

The Pursuit of Pleasure on TikTok Between Eros and Consumption as a Matter of Popular Habitus

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Abstract

Amid ongoing debates on the platformisation of consumer culture, in which both the value of commodities and the processes through which subjective identities are shaped are increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures, TikTok appears to reconfigure the relationship between platforms and local contexts. Rather than simply amplifying globalised aesthetic models, the platform enables forms of bottom-up visibility through which popular cultures articulate and display their own modes of self-representation, deeply embedded in specific autochthonous settings.

In this exploratory study, I examine how young people from the Neapolitan popular milieu construct models of desirable masculinity, and how local creators simultaneously contribute to the emergence of a popular gastronomic aesthetic, defined here as *gourmand*. Through the qualitative analysis of digital content, the two case studies provide an analytical lens to investigate how subjects who embody a popular habitus participate in the mediated reproduction of Neapolitan popular culture on TikTok.

Keywords: habitus, construction of masculinity, consumption, food, digital sociology.

1. Introduction: TikTok and the reproduction of Neapolitan popular culture

Since the early modern period, practices of consumption have played a central role in the organisation of social life, not only as economic activities but also as symbolic processes through which identities, hierarchies, and forms of

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belonging are produced. Far from being neutral or purely individual acts, consumption has historically functioned as a site for the social regulation of taste and distinction.

In the Western European context, a substantial body of sociological research has highlighted that consumer practices are deeply intertwined with class relations and processes of social differentiation. The capacity to define what counts as legitimate taste, appropriate consumption, or desirable lifestyles has been unevenly distributed, reflecting broader power relations within society (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This perspective was systematised by Pierre Bourdieu (1979), who demonstrated that tastes and preferences emerge from socially structured dispositions rather than individual choice. From this viewpoint, consumption does not simply express identity but actively contributes to the reproduction of social stratification, as individuals internalise class-specific schemes of perception and evaluation (Cerulo, 2010).

This research is situated within the contemporary field of digital sociology, which is increasingly concerned with investigating how popular culture gains visibility and circulation on platforms such as TikTok (Sujon & Ntalla, 2025; Arvidsson et al., 2025). The present study adopts an exploratory approach and analyses two empirical cases as phenomena through which it is possible to observe and examine how Neapolitan popular culture reproduces online consumption practices and selected spheres of everyday life.

However, recent developments in digital platforms invite a reconsideration of how consumption, identity, and culture are articulated in mediated environments. In the context of platformised consumption (Caliandro et al., 2024), TikTok and its popular trends foreground a renewed relevance of the autochthonous context, making visible how local cultural repertoires continue to shape the production and circulation of meanings. As emphasised by Schellewald (2022), platform infrastructures do not erase local specificities but interact with them, contributing to the construction and legitimisation of brands, consumer products, and subjective identities.

TikTok offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe consumer culture through the lens of popular culture, characterised by logics of excess and abundance. Unlike platforms historically associated with bourgeois aesthetics, TikTok enables the visibility of consumption practices and relational styles that are not mediated by middle-class norms of distinction. In its most viral trends, the platform reproduces both popular gastronomic consumption and marketing practices rooted in Neapolitan culture, as well as forms of mediatization of intimate relationships and the domestic sphere.

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Among the multiple trends that articulate popular modes of consumption and intimacy, two case studies are at the centre of this research: the phenomenon of *Malesere* and a new aesthetic of popular gastronomy, defined here as *gourmand*.

To interpret these practices, this study adopts the concept of cultural reproduction from Gramsci, and from Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), situating the analysis within an approach that conceives the internet as a cultural space in which social actors actively produce and reproduce meanings (Hine, 2000). This perspective does not neglect the structural and technical dimensions of platforms, their affordances, and their economic logics, but analyses them through the lens of a critical digital structuralism, or, to put it in Bourdieusian terms, a form of structural constructivism (Bourdieu, 1979). While platforms operate according to the dynamics described by Srnicek (2017), the subjects who inhabit them retain a degree of agency in orienting practices and reproducing their cultural dispositions.

In contrast to platforms developed within the Californian context, such as those of the Meta group, which have historically reproduced a bourgeois aesthetic and aspirational model (Manovich, 2019), TikTok has favoured the circulation of popular cultural forms since its inception (Wagner, 2023). These dynamics reflect the geographical and cultural conditions in which the platform was developed and foreground how digital infrastructures are shaped by the habitus of those who produce and inhabit them (Airoldi, 2024).

Drawing on Bourdieu's insights, and on their application to digital contexts (Airoldi, 2024; Schellewald, 2022), this study highlights how practices rooted in specific local settings tend to persist and reproduce themselves through platform mediation. The two empirical investigations presented here make visible how Neapolitan popular culture is reproduced on TikTok through shared aesthetic codes, practices of excess and abundance, and the construction of what is perceived as desirable within popular contexts.

2. The construction of a desirable masculinity and a popular gastronomic aesthetic

To describe and observe how forms of desire and pleasure are articulated within Neapolitan popular culture on TikTok, this study draws on two empirical investigations. The first concerns the digital trend of *Malesere*, a term that can be translated into English as *malaise*, and which is defined here as the mediated representation of intimate relationships among Generation Z in the Neapolitan suburbs (Graziano, 2025a).

This phenomenon reproduces male stereotypes that are deeply rooted in traditional Neapolitan popular culture and that are updated and rendered viral through digital media. These include, for instance, the figure of the neighbourhood *guappo*, dominant and violent, who places “respect” above all else, and the jealous man who defends family honour and treats women as his property (Arvidsson, 2024), today translated into a renewed ideal type of Neapolitan popular masculinity.

