

‘This Helped Me, Maybe It Helps You Too’

Rhetorical Strategies in TikTok Eating Disorder Recovery Content

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Master's Thesis
June 2025

Word Count: 19,911

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform for health communication, particularly among young people navigating mental health challenges. This thesis investigates how eating disorder recovery content on TikTok, created by content creators with lived experience, is constructed to be persuasive. The analysis builds on two theoretical pillars: a rhetorical framework grounded in Aristotle’s concept of ethos, pathos, and logos, and platform affordance theory, to highlight the possibilities and constraints embedded in the platform’s technological design. This research adopts a qualitative research design with a rhetorical approach, analyzing 64 TikTok videos collected using the hashtag #eetstoornisherstel. The videos were selected through purposive sampling and analyzed using both inductive and deductive coding methods. Particular attention was given to the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as to TikTok-specific visual and auditory affordances, vernaculars, and engagement metrics. Findings show that creators build credibility not through traditional authority or expert status, but through personal experience, emotional resonance, and platform fluency. Relatability is central: creators share vulnerable moments, reflect on their own recovery journeys, and use specific examples that signal lived experience and an insider perspective. Burke’s concept of identification proves especially relevant, as viewers are invited to see themselves reflected in the creator’s narrative, fostering a sense of shared struggle and mutual understanding. Ethos on TikTok is thus central and deeply embedded in the platform’s visual and emotional style. Creators also employ pathos by evoking emotional responses, such as empathy and hope, that draw viewers into the emotional dimensions of recovery. These appeals are often strengthened by the platform’s multimodal features. Lastly, logos emerges not through the form of objective data, but through experience-based and logical reasoning: creators structure their stories to show patterns of progress, relapse, and insight, often offering advice or coping strategies grounded in personal experiences. Together, these rhetorical appeals foster trust and engagement, illustrating how persuasive power on TikTok operates through the interplay of credibility, emotional impact, and experiential logic, all shaped by the platforms’ unique functionalities. Overall, this study contributes to media and communication studies by offering a rhetorical understanding of how persuasiveness is constructed in user-generated recovery content on TikTok. The findings offer practical insights for mental health organizations and educators aiming to engage audiences on platforms like TikTok, highlighting the persuasive potential of peer-based credibility. Moreover, effective communication on platforms like TikTok requires a nuanced understanding of platform-specific vernaculars. Encouraging interactive engagement can further strengthen community-building and enhance the persuasive power of mental health narratives. Together, these insights inform strategies for promoting trustworthy, relatable, and impactful mental health communication within digital peer networks.

KEYWORDS: *Eating disorder recovery content, TikTok, persuasive communication, rhetorical strategies, platform affordances.*

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1. Introduction

Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, present complex challenges that affect individuals physically, psychologically, and socially. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate among psychiatric disorders, underscoring the urgency of addressing this condition. Despite the severity of these disorders, many individuals may not seek professional treatment (Jones et al., 2012, p. 34). However, recovery communities on social media offer an appealing alternative due to their accessibility (Herrick et al., 2020, p. 516). These online communities allow individuals to share their recovery journeys, seek information, and reaffirm that recovery is possible (Herrick et al., 2020, p. 516).

A recent study by van Eeden et al. (2023, pp. 2295-2301) highlights concerning trends in the prevalence of eating disorders in the Netherlands. A nationwide primary care study examining the incidence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa over four decades found a significant increase in the incidence of anorexia nervosa among 10- to 14-year-old females. From 1985 to 2019, the incidence of anorexia nervosa among 10- to 14-year-old females in the Netherlands increased by over 350%. The increase in anorexia nervosa rates, particularly among younger females, has been attributed to both biological and sociocultural factors, including the growing influence of social media. This study underscores the importance of understanding how these trends manifest in digital spaces, where recovery communities on platforms like TikTok may play a crucial role in providing support and influencing perceptions of recovery.

In the DSM-5, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, eating disorders are categorized into several types including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and eating disorders not otherwise specified, such as binge eating disorder (Jones et al., 2018, p. 34). These disorders can lead to severe physical and mental health consequences, including extreme dieting, weight loss, and purging behavior. In this study, eating disorders were operationalized based on observable behaviors presented through recovery narratives shared by individuals on TikTok. While the Netherlands boasts a universal healthcare system, accessing mental health services presents notable challenges. General practitioners serve as gatekeepers, as their written referral is mandatory to access specialized (mental) healthcare, covered by health insurance (Smink et al., 2016, p. 1189). This can delay timely treatment. Additionally, recent decentralization efforts have shifted the responsibility for child and adolescent mental health services more locally, resulting in budget cuts and increased pressure on local resources. This restructuring has led to longer waiting times and reduced availability of specialized care for young individuals with eating disorders (Kleinjan et al., 2022, p. 2). These systemic barriers, coupled with societal stigma surrounding mental health issues, often discourage individuals from seeking professional help (Kleinjan et al., 2022, p. 1). Consequently, many turn to alternative sources of support, such as online communities.

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In recent years, the use of social media as a platform for seeking or sharing health-related information has surged (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 139). More and more individuals share personal experiences with diseases, medical treatments, medications, and communicate with individuals who experience the same struggles (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 139). The study of Zhou et al (2018, pp. 139-143) mentions various advantages that might explain this rise in social media use for health communication. They mention how social media offers users an accessible and low-barrier space to find information on a wide range of health issues, including mental health disorders like eating disorders. This has not only changed how people seek information about health problems but has also created new forms of support and community. Furthermore, they highlight the anonymity provided by social media, which encourages individuals facing mental health challenges to share their experiences and seek support, which they might be hesitant to do in offline settings due to societal stigma and the high cost of healthcare. By breaking down barriers like social isolation and the resistance to seek formal healthcare, social media offers a valuable opportunity for individuals to receive support and guidance in a more accessible and non-judgmental environment. Social media platforms, including TikTok, have increasingly become a space where individuals can find relevant health information and engage with others who share similar struggles (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 139). Hashtags like #eetstoornisherstel [Dutch for #eatingdisorderrecovery] allow individuals to share their personal narratives and create digital spaces for support and inspiration.

The recovery narratives on TikTok employ persuasive communication techniques, such as personal stories, visual cues, active engagement, frequent updates, and emotional appeals, to convey authenticity and build credibility (Lau et al., 2024, p. 65). Credibility plays a crucial role in persuasiveness, especially in the context of social media, where diverse speakers and audiences interpret credibility based on their own values and beliefs (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023, p. 16). As a highly multimodal platform, TikTok enables creators to combine video, sound, text, and performance, which amplifies the persuasive power of their content (McCashin & Murphy, 2022, pp. 285-302). Focusing on TikTok recovery content, this study examines the multimodal rhetorical strategies employed by creators to craft persuasive messages and engage their digital communities. In doing so, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the persuasive dynamics in eating disorder recovery content and offers insights for more effective public health communication.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

1. *How is eating disorder recovery content on TikTok constructed to be persuasive?*
2. *How do TikTok-specific affordances and vernaculars contribute to the persuasiveness of eating disorder recovery content?*

In order to explore these RQs, the study will analyze TikTok content through a rhetorical lens, incorporating perceived affordance theory and engagement metrics.

1.1 Scientific contributions

As pointed out above, social media has increasingly become a critical platform for health communication, where users turn to these platforms to seek support, share recovery strategies, and affirm that recovery is possible (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 139). A study by Naslund et al. (2016, pp. 114-119) showed that digital platforms, including TikTok, are integral in shaping health movements and fostering peer-to-peer support. These platforms allow individuals to connect with others facing similar health challenges, share personal experiences, and access information. Furthermore, digital health movements, including those that focus on mental health and eating disorders, have gained significant popularity in recent years, often supported by online communities that break down the barriers associated with stigma and access to formal healthcare (Naslund et al., 2016, pp. 115-116).

However, despite the widespread use of social media as a health communication tool and the growing body of research on eating disorders and social media, there remains limited research into how social media videos are crafted to persuade individuals affected by eating disorders. Most existing studies focus on audience reception, with relatively little attention given to how the content’s structure and composition influence its persuasiveness (Herrick et al., 2020, p. 524; Kells et al., 2024, pp. 10-15; Lau et al., 2024, p. 72). This gap is particularly notable in the context of mental health and eating disorders, where individuals often adjust their communication and behaviors in response to stigma, judgment, and insecurity, which may lead them to hide their feelings or cope with pressure in ways that do not reflect their true emotional experience (Arafah & Destiwati, 2024, p. 1961). Effective persuasive strategies that channel and validate these emotions, acknowledge diverse experiences, and align with the motivations of those struggling with mental health disorders could foster a more inclusive, supportive environment. This understanding could be crucial in encouraging individuals to seek help, engage with recovery communities, and feel empowered through their recovery journey. By focusing on how persuasive strategies are used in TikTok recovery content, this study aims to contribute new insights into the creation of persuasive health content, thereby advancing the field of social media health communication.

Personal stories and lived experiences play a critical role in shaping the persuasiveness of health messages, particularly for vulnerable populations. Research indicates that recovery stories shared by individuals with an eating disorder can have a significant impact by fostering hope, inspiration, and a sense of being understood (Dawson et al., 2018, pp. 5-10). A study by Dawson et al. (2018, pp. 5-10) found that recovery stories generated positive responses, such as feelings of hope and reduced isolation, among participants who were struggling with an eating disorder. Participants emphasized that seeing others’ recovery journeys made them feel less alone in their struggles. These stories not only provide emotional support but also affirm that recovery is possible, making them a valuable tool for health communication, particularly in the context of mental health and eating disorders.

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This growing body of research underscores the importance of integrating lived experiences into health communication, particularly for mental health issues like eating disorders. By emphasizing personal narratives, digital platforms like TikTok can foster supportive communities where individuals feel understood and empowered to seek their own recovery journeys. However, more research is needed to explore the mechanisms by which these stories work and to refine how they are presented in ways that maximize their positive impact while minimizing their potential negative impact.

1.2 Social contributions

This research not only has academic value but also addresses a broader societal concern regarding the role of social media in influencing the mental health of young people. With the increasing prevalence of eating disorders among youth (Eeden et al., 2023, p. 2295-2301) and the rising use of social media platforms for health communication (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 139), TikTok has emerged as a key space where individuals, especially those struggling with mental health issues, can find support, share their recovery journeys, and connect with others facing similar challenges. Social media’s accessibility has opened new opportunities for reaching broader audiences, including those who might not otherwise seek help due to stigma or geographic limitations. The digital space provides a valuable platform for peer-to-peer support where individuals can find both inspiration and solidarity (Naslund et al., 2016, pp. 115-116).

However, the use of social media for health information also raises questions about the reliability of the shared content, the impact of this information on the recovery process, and how social media can both positively and negatively affect mental health. Recent research by NOS (Driuch et al., 2025, para. 4) raises concerns about the influence of eating disorder recovery content on TikTok in the Netherlands, noting how the competitive nature of eating disorders can lead to harmful comparisons. The NOS’s findings serve as a critical reminder of the complexities surrounding eating disorder recovery content, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced approach to creating and consuming recovery content on social media platforms.

Another research study by Offringa (2025, p.1) for Pointer, the investigative journalism platform of KRO-NCRV, highlights that platforms like TikTok can reinforce insecurities through algorithmic targeting, which may contribute to the development of eating disorders. Individuals already struggling with mental health issues are especially vulnerable to being drawn towards weight loss content. This research also emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the recovery community on TikTok, where recovery-oriented content can both inspire healing and inadvertently glorify the severity of the illness (Offringa, 2025, p.1). Research into how social media can be effectively used for health communication, particularly on platforms like TikTok, is therefore crucial from both a scientific and societal perspective. It provides an opportunity to understand how social media

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contributes to healthcare while also gaining insight into the potential dangers of using such platforms for sensitive topics like eating disorders.

While the broader societal focus often centers on the potential harms of social media content in relation to mental health, this study focuses on how creators structure their content to engage their audience and motivate them in their recovery journey. By analyzing these persuasive strategies, this research provides insights into how content can be designed to be engaging and offer positive, accessible support for individuals struggling with an eating disorder. Understanding this might be useful for mental health professionals and content creators in fostering an environment that balances both emotional support and responsible communication.

2. Theoretical framework

Classical rhetorical strategies, ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical reasoning), have long been central to persuasive health communication. Previous research has explored how these strategies function in various health-related contexts, including health misinformation (Peng et al., 2022, pp. 2141-2142), the wellness industry (Deutsch, 2023, pp. 109-140), and breast cancer content on TikTok (Mheidly et al., 2024, pp. 6-7). These studies show how content creators enhance persuasiveness by strategically employing credibility, emotional engagement, and logical reasoning. On TikTok, these rhetorical appeals are particularly relevant, as they shape how recovery narratives are received, interpreted, and internalized by viewers.

As part of the rhetorical context, the platform affordances of TikTok should also be considered. Affordances and vernaculars such as algorithmic curation, interactivity, and specific formats shape the visibility and persuasiveness of eating disorder recovery content (Wittenberg, 2023, p. 209; Kells et al., 2024, p. 12). By integrating these aspects, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how TikTok facilitates the dissemination and reception of persuasive recovery narratives, with broader implications for users and health communication practices.

2.1 A rhetorical approach to trust-building on TikTok

This section starts with a review of the theoretical model of persuasion, as proposed by Aristotle and improved upon by Kenneth Burke. In the second part, there will be a discussion of the particularities of persuasion on TikTok, reviewing recent empirical studies on the topic.

2.1.1 Persuasion: a theoretical model

Traditionally, rhetoric refers to the use or study of persuasive techniques. The interest in how communication persuades and influences an audience has roots tracing back to Ancient Greece and Rome (Rutten & Soetaert, 2014, p. 340). The study of persuasion was first formalized by Aristotle, who structured rhetoric as a distinct field of study. He introduced the three fundamental persuasive appeals: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotions), and logos (logic). These concepts remain central to understanding persuasive communication today, providing a framework for analyzing how authors of texts, images, or videos attempt to convince their audience (Koszowy et al., 2022, p. 125).

These concepts were expanded by Kenneth Burke’s ‘new rhetoric’, which reframes persuasion not just as a matter of logic or appeal, but as a social process of establishing shared meaning and identification (Rutten & Soetaert, 2014, p. 340). Burke viewed rhetoric as a process of establishing and negotiating identities and social relationships. Rutten & Soetaert (2014, pp. 340-344) further explain that the core of Burke’s rhetorical theory is the idea that humans are symbol-using animals, meaning that humans actively interpret and assign meaning to language and images, besides

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responding to them. This lays the foundation for identification, a process of aligning with certain messages, values, or communities. When audiences see aspects of their own experiences reflected in a message, this fosters a sense of connection and trust between the author of the message and the audience, making persuasion more likely (Bullock et al., 2021, p. 2). This notion of identification becomes especially powerful in contexts where individuals are in search of meaning or identity, such as in the case of eating disorder recovery. Individuals with eating disorders often experience a profound disruption in their sense of self, as their identities become entangled with the illness itself (Kerr et al., 2019, p. 635).

