

# Small Stories with Food Allergies on TikTok: Design Opportunities for Social Technologies Supporting Health

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TikTok has become a prominent space for people to speak out about food allergies, a chronic and potentially life-threatening condition that requires constant vigilance. TikTok videos about food allergies were created to share lived experiences, build connection, and raise awareness. Using content analysis through a small stories lens, we examine the messages conveyed in TikTok videos and how they are crafted using platform affordances, such as text overlays and visual storytelling, to express vulnerability, negotiate safety, and call for changes. Our study contributes to HCI by advancing understanding of (1) fragmented, multimodal health storytelling and (2) participatory public health narratives that challenge stigma and advocate for inclusion. We also identify design opportunities to better support expressive, community-driven health storytelling on social media.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and Social Computing**; *Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: health; social media; food allergies; healthy eating; storytelling

## 1 Introduction

Food allergies are a growing public health concern, affecting many individuals globally [66]. They pose significant physical, emotional, and social challenges, as those affected must constantly navigate environments and interactions that may inadvertently expose them to life-threatening allergens. Despite their severity, food allergies are often misrepresented as minor or subtle conditions. This leads to public perception that contributes to their frequent dismissal in everyday interactions and broader media. Oftentimes, food allergies are portrayed as exaggerated, comedic, or inconvenient, which reinforces misunderstanding and social exclusion [49, 71].

People with food allergies have been using social media to find support, share their experiences, and promote public awareness [71]. On social media platforms such as TikTok, creators commonly use short videos, skits, affirmations, tutorials, and stitched responses to express messages and opinions about food allergies. Rather than communicated through complete or linear illness narratives, these experiences are more commonly expressed through brief moments, reactions, and partial accounts of everyday life—what is referred to as *small stories* [3]. Small stories in our study capture fragmented moments of living with food allergies, such as responding to a harmful comment, asserting a boundary in public, or offering a quick reminder about accommodation.

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Collectively, these small stories accumulate across posts and interactions, becoming a powerful way that people make sense of their condition, contest stigma, and reframe what it means to live with food allergies in everyday social contexts.

While prior HCI research has examined online health communities and illness narratives [15, 33, 34], much of this work has emphasized concrete storytelling and support-seeking exchanges. Less attention has been paid to how health experiences are communicated through brief, multimodal, and algorithmically distributed narratives that are characteristic of contemporary social media platforms like TikTok. Understanding these small stories is important because they constitute a primary way that health-related meanings are produced and exist in public-facing, non-clinical settings. In particular, examining how fragmented, multimodal stories are crafted through platform affordances helps provide insights into how everyday interactions on social media contribute to the normalization or reinterpretation of food allergy experiences outside formal health contexts. Our study is guided by the research question: *How do people tell stories about their experiences living with food allergies using TikTok videos?*

To answer this question, we conducted a content analysis of TikTok videos containing food allergy-related content. We manually searched on TikTok and analyzed a set of 202 videos. We reviewed each video's narrative, stylistic representation, and interactive characteristics. We found that themes of self-advocacy, inclusivity, and community support emerged in TikTok videos. Videos for individuals with food allergies often call for resilience and shared understanding, while content for general audiences emphasizes education, accommodation, and systemic change.

Our study contributes to the HCI literature by deepening the understanding of health narratives and messages on TikTok, including (1) meaningful health storytelling through fragmented, multimodal expression and (2) participatory public health narratives that challenge stigma, shift public attitudes, and advocate for inclusion. We also offer design directions for supporting flexible, expressive health storytelling in social media spaces like TikTok.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Narratives of Health in HCI

Sharing stories is a powerful way for individuals to interpret their experiences, connect with others, and shape both how they see themselves and how they are seen socially [29, 39, 55]. Beyond its interpersonal role, storytelling serves as a tool to communicate complex information in accessible ways, making abstract or complex ideas more accessible. Because stories are often easily memorable, they are more likely to encourage actions and reflections over time [52].

In the context of illness, narratives provide a means for individuals to express their lived realities of navigating health conditions [24, 37]. Narrative practices have a long history in clinical and care settings. Work in narrative medicine highlights how patients' stories are essential to building empathy, making sense of illness, and strengthening the relationship between patients and providers, positioning storytelling as central to clinical understanding rather than supplementary to biomedical data [35]. Related healthcare storytelling initiatives (such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' *My Life, My Story* program) [44] have operationalized these ideas by systematically collecting and sharing patients' personal narratives to humanize care and inform clinical practice.

While this work tends to focus on structured narratives guided by clinicians, social media platforms introduce more informal, self-directed, and publicly situated modes of health storytelling. CSCW scholarship has examined how individuals living with mental health challenges use digital platforms to share personal experiences, seek validation, and build community [15]. While these studies may not explicitly frame their analysis through narrative theory, they reflect key elements of storytelling: users document their experiences with depression,



anxiety, or recovery, disclose struggles to online peers, or construct meaning through posts and interactions [1, 73]. For example, exchanging written personal stories in an online breast cancer community brought the members closer to each other [32]. While these studies shed positive light, the performative and playful nature of these online platforms also raised other concerns. For example, Mittal et al. analyzed public discourse around mental health on TikTok and show how mental illness is sometimes pathologized, romanticized, or reduced to trends [41].

Previous research has highlighted the value of a “small stories” approach on social media, in opposition to “big stories” that refer to reflective and cohesive biographical accounts, often told during interviews or prompted situations where participants are asked to recount major life events or turning points [3, 26, 27]. Small stories are brief, everyday narratives that can reveal how people navigate life and identity in informal ways. Research in small stories pays attention to ways these stories are constructed on social media. The small stories framework attends to how people narrate experiences through situated moments of interaction. In this framework, *tales* refer to what is being narrated: the events, experiences, concerns, or claims that a story is organized around. *Tellers*, broadly referred to as the communicators involved in shaping a story, perform *stancetaking* and position themselves, others, and the events being narrated through evaluation, alignment, critique, humor, affect, or moral judgment. The small stories framework also examines the *site* and *ways of telling*, highlighting the context and styles in which stories are narrated and interpreted [26].

For instance, Stage (2019) analyzed a cancer patient’s illness narratives on Instagram by attending to momentary posts, visual content, and the narrative affordances of the platform. Through this lens, the study showed how patients construct public identities and engage in affective storytelling that is co-produced with their followers [63]. Similarly, Feuston and Piper (2019) examined everyday mental health disclosures on Instagram, exploring how users use images, captions, and hashtags to negotiate visibility, seek support, and perform identity work around mental illness. Their work revealed how informal and fragmented expressions can be important in expressing lived illness experiences, managing stigma, and cultivating authenticity in digital publics [22]. These studies highlight the value of attending to how health stories are constructed and shared in contextually specific, often non-linear ways.

Using this lens of small stories [26], we examine TikTok videos not only for *what* they reveal about food allergy experiences, but also for *how* these stories are constructed [56, 62] through a narrative stance, platform-specific designs as sites of telling, and multimodal expression of tellers. Rather than full autobiographical accounts, these brief, everyday narratives reflect how users perform identity and circulate social meaning within the playful, participatory environment of TikTok. We focus on food allergies, a serious yet often misunderstood condition that is frequently downplayed in daily life. While life-threatening, the ongoing experiences of managing food allergies, such as avoiding unsafe foods, dealing with social stigma, or educating others, are often shared through short, seemingly minor posts. By analyzing these small stories, we show how people with food allergies use social media to make their experiences visible, advocate for themselves, and challenge the tendency to overlook their condition as trivial. We use the term narrative to refer not only to explicit personal stories, but more broadly to how creators frame, express, and make meaning of food allergy experiences on TikTok. Drawing on the small stories framework [26], we consider storytelling to include a wide range of narrative practices, such as anecdotes, reenactments, reflections, affirmations, and advocacy, that unfold through TikTok’s multimodal, performative, and often non-linear format.

## 2.2 Community Expression and Norms in Health and Stigmatized Groups

Within HCI and CSCW, prior research has examined how social platform affordances shape norms of participation, authenticity, and support, especially in health-related contexts. For example, people with health conditions carefully decide how they use Facebook to post about health conditions and seek support [47]; people with

chronic illness use Instagram to compartmentalize their identities and convey support for each other [34]. Audience interactions, such as comments, reactions, and replies, further contribute to the negotiation of shared understandings around responsibility, legitimacy, and care [8, 19]. In this sense, health-related content on social media functions not only as self-expression, but also as a space for normative guidance.

