

**Clocked by the App:
Discovering Queer Identity on TikTok**

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Abstract

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Since 2020, anecdotes of ‘TikTok knew I was queer before I did’ have been prevalent. To examine this phenomenon, this thesis uses semi-structured interviews with five TikTok users in Canada who discovered one facet of their queer identity on the platform. This study seeks to understand these users’ experiences with identity discovery on TikTok and how TikTok’s affordances and limitations contributed to their experiences. This study finds that queer assemblages operate on the platform, users have paradoxical experiences with TikTok, and as a corporate platform, TikTok is limited in what it can offer queer users. These findings uncover fertile areas for future research and offer valuable insights for queer people to imagine a platform that better serves our needs.

Keywords: identity work, social media, LGBTQ, algorithms, affect, platform governance

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Introduction

In September 2020, I clicked on a video in my YouTube subscription feed entitled *Reacting to TikToks that ~Made Me Gay~* (Alayna Joy, 2020). This was posted by YouTuber, Alayna Joy (n.d.), who currently has 436,000 subscribers. As a viewer, I knew that she had recently called off an engagement to a man when she realized she was lesbian and not bisexual as she had previously thought. In this video, Joy explains, “I’m not even joking, I’m not being ironic when I say TikTok made me gay.” This was the first time I encountered this phenomenon and my interest was piqued. I am no stranger to queer awakenings — YouTubers certainly contributed to my bisexual awakening — but for a platform to be the catalyst for such a dramatic existential shift was intriguing. I had never used TikTok before, so this phenomenon made me think of the platform as some kind of queer crystal ball. In the years that followed, I would hear this same experience described to me by classmates, friends, and strangers I met at queer events. As I observed this phenomenon occurring over and over, my curiosity grew; I needed to get to the bottom of how TikTok was doing this.

This thesis examines the phenomenon of ‘TikTok knew I was queer before I did’. I have spoken to many queer people in my everyday life who discovered a facet of their LGBTQ+ identity on TikTok, whether that be someone who thought they were cis realizing they are non-binary or someone who thought they were pansexual realising they are asexual. This phenomenon is referenced in various press articles (Joho, 2022; MacGowan, 2020). Joho (2022) writes of how “TikTok's algorithms knew [she] was bi before [she] did”. MacGowan (2020) writes of TikTok confirming her bisexuality, saying that “queer TikTok has given me the gift of believing that my bisexuality can be a source of light, not a burden”. An Insider essay explains the impact of the Lesbian Masterdoc on TikTok (Olivia B., 2023). The Lesbian Masterdoc is a Google document that asks questions to provoke people who were socialized as women to reflect on the difference between compulsory heterosexuality and real attraction to men. “In 2021, videos about the Lesbian Masterdoc started going viral on TikTok” (Olivia B.). The essay’s author, Olivia B. (2023) explains how she realized she was a lesbian, writing, “[e]verything changed when I fell down the

rabbit hole of lesbian TikTok and found the Lesbian Masterdoc”. These articles demonstrate the prevalence of this phenomenon.

Some press articles have critiqued TikTok’s categorization of LGBTQ+ people (Heggestad, 2023; Wells & Tau, 2023). Heggestad (2023) warns against using TikTok’s algorithm to figure out one’s identity, writing that such tools can be limiting and “algorithms are often outright inaccurate in their constructions”. This is a significant concern that I will discuss further in my analysis.

Despite the prevalence of these conversations in queer spaces, both on and offline, I have not been able to find academic writing about this phenomenon. This research will build on work that has been done about the queer potentials of other social media platforms (Bates et al., 2020; Cavalcante, 2019; Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022; Gray, 2009; Jenzen, 2017). This project will explore the new possibilities and risks that TikTok offers to queer people, which can inform future research and the design of future platforms. I think that studying queer possibilities in social media is imperative in this current time of increasing acceptance of queer identities but also increasing violent backlash in the form of anti-trans policy and other anti-queer violence. Therefore, it is incredibly important that scholars study how platforms can be of use to LGBTQ+ people for expression, connection and mobilization and how platforms undermine queer liberation.

