meal-prep services.

Luna’s experience with the advertising of organic foods and meal prep services by white queer influencers performing queerness and health also brings to the surface issues of access to certain diet practices. Luna and my other interlocutors have discussed that even if dietary practices aren’t monetized on social media, the promotion of organic foods and other ingredients is not always financially feasible, especially since most immigrant families are low-income. For example, thinness was described as a sign of affluence because one was able to perform whiteness if one could afford more expensive food products that are imagined to be healthier. Jarrin’s examination of beautification practices in Brazil illustrates how beauty norms are deeply
embedded in social and economic systems, suggesting that beauty practices, such as plastic surgery, can serve as a pathway to social advancement for marginalized individuals (Jarrin, 2017). Similarly, the pressure to conform to body and eating practices can be seen as a form of cultural capital that confers social status and acceptance. Drawing on Jarrin's framework, we can analyze how social media's promotion of organic foods and meal prep services perpetuates these hierarchies by reinforcing certain dietary norms associated with affluence, privilege, and moral superiority. This narrative effectively marginalizes those who are unable to access or afford such foods, further entrenching socioeconomic disparities and reinforcing existing power dynamics. Past research has indicated the ways race and ethnicity in media are framed by mainstream culture (whiteness), portraying beauty as synonymous with success and power by “excluding deviations from the mainstream norm” (Stokes et al., 2016, 9). Samantha and Luna’s testimony makes evident that a lack of representation of Latin American foods eluded that they are not of the same value or as healthy as the meals they observed white creators publicize.

Social media’s interactivity also reinforces the social value of beauty and wellness standards, affirming a lack of approval for my interlocutors’ nonconforming identities. Susy, a first-generation Mexican American, shares how the comment section is a social space in which whiteness is performed by stating that there is more positive attention for women of all backgrounds who have more white-centric features (light skin, black hair, slim face, and body), further affirming a body standard that Susy does not fit into. This attention is indicated by a post's number of likes and an active comment section. Other interlocutors explained that comment sections were filled with mostly men praising a woman’s appearance. The communication between viewers via comments, likes, and reposts distinguish social media from other mainstream forms of media in that it offers opportunities to perceive, compare, and
internalize beauty standards (Gabrielli, 2022; Mills et al., 2017). Past studies have also indicated that young women are more likely to compare themselves to peers on social media with high status (Ferguson et al., 2014; Stokes et al., 2016). Observing the online praise for women who look a certain way makes Susy and my other interlocutors compare themselves to what is celebrated on social media. Additionally, my interlocutors have observed that when women who have bodies that do not conform to the typical thin standard post social media content, they often receive comments from men saying their stomach is “unacceptable” because it isn’t flat. Therefore, not only does the digital content enforce white-centric perceptions of health and beauty, but the attention this content receives via comments, likes, and reposts further emphasizes the social value assigned to body and diet.

It is evident from my interlocutors' stories that social media platforms perpetuate performances of whiteness by associating beauty and wellness with white-centric dietary practices and body standards while undervaluing varied bodies and ethnic dietary practices. Young LatinX women embrace diets and body ideals promoted by social media content creators to simulate values associated with whiteness. This promotion often excluded ethnic foods and diverse body types, reinforcing the idea that conforming to white-centric norms was necessary for achieving beauty and wellness. Influencers, particularly those embodying white queerness, played a significant role in perpetuating these norms, linking certain dietary practices with performances of queerness, health, and aesthetics. Moreover, the interactive nature of social media platforms reinforced the social significance attributed to these norms, reinforcing the glorification of bodies and diets conforming to white-centric standards. This observation underscores how social media platforms contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of
white-centric beauty and wellness standards, exacerbating existing racial and aesthetic hierarchies.

Manifestations of Surveillance

LatinX women are subjected to social media-endorsed thinness, coveted as a desired status of health and beauty. My interlocutors shared that their internalization of these social media norms led them to reject foods they had grown up with and closely monitor themselves and their dietary habits—informally alienating themselves from their ethnic identities and familial ties. Such practices serve to surveil their diet and body image and engender unsustainable behaviors to “pass” and perform whiteness.

