



What themes are present among TikTok videos related to depression?
by Michael O'Donnell

Abstract

“DepressionTok” is a popular subcategory of videos on the relatively new and popular social media platform TikTok. Researchers have yet to fully examine what users are discussing around depression on the platform and with the social media site attracting a young audience (Omnicores, 2020 as in Cervi, 2021), it is imperative to understand how users are discussing the subject because there is a link between social media use and the mental illness (Lin et al., 2016).

This study collected 30 videos from 15 popular hashtags related to depression. In total, 450 videos were coded and examined for themes. The majority of posts were categorized under five themes: “Venting,” “Education and Awareness,” “Relatable Media Clip,” “Community and Belonging,” and “Digital Diary or Personal Story.”

“Education and Awareness,” “Community and Belonging,” and “Digital Diary or Personal Story” echo what other researchers have found when researching how users discuss depression on other social media platforms. “Venting” and “Relatable Media Clips,” otherwise known as “sad edits,” are new topics that deserve to have further research conducted to see how viewing and posting these types of videos affects users.

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1. Introduction

TikTok is a relatively new social media platform. It was originally known as Musical.ly before being acquired by ByteDance in 2017 (Lin & Winkler, 2017). Since then, it has steadily grown to become a dominant social media platform. As of February 2024, TikTok has over one billion monthly active users (Dean, 2024). Even though TikTok is not as popular as other social media platforms, like Facebook which boasts a monthly user base of 2.9 billion users (Wong, 2023), the platform is tremendously popular among younger audiences, with 41% of users being between the ages of 16-24 (Omnicores, 2020 as in Cervi, 2021).

Users on TikTok create short form videos that utilize sounds on the platform. Many of these sounds are made up of popular music. TikTok makes it easy for users to edit their videos through the use of built in editing tools within the app. Once videos are posted to the platform, a recommendation algorithm controls who the post is shown to. This is done by the platform analyzing what content users' interact with and most likely want to see. Users get a personalized video feed on their 'For You Page (Cervi, 2021).'

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There is a wide variety of content on the platform that users are shown (Cervi, 2021). An issue arises with the algorithmic post recommendations. Users often have little agency in what they see. Simpson et al. found that 16 users who identified as LGBTQIA+ were never able to fully domesticate what videos they saw on the platform (2022). In other words, the recommendation algorithm shows users posts they do not want to see, even when they have tried to “game” the system to see posts they are truly interested in.

This is worrisome for a multitude of reasons, but despite TikTok’s popularity, there is relatively little research exploring the effects that the algorithmically recommended posts have on its viewers (Minadeo & Pope, 2022). With a correlation between social media use and depression (Lin et al., 2016), it is important to understand what users with depression may be viewing on the platform to see if it is harmful to them because they may not have as much agency as other social media sites with the posts they are seeing.

Research that has been conducted between the links of social media usage and depression have had mixed findings. A positive finding can be seen where Francis (2021) found that after Kid Cudi announced his struggle with depression on Twitter, now known as X, black men used the platform to express their thoughts on depression. They are often left out of the societal mental health conversation, so this was a way for users to create a sense of community online. Users’ posts often fell under three themes, which were advocating for mental health disclosure, providing online and offline support, and acknowledging the role and impact of culture and society.

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Positive social media usage for users with depression is echoed by Radovic et al. (2017). They found that depressed adolescents often used social media for both positive and negative reasons. Positive reasons included using social media for entertainment, humor, and having a creative outlet. While negative reasons included sharing risky behaviors, cyberbullying, self-denigration, oversharing personal details, stressed posting, and viewing triggering posts (Radovic et al, 2017).

Viewing negative posts can often reinforce unhealthy behaviors when users are trying to recover from their mental illness; however, it was found that social media provided a sense of community for those struggling with mental illness (Radovic et al, 2017).

Negative posts reinforcing unhealthy behaviors is supported by Lu et al. (2021) where they found that in an online depression community, users who were excessively participating in posting and viewing depressive posts often had their symptoms worsen. Lu et al. did find however, that participating in a depression community online, when not excessively participating, users benefited from using the platform (2021). These benefits included creating a sense of community, reducing isolation, providing support, helping depressed mood, and promoting positive psychosocial outcomes (Lu et al., 2021).