In this sense, *Malesere* appears to reactivate relational models that were never fully dismantled, despite decades of feminist critique. It reintroduces a form of gendered interaction characterised by dominance, possessiveness, excessive jealousy, and, at times, violence. The *malesere* figure embodies the topos of the “real man” and is perceived as desirable precisely because of these traits. TikTok videos representing *Malesere* frequently stage *malammore*, a dangerous form of love marked by torment, power imbalance, and subordination (Arvidsson, 2024).

The *Malesere* phenomenon constitutes an influential subculture (Hall & Jefferson, 2006), capable of orienting fashion, music, aesthetics, hairstyles, and behavioural attitudes. This study focuses on the success of this masculine ideal type and on the contemporary construction of desirability within Neapolitan popular culture, starting from the virality and circulation of the trend well beyond its original territorial context.

More broadly, the semantic meaning of *malesere* shifts from a subjective state of discomfort to a masculine ideal type endowed with specific aesthetic and behavioural features. It is often retrograde, violent, sexist, and homophobic. Its aesthetic recalls that of hip-hop culture in U.S. inner-city suburbs, later integrated into the culture of Neapolitan “hyper-ghettos” (Wacquant, 2016) with the diffusion of urban music from the late 2000s onwards. In *malesere* videos, scenes of heterosexual couples arguing out of jealousy are recurrent, and the *malesere* subject is not only predisposed to violence but actively cultivates erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) through behavioural models aimed at constructing a form of desirable masculinity rooted in a popular aesthetic.

The analysis of this digital trend highlights how processes aimed at deconstructing dominant models of masculinity have, in some contexts, remained incomplete and tend to re-emerge through mediated forms (Graziano, 2025a). However, *malesere* should not be understood as an isolated case of the mediation, diffusion, and reproduction of gender inequality on digital platforms.

Digital platforms have long facilitated the aggregation of predominantly male groups that reproduce and reinforce gender discrimination, often assuming these elements as distinctive identity traits (Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021). Although gender roles and binary constructions have been widely questioned, and

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masculinity has increasingly been conceptualised as a cultural and therefore mutable product (Hooks, 2004), these transformations have primarily concerned middle- and upper-middle-class contexts. As observed in the Italian case by La Cecla (2010), forms of “rough” or “coarse” masculinity persist, grounding virility in physical force and domination.

As this study foregrounds, hegemonic masculinity continues to be anchored in enduring symbolic foundations that reproduce violent and abusive behavioural models aimed at reinforcing male dominance (Bourdieu, 1998). At the same time, the analysis foregrounds female agency, in continuity with the work of Bainotti and Semenzin (2021) and Morgan (1982), highlighting the complex mechanisms through which women may actively participate in their own subordination. Examining the *malessere* phenomenon thus makes it possible to reflect on the social consequences of the desirability of violent masculine models and to investigate the cultural conditions under which such models are reproduced.

The second empirical investigation focuses on the diffusion of a new popular representation of gastronomic aesthetics, defined in this study as *gourmand* gastronomy, as opposed to *gourmet*. Here, *gourmand* refers to an irrepressible orientation towards excess, abundance, and sensory pleasure, which entails a redefinition of food tastes.

Culinary traditions historically central to Campanian culture are increasingly challenged by digital creators who propose hybrid and often excessive recipes, combining contrasting flavours and reworking dishes traditionally considered untouchable. Like *malessere*, the digital trend of *gourmand* gastronomy enables the observation of consumption practices from a popular perspective, without the mediation of bourgeois asceticism. This reconfiguration of taste, grounded in abundance and excess, has also gained significant traction offline, influencing restaurants, steakhouses, pizzerias, and fast-casual venues that adopt marketing strategies based on “all-you-can-eat” formulas and fixed menus.

Although the spectacularisation of food represents a recurring feature across other platforms, as highlighted by Manovich (2019), this trend makes it possible to analyse in an original way how individuals who embody a popular habitus produce and consume digital gastronomic content. Oversized portions, hyper-caloric foods, the absence of attention to healthy eating, and a strong attachment to traditional flavours, updated and spectacularised through a cultural mash-up typical of algorithmic dynamics, make the trend of *gourmand* gastronomy a particularly interesting case of analysis.

As will be discussed in the empirical section, these two trends illuminate how popular culture articulates desire and hedonistic pleasure through distinct yet interconnected domains, intimate relationships and food consumption,

making visible what is considered desirable, enjoyable, and worth pursuing beyond the bourgeois mediation that has historically shaped consumer cultures (Capuzzo, 2006).

2.1. Popular habitus on TikTok

In this study, to describe the ways in which Neapolitan popular culture is mediated, we employ the concept of *popular habitus*. This notion builds on Bourdieu's theorisation of habitus (1979; 1984) and on the legacy of the concept of the "popular" developed within cultural anthropology concerned with forms of *history from below*. In particular, the cultural frame of reference draws on the work of Italian anthropologists who played a disruptive role in the study of popular culture, first and foremost De Martino (1996) and Cirese (1959), whose analyses focused on the everyday life of the working classes and on mass consumption practices. Moreover, the concept of the "popular" adopted here also takes into account Bourdieu's contribution (1979) and the meaning of popular culture elaborated by the Birmingham School (Hall & Jefferson, 2006).