In recovery of an eating disorder, a key step involves redefining this identity, not simply rejecting the illness, but reconstructing a coherent sense of self that moves beyond it. Therapeutic approaches such as MANTRA therapy emphasize this process by helping individuals externalize the illness and reimagine themselves apart from it (Koshina & Schmidt, 2019, p. 2). This reconstruction of identity closely aligns with Burke’s view of persuasion as rooted in shared symbols, language, and meaning making. As people engage with messages that echo their internal struggles or aspirations, a process of identification unfolds. They begin to see themselves in the message, recognizing familiar experiences, emotions, or values. Platforms like TikTok, where individuals publicly share their recovery journeys, amplify the potential that viewers encounter stories that mirror their own, fostering a sense of connection and validation. Through this symbolic alignment, the persuasive power of the message increases (Bullock et al., 2021, p. 2).

Furthermore, Burke (1969, pp. 61-63) argues that identification and persuasion involve more than just the author and the message. The author’s background, experiences, and motivations all shape how their message is constructed and received, making them part of the rhetorical appeal. In addition, non-verbal factors, such as the specific situation or the audience’s attitudes, can also influence how a message is interpreted. Therefore, rhetorical analysis must go beyond the words themselves and consider the broader context in which communication takes place. To account for this complexity, Burke (1969, pp. 55-59) introduced the ‘dramatistic pentad’, another key element in his rhetorical model, to analyze human interaction within any given context. The pentad consists of five elements: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. These components not only structure rhetorical analysis but also deepen our understanding of identification. By emphasizing how individuals use symbols and language to connect, make meaning, and align with shared values, Burke redefined rhetoric as a way to create understanding and connection between people, rather than only a method of persuasion.

In the context of this research, it is important to look at the agent, the author of the TikTok content. Burke’s rhetorical context invites us to consider how the identity of the content creator, such as their lived experience with an eating disorder, shapes the audience’s reception of the message. In *Rhetoric of Motives* (1969, pp. 55-59), Burke draws on Aristotle’s ideas about virtue to show how character traits are fluid and rhetorically framed in relation to audience values. This depends on how

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the creator wants to be perceived and by whom. This process of reframing traits is central to Burke’s notion of identification, since the audience must see the speaker as ‘like’ them in some meaningful way. On TikTok, creators might strategically highlight certain aspects of their identity, such as resilience, vulnerability, or past struggle, in ways that align with what their audience views as credible or admirable. This makes the author ‘the agent of identification’, instead of just the messenger (Burke, 1969, pp. 55-59). As further described in *Rhetoric of Motives* (1969, pp. 55-59), another highly relevant element of the dramatistic pentad is ‘scene’, which, in the context of eating disorder recovery content on TikTok, refers to the multimodality of the platform. Among other things, TikTok’s algorithmic design, informal tone, and short-form video format all influence how messages are both constructed and received. The element ‘agency’ within this framework refers to the means through which the message is delivered, in this case, the use of video, audio, filters, captions, sounds, trends, and other TikTok functionalities and vernaculars. These will be further discussed in Chapter 2.2, ‘(Perceived) affordance theory’.

By viewing TikTok content through Burke’s rhetorical lens, it becomes possible to understand how persuasion operates not solely through logical arguments, but also through shared symbols, emotional appeals, and rhetorical positioning. In addition to the rhetorical context, the three Aristotelian pillars of persuasion, ethos, pathos, logos also warrant further attention. These will be explored in the next chapter.

2.1.2 Persuasion on TikTok

In the context of social media communication, the rhetorical framework has been effectively employed to study various topics such as health and wellness communication on TikTok, political communication on TikTok, persuasive health communication on Facebook and TikTok (Deutsch, 2023, pp. 109-140; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023, pp. 218-228; Mheidly et al., 2024, pp. 6-7; El-Dakhs & Ahmed, 2025, pp. 2-13). While this study is broadly interested in health communication, insights from other topics related to persuasive communication on social media can shed light on the forms that persuasion takes on a platform like TikTok. TikTok relies on multimodal communication, where images and sound play a crucial role in constructing persuasive messages. This section therefore reviews the various persuasive tactics identified in previous empirical research on TikTok.

Ethos on TikTok

Ethos, one of Aristotle’s modes of persuasion, refers to the credibility, authenticity, and moral character of the speaker, which plays a crucial role in how the message is received by the audience (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023, p. 16). Credibility is not just a pre-existing trait but is constructed through how the speaker presents themselves as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and aligned with the audience’s values. Since perceptions of credibility vary from person to person, there is a big challenge in modern communication as social media provides us with a large diversity of speakers and audiences. Who and what audiences consider to be credible often relates to their values and

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beliefs (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023, p. 16).

Studies have outlined at least five character traits used to identify appeals to ethos in content: similitude, deference, self-criticism, expertise, and the inclination to succeed (Beason, 1991, pp. 326-327; Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197). Similitude is an important tool for the identification process described by Burke (Beason, 1991, p. 332), referring to the creation of a connection between the creator and the audience by highlighting their similarities. This can be achieved using pronouns like “we” or “you and I”, which foster a sense of identification, even between groups that may have little in common (Cheney, 1983, p. 149). This, in turn, enhances the creator’s ethos and makes their message more persuasive (Cheney, 1983, p. 145), as the audience perceives the creator not as an outsider but as someone who understands their struggles and goals. In addition to similarity, creators may express deference, which refers to the creator's ability to show respect and avoid being presumptuous or harsh (Beason, 1991, pp. 333-335). This is often shown through phrases like “*in my opinion*”, “*join me, if you would*” (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 198), “*I believe*”, or “*as I see it*” (Beason, 1991, p. 334). These sentences help the creator come across as polite and suggest that the creator respects others’ rights to their own opinions (Beason, 1991, pp. 333-335). Another effective character trait to identify appeals to ethos is self-criticism, which is a way for creators to show honesty and trustworthiness and make them seem more credible and relatable (Beason, 1991, pp. 335-337). For example, they might say: “*I’m not a doctor or therapist, but here’s what I’ve learned*”. Expertise is another key trait to identify appeals to ethos, which focuses on demonstrating that the creator has knowledge and experience on the topic. Beason (1991, pp. 337-338) explains that people are more likely to trust someone who shows they have a deep understanding or experience in what they are discussing. Content creators, for example, might mention their personal experience to establish credibility, such as: “*In the 2 years that I had an eating disorder, I learned that...*”. Finally, creators can enhance their ethos by showing an inclination to succeed, referring to the creator’s potential for success, based on their past and future achievements. This can be demonstrated by mentioning previous successes or showing confidence in future outcomes (Beason, 1991, pp. 338-340). For example, saying “*In my recovery, I learned to listen to my body*”, refers to past successes, while “*I know it’s hard right now, but with the right support and mindset, I believe full recovery is possible*” expresses confidence in future success. Demonstrating both past and potential successes helps build credibility.

The complexity of building credibility becomes especially evident on platforms like TikTok, where content creators must continuously negotiate their ethos in a multimodal environment. Recent studies shed light on how audiences interpret and respond to these credibility cues in the context of mental health and recovery content. In their study, Adeane and Stasiak (2024, pp. 4-9) examined how young people perceive and react to mental health discussions by social media influencers. They discovered that the use of clinical language in mental health content can both strengthen and undermine an influencer’s credibility. When influencers share personal experiences and discuss their

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own diagnoses, they are often viewed as relatable and informative role models, which boosts their authenticity. However, misusing clinical language or treating diagnoses as trends can harm the influencer’s ethos. Jaakkola and Sakki (2025, p. 106) further highlight that informal behaviors, such as speaking directly to the camera, wearing casual clothing, and actively engaging with followers, enhance the perceived closeness and authenticity.

Both Adeane and Stasiak (2024, pp. 4-9) and Deutsch (2023, p. 112) emphasize that regular posting on a particular topic is important for maintaining authenticity and credibility. However, excessively posting about the same issues can become overwhelming and exhausting for viewers. Additionally, Adeane and Stasiak (2024, pp. 4-9) found that young people tend to prefer short videos, given their short attention spans. Yet, some participants noted that longer content appears more professional and trustworthy, which could further strengthen the influencer’s ethos. The study also found that influencers’ credibility is heavily influenced by their personal experience with mental health. Those who have lived through such challenges are perceived as more authentic. Similarly, Hendry et al. (2021, pp. 428-431) emphasize that credibility in health-related content stems less from formal qualifications or professional expertise, but rather from how they perform authenticity through personal storytelling and everyday experiences. On platforms like TikTok, where informal and experiential knowledge is often valued over institutional authority, such authenticity resonates strongly with audiences and enhances trust. This performative authenticity, shaped by personal narratives, vulnerability, and consistent digital presence, can help influencers teach others about health, even in the absence of formal health education. TikTok’s informal style, marked by everyday language, humor, and casual visuals, positions TikTok creators more as peers than professionals (Mheidly et al., 2024, pp. 6-7). According to McCashin and Murphy (2022, pp. 285-302), personal creators use TikTok features more frequently and are more active than health professionals who were active on TikTok, which results in higher engagement and in turn can enhance perceived credibility. They demonstrate that personal creators utilize multimodal strategies such as music, sound, filters, effects, visual content, interactive elements, dances, skits, and acting more frequently. These multimodal dimensions of communication through TikTok support the accessible tone of the creators and allow them to be perceived as credible and authentic. The study of Mheidly et al. (2024, p. 6) also mentions this, by stating that TikTok features like music, filters, text overlays, emojis, and infographics can add emotional depth which makes the content creator more relatable and their content more engaging.

The analysis will also consider action-oriented metrics like views, likes, comments, saves, and shares to assess the reach and resonance of recovery-related content within the TikTok community (Lau et al., 2024, p. 64). These metrics, commonly used by researchers to measure engagement (Kordzadeh & Young, 2020, p. 2), can also be interpreted as persuasive cues that contribute to the construction of ethos. When a video receives high engagement, it signals social approval, which can enhance the creator’s credibility in the eyes of viewers (Kordzadeh & Young, 2020, p. 2). A study by

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Spartz et al. (2017, p. 11) found that YouTube viewers perceived the issues discussed in a video as more important when the video had a higher number of views. This suggests that engagement metrics are not merely indicators of popularity but also function as rhetorical devices that shape how audiences evaluate both the message and the creator. In the context of recovery content on TikTok, these metrics play a key role in establishing ethos and persuasiveness. Together, these rhetorical and multimodal strategies shape a new form of ethos that is co-constructed by creator and viewer, tailored to the participatory and emotionally driven environment of TikTok.

Pathos on TikTok

Pathos, another mode of persuasion by Aristotle, refers to as Kuchel and Rowland (2023, p. 15) explain, emotional appeals that aim to engage the audience’s feelings and evoke empathy. A person’s emotional state influences how they interpret and respond to messages; individuals do not react the same way when they are angry as when they are calm or happy. For this reason, appealing to emotions is an effective strategy in persuasive communication. Pathos-based rhetorical strategies try to make the audience feel comfortable to ‘open up’ about a topic (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023, pp. 15-16). Emotional resonance increases the likelihood of adopting advice, as audiences who connect with a creator’s emotions feel more drawn to follow their guidance (Fan & Lederman, 2017, pp. 67-68). According to Burke, this emotional connection is created through identification, where the creator shows they understand and relate to the audience’s needs, values, and desires (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 198).

Pathos can be conveyed through imagery, sound, and language, for example, through tone, expressive descriptions, and personal stories that evoke an emotional response (Kuchel & Rowland, 2023, p. 15). Murthy and Ghosal (2014, p. 254) outline several strategies for effectively appealing to pathos in communication. These include incorporating metaphors, personal stories, and introducing humor to establish a connection with the audience. They also emphasize the power of visual elements, such as images, and non-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone, as essential tools to evoke emotional engagement. That humor can serve as an emotion-eliciting tool to make sensitive topics more approachable is also mentioned by Hendry (2020, p. 7). Furthermore, there is an increasing recognition of the value of lived experience in mental health care (Dawson et al., 2018, p. 8). Connecting with someone with lived experience and listening to their personal stories facilitates meaningful relationships grounded in shared experiences of mental illness and can support the recovery process (Dawson et al., 2018, p. 8).

To convey these personal stories effectively, creators can use emotion-eliciting language to appeal to pathos. Konat et al. (2024, pp. 370-373) describe this as words that act as stimuli, provoking specific emotional responses in the audience, including the activation of meaning, attention, and memory, similar to how images or sounds can trigger emotions. Besides emotion-eliciting language, the study of Richings et al. (2021, pp. 38-42) talks about sensory language which also plays a central role in rhetorical appeals to pathos by evoking physical sensations that connect

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directly to the audience’s emotional state. Sensory language enables the audience to closely experience sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Words like ‘hopeful’, ‘triggering’, and ‘overwhelming’ do more than just describe; they invite the reader to feel the argument rather than simply understand it. The use of sensory language strengthens the emotional connection between the creator and the audience, making it an essential rhetorical strategy for persuasion, particularly in topics that intersect with health and identity (Richings et al., 2021, pp. 38-42). Richings et al. (2021, pp. 38-42) identify two additional forms of pathos alongside stimulating physical sensations through sensory language: explicitly naming emotions, by directly stating the emotions the speaker wants to evoke in the audience and using visuals to provoke strong emotional and sensory responses.

In the study of Joffe (2008, pp. 84-86) about the power of visual material in persuasion, she explains the power of visual material eliciting emotional responses. Unlike textual or verbal information, visuals often bypass logical thinking and directly trigger emotional responses. In several studies, this emotional impact has been demonstrated. For example, the study of Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006, p. 644) found that individuals exposed to photographs of a traumatic news event reported significantly higher levels of fear compared to those who encountered the same event in written form. This suggests that visuals have the ability to make events feel immediate and personally relevant, thereby fostering identification with the creator. Joffe (2008, pp. 84-86) explains that visuals that are emotionally charged, rich in detail, and closely connected to the senses or recent experiences are more likely to leave impactful impressions. These impressions influence how we judge future information. As a result, visuals not only grab attention but also affect memory and decision-making, which are key elements for persuasion.