Social media performs a surveilling mechanism, coercing individuals—particularly people of color—to assimilate into performances of whiteness by reproducing modes of surveillance onto themselves. Tina Sikka’s research on how the internalization of body and diet norms can lead to self-surveillance and disciplining one’s bodily practices was experienced by my interlocutors (Sikka, 2019). Additionally, social media’s messaging about diet, body, health, and beauty standards created or exacerbated pressures from their social relations to conform to certain eating practices aimed at achieving an ideal physical appearance. Efforts to comply with social media’s beauty and wellness standards have led my interlocutors to reject opportunities to connect with ethnic foods and social relationships that build acceptance for their bodies and practices. Instead, they were led to critique their bodies via the lens of white standards. Young LatinX women othered themselves and lost connections with ethnic foods and relationships, resulting in detrimental effects on their physical and mental well-being.
I posit the term surveillance to describe how people internalize dominant norms and come to monitor and police their bodies (Foucault, 1984). Moreover, I argue that it constitutes a form of physical, ontological, social, and cultural violence that is enforced by social media’s emphasis on white-centric lifestyles. Social media surveillance can be particularly violent towards people of color, as they often influence women to compare themselves, resulting in low self-esteem and perpetuating performances of whiteness via constant self-surveillance (Hooks, 1992). Philosopher Slavoj Zizek speaks about systematic, objective violence as “not only direct physical violence but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation” (Zizek, 2009, 8). Building on Zizek’s concept, I analyze the violence of social media messaging as continuous with broader forms of assimilation and cultural erasure that young LatinX women have faced in the United States. Such assimilationist pressures have prompted young LatinX women to surveil their bodies, impacting the way they take care of their physical health, view monitoring habits as a price worth paying for thinness, interact in social spaces, and interpret their existing ethnic culinary practices as inferior.

Many of my interlocutors recounted how they internalized social media messaging and changed their body practices. Luna’s testimony exposed how this surveillance also infiltrated familial dynamics and reshaped their perceptions of traditional practices and ethnic foods:

What I’ve noticed in the past few years in terms of social media or how society wants you to eat. I feel like it was healthier, organic food. And now that I’m remembering, I would have those ideas in my head and would judge my parents for not reaching out for organic foods. I would feel unhealthy eating at home with the food that my dad would make. Which is so fucking stupid because it was monetized and stuff.
Because social media encouraged this white-centric performance of health at the peak of Luna’s consumption of diet-related media and insecurities with their queerness, Luna would criticize their parents for not prioritizing organic ingredients in their household without proper acknowledgment of the socioeconomic barriers at home. The lack of “organic” products at home made them believe the food their dad prepared with care was the “wrong” way of performing health, which were often Mexican dishes. Luna began to assign a moral judgment to their father and the food prepared at home using standards presented on social media, positioning Latin American foods as inferior to “organic” products and costly meal prep services. Subsequently, Luna reinforced social media’s “right” way of promoting health for their family and themselves. The internalization of this messaging led Luna to change their body and food practices at home to make physical changes that replicate social media’s idealized version of health.

For my interlocutors, these practices of self-surveillance led to two kinds of violence: first, the intense monitoring of body and diet that elicits racial erasure, and second, the physical, social, and emotional consequences of excessive working out. My interlocutors' routines implemented self-tracking and self-surveillance technologies when they felt most vulnerable. Eulalia, a first-generation Mexican American, described how she navigated the condemnatory surveillance of her body she received from herself and her family. Eulalia grew up with a bigger figure and relied on social media for Keto recipes in an attempt to improve her health after being diagnosed as pre-diabetic. Following high-fat, low-carb Keto recipes would help lower her cholesterol by putting her body in ketosis—a metabolic state that burns fat for energy instead of glucose. For Eulalia, losing weight signified conforming to a body image similar to that of her peers and achieving a healthy status. In high school, Eulalia adopted meticulous habits to track macronutrients, such as calculating carbs or memorizing nutritional facts, to stay in ketosis. This
self-tracking allowed her to monitor her progress toward health goals and served as a means of taking agency over her well-being and relying less on others in managing her health, as affirmed by Lupton’s analysis of motivations for incorporating tracking technologies (Lupton, 2019). With a keto diet, she also began to lose weight, causing her to associate becoming thin with becoming healthy. While her motivations to change her eating habits were health-related as opposed to social media pressures, she relied on social media for keto recipes using the #lowcarb hashtag.

