

# “TikTok Made Me Do It”: Teenagers’ Perception and Use of Food Content on TikTok

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores how teenagers interacted with food-related TikTok content and how this influenced their eating behavior and practices. Using 186 surveys and five interviews, we show how teenagers think of healthy eating and what actions they took after being inspired by TikTok. We find that teenagers take inspiration from TikTok food content in different temporal stages, from immediately trying out new food items to long-term diet planning. We discuss potential design opportunities to support teenagers’ social use of TikTok food content in online and offline contexts.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **User centered design; Empirical studies in HCI.**

## KEYWORDS

teenagers; food; social media; habit; healthy eating

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Teenagers use social media for information about health, including dieting, fitness, and body image [5]. Current research in teenagers’ social media use examines their perception of body image, how they navigate privacy, and their mediation of relationships through social networking platforms [2, 32]. Past research has also examined teenage behaviors on each successive trending social media platforms, such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Snapchat*. The emergence of new social media platforms opens opportunities to examine and understand new interactions and behavior. *TikTok*,

the most downloaded application from 2018 to 2020, is a platform revolved around short-form videos, with 25% of its users being teenagers [27]. By promoting short-form video content, TikTok allows users to engage with large amounts of content within a short amount of time in rapid succession. TikTok also provides a built-in video editor to allow ease of creating and sharing of content. By quickly learning and adapting to user preferences, users found it easier to discover interesting content on TikTok compared to other social media platforms [3]. According to Business of Apps [9], 69% of US teenagers have used TikTok as of Fall 2020. Within this trend, food content lies among the most popular genre as of March of 2022, with **#food** having over 270 billion views [4]. With TikTok now integrated into teenage popular culture, along with the readiness of vast food content, our research takes to TikTok as the opportune platform to study the relationship between consuming short and rapid food-related social media and teenagers’ perception of food, healthy eating, and eating habits.

This study aims to understand how teenagers use short-form video social media, namely **TikTok**, for food content and how these use behaviors influence their food-related activities. This study aims to answer the two following research questions:

- How are teenagers using TikTok for food content?
- How does using TikTok influence teenagers’ food practice and eating habits?

Our study consists of two parts. We first conducted an online survey to collect a broad understanding of teenagers’ eating habits and use of TikTok food content. We then invited survey respondents for follow-up interviews to further probe for social interactions and food activities on and off TikTok. We found that teenagers use food videos to explore food choices and receive information about food and healthy eating. They are inspired by TikTok food videos to try new food and recipes, participate in challenges, and change their dietary habits. To further analyze these findings, we found a temporal lens useful in understanding use pattern and intent. While teenagers reported taking immediate actions—liking and commenting on videos, sharing content with friends and family—they were also motivated to take long-term actions such as planning to make food following a TikTok recipe, or, on an even longer temporal scale, changing their long-term eating habits. These temporally-long actions were reflected through the action of “favoriting” a video on the platform. Based on these findings, we chart out design opportunities situated through temporal-based actions to engage

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and support teenagers' health considerations through the use of TikTok food videos in both online and offline contexts.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Teenagers on Social Media

Teenagers' use of social media continually changes. Teenagers—ages 10 to 19 [22]—are often referred to as “*digital natives*” as they are born in an already well-developed digitally-integrated world [26]. Today, 97% of teenagers have at least one social media account [1].

Early research focused on how teenagers use social networking platforms to engage with “*known pals*” [2]. Teenagers' also use social media to feel a sense of connectedness to the broader world outside of their home and school [11, 32]. More recent research have taken interest in teenagers' learning behavior through internet-mediated communication [17].

In 2018, the most popular social media for young people were Facebook and Instagram [1] and thus the primary focus for researchers. Starting in 2019, TikTok had rapidly risen in popularity; by 2021, TikTok was preferred by 30% of teenagers in the United States, ahead of its competitors Facebook and Twitter, ranking second to Snapchat [27]. TikTok's rapid growth in popularity and potential influence among teenagers serves as an opportunity for us to understand teenagers' behaviors.