Norms are defined as shared patterns of attitudes and behaviors that define a social group and distinguish it from others [31]. They may be explicitly articulated or implicitly understood [14], often communicated through subtle cues and practices [17, 28]. In online communities, norms are not static, but are continually negotiated among users, moderators, and other stakeholders [12]. These norms shape participation and interaction by encouraging behaviors that support collective goals, ranging from productive collaboration to the reinforcement of harmful practices.

Digital platforms enable expressions of both vulnerability and visibility, often shaped by platform-specific norms and affordances. HCI researchers have examined how users navigate sensitive disclosures [1, 2], engage with audience support [8, 19], and share recovery narratives such as those around anorexia [13].

While many health-related conditions have been studied within HCI and social computing, food allergies remain underexplored, despite their uniquely stigmatizing and often misunderstood nature, and the anxiety, isolation, and anticipatory fear in their lived experiences [16, 45, 58, 59]. For example, children experience teasing and bullying at school related to their food allergy conditions [16, 48, 57], and anxiety due to fear of allergic reactions [21, 36]. We see social media as a tool for people with food allergies to exercise their agency in disclosing their health condition, voicing their opinions through digital storytelling, and using social media affordances to challenge misconceptions and counter stigma. This understanding can also further support the design of systems that support stigmatized or underserved populations in voicing their experiences, challenge misconceptions, resist stigma, therefore contributing to norm-setting in those online spaces.

### 2.3 Study Context

TikTok is a widely used social media platform centered around short-form videos. As of 2024, TikTok was estimated to have an audience of around two billion users worldwide [64]. TikTok's primary interface—the For You Page (FYP)—delivers an endless, algorithmically curated feed, enabling content to reach audiences well beyond users' immediate networks, and has contributed to a platform culture focused on virality and broad visibility [6]. TikTok has also become a go-to destination for lighthearted and creative content, with users gravitating toward entertaining, performative and humor-driven comedy, alongside other popular genres like music, dance, and tutorials [61]. TikTok has emerged as a space where people navigating diverse health conditions document and share personal experiences through self-generated content. These expressions often take on creative forms, influenced by the platform's affordances. Prior work has documented this particularly in areas such as chronic illness and cancer [54], mental health [5, 68], neurodivergence [38], reproductive health [43], reporting different ways that TikTok allow creative storytelling. Food allergies offer a compelling lens through which to explore digital identity and health storytelling.

As a condition often shaped by daily vigilance, social negotiation, and embodied vulnerability, food allergies intersect with broader human concerns such as self-awareness, the acceptance of limitations, and navigating social inclusion [59, 71]. The experience of living with food allergies prompts reflection not just on one's body but also on one's lived experience socially—to feel safe, to be seen, and be understood. Studying how individuals with food allergies express their experiences on platforms like TikTok opens up new ways of understanding how digital spaces can support connectedness, emotional resilience and health awareness for people with health conditions and needs.

### 3 Methods

We use a qualitative content analysis method for this study, informed by prior research in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) examining social media content. For instance, researchers conducted a feature-based analysis of 169 hand-labeled videos from a dataset of over 19,000 mental health-related TikTok videos, building on a qualitative typology to distinguish clinical and pragmatic content and identify implications for moderation and personalization [72]. Another study on sharenting on TikTok analyzed 328 videos demonstrating sharenting behaviors and 438 videos contributing to sharenting discourse, using TikTok’s native search functionality to identify videos [65]. These studies, which achieved thematic saturation with datasets of comparable scope, informed our approach to data collection and analysis, ensuring depth and rigor in addressing our research questions.

In this study, we created a new TikTok account as a research tool to collect videos, in order to minimize the influence of prior personalization and browsing history on content recommendations. This account was shared by the first and second authors, allowing both researchers to access and use the same account throughout data collection.

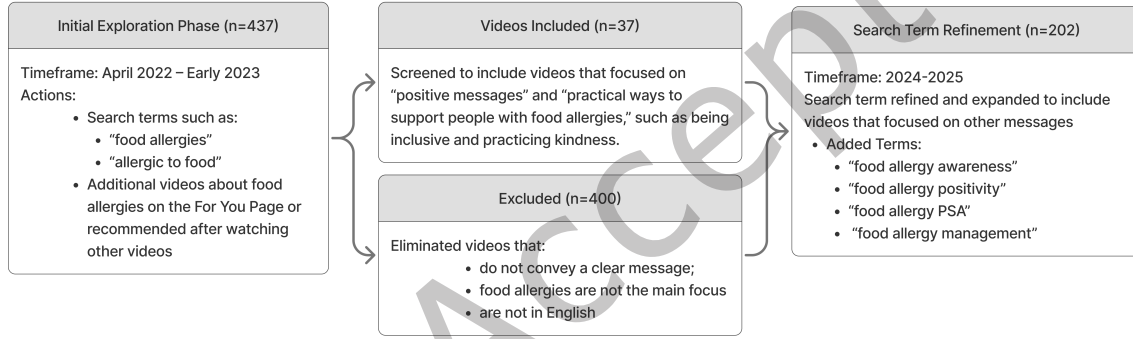


Fig. 1. TikTok Video Selection Procedure

#### 3.1 Data Collection

We initially collected 437 videos for screening using the search terms “food allergies” and “allergic to food” and also including videos that mentioned food allergies on the For You Page and recommended videos. Videos were excluded if they were not in English, did not focus on food allergies, or did not have a coherent or meaningful message about food allergies. For example, some videos only mentioned food allergies without providing context or any story, while others presented vague or confusing portrayals, such as exaggerated or unclear depictions of allergic reactions, which did not contribute substantively to awareness or understanding. The first round of screening resulted in a set of 37 videos. After the first and second authors discussed themes and coded the videos individually, we decided to continue to collect data with expanded search terms such as “food allergy awareness,” “food allergy positivity,” “food allergy management,” and “food allergy PSA<sup>1</sup>.” We expanded these terms iteratively as we discovered new relevant videos. Our interests with food allergy-related content on TikTok began in 2022,

<sup>1</sup>“Public Service Announcement” (PSA) is used in text messages, online chats, and social media to convey important information, raise awareness, or prompt specific actions.

and we decided to conduct formal data collection and analysis in 2025 once our research questions became more focused.

As our focus grew toward storytelling, we identified and collected videos as storytelling when they aligned with the small stories framework [26]—that is, they conveyed a stance toward an event or experience. We focused on content where users narrated or performed personal or social experiences and stances related to food allergies. Videos without a narrative element (such as product showcases or decontextualized trends) were excluded.

Food allergy-related content constitutes a relatively niche genre within TikTok’s broader food ecosystem and appears far less frequently than mainstream food content (e.g., recipes or lifestyle food videos). As a result, explicitly food allergy-centered videos are encountered intermittently through search results and algorithmic recommendation feeds. We therefore employed purposive sampling to curate a focused dataset of information-rich videos that clearly articulated food allergy experiences or messages. Rather than attempting to neutralize or control TikTok’s opaque and personalized recommendation system, we treated algorithmic surfacing as an inherent feature of the platform and part of the phenomenon under study. The resulting dataset reflects content made visible through TikTok’s recommendation dynamics at different times that enable in-depth qualitative analysis, rather than broad representational coverage.

For each video, we documented its URL, creator information, and key engagement (number of likes, comments, and shares). During analysis, we categorized videos into two groups: *Food Allergy*-specific and *General*-specific. Videos were categorized under “Food Allergy” if they addressed living with food allergies or managing conditions, and under “General Public” if they aimed to raise awareness or encourage support from those without food allergies.

