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'Divulging the Eat Deets': Postfeminist Self-Surveillance on Women's Fitness Blogs

**Permalink**

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**Publication Date**

2014-04-01

## ‘Divulging the Eat Deets’: Postfeminist Self-Surveillance on Women’s Fitness Blogs

Using a blog called *The Fitnessista* as a case study, this paper argues that while fitness blogging culture frames itself as a healthy antithesis to harmful, excessive practices of dieting and exercise, many bloggers continue to enact this postfeminist self-surveillance by framing the maintenance of one’s body as “fun” (Gill 262). This paper uses Rosalind Gill’s definition of postfeminism as a multifaceted sensibility, characterized by (among other components) “dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation)” (Gill 261). The Internet has dramatically changed the opportunities and modalities available to women for daily self-scrutiny, and fitness blogs demonstrate this increasingly routine, occasionally obsessive self-regulation.<sup>1</sup> These blogs are public, image-heavy diaries in which communal policing is an implicit facet of participation; women post their eating and exercise routines with the expectation of receiving feedback from readers. The public sharing and celebration of this information has become very commonplace; thus as a tool of surveillance, these fitness blogs complicate Gill’s description of postfeminist regulatory labor which “*must never* be disclosed” (Gill 262). Fitness blogs are dependent on this postfeminist cultural context, and are a culturally intelligible form of self-expression because many women have not only internalized hegemonic notions of beauty to the point of a unhealthy relationship with their bodies, but also because many women regularly participate in the normalized practices of monitoring their own behavior, their physical shape, and their eating habits (Bordo 203). While bloggers claim to promote a healthy lifestyle, they ultimately encourage a culture of harmful body-image comparison, and engage in self-monitoring practices that recall the language of body and eating disorder communities.

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<sup>1</sup> While men also participate in fitness blogging, this paper will study the implications of women’s involvement in order to engage more with theories of postfeminism, in which the maintenance of the perfect body is still sold as integral to a woman’s cultural worth.

In this paper I use Gina Harney's *The Fitnessista* as my main case study, and supplement her text with examples from other fitness blogs as appropriate; I do not want to lose the richness and variety of these women's experiences. As this paper will demonstrate, Harney's blog is representative of the majority of fitness blogs in many ways, but her departures and criticisms allow me to demonstrate the diversity of expression possible in these online projects. Harney's blog has a large reach, with over 18,500 Facebook likes and over 20,000 Twitter followers (<https://www.facebook.com/fitnessista>, <https://twitter.com/fitnessista>).<sup>2</sup> While the entire blog focuses on many aspects of her life, this chapter focuses on the posts in which she records her eating and exercising habits. The format of these image-heavy, point-by-point chronicles of her day (Fig. 1) is similar to what McRobbie recognizes as the "diary" or "life-plan" central to the monitoring practices of the postfeminist subject (19). Within this diary, Harney performs self-surveillance in two areas; the first is in the detailed "About" section typical of fitness blogs, in which she explains her health habits and summarizes her progression from eating "diet foods" to "more whole, unprocessed foods" ("About"). This section describes the initial transformation of her body when she lost 40 lbs., introduces the blog as a place to describe "some daily happenings, as well as quick, [effective workouts](#) and healthy recipes" ("About"), and explains her "eating style," which has evolved considerably since she began the blog in 2008. The other area in which she documents her eating and exercise is the blog posts themselves, which will be the focus of this paper.

### **"Divulging the Eat Deets": Images of Food as Self-Surveillance**

While fitness blogs celebrate food and eating, they engage in stricter self-surveillance than a typical food blog, as well as a potentially more personal narrative because the focus is

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<sup>2</sup> To measure popularity I look to Facebook and Twitter followers, and the amount of comments on posts. I assume most readers are lurkers, so Facebook and Twitter are an effective way to measure reader interest.