Since TikTok is a highly multimodal platform with numerous functionalities that encourage creative expression, it offers numerous affordances to appeal to pathos. Jaakkola and Sakki (2025, pp. 92-113) demonstrate how a populist politician employs diverse multimodal strategies to create an emotional connection with his followers. These strategies evoke both positive and negative emotions, strengthening a sense of shared identity. One key emotional tool is music, which, depending on the tone, can create a cheerful and uplifting atmosphere or intensify a serious and dramatic message. Familiar melodies may also trigger nostalgic or communal feelings, reinforcing the emotional power of the video’s message (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, p. 106). Additionally, textual elements, emojis, and digital filters contribute to the emotional appeal by making the content more expressive and entertaining, enhancing the viewer’s emotional engagement (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, pp. 108-110).

Logos on TikTok

Logos is the last of Aristotle’s elements of persuasion. This appeal refers to the use of logical reasoning and evidence to enhance the persuasiveness of a message (Koszowy et al., 2022, p. 126). When a creator relies on logos, they present objective evidence, facts, and clear explanations to appeal to the audience’s intellect. The goal is to make the argument rational and based on evidence that can be verified (Gagich & Zickel, 2023, pp. 34-35). Central to logos is argumentation, which

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involves presenting and supporting claims through structured reasoning.

According to Gagich and Zickel (2023, pp. 34-35), argumentation can take on various forms that help create a logical and persuasive line of reasoning. One method is comparison, where two similar things are evaluated to highlight the strengths of one over the other. Another is cause and effect argumentation, which shows how one event leads to another. Reasoning is fundamental to effective argumentation; therefore, various types of reasoning are used to organize and strengthen persuasive claims. For instance, deductive reasoning begins with a broad claim and narrows it down to support a more specific point, while inductive reasoning does the opposite by using several specific examples to arrive at a general conclusion. Arguments can also be supported through exemplification, by offering multiple examples that reinforce the claim. In addition, elaboration, explaining the relevance or significance of specific facts, adds depth to an argument. Finally, maintaining a clear and well-organized argument is crucial to avoid repetition or fragmentation. However, Higgins and Walker (2012, p. 198) emphasize that logos appeal to common sense rather than strictly following formal logic. This means that an argument can seem logical and convincing even if it does not follow strict logical proofs. Therefore, logos is not only about ‘reason’ but also about ‘the appearance of rationality’.

Health-related content that integrates data increases trust and provides a rational foundation to reinforce emotional appeals (Koszowy et al., 2022, pp. 145-146). On social media, creators can boost appeals to logos by incorporating statistics, expert opinions, or scientific research (Ju et al., 2021, p. 1543). Strategies for appeal to logos include, according to Higgins and Walker (2012, p. 198), argumentation, logic, justifications, claims, data, evidence, or examples. These appeals can be identified in content by looking for words such as experience, knowledge, practice, theory, research, and specialist (Hill, 2019, p. 94). The multimodality of TikTok allows creators to use visual strategies to appeal to logos in their content. Joffe (2008, pp. 84-86) explains that visuals are often perceived as truthful, as they present a direct portrayal of reality. Unlike verbal or textual claims, visuals tend to be assumed to be true, which provides perceived authority and enhances persuasive power. Still, the cognitive impact of visuals is not uniform; individual responses can vary based on factors such as identity, empathy, and personal experience. Nonetheless, visual content remains a particularly powerful tool for shaping audience perception and reinforcing rational claims.

Joffe (2008, pp. 86-89) also explains that visuals that evoke fear can, in addition to appealing to pathos, appeal to logos if they follow a logical structure and pair a perceived threat with a possible solution. Fear can motivate change when individuals perceive both a risk and a clear, actionable solution. For example, a TikTok video may begin with a striking visual of someone struggling physically with their eating disorder through hospital footage, immediately followed by footage of their current, healthier self with a caption such as: *“This is what recovery can look like.”* The visuals introduce an if-then logic of consequences, while the caption presents a rational solution. This

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strategy not only evokes strong emotions but also appeals to logos.

Besides textual and visual aspects, Mheidly et al. (2024, p. 5) mention that music or voice-overs help set an inviting tone for sharing facts with the audience, making information more approachable and easier to process. This aligns with findings from a recent design-based study by De La Mora Velasco et al. (2021, pp. 12-13), which suggests that background music, when intentionally designed and synchronized with visual and narrative elements, may enhance learning. The study demonstrates that background music can enhance the persuasive power to audiovisual materials by supporting attention, emotional engagement, and receptiveness to the message, particularly when the music is instrumental, emotionally positive, and free of lyrics that might compete with verbal content. The study highlights the importance of integrating background music that aligns in tempo, tone, and intensity with the storytelling and visuals to reduce the cognitive load and enable the audience to concentrate more effectively on the content. Lastly, the use of on-screen graphics, quotes, and lists can further strengthen the persuasive power of a video by visually organizing information and illustrating logical connections (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 5). These multimodal strategies together contribute to a coherent and trustworthy message, particularly when aiming to persuade through reason and evidence.

2.1.3 Interaction between the modes of persuasion

In practice, however, the boundaries between ethos, pathos, and logos are often blurred. These dimensions are deeply interconnected and reinforce one another (Stucki & Sager, 2018, pp. 375-377). For example, a strong appeal to logos (by using reasoning and providing evidence) can enhance ethos, the credibility of the creator. Research by Stucki and Sager (2018, pp. 381-382) indicates that explicitly using evidence to support an argument increases the creator’s trustworthiness. In other words, effectively employing logos can strengthen the appeal to ethos. The study highlights that evidence alone does not necessarily increase the emotional appeal (pathos), meaning logical reasoning must be complemented by other rhetorical strategies to maximize persuasiveness. Moreover, it also works the other way around if a creator lacks credibility (weak ethos), even a well-structured argument with strong evidence may fail to persuade.

Other examples of the interconnection between the different dimensions of persuasion, explained by Stucki and Sager (2018, pp. 381-382), include cases where ethos triggers pathos, as audiences are more likely to experience an emotional connection when they trust the creator. For example, when a content creator shares personal experiences of recovery in a sincere and credible manner, their perceived trustworthiness (ethos) can evoke empathy and emotional resonance (pathos) among viewers who relate to their struggles. Therefore, the credibility of a creator can make emotional engagement more effective. Likewise, this influence can also work in the other direction: when a creator successfully evokes emotions in the audience, it can positively impact their perceived credibility. For example, a creator who shares a vulnerable or emotionally compelling story may be

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seen as more authentic and trustworthy, thereby enhancing their ethos through the emotional (pathos) connection they establish.

Lastly, Stucki and Sager (2018, pp. 381-382) explain that even if logical arguments (logos) do not directly increase the emotional appeal of the content or creator, they can still play a crucial role in persuasion. Logos may indirectly influence the audience’s emotional response if it strengthens the author’s credibility. Think of an argument that alone might not be emotionally moving, for example, “*According to the National Eating Disorders Association, 70% of people who seek treatment show improvement.*” Although the statistic itself may not evoke emotion, citing a credible source makes the creator appear more trustworthy (ethos). As a result, viewers may feel safer, more understood, and more emotionally connected (pathos), even though the emotional impact did not arise from the statistic itself, but from the trust it helped establish. In other words, logical proof can indirectly lead to emotional impact by boosting the creator’s credibility (Stucki & Sager, 2018, pp. 381-382).

Informed by this theoretical model of persuasion, along with the different appeals of persuasion identified in empirical literature on TikTok, this study seeks to understand how content creators enhance the persuasiveness of eating disorder recovery content on the platform. The analysis will focus on how these creators establish credibility to enhance trust (ethos), use emotional engagement to connect with their audience (pathos), and present logical reasoning to promote recovery (logos).

2.2 (Perceived) affordance theory

The second theoretical pillar of this research is informed by platform affordance theory. This theory highlights the possibilities and limits of the technological design of a platform in shaping the production of cultural content (Yu et al., 2024, p. 4). This section begins by defining the concept of TikTok affordances and outlining its theoretical background. It then reviews current literature that explores the key affordances of TikTok. Finally, the concept of platform vernaculars will be discussed to clarify how meaning is generated by TikTok users.

TikTok offers several functionalities, such as short-form videos, hashtags, options to save or repost content, and an algorithm that curates what users see, which all shape user interaction and content visibility. These functionalities represent the platform’s affordances, connecting its design with user behavior by enabling certain types of engagement while limiting others (Kakavand, 2024, p. 39). In the context of TikTok, the platform provides specific functionalities, but it is the way in which users adopt and creatively engage with these tools that shapes the platform’s broader cultural and social role (Kakavand, 2024, p. 39). In the study by Kakavand (2024, pp. 39-42), six affordances are identified which are broadly suitable to all social media platforms: persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability, connectivity, and identifiability, though other studies may use different terms for these affordances. The table below illustrates how each of these affordances is realized on

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TikTok.

Table 1.

Examples of social media affordances on TikTok (based on Kakavand, 2024, pp. 39-42).

Affordances by Kakavand (2024, pp. 39-42)	Example from TikTok
Persistence	Users can save, download, and rewatch videos, allowing content to circulate long after its original posting.
Replicability	Features like the duet function allow users to copy and modify content by reposting another user's video with their own added alongside.
Scalability	Algorithmic curation enables videos to spread rapidly and reach a wide audience.
Searchability	Users can find content through search functions, hashtags, or keywords.
Connectivity	Users interact via comments, duets, likes, and shared interests, facilitating direct and indirect connections.
Identifiability	Users are recognizable through profile names, audio choices, and communication styles that contribute to a distinct platform identity.

While this table highlights general affordances, other scholars have further refined how these affordances relate to persuasion. Yu et al. (2024, p. 4) distinguish between cognitive affordances, those that support learning and understanding, and motivational affordances, which foster emotional expression and social connection. Searchability and persistence, for example, can help users with processing information over time (cognitive), while replicability, connectivity, scalability and identifiability encourage participation and identity expression (motivational). A concrete example of this interplay can be seen in TikTok’s duet feature. By allowing users to add their own video beside an existing video, the duet function supports replicability and connectivity. This not only motivates participation (motivational affordance) but can also clarify or build upon the original message, enhancing comprehension (cognitive affordance). Similarly, the platform’s algorithm-driven scalability increases the likelihood of widespread engagement, enhancing both the reach and impact of persuasive content.

As Wittenberg (2023, p. 209) notes, content that aligns with platform affordances, tends to perform better. On TikTok, messages that feel natural, through format, tone, and interactivity, are often more engaging and persuasive than structured or traditional formats. Hautea et al. (2021, pp. 5-7) support this argument in their study of climate change content on TikTok. They identify visibility

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(linked to searchability), editability (linked to replicability), and association (linked to connectivity) as key features allowing users to be creative and make their content emotionally powerful. For example, shared audio functions as an ‘emotional meme’, creating resonance across otherwise unrelated videos. Zamora-Medina et al. (2023, pp. 220-221) build upon the work of Hautea et al. (2021, pp. 5-7) by showing how political actors on TikTok use these affordances to craft personalized, emotionally charged messages to be persuasive. Their findings align with research by Oh et al. (2019, p. 1601), who demonstrated that interactive features, such as like or share buttons, on anti-smoking websites increased user engagement by fostering a sense of agency and involvement. The presence of such affordances encourages users to process persuasive messages more systematically and emotionally, deepening their impact.

Beyond technical affordances, platform vernaculars play a crucial role in shaping how messages are interpreted. As Keller (2019, p. 2) explains, platform vernaculars emerge from the interaction between affordances and user practice, shaping how content is created and interpreted. They reflect shared communicative styles that feel native to a given platform. On TikTok, vernaculars include trends, sound memes, stylistic patterns, and narrative formats like ‘*What I eat in a day*’ or ‘*If you know you know*’ (Kells et al., 2024, p. 12; Greene & Norling, 2023, p. 4). These formats make persuasive recovery content feel informal, relatable, and integrated in peer culture rather than top-down or medicalized. In fact, Kells et al. (2024, p. 12) suggest that these indirect forms of persuasion may be more effective than clear attempts at influence, because they feel familiar and personal. Vernacular elements such as humor, insider references, or aesthetic choices (e.g. emoji use, trending sounds) also help position content within a particular cultural logic. Trillò (2024, pp. 12-14) points out that meme culture, for instance, allows serious topics to be reframed in ways that are emotionally engaging and socially recognizable. Meanwhile, Low et al. (2023, pp. 4-5) describe how creators adjust their self-presentation based on algorithmic imaginaries; beliefs about how content will be ranked and circulated, suggesting that understanding of the platform is itself a rhetorical tool. Popularity, in this context, becomes both a goal and a signal of trustworthiness. As Abbasi and Liu (2013, p. 444) observe, visibility metrics like likes, views, or shares often function as indicators for credibility in online environments. Therefore, aligning content with both platform affordances and platform vernaculars not only improves reach, but also enhances persuasiveness. Taken together, these factors illustrate how TikTok’s platform dynamics, through affordances and vernaculars, shape the persuasiveness of content. By blending persuasive strategies with strategic use of platform affordances and vernaculars, creators can effectively enhance the persuasiveness of their content.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a rhetorical approach to examine how TikTok recovery content is constructed to be persuasive among viewers with eating disorders and how TikTok-specific functionalities contribute to this persuasiveness. A qualitative approach was essential for exploring the subjective experiences, personal narratives, and emotional connections central to eating disorder recovery content shared on TikTok (Neuman, 2014, p. 494). By focusing on how these narratives are constructed, this research aimed to understand how recovery stories resonate with audiences, particularly in terms of persuasiveness.

In this study, persuasiveness is conceptualized through a rhetorical framework, drawing on Aristotle’s classical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, and Kenneth Burke’s concept of identification (Beason, 1991, p. 332). Persuasiveness refers to the ability of TikTok recovery content to foster credibility, emotional resonance, and cognitive engagement through multimodal rhetorical strategies. This persuasiveness emerges from the interaction between rhetorical strategies, platform-specific affordances, and TikTok vernaculars, which feel familiar and personally relevant to viewers, fostering identification with the content and its creator. Such identification increased the likelihood of persuasion (Beason, 1991, p. 332), particularly in the context of sensitive health topics like eating disorder recovery. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring these recovery journeys, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of personal narratives and emotional connections (Lau et al., 2024, p. 65; Neuman, 2014, p. 494). Personal narratives enable individuals to subjectively experience and give meaning to their daily lives and actions. Qualitative research is ideal for examining the nuances of human experiences, including emotions, thoughts, and motivations, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies (Neuman, 2014, p. 496). By focusing on these subjective elements, qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of how individuals construct and share their recovery journeys, with a particular emphasis on persuasiveness in health communication.