### 2.2 Health and Social Media

People form their perception about health in their adolescent years. As the current generation of teenagers are “*digital natives*”, researchers are concerned with the role social computing technologies play in teenagers and health. Teenagers use social media for health-related information such as dieting, fitness, and body image [5]. Researchers have also investigated the opportunities and challenges of discussing teenagers' bullying, stigma, privacy, and sexual health on social media [12, 28], as well as how social media have been correlated with eating disorder [23, 31], including orthorexia nervosa [13, 30], among teenagers. However, there also exists research on how to leverage social media as health education intervention for teenagers. Plaisime et al. indicated that social media initiatives have effective potential to encourage youth involvement by spreading health promotion messages that affect health knowledge, awareness, and attitudes [24].

Social media content about health and fitness can be a double-edged sword. Although social support and health information can be beneficial for people who seek to improve their health, negative sentiments about body image, anxiety over maintenance of body weight, and appearance-related self-esteem issues are often induced through comparison with others on social media [5]. Our study adds to this line of prior work in understanding both positive and negative aspects of teenagers' use of TikTok for food content.

### 2.3 Teenagers' Eating Habits

Food plays an important role in everyday health practice. Before we study how social media plays a part in shaping teenagers' healthy eating habits, it is crucial to understand existing literature about what contributes to teenagers' healthy lifestyles. Kumar [20] identified eight main factors that serve as barriers and facilitators toward

teenagers' healthy lifestyles. These factors include hunger and craving, emotions and mood states related to food, convenience, availability and cost of foods, meanings associated with healthy and unhealthy eating, sensory properties of food, parental influence on eating behaviors, and environmental influences on food choice.

Sports involvement and cooking have been identified as additional factors towards food-related self-perception [25]. Physically-active teenagers tend to have a better understanding of the correlation between energy intake and output, resulting in more balanced dietary behaviors [18, 20]. As highly influential food content on social media are available at the fingertips of teenagers, increased nutritional literacy has been identified as an important goal to improve teenagers' dietary habits and lifestyle and to lower the incidence of obesity-related noncommunicable diseases [16]. Croll et al. [8] pointed out that understanding how teenagers think about healthy eating and how important it is to them can help them build interventions that make it easier, more appealing, regarded as more useful in the near term, and more accepted as a peer norm. This research takes reflection on teenagers' rapid use of and immediate reactions to social media—like TikTok—and how to leverage this fast-paced platform to form long-term healthy eating habits.

## 3 METHODS

We conducted a survey with teenagers recruited through mailing lists, personal contacts, and social media. The survey consisted of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions asking participants to define what they think is healthy eating, what their healthy eating goals are, why, how, and how often they use TikTok for food content, and what they learned and acted on based on TikTok's food content. The survey received 443 responses, with an average completion time of 10 minutes. After filtering out duplicate and incomplete responses, 186 responses were used for analysis. The respondents' age ranged from 13 to 19, with an average of 16.57 (SD=1.75). 115 identified as female, 57 as male, 7 as non-binary, 5 preferred not to disclose, and 2 self-described as “*Demigirl*”, and “*Genderfluid*”. Survey responses are hereafter denoted with the prefix “S” (e.g., S101).

We also reached out to five participants who provided their email address for follow-up interviews and were compensated with a USD \$10 gift card. These participants were between the ages of 14-18. All interview participants were female. We conducted semi-structure interviews [21] and asked participants further questions regarding what they watched on TikTok and what actions they took in response to videos. All interviews were conducted online. Interviews lasted between 30 to 62 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Interview participants are hereafter denoted with the prefix “P” (e.g., P4).

All research activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board associated with our institution. In this paper, we focus on the open-ended survey responses and the interview data. We analyzed these data using affinity diagramming [10] to iteratively derive indicative themes. Three researchers conducted the affinity diagrams separately, and then met to discuss the difference. They then completed the final affinity diagram together.