Looking at TikTok specifically, research supports the positive findings of using social media for positive mental health outcomes. Researchers examined the hashtag, “#mentalhealth” on TikTok and found that among the comments of those videos under the hashtag, users often offered

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support and validation, or described other mental health issues and struggles, creating a sense of community (Basch et al., 2022).

To my knowledge, as of April 2024, Basch et al. has done the most extensive research regarding mental health on TikTok. This topic, specifically depression on the platform, needs to be further investigated because of the mixed findings research has had on depression and social media usage. This paper seeks out what users on TikTok are posting about depression and depression related hashtags to better understand if users are being positively or negatively affected by posts that are algorithmically recommended to them.



2. Methods

Video Collection

To understand what users are discussing about depression on TikTok, I first needed to collect and code videos taken from the platform. I made a brand new TikTok account with my university email through Arizona State University. TikTok would not let me search and view videos without an account. To find videos related to depression, I searched depression within the search function on the platform. The results gave recommended hashtags based on the search term, which users are able to add to their posts so other users can find their post on the platform. This is also a way for the recommendation algorithm to find videos related to one another and show the videos to users who may be interested in that video. This can be a way for users to group their posts with other similar posts on the platform and a way to gain exposure to their video as well.

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After searching for depression, I was then able to see related hashtags on the platform. Initial posts included other hashtags within the posts found in “#depression.” This allowed me to get an initial list of popular and relevant hashtags (see Figure 1) to consider for data collection. I initially gathered a total of 34 hashtags relating to depression.

Initial Hashtags	Amount of Posts	Initial Hashtags2	Amount of Posts3
sad	85,700,000	struggle	886,700
MentalHealth	15,800,000	sadmood	853,700
MentalHealthMatters	10,800,000	mentalliness	766,000
pain	10,500,000	abandoned	569,900
SelfCare	10,300,000	sadtiktok	440,900
alone	9,300,000	sadd	356,600
sadvibes	8,800,000	mentallyill	261,700
broken	8,800,000	mentallyill	261,400
anxiety	5,100,000	inmyfeelings	261,300
alonelife	3,100,000	struggles	214,900
depression	2,600,000	suicideprevention	212,800
depressed	2,400,000	depressionawareness	163,900
hurt	2,400,000	depressionawareness	163,300
lost	1,700,000	depressedtiktok	151,100
painhub	1,700,000	nonecares	125,800
depressionanxiety	1,100,000	mentalhealthstruggles	16,200
bipolar	906,200	mentalhealthmotivation	12,100

Figure 1: The initial hashtags that were collected related to depression on TikTok

The hashtags I gathered varied drastically in the amount of posts under each hashtag. The hashtag “sad” had 85,700,000 posts using it, making it the largest hashtag collected. Meanwhile, “mentalhealthmotivation” had the lowest number of posts with just 12,100 posts.

The 34 hashtags collected provided a good starting point, but the list needed to be reduced in scope. Some of the hashtags were too broad, like “SelfCare.” Although there could be videos under “SelfCare” that dealt with depression, the top videos when searched mostly dealt with skin-care routines. Other hashtags like “alonelife” dealt with topics like romantic relationships. This again could touch upon depression, but this felt unrelated for the initial study.

After these considerations, I narrowed the hashtag list down to 15 hashtags. I aimed to include hashtags that had at least a million posts, but this left out important hashtags that should have

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been included, like “#suicideprevention,” “#mentalillness,” and “#depressionawareness.” These topics deal directly with depression and depression related themes, so I wanted to include them.

After excluding hashtags that did not fit the study and including smaller hashtags, I ended up with the following hashtags for analysis (see Figure 2): “#depression,” “#depressed,”

“#MentalHealth,” “#MentalHealthMatters,” “#sad,” “#broken,” “#sadvibes,”

“#depressionanxiety,” “#mentalillness,” “#depressionawareness,” “#pain,” “#bipolar,”

“#suicideprevention,” “#anxiety,” and “#struggle.”

