AFFORDANCES, AUDIENCES, AND AUDIO MEMES: LGBTQIA+ TIKTOKERS IN LOCKDOWN

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ABSTRACT

Michele L. Meyer: Affordances, Audiences, and Audio Memes: LGBTQIA+ TikTokers in Lockdown
(Under the direction of Daniel Kreiss)

TikTok is a digital environment that relies on expression, collaboration, play, and memetics. It is a social platform that does not rely on connections, but rather on topic interest, and connects people through creative production (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). While all platforms have individualized cultures and norms that arise from their technologies – which are, in turn, influenced by their designers' motivations – as well as the behaviors of their users (van Dijck et al., 2018), TikTok's culture is highly influenced by its algorithmic structure that allows users to create video content with low stakes and feel connected without having put work into building relationships.

In this dissertation, I aim to illuminate and situate three core elements of TikTok: 1) its affordances and resulting publics; 2) the identity exploration and community-building that many of its users participate in; and 3) the realities that many TikTokers face when they garner attention online. I explore these concepts through the lens of the LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok, particularly within the historical context of the Covid-19 lockdowns. I chose this community because, as I will show, TikTok is uniquely suited to meet many of their needs. Further, this community's online experience over the past few years, like that of most of the world's, cannot be isolated from the circumstances they were living in – especially as those

circumstances involved being confined to their homes, likely influencing their use of digital social spaces.

I contend that these core elements of TikTok are the result of specific conditions of the user experience on the site. First, TikTok has a digital culture that emphasizes expression and collaboration in a manner akin to sharing on social media, rather than traditional video production. Next, it has a technological architecture that prioritizes viewers' *interests,* rather than their pre-existing or offline friend *connections*. And last, the resulting audiences for any content created on the app is inconsistent – most people seeing a video have little to no context about the person who created it. However, said content is usually highly relevant to their interests.

In this study, I draw from digital and in-person fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with 28 digital creators and participant observation at a major online video convention. I show that they use TikTok to explore their identities and express themselves in a space that is relatively safe from the risk of being seen by hostile audiences. They seek validation from digital crowds, rather than from other individuals. They can also often find themselves with an audience by chance, which is a responsibility they take seriously, but do not always know how to navigate.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1: CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN PAJAMAS

This February, two seemingly unrelated things were occurring at my home. First, I was the subject of a brushing scam. Someone had access to my personal information and had ordered random items online in my name. They used my address (although, with some errors) and my phone number, but fake email addresses. They were not, however, stealing any financial information – nothing that was purchased was charged to any of my accounts, nor were any new financial accounts opened with my name or social security number. This was an odd experience because I was receiving random items I did not order (more on that in a moment), but also because it was an atypical brushing scam. Normally, those scams occur on sites like Amazon, where the scammer needs to make actual purchases in other people's names so that they can be labeled a "verified buyer" for the purposes of leaving inflated reviews (*Brushing Scam*, 2022). However, these items were purchased directly from small businesses. And, after speaking with those businesses directly, it was clear that they were just as confused as I was. The items I received included: a small lightbulb from a lighting store in Savannah, GA and a two-pack of silicon "pleasure rings" (colloquially known as "cock rings") from a bondage-focused sex toy shop in San Francisco, CA.[1]

The other thing happening in my home involved by my cat Hex, who is curious, stubborn, and surprisingly strong. Hex was fixated on knocking over his water fountain. My

[1] Interestingly, I recently received a third item: a white leather, LED-lit coffee table that is, and I cannot stress this enough, exceedingly ugly. We looked it up: it costs over $1,000. We assume it was ordered at the same time as the other two items but took longer to arrive due to supply chain issues. I should probably make a TikTok about it.

husband Erick glued the legs of the fountain to pieces of wood to prevent him from spilling it, but within a few days, he figured out how to knock it over anyway. Then, Erick clamped it to the kitchen island. Hex continued to try to flip it so aggressively that the glue on the wood began to separate from the legs of the water bowl. Erick eventually ended up modifying a bike rack to attach the bowl to the wall.

These things have nothing to do with one another, except both of those stories went viral on TikTok.

As I was dealing with the brushing scam, I decided to share about the experience online. It is odd, the items I received were random but hilarious, and I thought other people might find it entertaining. So, I posted about it in three places: Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. On Facebook and Twitter, I used the same language to describe what was happening. I said:

> Okay I have received two mystery packages this week. Both addressed to me and including order info but I did not order them:
>
> 1) a small lightbulb from a lighting store in GA
>
> 2) a set of cock rings from a bdsm website in CA (with a "thanks for ordering Michele!" handwritten note). (Meyer, 2022a)

I didn't include any photos because I did not think that the lightbulb or the rings were particularly interesting visually. This is also why I didn't post about it on Instagram. I would never have even considered making a YouTube video, because I have no presence on YouTube, nor would I be able to make a video about it that people would want to seek out directly (rather than stumbling upon it, as they would on TikTok).

For TikTok, however, I was able to talk about it a little differently. I filmed myself saying that I wanted to share a strange experience. Then, I walked through how I encountered the problem, showing the box containing the lightbulb and the incorrect address. I talked about how it worried me and so I checked my credit report and reached out to the company. After that, I

said, I had mostly forgotten about it until the rings arrived. I showed that envelope first too, including the incorrect address, the handwritten thank you note included with my receipt, and then paused for dramatic effect before I revealed what had been inside. Then I talked about contacting that shop, the helpful customer service worker named JoeBear, and my entertainment and confusion about the whole situation.

The posts on Facebook and Twitter got very little traction. The Twitter post received two likes and the Facebook post got 17 reactions (15 laughing faces, 1 like, and 1 "wow" face) and four comments, one of which was a person sharing that it was likely a brushing scam.

On TikTok, however, the post spread quickly. I cannot, however, share how many views, likes, or comments it received, as it was taken town for community violations for "sexually explicit material." However, before it was removed, I made a follow up video. Someone had commented "please someone tag me if there's an update!" I made a video reply to that comment, responding to some of the most common questions or reactions I had received.

People suggested that someone must have sent it as a prank, so I shared that I had reached out to my friends to verify that they hadn't done so. Many expressed their concern about my identity being stolen, so I reiterated that I had checked my accounts and credit report multiple times. Some worried that the lightbulb might contain concealed surveillance technology, which I said was unlikely, but that I promised not to plug it in, nor did I even have any lamps that it would fit into. Others joked that my husband had ordered the rings himself because he was too shy to tell me and that he was using the lightbulb as a sly diversion tactic. I walked up to him while he was playing a video game, turned the camera on him, and asked him if he made the orders, which he playfully denied. Then, because I didn't know how to end the video, I said,

> Sorry this was anticlimactic, so I'll show off my cats. This is Hex, he's a looong boy. He also likes to try to flip over the water bowl no matter what we do. And then this is Thistle, she's much much daintier and very cute! (Meyer, 2022b).

On that video (which got over 20,000 views) someone commented "put a towel under the water bowl. It made my cat stop flipping it." As I was in the midst of water fountain grudge match between Hex and Erick, I made another TikTok showing off the fountain, the wood he glued to the bottom, and the then-current state it was in: clamped to the kitchen island. Like the first video, I used some dramatic reveal tactics, showing the water fountain first, and then zooming out to show the wood, and then zooming out further to show the ridiculous clamp attaching it to the counter.

This video received over 230 thousand views. It has over 25,000 likes and 500 comments. People loved my very silly story about my cat and my husband. I don't even *show* the cat in the video – just my face as I'm explaining the situation and the water bowl itself. In the shots where I am on camera, I have unbrushed hair, no makeup, and I'm wearing pajamas. While I acknowledge that there were a handful elements to my editing choices that were semi-strategic to grasp attention, I was mostly just responding to a comment in real time, and I happened to be on the couch in pjs as I was in awe over the seemingly non-stop notifications rolling in from the first two TikToks.

I chose to share this long, bizarre story because it exemplifies many of the central arguments of this dissertation. First, the technology and affordances of digital social spaces influenced which details of the story I shared, how I told it, and whom I anticipated might see it. Next, the story's reach varied significantly based on how it entered the digital environment of each platform. And, finally, the audiences who did see it responded in different ways, likely due to their perceptions of me.

I have a modest presence on Twitter (just over 2,000 followers, mostly with interests in academia or media representation) and a smaller but more familiar network on Facebook (over 800 friends, most of whom have either known me personally at some point in my life or have been close online friends for over a decade). On TikTok, however, I have wider following (over 6,500 followers), but I posted on the account related to my small business, so my videos are usually focused on the realities of making stickers or about being a queer neurodivergent graduate student, as those topics are relevant to my designs. Therefore, my audience is not comprised of people who would necessarily be seeking out content about identity theft, sex toys, or even cat stories.

Thus, when I was telling this story, I thought that my potential Twitter and TikTok audiences might be comprised of people who knew nothing about me, but my Facebook friends would have more context for who I was. I shared a short description of the items I had received on Twitter and Facebook because I did not think those audiences would be interested in watching a video about it – especially because I personally rarely have the audio turned on when I use those apps. I included just enough information to describe the most compelling parts of the story because I did not expect people on either platform to be interested in reading a long, drawn-out description of everything that happened. I assumed that people who did not know me on Twitter might think, "what a silly sequence of events!" while those who did know me on Facebook might think, "the strangest things happen to Michele." It received almost no attention on either platform. I do not know for sure whether it was because people just didn't see it, if they didn't think it was funny, if they were offended by my language, or if they ignored it because the first few lines didn't catch their attention.

Because I was telling the story in video form on TikTok, I had time to add more details, such as peppering in the progression of events, and I was better able to express my confusion and entertainment about the situation. I was also able to hold the viewers' attention by beginning the video with a promise that the story would get stranger as it continued. I knew that some of my followers might see it, but I expected that most people would be putting themselves in my shoes as they heard the scam story, rather than projecting any opinions onto me (other than perhaps judging my appearance or wondering if I was perhaps making it all up). Also, I knew that if the first few people who saw it engaged with it in some way, TikTok would keep showing it to more people.

And, of course, I only posted the follow up information – including the water bowl video that got the most traction I've ever received anywhere online – because people kept having the same handful of questions, suggestions, and theories. I felt compelled to respond to them, partially because I wanted to be understood more clearly (people really thought I wouldn't check my credit report? They thought I had a relationship where my husband and I couldn't talk openly about sex?) and partially because I enjoyed the attention that came with having such a successful TikTok.

In short, making TikToks is fun and playful. There are very low expectations regarding quality – you can even post from your couch with unbrushed hair. And any random person, including a mid-30s grad student with no video production skills, can go unexpectedly viral. Clarity regarding this environment is crucial to understanding TikTok's appeal, as well as the experiences users have once they get there.

In this dissertation, I aim to illuminate and situate three core elements of TikTok: 1) its affordances and resulting publics; 2) the identity exploration and community-building that many

of its users participate in; and 3) the realities that many TikTokers face when they garner attention online. I explore these concepts through the lens of the LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok, particularly within the historical context of the Covid-19 lockdowns. I chose this community because, as I will show, TikTok is uniquely suited to meet many of their needs. Further, this community's online experience over the past few years, like that of most of the world's, cannot be isolated from the circumstances they were living in – especially as those circumstances involved being confined to their homes, likely influencing their use of digital social spaces.

I argue that these core elements of TikTok are the result of specific conditions of the user experience on the site. First, TikTok has a digital culture that emphasizes expression and collaboration in a manner akin to sharing on social media, rather than traditional video production. Next, it has a technological architecture that prioritizes viewers' *interests*, rather than their pre-existing or offline friend *connections*. And last, the resulting audiences for any content created on the app is inconsistent – most people seeing a video have little to no context about the person who created it. However, said content is usually highly relevant to their interests.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining the primary theoretical and empirical contributions of this research. I then clarify my use of terms relating to TikTok users. Next, I present the existing research about TikTok as a space for creative expression and production. Through this overview, I demonstrate the conditions listed above, providing the basis for my three research questions, which I provide next, and which focus on the app's core elements of affordances and publics, user expression, and creators' relationships with their audiences. I then outline my methodological approach to answering these questions. Finally, I present a chapter overview of the rest of this dissertation.

Introduction: Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

This dissertation brings research about the imagined audience into the context of TikTok. When interacting with others in any context, but especially online, we tailor our communication styles and self-presentations to the people we are addressing (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). When expressing ourselves online, we cannot know exactly who will be seeing it, and so we have to construct an imagined audience based on the contexts of the social media platform and the users we expect to have access to our content (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These contexts, in turn, are informed by the affordances of the individual platforms (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). Building on boyd's concept of networked publics (2010a) and Abidin's refracted publics (2021), I show how TikTokers create for a new, more complex form of imagined audience. TikTok does not limit videos to followers, nor does it privilege connections from one's personal life. Further, the algorithmic complexity of the For You Page (FYP) does not provide TikTokers with adequate information to know what kinds of people will be shown each individual video. Therefore, their concept of their imagined audience is primarily informed by what *they* see on their own FYP. Their understanding of what "does well" on TikTok is shaped by what TikTok believes they will enjoy. Thus, they are creating for an algorithmically distorted reflection of their own tastes. This is likely why, as I describe in chapter two, many LGBTQIA+ TikTokers find themselves making content that they would have liked to see when they were younger. In short: their past selves are often their imagined audiences.

Through this research, I also bring the creation of online video into our understandings of the modern queer experience. Here, my contributions are more empirical than theoretical. Given that the coming-out process is iterative and is usually modeled and practiced over time (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Robbins et al., 2014), and that online spaces provide queer

people with spaces to test out new identities (Cavalcante, 2016), TikTok provides many LGBTQIA+ people with space to practice their queerness on an audience that is likely to be hyper niche and supportive while also having very low stakes for content quality. Further, by making video, as opposed to blogging or connecting on more anonymous platforms, they are able to try these changes in more impactful ways. Additionally, I explain that even those who are just viewing others' TikToks can find significant validation from seeing others live openly queer lives in personal and informal ways.

Finally, this research contributes to our theoretical understanding of parasocial relationships (PSRs) (Horton & Wohl, 1956) as well as relational (Baym, 2015) and emotional (Hochschild, 1983) labor. Research indicates that parasocial relationships can help viewers to work toward an ideal self (Derrick et al., 2008) and to develop a self-concept, especially as adolescents (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). For LGBTQIA+ audiences, PSRs can influence self-realization and identity and provide comfort, hope, and inspiration (Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). I build upon these findings by exploring how it feels to be the *subject* of a parasocial relationship, given their understanding that the content they create matters so much to people. While the concepts of relational labor – the creation of social relationships to lead to paid work (Baym 2015) and emotional labor – managing others' feelings as part of one's work (Hochschild, 1983) can speak to these experiences, I find that they are insufficient to describe what these LGBTQIA+ creators are experiencing. Because TikTok can push any content into the spotlight unexpectantly, many people with audiences (and even those who create despite not having one) are not seeking paid work. Thus, they are not engaging in "labor" in the traditional sense. Further, they are not always interacting with individuals directly (though many individuals certainly do reach out), rather, they are consistently contending with the emotional stress

stemming from the pressures of having an audience and recognizing the potential impact of what they say and do on those who may see them as a role model. Given the increasing expansion of online fame and influence, it is important that we study the effects that can have on those who obtain it – intentionally or otherwise.

Creators, TikTokers, Users, Viewers, and Audiences: A Note on Language

Throughout this text, I refer to TikTok users in several ways. Here, I clarify my intentions and justifications behind the use of different terms.

Most professional and aspiring online video creators need to diversify their reach and find viewers and audiences across several social media platforms; thus Cunningham and Craig (2019b) take a platform-agnostic approach to how they refer to them, dubbing them "social media entertainers." I do not use that term throughout this work. As of this writing, TikTok operates in a unique system that allows for people to keep their audience's attention *within* the app itself (discussed further in Chapter 2). While many do choose to engage with their audience on external platforms such as Instagram and Discord, many do not, or even struggle to get them to follow them elsewhere. Further, many people who make successful content on TikTok (including several of my interviewees) do not intend to monetize their work or make TikToks professionally.

I use the term **creator** to refer to those who make online video content, regardless of their success, aspirations, or platform of choice. While this term can be vague – any person who posts anything online could be considered a "creator" – I argue that due to the nature of the content, one cannot post an online video without putting in some degree of creative effort. Any video posted online must be at filmed, viewed, and uploaded. However, it almost always also involves several forms of staging, performing, editing, captioning, tagging, and sharing. To make video

content online, especially for TikTok, one must *create.* This term also helps to make connections between literature written about other forms of online creative work (such as YouTube or blogging) and the experiences documented about TikTok in this research.

When referring to people who make content for TikTok specifically, I also refer to them as **TikTokers.** I use this specific language when referring to experiences that are unique to this platform. Crucially, I do not use this term to refer to those who use TikTok but do not create their own content. In that case, I may call them "users," "viewers," or "audiences," depending on context.

I refer to **users** when describing things that all types of people using TikTok encounter. For example, all users have a For You Page (FYP), regardless of whether they make their own content, or even have a profile. I prefer the term **viewers** when describing anyone who is seeing a TikTok – whether on the app itself or elsewhere. Many people encounter TikToks (or other forms of online video) for whom they are not the ideal audience. Therefore, they view it without really engaging with it in any meaningful way. Finally, I use the term **audience** to describe creators' intended viewers (including, but not limited to, followers) as well as any unintended viewers who enjoy their content.