## 4 FINDINGS

In this section, We first describe how teenagers used TikTok features to support healthy eating goals and food practices. We then present a variety of ways that food content influences teenager eating decisions and behavior.

### 4.1 Ways of Using TikTok Food Content

Teenagers in our study expressed how they explored and learned about food choices and information on TikTok, how they took control of content on their “For You” page, and how they used TikTok to save food ideas for future actions.

**4.1.1 Learning Food Preparation Techniques from Videos.** Teenagers learned about general cooking techniques on TikTok. Responses from the survey include: “knife skills and finding ripe fruits/veggies” (S037), “how to season/prepare vegetables in new ways” (S008), “cooking with veggies” (S004), and “how to cook a steak to preferred doneness” (S059).

Teenagers also learned about ingredient substitutions such as “substituting artificial ingredients with healthier alternatives” (S047) and “how to use yogurt/bananas/etc as replacements for butter or eggs” (S020). Sometimes TikTok also served as a place to look for information about unfamiliar ingredients. P4 shared her story of buying konjac noodles from a grocery store and looking it up on TikTok, learning to consume it with large amounts of water with it to prevent stomach aches.

Teenagers in our study also expressed concerns about misinformation on TikTok. S099 was cautious about food theories and suggestions on TikTok: “People on TikTok are usually wrong about their food theories and suggestions, I try to avoid culinary TikTok content as much as possible because of misinformation. But when I do, it’s to find out what other people are thinking about food.” (S099) P2 and P4 both talked about how they determined if the videos are spreading the right information. “If they’re the right ones, they won’t tell you to cut it (red meat) out because that’s not realistic. But they’ll be advising you, like, ‘don’t use that much of it.’” (P2)

**4.1.2 Curating Desired Content by Gaming the “For You” Page.** TikTok is well-known for its “For You” page, the landing page of TikTok. The page shows a TikTok-curated collection of videos that TikTok believes will appeal to the users’ tastes and interests. TikTok’s algorithm learns and tracks individual user’s likes, comments, and how long they spend watching each video. Because TikTok videos are so short (initially 15 seconds, later extended the duration to 60 seconds, and then tripled it to 3 minutes July 2021), TikTok’s algorithms are able to quickly create a large corpus of viewing data, influencing what shows up on each user’s “For You” page instantly [29].

All five interviewees talked about the “For You” page as one of the main features they like about TikTok. They enjoyed the content on their “For You” page and believed that TikTok knows what they like, and, most importantly, they had control over what appears on it. In particular, participants mentioned different ways of interacting with videos on the “For You” page to influence the algorithm. For example, P4 disliked bananas but knew that bananas often showed up in videos about healthy meal inspirations. Even though she knew the function of reporting “not interested” in TikTok, she was afraid that disliking these recipes due to certain ingredients would

result in the disappearance of other healthy recipes that she was interested in. Instead of indicating her interests, she chose to scroll past these videos quickly to avoid seeing this kind of content on the “For You” page. This was also the technique used by P1 and P2.

**4.1.3 Saving Food Ideas using the ‘Favorite’ Feature.** Teenagers in our study used the *favorite* function to save videos, such as recipes or food ideas, to revisit later. They also used these saved contents as reference for long-term diet plans.

When teenagers in our study came across recipes and videos that they like, they saved these posts using the *favorite* function on TikTok. “I want to try preparing food made in TikToks sometime in the future. I usually save the video to my favorites and will consider following one of the recipes when I have the time and motivation to.” (S151). P2 talked about the importance of favoriting videos since there are many similar account names on TikTok, and she did not want to have to remember the exact name of each creator to find their content again. “If you get like one digit off [you will] never find them again, you know, unless you favorite the video. Or like, save it to your photos. You can’t really find it again.” (P2)

However, participants also mentioned that it was difficult for them to find a specific video if they favorited too many. To solve this problem, P4, reportedly having 70 videos in her favorites collection, downloaded the TikTok recipe videos to her phone so she could easily find them. “A lot of the time I actually save them so it goes to my camera roll. And I only do that if I really like them, but usually then it’s easier to find. I just go to videos [on my phone], and then I don’t have many videos so it’s easier to find.” (P4)

### 4.2 “TikTok Made Me do It”

TikTok has encouraged the participants of this study to take action or think about new ideas in relation to food. Responses to the survey pointed out that TikTok inspired participants to learn recipes, try new food, use different ingredients, and engage in trending food practices.