At first, Eulalia was focused on wellness, but the thin appearances she constantly interacted with on social media and at school caused her to correlate thinness with beauty and happiness. Monitoring her body in the morning every day to track her progress was a daily ritual:

Growing up, I’ve always been chubby. I’ve always just been that way. And seeing your body not be that is kind of life-altering. We’re getting real personal… but what I would do in high school, I would go to the bathroom, I would do my business and I hadn’t eaten yet, and I would look at my stomach in my full-length mirror. Or I would weigh myself before I ate in the morning or after I went to the bathroom. I would be diligent about monitoring. I would never take a picture, but I would highlight these little rituals to look at my body. Being on the keto diet felt like wearing a badge of health, but I became like a toxic aunt putting it on other people and my family saying ‘this has too much carbs’ when I couldn’t eat stuff like corn tortillas. Also, my mom was always into diet culture. When I was a kid, my dad would be like, ‘You're fat.’ And my mom would be like, ‘Don't treat her like that. She's just chunky, she's just a little kid.’ But when I got older, she started calling me fat.
Eulalia's experience exemplifies how racial erasure manifests through the internalization of dominant beauty standards, signifying the assimilation into whiteness via dietary practices. I understand the adoption of new dietary habits to be a form of passing, as individuals like Eulalia feel compelled to conform to white standards of health and aesthetics, leading them to critique their existing body and diet practices. Eulalia's engagement in acts of “passing” through surveillance exemplifies how racial erasure manifests through the internalization of dominant beauty standards. For Eulalia, the requirement of passing as healthy was thinness, which she experienced as “wearing a badge of health.” Like many of my interlocutors, monitoring her body became a daily act of surveillance to measure her weight-loss progress, which she took to represent her health and beauty. This exposed her to three instances where surveillance inflicts violence upon her, perpetuating the cycle of racial erasure. The first moment of violence was the monitoring of her diet to improve her health, which influenced her to label Mexican food staples as “unhealthy.” Though she didn’t intend to be super skinny, she hoped other people wouldn’t “look at her differently” if she passed as not being overweight. Initially, the daily surveillance of her body for weight-loss progress reflects an internalized belief that conforming to mainstream beauty ideals equates to health. A rejection of her cultural foods accompanies this performance of self-surveillance, as she labels Mexican staples as "unhealthy," aligning with hegemonic conceptions of dieting. Additionally, self-tracking a chronic health condition as a preventive measure and ‘self-care practice’ demanded significant time and effort, causing frustration due to the demands of maintaining one's health (Lupton, 2019).

The second instance of violence elicited by surveillance is the “fat comments” she received from her parents. Not being overweight was to look “normal,” to look normal was to look thinner, and to look thinner was to be “healthy.” The body policing and weight management
practices observed in LatinX families due to health-related concerns like diabetes, primarily perpetrated by mothers to push for an ideal body type, are highlighted in the findings of Schooler and Lowry (2011). Coupled with these practices, Eulalia’s previous experience with discrimination via weight-based comments fostered the surveillance of her body and diet to limit anticipated stigma (Hunger et al., 2020). Anticipated stigma refers to Eulalia’s expectation of being judged or looked at differently based on her body size. The pressure she faced from her parents intersected with the influence of social media, where negative body talk and diet discussions further reinforce the stigma associated with deviating from thinness. Eulalia's previous experiences with discrimination via weight-based comments fostered the surveillance of her body and diet to limit anticipated stigma, reflecting the pressure to pass within both familial and societal contexts.

Family can be a source of anxiety around food and the body that compounds the anxiety produced through social media, further influencing Eulalia to enact performances of whiteness. For instance, many referenced nicknames that center on physical appearance, like Flaca or Gordita, are meant to be terms of affection but harm their confidence. Similarly, consistent negative body and diet talk at home made my interlocutors more inclined to accept similar messaging on social media. The compounding nature of familial and social media expectations led Eulalia to monitor her body and track her macronutrients to achieve a physical appearance that would avoid judgmental surveillance from others. In an attempt to gain control over how others perceive her, she tries to confront this form of violence through self-inflicted surveillance, creating a paradoxical strategy for achieving health. Internal restriction (surveillance) marked a tertiary moment of violence that Eulalia self-inflicted. Even though self-tracking started as a preventative measure to manage her diabetes, Euliala’s surveillance became habitual. She
considered it necessary to improve health and avoid negative judgment from family and peers, justifying the constant surveillance of diet and body. Eulalia's self-imposed surveillance of her body and diet represents a paradoxical attempt to gain control over external judgments while exercising harmful practices. However, this self-surveillance ultimately perpetuates a cycle of anxiety and reinforces the hegemonic norms she seeks to adhere to, highlighting the complexities of navigating intersecting systems of oppression.

