

**And How Does That Make You Feel?:
Unpacking the Phenomenon of TikTok Therapy**

BY

KRYSTEN STEIN

B.A., University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, 2011

M.A., University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, 2012

DISSERTATION

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2024

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Dr. Elena Maris, Co-Chair and Co-Advisor

Dr. Elaine Yuan, Co-Chair and Co-Advisor

Dr. Mariah Wellman

Dr. Rebecca Ann Lind

Dr. Jennifer Holt, Film & Media Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

Dr. Amanda Ann Klein, English, East Carolina University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Elena Maris and Dr. Elaine Yuan. Your guidance, wisdom, and unwavering support have been instrumental. Your patience and insightful feedback have shaped this dissertation. I have learned so much from each of you, not only about my research but also about critical thinking and academic rigor. As Carl Jung said, “One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings.”

I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Mariah Wellman, Dr. Rebecca Ann Lind, Dr. Jennifer Holt, and Dr. Amanda Ann Klein. Your unique perspectives and expertise have greatly enriched my research. Each of you brought a distinct viewpoint that broadened my understanding and challenged me to think more deeply. Your support and encouragement have been vital to my success. In the words of Helen Keller, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

To my partner, Donnell, and my two cats, Moe and CeeCee, I love you and thank you for being by my side throughout this wild ride! Donnell, your unwavering belief in me, patience during the long hours of writing, and constant encouragement have been my greatest source of strength. Thank you for being a Word power user (LOL) and helping me format this thing! It is even more special that we now have two first-generation doctors in our house (Juris Doctor and PhD)! Moe and CeeCee, your playful antics and warm cuddles have provided much-needed comfort and joy. “Home is where the heart is,” and my heart has been full because of you.

A heartfelt thank you to my Mom and Dad, who have believed in me and been pillars of support throughout my life. Your love and encouragement to pursue my dreams have been priceless. As the Japanese Proverb states, "A Father's goodness is higher than the mountain, a

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (continued)

Mother's goodness deeper than the sea." I love you both!

A huge thanks to my friends, both near and far, who have always believed in me, encouraged me, and lifted me up when I was down. Your faith in my abilities has kept me moving forward, even when the road seemed impossible. Whether through late-night conversations, words of encouragement, or simply being there when I needed a friend, you have played an integral role in my journey. As Maya Angelou said, "Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud." You all have been my rainbows.

I am deeply thankful to my colleagues, both past and present. Each of you has contributed to my professional growth and helped shape my future aspirations. Your support, collaboration, and countless discussions have enriched my understanding and been vital in navigating my academic journey. As John Dewey expressed, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."

I extend my sincere gratitude to all the mental health practitioners and creators who took the time to speak with me and share their experiences. This project would not have come to fruition without your generosity, openness, and willingness to participate in my research. Your insights and stories have been invaluable in shaping this dissertation. Thank you for your contributions and for trusting me with your perspectives and knowledge.

I also want to thank all of the students I have been lucky to teach over the past twelve years. Your curiosity, enthusiasm, and hunger for learning have consistently inspired me and kept my passion for teaching alive. As Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Thank you for reminding me of this truth every

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (continued)

day. It was an honor to be in the classroom with each of you.

Lastly, a special thank you to my therapist, Ashley. Your guidance, support, and understanding have been crucial in navigating the emotional and mental challenges of this experience. Your insights and encouragement have helped me maintain balance and resilience. Your compassion has been vital to my ability to stay focused and grounded throughout this process.

As bell hooks beautifully expressed, “We can begin the process of making community wherever we are. We can begin by sharing a smile, a warm greeting, a bit of conversation; by doing a kind deed or by acknowledging kindness offered to us. Doing this we engage in love practice [...] we lay foundation for the building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go, a place where we return to love.”

This journey has underscored the importance of living a life of love and fostering a love framework in my communities. Your love and support have not only helped me achieve this academic milestone but have also reinforced the value of community and collective care and growth. The love and connection we cultivate in our communities create a lasting impact that transcends the boundaries of our immediate environment. Thank you for being part of my journey and for embodying the principles of love and community in every step we take together!

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SUMMARY

Since its launch in the United States in 2018, TikTok has rapidly become a platform where mental health conversations flourish, giving rise to "TikTok Therapy" or "TherapyTok." This emergence features both licensed and unlicensed individuals sharing mental health information. Notably, licensed therapists often offer concise advice through engaging visuals in popular videos like "5 Signs You Need Therapy" and "How to Deal with Anxiety." By featuring vibrant backgrounds, on-screen text, and therapists speaking directly to the camera, these videos make mental health support accessible and relatable for viewers. Consequently, this trend highlights how media and technology have influenced the industry and cultural production of therapy. TikTok Therapy exemplifies this influence by enabling creators to share therapeutic content, facilitating content distribution, determining which content gains visibility, and shaping how therapeutic material is received by viewers. Thus, TikTok Therapy illustrates the impact of digital platforms on the accessibility and perception of mental health information.

Furthermore, the portrayal of therapy has evolved from traditional media formats such as talk shows and reality television to the digital realm of TikTok, permeated by the same ideologies but with different modes of engagement and interaction. Historically, legacy media often dramatized personal struggles and therapeutic interventions for entertainment. Talk shows featured structured discussions with experts or celebrities, offering somewhat in-depth explorations of mental health issues. Reality television immersed participants in contrived situations, emphasizing emotional reactions and interpersonal conflicts for dramatic effect. Both media forms focused on self-help and self-improvement, highlighting the idea that people need to constantly work on themselves. In contrast, TikTok's algorithm-driven, user-generated content and endless feed emphasize brevity and virality. Creators are encouraged to share their most

SUMMARY (continued)

intimate experiences to garner views and engagement. This evolution in media representation places therapy within the context of a rapidly consumable digital spectacle, prioritizing entertainment value over nuanced understanding and genuine support. While TikTok increases the visibility of mental health discussions and information, it often does so at the expense of depth and educational integrity.

While TikTok has expanded access to mental health information, this normalization often leads to commodification and sensationalization. Creators must navigate algorithmic systems to maintain visibility while contending with the historical limitations of popularized therapy in media. On the platform, individual mental health struggles are frequently attributed to personal failings rather than external circumstances. As a result, users can become objectified, serving as tools for generating profits for platforms like TikTok. The rise in these platforms' profits aligns with the growth of attention-driven economies and neoliberal ideologies. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to use digital engagement and sensationalized content to manage their distress. For instance, consuming more content, gaining followers, or achieving viral status is portrayed as a way to improve well-being and success. However, this engagement, while profitable for TikTok's attention-driven economy, becomes a crutch, masking and perpetuating deeper systemic issues within mental health care that require comprehensive and structural solutions. Ultimately, users seeking mental health information and creators making mental health content are viewed primarily as sources of profit for TikTok.

Moreover, the platform's attention-driven economy and neoliberal logics commodify and sensationalize mental health content, ultimately undermining its credibility, educational value, and ethical standards. The focus on self-help, self-improvement, and "healing yourself" aligns

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with ideologies of individual responsibility, detracting from broader systemic issues and evidence-based therapeutic practice. This mirrors past instances where popular media has distorted, sensationalized, and compromised the therapeutic project, which aims to promote mental health and well-being through scientifically validated techniques and ethical practices. Thus, TikTok's approach to mental health content often undermines the principles of effective therapeutic practice by prioritizing engagement over accuracy.

Additionally, theratainment, a term I coined to describe the merging of therapeutic advice or mental health information with media entertainment, exemplifies these challenges. For instance, a mental health creator might produce a video using catchy music and humor to discuss anxiety management techniques. While this video may be engaging and enjoyable, it can oversimplify complex issues and provide viewers with incomplete or misleading information. This mirrors how therapy is represented in prior media like talk and reality television, blurring the boundaries between therapeutic information and interventions with commercialized entertainment. When mental health content is designed to maximize engagement, a nuanced understanding of mental health issues may be lost, and viewers might receive incomplete or misleading information. Consequently, this can lead to individuals adopting ineffective or inappropriate coping strategies, potentially exacerbating their issues rather than alleviating them.

On TikTok, licensed mental health practitioners navigate dual roles as mental health care providers and content creators, competing for attention in a saturated market. This pressures them to simplify complex mental health concepts into engaging videos, potentially compromising the information's integrity and therapeutic value. Consequently, therapy on TikTok becomes a public spectacle prioritizing visibility and commercial dynamics over

substantive mental health education. The blending of professional credibility with the authenticity expected from social media lifestyle influencers also creates a distinct tension. Mental health practitioners creating content on TikTok must balance maintaining professional credibility with the demand for personal engagement and displaying their "true" selves. This emphasis on personal engagement can lead creators to overshare personal information, which is problematic as it can compromise their privacy and professional boundaries, potentially leading to emotional burnout and undermining their perceived professionalism.

Moreover, ethical challenges arise from mental health creators' participation in brand deals and product promotions, potentially undermining their credibility. For instance, when a mental health creator endorses a wellness app or supplement, their focus may shift from providing reliable support and information to prioritizing profit and quick-fix solutions. This approach risks offering viewers superficial remedies, reinforcing the notion that individual actions, such as using a specific app or supplement, are sufficient to address mental health challenges. Such a perspective neglects systemic issues that contribute to mental health problems, like socioeconomic inequality, racial discrimination, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and lack of affordable housing. By promoting market-driven solutions, this approach overlooks the need to address systemic problems to ensure equitable access to resources and support. This perspective aligns with a Foucauldian analysis, which critiques how neoliberal ideologies emphasize individual responsibility while obscuring the need for collective action and systemic change. In this context, TherapyTok, its content, creators, viewers, and the platform itself, exemplify the concepts of governmentality, biopolitics, the regime of truth, and madness.

First, governmentality is evident in TikTok Therapy content, which often focuses on

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practical tips, quick fixes, and personal anecdotes, promoting the idea that mental health is an individual project. This emphasis rarely addresses the need for systemic change or collective action, encouraging users to adopt a self-governing mindset. Mental health creators further reinforce this notion by emphasizing self-help strategies and coping mechanisms that align with ideals of self-management. By sharing personal stories and strategies for mental well-being, they encourage viewers to take individual responsibility for their mental health, supporting the broader neoliberal agenda that minimizes state responsibility for public mental health. Moreover, viewers may be influenced by this content to internalize the belief that their mental health outcomes depend solely on their efforts, often ignoring broader social and structural factors. TikTok's algorithm also promotes content that aligns with self-help and self-improvement narratives, reinforcing the idea that mental health management is an individual responsibility. Through these interconnected elements, TikTok Therapy perpetuates the notion that personal effort is the primary solution to mental health issues, reinforcing governmentality and broader neoliberal ideals.

Furthermore, as a form of biopolitics, TherapyTok manages users by normalizing specific practices and discourses around mental health in ways that serve market interests. Creators package therapeutic advice in an engaging and entertaining format to attract viewers, turning complex mental health concepts into commodified content. This often involves simplifying or sensationalizing issues to increase views and engagement. Consequently, the content is designed to be engaging and consumable, often prioritizing entertainment value over educational accuracy. This commodification process aligns user behavior with market logic, where mental health advice becomes a product to be consumed. Thus, users consume this commodified

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content, shaping their perceptions and behaviors around mental health, and may adopt practices that are more about engagement and consumption rather than genuine therapeutic benefit. In this context, TikTok's algorithms also prioritize content that drives engagement, often at the expense of nuanced and accurate mental health information. Therefore, the platform's policies and design inherently commodify mental health content, promoting material that serves commercial interests.

Additionally, the dominant "regime of truth" within TikTok Therapy dictates what is recognized as valid knowledge about mental health. To illustrate, creators often feel pressured to conform to popular trends and simplified narratives to gain visibility, which can undermine their professional expertise and the credibility of their content. Consequently, the content that gains the most traction tends to be easily digestible and sensationalized, overshadowing more accurate, fact-checked, and credible information, creating a "regime of truth" where popular content is perceived as more valid than professionally endorsed advice. As a result, users may be influenced by the "regime of truth" established by the platform, leading them to accept and internalize simplified and often dramatized understandings of mental health issues. This can result in misinformed self-diagnosis and management practices. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm promotes content that aligns with engagement metrics, often marginalizing more nuanced and credible information. In this way, the platform's focus on engagement over educational value creates a distorted "regime of truth" that favors dramatization.

Finally, Foucault's theory of madness, which examines how societies define and manage mental illness, provides a critical lens for understanding TikTok Therapy. Mental health creators on TikTok often present simplified and popularized versions of mental health issues,

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perpetuating stereotypical and reductive understandings. This reflects Foucault's idea that societies create and enforce norms about what constitutes "madness." Creators themselves may also experience significant pressure to constantly produce engaging content, driven "mad" by the platform and its algorithm, often at the expense of their mental well-being and professional integrity. Moreover, the content shared on TikTok often mirrors and reinforces societal norms around mental health, contributing to a standardized narrative that marginalizes alternative or more complex perspectives on mental illness. Users may internalize these norms and stereotypes, shaping their perceptions and experiences of mental health in ways that conform to these societal constructs, leading to a limited and potentially harmful understanding of mental health issues. Additionally, TikTok's algorithms and policies promote content that fits within popular and easily digestible narratives, reinforcing societal norms about mental health, aligning with Foucault's concept of how power and control shape the understanding and management of mental illness.

To address these challenges, I argue that platforms like TikTok need to implement regulations and provide support that prioritize the dissemination of accurate and high-quality mental health information. TikTok, like other social media platforms, serves as a central everyday communication infrastructure that goes beyond mere entertainment. Despite its claim to "spark joy and creativity," the platform plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and perceptions about mental health. Therefore, it is crucial to hold the platform accountable for the content it shares and promotes. This could include developing algorithms that recognize and promote credible sources, offering training and resources for licensed mental health professionals on effective digital communication, and establishing clear guidelines that discourage the spread

SUMMARY (continued)

of misinformation. Collaborative efforts between social media platforms like TikTok, licensed practitioners, healthcare institutions, and regulatory bodies are essential to ensure that mental health content on social media serves the public interest without compromising professional standards. This approach necessitates a shift from viewing mental health content as a commercial product for profit towards prioritizing the public good and focusing on serving the public interest.

This perspective also underscores the need for systemic changes that extend beyond the responsibilities of individual social media platforms like TikTok. To achieve this, decoupling mental healthcare from financial incentives through a publicly funded system is crucial. By doing so, professionals could focus on delivering high-quality care, reducing barriers to access, and treating mental health as a fundamental human right. Furthermore, integrating public mental health infrastructure with media literacy education could empower individuals to consume content responsibly while ensuring access to necessary care. In this context, TikTok could serve as an entry point, offering viewers initial mental health information and connecting them with local practitioners for personalized support. Additionally, TikTok could supplement mental health treatment or serve purely as entertainment without claiming educational value. Ultimately, no social media platform can address deep-rooted societal problems alone; in some cases, like TherapyTok, they may even exacerbate these issues. Therefore, systemic reforms in mental healthcare and media literacy are essential to ensure that platforms like TikTok contribute positively to public mental health.

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Chapter Summaries

I. Introduction

This introduction chapter explores the emergence and significance of TikTok Therapy (TherapyTok), where licensed mental health practitioners and individuals share mental health content via engaging short videos. Notable creators like Therapy Jeff and Dr. Courtney Tracy combine professional knowledge with relatable content to make complex concepts accessible. The chapter underscores the growing demand for mental health resources on TikTok and sets the stage for the dissertation's research questions, including how therapy portrayal in media has evolved, motivations behind content production, the impact of TikTok's platform policies, and how creators establish credibility. Furthermore, the literature review and methods sections provide further context and structure for the dissertation.

II. From Talk Shows and Reality Television to TikTok: Tracing the Evolution of Therapy as Entertainment

This chapter examines the evolution of therapy's portrayal in popular culture, from traditional media formats to digital platforms like TikTok. Specifically, the transition from talk shows and reality television to TikTok highlights broader societal shifts towards individualism, self-branding, and the commodification of personal experiences and emotions, driven by neoliberal ideologies. While modern media formats have increased the visibility and normalization of mental health discussions, they often prioritize entertainment over educational rigor and ethical standards, leading to simplified and sensationalized representations of therapy. This phenomenon, I call "theratainment," can undermine the therapeutic project by emphasizing self-help and self-care as primary solutions to mental health, thereby overshadowing systemic

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issues. I argue that these portrayals exemplify Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and madness. Governmentality is evident as media shapes how individuals govern themselves through therapeutic discourses. Biopower is reflected in the management of populations through normalized mental health discussions. The regime of truth is seen in how media constructs what is accepted as truth about mental health. Madness is recontextualized as entertainment, stripping it of its serious implications.

III. Understanding the Motivations of Mental Health Creators on TikTok: Insights into Content Creation

This chapter investigates the motivations behind licensed mental health practitioners' decision to produce content on TikTok. Personal, professional, and societal factors drive these practitioners to use the platform to expand their reach, enhance public understanding of mental health, and contribute to the destigmatization of mental illness. While TikTok provides a means to bypass traditional healthcare system constraints and address public knowledge gaps, it simultaneously subjects creators to exploitation through its attention-driven, capitalist ethos. As a result, creators experience a form of dual exploitation and potentially reinforce the system they tried to escape. Employing Foucauldian perspectives, the analysis highlights how TikTok's operational framework reinforces neoliberal ideologies, emphasizing individual responsibility over systemic reform. Governmentality is demonstrated through creators' self-regulation according to platform norms. Biopower is evident in the way creators influence public mental health perceptions. The regime of truth is seen in how creators establish what is considered credible mental health information. Madness is commodified, reshaping its discourse to fit platform engagement metrics.

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IV. The Impact of Platform Politics on TherapyTok: Navigating Algorithms and Content Moderation

This chapter examines how TikTok's platform politics compel licensed mental health creators to prioritize engagement metrics. Consequently, this focus results in sensationalized content that can compromise educational rigor, credibility, and professional integrity. In essence, TikTok's dynamics distort the quality of mental health information, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility while neglecting systemic change and collective action. Moreover, challenges such as inadequate financial compensation, opaque monetization models, and labor-intensive demands contribute to a sense of exploitation among creators. These dynamics reflect broader trends of individualism and market-driven logic, emphasizing self-reliance over systemic solutions. Governmentality is apparent in how creators navigate platform constraints to maintain their influence. Biopower is exercised through the platform's control over mental health narratives. The regime of truth is manipulated by algorithmic prioritization of certain types of content. Madness is sensationalized, affecting how it is perceived and addressed.

V. Performing Credibility and Authenticity on TikTok: Strategies of Licensed Mental Health Creators

This chapter argues that licensed mental health creators on TikTok establish credibility and authenticity by balancing professional expertise with personal sharing and engagement. Strategies such as sharing qualifications, simplifying complex concepts, and leveraging platform-specific features are used to build trust. However, TikTok's algorithms and audience expectations often pressure creators to disclose personal aspects of their lives, promoting self-disclosure to build a following. This dual approach can foster trust but risks undermining the credibility of

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information by emphasizing subjective experiences over evidence-based practices. Analyzing these dynamics through Foucault's concepts reveals how platform norms and audience preferences drive self-regulation and commodify personal disclosures. Governmentality is shown in the self-management of creators' public personas. Biopower is reflected in the influence creators wield over public health narratives. The regime of truth is constructed through creators' performances of authenticity. Madness is reframed through personal storytelling, altering its traditional discourse.

VI. Discussion/Conclusion: Towards a Critical Understanding of TherapyTok

This chapter synthesizes the key findings of the dissertation and presents a critical analysis of TherapyTok. While TherapyTok makes mental health information accessible, the platform's attention-driven economy commodifies and sensationalizes this information. Consequently, this process can undermine the educational value, credibility, and ethical standards of the content. Moreover, the emphasis on self-help and "healing yourself" on TherapyTok perpetuates ideals of personal responsibility, detracting from the broader context of systemic issues. I argue that this approach is problematic and provide practical recommendations for TikTok, such as revising algorithms to promote credible content and implementing stricter guidelines to prevent misinformation. Furthermore, the research implications highlight how the findings extend previous research on platform politics, creator culture, therapeutic culture, and neoliberalism. Additionally, it outlines the limitations of the study and recommends future research directions. Using Foucauldian concepts like governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and madness, this chapter critiques how platform politics shape mental health information

and the experiences of mental health creators. Governmentality is evident in how platform regulations dictate creators' content strategies. Biopower is reflected in the management of public perceptions of mental health. The regime of truth is constructed by what the platform promotes as credible information. Madness is sensationalized, distorting its representation and impact.

I. INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODS, AND DATA

A. Introduction

Imagine scrolling through TikTok, the platform famous for viral dances and catchy songs, and stumbling upon content that mirrors therapy sessions. Amid the dance challenges and cooking hacks, licensed therapists are simplifying complex mental health concepts into brief, accessible clips. This transformation allows TikTok to serve as a space where users engage in discussions about mental health through a mix of education and entertainment. Consequently, the integration of therapeutic content within a popular social media platform highlights the evolving nature of digital mental health information. Welcome to TikTok Therapy, or TherapyTok, where your For You Page (FYP) might feel like your therapist's office, blending mental health and social media into a unique experience.

To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to explore the background of TikTok itself. TikTok, launched in 2016 by ByteDance, is a prominent social media platform known for its short-form video content. It has captivated millions globally, particularly younger users, becoming one of the most downloaded apps (Moshin, 2022). Initially allowing videos between 15 seconds to one minute, TikTok now includes longer videos across various categories like dance, comedy, fashion, and education. Central to its appeal is the FYP algorithm, which recommends personalized content based on user behavior and video information. According to TikTok, this algorithm ensures a varied content feed, avoiding echo chambers, and differs from other TikTok algorithms, such as those used for moderation (TikTok Newsroom, 2020; Klug et al., 2021).

Moreover, TikTok's FYP algorithm prioritizes content over social interactions, pushing videos based on user activity such as likes and comments (Cervi, 2021). This approach creates an engaging experience by continuously tailoring content to individual preferences, resulting in

immediate and gratifying consumption (Schellewald, 2021; Siles & Melendez-Moran, 2021). TikTok's user-friendly interface, featuring easy video recording, editing, and enhancement tools, and its emphasis on virality and user interaction, fosters collaborative communities (Stein, 2023). This combination of user-generated content, algorithmic recommendation, and community engagement has made TikTok a dominant force in social media, transforming how people create, consume, and interact with digital content.

Building on this dynamic blend, the digital environment of TherapyTok offers a stage where everyday individuals share their personal therapy experiences. They recount interactions with therapists and discuss their mental health struggles, sometimes through creative skits blending vulnerability with humor. Mental health practitioners, including therapists, counselors, social workers, and psychologists, also actively participate by creating content such as concise mental health definitions and practical mental health tips. For instance, therapist Jaime Mahler noted in *USA Today* that mental health professionals use TikTok to reduce stigma around medication and psychological illnesses, explaining complex concepts in unique ways while users share authentic aspects of their lives, creating a mosaic of mental health discourse (Dastagir, para. 3). In support of this trend, Blum (2021) and Cuzzone (2022) state that these videos bridge therapeutic strategies and personal anecdotes, delivering educational content that resonates with viewers. TikTok Therapy features various formats, including short videos, live streams, storytelling sessions, interactive Q&As, and challenges, covering topics like anxiety, depression, and self-care.

A prime example of the blend of personal and professional content on TherapyTok is creators like TherapyJeff. A licensed therapist, he has garnered a massive following by combining his professional expertise with a relatable style. In one of his most popular videos,

titled "This is how you stop falling for unavailable people," Jeff explains why individuals might be attracted to unavailable partners. This video, with over 1 million views, features Jeff providing practical advice on recognizing and changing these patterns, emphasizing self-awareness and healthier relationships. In the video, he appears in a smart-casual outfit with neatly styled hair and glasses, enhancing his approachable and knowledgeable look. He speaks directly to the camera in a friendly and engaging tone, making complex psychological concepts easy to understand. The simple, well-lit backdrop keeps the focus on Jeff and his message, ensuring the content is both informative and entertaining.

Similarly, Dr. Courtney Tracy, known as "The Truth Doctor," has become a prominent figure on TikTok Therapy. A licensed clinical social worker and doctor of clinical psychology, Dr. Tracy offers advice on managing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Her videos often incorporate personal anecdotes and professional insights, creating a powerful connection with her audience. One of her viral clips, titled "Understanding Trauma Bonding," has amassed millions of views. In this video, she explains the concept of trauma bonding, debunks common misconceptions, and provides evidence-based strategies for recognizing and breaking these bonds. She begins by defining trauma bonding as a strong emotional attachment that develops between individuals in an abusive relationship due to intermittent reinforcement and cycles of abuse and reconciliation. She debunks common misconceptions, such as the idea that trauma bonds only form in romantic relationships, explaining that they can also occur in familial and platonic contexts. Throughout the video, she offers evidence-based strategies for recognizing the signs of trauma bonding and provides practical advice for breaking free from these unhealthy attachments. Dr. Tracy's combination of professional insight and empathetic communication creates a relatable and informative resource for her audience.

Along with the success of creators like Therapy Jeff and Dr. Courtney Tracy, mental health content has surged on TikTok. This trend may reflect a growing demand for accessible mental health resources, especially among younger audiences. Hashtags like #therapy and #therapist have collectively garnered over 2.3 billion views, establishing TherapyTok as a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, this rise in mental health content has also been discussed in popular press discourse, highlighting TikTok's influence on public perceptions of mental health and questioning whether such content even belongs on the platform (Christner, 2024; Cuncic, 2021; Javaid, 2023; Lindsay, 2024). As Therapy Jeff and Dr. Courtney Tracy exemplify, the increasing visibility and impact of mental health content on TikTok parallels the broader context of mental health struggles in the United States. The rise in accessible online resources reflects a critical need for mental health support, driven by alarming statistics.

In the United States, the prevalence of mental health struggles is widespread, and access to mental health information and treatment remains a challenge. While working on this project, I experienced the tragic loss of a dear friend to suicide. Around the same time, the renowned performer Stephen "tWitch" Boss, who I had followed for over ten years, also took his own life. These events impacted my life directly, but the larger statistics are also staggering, underscoring the urgent need to address the mental health crisis. The Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA) reports that 40 million adults in America are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and 264 million people worldwide live with depression. Yet, the availability of mental health providers is alarmingly low. According to the County-Level Analysis of the American Licensed Psychologists and Health Indicators report (2016) from the American Psychological Association (APA), many areas in the country lack adequate mental health resources. About 34.5% of counties have no licensed psychologists, 66.4% have five or fewer, and 74.6% have ten

or fewer. Financial barriers further complicate access, with the average cost of psychotherapy ranging from \$100 to \$200 per session, as noted by *Forbes Health*. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated mental health challenges. Extended periods at home led to increased media consumption, with The Nielsen Company reporting a 60% rise in video content viewership during the pandemic. TikTok, in particular, saw substantial growth during this time. Mohsin (2022) attributes this surge in TikTok downloads to the pandemic, as people sought new ways to stay entertained and connected through their mobile devices. Consequently, the urgent need to address mental health challenges, both statistically and personally experienced, becomes even more pressing when considering the digital avenues through which many seek support and information.

To address these challenges effectively, it is crucial to define the parameters of this study. For the purposes of this study, a TikTok licensed mental health practitioner is defined by three criteria. First, they maintain a public profile with videos that clearly indicate their professional titles or descriptors related to mental health, such as therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist. Second, they use pertinent hashtags like #therapy, #tiktoktherapist, or #therapytiktok to categorize their content. Third, they explicitly affirm their roles through text boxes or verbal statements, such as "I'm a therapist" or "me when talking to my clients." These criteria ensure that the practitioners included in the study are verified professionals who actively engage in the platform's mental health discourse.

This research aims to understand the motivations of mental health practitioners on TikTok and the potential implications of their presence on public perceptions of mental health. By drawing connections between talk television, reality television, and TikTok, it provides a comprehensive backdrop for examining how media evolution impacts mental health and media.

The study investigates the impact of platform politics on the creation and dissemination of mental health content, examining how TikTok's algorithms and content moderation policies influence this content. This critical analysis highlights the strategies employed by mental health creators on TikTok to establish credibility and authenticity, revealing the underlying forces shaping the digital mental health landscape. Ultimately, this research contributes to the literature on social media, digital culture, and mental health, emphasizing the complexities of providing mental health information in a neoliberal, attention-driven environment. The importance of this topic is underscored by the growing prevalence of mental health struggles and the critical need for accessible mental health resources. As mental health challenges become more visible, the need for credible and accessible information becomes paramount. The rise of TherapyTok represents a shift in how mental health information is disseminated and consumed. This research seeks to understand how digital platforms can shape public perceptions of mental health and influence therapeutic practices, bridging the gap between traditional mental health services and the digital age, and offering insights into the opportunities and challenges presented by new media.

B. Literature Review

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the theoretical frameworks and empirical studies relevant to understanding TherapyTok. Drawing together a diverse array of sources, this literature review weaves these works into a mosaic that critically examines the phenomenon of TherapyTok. Organized around central themes, it situates the research within broader academic discourse, highlights gaps, and establishes the theoretical foundation underpinning the study.

1. The Evolution of Psychotherapy

The evolution of psychotherapy began with Freud's psychoanalysis and the "talking cure" in the 1890s (Freud & Breuer, 1895). Early therapeutic approaches like behaviorism and client-centered therapy laid the foundation for cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in the 1970s (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 2006). Benjamin (2019) provides an overview of modern psychology's historical development, highlighting key figures and foundational theories, which contextualizes the origins and evolution of psychotherapeutic practices. This is relevant to my study as it enables a comparison with contemporary approaches like TikTok Therapy. Fisher and Greenberg (1977) critically examine the scientific basis and credibility of Freud's theories and methods, underscoring the importance of empirical validation in therapy. These traditional approaches were predominantly shaped by white male voices, often overlooking the diverse needs of marginalized groups, thereby perpetuating systemic biases and reinforcing oppressive power dynamics (Benjamin, 2019; Fisher & Greenberg, 1977). This critique aligns with my study's focus on how platform politics and neoliberal ideologies on TikTok can similarly marginalize diverse voices and experiences in mental health.

In response to historical exclusion, feminist therapy emerged in the 1960s, aiming to center the experiences of marginalized groups (Mitchell, 2000). This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal issues with social, cultural, and political contexts, seeking to empower clients to navigate and challenge oppressive systems while addressing their mental health needs (Vera & Speight, 2003). Mitchell (2000) reassesses Freudian psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective, challenging traditional interpretations, while Vera and Speight (2003) emphasize the importance of multicultural competence and social justice in counseling psychology. Feminist therapy acknowledges intersectionality, challenges power differentials between therapists and clients, and reframes therapeutic goals to include social change (Mitchell,

2000; Howe, 1993). By adopting a strengths-based and inclusive approach, feminist therapy promotes social transformation and empowers clients to embrace their identities while advocating for equity within the mental health field (Bennett, 2005; Madsen, 2014). Building upon this context, this research examines how TikTok Therapy can potentially address or perpetuate systemic biases within mental health practices. Through a critical lens, this study investigates how mental health creators on TikTok navigate platform politics, authenticity, and credibility, highlighting the ongoing struggle for equitable and inclusive mental health practices in digital spaces (Nehring, 2020; Segal, Hersen, & Thomas, 2006).

2. Neoliberalism as a Hegemonic Discourse

Neoliberalism operates insidiously on a global scale, reshaping power dynamics, control mechanisms, and daily existence. Harvey (2019) argues that neoliberalism functions as a hegemonic discourse, deeply ingrained in societal norms, shaping perceptions and interpretations of the world. Despite its pervasive influence, the term "neoliberalism" remains relatively unfamiliar to the general public in the United States, a nation deeply steeped in neoliberal principles (McChesney, 2001). In the United States, neoliberalism manifests across public policy, ideologies, and developmental frameworks, permeating politics, the economy, and media. It underscores individual responsibility while advocating for minimal government intervention, leading to the privatization of public services and reduced state management (Birch, 2015; Cahill et al., 2018). Embracing free trade, neoliberalism positions the market as the arbiter of deserving outcomes and a catalyst for economic growth, transforming citizens into consumers (Chomsky & McChesney, 2006). Neoliberalism also penalizes inefficiency, lauds competition and merit, and champions corporate deregulation and lower corporate taxes, reflecting Darwinian principles of survival of the fittest (Harvey, 2019). Neoliberalism discourages efforts toward building a more

equitable society, advocating corporate benevolence, individual volunteerism, and personal responsibility as solutions to social issues (McMurria, 2008). Thus, neoliberalism should be recognized not only as a policy initiative but also as a significant cultural project.

This study connects to this literature by examining how market-driven principles manifest in the digital realm, specifically through TikTok, and their impact on mental health content creation. The platform's attention-driven economy and logics commodify and sensationalize mental health content, undermining its educational value and ethical standards. By analyzing how licensed mental health creators navigate TikTok's platform politics, my research illustrates how economic and cultural ideologies influence the production and reception of therapeutic content, revealing the tensions between maintaining professional credibility and meeting the demands of the platform's algorithm. This study contributes to the understanding of neoliberalism as a cultural project by highlighting its influence on digital media practices and the commodification of mental health information.

3. Understanding Neoliberalism Through a Foucauldian Lens

From a Foucauldian perspective, neoliberalism emphasizes the ways individuals are encouraged to govern themselves according to normative societal values and norms. This approach illustrates how self-governance is influenced by broader societal expectations and pressures, shaping one's sense of self and behavior (Ganti, 2014). Within this framework, power is decentralized, manifesting in multiple dispersed forms such as institutions, social norms, and cultural practices, rather than being concentrated in a single entity like the state. Power is understood through three major concepts: biopower, governmentality, and regimes of truth. These concepts are integral to comprehending how neoliberalism influences individual and collective behaviors, particularly in digital spaces like TikTok.

4. Biopower and the Regulation of Life

Biopower, a concept articulated by Foucault (1980), refers to the mechanisms through which the state regulates populations, employing various techniques and strategies to manage life, health, and bodies within a society. Specifically, this form of power focuses on the management of life processes such as birth, death, health, and reproduction, operating on both individual and collective levels. For instance, institutions like healthcare systems, educational systems, and regulatory agencies impose norms and standards, utilizing practices such as public health initiatives, demographic surveys, and medical regulations to optimize the health and productivity of the population. Consequently, through these institutions, individuals may internalize norms related to health and behavior, leading to self-regulation and conformity to societal standards. This internalization can shape how individuals perceive themselves and their bodies, often emphasizing health and self-care as personal responsibilities. Notable examples of biopower include vaccination campaigns, public health guidelines, and fitness programs that regulate and normalize health behaviors (Foucault, 1978)

In the context of TikTok Therapy, biopower manifests through creators, users, content, and the platform itself. Specifically, mental health creators on TikTok, whether consciously or unconsciously, produce content that aligns with neoliberal and biopolitical imperatives, reinforcing societal norms and expectations around self-care and emotional regulation, emphasizing individual responsibility for mental health. As a result, users may internalize these norms and adjust their behaviors accordingly, often highlighting self-reliance and personal accountability. Moreover, the content itself embodies biopolitical control by commodifying wellness practices, treating mental health as a marketable commodity that underscores individual responsibility for well-being. Furthermore, TikTok's platform design and algorithms play a crucial role in biopower by promoting content that aligns with engagement and visibility norms,

encouraging the creation and dissemination of material that emphasizes self-care and personal responsibility. Thus, this reinforces biopolitical control through the normalization of specific health behaviors and practices.

5. Governmentality and Self-Governance

Governmentality encompasses the art of governing beyond traditional political structures, encompassing techniques and strategies for directing human behavior within society. Notably, it involves how governments, institutions, and various actors govern individuals and groups, often through subtle and indirect means (Foucault, 1991). For instance, this includes practices like the use of statistics, social policies, and administrative measures to influence behavior and achieve specific objectives. In essence, governmentality shapes norms, values, and practices through education, media, and other cultural institutions, emphasizing the role of knowledge, discourse, and expertise in governance (Dean, 1999).

Additionally, Foucault introduced the concept of self-governance, where individuals participate in their own regulation through a combination of incentives, regulations, and norms guiding their behavior, often involving self-regulation and the internalization of societal values (Foucault, 2008). Moreover, neoliberal policies promote self-regulation by portraying individuals as autonomous and enterprising while reducing welfare services, driving people in an unequal society to engage in constant self-improvement (Foucault, 2008). Furthermore, technologies of power, including technologies of the self, influence lifestyles, minds, bodies, and souls, promoting minimal state intervention and empowering individuals to be self-governing (Foucault, 1988).

For example, illustrative activities like going to the gym and attending therapy exemplify self-governance and technologies of the self. In these instances, individuals acquire knowledge

from therapists or health professionals, guided by rationales crafted under neoliberalism, reinforcing individualized goals and the free-market approach while reducing the government's role in everyday life (Birch, 2015; Cahill et al., 2018). As a result, this dominant culture encourages productivity through prioritizing mental health, normalizing therapy, and fostering self-responsibility. Therefore, a Foucauldian approach interprets neoliberalism as a form of governmentality by exerting control over individuals through regulating and normalizing practices such as therapy within modern institutions.

Furthermore, scholars such as Rose (1996, 1999) and Miller (2008) have expanded on Foucault's concept of governmentality, examining how neoliberalism promotes governance that integrates economic rationality into everyday life. Specifically, Rose explores "advanced liberalism," where the state's role is redefined to facilitate market-driven self-governance, emphasizing personal responsibility and entrepreneurial behavior (Rose, 1996; Rose, 1999). Similarly, Miller and Rose (2008) analyze the interplay between accounting, governance, and subjectivity, stating that governmentality refers to the state's control over the population through governing techniques and shaping individual behavior. According to Dean (1999), governmentality is a form of power operating through various techniques and strategies to shape individual and population conduct, influencing how they perceive and govern themselves. However, critics of governmentality, such as Brown (2015), argue that neoliberal governmentality reshapes political life by transforming democratic engagement into market transactions and promoting individualistic pursuits, eroding collective social and political action. Additionally, Cloud (1997) contends that neoliberalism undermines collective efforts by prioritizing market logic and individualism over collective engagement, weakening the potential for unified action and solidarity in addressing societal issues.

In the context of TherapyTok, governmentality elucidates how mental health content on TikTok reflects and reinforces neoliberal ideals. Specifically, licensed mental health practitioners on TikTok promote messages of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and individual transformation, aligning with neoliberal values and acting as agents of governmentality. Through their content, they guide viewers toward self-governance by providing mental health advice that encourages continuous self-improvement. Consequently, users of TherapyTok content internalize these neoliberal ideals, consuming content that promotes self-regulation and personal responsibility, reinforcing their roles as self-governing individuals responsible for their mental health and well-being. Importantly, the mental health content on TikTok is shaped to meet the demands of the platform's algorithms, which prioritize high engagement. This dynamic often leads to sensationalized content that commodifies mental health advice, turning it into a tool of governmentality that subtly guides viewers to adopt neoliberal principles. Thus, TikTok itself functions as a mechanism of governmentality; its design and algorithms encourage creators to produce highly engaging content, often at the expense of educational rigor. Ultimately, this dynamic promotes a culture of continuous self-improvement and self-governance, aligning with neoliberal values and embedding them into the everyday practices of both creators and viewers. Overall, TherapyTok operates as a space where governmental power subtly shapes how mental health is understood, performed, and commodified in the digital age.

6. Regimes of Truth and Power Dynamics

One key concept that underpins both biopower and governmentality is Foucault's notion of the "regime of truth." According to Foucault (1980), a regime of truth refers to the types of discourse a society accepts and functions as true; it is the set of rules and practices that produce what counts as truth within a particular society. This concept is crucial for understanding how

both biopower and governmentality operate, as they rely on accepted forms of knowledge and expertise to legitimize their practices. Specifically, in the context of biopower, the regime of truth is often linked to scientific and medical knowledge that dictates norms around health and the body. In contrast, for governmentality, the regime of truth encompasses broader social, economic, and political discourses that shape governance strategies and practices. Thus, both biopower and governmentality operate within these specific regimes of truth, utilizing them to enforce norms and maintain control.

Turning to TikTok Therapy, the regime of truth is evident through several interconnected elements. To illustrate, mental health creators produce content that aligns with the platform's norms, leveraging their expertise and personal experiences to craft engaging material that emphasizes self-improvement and personal responsibility. By doing so, they reinforce the accepted discourse and contribute to the platform's power dynamics. Furthermore, viewers engage with content that fits within this regime, with their interactions signaling to the algorithm what is deemed credible and valuable, thus shaping the collective understanding of mental health. Additionally, the content itself is influenced by the platform's algorithms and community guidelines, which prioritize material that aligns with neoliberal values and promotes self-governance. As a result, content that fits these parameters is more likely to be promoted, creating a feedback loop that perpetuates the platform's regime of truth.

Moreover, TikTok's algorithms, community guidelines, and overall design facilitate the dissemination of content that aligns with this regime, prioritizing engagement metrics that often favor sensational or simplified portrayals of mental health topics. This structural influence shapes what is accepted as credible and valuable information, reinforcing societal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-improvement. In summary, on TikTok, creators, viewers,

content, and the platform collectively form a regime of truth that aligns with neoliberal ideals, dictating which discourses are promoted and accepted, and reinforcing power dynamics and societal norms around mental health and self-governance.