**4.2.1 Practical Inspiration for Everyday Healthy Eating.** Tiktok content gave teenagers in our study ideas for their everyday meals. In our survey, 19 teenage participants reported learning how to increase variety in what they considered healthy foods or using healthy alternatives for certain ingredients to create healthier dishes. For example, adding more vegetables and fruits to their daily consumption is a common way that teenagers learn from Tiktok to improve the quality of their diet: “TikTok has inspired me to consider enhancing my common meals. For instance, adding fruit to my oatmeal, or meat and vegetables to my store-bought ramen.” (S151). Some teenagers also reported learning how to substitute ingredients to create healthy and tasty meals: “A couple things I learned is how to make vegan food options, and how to make healthy things taste better.” (S185) Sometimes participants needed ideas to prepare their food more efficiently, and they looked for examples on Tiktok: “I will occasionally find quick easy meals for college kids and make those.” (S071) These examples show how teenagers use TikTok videos to aid their everyday eating practices.

**4.2.2 Trying Specific Food Items Mentioned in Tiktok Videos.** Teenagers in the survey also mentioned wanting to try food mentioned in Tiktok videos. For example, some teenagers said they went out to

try specialty drinks mentioned on TikTok, such as bubble tea or Starbucks drinks: “Buying a certain bubble tea”(S049), “Sometimes if I see a Starbucks order on TikTok that looks good, I’ll try it. Normally it sucks.” (S053). Sometimes teenagers in our study could not find or did not have the access to the exact thing they saw on TikTok, and they looked for alternative ways to get what they wanted. For example, S087 said that videos about Korean food inspired her to try other international cuisines: “I usually see people make Korean food and meals, which inspires me to go to international markets and explore more food cultures.” (S088) During the interview, P5 also mentioned trying to find similar food items in her local grocery stores as a substitution to the ones mentioned in TikTok videos: “like this video about Costco dumplings. It’s like a cheaper option. And they said it’s really good. So I think I like that because I wanted to try it. But there’s no Costco here. I used to go to Costco. But I got something similar at Kroger.” (P5)

Some teenagers also mentioned negotiating with their parents about what to eat when they saw food on TikTok. P5, herself a soccer player, mentioned, “There’s one soccer player that I really like. And she is always posting things about her eating Chipotle.” (P5) Whenever P5’s family decided to have takeout meals, she would recommend Chipotle.

**4.2.3 Experimenting with New TikTok Recipes.** Many teenagers in our study decided to take action from the ideas that they found on TikTok. Different from making everyday meals, recipes that were trendy or different from everyday food were particularly attractive. For example, many participants mentioned trying out food trends on TikTok: “A bunch of TikTok recipes are very interesting looking, so I’m always looking to try them. A few examples are the Emily Mariko salmon rice, whipped coffee, and pesto was a big ingredient a while back. Now I put it on everything!” (S185). “I did the cloud bread trend” (S050), “keeping up with new trends, like frothy coffee, or wine glass cakes at a picnic” (S033).