These individual terms are not mutually exclusive, and their distinctions are not always relevant. However, I provide this context so that readers may understand the nuances between these different types of people who engage with online video.

TikTok: An Overview

TikTok is considered a social network, but is designed to present content to users based on algorithmic predictions, rather than their connections (Tolentino, 2019). TikTok enables users to create and share short-form videos and includes features that, among others, afford the use and

re-use of audio files. This enables users to see a video they like, pull the audio from it, and produce their own video with it – often lip synching or adapting the premise to humorous effect. As a writer for *The New Yorker* described,

> In the teleology of TikTok, humans were put on Earth to make good content, and "good content" is anything that is shared, replicated, and built upon. In essence, the platform is an enormous meme factory, compressing the world into pellets of virality and dispensing those pellets until you get full or fall asleep (Tolentino, 2019).

Because TikTok learns each users' individual preferences, it refines its ability to present appealing content to its viewers the longer they use it. Thus, TikTok's design is immersive – content is highly personalized, seemingly endless, and often funny – which is satisfying for consumers (Montag et al., 2021). The effectiveness of the algorithm has led some users to ascribe value or a sense of fate to the "chance" that something arrived on their FYPs – a concept that Cotter and colleagues refers to as "algorithmic conspirituality," which they describe as a sense of "a kind of algorithmically mediated cosmic intervention" (Cotter et al., 2022, p. 1). This research does not focus on the inclination to see algorithmic behaviors as conspiratorial or spiritual, however, it does build upon their notion that there has been "an epistemological shift that has positioned algorithms as important tools for self-knowledge" (p. 1). In the case of LGBTQIA+ users, several of my interviewees remarked that "the algorithm knew I was gay before I did," which aligns with the idea that one can learn about oneself through the content served to them on their FYP.

Despite the notorious effectiveness of the TikTok algorithm, some users describe a learning curve in which they are not immediately seeing content best suited to their personalities at first. Simpson, Hamann, and Semaan (2022) share that several of their interviewees felt they needed to "train" the algorithm to find their ideal content, and that they were active in their viewing choices and cognizant of how those would impact their recommendations. They also

expressed a distrust at times - suggesting that the platform might want to push them in the direction of specific types of content. Similarly, many users have expressed concern about being "shadowbanned," that is, they believe that the platform intentionally fails to show certain types of content – often, that related to the experiences of different marginalized groups – to a larger audience (Rauchberg, 2022). Therefore, those videos would only be viewed by users who navigate to that page directly and would not show up on others' FYPs.

Research has shown that successful content on TikTok is characterized by memetics. Internet memes are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). On TikTok, users often build upon styles or genres that have already gained popularity. Zulli and Zulli explain,

> Because TikTok links sounds and effects on the platform, copying similar features and video concepts automatically puts users in conversation with those who have obtained widespread attention. Thus, there is a greater chance for an average user's video to be found, liked, and then shared if the sounds and effects are replicated from and linked to an already popular video. On the other hand, there is still value in creating original video content if it starts a series of imitation and replication (Zulli & Zulli, 2020, p. 10).

This creates a culture wherein community is built around a shared understanding of TikTok's norms. Zulli and Zulli refer to this community as "imitation publics, which we broadly define as a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (2020, p. 11). Throughout this work, I build upon Zulli and Zulli's concept of imitation publics and explore the ways that this processual nature of creation can empower TikTokers to produce casual low stakes content that requires little planning or strategy, such as participating in viral trends. TikToks like these can help users feel more comfortable filming themselves and posting their work on the internet, which is a significant barrier to entry for many amateur creators. Slater (2022) also discusses how these features and

norms can lead to creators inviting others to engage and participate in self-disclosure online. She writes, "communities without the strict bounds of entry and exit can form through play, fluidly, in conversation with other users who likely share or have similar lived experiences" (p. 164). Further, I argue that the concept of imitation publics, while useful and insightful, does not fully describe the audiences that TikTokers create for, as that "collection of people" they describe is not just connected through "the shared ritual of content imitation and replication," but also through algorithmic taxonomies that silo like-minded users and, in a sense, largely protect them from being seen by "outsiders."

Cuesta-Valiño, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, and Durán-Álamo (2022) conclude that TikTok's appeal is especially rooted in the sense of community it engenders and the ease at which creators can make quality content. This is because users are highly motivated by both sharing behaviors (community) and making videos (content creation). I show that this becomes highly salient for LGBTQIA+ users who can benefit from the experiences of community by feeling understood by those they see on their FYPs. As members of imitation publics, they share mutual understandings of content trends and humor. Similarly, researchers have concluded that TikTok users are motivated by entertainment (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020), escapism and relief of pressure (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Shao & Lee, 2020), and creative expression (Wang, 2020). For members of the LGBTQIA+ community, these outlets for creative expression and/or platforms for identity-focused entertainment have been historically limited. Thus, having this digital space to meet those needs is noteworthy.

Controversy

TikTok is immensely popular, but it is also very controversial. The company has incurred fines by the Federal Trade Commission for failing to obtain parental permission for users under

the age of 13 (Tolentino, 2019). Further, TikTok is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, which has been the subject of investigation by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (Williams, 2019). There is evidence that TikTok moderators have been instructed to remove that portrays the Chinese government unfavorably (Biddle et al., 2020). Additionally, former employees of a former news app, also owned by ByteDance, claim that the app pushed pro-China content and that the content review system flagged news that reported on the Chinese government (Baker-White, 2022). Further, there is a potential national security risk in the collection of so much user personal data, as there have been intelligence reports suggesting that the Chinese government is building a massive database on US citizens (Williams, 2019).

Information Seeking and Sharing on TikTok

Research has shown that TikTok can be an effective platform for education, political activism, and information-sharing (Q. Chen et al., 2021; Fiallos et al., 2021; Guiñez-Cabrera & Mansilla-Obando, 2022; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). I find that all of these behaviors occur within the LGBTQIA+ community on the platform, who often connect within the community to organize politically or share knowledge about how to navigate queer life, but who also educate outsiders on elements of the queer experience they may not otherwise have access to.

Researchers have shown that it has become a common space for information seeking-and distribution, especially as it relates to education (Fiallos et al., 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2021) and health and wellness (Q. Chen et al., 2021; Stratton, 2021). Further, news organizations are adapting to TikTok's production norms and making content for the app to reach younger audiences (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020).

TikTok has also been a space for political expression and activism (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Literat and Kliger-Vilenchik show that TikTok's functionality can connect users with

like-minded people, while also connecting with that audience through shared beliefs and resources, which reinforces the sense that one is part of a larger political conversation (2021). For example, Hautea and colleagues concluded that TikTok's affordances enabled non-experts to join experts and journalists in conversations regarding solving the problem of climate change (Hautea et al., 2021). Some scholars also suggest that TikTok may be an effective way for researchers and policymakers to surveil the presence of health problems (Purushothaman et al., 2022). Overall, information seeking and distribution trends on TikTok can be influential for users looking to understand themselves better or who want to contribute to social change. However, the information being shared is not regulated in any way, and thus could result misinformation and harmful messaging being spread widely.

Research Questions

Users' experiences on TikTok are shaped by the app's recommendation system, which is personalized based on topic, rather than connections. Users are motivated by sharing, creating, and connecting, but they can connect with and create for a hyper-personalized, ever-evolving audience. This allows them to feel supported and validated by adding to trends and memes that already exist, rather than having to create original content or connect too directly with other users. In this dissertation, I apply these logics to the LGBTQIA+ community, and seek to address the following areas of inquiry:

1. How do the affordances of TikTok shape its publics, and what does that mean for queer creators, who must consider their own safety when creating content?
2. Considering the inconsistency and hyper-specificity of the audiences, how does that impact queer creators' experiences with self-expression on TikTok? How does it influence how they understand their own queerness?

3. Given the capacity for anyone to find an audience TikTok, how do queer creators perceive their relationship with their audience?

Methods

I employed multiple field methods to approach addressing these questions, including digital ethnography, interviews, and in-person observation at *PlayList Live*, an online video creator convention. I received exemption from the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB # 19-2854) for this research. Below, I describe my approach to each method in detail. I then discuss my positionality while conducting this research.

Interviews

I purposively sampled interviewees to have variety in follower count, gender, sexual orientation, and race. This was a strategic approach to understand how all types of users interface with TikTok, as well as to avoid propping up one subset of the LGBTQIA+ community as an insufficient proxy for a diverse group, which can happen when scholars and media creators alike treat cis white gay men as the standard for queerness (Lovelock, 2017). Overall, I drew from semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988) with 26 TikTokers, ranging from those who had less than 100 followers to one with over 5.5 million. I also drew on interviews with two other digital creators, both straight women with significant audiences – one on YouTube and one with multiple successful podcasts - for insight into how audience relationships appear in other online creative spaces.

Further, several of the TikTokers also held professional roles that provided me with useful information outside of the context of the individual creator. A few participants perform editing or comment moderation work for other online video creators. Additionally, I spoke with Chris Stokel-Walker, who does have a personal TikTok, but is better known for being a prolific

journalist who specializes in digital cultures and has written two books about online video: *YouTubes: How YouTube Shook up TV and Created a New Generation of Stars* (2019) and *TikTok Boom: China's Dynamite App and the Superpower Race for Social Media* (2021). I also spoke with Savannah Geary, who does not just have their own personal account, but also works on both TikTok and YouTube for *SciShow*, a popular educational science show with over 7 million subscribers on YouTube and over 680 thousand followers on TikTok. These interviews were crucial in helping to understand the ways that TikTok differs from YouTube, as well as how many operations function behind the scenes.

Recruiting. My primary method for recruitment was a TikTok requesting participation and asking others to interact with it and share it with others. In my bio, I linked to a form where people could submit their contact information if they wanted to participate, enabling me to contact them directly. I also tagged creators in the comments of the video, asking them to participate. I made a point to reach out to any creator whose videos I had found noteworthy while conducting digital fieldwork, so that I might get their perspective on that content. I did so by commenting on one of their videos, connecting via social media, or emailing them, depending on which forms of contact they made available on their profile.

While I did attempt to use snowball sampling, it was not a particularly fruitful method, as many TikTokers do not actually connect with one another outside of the app. However, I did benefit significantly from a video that Carls made, wherein they duetted my recruitment video, shared that they had a good experience from participating, and encouraged others to do the same. Carls makes content devoted to living with ADHD; thus, my sample had a high incidence of creators who were also neurodivergent.

Structure. I began each interview by reiterating the content in the consent form, ensuring that each participant knew that they had full control over what we discussed and what was attributed to them. After the first few interviews, a pattern emerged: nearly everyone had painful experiences related to their queerness that informed how they talked about their content. Upon recognizing this pattern, I began acknowledging the potential that personal experiences may come up in the conversation and assuring them that they did not have to explain themselves if they decided that they wanted to change the subject or end the interview at any time, though no one took advantage of that offer.

I asked each participant to tell me who they are and how they might describe their content to a stranger. This allowed me to get a sense of how they see themselves and their work. I then them to recount their experience on TikTok, as well as the other creative platforms they use, including other creators they admire. These questions were strategic – they enabled me to contextualize participants' relationship with performance, online video, and fan communities while also giving me the opportunity to establish expertise and familiarity by connecting with them about online subcultures. I let participants guide the direction of the conversation from there, following up on noteworthy comments they made as they described their personal experiences. However, I did ensure that we discussed their relationships with their audiences. Finally, I gave each participant the opportunity to tell me if there was anything they felt we should have discussed but hadn't, or if there was anything they wish other people understood about making TikToks. This allowed me to ensure that I was not missing crucial information that I might not have known to ask.

Analysis. Interviews were conducted over the phone or over Zoom, according to participant preference. Each was recorded and transcribed with consent from the participants,

and they ranged in length from 53 minutes to 148 minutes long. I took extensive field notes during the interviews, including making note of any specific videos they cited or other creators mentioned, so that I could return to them for further analysis. I reviewed field notes in the immediate aftermath of each interview for relevant themes or ideas that might inform the research going forward.

I coded transcripts according to themes driven broadly by my research questions, noting passages related to 1) how the app's features influenced their creative experience, 2) how they experience and express their queerness on TikTok and in their own lives, and 3) what their relationship with their audience looked like and how they felt about it. I sought to find patterns in common topics and themes, while taking care to consider similarities and differences among creators whose comments fell under those themes (e.g., how creators with larger audiences spoke about a topic, compared to those with smaller audiences).

Attribution and Pronouns. Every participant was given the opportunity to decide how they wanted to be identified in this project. While some asked to be given a pseudonym, most granted me permission to identify them openly. However, some participants preferred I not share parts of their legal names, as they do not make them publicly available. Therefore, I refer to all of my participants on a first name basis[2] throughout this text to avoid any confusion that may arise from inconsistent naming conventions.

When available, I use the most recent information I have regarding participants' pronouns. While I did ask for pronouns during interviews, I still verified the pronouns listed on their profiles in case they had changed in the interim. For participants who offered multiple

[2] I say "first name" basis, but some chose to go only by their last name. Regardless, I refer to them by one name only.

pronoun options, I defaulted to "they" while describing them (assuming that was included among said options), so as to avoid unintentional projection of binary thinking onto them by the reader. However, in rare cases where using "they" created linguistic confusion, I opted for "ze" instead.

Digital Ethnography

I participated in TikTok communities on several different levels. I first downloaded the app in April 2018 but did not start using it consistently until after recognizing its popularity and reach while at *PlayList Live* in February 2020. I began making TikToks on a personal account in June 2020 and created a second account for my sticker company (discussed more in below) in August 2020. These experiences using the app firsthand and seeing the flurry of activity in the LGBTQIA+ TikTok communities guided my decision to focus on TikTok as my primary location of study, deviating from the original design, which centered creators on YouTube.

Participation. For over a year, I used TikTok daily, multiple times a day. My personal FYP was quickly dominated by queer content, but I also worked to seek out different perspectives so I would not be limited by the perspectives in my custom feed. I sought out queer accounts that hadn't appeared on my own FYP by searching through comment sections, hashtags, and other TikTokers' following lists. I also posted a video asking that people tag me in the videos where they received negative content, so that I might get a sense for what that looked like. I went through creators' profiles to see how their content evolved over time and how their audiences reacted to them.

I also tracked activity that occurred on popular sounds or filters. When a trend began to flourish within the LGBTQIA+ community, I used the audio, filter, or hashtag to view the content following said meme. I watched dozens of videos, noting how creators played with the memes and how audiences reacted to their content.

I created content on both accounts, but more frequently on my business account – sometimes multiple times a day. As I grew a following, I began livestreaming and building friendships with other small business owners on the app, many of whom were also queer. I was careful to continue scrolling and interacting on my personal account as well, so that the small business focus of my professional account did not dilute the algorithmic recommendations I received in that space.

Supplemental Content. In addition to using the app, I also kept up on secondary content consistently. On Twitter, I followed journalists who covered TikTok, as well as thought leaders in the field of online video, and industry blogs. When I encountered TikTokers with personal Discord servers, I viewed them to see how they communicated with their audiences outside of the app. I also regularly watched TikTok compilations, reactions, and critiques on YouTube for insight into what was viewed as notable by outsiders.

Finally, I became a member of *The Online Creators' Association* (TOCA), a group founded by TikTokers that advocates for online creators and helps them navigate the intricacies of creating online (*Mission Statement*, 2022). Two of my interviewees, Cecelia Gray and T.X. Watson, are administrators and founding members, and invited me to join. I monitored the TOCA Discord intermittently, however, I made the strategic choice to resist engaging too much with the community during the research for this dissertation. I did so for three reasons. First, I did not set out to conduct research about collective organizing on TikTok and felt that it was likely to dissuade from my subject of study. Second, while I was invited to join by administrators of the organization, I had not gotten permission to use their semi-private space as a site for data collection. Finally, third, one of TOCA's primary missions is to conduct their own research about online communities. I did not want to risk inadvertently absorbing their ideas and

presenting them as my own. Therefore, while I did join and engage with the community minimally, I did not draw directly from their work.

In-Person Observation

I attended the online video industry convention *PlayList Live* in late February 2020. *PlayList Live* is one of the largest industry conventions in the field (Stokel-Walker, 2019). By attending this convention, I was able to identify the way that creators talk about their work when addressing both their audiences and aspirant creators. This allowed me to gain insight into topics that they may not usually discuss on their channels and guided the initial design of this research.

While there, I attended as many panels as possible and strategically chose those with thematic relevance, including panels about LGBTQIA+ creators, audience-building, mental health, and dealing with "haters," among others. I took extensive field notes throughout and asked questions of creators both during the panels and afterward, when possible. Because the panels were also available online following the conclusion of the convention, I downloaded the content from the entire convention, so that I could view panels I missed and return to any I had seen in person for clarity or transcription purposes.

In addition to attending the panels and seeking information from creators, I also observed and conversed with attendees of the convention. I found it especially fruitful to talk to parents who were there accompany their children. As someone with both anxiety and ADHD, I became overstimulated at one point during the convention and sought a quiet place to rest, recharge, and review my field notes. I happened upon a "parents' lounge" – a space with couches and refreshments where parents could rest while their children enjoyed the convention. It was here that I learned that TikTok was a site for connection for many young people, and that many of these parents had been to *PlayList* several years in a row because it was the only time that their

children were able to meet up with their TikTok friends. Many of them had queer children and walked me through how their kids used the app as well as what they did to monitor their children's activities for safety. This was a helpful way to understand the motivations and practices of young TikTokers without risking crossing any ethical boundaries that can occur when working with minors.