While eating disorder recovery content on TikTok is a global phenomenon, this research focuses specifically on the Dutch context to examine how local cultural norms and health communication practices shape the rhetorical construction of recovery narratives. As discussed in the introduction, this national focus responds to growing concerns in the Netherlands about the rise in eating disorders and the influence of online content on vulnerable audiences (Driuch et al., 2025, para. 3; Van Eeden et al., 2023, p. 2299). By situating this study within the Dutch cultural and media landscape, the research not only responds to an urgent public health issue but also allows for a deeper, context-specific understanding of how recovery is communicated and interpreted on social media. This national context is not only relevant in terms of urgency, but it also helps contextualize the rhetorical environment in which Dutch content creators operate. Drawing on Burke’s dramastatic pentad, act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke, 1969, pp. 55-59), this study conceptualizes ‘scene’ as the Dutch cultural and media context, analyzing how these rhetorical elements interact

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within Dutch TikTok recovery narratives to reveal the complex dynamics shaping meaning and persuasion in this specific setting. Additionally, through the lens of classical rhetoric, ethos, pathos, and logos, it explores how Dutch TikTok creators build credibility (ethos), evoke emotional resonance (pathos), and construct logical arguments (logos) within the Dutch specific context. These recovery narratives are influenced both by persuasive strategies and the unique communicative features of the TikTok platform. Understanding this rhetorical context is essential to analyzing how persuasiveness is constructed in Dutch recovery content.

3.2 Sampling

To identify relevant empirical material, a criterion-based sampling method was used to collect TikTok posts. Such a sampling method ensured that the selected content was representative of the social phenomenon under investigation and appropriate for answering the research question (Treadwell & Davis, 2024, p. 224). The content for analysis was identified by searching for the hashtag #eetstoornisherstel [Dutch for eating disorder recovery] on TikTok’s discovery page (Lau et al., 2024, p. 64). This hashtag was chosen because it captures both the illness (eetstoornis) and the focus on the recovery process (herstel). The use of a Dutch hashtag ensured that the posts themselves were also in Dutch, which is required for the scope of this study. To align with this focus, only Dutch-language content was included, allowing for cultural and linguistic consistency in the analysis of local recovery narratives. This language-specific focus provided a more contextualized interpretation of the rhetorical strategies used in recovery content. Additional exclusion criteria were applied: content created by individuals without lived experience of an eating disorder, and videos lacking spoken words or visible text were excluded. These criteria ensured that the analysis centered on persuasive recovery narratives with verbal and/or textual elements.

Other popular hashtags related to this topic include #eetstoornis [eating disorder], #hulpbijheetstoornissen [help with eating disorders], and #eetstoornishersteltips [eating disorder recovery tips]. However, these hashtags do not fully reflect the scope of the research interest. Moreover, most videos using these hashtags also included #eetstoornisherstel, which emerged as the most comprehensive and representative tag making #eetstoornisherstel the most suitable hashtag for data collection. When searching for the hashtag on TikTok, a total of 2,227 videos were generated as of March 12, 2025 (researcher’s own search on TikTok). TikTok’s algorithm suggests videos that it predicts will resonate with the hashtag, even if they don’t directly include them in the caption, based on, among other things, content similarity (TikTok Help Center, n.d.). The first 84 videos displayed under the hashtag were downloaded on a USB stick for the initial data collection. However, to ensure the relevance and consistency of the sample, 20 videos were excluded during the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 64 videos (See Appendix C for an overview of the analyzed TikTok videos). These exclusions were based on several criteria: some videos did not specifically address eating disorder recovery, others were not created by individuals with lived experience, and a few were

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spoken in English rather than Dutch, which fell outside the linguistic scope of this research. In addition, videos that lacked any narrative structure or on-screen text were excluded, as they offered insufficient rhetorical or thematic material for analysis. After these exclusions, the final dataset consisted of 64 videos that met the study’s focus on persuasive, Dutch-language recovery content shared by individuals with personal experience. The 64 videos ranged from 8 seconds to 10 minutes in length. This sample size supports thematic saturation while remaining feasible for in-depth qualitative analysis. It also aligns with the methodological guidelines for thesis research at EUR, which recommend analyzing 30 to 40 videos of 3 to 5 minutes in length. Since TikTok videos are, on average, shorter than this, the present study included a larger number of videos to ensure sufficient data coverage.

According to the TikTok Help Center, there are several factors that may influence the order of TikTok content when searching for a specific hashtag, including user interactions, content information and user information (TikTok Help Center, n.d.). For the data collection, a new TikTok account was created to minimize researcher bias due to platform interactions, ensuring content was selected without influence from previous usage. After selecting the videos, they were saved to prevent loss due to potential deletions. Therefore, videos were only downloaded and included in the research if their privacy settings allowed for downloading. Some videos had restricted settings, preventing download, in which case those videos were not included in the analysis. After downloading the videos themselves, the engagement metrics, including likes, comments, saves, shares, the use of music, and the caption, were recorded in an Excel file for each video. The username of each TikTok account was recorded in the Excel file and replaced with a number (e.g., Creator 1, Creator 2) to identify recurring creators while maintaining anonymity. This approach ensured that the collected data was well-organized and easily accessible for analysis, enabling a comprehensive review of user engagement and content interaction. This study adhered to ethical research guidelines to protect the privacy of content creators: no identifying information was included in the report, and only publicly available videos were used for analysis.

3.3 Data analysis

To analyze the selected TikTok content, a rhetorical analysis was employed. This means that the data was studied by focusing on elements that communicate ethos, pathos, and logos. However, given the platform’s multimodality and the intent to include engagement metrics, the focus on rhetorical elements was expanded to include attention to platform-specific functionalities and vernaculars. To ensure a systematic approach to the analysis, each video was watched multiple times. During each round of viewing, attention focused on a specific rhetorical element as outlined in the theory chapter (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 113). These aspects were documented in a coding frame created in Excel (see Appendix A), which included sections for analyzing narrative and multimodal elements of ethos, pathos, and logos, platform-specific affordances and vernaculars, comparative

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notes, and engagement metrics. Repeated viewings allowed for identification of patterns that revealed how eating disorder recovery content was constructed to persuade. This deductive approach was used when specifically looking for predefined categories derived from existing literature on persuasive communication (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 113).

This was supplemented by an inductive analysis to incorporate relevant patterns that emerged from the data during the analysis of the TikTok videos (Lai & To, 2015, p. 140). This led to the identification of concepts not covered by existing literature but that appeared consistently across multiple videos, such as community-building practices (e.g., creators directly addressing followers or responding to comments), message repetition, self-reassurance (i.e. where creators use affirming statements directed both at themselves and the viewer), and irony, in which creators critique disordered thoughts or diet culture using sarcasm. This dual approach ensured a detailed analysis of how eating disorder recovery content on TikTok conveys persuasive strategies, combining deductive and inductive coding strategies for a thorough exploration. Although only one researcher conducted the coding, steps were taken to make the analysis as careful and reliable as possible. This included writing notes during the process, viewing the videos multiple times, and describing the persuasive aspects of the content in detail.

3.3.1 Coding framework

The coding framework was developed based on literature concerning the persuasive strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as platform affordances and vernaculars (see Appendix B). The framework includes the categories ethos narrative, ethos multimodal, pathos narrative, pathos multimodal, logos narrative, logos multimodal, and platform affordances and vernaculars. Additionally, space was provided for (comparative) analytical notes that emerged during the coding process. Rather than functioning as a strict coding scheme, the framework served as a guiding lens to support a flexible yet systematic analysis of rhetorical and platform-specific features across the selected TikTok videos. The coding framework is designed to capture the key concepts deriving from the literature that reflect the modes of persuasion, which are central to understanding how creators construct their content to be persuasive.

For the concept of ethos, the analysis was guided by five character traits identified in the literature: similitude, deference, self-criticism, expertise, and the inclination to succeed (Beason, 1991, pp. 326-327; Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197). Additionally, aspects such as the use of everyday language, humor, personal anecdotes, and casual visual presentation, highlighted by Mheidly et al. (2024, pp. 6-7), were incorporated. These traits and features helped to identify how creators established credibility and trustworthiness with their audience. During the analysis, moments were noted in which creators demonstrated qualities like similarity to the viewer, knowledge, experience, respect, politeness, honesty, or ambition to recover. For pathos, the framework drew on Murthy and Ghosal's (2014, p. 254) and Konat et al.'s (2024, pp. 375-376) definitions of emotional

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appeals. These include the use of metaphors, personal stories, humor, emotion-eliciting and sensory language, explicit naming emotions, and vivid imagery. These elements were identified and interpreted in context to capture the emotional appeals. Logos was examined by logical reasoning and the use of evidence or argumentation. The analysis focused on how creators supported their claims through comparisons, cause and effect reasoning, exemplification, logic, justifications, claims, data, expert opinions, statistics, and scientific research (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 198; Ju et al., 2021, p. 1543). Indicators of logos included the use of percentages, references to research, scientists, theories, clear reasoning, structured arguments, and credible sources. Each video was viewed multiple times, focusing on different rhetorical aspects in each round. Observations were recorded in an Excel sheet to organize insights and facilitate comparison. This flexible approach enabled a detailed interpretation of how rhetorical strategies were applied across different videos.

Additionally, the analysis incorporated multimodal and platform-specific features, including TikTok’s affordances and vernaculars. Drawing on the difference between cognitive and motivational affordances explained by Yu et al. (2023, p. 4), the analysis considered how platform features such as hashtags, green screen effects, captions, likes, shares, comments, and trending sounds contributed to the persuasive impact of the content. Cognitive affordances supported coherence and authenticity, while motivational affordances enhance reach and engagement. Functions that reflect cognitive affordances include features like green screen effects, captions, hashtags, and duets. These features facilitate narrative coherence, emotional relatability, and expressions of authenticity, key elements in fostering persuasiveness. Motivational affordances included elements such as likes, shares, comments, saves, reposting, and the use of trending sounds, features that support users’ emotional and social needs, potentially enhancing reach through algorithmic curation. This framework offered a structured yet flexible way to examine how TikTok’s affordances are used in recovery content, providing insight into how creators adapt their messages to align with the platform’s technical possibilities and to enhance emotional resonance, credibility, and visibility. The inclusion of these affordances as analytical codes complemented the analysis of vernacular strategies and helped outline how persuasive messaging is embedded in both the multimodal style and interaction patterns of TikTok videos.

Before conducting the full analysis, a pilot test was conducted on five TikTok videos to evaluate the clarity, consistency, and practicality of the analytical approach. This exploratory phase helped optimize the coding framework and clarify how rhetorical strategies are represented across different modalities (Neuman, 2014, pp. 211-219). Conducting a pilot phase improved both the overall consistency and depth of the analysis by ensuring that the framework captured a broad range of persuasive techniques used in eating disorder recovery content (Neuman, 2014, p. 215). Importantly, the pilot also served as a test of the methodological process, allowing for reflection on whether the analytical approach was feasible, adaptable, and sufficiently detailed to support a meaningful interpretation of the content. This progressive process aligns with qualitative research

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standards emphasizing reflexivity and ongoing refinement throughout the research (Neuman, 2014, pp. 211-219).

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of a rhetorical analysis of 64 TikTok videos thematically centered on eating disorder recovery. Using the framework of ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as the concept of platform affordances and vernaculars, this study explores how creators construct persuasive recovery narratives on TikTok, a highly multimodal and interactive platform. The analysis aim is to identify recurring rhetorical patterns across the selected data. Although the original videos were all in Dutch, all quotes in this chapter and throughout the thesis are translated into English for clarity and accessibility.

4.1 Building credibility through lived experience and relatability (ethos)

Across the dataset, ethos was a key rhetorical mode used by creators to construct themselves as trustworthy, relatable, and emotionally credible narrators. Ethos was performed through a range of subtle linguistic, visual, and interactional strategies that reflected the platform’s aesthetics of authenticity and intimacy.

4.1.1 Narrative strategies

A common narrative pattern was the construction of a personal and emotionally intimate relationship with the viewer. Many creators framed their videos as if they were speaking in a one-on-one conversation with the viewer, crafting a narrative voice that felt direct, familiar, and emotionally resonant. This was often marked by using second-person pronouns (‘you’) and affectionate terms (‘darling’), or casual titles like ‘*Just having a nice chat with you all*’ (Video 15). The repeated use of ‘you’ was notable for fostering a sense of similitude (Cheney, 1983, p. 149). Through these linguistic choices, creators positioned the viewer as an active participant in the narrative rather than a distant observer. Moreover, creators frequently revealed intimate or irrational thoughts related to their eating disorder experiences, often employing self-criticism through irony or sarcasm to emphasize their absurdity (Beason, 1991, pp. 335-337). For instance, one creator stated: ‘*Did you know that not eating is totally not a skill? Can you imagine that on your resume underneath ‘skill’ it says not eating?*’ (Video 20). This use of humor and self-criticism appeared commonly in the videos.

Narratives frequently centered around insider knowledge, with creators presenting their experience and expertise to foster trust (Beason, 1991, pp. 337-338). Many positioned themselves as recovered individuals addressing viewers currently struggling with statements such as ‘*You should take yourself seriously*’ (Video 4). This blend of empathy and guidance appeared regularly in the videos, creating the idea that the creator knows what the viewer is thinking. Repetition was commonly used as a rhetorical device; several creators restated their main message at the end of their videos to emphasize key points. Additionally, phrases like ‘*that’s okay*’ were often employed, typically conveying tones of self-reassurance and encouragement. These expressions combined self-address with outreach and frequently indicated a hopeful stance toward recovery, reflecting an

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inclination to succeed (Beason, 1991, pp. 338-340). Ethos was also constructed through precise, behaviorally grounded advice. While assuming this insider position, creators frequently used highly specific examples that reflected detailed lived experience. In Video 33, for example, the creator tells the viewer to delete all the ‘body check videos’ from their camera roll. This is not generic encouragement, but a specific, recognizable action drawn from lived experience, indicating expertise (Beason, 1991, pp. 326-327). The combination of verbal instruction and visual demonstration made these moments powerful and credible.

Another common narrative element observed was the assumption of a shared experience. Creators frequently spoke as though the viewer also had an eating disorder, using direct and empathetic language that presumed a shared point of reference. For instance, one creator stated, ‘*But I know the eating disorder is going to pull you down*’ (Video 42), while another opened with, ‘Darling did I understand that you think that your eating disorder is fake?’ (Video 53). These statements positioned the viewer not as a distant observer, but as an insider, someone embedded in the same emotional and psychological landscape. This presumption of shared experience conveyed a sense of similitude, suggesting a connection between creator and viewer (Beason, 1991, pp. 326-327; Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197). In contrast, some videos focused more explicitly on the creator’s personal narrative, using first-person reflection to describe their recovery process. These videos generally did not assume anything about the viewer, instead presenting individual stories of struggle, absurdity, and change. Several creators alternated between these two approaches across different videos, addressing the viewer directly in some posts while focusing solely on their own story in others, suggesting a flexible use of narrative modes depending on the message or context.