### 3.2 Food Allergy Content Analysis

We used an inductive approach to analyze the TikTok videos. As an initial step, we recorded a set of descriptive attributes for each video to capture what was present in the data. These attributes reflected directly observable aspects of the videos rather than analytic interpretations and included basic video information (e.g., view counts, likes, comments), video styles (e.g., skits, direct-to-camera narration, stitched responses), and the apparent purpose of the video (e.g., experience sharing, information sharing, or opinion expression). This step served to support data familiarization and to provide contextual grounding for subsequent analysis. It also offered an entry point for analyzing the videos as small stories. Following Georgakopoulou’s heuristic for small stories analysis [26], we attended to these TikTok content’s ways of telling, sites of telling and tales, and tellers. We paid attention to *tales* and *stancetaking*, noting the messages from the videos that capture what food allergy experiences, concerns, misconceptions, advice, or claims were being narrated. Our codes about presentation style describe *ways of telling*, capturing how creators used TikTok’s multimodal styles to communicate these messages. We noted *sites of telling*—the platformed contexts in which videos appeared and circulated, such as original posts, stitches, duets, comment-referenced videos, trends, and sounds. We identified *tellers* as those who created and told the stories. To analyze the *content* of these videos, we then conducted an inductive thematic analysis. We did not begin with predetermined themes or a deductive coding framework. The first and second authors initially watched videos and took open-ended analytic notes about what each video was about and the key messages it conveyed. Through iterative discussion of these notes, we identified recurring messages and patterns across videos, which informed the development of an initial set of codes that summarized the primary focus of each video.

To identify styles of presentation, we focused on the conduct of messages and the multimodal cues used to convey them. For each video, we made analytic notes about visual and audio elements (e.g., background music, trending sounds, sound effects), editing choices (e.g., cuts, pacing, transitions), textual elements (e.g., captions, text overlays, on-screen annotations), and visual aesthetics (e.g., filters, camera angles, filming distance),

etc. We also attended to performative features, such as acting, gestures, and point-of-view framing. For each video, we recorded these analytic notes in a shared spreadsheet. The first and second authors compared these notes across videos and iteratively refined descriptive labels for recurring presentation styles. Over time, these clusters stabilized into a set of presentation styles that reflected shared ways creators visually and performatively expressed food allergy-related messages on TikTok.

The first and second authors independently coded a sample of 102 videos and then collaboratively refined the codebook. All themes emerged inductively from the data. The researchers met to align interpretations regularly. Once finalized, we divided the dataset among the first two authors, meeting regularly to address uncertainties and adjust the codebook as needed. When coding, we reviewed the video, caption, and creator's profile to capture context.

During the analysis, we soon noticed two main types of audiences that these videos intend to speak to: those with food allergies and the general public. We then refined our analysis to better understand these two aspects of the content. For videos geared towards people with food allergies, we identified messages from individual experiences, advocacy efforts, and strategies for managing food allergies. We identified patterns of content in the videos, focusing on themes like mental health challenges, community-building, and the positive reframing of food allergy experiences. For videos aimed towards the general public, we identified themes around public awareness and advocacy. Some videos conveyed overlapping themes or messages, such as simultaneously calling for greater availability of allergen-free food options and advocating for reduced allergen exposure in public spaces. We treated themes as analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive. Videos were initially open-coded to capture all relevant messages, and could receive multiple thematic codes. In later rounds of analysis, we examined overlap and co-occurrence across themes, which informed subsequent theme refinement and consolidation. This process led us to merge closely related themes that reflected a shared underlying concern, while preserving distinctions where messages diverged meaningfully.

Our final dataset comprised 202 unique videos, representing a wide range of perspectives and experiences. This dataset offers a foundation for exploring how food allergy-related content is created, shared, and received on TikTok, contributing to broader discussions on health, advocacy, and digital engagement. The 202 videos we collected have a video length ranging from 0:05 to 8:23, with an average of 1:06 ( $SD = 0.052$ ,  $M = 0:45$ ). The amount of likes ranged from 3 to 3.9 million, with an average of 64827.86 ( $SD = 380855.97$ ,  $M = 261.5$ ). In the remainder of the paper, we use Vid # to refer to each video in the dataset.

### 3.3 Ethical Considerations

Our study only includes public-accessible TikTok videos, and thus was deemed not to involve human subjects research by the Institutional Review Board in our institution, but ethical concerns remain when using social media content [9, 70]. Public posts may not be intended for research aggregation, and creators likely do not anticipate their content being taken out of context [9]. To protect anonymity, we avoided naming creators and blurred out creators' faces in screenshots.

### 3.4 Limitations

Our research has several limitations. Since TikTok's algorithm heavily personalizes users' experiences, the food allergy content that users see may vary widely. Although the authors created a new TikTok account solely for this study, which produced consistent search results, these results may differ from what users with personalized accounts and existing viewing histories might encounter.

While our analysis has focused on the more positive themes and styles of TikTok videos about food allergies, it is important to acknowledge the wide variety of content on this platform that we did not include. Given that our data collection was conducted from the United States and primarily surfaced English-language content, the



dataset likely reflects a U.S.-centric subset of food allergy communities and may not capture experiences from other cultural or regional contexts. These videos, particularly those that are more extreme or unconventional, could offer valuable insights into the broader cultural narratives surrounding food allergies. For instance, videos about misconceptions or myths, such as claims that food allergies can be “healed” through folk remedies or religious powers, reflect deeply held cultural or personal beliefs that influence how some individuals perceive and manage food allergies. However, these videos are beyond the scope of the research goals and questions of this study.

## 4 Findings

Through our analysis of TikTok videos related to food allergies, we identified four thematic categories. These categories illustrate how creators use the platform to achieve distinct communicative goals while addressing different audiences, people with food allergies (themes (1) and (2)), and the general public (themes (3) and (4)):

(1) People with food allergies - Supporting mental health and promoting affirming attitudes among individuals with food allergies,

(2) People with food allergies - Sharing practical strategies for food allergy management and encouraging self-advocacy,

(3) General public - Shaping public attitudes toward food-allergic individuals, and

(4) General public - Offering practical guidance to the general public for supporting those with food allergies.

We describe the messages in each theme and the styles used to convey these messages in the following subsections. Table 1 presents the distribution of TikTok videos across the four themes and their associated message types; we also present a brief summary of the styles used in each theme, showing how messages were conveyed through different storytelling techniques. While self-narrative emerged as the most prevalent and widely used style, our analysis highlights the more uniquely and interestingly employed styles within each theme. We also note that these videos were told by creators with different relationships to food allergies, including people living with food allergies, caregivers, experts, organizations, and supportive others; this demonstrates that food allergy small stories on TikTok are voiced from multiple social positions.

### 4.1 Supporting mental health and promoting affirming attitudes among individuals with food allergies

Videos in this theme, often posted by people living with food allergies, focus on emotional and mental well-being, providing affirmations to validate lived experiences and offer reassurance to individuals navigating food allergies. Themes of self-acceptance, resilience, and emotional validation emerge in our dataset, conveying messages about emotional and mental well-being, offering effective support and affirming messages for individuals living with food allergies. Common formats include affirmations, acknowledging food allergy-related anxiety, expressions of gratitude, and messages of encouragement (see Table 2), which are often accompanied by cheerful clips with upbeat music and text overlays. These videos were most often told by people living with food allergies, who drew on personal experience to validate anxiety and offer reassurance, framing food allergies as emotionally manageable within everyday life.