Timing

I conducted interviews and digital fieldwork from December of 2019 until May 2022, including in-person fieldwork at *PlayList Live* in February of 2020. The bulk of my interviews took place in late 2020 and early 2021, though they continued until May 2022. It is important to note this timing, as many of my participants' described experiences, as well as the content and dynamics I describe throughout this dissertation, must be contextualized within the historical and political atmosphere of Covid lockdowns and the 2020 election. Further, they must be understood as existing in a particular time of TikTok's evolution as a platform. Many features that exist now, such as pinned videos, playlists, stories, a dedicated space for pronouns on profile pages, longer video lengths, and more advanced editing techniques were not available during much of the data collection.

Positionality

Throughout the design, data collection, and documentation of this research, I endeavored to consider how my personal positions within the community might impact it. First, as a bisexual woman, I am a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, which helped me create connect with my interviewees on a personal level. Not only do I share experiences of both marginalization and pride, but I also understand certain elements of how the community operates – such as slang, history, and shared appreciation for media properties. However, I also hold many privileges

which allow me to avoid marginalization. I am a cis woman, and therefore do not experience trans or nonbinary discrimination. Further, although I am bisexual, I am in a straight-passing partnership, and thus do not face overt daily prejudices.

As a white woman, it is imperative that I recognize that there are many forms of marginalization that I cannot fully understand. Further, I understood that any people of color whom I interviewed or encountered in fieldwork might justifiably approach me with hesitancy. Thus, it was my responsibility to acknowledge those dynamics and earn their trust, which I endeavored to do by being transparent, asking direct questions, and allowing them to guide the boundaries of the conversation.

As discussed above, many of my interviewees were also neurodivergent. As someone with ADHD, I share these experiences, which allowed us to connect and understand one another. In many ways, having ADHD was both a hinderance and a benefit in this research. ADHD complicates any long-term project, as it is difficult to maintain extended focus and organize concepts and ideas. Additionally, in nearly every interview, I inevitably had to stop the flow of conversations to gather my thoughts. However, it also helped me to make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas quickly. Further, I am practiced at having to verify that I understood someone correctly, as that is a standard coping mechanism that I use in my everyday life. These traits allowed me to check in with participants on my perceptions of their comments in real time, and often led to richer conversations as they reflected on my insights.

Running a for-profit business with a TikTok account also impacted how I collected and interpreted data throughout this study. First, I had ethical concerns to consider. My following on my business account is much larger than it is on my personal one (about 6,600 compared to about 260). Thus, it could have been beneficial to use that account for recruiting purposes.

However, I did not want to seem as if I was attempting to profit financially from my research, and thus did not want to direct anyone to that account. Further, I did not want creators with larger followings to worry that I might be trying to earn their endorsements of my products. Therefore, I only posted the recruiting videos to my smaller personal account. I did attempt to duet it on my business account and direct traffic toward the personal account, however, as those videos were dissimilar to my standard content, they did not get many views.

Finally, experiencing organic audience growth helped me understand my interviewees better, and I often found myself reassuring them that I could relate to having someone project their personal lives onto me, or that I knew how it felt to have a random video suddenly acquire tens of thousands of views. Because I came into this project with such a thorough understanding of how difficult it is to build an audience on other platforms, I am not sure I could have truly comprehended how unpredictable the TikTok algorithm can be for creators of all sizes.

Data Integration

As outlined above, this research relies on several forms of data collection and analysis. Here, I clarify my process for reconciling different perspectives and reporting those findings.

Throughout each chapter, I contextualize TikTok and its users' behaviors alongside my description of the relevant literature. These analyses and descriptions are their own form of research results and are informed by all types of data collection: interviews, digital ethnography (including participation and supplemental content), and in-person observations. In many cases, such as detailing TikTok's affordances and popular meme formats, this information is largely descriptive. In others, such as providing context for why TikTok grew so expediently during the pandemic, the findings stemmed from weeks of observations, connections, and major themes that arose from interviews. In these more nuanced analytic cases, I began by noting the thematic

patterns, tracking them, and eventually only including those that were relevant to the literature. I then cross-referenced them, ensuring that no individual claim was coming from only one perspective. As I provide these findings and insights, I intentionally cite multiple examples, articles, and cases to illustrate the multiple points of access for this information.

When presenting direct results – that is, those that are new contributions rather than just contextualization – I lead with interview data. Again, all findings from the interviews were corroborated from other forms of data collection. However, interview data guided my analyses here, and no results were presented in these sections unless they emerged from interview themes. The cases illustrated in these sections were used to provide context, but the findings are not limited to those individual creators' experiences.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter 2, I aim to do three things: 1) provide an empirical understanding of TikTok as a space for queer online video production, using YouTube as a point of comparison; 2) describe TikTok's digital culture within the framework of its technologies; and 3) situate that digital culture and its resulting publics among the concepts of networked (boyd, 2010), refracted (Abidin, 2021), and imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) publics. In doing so, I show that the resulting creative environment situates queer TikTokers to make content in conditions that encourage self-expression and exploration with little apparent risk.

Next, in Chapter 3, I identify how LGBTQIA+ creators use TikTok for identity exploration, information-seeking, validation, and community support. While queer users have always turned to the internet for these purposes (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hillier et al., 2012), I explore how TikTok enables users to meet those needs in new ways. I also focus on the context of Covid-19 lockdowns as a backdrop for gender and sexual orientation exploration.

In Chapter 4, I explore the concept of being the subject of parasocial relationships, and the resulting implications and burdens for LGBTQIA+ creators. I distinguish these experiences from existing literature about creator labor (Abidin, 2016b; Baym, 2015; B. E. Duffy, 2018) and discuss the implications for creators who do not seek career success from TikTok creation.

In the final chapter, I summarize my findings and show how they may apply to other marginalized groups on TikTok. I also discuss limitations of the study and potential future research. Finally, I present my predictions for how TikTok is likely to change as it adapts to market demands.

CHAPTER 2: PUBLICS ON TIKTOK

TikTok blurs the lines between social media site and video-sharing platform. It is social in that its culture is shared, memetic, and processual, however, its framework is not heavily reliant on "friend" connections like most other social networking apps (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). On the other hand, it is a space for creating and disseminating online video, but unlike YouTube and Instagram (Frier, 2020; Stokel-Walker, 2019) videos do not need to have appealing aesthetics or high production values to be potentially seen by a wider audience.

I contend that TikTok's current atmosphere renders the notion of creating video content accessible and appealing for the everyday user, whereas the thought of doing so on other platforms may seem intimidating, overwhelming, or even self-indulgent. This atmosphere is due in part to publics on the app, which are characterized by inviting spaces and opaque but seemingly agreeable audiences. For LGBTQIA+ users, this provides them with a creative space where they can 1) engage in self-expression and exploration by 2) making content that aligns with a highly personalized niche while 3) being reasonably certain that they are doing so with low risk for harm or exposure.

In this chapter, I aim to do three things: 1) provide an empirical understanding of TikTok as a space for queer online video production, using YouTube as a point of comparison; 2) describe TikTok's digital culture within the framework of its technologies; and 3) situate that digital culture and its resulting publics among the concepts of networked (boyd, 2010), refracted (Abidin, 2021), and imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) publics. In doing so, I show that the resulting

creative environment situates queer TikTokers to make content in conditions that encourage self-expression and exploration with little apparent risk.

I find that TikTok's production norms are casual and intimate while much of the content style is memetic and prescriptive. This encourages users – especially those who would not normally consider themselves "online video creators" – to create informal, low-stakes content for the purposes of their own entertainment or self-expression, rather than for a larger audience as a professional YouTuber or influencer might. Further, I show how the atypical viewer dynamics complicate TikTokers' concept of an imagined audience, leaving them little choice but to make content for some iteration of themselves by creating either for their past selves or for their interpretation of what succeeds on the app, which is inevitably informed by their highly personalized FYP. Finally, I explore how these factors allow for queer creators to make content with low concern for harm, while identifying the conditions (such as off-platform distribution and mixed-audience topics) that can put them at higher risk for exposure and harassment.

I begin by explaining the basics of TikTok's functionality, including popular video formats. I then describe the norms of this digital culture, how they relate to TikTok's technological architecture, and the resulting creative environment for its LGBTQIA+ users. I use YouTube as a point of comparison, as it is the standard by which scholars and practitioners alike measure the world of online video. I discuss TikTok's high-level affordances, situate them between the concepts of networked and refracted publics, and show how the existing logics of online creative work do not always apply in the same ways. In doing so, I show how TikTok's algorithm helps creators build niche audiences, which can be very useful when your identity is inherently politicized, because it creates a sense of security regarding who is likely to see your content. I also describe how these factors impact queer creators' relationship with their own

content, which will help to understand how their content can impact their relationship with their own queerness.[3]

Using TikTok

All platforms have individualized cultures and norms that arise from their technologies – which are, in turn, influenced by their designers' motivations – as well as the behaviors of their users (van Dijck et al., 2018). As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, TikTok's environment is one of expression, collaboration, learning, play, familiarity, and spontaneity. In this section, I detail how users experience TikTok, both as viewers and creators, so that I may situate the app's technologies and norms throughout this research.

Viewing TikToks

When a user opens up TikTok for the first time, they are presented with the For You Page, commonly referred to as the FYP. Unlike YouTube, where users must select which video they want to start watching, TikTok immediately offers up popular content. The viewer can then either continue watching the video or swipe up to move on to the next one. As they continue watching, skipping, or interacting with various videos, the algorithm adjusts the types of videos it suggests based on their behavior – if they watch a video several times, share it, or interact with it, TikTok will recommend other videos that share similar qualities to that one ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020).

Alongside the FYP is the Following page. The words "Following" and "For You" are shown at the top of the screen. While the FYP is the default feed upon opening the app, users can swipe right to move over to the Following page, which limits the suggested content to creators that users have made the active choice to follow. While users have more agency over which

[3] I discuss this relationship between content and users' queerness in chapter 4.

creators are approved for this feed, the app still controls which ones are shown, as well as which videos appear, and in which order. Should a user want to ensure that they see all the content another TikToker makes, they would need to make the conscious choice to visit that person's page and watch the videos there.

As a TikTok is playing, additional information and icons are superimposed on the video, including the creator's username and profile photo, the video caption, the name of the underlying audio track, a heart denoting number of likes the video has, a comment bubble, which shows the number of comments, and an arrow, which represents shares. Each of these icons is also a button for users to engage with the video by following the creator or visiting their profile, viewing the audio information, liking the video, commenting on it, or sharing it.

The experience of watching TikTok is optimized for convenience – the app is designed to keep you scrolling: the feed is endless, un-paused videos loop indefinitely, and any button one may need to access to like, comment, share, or follow are within a few centimeters of the thumb. The more time spent on the FYP, the more personalized the videos start to feel. Further, as trends and memes start to show up on their FYP, users experience the familiarity of being "in on" the joke. Finally, users can start to get a sense of how to cultivate their own feed, which allows them to play an active part in the otherwise passive experience of consuming online video content.

Making TikToks

TikTok videos are short – for much of the app's existence, videos could only be up to one minute long. However, in 2021, the company increased the time limit to three minutes, citing user requests and a desire to reduce multi-part videos (Spangler, 2021). When a user decides to

start making a video, they have three options for its maximum length: 15 seconds, 60 seconds, or three minutes.[4]

Users can either upload existing video or shoot within the app itself. They can then edit their videos by cutting or rearranging clips, adding transitions, using visual features (e.g., green screen, stickers, gifs, or facial-recognition filters) or adding background music. While TikTok is a video – and thus visual – medium, one of its most notable features is the way users can integrate and play with audio. This derives from its origins as Musical.ly, which began as a lip-syncing tool (Stokel-Walker, 2021). The app provides an extensive database of songs that are searchable as well as categorized by genre. If users do not add a pre-existing track to their TikTok, then the audio associated with the video they post *becomes* the audio track. Future users could then make new videos using that sound. For example, if someone sees a funny interaction in a TikTok, they could sample that audio and reenact it while lip-syncing along.

Long before TikTok added automated subtitles (Hind, 2021), TikTokers would use the text feature to provide closed captioning for their videos. Indeed, many users continue to do so, as the automatic feature is, as of this writing, only available in English and Japanese. Others use third-party apps, including Instagram's Reels, to caption their videos automatically. However, this prevents them from shooting their videos within the TikTok app.

Once a TikToker is done making their video, they can add a caption and edit the thumbnail that will show up on their profile. Finally, they can edit the video's privacy settings, limiting who can view, download, or remix their content. While these privacy settings do grant the users some control over external uses of their content, they are not perfect. For example, even

[4] Recently, the app expanded maximum video lengths to 10 minutes, though not all users have access to this feature as of this writing.

if someone turns off the download option for their TikTok, viewers could still choose to record their screens to save it for personal use. Once the TikToker is finished making, editing, annotating, and captioning their videos, they can finally upload their video, where it gets released to others' FYPs.

TikTok Video Types

In addition to traditional videos, there are a four other types of TikToks: lives, duets, stitches, and replies. Lives, which are only available to users with over 1,000 followers, allow creators to stream in real time on the app, which will appear in others' FYPs, even if they don't follow them. Duets are a feature that allows a creator to repost another users' TikTok while adding their own video alongside it, creating a split-screen effect. Stitches are videos that take a short clip from other users' TikTok (5 seconds or less) and then append original content to it. Finally, replies are videos wherein a creator responds to a comment with a new video. The resulting TikTok will show the comment on screen and the original video will be linked in its caption. Table 1 includes common uses for each of these TikToks features.

Table 1: TikTok Features

Feature	Description	Common Uses
Lives	Real-time streaming that will appear on other users' FYPs.	Connecting with viewers directly, sharing a hobby (e.g., videogaming, painting), reacting to current events as they occur.
Duets	A split-screen effect where Creator B makes a video alongside Creator A's original TikTok. Both will play simultaneously for the viewer, with Creator B usually shown on the left.	Amplifying another creator's content, sharing one's reaction to a video, building upon the content of the TikTok (e.g., adding an acting role to a sketch or harmony to a song).
Stitches	Taking a small snippet of an another users' video to serve as the beginning of a TikTok.	Responding to a request for information, critiquing an idea, reacting to a short clip.
Replies	A video response to a comment on a previous TikTok. Only the original creator can make a video reply and it will link back to the first video.	Answering a question or comment that is too long to type, making a reaction video to a hurtful comment, following up on a story so that users can find the next videos easily.

Despite the myriad options for personalization, it can be very simple to make a TikTok. Users can shoot and edit in the app, and the expectation for production standards is low. Further, several features of the app, such as the built-in filters and games, the ability to stitch or duet, and the popularity of prescriptive memes, reduce any pressures to create content that is "original" – instead, users can make videos for the sake of joining in on the fun of what they are seeing on their FYP.

The TikTok Culture & Imitation Publics

The norms I describe above in both viewing and creating TikToks contribute to a digital culture that is casual, familiar, and intimate. Because TikTokers are often shooting in-app, they aren't using expensive equipment like YouTubers. They're looking into the camera using vertical video,[5] which has the feeling of someone who just picked up their phone and started shooting, rather than a planned or scripted production. In fact, overall, users tend to reject videos that are overproduced. TikTokers often create videos from the intimate spaces of their daily lives – sitting in their bed, talking into the bathroom mirror, lying on the couch, sitting in their parked car – without apparent regard for the aesthetics of their appearance. Unlike other spaces for online visual production like YouTube, these lower production values and use of intimate spaces are often not strategic branding choices (Abidin, 2016a; Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Of course, there are TikTokers who work to cultivate a curated "authentic" image for their videos. It is also common for creators to script or choreograph their TikToks in advance of shooting them, or for them to edit them strategically before posting. However, a significant proportion of the content

[5] That is, their phone is held vertically, rather than horizontally, so that the frame is tall and thin and optimized for phone viewing, rather than the typical widescreen view that is optimized for computers and televisions

on TikTok is unscripted, prescriptive, or additive in ways that deemphasize personal branding in favor of collaborative production.

Due in part to the emphasis on audio use, the TikTok culture is highly memetic. Internet memes are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Zulli and Zulli (2020) argue that TikTok's infrastructure is inherently suited for memes because the features described above deemphasize individual connection in favor of video styles or topics, cultivate feelings of liveness and immediacy, and allow for users to build upon existing videos as they create their own.

Indeed, there are many elements to the FYP that are memetic in nature. Audio tracks become frameworks for this - songs can adopt shared connotations so that they can signify intent when they are used as background music. Additionally, certain TikTok formats have become standard genres that ask the viewer to buy in to the conceit of the video while also creating space for additive collaborative play should they choose to build upon the idea with their own video (see Table 2 for common examples).

