



Make Your Story
Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies

Season 2, Episode 3: Cooking Up Content with TikTok

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AB: Hello and welcome to another episode of Purdue University's MakeYourStory podcast, celebrating student stories of making and creating new and exciting projects and innovations all over campus. My name is Dr. Annette Bochenek. I work as an assistant professor and business information specialist at Purdue and I am your host for today's podcast episode. As a librarian, I frequently see Purdue's Library and Information resources aiding in the research process that prefaces so many of these projects of making and creating.

Today, our story of making blends the nostalgic with the new. I think that many people may be familiar with or have at least heard of TikTok at this point—especially after 2020's quarantine. Quite a few people jumped on the TikTok bandwagon as app users or have even gone on to become content creators themselves. But do you also remember American Girl Dolls? As a product of the 90s, I absolutely remember them! I loved pouring over the catalogs, dreaming of all of the cool dolls, the different time periods they represented, and devoured the 6-book series behind each doll. When I was lucky enough to be able to get my very own American Girl Doll at the American Girl Doll Store in Chicago's Water Tower Place, I was over the moon. For the record, I went with Samantha, representing the Victorian Era.

Now how does all of this connect with the concept of making? American Girl Dolls and TikTok? Well, Purdue student—and now alum—Seth Workman also entered into the hobby of content creation through TikTok. Harboring a passion for cooking and also collecting some of the historic American Girl Dolls, he had the innovative idea to cook his way through the American Girl Doll cookbooks for TikTok users—and himself—to enjoy. Yes, the dolls also had cookbooks published that centered upon their different historical periods. The historical periods would serve as inspiration for the recipes that were featured in each cookbook. Through making not only food dishes but also creating highly focused and well-edited content for TikTok, Seth soon

struck up a steady following of TikTok fans—including myself. Here to share his journey with us is Seth Workman.

SW: So I'm Seth Workman. I am from Westfield, Indiana, which is like a little suburb north of Indianapolis. I started at Purdue in 2018 and then I graduated in May of this year. My degree was in hospitality and tourism management, so I was pretty involved with that all four years. I also was really involved on campus with the Purdue Student Union Board for all four years. When I graduated, I ended up moving out East. I'm currently in Williamsburg, Virginia. I work in hospitality out here. I kind of fell down the TikTok rabbit hole with everyone else early 2019, I think. I didn't really start putting in content until like 2020. I had a few hits here and there, but nothing really took off until April 2020, when I started cooking my way through the American Girl Doll cookbooks. I'd always been really interested in history as a kid. I always think like if I didn't go into hospitality, I probably would be a history teacher, probably. So I really fell kind of like down the American girl rabbit hole, too, like in 2020. I didn't have one growing up. A lot of my like neighbors did. When I as a kid, like Kit was really big, so everyone had her. I didn't know much about them until I stumbled on them in 2020 and I kind of, I didn't know that they were all historically based. But when I found that out I kind of like started looking into them a little more, um, kind of going into like the lore of the franchise. When I finally had cookbooks, I thought it'd be really fun to just kind of dive into. It definitely seemed to be really historically based and it's definitely been like a big wave of nostalgia lately for the brand in general.

AB: So, what made you interested in cooking?

SW: My mom has always been in the kitchen a lot when I was a kid, um, until now, but she's always been more like of a baker. Never really like a lot of cooking. But I was always with her in the kitchen for a lot of my childhood. So that was definitely like the early start, early love for the culinary arts in general. Then I took some culinary arts classes in high school and then obviously at Purdue with the hospitality curriculum. We do take culinary classes and we run like a little restaurant operation. So I was always interested in like experimenting and just getting more like hands on experience in the kitchen. So, I think that's kind of where that started to line up with. There was also Conner Prairie—a little bit north of Indianapolis and Fishers. It's a living history museum. I loved going there as a kid. My favorite part is always like going into the houses and like, if they're like cooking or baking, I always like want to stay and watch that.

