

# Food Insecurity: What can TikTok reveal about Hunger in the American Condition?

*Serena T. Tedesco<sup>1,\*</sup>, Adam J. Book<sup>2</sup>, Mary Katherine Thornton<sup>3</sup>, Margaret L. Tennant<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate Student, Department of Global Studies, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Consumer and Design Sciences, Auburn University

<sup>3</sup> Director of Global Education, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

<sup>4</sup> Graduate Student, Department of Global Studies Graduate, College of Human Science, Auburn University

The challenges brought by the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic revealed the immense struggle millions of United States citizens face amidst hunger and poverty. Currently, food insecurity in the United States affects roughly 10 percent of all households. This rate reflects no marked improvement from the rate in 2001, thus revealing stagnation and the need for deeper examination into the problem of hunger in the United States and the struggle faced by those living in food insecure conditions. This research aims to study the lived experiences behind food insecurity in the United States to provide a crystalized picture of the challenges and cycles present in hunger-stricken communities. Presenting an in-depth portrayal of hunger experiences will establish a foundation from which policymakers can develop informed, relevant solutions to food insecurity. Researchers developed software code to collect and synthesize TikTok posts related to a viral stitch about hunger and poverty in the United States. The researchers manually transcribed 170 TikTok posts from the original synthesized data. The data was then coded through the qualitative approach of thematic analysis for the purpose of identifying themes. The emerging themes identified in the data provide new insight into the lived hunger experience in the United States. These findings provide new information for researchers to find more effective solutions to the hunger crisis.

The United States is one of the most powerful and wealthy nations in the world [3]; however, food insecurity is still very prevalent. This is due to many factors, including a lack of research on the lived experience of food-insecure citizens. The purpose of this research is not to present numerical data on the number of people in need to gain more funding. The purpose is to understand the lived experiences of those suffering from food

insecurity and provide faces to the data to alleviate the hunger crisis more effectively in the United States.

The current literature available does not portray the full picture of food insecurity in the United States. The data available is largely based on numerical representations of the hunger crisis. Moreover, there is an underrepresentation of lived hunger experiences in literature. The current data and literature available have not led to beneficial programs to alleviate the number of food-insecure persons in the United States. With negligible change from 2020, there is 10.2 percent of households or 33 million people suffering from food insecurity in the United States in 2021.

Additionally, the literature also suggests that the lack of government responsibility has resulted in an increase in feeding programs run by non-profit organizations. The lack of involvement by the governments in capitalist nations, such as the United States, has led to the needs of food insecure citizens being missed or miscommunicated [5].

TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, with 3 billion downloads in the world in August 2020. Out of those 3 billion downloads, there were upwards of 1 billion active monthly users around the world [2]. Due to this growth, TikTok has become a place where people get their news and discuss topics with other users. The comment section on any given TikTok post shows engagement with the content as well as the emergence of communities within the platform. The interactive platform and the discreet manner of accessing information [4] has turned TikTok into a place for social change and political action. Between 2019 and 2020 countless adolescents utilized TikTok to mobilize

\* Corresponding author: szt0075@auburn.edu

social change and institute a new culture of advocacy and political learning [1]. This new culture of advocacy among adolescents with the use of an entertaining and discreet platform has resulted in more awareness in younger generations.

Researchers used the hashtag #growinguppoor that went viral in 2021 to collect data for this study. The hashtag was being utilized by users of TikTok to share their testimony of growing up in poverty or in low-income households. The videos related to users' lived experiences with hunger were especially interesting to our research team. After identifying the viral stitch, researchers created code to collect and synthesize the related videos from TikTok. Out of the 545 videos downloaded, only the top 200, based on view count, were selected for manual transcription. Following manual transcription, the researchers sorted through the transcribed videos and removed all transcripts not directly pertaining to hunger. This resulted in 170 video transcripts.

Researchers utilized a constant comparative method to analyze the transcripts and developed a series of codes. The codes were then defined and transferred to a codebook. This codebook was used by two third-party coders to test inter-coder reliability. The final codes were then summarized into an aggregated column graph, including codes from the original coders and the third-party coders. See Figure 1 for Summary of Code Analysis.