Table 2: Common TikTok Genres

Types of Collaborative Play	Description
Dancing	A user with choreograph a relatively simple dance to a specific song. Others will learn and perform the dance. With time, the dance may be parodied or performed by unexpected participants. The song may be remixed or put into different contexts.
One-sided acting	One user will act out one half of a fictional scene so that other users can duet their video and act out the other half. Sometimes the first user will provide a script for others to follow. However, sometimes they choose to leave that up to the others to fill in the empty time as they see fit.
Lip-syncing	Users will lip sync along to an audio track. This may look like pretending to sing along to a song, or it may include reenacting or reinterpreting a scene from a television show, movie, or viral video (including others' TikToks). As with acting, others may choose to duet a lip sync video to perform alongside the original user.
Making music	A user may record a video of them performing music (original or otherwise) and subsequent users may duet to add to the performance.

POVs (point-of-view)	A user will act out a sketch wherein the viewer is asked to imagine that they are present in the scene. The user provides a small bit of context in a text overlay at the beginning of the sketch so that the viewer has just enough information to understand the video. For example, a video may have text that says "POV: your substitute teacher wants to be an actor." The TikToker might then play the role of the attention-seeking teacher while the viewer imagines themselves in the classroom.
Stitch requests	A user may make a video featuring some sort of prompt (e.g., "tell me about a time when…"). They then instruct others to stitch the prompt and make a response video.
"Put a Finger Down" Challenges	A user will list a series of experiences or traits. Other users are asked to duet the video or use the audio without listening to the whole thing. While recording, they listen to the audio, hold up all ten fingers, and put one down every time they have done one of the experiences or can relate to one of the traits. At the end, the original user declares that if you put down a certain number of fingers, you fall into an identity group.

These types of videos are prescriptive in that they follow a formula, but they also leave space for creative play: the TikToker can make a "put a finger down" video about any hyper-specific group or could play any potential character in a "POV" video. Further, both of those formats allow other users to build upon them. For example, they could make their own TikTok using the audio from the "put a finger down" challenge before they've seen the whole video. Thus, they are showing the camera which traits or experiences they've shared as they lower their fingers and then their reaction is recorded as they realize that they were accurately described by the final identity group. A user encountering a POV video on their FYP may choose to duet it and act out the other side of the conversation. Thus, these memetic features and norms can inspire creative collaborative play – upon seeing a video that seems relatable, a TikToker can make content that is fun, low-stakes, and, in some cases, affirming of their identity.

Zulli and Zulli refer to TikTok audiences as "imitation publics," which they define as, "a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (Zulli & Zulli, 2020, p. 11). Further, they explain,

> …due to TikTok's memetic properties—the digital grouping of content and prompting users to select content genres as the basis for sociality—the energy that drives this collective experience is largely and initially processual, compared to interpersonal (e.g.

> public formation through disclosure or close ties), discursive (e.g. public formation through talk), affective (e.g. public formation through shared sentiment), or experiential (e.g. public formation through lived experiences) (2020, p. 12)

I build upon Zulli and Zulli's arguments regarding TikTok's platform architecture and its impact on the digital culture of the app. Further, I see the framework of an imitation audience as a useful way to contextualize the processual nature of the overall experience of the app, especially as it relates to users' perception of the barriers to entry regarding beginning to create their own videos. However, that context, while necessary to understand, is only one element of the creative experience on TikTok. In the next section, I look closer at TikTok's high-level affordances, and identify how the publics created on the app do not align with how they have been understood on other platforms.

TikTok Publics

Communication and self-presentation, including creative production, do not happen in a vacuum. They are processes that rely on shared social understandings – such as the context of the spaces we occupy, the expectations of the people we encounter, and the norms we operate within (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). When these processes occur in digital spaces, the affordances of the platforms inform those social contexts (Papacharissi, 2013; Walker-Rettberg, 2018). One approach to examining those dynamics is boyd's concept of networked publics, which she describes as "publics that are restructured by networked technologies" (2010a, p. 39). The term "publics" has been used by scholars in many different ways, including spaces for civil action, shared meaning, collective interests, or imagined communities, among others (Anderson, 2006; Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1991; Livingstone, 2005). boyd contends that networked publics are both the space itself and the collection of people "that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (2010a, p. 39).

She argues that four affordances are crucial to configuring networked publics: persistence (content posted online is archived automatically), replicability (content can be duplicated), scalability (content can potentially be seen by many people), and searchability (content can be found through search). Further, she identifies three dynamics that shape them as well: invisible audiences (audiences are not present at the time of creation), collapsed context (the lack of boundaries results in the potential for different groups of people to view the same content), and the blurring of public and private (there is no clear delineation or boundaries regarding publicness and privacy) (boyd, 2010).

Over a decade later, Abidin (2021), reacting to the changed media landscape of misinformation, content saturation, and data leaks, introduces the concept of "refracted publics." These are publics that are cultivated to remain "under the radar" – that is, they find ways to interact and communicate on social platforms in a semi-private manner that evades detection from outsiders. For Abidin, the conditions of refracted publics are transience (content is ephemeral), decodability (content is context-dependent), silosociality (content visibility is intentionally limited), and discoverability (content cannot be searched, only found). The dynamics of refracted publics are impactful audiences (the audiences shape creators' self-presentation), weaponized contexts (content is intentionally remixed so that it can apply to different contexts) and alternating the public and private (the variations in publicness and privacy are contingent on external factors such as internet accessibility and platform design) (Abidin, 2021).

Whereas boyd's networked publics provide context for understanding the early experiences of social media and the changing dynamics of public communication, Abidin's refracted publics reflect the over-saturated attention economies of more recent years. Both

scholars wrote about social media spaces; as discussed, TikTok cannot be cleanly categorized as a social media nor a video-sharing platform. However, in providing frameworks to understand both public and under-the-radar online experiences, these concepts serve as useful touchstones for the semi-private, unpredictable nature of TikTok audiences.

Persistence & Transience: Perceived Ephemerality

Persistence refers to content that is automatically saved and archived, whereas transience refers to that which is ephemeral (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2010). In some ways, paradoxically, these are both applicable to content on TikTok. When a user uploads a TikTok, it is automatically saved to their profile. However, unless it is strikingly successful, it will usually only be pushed to others' FYPs for a finite amount of time.

After a user sees a video, TikTok's algorithm will recommend related content from other creators based on other viewers' similar preferences and behaviors. However, the app is programmed to avoid monotony. It will not push content that is too similar too quickly, and videos with the same creator, audio, or topic won't show up consecutively on your FYP ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020). YouTube's algorithm, however, recommends videos based on more directly related metadata, such as tags, keywords, and, notably, the creator. Consequently, a YouTuber can assume that viewers are likely to see their older content and must consider that permanence as they create content.

Additionally, user profiles on TikTok feature their videos in order of recency and without any identifying information like dates or captions. Should one want to find a specific video on another user's page, they would have to sort through each one individually. Given that many users post multiple TikToks a day, content can get effectively "lost." These conditions give users the *impression* that their content is ephemeral, even if that is not technically accurate.

Replicability & Decodability: Collaboration in Context

Replicability refers to a piece of content's ability to be reproduced (and, often, taken out of context), while decodability is context-dependent (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2010). YouTube and TikTok both offer creators the option of disabling the download feature on their content, but it is turned on by default on both platforms. Regardless, any savvy viewer can find workarounds to download and redistribute content from either platform using third-party software or their phone or computer's built-in screen recording features. Therefore, both TikTokers and YouTubers run the risk of their content being reproduced without their knowledge, which, in addition to influencing how they see their potential audiences, can lead to problems of "freebooting," or others profiting off of their work without their consent (Cunningham & Craig, 2019a).

TikTok also has added levels of reproducibility: other creators can stitch or duet their content to build upon it, or they can use any audio they upload to the app for their own videos. In addition to knowing that someone might create content that builds on their work, they must consider how all every audio element of their videos - their words, the tone of their voice, or any sound effects - might be used by others. These interactive features are a core element of the memetic culture of the platform and contribute to the concept of imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

Despite these norms and standards that depend on replicability, many TikTokers still create content with decodability in mind, especially as memes evolve into shared understandings of coded language. For example, in July of 2020, TikToker Rocky Paterra posted a song about his experiences making small talk as an actor. The lyrics are,

> I'm a struggling actor but if I'm asked by a stranger what I do,
> I usually end up telling a lie because there's too much to get through.
> I don't wanna go through the motions of saying that auditions are a full-time job.
> I'd rather smile and simply state that I have a full-time job.

> As an accountant.
> As an accountant.
> Nobody asks you questions when you say you're an accountant.
> "What do you do?"
> I'm an accountant.
> "Where do you work?"
> At a place where accountants work.
> "Do you like your job?"
> Yes I like my job and my job and my job is an accountant (Paterra, 2020).

The audio was well-suited for memetic popularity: it's funny, it has a catchy background tune, and the pacing (especially the question-and-answer section) makes it easy for others to lip-synch to it. It became popular quickly, especially among sex workers on the app who could relate to the desire to avoid talking about their profession with strangers. Beyond that, they began using the term "accountant" and variations thereof as shorthand for talking about their work without being flagged for using "inappropriate" keywords in their content (Horn, 2021; Onibada, 2020). TikTokers who practice sex work are then able to grow their fanbase and create decodable content at the same time.

Scalability & Silosociality: Inconsistent Visibility

Scalability and silosociality refer to the potential visibility of users' online content. Networked publics result from scalability, when content can potentially be seen by many people (boyd, 2010) whereas refracted publics are characterized by intentionally limiting content visibility (Abidin, 2021). Again, TikTok blurs the lines between these two affordances.

In a practical sense, content posted on both YouTube and TikTok is scalable because profiles are public by default and thus, any video can potentially be seen by millions of people. Further, both sites have privacy settings that allow creators to control who can view their content. However, beyond these technical qualities, the practical experiences of visibility differ across these two platforms for three main reasons: advertising, algorithms, and architecture.

Advertising. YouTube has optimized its site to appeal to advertisers, and creators have adapted accordingly. The site prioritizes longer content (especially through viewer watch time) because more ads can run during longer videos. YouTube also invested in improving production standards because advertisers want to be featured alongside quality content (Burgess & Green, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2019). It is notoriously difficult for online creators of any kind to build an audience. Creators engage in countless hours of unpaid "aspirational" labor, including building a catalogue of work and connecting with similar creators and commenting and supporting their peers in order to seek support and attention (B. E. Duffy, 2017). These norms that have developed around advertising have contributed to raising the barrier to entry for success on YouTube even higher. On TikTok, however, ads do not run during individual creators' videos – they run between them. This relieves the individual creators of the responsibility of making advertiser-friendly content.

Algorithms. As discussed in the section about persistence and transience, TikTok and YouTube have algorithms that work on different logics – TikTok will show viewers content that was enjoyed by other users with similar watch habits, but will avoid monotony ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020) whereas YouTube recommends content based on tagging, keywords, and the creator channel the user is already watching (Bishop, 2019).

Architecture. YouTube is a video-sharing platform – while there is a robust entertainment industry built around it, it is also used for more utilitarian video storage and distribution. Consequently, YouTubers must do the work of distributing their content through other social media platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019b). TikTok, on the other hand, is designed for entertainment and play and users are exposed to new content on the app itself (Barta & Andalibi, 2021).

Given these three factors, visibility is very different on these two platforms. While it always *possible* on YouTube, it is rarely *probable* for the everyday user. On TikTok, however, nearly every video[6] creators post – regardless of their previous levels of success – is pushed out to other users' FYPs immediately and will continue to be shown to more people if the initial viewers engage with it favorably. At the same time, despite the higher possibility for visibility for everyday users on TikTok, they are more likely to be shown only to favorable audiences, which is more in line with the experience of silosociality, even when it is not directly intentional.

Searchability & Discoverability: Personalized Discoverability

YouTube is, of course, a subsidiary of Google. And, in many ways, this is a strength for the platform. Everything on it is designed in favor of searchability, which is especially useful for businesses who may want to advertise alongside content that speaks to a specific target audience (Febriyantoro, 2020). Even the process of uploading content accounts for this – YouTubers need to tag their video with keywords that will help the algorithm identify how it should be indexed for search results and recommendations.

TikTok, on the other hand, has a much less efficient search system that mostly prioritizes the most popular content on the app. Beyond that, it is difficult to search for content or users without knowing a username, caption, or audio track name in advance (Antonelli, 2021). Of all the ways that TikTok fails to create neatly distinct networked or refracted publics, discoverability the one affordance that clearly speaks to the experience of using TikTok.

As I have shown, TikTok's technologies engender publics that are neither networked nor refracted. Instead, they are shaped by the perception of ephemerality, collaborative production

[6] There are exceptions: some creators' accounts may be flagged, requiring that their TikToks go through review before they are pushed to others. Also, as I discuss in the final chapter, some topics have been blocked from distribution in the past.

styles that are nonetheless highly contextualized, inconsistent visibility, and personalized discoverability. Next, I discuss how these affordances influence creative behavior and imagined audiences, especially for queer creators.

An Algorithmic Experience

TikTok's digital environment is characterized by a content style that is intimate, playful, and casual. Creators do not make content for advertisers, do not expect their videos to have a long shelf life, and often do not have people from their home lives following them online. Thus, they can make content to suit their own needs without concern for whether it looks good or fits a particular image. And, because there is always a chance that their video might become popular, they are incentivized to join in the humor, expression, and collaborative play that occurs on the app.

For LGBTQIA+ users, this provides them with a creative space where they can 1) engage in self-expression and exploration by 2) making content that aligns with a highly personalized niche while 3) being reasonably certain that they are doing so with low risk for harm or exposure.

Low-Stakes Creation

TikToks are commonly prescriptive and memetic and often characterized by low production standards. These qualities help to ease the burden of creation for many users, allowing them make content that requires little planning or strategy, such as participating in viral trends. For LGBTQIA+ creators, it can be useful to have templates when they are seeking ways to engage with a queer community or practice expressing their queerness. One example of this is a trend using a short audio clip from the 2014 Jason Derulo song, "Get Ugly."

In November 2019, TikToker @carleyyyanne posted a TikTok that featured herself in the foreground and her sister behind her. She started the music and her sister began to dance. When the lyrics said, "oh my oh my oh my god, this girl's straight and this girl's not," she pointed to her sister during "this girl's straight" and to herself for "this girl's not." The video caption included, "coming out to my sister [rainbow flag emoji]. she was so supportive" (Pameticky, 2019). In 2020, this became a trend, where users – especially teens – would use the sound to come out to friends and family. Popular videos included examples where friends accidentally came out to each other simultaneously and others where teens tried to use it to come out to their parents who didn't understand what was happening because they didn't know the meme (Song, 2020; Wakefield, 2020).

This is one example of how a fun trend on TikTok can help queer users feel connected to the LGBTQIA+ community by participating in a communal experience while also getting practice (or, in the case of how this trend is applied – make major personal steps toward coming out) expressing their queerness. While previous research has shown that new media can provide users with models for coming out (Fox & Ralston, 2016), this example is a template that people actually applied to their real lives.

An Ambiguous Imagined Audience

TikTok cultivates the FYP for each individual user. As technology analyst Eugene Wei explains,

> Merely by watching some videos, and without having to follow or friend anyone, you can quickly train TikTok on what you like. In the two sided entertainment network that is TikTok, the algorithm acts as a rapid, efficient market maker, connecting videos with the audiences they're destined to delight. The algorithm allows this to happen without an explicit follower graph (Wei, 2020).

This efficient content-matchmaking process helps create a platform experience that is uniquely personal or even "scarily accurate" (Weekman, 2020). However, without having a

friends list, or even being able to rely on their videos being pushed out to their followers, TikTokers have very little insight into who will see their content. Rather than having the more traditional social media experience of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), they have insufficient information about their potential audience. Instead, they must imagine audience based on their perception of who uses TikTok and what they like. This perception is inevitably informed by what they see on their own FYP. Thus, there exists a recursive relationship between the algorithmically curated content creators see and the new TikToks they produce. Their imagined audience becomes a sort of impressionistic reflection of their own consumption preferences. When I asked Tat who they think of when they make TikToks, they said,

> Honestly, all I can think of is the queer community. I say things sometimes and I'm like, "I think only queer people will understand," or "they will 100% get this context if I say it like this." I don't have to explain it to anyone if they're queer. That's really where my mind is… this is who I'm making content for. And I'm pretty visibly queer. But I'm also very visibly Black. And very visibly plus-sized. I'm just kinda making it for the people who hopefully will resonate with me.

This aligns with a common theme in my interviews: queer creators often made content with themes or messages they wished they had heard when they were younger. Thus, their imagined audience is often their past selves. Responding to the same question about who she makes content for, Jen said, "myself, as a young person… what did I need to hear when I was 14 that I didn't hear at all until I was in my late 20s?" Similarly, Steff talked about striving to the be role model they didn't have when they were younger (discussed more in Chapter 3).

Safety

In many ways, TikTok is a platform that encourages you to find your niche. When you're using the app, you can expect a certain level of consistency or familiarity in the content you are shown in your FYP - and the people who are shown your content on theirs can say the same. For most queer creators, that engenders a sense of safety. They can make content and be reasonably

sure that the algorithm won't deliver it to the FYP of someone who finds their own existence offensive, unnatural, or even dangerous.

In nearly all my interviews, creators large and small commented on how little hateful content they receive. Most assumed I was expecting to hear about harassment – as if it is a given that someone who is publicly queer must have a rap sheet of traumatic internet encounters. While most of them had received some unfavorable or frustrating comments on their videos, very few had dealt with the systematic and traumatic experience of networked harassment, which occurs when members of a network promote harassment of a shared target (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). They spoke to me as if I was about to be shocked to hear that they were the exception. Instead, those that *had* experience with networked harassment and abuse were far less common. Generally, when it did occur, abusers found them because they said something that pushed their content to the wrong audience and/or their content was shared on another platform.