Objectives

The primary objective of my research is to study the experiences of queer people in Canada who discovered new facets of LGBTQ+ identity through TikTok. Exploring this phenomenon, the secondary objective is to understand some of the possibilities and risks presented to queer people by TikTok. Possibilities include identity formation and social support, while risks include algorithmic discrimination and surveillance. The project seeks to answer the following question: How have LGBTQ+ people living in Canada experienced this phenomenon? It also asks: How have TikTok’s affordances and limitations contributed to their experiences?

As Jenzen (2017) explains, “avoiding simplistic utopian or dystopian conclusions” is key when exploring LGBTQ+ people and the online space (p. 1639). Cavalcante (2019) utilizes a similarly nuanced

approach, avoiding binary conclusions. I will strive for a nuanced approach that acknowledges both the benefits and limitations of TikTok for queer people. I will also avoid technological determinism by acknowledging the ways in which queer users actively and creatively negotiate with the platform's limitations.

Definitions

TikTok is a video-sharing social media platform that was released in 2016 (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). The platform is owned by Chinese company, ByteDance (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In China, TikTok's twin service, Douyin, operates and TikTok is not available (Wang, 2022). In 2018, TikTok became available globally following its merger with Chinese social media platform, Musical.ly (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). At the beginning of 2020, TikTok experienced a massive surge in users (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). As of 2024, TikTok has 1.7 billion registered users and 1.1 billion active users (Shewale, 2024). On TikTok, users can upload videos that are up to ten minutes in length and can use a variety of audio-visual and social features (TikTok, 2021). Upon opening TikTok, one is automatically taken to the 'For You Page', or FYP. TikTok (2020) states that "[t]he For You feed delivers videos to each user that are likely to fit their interests" and the more that users interact with TikTok, the more tailored their FYP becomes. This means that users, including my study's participants, are able to stumble across content that they may not otherwise seek out. As a result, the FYP and its algorithm are significant for my research.

Borrowing from Cavalcante (2019), I use queer "as an umbrella term to discuss nonnormative forms (identities, spaces, practices, expressions, etc.) of gender and sexuality" (p. 1716). In this thesis, I define as queer anyone who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community; I use the terms queer and LGBTQ+ largely interchangeably. I also use queer to refer to aesthetics and representations that subvert or challenge dominant cisheteronormative narratives and aesthetics of gender, sex and sexuality.

While Alayna Joy described her experience as TikTok 'making her gay', this is playfully hyperbolic. She is speaking to her audience in an almost parodic way because she trusts that they will be 'in on the joke'. It is presumably her expectation that queer people will understand that one is not *turned* gay. TikTok aided her in discovering something about herself that she believes was always true. This

phrasing also makes for a compelling YouTube video title, which YouTube’s algorithm rewards. Thus, Alayna Joy’s word choice might demonstrate her awareness of how social media algorithms prioritize content that is sensational and hyperbolic. While I understand queerness as fluid, I also want to recognize the danger of this phrasing when it reaches people outside of the queer community. Anti-queer campaigners could take this as proof that people are ‘made’ gay rather than born gay, opening up the possibility of converting people back to heterosexuality. Further, this phrasing perpetuates media effects theory, which focuses on the effects that media have on people and “neglects the rich complexity of human social relationships to technologies” (Chandler & Munday, 2016). This kind of phrasing could cause a moral panic from anti-queer groups. Others phrase their experience as TikTok ‘knowing’ they were gay (Joho, 2022; MacGowan, 2020). This could also be questioned, since it more accurate to say that TikTok guessed that these users were gay. Interestingly, the terms ‘know’, ‘guess’ and ‘clock’ all anthropomorphize TikTok. This points to how users perceive social media algorithms as autonomous, almost living things that can know them in a human way. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines ‘clock’ as “to come to realize or understand”. I use the term ‘clocked’, which is popularly used as slang by trans people, drag queens and other members of the LGBTQ+ community to describe when another person “uncover[s] or reveal[s] the truth in a situation” (Gayzelle, 2011). For trans people who are trying to ‘pass’ as their gender, it often refers to someone realizing that they are trans (James, 2019). I elect to describe the phenomenon I am studying as TikTok *clocking* users as queer and *contributing* to their self-discovery.

Chapter Summary

In chapter 1, I outline the existing literature upon which my research builds. I explain that my work builds upon research in the fields of social media studies and queer studies. In five thematic categories, I outline and synthesize the key theories, concepts, and studies with which my work will be in dialogue: assemblages and affect; identity work; algorithms and governance; privacy; and the COVID-19 context. I describe how my research contributes to the small number of scholars researching LGBTQ+

experiences with TikTok, as well as the broader scholarship in the areas of TikTok and LGBTQ+ experiences, respectively.