AB: And then how did you specifically then become interested in the American Girl Doll books then? It was actually through your TikTok that I learned that they even made the cookbooks. I grew up interested in the dolls themselves and, as a product of the nineties, I had like Samantha and her little starter pack of books, and I read through so many of the other doll books, but I didn't know about the cookbooks.

SW: Yeah, I don't really know how I found the cookbook. I probably was looking online, um, but they've been out of print since like 1994.

AB: Oh, wow!

SW: I think anyone born after that probably didn't have them. When I like was hunting them down online, they were a little hard to find. Josefina's was the last cookbook to be published and hers is almost nonexistent. The Evergreen Indiana Library system only has two copies in the whole state. So, I'm not exactly sure how I found them. I don't know how long they were in print, but I don't think it was very long.

AB: Oh wow. Yeah, that is interesting. I guess that kind of covers on my next question, too. I was wondering if you were looking for more of like the classic, initial release of doll cookbooks, like that first set of I think the six original ones that Pleasant Company came out with versus even some of the contemporary ones that might be doing the cookbooks. That was all news to me. So, do none of the contemporaries have cookbooks at this point?

SW: I think there's two but I wouldn't say they were contemporary. So, the Pleasant Company was a lot more rooted in history than Mattel has been with the franchise. So, they took a lot of steps like guarantee historic authenticity. Pleasant Company had the first dolls: Kirsten, Felicity, Addy, Josefina, Molly and Samantha. Those are the OG six. And then when Mattel bought them in 1999, they were like in the pipeline of releasing both Kaya and Kit.

AB: Okay.

SW: Kaya doesn't have a cookbook but Kit does. She's kind of like one of the weird transition dolls.

AB: Okay.

SW: Her cookbooks a different format and I don't own that one. When I was starting the series, I was just going to do the original six. But Julie also has a cookbook, which is a little strange.

AB: Oh, which one is Julie? Is she the fifties doll?

SW: 1970s.

AB: Oh, the seventies! Okay, excellent.

SW: The 50s one came out a few years after Kit during that transition period between Pleasant Company and Mattel.

AB: Gotcha. Excellent. So, how did you find yourself getting the books? How are you able to access them with them being out of print?

SW: So, I find almost all of them online. There was a website, I think it's called AbeBooks. It's like secondhand books. Every copy that I bought came from Half Price Books. My oldest came from a random Half-Price Books Store in a Dallas suburb. I think I bought like two at a time because I didn't know like how far I was going to go with this. When I first started, I paid like

\$2.50 for each of the books. Then no one had Josefina's cookbook on that site. No one had her like on eBay or anything else. So, I just got her from the library started taking pictures of the pages that I needed.

AB: That's amazing! I did want to like plug—if you haven't already used it—inter-library loan in general. If you can't find something, you can basically like request it as like a nationwide search effort to get something mailed to you at your library, through a larger network of libraries all over the nation. So maybe you might have some success there. That helps me with my research. I'm really into classic films and most of that related content is out of print. So that's where the library systems really come in into play for me if I can't buy something secondhand. So, can you tell me a little bit then about your process for coming up with the different TikTok videos and what it's like to work through these?

SW: So, I first started with Felicity's breakfast. I'm going in historical order. Felicity would be first because she was there before we even were a country. She was 1774. I started with her. Each cookbook has three sections. There is breakfast, dinner and then favorite foods. I go through the cookbook, like start to finish, starting with breakfast for each of the characters. Felicity's breakfast was not very hard. It was super easy. It was a good thing, like just a good start with that. I definitely got thrown for some loops with her dinner. I think the hardest cookbook that I've done so far is a tie between Josefina and Kirsten. They both have some recipes that are just pretty difficult to work through. Josefina has tamales. I have never done that, so it was a long effort. Kirsten had a lot of bread in hers and I just happen to be someone who can never get bread to work for me. <laugh> That always killed it, I think.

AB: That's fun! With this angle, I think you're able to sort of learn about the time period and what was sort of in vogue then or typical of some of these meals and getting a sense of what ingredients they used. There are also the cultural connections. I think that's also really fascinating to work through and by default kind of learn from it all. Do you have any like memorable recipe successes or alternatively failures that stand out to you?