Chosen Hashtags	Amount of Posts	Chosen Hashtags2	Amount of Posts3
sad	85,700,000	depressed	2,400,000
MentalHealth	15,800,000	depressionanxiety	1,100,000
MentalHealthMatters	10,800,000	bipolar	906,200
pain	10,500,000	struggle	886,700
broken	8,800,000	mentalillness	766,000
sadvibes	8,800,000	suicideprevention	212,800
anxiety	5,100,000	depressionawareness	163,900
depression	2,600,000		

Figure 2: Hashtags chosen for codebook development and data analysis

The collected hashtags gave a good overview of “DepressionTok” without being too broad or narrow. It expands into anxiety and bipolar which are often included with depression hashtags. It also included hashtags such as “#sadvibes” to get a feeling of how users are expressing their emotions and not just what they are discussing related to the mental illness. This is supposed to mimic how a user may see posts on their “For You Page” since those posts are algorithmically displayed based on what TikTok thinks the user wants to see based on the post’s engagement statistics (Minadeo & Pope, 2022).

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Once the hashtags were selected, I then collected 30 videos for each hashtag resulting in a total of 450 videos to code and examine. 30 videos spread across 15 hashtags resulted in a broad sample size of “DepressionTok.” Although the sample could have been larger for a more precise dataset, this was a good starting point for examination.

I included the top 30 videos listed under the hashtag when queried for that specific hashtag that was searched. The search results did not list videos in an ascending listed order by views but appeared to list videos by relevance to the hashtag. Many of the posts collected appeared to be quite popular within the hashtag.

Since many posts used multiple hashtags, there were a few of the same post included in multiple hashtags. I did not include these posts to have a more diverse dataset. I did include posts that were the same, or very similar, as long as they were uploaded by different creators. I did not come across any posts that were considered private. All posts collected appeared to be public facing. An example of my data collection can be seen below in Figure 3.

ID	Hashtag	Display Name	Username	Verified Account	Mental Health Pr	Post Caption	Views	Likes	Comments	Saves	Shares	Date Posted	Date Gathered	Video Link
001	depression	Logan Cohen	healinghumanity	No	Yes	5 Examples of W	670000	459800	4330	81100	13200	10/21/2022	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@healinghumanity/7771ideo7156974820503063854
002	depression	Dr. Kojo Sarfo	dr.kojosarfo	Yes	Yes	Every victory mu	142000	25400	118	581	44	06/12/2022	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@dr.kojosarfo/video/7199940895369268523
003	depression	therapy session	_therapysession	No	No	None	918400	84300	722	22000	12500	10/29/2022	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@_therapysession_/ideo7159834677904166190
004	depression	LeSandra Vidal	healing.lesandra	No	No	You CANT always	431400	24200	127	1480	168	04/27/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@healing.lesandra/video/726775341476351278
005	depression	Jessa Therapist	therapistjessawf	No	Yes	This job isn't for	1410000	483300	1532	31400	907	04/03/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@therapistjessawf/video/7217954365670162186
006	depression	Leets	leets_00	No	No	TW. depression	16900000	2300000	9614	26800	31400	03/24/2022	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@leets_00/video/7078730044230716714
007	depression	Allison Renie	evokhmalison	No	No	if you can relate,	1700000	82900	671	14200	1225	08/08/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@evokhmalison/video/726491258701020421
008	depression	Amber H	amberhson_	No	No	This hits so hard	9500000	2100000	6045	408600	182900	02/27/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@amberhson_/video/7205021497805507841
009	depression	rylee stelling	fake.it.tilu.make	No	No	depression is a t	16000000	2200000	9026	339900	77000	02/19/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@fake.it.tilu.make.0/video/7201946083042364718
010	depression	lockednvision	lockednvision	No	No	30.18	1700000	210200	1221	43900	18700	05/15/2023	04/10/2024	https://www.tiktok.com/@lockednvision/video/7233596931933656010

Figure 3: The first 10 rows of data for the videos collected.