By the term "popular", we refer to that set of traditions, forms of knowledge, ideas, and customs transmitted and disseminated by the working classes, understood as subaltern social groups characterised by a modest standard of living and, consequently, by conditions of economic, social, and cultural disadvantage. For the study of the online popular dimension, it is therefore crucial to observe elements that can be traced through indirect indicators such as dialect, idiomatic and dialectal expressions, local objects and concepts, as well as modes of representation grounded in these elements. TikTok is particularly rich in such indicators, which can be identified through the analysis of sound elements, aesthetics, attitudes, and practical sense, that is, habitus.

The concept of *popular habitus* employed in this article has been analytically developed in a previous contribution (Graziano, 2025b), where it was proposed as an update of the Bourdieusian framework for qualitative digital research. In the present study, this conceptualisation is not reformulated but rather mobilised as an analytical lens to investigate how locally rooted dispositions are reproduced and made visible within platform-mediated environments. Accordingly, *popular habitus* is defined here as "the set of practical dispositions, behavioural schemes, and attitudes, characterised by a specific aesthetic, shaped within particular historical and social contexts, which acquire an internalised and shared semantic meaning among subjects who occupy more or less similar positions within the social field, as a function of a tacit but constantly present autochthonous rootedness that orients their trajectories".

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Although this definition does not correspond exactly to Bourdieu's classical formulations of habitus, it draws explicitly on one of his later definitions presented in *La misère du monde*, where habitus is understood as "the acquisition of forms of capital that exist in an embodied state" (Bourdieu et al., 1993, p. 17). From this perspective, distinctions among forms of capital become crucial for the formation of habitus. Bourdieu identifies four main types of capital, namely economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. However, as argued in Graziano (2025a), these classical forms are not always fully operationalisable in digital sociological analysis, particularly when studying platform-based content and practices.

For this reason, the present research adopts an updated notion of *popular habitus*, integrating additional forms of capital that can be empirically traced in digital environments. Specifically, to grasp the formation of *onlife habitus*, this study includes erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) and autochthonous capital (Chamboredon, 1982; Retière, 2003) within Bourdieu's classical distribution of capitals. Erotic capital, as defined by Hakim, consists of six components, beauty, sex appeal, social interaction skills, liveliness, presentation, and sexuality or sexual competence, and can be understood as the set of attributes capable of eliciting an erotic response in others. Acknowledging the social relevance of sexual desirability, Hakim conceptualises erotic capital as a personal asset and later integrates it with social capital, arriving at the notion of "spornosexual capital".

Erotic capital can be traced back to symbolic capital, understood here as a form of immediate recognition that is always situated within a specific context of autochthony that is physical, social, and temporal. Erotic desirability cannot be adequately captured through numerical indicators alone without taking into account the local cultural context in which it is produced and evaluated. From this perspective, the interaction between erotic capital and autochthonous capital appears particularly suited to the study of digital practices on TikTok.

The second form of capital introduced is autochthonous capital, defined as the set of resources deriving from belonging to localised networks of relationships. These resources are primarily symbolic and are connected to prestige, recognition, and shared meanings. Autochthonous capital is closely linked to processes of primary and secondary socialisation and refers to the subjective elaboration of socialisation, that is, to the ways in which socialisation mechanisms become embodied resources. The early stages of life are particularly decisive in this respect, as the autochthonous context plays a central role in shaping habitus, which becomes embedded at the cognitive level and translates into practices that individuals are unlikely to abandon, regardless of the accumulation of other forms of capital.

Autochthonous capital concerns the peer groups with whom individuals grow up, both in childhood and adolescence, where ambitions and aspirations

are forged and aesthetic models are adopted and mythologised. Context, therefore, plays a key role in the formation and persistence of habitus. These two forms of capital are mobilised in this study because, according to our interpretation of digital phenomena on TikTok, they are particularly effective in capturing online practices and function as additional analytical indicators for the selection of empirical cases, as discussed in the methodological section.

3. Methodology

In this study, we adopted digital methods, specifically digital ethnography (Caliandro & Gandini, 2019), to investigate the research questions concerning the reproduction of Neapolitan popular culture on TikTok. The overall research objective was to explore how popular cultural dispositions, aesthetics, and practices are reproduced and made visible on the platform.

The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Is there an analogy between the popular aesthetics circulating on TikTok and the hedonistic search for gourmand food?
- 2) Is there an analogy between the popular aesthetics circulating on TikTok and the construction of a “popular” desirable masculinity?
- 3) How do TikTok creators contribute to redefining both Neapolitan gastronomic aesthetics and models of desirable masculinity?
- 4) Does the platform structure of TikTok enable subjects who embody a popular habitus to reproduce online what they desire, without the hegemonic mediation of bourgeois culture?

To address the research questions, two empirical investigations were conducted following a shared methodological framework. In both cases, newly created TikTok accounts were used in order to reduce the effects of algorithmic personalisation linked to previous user activity (Airoldi, 2024). The field of observation was deliberately restricted to the urban context of Naples. During the exploratory phase of the digital ethnography, carried out between March and April 2024, a set of keywords were tested within the platform’s search function to examine the types of content prioritised by the algorithm.

For the first case study, centred on the *malessere* trend, the keywords “relationships”, “couples”, “love”, and “romantic relationships” were employed. The search results generated a large corpus of videos associated with the hashtag #malessere. From this material, 70 profiles were selected according to qualitative criteria related to content production, including medium-to-high levels of engagement, aesthetic and communicative coherence, and the intensity and tone of audience interaction in the comment sections. Based on observable features, the profiles were analytically grouped into four

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categories: (1) individual male profiles, (2) individual female profiles, (3) couple profiles, and (4) commercial profiles. For each profile, one video considered particularly significant for the reproduction of desirable masculinity was selected and subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis. This procedure resulted in the construction of a dataset composed of 24 analytical variables, including only profiles that displayed consistent and recognisable engagement with the trend.