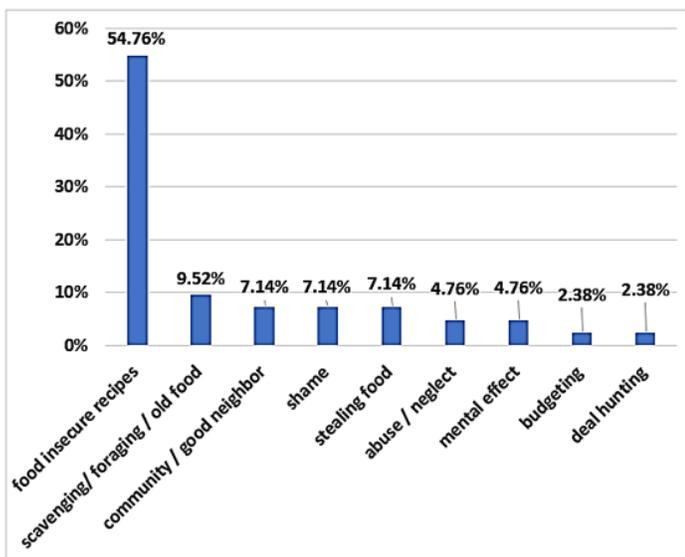


Fig. 1 Summary of Code Analysis

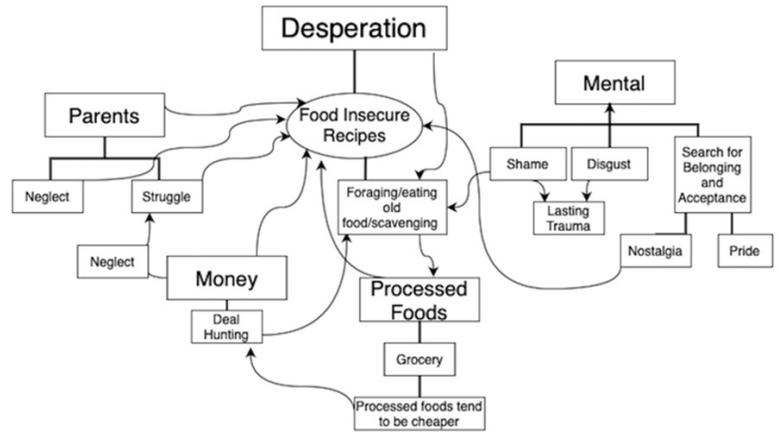


Fig. 2 Thematic Map.

With the analysis of the aggregated column graph, two researchers developed a thematic map to interpret code themes. See Figure 2 for Thematic Map.

The initial thematic map developed by researchers was analyzed again by two researchers and resulted in a final web of codes chart. See Figure 3 for Web of Codes Chart.

In the final round of thematic analysis three researchers refined the web of codes chart into the finalized map of overarching themes. These themes were Nutrition, Desperation (experienced when in food insecurity), Enduring Mental Effects, Parental Experience, and Assistance. See Figure 4 for Finalized Overarching Themes.

The emerging themes provide researchers with new insights into the lived hunger experience in the United States, which will allow researchers to find more effective solutions to the hunger crisis in the United States.

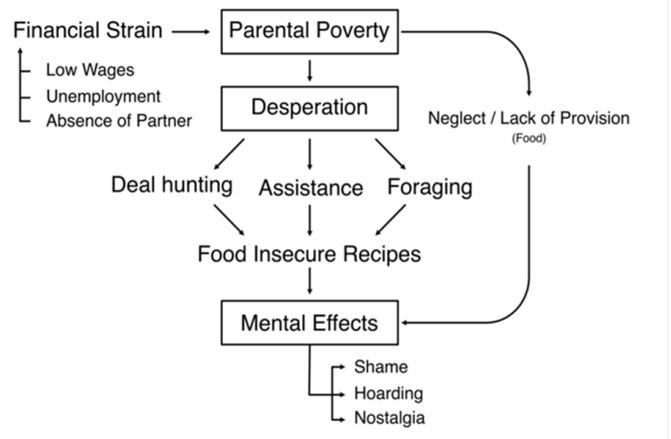


Fig. 3. Web of Codes Chart

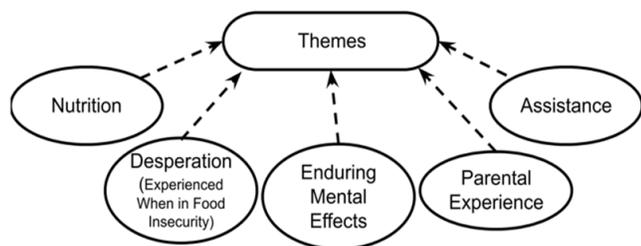


Fig. 4. Finalized Overarching Themes

**Keywords:** food insecurity, hunger, social media, TikTok, thematic analysis

### Statement of Research Advisor

Beginning in the Summer of 2023, Serena has provided contributions to our study of learning about the lived hunger experience in the United States through a viral TikTok stitch. Her role, in addition to being a third-party coder and collaborating with two researchers to create a thematic map, was to develop a literature review. The literature review provides background and insight into the current literature available relating to food insecurity in the United States and using social media as a tool for social change.

- *Kate Thornton, Department of Global Education, Auburn University College of Human Sciences*

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### Authors Biography



Serena T. Tedesco is a senior-year student pursuing a B.S. degree in Global Studies with a minor in Business at Auburn University. She is a 2023 Auburn Undergraduate Research Fellow. Serena has a passion for social impact studies and hunger research.



Adam J. Book is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Consumer and Design Sciences at Auburn University. He studies the quality of life among consumers in areas of product interaction and nutrition.



Kate Thornton, Ph.D., serves as the Director of Global Education in the College of Human Sciences at Auburn University. Thornton earned her Ph.D., MBA, and an MS in Consumer Affairs from Auburn University. She also holds a BS in Biochemistry and a BFA in Painting from Clemson University. Thornton has received many academic accolades, including being named a Rhodes and Marshall Scholar finalist

and Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award recipient. Her interest and commitment to solving problems of hunger and poverty stemmed from adopting her children from Ethiopia.



Maggie Tennant holds a BS in Global Studies in Human Sciences from Auburn University and is pursuing graduate studies in the Netherlands. She focuses her research on hunger and equitable food access.