One video exemplifies how creators use social media to support mental health and promote affirming attitudes among individuals with food allergies. In Vid #46, a creator openly acknowledges the challenges of living with food allergies, starting with stating that *“It can be very hard having food allergies,”* but gently invites viewers to pause and reflect. Against a backdrop of slow, calming music, she encourages her audience to close their eyes and breathe deeply with her. As viewers follow along, she shows a series of affirmations with text on the screen: *“My body is strong and protects me,” “Food is a gift. I am grateful for its abundance to bless my body,”* and *“I am not a burden—those around me want me to be safe and healthy.”* The video’s soothing tone and affirmations creates a

| Theme                                                   | Primary Audience           | Messages (as coded)                                                                                                                               | Dominant Storytelling Styles (Theme-level)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Supporting mental health and affirming attitudes</b> | People with food allergies | Positive outlook and gratitude; Food allergy mental health awareness; Courage to explore; Words of affirmation.                                   | These videos are <b>self-narrated</b> , or they combine happy everyday visuals, calming or upbeat music, and affirming <b>text overlays</b> to construct small, slow-paced narratives that counter TikTok's rapid consumption norms, reframing life with food allergies as emotionally supported, fulfilling, and not defined by limitation.   |
| <b>Sharing strategies for advocacy and safety</b>       | People with food allergies | Taking measures and condition management; Self-advocacy and speaking up; Calling for community building.                                          | These videos rely on <b>direct narration</b> , <b>audience-comment prompts</b> , and <b>real-time situational filming</b> to demonstrate self-advocacy and safety practices, framing food allergy management as a participatory and learnable everyday skill.                                                                                  |
| <b>Shaping public attitudes</b>                         | General public             | Taking food allergies seriously; Anti-bullying and opposition to ridicule; Correction of food allergy misconceptions.                             | These videos call for greater public understanding and correction of misconceptions of food allergies, using <b>stitching and remixing</b> to criticize, and <b>performance</b> -based styles (e.g., skits and songs) to make serious and emotionally heavy information more accessible, and easier for broader audiences to absorb.           |
| <b>Practical guidance for the public</b>                | General public             | Social inclusion and accommodation; Accessibility of allergen-free options; Reducing allergens in public spaces; Small supportive safety actions. | These videos offer practical guidance for supporting people with food allergies, through <b>tutorials</b> (step-by-step demonstrations) and <b>performances</b> (e.g., POV narratives, and skits) to translate complex or emotionally charged situations into clear, relatable actions that general audiences can easily understand and apply. |

Table 1. Theme-level synthesis of food allergy-related messages and dominant storytelling styles on TikTok, with explicit message categories retained.

meditative experience that supports viewers in building a more positive and accepting view of their condition and body.

**4.1.1 Messages.** We found four major messages that videos in this category convey.

**Positive outlook and gratitude.** These videos focus on reframing the challenges of food allergies as opportunities for growth, resilience, and gratitude, and explore how food allergies can positively shape aspects of life, such as developing advocacy skills, fostering deeper friendships by connecting with the community, and building resilience. Creators share personal reflections, such as “*food allergies positively impacted my life*” and “*silver linings as a person with food allergies*”, emphasizing that there are different angles to look at their lived experiences, like getting “*resilience and mindfulness*,” “*creative cooking skills*,” (Vid #41), etc. They also highlighted the support systems, meaningful connections, and self-advocacy skills formed through these shared experiences.

| Message Themes                       | Description                                                                                                                                                              | Count |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Positive outlook and gratitude       | Encourages a positive outlook by reflecting on how living with food allergies can lead to personal growth, resilience, and appreciation for supportive communities.      | 11    |
| Food allergy mental health awareness | Highlights the psychological impact of managing food allergies, including anxiety, stress, and emotional struggles, while encouraging mindfulness and mental well-being. | 10    |
| Courage to explore                   | Inspires individuals to pursue life experiences such as traveling, dining out, or participating in activities without letting food allergies hold them back.             | 8     |
| Words of Affirmation                 | Provides positive reinforcement and self-empowerment messages, reminding individuals of their strength and worth despite the challenges of living with food allergies.   | 6     |

Table 2. Type of messages and frequency of videos supporting mental health and promoting affirming attitudes.

**Food allergy mental health awareness.** In these videos, creators shared how individuals experience food allergy anxiety, which can manifest in both subtle and intense ways, including fear of extreme reactions or intrusive thoughts about worst-case scenarios. These anxieties can deeply affect daily life, especially mealtimes, particularly for those also managing generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), health anxiety, or emetophobia (fear of vomiting) (e.g., Vid #69). Creators also mentioned that it is normal to feel overwhelmed or emotional after being newly diagnosed with a food allergy or celiac disease (Vid #57).

**Courage to explore.** These videos encourage individuals with food allergies to embrace life fully and not let their condition limit their experiences. The creators of these videos share stories of traveling, exercising, partying, and learning new things, demonstrating that food allergies, while challenging, do not have to hold them back. These videos call for viewers to face their fears, adapt to challenges, and pursue fulfilling lives while managing their condition with confidence and preparation. For example, one creator recalled how food allergies taught them to surround themselves with compassionate people, waving goodbye to dismissive attitudes like “*your food allergies are a burden*.” (Vid#96). Another reflects on the support they have received from followers and friends, stating how these relationships transformed feelings of isolation into a sense of belonging (Vid#45).

**Words of Affirmation.** Videos showing words of affirmation provide individuals with food allergies with validation and encouragement, helping them cope with the unique challenges of their condition. From daily affirmations addressing anxiety, like “*I’m not having an allergic reaction*,” (Vid #51) to reminders that “*food allergies don’t define me, you are more than that*” (Vid #135), these videos aim to help individuals differentiate between real risks and heightened worry.

**4.1.2 Styles.** These videos often employ aesthetic techniques, such as happy video clips of them traveling or enjoying fun activities, upbeat or calming background music, and motivational text overlays (as shown in example (1) in Fig 2). The happy video clips typically includes snippets of everyday life, such as scenes at the beach, travel moments, or joyful social interactions, intended to convey a sense of fulfillment and normalcy. By showcasing these moments, creators construct a narrative that having food allergies does not limit one from leading a joyful, adventurous, or socially connected life.

The use of text overlays, especially in videos that address anxiety or stress, serves to slow down the delivery of sensitive content (as shown in Fig 2, example (2)). Affirming phrases such as “*you are enough*”, “*you are brave*”, and “*your food allergies don’t define you*” are designed to offer reassurance and support. This technique enables

viewers to engage with emotional content at their own pace, offering a buffer against the rapid consumption norms of TikTok.

When paired with slower, calming music, the videos create a calm atmosphere that contrasts with more fast-paced or humorous allergy-related content. Together, these stylistic elements contribute to a form of digital storytelling that fosters emotional validation and supports mental well-being within food allergy communities.

#### 4.2 Sharing Practical Strategies to Encourage Self-Advocacy and Safety

Creators, often drawing on their own experiences managing food allergies, share practical strategies and encourage self-advocacy to support food-allergic individuals with actionable strategies for navigating everyday life. These videos often promote self-advocacy and self-efficacy, encouraging viewers to assert their needs in social, institutional, and medical contexts. Additionally, they provide resources and useful tips for promoting a safer lifestyle for these individuals (See Table 3).

One example is a video of a woman filming herself in real time while ordering food at a sushi restaurant, where she managed multiple allergies including peanuts, walnuts, and others (Vid #132), with the on-screen caption of “POV: You’re ordering sushi with food allergies.” In the video, she modeled how to communicate effectively in such settings—by asking clear and specific questions about ingredients, cross-contact procedures, and how the food was prepared. She repeated her allergy condition a few times, and asked detailed questions to ensure full clarity and demonstrated persistence in advocating for her safety, until she was “*confident with the restaurant’s allergy protocols*.” This situated, real-time format documents the interactional work in disclosing food allergies, making visible how safety can be negotiated through repeated clarification between the customer and staff.

| Message Themes                           | Description                                                                                                                                                     | Count |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Taking measures and condition management | Empowers individuals to manage their food allergies proactively through tools, strategies, and informed decision-making.                                        | 22    |
| Self-advocacy and speaking up for self   | Promotes self-advocacy by encouraging individuals with food allergies to assert their needs and educate others, whether in social, medical, or public settings. | 17    |
| Calling for Community building           | Encourages individuals with food allergies to connect, share experiences, and support one another, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.     | 14    |

Table 3. Descriptions of Food Allergy Message Themes Related to Action and Advocacy

**4.2.1 Messages. Taking measures and condition management.** Videos show creators talking about their strategies for navigating food-related events and situations. For example, for dining out, creators show how their food allergy cards—either self-made or provided by commercial services—offer a tangible way to communicate dietary needs to servers. Videos that encourage individuals to “*take measures when traveling to ensure safety and mental health*” emphasize proactive strategies for safer journeys, such as labeling self-packed food to reduce uncertainty and requesting attendants to announce food allergies, and sharing guidance about minimizing exposure to nut-based snacks during flights. These strategies are presented as ways of managing physical safety and emotional reassurance when navigating unfamiliar environments. Other self-care measures depicted include keeping a food sensitivity journal as a means of tracking and reflecting on food-related experiences.