7. Interconnectedness of Biopower, Governmentality, and Regimes of Truth

While distinct, biopower and governmentality are also interconnected. Governmentality encompasses biopower as one of its techniques, with biopower being a specific form of managing populations within the broader framework of governing society. Thus, both concepts illustrate Foucault's broader critique of modern power structures, highlighting how power operates through both direct and indirect means to shape the behavior and life of individuals and populations (Foucault, 1980). Moreover, both rely on regimes of truth to sustain and legitimize their influence, using accepted forms of knowledge to justify their strategies and interventions (Foucault, 1980). Specifically, regimes of truth are fundamental in establishing the norms and practices that biopower and governmentality use to exert control, ensuring that these forms of power are seen as legitimate and necessary by those they govern (Foucault, 1980).

In the context of advanced liberalism, Rose (1996) discusses how the state's role is redefined to facilitate market-driven self-governance, emphasizing personal responsibility and entrepreneurial behavior. Furthermore, Rose (1999) elaborates on the broader framework of governing society through biopower and governmentality, highlighting their interconnectedness. Similarly, Miller and Rose (2008) examine the interplay between accounting, governance, and subjectivity, stating that governmentality integrates economic rationality into everyday life. These insights illustrate how neoliberalism has transformed the state's role and individual behaviors in a market-driven society.

8. The Influence of Neoliberalism on Media, Health, and Education

Neoliberalism shapes media and societal norms, influencing perceptions of selfhood, citizenship, and governance, and its impact on media, health, education, and individualism is widely critiqued by scholars. For example, Ouellette (2008) explains that shows like *Judge Judy* promote a culture where individuals manage their lives without state support. Additionally, Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue that reality television emphasizes personal responsibility and entrepreneurial skills for success. In another analysis, Weber (2009) examines makeover shows, illustrating how they depict personal transformation and success through individual effort. Moreover, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) highlight how media shapes perceptions of the self, reinforcing societal norms aligned with neoliberal ideologies.

Critically, Birch (2015) critiques neoliberalism's reduction of state welfare, which pushes individuals towards self-improvement in an unequal society, promoting a survival-of-the-fittest mentality. In line with this, neoliberal policies in health and education emphasize individual accountability, often ignoring structural disparities, as discussed by Cahill et al. (2018). Furthermore, Lupton (2016) examines the commodification of wellness through digital health technologies, turning wellness into a marketable product that reinforces biopolitical control and self-surveillance. In contrast, Cloud (1998) argues that therapy culture's focus on personal growth and self-improvement reflects neoliberal ideals, undermining collective efforts. Finally, Brown (2015) critiques how neoliberalism transforms democratic engagement into market transactions, promoting individualism over collective action and marginalizing collective goals.

My study applies these Foucauldian and neoliberal concepts to the context of TikTok, focusing on how the platform's politics and algorithms shape mental health content. Specifically, it investigates the strategies used by licensed mental health practitioners to establish credibility and authenticity while navigating the pressures of producing engaging content. Moreover, the

broader implications on mental health discourse are also analyzed, highlighting the intersection of power, governance, and neoliberal ideologies in digital content creation. By using a Foucauldian lens, this study provides a deeper understanding of how TikTok's attention-driven economy commodifies and sensationalizes mental health content, undermining its educational value and ethical standards. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to the ongoing discourse on the impact of digital platforms on mental health practices and the commodification of therapeutic content.

TikTok Therapy exemplifies biopower through the interplay of creators, users, content, and the platform itself, each contributing to the normalization and commodification of mental health practices in line with neoliberal ideologies. Furthermore, governmentality elucidates how mental health content on TikTok reflects and reinforces neoliberal ideals. In this context, licensed mental health practitioners on TikTok promote messages of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and individual transformation. By doing so, they align with neoliberal values, acting as agents of governmentality. Consequently, they guide viewers toward self-governance by providing mental health advice that encourages continuous self-improvement. Thus, TikTok's regime of truth, evident through its creators, users, content, and platform, collectively forms a discourse that aligns with neoliberal ideals, dictating which discourses are promoted and accepted, and reinforcing power dynamics and societal norms around mental health and self-governance.

9. Foucault's Theory of Madness

Foucault's examination of madness, as articulated in *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault, 2001), reveals how societal transformations constructed madness as a threat, leading to the establishment of asylums. He argues that mental illness was framed as a social myth to justify

disciplining marginalized individuals, effectively turning them into political prisoners. Moreover, with the emergence of bourgeois society, terms like "mental illness" and "psychology" allowed power to regulate personal lives and behaviors, isolating individuals under the guise of protection. Foucault characterizes psychoanalysis as a "political technology of the self," aligning the self with the system of power (Foucault, 2001).

Building on this historical perspective, Foucault's analysis extends to modern contexts, including digital platforms like TikTok. In the context of TherapyTok, licensed mental health practitioners navigate the platform's politics to produce content that both educates and engages. However, the attention-driven economy of TikTok often pressures these creators to simplify complex mental health issues into digestible, sensationalized content. This mirrors the historical commodification and regulation of mental illness that Foucault describes (Foucault, 2001). TikTok's algorithm and platform politics function as contemporary mechanisms of control, influencing which types of content gain visibility and how mental health is portrayed. This dynamic is akin to how asylums and the medicalization of madness served to isolate and manage individuals deemed deviant (Foucault, 2001).

Furthermore, on TikTok, creators are incentivized to produce content that aligns with popular trends and generates high engagement, often at the expense of nuanced, accurate information. This can lead to the perpetuation of mental health myths and the marginalization of more complex, less palatable truths. Moreover, the platform's focus on personal responsibility and self-help resonates with Foucault's concept of "political technology of the self." Creators on TherapyTok often frame their advice within the neoliberal ideology of self-optimization and personal accountability, reinforcing the idea that individuals must manage their mental health independently, without addressing broader systemic issues (Foucault, 2001).

In this light, the pressure to create engaging content on TikTok often results in the simplification and sensationalization of mental health issues. This aligns with Foucault's argument that mental illness has been historically commodified and regulated to serve societal power structures. The content on TherapyTok, driven by TikTok's algorithms, reflects this commodification, prioritizing engagement over educational value and ethical standards.

For users, the content they might consume on TherapyTok is shaped by the platform's engagement-driven model, which can reinforce superficial understandings of mental health. Users are encouraged to adopt self-help solutions and personal responsibility for their mental well-being, mirroring Foucault's idea of "political technology of the self." This focus on individualism can obscure the need for systemic change and collective action in addressing mental health issues. TikTok's platform politics, driven by an attention economy, commodify and sensationalize mental health content, undermining its educational value and ethical standards. The platform's algorithms and policies act as contemporary mechanisms of control, dictating which content gains visibility and shaping public perceptions of mental health. This reflects Foucault's analysis of how societal institutions, such as asylums, have historically managed and regulated individuals deemed deviant.

Ultimately, Foucault's critique of the societal construction and regulation of madness provides a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of TherapyTok. The platform's politics and the pressures on creators to conform to its engagement-driven model continue the historical trend of commodifying mental health, shaping public perceptions, and reinforcing systems of power. These pressures often drive creators themselves to experience the very madness they seek to address in their content (Foucault, 2001). Foucault's theory of madness highlights the socio-political dimensions of mental health practices, both historically and in contemporary settings. In

the digital age, platforms like TikTok serve as new arenas where these dynamics play out, underscoring the persistent nature of these power structures and their impact on contemporary mental health discourse.

10. Modernity and Therapeutic Discourse

Therapeutic discourse emerged in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries, coinciding with industrialization and the rise of corporations. It transferred the responsibility for health and well-being from the state to the individual, providing psychological solutions to structural issues (Madsen, 2014). This period also saw the rise of consumerism and advertising, emphasizing wealth accumulation and the self-made individual characterized by autonomy, self-expression, and self-reliance (Cloud, 1998; Nehring, 2020). In this context, between World War I and World War II, therapeutic emotional style gained prominence and became institutionalized, influencing various intimate realms from psychoanalysis to casual conversations and talk shows (Illouz, 2017; Berlant, 2000).

Additionally, modernity, as conceptualized by Giddens (1991), impacts both personal and societal dimensions. It is characterized by capitalism and post-industrial attitudes, leading to the commodification and fragmentation of human existence, and transforming identity into a "project of the self." Giddens argues that modernity increases individual freedom but also creates an environment marked by uncertainty and constant change, compelling individuals to continuously create and sustain coherent narratives of their lives. Cloud (1998) supports this view, emphasizing that modern societies commodify human existence, leading to isolation and alienation. White (1992) adds that therapeutic discourse in television advises individuals on navigating these uncertainties, reinforcing the idea of the self as a project.

Furthermore, therapeutic discourse, as discussed by Illouz (2017) and Cloud (1998),

parallels the institutionalization of modernity. It urges self-examination and makes identity a project requiring a consistent narrative over time. Giddens' concept of the "duality of structure" demonstrates that social structures both empower and constrain individuals, particularly concerning identity markers like gender, race, sexuality, and class. This intense self-focus can lead to narcissism and individualism, posing psychological challenges in modernity. Wahl (1995) argues that media representations of mental illness contribute to this dynamic by shaping public perceptions of normality and deviance. Moreover, therapeutic discourse emerged in response to the crisis of the American Dream, shifting focus from macro-level issues to individual responsibility. Cloud (1998) argues that this paradigm emphasizes individual change over state intervention, aligning with modern capitalist ideologies.

Finally, critical analyses of therapeutic discourse in American culture further illuminate these dynamics. Cloud (1998) highlights how therapeutic rhetoric promotes individualism, discourages challenges to power structures, and commodifies emotional performances for strategic gain, weakening systemic change potential. Dovey (2000) examines reality television's role in public confession and personal revelation, mimicking therapeutic practices. Dubrofsky (2007, 2009) focuses on reality shows that frame personal transformation and self-improvement using therapeutic language, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility. Grindstaff (2002) investigates daytime talk shows, highlighting how they commodify emotional expression and self-disclosure for entertainment, reinforcing individualistic approaches to personal and social issues. Additionally, therapeutic discourse and culture have permeated everyday life, especially within popular culture. Common Freudian terms and modern confessionals featuring personal experiences related to illness, trauma, and health are prevalent in media as they construct intimacy and authenticity (Dovey, 2000). Illouz (2017) defines the "therapeutic" as

assertions by certified psychologists and mediated texts featuring psychologists or therapy, such as in *The Sopranos* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Lofton (2011) explores how Oprah Winfrey's brand of self-help exemplifies this therapeutic culture, blending personal revelation with commercial success.

Building on this understanding, therapeutic discourse has commodified therapy speak, emotions, and suffering, transforming them into marketable elements. This commodification aligns with the capitalist drive to convert all aspects of human experience into consumable products (Illouz, 2008). Emotions and personal struggles are packaged and sold, often through media and digital platforms, creating a spectacle of suffering that can be consumed for entertainment or self-help purposes (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). This process not only trivializes genuine emotional experiences but also reinforces the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility, suggesting that personal problems can be resolved through consumption of therapeutic products and services (Rose, 1999).

In the realm of TherapyTok, creators, particularly those producing mental health content, are influenced by the commodification and individualization of therapeutic practices. According to Illouz (2008), the rise of therapeutic discourse has transformed personal suffering and emotional experiences into marketable commodities. Creators leverage this by sharing personal narratives and therapeutic advice, thus positioning themselves as both experts and relatable figures. This dual role enhances their credibility and appeal, aligning with Giddens' (1991) concept of the "project of the self," where identity is continuously shaped and performed. Cloud (1998) further argues that creators perpetuate the neoliberal ideals of self-regulation and individual responsibility by promoting personal change over systemic solutions, reinforcing the therapeutic culture's focus on self-help and autonomy.

Moreover, the content produced within therapeutic culture is shaped by the need to engage viewers while adhering to the norms of therapeutic discourse. TherapyTok content often includes self-help tips, personal stories of struggle and recovery, and professional advice framed in accessible language. This aligns with Berlant's (2000) observation that therapeutic discourse permeates intimate realms and media, creating narratives that resonate with viewers' personal experiences. The commodification of therapeutic content, as discussed by Illouz (2008), means that creators must package complex psychological concepts into digestible and appealing formats, often prioritizing engagement over depth. This content mirrors the therapeutic emotional style described by Illouz (2017), which emphasizes personal transformation and emotional authenticity, further aligning with capitalist values of individualism and self-improvement.

From the viewer's perspective, they may feel they are consumers of emotional and therapeutic content, seeking both entertainment and self-help. According to Wahl (1995), media representations of mental illness shape public perceptions of normality and deviance, influencing how viewers understand and approach their own mental health. The literature on therapeutic culture suggests that viewers are drawn to content that offers relatable narratives and practical advice, fulfilling their desire for personal growth and emotional support. This consumption reinforces therapeutic culture's focus on individual responsibility and self-regulation, as viewers are encouraged to internalize and act upon the advice given by creators (Cloud, 1998).

Last, the platform, in this case, TikTok, plays a crucial role in shaping and disseminating therapeutic culture. The literature about therapeutic culture, like work by Illouz (2008) and Cloud (1998), highlights how digital platforms commodify emotions and personal struggles, transforming them into consumable content for entertainment and self-help. TikTok's algorithmic

design prioritizes content that drives engagement, often favoring sensational or emotionally charged material. This aligns with Ouellette and Hay's (2008) argument that media platforms create spectacles of suffering that can be easily consumed. The platform's attention-driven economy, as discussed by Illouz (2017), reinforces neoliberal logics by promoting individual success and visibility over collective action and systemic change. This dynamic pressures creators to produce content that balances authenticity with appeal, often leading to the commodification of therapeutic practices and the reinforcement of individual responsibility narratives.

11. The "Treat Yo'self" Mentality: The Commodification of Self-Care in Neoliberalism

The concept of self-care has undergone a significant transformation, increasingly aligning with neoliberal values. Originally rooted in ancient Greek philosophies of self-preservation and later politicized by Audre Lorde in the 1980s, self-care has shifted from a radical act of self-preservation and political warfare to a commodified practice emphasizing individual responsibility and consumption. This historical context highlights the broader influences of neoliberalism and therapeutic culture, where self-care is marketed as a personal duty and commercialized product.

To understand this evolution, we must look back to Audre Lorde's seminal work, *A Burst of Light*, which framed self-care as a radical act, resonating deeply with feminist and queer activists during the civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. During this era, self-care was an act of resistance and survival, particularly for marginalized communities. Fast forward to 2016, amid widespread stress and anxiety following Donald Trump's election, self-care experienced a resurgence, further highlighting its evolution (Birch, 2019). However, contemporary self-care discourse often shifts the responsibility for mental

health to individuals, thereby obscuring systemic issues such as capitalism, racism, and oppression (Cloud, 1998).

This individualistic approach brings us to a critical point: the tension between promoting independence and recognizing interdependence. Nakita Valerio, an academic and community organizer, criticized this trend, emphasizing that the focus on self-care often overlooks the need for community support. Valerio (2019) argued, "Shouting 'self-care' at people who actually need community care is how we fail people." This sentiment highlights how the commodified self-care movement neglects broader social responsibilities (B., 2021).

Over the past decade, self-care has been increasingly commodified, driven by neoliberal and therapeutic discourses. The concept, once centered on nurturing the mind, spirit, and body, has become a framework promoting personal well-being as a commodity. In this context, consumption is encouraged as a pathway to self-improvement and emotional fulfillment. The TikTok hashtag #selfcare, with over 37 billion views, epitomizes this trend, showcasing consumer activities such as baths and skincare routines. This shift in focus diverts attention from systemic issues, encouraging the purchase of products like self-help books, podcasts, and wellness items (Birch, 2019). Consequently, the commercialized self-care industry suggests that financial investment is essential for mental and physical well-being, thereby excluding those without financial means.

Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in promoting individualism and self-reliance within the context of self-care. Cloud (1998) and Dubrofsky (2011) explore how media and therapeutic culture reinforce these neoliberal values, particularly through the portrayal of self-care as a personal responsibility rather than a collective effort. Specifically, reality television, as critiqued by Pozner (2010), depicts personal transformation and self-improvement, aligning with

neoliberal ideals and framing self-care as an individual endeavor. Turner (2006, 2010) discusses how reality television and media visibility contribute to the commodification of ordinary people's experiences, presenting self-care as a series of consumer choices. Similarly, Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) analyze how cinema has portrayed psychiatry, embedding therapeutic discourse into popular culture, and promoting self-care as a therapeutic, consumer-driven activity. Becker (2005) critiques the notion of empowerment within therapeutic culture, particularly its impact on women by promoting individual solutions like self-care over collective action. In addition, Collins (2016) examines Dr. Joyce Brothers' influence on television psychology, demonstrating how therapeutic discourse has been mainstreamed through media, reinforcing self-care as a personal and commercial pursuit.

The framework of self-care and self-help is intricately related to creators, viewers, content, and the platform itself. Licensed mental health practitioners create content that aligns with the broader self-care movement. These creators often leverage the self-care and self-help narrative to build their content and brand, presenting themselves as experts or relatable figures who offer practical advice and personal anecdotes. By framing their content within a marketable, therapeutic discourse, they establish their credibility while aligning with the platform's emphasis on individualistic solutions to mental health challenges. This approach not only bolsters their credibility but also conforms to the platform's focus on individualistic mental health solutions.

TherapyTok content is crafted to resonate with the neoliberal ethos of personal improvement and consumption. Self-care routines, wellness tips, and motivational messages are packaged to promote consumer engagement, often highlighting quick fixes and purchasable solutions. This content emphasizes personal mental health strategies, such as mindfulness, positive affirmations, and self-soothing techniques, underscoring an individualistic approach to

self-care. While these practices can be beneficial, they also reflect a neoliberal logic that stresses personal responsibility for well-being, often overlooking broader systemic issues. The commodification of self-care is evident in how mental health content is marketed, with therapists promoting products, services, and self-care routines for individual consumption. This dynamic encourages creators to balance authenticity and credibility while producing engaging, easily digestible content that fits TikTok's format, often diverting attention from systemic changes in mental health care.

For viewers, self-care and self-help content provides accessible guidance and a sense of community but often reinforces the idea that mental health and well-being are personal responsibilities. Viewers may be encouraged to purchase products or adopt behaviors that fit within the commodified self-care framework, potentially overlooking the need for systemic change and collective support. The tension between individual self-care and the need for community care is apparent in TherapyTok discourse. While creators aim to provide accessible mental health resources, the platform's emphasis on engagement and visibility often leads to promoting content that prioritizes individual solutions over collective action. This individualistic approach aligns with the rise of 20th-century capitalism and the concept of rugged individualism in America (Berlant, 2000).

TikTok promotes self-care and self-help content through its algorithms and trends, emphasizing engagement and visibility. The platform's attention-driven economy incentivizes creators to produce content that garners likes, shares, and views, often favoring sensational and marketable self-care narratives. This focus can overshadow more substantive discussions about mental health and systemic issues, reinforcing the commodification of self-care. Overall, the commodification of self-care refers to how practices aimed at self-improvement and well-being

have become marketable products in contemporary society (Illouz, 2008). This phenomenon is evident in how therapeutic content on TikTok intersects with consumer culture, where self-care tips and mental health advice are packaged for mass consumption. Understanding the commodification of self-care is crucial for critically analyzing the content and dynamics of TherapyTok within the broader context of therapeutic culture and modernity.

In conclusion, the commodification of self-care within a neoliberal framework has significant implications for contemporary understandings of mental health and well-being. By emphasizing individual responsibility and consumption, this shift detracts from the original concept of self-care as a holistic and communal practice. As self-care continues to be marketed and consumed as a personal duty, it is essential to critically examine the broader socio-economic and political contexts that shape these practices. By doing so, we can better address the systemic issues that underlie the need for self-care, promoting a more inclusive and supportive approach to mental health and well-being.

12. The Intersection of Mental Health, Technology, and Digital Spaces

The integration of mental health with technology and digital spaces has been significantly influenced by platforms like TikTok. These platforms provide interactive formats for sharing experiences, seeking support, and accessing therapeutic content, necessitating reflection on technology's role in shaping narratives around well-being. Phillips and Milner (2017) critique the simplistic view of the internet as either entirely beneficial or detrimental, highlighting its complex impact. This perspective aligns with research on TikTok Therapy, which explores both its positive aspects, such as increased access to mental health resources, and its potential downsides, including the spread of misinformation and harmful advice from unqualified sources.

Moreover, social media platforms, particularly TikTok, play a pivotal role in promoting

mental health information. Alper et al. (2023) found that TikTok facilitates discussions about diagnoses and shapes individuals' self-concepts, illustrating the concept of "platformed diagnosis." Similarly, Alper et al. (2021) emphasize that TikTok acts as an algorithmically mediated tool for self-discovery, especially for autistic individuals. Studies by Välimäki et al. (2020) and Naslund et al. (2016) indicate that social media provides opportunities for disseminating mental health resources and creating support communities. However, John et al. (2020) highlight challenges such as misinformation and cyberbullying. Akhther and Sopory (2020) noted that seeking and sharing mental health information on social media during COVID-19 was influenced by peer support and perceived health benefits, but also exacerbated by underlying depression and anxiety. These findings are critical for understanding the dual nature of TikTok Therapy, where the platform's affordances allow for both beneficial and potentially harmful content.

Furthermore, the increasing role of social media in mental health underscores its importance in raising awareness and providing support. Debates on its impact consider whether social media use leads to negative psychological outcomes or improved well-being. Verduyn et al. (2015) suggest that passive use results in negative outcomes, while Twenge (2017) links increased anxiety among teenagers to social media usage. Conversely, Burke and Kraut (2016) and Bessière et al. (2010) demonstrate that online communication with close acquaintances can enhance well-being. Bedor Hiland (2021) emphasizes that while mental health technologies impact therapy, they cannot address structural healthcare inequalities alone. Jeyaraman et al. (2021) point out the multifaceted role of social media in healthcare, emphasizing the need for quality control to maximize benefits and minimize harm. Kraut et al. (1998) address the "Internet paradox," suggesting that increased internet use can reduce social involvement and well-being.

Keselman (2022) offers strategies for combating online health misinformation, highlighting the professional's role in guiding public understanding. Stein et al. (2022) examine communicative forms in TikTok sexual health videos, revealing the platform's potential in health education.

O'Reilly et al. (2018) discuss the potential of social media in promoting adolescent mental health, suggesting that it can be a valuable tool if used responsibly. This dual perspective aligns with the goal of examining both the positive contributions and potential drawbacks of TikTok Therapy, providing a nuanced understanding of its influence on mental health discussions.

In summary, this literature on the intersection of mental health, technology, and digital spaces directly relates to this study on TikTok therapy by providing a framework for understanding the dual nature of TikTok's influence on mental health discourse. The critical insights offered by Phillips and Milner (2017) regarding the internet's complex impact align with this examination of TikTok therapy, which identifies both the increased accessibility to mental health resources and the potential spread of misinformation. The concept of "platformed diagnosis" introduced by Alper et al. (2023) and the algorithmically mediated self-discovery discussed by Alper et al. (2021) underscore the unique ways in which TikTok shapes mental health narratives and individual self-concepts. Additionally, the studies by Välimäki et al. (2020) and Naslund et al. (2016) highlight the supportive communities formed on social media, while John et al. (2020) and Akhther and Sopory (2020) reveal the risks of misinformation and exacerbated mental health issues. Thus, this literature supports the central argument of this study that TikTok therapy, influenced by platform politics and neoliberal logics, embodies both the benefits and drawbacks of digital mental health interventions, necessitating a nuanced understanding of its impact on therapeutic content and practice.

13. Political Economy and Algorithmic Governance

The political economy and algorithmic governance of platforms like TikTok are crucial in determining the visibility and distribution of content. This examination underscores the multifaceted influences shaping TikTok's algorithmic decisions, broader implications for content creation and dissemination, and specific challenges faced by mental health practitioners.

The literature on political economy and algorithmic governance provides essential insights into these dynamics. Algorithms often prioritize high-engagement content, favoring sensational or polarizing posts (Tufekci, 2015). These decisions are driven by economic imperatives, such as maximizing user attention and advertising revenue, aligning content with advertisers' interests (Gillespie, 2018). Additionally, government regulations and geopolitical tensions impact content moderation practices, potentially leading to censorship or suppression (Roberts, 2020). Bishop (2018) discusses how YouTube's algorithmic decisions create inequalities and affect users' mental health, further illustrating the impact of algorithms on content distribution. These factors illustrate that TikTok's algorithmic governance is shaped by an interplay of user engagement, economic priorities, and political contexts.

Building on this understanding of algorithmic prioritization, it is crucial to explore broader concepts of algorithms and platforms. The terms "algorithms" and "platforms" have gained traction in public, media, and academic discourse but often remain enigmatic. Platforms like TikTok, governed by algorithms and fueled by data, face challenges related to regulatory policies, business models, and content moderation (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018). Platform affordances—features like likes, comments, shares, duets, and hashtags—shape user interactions and behaviors (Davis, 2020). Bucher (2017) investigates how users perceive and are affected by Facebook's algorithms, emphasizing the broader impact of algorithmic governance. Understanding these affordances and their impact on content visibility is crucial for all content

creators, including mental health practitioners on TikTok.

Further complicating the landscape is the concept of platform capitalism. This is characterized by the dominance of digital platforms acting as intermediaries and leveraging user data for value generation (Zuboff, 2020). These platforms collect vast amounts of user data, monetizing it through targeted advertising and personalized recommendations (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This data-centric approach can lead to monopolistic tendencies and market power, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and exploitative practices (Srnicek, 2017). Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending how digital platforms accumulate wealth and influence.

In addition to economic considerations, corporate politics also play a role in shaping platform functionalities, particularly in algorithmic recommendations and content moderation. Platforms control user-posted content and establish acceptable speech boundaries based on user preferences (Gillespie, 2021; Myers West, 2018). Platform politics—design, policies, and norms—favor specific cultures, shaping the overall user experience and content landscape (Massanari, 2016). Influencers, including mental health providers on TikTok, are influenced by platform design, conditions, affordances, and business models (Bishop, 2022).

Central to the discussion is the opacity of algorithms, which have acquired a mythical status as opaque "black boxes" shaping social realities. These algorithms impact content visibility and accessibility, with their opacity and mystery contributing to their powerful influence (Christin, 2020; Cotter, 2018). Cheney-Lippold (2011) discusses how algorithms create new forms of identity and control, adding another layer to the understanding of algorithmic governance. Algorithms continuously collect and categorize user data, making decisions that affect online experiences (Zuboff, 2020). Introna (2016) and Introna and Nissenbaum (2000)

further elaborate on the implications of algorithms in governing information and shaping web content.

Given these complexities, mental health practitioners on TikTok must navigate the platform's algorithmic mechanisms to ensure their content's visibility and reach. TikTok's algorithm, driven by user engagement metrics, can both facilitate and challenge the dissemination of mental health content, often prompting creators to prioritize entertaining content over educational depth, impacting the substance of their messages. The literature on platform politics and algorithmic governance elucidates these intricate dynamics, revealing the challenges posed by the prioritization of engagement-driven content combined with economic and political pressures shaping algorithmic decisions (Gorwa, 2019; Klug et al., 2021; Rauchberg, 2022).

Overall, this literature provides essential insights into the multifaceted influences shaping TikTok's platform and their subsequent impact on creators, content, viewers, and the platform itself. The political economy and algorithmic governance of platforms like TikTok impact creators, particularly mental health practitioners. Algorithms prioritize high-engagement content, which often favors sensational or polarizing posts (Tufekci, 2015). This prioritization is driven by economic imperatives to maximize user attention and advertising revenue (Gillespie, 2018). Mental health creators must navigate these algorithmic mechanisms to ensure their content is visible and reaches their intended audience. This often requires balancing educational depth with entertainment value to meet the platform's engagement metrics. The economic and political pressures shaping these algorithmic decisions can compel creators to produce content that may sacrifice educational rigor for broader reach, posing ethical challenges (Gorwa, 2019; Klug et al., 2021; Rauchberg, 2022).

Algorithmic governance directly influences the nature and quality of content on TikTok. The platform's algorithm, driven by user engagement metrics, tends to promote content that generates high levels of interaction, which can lead to the sensationalization of topics, including mental health (Tufekci, 2015). This emphasis on engagement can result in the dissemination of content that prioritizes entertainment over accuracy, potentially spreading misinformation. Additionally, platform affordances such as likes, comments, shares, duets, and hashtags shape user interactions and behaviors, further influencing the content landscape (Davis, 2020). The literature on platform politics and algorithmic governance elucidates these intricate dynamics, revealing the challenges posed by the prioritization of engagement-driven content combined with economic and political pressures shaping algorithmic decisions (Gorwa, 2019; Klug et al., 2021; Rauchberg, 2022).

Viewers are also impacted by the platform's political economy and algorithmic governance. The high-engagement content promoted by TikTok's algorithm can affect viewers' perceptions and understanding of mental health topics. Sensational or polarizing posts may attract more attention but can contribute to the spread of misinformation or superficial understanding of complex issues. The platform's design and policies, which favor specific types of content, shape the overall user experience and influence how viewers interact with and interpret mental health information (Massanari, 2016).

Finally, the platform itself is shaped by its political economy and algorithmic governance. TikTok operates within an economic model that emphasizes user engagement and advertising revenue, which influences its content moderation practices and algorithmic decisions. Government regulations and geopolitical tensions can also impact the platform's policies, leading to potential censorship or suppression of certain types of content (Roberts, 2020). The opacity of

algorithms, often seen as "black boxes," adds to the complexity of understanding how content is governed and distributed (Christin, 2020; Cotter, 2018). These factors illustrate that TikTok's algorithmic governance is shaped by an interplay of user engagement, economic priorities, and political contexts, affecting all aspects of the platform, from creators and content to viewers and the platform's overall functionality.

14. Creator Culture and Economy

The rise of social media has given birth to a new breed of celebrities known as influencers. These individuals leverage their online presence to shape trends, opinions, and consumer behaviors. The influencer economy, fueled by the ability to monetize personal brands and content, has rapidly expanded, becoming a significant component of the digital landscape. This section explores the development of influencer culture, its economic implications, and the critical perspectives surrounding its influence on society and commerce.

The foundation for online interaction on niche subjects was laid in the 1990s when numerous websites emerged for people to communicate about shared interests, often functioning as online forums for sharing advice and experiences. This aligned with participatory culture, where users engaged in creating and sharing content to foster community and potentially affect social change (Jenkins, 2009). In the late 1990s, more websites appeared, providing users with a platform to share personal stories in longer article or diary formats, incorporating images and videos (Hund, 2023). This laid the groundwork for the blogging explosion in the early 2000s, particularly with the launch of WordPress in 2003 (Hund, 2023). Social media sites followed, allowing users to create profiles and quickly connect with others. Since then, social media platforms have undergone tremendous growth and evolution, becoming central to society due to their impact on industry, culture, technology, and the economy.

A study conducted by Senft (2008) examined the phenomenon of early internet users, particularly camgirls, who broadcasted their daily lives via webcam, cultivating cult followings. Senft introduced the term "microcelebrity" to characterize this novel form of online performance, wherein individuals bolstered their popularity over the internet using various technologies such as video, blogs, and social networking sites (Senft, 2008). The framework of microcelebrity encompasses a set of practices wherein individuals mold their public persona into a commodity, symbol, or product to be consumed by others (Hearn, 2008). Hearn (2008) discusses how these individuals actively craft their identities for public consumption, essentially turning themselves into marketable brands. Through these combined practices, microcelebrities navigate the digital landscape, leveraging personal branding and audience engagement to build and sustain their public image.

Moreover, microcelebrities employ a repertoire of online self-presentation techniques, typically revolving around three core practices: identity constructions, fan interactions, and expanding visibility beyond their current fan base. Abidin (2016) explains that individuals construct their identities by carefully curating their online personas to attract and maintain followers, often by sharing personal aspects of their lives. Marwick (2013) emphasizes the importance of engaging with fans, noting that interactions with followers help to build a sense of community and loyalty. Mavroudis and Milne (2016) discuss the strategies used to increase visibility, such as collaborating with other influencers or utilizing trending hashtags to reach a wider audience. Senft (2008) introduces the idea of strategic intimacy, where microcelebrities share personal details to create a sense of closeness with their audience. Together, these practices form an approach to online self-presentation that helps individuals cultivate and grow their digital presence. Microcelebrities are perceived as public figures well-known within specific

groups or niche networks on social media platforms, achieved through online performance and self-branding efforts (Jerslev, 2015; Marwick, 2013).

Building on this, the influencer economy represents a shift in advertising and marketing strategies, as brands increasingly collaborate with influencers to reach targeted audiences. This shift is driven by the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers compared to traditional advertisements (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencers serve as intermediaries who can effectively communicate brand messages to niche markets, making them valuable assets for companies seeking to enhance their reach and impact. Monetization avenues for influencers include sponsored content, affiliate marketing, merchandise sales, and platform-specific monetization programs (e.g., YouTube's Partner Program) (Hou, 2020). The economic potential of influencers has led to the professionalization of the role, with many influencers employing teams to manage content production, brand partnerships, and audience engagement (Hou, 2020).

Despite the economic benefits, influencer culture has faced criticism for promoting consumerism, perpetuating unrealistic lifestyles, and exploiting personal identity for commercial gain. The commodification of authenticity, where personal experiences and emotions are packaged and sold, raises ethical concerns about the blurring of private and public life (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Critics argue that this commodification can lead to burnout and mental health issues among influencers, as they constantly perform for an audience (Abidin, 2018). Moreover, the influencer economy is marked by inequalities, with top-tier influencers reaping financial rewards while smaller influencers struggle to monetize their content (Cotter, 2019). This disparity mirrors broader social and economic inequalities, raising questions about the democratizing potential of social media.

Furthermore, the development and evolution of the influencer industry have often been likened to the "Wild West," characterized by its unofficial and unregulated nature. However, the industry actually adheres to norms and processes dictated by social media companies and corporations. Early influencers faced skepticism from advertisers, who viewed them as risky and unpredictable compared to conventional celebrities. This began to shift as the early 21st century witnessed the integration of regular people into mass media and popular culture, significantly influenced by reality television, which provided exposure to the private and intimate aspects of individuals' lives (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006). These individuals, termed "celetoids" by Rojek (2001), represent ordinary people who attain fame through their everyday achievements or their distinctive personalities. As influencers began leveraging their relatability and authenticity to build large followings, they adopted business-oriented approaches, also turning their personal lives into marketable brands.

A major catalyst in the rise of the influencer economy was the Great Recession in America, lasting from December 2007 to June 2009, with enduring impacts. Rich (2023) explains that during this period, widespread job losses and financial instability led media companies to lay off employees, increasing the demand for free labor from freelancers and entry-level workers. Hund (2023) discusses how this economic downturn coincided with the growing discussions about bloggers and social media, which were not yet widely recognized terms. This period created ideal conditions for the rise of social media and influencers, as the public began seeking content from "real" people who reflected ordinary everyday experiences, distinct from the curated narratives of global media companies.

In addition to traditional influencers, professionals across various sectors, including healthcare providers (Stein et al., 2022), educators (Carpenter et al., 2023), veterinarians

(Maddox, 2023), and journalists (Maddox, 2022), are also embracing TikTok as a platform to engage with audiences and enhance their influence. Stein et al. (2022) explore how OBGYNs utilize TikTok to disseminate medical knowledge while fostering relatability with their audience, portraying themselves as credible medical professionals and approachable individuals. They employ creator strategies such as sharing personal stories and aspects of their identities. Bishop (2022, 2023) coined the term "influencer creep" to describe this phenomenon, where professionals adopt influencer tactics like self-branding and authenticity to engage audiences. This blurring of boundaries indicates how professionals now incorporate influencer roles into their professional identities. Maddox (2022) characterizes this as the emergence of knowledge influencers—individuals who leverage their professional “9-5” expertise with influencer strategies to share information and insights on social media platforms. These knowledge influencers use the platform's format to present themselves as both professionals and relatable figures, blending their professional roles with their content creation. They engage with audiences through informative and entertaining content, establishing themselves as trusted and credible authorities while building a dedicated following.

To maintain credibility and effectively engage with their audience, knowledge influencers employ strategies of calibrated expertise, as described by Maddox (2022). This involves the strategic use of information sharing, relationship building, and personal/affective communication strategies. For example, Maddox highlights the importance of sharing relevant information in an accessible manner, building genuine relationships with followers, and using personal anecdotes to connect emotionally. In addition, Wellman (2023) examines the role of credibility among wellness influencers on Instagram, identifying four key constructs: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and positionality. Expertise refers to the influencer's knowledge

and skill in their field, trustworthiness involves being honest and transparent, attractiveness is about the influencer's ability to appeal to followers, and positionality reflects the influencer's unique perspective and identity. These constructs help influencers build strong follower relationships and achieve business success. The convergence of professional roles with content creation on platforms like TikTok allows professionals to reach wider audiences. This blurring of professional and influencer roles aligns with the research aim of analyzing the tension between professional credibility and personal branding in creator culture.

The literature on influencers, microcelebrity culture, and the rise of social media offers significant insights that connect closely with this study on TherapyTok and the role of licensed mental health creators on TikTok. By examining the intersections between creators, platform, content, and viewers, we can contextualize the dynamics of TherapyTok within the broader framework of influencer culture and its implications.

The concept of microcelebrity, introduced by Senft (2008), is foundational to understanding how mental health creators on TikTok navigate their digital personas. Similar to influencers in other niches, these creators engage in self-branding and strategic intimacy, sharing personal stories and professional insights to establish a sense of authenticity and relatability with their audience. This practice aligns with Abidin's (2016) notion of curated online personas to attract and retain followers. For mental health creators, this involves balancing their professional expertise with personal disclosure, fostering a relatable yet authoritative image to build trust and engagement. Stein et al. (2022) explore how mental health professionals, like OBGYNs, use TikTok to disseminate medical knowledge while portraying themselves as both credible professionals and approachable individuals. This dual role underscores the importance of relatability and professionalism in building a successful online presence.

Furthermore, TikTok's platform politics play a crucial role in shaping the content produced by mental health creators. As highlighted by Maddox (2022) and Cotter (2018), social media algorithms and corporate interests significantly influence visibility and engagement. TikTok's emphasis on short, engaging content often pressures creators to simplify complex mental health concepts or lean towards sensationalism to meet platform demands. This platform-driven dynamic mirrors the broader trends in the influencer economy, where visibility and engagement metrics dictate content strategies (Hou, 2020).

In addition, the content produced by mental health creators on TikTok reflects the strategies of calibrated expertise discussed by Maddox (2022). These creators blend professional knowledge with personal anecdotes and affective communication to resonate with their audience. This approach is akin to the influencer practices identified by Wellman (2023), where constructs of expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and positionality are leveraged to build strong follower relationships. In the context of TherapyTok, creators must navigate the fine line between educational rigor and engaging presentation, often contending with the platform's tendencies towards commodification and sensationalism (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Moreover, viewers on TikTok consume mental health content through the lens of perceived authenticity and relatability, much like followers of other influencers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The strategic use of personal stories and approachable personas by mental health creators helps foster a sense of community and trust among viewers, aligning with Marwick's (2013) emphasis on fan interactions. However, this relationship is not without its challenges. The commodification of authenticity raises ethical concerns about the potential exploitation of personal identities for commercial gain and the risk of burnout among creators (Abidin, 2018).

In conclusion, the rise of influencer culture and the dynamics of microcelebrity provide a valuable framework for understanding the practices of mental health creators on TikTok. These creators employ strategies similar to those of influencers in other niches, balancing professional credibility with personal branding to engage their audience. Maddox's concept of calibrated expertise and the emergence of knowledge influencers highlight the intricate balance these creators maintain. However, the platform's influence and the pressures of the attention-driven economy complicate these efforts, highlighting the tensions between educational value and market-driven content. By situating TherapyTok within the broader context of influencer culture, this study underscores the interplay between creators, platforms, content, and viewers in shaping the digital therapeutic landscape.

C. Research Questions

This dissertation began with an interest in how therapy and therapists are portrayed in various media forms, such as film, television, talk shows, and reality television. Recognizing a gap in research on the representation of therapy in digital entertainment, I turned my focus to therapy content on TikTok, a rapidly growing genre on the platform. Therefore, this dissertation addresses four primary research questions

RQ1: *How has the portrayal of therapy as a cultural genre evolved from talk shows and reality television to TikTok?*

RQ2: *Why do licensed mental health practitioners produce content on TikTok?*

RQ3: *How do TikTok's platform policies and practices impact the content creation practices and experiences of licensed mental health creators?*

RQ4: *How do licensed mental health creators on TikTok establish credibility?*

Thus, the foundation of this project has been laid through (i) examining the historical context, (ii)

reviewing pertinent literature, (iii) constructing a theoretical framework, and (iv) formulating research inquiries. Subsequently, the next section will delineate and explain the methods utilized to carry out this research.