In chapter 2, I describe the specific method I have selected, and assess the strengths and limitations of my chosen methods of data collection and analysis. I justify each decision that went into my research design, including my chosen sampling and research methods, my use of Zoom, and my employment of automatic transcription software and inductive thematic analysis. I also describe the limitations of all of these choices and my own positionality. Finally, I describe the ethical considerations that inform my research design.

In chapter 3, I engage in a thematic analysis of my interview transcripts, discussing each of the four themes that arose through my coding: queer discovery; affective connection; algorithm and governance; and privacy. Using key studies and concepts, I examine these themes and describe how these findings align with or depart from previous research.

In chapter 4, I examine three major findings that resulted from this analysis. Respectively, the findings are concerned with the content, the user and the platform. I discuss each finding and the implications that it has for the queer community and future research.

In the final and concluding chapter, I summarize the contents of this thesis. I review the results of my thematic analysis. Lastly, I reiterate the importance of this area of research and restate the implications of this research for the queer community and future research.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The stream of study to which my thesis contributes is media and culture. This stream involves engaging critically with media and their cultural, social and political dimensions. Specifically, my work contributes to fields of queer studies and social media studies. The literature with which my work is in dialogue falls into the following thematic categories: assemblages and affect; identity work; algorithms and governance; privacy; and the COVID-19 context. My project builds on understandings of queer assemblages and affective connections. Since my project explores the phenomenon of people discovering a facet of their LGBTQ+ identity on TikTok, it builds on scholarship that designates social media as a space for identity formation. My work also builds on studies of how algorithms and platform governance shape users' experiences by examining queer user's experiences with TikTok's FYP algorithm. I connect these two areas by examining how the FYP algorithm was used by my participants in queer identity work. In my analysis of the tensions that this phenomenon presents, I build on privacy scholarship to describe the potential threats of users' queerness being recognized by TikTok. Further, my work will incorporate scholarship about queer people and social media in the COVID-19 context.

Assemblages and Affect

My research will approach queerness as a process mediated through TikTok. To examine TikTok as a platform, I will employ platform affordances theory. Affordances are “a sociotechnical concept describing the relationship between people and technology” (Kitzie, 2019, p. 1340). Petersen (2022) offers a similar definition, writing that “the affordances of technologies refer to the relationship between artefacts, users, and environments broadly understood” (p. 6). I will analyze TikTok's affordances and how they mediate queerness for my participants. In order to examine TikTok's assemblages of video, sound and text, I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari (1987). They explain that “[a]n assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 22-23). This will allow me to understand how TikTok's audio-visual and textual elements contributed to my participants' queer discoveries. Keeling (2019) and Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022) emphasize the importance of audio culture. Specifically, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022) discuss the circulation of

audio memes and music on TikTok. This is useful for my exploration of TikTok as an audio memetic space and of music as an enabler of queer connection on the platform. Lin (2021) and Duguay (2022, 2023) both offer a basis for understanding the visual elements of TikTok. Duguay (2023) explains that “[d]isplays of queer fashion” interact with other affordances on TikTok (p. 1). She also offers the concept of the “lesbian digital dreamgirl” aesthetic, which describes the online lesbian figure that conforms to and reproduces “the hegemonic idealization of white supremacy, ability, and the retention of femininity” (Duguay, 2022, p. 85). Lin (2021) describes the prevalence of Lesbian ways of dressing on TikTok and how they aid in the formation of safe spaces. These scholars will aid me in examining the visual queer aesthetics offered to TikTok users.

I use a definition of affect that is “a looser, socially inflected understanding of what the emotional constitutes, one that is not simply confined to individual feelings but socially affecting formations” (Kanai, 2017, p. 296). Affect on TikTok is not separate from offline intimacies that coexist with it or preceded it. McGlotten (2013) allows us to recognize virtual intimacies as “forms of connection and belonging that are not necessarily identitarian and that do not fit neatly into our beliefs about how we might belong to a couple, a family, or nation” (p. 10-11). On TikTok, people are able to experience these feelings of connection, belonging and relatability in a digital space. Kanai (2018) describes “relatability as an affective relation” (p. 3-4). She explains that relatability requires labour and relies on personal experiences being presented as general (Kanai, 2018). When a queer user gets content on their FYP that describes what they have thought, felt or experienced, they have an affective experience. The feeling of common or shared experience is pleasurable and desirable; it makes people feel like they belong (Kanai, 2018). This belonging is, of course, working together with relatability to give participants an enjoyable experience where they feel included and validated. On TikTok, though, belonging is not derived from relying on the fantasy of sameness and generality that Kanai (2017, 2018) identifies in feminine publics. Instead, it offers a feeling of normative belonging that is more specific but also more multiple.