The same methodological approach was applied to the second case study, dedicated to popular gastronomic content. In this case, the keywords “set menu”, “all you can eat”, and “where to eat in Naples on a budget” were used. From a large corpus of videos related to food and catering practices in the Campania region, 86 profiles were selected according to their relevance for content production, medium-to-high engagement, aesthetic and communicative style, and the nature of user interactions. Once identified, these profiles were followed over time, and a manual dataset of 10 variables was constructed. For each profile, one video considered emblematic of the case study was selected and analysed in depth. All videos were extracted and examined manually through qualitative analysis; no automated software was used for either data extraction or coding.

In both empirical studies, the analytical focus was on reconstructing how Neapolitan popular culture is reproduced through practices, behaviours, dispositions to act, aesthetic representations, and internalised customs and traditions, that is, through habitus (Wacquant, 2010). In order to operationalise the concept of popular habitus discussed in the theoretical section, we relied on Bourdieu’s framework of capital (1979), integrating it with erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) and autochthonous capital (Chamboredon, 1982; Retière, 2003) as analytical indicators suitable for digital content analysis.

These two forms of capital proved particularly effective for reconstructing popular aesthetic representations and practices in online environments. They were treated qualitatively and operationalised through the use of indirect indicators during the analysis of digital content. Accordingly, alongside basic descriptive variables such as gender, engagement levels, and publication dates, we employed indirect indicators understood as analytical categories that allow concrete or abstract objects to be classified and named, thus reducing their level of abstraction and making them empirically observable (Amaturo & Punziano, 2016). These indicators concerned elements related to aesthetics, idiomatic and dialectal expressions, local objects and concepts, modes of representation, and embodied practices that signal the incorporation of a popular habitus. The specific indicators used to operationalise autochthonous capital and erotic capital are detailed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Indicators of autochthonous capital Source: author's re-elaboration, 2025

Size	Elements of analysis
Dialectisms; idiomatic expressions Autochthonous language	Vulgar expressions local dialects Neapolitan dialect
Local objects and concepts	Motorbikes (Transalp; Tmax) Sunglasses; Gold necklace; Sling bag local food, home-grown gourmet products, etc.
Geocalisation	Geographical location where the contents were generated
Representation based on local items	Subjects' willingness to act and behaviour patterns attributable to specific contexts
Elements related to the reference context	Home furnishings or in restaurants, neighborhoods where videos were filmed, football teams supported, social and physical space
Music	Urban trap, trap music, Neapolitan neo-melodic, traditional music of the Neapolitan culture, heard in commercial Venues

Table 2 Indicators of erotic capital. Source: author's re-elaboration, 2025

Size	Elements of analysis
Video captions	Example: They are ovulating and the malessere breathes near me; two evils that mate; Cutting the malessere: how beautiful This pizza is for the people; have you ever seen such a big sandwich?; This cutting board is orgasmic
Type of comments related to the video	Example: I want the boy to be so jealous; I want him to like My new haircut, I just want him to be so jealous of it this pizza; it's so beautiful; I love just seeing it before eating it; it looks so
Facial expressions and details about food products	The way the subject looks at the camera, the subject who kisses the screen, shows self-confidence; facial expressions, eyebrow movements to increase his desirability.
Self-promotion, self-care, and product branding	For the malessere: Fixing their clothes, their hairstyles, their eyebrows, filming themselves putting on perfume. For the food: details in the way the shots are framed on the product; details such as stringy mozzarella; sauces highlighted; the spectacularisation of food.
Aesthetics of subjects and objects	For malessere: 'Mullet' haircut, a look that brings to mind urban American imagery mixed with Neapolitan popular culture; For food: products: close-up of the size of the product; detail of the breading; the crispiness of the product
Bodily dispositions	videos with a strong erotic component, such as couples showing their intimacy For the food trend, emulate the moans of orgasm after eating a gourmet dish.
Number of likes and comments in the videos	Content engagement
Clothing	Monitor the aesthetic style, for example, for men: Adidas or Nike shoes, Nike sweatshirts, Adidas Dsquared2 leather jacket, jeans, Kappa or North Face sweatsuit

4. Digital content analysis

4.1 *The construction of desirable masculinity as a matter of popular habitus*

TikTok videos portraying the intimate relationships of young Neapolitans display a wide range of relational moments, oscillating between jealousy, conflict, and forms of violence, as well as moments characterised by strong erotic tension. The analysis of the digital content included in the dataset shows that these subjects, who embody a popular habitus, are perceived as desirable by many young women, not only by those who come from similar social contexts.

The *malessere* trend, as it emerges from the analysis of male profiles, is characterised by a set of shared predispositions, cognitive schemes, and a highly standardised aesthetic and behavioural repertoire (Willis, 2008). The distinctive traits that define male profiles as *Malesseri* include, first and foremost, specific bodily markers and consumption styles, as illustrated in Figure 1. The figure depicts three barber shops located in working-class neighbourhoods of the Campania region that explicitly promote the so-called “Malesseri haircut,” signalling the consolidation of a recognisable aesthetic code.

Beyond hairstyle and tattoos, this ideal type of young man who embodies a popular habitus displays a carefully curated bodily aesthetic. Attention to personal grooming, shaped eyebrows, and clothing brands associated with American urban hip-hop imagery (Wacquant, 2016) are recurrent elements. As shown in Figure 2, the *malessere* aesthetic has also become explicitly commodified. Some local commercial profiles mobilise the trend to promote clothing and accessories, presenting them as essential items for becoming a “true Malesseri.” In this sense, the figure of the *Malesseri* is not only stylised but effectively branded. The selfies displayed on the left side of Figure 2 exemplify how young men use their adherence to the trend to circulate symbolic capital and actively cultivate erotic capital.