D. Methods and Data

1. Research Design

This research explores the intersection of therapy, entertainment, and education on TikTok using Kellner's (2011) media analysis framework, focusing on platform politics and their impact on creators and how the creators establish credibility and authenticity on the platform. Specifically, the methodology includes in-depth interviews with 42 licensed mental health practitioners on TikTok and a textual analysis of 150 TikTok Therapy videos. To elaborate, semi-structured interviews provide in-depth insights from participants, as highlighted by Kvale (1996) and Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). Additionally, Lindlof & Taylor (2019) and Rubin & Rubin (2005) emphasize the flexibility of these interviews for exploring complex subjects, and Stroh (2000) underscores their effectiveness in qualitative research. Furthermore, the analysis of video content and context is guided by Fairclough (2003), McKee (2016), and Miles et al. (2020). More specifically, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis uncovers underlying meanings and power dynamics, McKee offers a framework for media text analysis, and Miles et al. provide guidance on organizing and interpreting qualitative data. Thus, this approach integrates interviews with textual analysis, acknowledging both similarities and disparities in content creation strategies and practitioners' perceptions. Unlike previous studies that rely solely on interviews (Stoldt et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020) or textual analysis (Abidin, 2016; Wellman, 2020), this research uniquely combines both methods.

2. Data Collection

This study utilized a three-step data collection approach:

Initial Curation of Videos: To gather a representative sample for the research, a preliminary set of 150 TikTok Therapy videos was curated to establish the sampling strategy and inclusion criteria. This initial sample aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the video corpus and generate a group of potential creators for interviews. The process began by using TikTok's search function with keywords such as "therapy" and "therapist," followed by accessing the Hashtags section to find those with the highest views. Specifically, hashtags such as #therapistsoftiktok, #therapist, #therapy, #therapysession, #therapyhumor, #therapytiktok, #tiktoktherapy, #therapytok, #tiktoktherapist, #therapysessions, #psychotherapist, #therapylife, #therapyiscool, and #tiktoktherapytherapy were favorited and followed. In an attempt to ensure diversity, hashtags related to marginalized groups, such as #blacktherapist, #blacktherapistsoftiktok, #blackmentalhealth, #queertherapist, #queertherapy, #lgbtqtherapist, #transtherapist, #asiantherapist, #hispanictherapist, #latinxtherapist, and #femaletherapist, were also included. Following these hashtags allowed videos from various mental health practitioners to appear on the For You Page (FYP). Additionally, TikTok's recommendation algorithm was utilized to identify and track more creators and videos, broadening the sample. After this hashtag-driven identification process, the first six videos from each of the 25 hashtags that met the criteria were selected, resulting in a curated sample of 150 videos. This method, as discussed by Maddox (2024), leverages relevant and trending hashtags to optimize participant recruitment on TikTok by targeting specific audiences, thereby enhancing the visibility and engagement of the research initiatives.

Identification of Licensed Practitioners: The videos were publicly available and produced by licensed mental health practitioners. Practitioners were identified based on maintaining a public

profile with mental health-related descriptors (such as therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist) in their account description, using pertinent hashtags like #therapy, #tiktoktherapist, or #therapytiktok, and explicitly indicating their therapist role through text boxes or verbal affirmations such as “I’m a therapist” or “me when talking to my clients.” The 150 videos were used for textual analysis and participant selection.

Contacting Potential Participants: Potential participants were contacted via direct message (DM) and/or email for interviews. The outreach messages included project details, interview logistics, and assurances of anonymized data using pseudonyms.

3. Demographics

The demographic data highlighted participants' age, gender, pronouns, race, marital status, education, years practicing, mental health license status, professional title, household income, and employment status. Most participants were aged 35-44 (20) and 25-34 (19). The majority identified as women (32), with men (6), genderqueer or genderfluid (2), non-binary (1), and agender (1) also represented. Pronouns were predominantly she/her (31), with he/him (7) and they/them (2) following, along with 2 selecting other pronouns. Racially, participants were mostly White (31), with Black or African American (9), Asian (1), and other (1) also included. Most were married or in a domestic partnership (29), with 9 divorced, 3 single, and 1 widowed. Education levels showed a majority holding a Master’s degree (32), followed by Doctorate (8) and Bachelor’s degree (2). Years of practice were mainly 5-10 years (16), with other categories being 1-5 years (11), 10-15 years (8), and 15-20 years (7). All participants held a mental health license (42). Professional titles included therapists (12), counselors (10), social workers (5), psychologists (5), and others (10). Household income was over 100K for 23 individuals, while 42 preferred not to disclose their income. Employment status revealed 30 self-employed, 11

employed full-time, and 1 employed part-time.

Many practitioners said they feel compelled to create TikTok content due to inflation, student loan debt, and job instability. They said that compensation is typically limited to client sessions, with no payment for cancellations or no-shows, and insurance issues often delay or deny payments. Rising living costs exacerbate these pressures, especially in high-cost areas, prompting them to seek additional revenue streams. They said diversifying income is essential, with TikTok seen as a way to supplement earnings and safeguard against economic uncertainties. Beyond financial stability, they also mentioned altruistic goals, such as providing pro bono therapy to underserved communities, starting non-profits, or developing broader therapy programs, which require substantial funding they hope to generate through TikTok. By building a presence on the platform, they said they believe they can reach a wider audience and earn additional income to support these endeavors.

However, the sample has notable limitations regarding gender and race, making the findings not fully representative. The mental health workforce remains predominantly white, with the American Psychological Association (APA) reporting in 2021 that approximately 80.85% of professionals in the psychology workforce were white, a slight decrease from 85.75% a decade earlier. Professionals identifying as Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian, and other people of color constituted only 5.08% of the psychology workforce in 2021, highlighting underrepresentation. Despite efforts to include marginalized creators, the study's findings primarily featured white participants who identify as women.

4. In-Depth Interviews:

a. Methodology

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research method characterized by its exploratory

and open-ended nature, aiming to elicit detailed insights into participants' perspectives, experiences, beliefs, and motivations. Kvale (1996) emphasizes its flexibility to delve deeply into specific topics, while Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight its capacity to explore thoughts and feelings in depth. Similarly, Lindlof and Taylor (2019) describe it as engaging participants in one-on-one conversations over an extended period, using probing questions and follow-up prompts to uncover hidden meanings and emotions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Stroh (2000) values it for generating rich, contextually relevant data, offering insights into participants' lived experiences and perspectives. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can capture the nuanced and detailed dimensions of participants' realities, providing a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

b. Data Collection Methods

The decision to conduct 42 interviews aligns with established practices in similar studies (Abidin, 2013; Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Stoldt et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020). Acknowledging potential variability, the interview count remained flexible, subject to adjustment based on achieving theoretical saturation. Interviews concluded when no new themes emerged, ensuring comprehensive exploration of the subject matter (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Given the focus on mental health practitioners on TikTok, semi-structured interviews were effective. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note that this method allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and identity shaping on the platform. Other scholars emphasize that semi-structured interviews provide direct understanding of participants' perspectives (Krauss, 2005; Kvale, 1996; Stroh, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This approach offers flexibility and adaptability while maintaining structure (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), allowing

for dynamic data collection and continuous refinement of research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Rowley et al., 2012).

To establish contact with the practitioners and assess their interest, I initiated communication with each mental health practitioner identified in my textual sample of 150 videos via direct message (DM) and/or email, aiming to reach out to a total of 42 individuals for interviews. Given that interviews are a primary method for researching influencers (Bishop, 2022), this approach was adopted to understand the experiences of mental health practitioners in creating content on TikTok. The interviews focused on various aspects, including the platform itself, the algorithm, opportunities for monetization, motivations for content creation, and strategies for curation and performance. Through these semi-structured interviews, I had the opportunity to pose direct questions to the mental health practitioners.

In the recruitment materials and messages approved by the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Institutional Review Board (IRB), I introduced myself, presented a project overview, provided specific information regarding the creators' content and its suitability for the project, and included practical details such as the interview duration and location (either in-person or online). Additionally, I assured participants that their shared information would be anonymized using pseudonyms and provided my contact information. An illustration of the outreach messages can be found in **Appendix A**. Upon reaching out or responding to my direct messages or emails, potential participants received a document with more in-depth information about the study, an informed consent form, and a demographics survey to fill out. Participants who were willing to participate submitted the informed consent form via email and completed the demographics sheet through the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Qualtrics. The consent form is presented in **Appendix B**, and the demographic survey is included in **Appendix C**. They

also chose the date and time for the interview, provided their contact information (phone and email address), and upon confirmation of the schedule, received a calendar invite if preferred. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted on the official Zoom platform of the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed to ensure an accurate record of the discussions. This flexibility in recording facilitated data collection across various time zones and locations (Bishop, 2022). The interview guide is provided in **Appendix D**.

c. Data Analysis Procedures

The interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis using a manual coding approach to identify recurring patterns and themes, validated through multiple coding rounds. Saldaña's (2016) elemental methods of descriptive topic coding documented patterns to generate themes efficiently. Initial codes were refined through successive coding rounds to ensure accurate representation of the data, leading to the identification of major themes based on Fairclough's (2000, 2003) 'multi-functional' view of texts. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge from the transcripts, which explored mental health practitioners on TikTok, their motivations for content creation, online presentation, content nature, and platform experiences. The interview questions were edited for clarity to effectively address the research objectives.

5. Textual Analysis

a. Methodology

Textual analysis is a qualitative method for examining and interpreting texts to uncover underlying meanings, patterns, and themes. Fairclough (2003) emphasizes the detailed examination of various forms of communication, such as articles, books, speeches, advertisements, and social media posts, to identify key elements like language usage, rhetorical

strategies, and cultural representations. McKee (2016) highlights that this method allows researchers to investigate how language and symbols convey ideas, values, ideologies, and power dynamics. By systematically coding and interpreting textual data, researchers uncover implicit meanings, social constructions, and cultural norms (Miles et al., 2020). The process begins with collecting relevant texts, followed by coding to categorize text segments based on themes and patterns. Initial coding is often followed by more in-depth, iterative rounds to capture data complexities. Researchers pay attention to language nuances, including word choice, metaphors, tone, and style, as well as visual elements in multimedia texts, considering the broader socio-cultural and historical context. Textual analysis can reveal how texts perpetuate or challenge dominant ideologies and social norms, uncovering representations, power relations, and societal negotiations. This method has practical applications in media studies, cultural studies, communication, marketing, and political science, making it a versatile and insightful tool for understanding how language and symbols convey meaning and reflect cultural and social realities.

b. Data Collection Methods

Influencer research, a pivotal domain within textual analysis, involves compiling and analyzing social media content generated by influencers. Abidin (2016) highlights the importance of examining profile information and social media posts, including videos, images, and text, as well as considering metadata such as publishing dates and times, comments, likes, shares, and post captions. Baker and Walsh (2018) and Bayerl and Stoyanov (2016) further elaborate that this research requires a meticulous approach to understand how influencers craft their online personas, engage with their audiences, and influence public opinion. Bishop (2022) and Huntingdon (2016) note that this analysis provides insights into the strategies influencers use

to gain visibility, credibility, and impact within digital spaces. Maddox and Creech (2021), Milner (2013), and Peck (2014) add that it also sheds light on how social media platforms' algorithms and affordances shape the dissemination and reception of content, thus influencing the narratives and ideologies that become prominent. Wellman (2020) and Zeng and Abidin (2021) emphasize that understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of influencer culture.

I analyzed my initial collection of 150 videos to ensure a comprehensive perspective, including both those from interviewed creators and others associated with various hashtags. During each interview with mental health practitioners, I explicitly informed them that I would analyze their content alongside other TikTok Therapy videos. This transparency was crucial for maintaining ethical standards and ensuring participants were aware of the research scope. To collect and archive creators' videos, I utilized SaveTT.cc, a TikTok video downloader, saving individual TikTok videos as MP4 files directly onto my computer. This process allowed me to systematically organize and review the content, enabling a thorough analysis of the visual and textual elements within the videos. By examining these videos, I aimed to understand how mental health practitioners present themselves on TikTok, the strategies they employ to engage their audiences, and the broader implications of their content within the context of digital mental health discourse.

c. Data Analysis Procedures

In conducting a textual analysis of the 150 TikTok videos, I utilized hand coding based on Marwick's (2015) methods. Initially, adopting Hall's (1975) approach to textual analysis, I viewed and reviewed all posts, dissecting elements such as account name, biography, video description, hashtags, emoticons, music, number of likes, and comments, which were then

imported for analysis. Additionally, employing Geertz's (1973) thick description approach, I noted the digital representation of therapy and the performance strategies evident in each video. Following the initial analysis, I engaged in a 'preliminary soak,' a reflective process to identify prominent ideas, words, and themes (Maddox, 2022). To ensure the reliability of interpretations, multiple rounds of coding were conducted. Structuring my comprehensive notes according to Saldaña's (2016) elemental methods of descriptive topic coding, I documented patterns and extracted themes for streamlined analysis. Saldaña's method involves tracking initial codes and conducting subsequent rounds of deeper coding to refine and elaborate on each code, ensuring precision in representation. Consequently, major themes were deduced from these codes, aligning with Fairclough's (2000, 2003) 'multi-functional' view of texts, which considers the various functions and meanings within a text. Employing thematic analysis from an inductive standpoint, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), I allowed the videos themselves to shape the emergent themes, which yielded a dataset comprising visual, audio, and textual content, facilitating the establishment of connections and the formulation of conclusions.

6. Ethical Considerations

Embarking on online ethnographic research and data collection from digital platforms requires careful attention to ethical considerations. To ensure compliance, I obtained IRB permission to interview creators and study public TikTok videos. The creators who post TikTok Therapy content often reach a wide audience, sometimes garnering a million or more viewers. This research is considered ethical because TikTok allows users to make their accounts private, and the creators analyzed have chosen to keep theirs public. However, ethical challenges can arise as ordinary users may be unaware that their data is subject to research use (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). To address these concerns, I prioritized examples from mental health

practitioners who explicitly provided written consent and maintained public-facing accounts or videos.

In alignment with the ethical guidelines set forth by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) in 2020, I implemented strategies to de-identify data, such as using pseudonyms and paraphrasing techniques (Vaughan, 2021). Fiesler and Proferes (2018) emphasize the importance of obtaining consent and ensuring participants are aware of how their data will be used. Additionally, Vaughan (2021) highlights the necessity of de-identifying data to protect user privacy. Hine (2015) underscores the ethical standards prevalent in digital research, advocating for methods that minimize traceability and safeguard user privacy. By following these guidelines, my research aims to uphold ethical standards while studying the public content of mental health practitioners on TikTok.

7. Positionality and Reflexivity

Upholding ethical standards was paramount in the interviews, participant engagement, and online content analysis. To guide my research, I adhered to the principles of feminist ethics of care, as articulated by Held (2019), emphasizing the avoidance of harm and maintaining contextual awareness. Additionally, Luka et al. (2017) underscore the importance of these principles, advocating for sensitivity to the complexities of participants' experiences.

Recognizing the impact of my identity and positionality on interactions, interviews, and data interpretation was crucial. I am a white, mid-thirties, first-generation PhD student from a working-class background. I identify as straight and cisgender and have struggled with anxiety and depression for as long as I can remember. This personal dimension deepened my connection to the subject of mental health. My experience as a case manager for 17–24-year-olds with diverse mental health challenges has provided firsthand experience with navigating societal

systems, particularly in relation to health insurance and mental health services. Additionally, my personal network includes individuals actively engaged in the mental health field, from social workers to counselors and psychologists. Having actively engaged with social media, particularly TikTok, I understand TikTok Therapy and frequently discuss it with my therapist, friends, and family. Recognizing the ongoing need for reflexivity, especially considering my own experiences, I believe that my personal connections have enriched my understanding of mental health practitioners' experiences, online methodologies, and specialized language use on TikTok.

To integrate reflexivity into my research process, I committed to regular reflection and documentation of field notes following each interview. This practice aligns with the recommendations of Held (2019) and Luka et al. (2017), who emphasize the importance of reflexivity in feminist research methodologies. This dual emphasis on positionality and reflexivity bolstered the validity and depth of my research findings, ensuring a comprehensive and ethically grounded study.

II. FROM TALK SHOWS AND REALITY TELEVISION TO TIKTOK: TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF THERAPY AS ENTERTAINMENT

A. Introduction

The portrayal of therapy in popular culture has evolved over the years, potentially reflecting shifting societal attitudes toward mental health. Traditionally, therapy was depicted in serious dramas or psychological thrillers, perpetuating stereotypes of therapists as enigmatic or intimidating figures (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). However, a pivotal shift occurred with the rise of talk shows and reality television in the late 20th century. For example, shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* revolutionized daytime television by incorporating self-help advice and personal storytelling (Timberg & Erler, 2002). This move resonated with audiences seeking relatable narratives and guidance, paving the way for integrating psychological themes into other entertainment forms like reality television. More recently, mental health practitioners on TikTok signify another shift in how therapy is portrayed in media. TikTok allows professionals to engage audiences, share information, and challenge mental health stigma. Thus, this progression from talk shows to reality television, and now to digital platforms like TikTok, underscores the media's influence in shaping perceptions of therapy and mental health. Consequently, this dissertation explores how the portrayal of therapy has evolved across these media formats, addressing the following research question: How has the portrayal of therapy evolved from talk shows and reality television to TikTok?

B. The Evolution of Therapeutic Narratives

In the contemporary landscape of therapeutic narratives, there is a discernible trend toward highlighting the participation of ordinary individuals, blurring the once-distinct boundaries between public and private domains. Gamson (1994) discusses how this shift has brought everyday experiences into the public eye, emphasizing personal storytelling and self-

disclosure. This change is complemented by Goffman's theory of self-presentation, introduced in 1959, which illuminates how individuals strive to shape others' perceptions through their actions and communication. Specifically, Goffman's concept of "region" categorizes interactions into settings such as the front stage, where individuals consciously project themselves to others, and the backstage, where they can relax and express themselves more authentically. By leveraging Goffman's framework of the "backstage" and "frontstage" dynamics, it becomes apparent how therapeutic narratives are constructed within media platforms. Creators strategically unveil specific aspects of these narratives to convey tailored messages to their viewers.

Furthermore, Turner's notion of the "demotic turn" (2010) signifies a shift in cultural studies, redirecting scholarly attention toward exploring everyday, commonplace facets of culture, thereby challenging the dominance of elite or high culture. At the core of this paradigm shift lies the metaphorical concept of the backstage (Goffman, 1959), where often-overlooked cultural elements come to prominence. Turner argues that immersing oneself in the backstage—embracing informal, behind-the-scenes cultural phenomena—reveals insights into society's intricate web of values, norms, and power dynamics. Thus, this fascination with the backstage acknowledges the intrinsic importance of seemingly mundane aspects of daily life in shaping broader cultural phenomena. Therefore, Turner's demotic turn has spurred scholars to look deeper into the multifaceted nature of culture, urging them to scrutinize what unfolds behind the scenes, thereby enriching our understanding of cultural dynamics and societal structures. This exploration of everyday and mundane aspects forms the cornerstone of this dissertation, tracing the evolutionary trajectory of incorporating ordinary individuals into media narratives, spanning from the early days of talk television to the influence of reality television and the emergent realm of platforms like TikTok.

In addition, media texts shape our perceptions and understanding of the world, as highlighted by Hall (1997), Couldry (2000), and Dyer (2002). For instance, Hall (1997) explores how media representations construct meaning and influence societal perceptions through language and discourse. Couldry (2000) examines media rituals and their power to shape everyday experiences, emphasizing how media practices create a sense of belonging and identity. Moreover, Dyer (2002) underscores the importance of representation in understanding cultural identity and power dynamics, exploring how images and narratives in media reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. Hence, representation studies examine what is depicted, omitted, and emphasized in media texts, fostering diverse interpretations. Extensive research has examined therapeutic culture and the depiction of therapy, mental health, and therapists in film and television, highlighting their presence (Dubrofsky, 2007; Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Giles, 2003; Grindstaff, 2002; Illouz, 2012; Peck, 1995; Schneider, 1977, 1985; Shattuc, 1997; Stout et al., 2004; Srivastava et al., 2018; Wahl, 1995; White, 1992; Wedding & Boyd, 1999).

For example, Dubrofsky (2007) explores the emergence of therapeutic discourse in reality television, emphasizing how personal narratives of trauma and healing have become central to media trends surrounding intimacy and authenticity. Similarly, Gabbard & Gabbard (1999) analyze the portrayal of therapists in cinema, noting the prevalence of negative stereotypes that often depict therapists as unethical or untrustworthy. In addition, Giles (2003) discusses how media depictions of therapy in shows like *How I Met Your Mother* contribute to misconceptions by portraying simplistic solutions to complex issues. Furthermore, Grindstaff (2002) examines how television incorporates therapeutic elements, reflecting broader cultural shifts in how therapy is perceived. Moreover, Illouz (2012) examines how modern culture commodifies therapy, integrating it into various media formats and shaping public understanding

of mental health. Peck (1995) and Schneider (1977, 1985) focus on the historical portrayal of mental health in media, identifying recurring themes and stereotypes that have influenced societal views. Similarly, Shattuc (1997) and Stout et al. (2004) further investigate how media narratives impact public perceptions of mental health professionals and treatment practices. Srivastava et al. (2018) and Wahl (1995) provide insights into the stigmatization and misrepresentation of mental health in media, advocating for more accurate portrayals. Finally, White (1992) and Wedding & Boyd (1999) highlight the evolution of mental health depictions, noting both progress and persistent challenges. White (1992) specifically discussed the concept of tele-advising, where television shows featuring therapists and self-help advice normalized and commodified therapeutic practices. She argued that this media trend transformed therapy into entertainment, influencing public perceptions of mental health and personal improvement.

Although social media is not typically associated with traditional film and television in terms of representation, witnessing oneself and one's experiences mirrored on social media platforms can be equally profound and influential. Faltesek (2023) argues that TikTok, with its visual storytelling and personal narratives, mirrors traditional television's role in shaping public perception. Moreover, the disclosure of personal experiences related to illness, trauma, and health is becoming increasingly central to media trends surrounding intimacy and authenticity (Dubrofsky, 2007; Furedi, 2004; Grindstaff, 2002). These representations shape public perceptions of therapists and mental health. However, numerous depictions fail to accurately reflect reality, perpetuating stigmas and fostering adverse public perceptions (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Schneider, 1977, 1985; Wedding & Boyd, 1999). For instance, media narratives often trivialize severe disorders like postpartum depression, with characters dismissively urged to "get over it" (Giles, 2003).

Overall, the portrayal of therapy has evolved over time, reflecting possible cultural shifts, and changing attitudes towards mental health. Initially depicted in literature and film, therapy gradually integrated into mass media platforms, becoming prominent in American media landscapes (Giles, 2003). Thus, therapists have maintained a consistent presence across media outlets, from news segments to scripted shows, highlighting their enduring relevance (Giles, 2003). Figures like Dr. Joyce Brothers exemplify this transition, evolving from practicing therapists to celebrity personalities providing guidance through television and radio appearances (Collins, 2016; Giles, 2003). Despite their contributions, media often portrays therapists perpetuating negative stereotypes and disseminating misinformation about mental health conditions (Giles, 2003). In film and television, therapists are frequently depicted unethically and untrustworthy, contributing to mental illness stigmatization (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Giles, 2003; Schneider, 1977, 1985; Wedding & Boyd, 1999). Male therapists are often characterized as eccentric or sexually deviant, while females are portrayed as controlling and unfulfilled (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). Moreover, films tend to sensationalize mental illness, presenting unrealistic narratives of trauma and exaggerated recoveries that diverge from real experiences (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). Furthermore, television shows like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* contribute to therapy misconceptions by depicting unrealistic therapist-client relationships and simplistic solutions to complex issues (Giles, 2003).

C. **The Influence of Talk Shows and Reality Television**

Traditional media formats, notably talk shows and reality television, have played a crucial role in shaping the portrayal of therapy in contemporary media landscapes, setting the stage for its representation on platforms like TikTok. Peck (1995) explores how these formats have transformed private struggles into public spectacles, making therapy more visible and

accessible to a wide audience. Dubrofsky (2007) delves into how reality television, in particular, has provided platforms to display real-life personal challenges alongside therapeutic interventions, creating a blend of entertainment and genuine therapeutic discourse. Through intimate interviews and unfiltered glimpses into individuals' lives, talk shows and reality television have demystified and exploited therapy and mental health issues, making them relatable to a broader audience. Peck (1995) highlights how talk shows often present therapy in a way that is both educational and sensational, bridging the gap between private experiences and public awareness. Dubrofsky (2007) emphasizes how reality television's raw, "unedited" portrayal of personal struggles brings therapeutic conversations into mainstream entertainment. Moreover, Furedi (2004) argues that this normalization of publicly discussing mental health and therapeutic processes has paved the way for social media creators to openly share and explore these themes. By building on the foundations laid by traditional media, platforms like TikTok have become spaces where mental health discourse continues to evolve, allowing creators to engage audiences with personal stories, therapeutic advice, and mental health advocacy.

Consequently, therapy has transitioned from a private encounter to a shared experience, influencing public perceptions and amplifying the visibility of mental health discourse. Scholars researching platform dynamics must acknowledge how content creation practices are shaped by preceding media forms, notably talk and reality television, considering social media's ascent following reality television's dominance. On TikTok, creators vie for engagement by sharing personal experiences, reflecting dynamics observed in traditional formats. As various industries converge, it becomes imperative to contemplate how therapeutic discourse and culture are adapted for entertainment purposes and monetization in the digital age.

In talk television shows, therapy often took on a sensationalized and entertainment-

focused format. Hosts would invite guests with various personal or psychological issues to share their stories in front of a live or studio audience. These guests would engage in discussions with the host and sometimes with mental health professionals or experts who were invited onto the show. The "therapeutic interactions" were typically condensed into short segments, focusing on dramatic storytelling and emotional moments designed to capture the audience's attention. The therapeutic process was often oversimplified, and there was little follow-up or long-term support for the guests after the show aired. The primary goal was to entertain rather than provide comprehensive or effective therapy.

Furthermore, the late 20th century saw talk shows influence therapy's representation, with programs like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Dr. Phil* playing pivotal roles in mainstreaming therapeutic discussions. Becker (2005) noted that these shows brought therapy into the public eye, blending personal stories with expert advice. Berlant (1998, 2000) explored how these programs created a space for intimate public disclosures, merging private struggles with public entertainment. Cloud (1998) highlighted the role of these shows in shaping public perceptions of therapy, often simplifying complex issues for dramatic effect. Foucault (2001) discussed the power dynamics involved in such public displays of therapy, where hosts often assumed authoritative roles over guests' narratives. Furedi (2004) examined how these shows both normalized and commodified personal suffering, turning it into a spectacle for mass consumption. Giddens (1991) emphasized the reflexive nature of modernity, where personal experiences are publicly scrutinized, influencing self-identity and societal norms. Illouz (2017) critiqued the commercialization of therapy on television, arguing that it transformed therapeutic practices into market-driven performances. Madsen (2014) analyzed how therapeutic narratives on talk shows contributed to the broader cultural understanding of self-help and personal

improvement. Nehring (2020) explored the ethical implications of treating therapy as entertainment, questioning the long-term impact on public perceptions of mental health. These shows provided a platform for intimate, therapeutic dialogues reaching broad audiences. While they helped normalize mental health conversations and reduce stigma by openly showcasing personal struggles, they also introduced problematic elements by treating therapy as entertainment.

In the 1950s and 1960s, television programming saw the emergence of early talk shows, which quickly became a staple of entertainment. Shows like *The Phil Donahue Show* (1967-1974) offered viewers a glimpse into the lives of both celebrities and ordinary individuals. Set in cozy studio environments, these programs provided light-hearted entertainment and engaging celebrity interviews. Hosts facilitated lively conversations on topics ranging from Hollywood gossip to pressing current events. While therapeutic themes were not yet a focal point, occasional segments addressed personal issues, reflecting the evolving nature of daytime television. Phil Donahue's groundbreaking approach, characterized by innovative formats and open discussions, covered a wide array of topics, including relationships, societal issues, and personal growth (Timberg & Erler, 2002). Donahue's show was pivotal in providing a platform for individuals to share their stories and engage in therapeutic dialogue, setting the stage for a new era of television focused on psychological insights and self-help themes. Timberg and Erler (2002) noted that Donahue's show broke new ground by tackling controversial and taboo subjects, thereby expanding the scope of daytime television and paving the way for future programs that would explore therapeutic content more deeply.

Over the years, talk shows have served as platforms for ordinary individuals to share their stories and engage in discussions on pressing social issues. Shows like *Oprah* (1986-2011) and

The Ricki Lake Show (1993-2004) played crucial roles in shaping daytime television, particularly by introducing therapeutic talk show formats (Illouz, 2012; Timberg & Erler, 2002). Oprah Winfrey, despite her background as a reporter and lack of formal counseling training, emerged as a pioneer in this genre (Illouz, 2012). Her empathetic and relatable demeanor provided a safe space for guests to share their triumphs, struggles, and journeys of self-discovery with the public (Stein, 2021). By incorporating elements of therapy, such as self-help advice and personal storytelling, Winfrey's show catalyzed public conversations about mental health and emotional well-being (Illouz, 2012). She normalized discussions around taboo topics like trauma and addiction, setting a new standard for talk show programming and inspiring subsequent hosts to explore similar themes and integrate psychological insights into mainstream entertainment (Lofton, 2011). Oprah's influence extended beyond television, shaping consumer trends, and influencing purchasing decisions through her annual Christmas lists, endorsed books, products, and causes (Harris & Watson, 2009). Renowned as one of the most influential figures in American television history, Winfrey's impact led to the emergence of what Illouz terms the "Oprah Industry," a network adept at presenting narratives of self-improvement and adversity (Illouz, 2012). Her legacy expanded beyond television into film production, publishing, philanthropy, and activism, solidifying her status as a transformative figure in American society (Illouz, 2012).

During the 1990s and 2000s, a surge in talk show popularity coincided with the ascent of celebrity culture, giving rise to more celebrity-hosted programs that further blurred the boundaries between entertainment and therapy (Tolson, 2001). Shows such as *The Montel Williams Show* (1991-2008) and *The Dr. Phil Show* (2002-present) epitomized this trend. Hosted by familiar public figures, these programs provided both celebrities and everyday people with a

platform to openly discuss personal struggles, including mental health and addiction (Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Personalities like Dr. Phil McGraw utilized their expertise to offer advice and guidance on various mental health and emotional well-being issues, leveraging their shows to provide solutions to their guests' problems (Harris & Watson, 2009).

Moreover, the evolution of therapy-focused content on daytime and primetime talk shows marks a shift in mainstream media's portrayal of mental health. Initially, these shows primarily offered light-hearted entertainment and celebrity interviews, with little emphasis on therapeutic themes (Shattuc, 1997). Over time, producers and hosts began to recognize the value of exploring deeper, more personal topics with their guests. This shift led to the integration of therapy-based content, where individuals openly shared their experiences with trauma, addiction, relationships, and personal growth (Shattuc, 1997). Additionally, talk shows started incorporating elements of catharsis into their formats, providing guests a platform to express their emotions, confront past traumas, and seek closure (Tolson, 2001). These heartfelt conversations and emotional revelations allowed guests to find relief and healing, while audiences offered empathy, support, and validation (Illouz, 2012). Timberg and Erler (2002) note that witnessing these raw moments enabled viewers to connect with the guests on a deeper emotional level, fostering a sense of emotional connection and understanding. In essence, talk shows evolved to serve as cathartic outlets for both guests and viewers, facilitating emotional expression and enhancing the therapeutic narrative in mainstream media.

Similarly, the integration of everyday individuals into talk and reality television has transformed the discourse surrounding therapy, blurring the lines between public and private spheres. This shift aligns with the emergence of "celetoids," individuals who gained fame through the exposure of their personal lives rather than through traditional achievements in

acting, music, or sports (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006). Unlike conventional celebrities, celestoids became well-known primarily by publicly sharing their private experiences and vulnerabilities. This era saw a surge in reality television programming, where the intimate details of individuals' lives were not just shared but glorified, turning private moments into public spectacles. This phenomenon also introduced "celebrification," wherein ordinary people could attain celebrity status simply by being themselves, reshaping the concept of work in the media realm (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006). Reality television contestants epitomize this trend, offering relatability and authenticity derived from their lack of formal entertainment training. Turner's (2006) analysis highlights how these individuals' ability to resonate with viewers has altered perceptions of celebrity and transformed the mundane into a source of entertainment, challenging conventional boundaries and expectations surrounding visibility and fame.

Expanding beyond the talk show genre, reality television has focused on personal narratives by showcasing individuals in confessional settings and highlighting "real-life" people undergoing therapy. Building on the foundation laid by talk shows, reality television began filming individuals in confessionals and producing programming featuring real-life therapy sessions (Andrejevic, 2004; Murray & Ouellette, 2004; Pozner, 2010). Dovey (2000) explores the role of reality television in fostering a culture of public confession and personal revelation, arguing that these shows mimic therapeutic practices typically found in private settings. Reality television programs often encourage participants to share intimate details of their lives, emotions, and personal struggles in front of a camera, creating a form of mediated therapy. This phenomenon can blur the lines between entertainment and therapy, as viewers are invited to witness and engage with the participants' emotional journeys. By doing so, reality television not only entertains but also functions as a platform for the public performance of personal

transformation and healing, reflecting broader societal trends towards openness and self-disclosure in the pursuit of emotional well-being. This trend towards therapeutic culture in media underscores the growing influence of psychological discourse in everyday life and highlights the ways in which personal and emotional authenticity are commodified for mass consumption. For instance, *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (VH1) premiered in 2008, marking the onset of a trend where various reality television shows focused on clients in therapy sessions. Other examples include *Intervention* (A&E, 2005-present), *Couple's Therapy with Dr. Jenn* (VH1, 2012-2015), *Iyanla: Fix My Life* (OWN, 2012-present), *LA Shrinks* (Bravo, 2013), and *Couple's Therapy* (Showtime, 2019-present). In the realm of reality television, the production team often encourages negative behaviors, false narratives, and extreme emotions, a phenomenon referred to by Grindstaff (2002) as the "money shot" – moments when participants lose control and exhibit intense emotions on camera. Giles (2003) and Grindstaff (2002) observe how reality television has normalized celebrating struggles with mental health, often pushing participants to their emotional limits. Andrejevic (2004) and Murray & Ouellette (2004) further highlight how these shows capitalize on raw, unfiltered emotional content to engage viewers, blurring the line between genuine therapeutic intervention and entertainment. Pozner (2010) critiques this approach, noting that it often prioritizes dramatic storytelling over ethical considerations and the well-being of the participants.

Additionally, previous research has explored television's impact on consumer culture, family dynamics, and the role of therapeutic discourse in shaping social and cultural identities (White, 1992). This body of work suggests that television programming influences individuals' consumption habits and family interactions, while also contributing to societal norms and values by disseminating therapeutic messages and practices. Dubrofsky (2007) analyzed reality

television programs such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, focusing on how participants employ what she terms "therapeutics of the self" to justify their actions and behaviors under constant camera surveillance. This concept refers to the strategic use of therapeutic language and practices by participants to validate their actions and emotions within the context of the show's monitoring. Additionally, Dubrofsky (2009) examined the portrayal of emotional displays by female participants on *The Bachelor*, likening them to "emotional peaks" commonly depicted in film pornography. She suggests that both reality television and pornography emphasize heightened emotional states, particularly among individuals grappling with romantic setbacks. These studies highlight the interplay between reality television, therapeutic practices, and the construction of personal identity within the public sphere. They underscore how reality television blurs the lines between "authentic" experiences and entertainment as participants navigate their emotional lives under the camera's scrutiny (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2007). Andrejevic (2004) adds that reality television creates a unique environment where personal and private experiences are "watched" for public consumption, influencing viewers' perceptions of authenticity and emotional expression.

In the 1970s and 1980s, reality television began to take shape with pioneering shows such as *An American Family*. These early programs diverged from scripted dramas and sitcoms by documenting the lives of ordinary individuals or showcasing "real-life" events and experiences (Murray & Ouellette, 2004). Despite their innovative approach, these shows did not achieve the same widespread popularity as other television genres of the time. Murray and Ouellette (2004) note that the unconventional format and the audience's unfamiliarity with reality television likely hindered their mainstream appeal. Nevertheless, these early efforts laid the groundwork for the explosive growth of the reality television genre in the following decades.

In the early 2000s, reality television experienced the rise of shows like *The Swan* and *The Biggest Loser*, both focusing on themes of self-improvement (Weber, 2009). *The Swan*, a makeover reality show, gained attention for its contentious premise of participants undergoing extensive cosmetic surgery to enhance their appearance and bolster self-esteem. Despite facing criticism for its extreme approach, the show sparked discussions about body image, self-perception, and societal pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Conversely, *The Biggest Loser* centered on weight loss and physical transformation through rigorous exercise and dietary changes. Beyond showcasing physical changes, Weber (2009) explains that the show illuminated the mental and emotional challenges of contestants on their journeys toward self-improvement. Despite their controversial elements, both shows contributed to public discourse surrounding body image, self-esteem, and the pursuit of physical and mental well-being.

In the mid to late 2000s, reality television took a deeper dive into mental health and self-help topics through shows such as *Intervention* and *Hoarders*. Airing from 2005 to 2015, *Intervention* adopted a documentary-style approach to chronicle the journeys of individuals grappling with addiction. The series depicted their struggles as their families orchestrated interventions to encourage them to seek help and enroll in treatment programs. By portraying the complexities of addiction and its impact on individuals and their loved ones, *Intervention* heightened awareness about the challenges of substance abuse and underscored the significance of intervention and rehabilitation. Similarly, *Hoarders*, airing from 2009 to 2013, shed light on the often-misunderstood disorder of hoarding. The show offered an intimate glimpse into the lives of individuals contending with compulsive hoarding behaviors, showcasing the emotional toll on their well-being and relationships. Through its depiction of interventions and therapy methods, *Hoarders* underscored the seriousness of hoarding disorders. Shows like *Intervention*

and *Hoarders* have transcended mere entertainment to become cultural phenomena, offering audiences insights into psychological treatment and personal transformation. They frequently feature real-life individuals grappling with addiction, mental health challenges, relationship conflicts, and personal crises, often exploiting these vulnerable situations for dramatic effect and higher viewership. By sensationalizing personal struggles, these shows capitalize on the pain and suffering of their participants, turning deeply private issues into public spectacles. This approach not only raises ethical concerns about the exploitation of participants' hardships but also questions the integrity of using such sensitive content primarily for entertainment purposes.

Throughout the 2010s, reality television continued to explore themes of mental health and self-improvement through shows like *My Strange Addiction* and *Hoarding: Buried Alive*. Spanning from 2010 to 2015, *My Strange Addiction* provided viewers with an inside look into the lives of individuals grappling with unconventional compulsions and addictive behaviors, such as consuming non-food items and extreme body modifications. Despite facing criticism for its sensationalized approach, the show sparked conversations about mental health and the complexities of human behavior. Similarly, *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, airing from 2010 to 2014, offered intimate portrayals of individuals struggling with hoarding disorder, highlighting the obstacles they faced in addressing their condition. Both *My Strange Addiction* and *Hoarding: Buried Alive* contributed to increasing knowledge about mental health and understanding those affected by compulsive behaviors. However, these shows often exploited participants' struggles for entertainment purposes, blurring the lines between genuine awareness and sensationalism.

Ultimately, reality television's impact on perceptions of therapy and mental health is both extensive and profound. These shows offer audiences a window into individuals' therapy journeys, addressing issues ranging from addiction and mental illness to relationship conflicts.

By doing so, they contribute to the normalization of therapy and raise awareness about the challenges people face when seeking help for mental health concerns. However, concerns linger regarding the accuracy and ethical implications of these portrayals. There is a risk that these shows may oversimplify complex issues or exploit participants' vulnerabilities for entertainment purposes. Additionally, the sensationalized nature of reality television can perpetuate stereotypes about therapy and mental health, potentially fostering misconceptions, or unrealistic expectations among viewers.

Within reality television shows, therapy also frequently serves as a dramatic plot device rather than an authentic therapeutic process. These programs often depict cast members or contestants grappling with personal or psychological issues, with therapy sessions filmed as part of the storyline. However, these sessions are typically condensed and heavily edited for entertainment purposes, prioritizing conflict, emotion, and sensationalism over genuine therapeutic progress. Although licensed therapists or counselors occasionally facilitate these sessions, their role often takes a back seat to the demands of the show's format and narrative, resulting in minimal emphasis on the ethical or professional standards of mental health care. Despite fluctuations in popularity and reception over the years, reality television shows centered around mental health and self-help continue to attract viewers. Reality television has undeniably played a role in sparking conversations about mental health and therapy in mainstream culture. This highlights the importance of critical analysis and responsible representation in media portrayals of psychological treatment.

D. TikTok Therapy: Mental Health Content on Digital Platforms

Drawing from my definition in Chapter 1, the side of TikTok that focuses on mental health is known interchangeably by several names, including TherapyTok and TikTok Therapy. I

will use both interchangeably and define TherapyTok and TikTok Therapy as the utilization of TikTok as a platform for distributing mental health-related education and entertainment.

TherapyTok content includes listicles, personal anecdotes, Q&A sessions, romance and relationships drama, skits of interpersonal reactions, skits of therapy interactions, and guided mindfulness exercises, among other formats, tailored to engage and inform viewers.