Of the people I interviewed who did encounter this type of abuse, most mentioned that it occurred after they had said something that got them seen in the "wrong" spaces. Ty, for example, found themselves bullied by gamers after posting a video about the game *Call of Duty,* in which they criticized people who claimed that using they/them pronouns was difficult. In it, Ty plays two characters: themself, as well as a gamer:

> Gamer: They/them pronouns are confusing, man.
> Ty: Not a man.
> Gamer: ✨they✨ just don't make sense
> Ty: What game is it you're playing?
> Gamer: Call of Duty.
> Ty: I see. And this makes sense to you?
> Gamer: WHOA! I got knocked out by that AK! Leask! Cranstoun! Drop an amax when I respawn. I'll shoot one out of the Gulag.
> Ty: [confused expression]
> Gamer: That's the last time I try a 360 no scope with an AR. What am I, a newb? [text overall reads *maniacal laughter*]
> Ty: [pretending to laugh along] yeah… haha. [stares at Gamer like he is ridiculous]

(2021).

In this exchange, Ty highlights the fact that a gamer is willing to learn complicated jargon and game dynamics but unwilling to reconsider how to use a pronoun. This is one of many videos that Ty has made that criticizes people's unwillingness to use singular they/them pronouns despite their commonality in the English language. However, because this particular video used *Call of Duty* fans in the metaphor, it got some attention in the gaming world and drew harassment in Ty's direction. They told me,

> What's really alarming is that these young kids just see me as another video game character that they're looking to shoot down. So, their words are often empty. But their threats are very real. They were sharing my personal information online and reaching out to my family asking for my personal information and saying, like, horrifying things. I was getting, like, 10 death threats a day for like weeks… I now know what to not talk about. Like, don't talk about *Call of Duty*. Honestly, what's shocking is that people the level of violence that I received from these young kids over this violent video game matched the level of violence that I received from Christians on TikTok when I said that God is non-binary.

Ty recognizes that the harassment they received was not truly about *them* for their harassers and they concluded that there are some topics they shouldn't discuss for fear of angering potentially volatile outsiders. When they said that their harassers see them as a video game character, Ty was observing that those people knew very little about them. This is made possible by the norm of the algorithmic audience experience.

On YouTube, harassers can take the time to make long "response videos" about creators that are designed to seem rational while linking to the original YouTuber's page and emboldening their viewers to flood their content with negativity(Lewis et al., 2021). YouTuber panelists at *PlayList Live* described how the site's algorithm sometimes recommended hateful or critical content to their fans because it the topic, keywords, and tagged videos had so many similarities.

While this is of course *possible* on TikTok, it's far less common because is not nearly as intuitive or profitable to make hateful reactionary content. And, because of TikTok's preferencing of discoverability over searchability, it is unlikely that they'll ever see a creator unless they're seeking them out intentionally.

For Ty, it was mentioning the game got them noticed by the *Call of Duty* harassers, not the substance of who they are as a person or the message of their video. Regardless, they were still subject to harmful, terrifying networked harassment.

The Algorithmic Assistance Plea

In reaction to this experience, Ty used a tactic that is becoming somewhat common when people find themselves facing too much negativity in their comments. They asked their audience for help. The day after the *Call of Duty* video, they posted another one with the caption "I want this to be a safe space. If you're an ally or a queer person, please interact with this video" (2021). In it, they said,

> Can y'all help me out? Because I am getting a lot of engagement from incredibly hateful trolls in my comments section. And so much of my time on TikTok now, is spent reporting death threats. And that is obscene. And I want to be engaging with people who are here to learn. Who are here to stretch their understanding about something that they don't experience. For people who are looking to celebrate queerness and otherness. So, if you are an ally or a queer person, please interact with this video so we can get rid of these hateful people. Like, there's no teaching them. So please. I feel so desperate. But please help me (2021).

This type of request is not uncommon on TikTok. In fact, it could almost be considered a type of genre: the Algorithmic Assistance Plea (AAP)

Patrick made an AAP as well. Patrick's story is interesting because TikTok – as well as their AAP experience, had a direct experience on their coming out (discussed further in chapter four). In late summer of 2020, four things happened in quick succession: 1) they made a video about their gender, which drew a lot of positive attention; 2) they made another video criticizing

police violence, which drew a lot of negative attention; 3) they made an AAP to their supporters, which was wildly successful; 4) the support and attention from that video forced them to reckon with their gender identity.

On August 28th, they made a video reacting to the things they saw on their FYP. They captioned it, "LGBTQ+ TikTok got me. #lgbtq #comedy #gender #therapy #trauma." They stood at their bathroom mirror and spoke to the camera:

> Okay so people keep telling me that if I show up on their For You Page that means I'm LGBTQ+. And it's like, "okay, probably. But I don't have time to unpack that right now." Do you know how much therapy I'm in from fighting in a war in Afghanistan as a medic? Do you have any idea how many people I've seen die? [Laughing] I don't have time to figure out my gender identity! Not right now, anyway. I mean, I spend a lot of time thinking about it, so… it's probably not as obvious as I thought. Yay! (2020).

A few days later, on September 1, they made a different TikTok about police violence. The video is short; Patrick speaks directly to the camera, stating: "You know what's weird? When I was at war, if you shot an unarmed person in the back, they called it a war crime. No one defended those guys. Sent em to prison" (2020). A text overlay at the top of the video read, "WHY DO POLICE HAVE LESS STRINGENT 'RULES OF ENGAGEMENT' THAN SOLDIERS?"

This drew significant attention from conservative audiences, including supporters of both the military and the police. Patrick was flooded with comments from people questioning their service and accusing them of disrespecting the military. So, on September 4th, they made an AAP, captioned, "I need an army! #lgbt #lgbtq #gaytiktok #gender #trauma #comedy #veteransagainsttrump":

> I need to summon the gays. Not like… [trails off] I had a post blow up on gay TikTok because I'm like a veteran questioning my gender identity and I thought it was just… [trails off] but you all [loud exhale] you showed up. [Puts hand on heart] you… [exhale]. Feelings? And like, support?

> At the same time that my post got huge on gay TikTok, I had another post get on conservative TikTok and they hate me because I'm a veteran questioning them.
>
> So I had like a comment stream that was like "we love you and we support you and you can do this. And your trauma is valid." And over here they're like "you're not a real soldier." And it's like [stressed out sigh].
>
> And I was able to fight em! Cuz I had the strength of the gays! And now I'm going to make a whole bunch of gay content and I need y'all to show up and say really kind things because it is powering me and I'm gonna destroy these FASCISTS (2020 [emphasis added]).

Patrick's AAP was very different from Ty's – it was written in a way that assumed the viewer had no idea who they were. It was just personal *enough* to share what they were going through, but it made identity appeals to the audience as well. They began with a direct request from a clear audience. They also framed his LGBTQIA+ viewers as kind, helpful, and understanding while simultaneously making outgroup comments and situating their need for support as political. As Patrick is a stand-up comedian, their delivery is also funny. The video was massively popular. As of this writing, it has 1.9 million views, but it already had nearly 1 million within four days. I return to Patrick's "summon the gays" experience in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the affordances of TikTok have helped engender a digital culture that encourages collaborative content that is memetic and low stakes. I have demonstrated that for LGBTQIA+ users, this provides them with a creative space where they can 1) engage in self-expression and exploration by 2) making content that aligns with a highly personalized niche while 3) being reasonably certain that they are doing so with low risk for harm or exposure. In the next chapter, I contextualize the wider queer TikTok experience within the circumstances of lockdown during the early months of Covid-19.

CHAPTER 3: TIKTOK AND THE MODERN QUEER EXPERIENCE

You grow up feeling like there is something that people aren't telling you about how attraction works. At some point, you realize that there are things about yourself that you can't tell other people because they're not okay to share. At some point, you realize that your sex educators have lied to you about what kinds of sex are possible. At some point you realize that a lot of the world was built for people who aren't you. And… fairly unique to queer people is that the there's no familial knowledge to share these experiences. And particularly queer kids of my generation, there were no elders because of AIDS - because a generation of artists were deliberately left to die. Even where there are elders, they're not family in a direct sense. They're a queer found family. Which is a huge deal, but you have to find it… that there is knowledge and culture that is important but that will not be shared with you, is an inherent part of the queer experience. -T.X.

Scholars have explored ways that the internet can help to provide connection, community and validation for queer users – especially those who are isolated or living under unsafe or precarious positions (Gray, 2009b). TikTok is just a new space for this to happen. However, what it adds is crucial: 1) everyday queer people share bits of their lives in a way that is often informal, comfortable, and familiar; 2) the algorithm delivers queer content to users for them, relieving them of the responsibility of searching for it themselves[7]; 3) people can see others and be seen by others with very little effort – disrupting the dynamic in which only those who are able to and desire to engage in visibility labor can grow an audience; and 4) the sense of community and familiarity that comes from different trends allows people to feel less alone.

In this chapter, I identify how LGBTQIA+ creators use TikTok for identity exploration, information-seeking, validation, and community support. While queer users have always turned to the internet for these needs, TikTok makes them more salient because it is a visual medium

[7] And if they don't respond to it, they can just scroll away, communicating to the algorithm that it's not what they want to see.

that shows people in their everyday lives and connects creators to supportive audiences. I find that seeing other queer people post about their lives on TikTok – especially other nonbinary people – has been informative and affirming for viewers and provides them with frameworks to question their assumptions about themselves as well as help others do the same. I also find that faceless community support, rather than intimate bonds formed over time, can be similarly affirming.

To situate these findings, I begin by describing the history of queer internet use. I then identify the conditions that helped TikTok achieve massive growth at the beginning of lockdown, so that I can show why lockdown was a useful time for identity work. Finally, I outline how TikTokers engaged in identity exploration during this time and why TikTok itself enabled it.

The Trajectory of the Queer Internet

Queerness is a unique marginalization experience because most come to understand and embrace it later in life. As Larry Gross wrote in 1998,

> All minorities share a common media fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes. But sexual minorities differ from the "traditional" racial and ethnic minorities; in many ways we are more like "fringe" political or religious groups. We are rarely born into minority communities in which parents or siblings share our minority status. Rather, lesbians and gay men are a self-identified minority, and generally only recognize or announce our status at adolescence, or later (Gross, 1998, p. 72).

In most cases, LGBTQIA+ people are not born into circumstances that can provide them with all the information and support they need to understand and navigate their identities, nor are there sufficient media representations to provide those models, and these problems contribute to significant mental health threats (Lucassen et al., 2017).

Due in part to these limitations, LGBTQIA+ people were among the first to use the internet to connect with one another (Grov et al., 2014). The first known queer space on the

internet was a Usenet group called soc.moss[8], where users discussed personal experiences and political issues – especially the AIDS epidemic (Auerbach, 2014). Users connected on this site to share health and safety information, but also to connect over the experiences of loss and survival. Of course, many used online spaces so they could build connections and relationship in person as well (Weinrich, 1997).

In these early days of online information-seeking and connection, users developed systems to signal their queerness discreetly in places that afforded customization – such as their usernames or, later, homepages (Driver, 2005). As internet technologies progressed beyond forums into chatrooms, queer users took advantage of low-stakes interactions and anonymity features that allowed them to "try on" their queerness in emotionally safe spaces (G. Brown et al., 2005; Gray, 2009a).

Alongside the rise of social media came opportunities for users to build more online relationships because they had spaces like MySpace and Friendster that could act as a hub that kept their connections all in one place. However, there were downsides to these conveniences, such as surveillance and targeted marketing. For example, during the era of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," AOL passed the names of members of queer forums to the military (Napoli, 1998). Now, most social media companies log all activity, are public by default, and link with third-party sites (Baym & boyd, 2012). While this allows many LGBTQIA+ people to engage with activism and share their experiences publicly, closeted users must be much more careful to keep their queer online activity separate from their offline lives.

Queer Internet Uses

[8] MOSS stands for "members of the same sex"

LGBTQIA+ people often use the internet for information-seeking and modeling because they do not often have those models in their everyday worlds (Gross, 1998); they often view social media interactions passively for insight into the norms of queer life (Gray, 2009a). Consequently, a site's profile requirements have an impact on queer use - the ability to view a social media site without creating a profile allows users to seek information without revealing their presence (Craig et al., 2015). Information-seeking includes exploring different genders and sexualities, coming out models, queer sex insights, health information and finding romantic, sexual, and platonic connections (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Magee et al., 2012). Storytelling formats, such as blogs and YouTube videos, can be especially helpful and salient, as it allows users to learn from others' experiences from a safe distance (Adams-Santos, 2020; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012).

The coming-out process is iterative and is usually modeled and practiced over time (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Robbins et al., 2014) . Online spaces provide queer people with spaces to test out new identities – especially social media platforms that allow for anonymous usernames (Cavalcante, 2016). Furthermore, when they find a community, they can practice by coming out to them before telling the people in their everyday lives (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

The Impact of Platform Policy and Structure on Queer Use

The concerns of surveillance and privacy from early social media remain salient today. Many social media, including Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, operate under what Alexander Cho refers to as "default publicness," wherein platforms automatically make all user activity public unless they make the active choice to change their settings (2018). Some go even further – Facebook, for example, has a requirement that its users use their legal names, which

can be harmful for many people, but especially those who are in the process of transitioning and may find their deadname[9] traumatic (MacAulay & Moldes, 2016). Policies like these can put queer people – particularly young queer people – at risk, especially if they have families who do not support their lifestyles but whom they are not able to leave (Cho, 2018). While some queer users opt to create additional accounts or use secret groups, they still risk exposure. Fundamentally, these sites are built to connect users – especially people who know each other in real life – because connection and real-life user data are central to their business models (Srnicek, 2017).

Conversely, Tumblr has historically been useful for queer users, largely due to its design. Much like the early Usenet forums, its system is not immediately intuitive to outsiders, which deters many casual users (Cavalcante, 2018). For most of its early years, it did not have messaging services, which reduced fears of targeted abuse. It also does not have an easily searchable timeline and allows for users to change their names and URLs at will. As the coming out process is iterative, this allows people the grace to grow and change with much less evidence of beliefs or perspectives they no longer hold. Due in part to these features, it has become a space for people who are open to and educated about sexualities and genders of all kinds - scholars have referred to Tumblr as a "queer utopia" (Cavalcante, 2018), channeling the dream outlined by Muñoz (2009). However, after Tumblr's policy changes disallowed pornographic content in 2018, the culture shifted and many queer uses abandoned the site (Jackson, 2021). In many ways, this set the stage for TikTok to rise to popularity among queer users (Skinner, 2022).

TikTok and Lockdown

[9] A deadname is the name that a trans person was given at birth, which they have replaced with one that affirms their gender.

The vast majority of the TikTokers I spoke to downloaded the app out of lockdown-motivated boredom. They were stuck at home, could not see their friends, and needed a distraction. This was not purely by chance – the pandemic hit at a particularly convenient time for TikTok as a company. In this section, I describe the circumstances that contributed to TikTok's popularity boon alongside Covid-19 lockdowns so that I may outline the subsequent social conditions that played a crucial role in how LGBTQIA+ users engaged with TikTok.

Why TikTok Exploded During Lockdown

TikTok had already been rapidly growing worldwide in the months leading up to March 2020 (Chan, 2021). Further, in the fall semester of 2019, TikTok was on a massive campaign to reach young audiences. They had campus ambassadors at over 100 universities across the United States. As the TikTok newsroom site described it,

> [The campus ambassadors are] hosting trivia and karaoke nights, scavenger hunts, and handing out trendy TikTok merchandise. Campus ambassadors go the extra mile to organize these events to support the app and empower their classmates to capture and showcase their creativity, knowledge and moments that matter at their university (*College Creativity Thrives on TikTok*, 2019).

Near UNC Chapel Hill, they partnered with a local pizza parlor to hand out free slices to anyone who downloaded the app on site.

Thus, in March of 2020, millions of college students who were newly hooked on the app were suddenly stuck at home with their families and very few outlets for their creative energy. Pandemic and lockdown-related content quickly flourished on the app. Just over a week before national quarantines went into effect, then-unknown rapper Curtis Roach posted a 15-second TikTok with a new song, which he encouraged others to use in their content. Roach looked at the camera and alternated between slamming his fist on the table and snapping his fingers as he sang. The lyrics are straightforward:

> Okay I'm bored in the house and I'm in the house bored.

> Bored in the house and I'm in the house bored.
> Bored than a motherfucker, in the house bored.
> And I'm bored than a motherfucker, in the house bored.
> Bored in the house, bored in the house, bored.
> Bored in the house, bored in the house, bored.
> I'm bored than a motherfucker, in the house bored (Roach, 2020).

Despite the simplicity of the content, the song exploded on the app – there are currently over 3.2 million videos using the original version of the audio[10] – largely due to its catchy tune and Roach's stellar timing. People made videos of themselves passing the time doing inane tasks, lying in unlikely positions around their houses, and creating odd crafts, among other things. And often, they did these things with their families. Notably, the popularity of this audio launched Roach's music career. Two weeks after he posted the original video, rapper Tyga saw it and partnered with Roach to make a studio version of the song (Aspuru, 2021).