Figure 1. *Aesthetics of malesseri*. Source: authors’ re-elaboration, 2025; content retrieved March 2024

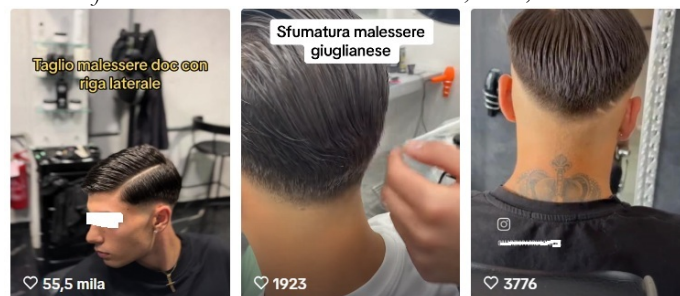
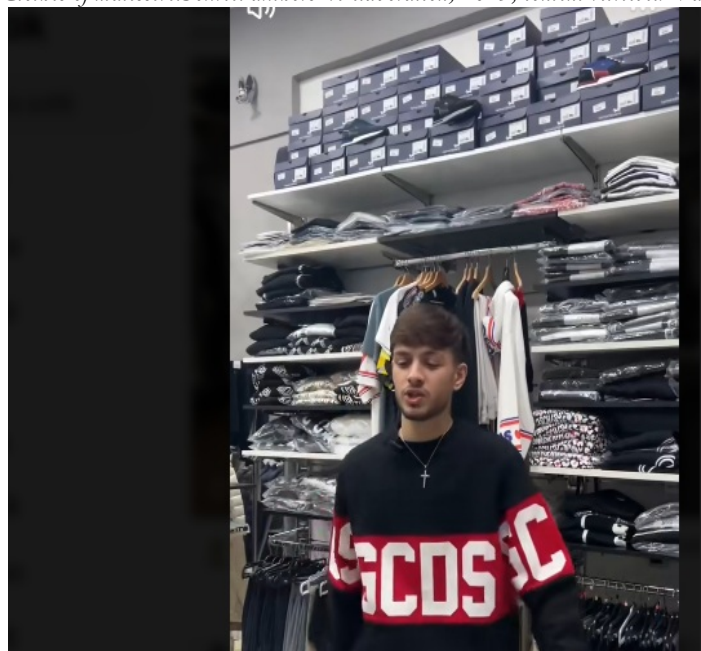


Figure 2. Clothes of *malessere*. Source: authors' re-elaboration, 2025; content retrieved March 2024



Sound also plays a central role in the construction of this masculine identity. Most *Malessere* videos are accompanied by Neapolitan music genres such as urban trap, rap, Neapolitan hip-hop, and neomelodic songs. The centrality of the sound dimension is structurally embedded in the TikTok interface itself (Marino & Surace, 2023). Trap music, in particular, is deeply involved in the identity work of these young men. In this respect, they display several features highlighted by scholars associated with the Birmingham School (Hall & Jefferson, 2006), who conceptualise youth cultures as subcultures that maintain collective identity through shared practices and dispositions. Here, identity construction revolves around autochthonous cultural and symbolic elements connected to everyday life in the Neapolitan hyper-ghettos.

The videos portray a ritualised daily routine marked by precarious and informal work, petty crime, the use of specific types of scooters, intense bodily self-care practices such as beauty salons and tanning lamps, the wearing of branded sportswear often associated with street culture, and the display of ostentatious gifts for girlfriends, including large bouquets of roses, stuffed animals, jewellery, and smartphones. Across male profiles, self-representation is largely organised around sexual desirability and the performative display of masculinity.

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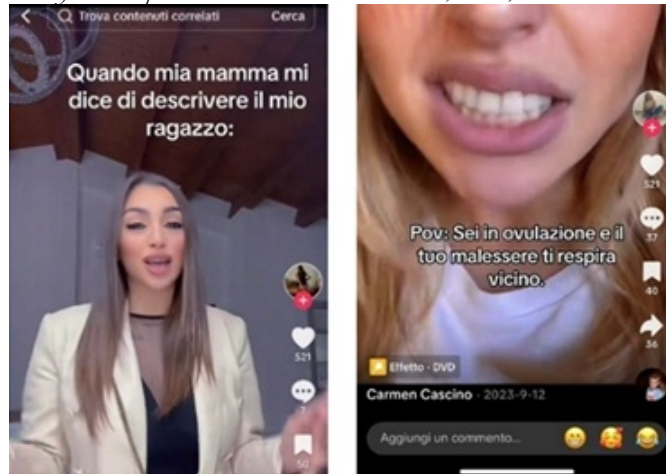
Erotic desire associated with the *malessere* trend emerges even more clearly in female and couple profiles. Couple accounts frequently display highly intimate moments, often filmed in private spaces such as bedrooms, accompanied by explicit declarations of love and Neapolitan music in the background. In these videos, intimacy is framed as a central expressive dimension of the trend and is made visible through gestures, bodily proximity, and affective language.

Erotic dimensions are also evident in many female profiles, where intimacy is often articulated through captions, self-presentations, and performative references to desire that explicitly draw on the symbolic vocabulary of *malessere*. In this context, intimacy is not presented as a private or marginal aspect of social life but as a publicly shared and culturally recognisable mode of expression, embedded within the aesthetic and affective grammar of the trend.