To illustrate, listicles on TikTok are short, concise videos that present information in a list format, typically ranging from 15 to 60 seconds. These videos often include text overlays that highlight each point on the list, accompanied by voice overs or background music. Listicles can serve as vehicles for therapists to offer quick tips, coping strategies, or self-care techniques for managing specific mental health issues. For instance, a listicle titled "5 Daily Affirmations for Boosting Self-Esteem" might feature text overlays listing each affirmation one by one, such as "I am worthy," "I am confident," and "I am capable." The therapist might provide a voiceover explaining how repeating these affirmations daily can improve self-esteem. Another example is a listicle demonstrating "3 Breathing Exercises for Anxiety Relief," which could show different breathing techniques like deep breathing, box breathing, and 4-7-8 breathing. The video might include text instructions and visuals showing how to perform each exercise, while the therapist explains the benefits of each technique through a voiceover. These listicles are usually quick and easy to consume, fitting for the fast-paced environment of TikTok.

In addition to listicles, personal anecdotes in therapy content on TikTok are usually short stories or experiences shared by mental health professionals to illustrate key concepts, offer relatable insights, and provide support to viewers. These anecdotes often draw from the therapist's own life or experiences working with clients, showcasing real-world applications of therapeutic principles, and demonstrating empathy and understanding. For example, a therapist

might share a personal anecdote about overcoming self-doubt and imposter syndrome in their career journey. The video might start with the therapist speaking directly to the camera, recounting moments of insecurity and fear of failure they experienced in the past. They could describe specific situations where they felt inadequate or doubted their abilities, making the narrative relatable and engaging. The therapist then explains the strategies they used to build confidence and resilience, such as practicing self-compassion, setting achievable goals, and seeking support from mentors and peers. Throughout the video, the therapist's tone comes across as empathetic and supportive. Visuals might include text overlays highlighting key points, or clips of the therapist in different settings, such as their office or a peaceful outdoor location, to create a comforting atmosphere. Background music is often calm and soothing, enhancing the emotional impact of the story.

Furthermore, Q&A sessions allow therapists to respond to viewer questions about various aspects of mental health. These sessions provide a platform for therapists to offer personalized advice, clarify misconceptions, and address common concerns raised by their audience. A typical session might start with a therapist announcing the topic, such as anxiety management, and inviting viewers to submit questions through comments or direct messages. The therapist might then select questions to address in the video, often reading them aloud and sometimes displaying them as text overlays. For example, a viewer might ask, "What are some effective coping strategies for dealing with anxiety in public places?" The therapist might then offer practical advice such as practicing deep breathing techniques, using grounding exercises, or gradually exposing oneself to anxiety-provoking situations. The visuals typically include the therapist speaking directly to the camera, interspersed with text overlays summarizing key points or additional tips, with subtle background music that does not distract from the message.

In addition, another prevalent theme on TikTok revolves around romance and relationships, exploring various aspects of interpersonal connections, dating, and love. Therapists use this content to address common relationship challenges, communication skills, boundaries, and foster healthy relationships. They provide advice on navigating conflicts, building intimacy, or recognizing red flags in relationships. These videos often take various formats. For instance, a therapist might create a series of short videos addressing common relationship challenges. In one example, using the duet format, the therapist responds to a user's question about dealing with jealousy in a relationship. The video typically features the therapist side-by-side with the user's original video, allowing for a direct and interactive response. The therapist emphasizes open communication and trust, offering practical tips such as self-awareness and fostering a supportive environment. Key points like "Open Communication" and "Trust Building" might be highlighted with text overlays to reinforce the message. In another example, a therapist might use a comedic skit to illustrate effective communication skills. The skit could feature a couple resolving a disagreement about chores, with the therapist playing both roles or collaborating with another creator. Through playful banter and exaggerated scenarios, the therapist demonstrates active listening, empathy, and compromise. Visual cues such as speech bubbles or text overlays might highlight positive communication strategies like "Active Listening" and "Empathy." These videos are often set in familiar environments like a living room or kitchen.

Moreover, drama-themed content on TikTok prominently features scripted scenarios or dramatized portrayals of real-life situations to evoke emotional responses from viewers. In therapy content, therapists might use dramatic storytelling to illustrate common mental health struggles, such as depression, anxiety, or trauma. These skits involve role-playing scenarios that depict social interactions, communication dynamics, and emotional responses, allowing

therapists to display various communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, assertiveness, and boundary-setting. For instance, a therapist might create a series of videos where they act out a situation involving a character dealing with anxiety at a social event, starting with the character feeling overwhelmed and panicked, followed by interactions highlighting misunderstandings and emotional turmoil. The therapist then steps in to model effective coping strategies, such as deep breathing exercises, positive self-talk, and seeking support from friends. Visual elements in these videos often include realistic settings like living rooms, offices, or social gatherings to make the scenarios more believable, and the use of costumes and props. Text overlays might highlight key lessons or important dialogue, while background music is usually chosen to match the emotional tone of the scene, whether it is tense, uplifting, or calming.

Similarly, skits of therapy interactions simulate counseling sessions by featuring hypothetical therapist-client dialogues or monologues. These role-play videos are typically set in office-like environments, with the “therapist” and “client” engaging in conversations about mental health issues. The therapist provides insights and guidance while the client discusses their concerns and experiences. They often address common misconceptions about therapy, such as the therapist being judgmental or the process being intimidating. Visual elements include realistic settings, professional attire, and sometimes props like notebooks or therapy tools. Text overlays highlight key points or therapeutic techniques being demonstrated, while subtle background music creates a calming atmosphere.

Additionally, guided mindfulness exercises on TikTok therapy are audio or video recordings led by mental health professionals to help viewers cultivate present-moment awareness, reduce stress, and promote relaxation. These exercises typically involve gentle instructions and prompts to guide listeners through various mindfulness techniques, such as deep

breathing, body scans, and visualization. The therapist's soothing voice and calming demeanor create a supportive atmosphere conducive to mindfulness practice, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the present moment and cultivate a sense of inner peace. For example, a therapist might create a guided mindfulness exercise titled "Breathing Meditation for Stress Relief." In this video, the therapist begins by inviting viewers to find a comfortable seated position and close their eyes. They then guide listeners through a series of deep, rhythmic breaths, encouraging them to focus on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving the body.

As a more recent phenomenon, TikTok Therapy involves users creating and sharing short videos that focus on personal stories, experiences, and insights related to mental health, including discussions on struggles such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, along with advice and coping strategies, similar to how YouTube vlogs featuring self-exposure and emotional vulnerability contribute to the cultural significance of negative affect (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Unlike talk television and reality television, the content on TikTok Therapy is often created by ordinary individuals rather than television celebrities (Abidin, 2016). Abidin (2016) highlighted that this user-generated content creates a sense of authenticity and relatability, as viewers see people like themselves. In this case, they see other people discussing their mental health issues. While TherapyTok makes mental health information more accessible, it also can reflect the commodification and commercialization of therapeutic practices within a neoliberal framework (Illouz, 2012). Illouz (2012) argued that this trend can transform therapeutic practices into marketable products, shifting the focus from genuine healing to profit-driven motives. This is relevant to TikTok as Gillespie (2018) noted that platform's algorithms and the incentives for viral content can prioritize sensationalism and oversimplification, potentially reducing complex mental health issues to easily consumable content for engagement.

Moreover, TikTok Therapy also aligns with neoliberal values in other ways. By individualizing mental health issues and focusing on personal experiences, coping strategies, and self-help techniques, it emphasizes personal responsibility and self-governance, which are core tenets of neoliberalism. Harvey (2005) explains that neoliberalism promotes the idea that individuals are responsible for their own well-being, downplaying the influence of structural or systemic factors. This perspective suggests that mental health is primarily a personal issue that can be managed through individual effort rather than addressing broader societal influences.

Furthermore, the platform's algorithms and the incentive for viral content can lead to the commodification of mental health experiences and narratives. Illouz (2008) discusses how modern culture tends to commodify emotional experiences, turning them into marketable products. On TikTok Therapy, personal stories of mental health struggles and recovery are often shared in a way that makes them consumable and appealing to a wide audience, aligning with the neoliberal logic of commodifying all aspects of the human experience. Moreover, the creators commodify their expertise, aligning with principles of individual entrepreneurship, self-promotion, and commercialization, rather than collective or state-supported mental health resources.

Many TikTok Therapy videos, in line with this trend, promote self-care practices, self-improvement strategies, and personal growth, resonating with neoliberal values that position individuals as entrepreneurs of the self. This concept, detailed by scholars such as Lupton (2015), highlights how individuals are encouraged to constantly strive for self-optimization and maximization of their potential. This mirrors the idea that individuals should continuously work on and improve themselves. While providing access to mental health discourse, TikTok Therapy can also contribute to the marketization of therapeutic practices. The platform allows users to

promote or advertise self-help products, services, or personal brands, which aligns with the tendency to commercialize and privatize aspects of healthcare. These products are not regulated and thus might also include misinformation or information that has not been fact-checked.

In this context, Andrejevic (2013) notes that digital platforms often encourage the commodification of personal experiences and promote a market-driven approach to content creation. By emphasizing individual coping strategies and self-help techniques, TikTok Therapy reinforces the notion that managing mental health is primarily an individual responsibility. This shift away from collective or state-provided solutions towards privatized and individualized approaches is a hallmark of neoliberalism. This perspective suggests that individuals should manage their mental health through personal effort rather than relying on broader societal support systems. Furthermore, by focusing on personal narratives and experiences, TikTok Therapy potentially depoliticizes mental health issues. Couldry and Hepp (2016) argue that media representations can at times separate personal experiences from broader social, economic, and political contexts, aligning with the neoliberal tendency to depoliticize and individualize structural problems. This approach can obscure the systemic factors contributing to mental health issues, emphasizing individual solutions over collective action or a critique of the state.

E. Comparative Analysis: Talk Shows, Reality Television, and TikTok Therapy

Social media platforms like TikTok and traditional formats such as talk shows and reality television both have their strengths and limitations in changing the media representation and popular understanding of therapy. To begin, TikTok provides short videos that quickly convey mental health information, such as tips and coping mechanisms, but the brevity can lead to oversimplification and a lack of depth. On the other hand, talk shows and reality television offer longer segments for more detailed discussions, yet they often dramatize therapy for

entertainment, potentially misrepresenting its true nature (Illouz, 2017).

Moreover, TikTok enables a wide array of voices, including diverse therapists and everyday individuals sharing their experiences, which can broaden understanding but also risks spreading misinformation due to lack of regulation and the algorithm's tendency to suppress marginalized creators (Gillespie, 2021; Rauchberg, 2022; Stein, 2023). In contrast, talk and reality television do not provide the same platform for everyday people to create content, as platform algorithms control which videos gain visibility (Myers West, 2018).

Furthermore, practitioners on TikTok often speak directly to the viewer, creating an impression of personal engagement. Conversely, talk shows and reality television feature a limited number of experts and guests, resulting in a narrow and controlled portrayal of therapy. In these traditional formats, therapists typically do not speak directly to the viewer and are usually further away from the screen, creating a sense of distance. Additionally, talk shows and reality television are produced by individuals trained in television production, unlike the everyday creators of TikTok content.

In addition, TikTok allows for immediate viewer interaction through comments and shares, fostering ongoing dialogue but can also lead to echo chambers and the spread of unverified advice. In contrast, talk shows and reality television lack this real-time interactivity, offering a one-way flow of information that limits audience engagement and the opportunity for immediate feedback. Moreover, TikTok's algorithms tailor content to individual preferences, possibly making mental health information more relevant but can also create filter bubbles that reinforce existing biases. On the other hand, talk shows and reality television aim to appeal to a broad audience, diluting the specificity and relevance of therapy content, often resulting in generalized and sometimes inaccurate portrayals of therapy.

Despite these differences, all these formats—talk shows, reality television, and TikTok Therapy—promote individualistic approaches to personal growth and emotional well-being, often commodifying personal experiences and aligning with neoliberal ideologies that emphasize self-branding and individual responsibility over addressing systemic factors (Cloud, 1998). Nehring (2020) discusses how these platforms encourage self-governance and therapeutic culture, wherein individuals are seen as responsible for managing their own mental health without acknowledging the broader societal and structural influences that impact well-being. For instance, Illouz (2017) highlights how modern culture commodifies emotional experiences into marketable products, a phenomenon evident in the personal narratives shared and consumed as entertainment across these media spaces. While promoting self-help and improvement, these formats risk oversimplifying complex mental health issues by focusing on individual solutions and neglecting broader social and structural influences (Furedi, 2004). On TikTok, the short videos often reduce therapy to simplistic tips and tricks, failing to address the underlying systemic issues that contribute to mental health problems. Similarly, talk shows and reality television dramatize therapy for entertainment, offering a narrow and often sensationalized portrayal that prioritizes individual responsibility over collective action (Foucault, 2008).

Furthermore, these formats often push self-care and the consumption of self-care products, reinforcing neoliberal ideals. A prominent example is Oprah Winfrey, who has built a media empire that extensively promotes self-care products. Oprah's endorsement of various self-help books, wellness products, and lifestyle goods exemplifies how therapeutic culture is intertwined with consumerism. This promotion of self-care items not only commodifies personal well-being but also perpetuates the notion that purchasing these products is essential for self-improvement (Harris & Watson, 2009). Similarly, practitioners on TikTok capitalize on their

platform by selling their own workbooks, series, and merchandise. This commercialization of therapeutic content aligns with neoliberal values, encouraging individuals to invest in self-care products as a means of managing their mental health. The emphasis on buying these products suggests that personal well-being can be achieved through consumption, further obscuring the need for systemic change and collective action to address the root causes of mental health issues (Cloud, 1998; Illouz, 2012).

Moreover, all these media forms facilitate self-expression and personal narrative sharing, reflecting neoliberal logic that transforms personal experiences into commodities that can be marketed and consumed by audiences (Madsen, 2014). This commodification aligns with the broader emphasis on self-branding, where individuals are encouraged to present their personal growth and therapeutic journeys as part of their personal brand (Hearn, 2008). By examining how these media formats have facilitated self-expression and personal narrative sharing while also commodifying these experiences, the chapter provides historical context to connect to the broader dissertation argument: neoliberal ideologies shape the practices and experiences of mental health practitioners and the phenomenon of TherapyTok. This commodification of therapy content emphasizes the need for collective action and systemic change to effectively address mental health issues, moving beyond the individualistic approaches promoted by these popular media formats. The push for self-care products and the commercialization of therapeutic content underscore the limitations of current systems and highlight the necessity for more institutional support for mental health care.

F. Therapy as Diversion: Masking Systemic Issues and Fueling Consumerism

In many cases, the use of therapy in media can potentially function as a means to divert attention from larger systemic issues, leading individuals to internalize their struggles and

believe that personal effort alone can resolve their problems. This phenomenon can obscure the role of structural factors in shaping mental health, such as socioeconomic inequality, lack of access to healthcare, and systemic discrimination. By focusing on individual therapy, there is a risk of promoting the notion that mental health issues are solely the result of personal failings or deficiencies. This perspective can lead individuals to overlook the broader social and economic conditions that contribute to their distress. Consequently, they may place undue blame on themselves, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation. As individuals internalize their struggles, they may turn inward for solutions, often embracing self-care practices and products marketed as remedies for their mental health issues. The commercialization of self-care can encourage individuals to spend money on products and services that promise well-being and happiness, from wellness retreats and mindfulness apps to dietary supplements and fitness programs. This shift toward consumer-driven solutions not only benefits industries that profit from these products but also reinforces the idea that personal consumption is a viable pathway to mental health. This dynamic can perpetuate a cycle where individuals invest in self-care products and services in an attempt to alleviate their symptoms, without addressing the underlying systemic causes of their distress.

The focus on individual responsibility can thus serve to maintain the status quo, deflecting attention from the need for systemic change and allowing structural inequalities to persist. While therapy and self-care can offer valuable support for individuals, there is a critical need to recognize and address the broader systemic issues that contribute to mental health struggles. Without this recognition, there is a risk that the focus on individual solutions will obscure the need for collective action and systemic reform, perpetuating a cycle of internalized blame and consumer-driven coping strategies.

G. Discussion/Main Argument

The portrayal of therapy in popular culture has evolved significantly, transitioning from traditional media formats such as literature and film to talk shows, reality television, and digital platforms like TikTok. This shift reflects broader societal movements towards individualism, self-branding, and the commodification of personal experiences, influenced by neoliberal ideologies. While these new media formats have increased the visibility and normalization of mental health discussions, they often prioritize entertainment value over educational rigor and ethical standards, leading to simplified and sensationalized representations of therapy. Additionally, the promotion of self-care products and services within these formats underscores the commercialization of therapeutic practices, encouraging consumerism rather than addressing underlying systemic issues.

This phenomenon exemplifies Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and madness. Governmentality, in this context, refers to how therapeutic culture functions as a mode of governance that regulates individual behavior and self-perception, emphasizing self-care and personal responsibility. This aligns with neoliberal logics that prioritize market-driven solutions and individual resilience, thereby managing populations through normalized practices and ideals. Biopower is evident as these media representations shape and control how individuals understand and manage their mental health, directing them towards consumerist practices rather than systemic solutions. Furthermore, the regime of truth perpetuated by these platforms prioritizes market appeal and engagement metrics over nuanced and ethically sound portrayals of mental health experiences, establishing what is accepted as 'true' within the discourse. Lastly, Foucault's concept of madness is relevant here as the sensationalized and simplified portrayals often marginalize complex mental health issues, framing them in ways that conform to societal norms and market interests rather than addressing

the deeper, often uncomfortable truths about mental health.

The implications of these shifts are multifaceted. First, they highlight the tension between authenticity and credibility in mental health discourse. While creators may intend to provide genuine advice, the pressure to conform to platform algorithms can lead to content that sacrifices depth for engagement. Moreover, the commercialization of therapy through media platforms contributes to the pathologization of everyday experiences. By framing normal emotional responses as conditions requiring intervention, these portrayals can increase dependency on self-care products and services, perpetuating a cycle of consumerism rather than promoting resilience and self-understanding. Furthermore, the emphasis on individual solutions overlooks the broader social determinants of mental health. Issues such as socioeconomic status, access to healthcare, and community support are often sidelined in favor of promoting personal coping strategies. Additionally, the concept I call "theratainment" — a fusion of therapy and entertainment — has been particularly problematic in talk shows and reality television, and this trend can be equally problematic for TherapyTok.

Thus, maintaining a critical perspective is essential to advocate for responsible and accurate depictions that acknowledge the broader social and economic conditions impacting mental health. By highlighting the necessity for more institutional support and systemic reform, scholars and practitioners can work towards a more holistic understanding of mental health that integrates individual care with societal well-being. This approach can lead to more equitable and effective mental health practices that address the root causes of mental health issues rather than merely their symptoms.

In summary, the evolution of therapy's portrayal in popular culture—from traditional media to platforms like TikTok—reflects deeper societal shifts influenced by neoliberal

ideologies. This transition has led to increased visibility and normalization of mental health discussions but often at the cost of educational rigor and ethical standards. Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and madness provide a critical lens to understand these changes, highlighting the tension between authenticity and credibility, the commercialization of therapy, and the marginalization of complex mental health issues.

Looking back to the earlier chapters, this discussion builds on the themes introduced at the beginning of the dissertation, emphasizing the commodification and sensationalization of mental health content. It extends the argument that media and technology shape the industry and cultural production of therapy, reinforcing neoliberal ideals and promoting individual responsibility over systemic issues. This chapter has advanced the overall argument by illustrating how these dynamics play out on digital platforms like TikTok, further complicating the landscape of mental health discourse.

III. UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH CREATORS ON TIKTOK: INSIGHTS INTO CONTENT CREATION

A. Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionized the ways in which mental health information is disseminated and consumed. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a prominent space where licensed mental health practitioners engage with a diverse and expansive audience. TikTok has become a platform for content creators in professional domains such as education, veterinary science, journalism, and obstetrics and gynecology, including mental health creators, providing a space for the dissemination of short-form mental health content. Carpenter et al. (2023) and Hartung et al. (2022) highlight the use of TikTok in education, while Maddox (2023) discusses its role in veterinary science. Negreira-Rey et al. (2022) explore how journalists utilize TikTok, and Stein et al. (2022) focus on its application in obstetrics and gynecology. This chapter addresses the research question: Why do licensed mental health practitioners produce content on TikTok?

Mental health creators on TikTok navigate a unique set of challenges and opportunities as they strive to balance the provision of credible, educational content with the demands of an attention-driven platform. This balance is critical, as the nature of TikTok's algorithm and user engagement dynamics often prioritize entertaining and sensational content, potentially at the expense of educational rigor and professional integrity. Understanding why licensed mental health practitioners choose to engage with TikTok allows for a deeper insight into the intersection of professional practice and digital media.

Drawing on interviews with creators, content analysis, and theoretical frameworks, this chapter explores the personal, professional, and societal factors motivating mental health practitioners to share their expertise on TikTok. It investigates the ways in which these creators

use the platform to extend their reach, enhance public understanding of mental health issues, and contribute to the destigmatization of mental illness. Moreover, it critically examines how these motivations align with or diverge from traditional therapeutic practices and the implications for the broader field of mental health.

I position this chapter within the literature on platform politics (Gillespie, 2018; Myers West, 2018) and the creator culture and economy (Abidin, 2015, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Gamson, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008), utilizing the critical perspectives of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2019; McChesney, 2001) and therapeutic culture (Illouz, 2017; Cloud, 1998; Madsen, 2014) to provide insights into the cultural and societal dynamics shaping TherapyTok. This chapter explores how these creators explain why they create content on TikTok. The methodology outlined in Chapter 1, including textual analysis of 150 TikTok videos and 42 interviews with active mental health creators, provides insights into their motivations. By shedding light on the motivations of mental health creators, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape of digital mental health. It underscores the complexities and potential of TikTok as a tool for mental health education and the ways in which creators navigate the intersection of professional responsibility and digital engagement. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to a critical discourse on the role of social media in shaping contemporary mental health practices.

B. Why TikTok?

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of telehealth and the integration of social media into mental health services, ushering in rapid changes and blurring boundaries in this space (Wosik et al., 2020). As traditional modes of therapy shifted online, the lines between in-person sessions and virtual consultations became increasingly blurred. This transition brought

both opportunities and challenges, with telehealth offering greater accessibility to mental health services while also raising concerns about privacy and security (Reeves, et al., 2020). Similarly, the use of social media platforms for mental health support expanded during the pandemic, providing a space for individuals to connect, share experiences, and access resources (Akhther & Sopory, 2020). However, this integration introduced complexities, such as navigating ethical considerations, maintaining professional boundaries, and addressing misinformation (Jeyaraman et al., 2021).

The decision to opt for TikTok as their platform of choice stemmed from various factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many were confined to their homes, mental health creators said they seized the opportunity to establish their presence and generate content on TikTok. Many stated they selected TikTok due to its broad accessibility, enabling them to reach diverse audiences and confront misconceptions surrounding mental health in an engaging and relatable manner. Furthermore, they highlighted that TikTok's concise format allowed them to communicate concepts in “bite-sized” content, as they hoped to enhance audience comprehension and foster meaningful discussions about mental health. They said that frustrations with working in the mental health field, and the lack of available mental health education, further drove their content creation efforts. These motivations encompass a mix of personal, professional, and economic incentives, shaping their participation on the platform.

C. Overcoming Limitations of the Mental Health Field/Profession

A majority of creators (39/42) expressed frustration with various aspects of their field, including stigma and misunderstanding, financial struggles, representation and advocacy, and lack of community. Consequently, these practitioners said they turn to platforms like TikTok to disseminate mental health information and supplement their income or practice. However, this

can be problematic as platforms like TikTok are revenue-driven and are known to prioritize sensationalized content over educational content (Gillespie, 2018).

D. Frustration with Stigma/Stereotypes

All of the creators (42/42) discussed the stigma associated with mental health and therapy within our culture. They talked about its negative impact on individuals, society at large, and themselves as practitioners. Consequently, they stated that their objective for being on TikTok is not only to destigmatize mental health but also to address common perceptions of therapy and therapists.

When addressing stigmatization, some creators explicitly stated sentiments such as "I am committed to destigmatizing mental health" in their videos. They discussed the challenges associated with mental health stigma and ways to combat it in their content. For instance, in some videos, creators shared personal experiences or anecdotes to illustrate the harmful effects of stigma on individuals living with mental health conditions. They also discussed common misconceptions about mental illness and provided credible information to debunk mental health myths.

For example, in one video, a creator starts by addressing a common misconception, such as the belief that people with depression can simply "snap out of it" if they try hard enough. The creator then explains why this misconception is harmful, sharing statistics and research findings that highlight the biological and psychological complexities of depression. The video begins with the creator greeting the audience and introducing the topic, saying, "Today, we're talking about a common myth about depression—that it's just a matter of willpower." The creator then shares a brief personal story, saying, "When I was struggling with depression, people often told me to just cheer up or try harder, which made me feel even worse." To debunk the myth, the creator then

uses on-screen text and visuals to present credible information from mental health professionals or academic sources. For example, they say, "According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression is a serious mood disorder with complex causes, including genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors." The creator also quotes a well-known psychologist or psychiatrist, who explains that telling someone with depression to 'snap out of it' is like telling someone with diabetes to just produce more insulin." The video concludes with a call to action, encouraging viewers to educate themselves and support those with mental health conditions. The creator says, "Let's work together to debunk these harmful myths and support those who are struggling. Share this video to spread awareness!"

Visually, the content comes across as engaging, featuring a mix of the creator speaking directly to the camera, relevant text appearing on the screen, and the use of animations or graphics to illustrate key points. The tone is empathetic and informative, aiming to both educate and connect with the audience. Additionally, they offer practical tips and strategies for promoting mental health awareness and destigmatization, such as initiating open conversations about mental health, encouraging help-seeking behavior, and advocating for policies that support mental health education and access to treatment. These strategies all contribute to how they construct their performance in their content which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

In addition to the videos, 35 out of 42 practitioners talked to me about their hope that their content would help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. Despite these motivations, they did say that the enduring stigma surrounding mental health and their work remains a significant frustration for them. They said that this situation highlights a fundamental limitation in the mental health field, complicates their jobs, and undermines their efforts to provide effective support and education. They said the societal stigma against mental health issues makes

it difficult for them to gain the recognition and support they need, both financially and socially. This stigma, they said, can also lead to content suppression and flagging, further limiting their reach and impact. Nearly all of the creators (38 out of 40) talked about the lack of understanding among the public about practitioners and the depth of their work. They noted that this misunderstanding can often result in unrealistic expectations and underappreciation of their contributions. They said their goal of creating TikTok content is to challenge stereotypes about mental health professionals and present what they frequently describe as an "authentic" portrayal of themselves. Through these endeavors, they said they seek to increase therapy's accessibility for individuals who may be hesitant or actively seeking help. By offering insights into the complexities of therapy and sharing their own vulnerabilities, they said they aim to invite viewers into the world of their mental health practice.

Drawing from the observations outlined in Chapter 2 concerning therapy and therapists in popular culture, 32 out of 42 creators said they create TikTok content to challenge prevailing stereotypes depicted in mainstream media. These stereotypes often portray therapists as enigmatic or intimidating figures, contributing to the ongoing stigmatization of mental illness (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Giles, 2003; Schneider, 1977, 1985; Wedding & Boyd, 1999). Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) explore how media portrayals can shape public perceptions, often reinforcing negative stereotypes of therapists. Giles (2003) highlights the impact of these depictions in trivializing severe mental health issues, such as postpartum depression, by presenting them in a dismissive manner. Schneider (1977, 1985) discusses the historical context of these portrayals and their role in perpetuating misconceptions about therapy and mental health professionals. Wedding and Boyd (1999) emphasize the importance of addressing these stereotypes to improve public understanding and reduce stigma. For instance, Creator 32

explained:

It's where we play cool games and talk about mental health, psychology, therapy, and more in an effort to destigmatize those things and bring information to people who wouldn't otherwise have access to it in a responsible and ethical way.

By incorporating video games into his content, he said he aims to both illustrate and explain mental health concepts and demonstrate that therapists also enjoy things like gaming. He said through this, he hopes to show familiarity and relatability with his audience. He shares his gaming experiences and provides commentary while dressed casually, wearing a ball cap and gauged earrings. This example demonstrates the broader effort of creators as many of them said they are motivated to reshape public perceptions of therapists, aiming to make them more approachable. This approach, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5, aligns with Stein et al.'s (2022) study of OBGYN professionals on TikTok, which shows how OBGYN's on TikTok humanize their professional identities. Stein et al. found that their videos portray them as both everyday people and trained professionals, thus blending the personal and professional aspects of their lives.

Similarly, Creator 34 told me she embraces what she terms a "humanizing" approach, as she said she seeks to educate and demystify perceptions about therapists. She said, "We're not all stuffy old white men and button-up sweaters anymore." As a licensed sex educator and therapist, she frequently appears in her videos at home, dressed comfortably, and openly discusses her identity as a Black woman. She said she is motivated to create content on TikTok to challenge stereotypes that therapists are only elderly white men. She said she believes her laid-back demeanor humanizes her and showcases the diversity and relatability of therapists. She said that through this approach, she hopes to break down barriers and foster a more inclusive and understanding perception of mental health professionals. She also said she hopes to cultivate a

supportive atmosphere where individuals feel empowered to seek help and engage in open dialogues about mental health without fear of judgment. Additionally, another creator discusses the "therapists are human too" movement in her content. She emphasizes that therapists experience feelings and triggers like their clients.

E. Financial Limitations

Drawing on the demographics discussed in Chapter 1 about household income, nearly all creators (35 out of 42) revealed encountering financial obstacles and experiencing a sense of undervaluation for their expertise and dedication. Despite their motives to help others, they told me they frequently grapple with maintaining their own financial stability within a profession centered around helping others. In both their videos and interviews, these creators talked about insurance challenges, striking a balance between accessibility and financial stability, and their approaches to marketing. Not all, but some also mentioned creating coaching businesses to work with clients beyond their licensed state, all of which directly tie into their financial struggles. They explained that insurance obstacles often result in inadequate reimbursement for their services. They told me about the balance between financial sustainability and accessibility shows the ethical challenge of not being able to provide therapy to all people or having to charge clients who may already be struggling, which also adds to their own financial strain if they lower their prices or offer some pro bono sessions. They said marketing strategies on TikTok and venturing into coaching businesses ways they can diversify their income sources. By leveraging TikTok's platform for these purposes, they said they are motivated to supplement their income from traditional therapy practices and alleviate the financial pressures they face.

More than half of the creators (27/42) discussed the complexities of insurance. While many expressed a desire to provide free therapy services, they highlighted their own financial

sustainability as a major hurdle. These creators described the arduous process and time investment required to become insurance-accepting practitioners. Many mentioned that they have to work at a private practice or hire someone to manage all the insurance and billing issues. They noted that while accepting insurance can make them more accessible to patients with limited incomes, the insurance system as a whole is flawed. They expressed a desire for insurance to cover the full cost for clients and fully reimburse them. However, many reported that even when they do accept insurance, the reimbursement is usually not the full amount, with insurance companies taking more than they should. The complexities of this situation are exemplified, as Creator 12 discussed their frustration with an insurance company's termination of mental health coverage alongside a rise in deductibles, illustrating the broader argument that the current system places undue financial and administrative burdens on both practitioners and clients, exacerbating accessibility issues in mental health care.

Conversely, other creators told me they choose to forego insurance to avoid these complications, accepting only clients who can pay out of pocket. These creators acknowledged the exclusionary nature of this approach and its detrimental impact, as only individuals with sufficient financial resources can then access therapy. Some mentioned having worked with insurance companies in the past but stopped after negative experiences. Reflecting on these challenges, Creator 20 candidly admitted, "I do not accept insurance, to be fully transparent. My rationale is that I don't want to support insurance companies, and they need to meet us halfway. But from the client's perspective, it's like, "I can't afford this." These experiences illustrate the bind these creators are in: using insurance is problematic, and not using insurance is also problematic.

Recognizing the limitations and frustrations of the current insurance system, numerous

creators (35/42) said they are motivated to use TikTok to monetize their content or hope to do so. They told me they view content creation as a strategic approach to maintain financial viability while expanding access to mental health services. These creators said they aim to broaden their audience and offer therapy sessions at reduced costs or pro bono, while others said they seek to make extra money for savings or personal enjoyment. These creators also expressed a desire for compensation for their time and dedication spent crafting content, conducting research, and sharing mental health insights on TikTok, stressing that compensation serves as motivation and provides essential support for their ongoing creative endeavors and livelihoods.

Because of the motivation for monetization, these creators said they feel compelled to enhance their brand presence and visibility on the platform. Within the realm of microcelebrity, self-branding entails deliberately crafting an online persona to establish a distinct and recognizable identity (Marwick, 2013). They told me they use TikTok as a platform to display their online personas, curating content that mirrors their expertise and personalities. They said they have to do this as they know branding is crucial in the contemporary digital landscape, where visibility is paramount for success. These creators also told me that they are motivated to craft unique online personas through visual elements and their distinct personal styles. For instance, Creator 6, known for her distinct oversized glasses and colorful attire, exemplifies deliberate branding in this context. She said:

It's not a secret; it wouldn't be unusual if people knew about this, but I don't wear prescription glasses. They're blue light glasses, but they've become somewhat of a costume. I don't need glasses, but they've become part of my aesthetic. There's a visual identifier, and I've noticed there's greater recognition like 'oh, it's that white lady with the fun glasses.' So, there's definitely a branding aspect. Very specific color. Like, I know, my own personal style has evolved to become more and more exaggerated the longer I spend online, which feels good. It feels like a form of self-actualization. But, oh yeah, there's definitely a deliberate, zany, art teacher who makes her own clothes vibe.

Through this crafted aesthetic, she said she forges her unique online identity and brand as a "zany art teacher." Similarly, Creator 7 shared her brand strategy, demonstrating that for some, branding is outsourced:

So, my brand strategy—all of my logos and color palette, all of those things—I hired out. They were incredible because they usually only work with brands where, like, you know, their packages start at like 5K and up, and I was like, 'I'm making \$25 an hour, I can't.' So, anyway, they did it for me, for like 3 grand, I think, which was great. My official tag is professional therapy big sister vibes. Well, I hired all of that out too because I wanted consistency. I love, love, love it—I will buy any product if the aesthetic is on, you know what I mean?

By using an external organization to develop her aesthetic and brand strategy, she said she has a personalized logo, specific color scheme, and tagline. These examples illustrate how creators, whether individually or through outside services, are motivated to craft their brand and mold their persona to capitalize on their online presence.

In addition to branding, these creators also mentioned leveraging TikTok to broaden their income streams, aiming to improve financial stability while extending their professional horizons. They expressed their motivation to build a following on TikTok to establish themselves as influential figures in the mental health field, with aspirations for opportunities such as book deals, podcasts, collaborations, and public speaking engagements. Creator 41 said: "I think it definitely opens up other opportunities. The book thing is one I have thought about and considered. I have friends who are authors, and social media following is required." Similarly, Creator 12 highlighted:

The only reason I started it was because I wrote a book that I'm trying to get published... you basically have to have a platform you have to like, tell publishers, hey? I have X number of followers who may buy my book.

This underscores their approach of utilizing TikTok as a platform for expanding their career beyond content creation alone. Creator 5 also expressed a motivation to get public speaking gigs:

What I aspire to do is engage more in public speaking. That would be fantastic. I could share my expertise, connect with audiences, and be compensated accordingly. Ideally, I'd balance this with my practice, meeting clients once a week while also engaging in public speaking engagements. That's my vision. But I'll never rely solely on social media or trying to be a full-time creator.

To do this, these creators also told me they employ various strategies such as producing sponsored content, forging partnerships, and selling products like workbooks or merchandise, although they said brand deals and sponsorships can be difficult to manage due to professional ethics. Some even crafted purchasable series on subjects within their field of expertise. For instance, Creator 1 devised a series centered on coping skills, which viewers could acquire, explaining: "I actually turned it into a series people can purchase on coping mechanisms for like \$20 because some people say, 'I can't see a therapist due to long wait times' or 'I don't have the funds.'" These examples show that monetization and earning money is a significant motivation for creators being on the platform.

Despite their ambitions, many said they have struggled to achieve their goals on TikTok. Only three creators reported earning enough to realize their aspirations. The majority said they have experienced ongoing challenges with the platform's compensation structure, which is further explored in Chapter 4. They said that the platform structure often results in meager earnings despite considerable dedication and audience engagement. They told me that these financial constraints restrict their capacity to offer pro bono or affordable therapy services, perpetuating a cycle where economic hurdles impede their ability to serve those who cannot pay out-of-pocket prices.

Historically, mental health professionals have relied on traditional methods such as print media, radio, television, direct mail, referrals, and networking to market their services (Benjamin, 2019). However, numerous creators told me they now perceive TikTok as a superior alternative to these conventional channels. In fact, 32 out of 42 said they see TikTok as a

platform to highlight their talents and expertise to a global audience. For example, creator, Creator 14, said, "TikTok has allowed me to reach a wider audience than I ever could with traditional marketing methods. The engagement I get from my videos has translated directly into new clients and more interest in my workshops." They said they believe this increased visibility can enhance their credibility and potentially attract new clients. This was especially motivating for those frustrated by financial limitations in the field. For instance, Creator 11 said she realized the limitations of traditional marketing and saw TikTok as a valuable tool to expand her therapy practice. Reflecting on this use of TikTok as a marketing tool, Creator 11 shared:

Previously, I lacked a cohesive marketing strategy and wasn't actively seeking clients on social media. Then, a video went viral, and suddenly I started receiving therapy requests. It made me realize that I could leave the agency I wasn't passionate about and fully transition into private practice, focusing on adult therapy. Recognizing this opportunity shifted my focus to balancing roles as both an art therapist and a content creator.

She told me this allows her to reach more potential clients compared to if she were only marketing locally and motivates her to keep making content.

In another video, a creator shares insights such as creative self-care activities and hosts a paid online open studio on Saturday mornings. Each session revolves around a theme like "truth and certainty," featuring a check-in question such as "What do you know for sure?" She then suggests three art project ideas, encouraging participants to spend the hour creating and journaling. This initiative, framed as creative self-care, occurs every Saturday and Wednesday and is accessible through her monthly membership or single-session registration, as detailed in her bio. When asked about sign-up procedures in her comments, she responds, "It's a \$25 monthly membership, which breaks down to about \$3 per session. You can cancel anytime. Details are in my bio!" Through her bio, she guides interested individuals to her website, presenting a range of options including personal support and mental health treatment, guidance

in art making within a supportive community, creative self-care and art project ideas, strategies for well-being on social media, and professional development resources. Each link leads to detailed information on how to begin treatment, join a series, access webinars, or purchase her book, ultimately directing viewers to her therapeutic practice and additional products and services.

Although not common among the majority of creators, 5 out of 42 said they have established or are considering establishing coaching businesses in response to interest from TikTok users outside their licensed therapy states. They said they are motivated by the desire to expand their reach beyond the geographical limitations imposed by their state licenses and serve a broader client base, potentially reaching individuals who may not have access to mental health services in their local area. Creator 4 expanded on this:

I've also established a coaching business to assist those unable to access therapy for their child but seeking strategies and guidance for both themselves and their child. This additional avenue serves as a resource for specific interventions and personal development support. While I don't actively promote it, I make it available when people reach out for assistance.

They told me that establishing coaching businesses has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, they said it allows them to broaden their reach and assist individuals hindered by geographical constraints or licensing regulations, enabling people from various regions to benefit from their expertise. They also said that coaching businesses can offer supplementary resources for specific interventions and personal development support, providing a range of tailored services. However, they also said this can blur their professional ethics and they have to be sure to keep their coaching business and therapy practices completely separate.

F. Lack of Representation and Advocacy

In a significant portion of literature on modern therapy, white male figures in psychology

and psychiatry, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and B.F. Skinner, are highly referenced (Benjamin, 2019; Fisher & Greenberg, 1977; Segal et al., 2006). While their contributions have influenced the field, feminist therapeutic perspectives highlight the challenges posed by their historical dominance. Marginalized groups, including people of color, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from diverse cultural backgrounds, often find their perspectives and experiences overlooked or marginalized in the construction of therapeutic frameworks (Mitchell, 2000).

This lack of representation can lead to therapies that inadequately address the needs of these populations and perpetuate systemic biases, reinforcing power dynamics that favor dominant cultural norms (Cloud, 1998). Furthermore, the historical underrepresentation of diverse voices has perpetuated Eurocentric or Western-centric models of mental health care, creating barriers to access for marginalized communities (Brown, 2015). The dominance of white male voices in therapy also affects power dynamics within therapeutic relationships, leaving clients who do not fit the traditional therapist mold feeling disempowered or misunderstood (Nutt, Rice, & Enns, 2007). Recognizing these challenges underscores the need for greater diversity, inclusion, and representation in the field. There is a call for a critical examination of whose voices are valued and whose perspectives are marginalized in therapy's development and practice (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016).

Based in a feminist approach to therapy (Mitchell, 2000), among the 42 creators, 24, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, said they are motivated to use TikTok as a platform for advocacy, aiming to catalyze social change within the mental health landscape. These creators said they hope to empower individuals to advocate for themselves, lobby for policy reforms, and champion social justice and equity in mental health care. By providing

culturally sensitive guidance and exploring intersectional identities, they told me they strive to confront systemic challenges such as discrimination and inequality, amplifying voices and experiences often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

In the realm of microcelebrity, these creators hold sway as influential figures, akin to advocates for specific lifestyles or ideologies (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Stoldt et al., 2019). Utilizing their specialized training and therapeutic perspectives, they said they promote specific mental health approaches, such as trauma-informed methods or sex-positive parenting. For example, Creator 3 said they are dedicated to uplifting Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities by centering their experiences and critiquing therapeutic approaches that lack cultural sensitivity. She articulated her motivation, stating:

I want to support Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities because a lot of what we learn does not have our culture or our experiences at the forefront, and there are so many things that need to be acknowledged and validated. I want to be able to show up for those communities on a larger scale, and also teach the clinicians that are coming behind me to do the same thing.