Most videos were directed either toward the creators themselves (as self-reflection) or toward viewers presumed to be in recovery. Only a small number of videos specifically addressed people who know someone with an eating disorder (Video 4, 63, 21, 58, 74). These videos shifted the narrative perspective from first-person experience to second-person support. Rather than personal updates or emotional disclosures, they focused on practical advice and insights for friends, family members, or partners trying to support someone in recovery. For example, Video 63 states, ‘*Do you know someone who is struggling with an eating disorder? Then keep watching this video.*’ These videos expanded the imagined audience and positioned the creator’s authority as both personal and informative.

4.1.2 Multimodal strategies

TikTok’s platform-specific features enabled creators to combine verbal, visual, and interactional elements to build a connection with viewers. Recurring multimodal techniques were the use of eye contact, gaze, and camera positioning to simulate direct interaction. Many creators looked straight into the camera while speaking, visually mimicking a face-to-face, one-on-one conversation. This embodied performance was often accompanied by affectionate or inclusive language, such as

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second-person pronouns (‘you’), nicknames like ‘*darling*’, or informal phrases like ‘*Just having a nice chat with you all*’ (video 15). The combination of visual address and intimate language created the impression of a shared moment, making viewers feel seen, directly addressed, and emotionally involved. Informal clothing, setting, and posture often reinforced this sense of closeness (McCashin & Murphy, 2022, pp. 285-302). Instead of presenting a polished version of themselves, creators embraced a sense of realness that aligned with TikTok’s broader aesthetic of authenticity.

Videos often featured minimal editing. Most videos, especially those focusing on personal narratives, were filmed in single frame with only slight cuts. Creators typically filmed themselves in familiar personal spaces like bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms, which contributed to a sense of casual intimacy. The videos featured limited post-production, sometimes consisting of a line of text on screen to clarify the topic or correct a spoken statement. The simplicity of the visual setup mirrored the unpolished message and an overall impression of emotional openness. Background music was usually soft and without lyrics to avoid distraction. When lyrics were present, they were theoretically aligned with the video’s message, supporting the emotional tone. This subtle integration of sound supported the spoken content without overshadowing it.

Another key strategy observed in the videos was the presumption of continuity. Creators sometimes referenced earlier videos (‘*Here I am again*’, e.g., Videos 22, 23, 32, 62, 78), suggesting an ongoing relationship with the viewer. Even when encountered as the first video, the language often implied familiarity and continuity. This positioned the viewer as someone already familiar with the creator. This sense of continuity was further reinforced by creators who presented their content as part of a named series. For example, one creator titled her video series ‘Together’, highlighting the idea of recovery as a collective journey rather than an isolated struggle. The series name was often shown in captions or on-screen text, inviting viewers to follow multiple posts as a part of a larger narrative. This approach contributed to a consistent presence of the creator within the viewer’s feed. Furthermore, creators navigated the tension between personal storytelling and public exposure. Although TikTok’s algorithm circulates content widely, most creators framed their videos as if speaking to a very specific, imagined audience: ‘the insider’. This selective address offered strong recognition to some viewers while potentially excluding others. Yet it also made the connection feel personal and emotionally resonant, even on a mass platform. Several creators also included trigger warnings in their videos, often presented as on-screen text, a brief verbal disclaimer, or written in the caption of the video. These warnings can be seen as rhetorical acts of deference (Beason, 1991, pp. 333-335).

Some creators incorporated TikTok-specific vernaculars and editing practices to align with the platform’s cultural logic. For example, some videos opened with a short, dramatic insert from another TikTok (Video 38 and 59), such as a clip of someone hitting a baseball toward the camera (Video 38), creating a moment of visual impact before the creator’s own message continued. This

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type of opening is often used on TikTok to grab attention in the first seconds, sometimes referred to as ‘Brazilian marketing’. In addition to visual cues, creators also used TikTok-specific language, such as the phrase *‘Your thinking mind will shut off’* (Video 29 and 70), referencing a popular Dutch meme (Trillò, 2024, pp. 12-14). These uses of familiar vernacular reinforced the creator’s ethos by signaling insider status, cultural awareness, and relevance to their intended audience.

Across the dataset, ethos was most often constructed through appeals to relatability and authenticity. Creators established credibility not through formal authority or expertise, but by drawing on lived experience, emotional openness, and recognizable behaviors or thoughts. This form of ethos emerged as both individual and relational: grounded in vulnerability, humor, and the suggestion of shared understanding between creator and viewer.

4.2 Connecting through shared emotional experience (pathos)

Across the dataset, the emotional appeal was a central rhetorical strategy used by creators to foster connection and emotional resonance. Pathos was embedded not only in what creators said, but also in how they said it. A carefully coordinated use of multimodal elements, such as music, tone of voice, facial expression, camera perspective, and on-screen text, produced brief but engaging emotional experiences that resonated strongly with viewers.

4.2.1 Narrative strategies

A recurring narrative strategy to appeal to emotions was gentle self-talk, often directed simultaneously at the creator and the viewer. Phrases like *‘that’s okay’* were softly repeated after moments of vulnerability or personal struggle, functioning as emotional reassurance. These expressions blurred the boundary between internal reflection and external encouragement, creating a sense of shared emotional space. The layering of calm voice, direct eye contact, and soft background sounds heightened the sense of empathy and care. In one video, a creator read aloud from a diary she kept during her eating disorder (Video 11), sharing her fears as well as moments of hope and self-encouragement. After reading for one minute and twenty-five seconds, she smiled and, with a look of relief, said: *‘Today I celebrate two years of recovery’*. This transition underscored the emotional distance between past and present, while inviting viewers to feel the pain and confusion of that earlier time. In doing so, it deepened emotional resonance and fostered recognition (Fan & Lederman, 2017, pp. 67-68).

A narrative strategy observed in several videos was the explicit naming of emotions. This involved creators verbally identifying how they felt during or about a particular experience. For example, in Video 8, the creator says, *‘This is something I find scary’*, before discussing a personal experience related to recovery. This direct expression of emotion highlights an affectively charged moment and framed the content as personally significant. As Richings et al. (2021, pp. 38-42) note,

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such explicit naming of emotions can function as a way to structure emotional meaning. In the context of these videos, this technique made the narrative more transparent and may serve to guide the viewer's interpretation of the content. Whereas some creators explicitly named their emotions to foster direct emotional resonance, others employed a contrasting approach: humor. Humor was used to introduce playfulness while addressing emotionally difficult or sensitive topics. In Video 20, for instance, the creator jokingly states that *‘Not eating isn’t on your CV’*, before highlighting other qualities that are more meaningful in life. This lighthearted framing allowed her to indirectly critique harmful thought patterns while maintaining a supportive tone. Such playful commentary made the topic more approachable and helped reframe recovery in terms of self-worth and personal strengths (Murthy and Ghosal, 2014, p. 254). Following humor, creators also used memes to engage viewers emotionally. For example, Videos 22, 29, and 32 incorporated TikTok-specific vernaculars referencing popular Dutch memes (e.g. *‘Your thinking mind will shut off’*) (Trillò, 2024, pp. 12-14). Besides reinforcing the creator’s ethos, these familiar references also functioned as a humorous way to connect with the audience.

One creator effectively expanded her appeal by listing a series of specific and recognizable examples to disprove the internalized belief that one is ‘making up’ their eating disorder. Rather than offering a single anecdote, she described seven distinct behaviors and thought patterns, such as *‘I know what you will be doing; watching videos all day long about food, recipes, 10K calorie challenges, whatever.’* These vivid depictions increased the likelihood that viewers would recognize themselves in her words, enhancing both relatability and emotional resonance. By using concrete language and referencing familiar digital habits, she enabled viewers to imaginatively enter the described experience. This strategy not only validated diverse expressions of disordered behavior but also reassured viewers that their struggles were real and shared, deepening both the rhetorical appeal of pathos and the creator's ethos as a credible insider (Fan & Lederman, 2017, pp. 67-68).

4.2.2 Multimodal strategies

Emotional resonance was often reinforced through subtle visual elements. Creators used informal settings, such as bedrooms, kitchens, or living rooms, to signal vulnerability and openness. Many videos also included small, emotionally expressive visual cues like emojis in captions or on-screen text. For example, the white heart emoji frequently conveyed support, the plaster emoji referenced recovery or repair, and the kiss emoji suggested warmth and closeness. These symbols added an affective layer to the communication, making messages feel more personal and emotionally resonant, thereby strengthening the connection with the audience. In addition to these symbolic cues, creators used visual content that directly depicted moments of emotional significance. A recurring motif was recovery eating, which often functioned as a visual strategy for pathos (Joffe, 2008, pp. 84-86). Several creators filmed themselves eating meals, sometimes referred to as ‘fear foods’, and did so with visible joy, pride, or relief. These moments generally appeared casual rather than performative, as many videos were informal vlogs with creators simply setting up the camera and

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recording spontaneously. Such scenes reinforced the message that recovery can be positive and pleasurable.

Most of the videos in the analysis did not feature (background) music; however, those that did used it strategically to enhance emotional meaning (De La Mora Velasco et al., 2021, pp. 12-13). In many cases, background tracks were slow or sad songs, often instrumental or with lyrics carefully selected to match the video’s tone. For example, in Video 72, the creator includes the song ‘*Get you the moon*’ by Kina. The lyrics: ‘*You gave me a shoulder when I needed it. You showed me love when I wasn’t feeling it. You helped me fight when I was giving in.*’ play softly as the creator shares how their eating disorder developed. The music serves as an emotional pillar, deepening the atmosphere of sadness and empathy. In contrast, Video 35 uses the song ‘*Pumped up kicks*’ by Foster the People to underscore a lighter, celebratory tone, as the creator shares a recovery win: eating chips from a gas station.

Another multimodal trend was the use of popular audio formats layered with custom text. For instance, on TikTok, the viral audio clip by Kari’s ‘*What an odd thing to say*’, is frequently used to add text-based dialogues, with the audio punctuating or responding to the written statements. In Video 74, the on-screen text reads: P1: ‘*I sometimes find it scary to eat in public. I am recovering from an eating disorder.*’ P2: ‘*Heh, you are not that thin right?*’. The lyrics in the audio clip then responds to the second on-screen statement, functioning as a reply to the preceding statement by saying, ‘*What an odd thing to say*’. This technique leverages TikTok’s audiovisual affordances, combining sound and visuals to capture attention and engage viewers through layered, multimodal meaning making. It dramatizes social dynamics and evokes empathetic reactions.

Many creators used the caption space not only to summarize their message but also to add an emotive, humorous, or motivational touch that resonated with viewers. These captions often included emojis (such as white hearts, kisses, stars, or a plaster) that added nonverbal emotional cues, signaling care, hope, and comfort. For example, several captions closed with messages like ‘*small request from me darlings!!!*’ or ‘*Good Morning darlings!!*’, using affectionate language to establish warmth and relatability. Captions also served as calls to action, encouraging viewers to engage via comments or direct messages. This interactional framing turned viewers into participants. Phrases like ‘*If you have any questions, let me know in the comments*’ (Video 23), or ‘*How was your day?*’ (Video 22 and 62) positioned the video as part of a broader, ongoing conversation. Such uses of TikTok’s comment affordances reinforced a sense of community and shared experience, key features of persuasive recovery content.

Creator 8, who appeared multiple times in the dataset, developed a personal vernacular that featured consistently across her videos. She regularly used playful, invented terms such as ‘*Tikkerdetaktoktik*’ (referring to TikTok) (e.g., Videos 23, 28, 29, 42, and 60) or ‘*funnerdefunfunfun*’. These recurring phrases contributed to a recognizable persona or micro-brand

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that was light-hearted, humorous, and emotionally resonant, making the creator identifiable (Kakavand, 2024, pp. 39-42). They often served to soften serious content or humanize the recovery process, making the sensitive topic more approachable (Hendry, 2020, p. 7). Building on this use of language to create emotional resonance and relatability, some creators also used captions to promote intuitive eating and body trust. In one video, a creator framed her hunger in a positive and affirming way through the caption: *‘Today I had a big appetite, so we listen to that too’* (Video 24). This casual but powerful phrasing normalized appetite and presented intuitive eating as something joyful and self-respecting. By using everyday language and a warm, affirming tone, the caption contributed to an emotionally safe atmosphere, encouraging viewers to adopt a better relationship with their own hunger cues. This kind of framing subtly challenged diet culture and underscored recovery as a process of self-trust and acceptance.

Together, these emotional strategies made emotion feel immediate and shared. Whether through humor, reassurance, joy, or sadness, creators performed their emotions in ways that drew viewers in not only cognitively but also affectively. By employing TikTok’s unique platform affordances and vernaculars, such as short-form video, sound clips, text overlays, and visual effects, these videos employed multimodal techniques to amplify pathos, making the emotional appeal deeply persuasive.

4.3 Using logic and structure to support recovery narratives (logos)

Within the dataset, logical appeals were an important, though less prominent, rhetorical strategy compared to ethos and pathos. Creators employed logos primarily to explain, rationalize, or contextualize their recovery processes, often combining factual framing with personal insight to make their narratives more persuasive and credible.

4.3.1 Narrative strategies

Many creators structured their videos around clear, resonant explanations of recovery-related experiences, such as outlining the physical or psychological consequences of disordered eating, describing therapeutic approaches, or detailing steps taken toward recovery. These explanations often took the form of inductive reasoning, step-by-step reflection, or cause and effect explanations (Gagich and Zickel, 2023, pp. 34-35). For instance, in Video 46, the creator explains: *‘In my eating disorder I did not feel good, but I was really good at suppressing that by using my eating disorder as coping. But okay now I don’t use those things to cope anymore, which means that everything is very palpable. And then I realized, oh my God it is actually going well with me because I felt everything and that is very healthy. Well, that is very nice but it still also brings challenges.’* This structured reflection framed recovery as a rational, healthy process, even when it involved emotional discomfort. The clarity of the message gave the emotional experience cognitive structure, enhancing its persuasive power.