SW: My most recent failure was with Addy's breakfast. Addy is 1864. I believe she's in Philadelphia. Addy is a former enslaved person and she flees the South for Philadelphia. Her breakfast has biscuits in it. And the biscuits, I tried them twice. I could not get them to rise and the cookbooks sometimes offer suggestions or tips and tricks on how to get certain recipes to work. But this one had like, it's like three ingredients. It's flour, butter, and milk essentially. It could not work for me. I did that one two times and I never remake the recipes. Usually I just like, if it fails the first time, I'm just honest, like, this was a fail, the cookbook's wrong, but I really wanted to get this right, but I couldn't do it. That was like the most recent failure I've had. And then another one—I know I had a few with Josefina, but I can't think of them off the top of my head.

AB: <laugh> So it sounds like someone forgot to list like baking powder in the recipe or something. Some sort of a riser. Any successes, though? Is there anything you'd make again or anything you were particularly proud of?

SW: Yeah. Kirsten had what were like rusks essentially, I think it was in her breakfast section possibly. I mean, a rusk is essentially just bread that you've sliced and then you toast it in the oven and it gets so dry that it can just stay shelf stable for a really long time. You want shelf stable foods when you're on the Minnesota prairies. I'd make the rusks again. They had like a cardamom in them, which is a flavor I'm really into. I'll probably make that again. Kirsten's cookbook was really fascinating because it had a lot of different spices in it, which I hadn't really seen with a lot of other characters. We often forget, I think, that Swedish cooking has a lot of spices that have ended up in Sweden. It was really interesting to cook all this food that Kirsten would've been eating on Minnesota prairies. That was pretty typically Swedish. I had a lot of people commenting on my TikTok like, "Oh, my grandma used to cook like this." And I was like, "That's really interesting."

AB: So cool. Yeah, I think a lot of like the Scandinavian dishes have cardamom in them in some capacity. It's really interesting to see what sort of flavors they highlight. So, over time, you really started to build up a following. I'm sure you found me along the way, too. <laugh>. I was among them. What was it like for you to see a following slowly build and when did you really start to notice it? Was there a turning point or some moment where you realized like, "Wow, <laugh>, there are a lot of people who are into this?"

SW: When I first started cooking, I had like 3000 followers and then after the first full video, like things just like hit from there. Within days I had 30,000.

AB: Wow.

SW: That was just that one video. I've just been building since then. It's really interesting to see like, so on TikTok, you know, on your video page it'll say like, this person follows you. And like, sometimes it's a verified person. I'm like, "Why does Holly and Madison follow me?" Like, that's just so funny to me. The following has definitely been interesting to watch slowly build. As someone who has a professional career, I'll show up to work and someone will be like, "I didn't know you were on TikTok." And I'm like, "Oh gosh, I was on your For You page. Please don't tell anyone." <laugh> But yeah, it's been really interesting to watch that like build up for the last few months. I think the moment where I was like, "Oh wait, I have a following," was when Holly Madison was commenting on my TikTok.

AB: Oh, my goodness. <laugh>. That is so fun. Yeah, the Felicity video is the one that brought me to you. I think it was Felicity's breakfast if I remember correctly. And yeah, <laugh>, I followed from there on out.

SW: <laugh> She has a breakfast that also blew up as well—and American Girl commented on that one.

AB: Oh wow!

SW: I had been noticed by like the motherland.

AB: Yes! Have you been able to connect with American Girl in any capacity or maybe even Pleasant Company or Mattel at this point? Have there been any connections or potential for collaboration if you're allowed to say?

SW: I would love to collaborate with American Girl. So, they've commented on my TikTok—on that one, Felicity's Breakfast. I haven't heard anything else from them. They're historically a very difficult company to contact. There's actually a podcast called Dolls of Our Lives. They used to be called American Girls, where they went through each American Girl book. They had an episode where they interviewed someone who used to work for *American Girl Magazine*. And she explained that there's no like digital way to contact American Girl because their audience is children, so there's a lot of like weird privacy laws that come in with that. When the magazine was still in, you couldn't really contact them through mail. I went to the American Girl Store a few months ago and I was trying to contact them some way online, but it's almost impossible to.