Another creator's account description also underscores this approach, highlighting her mission of "Virtually helping BIPOC Folx heal from historical trauma." In many of her videos, she shares insights into her training and objectives concerning serving BIPOC populations. She critiques certain therapeutic approaches, such as CBT, for their cultural insensitivity, arguing they can be dismissive and superficial, failing to consider the historical traumas that marginalized communities endure. She also says that within a biased and racist system, interventions can inadvertently retraumatize if clinicians are not careful.

Additionally, another creator emphasized the importance of understanding and celebrating Black glory stories. According to her content, these narratives celebrate and highlight the achievements, successes, and resilience of Black individuals or communities, often

spotlighting instances of overcoming adversity, breaking barriers, and making substantial contributions to various domains or movements. Serving as sources of inspiration and empowerment, these stories illuminate the strength, talent, and perseverance within Black communities while challenging stereotypes and systemic injustices. Through her videos, she talks about her specialization in intergenerational transfer. She defines it as the transmission of stories, wisdom, and values across generations. She emphasizes the importance of embracing this form of transfer, highlighting its role in fostering empathy, comprehension, and unity among communities. Additionally, she underscores the importance of positive intergenerational transfer as a tool for promoting healing within marginalized communities.

These same creators also said they are motivated to provide representation, particularly for marginalized communities. They told me they aim to amplify overlooked voices and experiences, address challenges faced by minorities in navigating mental health issues and provide culturally sensitive advice tailored to diverse communities. For example, in one video, a creator highlights the significance of "NeuroQueer Heresies" by Nick Walker, drawing on Audre Lorde's concept of "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" to propose a new framework for challenging conventional views of mental health and pathology. This concept, akin to the feminist approach to therapy, involves questioning and deconstructing traditional notions of mental illness to address systemic biases and social injustices within diagnostic and treatment practices. Despite potential resistance within the field of psychology, many of these creators said they remain dedicated and motivated to sharing resources that critique entrenched power structures, including those within the mental health profession itself.

Playing into representation, these creators also explained they are motivated to leverage their own identities and expertise to talk about various subjects, encompassing sexuality, gender

identity, neurodiversity, and trauma. For instance, Creator 37, said she tailors her TikTok content to explore the confluence of cultural identity and mental health, with a goal to offer validation to those often sidelined in mainstream conversations. She explained her approach, saying:

I concentrate on the psychoeducation aspect of where Latino or Latinx culture intersects with mental health. I adopt more of a systemic viewpoint, steering away from individual narratives, but consistently linking it back to the broader experience, such as what it means to exist as a marginalized individual within an oppressive system.

Another creators' account is similar and her description reflects her identity as a "Licensed Clinical Social Worker in CA• Proud Chicana• Trauma specialist." Furthermore, a majority of her videos center on the Latinx community, tackling topics like the exacerbation of Latino mental health in the U.S. due to acculturative stress, the detrimental effects of the U.S. environment on Latino mental well-being, the Latinx identity dilemma, and her journey to becoming a Latina Trauma Therapist. She explained that she feels this approach enables her to utilize her platform for racial justice and advocacy.

G. Addressing Professional Isolation: Lack of Community in the Field

Many creators (33/42) told me that therapy work can often entail isolation and loneliness, as they frequently operate as sole providers, making it challenging to cultivate peer support and camaraderie, especially when working remotely or without colleagues nearby. They said that even when private practitioners have peers alongside them, barriers like competition and differing specializations may hinder effective communication and support-seeking, fostering a culture of self-reliance. They explained that this environment can lead to reluctance in expressing vulnerabilities or seeking help (Kirkbride, 2016). Additionally, they said the confidential nature of therapy work can further isolate them, limiting opportunities for discussing cases and processing emotional tolls, contributing to professional loneliness (GoodTherapy, n.d.). These

challenges highlight systemic issues within the mental health sector, necessitating better support structures. To address these gaps, these practitioners said they leverage TikTok to create content and a virtual community. They said this motivation to overcome isolation and foster a sense of community drives them to produce content on TikTok, where they can engage with other practitioners.

They explained that these exchanges are crucial for discovering novel therapeutic techniques and educational content, thereby enhancing their therapeutic knowledge and methodologies. Additionally, they mentioned that these interactions spur self-reflection and motivate them to pursue further training or education. As expressed by Creator 26, "Engaging with other therapists is beneficial. Learning about different training programs and methodologies used by creators provides valuable information for me."

These creators also emphasized the importance of establishing connections with like-minded professionals through TikTok, pointing out the obstacles in creating affinity groups within the mental health sector in-person. As stated by Creator 21, "I appreciate it because it helps me continue networking and building strong communities and relationships with other therapists." They said that TikTok is a place where they can find a sense of community among professionals, acting as a space for dialogue, assistance, and unity. Some creators told me they even formed friendships, leading to collaborative projects like joint in-person trips and podcast hosting.

H. Tackling the Lack of Mental Health Education

1. Historical Context

In the late 80s and 90s, public health professionals disseminated health education through government agencies, healthcare institutions, and community organizations, using public service

announcements, educational programs, printed pamphlets, and community workshops to address smoking, vaccination, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, and exercise (Harrington, 2015). These campaigns aimed to improve outcomes by increasing awareness, changing behaviors, and promoting preventive measures (Parvanta et al., 2017). Collaborations with schools provided education on sexual health, substance abuse prevention, and mental health, while television and radio were used for broader dissemination (Lewis & Lewis, 2015). Despite these efforts, disparities in access to health education highlighted the need for targeted outreach (Kreps, 2010). *The Oprah Winfrey Show* blended education and entertainment, offering accessible information, personal stories, and expert advice on mental health, encouraging viewers to seek help and adopt self-care practices (Timberg & Erler, 2002; Illouz, 2012). However, Oprah's approach emphasized neoliberal self-help, framing personal success and well-being as individual efforts, promoting self-help books and workshops, and contributing to the commodification of mental health (Shattuc, 1997). This laid the groundwork for TherapyTok, where creators continue to bring mental health discussions and entertainment into the public sphere.

2. Educational Content on TikTok

Many creators (36/42) not only expressed their frustrations with working within the mental health field but also highlighted the widespread lack of mental health education in society. They talked about its inadequate integration in schools, workplaces, and community settings, leading to misunderstandings, stigma, and misconceptions about mental health issues. They said this deficiency can hinder individuals' ability to recognize mental health problems, access appropriate support, and engage in meaningful conversations about mental well-being. Consequently, they told me they advocate for increased efforts to promote mental health education and normalize discussions about mental health.

To address this educational gap, these practitioners said they turn to TikTok to share their expertise and reach a broader audience, describing their content as both educational and entertaining. They said they are motivated to provide tailored content for their viewers. For instance, Creator 20 told me she curates specialized content on mental health and sleep, showcasing her professional expertise and positioning herself as an authority in the field. Expanding on their niche content approach, many creators mentioned that individuals frequently reach out through comments or direct messages, expressing feelings of overwhelm or shame while navigating mental health challenges, often exacerbated by limited access to mental health education. In response, these creators said they are motivated to create content addressing topics like coping skills and mental health tips to bridge gaps in awareness. They told me they aim to deliver information they described as practical, concise, and focused, ensuring it is easily digestible for their audience. Moreover, these creators said they take this approach due to the fast-paced nature of TikTok and the potential limited attention span of viewers.

One of the key goals these creators mentioned is providing coping mechanisms. For example, Creator 1 shares coping strategies, mental health techniques, and self-care practices in her videos. She expressed her motivation for creating TikTok content, stating, "I am here to raise mental health awareness and reassure people that it's okay to struggle. My online presence revolves around providing coping skills and support, letting people know they're not alone." In one video, she shared a "simple" sleep hack for those struggling to get out of bed, recommending that individuals who have been lying awake for over 20 minutes should get up, take a sip of water, and do some stretches.

Much like their provision of coping skills and mental health advice, these creators also told me they are motivated to provide free psychoeducation. They defined this as a combination

of cost-free accessibility and educational insights embedded within their content, addressing the general populace's lack of access to mental health knowledge and education. By offering free psychoeducation, these creators told me they seek to dismantle barriers and make resources more accessible to a broader audience. This is exemplified in a video where a mental health creator outlines five signs of trauma.

Moreover, Creator 7, like many others, expressed frustration with the lack of access to information about mental health, and views her content creation as a form of education and mutual aid. She said, “I appreciate having TikTok as a platform to offer free psychoeducation, almost like a form of mutual aid where it's like, 'Conventional individual therapy sessions should be freely available anyway.’” These creators told me that by sharing what they describe as educational and entertaining content on TikTok, they are motivated to combat the prevailing lack of awareness regarding mental health and contribute to the broader effort of destigmatizing mental health issues. Additionally, they expressed their intention to equip viewers with practical tools to navigate common mental health challenges. They said this highlights a dual motivation: to share educational insights about mental health topics while concurrently challenging entrenched societal taboos and misconceptions. They explained that these objectives are interconnected, as the educational process often involves dispelling myths and reducing stigma, while efforts to destigmatize mental health necessitate providing accurate information and cultivating empathy. Thus, they said their motivations to educate and destigmatize mental health not only intersect but also mutually reinforce each other.

I. Discussion/Main Argument

This chapter argues that licensed mental health practitioners turn to TikTok to bypass traditional healthcare system constraints such as underpayment and bureaucratic hurdles, while

also addressing the public's limited understanding of mental health. However, TikTok's attention-driven, capitalistic framework creates a new form of exploitation. This dual exploitation involves uncompensated labor within both healthcare and digital realms, perpetuating the system practitioners seek to escape and reinforcing neoliberal ideologies that emphasize individual accountability and market-based solutions. This shift of focus away from systemic reforms underscores the need for a paradigm shift towards a socialized healthcare model that prioritizes universal access and patient welfare over commercial imperatives.

The motivations of licensed mental health practitioners to use TikTok, and the resulting dual exploitation in both traditional healthcare and the digital realm, can be analyzed through the lenses of governmentality, biopower, regime of truth, and madness.

First, governmentality involves how the state exercises control over the population through various techniques and rationalities. Mental health practitioners use TikTok to circumvent traditional healthcare constraints like underpayment and bureaucratic hurdles. However, by turning to TikTok, they encounter a new form of governmentality. TikTok's framework, driven by metrics such as likes, shares, and views, compels practitioners to conform to platform norms and engagement strategies. This self-regulation aligns with neoliberal principles, promoting individual solutions to systemic problems and reinforcing the notion that success and credibility are tied to market-driven metrics. Thus, practitioners' motivations and actions are subtly governed by both the traditional healthcare system and the digital economy.

Second, biopower refers to the regulation of populations through subtle means, impacting how individuals understand and manage their lives. In the traditional mental health field, practitioners are already subject to biopower through institutional practices and norms that dictate their professional behavior and patient interactions. On TikTok, this biopower extends

into the digital realm, where practitioners' content creation and engagement strategies are influenced by platform algorithms and audience preferences. This dual exploitation highlights how practitioners' labor and expertise are regulated by both healthcare institutions and digital platforms, shaping their professional identity and public persona. The commodification of their expertise on TikTok, driven by the need for visibility and engagement, exemplifies biopower's influence over how mental health knowledge is produced and consumed.

Third, the regime of truth encompasses the accepted norms and discourses that define what is considered true within a society. In the traditional mental health field, the regime of truth is established through formal education, clinical guidelines, and professional standards. On TikTok, a new regime of truth emerges, where content that attracts high engagement is often perceived as more credible, regardless of its educational rigor or clinical accuracy. Practitioners are motivated to create content that fits within this regime, often simplifying complex mental health concepts to appeal to a broader audience. This dual exploitation results in tension between maintaining professional integrity and meeting the demands of the platform's engagement-driven economy, ultimately shaping public perceptions of mental health in ways that may not align with clinical realities.

Finally, madness, as conceptualized by Foucault, involves the ways societies define and treat mental illness. In traditional mental health practice, practitioners navigate the medicalization and institutionalization of mental illness, often constrained by systemic issues such as inadequate funding and bureaucratic hurdles. On TikTok, the portrayal of mental health can lean towards sensationalism and simplification, driven by the platform's need for engaging content. This dual exploitation mirrors historical patterns where the voices of those with mental illness, and those who treat them, are marginalized and commodified. Practitioners, in their

efforts to raise awareness and educate the public, may inadvertently contribute to the stigmatization and misrepresentation of mental illness by adhering to the platform's norms. This dynamic underscores the ongoing struggle to balance authentic representation of mental health with the demands of a commodified digital space.

Building on earlier chapters, this analysis deepens the understanding of how TikTok's platform politics affect mental health content creation. It advances the overall argument by showing that despite the potential for increased accessibility and public engagement, the platform's capitalistic dynamics undermine the educational and ethical integrity of mental health discourse. This chapter ties back to the opening chapter's discussion on the commodification and sensationalization of mental health content, reinforcing the need for systemic reforms. In conclusion, by examining these dynamics through a critical lens, this chapter highlights the broader implications for the ethical integrity and educational value of mental health discourse on digital platforms like TikTok. This analysis urges reconsideration of how such spaces can better serve public health needs beyond profit-driven metrics. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for comprehensive systemic reforms that challenge the neoliberal and capitalistic frameworks currently shaping mental health content and discourse, advocating for a more equitable and socially responsible approach to mental health care.

IV. THE IMPACT OF PLATFORM POLITICS ON THERAPY TOK: NAVIGATING ALGORITHMS AND CONTENT MODERATION

A. Introduction

Platform politics encompass the policies, algorithms, and governance structures that regulate user interactions, content dissemination, and monetization on digital platforms (Gillespie, 2018; Myers West, 2018). This term highlights how platform operators enforce rules and standards that impact visibility, engagement, and the overall user experience (Massanari, 2016; Pasquale, 2015). Essentially, platform politics illustrate the role of digital intermediaries in mediating online interactions, curating content, and influencing public discourse (Roberts, 2020; Tufekci, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The implications of platform politics are significant, affecting content creation, user engagement, and economic opportunities. These politics shape the digital landscape by dictating what content is promoted or suppressed, how users interact, and the economic viability of creators (Zuboff, 2020). For instance, algorithms that prioritize sensational content often marginalize educational material, as seen with mental health creators on TikTok. The pressure to align with algorithmic preferences can lead to ethical dilemmas, as creators balance producing popular content and maintaining professional integrity (Gillespie, 2018; Massanari, 2016).

Platform governance structures influence user interactions and engagement. The lack of transparency in algorithmic processes can frustrate users and creators, leading to feelings of disempowerment (Bucher, 2017). Creators often employ strategies like using coded language to avoid content suppression, highlighting the impact of platform politics on user behavior (Myers West, 2018; Tufekci, 2015). Moreover, the monetization models and compensation structures on platforms like TikTok often result in inadequate financial returns for creators, despite their investments of time and effort, underscoring broader issues of economic inequality and

exploitation (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Cotter, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Platform politics wield immense power over the online ecosystem by influencing content amplification, user engagement, and creators' economic viability. Addressing these politics is essential for fostering a more equitable, transparent, and supportive digital environment. These politics also affect the offline world, intertwining with broader political landscapes and influencing socio-political dynamics. For example, when platforms suppress certain content, it not only reveals their internal governance and political stances but also shapes public discourse and societal norms, demonstrating the power digital intermediaries have in curating online interactions (Gillespie, 2018; Myers West, 2018).

Gorwa (2019) describes platform governance as an interdisciplinary approach involving digital media studies, political science, and international relations. He defines platform governance as involving relationships and regulatory mechanisms structuring interactions among stakeholders within the digital platform ecosystem, such as platform companies, users, advertisers, governments, and political actors. Understanding platform governance requires examining how platforms' practices, policies, and affordances interact with external political forces shaping these practices. This interdisciplinary approach reveals how platform governance impacts both digital and offline worlds, influencing and being influenced by the larger political landscape.

This chapter examines the relationship between mental health content creators and TikTok. I situate this analysis within the literature on platform politics (Gillespie, 2018; Myers West, 2018) and creator culture and economy (Abidin, 2015, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Gamson, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008), framed by critical perspectives of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2019; McChesney, 2001) and therapeutic culture (Illouz, 2017; Cloud,

1998; Madsen, 2014). It addresses the research question: How do TikTok's platform policies and practices impact the content creation practices and experiences of licensed mental health creators? Using a textual analysis of 150 TikTok videos and 42 interviews with mental health creators, this chapter explores the platform politics shaping TherapyTok, including algorithmic prioritization, content, monetization, and labor. Their narratives and content highlight their struggles with balancing professional responsibilities and creating content geared towards virality and engagement metrics.

B. Algorithmic Prioritization and Content

Many creators (40 out of 42) said that TikTok's attention-driven economy fosters intense competition, with all creators striving to capture and retain viewers. These creators explained that they try to innovate and fine-tune their content to achieve optimal engagement and visibility. However, they said that this competitive environment often compels them to prioritize sensational content at the expense of depth and accuracy. This aligns with the broader context provided by Van Dijck et al. (2018), who emphasize the competitive nature of platform economies and the pressures on creators to gain visibility.

These creators expressed frustration with TikTok's algorithms, which they said they believe are central to the platform's attention-driven economy. They voiced their struggles with the lack of transparency and guidance on how the algorithm operates. They described feelings of being left in the dark, with no clear understanding of how to manage or adapt to its dynamics.

Creator 40 articulated this sentiment, saying:

It's the algorithm. They don't educate us, and we can't see it. It's intentionally designed to deceive us. Should I use something just because it'll boost the algorithm? Or should I stick to what's popular, risking being lost in oversaturation? There's a pattern one moment, gone the next. I don't stick to a content creation schedule because what works today might not tomorrow. It's like

trying to catch a moving carousel. How am I supposed to keep up?

This highlights the creator's frustration with the opaque and ever-changing nature of TikTok's algorithm. It illustrates a sense of helplessness and confusion they said they experience as they struggle to understand and adapt to the platform's dynamic rules, which seem intentionally designed to be misleading. The analogy of trying to catch a moving carousel underscores the difficulty in maintaining consistent content performance, which they said led to feelings of disorientation and dissatisfaction.

These creators also complained about their inability to anticipate which videos would resonate with viewers due to the algorithm's lack of transparency and unpredictable preferences. Creator 32 said, "TikTok arguably has the most elusive algorithm of all the apps. It's impressive from a viewer's standpoint because it's astonishingly accurate! But from a content creator's perspective, I can never predict which videos will go viral." This shows the creators' frustration with TikTok's algorithm, which many said is highly accurate from a viewer's perspective but unpredictable for content creators. They said this dynamic underscores the difficulty creators face when trying to anticipate which videos will become popular, reflecting their struggle with the lack of transparency and consistency in the algorithm's preferences. They said that this unpredictability adds to the challenge of maintaining engagement and visibility on the platform. Creator 42 recounted their encounter with the algorithm:

I used to care, but I've stopped because there are times when I think, 'Wow, that video did really well, maybe I can replicate it.' But then it just doesn't work the same way. I don't understand the algorithm, and for my mental health, it's better not to obsess over it anymore.

This illustrates the creator's frustration and disillusionment with TikTok's unpredictable algorithm, leading them to prioritize their mental health over trying to manipulate the algorithm for consistent visibility and engagement. Gillespie (2018) and Pasquale (2015) support this by

discussing the lack of transparency in algorithmic processes and its impact on user frustration. Pasquale (2015) examines the "black box" nature of algorithms, where the inner workings are opaque and inaccessible to users, while Gillespie (2018) dives into the broader implications of algorithmic opacity, illustrating how it perpetuates power imbalances and user disempowerment. These studies collectively highlight the psychological toll and ethical dilemmas faced by creators navigating opaque algorithmic systems, tying into Foucault's (2001) concept of madness.

Many creators (36 out of 42) admitted they do not fully understand the intricacies of the algorithm. However, they did express concern about the algorithm favoring sensational content, which they said can influence the type of content users see on their feeds and inadvertently sideline mental health creators striving to provide credible insights and support. Creator 6 raised concerns, stating:

There's pressure to use client relationships as social currency, and then I don't think it works. But I understand, because they want the drama, and TikTok's algorithm rewards that. So if they can spice up, 'Oh, this crazy thing happened in session today,' the algorithm will probably reward it.

They noted that the algorithm prioritizes "engagement" metrics, often driven by audience desires and viewer curiosity. This reveals the ethical and professional challenges mental health creators said they face on TikTok due to the platform's algorithmic preferences. The pressure to sensationalize content by using client relationships as "social currency" highlights a conflict between maintaining professional integrity and conforming to the demands of the algorithm, which rewards dramatic and engaging content. They said this dynamic pushes them to "spice up" their content with sensational elements to gain visibility, even though it might not align with their professional values or the educational purpose of their content. For example, Creator 2 noted: "Now if I go viral, it can't just be like, here's good relationship advice, it's got to be outside of the box, a little weird, unexpected, slightly controversial." This underscores how the

algorithm incentivizes behavior that may compromise the quality and ethical standards of mental health information shared on the platform.

In addition to the creators' experiences, a lot of the TikTok content also focused on sensational topics, often prioritizing attention-grabbing themes over substantive and nuanced discussions. Examples of sensational content in TikTok therapy include creators sharing dramatic and provocative client stories, using clickbait titles, and engaging in controversial or emotionally charged discussions. For instance, some videos highlighted extreme cases of mental health crises, shocking therapeutic interventions, or dramatic personal transformations. One common example involved creators discussing "toxic" relationships or narcissistic abuse in highly dramatized ways, which garnered substantial views and engagement but could be viewed as lacking depth, quality, and professional insight. This phenomenon is discussed by Myers West (2018) and Massanari (2016), who explore the ethical dilemmas faced by creators due to algorithmic pressures to produce sensational content. Myers West (2018) highlights how creators adapt their content to fit platform norms, while Massanari (2016) examines how algorithmic biases can lead to the popularity of toxic content.

Many marginalized creators also expressed that the platform's inclination for superficial content obstructs their efforts to address systemic societal issues. For instance, Creator 19 recounted their experience of being shadow banned while discussing anti-oppression work:

Right now, I think I've been shadow banned for like 6 months. I don't know what it is. If I look back through my feed, there's been 2 things that people like you know, censored like they said the community thought this needed to be censored. And it was just right-wing nut jobs that didn't like me talking about anti-oppression work, whatever.

This illustrates the challenges marginalized creators said they face on TikTok when trying to address systemic societal issues like anti-oppression work. They said the experience of being

shadow banned for discussing such topics highlights the platform's tendency to suppress or censor content that tackles sensitive or controversial issues. They also told me that this suppression is often influenced by backlash from specific groups, in this case, "right-wing nut jobs," which can lead to marginalized voices being silenced. The quote underscores how the algorithmic and moderation biases on TikTok favor superficial content, making it difficult for creators to engage in meaningful discourse on important social matters.

Shadow banning refers to the practice where a user's posts or activities on a social media platform are made less visible or hidden without their knowledge (Rauchberg, 2020). This can occur for various reasons, including violations of community guidelines, the dissemination of misinformation, or engagement in spam-like behavior (Myers West, 2018). Unlike an outright ban, where the user is informed and cannot use the platform, shadow banning allows the user to continue posting and interacting, unaware that their content is being suppressed. The primary effect of shadow banning is a reduction in the visibility of the user's posts, which may not appear in hashtag searches, on followers' feeds, or in the platform's explore section (Rauchberg, 2022). Users might notice a sudden drop in engagement metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, despite no apparent changes in their posting behavior, impacting their ability to reach and interact with their audience effectively (Gillespie, 2018).

Similarly, Creator 2 expressed apprehension about discussing topics like white supremacy, fearing potential banning or shadow banning, "If I say white supremacy or if I say racist, I will most likely be banned or shadow banned." This highlights the fear and self-censorship creators experience when discussing sensitive or controversial topics, such as white supremacy and racism. Creator 2's apprehension about potential banning or shadow banning reveals how the platform's content moderation practices can inhibit open discussion on critical

societal issues. This aligns with neoliberalism's intention to divert attention from critical societal issues, emphasizing individual responsibility without reliance on the state. Creator 3 also elaborated on their experiences with the algorithm, expressing frustration with its preference for surface-level content over more nuanced discussions:

The videos where I discuss capitalism and how most of the people that come to my office are directly impacted by it don't perform as well. The algorithm doesn't seem to favor this heavy content; it prefers the surface-level stuff.

These creators said the fear of being banned or shadow banned creates a chilling effect, discouraging them from addressing important societal and cultural topics and pushing them to produce more engaging but less substantive material to maintain visibility and reach. These experiences highlight the challenges marginalized creators face in using TikTok to address systemic societal issues, as the platform's algorithmic biases and content moderation practices often stifle substantive discussions on important social matters. This situation is addressed in the works of Rauchberg (2022), Gillespie (2018), and Stein (2023) who discuss shadow banning and content suppression. Rauchberg (2022) and Stein (2023) focus on the experiences and content of marginalized creators, highlighting how content moderation practices can silence their voices, while Gillespie (2018) provides a broader framework for understanding the impact of platform moderation on public discourse.

Similar to shadow banning, some creators (30 out of 42) reported experiencing content suppression and flagging. To navigate these challenges, they said they employed tactics like using coded language or "algospeak" in video descriptions and text overlays. One creator replaced "sexually" with "S3ually" to evade automated flagging, illustrating the complexities creators face in balancing visibility with delivering their intended content. This coded substitution exemplifies a broader trend of mental health creators on TikTok engaging in

algospeak strategies to avoid having their videos suppressed or removed due to the platform's content moderation systems.

Klug et al. (2023) explore how creators on TikTok modify their language to navigate the platform's content moderation systems. This phenomenon, known as algospeak, includes strategies such as altering spellings, using euphemisms, substituting characters, phonetic alterations, and employing initials. Like their findings, mental health creators also engaged in algospeak. Common methods include altering the spelling of sensitive words, such as using "s3x" or "seggs" instead of "sex." Creators also employ euphemisms, replacing direct terms with more ambiguous alternatives, like saying "unalive" or "not wanting to be here" instead of "suicide." Another tactic is substituting characters, where certain letters are replaced with numbers or symbols, such as writing "therapy" as "th3rapy." Phonetic alterations are also used, with words like "depression" being written as "dee-pression." Additionally, creators might use initials instead of full words, abbreviating "mental health" to "MH," and "post-traumatic stress disorder" to "PTSD." Some creators said they use algospeak to deliver important information without triggering automated content moderation that could reduce visibility or lead to flagging.

Content suppression refers to actions taken by platforms to limit the visibility of certain posts (Petre, et al., 2019; Wilson, 2017). This can occur manually, where moderators intervene, or automatically, using algorithms to detect and limit the spread of flagged content, which may violate community guidelines, contain misinformation, or be deemed inappropriate (Gillespie 2018). As a result, suppressed posts might not appear prominently in feeds, searches, or recommendations, thus reducing their exposure. Content flagging involves users or automated systems marking content as potentially problematic, triggering a review process. If flagged content is found to violate policies, it may be removed, limited in distribution, or result in

penalties for the account (Myers West, 2018). Despite using algospeak, these creators said that they still believe their content is flagged or removed when they discuss sensitive topics. They said that this issue not only diminishes their visibility but also constrains the type of content they feel they can produce (Myers West, 2018).

From these frustrations, many creators (35/42) told me that they chose to stop attempting to understand the algorithm or tracking metrics entirely. While they acknowledged that this decision could affect their standing within the platform's economic landscape, they talked to me about the importance of prioritizing their own mental well-being over metrics. As they grappled with the demands imposed by algorithms, many creators said that focusing on traditional success metrics led them to experience feelings of stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and overwhelm. Initially motivated by excitement and aspirations for platform growth, these creators expressed that over time, they became frustrated and even described feeling "driven insane" by the relentless pursuit of metrics. Creator 6 elaborated on her experience with tracking and mental health:

When I was working on my book proposal for publishers, I meticulously monitored my progress by creating 3 pieces of content a day for 30 days. This was to demonstrate to potential publishers the growth that could stem from my efforts. Although this approach provided valuable data, it had a negative impact on my mental health. Now, I adopt a more passive approach to tracking, simply glancing at my follower and view counts. I don't delve deeply into the analytics, but if a video has less than 1,000 views, it doesn't bother me. However, seeing a video reach 50,000 views fills me with a sense of accomplishment. There's definitely a feeling of validation associated with the numbers.

This transition not only underscores the impact of platform politics on both content creation and creator well-being but also reflects some creators' attitudes toward metric tracking. It also shows the tension of some creators wanting to protect their own mental health while still feeling fulfilled by gaining visibility and high metrics. As expressed by Creator 5:

I don't want to be solely defined by views. So that was my signal to take a break.

The more I became consumed by these metrics, the more uncomfortable I felt. It made me feel like my value was solely based on views, which isn't true. So when I notice this happening, I take it as a sign to step back.

This also highlights the creator's struggle with being overly focused on metrics, such as views, which led to discomfort and a feeling of being valued solely based on these numbers.

Recognizing the detrimental effect this focus had on their sense of self-worth, the creator decided to take breaks whenever they felt consumed by these metrics. This decision underscores the importance of mental health and self-awareness, illustrating that stepping back is necessary to maintain a healthy balance between content creation and personal well-being. It also reflects a broader concern among creators about the pressures of digital validation and the need to resist being defined by engagement metrics alone.

Similarly, one creator produced a video detailing the detrimental impact of striving to be a "content machine" had on her well-being. This underscores the tension faced by creators as they engage in providing mental health content on TikTok while simultaneously grappling with the platform's role as a trigger or catalyst for their own mental health challenges. This highlights how the pressure to maintain visibility and adhere to algorithmic demands can exacerbate mental health issues for creators who are trying to deliver content they describe as educational and credible. This ties to Foucault's (2001) work on madness by illustrating how the relentless pursuit of metrics and visibility on TikTok can exacerbate mental health issues, echoing his exploration of societal pressures and their role in defining and intensifying experiences of madness.

These experiences align with the literature on the social impacts of metrics (Baym, 2018; Duffy & Sawey, 2021; Evans, 1996; Thorne, 2022). Baym (2018) discusses how metrics-driven environments can shape creators' behaviors and self-perceptions, leading to stress and anxiety that impact their mental health and ability to produce authentic content. Duffy and Sawey (2021) explore the emotional toll of the attention economy on digital content creators, highlighting how

the pressure to maintain visibility and engagement can result in burnout and disillusionment. Evans (1996) examines the broader societal implications of metrics and quantification, suggesting that the emphasis on numerical performance measures can dehumanize professional practices and erode intrinsic motivations, leading to negative psychological outcomes. Thorne (2022) analyzes the algorithmic governance of online platforms, emphasizing how the opaque and constantly changing nature of algorithms creates uncertainty and frustration for creators, exacerbating stress and undermining their ability to plan and execute content strategies effectively. These authors explain the multifaceted impacts of metrics and algorithmic governance on content creators.

In addition to stopping tracking metrics or trying to figure out the algorithms, some creators (15 out of 42) said they opted to decrease their posting frequency or abandon the platform entirely (Alexander, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). According to Alexander (2018), this decision is often driven by the overwhelming pressure and stress associated with maintaining a constant online presence. Alexander discusses how the demands of content creation can lead to burnout and mental health challenges, prompting creators to step back for their well-being. Similarly, Srnicek (2017) explains that the precarious nature of platform labor can push creators to reduce their activity or leave platforms altogether. Srnicek highlights the exploitative dynamics of digital labor, where creators are caught in a cycle of producing content to meet algorithmic demands, often without adequate financial compensation or support, leading to frustration and disillusionment. These authors illustrate how platform politics negatively impact creators' mental health and professional sustainability.

C. **Monetization and Labor**

Monetization strategies on social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram

shape content creation practices and the overall dynamics of these platforms (Duffy, 2017). These avenues incentivize creators to tailor their content to attract views, engagement, and sponsorships (Baym, 2018). Additionally, creators can earn money through brand partnerships and sponsorships, where they collaborate with companies to promote products or services (Cunningham et al., 2016). The labor-intensive nature of maintaining a presence on TikTok, which involves continuous content creation and audience engagement, also plays a crucial role in this dynamic (Abidin, 2015). Monetization and labor dynamics on TikTok directly relate to the argument that the platform's politics undermine the ability of licensed mental health creators to produce truly educational, informative, and credible content.

Drawing on the demographics discussed in Chapter 1 about household income, nearly all creators reported feeling pressured to generate income and maintain visibility, which they said pushes them to prioritize engaging content that aligns with algorithmic preferences. Gillespie (2018) highlights that monetization impacts content creators' decision-making processes, prompting them to prioritize topics and formats with higher revenue potential. Therefore, the economic incentives and labor demands of the platform influence the nature of the content produced.

At the time of writing, TikTok provides several monetization tools and features for creators to earn income from their content and audience on the platform. The TikTok Creator Fund allows eligible creators to monetize their content based on video views and engagement metrics. To qualify, creators must be at least 18 years old, reside in the U.S., have a minimum of 10,000 authentic followers, accumulate at least 100,000 video views in the last 30 days, and adhere to TikTok's Community Guidelines (TikTok, 2024a). The Creator Marketplace acts as a hub connecting creators with brands and users for collaboration opportunities, where creators can

browse campaigns, apply for membership, and receive invitations from brands (TikTok, 2024b).

During LIVE streams, viewers can purchase virtual LIVE Gifts as appreciation for creators, with these gifts contributing directly to the creator's earnings. For regular video uploads, viewers can purchase virtual Video Gifts to support creators, and creators receive a portion of the revenue from these gifts based on the quantity and value received. Creators can also enable a tipping feature, allowing followers to send direct monetary tips ranging from a few dollars to larger amounts (TikTok, 2024c). Additionally, some creators sell branded merchandise like apparel and accessories through TikTok, earning a percentage of the sales revenue.

To participate in certain monetization programs like Video Gifts and Tips, creators must opt into TikTok Creator Next, be at least 18 years old, have over 100,000 followers, maintain an active account, and comply with TikTok's guidelines (TikTok, 2024d). These monetization options provide creators with various avenues to earn income based on their content performance, audience engagement, brand collaborations, and merchandise sales on the TikTok platform.

Building on the demographics about household income in Chapter 1 and the motivations discussed in Chapter 3, 36 out of 42 creators indicated they produce content to supplement their income and to offer pro bono services and start programs to provide therapy on a larger scale. Interestingly, only three creators expressed a desire to become niche thought leaders. Of these, only one told me they aim to transition to full-time content creation, while only two said they seek therapy fame similar to figures like Brené Brown or Esther Perel. Most creators (38/42) emphasized their commitment to maintaining their full-time roles as therapists rather than shifting to full-time content creation. They said they believe it is crucial to remain actively involved in therapy practice, noting that producing mental health content would lack credibility

without ongoing engagement in therapeutic work. Nonetheless, these creators said they still engage in or aspire to engage in revenue-generating activities such as sponsored content, partnerships, and product sales that align with their professional ethics.

Despite the various monetization opportunities available on TikTok, most creators (38 out of 42) reported earning less than \$100 per month from the platform. They told me their earnings from the TikTok Creator Fund typically range from \$0.01 to \$0.02 per 1,000 views. This translates to a video with 1 million views potentially earning only \$10 to \$20. These creators expressed significant dissatisfaction with TikTok's compensation practices, arguing that they lead to inadequate direct compensation, which undermines their economic stability. Creator 5 stated, "TikTok pays me 2 cents for every 1,000 views. Yeah, not nearly enough to sustain oneself, I believe." Similarly, Creator 20 shared, "So I had a video, it got a million views, and I got \$50. It was like, \$50 right, gas money, cool, you know, but for the amount of time and effort I put into it, it didn't match."

These creators also told me they doubted the efficacy and transparency of TikTok's compensation programs. Creator 1 expressed skepticism, stating, "My own Creator Fund earnings stopped, and I've only made around \$50 altogether." Creator 28 lamented TikTok's meager financial compensation, remarking, "I mean the Creator Fund, but it's like, 'oh, you get 10 cents a day.' I think, after you know, millions of views in several years, I got like \$200 to \$300. Yeah, like the Creator Fund was shit." Creator 39 also exemplified this sentiment with her experience in the Creator Fund, stating:

It's up to like \$35 maybe, and then like, it tricks you because, when I signed up for it, I got in like right away, which I was like, 'Oh, okay!' The first couple of days it was like \$4 a day. And I was like, 'oh, this makes me feel like it could add up.' Then I go and I get the one video that hits a million. And I'm like, 'oh, that's definitely got to impact it right?' And it's just like, no, it's like 7 cents.

These creators told me they would like transparency regarding how payments from the TikTok Creator Fund are calculated and distributed, seeking a clearer understanding of the algorithms and criteria used to determine earnings.

They also said that TikTok's policies perpetuate unequal power dynamics and fail to provide the financial stability and recognition they deserve. Despite hopes for higher earnings from viral videos, many creators reported receiving minimal payments, often just a few cents per video. They told me they face challenges in earning sufficient income commensurate with their time and expertise, with nearly all stating that even if they wanted to pursue content creation full-time, it would be infeasible due to the minimal compensation. They said that relying solely on content creation for income is simply not a viable option for them. For instance, Creator 28 emphasized the stress of depending solely on TikTok for income, stating, "I could never have this be my sole source of income like it would be so so stressful. Way too stressful!" Similarly, Creator 5 said, "When I was posting regularly, I made about a thousand dollars in one year. So, even with multiple videos garnering over a million views, I don't think it's enough to rely on as a full-time income, definitely."

These creators also expressed a desire for support for professional and ethical content, urging TikTok to implement policies that foster the creation of educational, informative, and credible material. They emphasized the need for TikTok to recognize and adequately financially compensate for professional expertise. Additionally, creators called for improved verification and recognition systems to authenticate the credentials of licensed professionals and distinguish their content from that of unlicensed individuals, ensuring compensation reflects their professional qualifications. Many creators mentioned they would be content with earning rates comparable to what they charge per hour for their therapy sessions when creating content. This

concern aligns with Srnicek's (2017) analysis of platform capitalism and digital labor dynamics, which highlights the exploitative nature of content creation on platforms like TikTok. Srnicek (2017) discusses how creators are often trapped in a cycle of producing content to meet algorithmic demands without receiving adequate financial support. This analysis underscores the broader systemic issues within digital labor, where economic incentives frequently fail to match the creators' expertise and efforts.

Building upon their motivations for creating content from Chapter 3, creators' frustration reflects broader concerns about the dual exploitation they face both within their professional field and as creators on TikTok. Many creators (37/42) said they feel exploited in their roles as mental health professionals, facing systemic issues like low pay, high workloads, and inadequate support. They also said this sense of exploitation extends to their experiences on TikTok, where they encounter opaque and unfair compensation practices that fail to reward their time, expertise, and effort adequately. For instance, Creator 39's experience with the Creator Fund underscores this dual exploitation. She initially expected substantial earnings but was disappointed by minimal returns, stating, "It's just ridiculous. And so, the way that I'm looking at it is absolutely exploitation which is frustrating because my entire field is exploitative." This dual exploitation underscores how creators must navigate both the challenges of their professional roles and the additional burden of securing fair compensation on digital platforms.

These exploitations and their experiences with direct compensation from TikTok align with Duffy's (2017) concept of aspirational labor, which involves curating content, building an online persona, and engaging in networking and self-promotion to enhance social and cultural status, often without financial compensation. While aspirational labor promises personal fulfillment and empowerment, it perpetuates unequal power dynamics by often remaining

unrecognized and unrewarded, especially in digital and creative fields where monetization prospects are uncertain. Compensation and monetization from TikTok often result in minimal earnings for creators. They said this can influence their content creation practices by pushing them to prioritize high-engagement content over substantive quality to achieve financial viability. Overall, they said they would like TikTok to evolve its monetization policies to better support creators, ensuring fair compensation, transparency, and recognition of professional expertise.

Brand deals and sponsorships are a significant aspect of monetization on TikTok, directly tied to the platform politics that influence content creation. These partnerships can push creators to produce content that aligns with brand expectations and audience engagement metrics, which can be at odds with the creators' original educational and professional goals. For instance, a mental health creator might feel pressured to sensationalize their topics to attract brand deals, which can dilute the quality and integrity of their educational content.

In addition to exploring direct monetization options on TikTok, 33 out of 42 creators expressed concerns regarding conventional brand collaborations and sponsorships, particularly emphasizing the ethical challenges linked to monetizing mental health-related content. These creators said they would not risk accepting brand deals that could potentially jeopardize their professional licenses or credibility. They said that accepting brand deals could compromise their trustworthiness and credibility, especially when addressing sensitive topics within mental health. Consequently, they told me they are reluctant to accept such deals. Creator 1 articulated her stance, stating, "I'll receive requests for brand deals for products related and unrelated to mental health, and I won't accept or promote them due to my professional ethics."