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A notable narrative strategy observed in the dataset is exemplification, where creators support their recovery narratives by providing multiple specific examples that illustrate broader claims or concepts (Gagich and Zickel, 2023, pp. 34-35). Rather than relying on a single anecdote, several creators offer a series of recognizable behaviors, thought patterns, or experiences related to eating disorder recovery. For example, one creator lists seven distinct forms of disordered thinking, such as spending extensive time watching food-related videos online, which collectively help to validate and normalize various expressions of the disorder. By doing so, exemplification increases the likelihood that a wider audience will identify with the content, enhancing both the clarity and credibility of the message. This strategy not only strengthens the logical structure of the argument but also bridges personal insight with shared experience, making recovery narratives more accessible and persuasive.

Notably, none of the creators explicitly cited external sources or presented verifiable facts during their videos. Instead, the appeal to logos was often implicit and grounded in personal experience, sometimes combined with professional expertise (e.g., Video 2). In this specific case, the creator’s dual perspective reinforced the logical appeal of the message, suggesting that her insights were not only rooted in lived experience but also informed by clinical practice. Several creators mentioned consulting psychiatrists, therapists, or other healthcare professionals, which functioned as a justification (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 198) and added credibility (e.g., Video 40). This positioning implied that the information they shared was informed by expert advice, even though specific studies or sources were not referenced. By drawing on this professional knowledge, creators implicitly aligned their personal stories with broader professional insight, strengthening the logical foundation of their recovery narratives while maintaining an intimate and relatable tone.

A logical approach observed in the dataset was the clarification of common misconceptions about eating disorders. Several creators directly addressed and corrected inaccurate beliefs by offering clear, structured argumentations. A recurring theme was the rejection of the idea that eating disorders are only valid when someone is visibly underweight (Video 12 and 57). In multiple videos, creators emphasized that the severity or legitimacy of an eating disorder cannot be measured solely by body size. These statements about misconceptions framed recovery discourse in rational terms, using cause and effect logic to dismantle harmful assumptions. This strategy offered viewers cognitive tools to reassess their own or others’ experiences, making the message more inclusive and reinforcing the credibility of the creator as someone who not only speaks from experience but from considered understanding.

4.3.2 Multimodal strategies

Visuals were often used to reinforce the logical appeal of the creators’ messages by providing direct, observable evidence of what was being discussed. Rather than simply describing their recovery behaviors, many creators showed them, visually aligning their actions with their verbal claims (Joffe, 2008, pp. 84-86). For instance, when discussing the importance of eating regularly or

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facing ‘fear foods’, creators often filmed themselves eating the foods they referenced. Similarly, if they spoke about movement or self-care practices, such as going for a walk or taking a break, the video frequently included footage of them performing those activities in real time. These visual demonstrations served as practical evidence supporting the reasoning behind their advice or reflections. In doing so, creators enhanced the clarity, credibility, and persuasiveness of their messages, allowing viewers to see recovery not only as an idea but as something tangible and achievable.

A few creators filmed their videos from within the eating disorder clinics where they were undergoing treatment (e.g. Video 1 and 5). These settings were visually recognizable through institutional features such as white walls, shared living spaces, or were explicitly mentioned in their story. Filming from within the clinic subtly reinforced the logical appeal of their narratives by providing tangible evidence of formal recovery efforts. The clinical background added credibility to their reflections and emphasized that their experiences were part of a structured, medically supervised process. This visual context strengthened the perceived reliability of their message, suggesting that their advice and insights were grounded in both personal recovery and professional care.

On TikTok, creators leveraged the platform’s affordances to enhance the clarity and impact of their logical appeals. Text overlays were primarily used to correct something said in the video, served as subtitles, or clarify key points. These overlays reinforced the perceived reliability of the message by acknowledging moments of imprecision and offering immediate clarification (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 5). Additionally, voiceovers combined with illustrative footage allowed creators to explain concepts in a way that was both accessible and engaging. Overall, logos in these recovery narratives functioned to support and strengthen the emotional and ethical appeals, providing viewers with concrete reasons and arguments that framed recovery as a logical, necessary, and achievable process. This integration of rationality and emotion contributed to a persuasive multimodal rhetoric that resonated both cognitively and affectively.

4.4 Content and engagement overview

While this study primarily focused on the rhetorical strategies (ethos, pathos, and logos) in TikTok recovery content, a broader overview of content formats, creators, and engagement patterns offers additional insight into how these messages circulate. This section briefly highlights recurring structures, platform vernaculars, and observed trends in visibility and interaction, including gender distribution, the use of familiar TikTok formats, and affordances related to engagement. These descriptive patterns provide important context for understanding how persuasive recovery content reaches and resonates with audiences on TikTok.

4.4.1 Authorial context

While the majority of videos in the dataset were created by men or women, only three videos featured men sharing their experiences with eating disorders. These male-authored videos generally followed similar narrative and emotional structures as those made by women, but their presence was notably limited, suggesting a gender imbalance in this particular segment of TikTok recovery content. This limited male representation may also affect the persuasive potential of the content. When viewers do not see their own gendered experiences reflected, it may become more difficult for them to identify with the message, potentially reducing persuasiveness (Rutten & Soetaert, 2014, p. 340).

While most videos were created by individuals sharing personal experiences, a few were produced by the media organization NPO Zapp to promote series about eating disorder recovery. These videos, posted either from NPO’s official TikTok account or the personal accounts of featured individuals, had higher production quality but often imitated the informal tone of user-generated content. Nevertheless, they tended to feel less authentic and emotionally immediate. Unlike the spontaneous tone of individual creators, these organizational videos rarely established direct viewer connection. Their presence in the dataset highlights how institutional actors also participate in TikTok’s recovery discourse and strategically adapt to TikTok’s vernaculars to increase reach and relatability.

4.4.2 Video formats shaped by TikTok’s affordances and vernaculars

TikTok’s platform affordances, such as flexible sound tools, camera features, and text overlay options, enable creators to produce a wide range of video styles (Kakavand, 2024, p. 39). Reflecting this, the dataset included a mix of spoken and unspoken video formats. Many creators addressed the viewer directly through selfie-style videos, often framed as personal monologues or conversations (e.g. Video 15, 19, 44, and 47). In contrast, other videos relied more heavily on visuals, text overlays, and music to convey their message, without the creator speaking aloud (e.g. Video 3, 26, 73, and 74). These silent or sound-driven videos often used voiceovers, popular audio clips, or background music with symbolic meaning to enhance emotional or narrative depth. This variation in format highlights the flexibility of TikTok’s platform affordances and the diverse ways creators construct persuasive recovery content.

Some videos were very short, while others were longer. The longer videos (ranging from one to ten minutes) were typically talking videos in which the creator shared their experiences or offered tips about recovery. The shorter videos (10 seconds to one minute) reflected a key element of TikTok’s vernacular: quick, impactful messaging tailored to the platform’s fast-paced content culture (Keller, 2019, p. 2). These brief clips often delivered compact, motivational reminders or instructions, featuring a single clear message, such as encouraging viewers to delete ‘body check’ videos from their phone (Video 33) or reminding them not to compensate for eating more during

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Christmas dinner (Video 42). Despite their brevity, these clips were emotionally and rhetorically effective, often delivered with direct eye contact, informal language, and a tone best described as a ‘don’t be ridiculous’ attitude. This rhetorical approach worked as a form of empathic confrontation: honest and straightforward, without judgement, yet without downplaying the seriousness of the issue. These short-form videos were designed to interrupt disordered thinking and insert a moment of recovery-oriented clarity into the viewer’s TikTok experience.

A prevalent format on TikTok is the ‘*What I eat in a day*’, where creators document their meals in short, segmented clips (Video 5, 10, 22, 24, 32, 62, 64, 82, and 83). Although not exclusive to eating disorder recovery content, this format is deeply embedded in TikTok’s vernacular (Kells et al., 2024, p. 12), and serves as an accessible way to share recovery experiences. These videos often feature everyday food choices, sometimes including ‘fear foods’, accompanied by voice-overs or music. Another format embedded in TikTok’s vernacular involves the creative use of popular TikTok audio clips combined with customized on-screen text, an approach enabled by the platform’s affordances (e.g. Video 74). These videos followed a structure in which creators staged brief dialogues through on-screen texts, while the audio served as a punchline or reaction, creating emotionally effective and concise messages that align with platform trends. Finally, the ‘Brazilian marketing’ technique, marked by a sudden, attention-grabbing clip before shifting to the creator’s message, leverages irony, meme culture, and playful editing to hook viewers quickly (Video 38 and 59). By adopting these familiar vernaculars, creators signal cultural fluency and embed recovery narratives within TikTok’s multimodal, engaging vernacular, enhancing both visibility and emotional impact (Kells et al., 2024, p. 12).

4.4.3 Engagement patterns

Some creators also showed awareness of how their content might be received or moderated on TikTok (Low et al., 2025, pp. 2341-2343). For example, one creator encouraged viewers to speed up the video if they wanted to (Video 23), acknowledging short attention spans and the fast-paced nature of TikTok browsing. Others used strategic adaptations to avoid content removal or restriction, such as replacing letters in sensitive words with symbols (e.g., using ‘\$’ for the ‘S’ in ‘eating disorder’) to avoid TikTok’s automatic moderation filters (Video 72). These linguistic adjustments reflect an awareness of how platform logics shape content visibility. Such small modifications indicate that creators actively tailor their content to remain visible, indirectly reinforcing their credibility by maximizing their message’s reach. Similarly, Video 76, posted by NPO ZAPP, a public broadcaster, received high like, share and save counts despite receiving no comments. However, they disabled the commenting function, limiting direct interaction. While this limits community interaction, it may reflect an intentional choice to avoid triggering discussions, maintain control over the content space, or protect the emotional safety of the man featured in the video.

Hashtags were widely used in captions, both for visibility (e.g., #voorejoupagina, #fyp) and to

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signal content categories (#eetstoornisherstel, #mentalhealthawareness) or tone (#recoveryispossible, #youcandoit). Some creators even employed playful or ironic hashtags like #edsheeranrecoveryy, blending humor with support. The variety and frequency of hashtag use demonstrate their role in categorizing content and potentially increasing reach within the platform.

4.4.4 Engagement metrics

This section briefly analyzes key engagement metrics, including likes, comments, saves, and shares, which offer insight into both the reach and perceived value of the content. Video 74 stood out across multiple categories, receiving the highest number of likes (29,300), saves (2,510), and shares (618), indicating strong resonance with a broad audience. In contrast, Video 84 received the fewest likes (26) and lowest number of saves (1), suggesting minimal viewer impact. Comment activity also varied: Video 3 received the most comments (155), while several others, including Video 30, 76, 82, 83, and 84, received none. Similarly, the lowest number of shares (0) was recorded for Videos 22, 56, 64, 81, and 82. These extremes illustrate the wide variation in how viewers interact with recovery-related content on TikTok.

While no clear or linear relationship between the rhetorical appeals and engagement metrics emerged, some notable patterns were observed. Video 74, the most engaged-with post, was also the shortest video in the dataset at only 8 seconds. It contained no spoken words and relied on a platform-native format discussed earlier, involving a popular TikTok audio clip (*‘What an odd thing to say’* by Kari) paired with on-screen text. Though no traditional logos appeal was present, the appeal lies in its emotional tone, hopeful caption (*‘a little scary to post, but I am happy that I am doing so much better now’*), and use of TikTok vernaculars. Despite including no hashtags, the video’s minimalistic authenticity and alignment with platform-native sound trends may have contributed to its wide reach, though the influence of the creator’s follower base cannot be overlooked. Video 3, which also performed well in terms of comments and saves, similarly contained no spoken words and relied on a strong pathos-driven contrast. The video featured a reflective caption about the complexity of eating disorders and used the emotionally evocative song *‘Possibility’* by Lykke Li, aligning with platform practices around authenticity and mood. Like Video 74, its success appears rooted more in mood, relatability, and emotional tone than in logical argumentation, highlighting how emotional resonance can drive engagement on the platform.

One creator who appeared multiple times in the dataset also featured repeatedly among the top-performing videos (Creator 8), suggesting the importance of a recognizable creator identity and consistent tone (Kakavand, 2024, pp. 39-42). Her content often used informal, encouraging language and recurring personal vernaculars (e.g., *‘Tikkerdetaktoktik’*), which may have helped foster a sense of continuity and trust among viewers. The creator’s consistent use of a personal tone and linguistic style exemplifies how TikTok affordances support identity-building practices. Her frequent presence in the top-performing videos further reinforces the idea that creator visibility and community-

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building play a significant role in driving engagement. Across these examples, high engagement was often associated with content that evoked emotional resonance through pathos, such as vulnerability and relatability, while also making use of platform-native formats like trending audio clips and on-screen text. In addition to these features, the most successful videos tended to be short, featured with consistent creator identities, and aligned with familiar platform practices. However, their success may be intertwined with the algorithmic visibility and existing follower base of the creators, making it difficult to isolate individual drivers of engagement.

5. Discussion

This study explored how persuasive messages about eating disorder recovery are constructed in Dutch-spoken TikTok videos, focusing on rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, logos, and the role of platform-specific affordances in shaping persuasiveness. Through rhetorical analysis, the findings reveal that persuasion in this context is multimodal, emotionally layered, and embedded in the platform’s logic. Rather than operating independently, ethos, pathos, and logos intersect and are shaped through interaction with TikTok’s features, such as short-form video, audio layering, on-screen text, algorithmic visibility, trending formats, and informal vernaculars.

5.1 Ethos within TikTok’s design

A key insight is that credibility (ethos) emerges not through traditional markers of authority, but through peer-based credibility, grounded in insider knowledge, relatability, trustworthiness, and emotional resonance. Creators build trust by presenting themselves authentically and speaking openly about their own recovery journeys. Their credibility rests on emotional transparency, shared experience, and fluency in platform vernaculars, such as informal language, minimal editing, and direct address. This positions creators as empathetic insiders who ‘get it’, aligning with Burke’s (1969, pp. 61-63) concept of identification, in which persuasion arises from perceived similarity between speaker and audience (Beason, 1991, p. 332). By foregrounding their own recovery journeys, creators invite viewers to see themselves reflected in the creator’s story, strengthening both trust and rhetorical effectiveness. Ethos, in this context, is relational rather than hierarchical; trust is not dictated but earned through vulnerability and resonance. This peer-based model of ethos reflects a broader cultural shift in mental health communication, where experiential knowledge is increasingly valued (Parnell et al., 2023, p. 9). TikTok’s affordances amplify this shift: the platform rewards raw, relatable content with high engagement metrics, reinforcing the persuasive potential of authenticity over polished authority. However, the scarcity of male-authored content holds significance beyond representation alone. According to Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification, persuasion can arise from the symbolic process of establishing shared meaning between speaker and audience (Rutten & Soetaert, 2014, p. 340). Identification requires that individuals see themselves reflected in the message, recognizing familiar values, experiences, or emotions. The scarcity of male-authored content therefore may limit opportunities for male viewers to identify with recovery narratives, weakening the persuasive power of the content.