These contents reveal how relational intimacy is publicly staged on TikTok together with a strong sense of belonging to the digital trend. One of the most consistent findings of the analysis concerns female agency. Young women are not only involved in the reproduction of dominant cultural models by actively participating in their own subordination (Bourdieu, 1998), but they also engage in symbolic practices aimed at gaining recognition, approval, and belonging within peer groups.

The presence of a specifically “popular” erotic desire is further confirmed by videos in which young women openly declare their attraction to *malessere* for both aesthetic and behavioural reasons. In several cases, women list the characteristics they expect from an ideal partner, all of which correspond to the traits outlined above. Figure 3 offers a particularly explicit example: the caption accompanying the video reads “*sono in ovulazione e il malessere mi respira vicino, lo mangio*” (“I’m in my fertile period and the Malessere is breathing next to me, I could eat him”), openly articulating desire for this masculine ideal type.

Figure 3. Intimacy as a couple- Source: authors're-elaboration, 2025; content retrieved March 2024



4.2 Excessive behaviour in Neapolitan couples

The behaviours emerging in videos that depict intimate relationships are consistently characterised by elements of excess and abundance. In many videos centred on conflict, often triggered by jealousy, forms of exaggerated violence prevail, mainly enacted by men but, in some cases, also by women. These interactions are rarely moderated and are instead amplified through the performative logic of the platform.

Male protagonists frequently reproduce patterns of male dominance marked by forms of exaggeration that resonate with the cultural imagery of the Campania region. In several videos, control over the partner is enacted through highly symbolic gestures, such as violently tearing clothes, throwing objects, or staging scenes of intimidation. Women, in turn, often respond with equally intense emotional reactions, including shouting and overt expressions of anger. Both moments of conflict and displays of affection are mediated online through a shared aesthetic of excess: declarations of love, hyper-romantic gestures, ostentatious gifts shown without discretion, and intimate moments that couples openly expose to the audience.

Excessive and abundant gift-giving constitutes a distinctive element of the *malessere* model. As illustrated in Figure 4, some videos depict extreme forms of gifting, such as a young man offering his girlfriend an entire box of chocolate eggs or even a live pig. These scenes are not presented as ironic exceptions but as coherent expressions of an affective economy grounded in abundance and

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spectacularisation. More generally, content analysis shows that the gifts offered by a *Malessere* boyfriend, large bouquets of roses, clothes, jewellery, and other luxury items, are frequently received with visible enthusiasm and appreciation by female partners, reinforcing the association between excess, desirability, and masculine recognition.

Figure 4: excessive gifts Source: authors' re-elaboration, 2025; content retrieved March 2024



4.3 Gastronomic aesthetics popular gourmand

The profiles included in the dataset comprise trattorias, restaurants, pubs, and pizzerias that deliberately adopt a “popular” visual and communicative style in their TikTok presence. These establishments systematically mobilise the logics of excess, abundance, and low cost as central elements of their promotional strategy. All the activities observed are located in Campania, primarily in the provinces of Naples and Caserta, with a significant concentration in urban areas historically characterised by popular-class settlements.

In most cases, the production of digital content is handled directly by the owners or staff of the establishments, resulting in videos that closely mirror the actual food offerings and everyday practices of the venues. Unlike patterns commonly observed on Instagram, where food influencers often act as intermediaries between businesses and audiences (Bainotti et al., 2021), sponsored content appears only marginally in this dataset. When sponsorship does occur, it generally involves local food-related pages that have already achieved a degree of visibility on Instagram, such as “Napoli Food Porn” or “Il mio viaggio a Napoli”, rather than professional influencer marketing campaigns.

From the perspective of gender composition, the creators featured in the dataset show a relatively balanced distribution between men and women. Nevertheless, the circulation of gastronomic content tends to reiterate traditional gendered divisions of labour. Male figures are predominantly represented as owners or authoritative voices of the business, often addressing the audience

directly and framing the offer. Women, by contrast, appear more frequently while performing practical tasks, such as cooking, serving customers, or working behind the counter. These representational patterns contribute to the persistence of a conventional gastronomic imaginary, in which gender roles remain largely aligned with established cultural norms.

A further distinctive feature emerging from the analysis concerns the widespread use of highly standardised promotional expressions, repeated across videos with minimal variation. Phrases such as “It’s for everyone”, “Only ten euros”, “Here you can eat a lot for very little”, or “You only have fifteen euros? That’s not a problem” operate as rhetorical devices that foreground accessibility, generosity, and affordability. As observed in multiple cases, this communicative style closely resembles the discursive practices historically associated with open-air markets and informal commercial settings aimed at a popular clientele (Di Maggio, 1995). Through these recurring formulas, creators activate a shared cultural repertoire that resonates with popular modes of exchange and reinforces a collective understanding of food consumption as abundant, inclusive, and opposed to restrictive or elitist gastronomic norms.

4.4 From a reference to tradition to a cultural mashup

Neapolitan popular gastronomic culture, as it circulates on TikTok, is characterised by an aesthetic grammar grounded in accessibility, rapid gratification, and embodied engagement. The foods showcased in these videos are generally dishes that can be easily reproduced in domestic settings and that do not rely on the specialised skills or technical refinement associated with haute cuisine. Rather than aspiring to culinary distinction, these representations reactivate long-standing models of popular food provision centred on generous portions and affordable prices. In this respect, creators rework the fixed-menu logic historically associated with Neapolitan trattorias, translating it into a platform-specific reinterpretation of the “all-you-can-eat” format.