**Self-advocacy and speaking up for self.** Videos in this theme emphasize the importance of self-advocacy for individuals with food allergies, particularly in settings like restaurants, planes, or social gatherings. Example videos start with on-screen texts that set the context, such as “*only having two foods at a restaurant*” or “*ordering*

*at a restaurant with many allergens*” to highlight the challenges of dining out, and then creators offer practical tips like ways of communicating dietary restrictions to staff.

One video that exemplifies self-advocacy shows the creator explaining their food allergies to others during the holidays (Vid#55), using this opportunity to capture how one can balance advocating for oneself in a social setting. While the focus is on enjoying time with loved ones, the creator also suggests practical strategies, like bringing their own safe food, to ensure both safety and inclusion. This message from the videos aims to normalize self-advocacy that takes place within everyday social relationships and mutual understanding. Videos saying “*you are worth being heard*” and “*never be afraid to use your voice*” further call for individuals to confidently advocate for accommodations and assert their needs, reinforcing that their voices matter. Other content about “*being brave enough to speak up even when it doesn’t come easily*” also offer reassurance that self-advocacy is a skill that can be learned and practiced, while also being vital for one’s safety.

**Calling for Community building.** Food allergy creators called for community building by inviting other TikTok users to participate in discourse related to food allergies. To call for connection, videos show prompts to share similar experiences, questions, or vulnerable moments, encouraging others to respond. Rather than using TikTok as a space for passive consumption of their video content, creators treat each video as an opportunity to exchange ideas and support. In this interaction, the audience also has the opportunity to participate actively and contribute to the community without sharing videos themselves.

**4.2.2 Styles.** Creators share personal experiences and offer advice through direct-to-camera narration, simulations of real-world scenarios (e.g., disclosing allergies at restaurants), and responses to viewer questions.

A key feature of this category is its style of using a floating audience comment on their video to show that the content was created in response to audience comments (as shown in example (3) in Fig 2). This reflects a participatory approach to content creation and an emerging, interactive mode of health communication. For example, Video #81 showed a comment from an empathetic restaurant staff member who encouraged people to disclose their food allergies when dining out. The content creator used this as a prompt to further call for individuals to take safety measures when eating out.

Another style is the documentation of real-time, narrative-driven content. By capturing moments as they unfold, such as ordering food at a restaurant or responding to early symptoms of an allergic reaction, creators offer an unfiltered view into the day-to-day realities of living with food allergies (as shown in Fig 2 example (4)). This style allows viewers to observe specific communicative strategies and decision-making processes in context. For instance, in a video showing the process of ordering food at a sushi restaurant, viewers witness the creator’s dialogue with the server, the questions she asks to ensure allergen safety, and the reasoning behind those questions, communicated through layered text overlays (Vid#132). This real-time storytelling approach reinforces the importance of speaking up and asserting one’s dietary needs, and normalizing these behaviors in public settings. Also, with the detailed narration of her thought process, they demonstrated how individuals with food allergies can remain vigilant, take control of their environment, and reduce risk through informed, intentional action.

### 4.3 Addressing Public Attitudes Toward Food-Allergic Individuals

Videos in this category were aimed at addressing broader societal perceptions of food allergies. Targeting a general audience, these videos try to correct misconceptions, challenge dismissive behaviors, and advocate for greater empathy and seriousness in how food allergies are treated (See Table 4). In this category, tellers included both creators with lived experience and medical experts such as allergists, bringing both experiential and professional perspectives to correcting misconceptions.

One video (Vid #77) features a content creator playing both roles in a skit: one as a person with food allergies, and the other as someone dismissive of the seriousness of being “allergic to milk.” The skit begins with a casual



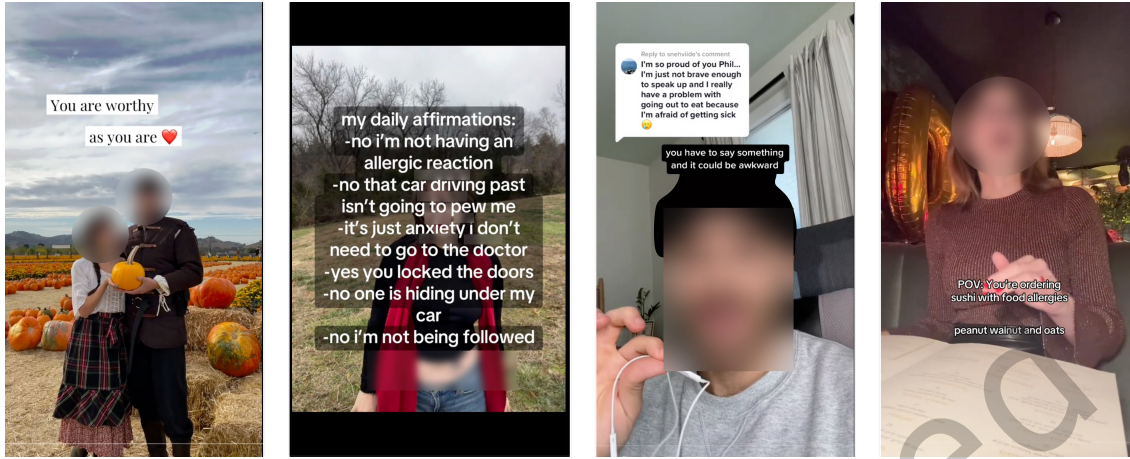


Fig. 2. Examples of representative visual styles used to support mental health and promote affirming attitudes among individuals with food allergies. From left to right: (1) **Happy clips**: A cheerful scene paired with “You are worthy as you are” promotes self-worth and emotional support through positive visuals. (2) **Text overlays of reassurance**: Affirmations address anxiety and health fears, offering solidarity through direct text overlays. (3) **Comment replies**: A response to a viewer comment encourages speaking up despite social discomfort, using the comment as a prompt to share specific strategies and foster dialogue around stigma and self-advocacy. (4) **Real-time experiences**: A creator films themselves ordering food with specific allergens, modeling how to navigate dining out safely.

exchange, “Are you allergic to anything?” “Yes, milk.” “Lactose intolerant? You can’t handle a little tummy ache?” In response, the character with milk allergies replies firmly, “I’d rather not.” while the other person appears unimpressed. The video then shifts as the creator explains that food allergies exist on a spectrum, ranging from “mild skin rash to death,” and emphasizes the difference between an allergy and an intolerance. Blending humor through role-play with a serious informational moment, the skit moves from an everyday casual scenario to an explicit critique of how the public often misunderstands and minimizes food allergies.

| Message Themes                                             | Description                                                                                                                                                                   | Count |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Taking food allergies seriously                            | Emphasizes the importance of understanding the life-threatening nature of food allergies and respecting them in all contexts, including social, medical, and public settings. | 23    |
| Anti-bullying and opposition to ridicule of food allergies | Advocates against bullying or mocking individuals with food allergies and highlights the emotional and physical harm such actions can cause.                                  | 12    |
| Correction of food allergy misconceptions                  | Aims to educate the public by addressing and debunking myths or misunderstandings about food allergies.                                                                       | 14    |

Table 4. Descriptions of General Public-Focused Food Allergy Message Themes

**4.3.1 Messages. Taking food allergies seriously.** Creators encourage everyone to “take food allergies seriously,” as the dangers and risks of living with food allergies are overlooked. Videos point out that, in some cases where people with food allergies have already taken necessary action to prevent allergic reactions, the inability of others to take food allergies seriously could still put someone in danger. For example, one video depicts a creator

experiencing an allergic reaction after consuming a drink, despite having informed the staff of her allergies beforehand (Vid #3). The caption, “*AFTER I told them I had allergies... having allergies is NO joke*,” describes the event as a case in which disclosure alone did not prevent harm. Across such videos, creators use personal incidents to communicate expectations to the greater general public about how food allergies should be understood and responded to in everyday settings.

**Anti-bullying and opposition to ridicule of food allergies.** In one example of calling for people to “stop bullying and making fun of food allergies” both online and in real life, creators share news about a lawsuit involving food allergy bullying and pranks in schools<sup>2</sup> to bring awareness of the critical danger of such behavior (Vids #16 and #26). Creators use materials from both news reporting and others’ accounts to call for the urgent need for stricter policies in schools and workplaces that treat food allergy bullying as a serious offense, and not a trivial matter.