These creators almost unanimously reported prioritizing integrity, ethics, and alignment

with their values over mere financial gain. Creator 34 exemplified this approach by detailing her method for assessing potential sponsorships, explaining:

I have been asked to sponsor a few products, and my decision process includes whether it is something I would personally use or that my clientele would find helpful. Another consideration is whether I want to be associated with the brand. I look at their website to see if they feature diversity, such as people of color, women, individuals with natural hair, and different body types. If the answers to these checks are no, then I decline the sponsorship.

Similarly, Creator 5 explained her refusal to collaborate with brands that do not resonate with her audience's demographic or values, stating:

When I first started, numerous CBD companies, sex toy vendors, water bottle brands, and many gummy vitamin manufacturers approached me for collaborations. However, I never considered working with them, especially considering the youthful demographic of my audience. It's just not appropriate, regardless of my personal inclinations.

Due to this, these creators explained that their professional ethics and licensing obligations often limit their opportunities for brand partnerships. They said that their commitment to maintaining ethical standards restricts the types of brands they can collaborate with. Additionally, they said that brands may hesitate to partner with them due to the potential risks associated with aligning their brand with mental health topics. Consequently, they told me they face challenges in securing brand partnerships compared to creators in other niches or traditional influencers. This aligns with Banet-Weiser's (2012) research on the politics of visibility and branding in the digital age, which examines how branding and sponsorships can impact the integrity and quality of educational content. Banet-Weiser's (2012) work highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by creators when monetizing content, as commercial interests often conflict with maintaining professional integrity and the educational value of their material.

Monetization through TikTok, whether directly via the platform or through potential

brand deals and sponsorships, is inherently labor-intensive. Nearly all creators (37 out of 42) said that balancing audience engagement on TikTok, especially as their follower count grows and they manage full-time jobs concurrently, constitutes a significant form of labor. As Creator 28 said, "For comments, I will respond to a few, but I don't respond to all of them. I simply don't have the time or energy." Creator 25 echoed these sentiments, highlighting the guilt and stress associated with not being able to respond to all comments as their audience expanded:

I respond to every single comment. And at first that was completely sustainable. And then, when I had 3 videos go big at once, I had a panic attack, because I had already put the sense of obligation and pressure on me to do that. I had many people ask why I cared, why that mattered. But I'm here for that individual connection—part of my platform is making people feel seen, heard, and validated. I'm not here just to share a message and bask in thousands watching. With all those comments, it felt like using people for views. I had one day where I responded to comments for 16 hours.

The creator's experience of spending 16 hours in a day responding to comments illustrates the labor-intensive nature of maintaining an online presence and the emotional challenges involved.

The concept of "microcelebrity" is useful for understanding this phenomenon. Scholars use the term "microcelebrity" to analyze how content creators cultivate an ever-present, accessible persona across digital spaces, reflecting the influence of social media platforms on content creation strategies and the labor involved in maintaining an active online presence. Gamson (2011) discusses how microcelebrities leverage their personal lives to engage with their audience, blurring the lines between public and private spheres. He emphasizes that this practice requires a continuous performance of authenticity and relatability to maintain their follower base and visibility. Marwick (2013) and Marwick & boyd (2011) explore the dynamics of microcelebrity culture, highlighting the pressures creators face to remain constantly visible and engaged with their audience. They argue that this visibility involves strategic self-branding and interaction with followers to foster intimacy and loyalty. Senft (2008, 2013) elaborates on the

performative aspects of social media presence, noting that microcelebrities must continuously negotiate their identity and audience expectations, which requires emotional and cognitive labor. Senft (2008, 2013) underscores that the demand for constant interaction and the maintenance of an online persona can lead to burnout and other mental health challenges. Collectively, these scholars illustrate that the role of microcelebrity involves ongoing engagement, personal branding, and managing audience expectations, which are direct consequences of platform dynamics prioritizing visibility and engagement, thereby shaping creators' approach to their online presence.

These creators said they do not have the time or energy to keep up with the frequency posting expectations. They said they assumed the platform expects them to post frequently, reflecting an "algorithmic imaginary." An "algorithmic imaginary," as described by Gillespie (2014), refers to the conceptual framework through which people perceive, understand, and interact with algorithms and algorithmic systems in their daily lives. This concept encompasses the beliefs, expectations, and assumptions individuals and societies hold about how algorithms function, their purposes, and their impacts on various aspects of life. It highlights how creators' perceptions of platform algorithms shape their content production strategies and contribute to the pressures they experience in maintaining an active presence on social media. Creator 27 expressed this sentiment about her relationship with the algorithm:

People have been telling me, 'Yeah, you have to post every day, and if you stop, they stop pushing your videos.' That's what my daughter said—my teenager was like, 'You gotta post every day. If you could post a couple times a day, that'd be great, Mom, but you have to post at least once every day.' And I'd be like, 'I might as well quit, I don't have the capacity for that.'

Maintaining an active presence and cultivating an audience on social media often extends far beyond just creating content itself. This concept is also explored by Cotter (2019), who examines

how creators' perceptions of platform algorithms shape their content production strategies and contribute to the pressures they experience. Cotter's work on the "algorithmic imaginary" is essential for understanding the creators' belief that frequent posting is necessary for maintaining visibility.

Building upon the motivations for content creation discussed in Chapter 3, some creators (29/42) said they found themselves needing to develop professional branding and marketing strategies, essentially taking on another full-time job in addition to being a mental health practitioner. These creators talked to me about the necessity of or desire to eventually hire dedicated social media managers to assist with these ancillary tasks due to time constraints. Creator 32 disclosed relying on two friends to help manage his TikTok account and engage with brands:

It's not that hard for me to manage again, because I have Shawn. If I didn't have Shawn it would be a whole other answer. If I didn't have Shawn I would be streaming on Twitch, and that's about it. I would not have a YouTube channel or TikTok. I wouldn't have any of this stuff. So he helps a lot with managing that. My friend Jared does a lot of brand interfacing for me as well, so that helps too.

For these creators, they said that they believe that building and maintaining an online presence requires a whole team of personnel to manage content creation, audience engagement, marketing, and more—highlighting just how labor-intensive and multifaceted running social media accounts has become. This aligns with Cunningham and Craig's (2019) research on social media entertainment, which highlights the professionalization of content creation, where creators develop business strategies and collaborate with a team to manage their brand. This is shown as some mental health creators on TikTok, in particular, said they need to hire social media managers and engage in brand interfacing to sustain their presence.

Overall, many creators discussed the labor-intensive nature of TikTok, noting that the

platform demands constant content production and audience engagement, which can lead to burnout and influence their content creation practices. This observation aligns with Baym's (2018) research on relational labor, which explores how digital content creators build and maintain relationships with their audiences. This labor includes interacting with followers, managing comments, and producing consistent content, which can be overwhelming and lead to burnout. Creators highlighted that content creation requires significant time and effort, often necessitating additional support and resulting in substantial emotional and cognitive demands.

D. Content Moderation and Policy

At the time of writing, TikTok explains its content moderation processes as a combination of automated technology and human moderators to enforce their Community Guidelines. According to their website, videos uploaded to TikTok are initially reviewed by automated moderation technology that checks for potential violations by analyzing various signals, including keywords, images, titles, descriptions, and audio. If the system identifies content as potentially violating the guidelines, it either automatically removes it or flags it for further review by human moderators. This approach aims to quickly remove clear-cut violations, such as nudity or youth safety issues, while more ambiguous cases are reviewed by human moderators who consider additional context and nuance (TikTok, 2024e). Human moderators also handle reports from the community and review popular content that may pose a risk. If users believe their content was removed incorrectly, they can appeal the decision, which will be reviewed by the moderation team. TikTok's moderation efforts are supported by partnerships with external safety organizations and a network of over 400 specialized groups to enhance platform safety and develop forward-looking guidelines (TikTok, 2024e; TikTok, 2024f).

According to their website, the verification process on TikTok involves several steps to

ensure that accounts meet specific criteria for authenticity and notability. To get verified, users need to prove their notability, which can be supported by having a large following, being a recognized public figure, or having significant media coverage. Verification requests can be submitted through TikTok's verification request form, where users provide details such as their username and relevant documentation to prove their identity and notability (TikTok, 2024h). For business verification, TikTok requires businesses to submit verification documents through the TikTok Ads Manager. This process includes providing a digital copy of a business verification document, such as a business license or certification number, to authenticate the identity of advertisers and businesses on the platform (TikTok, 2024g).

TikTok claims that its verification and content moderation processes aim to ensure the authenticity and credibility of accounts. However, many creators (33 out of 42) expressed frustration with TikTok's content moderation and verification processes, citing struggles with verification, safety issues, and ethical concerns.

One major challenge these creators said they face is the absence of clear guidelines and verification systems on TikTok for licensed professionals. They told me these challenges include the lack of specific instructions for licensed creators about what content is appropriate and how to maintain ethical standards online. Additionally, they said there is an absence of a system to verify the schooling or licensing of creators, making it difficult to establish credibility and trust. They said the lack of clear guidelines exacerbates concerns related to maintaining ethical standards and confidentiality, as these creators struggle to determine what is acceptable to share. Creator 37 explained, "Without clear guidelines, it's hard to know if I'm crossing any lines ethically, and that uncertainty affects the content I produce as I want to be educational and entertaining." Furthermore, these creators said they feel pressured by the platform's algorithms to

produce engaging, popular content, complicating their efforts to uphold professional standards. They said they strive to uphold the same ethical standards online as they do in their therapy practice. However, they said the uncertainty about what is acceptable to share and how to maintain these standards online poses a challenge, as there are no consistent guidelines or parameters. Creator 7 underscored this issue by pointing out the vague ethical standards of professional associations regarding content creation:

Different associations have different ethics on this. The National Association of Social Workers is very vague and overarching. So I kind of try to just hold to those values, you know, holding human dignity at a high regard and not doing any harm.

They said that the lack of clear guidelines for online content can lead to potential ethical breaches as they navigate the ambiguous digital landscape. These creators expressed concerns that this regulatory gap can also lead to a lower quality of mental health-related content on the platform, potentially spreading inaccurate information and undermining the credibility and safety of the content available to users.

Despite the absence of consistent guidelines from mental health associations, these creators noted that it is relatively easy to access someone's license information and contact their professional board, which can function as a potential mechanism for accountability for licensed practitioners. However, they also said that TikTok needs better models to properly recognize licensed professionals who provide expert content. They indicated that the lack of clear guidelines and proper recognition impacts their ability to navigate content guidelines, affecting their content creation practices and overall platform experience. Improved regulatory frameworks are crucial, they said, to ensure that licensed mental health professionals can provide safe, accurate, and ethical content.

Playing into verification issues are the differences between licensed practitioners and

unlicensed mental health creators, such as coaches. These creators (38 out of 42) discussed the disparity between licensed professionals and unlicensed individuals, noting that the latter do not face the same level of regulation through ethics boards and professional associations. In one video, a creator names her degrees and training while calling out "healers and trauma coaches." Without proper recognition or verification, creators said their efforts to distinguish themselves from non-professionals, such as life coaches, are hindered. Creator 16 highlighted the unethical practices of unlicensed coaches by saying:

I could talk for a whole other hour about the unethical, unlicensed, unregulated coaches, making very dangerous content, full of misinformation. It is crazy... I think there should definitely be regulation around that... Coaches will go on there and be like, 'if you pay \$300 to take my class, you will learn how to regulate your nervous system, and you'll have perfect relationships, and you'll make money, and your whole life will be amazing.' It's like these grandiose promises where any real therapist will be like, 'we can't promise you any of that like. That's not realistic.'

Creator 12 echoed this sentiment, stating, "It's really disheartening to see how much misleading information is out there. As licensed professionals, we have a responsibility to ensure people are getting accurate advice, but it's tough when unlicensed individuals can say whatever they want without repercussions. There needs to be more oversight and accountability." They said this lack of regulation can lead to the dissemination of inaccurate or harmful information, with content from unlicensed creators potentially being perceived as equally valid by both platform algorithms and users. Creator 15 stated, "It's frustrating to see unlicensed coaches gain the same visibility as trained professionals. This undermines our credibility and misleads users seeking reliable mental health information."

In addition to the blending of licensed and unlicensed creators, many also mentioned that it is nearly impossible to get officially verified. Creator 16 expressed, "I've applied for verification multiple times and keep getting denied with no clear reason. It feels like the system

is working against us, and it's incredibly frustrating not knowing what more we need to do to get recognized." They shared experiences of repeated verification denials without clear reasons, which adds to their frustration and challenges in gaining credibility on the platform. Creator 34 also highlighted this issue by saying, "There are licensed mental health creators who have hundreds of thousands of followers who cannot get verified, and it makes no sense. It's wild. So that's really confusing." They said these experiences underscore broader systemic issues within TikTok's verification system, reflecting the need for more transparent and specialized guidelines for verification.

This issue is fundamentally a platform policy problem rather than merely a regulatory issue within the mental health field. It highlights the systemic challenges arising from TikTok's lack of clear and consistent guidelines for all creators, particularly licensed professionals. TikTok's policies influence how content is created and perceived, affecting both licensed and unlicensed creators. The platform's failure to distinguish between different levels of professional expertise and to provide appropriate recognition and support for licensed professionals can compromise the quality and reliability of information available to users.

This situation exemplifies governmentality, where power is exercised through the regulation of individuals' behavior and self-governance. By promoting the idea that anyone can be an expert, TikTok shifts the responsibility onto individuals to discern the credibility of information. This approach aligns with neoliberal principles, emphasizing self-regulation and personal responsibility over collective oversight and state intervention. Platforms like TikTok shape and control public discourse by decentralizing expertise and placing the burden of judgment on the individual user. This process influences how knowledge and authority are perceived and validated, blurring the lines between professional and amateur content. Ultimately,

it prioritizes market-driven solutions and individual responsibility over collective regulation. Therefore, the call for better regulatory frameworks and clearer guidelines is not just about regulating the mental health field but about ensuring that platform policies adequately support and differentiate between content creators based on their qualifications and the type of content they produce.

In addition to verification issues, many creators with large followings (15 out of 42) reported facing safety issues on TikTok, including legal threats, personal safety concerns, and online harassment. These creators emphasized the importance of improved safety protocols and ethical standards in disseminating mental health information responsibly, particularly given the challenges posed by online trolls. Creator 16 shared the harsh reality of these online interactions, by saying:

People on the Internet are really mean. It's definitely like the downside to being visible online, and it is something that I've struggled with. I actually deleted my entire online presence in 2022 because I was so stressed out about it, and then I took like a 6-month break or 9-month break or something, and then I came back and rebuilt my whole platform.

This underscores the impact of online negativity, sometimes pushing creators to temporarily withdraw from their work to protect their mental health. These creators said they think TikTok has a responsibility to address these safety issues through comprehensive policy measures. They said that the platform must implement and enforce safety protocols to protect creators from harassment, threats, and other harmful interactions. Since they were frustrated by the lack of guidelines, they said that TikTok's policies should include clear guidelines for addressing harassment, mechanisms for reporting and quickly responding to threats, and support systems for creators facing severe online abuse. By failing to provide these protections, they told me that TikTok risks the well-being of its creators, making it imperative for the platform to prioritize and

enhance safety measures to foster a secure and supportive environment for all users. Creator 2 also explained the risks associated with viral content reaching hostile audiences:

The worst is when it clearly ends up on the wrong side of TikTok. You want your videos to all go viral, but there is a price to pay because it'll end up somewhere else on like, you know, Bible TikTok or conservative TikTok or something like that. That's when there can be death threats. Even just a couple weeks ago when my Jonah Hill thing went viral, there were a bunch of death threats that I got being like, it's problematic that I'm defending Sarah, his ex. Someone said if I ever saw you on the street, I would kill you. So it's weird that I'm just doing my job. I'm getting death threats at my job.

This highlights the severe safety issues faced by creators on TikTok, emphasizing the potential for viral content to attract hostile and dangerous reactions. It shows how creators can receive death threats and other forms of harassment when their videos reach audiences with differing or opposing views, such as those on "Bible TikTok" or "conservative TikTok." The creator's experience of receiving death threats for merely defending someone illustrates the risks and emotional toll associated with visibility on the platform. It also underscores the need for enhanced safety measures and support for creators to protect them from the real-world dangers that accompany their online presence.

In addition to online threats, sometimes this moves to threats in-person as well. Creator 20 shared her experience with threatening letters:

In 2021, I had a stalker, which was really scary. To protect my privacy, I used a PO BOX for my private practice, but they still sent letters. I noticed similar usernames leaving hateful, body-shaming comments online that were similar to the letters. It got to the point where I felt the need to ensure my actual address wasn't on the Internet due to the alarming nature of the threats. That's the level it got to.

This account highlights the impact of online harassment and the real-world dangers it can pose to creators. Despite taking precautions like using a PO BOX to protect her physical address, the creator still faced stalking and alarming threats. These creators said these situations underscore

TikTok's failure to provide adequate support and safety measures for them. They all said that TikTok did not take sufficient action to address these serious concerns, leaving them to manage the situation independently. They said the platform's policies should include better measures for dealing with harassment, stalking, and threats, providing clear guidelines for reporting such incidents and ensuring timely and effective responses. They said the lack of intervention from TikTok in their cases demonstrates a failure to protect its creators from online abuse, emphasizing the urgent need for improved safety protocols and support systems to safeguard creators' well-being.

In addition to safety issues, many creators (31 out of 42) highlighted the ethical and potential legal ramifications of being on TikTok, as it is not clear what they can and cannot do as licensed professionals. A significant issue discussed was the ethics of conducting LIVE sessions. These creators emphasized that going LIVE could be unethical and risky. Creator 19 stressed the need for strict measures to safeguard user privacy and uphold ethical principles during LIVE sessions, saying:

I have seen some therapists go LIVE and have people post questions to them on the LIVE. To me, it is massively unethical, and professionally, you would probably lose your license. But you should lose your license if you did that. Online therapy through TikTok, I mean, breach of confidentiality for one thing, but also super dangerous. So I would never go LIVE in that way.

A notable case illustrating these concerns involved TherapyJessa, a licensed mental health practitioner who went LIVE on TikTok. During these sessions, she engaged directly with viewers, answering personal questions and offering advice. While this approach was popular with viewers, it raised ethical and legal questions. Ultimately, TherapyJessa was reported to her licensing board, with complaints focusing on potential breaches of confidentiality and the appropriateness of providing real-time therapeutic advice in a public forum. This incident

underscores the balance licensed mental health practitioners must maintain between engaging with their audience and adhering to professional standards that protect client confidentiality and uphold ethical guidelines. These creators told me that TikTok's lack of clear policies for licensed professionals exacerbates these issues, creating a precarious environment where creators must navigate ethical and legal minefields without adequate guidance. They said these situations highlight the need for TikTok to implement clearer, more stringent guidelines to support licensed professionals in maintaining ethical standards while using the platform.

E. Discussion/Main Argument

In this chapter, I argue that TikTok's platform politics compel licensed mental health creators to prioritize engagement metrics, resulting in sensationalized content that compromises educational rigor, credibility, and professional integrity. Consequently, this dynamic distorts the quality of mental health education on the platform, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility while neglecting the need for systemic change and collective action. Moreover, these challenges are exacerbated by inadequate financial compensation, opaque monetization models, and labor-intensive demands, which contribute to a sense of exploitation and frustration among creators. In addition, the lack of clear guidelines and verification systems for licensed professionals further complicates their efforts to maintain ethical standards and establish credibility, while safety issues and harassment add to the difficulties they face.

Addressing these issues requires comprehensive measures, including clearer regulatory frameworks, improved verification processes, and enhanced safety protocols to create a more equitable and supportive environment for mental health creators on TikTok. These interconnected challenges reflect broader trends of individualism and market-driven logic, emphasizing self-reliance over systemic solutions.

A significant concern is the potential spread of misinformation. With many creators posting mental health content, there is a risk of inaccurate or misleading information being widely shared. Additionally, the limitations of providing mental health support on social media are apparent, as the short-form video format constrains addressing complex mental health topics comprehensively. Therefore, TikTok lacks a system to verify mental health professionals and moderate potentially harmful content. The need for better content moderation and verification is critical to ensure the dissemination of accurate and helpful information.

Mental health creators must constantly adapt to TikTok's evolving features and content distribution methods to maintain their reach and impact. By acknowledging and addressing these multifaceted challenges, there is potential to improve the environment for mental health education on TikTok. Thus, implementing comprehensive regulatory frameworks, enhancing verification processes, and establishing robust safety protocols are necessary steps toward creating a more equitable and supportive space for mental health creators. Ultimately, these measures are essential for mitigating the adverse effects of platform politics and ensuring the delivery of credible and educational mental health content.

Furthermore, the influence of TikTok's platform politics can be understood through Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, and regimes of truth. Governmentality describes how the platform governs the behavior of creators by setting norms and expectations that prioritize engagement metrics. Biopower, the regulation of populations through subtle and dispersed forms of control, is evident in how TikTok shapes the discourse around mental health by promoting content that aligns with neoliberal values of self-management and personal responsibility. The regime of truth refers to the construction and validation of knowledge, which TikTok influences by determining which types of mental health content are visible and deemed

credible. This curation process often favors sensationalized material over educational rigor, reflecting Foucault's notion of madness by marginalizing content that challenges the dominant discourse. These Foucauldian concepts illuminate the complex ways in which TikTok's platform politics shape mental health education, prioritizing certain narratives and behaviors while undermining the potential for systemic critique and collective action.

Building on earlier chapters, this discussion highlights the continuation of key themes such as the commodification and sensationalization of mental health content, and the impact of platform politics on content quality and creator integrity. Previous chapters have shown how TikTok's attention-driven economy and neoliberal ideologies influence content creation, visibility, and reception. This chapter advances the overall argument by detailing how these dynamics specifically affect licensed mental health creators, emphasizing the broader trends of individualism and market-driven logic. The argument connects back to the foundational discussion on how media and technology have shaped the industry and cultural production of therapy, specifically through TikTok Therapy (TherapyTok).

V. PERFORMING CREDIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY ON TIKTOK: STRATEGIES OF MENTAL HEALTH CREATORS

A. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms like TikTok can influence public discourse and shape perceptions through user-generated content. A key aspect often overlooked is how professionals, such as licensed mental health creators, establish credibility on these platforms. This chapter explores this process, drawing on insights from the methodology outlined in Chapter 1. By analyzing 150 TikTok videos and conducting 42 interviews with active mental health creators, the chapter addresses the research question: How do licensed mental health creators on TikTok establish credibility? Creators' motivations, defined as their reasons for creating and sharing content (such as providing education, building a personal brand, or connecting with others), drive their presence on TikTok. Performance strategies, on the other hand, refer to the specific techniques, tactics, and methods used to perform credibility. These strategies include things like disclosing personal qualifications, simplifying complex concepts, and employing audiovisual effects to attract and retain an audience. While motivations focus on the "why" of content creation, performance strategies concentrate on the "how," encompassing practical approaches to achieve desired outcomes on the platform.

Central to this chapter is Turner's concept of the "demotic turn" (2010), which emphasizes the growing visibility of ordinary individuals in media over elite culture. This shift highlights how everyday people gain prominence in media representations, transforming media landscapes to focus more on relatable, personal experiences rather than traditional elite figures. Goffman's self-presentation theory (1959) complements this by dividing interactions into front stage (where individuals consciously manage their self-presentation) and backstage (where they can relax and be their authentic selves). Together, these theories provide a framework for

understanding how mental health creators on TikTok craft their online personas to build credibility with their audiences. The rise of "celetoids" – individuals who gain fame by sharing their personal lives (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006) – further illustrates how creators strategically manage their online identities. These "celetoids" use personal narratives to attract attention and build a following, mirroring how mental health creators on TikTok engage with their audiences by sharing aspects of their personal and professional lives. By engaging with everyday cultural phenomena, these creators reflect broader societal values and norms, enhancing their perceived authenticity and reliability.

Marwick (2013) expands on this by examining how social media platforms influence self-presentation. She explores how users consciously curate their online personas to fit the expectations of their audience, a practice that is critical for maintaining credibility. Scholars like Gamson (2011), Hearn (2008), Marwick and Boyd (2011), and Senft (2008) delve into microcelebrity, analyzing how individuals cultivate and manage their online personas to gain and maintain fame in the digital age. These studies highlight the labor and strategy involved in presenting oneself as both relatable and authoritative online. Abidin (2015, 2018) focuses on influencer cultures, examining how influencers engage with their followers to build strong online personas. Her work reveals the nuanced strategies influencers use to maintain their visibility and influence, which are applicable to mental health creators striving to establish credibility on platforms like TikTok.

Building upon this body of work, research on professionals as content creators on social media is integral to this discussion. Stein et al. (2022) examined how obstetrician-gynecologist (OBGYN) professionals on TikTok present themselves as both credible health professionals and relatable individuals. Their study shows that these videos depict health professionals in a

multifaceted way, balancing professionalism with relatability. This balance is crucial for establishing trust and credibility with their audience. Maddox (2022) introduces the concept of the knowledge influencer, referring to individuals who leverage their microcelebrity status by sharing expertise derived from their primary occupation. Maddox highlights how these individuals use social media to share their professional knowledge while engaging with a broad audience. The notion of calibrated expertise, where experts utilize social media affordances and platform dynamics alongside their primary occupation to convey information effectively, is particularly relevant. This performance strategy enables professionals to maintain credibility while adapting to the demands and opportunities of social media platforms.

Using Stein (2022) and Maddox's (2022) work together provides a comprehensive framework to analyze how mental health creators establish credibility online. Stein's (2022) concept of balancing professionalism with relatability will help examine how creators present themselves as both knowledgeable experts and approachable individuals. Maddox's (2022) notion of calibrated expertise will be used to understand how these creators leverage their professional background while adapting their content to fit the platform's dynamics and audience expectations. By combining these approaches, this analysis will reveal the strategies mental health creators use to perform credibility.

Thus, I situate this chapter within the literature on influencer cultures, framed by the critical perspectives of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2019; McChesney, 2001) and therapeutic culture (Illouz, 2017; Cloud, 1998; Madsen, 2014). This critical lens helps to understand the broader societal and cultural dynamics influencing the phenomenon of TherapyTok.

According to established literature on therapeutic approaches, effective therapy relies on

therapists maintaining professionalism to build trust while also forming personal connections with clients within appropriate boundaries. Bennett (2005) and Howe (1993) emphasize that achieving this balance involves selectively sharing personal experiences or emotions to deepen rapport while upholding professionalism and objectivity. Bennett (2005) further elaborates that this selective sharing can enhance the therapeutic alliance, while Hubble, Duncan, and Miller (2006) note that maintaining this balance is crucial for effective therapy.

Expanding on this notion, mental health creators on TikTok employ categorized performance strategies to achieve a similar balance. Using Maddox's (2022) framework, these strategies are organized as information dissemination, relationship establishment, and personal/emotional communication. By analyzing the tactics they employ in their content creation, this discussion offers insights into how mental health creators navigate the pressures of personal branding and behind-the-scenes revelations.

B. Performance Strategies of Mental Health Creators

1. Information Sharing

The use of calibrated expertise, as defined by Maddox (2022), is a key performance strategy for establishing credibility and expertise online. By strategically presenting their qualifications and knowledge, creators craft an online persona that conveys authority, professionalism, and reliability within their specific field. This is achieved through the careful curation of content that highlights their expertise, active engagement with followers to build trust, and the consistent establishment of themselves as credible sources of information and advice. Adopting the role of a "knowledge influencer," as articulated by Maddox (2022), allows these professionals to leverage their microcelebrity status to disseminate specialized knowledge to a wider audience. They share their professional insights in a manner that reinforces their

expertise and reliability. This performance of credibility is further enhanced by using platform affordances like hashtags, video responses, and interactive content to engage directly with their audience, demonstrating their knowledge in real-time and solidifying their authority in the eyes of their followers.

In contrast, Abidin's (2017) concept of calibrated amateurism focuses on positioning oneself as an approachable and relatable non-expert, despite possessing significant knowledge or skills. This strategic self-presentation aims to foster connections with audiences who might be more comfortable engaging with someone perceived as less authoritative. The performance of calibrated amateurism emphasizes accessibility and relatability, making the creator appear more like a peer than an expert.

The key difference between these two performances lies in their intentions and presentations. Calibrated expertise is about showcasing professional competence and authority, thus reinforcing the creator's credibility as an expert. On the other hand, calibrated amateurism is about creating a sense of approachability and relatability, making the creator appear more accessible and less intimidating. Both strategies involve careful and deliberate self-presentation on digital platforms but serve different purposes and cater to different audience perceptions. The performance of credibility through calibrated expertise reassures audiences of the creator's professional reliability, while calibrated amateurism seeks to build a more personal and relatable connection.

Similar to the OBGYN TikTok doctors examined by Stein et al. (2022), many mental health creators on TikTok combine both approaches. They present themselves as credible experts in their field while also appearing as relatable everyday people. This dual strategy helps them navigate the pressures of personal branding and performing credibility online through a blend of

authority and relatability.

2. Verbally Disclose Qualifications

One key strategy employed by mental health creators in their videos is the sharing of their professional qualifications. In the opening moments of each analyzed video, many creators verbally share their credentials, including licensure, certifications, and academic background. They say something like, “I am a licensed mental health counselor specializing in trauma informed therapy.” In addition to the videos, many creators (32/42) mentioned that this disclosure is intended to establish credibility, cultivate trust with viewers, and underscore their expertise in mental health. By openly sharing their credentials as a performance strategy, creators said they leverage their qualifications to demonstrate trustworthiness and credibility. Through this deliberate disclosure, they said they position themselves as dependable sources of mental health knowledge, combining their micro-celebrity status with their professional roles. For example, in one video, the creator identifies herself as a psychotherapist specializing in shame-related issues.

3. Providing Practical Tips, Coping Mechanisms, and Actionable Advice

Additionally, the majority of creators (37 out of 42) stated that they use information sharing as a core performance strategy, leveraging their professional expertise to provide practical tips, coping mechanisms, and actionable advice on mental health topics. They said this shows them as knowledgeable and reliable sources of mental health information. For example, Creator 10 said she focuses her videos on "tips and strategies that people can use in their day-to-day life," while Creator 5 provides guidance on tackling specific mental health challenges. In one of her videos, Creator 5 stated, "So if you're grappling with social anxiety, I say – here are 3 tips to help ease it," thereby demonstrating her expertise on the subject and offering practical

methods for managing it. By sharing self-care techniques and general tips for addressing various mental health concerns, creators said they try to appear credible by providing specialized mental health guidance to their audience.

This performance of credibility and expertise involves not just the sharing of information, but also the way it is presented. By articulating their knowledge clearly and offering practical, actionable advice, creators said they aim to reinforce their authority and trustworthiness. This aligns with Maddox's (2022) concept of calibrated expertise, where the strategic presentation of one's professional knowledge enhances one's perceived authority. Through these efforts, creators said they aim to solidify their role as dependable sources of mental health information.

4. Simplifying Complex Psychological Concepts

Wellman (2023) discussed the importance of wellness influencers being capable of interpreting detailed research reports and presenting them in an understandable manner to their audience to demonstrate their credibility. Similarly, a majority of mental health creators simplify complex psychological concepts into easily digestible content in their videos. By adopting this approach, over half of the creators also told me they aim to equip viewers with the knowledge and tools to comprehend and navigate mental health challenges.

They noted that this simplification process serves as a demonstration of expertise, as the ability to break down intricate psychological theories and concepts into accessible information showcases their proficiency in explaining and teaching common mental health topics. For example, in one video, a creator breaks down the definitions and distinctions between self-esteem and self-worth. This demonstrates his effort to make these concepts understandable for a broad audience, highlighting his performance of delivering accessible and informative content.

By presenting complex information in a simplified manner, creators said they perform

their expertise, aligning with Maddox's (2022) concept of calibrated expertise, where the strategic presentation of one's professional knowledge enhances their perceived authority. Many creators told me that the effort to make mental health information accessible is to not only educate their audience, but to also build trust through their expertise and reliability. Through these efforts, creators said they hope to establish themselves as trusted sources of knowledge and support in the field of mental health. Hence, the act of simplifying intricate psychological concepts into easily understandable content serves as a performance tactic.

5. Encouraging Independent Research and Critical Evaluation of Online Mental Health Content

Roughly half of the creators (20/42) said that viewers should conduct independent research rather than solely depending on information they hear or see on TikTok. By advising their audience to cross-check information in their videos, creators said they reinforce the idea that responsible consumption of content involves critical thinking and validation from multiple sources. They said that they believe that this enhances their own credibility as trustworthy and ethical sources.

For instance, one creator explores topics like ADHD and autism in her content, as demonstrated by a popular video where she outlines subtle symptoms of autism in women, such as feeling overwhelmed by social situations despite appearing socially adept. This content aligns with Alper et al.'s (2023) concept of "platformed diagnosis," which refers to individuals using online platforms to self-diagnose or seek diagnoses for health-related concerns. By encouraging viewers to verify such information, and get a formal diagnosis from a licensed practitioner, this creator highlights the potential risks of relying solely on digital platforms for medical guidance. In her video, she emphasizes the importance of professional medical evaluation to avoid the pitfalls of self-diagnosis and the spread of misinformation.

These creators also told me that qualified experts should never present information as absolute truths and should always acknowledge when something is their personal opinion. They said that this approach serves as an indicator of the creators' ethics and credibility. As Creator 7 stated:

The Internet is not a place that creates a lot of space for nuance. You have to consciously and intentionally do that. So even when I post things, even when I post facts from the DSM... that has its own issues, right? So I'm not ever going to say, well, you don't fit DSM criteria. So I'm not gonna have you pursue a formal diagnosis because you don't fit A, B and C. I'm going to say, here's what I see. What do you see? Do you want to pursue a diagnosis? So I think when creators create content and they present themselves as like, I have the correct answers, I'm like immediately no.

This perspective resonates with Wellman's (2023) findings on wellness influencers, who also prioritize conveying the nuanced nature of expertise. According to the wellness influencers interviewed by Wellman, true experts refrain from providing definitive statements or guarantees when discussing health and wellness, despite potential expectations from followers. This careful, nuanced approach to presenting information is a performance that establishes the creators as credible, and reinforces their role as responsible, ethical sources of mental health information.

6. Addressing Misinformation

Drawing from Maddox's (2022) insights on influencer veterinarians, a majority of the creators (37/42) expressed concerns about unqualified individuals producing mental health content on the platform. They said that in an environment where anyone can engage in content creation, there is a heightened risk of spreading misinformation due to the absence of proper credentials or the fabrication of fake credentials. Similarly, Wellman (2023) observes that wellness influencers often draw on embodied knowledge gained from personal experiences to demonstrate expertise, rather than official credentials.

This concern ties into the broader issue of how credibility is constructed and performed online. These creators also pointed out how easily individuals can leverage expertise in one area to confidently speak on another, a perception often embraced by followers who may not prioritize formal qualifications. For example, someone might assume because a creator says they are an expert in ADHD, that they are also an expert in eating disorders. They said this situation creates a potential slippery slope of influence and misinformation on TikTok, especially in the absence of a formal mechanism to assess credibility. This highlights a tension regarding accountability for misinformation—whether it lies with the creator, the platform, or the viewer, or all three. Creator 33 underscored this concern, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between trained professionals and uncredentialed individuals:

I went to school, you know, like all the schooling I've done so like I'm more, you know, credible in what I'm talking about versus you, in a sense, right? When it comes to mental health things, I feel like we're not saying we're better than them, but it's just, you know, I'd rather listen to a therapist tell me about anxiety versus a random person that doesn't have the background in it.

Similarly, Creator 5 echoed these sentiments, pointing out instances of misinformation shared by unlicensed individuals:

I also see people who say that they're ADHD coaches or advocates, and they're putting out a lot of misinformation. And people are in the comments like, that's not what my psychiatrist said. And this person's like responding back, well, you should get a new psychiatrist because they're outdated on diagnosing. And I'm like, no, you're wrong.

To counteract the spread of misinformation, some creators (35/42) said they leverage TikTok. In many videos, creators were shown sharing mental health advice from credible sources, engaging with videos spreading misinformation through comments, and collaborating via duet videos with content they identified as sharing inaccurate information. For instance, some creators directly addressed misleading content by creating duet videos with the original content, offering

corrections or alternative perspectives in their videos. Through these efforts, they said they aim to establish their authority and expertise while actively promoting the dissemination of accurate and reliable mental health information. By highlighting the importance of proper credentials and engaging with misinformation, these creators perform their credibility and calibrated expertise. They said they take on the role of knowledge influencers as they said they provide reliable information, work to correct misinformation, and discuss the value of verified, professional advice over unqualified opinions in their videos.

7. Integrating Credible Sources in Mental Health Content

To address concerns about unqualified individuals disseminating mental health content, many creators integrate credible sources into their videos, using features like green screens to overlay images from reputable outlets such as the American Psychological Association and the DSM. They said they incorporate reputable studies and expert opinions to bolster their credibility and establish themselves as trustworthy professionals. By visually associating themselves with authoritative sources and prioritizing citations from respected studies, organizations, or experts, creators said they aim to deliver clear, evidence-based content. They said they hope to provide accurate and professional mental health guidance while distinguishing themselves from those who spread misinformation.

8. Balancing Brand Partnerships and Professional Ethics

The performance of calibrated expertise, which highlights credible sources, also impacts creators' choices regarding brand partnerships. Many creators (35/42) discussed the importance of maintaining integrity and ethical standards in their brand partnerships, highlighting how these decisions influence their perceived credibility. By adopting this approach, they told me they strive to balance financial incentives with the preservation of their ethics and credibility as

mental health professionals. Creator 33 expressed this sentiment by saying:

If I don't believe in your product, then I'm not going to partner with you. There are some platforms, like BetterHelp that I don't agree with. You know that I will not partner with them if they've ever approached me like no, you exploit your therapists.

This quote encapsulates the consideration these creators exercise when selecting brand partnerships. Some practitioners who were among the first to create mental health content on TikTok told me they initially welcomed offers from BetterHelp, believing it would increase access to care. However, as information surfaced about BetterHelp exploiting practitioners and selling user data, nearly all told me they decided to end their partnerships. This illustrates how they strategically choose brand collaborations as a performance of credibility. By prioritizing partnerships that align with their principles, they said they aim to position themselves as trusted influencers in the mental health sphere. They said this transparent approach not only reinforces their credibility but also distinguishes them as ethical influencers who prioritize their audience's well-being, fostering trust and loyalty.

9. Merging Education and Entertainment

Many creators (33/42) acknowledged that TikTok's short-form, visually appealing content poses challenges in addressing intricate psychological topics. Despite these limitations, they said they strive to convey meaningful information without sacrificing accuracy or depth, thereby reinforcing their performance of credibility. Many videos showed creators leveraging creative storytelling techniques in their videos, such as animations, skits, or personal anecdotes. These creators said they do this to make complex concepts more accessible and relatable to their viewers. They said that this approach not only engages their audience but also demonstrates their ability to simplify complicated ideas without losing essential details. By doing so, they said they

perform their expertise in a way that is both educational and entertaining, maintaining the balance between the two.

Moreover, these creators told me about the importance of context and nuance when discussing sensitive topics. They said they understand that oversimplification can lead to misunderstandings or the trivialization of mental health struggles. As Creator 28 explained, “The Internet is not a place that creates a lot of space for nuance. You have to consciously and intentionally do that.” This quote highlights the effort required to present nuanced, accurate information in a format that is typically not conducive to such depth. By providing comprehensive explanations, offering multiple perspectives, and encouraging critical thinking in their content, creators said they perform their credibility and expertise. They said they try to show their commitment to educating their audience while also respecting the complexities of mental health issues.

C. Relation Building

In almost all of the videos, creators engage with their audience and peers, a practice that 39 out of 42 creators also said is essential to their content creation. They said this engagement serves as a performance of credibility, as they believe building relationships enhances their perceived trustworthiness and place in the mental health community. By conveying their knowledge and establishing trust through connections with both their audience and professional peers, creators said they aim to solidify their status as credible sources of mental health information.

Utilizing creative formats inherent in the microcelebrity framework, nearly all creators said they adopt performance strategies and tactics commonly used by traditional influencers. This phenomenon, termed influencer creep by Bishop (2023), involves professionals, particularly

mental health practitioners in this case, adopting strategies from traditional social media influencers to enhance their online presence and engagement. Ultimately, social media is so pervasive that everyone must become an influencer, and influencing has crept into all aspects of modern-day life. Bishop (2023) suggests that this behavior blurs the lines between professional conduct and influencer-style self-promotion, representing a form of boundary-crossing. For example, many creators often engage in interactive Q&A sessions, respond to comments, and collaborate with other professionals through features like duets in their videos. They said these interactions not only facilitate the sharing of mental health information but also hope to show their accessibility and dedication to their audience. As Creator 10 noted, "If in the comments I'm getting a lot of the same question, that's a signal to me that this needs further clarification. So I'm going to make another video replying to that comment, to talk more on that." This approach illustrates the creators' addressing their audience's needs and thus, believe they are further establishing their credibility.