The *Bored in the House* trend is just one example of how people took to TikTok to pass the time in quarantine. Many families made content together as high school and college students turned to the only people around to help them make videos - for themselves, for their friends, and for the TikTok userbase at large. One family, the Presleys, created what they called the "Quarantine Olympics," in which they challenged each other to various silly games around the house and posted them on TikTok. As described by *Good Morning America* on April 20, 2020,

> When the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games were officially postponed due to the coronavirus, this North Carolina family organized their own Olympic-inspired games -- quarantine style. The Presley family of Cornelius, North Carolina, created a series of creative family games like "Toilet Paper Dodgeball" and "The Straw Challenge" and dubbed it the "Quarantine Olympics." Their homestyle games have over 36 million views on TikTok since they began posting on April 2 (Yamada, 2020).

These examples are massively popular viral videos. However, millions of everyday households were exposed to the app – either through students at home or through national news coverage

[10] Remixes have thousands more.

like *GMA*'s story about the Presley family – at a time when the population had an unprecedented amount of free time and uncertainty about any non-digital forms of connection.

YouTubers' Contribution to TikTok's Rise

Just as the rest of the world was experimenting with making content from home, YouTubers found themselves in an interesting position. In one sense, they were equipped to make professional-grade content from home in a way that mainstream media creators were not. As television hosts and reporters began struggling to broadcast from home, the skill required to do so effectively – and thus, the skill that YouTubers have been practicing for over a decade – became more apparent. When beginning to shoot from his home, Seth Meyers said, "Shout-out to YouTubers who have been doing this for a long time and making us pros look like real dopes this week. I tip my cap!" (quoted in McFarland, 2020). Indeed, at the time, many likened late-night hosts' homemade content to the early days of YouTube – especially as it engendered an apparent sense of authenticity and familiarity by seeing celebrities' homes and families (Hill, 2020).

Like TikTok, activity on YouTube exploded in the early days of the pandemic (Marshall, 2020). And while YouTubers were skilled at making content from home, many had brands that relied on visiting public places or interacting with strangers. Even those who made at-home content were denied the creative influences of the outside world (Alexander, 2020). Consequently, many YouTubers turned to TikTok for ideas – they had fans send in their favorite TikToks and shot "react" videos; they tried popular recipes, dances, and crafts; they made compilations of their favorite videos; they created parodies, and much more. In their attempt to entertain viewers on YouTube, these creators helped to popularize TikTok.

Often, I began my interviews by asking people how and when they downloaded the app. As I stated earlier, the majority said that they did so during lockdown. Several mentioned that

they were inspired to try the app because they encountered YouTube compilation videos that they found entertaining – some saw them on YouTube itself, but others encountered them on other apps, especially Facebook. Furthermore, three interviewees cited YouTuber Danny Gonzalez specifically, as he has made several popular videos reacting to content on the app, and even made content about Musical.ly before it was purchased by ByteDance.

These factors all contributed to TikTok's massive explosion in popularity in spring 2020 and the months following. Millions of new users didn't just flock to the app, they also used it for hours on end, quickly training their FYP to show them the kind of content they may not even have known that they wanted to see.

The TikTok Algorithm

The TikTok algorithm is one of its defining features – it provides a customized viewing experience for its users through the For You Page (FYP), which is the default feed one sees upon opening the app ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020). This is distinct from the experiences on other social and video sharing sites – the content that is pushed to viewers when they open the app is not necessarily tagged with terms they selected or created by their friends or the TikTokers they actively chose to follow – rather, it is chosen for them by the app's algorithm. Therefore, if the algorithm is not accurate, users will not be incentivized to continue using app at all.

While the basic mechanics of the algorithm are public information – the company has made it clear that it tracks information such as watch time, likes, shares, and downloads ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020) – the intricacies of what makes a video successful are not. Thus, much like YouTube and Instagram, users often end up theorizing and projecting their assumptions onto it (Bishop, 2018). However, on most platforms, the algorithm

has a much more measurable effect on users who create content, rather than just those who consume it. On other platforms, features such as recommendation algorithms and trending topics can impact passive users (Lewis, 2018; Willson, 2017) however the so-called "algorithmic lore" (Bishop, 2020) that users and experts create and extol is often reserved for active creators. However, in the case of TikTok, researchers have demonstrated that audiences have begun viewing algorithms has an avenue for self-knowledge, and that project meaning onto content that they find algorithmically. Cotter and colleagues refer to this phenomenon as "conspirituality," a combination of "conspiracy" and "spirituality" (Cotter et al., 2022).

Research surrounding how users interface with algorithms and the meaning they attribute to them are often focused on YouTubers, bloggers, and influencers – those who have either already cultivated an audience or are seeking to do so (Bishop, 2019, 2020; van Es, 2020). However, TikTokers do not always create with the goal of crafting a loyal online following or attaining any level of professional success. Like more traditional social media platforms, most users on TikTok are people who either just consume content or who create for their own personal entertainment and expression. However, unlike most traditional social media platforms, there is always the potential that something they make could be seen by hundreds, thousands, or even millions of other users. Thus, TikTokers' relationships with the algorithm goes beyond the labor involved in hoping to gain viewership – it extends to more casual users and their experience not only with visibility of their own content, but also with the videos they are served on their FYP.

This relationship with the algorithm, wherein users provide it with personal information through engagement and it provides them with customized content, helps to generate a digital identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2018). Further, the memetic nature of TikTok's algorithm, combined

with its collaborative features, engenders a culture that emphasizes creative play. As Collie and Wilson-Barnao explain,

> These systems function to embed creative, playful practices and their value within the data-driven and commercial logic of the digital economy, including ubiquitous forms of ever more granular surveillance and data capture. Culture is increasingly dominated by an imperative on all of us to be creative – to express ourselves, to build a personal brand and to curate our lives – yet this identity work is outsourced to the mediation of digital platforms. And this imperative has become embedded in our social identity, relationships and the logistics of our everyday lives (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020, p. 173).

In other words, platforms like TikTok generate digital spaces wherein users are compelled to express themselves and conduct identity work in a creative way – while also generating value for those platforms. This "architecture of digital labor" (Postigo, 2016) is more complicated on TikTok than other platforms, however, because 1) as discussed in the previous chapter, the barriers to visibility are much lower, reducing the need for difficult and arduous aspirational labor practices, and 2) the act of creating within this playful environment can generate personal value for users of all levels of success.

These conditions have contributed to the current moment wherein, as Boffone explains, "digital spaces and practices force us to reimagine our identities and sociocultural practices. In this case, TikTok informs identity formation as well as group culture" (2022, p. 6). He goes on to suggest that,

> …what makes TikTok tick tock is algorithmic personalization that enables identities, communities, and cultures to take shape on the platform, a phenomenon that quickly spills into the analog world as TikTok content goes viral. As a result, TikTok becomes US culture, and US culture becomes TikTok (Boffone, 2022, p. 7).

Further, LGBTQIA+ TikTok users report feeling validated by the processes of seeing relatable content on the FYP and by seeing others relate to their original content as well (Simpson & Semaan, 2020). In the next section, I explore concrete examples of those validating experiences.

#Validation. Or, Not Just Disney Channel Shit

Although my interviewees were creators, they also spoke about the experiences of consuming TikToks. As the algorithm fed them more individualized content, they found themselves drawn to subsets of TikTok that spoke to their personal experiences, as well as some of the things they hadn't even had the chance to experience yet.

For Carls, TikTok gave them perspectives on gender that hadn't had access to before, despite having a queer community:

> Honestly, it's because of TikTok that I started to explore [my gender] because I ended up seeing a bunch of non-binary content and people talking about their experience with gender. And it made me realize, "oh, this isn't what I thought it was." Because I had some non-binary friends, but I never really asked them much about it because I didn't really feel like it was my place to drill them on their gender experience. But then, once TikTok started showing me people's experiences, it was like, "wait a second, I relate to a lot of this." And then I just kind of started to think about it more… And I started to think about my experiences growing up and, and kind of looking at my childhood experiences through a gender non-conforming lens, and just kind of connecting dots and thinking "if I wasn't socialized female, what would I be like now?

Carls describes seeing non-binary content on their FYP as a catalyst for exploring their gender. They went on to describe different methods that they used to find information online about what it "meant" to be non-binary, eventually finding comfort in the idea that there is no "correct" way to be any gender. For them, seeing others sharing their experiences on TikTok was helpful because it gave them insights that would have felt too intimate to ask others in person.

Tat's experience was similar. They explain,

> TikTok was like the tipping point for realizing I was nonbinary. Because even prior to the pandemic, I had been feeling like, "I'm not 100% a girl." But I've always thought, "you don't want to transition, you're not a man." Being on TikTok and seeing the spectrum that gender can be, I was like, "Oh, let's do a little bit more research." And then also, "Oh, yeah, this is you. This is where you've been this entire time."

For both Carls and Tat, the people in their feed shared information that aligned with some of what they had been feeling. For example, for Carls, seeing someone affirm the idea that it was okay to have multiple pronouns had validated concerns they had about their own pronouns. For

Tat, showing possibilities outside of gender binary gave them the insights they needed to explore how they had been feeling.

Savannah articulated what it was about TikTok that created so much value for queer users – especially nonbinary people. Comparing it to Tumblr, they said,

> I like that it lets us see each other… With the nonbinary experience specifically, you can cognitively know that non-binary people don't owe you androgyny, but if you don't see nonbinary people and the way they actually look, you're not going to get that repetitive understanding that it's true. If you just see it as text, you're still picturing skinny, white, short person with an undercut every time you see that phrase.

Even as individuals shared different experiences from different perspectives, those themes of validation continued to arise. Mike, who is disabled and thus financially dependent on his family, described a similar situation of seeing people in their everyday lives helping his experiences with his own gender and sexuality:

> Seeing people be themselves that I think is such a beautiful thing. I think a lot of people haven't been able to be themselves… so seeing a lot of creators or artists on TikTok be themselves is really valuable… There's the other side of it, though - there's a little bit of jealousy too. Because I can't do that to the full extent because of my situation. But it's never a hateful jealousy. It's more of a "I want that." It's more of a happy jealousy. And sometimes that jealousy turns into inspiration.

Although the realities of his personal situation left him unable to be fully out and express his gender and sexuality completely openly, he is still able to find fulfillment alongside frustration when he has access to representations of what his life might be like some day.

For Parker, the visibility that they gained on TikTok has been validating as they think about others avoiding the more difficult things they experienced. They began by providing some context:

> There's this thing that happens a lot in Black families where someone will point something out, and the parent, or whoever's in the authority figure, or whoever's perpetuating those harsh vibes, will be like, "this isn't the Disney Channel. That's for white people."

They then went on to explain why TikTok helped to disrupt this problem, and what it meant for them personally.

> There was this one video that I saw on Facebook, and it was just somebody being really really supportive of their non-binary child. And it made me cry. And I was like, this is a really, really good video and it's also educational. And it really does a really good job of explaining why it's important to family relationships and to mental health to hold space for trans and non-binary identity and foster it. And I never showed it to my mother, because all the people in it were white. And I was like, "she's gonna look at this and say, 'that's some white people shit.'" Then she will use that the lack of diversity in that to invalidate my gender identity which is nuanced and layered. It means so much to me that I am someone who is Black and nonbinary and that I take pride in those identities and their intersection. And that people who are Black, and non-binary kids who are Black, can look at my stuff and will have someone to show to their parents. So, when they're presented with that, they can't be like, "oh, well that's some Disney Channel shit."

Not only does the visibility that TikTok affords Parker and people like them provide frameworks to expand normative assumptions about race and gender, it also helps them to process their own painful experiences and turn them into healing behaviors.

Challenging Norms: Do it. Do it NOW.

In a popular two-part video published in December of 2020, a TikToker named Leah, who goes by the username @slugmugg, posted a theory about what they refer to as the "she/they gender revolution." Citing Butler (1988), Leah hypothesizes that lockdown mitigated the intensity of everyday gender performance, thus granting people unprecedented space to reflect upon their gender identities. Leah takes it as fact that there is currently a "wave of consciousness" and a "gender awakening" occurring right now. Like Leah, my interviewees spoke about the early days of the pandemic as an obvious time of gender and sexuality exploration. Similarly, in her piece about queer women and nonbinary creators on TikTok, Skinner writes,

> Potentially, people's isolation from the public outside their home could lead them to pursue other forms of gender performance that they have developed an interest in, with TikTok offering a fertile space to practice that performance and find others who model such gender and sexuality play (Skinner, 2022, p. 76).

In this section, I build on these ideas, showing how my interviewees were able to explore their genders and sexualities during lockdown.

In December 2019, TikTok user @vampdivision (now operating under the username @bussygoblin666) posted a 42-second video that said,

> This is a PSA to all the girls who want to shave their head. Do it. Do it. Do it. Do it NOW. Because you know what? In five years from now, if you don't shave your head, you can never say *you shaved your head*. You can never tell your *kids* that you shaved your head. Do you really want to look like a lame-ass parent? No! Shave that fucking head! No one's gonna stop you. And if people make fun of you, fuck it! You only live once, it's gonna grow back. Don't listen to people. Listen to your brain and your mind (that was the same thing). Regardless, do it! Just do it, okay? Literally, there's no cons. You may have mental breakdowns because you can't do your hair right – get a wig! Wigs are cheap on Depop. Just do it. Do it, do it, do it, do it, do it, do it (@bussygoblin666, 2019 [emphasis added]).

While the video was posted in the end of 2019, it exploded in popularity in 2020, as thousands of people used her words as background audio for their own head-shaving experience. In October of 2020, the British lifestyle magazine *Grazia* covered the trend, noting that over 11,000 people (mostly women) had used the audio to show themselves shaving their heads (Aspinall, 2020). The author explained that,

> For many women, their hair can be both their prized possession or their greatest burden on any given day. Lockdown then, and the ensuing mandate to stay in the house at all times, seemed to provide a blissful escape for women to experiment with hairstyles they've always wanted to do but never felt confident enough – shaving their heads being one of them. Because, without strangers casting a doubtful eye or the fear of what friends, colleagues or family might say when we see them next, women were liberated to do whatever the hell they wanted with their body hair (2020, para. 2).

This was true not just for women, but for people of all genders who unexpectedly found themselves with a healthy detachment from societal expectations of how they expressed their appearance – including how they expressed their gender.[11]

[11]It must be noted, however, that they were also distanced from access to professional hair stylists, which perhaps contributed to their willingness to participate in the trend.

For Jubilee, lockdown provided her with the opportunity to go through some of the more awkward parts of transitioning in a relatively private way. She got laser hair removal on her face and was able to avoid interacting with others outside of the home while it was healing. Even if she did have to leave the house, she wore a mask that covered it up. She expressed relief that she had a respite from societal expectations surrounding her appearance so that she could have privacy while going through these awkward changes. The conditions of the pandemic, however, made it so that she presented as a very different person when we spoke in 2022 compared to who she was at the beginning of lockdown. The day we spoke, she was about to have a gathering with friends who hadn't seen her since before the pandemic.

> I just finished my social security, my birth certificate, and my driver's license - finally got the name all updated on those things. And we're having a cotillion/gender reveal for a big group of my friends because a lot of people didn't really see me… some of these people I hadn't seen for months before the pandemic and so it's been literally two years since I've seen you. And I'm wearing the dress and have breasts and my hair is like a foot longer and like I'm wearing makeup.

She later posted a TikTok about how much fun she had that night.

Although she was exploring her sexual orientation rather than her gender, Robin's[12] explains that she was able to turn to TikTok for information seeking while she was confused and disconnected from community during lockdown. She explained,

> I was going through kind of a hard time when I downloaded TikTok. I was in a shitty relationship and then also I came out earlier this year… then add quarantine to that mess - I didn't know where to turn. And I didn't know if I would be able to find the community here, because we were all going into lockdown. I was able to find the LGBTQ community on TikTok, which was really helpful because I had so many questions, and I didn't really have anywhere to turn. And TikTok is not necessarily real life, but at the same time, there is a lot you can learn on there.

[12] This participant elected to use a pseudonym.

She went on to say, “TikTok gave me the freedom to play and explore and rediscover myself where during a time where I was totally lost.”

Community Support: The Alphabet Mafia

In addition to feelings of affirmation and validation in what they saw on their FYP, TikTokers also discussed how receiving positive feedback from others about their content sometimes inspired them to take steps in their identity exploration. For example, Steff explained what it was like to test out wearing a skirt in public.

> I think someone was like, “Oh, can we see you in a skirt?” And I never thought about wearing skirts because I was very shy on TikTok. Even though I was wearing heels, I was still very shy to wear a skirt. Even though I was already wearing skirts at home, I was just scared to show it on TikTok. But someone was like, “Oh, do you wear skirts?” I was like, “wait, I do wear skirts, maybe I should try this.” And I tried it and it like blew up.

When the video succeeded, it reaffirmed for them that it was okay to push the boundaries of their gender expression. They told me that it helped them build confidence.