Videos calls for opposition to ridiculing food allergies by documenting and responding to ridicule of food allergies in everyday interactions. Examples include scenarios in which others joke about food allergies, followed by creators’ serious responses that surface how mockery is enacted in everyday interaction. Some of these videos include explicit statements identifying behaviors the creator describes as inappropriate, such as acting out anaphylactic shocks or joking about life-threatening scenarios like “*Could you perform CPR on yourself?*” (Vid #87).

**Correction of food allergy misconceptions.** Creators use TikTok to challenge inaccurate narratives or assertions about food allergies, such as the belief that a food intolerance is the same as a food allergy or that allergies are easily avoidable. For example, an allergist popular in this topic often provides his insights on other creators’ food allergy content. In one video, he corrects the misconception that having food allergies are just “*a sign of a weak immune system*” (Vid #101). In another video, he debunks the myth that one can get rid of their food allergies using will power (Vid #128). Sharing personal experiences, citing medical research, and debunking other TikTok videos can educate viewers on the realities of food allergies. This behavior of correcting false discourse surrounding food allergies validates the experiences of food allergy individuals and encourages the importance of education about food allergies.

**4.3.2 Styles.** One prominent style is creators remixing and responding to others’ content using TikTok’s platform features. The “stitch” feature enables creators to incorporate a brief clip from another user’s video, followed by their own commentary or response (as shown in Fig 3, example (1)). Creators on TikTok also use others’ content to remix with their own opinions. By referencing a specific moment from an existing video, creators provide their audience with a shared reference point, situating their response within an ongoing or broader conversation. This style of video creation frequently supports educational or reflective engagement, as it helps directly clarify or critique prior content.

For example, a TikTok food allergy expert creator frequently uses stitching or remixing to assess or critique videos related to food allergies, offering the audience his practical insights. In one of his videos, he reviewed a video of a young woman ordering food at a restaurant, using it as a case study to emphasize the importance of clear and assertive communication when managing food allergies (Vid #79). He included screenshots of commenters who criticized the woman for being impolite or excessively demanding. In response, he defended her actions as a necessary form of self-advocacy for health and safety, while addressing interpretations that people with food allergies are being overly serious or demanding. He also reminded the audience of the life-threatening nature of food allergies and called for greater public understanding and accommodation.

This remix format supports the use of concrete, turning real-world moments into educational messages aimed at shifting public attitudes.

<sup>2</sup>An incident in Texas involved high school football players allegedly bullying a teammate with a peanut allergy by putting peanuts in his football equipments after asking about the severity of his food allergies [60].

Performance-style TikTok videos frequently incorporate acting and humor as powerful tools for communication. By presenting exaggerated or ironic portrayals of social situations, creators are able to critique harmful behaviors and highlight the everyday challenges of living with food allergies in an engaging and accessible way (see Fig 3, example (2)). These videos often take the form of skits, original songs, or lip-sync performances (where creators mouth along to pre-recorded audio, including songs or clips from other creators) and frequently incorporate platform-specific features such as green screen effects, filters, and trending audio.

Within this category, skits function as a structured format for reenacting familiar scenarios, such as dining out, family gatherings, or casual conversations in which food allergies are questioned or minimized. Producing skit-based videos typically involves scripting and planned performance, resulting in clearly delineated scenes that make food allergy-related situations recognizable to viewers with varying levels of prior familiarity. For instance, a gluten-free creator uses a holiday-themed skit to depict the anxieties of navigating food allergies during family gatherings, followed by a humorous yet informative song promoting an allergy-friendly food brand (Vid #44).

Similarly, the lip-sync format translates serious frustrations into humorous performances that fit well within the platform's entertainment-focused context and playful aesthetics. Through short, affective clips, this format situates food allergy-related experiences within familiar modes of content consumption on TikTok, aiming to raise awareness, challenge stigma, and influence public perceptions of food allergies.

#### 4.4 Offering practical guidance to the general public for supporting those with food allergies

The final category comprises videos that provide practical educational content for the general audiences, including how-to guides for preparing allergy-friendly meals, tips for reducing allergen exposure in shared spaces, and suggestions for supporting food-allergic individuals in everyday situations. Tellers in this category included caregivers (particularly mothers of children with food allergies), people with food allergies, and also supportive others, showing how responsibility for food allergy safety and accommodation is voiced across multiple social positions.

| Message Themes                                                                 | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Count |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Small supportive safety actions for supporting individuals with food allergies | Suggests simple and actionable steps to ensure the <b>safety</b> of individuals with food allergies, such as clear labeling, avoiding cross-contamination, and being mindful of allergen presence, toward lay individuals—people without food allergies or formal caregiving roles, who may nonetheless encounter situations in which they are responsible for others' safety in everyday settings. | 22    |
| Social inclusion and accommodation for individuals with food allergies         | Emphasizes the importance of practical actions of empathy, understanding, and consideration toward individuals with food allergies in <b>social settings</b> environments where they can participate fully, such as providing allergen-free food options or alternative activities.                                                                                                                 | 21    |
| Improvement of market and material access to allergen-free food options        | Addresses <b>market and material access</b> to allergen-free foods, focusing on how limited product availability constrains everyday food choices for individuals with food allergies.                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 12    |
| Reduction of common allergens in public spaces                                 | Emphasizes <b>environmental and policy-level interventions</b> that aim to reduce or eliminate allergens in shared spaces, shifting responsibility from individuals to institutions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 10    |

Table 5. Descriptions and Frequency of Food Allergy Safety and Accessibility Themes

**4.4.1 Messages. Small supportive safety actions for individuals with food allergies.** This was the most common theme of the messages in this type of video. This theme centers messages directed toward lay individuals (people without food allergies or formal caregiving roles) who may nonetheless encounter situations in which they are responsible for others' **safety** in everyday settings, such as social gatherings, schools, or community events, where food allergies may be present. One example is a video (Vid #99) with the caption, "*When you bring PB & J for lunch then remember your coworker is deathly allergic to peanuts,*" depicting a person initially enjoying her sandwich. Upon noticing her coworker walk by, she quickly puts the sandwich away, cleans the desk, and sanitizes both the surface and the door handle she touched. This video functions as a form of advocacy by modeling concrete, repeatable actions that encourage viewers to take proactive care for others with food allergies in shared spaces. Rather than focusing on formal accommodations or institutional rules, these videos orient toward anticipatory responsibility among members of the general public.

express using actual actions and emotions.

**Social inclusion and accommodation for individuals with food allergies.** Another common theme focuses on **social inclusion**, such as videos filmed in social and public settings, such as cafes or restaurants, that asked staff to be kind to those with food allergies and respect their dietary restrictions. Kindness in these moments, such as allowing menu changes, can transform an anxiety-inducing interaction into a positive one. In school settings, an example is a video criticizing a teacher equating food allergy accommodations with entitlement rather than necessity, showing a skit of the teacher saying to the student, "*Oh come on, it's just a party, we're all having fun, don't be difficult,*"; this illustrates the harmful attitudes that can arise from a lack of understanding (Vid #38).

The most mentioned settings were holidays that involve social gathering and food, such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas (5 videos). Some of these videos, posted by moms of kids with food allergies, spread awareness about the Teal Pumpkin Project, which involves preparing non-food treats suited for children with food allergies. Others told stories about children with food allergies being excluded from social settings, such as birthday parties and sports seasons. Still others called for a more inclusive attitude from everyone since "*food allergies epipens and avoiding food are not good enough*" (Vid #66).

**Improvement of market and material access to allergen-free food options.** Given the prevalence of allergens in many available foods, individuals with food allergies face limited dietary options. Creators on TikTok who share this struggle often advocate for allergy-free food options to be more accessible to the broader public. The limited food options are often showcased through creators filming their trips to the grocery store and face difficulties in finding products free of allergens (for example, Vid #100 shows a person finding sesame in all of the bread options they could access). In other videos, some review allergen-free foods and call for more brands to be more inclusive.