I included post metadata along with assigning an ID to each post collected. I included the hashtag the post was taken from, the user display name, the user account name, whether the user was verified, whether the user was a mental health professional, the post caption, the views, likes, comments, saves, shares, posted date, date gathered, and the link to the video.

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Mental health professionals were marked “Yes” when the creator explicitly said they were a professional during the post, included it in the post description, or included it on their account page. Every account page was checked during the data gathering process.

Codebook Development

Since all of the posts were given IDs, I was able to use these IDs to code the videos in a separate spreadsheet under the themes gathered from the videos. I used inductive coding for this codebook. Inductive coding is a way to gather keywords from the original sources to be used as codes as the researcher traverses through the dataset and organically produces a code from the data (Thomas, 2006 as cited in Naeem et al., 2023). Inductive coding uses codes that are directly taken from the data instead of codes that are taken from theory like in deductive coding (Naeem et al., 2023).

As I began examining the collected posts, I wrote down what codes emerged from the posts and then assigned each video ID under the code when the video had themes to match. Each video could have multiple themes, so many video IDs were listed under multiple codes. After watching all 450 videos that were collected, 18 codes emerged. An example of the codebook used can be seen below in Figure 4.

	Education and awareness	Encouragement	Community and Belonging	Venting	Digital Diary or Personal Story	Relatable Media	Relatable Song	Romantic Relationship	Comedy	Memorial	Art	Self-deprecation o Adult Content	Misinformation or Disinformation	Misogyny
2	001	002	005	003	004	006	124	016	002	013	006	079	232	128
3	004	063	008	006	009	015	130	044	017	046	012	158	259	175
4	006	065	009	008	011	017	148	114	059	070	159	179	262	310
5	007	069	010	009	012	019	173	121	074	097	174	193	342	342
6	013	071	014	010	014	024	180	126	088	284	182	205	397	
7	014	076	016	012	016	026	191	129	122	364	187	219	404	
8	016	082	018	015	018	031	197	133	131	365	188	231		
9	028	087	020	016	020	032	200	138	139	367	189	242		
10	031	092	021	017	021	033	202	141	141	369	190	262		
11	032	096	023	018	022	035	203	150	147	372	192	278		

Figure 4: An excerpt of the codebook that displays the first 10 rows of data for some of the codes.

The codes that were collected from the videos included: Education and awareness, Encouragement, Community and Belonging, Venting, Digital Diary or Personal Story, Relatable

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Media Clip, Relatable Song, Romantic Relationship, Comedy, Memorial, Art, Self-deprecation or self harm, Adult Content, Misinformation or Disinformation, Misogyny, Video Games, Religious, and Video Unavailable. Seven videos were labeled as Video Unavailable for not being available to watch, even though the videos were coded shortly after being collected.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted by using Python in Google Colab. To do so, the spreadsheets were copied into comma-separated value (CSV) files so data would not be lost, and then imported into the code using Pandas, where the data was stored as dataframes. I first did a basic overview of the data from the spreadsheet with the metadata of the videos. I then did an analysis of the codebook data.

I found the median number of views of all the posts was 1,600,000. The median number of likes was 177,400. The median number of comments was 926. The median number of saves was 23,600. The median number of shares was 4,704.5. I used the median instead of the mean when describing the collected post metrics. This gave a more accurate picture of the data since some videos pulled the data away from the mean by being outliers with much higher view counts. This can often be attributed to the post going viral. The median still shows how much attention the posts in “DepressionTok” garner among audiences.

I then found the median views, likes, comments, saves, and shares among all 15 hashtags collected. The data from this differentiates from the post count, which was unexpected. For example, “#sadvibes” had 8,800,000 posts at the time of the data collection (or tied for fifth

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among post count), but had a median view count of 3,950,000, putting it second in median views among all 15 hashtags. This can be further seen below in Figure 5.

