

HEALTHY FOOD, AS TOLD BY TIKTOK

A Thematic Analysis of the Most Liked #healthyrecipes on TikTok

Kaitlin Sandberg, BA, Olivia Banerjee, Cristen Harris, PhD, RDN, CD, CEDS, CSSD, CEP, FAND, Michelle Averill, PhD, RDN



INTRODUCTION

As a growing video-sharing platform with massive reach, TikTok is shaping food culture through the popular hashtag #healthyrecipes. TikTok videos have the ability to influence health attitudes and behaviors, yet little is known about what characterizes the healthy food landscape on TikTok.

Research Question

How do the most popular healthy recipe videos on TikTok define healthy food?

METHODS

- Inductive qualitative coding was used to perform a thematic analysis of the most liked videos on TikTok with the hashtag #healthyrecipes.
- The top 150 videos were cataloged and downloaded over 3 consecutive days in early November 2021. Video visuals, audio, captions, and hashtags were included in the dataset.
- An initial review excluded 40 videos, which were predominantly non-English, presented technical issues, or shared similar messages from the same creator.
- A multi-phase qualitative analysis was conducted among the final sample (n=110) using inductive coding methods.
- The code frame was iteratively developed by a collaborative team of researchers, and each video was independently coded by two researchers employing Dedoose software.
- Codes were consolidated into themes and sub-themes to address the primary research question.

RESULTS

Three overarching themes were identified. The most popular healthy recipes on TikTok portray healthy food as:

- 1 PRACTICAL SKILLS**
 - Addressing barriers to cooking at home
 - Confidence-building in the kitchen
 - Maintaining a cooking routine
- 2 PERFORMATIVE WELLNESS**
 - Ingredient-based wellness trends
 - Functional foods and health benefits
 - Vegan and plant-based
- 2A. SENSORY & EXCITING**
 - Healthy food doesn't have to be boring
 - Experimentation and food hacks
 - Bright colors and indulgent textures
- 3 WEIGHT NORMATIVE**
 - Eating for weight loss
 - Permissible indulgence and reducing guilt
 - Explicitly showing "ideal" body



DISCUSSION

TikTok provides a platform for examining broader perceptions of health in food culture. The #healthyrecipes space highlights many aspects of wellness culture at large:

- Building habits through repetition and preparation
- Singular ingredients and health claims have the power to designate health
- Reinforcing an association between weight and health
- Attaching morality to foods and health behaviors
- Focusing on individual behaviors over systemic barriers
- Assuming access to a variety of foods and cooking tools

Conclusion

The themes uncovered present an opportunity for nutrition educators to take a critical approach in understanding how social media platforms amplify wellness culture ideas and shape health messaging.

Given the highly individualized nature of the TikTok algorithm, further research is needed to understand whether these results are reflective of the individual user experience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express deep gratitude to my research assistant, Olivia Banerjee, whose reflections and partnership provided valuable insight. I would also like to thank my advisors, Michelle Averill and Cristen Harris, who helped develop my ideas and guided me throughout this study.