AB: Gotcha. Uh, which uh, American Girl store did you go to? There are so many locations now.

SW: I went to the one Chicago.

AB: Oh yeah, that one was my home base. <laugh> Excellent. Well, hopefully maybe there will be some sort of a collab down the road. I don't know—or maybe some new cookbooks. I think that'd be a lot of fun. I think they should jump on that bandwagon. <laugh>

SW: The newest doll is Claudie, and baking I believe is part of the plotline for her. I think like easily there's potential there for a cookbook.

AB: Definitely, I would hope so. And I haven't peeked at some of the contemporary doll books since. It's been <laugh> a long time since I read American Girl Books, but I wonder if some of them include recipes in the back or include recipes just informally in their appendices or something.

SW: Some. The older Pleasant Company books had recipes in them sometimes because someone was asking about a recipe. I think it was a cookie for Kirsten. But I was like, "That's not in her cookbook." I think it was in one of her books.

AB: Yeah, that wouldn't surprise me. Do you have any strategies that you'd recommend for someone who's looking to build a following, say on TikTok or elsewhere?

SW: Definitely find a niche. Whenever I post things that are not American Girl content, they don't always do as well or perform a strongly, even if it's not cooking American Girl books. If it's still involved that franchise in some way, that TikTok will still progress and move on and get likes and follows. So definitely find a niche to stick with it. I just kind of stumbled into this niche,

like I didn't think too hard about it. I was like, "Oh, this just sounds like a fun thing to do." It's a little bit trial and error and definitely with TikTok, the algorithm is such a difficult thing to understand and no one really seems to understand how it works either. But definitely find your niche and make content that asks people to comment, too, to kind of boost up in the algorithm. Sometimes I will say like, "Oh, drop a comment below if, you know, whatever X, Y, Z" and that definitely helps move it out and get it spreading around, too.

AB: Absolutely. And I noticed like hashtags and that kind of thing help. Like you said, I think kind of knowing your audience matters. Since you've built up a following, you kind of know what piqued their interest and to kind of keep giving them what they want, but in a way that's still enjoyable and fun for you to do.

SWL Yeah.

AB: And certainly, to routinely keep producing those videos too. I'm sure they always want more. I guess I have one last question for you. Are there any future plans or other cooking endeavors that you maybe aim to pursue or showcase, if you're able to share anything?

SW: I mean, I still have more cookbooks to work through with American Girl. Definitely since leaving college and getting a full-time job, working through the cookbooks has been a lot slower of a process than I would like it to be. But I still have two more sections of Addy and then we have Samantha and Molly after that. There might be a possibility for Kit or Julie in the future, since they both have "cooking studios," as Mattel branded them.

AB: Okay.

SW: But once I finish the American Girl franchise, I don't know where I'm gonna go next. I have been looking at other cookbooks. There's a Dolly Parton cookbook, which I think would be really fun. There's a little women cookbook, which I would love to go and do that one.

AB: Great fun.

SW: Yeah. I'm not really sure where I'll go after this.

AB: Excellent. And those cookbooks in general, too, are so fun. There's so many that are tied to all different kinds of areas of interest, whether historical or pop culture, like TV or movie-oriented. So yeah, I'm sure world's your oyster <laugh> and people are, are curious to see the final products with some of these, too. Especially those that aren't illustrated. I think that's part of a lot of the fun with your videos, too—just seeing what we get in the end.

SW: <laugh> The American Girl Cook folks are illustrated. But they definitely took some artistic liberties there, <laugh> like a lot of my products don't always look like theirs.

AB: Seth—thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your maker story. To continue following Seth and his exciting journey, you can find Seth on TikTok as @arencelle. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the MakeYourStory podcast. We certainly hope that you will continue to tune in to future episodes and certainly continue exploring more information about the MakeYourStory podcast. In order to access our website, please visit lib.purdue.edu/makerpodcast. See you next time.