Hashtag	Median Views	Median Likes	Median Comments	Median Saves	Median Shares
sad	5000000	577650	3315	96600	11071
sadvibes	3950000	267500	1453	35050	17350
MentalHealth	3650000	479700	1912	58700	10250
depressed	2450000	251900	1290.5	44500	8867.5
depression	2350000	292450	1658	33200	4275
MentalHealthMatters	2050000	188300	1005	29300	2564.5
depressionanxiety	1950000	174650	1088	28100	6451.5
mentalillness	1550000	250350	1637.5	38250	6896
suicideprevention	1400000	196100	440.5	8096	769.5
anxiety	1300000	110100	1085.5	13350	5699
pain	898750	66950	346.5	12550	3431.5
bipolar	811750	50850	605	7081	2183
depressionawareness	594200	80950	468.5	6904.5	1511
struggle	576150	81600	481.5	10299.5	2731
broken	522050	42300	258.5	4245	2539

Figure 5: The median metadata count for all of the hashtags collected.

After this analysis, I moved on to examining the mental health professional side of the data. Of the 450 videos collected, only 29 videos were from mental health professionals (MHPs). MHPs' posts garnered considerably less post engagement than non-mental health professional users (NMHPUs) across all of the collected hashtags.

The median view count among their videos was 383,400 compared to 1,700,000 views for NMHPUs. The median like count for MHPs was 25,400 compared to 197,200 for NMHPUs. The median comment count for MHPs was 260 compared to 995 for NMHPUs. The median saves for MHPs was 1,547 compared to 27,300 for NMHPUs. The median shares for MHPs was 464 compared to 5,203 for NMHPUs.

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It was also found that MHPs only had posts in six of the 15 collected hashtags. They had nine videos in #anxiety, eight videos in “#depressionawareness”, four videos in #bipolar, three videos in both #depression and #suicideprevention, and two videos in “#mentalillness.”

The data from the codebook favored five codes. The codes were “Venting” with 159 posts, “Education and Awareness” with 129 posts, “Relatable Media Clip” with 102 posts, “Community and Belonging” with 93 posts, and “Digital Diary or Personal Story” with 93 posts. The entirety of the code book can be seen below in Figure 6.

Code	Number of Posts	Percent of Posts from Total	Code2	Number of Posts3	Percent of Posts from Total4
Venting	159	35.33%	Art	17	3.78%
Education and awareness	129	28.67%	Memorial	15	3.33%
Relatable Media Clip	102	22.67%	Self-deprecation or self harm	13	2.89%
Community and Belonging	93	20.67%	Video Unavailable	7	1.56%
Digital Diary or Personal Story	93	20.67%	Misinformation or Disinformation	6	1.33%
Encouragement	40	8.89%	Religious	5	1.11%
Romantic Relationship	27	6.00%	Videogames	5	1.11%
Comedy	27	6.00%	Misogyny	4	0.89%
Relatable Song	22	4.89%	Adult Content	1	0.22%

Figure 6: A table displaying the codes from the codebook with the number of posts that could be categorized in each code along with the percentage of posts for each code compared to the total number of posts (450).



3. Results and Discussion

Out of the top five codes collected, three of the five codes exemplify what other researchers have found when examining depression on other social media sites. Users who post about depression are likely to discuss themes around “Education and Awareness,” “Community and Belonging,” and “Digital Diary or Personal Story.” To my knowledge, what has not been examined in prior research on TikTok, or other social media platforms, thus far is users who vent on the platform or post relatable media clips. Most of these clips are otherwise known as “sad edits.”

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159 out of 450 posts had some aspect of venting in the post. This was the number one code collected of videos spread out across the 15 hashtags related to depression. Little research has been done that discusses the effects of users venting about their mental health on social media.

A sad edit is often a clip taken from a movie or television show that includes music and relatable text. This text often fell under the category of “Venting,” with 51 out of 450 videos having both themes of “Venting” and “Relatable Media Clip.” Therefore, posting sad edits and venting are somewhat related. Both of these express that further research is needed on how posting these types of videos impacts the users who do so and the users who view them.

129 out of 450 posts that were sampled fell had themes of “Education and Awareness.” At first glance, this seems to be a positive finding, but some research may suggest otherwise.