As Eulalia began to improve her health by engaging in performances of whiteness to lower her cholesterol, she started to lose weight. She then believed that she could try to gain more positive social recognition— by having a boy attracted to her— as she got slimmer. In this manner, Eulalia assigned value to her body through a white-centric lens that labels thinness as the epitome of health and beauty that has been indoctrinated into social media and her social sphere (family and peers). By achieving a thinner figure, Eulalia performed a “normal” status of health that would counter the judgment she received from others. Yet, the idea that she is constantly under surveillance by others persists as she monitors herself when enacting new dietary practices. Despite her efforts, the persistent sense of surveillance shifts internally, highlighting the complex interplay between societal expectations, personal relationships, and body image perceptions. Eulalia's adoption of surveillance to achieve a thinner body reflects societal norms equating thinness with health and desirability. As Eulalia's experience illustrates the pervasive influence of societal norms from personal relationships and social media on individual perceptions of body image, it becomes evident that body surveillance is deeply intertwined with performances of whiteness via dietary practices.

Body and diet surveillance as performances of whiteness went hand in hand for many of my interlocutors as they sought to comply with the dominant health and beauty standards. Those
who worked out seemed to have a heightened consciousness of how their physical appearance responds to the food they consume, determining their exercise and eating routines. As the previous example showcased, wanting to look a certain way influenced my interlocutors' eating. Similarly, the calories one consumed dictated one’s workout to accomplish a particular appearance. Constantly negotiating how much to eat and how much to exercise were acts of “passing” that proved to be a mentally and physically draining task for my interlocutors and was discussed as an unhealthy phase that they endured and have worked to overcome. My following example describes Rosy, a first-generation Mexican American and junior at the Claremont Colleges, and her experience tracking calories, excessively working out, and avoiding gatherings with friends to compensate for the calories she consumed to lose weight. These examples uncover the ways prominent social norms of dieting and working out to achieve a slim figure manifest ontological and cultural violence for young LatinX women, causing them to believe their non-conforming bodies and practices are inferior.

Rosy described the unhealthy patterns she upheld when it came to eating and working out to achieve a slimmer body to become more aligned with traditional beauty standards and eating habits presented on social media:

When I was on my extreme weight loss journey, I was tracking every single thing that I ate for weeks and the calories I was burning. The constant calculation in my head of ‘okay if I really want this cookie it’s 200 calories, that means I have to burn 200 extra calories at the gym’ was an obsessive system of punishment. I somehow deserved my food and to eat a cookie. That’s weird! I struggled with that, especially because on social media, people aren’t eating desserts. When they have snacks, it’s almonds, fruit, and
yogurt. I don’t want fucking yogurt, I want a chocolate bar! A Brownie! A milkshake!

But there was this idea that I couldn’t have that because it was too high in calories. It was so unhealthy to the point I didn’t even want to go out to eat with friends because I was so concerned about eating whatever had the least amount of calories. When I’m at home eating my Mexican food … there’s no way I’m tracking this. How do I track a caldo de pollo? I was forced to stop and fix my relationship with food because there was no way I could track every single ingredient! How am I gonna track a concha from Northgate Market? I still struggle with that thinking, but I’m like yo chill out, you don’t have time for that.

Rosy’s surveillance of body and diet made it difficult to establish a sustainable balance between diet and exercise, taking a mental and physical toll. Having to calculate the calories in food-tracking apps acted as a form of surveillance to manage her appearance. Social media’s influence on these pressures is evident, not only by upholding the thin standard Rosy felt obligated to achieve but by narrowing her perception of what a “healthy” diet looks like, increasing her anxiety about avoiding foods she usually enjoys. Rosy now speaks about this punishment system and the mentality that she deserved food as “ridiculous” and unrealistic. Maintaining control over denying herself the pleasure of enjoying the food she labeled “bad” for weight loss was also considered morally commendable (Sikka, 2019). Rosy and my other participants admitted intense “feelings of guilt” if they didn’t have the self-control to restrain themselves from consuming “unhealthy” foods. Having her mind consumed with concerns about calories and making the time to excessively workout was something that she simply didn’t have
time for. The constant monitoring of Rosy and her diet is a form of self-induced harm that poses a threat to her agency and health in an attempt to assimilate into hegemonic norms.