Participants also used TikTok as recipe storage when they wanted to make particular foods. For example, S029 reported finding recipes for baking: “I’ve been baking a lot. I made muffins yesterday after seeing someone post about making blueberry/lemon zest muffins.” P4 used the recipe features socially—they tagged their friends under a video of sweet recipes and to see if their friends wanted this recipe to be made: “I tag my friends if there’s a recipe I really like, because I like baking for other people. And so I tag them and say, ‘Do you want me to make you this?’ And they say yes or no.” (P4) Recipes initiated by celebrities also attracted teenagers’ attention. “I saw a video about a person trying to make the pasta that a celebrity made, [I have] made my family Gigi Hadid famous pasta like the eighth time this week.” (P3) Participants in our study thought that making food inspired by recipes on TikTok was a form of expressing creativity and having fun. They also thought that completing it brought a sense of achievement.

**4.2.4 Learning and Adopting Trendy Dietary Regimen and Attitudes.** Teenagers in our study reported being inspired by content on TikTok to learn and try out dietary regimens, such as intermittent fasting and acid-base balance, to develop long-term eating habits. For example, P4 mentioned learning about intermittent fasting and tried to implement that in her life. “On TikTok, I came across intermittent fasting, which is like, we eat for a certain window of time, then

*we don’t eat for another window. And I actually did it. I do actually still do intermittent fasting. Because it makes me less likely to overeat.”* (P4)

Some teenagers in our study were also inspired by TikTok to shift their attitudes toward eating. Concepts related to intuitive eating, or mindful eating were mentioned in our study. One participant mentioned being inspired by TikTok to “*be conscious of my motivation to eat and matching my food portions to how hungry I really am.*” (S047) However, some participants also mentioned that they became conscious about how messages on TikTok influenced how they felt. For example, P5 expressed how she did not like “*health coaches*” on TikTok that taught people to be conscious about one’s metabolism in a very aggressive manner, “*It just seems kind of disingenuous and so it’s weird, it makes me uncomfortable. So I scroll right past it.*” (P5) She was conscious about her emotions after watching such videos and adopted diet suggestions that she felt more comfortable with.

Teenagers in our study were inspired by TikTok food content in several different aspects. From TikTok inspirations, they made changes to their everyday meals, bought certain food, made recipes on TikTok, learned and tried out dietary trends, and were also inspired to take a different attitude towards food.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Our survey responses and interview participants reported using TikTok to explore new food choices and discover recipes. Food-related videos also inspired teenagers to partake in cooking or baking, or try dietary trends. Our participants also reported learning about healthy eating tips and described how this influenced their short- and long-term eating habits.

One salient theme brought forth from our findings was that of the **temporality in teenagers’ food-related action**. We found that TikTok—a platform revolved around rapid short-form videos—pushes teenagers to take immediate food-related action (e.g., cook a recipe, try a challenge). However, these reports of rapid-action only constitute a subset of our participants’ responses. They also described temporally-slower actions in the form of delayed planned actions (e.g., cook food according to recipes saved in their favorites), and even slower decisions in healthy eating-related decisions (e.g., adopting a diet plan, forming certain food preferences food). We propose an analytical lens for approaching teenagers’ use of TikTok from four temporal stages: *immediate*, *planning*, *planned*, and *reflective actions*. Using this temporal lens, we bring to attention the disparity between teenagers’ healthy-eating related decisions and the design facilitating these decisions. Finally, we highlight design potentials to support teenagers’ food related use of TikTok.

### 5.1 Immediate Actions

*Immediate actions* refer to actions teenagers take as a direct consequence of watching food content on TikTok. This *immediacy* resonates with the fast-paced design ethos of TikTok as well as echoed in broader observations on accelerated human-computer interaction [7, 19] and the leveraging of social media technologies’ immediate affordances [14, 15]. These actions happen both on and off the platform. On TikTok, teenagers took immediate actions primarily on the “For You” landing page. Users have the ability to *like*,

*favorite*, or *save* a video, as well as *comment* on a video, *tag* other users, *follow* a creator, or even clicking *not interested* on a video. Our participants reported thoughtful acknowledgement of their control over—or lack thereof—what was promoted to them on the “For You” page. Two interview participants (P4 and P5) explained their hesitancy to use the “*not interested*” feature in fear of not getting more healthy eating-related videos. Off TikTok, *immediate actions* take the form of showing what they see on TikTok to people directly, or asking for the food inspired by TikTok. Currently, TikTok does not provide means for users to communicate this engagement aside from surface-level *liking* or *favoriting* videos. This gap in both on and off platform engagement highlights design opportunities to provide fine-grained controls for users to more accurately communicate what they are interested or not interested in. Such designs could facilitate users’ agency in curating their content and promote engagement as well as useful in scenarios where individuals prefer to avoid certain content triggers that need to be avoided for individuals.