In the previous chapter, I described Patrick’s “Summon the Gays” TikTok, wherein they put out an Algorithmic Assistance Plea to the LGBTQIA+ community because they were dealing with harassment from conservatives who disliked their political content. They posted that video on September 4th, 2020. On September 8th, they posted another TikTok explaining the influence that their “summon the gays” video had on their life. They captioned it, “Your support is everything. I think I’m a Q!!!!! #lgbt #lgtbq #gay #bi #queer #gender #armyofthedowntrodden #comedy #love.” In it, they slid into his bathroom so they could record themselves in the mirror. They wore a regal cape and a fake crown that fell off as they entered the shot. A text overlay read, “Attention LGBTQ+ Army.” They said,

> I’ve summoned the gays! 800 thousand views! 300 thousand likes! Do you have any idea how many 300,000 is? George Washington’s army numbered 14! [pulls out fake scepter] Oooooh we’re crush these fascists with our… love, I guess? Whatever!

> So many people saw this video. So many! I had to come out to my parents! Which is not how I thought the weekend was gonna go, but whatever! I'm famous now. Oh my god. And if you're wondering like, "why the cape?" 5,000 of you left a crown emoji. So I was like, "eh well, when in Rome!" And I dunno if like a "King of Queers" fighting fascism is the right message? But eh! Right?
>
> And "King" was my first role in the *theatre.*
>
> My friend he was like, "be careful Pat. Don't fly too close to the sun." Fly too close? [shouts] I AM THE SUN!!!! (2020).

I spoke to Patrick about these videos and their experiences with going viral as the "King of Queers." They reflected on how they had been uncertain about their gender before lockdown and TikTok, but how they didn't feel comfortable claiming it without some form of outside confirmation.

> [In a journal] I was talking about liking the word 'queer' and how I wanted to identify with it, but I didn't- I guess I was like waiting for someone to- I have severe ADHD and I'm neurodiverse and I have all this stuff that comes with that and I'm pretty sure I'm also on the autistic spectrum. And I've gone to dozens of therapists over the last four or five years and a lot of them are like, 'yeah probably but you're 32 and you mask[13] super well and it's really hard to get a diagnosis.' And I've been fighting to get this diagnosis. And then I came to my gender, and I was like waiting for a doctor be like 'oh yes, you have fit the criteria for being not a man.' And that doesn't exist. Eventually I was like, 'oh it's just a thing that I declare and then it's true? Oh, cool. I declare it then.'

Then, as they began using TikTok – and then had this massively popular series of videos – they found that confirmation through the hordes of people responding to their experience.

> With Covid, I think that by the end of this, if there's an end to this, we'll see a lot more people come out. I have largely been isolation for eight months and I've had all this time to just sit with me and get to know myself. And what I've discovered is that I'm real queer, and without other people to bounce off of, and without having to mask or like put myself into a box I just discovered like, where I'm most comfortable. And then when I was on TikTok and I was like I 'think I'm a little bit this' and people were like,' come on in! We love you!' I was like, oh, 'okay, perfect.'

Thus, it wasn't necessarily an intimate, safe, familiar community that gave Patrick the validation they needed. Rather, it was the aggregate of thousands of responses. And for others seeing this

[13] "Masking" refers to the concept of hiding neurodiversity symptoms and behaviors for the comfort and acceptance of neurotypical society.

experience secondhand, they were able to see an everyday person live out their gender exploration process in real time, receiving validation in the same ways that Carls and Tat described.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how TikTok provides viewers and creators alike space to explore their identities through visibility, affirmation, creative play, and comedy. Lockdown provided LGBTQIA+ TikTokers with the space to explore their identities with some emotional distance from normative expectations and validation from others with similar experiences. Further, it is likely that the intimate conditions of lockdown – that is, people were forced to create from their homes –contributed to the feelings of familiarity that allowed users to view others' experiences as genuine rather than performative, as they may have had they occurred on a platform like Instagram.

CHAPTER 4: TIKTOKERS AS SUBJECTS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, TikTok uniquely situates everyday creators to stumble upon an audience on a new scale. Although amateur users have leveraged accidental virality into internet fame in the past, those cases were rare, despite appearances. Instead, creators on other platforms have to work hard to cultivate and maintain both an audience and a strategic brand that appeals to that audience (Burgess & Green, 2009; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; B. Duffy, 2015). TikTok presents a new social phenomenon: in a space devoted to creative video content, where larger audiences are typically reserved for influencers, professional YouTubers, or legacy media producers, everyday people can find an audience and maintain it without any conscious intention to leverage it into career or monetary advancement. For queer creators, amateur, aspiring, and professional alike, these audiences are situated to be especially enthusiastic, as they are hungry for relatable dynamic representations of LGBTQIA+ life.

The realities of having this audience are also unique to the platform in many ways. First, TikTokers do not necessarily have to perform the types of labor that scholars have shown are the norm for digital creators. Second, their content is often personal in nature and presenting from intimate settings, yet at the same time, individual videos are only short glimpses of their lives that are pushed to audiences inconsistently. These conditions, combined with the aforementioned enthusiasm from queer audiences who are hungry for representation, position viewers to *feel* as if they are truly getting to know the TikTokers as people, when in actuality, they are given just enough information to project their own imaginings of who they hope that creator to be.

In this chapter, I explore the realities of having such an audience. While many of the experiences and feelings described by my interviewees have likely been shared by creators across all platforms (in fact, I argue that they do), TikTok's popularity drastically expands the pool of people who could potentially find themselves in similar situations. Further, its affordances leave audiences with less context for who the creators are offline but, potentially, more feelings of intimacy and familiarity.

I show that queer creators feel the responsibility of having a platform, and many strive to cultivate progressive messaging but struggle with meeting audience expectations. Additionally, I find that as queer audiences have so much to gain from positive representations on TikTok (as discussed in previous chapters), they sometimes project those feelings onto creators. This can take an emotional toll on TikTokers, many of whom are not equipped to manage this psychic load.

I begin by discussing the concept of parasocial relationships – the connection that audience members can create with visible personalities they find engaging – and explaining why they are especially valuable to members of the LGBTQIA+. I contend that while research has identified the many forms of labor that creators perform, it has not thoroughly explored the realities of being the subject of a parasocial relationship. I endeavor to do so here.

Parasocial Relationships

The emergence of parasocial relationships (PSRs) as a concept began in the 1950s, as the popularity of televisions in the home grew. In 1956, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl published their article "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," which identified the phenomenon wherein audiences saw media personalities as

peers. They noted that while audiences can create attachments to any characters they encountered in film, television, or radio, they emphasized the strength of relationships to performers who appeared in media as some version of themselves, such as interviewers and game show hosts, whom they referred to as "personae."

Personae, they explain, are personalities who perform in a manner that intentionally generates feelings of familiarity for the viewer through the informality of their language and mannerisms as well as the ways they are shot by the camera. As they describe,

> The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive and share in it. They "know" such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations. *Indeed, those who make up his audience are invited, by designed informality, to make precisely these evaluations-to consider that they are involved in a face-to-face exchange rather than a passive observation* (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216 [emphasis added]).

These strategic presentations help to garner one-sided connections between the viewers and the personae. One of the most direct of these performative behaviors is the parasocial interaction (PSI), when personae break the fourth wall and address viewers directly (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Later research confirmed that feelings of parasocial connection are stronger when these interactions occur (Auter, 1992).

In the following decades, scholars demonstrated audience tendencies to create PSRs with personalities from all forms of media, including newscasters, hosts, fictional characters, and athletes, among others (e.g. Brown, 2010; Brown & Basil, 1995; Levy, 1979; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Sood & Rogers, 2000). As the internet fostered new opportunities for people to gain visibility, audiences developed PSRs with people online, such as creators on blogs, social media

sites, streaming platforms, and online video spaces (C.-P. Chen, 2016; Kreissl et al., 2021; Leith, 2021; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021; Stever & Lawson, 2013; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006).

Viewers can use PSRs, including romantic attachments, to work toward an ideal self (Derrick et al., 2008) and in developing a self-concept, especially as adolescents (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). To the viewer experiencing the PSR, the closeness of that relationship falls in between the feelings toward a friend and a neighbor or acquaintance (Koenig & Lessan, 1985; Löbler, 2009); further, they experience real feelings of loss when PSRs end (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Familiarity and identification contribute to the connections that viewers make with personae, as well as the impact of their the PSRs. When the viewer identifies with or perceives similarities to a character or celebrity, it is more likely that they will develop a PSR with them (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Additionally, PSRs with personalities who are distant and whose lives are unfamiliar can result in life unsatisfaction and feelings of loneliness; however, reciprocal relationships online, including those with PSIs, can reduce feelings of loneliness (Baek et al., 2013).

Brown (2015) noted too much variability in how scholars discuss PSRs and PSIs. He identified four processes that make up the successive degrees of audience attachments to personae: transportation, parasocial interaction[14], identification, and worship. He argued that these are cumulative – an audience member becomes engrossed in a narrative (transportation) and connects with personae (parasocial interaction). Then, they may adopt that persona's

[14] In this context, Brown is distinguishing from Horton and Wohl's original definition of parasocial interaction as an act where a persona addresses the audience directly. Rather, he is using the term to refer to the overall concept of an audience member developing a connection to a personality in media. Notably, he contends that parasocial interactions can have both a positive and negative valence, as long as the audience member feels that they know the persona well.

attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs (identification). Finally, in the most extreme cases, they may progress to develop intense feelings of devotion or loyalty (worship). He explains that clarity between these processes is necessary so that scholars can ensure that they have mutual understanding of how they are discussing PSRs. Throughout this chapter, I explore how creators cope with having fans who fall along this spectrum.

Parasocial Relationships and Queerness

It is not always easy for LGBTQIA+ people to find role models in their lives, but media can help to provide them. For those audiences, these mediated role models can influence self-realization and identity and provide comfort, hope, and inspiration (Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). For example, during lockdown, researchers found that high parasocial relationship strength with LGBTQIA+ YouTubers weakened loneliness and depression symptoms in LGBQ emerging adults (Woznicki et al., 2020). For trans viewers, PSRs can help them to make sense of their identities, but also, any media representations of other trans people can help give them information about processes and procedures surrounding transitioning (Kosenko et al., 2018).

In addition to individual effects, PSRs can have larger social implications for the LGBTQIA+ community. The parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH) suggests that, "exposure to positive portrayals of minority group members that produce parasocial interaction will be associated with a decrease in prejudicial attitudes" (Schiappa et al., 2006, p. 22). In the original article that proposed the PCH, Schiappa and his colleagues demonstrated that a connection to characters on the original run of *Will & Grace* reduced prejudice based on sexual orientation. Subsequent research has demonstrated similar results regarding prejudice based on sexual

orientation and gender on social media, in news, and in other scripted series (Bond & Compton, 2015; Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2020; Massey et al., 2021; Zhao, 2016).

Creator & Relational Labor

Parasocial relationships among online creators have been the subject of study when considering how users relate to creators as well as how that impacts their purchasing decisions (Bond, 2018; Chung & Cho, 2017). However, it has not focused on the experiences or impacts that come with being the *subject* of a PSR. Chen (2016) does consider this position for amateur YouTubers, however, she writes about the strategies that creators use to attempt to entice viewers to develop a PSR with them. In some ways, scholars who have identified the types of labor that online creators engage in have touched upon some of these experiences; however, those findings and interpretations are based on the experiences of creators on other platforms. For YouTubers or Instagrammers, they must work very hard to cultivate an audience and a self-brand while maintaining an image of authenticity and relatability. On TikTok, however, this is not always the case.

Scholars have outlined the various types of labor that online creators must perform to develop a successful brand and cultivate a loyal audience. Duffy has illustrated how, digital creators have traditionally been viewed as everyday people who happened upon online fame and have been able to leverage it into a career, but who have actually had to work very hard to achieve their success (2017, 2018). This creates tension wherein they are working to meet the expectation of seeming like an "everyday" person while also working behind the scenes in order to maintain the image of an "authentic" online persona, as this helps them connect with their audiences and distinguish themselves from mainstream celebrities (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). On TikTok, however, many creators truly do happen upon online fame – or at least, visibility.

The algorithm pushes everyone's content out to a small number of viewers and continues to do so if those initial views encourage engagement ("How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou," 2020). Thus, many creators did not work to find their audience and thus, are much less prepared to manage it. Further, while the culture of YouTube has been based around feelings off connectivity and authenticity, the increasing professionalization of the platform has changed those dynamics over the past several years – raising the barrier to entry for newcomers and lowering the standards of an "everyday" image for veterans (Meyer, 2020).

Once creators start to find an audience, building relationships with those communities helps them maintain their authenticity, as accessibility is preferable to the barriers and gatekeepers present in the traditional fan/celebrity dynamic (Marwick, 2013). Nancy Baym coined the term "relational labor" to describe the context and practices that creators and producers in cultural industries perform. She writes that creators – in her case, musicians – engage in relational labor, which she describes as,

> …regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work. "Relational" is meant to emphasize effort that goes beyond managing others' feelings in single encounters… to creating and maintaining ongoing connections. Relationships built through relational labor can entail all the complex rewards and costs of personal relationships independent of any money that comes from them. At the same time, the connections built through relational labor are always tied to earning money, differentiating it from affective labor, as the term is used in most Marxist traditions (2015, p. 16).

These conditions do not always apply for TikTok creators. While many do seek to benefit financially from their online audience, others do not. Similarly, the concept of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) – managing others' feelings as part of one's work – does not apply either, as they generally do not work to impact audience members' emotions in their content.[15] Further,

[15] This is not to say that there aren't creators who make content that is designed to elicit an emotional reaction from viewers. However, the issues described in this chapter apply to queer creators who make a variety of types of videos.

they do not even necessarily need to engage with their audiences directly to continue getting viewership on the platform.

Looking at Patreon, a subscription service that allows fans to fund creators monthly, Bonifacio, Hair, and Wohn (2021) concluded that relational labor has both positive and negative implications for creators. While it garners emotional support, engagement, and content feedback, creators must also deal with disruptive fans, semi-public incidents of tension or disagreement, and at times, fans who overstep boundaries. My interviewees expressed similar struggles, which I outline below.

The Other Side of the Parasocial Relationship

As described in previous chapters, finding an audience on TikTok can be reaffirming and validating for creators, whether that audience is comprised of devoted fans or people who just happened upon their video on their For You Page (FYP). However, having a platform to reach many people at once can be daunting, and my interviewees shared the privileges and pressures that come alongside it. Many felt that they had an obligation to speak out about injustices and inequality, especially considering the political climate of the past few years. Further, as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they understand the experience of marginalization firsthand and have their own experiences seeking information and validation from other public personalities, especially YouTubers. They took that position of visibility and authority seriously.

The Responsibility of an Audience

My interviewees expressed gratitude about the privilege of having a public, or at least semi-public platform. As noted in previous chapters, they often find comfort, support, and validation from both their devoted fans and their casual viewers. They also recognized the opportunity this afforded them – not only do they have the opportunity to be the representations

they craved in the past, but they are also situated to advocate for social change. Indeed, many feel that it is their duty to do so. Cecelia mentioned that some of her content that gets the most negative responses are TikToks about how fat people do not owe anyone health, or that trans women are women. When I asked why she makes content about those things if they create problems for her and neither of those issues affect her directly, she said,

> There's this common thread through my family: you do things to help people. And that has somehow manifested in me as, "well, I have a platform, so I should be yelling." …my best friend is fat. [She] is so strong and she could kick my ass like I'm a noodle of a person. But that doesn't matter. She doesn't owe that to anybody. Her existence is worth something. And I know and love so many people who are trans. Their existence is worth something. They owe you absolutely nothing and yet they keep coming to the table with kindness and sources and time and they're just saying, "please listen." We act as if they have eternal patience, which I know they don't. And I know it is killing them. I don't have to deal with any of that on a daily basis. I walk around as a cis white woman who is regular looking, definitely smaller than average in terms of weight. And I'm fine, so I'm here to yell.

For Brenna, it's not always easy for her to feel like she belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community, which is a common problem among bisexual people who are in straight-passing partnerships. However, she believes strongly in the importance of representation and wants to increase bi visibility – especially among women in the sciences. Thus, having an audience on TikTok forces her to face that directly.

> I feel slightly disingenuous at times. And I think that's that really spicy internalized homophobia - where I feel disingenuous because I'm not dating a woman or I'm not out to my parents. But I always try to bring it back to what I would preach to someone if it was not me… if I knew someone who was questioning their sexuality, who was identifying currently with bi or queer, and they were in a relationship with a man, would I ever make them feel like they were any less valid part of this community? Absolutely not.

Thus, she must navigate the balance between advancing the representation she wants to see and facing the emotional implications of those dynamics. Steff also creates with the responsibility of being a role model in mind. They told me,

> My TikTok is basically just an outlet for queer POC, alternative people, people who are different, people with disabilities, a safe space for them to just be themselves have

> conversations and have a role model. When I was younger, I didn't have anyone to really look up to. And I really just wanted to be that for people… I didn't have my father in my life. My father actually left when I came out to him, so I haven't seen him since that day. So, when I was younger, I really just looked for a male figure that could teach me things… I didn't have any queer role models, so I didn't know about all of the different identities and all the different like ways of living as a queer person, or honestly even as anything other than a Black man.

They went on to describe how younger people create fan art of them, such as drawings or animations of him dancing. Whereas the older viewers interact with their TikToks in ways that build upon the original content and allow them to express themselves. For example, Steff described a TikTok where they joked about how pansexual people can find each other by tapping pans together. Older viewers, they explained, duetted the TikTok and pretended to be peeking around the corner as if they were responding to the call. Steff recognized that their content was giving people the opportunity to express themselves – especially their queerness – creatively.