Across a substantial share of the analysed material, this reconfiguration is accompanied by a pronounced nostalgic framing (Gandini, 2020). Creators frequently rely on familiar expressions that evoke domesticity and tradition, such as references to eating “like at a grandmother’s house” or to the rediscovery of “authentic” trattoria experiences. As illustrated in multiple videos in the dataset, these narratives mobilise a collective memory of affordable fixed menus that allowed customers to sample a wide range of dishes associated with local culinary repertoires, reinforcing an idea of abundance rooted in conviviality rather than exclusivity.

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At the same time, a number of pizzerias adopt representational strategies aligned with gourmand formats that draw explicitly on popular cultural codes (Dei, 2018). Their content positions itself in opposition to what is commonly labelled as “contemporary pizza”, a style that has gained prominence through Instagram-driven visual regimes privileging aesthetic refinement and formal presentation (Verrastro et al., 2020). On Meta platforms, contemporary pizza is typically showcased through highly stylised imagery emphasising dough hydration, ingredient provenance, and artisanal processes, and is offered at comparatively elevated prices.

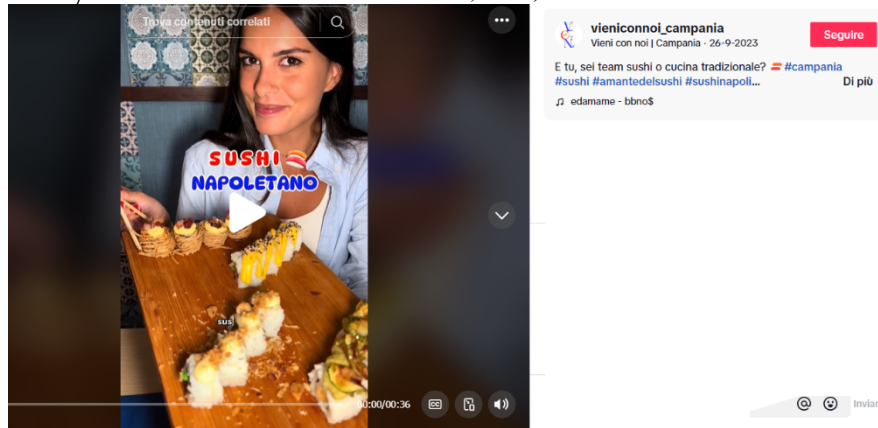
To justify these price points, pizzerias specialising in contemporary pizza often circulate explanatory videos detailing production costs, ingredient quality, and labour intensity. In reaction, the establishments analysed in this study produce counter-narratives that openly contest such pricing strategies, reaffirming a popular understanding of pizza as an everyday and accessible food. This antagonism is frequently articulated through vernacular expressions that symbolically reclaim pizza as belonging to ordinary people, reinforcing its status as a shared cultural good rather than a marker of distinction.

While these dynamics draw heavily on imaginaries of tradition and local authenticity, they also exemplify the capacity of TikTok to facilitate the circulation of content that is easily standardised and scalable across contexts (Nieborg et al., 2022). Within this infrastructural setting, creators engage in glocal reinterpretations of established recipes, producing hybrid combinations that merge heterogeneous culinary references. These cultural mashups, often incompatible with the normative principles of “slow food”, highlight how popular gastronomy on TikTok is simultaneously anchored in local repertoires and oriented towards global platform logics.

In this context, TikTok creators intertwine the non-Neapolitan genealogy of the “all you can eat” formula, today commonly associated with Asian cuisines, particularly Japanese sushi, with local culinary repertoires. This model has much older origins and re-emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with the diffusion of Swedish smörgåsbord and brännvinsbord.

Contemporary creators revitalise this formula while incorporating Neapolitan dishes, producing hybrid formats such as “Neapolitan sushi”. As shown in Figure 5, this gastronomic mashup reproduces the visual and compositional conventions of sushi while substituting its contents with aubergine parmigiana and other emblematic dishes of Neapolitan cuisine.

Figure 5 Neapolitan sushi- Source: authors' re-elaboration, 2025; content retrieved March 2024



A further widely circulating format in the contemporary reconfiguration of popular Neapolitan taste revolves around the recurring catchphrase “Ti fidi di me?” (“Do you trust me?”), introduced and disseminated by the TikTok creator Patrizio Chianese. Rather than functioning as a mere slogan, this expression structures a specific mode of interaction through which the creator redefines the consumption experience. The phrase operates as a performative invitation, establishing a relationship of trust that precedes and frames the act of consumption itself.

Within this format, a traditionally inexpensive street-food product, namely the hot dog, is reworked through an extreme logic of accumulation. Ingredients such as sausage, cheddar, bacon, fries, caramelised onions, ketchup, mayonnaise, parmesan, and additional portions of fries are progressively layered, producing an exaggerated composition that exceeds the conventional boundaries of the dish. In this configuration, abundance is not simply a quantitative attribute but becomes an organising aesthetic principle that shapes both narration and presentation.

The appeal of this format does not reside solely in the final product but also in the staged interaction between creator and consumer. The ritualised question “Do you trust me?” introduces an element of suspense and anticipation, temporarily suspending ordinary expectations and transforming consumption into a performative experience. Trust, surprise, and affective engagement thus become integral components of value creation, reinforcing the spectacular dimension of popular gastronomy on TikTok.

This logic of excess is not limited to the reconfiguration of individual products but extends to the broader appropriation and reworking of heterogeneous

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culinary repertoires. Within the dataset, this is evident in the circulation of pizzas flavoured with carbonara sauce, pizzas topped with spaghetti carbonara, and American-style sandwiches assembled in portions so oversized that they challenge individual consumption. These hybrid creations prioritise scale, density, and sensory saturation over culinary coherence or nutritional balance.