Self-induced surveillance encouraged by social media’s white-centric portrayal of health and beauty restricted her from moving freely in social spaces to enjoy conviviality with friends, which was an element of social violence. Food and calories became a significant concern that affected how she socialized. Rosy’s avoidance of eating in social settings was rooted in the fear that she would consume too much or not have the choice to eat low-calorie options, slowing down her weight-loss journey. It wasn’t until she returned to home-cooked Mexican dishes that she felt she didn’t have the time or ability to track these foods because it was difficult to track precisely how much she was eating. In addition to food-tracking apps not including most Mexican ingredients, there was no caloric information about the Mexican pastries or the ingredients family measured by heart and memory. For individuals who rely on health-tracking apps, the information that challenges an individual’s self-control can prove to be emotionally taxing (Lupton, 2019). On the contrary, if Rosy’s tracking app indicated she ate the desired amount to lose weight, she felt that others would value her self-monitoring (Lupton, 2019). Even though she lost weight, Rosy acknowledges that the constant policing of her body and diet was an unhealthy routine that threatened her emotional, mental, and physical health, challenging the idea that a slimmer body is not synonymous with health.

The experiences of Eulalia and Rosy show how they considered such harm to be ordinary and necessary to “pass” and conform to body and diet standards presented on social media. Though Eulalia and Rosy have shared that they have made an effort to move away from these mindsets, these ways of thinking still cross their mind, threatening their relationship with ethnic foods, security in identity, and how their social relationships. Eulalia and Rosy’s accounts show
evidence of an increased awareness of food and body that self-monitoring induced. The concept of 'passing' as white in this context extends beyond physical appearance to encompass the monitoring of dietary habits and adherence to cultural norms associated with food consumption. While they initially hoped to address health and weight concerns, their adopted practices were unsustainable for overall well-being.

_Eating Identity_

My interlocutors rethought how they engaged with diet-related media once they realized the information they were consuming was often at odds with homemade food, social relations, and mental health. Some identified social media messaging on diet as a way to marginalize low-income communities of color by making a healthy lifestyle appear inaccessible and causing them to blame their parents for not imitating dietary lifestyles observed on social media. When my participants got older, they recognized the food they consumed served a greater purpose than nutritional sustenance: it sustained joy and conviviality. They reflected that their families did “the best they could with what they had” to nourish their families. As my interlocutors reckon with the performance of whiteness and health on social media, it becomes evident that the promotion of certain dietary practices not only perpetuates socioeconomic disparities but also impacts familial relationships, cultural identities, and their efforts to move away from surveillance practices. This underscores the complexities of cultural connection and the importance of critically examining the narratives propagated by social media platforms, particularly concerning health and wellness, to foster a more inclusive understanding of food, identity, and well-being.
My interlocutors recognized surveillance practices as forming harmful routines that affect their physical and emotional health and relationships with loved ones, which they have worked to overcome. In addition to recognizing these harmful surveillance practices, my interlocutors reflected on shifts in their awareness, away from unconsciously internalizing social media's messaging toward making intentional, conscious efforts to resist them through cultural food practices. It wasn’t until college that my interlocutors began to see the messaging they internalized from social media as unhealthy and creating unsustainable practices like self-inflicted surveillance, restriction, and over-exercising, leading them to set boundaries by blocking, limiting media consumption, or deactivating accounts to improve mental and physical health.

Such practices were abandoned not just because they were “unrealistic” to maintain alongside academic responsibilities but also because attending a predominantly white institution forced them to seek out opportunities for belonging via ethnic food. Attending a school with a majority white population at The Claremont Colleges is isolating for my interlocutors, but ethnic foods that were offered at affinity group events or for dining hall meals became a space for my interlocutors to affirm their identities and connect with peers from similar backgrounds. Specifically, one shared that if a dining hall offers a Latin American dish they don’t usually serve, like pupusas, they are confident they will see most of their Latin American friends there with a shared relief that they can consume a dish familiar to their ethnic background. Despite these efforts to reclaim identity through food, my interlocutors still grapple with the complexities of food as a site of connection. The normalized surveillance tendencies perpetuated by social media messaging continue to affect their relationship with food. In addition, family dynamics
incorporate another layer of complexity that reinforces dominant diet and body messaging and
gendered expectations to be involved in the kitchen.