specifically upon the author's body and the food that goes into it. While the focus on food and eating occasionally addresses topics like eating disorders and negative body image, fitness bloggers make an effort to frame the engagement with food as fun, reflecting Rosalind Gill's observation that in the postfeminist moment, engagement with these disciplinary practices is meant to be a matter of enjoyable choice (Gill 262). Like food bloggers, fitness bloggers place a great significance on images of food in order to frame surveillance as fun. Images of food have become commonplace in American culture; in any restaurant one can see men and women taking pictures of their meal for the sake of posting on Instagram (Kingkade), and many food blogs are famous for their use of hyper-aestheticized pictures of meals; popular website *Buzzfeed* even had a list of "50 Best Food Blog Photos Of 2012" (Sanders 2012). Food blogs build on this normalization of food pornography (Probyn 107); in addition to featuring pictures of meals that would be found in traditional cookbooks, they often feature photos of special restaurant meals, or even packaged food products. Fitness blogs draw on a similar tradition, building on the celebratory energy of food blogs in their use of food images and graphics. Because the project of a fitness blog is self-surveillance, these images of food take on additional significance, as evidence of adherence to one's life-plan or diary. Therefore, fitness blogs often take this visual documentation farther and provide images of each breakfast, lunch, dinner, and the snacks in between. Recipe or no recipe, these women present at least a sizable portion of their daily eats, whatever they want the reader to see.

This practice is illustrated in a popular posting trend called "What I Ate Wednesday,"<sup>3</sup> in which women post colorful graphics, photos of food, and excited comments about each photo

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<sup>3</sup> This practice is also popular on Instagram and Twitter, where the post is often accompanied by the hashtag #WIAW, denoting that "people post what they ate in one day" (<http://tagdef.com/wiaw>). This definition suggests that the practice is gender-neutral, that men and women have the opportunity to participate equally in this practice of surveillance.

(Fig. 2). This practice has roots in pro-ana<sup>4</sup> behaviors; a Google search for “What I Ate Wednesday” also suggests searches for “What I Ate Wednesday anorexic” and “What I ate when I was anorexic.”<sup>5</sup> In spite of these associations with pathological restriction, the use of “What I Ate Wednesday” posts on women’s fitness blogs exemplifies the ways in which these women frame their surveillance of food habits as fun. By participating in “What I Ate Wednesday,” women also perform proper consumption behaviors, and model these behaviors for their readers. In a post on *Peas and Crayons*, food blogger Jenn L. explains the appeal of “What I Ate Wednesday” posts:

----What WIAW isn't about----

Comparison - Judgement (sic) - Restriction – Guilt

----What WIAW is about----

Celebrating one of the glorious things we all have in common: We all eat!  
WIAW is about food and fun! It's about making new friends, breaking out of a food rut, noting changes in your diet/lifestyle, inspiring yourself & others, embracing fruit & vegetables, nourishing your body with the foods that work for you, finding new ways to eat your favorite foods, and so. much. more. <3

Celebrate Food. Celebrate blogging. Celebrate Individuality. (Jenn L.).

The opening language of this passage suggests a rejection of “What I Ate Wednesday’s” pro-ana heritage, as well as a rejection of any associations with women’s traditional experiences of dieting; negative feelings of “restriction” and “guilt” are removed, thus positioning this practice as an act of “correct” monitoring, and as a socially acceptable behavior for woman. She replaces negative words with positive: “inspiring,” “nourishing,” “friends,” and most importantly, “food

<sup>4</sup> Michele Polak defines pro-ana websites as those that claim disordered eating as a “*lifestyle choice*” and “include personal reflections and journaling about living with an eating disorder, motivational quotations supporting the pursuit of a pro-anorexia lifestyle, dieting tips and tricks, recipes for low-calorie meals, medical information and hundreds of pictures of women of various weights” (82).

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.google.com/search?](https://www.google.com/search?q=what+i+ate+wednesday&oq=what+i+ate+we&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.3126j0j7&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es_sm=91&ie=UTF-8)

[q=what+i+ate+wednesday&oq=what+i+ate+we&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.3126j0j7&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es\\_sm=91&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=what+i+ate+wednesday&oq=what+i+ate+we&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.3126j0j7&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es_sm=91&ie=UTF-8)

and fun!” Self-surveillance in the fitness blog is similarly framed as togetherness, rather than a chore; it is a fun opportunity to bond with other women in a way that makes cultural sense, working on the assumption that all women are naturally curious about what other women are eating and will benefit from sharing this information. The notion that sharing pictures of personal meals with other women is a “fun food diary party” (Jenn L.) effectively frames the labor of documenting every meal as a game, in keeping with the sensibility of postfeminism.