Across the analysed content, creators position themselves competitively by combining low prices with exaggerated abundance. Menus are strategically designed to aggregate flavours collectively imagined as “fatty” and “tasty”, drawing on a shared popular repertoire of indulgent foods. Marketing practices thus converge around an explicit orientation towards pleasure, with gastronomic offerings structured to foreground immediacy and gratification rather than restraint or refinement.

Within this framework, naming practices further consolidate the emphasis on bodily pleasure and sensory intensity. Dish names frequently evoke ideas of indulgence, surrender, or overwhelming enjoyment, contributing to a semantic register in which eating is framed as an immersive and affect-laden experience rather than a regulated or reflective practice. Linguistic choices operate alongside visual and narrative strategies that emphasise accumulation, density, and saturation, staging desire as a legitimate and openly celebrated dimension of popular consumption.

Taken together, these elements contribute to the construction of a gastronomic aesthetic grounded in embodied enjoyment, excess, and shared affect, reaffirming the centrality of popular taste as a culturally meaningful and collectively negotiated form of consumption within platformised environments.

5. Conclusions: The pursuit of pleasure as a matter of popular habitus

In summary, by interpreting the results of this exploratory investigation, we argue that a series of recurring patterns emerge in the construction of a popular aesthetic both in the field of desirable masculinity and in gastronomic consumption. Within the geographically delimited context of Campania, the first case study highlights how the *malessere* trend succeeds in representing a masculine prototype characterised by a strong autochthonous rootedness, which guarantees erotic desirability and positions this figure as a model and aesthetic standard for heterosexual men. The *malessere* reintroduces elements of identity in the construction of masculinity that are taken for granted and perceived as “natural”, and which, as highlighted by the analysis, directly shape desirability. The examination of videos and digital content demonstrates that the reproduction of specific behaviours, physical traits, and aesthetic dispositions contributes to increasing the desirability of young Neapolitan men. Within the erotic field

(Green, 2008), as observed in this context, these practices render the *malessere* desirable to both men and women, who naturalise and reproduce the attributes of hegemonic masculinity as theorised by Connell (Demetriou, 2001).

Empirical analysis also makes it possible to identify a strong analogy between the “popular” aesthetics of TikTok and the construction of desirable masculinity embodied by the *malessere*. In continuity with other platform trends, TikTok promotes a form of popular culture (Dei, 2018) in which pre-existing social types such as the *malessere* find an unprecedented space for representation, circulation, and legitimisation, with effects that differ from those observed on other digital platforms. This opens up new avenues for sociological reflection on the platformisation of popular cultures.

The second empirical case, centred on the diffusion of a *gourmand* gastronomic model, brings to the surface dynamics already identified in studies of consumer culture, where members of popular classes pursue immediate hedonistic pleasure without projecting consumption choices into the future, a disposition also linked to material living conditions (Capuzzo, 2006). The corporeality and explicit sexual allusions conveyed through dish names such as “culinary orgasm” or “orgasm cutting board” point to a search for immediate gratification rather than long-term aspirations. Pleasure emerges here independently of the symbolic valorisation of food as a status marker, which instead characterises bourgeois gastronomic aesthetics. Practices such as ultra-cheap street food, disregard for formal gastronomic rules, and the fusion of heterogeneous culinary traditions collectively constitute a new empirical framework for analysing contemporary representations of food consumption.

Across both case studies, TikTok appears as a platform that enables popular culture to be publicly articulated without the filters and constraints traditionally imposed by bourgeois cultural mediation. Subjects who embody a popular habitus are not only able to represent themselves, but also to articulate the identity models to which they aspire, their desires, and their everyday practices. Consumer choices are thus closely intertwined with social positioning and with lifestyles sedimented over time. Through TikTok, the popular habitus becomes visible in the symbolic production and consumption practices that structure everyday life.

The aesthetics of abundance and excess, defined in this study through the notion of *gourmand* consumption and mirrored in the behavioural dispositions of the *malessere*, refer to a historically situated imaginary of popular-class consumption styles, marked by limited concern for health and product quality (Capuzzo, 2006). Returning to Bourdieu’s framework, the popular habitus seeks pleasure by privileging embodied, immediate enjoyment and by renouncing foresight and planning (Bourdieu, 1979), thereby alleviating *il logorio della vita moderna* (the wear and tear of modern life).

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While platforms such as Instagram have predominantly reproduced a bourgeois gourmet aesthetic grounded in asceticism, resource accumulation, and the display of future-oriented success (Manovich, 2019; Caliandro et al., 2024), this exploratory investigation highlights that TikTok platformises a different objective, namely the open manifestation of immediate gratification. The convergence between the *malessere* trend and *gourmand* consumption practices suggests a countertrend to discourses centred on health, sustainability, and emotionally balanced relationships.

Finally, it is important to stress that both empirical cases analysed in this article are part of a broader and ongoing research programme on the mediatisation of Neapolitan popular culture, conducted through digital ethnography and extended empirical observation. The present contribution does not aim to produce generalisable claims, but rather to lay the groundwork for a pilot study capable of guiding future, more in-depth investigations through mixed methods and traditional social science fieldwork. The abundance of gifts, intense romantic relationships, excessive displays of affection, high-calorie dishes, and the eroticisation of food all emerge as key analytical dimensions that call for further research into the interplay between platform structures, social context, and habitus in contemporary digital cultures

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