The kitchen became a key site for reaffirming belonging and connection for many of my interlocutors. Most participants already assumed a role in the kitchen alongside their mother due to gendered expectations to cook and provide for the family. However, they still view cooking as an opportunity to learn passed-down recipes and strengthen relationships. Locating the kitchen as a site of culinary care and a framework for producing health through conviviality and food is intimately linked to ideas about ethnic identity. Medical Anthropologist Emily Yates-Doerr identifies the kitchen as a site of health, despite not being a biomedical site, where Latin American women emphasize the importance of _cuidar de la comida_, which cultivates forms of health and care for or through food (Yates-Doerr, 2015). The perception of health by Latin American women is more nuanced than just being rooted in nutritional sustenance. It reveals engagements with LatinX culinary practices to maintain social relationships for health and well-being. Cooking Mexican dishes while socially engaged is important for intergenerational connection that strengthens conviviality even across geographic distances that migration has elicited. Furthermore, reaffirming food as a process that transcends geographic boundaries allows my interlocutors to redefine the “borders” of family and identity that the boundary between Mexico and California imposes (Steere, 2013). Through their engagements with Mexican dishes, they resist the border as a deterrent to connection, upholding a healthy relationship with their Mexican identity and ethnic roots.

For most of my interlocutors, they came to recognize and reaffirm familial relationships as central to their identity and well-being. When asked about their relationship with food and LatinX identity, many responded that sharing meals and cooking with family members were
ways to link back to their cultural roots. Especially when separated from loved ones, participants like Erika—a first-generation Mexican American woman—expressed cooking and eating LatinX meals as an intentional practice to connect with family members:

When I think of my Mexican identity, I think of my grandma who lives in Mexico. Cooking is a social activity because, over a phone call, my mom and my grandma will be making food. When I started taking recipes and cooking more seriously, I started to be more intentional about cooking as a way of reconnecting to people, more than anything, across borders. Talking to my grandma, asking questions, pidiendo las recetas…that was a way of building connections over food.

It is common for immigrant families to have remaining familial connections in their homeland, making it challenging to spend quality time together. Traveling to visit family is often unrealistic, considering time, money, health, and visa/passport status. Being separated from loved ones across borders is emotionally difficult, leading us to participate in shared cultural practices to draw us closer to our family. Although for some, the family was a negative source of pressure for diet and body image compounded by social media, for Erika, ethnic foods nonetheless offered a connection to family and homeland in meaningful and caring ways. Positive connections with ancestral foods that their family prepared and consumed extensively contributed to a sense of well-being. For Erika, cooking Mexican dishes inspired by her grandma’s recetas while on the phone with her grandma as she also cooks acted as a way to mitigate the distance felt by separation. Thus, even across a long distance, the kitchen becomes a social space where family members learn from each other through shared recipes, life stories, and passed-down histories, even across borders. Thomas Turino’s interpretation of identity as “the partial and variable selection of habits and attributes that we use to represent ourselves to
ourselves and others” (Turino, 2008, 102-103) is helpful to recognize how Erika interprets what is socially important to reaffirm and perform her Mexican identity. Unlike mainstream messaging of thinness as the desirable outcome of food choices, Erika’s engagement with Mexican culinary practices holds paramount value because of its family connection. Their identity is nourished as Erika and her grandmother are on the phone to learn recipes and about each other while they cook in their respective spaces. At the same time, they prepare physical nourishment that is representative of Latin American cultural practices. Participating in these culinary practices allows Erika to perform her Mexican heritage to establish a sense of belonging to her ethnic roots and grandmother. Although they are physically apart, they can still connect by eating the same cultural foods and cooking simultaneously.

In addition to cooking, sharing a meal strengthens social connections by reaffirming spaces of belonging that social media disrupts. Rosy spoke about how she feels connected to her family’s homeland because of the conversations her family shares while eating meals. Comparing the food quality or recipes to what they enjoyed in Mexico, reminiscing on the memories they share of their hometown, and talking about how much they miss Mexico serve as constant reminders of how she is connected to the land and culture of her relatives, despite being born in the United States. Being born into a mixed-status family, Rosy has always been aware of the privilege of being the first of her family to be born in the United States. Thus, while citizenship may define Rosy’s American identity, eating and sharing Mexican cuisine with her family transcends mere sustenance—it becomes a performative affirmation of her connection to the land her family left behind. Similar to how LatinX immigrants perceive their life in the United States with their connections with places of origin (Valencia, 2017), Rosy's engagement with Mexican food offers her an avenue to cherish and embody an understanding of citizenship.
and ethnic identity, rooted in her immigrant family's bond with Mexico. Though the previous section revealed how social media pushed Rosy to inherit a diet and exercise routine that performed whiteness, she found these practices increasingly tricky to maintain, especially when they conflicted with her desire to participate fully in the family activities centered around food. Over time, this conflict urged Rosy to prioritize enjoying quality time with her family over restrictive dieting.