However, this public engagement with food is significant in consideration of the history of women’s relationship with eating. According to Bordo, popular media rarely represents women with “unrestrained appetite;” rather, women’s eating has historically been a “private, transgressive act,” and thus “restriction and denial of hunger [are] central features of the construction of femininity” (130). The explosion of fitness blogging in the current postfeminist moment demonstrates the contradictory ways in which the postfeminist sensibility both acknowledges the struggles of feminism and simultaneously discards these issues as no longer relevant (Gill 2007); fitness bloggers often claim to reject dieting as a restrictive, negative practice and profess to eat foods to please themselves, but do so in a way that adheres suspiciously to the restrictive conventions of traditional dieting. Like many fitness bloggers, Gina Harney’s posts reflect this concurrent enjoyment and disavowal of certain kinds of food. Her narrative of surveillance on *The Fitnessista* demonstrates a detailed enthusiasm for eating, and in the early years of her blog Harney monitored her eats in an almost obsessive way. This excerpt from a typical post on Harney’s blog (2008) demonstrates her process:

I came home and made dinner (in the process I munched on 2 tbs of peanut butter; I was pretty ravenous): grilled tilapia with green beans and mashed potatoes (for the hubby). The tilapia was seasoned with lime zest and juice, Montreal low sodium steak seasoning and cayenne pepper. It came out flaky and delicious. Suprisingly [sic], I had hardly any of my wine- like 3 sips, max. I gave it to [my husband] and decided not to waste my calories

on something I wasn't really enjoying. Anyway, I needed those calories for my MARBLE SLAB!!! yes yes yes yes yes

I got a taste of the chocolate peanut butter ice cream –I always get a taster of a fatty ice cream and then the non-fat as my main dessert– and got a small chocolate frozen yogurt (fat free, no sugar added) with chocolate chips. It was like summer in a cup. I enjoyed every bite and it was so much more fulfilling [sic] than the wine would have been. It squashed [sic] my craving in an instant. (“You know it’s summer when...”)

Harney’s excitement and energy is apparent; her word choice, her use of capital letters to emphasize importance, multiple exclamation points, and repetition of words all suggest a breathless enthusiasm for eating. While Harney’s engagement with food in this passage is far from the “private, secretive, illicit” feminine activity (129) that Bordo describes as commonplace in advertisements of the early 1990s, her words reveal an obvious monitoring and containment of desire, positioning herself in the traditional feminine role of “restriction and restraint” (60). She mentions feelings such as “ravenous” and “craving,” which are resolved (she “decided not to waste calories” and “squashed her cravings”) by the end of the blog post. Harney’s diet management complicates the conventional “rhetoric of indulgence” (Bordo 129); she does not frame her cravings as “dirty” or “shameful,” but rather as something she engages with properly in her posts. Her emphasis on choice and agency in this passage, knowing when to eat what, demonstrates her “correct” management of desire as a postfeminist subject (Bordo 187).

However, Harney has recently become more critical of the practice of posting narratives of food on her blog. In a post called “Eating Everything” (2013), Harney admits she thinks it is “weird” to post everything she eats, and mentions “it’s been freeing to not think about food all the time.” She goes on to admit that she used to be very restrictive in her diet, “taking photos of every single morsel that went into my mouth,” but has recently started “eating everything” and “It’s been pretty awesome.” By distancing herself from the attitude she displayed in the previous paragraph, she is critical of the typical fitness blogger’s adherence to self-surveillance, but by

addressing her eating habits even in this way, she continues the process of disclosure. She admits, “it’s silly that I think anyone should care about how I choose to feed myself, but at the same time, I feel like it’s important to be transparent with my readers.” This surveillance is undertaken with the same positive intentions as the other discourses of monitoring on the blog; thus even though Harney criticizes self-surveillance, she still operates within the logic of postfeminist monitoring practices.