1. Audience Engagement

Employing influencer creep, many creators (47/42) said they aim to enhance viewer engagement and understanding by using various formats in their videos, such as animations, infographics, and interactive Q&A sessions (Bishop, 2023). For instance, one popular format allows viewers to submit questions to the creators, prompting them to address these queries via video. They said that this approach facilitates the sharing of mental health information and fosters interaction between them and their viewers. For example, Creator 14 said she directly addresses questions received via direct messages or comments in her videos. By engaging with their audience in this manner, these creators said they demonstrate their commitment to providing valuable insights and their understanding of their audience's needs. As Creator 7

explained:

If in the comments I'm getting a lot of the same question, that's a signal to me that this needs further clarification. So I'm going to make another video replying to that comment, to talk more on that." This quote highlights the creators' proactive approach to engagement, showing their dedication to clarifying and expanding on important topics based on audience feedback.

This scenario is common, as numerous creators (37/42) said they monitor their viewers' comments and discussions to tailor their content accordingly. These creators told me they find this approach helpful in easing the pressure to constantly generate new content, as they can draw inspiration from their audience's feedback. They said the practice of monitoring and responding to viewers' comments serves as a strategic performance, enabling them to manage their online presence, foster community engagement, and sustain their influence in the digital realm. By consistently engaging with their audience and responding to their needs, creators said they hope to perform their expertise, reinforce their credibility as knowledgeable and approachable mental health professionals.

2. Peer Engagement

Over half of the creators (30/42) reported that they also actively engage with the TikTok Therapy community by interacting with fellow professionals. Many videos depict creators collaborating with other mental health experts, using features like duets to appear together in videos, exchange ideas, and share resources. They said that this collaborative method not only helps them expand their audience but also boosts their credibility. They said it serves as a visual indication of their presence in the TikTok Therapy community and their connections with other licensed mental health professionals.

This performance strategy aligns with research by Maddox (2022) and Stein et al. (2022), which shows that knowledge influencers prioritize creating accessible content for lay people

while also incorporating insider jokes or relatable content for peers in their field. Furthermore, these creators said endorsements from fellow licensed mental health creators contribute to bolstering their authority and trustworthiness. On TikTok, they said the duet feature can function as a tool for signaling expertise and displaying alignment with or support of peers. For example, one creator references a book authored by another creator in her video, highlighting their connection and noting that she distributes copies of the book to her clients, emphasizing the endorsed publication's value and credibility. These creators explained that by participating in the TikTok Therapy community and collaborating with fellow creators, they aim to visually demonstrate their connections and foster a sense of camaraderie. They said they believe this builds interconnectedness and enhances their credibility. They said that partnering with others in their field or related industries boosts the credibility of their content and highlights their networking abilities. They said that this performance strategy portrays them as both experts and approachable individuals open to interaction.

3. Blending Personal and Professional Identities

Within TikTok, the line between content creator and licensed professional frequently blurs, prompting creators to aspire beyond mere interaction with their audience and peers. They said they strive to achieve a nuanced balance between their personal and professional online identities while bolstering their authority as subject matter experts (Maddox, 2022; Stein, 2022). Reflecting on Chapter 2 about therapy and therapists in popular culture, therapists are often depicted in film and television as enigmatic or intimidating figures (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999), perpetuating negative stereotypes and misinformation about mental health conditions (Giles, 2003). Male therapists are frequently portrayed as eccentric or sexually deviant, while female therapists are depicted as controlling and unfulfilled (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Giles, 2003;

Schneider, 1977, 1985; Wedding & Boyd, 1999).

Tying back to their motivations for content creation in Chapter 3 and addressing inadequate portrayals of therapy and therapists in popular culture, many creators expressed their desire to alter these perceptions through their content. They said they find it liberating to share the more social or "human" aspects of their personalities on TikTok. By harnessing TikTok's emphasis on visual storytelling, creators said they merge mental health insights with entertainment elements, integrating features such as duets, green screens, text overlays, and trending soundtracks to craft their content. They stated that this blending of personal and professional identities underscores their balancing act, drawing inspiration from and challenging the historical trajectory of mental health representation in film and television. By sharing personal stories and showcasing their daily lives, creators said they aim to humanize themselves and make mental health more relatable. This approach aligns with the microcelebrity framework, where "authenticity" is a key factor in establishing an online presence. For instance, by sharing aspects of their personal lives, creators said they hope to break down the stigma surrounding mental health and demonstrate that therapists are approachable and relatable individuals.

Despite these challenges with representation, they said the performance of blending personal and professional identities serves to enhance credibility and expertise. By presenting themselves as both knowledgeable professionals and relatable individuals, creators said they hope to build trust and rapport with their audience. They said this strategic performance helps to redefine the image of mental health professionals, making them more accessible and human while maintaining their authority and expertise in the field. Through these efforts, creators said they play a role in shaping public perceptions of mental health and therapy on TikTok.

4. Platform Affordances

Platform affordances, as discussed in Chapter 4, refer to the inherent features and functionalities provided by a social media platform that enable and shape user interactions and behaviors (Davis, 2020). These affordances include tools like likes, comments, shares, duets, and hashtags, which facilitate content creation, engagement, and the overall user experience (Gillespie, 2010). Creators said they use many affordances in their videos, such as duets, green screens, text overlays, musical elements, mental health-themed sketches, and hashtags. Creator 8 explained, "Using the duet feature allows me to directly respond to viewers' questions and comments, showcasing my expertise in real-time while demonstrating my engagement with the community." By leveraging these affordances, creators said they show their knowledge of the platform in addition to their knowledge about mental health.

5. Using Platform Affordances: Duet

Duetting is widely popular on TikTok and promotes collaboration, transforming individual narratives into collaborative dialogues. Numerous creators said they use the duet feature in their videos. Many also told me they duet with other creators to foster engagement and dialogue within the TikTok Therapy community. They often incorporate the hashtag #duet into their content as well. They said by incorporating the specific hashtag, they hope to interact with colleagues, exchange references, and offer professional endorsements. According to research by Stein et al. (2022), duet videos enable creators to interact not just with their existing audience but also with the followers of those they collaborate with. With mental health creators, this is the same as duetting not only facilitates engagement with their peers, but can also boost external interactivity as it pushes their content to their collaborators' viewers as well.

As previously mentioned, by engaging in duets, creators said they can visibly align themselves with other professionals. They said this practice helps establish them as active and

respected members of the professional community on TikTok. For example, Creator 6 noted, "The duet feature allows me to highlight the expertise of my peers while also showcasing my own insights, creating a richer and more engaging dialogue for our audiences." They said that this engagement not only showcases their knowledge but also visually signifies a sense of community and interconnectedness among mental health professionals on the platform. For instance, one creator uses the duet feature to collaborate with another mental health creator in her video.

6. Using Platform Affordances: Green Screen

Similar to the duet feature, TikTok's green screen feature serves as a tool for creators to enhance visual communication and integrate content that acts as visual aids (Stein et al., 2022). They said that this feature allows users to replace the background of their videos with any image or video, providing a dynamic and engaging way to present information. They said it expands the range of topics they can address, allowing them to visually represent complex ideas and data in their content. They said this visual representation helps to support their arguments and make the content more accessible and engaging for their viewers. By incorporating images, charts, and other visual elements, creators said they can better explain and illustrate mental health concepts that might be difficult to convey through words alone.

They said the green screen feature also provides a platform to present visual evidence supporting their arguments, contributing to establishing credibility by including authoritative citations. By showing sources and references directly in the video, creators said they can reinforce the reliability of the information they are sharing. They stated that this direct presentation of credible sources serves as a performance of expertise, displaying their commitment to evidence-based practice. They also said by immersing themselves in various

backgrounds or settings, they can elevate the visual appeal of their videos and convey complex concepts in an innovative manner. They said they believe the visual dynamism can both capture the viewer's attention and enhance the overall educational value of the content.

Many creators frequently employ the hashtag #greenscreen in their content when utilizing this feature, similar to the duet feature. By doing so, they said they signal their use of this specific affordance, making their content more discoverable and aligning themselves with a broader community of creators who use the same tool. For example, as Creator 24 explained, "Using the green screen feature allows me to present research findings and theoretical concepts in a visually engaging way, making it easier for my audience to understand and trust the information I'm providing." This quote highlights the strategic use of the green screen feature to perform credibility and expertise by integrating research into her content. This deliberate use of platform affordances can reinforce their role as knowledgeable and reliable sources of mental health information.

7. Using Platform Affordances: Text Overlay

In addition to the duet and green screen features, creators also leverage text overlay when creating content. Text overlay on TikTok involves adding textual elements like captions, labels, or overlays to videos. These overlays serve various purposes, including conveying additional information, providing context, emphasizing key points, or engaging with viewers. Typically overlaid onto video content in a visually appealing manner, the creators said text overlay can enhance storytelling, educational, or entertainment value, enabling them to communicate effectively even without audio. They said they use things like titles, subtitles, descriptions, hashtags, or call-to-action prompts.

They said the text overlay functions as their "voice," ensuring the delivery of information

in a performative manner. By strategically adding overlays, creators said they have the opportunity to provide context, clarify complex concepts, and cite relevant sources, demonstrating their knowledge and expertise concisely and accessibly. For example, in one video, a creator uses text overlay to include and highlight the definition of trauma informed therapy. They said this practice not only makes the content more informative but also highlights their commitment to accuracy and evidence-based information. As Creator 37 explained, "Using text overlays allows me to break down complex topics and provide immediate references, making it easier for my audience to follow along and trust the information I'm sharing." This quote underscores how text overlays function as a visual reinforcement of the creator's expertise, providing viewers with tangible evidence of the reliability and accuracy of the information presented. By leveraging text overlay, creators said they believe they improve the clarity and engagement of their content, and also perform their credibility in a way that is accessible and trustworthy.

8. Using Platform Affordances: Musical Elements

Another frequently used performance strategy includes integrating musical elements like songs, dance, and lip-syncing. For instance, many creators integrated the popular TikTok song "Me!" by BAILEYS SOUND in their content, humorously reflecting on the time and financial investment they made in their education and training. They lip-synced the lyrics, "all that work and what did it get me? Why did I do it?," while referencing how their field is exploitative. Many creators (35/42) said these elements play a role in performing credibility online by making mental health-related content more relatable, particularly for audiences who enjoy and identify with popular culture references. By integrating these elements, these creators said they demonstrate their understanding of both the platform and their audience, thereby reinforcing

their credibility as knowledgeable and engaged professionals.

Moreover, many of the creators incorporated dancing or simple body movements like nodding their heads and waving their hands in their videos. Typically, these movements are synchronized with a song. In addition to these videos, many creators (35/42) said this performance strategy aids in linking their videos with others using the same music, potentially boosting the videos' visibility and engagement. For instance, one creator dances while sharing five ways to cultivate joy in their video.

Through the integration of musical elements and comedic techniques, these creators said they believe their content will be “engaging,” “entertaining,” “accessible,” and “memorable.” They said that incorporating musical elements such as songs, dance, and lip-syncing represents a performance of credibility, as they showcase their ability to engage and entertain while also delivering messages about mental health. As Creator 28 noted, “Using popular songs and dance moves allows me to connect with my audience on a cultural level, making the information I share more engaging and easier to remember.” This quote underscores how integrating musical elements serves as a performance of credibility and expertise. By combining entertainment with educational content, these creators said they hope to not only capture their audience's attention but also reinforce their authority and approachability.

9. Using Platform Affordances: Mental Health-Themed Sketches

Many creators (33/42) also said they create mental health-themed sketches, drawing inspiration from their therapeutic experiences and personal insights. This may not be considered an official “technical” affordance, but I regard it as both an affordance and a cultural trope for the platform, particularly for professionals like doctors and mental health practitioners. For instance, Creator 19 expressed her enjoyment of incorporating sketches into her videos, describing it as a

playful and creative method to connect with her audience. She elaborated on her approach, stating:

I just love the medium. I think it's really fun. So I've done some videos where, like, I'm the therapist, and I'm acting like a therapy session. And I'll be like this is what internal family systems looks like, and I'll do like a fake session. I think that's fun.

In these sketches, creators often assume the roles of both therapist and patient, reminiscent of the style observed in OBGYN TikTok docs, where medical professionals portray both doctor and patient. Through the use of exaggeration and role-play techniques, creators inject humor and entertainment into their content. These creators told me these mental health sketches serve as a demonstration of credibility, offering viewers glimpses into what a therapy session might look like. By portraying both roles, these creators said they are able to break down the barriers between therapist and patient, making the therapy process more accessible and less intimidating. They said this approach allows them to convey therapeutic techniques and psychological concepts in a way that is both educational and entertaining. They said this performance strategy displays their expertise while also humanizing them and making their content more approachable. These creators said they believe this blend of education and entertainment helps to build trust and credibility with their audience.

10. Using Platform Affordances: Hashtags

In addition to utilizing audiovisual features, many creators also use hashtags in their content to engage with the TikTok Therapy community. A hashtag on TikTok is denoted by the '#' symbol followed by a word or phrase, serving to categorize and organize content. These clickable links enable users to explore videos related to specific topics or themes. All the creators (42/42) said they include relevant hashtags in their video captions or comments to enhance the

visibility of their content and expand their reach to a broader audience interested in similar subjects. They said they believe hashtags can facilitate the discovery of content pertinent to their expertise, fostering relatability and interaction with users who share common interests. They said the strategic use of hashtags can both boost visibility and position them within relevant discussions and communities, demonstrating their understanding of online engagement and visibility. For instance, a trauma therapist incorporates specific hashtags like #traumatherapy tailored to their profession in their content.

In their exploration of BookTok, Maddox and Gill (2023) investigated how creators strategically employ TikTok hashtags to foster community and increase visibility. Building on this insight, all the creators said they frequently incorporate hashtags into their videos, selecting popular ones like "mental health," "therapy," "therapist," and "For You," as well as tailored hashtags relevant to their content. As mentioned earlier, these creators also said they may include the name of the audiovisual feature they utilize as a hashtag. For example, Creator 19 noted, "By using hashtags like #mentalhealth and #therapist, I can ensure that my content reaches people who are specifically looking for mental health information. This helps me connect with the right audience and establish myself as a credible source in the field."

D. Personal/Effective Communicative Strategies

All of the creators said they employ personal and effective communication strategies in their videos. Specifically, they said they incorporate personal storytelling, offer glimpses into the backstage of their lives, and share information about their personal identities.

1. Personal Storytelling

Out of the 42 creators, 35 told me they use personal storytelling to shape their online persona and brand. They said that this method not only infuses a human element into their

presence but also enhances their "authenticity" and fosters "relatability," aligning with their objective of becoming dependable sources of mental health guidance and support. They told me that through this approach, they aim to demystify the landscape of mental health and make it more accessible and relatable. Creator 34 emphasized this objective by stating, "Sharing my own experiences helps people see that therapists are real, relatable individuals. It breaks down barriers and makes the mental health journey less intimidating." By sharing personal stories and experiences, these creators said they aim to humanize themselves and make mental health concepts more relatable to their audience. They said that they believe this approach not only enhances engagement but can also build trust, as viewers may feel a personal connection with them. For instance, Creator 4 shared her personal struggles with anxiety, detailing how she manages it in their daily life. She said this vulnerability helps viewers see her as genuine and approachable, reinforcing their credibility as someone who understands mental health issues on a personal level.

As noted earlier, traditional media formats, such as talk and reality television, have influenced the representation of therapy in today's media landscapes, setting the stage for its portrayal on platforms like TikTok. These formats have transformed the public's perception of private struggles, offering avenues to showcase "real-life" personal challenges alongside therapeutic interventions (Dubrofsky, 2007; Peck, 1995). Much like OBGYN TikTok doctors, licensed mental health creators said they utilize narratives to unveil their personal stories. They told me they talk about their unique paths and diverse identities beyond their roles as therapists (Stein et al., 2022). Through these narratives, they said they expose both their vulnerabilities and triumphs. They explained that they believe this can help facilitate a connection with their audience by sharing common experiences. They emulate the relatability of talk show guests and

reality television contestants, presenting themselves as “everyday,” accessible people (Bishop, 2022; Danesi, 2008; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006, 2010). This sense of “realness” is underscored as many openly address their mental health challenges and emotions in their videos. This performance strategy is reminiscent of how programs like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* revolutionized daytime television by integrating therapeutic aspects like self-help advice and personal narratives (Timberg & Erler, 2002). Stein (2021) said that Oprah focuses on “ordinary” individuals openly addressing and resolving their personal issues and emotions in a public forum. This mirrors TikTok Therapy content, where creators, who are therapists, also share their emotions, struggles, and triumphs.

2. Glimpses into the Backstage

Creator 27 said they utilize their platform to destigmatize therapy and challenge the stigma surrounding mental health by portraying therapists as approachable and “relatable,” and by emphasizing the human aspects of mental health professionals. They said they try to maintain a balance between professionalism and personal privacy to engage with their audience while ensuring their own safety and well-being. She said this can be a challenge as the platform pushes her to share more about herself. Also reflecting on this challenge, Creator 40 stated:

The narrative that resonates the most would typically be one of my personal stories, drawn from my own experiences. This allows me to uphold ethical standards in my content creation. However, it has led me to share more about myself than I initially intended, whether it's sharing embarrassing dance moves or childhood traumas.

Like reality television contestants, and OBGYN TikTok doctors, licensed mental health creators provide glimpses into the backstage of their lives, blending their personal and professional spheres (Goffman, 1959; Stein et al., 2022). Creators expressed their desire to demystify therapy and present themselves as relatable individuals by showing viewers things like their daily

routines, workplaces, and homes (Stein et al., 2022). This performance strategy offers viewers a peek into their lives beyond the screen. Numerous creators said that breaking down the barriers between their professional and personal personas fosters a sense of authenticity and trust with their audience. They said that by showing their daily routines, workspaces, or even moments of relaxation, they aim to humanize themselves and make mental health concepts more relatable. As Creator 36 mentioned, "Sharing parts of my daily life helps my audience see me as a real person, not just a professional. It builds a deeper connection and trust." This quote underscores how many creators believe that transparency in showing personal aspects of their lives fosters authenticity and trust, reinforcing their credibility.

Building upon this idea, research on influencers highlights the crucial role of "authenticity" in establishing an online presence, offering followers a distinctive experience that bolsters visibility and strategic growth (Abidin, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017). In many of the videos, creators said they show their personal spaces, allowing their "true" personalities to emerge when recording videos in their personal environments, whether it be their homes, cars, or offices. They noted that less scripted videos recorded in these backstage spaces typically receive more likes, shares, and comments, compared to their more curated and highly edited videos. This is an example of society's fascination with backstage and getting a "peek behind the curtain," or in this case, the screen. By incorporating these personal spaces into their content, they said they aim to solidify their identities and portray themselves as relatable individuals (Abidin, 2015). They said they believe this blend of professional insight and personal transparency not only makes their content more engaging but also builds a loyal and trusting audience, reinforcing their role as credible and empathetic mental health professionals.

3. Personal Identity

In addition to offering glimpses into their personal lives, many creators (30/42) said identity and representation can also serve as powerful tools for them, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Many told me they share or highlight aspects of their identity, especially if they are trying to discuss systemic issues and advocate for social justice in their content. By integrating their various identity markers into their content, many address topics such as sex-positive parenting, ADHD, menopause, LGBTQ+ experiences, racism, and religious trauma in their videos. They said they do this to expand the discourse on mental health and promote diversity in representation.

Through candidly sharing their own struggles and journeys with identity, they said they aim to build their credibility, forge connections with viewers, humanize their experiences, and foster a more inclusive environment for mental health conversations. They said that this incorporation of personal experiences and identity not only humanizes them, but also highlights their expertise in navigating the challenges faced by individuals from similar backgrounds. For instance, Creator 7 incorporates her ADHD experiences into her TikTok content. Through this, she said she aims to educate and offer relatable insights to individuals with similar backgrounds, thereby bridging her personal and professional perspectives. By sharing information about their personal identities, such as cultural background, gender identity, or experiences with specific mental health conditions, numerous creators said they can connect with a wide range of viewers. They said they believe this demonstrates their awareness and understanding of different perspectives and experiences, further enhancing their credibility. As Creator 24 said, "By sharing parts of who I am, I can connect with my audience on a deeper level, showing them that I understand their struggles from both a professional and personal perspective."

They said this performance of credibility and expertise is rooted in "authenticity" and

relatability. By openly discussing their identities and personal experiences, numerous creators said they demonstrate an understanding of the issues they address. They said this not only builds trust and relatability but also emphasizes their expertise in mental health, particularly in areas related to their personal experiences and identities. Moreover, numerous creators said that integrating personal identity into their content allows them to challenge and reshape narratives around marginalized communities.

E. Discussion/Main Argument

In this chapter, I argue that mental health creators on TikTok establish credibility by balancing professional expertise with personal engagement. To achieve this balance, they employ various strategies, such as sharing qualifications, simplifying complex concepts, utilizing platform-specific features, and balancing professional ethics with personal storytelling. However, platform algorithms and audience expectations push them to reveal personal aspects of their lives, incentivizing self-disclosure to build a following. While this mix of professional advice and personal anecdotes can foster connections and trust, it also obscures the credibility of the information. As a result, this dynamic leads viewers to over-rely on subjective experiences rather than evidence-based practices. Furthermore, it becomes challenging to distinguish between licensed professionals and unqualified creators, resulting in confusion among viewers about who is a real therapist versus someone creating mental health content without proper credentials.

Additionally, mental health creators face the challenge of balancing entertainment with evidence-based information. They need to make engaging content while still providing accurate, research-backed mental health information. This balancing act often places creators in a difficult position, as they must entertain their audience to maintain engagement without compromising the integrity of the information they provide. Another critical aspect is combating stigma while

maintaining professionalism. Creators aim to destigmatize mental health issues while still maintaining appropriate boundaries as professionals. This dual objective requires careful navigation to ensure that while mental health issues are normalized and made accessible to a broader audience, the professionalism and ethical standards of therapy are upheld. Overall, the convergence of professional advice and personal storytelling on TikTok presents both opportunities and challenges for mental health creators, impacting how credibility is perceived, and information is received by viewers.

This chapter also critically examines these dynamics through Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and madness. Governmentality is evident as platform norms and audience preferences regulate how mental health information is presented, promoting self-regulation among creators to meet these expectations. Biopower is exercised through the management of creators' bodies and lives, as their personal disclosures become commodified content. The regime of truth is reflected in how societal power structures on TikTok dictate what is considered credible mental health information, often favoring personal stories over professional expertise. According to Foucault, madness represents a departure from socially accepted norms and rationality, often leading to the marginalization and control of individuals deemed "mad" by societal standards. In the context of TikTok mental health creators, the blend of professional advice and personal storytelling can be seen as a form of madness. This is because the platform's pressure to reveal personal aspects and emphasize emotional authenticity disrupts traditional boundaries between professional expertise and personal life, creating a space where subjective experiences often overshadow evidence-based practices. Thus, the creators' performance on TikTok illustrates the inherent instability in how society constructs and perceives mental health expertise, embodying Foucault's notion of madness as they straddle

the line between credible professionals and relatable influencers. These dynamics of self-regulation, commodification of personal disclosures, and the shaping of perceived truth by platform norms exemplify governmentality, biopower, and the regime of truth.

In previous chapters, I examined the motivations of mental health creators and the impact of platform politics on their content. This chapter builds on those themes by highlighting the tension between providing credible, research-backed information and meeting the entertainment demands of the platform. Creators face the challenge of balancing entertainment with evidence-based content while combating stigma and maintaining professionalism. These issues are interconnected with the platform's politics and the motivations driving creators, showcasing how TikTok's environment influences mental health content.

The implications of these dynamics are significant, suggesting that while TikTok provides a unique platform for disseminating mental health information, it also necessitates a critical examination of how credibility and authenticity are constructed and perceived. Moreover, the emphasis on personal engagement and self-disclosure may undermine the educational value of mental health content, potentially leading to the spread of misinformation. Ultimately, this chapter highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of social media in shaping mental health discourse, recognizing both its potential benefits and its limitations. The next chapter will delve into how platform politics and algorithms further shape the experiences and content of mental health creators, examining the broader impacts of TikTok's attention-driven economy on mental health discourse.

VI. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THERAPY TOK

A. Introduction

Since its U.S. debut in 2018, TikTok has quickly emerged as a platform for mental health discussions, giving rise to "TikTok Therapy" or "TherapyTok," which includes both licensed and unlicensed individuals disseminating mental health information. Licensed therapists typically offer concise advice through visually engaging videos with titles like "5 Signs You Need Therapy" and "How to Deal with Anxiety," often featuring vibrant backgrounds, on-screen text, and therapists speaking directly to the camera, making mental health support more accessible and relatable for viewers. This trend underscores the influence of media and technology on the field and cultural production of therapy, as TikTok Therapy exemplifies this influence by enabling creators to share therapeutic content, facilitating its distribution, determining visibility, and shaping how audiences perceive therapeutic material.

The rise of TikTok Therapy raised critical questions about the evolution of therapy in the digital age, which this dissertation explored through inquiries such as: How has the portrayal of therapy evolved from talk shows and reality television to TikTok? Why do licensed mental health practitioners produce content on TikTok? What strategies do mental health creators use to establish credibility and authenticity on this platform? How do TikTok's platform politics impact the experiences and content of mental health creators? By investigating these questions, this dissertation aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within TikTok Therapy, examining the implications of media and technology on the industry and cultural production of therapy, and considering how these factors shape visibility, reception, and the overall therapeutic project. This exploration revealed the commodification and sensationalization of mental health content, the pressures of platform politics, and the broader

socio-cultural influences that redefine the role of mental health practitioners in the digital age.

B. Findings

The representation of therapy has evolved from traditional media, such as talk shows and reality television, to the digital space of TikTok. Historically, traditional media formats often dramatized personal struggles and related therapeutic interventions for entertainment purposes. Talk shows generally featured expert or celebrity discussions within a structured format, offering somewhat in-depth issue explorations. Reality television immersed participants in contrived situations, emphasizing emotional reactions and interpersonal conflicts for dramatic effect. Meanwhile, TikTok's algorithm-driven, user-generated content and endless feed emphasize brevity and virality, prompting creators to share their most intimate experiences to garner views and engagement. This shift in media representation places therapy within the context of a rapidly consumable digital spectacle, prioritizing entertainment over nuanced understanding and genuine support. Thus, while TikTok increases the visibility of mental health discussions, it often does so at the expense of depth and educational integrity.

TikTok has expanded access to mental health information, but this normalization frequently leads to commodification and sensationalization. Creators must navigate algorithmic systems to maintain visibility, contending with the historical limitations of popularized therapy in media. Additionally, individual suffering is often attributed to personal failings rather than external circumstances. Users are objectified, becoming tools for generating profits for platforms like TikTok. The surge in these platforms' profits aligns with the rise of attention-driven economies and neoliberal ideologies. As a result, individuals are encouraged to use digital engagement and sensationalized content to manage their distress. Consuming more content, gaining followers, or achieving viral status is portrayed as a way to improve well-being.

However, this engagement, while profitable for TikTok's attention-driven economy, becomes a crutch. Meanwhile, platforms and authorities emphasize personal responsibility for mental health and online behavior, creating a social catch-22. Ultimately, users and creators in distress are viewed primarily as sources of profit.

The platform's attention-driven economy and neoliberal logics commodify and sensationalize mental health content, ultimately undermining its credibility, educational value, and ethical standards. The focus on self-help, self-improvement, and "healing yourself" aligns with ideologies of individual responsibility, detracting from broader systemic issues and evidence-based therapeutic practice. This mirrors past instances where popular media has distorted, sensationalized, and compromised the therapeutic project, which aims to promote mental health and well-being through scientifically validated techniques and ethical practices. Thus, TikTok's approach to mental health content often undermines the principles of effective therapeutic practice by prioritizing engagement over accuracy.

Theratainment, a term I coined to describe the merging of therapeutic advice or psychological information with media entertainment, exemplifies these challenges. For instance, a mental health creator might produce a video using catchy music and humor to discuss anxiety management techniques. While this video may be engaging and enjoyable, it often oversimplifies complex issues and provides viewers with incomplete or misleading information. In this way, this mirrors how therapy is represented in prior media like talk and reality television, blurring the boundaries between therapeutic information and interventions with commercialized entertainment. When mental health content is designed to maximize engagement, a nuanced understanding of mental health issues may be lost, and viewers might receive incomplete or misleading information. Consequently, this can lead to individuals adopting ineffective or

inappropriate coping strategies, potentially exacerbating their issues rather than alleviating them.

On TikTok, licensed mental health practitioners navigate dual roles as mental health care providers and content creators, competing for attention in a saturated market. This pressures them to simplify complex psychological concepts into engaging videos, potentially compromising the information's integrity and therapeutic value. Consequently, therapy on TikTok becomes a public spectacle prioritizing visibility and commercial dynamics over substantive mental health education. The blending of professional credibility with the authenticity expected from social media lifestyle influencers creates a distinct tension. Mental health practitioners creating content on TikTok must balance maintaining professional credibility with the demand for personal engagement and displaying their "true" selves. This emphasis on personal engagement can lead creators to overshare personal information, which is problematic as it can compromise their privacy and professional boundaries, potentially leading to emotional burnout and undermining their perceived professionalism.

Ethical challenges arise from the involvement of mental health creators in brand deals and product promotions, which can undermine their credibility and shift the emphasis from offering credible support to prioritizing profit and promoting quick-fix solutions. This approach risks providing viewers with superficial remedies, reinforcing the idea that individual efforts are enough to address mental health challenges while overlooking harmful systems like socioeconomic inequality, racial discrimination, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and lack of access to affordable housing. Therefore, this market-driven approach to mental health, both as an industry and a cultural genre, reinforces the idea that individual efforts are enough to address or resolve mental health challenges. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for providing more equitable access to resources and support. This perspective aligns with Foucauldian

analysis, which critiques how neoliberal ideologies emphasize individual responsibility while masking the need for collective action and systematic change. In this context, TherapyTok illustrates the concepts of governmentality, biopolitics, the regime of truth, and madness.

Governmentality is evident in how TikTok Therapy functions, promoting the idea that individuals must manage their own well-being through self-discipline and self-improvement, thus reinforcing the notion that personal effort is the primary solution to mental health issues. In particular, mental health creators often emphasize self-help strategies and coping mechanisms that align with neoliberal ideals of self-management. They share personal stories and strategies for mental well-being, encouraging viewers to take individual responsibility for their mental health. Additionally, the content often focuses on practical tips, quick fixes, and personal anecdotes, which promote the idea that mental health is an individual project, rarely addressing the need for systemic change or collective action. As a result, users are encouraged to adopt a self-governing mindset, viewing their mental health as a personal responsibility, and internalizing the belief that their mental health outcomes are solely dependent on their efforts, ignoring broader social and structural factors. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm promotes content that aligns with self-help and self-improvement narratives, reinforcing the idea that mental health management is an individual responsibility. This aligns with broader neoliberal agendas that minimize state responsibility for public mental health.

As a form of biopolitics, TherapyTok manages users by normalizing specific practices and discourses around mental health in ways that serve market interests. Specifically, creators package therapeutic advice in an engaging and entertaining format to attract viewers, turning complex mental health concepts into commodified content. This often involves simplifying or sensationalizing issues to increase views and engagement. Consequently, the content is designed

to be engaging and consumable, often prioritizing entertainment value over educational accuracy. This commodification process aligns user behavior with market logic, where mental health advice becomes a product to be consumed. Thus, users consume this commodified content, shaping their perceptions and behaviors around mental health, and may adopt practices that are more about engagement and consumption rather than genuine therapeutic benefit. In this context, TikTok's algorithms prioritize content that drives engagement, often at the expense of nuanced and accurate mental health information. Therefore, the platform's policies and design inherently commodify mental health content, promoting material that serves commercial interests.

The dominant "regime of truth" within TikTok Therapy dictates what is recognized as valid knowledge about mental health, often favoring sensationalized or easily digestible content over nuanced and professionally endorsed information. To illustrate, creators often feel pressured to conform to popular trends and simplified narratives to gain visibility, which can undermine their professional expertise and the credibility of their content. Consequently, the content that gains the most traction tends to be easily digestible and sensationalized, overshadowing more accurate and nuanced information, creating a "regime of truth" where popular content is perceived as more valid than professionally endorsed advice. As a result, users are influenced by the "regime of truth" established by the platform, leading them to accept and internalize simplified and often dramatized understandings of mental health issues. This can result in misinformed self-diagnosis and management practices. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm promotes content that aligns with engagement metrics, often marginalizing more nuanced and credible information. In this way, the platform's focus on engagement over educational value creates a distorted "regime of truth" that favors sensationalism.

Foucault's theory of madness, which examines how societies define and manage mental illness, provides a critical lens for understanding TikTok Therapy. Mental health creators on TikTok often present simplified and popularized versions of mental health issues, perpetuating stereotypical and reductive understandings. This reflects Foucault's idea that societies create and enforce norms about what constitutes "madness." Creators themselves may experience significant pressure to constantly produce engaging content, driven "mad" by the platform and its algorithm, often at the expense of their mental well-being and professional integrity. Moreover, the content shared on TikTok often mirrors and reinforces societal norms around mental health, contributing to a standardized narrative that marginalizes alternative or more complex perspectives on mental illness. Users may internalize these norms and stereotypes, shaping their perceptions and experiences of mental health in ways that conform to these societal constructs, leading to a limited and potentially harmful understanding of mental health issues. Additionally, TikTok's algorithms and policies promote content that fits within popular and easily digestible narratives, reinforcing societal norms about mental health, aligning with Foucault's concept of how power and control shape the understanding and management of mental illness.

To address these challenges, platforms like TikTok need to implement regulations and provide support that prioritize the dissemination of accurate and high-quality mental health information. Notably, TikTok, like other social media platforms, serves as a central everyday communication infrastructure that goes beyond mere entertainment. Despite its claim to "spark joy and creativity," the platform plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and perceptions about mental health. Therefore, it is crucial to hold the platform accountable for the content it promotes. This could include developing algorithms that recognize and promote credible sources, offering training and resources for mental health professionals on effective

digital communication, and establishing clear guidelines that discourage the spread of misinformation. Collaborative efforts between social media platforms like TikTok, licensed practitioners, healthcare institutions, and regulatory bodies are essential to ensure that mental health content on social media serves the public interest without compromising professional standards. This perspective aligns with the need for systemic changes that go beyond the responsibilities of individual social media platforms like TikTok. Decoupling mental healthcare from financial incentives through a publicly funded system could allow professionals to focus on delivering high-quality care, reduce barriers to accessing help, and treat mental health as a fundamental human right.

On a broader societal level, addressing these challenges effectively requires systemic changes that go beyond the responsibilities of individual social media platforms like TikTok. Moreover, integrating a public mental health infrastructure with media literacy education could also empower individuals to consume content responsibly while ensuring access to necessary care. Within this framework, TikTok could potentially serve as an entry point, providing viewers with initial mental health information and then connecting them with local practitioners for personalized support. Additionally, TikTok could supplement mental health treatment or serve purely as entertainment without claiming educational value. Ultimately, no social media platform can address deep-rooted societal problems alone; in some cases, like TherapyTok, they may even exacerbate these issues. Therefore, systemic reforms in mental healthcare and media literacy are essential to ensure that platforms like TikTok contribute positively to public mental health.

C. Comparison to Existing Literature

1. Focus on Mental Health Content

First, this research delves into the communication of mental health content on TikTok, a

relatively new area within communication and media studies. Furthermore, it explores the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by mental health creators on this platform, highlighting how sensitive topics are conveyed in digital spaces known for their brevity and entertainment-driven algorithms. Specifically, the study examines strategies creators use to maintain credibility and authenticity, the influence of platform policies on content creation, and the impact of neoliberal and therapeutic cultural norms on the portrayal of mental health issues. Moreover, this study extends current literature by examining how digital affordances impact mental health discourse, a topic previously explored by Abidin (2015) in the context of influencer culture. For instance, mental health creators on TikTok often use trending hashtags and collaborative features like duets to increase visibility while maintaining the integrity of their message. This example illustrates how creators leverage platform-specific tools to navigate the complex dynamics of engagement and authenticity. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between digital media, mental health discourse, and platform dynamics, building on existing studies and providing fresh insights into the unique ecosystem of TikTok. Further elaboration on these dynamics is provided in the next section.

2. Neoliberalism and Therapeutic Culture

This study demonstrates that neoliberalism and therapeutic culture significantly influence mental health creators on TikTok. Neoliberal ideologies, which emphasize individual responsibility, minimal state intervention, and the privatization of public services, promote a consumerist form of citizenship (Birch, 2015; Chomsky & McChesney, 2006; Foucault, 2008; Ganti, 2014; Harvey, 2019; McChesney, 2001). Concurrently, therapeutic discourse commodifies emotional well-being, aligning with trends toward individualism and self-care (Cloud, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Illouz, 2017). In this context, mental health creators on TikTok

endorse self-management strategies and personal responsibility, reflecting neoliberal values. They advocate self-help practices such as mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral techniques, presenting them as privatized, self-administered care. Additionally, the platform's algorithm favors emotionally charged or sensational content, incentivizing creators to blend therapeutic advice with entertainment to maximize engagement. Therefore, this study underscores the broader implications of neoliberalism for mental health discourse, highlighting its role in commodifying and sensationalizing therapeutic content.

Moreover, digital platforms reinforce neoliberal individualism among mental health creators, aligning with Harvey's (2019) critique of market-driven individualism and Illouz's (2017) analysis of emotional well-being commodification. Docherty (2021) discusses how digital self-control reflects neoliberal ideologies, as explored by Cahill et al. (2018) and Chomsky and McChesney (2006) across various domains. Consequently, this study emphasizes the broader implications of neoliberalism for mental health discourse, highlighting its role in commodifying and sensationalizing therapeutic content, prioritizing individual responsibility over systemic change. By applying the therapeutic culture framework to digital media, we gain insights into the commodification of personal well-being and professional ethics on platforms like TikTok. Furedi (2004) and Illouz (2017) explore therapeutic culture's impact on Western societies and emotional well-being commodification, informing research on digital therapy's cultural dynamics (Abidin, 2015; Marwick, 2013). Ultimately, TikTok therapy reflects these trends by promoting self-help practices that prioritize personal responsibility. Thus, this study examines how therapeutic discourse on TikTok perpetuates modernity's emphasis on individualism and self-care, often at the expense of addressing systemic issues. Subsequently, further analysis can deepen understanding of how digital media, therapeutic culture, and professional ethics intersect,

shaping both creators and audiences in digital contexts. Building on these insights, the next section applies Foucault's theoretical frameworks to understand how these dynamics manifest in digital mental health.

3. Foucault's Concepts in Digital Mental Health

Extending the discussion of neoliberalism and therapeutic culture, this study applies Foucault's theoretical frameworks of governmentality, biopower, the regime of truth, and the theory of madness to the context of TikTok therapy, illustrating how these concepts manifest in the digital mental health space. This application extends the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape mental health discourse and practices through the lens of Foucauldian theories.

Foucault's concept of governmentality refers to the ways authority exercises control over populations through norms, practices, and regulations (Foucault, 1991). For instance, on TikTok, this is evident in the platform's algorithmic controls and content moderation strategies, which influence the behavior and content production of mental health creators. TikTok's algorithm prioritizes engagement, shaping the visibility of content based on likes, shares, and comments. Therefore, this system of governance affects what mental health information is disseminated and how creators tailor their content to align with these norms, thus extending the literature on digital governance and mental health. Moreover, viewers are guided by the platform's recommendations, which shape their consumption patterns and understanding of mental health. They are often exposed to content that aligns with the platform's engagement-driven priorities, potentially limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives. Consequently, the platform itself exercises control by determining what content is promoted or suppressed through its algorithms and moderation policies, shaping the overall discourse on mental health by prioritizing content

that drives user engagement and retention. As a result, content is shaped to fit within the platform's norms and guidelines, often prioritizing sensational or easily digestible information over comprehensive or nuanced discussions. This can lead to the oversimplification of complex mental health issues.

Biopower, another key Foucauldian concept, describes the political strategies that manage and regulate populations' lives and bodies (Foucault, 2008). In the context of TikTok therapy, biopower is exemplified by the commodification of mental health content, transforming practices and representations into marketable products. This commodification shapes both individual well-being and societal norms within the digital sphere. By examining TikTok through the lens of biopower, this study extends existing literature by highlighting the intersection of digital capitalism and mental health, showing how content is influenced by market dynamics and platform policies. Specifically, creators are encouraged to commodify their mental health knowledge and experiences, turning them into marketable products. This can lead to the commercialization of personal struggles and professional expertise. Additionally, viewers are influenced by the commodified mental health content, which shapes their perceptions and practices around self-care and mental health management. They may adopt behaviors and attitudes promoted by creators, often aligning with market-driven solutions. Furthermore, the platform benefits from the commodification of mental health content by driving engagement and monetization. This biopower dynamic reinforces the platform's economic model, which relies on user interaction and content circulation. Consequently, content is often created with marketability in mind, leading to the commodification of mental health practices and representations. This can result in a focus on quick fixes and consumer-oriented solutions rather than deeper, more systemic approaches to mental health.