Cooking and enjoying Latin American dishes are performances of identity and belonging that sustain social and emotional connections for family members and their ties to their homeland. The kitchen and food offer a form of identity-making that is an alternative to the performance of whiteness encouraged by social media. My interlocutors have recognized how food sustains social bonds that create a foundational understanding of their cultural identity. Tey Diana Rebolledo describes how women in the novel So Far From God define ethnic identity and create a “conscious self by means of cultural food icons [and] by means of food preparation” (Steere, 2013, 81). Similarly, Rosy consumes cultural food icons that reflect and construct an understanding of her Mexican identity. Despite not being born in Mexico, Mexican foods are a vehicle for Rosy’s agency in performing identity that establishes community and values and fosters familial relations and social connections. As a US citizen, Rosy performs an individual and collective identity by consuming Mexican foods with a family that reminisces about their lives in Mexico, strengthening her bonds to a land she has never visited. Instead of conforming to mainstream ideals of health and beauty, Rosy and my other interlocutors reassert their ethnic identity through their culinary practices, prioritizing community connections over assimilation. By embracing their ethnic heritage, they resist the homogenizing influence of performances of
whiteness and assert their racial identities, offering a wholly different concept of what ‘health,’ 'beauty,' or 'nourishment' can mean in their cultural context.

In recognizing how consuming food reaffirms identity and belonging, my interlocutors actively resist white-centric ideas of wellness and beauty. However, while my interlocutors considered food as an important connection to family and culture, many of them still struggled with navigating a healthy relationship with food, body, and identity at one point or another because social media maintained white-centric ideals. It has not been a quick or easy recovery challenging and moving away from hegemonic norms of health and beauty, but they are more intentional about reaffirming connections fostered by food. Even as they strive to overcome the pressures imposed by social media, familial dynamics continue to complicate this journey. For instance, Rosy shared that despite the solace she finds in the connection to her culture through food, her family's expectation for her to assume traditional gender roles, such as cooking and providing for men in her family, presents a conflicting narrative. This expectation adds another layer of pressure and restricts her from assuming a more prominent role in the kitchen, hindering her ability to embrace her culinary heritage and assert her agency fully. Thus, while food serves as a site of resistance against dominant beauty standards, familial expectations and gendered roles persist as challenges that young LatinX women must navigate in their quest for identity and well-being.

For LatinX women, we literally eat identity by consuming dishes passed down for generations, maintaining ancestral dishes and knowledge with ingredients that tie us to our family’s homeland. The kitchen emerges as a central site for my interlocutors to reevaluate their surveillance practices and reconceptualize food to challenge dominant narratives prioritizing assimilation over cultural authenticity, reclaiming identity and agency as LatinX women in
response to isolating pressures felt in predominantly white spaces. Consuming and preparing Latin American foods emerges as an alternative, non-hegemonic site of resilience and belonging while uniting us with family members who enjoy the same meals.

However, food from Latin America is not a homogenous source of identity. It holds complex politics that encompass various intersecting issues amplified by social media’s body and diet pressures: colonial influence, food access, food sovereignty, nutrition, and representation. Even when we are connecting to home, it's not always free of these politics. María Elena García discusses, for example, how discourses of love and unity around food in Peru work to erase racial differences. These forms of erasure parallel the experiences of young LatinX women navigating issues of identity, nationality, and belonging in the United States (García, 2021). Food is a complicated way of associating with national identity because it can also be a tool of exclusion and violence against those who do not fit within the boundaries of the nation-state’s constructed identity.

This intersectionality reveals a layered complexity wherein individuals residing in the United States are marginalized due to their nationality of origin, even as Latin American nation-building projects contain inherent violence due to racializing projects. Yet, amidst the violence faced by immigrants in the United States, food has become a way of resisting violence, serving as a means of reclaiming cultural heritage and asserting ethnic identity. It's essential to recognize that food should not be simplified as an uncomplicated site of resistance. Despite their significance in preserving ancestral traditions, food narratives can also be co-opted and commodified. The food we think of as ancestral does not operate entirely outside systems of power, but it does offer an essential and meaningful form of connection that is erased through social media messaging on wellness and beauty.
While traditional dishes provide a sense of heritage and connection, they're also subject to broader socio-political forces that marginalize ancestral customs. Understanding the nuanced ways young LatinX women conceptualize their relationship to identity and food becomes crucial for understanding how food serves as a site of oppression and resistance for young LatinX women. Family, playing a complex role in replicating dominant messaging and inflicting gendered expectations, further complicates this dynamic. Initially influenced by social media's messaging on diet and body image, my interlocutors adopted self-surveillance and restrictive practices. However, they reaffirmed this connection when they recognized how surveillance practices affected their well-being and social relationships. They found that food created spaces of belonging, particularly when they felt isolated at a predominantly white institution. As a result, they began to perceive the disparity between social media ideals and the significance of food, viewing this reconnection as a defining aspect of nourishment that extends beyond nutritional sustenance.

