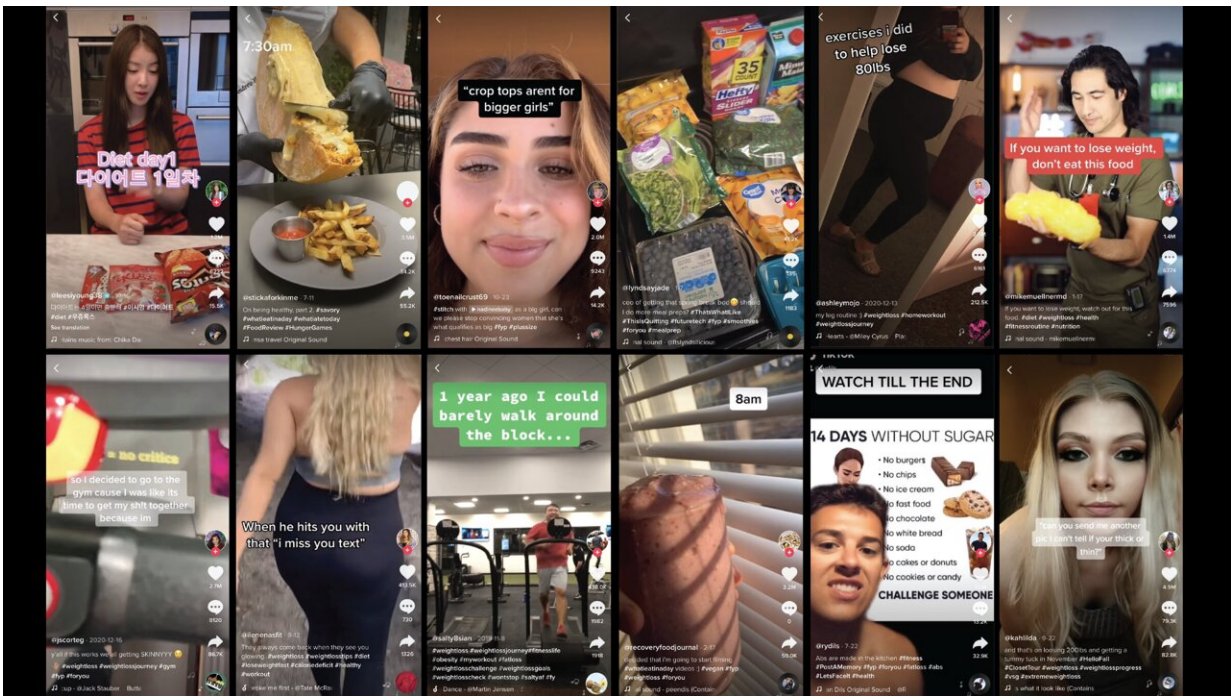


TikTok perpetuates toxic diet culture among teens and young adults, study finds

November 1 2022



Sampling of TikTok videos analyzed in the study. Credit: UVM research team.

New research from the University of Vermont finds the most viewed content on TikTok relating to food, nutrition and weight perpetuates a toxic diet culture among teens and young adults and that expert voices are largely missing from the conversation.

Published today in *PLOS One*, the study found weight-normative

messaging, the idea that weight is the most important measure of a person's health, largely predominates on TikTok with the most popular videos glorifying [weight loss](#) and positioning food as a means to achieve health and thinness. The findings are particularly concerning given existing research indicating social media usage in adolescents and young adults is associated with disordered eating and negative body image.

"Each day, millions of teens and young adults are being fed content on TikTok that paints a very unrealistic and inaccurate picture of food, [nutrition](#) and health," said senior researcher Lizzy Pope, associate professor and director of the Didactic Program in Dietetics at UVM.

"Getting stuck in weight loss TikTok can be a really tough environment, especially for the main users of the platform, which are young people."

The study is the first to examine nutrition and body-image related content at scale on TikTok. The findings are based on a comprehensive analysis of the top 100 videos from 10 popular nutrition, food and weight-related hashtags, which were then coded for key themes. Each of the 10 hashtags had over a billion views when the study began in 2020; the selected hashtags have grown significantly as TikTok's user base has expanded.

"We were continuously surprised by how prevalent the topic of weight was on TikTok. The fact that billions of people were viewing content about weight on the internet says a lot about the role diet culture plays in our society," said co-author Marisa Minadeo, who conducted the research as part of her undergraduate thesis at UVM.

Over the past few years, the Nutrition and Food Sciences Department at UVM has shifted away from a weight-normative mindset, adopting a weight-inclusive approach to teaching dietetics. The approach centers on using non-weight markers of health and well-being to evaluate a person's health and rejects the idea that there is a "normal" weight that is

achievable or realistic for everyone. If society continues to perpetuate weight normativity, says Pope, we're perpetuating fat bias.

"Just like people are different heights, we all have different weights," said Pope. "Weight-inclusive nutrition is really the only just way to look at humanity."

Weight-inclusive nutrition is becoming popular as a more holistic evaluation of a person's health. As TikTok users, UVM health and society major Minadeo and her advisor Pope were interested in better understanding the role of TikTok as a source for information about nutrition and healthy eating behaviors. They were surprised to find that TikTok creators considered to be influencers in the academic nutrition space were not making a dent in the overall landscape of nutrition content.

White, female adolescents and [young adults](#) accounted for the majority of creators of content analyzed in the study. Very few creators were considered expert voices, defined by the researchers as someone who self-identified with credentials such as a registered dietitian, doctor, or certified trainer.

"We have to help [young people](#) develop critical thinking skills and their own body image outside of [social media](#)," said Pope. "But what we really need is a radical rethinking of how we relate to our bodies, to food and to health. This is truly about changing the systems around us so that people can live productive, happy and healthy lives," said Pope.

More information: Marisa Minadeo et al, Weight-normative messaging predominates on TikTok—A qualitative content analysis, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0267997](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267997)

Provided by University of Vermont

Citation: TikTok perpetuates toxic diet culture among teens and young adults, study finds (2022, November 1) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-tiktok-perpetuates-toxic-diet-culture.html>

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