Several creators discuss observing an increase in products containing sesame following its designation as a major allergen, attributing this shift to manufacturers adding sesame to address cross-contamination concerns via labeling. One such video was posted by a creator whose TikTok account was not centered on food allergies, but instead mixed commentary, news, and everyday observations about issues he considered worth wider attention, as he said in Vid #152, "*It's easier to just add sesame to food items that don't normally have sesame instead of removing it from the manufacturing lines,*" highlighting how regulatory changes are experienced by creators as reshaping the availability of sesame-free food options, and calling for improvement. Sharing these concerns and sentiments contributes to discussions of how the food industry responds to the needs of people with food allergies.

**Reduction of common allergens in public spaces.** These videos promote the reduction or elimination of common allergens in public spaces, such as schools, airplanes, or restaurants. Videos on Unlike content that centers on personal narratives or everyday micro-interactions, these videos advocate for **structural change**



rather than individual empathy. In some cases, creators describe allergen reduction as a collective responsibility that extends beyond individual accommodation or empathy.

**4.4.2 Styles.** While these videos still maintaining a performative tone, they tend to adopt a more explicitly instructional format. Tutorials, demonstrations, and POV (point-of-view) narratives help break down complex topics into digestible, relatable moments. Creators with food allergies or close to someone with food allergies may structure videos specifically in the form of “how-tos” or tutorials in which they list steps or tips related to food allergies (see Fig 3, example (3)). This includes describing how to address food allergy-related obstacles and proposing thoughtful ideas to manage allergies. The videos hold a variety of content, from hands-on activities with tangible objects in a step-by-step format (such as preparing lunch for their child while also avoiding using common food allergens in consideration of other children (Vid #72)) to sharing helpful tips on handling social situations where food allergies are a consideration in everyday life (such as labeling homemade food for social events (Vid #84) and checking restaurant information for their food ingredients (Vid #78)). These videos help others understand the challenges that come with having food allergies, and the step-by-step content offers the clarity needed to serve as practical strategies encouraging viewers to support people with food allergies. This microlearning style is also well-suited to TikTok’s short-form structure and broadens the reach of food allergy awareness efforts by translating them into accessible, shareable content that aligns with platform norms.

Performances by food allergy creators differ from typical humor or leisure-based content, and endures as a style for promoting practical applications along with constructive attitudes. The educational aspect of this style emphasizes the responsibility of both the general public and individuals with food allergies to create a safer and more accommodating environment. In one TikTok video, a content creator performs a skit in which they play both the staff and the customer’s roles during a visit to a bakery. As her character attempts to buy a loaf of bread, the staff member informs her that the bread “*may contain*” soy. Upon hearing this, she reacts with visible fear, highlighting her severe soy allergy. The skit uses humor and dramatization to convey the anxiety and uncertainty people with food allergies often face due to vague or insufficient food labeling in public food establishments (Vid #7).

## 5 Discussion

By identifying which video formats and message styles recur in food allergy-related TikTok content, our analysis offers insight into how supportive and health-oriented engagement is publicly performed on social media. Our findings show that food allergy-related TikTok videos rarely take the form of lengthy, structured narratives around illness. Instead, content creators share fragmented, episodic moments that collectively express lived experiences of navigating food allergies. These small narrative units function as a distinctive form of illness storytelling that is native to TikTok’s platform norms and interactional features.

Recognizing TikTok videos as valid narrative expressions shifts our perspective on patient agency and care within digital spaces. These expressions challenge dominant paradigms that privilege coherence or closure, instead valuing situated, aesthetic, and fragmented storytelling as creative and meaningful ways people navigate chronic health conditions. For HCI, this calls for the need to design for small, expressive, and reflective practices that resonate with how people actually live with and communicate about health.

### 5.1 Flexible Expression and Reflection through Fragmented, Small Stories

Prior work in narrative medicine has emphasized the value of structured patient storytelling in fostering patient-centered care. Initiatives such as *My Life, My Story* [44] rely on prompted, clinician-facilitated narratives that are curated to present a coherent account of a patient’s life and illness. These narratives are institutionally elicited and designed to help clinicians understand patients beyond their medical conditions.



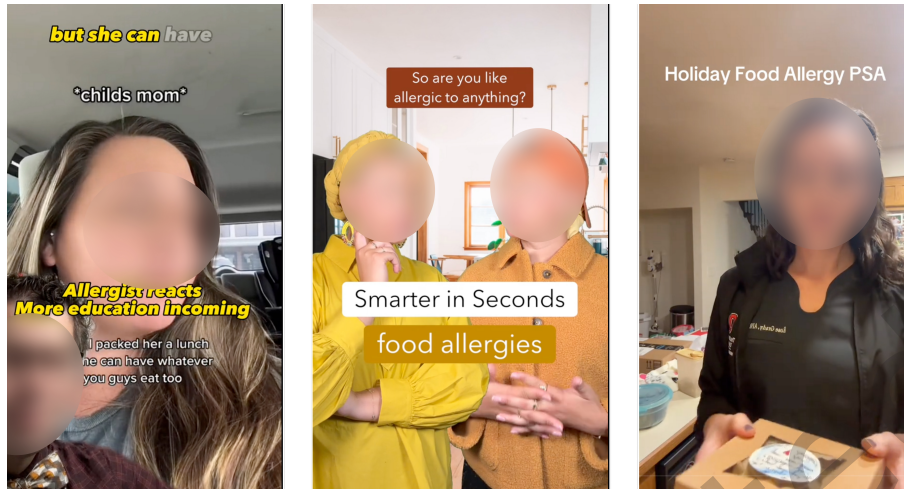


Fig. 3. Styles commonly used in videos providing practical strategies to encourage self-advocacy and safety. From left to right, (1) **Expert Reaction and Remix**: An allergist shared a video of himself reacting to a parent’s video, validating their concerns and adding expert advice. (2) **Skit-Based Correction**: This skit-style video uses humor and role-play to correct the common confusion between food intolerance and allergies. The performative format draws attention to the importance of accurate understanding. (3) **Tutorial**: In a self-filmed clip, a mom walked through how she labeled homemade treats to protect kids with food allergies at school. This practical format models inclusive and mindful behavior.

In contrast, the food allergy narratives we analyzed on TikTok are informal, fragmented, and self-initiated. Rather than presenting cohesive illness stories, creators share episodic moments drawn from everyday life, such as navigating meals, social interactions, travel, or public misunderstandings by sharing a reaction, a meme, a short clip, or a stitched video. These forms were not always linear or polished, yet they provided a vivid entry into lived experience. Prior research has shown how features on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook support temporary storytelling, which can reduce pressure and encourage more authentic sharing [40]. The episodic, spontaneous moments on TikTok were raw and emotionally resonant. This ephemerality makes it easier to share casual or “small” moments [53].

This short video platform-native form of storytelling also differs from other narrative artifacts examined in HCI, such as written reflections [51] or tattoos [20]. While writing often privileges coherence and retrospection [51], and tattoos function as compressed and symbolic inscriptions of experience [20], TikTok videos are dynamic and revisable. Content creators craft stories with multi-modal materials, and delete, update, or reframe their stories over time, allowing narratives to shift alongside their ongoing experiences with food allergies.

**5.1.1 Design Implications: Supporting Flexible Narrative Reflection.** For the design of health-facing technologies, we argue that systems should not treat narrative inconsistency as error or non-compliance, but as a sign of evolving understanding, coping, or context. Instead of requiring users to produce a single coherent account, technologies might better support small storytelling by allowing people to revisit, annotate, and reinterpret earlier expressions over time. One design implication is that, rather than asking users to construct coherent narratives upfront, health technologies might support reflection through “backstage annotation”—allowing people to add reflective metadata to their existing fragmented stories. A person might share a raw moment (“had a severe reaction at dinner”) on TikTok (public), but could also add contextual notes to themselves (private), and private backstage annotations could be done overtime, with different needs of reflection and expression of their food

allergy experiences. The original expression remains unpolished; reflection becomes an additive layer rather than a demand for coherence. This differs from structured reflection prompts, which require users to author coherent accounts retrospectively. Instead, metadata annotation lets people iteratively build understanding without sacrificing the emotional truth of their lived moments. Such tools could combine light scaffolding with narrative flexibility: as structured templates support coherence and comparability in reflection on personal data [18], platform-supported interactive features such as replying to a comment, stitching another user's story, or initiating a direct message may better support personalized storytelling by building on existing social practices. In this regard, stitches and duets in TikTok food allergy videos point to an important reflective possibility. Although individual videos are brief and episodic, connections across creators can produce a longer-term, distributed narrative of food allergy management. A creator may share a small story about a reaction, another may stitch it to offer advice or validation, and others may make a duet to show similar routines, risks, or accommodations. Through these linked fragments, food allergy experiences can be revisited and reframed over time by both creators and audiences. This suggests that health technologies might support reflection not only through individual logging or fixed narrative templates, but also through collective storytelling to help people compare practices, reinterpret past experiences, anticipate future risks, and imagine more socially supported ways of living with food allergy.