Giedinghagen (2023) notes that there is a rise of cases from TikTok where users are displaying symptoms of Dissociative Identity Disorder after seeing posts online. Users are relating to the symptoms displayed in the video even when the symptoms are not actually a part of the illness. Users may be presenting symptoms after viewing related videos even though they never presented symptoms for the illness before.

This is worrisome when considering the research from Bippert (2023) who found that users who engaged in one behavior seen on a mental health TikTok, were more likely to engage in additional ones they saw via mental health TikTok as well. Although many of the depression related posts had positive themes, there were enough posts with negative themes where this is cause for concern. More research is needed in this area to examine if users are self diagnosing

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depression from “DepressionTok” and if users are displaying symptoms learned from the platform.

The collected data about MHPs agrees with prior research from McCashin and Murphy (2022), Minadeo and Pope (2022), and Basch et al. (2022) where they all found that MHPs are vastly underrepresented on TikTok. This is not the main focus of the paper, but something that is important enough to be mentioned. As others have recognized, MHPs should better utilize the app’s built in functions to reach wider audiences. Minadeo and Pope (2022) also discuss how it is quite difficult to grow a following on the platform, so it may be more beneficial to teach users how to determine whether information is credible or not from non-professional users.

Regardless, MHPs who use the platform to spread information should be following the trends and resources on the app to help spread their information to a broader audience. This may be done by posting to different mental health hashtags that garner more of an audience than the hashtags that they already post under.

The findings of this study present two cases of further research with depression and TikTok.

There needs to be a qualitative study conducted that examines how posting negative posts about users’ own mental illnesses affects them. It is important to see whether this is a healthy coping strategy or a way that users are harming themselves. If it is found that this harms users, TikTok may want to consider implementing ways to prevent young users from posting or seeing these kinds of posts.

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A second study that should be conducted from the results of this paper is another qualitative study that further explores if users have suffered mass social media induced illness. To do this, the proposed study should interview users and ask if they have diagnosed themselves with depression or have been diagnosed with depression after finding out about symptoms from TikTok. This study should also explore if users are learning symptoms that they apply to themselves from “DepressionTok” that they may not have previously displayed.



4. Limitations

It is worth noting that this study was not approved by Arizona State University's IRB. I did not seek out their explicit approval to conduct this study since the project is not being considered for publication. If that were to change, I would have to submit this to their IRB since the study examines human subjects without their approval.

The study itself was limited as well. The sample size was rather small with 450 posts across 15 hashtags. There may have been prominent hashtags related to depression that were not included. This may not cover the true extent of what is posted as well. Also, only collecting 30 posts per hashtag may not give a full overview of the kinds of posts being posted to that hashtag.

I was the only researcher for this project, so I did not have anyone cross reference my codes for accuracy. Some videos may be coded inaccurately. With a single researcher, there may also have been bias when coding. I tried my best to check my biases with each post, but without any additional perspectives examining my codes, I cannot be certain if there are biases or not.

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Even with the limitations of this study, the findings still suggest that further research is needed to examine the effects of videos related to depression on the social media platform.



5. Conclusion

TikTok is a popular and relatively new app with a young audience. Little research has been conducted on the platform thus far. Depression is a popular topic of discussion on the platform. Researchers who have researched depression on other social media platforms have had mixed findings. The study conducted in this paper supports the mixed results where many users use the platform for positive reasons in regards to depression, but there are still negative aspects surrounding the topic that need further research. It is also apparent that MHPs are not reaching their full potential on the platform and should look into better utilization of the app's features and trends.

About the author

Michael O'Donnell (He/Him) is a master's student at Arizona State University studying social data science. This research has been conducted for the class STC 570: Social Data Projects. He can be contacted by email at mjodonn4@asu.edu or michaelod9966@gmail.com.

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Weight-normative messaging predominates on TikTok—A qualitative content analysis. I used this paper as a guideline while conducting this study. Lastly, I would like to thank my classmates in the program who have challenged me to grow as a student.

Notes

My data collection sheet can be found [here](#). My codebook can be found [here](#). My python code I used for analysis can be found [here](#).

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