Creators also showed rhetorical sensitivity by acknowledging the viewer’s emotional state, for example, through trigger warnings, messages of support, or self-critical humor that helped reduce stigma and foster connection. As discussed in the theoretical framework, trigger warnings can be seen as a rhetorical act of deference to the viewer’s emotional safety and self-criticism can be a way to show honesty and trustworthiness (Beason, 1991, pp. 333-335), reinforcing the creator’s

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sensitivity to the subject. The use of humor and sarcasm to convey serious messages was especially prevalent in the dataset, often taking culturally specific forms such as references to Dutch memes or conversational joking. By embedding recovery-oriented messages in humor-infused formats, creators were able to reframe emotionally heavy topics in ways that felt familiar, digestible, and socially relevant. As Trillò (2024, pp. 12-14) suggests, this rhetorical strategy makes serious content more emotionally engaging and allows audiences to recognize their own struggles within a shared cultural frame. In this way, humor functions not only as a persuasive tool, but also as a bridge between individual experience and collective recognition, helping to foster identification and invite viewers into a broader discourse of recovery and support.

While short videos captured attention through immediacy, humor, and emotional punch, longer videos often conveyed greater vulnerability and depth. Across both formats, creators adapted their rhetorical style to fit the platform while maintaining authenticity and a sense of connection. This strategic variation aligns with Adeane and Stasiak’s (2024, pp. 4-9) findings that younger audiences generally prefer short-form videos due to limited attention spans, yet also perceive longer content as more professional and trustworthy. This balance between brevity and depth illustrates how creators build credibility not only through content, but also through how they manage duration and pacing, tailoring each message to match viewer expectations while sustaining rhetorical impact. In both video lengths, creators demonstrated platform fluency through consistent use of TikTok’s multimodal affordances. While filters and duet functions were largely absent in the dataset, perhaps to preserve an unfiltered and authentic aesthetic, creators frequently employed text overlays, emojis, background music, and editing functions to shape their message and guide interpretation. These elements were not merely decorative but functioned as rhetorical tools, shaping how messages were received by the audience. Emojis, for example, acted as affective signposts (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 6), while background music underscored mood and created emphasis to emotional messages (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 5; De La Mora Velasco et al., 2021, pp. 12-13). Text overlays offered clarifications, punchlines, or emotional emphasis, often directing the viewer’s attention to key takeaways (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 6). Creators also used calls to action in their narrative or captions to invite comments, questions, and sharing of personal experiences, fostering interactive dialogue. This engagement reinforced their ethos, as responsive interactions demonstrated kindness and community-building. Such techniques enhanced not only the clarity of the message but also its emotional accessibility, reinforcing the creator’s position as a relatable and trustworthy voice within the recovery space.

Many creators showed a strong, ongoing commitment to recovery content through consistent posting, often using their entire account to document their eating disorder recovery journey. This consistency, along with recurring phrases and personal styles, contributed to a sense of familiarity and trust between creator and viewer. This commitment allowed viewers to witness progress, setbacks, and emotional growth over time, and fostered familiarity, continuity, and parasocial

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connection. Repetition of key messages and expressions of self-reassurance throughout their content not only reinforced the creators’ credibility by reflecting an underlying inclination to succeed in recovery (Beason, 1991, pp. 338-340). Viewers came to recognize individuals through recurring visual styles, repeated phrases, tonal consistencies, or catchphrases, which functioned as markers of personal branding and emotional reliability, solidifying the creator’s ethos.

5.2 Pathos within TikTok’s design

The emotional appeal (pathos) further reinforces the relationship between creator and viewer. Creators share vulnerable moments, use humor to make difficult topics more approachable (Trillò, 2024, pp. 12-14), and frame eating disorder recovery as emotionally meaningful acts. Creators shared different types of emotionally charged moments from their recovery journey, ranging from discomfort and shame to mental strength and hope, inviting viewers to empathize with their experiences. This empathizing often operated through relatability, using strategies like gentle self-talk, diary readings, or the listing of highly specific behaviors (Gagich & Zickel, 2023, pp. 34-35). By doing this, the creators blurred the lines between individual reflection and collective experience, aligning with the study of Adeane and Stasiak (2024, pp. 4-9), who state that sharing personal experiences can make creators be seen as relatable and as role models. The sense of this relatability deepens the emotional appeal while simultaneously reinforcing the creator’s credibility, highlighting how the two rhetorical appeals intersect, as also observed by Stucki and Sager (2018, pp. 375-377). This relatability is important for the process of identification. Audiences need to see aspects of their own experiences reflected in a message to be able to identify with the creator (Bullock et al., 2021, p. 2), which is particularly important in the context of eating disorder recovery, since isolation and shame are dominant in this psychological landscape.

Humor played a significant role in shaping the emotional appeal of the content. Through irony, sarcasm, and playful delivery, creators introduced emotional lightness into otherwise heavy topics, helping viewers process difficult experiences with less emotional weight (Trillò, 2024, pp. 12-14). This humorous framing created a sense of emotional safety and distance but also acted as soft disclosures. In addition, the use of shared cultural references, such as memes or familiar TikTok audios, further deepened the emotional appeal by making the content socially and emotionally recognizable. By embedding their messages in popular, relatable formats, creators fostered a collective emotional understanding. In this way, the emotional appeal was not solely built through personal vulnerability, but also through shared emotional culture, rooted in the vernacular, trends, and humor styles unique to TikTok.

Emotional resonance is not only expressed verbally but is carefully constructed through multimodal layering: tone of voice, facial expression, music, and emoji use, all of which contribute to a sense of closeness, solidarity, and validation. A recurring and emotionally powerful motif across

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the dataset was the act of eating, often filmed casually and accompanied by visual and verbal reassurances. In many videos, creators documented themselves eating meals. Rather than presenting these moments as struggles, they framed them as small victories or sources of joy. Smiles, thumbs-up gestures, and enthusiastic comments like ‘*10 out of 10*’ or ‘*Yummy*’ created a mood of celebration and pride. On-screen text reinforced this positive tone, often including affirming messages, heart emojis, or humorous encouragements that made the moment feel light, safe, and supportive. These emotional cues served not only to normalize eating but also to reframe it as something pleasurable, empowering, and collective. By performing joy and ease in relation to food, creators used pathos to counteract shame and anxiety, offering viewers a positive example of what recovery could feel like.

Other multimodal strategies also played a powerful role in creating a feeling of emotional resonance. Background music, visual filters, facial expression, tone of voice, emojis, camera framing, and the use of TikTok-specific vernacular shaped the emotional tone of the videos. The emotional resonance created through this layering was often subtle but significant, for example, a soft voice paired with a white heart emoji, a casual phrase that reframes hunger as something not to worry about, and a familiar audio clip that dramatizes social misunderstanding. Each of these moments served to heighten emotional resonance and foster connection. What sets these TikTok videos apart from traditional health communication, beyond their narrative structure and skillful use of multimodal strategies, is their ability to use the platform’s affordances to make that emotion feel immediate and real. TikTok’s design encouraged multimodal communication, combining audio, video, text, and interactivity. This draws on the platform’s native vernaculars to enhance emotional appeal, making the content not only personally expressive but also culturally and socially resonant.

5.3 Logos within TikTok’s design

Although less prominent in the dataset, the logical appeal (logos) adds a layer of clarity and depth to these messages. Rather than relying on abstract argumentation or clinical terminology, creators in this dataset appealed to logic through clear, relatable explanations of disordered thought patterns and recovery processes, as well as visually demonstrating progress (e.g. through meals or treatment settings). This aligns with the research by Higgins and Walker (2012, p. 198), which suggests that logos can be created through the appearance of rationality, even when not following strict logical proofs. Furthermore, both inductive reasoning and cause and effect reasoning were both used to present recovery as necessary and achievable, as described by Gagich and Zickel (2023, pp. 34-35). While rarely explicitly citing external sources, some creators referenced therapy, clinic admissions, or professional experience (besides their personal experience) to reinforce the reliability of their insights. Additionally, some creators broke down harmful beliefs, such as the idea that one must look severely underweight to ‘deserve’ help, by giving structured counterarguments embedded in everyday language. Others presented lists of obsessive behavior or thought loops that viewers

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could instantly recognize in themselves, thereby validating their experiences while encouraging critical reflection. These forms of logos did not feel abstract or clinical but rather accessible and grounded in lived experience.

Visuals, such as clips of eating meals, confronting fear foods, or attending treatment, served as evidence of recovery, making logical claims more tangible and persuasive (Joffe, 2008, pp. 84-86). These visual moments grounded abstract ideas, such as the importance of nutrition or the possibility of change, in real, observable actions. Rather than simply stating that recovery is possible, creators showed it in practice, using visuals to strengthen the plausibility of their message. This form of visual logic made their reasoning feel not only credible, but also achievable.

Notably, logical appeals rarely appear in isolation. Instead, they become more persuasive when woven together with emotional (pathos) and ethical (ethos) elements. For instance, when creators use humor to highlight the irrationality of disordered thoughts, they are not only offering a rational critique but also providing emotional relief and reinforcing a sense of shared values and trust. Additionally, when creators back up their recovery tips with personal stories or openly share their own struggles, they not only support their logical arguments in lived experience but also strengthen their credibility. These examples illustrate how persuasion on TikTok is fundamentally hybrid: rational arguments, emotional resonance, and personal credibility are deeply interconnected and work together to enhance the overall impact of the message. This interplay is facilitated and shaped by TikTok’s specific platform affordances. TikTok’s short-form format requires immediacy, which creators address by embedding logical and emotional appeals within recognizable formats, such as ‘What I eat in a day’ videos or popular audio trends. Even very short videos (sometimes under ten seconds) can deliver cognitively engaging content by drawing on concise, familiar structures. The platform’s editing tools, audio trends, on-screen text, and caption features are integral to how creators clarify their message and emphasize key points, enhancing the clarity and accessibility of rational appeals. This underscores a central argument: on TikTok, rhetorical effectiveness relies not only on what is said, but on how well the message is adapted to the platform’s communicative norms. Persuasiveness is co-produced by rhetorical content and platform fluency. Creators who understand TikTok’s logic, its trends, vernacular, and engagement metrics, are better able to make their message resonate.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored how Dutch TikTok content about eating disorder recovery constructs persuasive messages through rhetorical strategies and platform-specific features. To guide this analysis, two central research questions were posed:

1. *How is eating disorder recovery content on TikTok constructed to be persuasive?*
2. *How do TikTok-specific affordances and vernaculars contribute to the persuasiveness of eating disorder recovery content?*

Through detailed rhetorical analysis of a diverse set of user-generated videos, the study examined how creators employ classical rhetorical appeals, ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic), in combination with TikTok’s affordances and vernaculars. The analysis was based on qualitative content analysis of 64 Dutch-spoken TikTok videos, selected through purposive sampling using an eating disorder recovery-related hashtag. This study contributes scientifically to media and communication scholarship by demonstrating how persuasiveness is rhetorically constructed within platform-specific vernaculars. Socially, the findings offer insights into how persuasive content can support viewers navigating the challenges of eating disorder recovery, while also providing valuable guidance for content creators aiming to promote recovery-oriented messaging. In addition, these insights are relevant for mental health professionals aiming to better understand the role of social media in facilitating informal peer support. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Collaborations between health institutions and peer creators.

The effectiveness of peer-based ethos highlights the potential benefits for health organizations and educators in incorporating more lived experience into their communication strategies. Collaborating with mental health content creators, who act as reliable community leaders, can be a powerful way to promote well-being and recovery. This aligns with research by Liu et al. (2024, pp. 21-22), which shows that engaging and training mental health content creators as influential community leaders can significantly enhance viewers’ mental health knowledge and emotional support abilities. While Driuch et al. (2025, para. 4) rightly caution that even well-meaning recovery posts can unintentionally foster harmful comparisons or normalize problematic portrayals of recovery, these risks underscore the value of structured collaboration. Rather than leaving creators unsupported, health organizations should provide evidence-based training and resources to empower them to communicate responsibly. This institutional support enables creators to present information with greater confidence, accuracy, and logical clarity, strengthening their trustworthiness and appeal to logos, while minimizing the potential for harm. For health organizations, this network-based strategy employs authentic peer communication to promote meaningful, positive behavioral outcomes among youth audiences. This dual effect supports the spread of trustworthy and relatable mental health messages.

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Recommendation 2: Content creators must develop strong platform fluency.

Effective communication on TikTok requires a nuanced understanding of its unique affordances and vernaculars. Successful mental health communication on TikTok lies at the intersection of emotional authenticity and platform-specific presentation. Creators who skillfully balance genuine vulnerability with awareness of TikTok’s communicative norms can foster deeper engagement and build trust with their audiences. Platform fluency goes beyond simply using TikTok features; it involves mastering how to convey complex, sensitive mental health topics in ways that resonate within the platform’s culture. This includes knowing when to use humor, trending sounds, text overlays, or specific editing techniques to maximize impact and accessibility. Creators who develop this fluency can more effectively reach and influence their viewers, making their messages feel relatable and credible. Moreover, platform fluency is essential in peer communication, where the line between support and potential harm can easily blur. Therefore, developing platform fluency empowers creators to engage audiences meaningfully, while minimizing risks of misinterpretation or unintended negative effects.

Recommendation 3: Encourage interactive engagement to strengthen community and message impact.

One of TikTok’s most distinctive features is its highly interactive and participatory nature. Unlike traditional media where audiences are passive consumers, TikTok invites users to actively engage through comments, shares, and responsive videos. This interactive dynamic fosters a sense of co-creation and belonging, significantly enhancing the persuasive power of mental health content. By encouraging interaction, creators can transform recovery narratives into shared conversations rather than one-sided messages. This participatory environment deepens emotional investment and trust, helping audiences feel seen and heard. Leveraging interactive features such as call to actions and using second-person pronouns can further amplify the reach and relevance of mental health messaging, while also facilitating a supportive, peer-based environment. Health organizations and creators who adopt this participatory approach can foster more empowered and engaged communities that actively contribute to positive mental health discourse. However, promoting interaction must be carefully balanced with creating safe spaces where users can engage without potential harm, such as exposure to triggering content or harmful feedback. Clear moderation strategies and community guidelines are therefore essential to ensure that interaction remains safe and respectful.

Recommendation 4: Prioritize authentic peer credibility through emotional connection and logical reasoning.