Our insights also suggest opportunities for supporting medical professionals in understanding how patients make sense of food allergies beyond clinical settings. Food allergy narratives circulating on social media reveal social concerns such as legitimacy, safety, and accommodation, and shape how patients interpret and manage their conditions in everyday life. Incorporating multimodal, public-facing patient narratives—such as TikTok-like forms that combine visuals, performance, and personal storytelling—into clinician training or reflective tools could help health professionals better recognize how patients express fear, reassurance, stigma, or confidence outside of clinical language. Greater awareness of these circulating narratives may enable clinicians to more effectively contextualize patients' questions, anxieties, and expectations that are shaped through everyday digital encounters.

Prior CSCW research has established that individuals managing chronic health conditions draw on “diffuse sociality,” a connection produced through proximity to others without direct interaction [10]. Further research has shown that sociality's benefits can be maintained through low-stakes and accessible interactions with algorithmic systems [7]. Our findings extend this understanding. First, we show that food allergy discourse circulated across everyday genres: parenting, cooking, restaurant-going, travel, humor, and included tellers who did not primarily identify as food allergy creators. Second, TikTok's stitch and duet features create a fundamentally different form of sociality. Food allergy narratives circulate across diverse genres and tellers, producing ambient exposure. But stitches transform passive encounters into dialogic, traceable response chains—a creator shares a moment, another stitches advice or a response. These public chains are visible to incidental viewers, producing connection that is simultaneously direct (creator-to-creator) and distributed (encountered by strangers). Part of the health community boundaries on TikTok are actively constructed through networked response, complicating prior assumptions about how belonging emerges in health spaces.

## 5.2 Using Creative Storytelling Tools to Communicate Normative Expectations Around Food Allergies

Research on digital storytelling in HCI emphasizes its role in fostering social inclusion and participation by enabling people to articulate lived experiences in their own voices, often through educational or facilitated practices [42]. In our study, we see how creative storytelling tools can be used in shaping public narratives around food allergies. While existing public infrastructures, such as labeling laws [67], school policies [23], or public health campaigns, may appear to be in place to support people with food allergies, these systems in practice often fall short. The trivialization of food allergies is still a common issue, with many individuals being

ridiculed and not taken seriously in everyday situations, according to our findings. We discovered that food allergy videos on TikTok serve not only as forms of personal expression and community support but also as means to challenge stigma and reshape societal norms. The interactive culture of TikTok, where users stitch, comment, or review news and other materials as background to amplify and validate these narratives, enables a collective critique of societal attitudes and opens up a space for norm transformation. These videos serve not only as personal expressions but as public interventions, challenging dominant cultural attitudes and demanding greater recognition, empathy, and structural change.

Building on prior work that highlights how affordances of platforms [4] like TikTok shape norms of authenticity and social support, our analysis highlights how these affordances are used to support explicit norm-setting in the context of food allergies. In contrast to many social norms on social media where expectations about what is acceptable often remain implicit or unspoken [11, 46], food allergy TikTok videos in our dataset communicated norms in clear and direct ways. Content creators in our dataset make their messages intentionally clear and direct due to the life-threatening nature of food allergies. Their seriousness prompts them to actively shape the narrative, using creative storytelling tools (e.g., skits, voiceovers, real-time tutorials) to correct misinformation and promote safe behaviors. The videos we collected also showed how these food allergy creators were explicit in their communication, reshaping the social dynamic, disclosure, and instruction became expected and normalized behaviors.

However, these co-constructed norms around food-allergy videos sometimes also show contradictions with other social expectations, which echo tensions found in other areas of health discourse, such as body tracking and body image technologies [50]. For instance, food tracking apps often promote body positivity rhetorically, encouraging users to “love their bodies,” while simultaneously reinforcing weight-loss goals and anti-fat biases through design features and feedback loops [30, 50]. Similarly, messages in food allergy videos highlight reassurance, being brave and living a “normal” life alongside their condition (e.g., in 4.1, while also emphasizing more ways to stay cautious and safe (e.g., in 4.2). These forms of norm-setting suggest that even well-meaning health narratives may reproduce stigmatizing expectations, shaping what kinds of bodies, behaviors, and health identities are seen as responsible, desirable, or socially acceptable. To help individuals navigate potentially conflicting social norms while encouraging diverse forms of story sharing, more research is needed on how platforms can accommodate the coexistence of conflicting yet valid health narratives without reducing them to a single, morally coded standard of behavior.

Collectively, food allergy TikTok videos serve as a form of “live” testimony of public discourse. Individuals with food allergies use TikTok to voice concerns, critique regulations, and offer practical advice. One such example is when creators discussed their observed side effects of making sesame one of the nine big allergens [69] (in section 4.4.1). Another example is when food allergy experts, or allergists, used “stitches” to correct misconceptions of food allergies on TikTok and further construct what is acceptable in these contexts (such as not making fun of people with food allergies) (in section 4.3). Through taking on roles as co-tellers of food allergy small stories [25, 26], these creators participate in the collaborative production of health knowledge and social norms.

To better support public participation and discussion, platforms could group and contextualize related videos—such as responses to recurring misconceptions or shared social situations—highlighting how discussions evolve, are challenged, and are collectively negotiated over time. For general audiences, this arrangement can help transform isolated encounters into meaningful learning experiences, making visible how everyday assumptions about food allergies are questioned and reshaped. For people with food allergies, seeing fragments accumulate into shared patterns can reduce the burden of self-advocacy and affirm that their experiences are collectively recognized rather than individually exceptional. For health experts, such arrangements provide opportunities to engage with public discourse in situ, contributing explanations or clarifications, like what is done using stitches (4.3.1), as part of an ongoing conversation, rather than as final authoritative judgments.

To further encourage such public participation, platforms like TikTok could also extend lightweight reaction and aggregation features beyond raw engagement metrics (e.g., likes or views) to support meaning-oriented signals such as “people found this helpful” or “this addressed a common misunderstanding.” These signals would foreground collective sense-making over popularity, helping surface content that contributes to shared understanding even when it does not attract high visibility.

In all, fragmented stories on TikTok contribute to a narrative infrastructure that supports collective sense-making. By making the relationships between small stories visible without enforcing linearity or authority, platforms can help paint a more meaningful and inclusive picture of food allergy experiences—one that reflects both lived realities and evolving public norms.

## 6 Conclusion

This work contributes to HCI, digital health, and narrative research by analyzing 202 TikTok videos about how people use TikTok as a platform for constructing small, fragmented, but meaningful storytelling. We show how content creators use different styles such as skits, text overlays, and real-time clips to express identity, reflect on their lived experiences, communicate the emotional and practical realities of food allergies, and also convey important messages. These fragmented, situated narratives expand how we understand personal health expression in digital environments. We then highlight how TikTok’s social features, including stitches and comment replies, facilitate lightweight interaction, and norm-setting. These practices illustrate how platform-specific affordances can scaffold ambient belonging and asynchronous peer connection, which are key in CSCW and health communication design. Furthermore, we demonstrate how user-generated videos function as acts of public health storytelling. Creators challenge misconceptions, resist stigma, and use narrative forms native to the platform to reshape public understanding of food allergies. This shows the potential of social media to support participatory public health discourse. Our study offers new insights into how small story health narratives unfold in sociotechnical contexts like TikTok, and suggest design opportunities for storytelling technologies that support chronic illness management and digital care practices.

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