### **“Get Fit. Have Fun”: Images of Exercise as Self-Surveillance**

Surveillance of the female body in Western culture is nothing new, and because postfeminist media culture lauds the body as the source of a woman’s power, these highly visual bodies are often subject to intense scrutiny and criticism (Gill 2007). Concerned writers have recently attacked “selfies,” arguing that these portraits encourage self-objectification among girls and women. Psychologist Kellie Hodder says that fitness selfies especially contribute to “the mentality that our bodies are objects that are on display and exist to be judged” and this “perpetuates the belief that in order to be healthy, our bodies should look a certain way or be a particular size” (Heinrich). When girls and women post pictures of themselves online, their self-esteem often remains tied to their appearance, and to the feedback received based on that appearance. In a study of girls’ YouTube videos, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that this feedback culture has become a normalized part of Internet participation, noting that these are “strategies of surveillance, judgment, and evaluation [...] simultaneously disciplining and constituting subjects” (18). The use of images on fitness blogs invites this disciplining discourse of surveillance, with the intent of motivating readers. However, Hodder also suggests that these “fitspiration” pictures are a new kind of “thinspiration” (Heinrich), implying that the locker-room



selfies typical of many fitness bloggers can be triggering material for women experiencing eating and/or exercise disorders (Polak 2007), and encourage dangerous monitoring behaviors.

While images of fitspiration are popular on Tumblr and Pinterest, the use of this device in the day-to-day, narrative-based surveillance of the female body project is even more problematic. Whether the goal is gaining weight or losing weight, there are two main ways in which exercise is typically represented on a fitness blog: either as an entire post complete with images devoted to a new workout or technique, or as one aspect of an entire day of surveillance, interspersed with pictures of meals described in the previous section. As with images of food, images of fitness constitute a significant portion of women's self-surveillance labor. For example, *Eating Bird Food* author Brittany Mullins' ongoing attempts to maintain a fit body are part of her fitness narrative, and as a result her posts occasionally include mirror "selfies" juxtaposed with bikini shots in a "before and after" dyad reminiscent of weight loss advertisements, demonstrating the benefits of her hard work. For example, in a post called "Tone It Up Bikini Challenge Recap" (2012) Mullins posts a comparison picture of herself in this archetype, showing the new abs she achieved during a "Tone It Up" fitness challenge (Fig. 3). While ostensibly posted to inspire others, these images invite comparison and surveillance; of the 53 comments on the post, the majority express sentiments such as "Brittany, you look AMAZING!!! Look at those abs!!" and "What a difference!" The surveillance performed in the comments section serves as a feedback mechanism that is not possible with fitspiration images on a medium such as Pinterest; as an extension of postfeminist media culture, fitness blogs present healthy lifestyle discourse in a way that reduces a woman's accomplishment to her visible management of her body, thereby validating the practice of self-surveillance.

While Mullin's blog provides a typical account of women's self-surveillance, Harney's blog demonstrates a more complicated engagement. Rather than posting fitness selfies from the gym, Harney makes a conscious effort to deny the reader access to her body as an object, saying "not once on this blog will you see a pic of me in a sports bra/bikini, weight, measurements or clothing size- that info doesn't help anyone!" ("My Kinda Triathlon"). As a fitness instructor, Harney posts pictures with explicit instructional intention. She restricts fitness images to those of herself in the gym, always fully clothed and demonstrating an action such as lifting weights or Pilates, rather than posed in front of the mirror as is common in many fitness blogs (Fig. 4). By restricting her public self-surveillance to these practical, active images, Harney discourages the kind of physical comparison most active among the pro-ana community. While she does not display her body through the traditional "selfie," she both monitors her workouts and creates workout plans for her readers to follow. For example, Harney's "Summer Shape Up 2013" (2013) provides a workout and eating plan, and explains which kinds of measurements to take before and how to frame before and after photos: "snap a few pictures facing forwards, sideways, and to the back, wearing a swimsuit or sports bra and tight-fitting shorts. This way, you'll have a clear method to track your progress over the four weeks. **Check your measurements again halfway through the challenge and again at the end.**" In this way, Harney supports a community of surveillance among her readers, and by encouraging dialogue and the sharing of results she frames self-policing as a bonding activity. As these examples demonstrate, the postfeminist project of surveillance is slightly different for every woman.

## Conclusion

In postfeminist media culture all women, especially white middle-class women, are encouraged to engage in some form of self-surveillance. Fitness blogs claim to promote personal

health and wellness, but Harney's and Mullins' blogs demonstrate that these texts are often just a culturally acceptable avenue for celebrating the skills of diet and exercise, of self-control and body-monitoring that are so valued by postfeminist media culture. They emerge as culturally acceptable avenues for this necessary self-surveillance, by focusing on "fun" rather than restriction, by promoting "health" rather than diets, and by adding "strong is the new" in front of the word "skinny." While these blogs distance themselves from controversial pro-ana websites in this way, they retain the problematic, often harmful use of images that encourages women to measure themselves against socially determined standards of beauty and value.