**Conclusion**

This thesis argued that the ideological concept "you are what you eat" extends far beyond mere nutritional sustenance, encompassing complex layers of identity and cultural connection for young LatinX women. In the realm of social media, where hegemonic standards dictate notions of wellness and beauty, LatinX women often find themselves navigating a landscape where they are pressured to perform whiteness through the consumption of presumably “healthy” foods. My interlocutors’ internalization of dominant standards led to self-surveillance, the rejection of ethnic foods, and the erasure of their identities, perpetuating a cycle of anxiety and reinforcing hegemonic norms to attain societal acceptance. However, as they became increasingly aware of these practices' time-consuming nature and their negative impact on their well-being and
relationships, my interlocutors began to challenge these harmful perceptions. They actively reconsidered their engagement in surveillance practices and media internalization, embracing and consuming foods tied to their heritage to reaffirm identity and belonging while promoting a healthier and more inclusive approach to wellness.

My interlocutors internalized social media messaging, particularly regarding diet and body image, which led them to perform whiteness by adopting dietary norms and beauty standards associated with the dominant culture. This internalization resulted in alienation from their own ethnic identities and familial ties, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt while also perpetuating financial inequality and social conflicts. Additionally, the interactive nature of social media amplified the impact of these standards, reinforcing the social value assigned to conforming to dominant ideals and marginalizing non-conforming identities, further exacerbating feelings of insecurity and negatively affecting mental and physical health.

Social media’s content and form, I suggest, made wellness and beauty synonymous with whiteness. Many wellness content creators demonstrated thinness and healthiness as products that could be achieved through the performance of whiteness. These performances included the consumption of organic foods and meal-prep delivery services associated with a white American diet while excluding or commodifying LatinX ethnic foods. As my interlocutors observed the social validation of white-centric diet-related content received through likes, comments, reposts, and shares, they internalized performances of whiteness as the “right” way to perform health and beauty. Thus, social media’s interactive nature served as a unique social space to circulate the performance of whiteness as a vehicle to achieve social capital.
The pressure to conform to white-centric standards enforced by social media and social relationships influenced some of my interlocutors to monitor their own body and diet practices, in addition to altering their perceptions of the LatinX foods they usually consume. Self-surveillance practices created unsustainable habits to “pass” and perform whiteness, promoting racial erasure and limiting young LatinX women’s opportunities to connect with others and their cultural heritage fostered by the consumption of ancestral dishes. Their constant need to monitor their body and diet created mental and physical exhaustion for my interlocutors, illuminating how social media’s hegemonic messaging perpetuates harmful cycles of racial erasure and disconnect from one's identity and community.

Despite pressures to conform to white standards of wellness and beauty, my interlocutors reassessed their social media engagement and reconnected with their ethnic foods to reaffirm their LatinX identities. Social media's portrayal of body and diet standards created harmful understandings and practices of health and beauty among my interlocutors, causing them to question their ancestral food practices and familial relationships. Yet many have come to recognize the importance of the kitchen as a space for cultural preservation and familial connection when they, despite the disruptive influence of social media messaging, in order to combat their sense of isolation produced by white-dominated spaces. In this manner, young LatinX women resist white-centric beauty standards by reclaiming agency in their food consumption and cooking practices and embracing their ethnic heritage. This form of resistance allowed young LatinX women to affirm non-hegemonic sources of connection and belonging through LatinX culinary engagements representative of their family’s homeland.

The intimate testimonies of my interlocutors reveal the pervasive influence of social media in shaping the perception of wellness and beauty, mainly through the lens of performances
of whiteness. Social media platforms allow space for white-conforming creators to perpetuate certain dietary practices and thinness as the epitome of health and beauty. However, amidst these challenges, this study acknowledges the instrumental role of ancestral foods in forming and understanding identity for young LatinX women. A confident engagement with LatinX culinary practices can encourage a strong sense of security in ethnic identity for young LatinX women, suggesting a potential buffer against assimilationist pressures.

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