Whether they were working toward visibility or advocacy, larger creators, who do need to consider the practicalities of their self-branding and their audience engagement, also understood that they could not only do those things without adding entertainment, for fear of losing viewers. Cecelia, for example, described diversifying her content to keep viewer attention. She explained,

> I know in order to keep the platform, I have to make a certain number of "haha dumb funny lady" videos. And I don't ever want that to overshadow the other work I do. It's like, "Hi, I know you thought you signed on for a 'haha funny lady.' You want to talk about Black feminist thought?" I feel like I have an opportunity here.

Patrick also noted that they had to ensure that their messages got across. They said,

> I understand the way TikTok works and the way the internet works, that if you give people too much bitter medicine, they're going to stop listening to you. And so I have to be funny. There has to be jokes, there has to be levity and amusement, or people are going to tune out because nobody wants to hear how shitty it is to be these things. They want to laugh, and if you trick them, they'll listen to your message.

This awareness of needing to find these balances is impressive and echoes previous research about how creators need to be strategic in how they present their content to their audiences.

However, Cecelia and Patrick are both creators with larger platforms (as of this writing, Cecelia has over 276 thousand followers and Patrick has over 817 thousand) and who both have experience as performers. Patrick is an actor and standup comedian, and Cecelia went to school for theater. Their sophisticated understanding of the platform is not always shared by those who found an audience with less experience.

Alongside a larger audience comes more scrutiny from those viewers. Many creators discussed uncertainty surrounding how to manage expectations surrounding their own capacities as activists and advocates. As Patrick explained,

> It feels like a lot of responsibility and it's tough because you've got to pick your battles, and… the people that I'm sticking up for the most right now are vets, the disabled, and trans people. Which is a big swath of the country. And then people will come in and be like, "yeah, but what about Natives?" And I'm like, "well yeah, them too." And they're like, "what about Black people?" And I'm like, "I also agree!" But it's frustrating because I want to also fight those battles. But you have to pick and choose. And so, it can be frustrating having an audience because people seem to think I'm this automaton for justice who never gets tired or needs like a week to recuperate. And I find that very challenging to navigate. Like, when should I step in? Sometimes people are like, "would you just share this video?" And I think, "if I do, other people are gonna want me to share their video." It feels like every time, I have to make a decision: Do I think this is going to expand into something I can't handle or into a fight that I just don't have the resources for?

Their mention of "resources" is notable here – the trend of valuing sourcing is prevalent in activist subsets of LGBTQIA+ TikTok. Many of my interviewees discussed finding the line between when they should advocate for those who have fewer privileges than them and when they should recognize the limits of their own experiences and knowledge. In their content, they work to boost other creators with more expertise and/or direct experience. Many also use external platforms like link-aggregation services or discords to provide easy access to things like links with more educational information or non-profits that need financial support. These serve two main purposes: first, they can drive traffic toward those information and fundraising places in a relatively straightforward way, especially since TikTok did not always allow for links in

videos or captions. Second, they can keep that information in a place that is easily accessible, allowing them to answer repeated questions by simply directing them to the link in their bio, which is already a common internet convention. They may also use newer features of the platform, such as a "pinned" video at the top of their profile or addressing common questions using the app's Q&A feature, to discuss openly what they can and cannot discuss or address in their content.

However, no matter how much effort they put in to be clear about their stances on certain issues, they will consistently be gaining viewers by ending up on new FYPs. This means that they are constantly balancing an audience of those who are creating parasocial relationships with them and those who have little to no context for who they are at all, outside of whichever video that person happened to have just seen. For smaller creators, this is much less of a problem, as their content is far less likely to be pushed out to new viewers after a few days of posting. For larger creators, however, their older content continues to gain viewership as long as people continue to engage with it.

Creators with follower counts both large and small, however, had experiences with viewers growing attached to them, thanking them for making a significant difference in their lives, or asking them for significant emotional support.

Parasocial Projection

So much of what is revolutionary about LGBTQIA+ TikTok is effective because of the people who create content on the app. As discussed in previous chapters, they help cultivate the feelings of safety and community as well as increasing visibility for groups who have been silenced, erased, and overlooked in mainstream media and society writ large. By being active and visible on the app, queer TikTokers are providing viewers with representations that

potentially have significant emotional meaning to them. For example, Tat described how it feels to see people like them thrive publicly,

> I honestly don't know how to put to words how it feels when a Black queer creator is celebrated. The amount of community around them - you feel it. Someone like Lil Nas X is very visibly queer and very visibly Black… They really are carrying so much on their backs just by existing in that space. And it means everything for me to see them do that.

Tat is not alone in these feelings. Many creators expressed their appreciation for others who live and create openly for improving visibility for the whole LGBTQIA+ community. Further, many of them had direct experiences with people feeling similarly about them. For example, Mike explained that he has gotten feedback about his influence on others:

> I've had people say that the workout stuff I've done was the thing that got them to start working out themselves. I've had messages of people saying they needed to hear something today that I had shared… I know it sounds cheesy, but it really does mean so much. I genuinely am glad I can help people like that… I may have contacts that are like doing this professionally and have [high viewership] numbers. But my highest platform is TikTok at 715. But it's making a difference in some people's lives, and that's pretty rad. ,

Similarly, Carls said,

> I'll be honest, there are days when I think, "why am I doing this? This is silly. Nobody wants this content." But then I open up the app, and I have so many comments of people saying that I've been helping them, or that they feel less alone now.

The intimacy of TikTok has allowed people to build an attachment to Mike and Carls, and that has been mutually beneficial in many ways. However, they are describing connections that are impactful but still at a healthy emotional distance – those who may fall somewhere between Brown's (2015) description of parasocial interaction and identification. When fans reach levels approaching worship, those dynamics change.

Sam[16] told a story about going through significant personal struggles when his parents found his account. It was a difficult time for him. However, he decided to stay on TikTok. He explained,

> I've gotten messages and comments with people saying like, "you changed my life," "you make me happy," or "you help me get through the day." Or "because of you, I didn't try to unalive myself today." And like, that's mind blowing to me. And that's what keeps me going even on the toughest days.

The expression "unalive myself" refers to suicide.[17] For Sam, as it would be for many people, it was empowering to hear that he had helped to encourage someone to keep living. However, the implications there are considerable. Sam did not express feeling overwhelmed or pressured by that statement, but others might. He mentioned that it kept him going when things were hard, but it is important to consider how he might feel should he choose that staying on TikTok is too much of a burden. Sam has just over 10 thousand followers. He is not positioned to make a living from this platform. Yet, he still has a significant impact on others' lives.

Other creators have felt the emotional weight of being in this position. They shared experiences of people projecting onto them and assuming that their one-sided parasocial relationship is a mutual connection. Cecelia explained,

> There's a lot of assumptions on TikTok of, "this is an adult woman who presents as relatively normal. Therefore, I assume all of these things about her." There's a lot of trauma dumping. Because I am an older woman who has made it through the teenage years and made it through my early 20s and come out relatively okay, I will get a lot of younger women saying like, "can you be my older sister?" and then like commenting a lot of things… There was a certain point where my boyfriend said, "you probably have to turn off your comment sections because people keep coming to you like you're their sibling." I tried really hard to draw a firm line with of, "I appreciate you being here, and

[16] This participant opted to use a pseudonym.

[17] Users have adopted using "unalive" as a euphemism for "death/dead/die" or "kill." They do this for two reasons: first, they want to avoid censorship from the app – certain keywords might get their video flagged for moderation review before it gets posted or get it flagged for review. Second, some use it to avoid the potentially triggering effects of using harsher language on viewers who unintentionally stumbled on their videos through their FYPs. The word can be used as a verb, as it was here ("to unalive someone" would be to kill them) or as an adjective ("my unalive sister" would be "my dead sister").

> you can message me for resources at any time. But you can't unload on people you don't know."

This problem is not unique to TikTok, two other prominent creators I spoke two, one on YouTube and one with several successful podcasts, shared similar experiences. They both preferred to remain anonymous, but they explained that it can be difficult to know how to create emotional boundaries when people feel so strongly about them. This is especially salient for creators in online digital spaces because the intimacy that encourages the connections that can be beneficial and validating is the same intimacy that engenders such strong feelings of attachment on the part of these fans.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown what it is like for creators to be on the receiving end of parasocial relationships. In many ways, this can be empowering and validating. It gives them the opportunity to advocate for causes they believe in and to elevate other creators they admire. It also provides them with significant personal fulfilment and encouragement. However, it also comes with hefty responsibilities and complicated emotional dynamics that most are unequipped to handle.

These experiences are not unique to TikTok. As long as there have been audiences developing parasocial relationships with personae, there have been people who have had to endure the practical and emotional consequences of them. However, TikTok increases the likelihood that this might happen to anyone, as well as the access that those who form PSRs have to the subjects of their attachments. Further, because the experience of queerness is so personal, the attachment that audiences feel in PSRs with queer creators is likely to be more intense and more high stakes than it may be for other types of personae - especially as so many people have been exploring their genders and sexual orientations since the beginning of Covid-19. It's

important that we recognize these conditions so that we might work to develop ways to support creators who find themselves in these precarious positions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation has been to understand the connections and mutual influences between the platform, the users, and the audiences within LGBTQIA+ TikTok. I have shown how TikTok's platform architecture, alongside the cultural conditions of early 2020, empowered users to create in playful, collaborative ways that helped cultivate a digital environment of queer acceptance and exploration. I have contextualized this digital environment among scholarship of queer online spaces and emphasized how the act of *creating* online video is becoming an increasingly common tactic for gender and sexual orientation exploration and expression. Finally, I have shown how parasocial relationships form on TikTok, the complicated dynamics within them that queer creators must navigate, and the ways that they are largely unprepared to do so.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate how this analysis of TikTok's digital culture can apply to marginalized groups outside of the LGBTQIA+ community. Further, although much of this work identifies how TikTok serves as an asset to queer users, I also discuss the negative implications of its framework and culture. I also identify the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research. Finally, I discuss the future of the platform, and how the culture of the app is likely to shift, which may change how queer users create on it.

TikTok's Digital Culture and Marginalization

Throughout this dissertation, I explored TikTok's digital culture through the lens of the experience of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, the app's affordances, as well as its culture of collaboration, play, information-seeking, and representation, can and does provide resources

for many other groups as well. Through my own experiences on ADHD TikTok, I have seen many people discovering the possibility that they may have it themselves, as well as sharing information on lesser-known symptoms of the disorder and insights on how to manage it. Carls is working toward a master's in psychology to become a therapist and their channel is focused on ADHD. They shared that they consistently get messages from people who told them that they were the reason those people decided to get tested and subsequently diagnosed. Personally, I have made a handful of videos about my own experience with ADHD and even I have received similar comments.

People with ADHD are often underdiagnosed, live and work in a system that is not built for how their minds work, and receive treatment from practitioners with insufficient training to understand their conditions (Erlandsson & Punzi, 2017). Thus, many people – myself included – go through much of their lives internalizing feelings of failure and ineptitude and not understanding why they can't seem to complete seemingly straightforward tasks. The opportunity to see what ADHD looks like in other adults on TikTok, as well as how they cope with it, appears to be similarly validating as it does for people exploring their genders and sexual orientations. Similarly, other groups who experience marginalization that is not inherently linked to community and who lack adequate representations in mainstream media (as neurodivergents and LGBTQIA+ people do) can benefit from a digital culture that encourages low stakes play, collaboration, and information-sharing.

The Darker Sides of TikTok

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to show an accurate portrayal of how LGBTQIA+ creators use and experience TikTok for identity work, expression, and audience connection. However, this does not mean that TikTok is a universal good or that queer users

don't have negative experiences with the platform. In this section, I will briefly discuss issues with harassment, content moderation, and censorship on TikTok.

In chapter 3, I discussed how most of the harassment that creators face occurred when they found themselves on the "wrong side" of TikTok because their content was shared on another platform or because they referenced an outside group that became hostile. Those experiences of harassment, as well as similar ones that marginalized users experience every day, can become overwhelming and outright terrifying. Further, if someone tries to defend themselves or respond to those comments, the algorithm can push their content to more people who feel hostile to them, as it does not distinguish between positive and negative engagement. While this can be an issue on any platform, the TikTok algorithm is quick and effective in a way that can range from exciting to overwhelming to alarming. Further, according to my interviewees, dozens of user videos, as well as discussions on the Discord for *The Online Creators' Association,* TikTok is insufficient at dealing with harassment when it occurs, often failing to act against harmful behaviors.

In addition to issues of harassment, TikTok has historically suppressed LGBTQIA+ content (in addition to content created by people from other marginalized groups), claiming that they did so to avoid bullying (Factora, 2020). Users also experience a form of censorship called "shadowbanning," wherein videos are not pushed to audiences as they are published, effectively ensuring that no one will see them without intentionally seeking them out (Rauchberg, 2022). Shadowbanning appears to happen at high rates for marginalized creators' accounts. There is little certainty around the prevalence or processes of shadowbanning – many believe that TikTok is still intentionally censoring certain types of content. However, it is also likely related to algorithmic biases, as well as a consequence of being flagged as "inappropriate" by other users

(Rauchberg, 2022). Regardless of its origins, it remains a problem that requires more clarity and corrective action.

Finally, the same features that create a relatively digital environment for marginalized creators can also create effective spaces for the rapid spread of hate, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Just as the algorithm can provide insights into progressive ideologies and give marginalized people spaces for self-expression, it can increase representations of harmful ideologies and spread harmful information as well.

Limitations and Future Research

This research aims to share how LGBTQIA+ users experience TikTok and use it as a tool for self-expression and connection. However, in the previous section, I identified some of the risks and complications that also occur in this space. A limitation of this study is the restricted inclusion of these issues throughout. However, the data I encountered largely did not emphasize these problems, and I endeavored focus on the information provided to me by my interviews and observations.

This research is also limited by the context and timespan of when it was collected. As I describe in the final section of this chapter, TikTok continues to evolve. Much of what I have described throughout this dissertation is illustrative of TikTok as it was in 2020. For the interviews conducted in late 2021 and early 2022, I was more reliant on my participants' interpretations and memories of when they first joined the app, rather than a more recent account of what others were experiencing when I interviewed them in 2020. Further, as I discuss in the final section, the culture of TikTok is likely to evolve. Thus, new research will need to be conducted to understand how the LGBTQIA+ TikTok community evolves with it.

In addition to following the shifts in the digital culture, future research might focus on the distinctions between professional and social creation on TikTok. As I discussed in chapter 3, TikTok blurs the line between social media platform and video-sharing app. It is crucial that we understand the distinctions between these experiences, lest we overlook important social progress that may be occurring in one space but not the other. Also, I have shown how the affordances and the culture of play and collaboration have been useful for LGBTQIA+ creators. This can be useful in helping organizers and advocates understand how to reach marginalized audiences for outreach and political organization.

Finally, in chapter 5, I identified the struggles and responsibilities of having an audience and being the subject of a parasocial relationships. Although this is more likely to happen to an everyday person on TikTok, it is a problem that exists across the social internet. We need more research that understands how people cope with these burdens, as well as how to integrate a thorough understanding of parasocial relationships and their consequences into media literacy programs for audiences and creators alike.

The Future of TikTok

As TikTok grows in popularity, it is inevitable that the platform's business goals will shift from market saturation to increased profit margins. Like YouTube before it (Andrejevic, 2009), the content on TikTok will grow increasingly professionalized as more industry finds its way to the platform. Brands are already flocking to the app, both by creating their own channels and by investing in sponsored content from creators (Pasquarelli, 2021; Sloane, 2021a). Similarly, news outlets have been successful in expanding to the app as well (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). Further, TikTok is working to make itself more viable as an advertising-friendly space (Sloane, 2021b). For example, Savannah mentioned that TikTok approached *SciShow* to

produce educational content on the app as they do for YouTube. *SciShow* was created by John and Hank Green, alongside their *Crash Course* educational series, with sponsorship money from YouTube, as part of their initiative to make their platform more appealing to advertisers. TikTok is following the same path.

Similarly, TikTok continues to extend its maximum video lengths, moving from 1 minute to 3 in 2021, and then up further to 10 minutes in 2022 (Malik, 2022; Spangler, 2021). Again, this signals a trend toward increasing advertising possibilities, especially as longer runtimes allow for ads *within* videos, rather than between them, which increases advertising view rates and potentially creates opportunities for TikTokers to be paid for the ads attached to their individual videos, rather than just the advertising money that the app brings in overall.

Many of TikTok's more recent design updates also signal a strategic move toward a user experience that is amenable to self-branding. Much of what I described in this research that made the platform less intimidating as a creative space relied on the relative ephemerality of the TikToks creators produce. However, as TikTok adds more options like pinned videos, playlists, and stories, they create more opportunities for TikTokers to control their own image when someone visits their profile. If those creators *want* to be practicing self-branding and micro-celebrity, these features are incredibly useful. However, this will likely contribute to a more professional production culture, which raises the barrier to entry for any new creator, whether they aim to build a self-brand or not. Should this culture shift occur as I predict, it will inevitably change the dynamics for how LGBTQIA+ creators interface with the app. However, as the percentage of the population who identifies as LGBTQIA+ in some capacity increases – especially among Gen Z – we can hope that there will be more avenues for representation, validation, and expression outside of TikTok.

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