However, the purpose of this paper was not to devalue the contributions of the women who engage in this cultural labor, nor to deny the personal benefits they reap from their participation. Bartky encourages us to look at these disciplined women as "skilled individuals;" in other words, regardless of the larger cultural implications, fitness blogs provide women with an important "sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity" (Bartky 77). These projects are far from homogenous, and a close read of Harney's blog reveals that there is a more complex engagement at work within fitness blogs, as women negotiate mainstream fitness discourse and utilize the aspects of healthy living that may not be as popular within postfeminist media culture, but are instrumental in helping them find satisfaction in their lives.

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Fig. 1

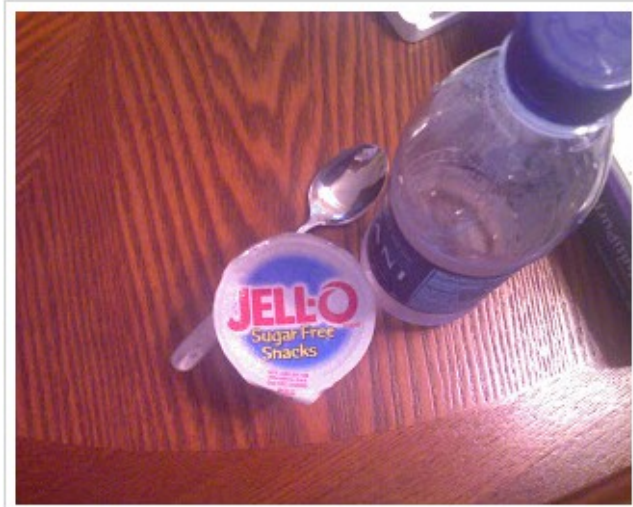


IT'S ICE CREAM NIGHT!

All day today, I've had a mad hankering for an ice cream sandwich. I'm pretty such that it's due to the fact that I saw an ad for the Skinny Cow ice cream sandwiches in my current Women's Health mag. Since then, I've been daydreaming about delicious ice cream sandwiched between slightly mushy chocolately wafers and couldn't get it out of my mind. Did I mention I was reading Women's Health on the treadmill at the

gym when this craving was born?? How convenient.

So today, I didn't accomplish much around the house, or get my cousins birthday present until tonight, but I did spend a few hours working on a budget and opening some mutual fund accounts and IRAs. I know it's drab, but our goal is to get a sweet house at our next PCS (permanent change of station) and doing a budget is the first step. Now we'll be able to have a good down payment... if I stay FAR away from the Orlando malls! Heh.



After finishing the budget, I had an awesome lunch of Chicken Cacciatore (I froze it a few weeks ago and it reheated beautifully), a Laughing Cow cheese wedge and a Sugar-free Jell-o pudding. It was glorious. After a little nap time (our dog kept us awake all night last night and I desperately needed one!), I went to the gym an hour before spin class to read my new magazine and do my abs.



- 1. 25 minutes on treadmill at 4.0 with 3.5% incline (I prefer to leisurely walk while I read)
- 2. Incline ab bench: 10 crunches and 5 full sit ups, 3 sets, holding a 10 lb weight
- 3. Crunch and twist lifting opposite knee (3 sets of 15 on each side)

- 4. Plank pose (3 sets of 1 minute)
- 5. "Hello Dolly"s (3 sets of 12)
- 6. Spin class, 50 minutes

After the gym, I hit up the store to get my cousin's b-day gift: a brownies cookbook, a cupcake cookbook and a Red Velvet cupcake and cream cheese frosting mix set. She's on a baking kick lately and I think she'll like it.

I came home and made dinner (in the process I munched on 2 tbs of peanut butter; I was pretty



ravenous): grilled tilapia with green beans and mashed potatoes (for the hubby).

The tilapia was seasoned with lime zest and juice, Montreal low sodium steak seasoning and cayenne pepper. It came out flaky and delicious. Suprisingly, I had hardly any of my wine- like 3 sips, max. I gave it to the pilot and decided not to waste my calories on something I wasn't really

Fig. 2



WIAW Sensible Snacking #1 #2 #3 #4



WIAW Fun, Food, + Fitness #1 #2 #3 #4



WIAW FALL into Good Habits #1 #2 #3 #4



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