On TikTok, a creator’s credibility is deeply influenced by both logos (appeals to reason and evidence) and pathos (emotional connection). Mental health content creators who openly share their lived experiences, communicate with emotional honesty, and use informal, conversational language

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build stronger trust with their audiences. This blend of reason and emotion is particularly crucial on a platform where users seek connection and validation rather than clinical advice. To maintain and strengthen trustworthiness, creators should also prioritize transparency and emotional safety. This means including trigger warnings for sensitive topics and consistently posting to maintain a reliable presence. Thoughtful use of humor can further enhance accessibility and help reduce stigma around mental health topics. By combining honesty, informality, consistency, and care, creators can foster a sense of safe familiarity. This strengthens parasocial bonds with their audiences, increases engagement, and encourages viewers to interpret recovery content as both trustworthy and emotionally resonant.

In sum, persuasive recovery messaging on TikTok operates at the intersection of rhetorical appeal and technological mediation. Ethos, pathos, and logos are not static modes of persuasion but dynamic forces shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, and social context. Understanding persuasion in this space requires attention to how emotional, ethical, and logical appeals are actively mobilized through the medium, not merely within it.

6.1 Limitations

While efforts were made to conduct the research to its fullest potential, some inevitable limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of the dataset was limited to content spoken in Dutch, meaning the findings reflect a specific linguistic and cultural context. Rhetorical norms and platform practices may vary significantly across languages and communities, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions to broader, international TikTok environments (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, p. 26). Moreover, the study’s qualitative and interpretive nature reflects the researcher’s analytical lens, which, although grounded in theory and supported by concrete examples, introduces a degree of subjectivity (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 125). The analysis does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview of all persuasive strategies in recovery-related TikToks but instead offers a focused exploration of key rhetorical patterns.

Another limitation concerns the descriptive approach to engagement metrics. While the study considered likes, shares, and comments, it did not assess causality or systematically test which rhetorical strategies most directly influenced viewer engagement. Given the non-transparent nature of TikTok’s algorithm, viral visibility likely results from a dynamic interplay of factors, including timing, creator popularity, follower networks, and platform trends, in addition to rhetorical effectiveness (Lang, 2025, p. 1). Furthermore, the study focused primarily on the creators and the rhetorical construction of their messages, without incorporating audience feedback or measuring actual persuasive outcomes. Consequently, the assessment of persuasion is based on form and strategy rather than verified through audience interpretation or behavioral impact. Finally, it is important to note that only videos with privacy settings that allowed downloading were included in

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the dataset. Videos that could not be downloaded due to stricter privacy settings were excluded from the dataset, potentially leading to an underrepresentation of certain user groups. This limitation may narrow the diversity of recovery-related narratives analyzed, particularly those shared by individuals who are more cautious about their digital visibility.

6.2 Future research

The findings of this research open several promising directions for future research, particularly in digital health communication, platform rhetoric, and online recovery communities. The primary focus of this study is on the platform TikTok, examining how persuasive rhetorical strategies and platform-specific affordances shape recovery-oriented content. Future research could explore whether similar rhetorical patterns and dynamics appear on other platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook. Each of these platforms has distinct technical affordances, vernaculars, and content formats, which may influence how recovery narratives are constructed and received. As Keller (2019, p. 9) demonstrates in her analysis of feminist engagement on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, different platform vernaculars significantly shape user discourse and the strategies they use to mobilize. Similarly, a cross-platform comparison of recovery content could provide deeper insight into how digital environments shape persuasive communication.

Furthermore, while this study focused on how creators construct persuasive recovery content on TikTok, future research could shift attention to the audience’s reception and interpretation of these messages. Gaining insight into how viewers engage with, interpret and emotionally respond to recovery narratives would provide a deeper understanding of the actual impact of such content. Questions such as how viewers perceive credibility and how peer narratives influence their own recovery journeys remain unexplored. Audience-centered research, using methods such as surveys, interviews, or comment analysis, could reveal how persuasive strategies are received across different demographics and stages of recovery, and whether these strategies foster empowerment or misunderstanding. Such insights are valuable for assessing the ethical and psychological implications of peer-generated recovery content and for informing more responsible digital health communication practices.

As shown in research by Yang et al. (2024, pp. 247-267) on video advertisement on TikTok, specific elements of video content can significantly predict persuasiveness outcomes. This suggests that engagement is not merely a passive metric but can reflect the persuasive effectiveness of particular content features. Building on this, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach to examine how rhetorical strategies, such as credibility, emotional appeals, and logical reasoning, correlate with engagement metrics. Additionally, this study’s analysis, along with findings by Pater et al. (2019, p. 10), highlights the notable underrepresentation of men in social media content related to mental health. This gap contributes to the broader exclusion of male perspectives in eating

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disorder research. Many existing studies rely on frameworks centered around female symptoms and experiences, which can deepen gender-based inequalities in healthcare (Pater et al., 2019, p. 10). This stigma surrounding male eating disorders further deepens the issue, often discouraging men from seeking professional mental health support. Future research should address this imbalance by actively including male narratives and exploring how gender influences the rhetorical construction and reception of recovery content.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A. Excel coding template

Description

Name: TikTok eating disorder recovery coding template.

Source: Template based on the coding scheme derived from the theoretical framework.

Purpose: To systematically analyze rhetorical strategies (ethos, pathos, logos) and platform-specific features in Dutch-language eating disorder recovery videos. This template structured the coding process during qualitative analysis.

Dataset composition

Table A1. Excel coding template - part 1

	Video summary	Ethos narrative	Ethos multimodal	Logos narrative	Logos multimodal	Pathos narrative	Pathos multimodal	Platform affordances/ vernaculars
Video 1								
Video 2								
Video 3								
Video 4								
...								

Table A2. Excel coding template - part 2

	Comparative notes	Video length	Caption	Music	Creator	Date posted	Likes	Comments	Saves	Shared
Video 1										
Video 2										
Video 3										
Video 4										
...										

Appendix B. Coding Scheme

Description

Name: TikTok eating disorder recovery coding scheme

Source: Coding scheme based developed from the theoretical framework, drawing on classical rhetoric (ethos, pathos, logos) and literature on platform affordances and vernaculars.

Purpose: To guide the content analysis of TikTok videos related to eating disorder recovery. All the analytical categories are informed by literature and structured to ensure systematic coding of both verbal and multimodal elements across the dataset.

Table B1. Coding scheme

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Focus in analysis	Example from the data
Ethos	Ethos narrative	The way the creator builds credibility through storytelling and narrative structure.	Similitude, deference, self-criticism, expertise, and the inclination to succeed (Beason, 1991, pp. 326-327; Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197). The use of everyday language, humor, and personal anecdotes (Mheidly et al., 2024, pp. 6-7).	“I’ve been there too”, “What really helped in my situation is to...”, and “What I wish I knew earlier...”.
	Ethos multimodal	The way the creator builds credibility through visual, auditory, and textual elements.	Consistent posting, video length (short vs. long-form), music, sound, filters, effects, casual visual styling, interactive features, and performative elements like dances, skits, or acting (McCashin & Murphy, 2022, pp. 285-302).	Talking directly into the camera and filming in a casual, home setting.

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Pathos	Pathos narrative	The way the creator evokes emotions through storytelling and narrative structure.	Metaphors, personal stories, and humor (Murthy & Ghosal, 2014, p. 254). Emotion-eliciting language (Konat et al., 2024, pp. 375-376), sensory language and explicitly naming emotions (Richings et al., 2021, pp. 38-42).	“Delicious”, "I found it so hard", and "This is something I find scary".
	Pathos multimodal	The way the creator evokes emotions through visual, auditory, and textual elements.	Vivid imagery, body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone (Murthy & Ghosal, 2014, p. 254). Music (Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025, pp. 92-113) and photographs (Oldmeadow, 2006, p. 644).	Using a sarcastic tone, smiling, and dancing while eating.
Logos	Logos narrative	The way the creator appeals to logic and reason through explanations, evidence, or informational content.	Argumentation like comparison, cause and effect, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, and exemplification (Gagich & Zickel, 2023, pp. 34-35). Using common sense, justifications, claims, data, and evidence/examples (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 198). Referencing statistics, expert opinions, or scientific research (Ju et al., 2021, p. 1543).	Mentioning their lived experience (sometimes in combination with professional experience), Saying things like “it can happen to anyone”, "Don't believe you're less sick because you're gaining weight", and “But that will also pass, so that is good to remember.”

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	Logos multimodal	The way the creator conveys logic and reason through visual aids and text on screen.	Visuals as evidence, or to create if-then logic to evoke fear (Joffe, 2008, pp. 84-86), voice overs (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 5), background music (De La Mora Velasco et al., 2021, pp. 12-13), and on screen quotes (Mheidly et al., 2024, p. 5).	Visually showing an empty plate, writing the tips as on screen text, and giving a call to action.
Platform affordances and vernaculars		How TikTok affordances are used to reinforce the persuasiveness of the message.	Functionalities, such as short-form videos, hashtags, content saving or reposting, and algorithmic curation. Aspects of videos like persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability, connectivity, identifiability (Kakavand, 2024, pp. 39-42). Lastly, meme culture (Trillò, 2024, pp. 12-14) and algorithmic imaginaries (Low et al., 2025, pp. 2341-2343).	Minimal editing, “What I eat in a day” format, “POV” format, and using an informal self-created language “Tikkerdietaktoktik”.

Appendix C. Overview analyzed TikTok videos

Description

Name: Overview of the TikTok videos used in the analysis.

Source: Publicly available videos collected through the hashtag #eetstoornisherstel

Purpose: To provide a transparent overview of the 84 downloaded videos and the 64 videos included in the content analysis, this table lists details such as video duration, creator, date of upload, and creator’s gender.

Table C1. Overview of analyzed TikTok videos

	Video length	Creator	Date posted	Gender
Video 1	0:40	Creator 1	15-6-2024	Male
Video 2	2:42	Creator 2	7-6-2024	Female
Video 3	0:18	Creator 3	26-8-2024	Female
Video 4	0:15	Creator 3	9-2-2022	Female
Video 5	1:29	Creator 4	7-12-2022	Female
Video 6	0:48	Creator 5	21-8-2023	Female
Video 7				
Video 8	0:31	Creator 1	23-6-2024	Female
Video 9	0:06	Creator 6	3-1-2025	Female
Video 10	0:27	Creator 7	17-8-2024	Female
Video 11	2:45	Creator 8	31-1-2025	Female
Video 12	0:19	Creator 19	1-10-2024	Female
Video 13				
Video 14				
Video 15	5:56	Creator 8	3-9-2024	Female
Video 16				
Video 17				
Video 18				
Video 19	3:04	Creator 8	24-1-2025	Female
Video 20	1:02	Creator 8	12-11-2024	Female
Video 21	1:13	Creator 8	24-12-2024	Female
Video 22	1:29	Creator 8	23-5-2024	Female
Video 23	10:17	Creator 8	15-7-2024	Female
Video 24	0:31	Creator 9	22-2-2023	Female
Video 25				
Video 26	0:08	Creator 6	13-1-2025	Female
Video 27				
Video 28	1:09	Creator 8	25-7-2024	Female
Video 29	1:37	Creator 8	23-11-2024	Female
Video 30	0:20	Creator 10	2-10-2024	Female
Video 31	1:18	Creator 8	24-8-2024	Female
Video 32	1:15	Creator 8	25-5-2024	Female
Video 33	0:14	Creator 8	22-5-2024	Female
Video 34				
Video 35	0:09	Creator 11	29-5-2024	Female
Video 36				
Video 37	0:20	Creator 8	9-5-2024	Female
Video 38	0:26	Creator 8	5-4-2024	Female

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Video 39	0:25	Creator 12	3-7-2025	Female
Video 40	2:55	Creator 13	31-1-2023	Female
Video 41				
Video 42	1:21	Creator 8	27-12-2024	Female
Video 43				
Video 44	1:33	Creator 5	17-7-2023	Female
Video 45	2:23	Creator 8	14-10-2024	Female
Video 46	4:33	Creator 8	7-9-2024	Female
Video 47	1:19	Creator 8	28-11-2024	Female
Video 48	1:41	Creator 8	19-5-2024	Female
Video 49	1:17	Creator 3	29-6-2023	Female
Video 50				
Video 51	1:43	Creator 8	26-12-2024	Female
Video 52	5:11	Creator 19	29-8-2024	Female
Video 53	2:32	Creator 8	24-10-2024	Female
Video 54				
Video 55	1:33	Creator 14	19-2-2024	Female
Video 56	1:10	Creator 8	14-4-2024	Female
Video 57	5:01	Creator 20	12-11-2024	Female
Video 58	3:46	Creator 8	23-12-2024	Female
Video 59	0:23	Creator 8	13-4-2024	Female
Video 60	2:54	Creator 8	11-8-2024	Female
Video 61				
Video 62	1:07	Creator 8	23-3-2024	Female
Video 63	1:30	Creator 2	1-7-2024	Female
Video 64	0:48	Creator 15	7-9-2022	Female
Video 65				
Video 66				
Video 67	2:53	Creator 8	28-8-2024	Female
Video 68	0:31	Creator 16	2-6-2023	Female
Video 69				
Video 70	1:07	Creator 8	20-11-2024	Female
Video 71				
Video 72	0:51	Creator 17	5-6-2023	Female
Video 73	0:07	Creator 3	3-12-2021	Female
Video 74	0:08	Creator 21	11-12-2024	Female
Video 75	1:08	Creator 22	30-4-2024	Male
Video 76	0:49	Creator 10	18-10-2024	Female
Video 77	0:30	Creator 8	25-12-2024	Female
Video 78	5:39	Creator 8	23-7-2024	Female
Video 79	0:30	Creator 18	19-2-2023	Female
Video 80				
Video 81	1:42	Creator 3	12-7-2023	Female
Video 82	2:05	Creator 3	9-5-2024	Female
Video 83	1:12	Creator 4	16-1-2023	Female
Video 84	1:28	Creator 23	16-9-2023	Female

Appendix D. Privacy and ethics statement

Description:

This study exclusively used publicly available TikTok videos collected through the platform’s search function. No private, locked, or user-restricted content was accessed. All usernames and identifiable information were removed to protect the privacy of content creators. Each creator was assigned a number to ensure anonymity throughout the analysis. The dataset was not shared publicly and was handled with care to follow the ethical standards for research involving online content.

This approach meets the requirements set by Erasmus University Rotterdam’s thesis research ethics policy.

Appendix E. Declaration of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Bregje Rolink

Student ID: 534467

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050

Supervisor Name: Dr. Delia Dumitrica

Date: 25-06-2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly).
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code).
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books.

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [ChatGPT], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Bregje Rolink

Date of Signature: 25-06-2025

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Bregje Rolink

Date of Signature: 25-06-2025