Foucault's regime of truth concept refers to the mechanisms and processes that establish what is considered valid and authoritative knowledge within a society (Foucault, 1980). On TikTok, the regime of truth is determined by the platform's algorithms and community guidelines, which shape the discourse around therapeutic practices and information dissemination. This study extends the literature by analyzing how digital platforms construct and regulate truth, influencing public perceptions of mental health and the credibility of content creators. Thus, creators are influenced by the platform's regime of truth, shaping their content to fit what is perceived as credible and authoritative within the TikTok community. This often means aligning with popular trends and the platform's preferred narratives. Similarly, viewers' perceptions of mental health are shaped by the platform's regime of truth, which dictates what content is visible and credible. This can limit their understanding of what the platform promotes as valid knowledge. The platform, in setting the regime of truth, uses algorithms and community guidelines to determine which content is seen and considered authoritative, shaping the discourse on mental health, and establishing norms for credible information. Consequently, content is created to align with the platform's regime of truth, often emphasizing sensational or trending topics that the algorithm favors. This can marginalize less popular but potentially more accurate or comprehensive information.

The theory of madness explores how societies manage and control mental health representations and practices (Foucault, 1965). On TikTok, this involves the regulation and normalization of mental health discourse, influencing perceptions of acceptable behavior and treatment. Creators navigate the regulation and normalization of mental health discourse on TikTok, often shaping their content to fit societal ideals and platform expectations. This can involve presenting their experiences and expertise in ways that are palatable and engaging to the

audience. Additionally, creators may feel driven "mad" or crazy by the platform's demands and pressures, constantly needing to adapt to its changing algorithms and audience expectations. Moreover, viewers' understanding of mental health is influenced by the normalized representations on TikTok, shaping their perceptions of what constitutes acceptable behavior and treatment, which can reinforce or challenge their pre-existing beliefs about mental health. Furthermore, the platform plays a role in regulating mental health discourse by enforcing community guidelines and using algorithms to promote certain types of content, affecting which aspects of mental health are highlighted and how they are portrayed. Consequently, content reflects the normalized views of mental health, often aligning with societal ideals and the platform's standards, which can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes or the promotion of certain treatment modalities over others.

Applying Foucault's theories to TikTok therapy reveals how digital platforms govern mental health content and practices. These frameworks illuminate the power dynamics at play, where technologies of the self are promoted alongside market-oriented behaviors, shaping new forms of governance and knowledge production in the digital age. This analysis opens new avenues for scholarly inquiry into the intersections of digital governance, mental health, and power dynamics in contemporary media environments. By situating TikTok therapy within these Foucauldian concepts, this study extends the literature on digital mental health, offering a critical lens to understand the complexities of mental health content creation and dissemination on social media platforms. To further contextualize these findings, the next section examines the continuity of therapy representations from legacy media to TikTok.

4. Continuity from Legacy Media to TikTok

This study explores the evolution of therapy representations from legacy media to

TikTok, highlighting the ongoing commodification of mental health. In legacy media like talk and reality television, scholars have observed how personal struggles are turned into engaging entertainment (Dubrofsky, 2007; 2009; Peck, 1995; McMurria, 2008). Reality television often dramatizes therapy sessions, while talk shows use therapy for dramatic storytelling, simplifying complex emotional issues (Furedi, 2004; Grindstaff, 2002; Stein, 2021). Similarly, this trend continues on TikTok, where mental health creators share tips, coping strategies, and personal stories in quick, attention-grabbing formats, prioritizing likes and shares over content depth and accuracy.

Moreover, this study extends the literature by coining the term "theratainment" to describe this phenomenon where therapeutic content is transformed into entertainment. Theratainment captures the essence of how therapy and mental health topics are commodified and sensationalized across media platforms. While TikTok therapy enhances visibility and access to mental health information, it also perpetuates a media environment where emotional well-being is commodified and sensationalized. Thus, this reflects a broader pattern of engagement-driven content shaping public discourse on mental health. Placing TikTok within this historical context frames the platform as part of a larger media landscape that has long influenced how therapy and mental health are perceived by the public. Understanding this context is crucial for grasping the ongoing impact of media on therapy and mental health narratives. Consequently, transitioning from this broader media context, the next section explores how digital influencers and self-branding play a role in TikTok therapy.

5. Digital Influencers and Self-Branding

Transitioning from the broader media context, TikTok therapy exemplifies how mental health creators blend therapeutic content with entertainment and self-branding to engage their

audience. These creators often share personal stories and professional advice, aiming to make mental health topics more accessible and relatable. This blend of therapy and entertainment makes the content engaging but can also dilute the educational value. Moreover, many creators sell their own workbooks, merchandise, or other products, further blurring the lines between providing therapeutic guidance and marketing. These products are often presented as extensions of the creators' personal brands, reinforcing the idea that emotional well-being can be commodified and packaged for consumption. This phenomenon extends the literature on digital influencers by demonstrating how self-branding and commodification are intricately linked to the provision of mental health content on social media platforms like TikTok.

Research by Duffy and Hund (2019) and Bishop (2020) demonstrates that digital influencers, including TikTok therapy creators, must continually manage their personal brands, commodifying themselves and promoting related products and services. This mirrors the "Oprah Effect," where Oprah Winfrey's endorsements transformed products into cultural phenomena (Peck, 1995). These products, primarily focused on self-help, commodify well-being by placing responsibility on individuals. A notable example of the "Oprah Effect" in self-help is the book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. Featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2007, the book's popularity surged, promoting the law of attraction concept that positive thinking leads to life improvements, thus placing well-being responsibility on individuals and ignoring systemic factors.

Similarly, mental health creators on TikTok use their platforms to endorse therapeutic practices and products, blending therapy with entertainment. The commodification of self-care, epitomized by the "treat yo'self" mentality, is prevalent on TikTok (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Mental health creators often promote products and services that align with this consumerist

approach to well-being. Thus, this study explores how the commodification of self-care on TikTok reflects and reinforces neoliberal values, prioritizing individual responsibility over collective well-being. This evolution from legacy media to TikTok illustrates the ongoing prioritization of engagement and viewership metrics, often at the expense of in-depth, educational content. Examining the motivations behind this trend, the next section discusses the neoliberal influences on creators' motivations.

6. Neoliberal Influences on Creator Motivations

Neoliberal ideologies influence licensed mental health creators on TikTok, prompting them to utilize the platform as a response to financial insecurity, professional isolation, and societal stigma. For instance, many creators seek to supplement their income through TikTok, leveraging features like brand partnerships and sponsored content, especially crucial as traditional income streams from clinical practices may prove inadequate. Despite reaching millions with mental health tips, these creators often face limited financial compensation, reflecting neoliberalism's impact on public services as analyzed by Harvey (2019), where professionals must seek alternative means of financial sustainability and self-reliance due to reduced state support. Additionally, mental health creators aim to destigmatize mental health issues and dispel misconceptions, using TikTok to enhance public education and increase visibility of mental health topics. This approach resonates with Hall's (1997) exploration of media representation, highlighting how TikTok empowers creators to influence public discourse on mental health and therapists, illustrating the platform's role in shaping societal attitudes and knowledge.

This analysis extends the literature by linking neoliberal influences on professional motivations to the digital realm, particularly within the context of mental health content creation

on social media. Previous research has examined neoliberal impacts on public services and media representation independently (Harvey, 2019; Hall, 1997), but this study bridges these areas by demonstrating how neoliberalism shapes the motivations and strategies of mental health creators on TikTok. Furthermore, it highlights the dual role of these creators as both educators and entrepreneurs, navigating the complexities of financial viability and public service within a neoliberal framework. Expanding on these motivations, the next section illuminates the governance dynamics and ethical challenges faced by mental health creators on TikTok.

7. Platform Dynamics and Ethical Challenges

The political economy of digital platforms, characterized by algorithmic governance and monetization strategies, significantly impacts mental health content on TikTok (van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2018). Consequently, creators often adapt their content to align with platform dynamics, potentially compromising educational depth for popularity. By examining these trends, this study extends the existing literature by analyzing how TikTok's algorithmic governance shapes mental health discourse and creator behavior. This in turn adds a nuanced understanding of the governance dynamics of digital platforms, particularly for licensed mental health professionals engaged on TikTok.

Furthermore, this phenomenon highlights how neoliberal frameworks influence creators' motivations, driven by algorithmic demands and monetization strategies that prioritize engagement and visibility (van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2018). To sustain financial viability, creators often adapt their content to be more sensational or emotionally resonant, aligning with platform dynamics and user preferences. This commodification process is evident as creators simplify complex mental health concepts into concise, viewer-friendly videos, potentially compromising educational depth for popularity metrics. Moreover, broader structural factors

such as health insurance limitations and unstable labor conditions prompt mental health professionals to seek supplementary income streams like TikTok. Thus, while expanding outreach, this shift necessitates negotiating the platform's emphasis on self-branding and entrepreneurialism, often leading to tensions between maintaining professional standards and conforming to commercial imperatives (Srnicek, 2016). Ultimately, this dynamic challenges the educational rigor and ethical integrity of content, highlighting the need for transparent and ethically informed algorithmic practices in platform governance (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2012).

8. Credibility Performance on TikTok

This study examines how licensed mental health creators on TikTok navigate the performance of credibility, blending professional expertise with personal engagement to establish trust with their audience. This performative aspect aligns with the concept of microcelebrity, where authenticity and relatability are crucial for maintaining audience engagement. Specifically, Marwick (2013) discusses how microcelebrities manage their online personas to appear genuine and relatable, while Abidin (2015) explores the deep personal connections influencers cultivate with their followers to maintain engagement. In this context, these dynamics are increasingly relevant in digital mental health, where balancing professional credibility and personal relatability is essential for effective communication and audience trust.

Moreover, this study extends the literature by enhancing the understanding of how licensed mental health creators strategically present their expertise to align with platform expectations and audience needs. Building on previous works, Maddox (2022) and Stein et al. (2022) have explored similar themes, but this research dives deeper into the specific strategies used by these creators to establish credibility and authenticity. In particular, by highlighting the tension between professional expertise and the performative demands of the platform, this study

reveals how creators navigate these challenges while trying to maintain their ethical standards and educational goals. Furthermore, it addresses the limitations of digital platforms in promoting ethical mental health content, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the ethical challenges inherent in digital mental health communication.

D. Implications

1. Limitations of TikTok

This research highlights shifts in how mental health content is created, shared, and consumed on digital platforms like TikTok. The findings underscore the necessity for robust mechanisms to ensure that mental health information shared online maintains high ethical and educational standards. The commodification of mental health content poses risks not only to the credibility of licensed professionals but also to the well-being of users who rely on this information for guidance and support. As platforms prioritize engagement metrics, the delicate balance between accuracy and popularity becomes increasingly precarious, leading to potential misinformation and the dilution of professional integrity.

TikTok Therapy exposes the limitations of digital platforms in promoting ethical mental health content. Creators often struggle with algorithmic and monetization pressures, echoing Foucault's (2001) concept of "madness," where these complexities overwhelm individuals. Creators frequently voice dissatisfaction with TikTok's opaque algorithms, which function as "black boxes" determining content visibility and desirability (Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). This lack of transparency complicates efforts to produce valuable content, as creators must navigate an unpredictable system prioritizing engagement metrics over educational rigor. Constant adaptation to platform changes exacerbates these challenges, diverting focus from high-quality content and increasing pressure to conform to ever-changing norms, often at the expense

of ethical standards. TikTok also exemplifies Foucault's notion of governmentality, where algorithms and monetization strategies control content visibility and rewards, influencing creators' behaviors (Foucault, 2001). This dynamic forces creators to internalize pressures to produce engaging content, often sacrificing ethical considerations. The engagement-driven model complicates the balance between high engagement and accurate mental health information (Pasquale, 2015). The power dynamics of platform capitalism, as described by Srnicek (2016), further complicate these challenges, with platforms like TikTok dictating terms and benefiting disproportionately from user interactions. This environment undermines the educational value and ethical standards of mental health content, highlighting the need for systemic changes to support ethical content creation.

2. Practical and Theoretical Implications

The practical and theoretical implications of my findings contribute to understanding the intersection of therapy and digital media, particularly through the lens of TikTok Therapy (TherapyTok). Practically, the insights reveal the challenges licensed mental health practitioners face in maintaining credibility and educational integrity while navigating the platform's engagement-driven algorithms. These findings suggest that policy changes could be beneficial, advocating for stricter content moderation and clearer guidelines to prevent the spread of misinformation. In practice, mental health professionals might need to develop new strategies to balance engagement with ethical content delivery. Theoretically, the research underscores the commodification of mental health content and the influence of neoliberal ideologies, enriching the discourse on the digital mediation of therapy. Novel findings, such as the tension between authenticity and sensationalism, highlight the complexity of performing credibility in a digital age and suggest the need for a critical reevaluation of how therapeutic content is consumed and

perceived. These insights have the potential to inform future studies, shaping the framework for analyzing digital therapeutic practices and their broader societal impacts.

3. Need for Systemic Changes

TikTok lacks mechanisms to verify mental health professionals' credentials and moderate harmful content. Algorithmic control and monetization pressures necessitate systemic changes to support ethical content creation (Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). Previous studies emphasize the pressures creators face to conform to platform expectations (Gillespie, 2018; Myers West, 2018; Srnicek, 2016), stressing the importance of systemic reforms to uphold ethical content standards, especially for licensed professionals discussing sensitive mental health issues (Pasquale, 2015).

4. Practical Recommendations for TikTok

Prioritize Transparency and Accountability: Provide creators with insights into content ranking mechanisms and avenues to appeal algorithmic decisions to ensure informative content is not overshadowed by sensational material.

Support Creator Well-being: Offer comprehensive tools and resources to assist creators in addressing burnout, combating misinformation, and upholding professional integrity.

Reevaluate Platform Practices: Prioritize empowering and safeguarding creators over commercial interests for long-term sustainability, creating a supportive environment for mental health creators.

Enhance Equity and Inclusion: Ensure diverse representation and improve access to authenticated mental health education by designating segments for different groups.

Initiate Educational Campaigns: Clarify the distinction between therapeutic content and professional therapy through in-app notifications, pop-up messages, or dedicated informational

videos.

Promote Disclaimers: Encourage mental health creators to include disclaimers like "TikTok ≠ Healthcare or Therapy" in bios or captions to manage user expectations.

Establish a Verification System: Create a verification system denoting mental health professionals' qualifications with a badge, requiring official documentation for schooling and licensing.

Create a Dedicated Resource Hub: Develop a hub where users can access reliable mental health information, including links to reputable websites, hotlines, and support groups.

Collaborate with Mental Health Organizations: Work with organizations and professionals to develop guidelines for creating and sharing mental health content, hosting live sessions, and workshops.

Incorporate Professionals in Content Moderation: Involve licensed mental health professionals in content moderation to ensure quality and appropriateness of shared information.

Establish Ethical Guidelines for Monetization: Develop guidelines for creators on monetizing and managing brand partnerships related to mental health content, maintaining content quality and integrity.

E. Acknowledging Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The qualitative approach, though detailed, may not capture the full diversity of experiences among TikTok mental health creators. Future research could benefit from larger, more diverse samples for broader representation. The rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means findings may quickly become outdated, necessitating ongoing research to keep pace with changes. Additionally, the exclusive focus on TikTok limits the generalizability of findings to

other platforms with different user demographics. Examining platforms like YouTube and Instagram would provide a comprehensive understanding of digital mental health content, highlighting unique affordances and challenges.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data from creators, which may introduce bias. This study also did not analyze the creators' video content for accuracy and adherence to evidence-based practices. Future research could incorporate detailed content analysis to assess the quality and reliability of shared information. Longitudinal studies are also essential for understanding the evolution of motivations and strategies employed by mental health creators over time. Additionally, this study does not address the perspectives of viewers consuming TikTok therapy content. Future research should explore the impact of this content on viewers' mental health attitudes and behaviors, and include a broader range of creators, both licensed and unlicensed, to offer a more nuanced understanding of the digital mental health landscape. Addressing these limitations would ensure a comprehensive examination of the evolving intersection between digital media, mental health, and socio-cultural influences.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Outreach Messaging

Hi _____ -- I hope you are doing well!

My name is Krysten Stein. I am a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Here is a link to my website [<https://krystenstein.com/>] if you would like to learn a little more about me.

I am conducting a research study to better understand the phenomenon that is TikTok therapy. I am reaching out due to you being an active mental health content creator on TikTok. I recently viewed your video titled, _____, and found it very interesting and helpful.

I am studying mental health practitioners as content creators on TikTok as I am interested in the intersection of mental health, wellness, and media. Moreover, I am interested in mental health content creators' experiences on TikTok in regard to algorithmic power and monetization and how creators represent themselves and perform on the platform.

I am reaching out directly to see if you would be open to participating in a 60-minute interview with me in-person, on Zoom, and/or phone call. If you are open to being recorded, you can choose to be audio recorded, video recorded, or both audio and video recorded. While recording the interview is preferred, it is optional. If the interview is not recorded, I will instead take notes.

Prior to the interview, you will be also asked for some demographic information including personal and sensitive questions regarding your sex, gender, sexual preferences and orientation, and education. You will have the ability to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering and/or have the option to “prefer not to disclose” on every question.

I would like to ask you some questions about your background and your experiences as a mental health practitioner and content creator on TikTok. You should know that your participation in this interview is voluntary. I hope to use the information from our interview for my dissertation project. For your privacy, none of your personal information will be revealed and pseudonyms will be used for each person I speak with. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Please use this Qualtrics link

[https://uic.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_dnYUmlBUNTla3IO] to fill out your consent form, demographics sheet, to fill out and get a time scheduled for us to chat.

Please feel free to also share my recruitment message with others who may be interested.

Thanks in advance for your help and time!

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Research analyzing the political economy/content creation practices of mental health practitioners on TikTok and how they perform online.

The purpose of this research study is to interview mental health content creators with public profiles on TikTok to analyze (i) their experiences on the platform, specifically in regards to political economy, like algorithmic power and monetization, (ii) how the line between licensed mental health practitioner and TikTok content creator is blurred, (iii) what the mental health practitioners' TikTok videos communicate, and (iv) how mental health practitioners perform and represent themselves on the platform.

Before the interview, you will be asked for some demographic information which includes some personal and sensitive information, like your name, email, sex assigned at birth, pronouns, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, marital status, education level, mental health licenses, professional title, how long you have worked in the mental health field, your current employment status, and your household income. This demographic data will be stripped of all identifiers, coded with a pseudonym, and will not be linked to each-other or to the master list that contains the identifiers. It will be stored and secured on an encrypted UIC Google Drive, and will be destroyed as soon as possible after data analysis.

The interviews will ask mental health content creators with public profiles on TikTok about (i) their profession in general, (ii) why and how they create content on TikTok, (iii) their experiences with monetization on the platform and the TikTok algorithm, (iv) and the process that goes into how they present themselves on the platform.

If you agree, you will participate in an interview via UIC Technology Solutions secure subscription of UIC Zoom about your content creation practices/experiences, and how you perform on TikTok. The interview will be audio recorded, but if you prefer not to be recorded, the primary researcher will take notes instead. The interview should take approximately 60 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer a question or are free to withdraw from the interview or the entire study at any time without penalty. The interview will take place in-person, virtually over Zoom, or via phone call. The interview recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be stored and secured on an encrypted UIC Google Drive. The recordings will be transcribed by the primary investigator and will be deleted as soon as possible after data analysis. Through this process, the transcriptions will be stripped of identities and coded with pseudonyms and will not be linked to each-other and to the master list that contains identifiers.

In addition to interviews, your 10 most recent videos posted 30 days before our scheduled interview will be collected. From these videos, the following will be collected: videos, images, and texts and in addition to metadata like published dates and times, comments, likes, shares, post captions etc. The video data will not be directly identifiable and will not be linked to your interview and demographic data. It will be stored and secured on an encrypted UIC Google Drive

and will be destroyed as soon as possible after data analysis.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Your participation in this online survey/interview involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet. The primary risks presented by this research study are breaches of privacy (others outside of the study may find out you are a subject) and/or confidentiality (others outside of the study may find out what you did, said, or information that was collected about you during the study. There will be no direct benefit. When research is presented and/or published no one will know that they participated.

If you have any questions or complaints or if you feel you have been harmed by this research please contact Primary Investigator, Dr. Mariah Wellman at mwellman@uic.edu and Krysten Stein at kstein22@uic.edu, Department of Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago. Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints, or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Illinois at Chicago IRB may be reached by phone at (312) 996-1711 or by email at uicirb@uic.edu.

By participating in the interview, you are giving your consent to participate in this research and to be recorded. Thank you for your willingness to participate!

- I agree to participate
- I agree to be audio recorded
- I disagree to be audio recorded
- I disagree to participate

APPENDIX C

Demographic Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this demographic questionnaire before our interview!

What is your name?

What is your preferred email address?

What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old

Sex assigned at birth:

- Male
- Female
- Intersex
- Other (write in)
- Prefer not to disclose

Pronouns that should be used to refer to you (optional):

- She/her/hers
- He/him/his
- They/them/theirs
- Ze/zir/zirs
- Something else: _____
- Prefer not to disclose

Do you identify as transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to disclose

What gender do you most identify with (select all that apply)?:

- Agender
- Genderqueer or Genderfluid
- Māhū
- Man

- Muxe
- Non-binary
- Questioning or unsure
- Two-spirit
- Woman
- Prefer not to disclose
- Additional gender category/identity not listed (please specify below)
 - Gender Identity _____

What sexual orientation do you most identify with (select all that apply)?:

- Aromantic
- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Fluid
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- Same-gender-loving
- Straight (heterosexual)
- Stud
- Prefer not to disclose
- Additional category/identity not listed (please specify below)
 - Sexual Orientation _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to disclose

How would you describe yourself (if you identify as a member of multiple races, please select them all)?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to disclose
- Other (write in)

What is your marital status?

- Single (never married)
- Married, or in a domestic partnership

- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Prefer not to disclose
- Other (write in)

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (If you're currently enrolled in school, please indicate the highest degree you have *received*.)

- Less than a high school diploma
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
- Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS, BSW)
- Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd, MSW)
- Professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, DVM)
- Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD, PsyD)
- Prefer not to disclose

Do you hold any licenses related specifically to mental health?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to disclose

What is your professional title?

- Social worker
- Counselor
- Therapist
- Psychologist
- Prefer not to disclose
- Other (write in)

How long have you been a practicing mental health provider?

- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-15 years
- 15-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25-30 years
- 30+ years

What is your current employment status?

- Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
- Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)

- Unemployed and currently looking for work
- Unemployed and not currently looking for work
- Student
- Retired
- Homemaker
- Self-employed
- Unable to work
- Prefer not to disclose

What is your household income?

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- Over \$100,000
- Prefer not to disclose

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide for Creators

OPENING / WARM UP

A. (Establish Rapport) Hi, my name is Krysten Stein. I am a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I want to say I truly appreciate you taking the time to share this space with me today. You should know that your participation in this interview is voluntary. If at any point, you do not feel comfortable responding to a question, it is okay, please let me know. You can always skip questions if you do not feel comfortable answering. Additionally, if at any point you would like the interview to end, please let me know.

B. (Purpose) I would like to ask you some questions about your background and your experiences as a mental health practitioner and content creator on TikTok.

C. (Motivation) I hope to use the information from our interview for my dissertation project that seeks to better understand the phenomenon that is TikTok therapy. I am studying TikTok therapy as I am interested in the intersection of mental health, wellness, and media. For your privacy, none of your personal information will be revealed and pseudonyms will be used for each person I speak with.

D. (Time Line) The interview should take about 60 minutes. Are you still available to respond to some questions at this time? Is it also okay if I audio record our interview today? If you are not comfortable with me recording, I will instead just take notes.

Transition: Let me begin by asking you some basic questions about you, your expertise as a mental health practitioner, and TikTok content creator.

BODY

Note: Potential participants will be sent a UIC Qualtrics link containing in-depth information about the study, an informed consent form, and a demographics sheet for them to fill out before the interview.

Note: Questions are grouped by research questions/themes. Participants will not be made aware of themes so as to not influence responses. The groupings are to help organize the flow of the interview.

Introduction/Ice Breaker Questions

Note: Move on after five to ten minutes

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in mental health?
2. What is your official job title?
3. How many years have you been working as a therapist/mental health practitioner?
4. How long have you been on TikTok, and when did you start making your own videos?

Research question/focus area :: Why do therapists and mental health practitioners create content on TikTok?

1. Tell me your thoughts about therapy content creation on TikTok.
2. Tell me about the last video you posted.
 1. What inspired you to create this video?
 2. Did you incorporate any trends into your video such as a viral song, dance move, stitching videos, etc.?
3. How would you describe your TikTok content?
 1. What genres or themes do you address the most?
4. What led you to start and continue producing content on TikTok?
5. Has your motivation for producing content changed over time?
6. Do your followers influence what kind of content you create? If so, how?

Note: If not mentioned, probe about these topics:

- Compensation?
 - Do you receive any monetary compensation for your content?
- Sharing information/educational content?

- Identity building?
 - Gaining more clients?
 - Brand deals / monetization / sponsorships?
5. Do you only post videos, or do you also go Live?
 1. Tell me about a time that you went Live. Why?
 2. How often would you say that you use the live feature?
 3. What kind of content do you feel is best expressed in live?
 4. What are the benefits of going Live?
 6. Tell me about other TikTok creators you follow and/or whose content you watch.
 1. What do you think of their content?
 2. What kind of therapy related content do you find most engaging (or useful)?
 3. What kind of therapy content do you avoid watching or interacting with?
 4. What kind of therapy content would you consider to be (un)ethical?
 8. Who do you think watches your content?
 1. Who is your audience?
 2. Do you use any sort of analytics to understand your audience better?
 1. If so, why?
 2. If not, why?
 3. Why do you think your followers watch your content?
 4. What impact do you think it has?
 5. Describe what service you think your videos provide to viewers.
 9. Describe the kind of content your follower's request.
 1. What kind of content is requested most frequently?
 2. Are there any topics you refuse to discuss or think are inappropriate for TikTok?
 10. Has your content led viewers to seek professional treatment? If so, what experiences have they shared?
 11. Many content creators post about mental health issues on TikTok, but lack credentials to advise people. Tell me about your thoughts around this.
 12. What should users be aware of when interacting with therapy related content?
 13. Tell me about your followers/fans.
 1. Tell me about a time that you interacted with your followers/fans.
 2. How would you describe the interactions? e.g. (positive, negative, encouraging, etc.).

14. What do you think about collaborating with other TikTok content creators?
 1. If you have collaborated with others, can you tell me about a time you collaborated and what the goal of that content was?
15. How can TikTok users avoid misinformation or harmful advice about mental health?

Research question/focus area:: What do their experiences tell us about their profession?

1. Has your content on TikTok impacted your offline career?
 1. If so, tell me how.
2. Has your presence on TikTok impacted how you interact with colleagues or their perceptions of you?
 1. If so, in what ways?
3. Do you think that social media and the popularization of mental health content has impacted how therapists think of their work?
 1. If so, tell me how you think social media has impacted the field of therapy.
4. How do your clients engage with your content?
 1. How does your content impact private sessions?
5. What barriers do your followers express that make it difficult for them to receive treatment?
6. In what ways can TikTok offer solutions to these barriers?
 1. In what ways does TikTok create new challenges or increase existing barriers?
 2. How do these barriers impact your focus as a content creator?
7. What is the best part about being a therapist or mental health practitioner?
8. What is the worst part about being a therapist or mental health practitioner?
9. A lot of content on TikTok is assumed to be fun and entertaining. Do these depictions minimize or misrepresent mental illnesses or the effort and time required to make progress in therapy?
 1. How so?
10. A common theme in the mental health TikTok community is the idea of cultural competence and therapy that engages with the challenges that face marginalized identities. How does cultural competence manifest in the conversations you have with clients? Members of your profession?

Research question/focus area :: What do their experiences tell us about the political economy of platforms/creators?

1. On average, how many hours a week do you spend on creating content?
2. On average, how many hours per week do you spend responding to followers or answering questions?
3. How do you balance producing videos on TikTok with your job as a therapist?

Do you make or share content on other platforms?

1. If so, which platforms?
 2. How does your content differ on those platforms?
 3. If not, why do you choose to focus solely on TikTok content?
4. Tell me about the features on TikTok that make it difficult to produce content? (e.g., time constraints, editing tools)
 1. How do those constraints shape your content?
 5. Tell me about features on TikTok that make it useful for creating therapy related content.
 6. How often do you incorporate viral trends into your videos? (e.g. songs, dances, challenges, duet, green screen, AI voice).
 1. Which do you incorporate the most?
 2. Why do you incorporate those elements?
 3. Why do you avoid incorporating those elements?
 7. Describe a video of yours that went viral or received a lot of views. Why do you think this video received so much visibility?
 8. On the other hand, tell me about your videos with the least amount of views. Why do you think that video(s) receive less views?
 10. Have you ever had your content get removed by TikTok?
 1. If so, what was the content about?
 2. Why do you think it was removed?
 11. How do you think content moderation affects your content creation process?
 12. Do the community guidelines help or hinder your ability to produce content?
 13. TikTok is known for personalized algorithms (For You Page). How do you think this algorithm impacts your content?
 14. Do you have any sponsorships with brands?
 1. If so, which brands?

2. If not, have you been approached by any brands? Why did you choose to not work with them?
15. If creator is not compensated:
 1. Do you hope to monetize your content?
 2. How would monetization impact your ability to create content?
 16. Since you have been producing content on TikTok, have new doors/opportunities opened up for you?
 1. If so, what kinds?
 17. Have you had any conflicts with your pay and/or employer at your therapy job due to your presence on TikTok as a creator?
 18. Have you heard of the TikTok Creator Next program?
 1. If so, are you a member?
 2. If not, why?

Note: If creator is a member of the TikTok Creator Next program, probe about the monetization programs:

19. What is your experience with the TikTok Creator Fund?
20. What is your experience with the TikTok Creator Marketplace?
21. Have your viewers ever sent you Gifts like coins?
22. Have your viewers ever sent you tips?
23. Have you ever been awarded Diamonds from TikTok?
24. If you had a large creative budget, what kind of content would you want to produce?
25. As a platform, should TikTok try to moderate therapy content produced by creators lacking credentials?
26. Should there be verification markers akin to Twitter's blue checkmarks to help users identify professionals?

Transition: It has been a pleasure to learn more about you and your experience as a mental health practitioner and TikTok content creator.

CLOSING

A. (Maintain Rapport) I really appreciate the time you took for this interview, and I should have all the information I need.

B. (Action to be taken) Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know or that I did not ask in the interview? Would it be alright to follow up if I have any more questions? Additionally, do you know other TikTok therapists and mental health practitioners and/or viewers/fans of your videos? If so, would you be open to sharing information with them about my study? I would love to have the opportunity to interview them about their experiences as well. Thank you again!

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Stein, K., Yao, Y., & Aitamurto, T. (2022). Examining communicative forms in TikTokDocs' Sexual Health Videos. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 23-45.

Stein, K. (2023). You better work! Drag queen performativity and visibility on #dragqueen TikTok. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 8(2), 139–157.

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- Zuboff, S. (2020). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs.

VITA

NAME

Krysten Stein

EDUCATION

Ph.D. The University of Illinois Chicago | June 2024
 Communication and Media Studies.
 Interdepartmental Concentrations: Gender and Women's
 Studies and Black Studies.
 Committee: Dr. Elena Maris (co-chair), Dr. Elaine
 Yuan (co-chair) Dr. Rebecca Lind, Dr. Mariah Wellman, Dr. Amanda Ann
 Klein, and Dr. Jennifer Holt

Graduate Certificate. The University of Cincinnati | June 2016
 Film & Media Studies.

M.A. The University of Cincinnati | June 2012
 Communication.
 Advisor: Dr. Nancy Jennings

B.A. The University of Cincinnati | June 2011
 Major: Communication.
 Minors: Psychology. Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies.
 High Honors. Cum Laude.

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

The University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College
 The Department of English & Communication
 Assistant Professor, 2024 - present

The University of Illinois Chicago
 Department of Gender & Women's Studies
 Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2023-2024
 GWS 101 - Gender in Everyday Life

Department of Communication
 Instructor of Record, 2019-2023
 COMM 100 - Fundamentals of Human Communication
 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Fall 2021, Fall 2022, Spring 2023, Fall 2023
 COMM 102 - Intro to Interpersonal Communication

Loyola University Chicago, School of Communication

Adjunct Professor, Fall 2023
 COMM 227 - Social Justice & Communication
 COMM 281 - Communication, Language & Gender

The University of Cincinnati, The School of Communication, Film, and Media Studies (SCFMS)

Department of Communication

Adjunct Associate Professor, 2013 - 2024

COMM 1071 - Effective Public Speaking

COMM 2026 - Introduction to Mass Communication

COMM 2028 - Communication and Popular Culture

COMM 2081 - Business Communication

PD 1001 - Introduction to Cooperative Education (professional development course to prepare students for co-op)

Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2011- 2012

COMM 1071 - Effective Public Speaking

SCHOLARSHIP

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Stein, K. (2023). YOU BETTER WORK! Drag Queen Performativity and Visibility on #dragqueen TikTok. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 8(2), 139-157. [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

Stein, K., Yao, Y., Aitamurto, T. (2022). Examining Communicative Forms in #TikTokDocs' Sexual Health Videos. *International Journal of Communication (IJoC)*, 16(2022), 1309-1331. [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

Psarras, E., Stein, K., Shah, P. (2021) "You're not here for the right reasons!" From The Bachelorette to Instagram Influencer, *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(2), 571-578. [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

Gray, K., Stein, K. (2021). "We 'said her name' and got zucked": Black Women Calling-out the Carceral Logics of Digital Platforms. *Gender and Society*, 35(4). [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

Stein, K. (2021). What Do TV, Rhetorical Analysis, and Black Men Living on The Down Low All Have in Common? The Oprah Winfrey Show. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 9(1). 321-338. [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

Aitamurto, T., Stevenson Won, A., Sakshuwong, S., Kim, B., Sadeghi, Y., Stein, K., Royal, R., Kircos, C. (2021). From FOMO to JOMO: Fear and Joy of Missing Out in 360° Video Viewing Experience. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI'21)*. ACM. [\[Electronic Version\]](#)

DATABASE AND ENCYCLOPEDIA ENTRIES

Stein, K. Shaping Body Image: The Influence of Reality Television and Social Media, *ABC-CLIO Women's U.S. History Database*, (Forthcoming, October 2024).

BOOK REVIEWS

Stein, K. (2022). Review of Design Justice Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds

We Need by Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Communication Research Trends (CRT)*, 41(2), 17-19 [[Electronic Version](#)].

Stein, K. (2022). Review of #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice by Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *Television and New Media (TVNM)*, 24(2), 242-244. [[Electronic Version](#)].

Stein, K. (2022). Review of Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media by Tarleton Gillespie, *International Journal of Communication (IJoC)*, 16(2022), 2387-2389. [[Electronic Version](#)].

PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP AND MEDIA COVERAGE

Business Insider / Culture – British politicians think they have a plan to combat Andrew Tate's influence in schools. It's doomed to fail, expert interview on identity and the manosphere 2023 [[Electronic Version](#)]

Business Insider / Tech — The Gen Z gender gap is widening, and the influence of manosphere podcasters can't be ignored, expert interview on identity and the manosphere, 2023 [[Electronic Version](#)]

Business Insider / Entertainment – Lunden and Olivia Stallings are TikTok's lesbian power couple. Straight people love them; queer people aren't so sure, expert interview on identity and influencers, 2023 [[Electronic Version](#)]

Business Insider's TikTok / Entertainment — Lunden and Olivia Stallings (@Lunden & Olivia) are TikTok's lesbian power couple. Straight people love them; #queer people aren't so sure. #wlw #lgbtq, expert interview on identity and influencers, 2023 [[Electronic Version](#)]

CNN Business / Tech – TikTok is pushing longer videos. Some creators worry about the vibe shift, expert interview on TikTok, 2023. [[Electronic Version](#)]

The Guardian – ‘The sex ed class you wish you’d had’: the influencer doctors teaching Americans the basics, expert interview on OBGYN TikTok Docs, expert interview on OBGYN TikTok Docs, 2023 [[Electronic Version](#)]

Feminist Book Club Podcast – But Really...Can Reality TV be Feminist?, expert interview on reality TV and feminism, expert interview on reality TV and feminism, 2022 [[Electronic Version](#)]

INVITED TALKS, PRESENTATIONS, AND PARTICIPATION

Westwood, H. (Chair). Holroyd, D., Stein, K., Tylstedt, B., Westwood, H. (2024). *Social Media as a Key Actor in Redefining Healthcare Industry Dynamics* [Panel]. The Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, England

TikTok, Storytelling, and Gaming, workshop creator and facilitator for Dr. Kishonna Gray's Mellon Foundation grant-funded project on Intersectional Technology and Gaming, 2024

Visuality, Culture, Methods PhD School: Exploring visual cultures, when you can't really trust your eyes. In collaboration with the TRAVIS project, University of Tallinn, Estonia, Selected Participant, 2024. Could not attend due to timing of completing dissertation and moving for tenure track position

Stein, K. (Co-Chair), Rauchberg, J. (Co-Chair), Wellman, M., Stowell, O., Southerton, C., Gerrard, Y., Fernandes, K. (2024). *Mind Matters: The Intersection of Mental Health, Well-Being, and Popular Media* [Panel]. The International Communication Association Conference. Gold Coast, Australia. Virtual Participant

Holroyd, D. (Chair), Stein, K., Tylstedt, B., Westwood, H. (2024). *Intimately Knowing the Body: Embodied Knowledge Production and Wellness on Social Media* [Panel]. The Global Digital Intimacies Conference. Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Virtual Participant

"The Promises and Perils of Generative AI for the Creator Economy" Workshop hosted by Nancy Baym & Zoë Glatt, Microsoft Research New England, and David Craig, University of Southern California/Harvard University, Invited Participant, 2023

AoIR Doctoral Colloquium, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Selected Participant, 2023

Stein, K. (Co-Chair), Divon, T. (Co-Chair), Maddox, J., Bishop, S., Miller, K., Tran, C. (2023) *Influencer Creep: Professionals as Influencers on Social Media* [Panel]. The International Communication Association Conference. Toronto, Ontario.

Driessen, S. (Co-Chair), Escurignan, J. (Co-Chair), Stein, K., Reinhard, C., Williams, J., Moulton, C., Wang, E. (2022). *Trends in Global Fandom: From Post-Covid Practices to Fannish Policing* [Panel]. The International Communication Association Conference. Paris, France.

Zhang, E., Stein, K., Guarriello, N-B., Homent, E., Persaud, C. Szulc, L (Chair). (2022). *Problematizing Diversity and Visibility for Queer and Trans Content Creators* [Panel].

The International Communication Association Conference. Paris, France.

Hessler, J., Navar-Gill, A., Stein, K., Siles, I., Stoldt, R. (2022). *Mythologies of Datafied Optimization* [Panel]. The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Virtual due to COVID-19.

Kustritz, A., Reinhard, C., Stein, K., Condis, M., Schweizer, B. (2022). *Resituating Fandom: New Media, New Era* [Panel]. The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Virtual due to COVID-19.

AWARDS AND SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS

Offered: The postdoctoral fellowship at the Center on Digital Culture and Society (CDCS) at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania for 2024-2025. Declined due to acceptance of a full-time tenure track position

The Center for Critical Internet Inquiry, UCLA, Dissertation Fellow, 2023-2024

The University of Illinois Chicago Department of Gender & Women's Studies, Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2023-2024

The University of Illinois Chicago Department of Communication, Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2019-2023

The International Communication Association (ICA) Conference Popular Media & Culture Division, Conference Registration Waiver Recipient, 2022, 2023

The University of Illinois Chicago Graduate College Student Travel Award Recipient, 2020-2023

The University of Illinois Chicago Graduate College Student Presenter Award Recipient, 2021-2023

The University of Illinois Chicago Department of Communication Student Presenter Award Recipient, 2021-2023

The University of Illinois Chicago Department of Communication Research Fund Award Recipient, 2022, 2023

The University of Illinois Chicago Gender & Women's Studies Esther O. Kegan Travel Award Recipient, 2022, 2023

The University of Illinois President's Research in Diversity Travel Assistance Award Recipient, 2022

Console-ing Passions, The Jane Feuer Memorial Fund Recipient, 2022

The International Communication Association (ICA), Michael Haley Travel Grant Recipient, 2022

The University of Illinois Chicago Graduate Prize in Gender & Women's Studies Recipient, 2021

SERVICE

Social Media Editor, *Feminist Media Studies*, 2022-2025

Paper Reviewer, International Conference on Social Media & Society (#SMSociety), 2024

Session Chair, P25: Intimacies, The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), 2023

Panel Moderator/Interviewer, International Communication Association (ICA) Fellows Panel, 2023

Assisted the Graduate Admissions Committee, Department of Communication, University of Illinois Chicago, 2023

Mentor, Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Fan and Audience Studies SIG Mentorship Program 2022-2023

Student Member Volunteer, International Communication Association (ICA), Traditional Student Volunteer Program, 2022

Student/Early Career Representative & Social Media Manager, International Communication Association (ICA) Popular Media & Culture Division, 2021-2023

Top Paper Awardees & Conference Waiver Reviewer, International Communication Association (ICA) Conference, Popular Media & Culture Division, 2021-2023

Reviewer, International Communication Association (ICA) Conference, Popular Media & Culture Division, 2021-2024

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

The Content Creator Scholars Network, Core Founding Member, 2023-present

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), 2023-present

The International Communication Association (ICA), 2021-present

The Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), 2021-present

The Popular Culture Association (PCA), 2021-present

The TikTok Cultures Research Network, 2021-present