## 5.2 Planning Actions

*Planning actions* is the active ongoing decision making process our participants reported in response to TikTok’s food content. Such actions include planning to cook or bake after watching videos, of which these inspirations are stored in the back of the teenager’s mind. This *planning* combines both the act of *saving* a recipe on TikTok via the *favorite* function and *revisiting* these reserved videos for food ideas. There is a social dimension to these acts of *planning* as well, most notably demonstrated when P4 shared recipe videos with their friends and asked if they wanted certain sweets before deciding which recipe to bake. *Planning* also constitutes a repeated filtering process upon revisiting favorited videos; not all acts of planning are followed through to completion. We see space for designing systems to support these perpetuated planning actions, such as reintroducing favorited videos in the “For You” page or introducing collaborative favoriting functions to help teenagers share their planning with friends and family.

## 5.3 Planned Actions

*Planned actions* refer to users carrying out their ideas from the *planning* stage. Teenagers reported following through their inspired cooking ideas from TikTok, cooking or baking for their family and friends. *Planned actions* constitute the act of *remembering* specific TikTok content, whether implicitly through recollection or explicitly through scrolling through their saved recipes, and putting these corresponding plans to action. These actions require supporting users in the discovery of these videos and supporting content creators in making informative videos. Taking cues from TikTok’s well-developed video editing workflow, we see productive design trajectories in iterating upon content creating support features, such as recommending video pacing and templates for educational content. For users, teenagers’ gaps in culinary knowledge can be alleviated through integrating split-screen or picture-in-picture functionality to include supplementary information to the recipe. We also envision *planned actions* to be also social activities through integrating of real-time voice or video features with friends, encouraging teenagers to support each other’s culinary endeavors.

## 5.4 Reflective Actions

*Reflective actions* are long-term actions that span beyond planning and planned actions. This was most prevalent in our participants’ discussions involving dietary changes such as food substitutions, cutting down on certain foods, and intermittent fasting. Teenagers may reflect on their perception of food but may not take or plan immediate actions. They may also form habit change decisions in this temporally-long process. Approaching teenagers as reflective users of TikTok paints them as active learners from social media content with intent on establishing healthy eating or lifestyle attitudes or lifestyle. These *reflective actions* are continuous and long-term, and thus are often elusive to design for. Designing for *reflective actions* inherently requires adding complexity to address these temporal considerations, of which conflicts with social media’s design ethos of simplicity and rapid engagement. While we currently do not have design suggestions for this space, we want to draw attention to this design challenge as it is most directly engaged with supporting developing of healthy eating and habits for teenagers.

## 6 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Even though TikTok videos are temporally short and often promote fast and immediate actions, there were temporally different actions that teenagers took. To support the development of teenagers’ long-term healthy eating habits, we need more thoughtful designs that support teenagers to make decisions in immediate actions, to have more agency in their choice of videos, to incorporate the social aspects of planning and reflecting, and to carry out planned actions.

Previous research has shown how people post and consume content on social media as well as receive and provide social support to reach health goals [6]. In our preliminary data, we saw that teenagers were conscious and reflective about the food content on TikTok and their own eating habits. However, it is possible that misinformation and social pressure could create negative influences that we have not yet seen in our data, particularly concerning that of eating disorders [13, 23, 30]. We plan to conduct follow-up interviews with a more precise lens to explore how teenagers interact with TikTok content in online and offline contexts as well as how to support them to receive, interact, reflect, and act on this information at different times.

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