Cho’s chapter in Hillis et al.’s (2015) book, *Networked Affect*, offers a useful contribution to theorizing about queer people, affect and social media. In his discussion of affect on Tumblr, Cho (2015)

offers the concept of ‘queer reverb’. He uses the metaphor of ‘reverb’ “as a way of understanding how affect circulates in [Tumblr’s] social media environment” (p. 47). He explains that “reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain” (p. 35). Queer reverb is “a way to understand how intensity interacts with refrain over time and as a function of repetition.” (p. 53). This concept is useful when applied to TikTok as a way to understand how repetition over time builds the intensity of my participants affective connections with queer content.

Identity Work

The literature points to the use of social media for identity formation (Bates et al., 2020; Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Cavalcante, 2019; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2009; Lin, 2023; Simpson & Semaan, 2020; Skinner, 2023). Gray (2009) offers the concept of ‘queer realness’, explaining that authentic and diverse stories told by real queer people are more meaningful for queer rural youth than fictional media portrayals. ‘Queer realness’ allows me to examine how authentic performances of queerness on TikTok made participants feel represented and less alone. Gray’s ‘queer realness’ builds on Butler’s (1990, 1993, 2004) theory of ‘gender performativity’. Butler’s theory “refers to gender as an ongoing and variable enactment rather than a given identity” (Chandler & Munday, 2020e). Rather than being innate and biological, Butler understands gender as culturally constructed by the expressions and behaviours that are often seen as a result of an innately gendered subject. This allows us to understand how queer identities are fluid and emergent, shaped by the social and cultural context in which one exists. Further, using their theory, “dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized” (Butler, 2004, p. 209). Performativity recognizes both normative and queer identities as culturally constructed and “performatively established” (Butler, 2004, p. 209). My work will build on Butler’s theory, discussing how TikTok enables users to access others’ performances of gender identity and sexual orientation, which shapes how they construct and enact their own queer identities. I want to note that viewing gender and sexual orientation as fluid and culturally constructed does not mean that it is a choice. While queer performativity is a contentious concept in today’s queer discourse, I do not believe that we need to rely on the notion that queerness is biologically innate for us to be valid and deserving of rights. In fact, Butler argues that the self-

determination of one's gender is an important exercise of freedom (Butler, 2004). TikTok's affordances enable performances of queerness to be mediated through the platform. Craig and McInroy (2014) describe how new media enable LGBTQ youth to access resources, explore their identity, find others like them, and come out online; these online activities then expand into their offline life. The youth in their study felt more comfortable with their own identities after watching the experiences of other LGBTQ youth online (Craig & McInroy, 2014). This literature makes clear how queer representation, or performances of queerness, on TikTok are important, especially for people who do not have representation or support in offline life.

My project will incorporate perspectives from queer theory, such as compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), heteronormativity (Chandler & Munday, 2020d) and (dis)orientation (Ahmed, 2006). Discussing lesbians specifically, Rich (1980) describes compulsory heterosexuality as the assumption that people have an innate or natural sexual attraction to the opposite sex, one that need not be questioned or examined. On a societal level, compulsory heterosexuality erases queer attraction or labels it deviant (Rich, 1980). On an individual level, compulsory heterosexuality leads many people to never question whether they are actually attracted to the opposite sex; instead, they take it as a given. According to Sara Ahmed (2006), compulsory heterosexuality can be understood as "a straightening device" (p. 23) that directs us to follow the line or path of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the "deeply embedded cultural presumption that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous" (Chandler & Munday, 2020d); heterosexuality is considered the default and superior sexual orientation. "When we are orientated, we may not even notice that we are orientated" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 5), but queer representations can disorient us and allow us to imagine new possibilities. Ahmed's idea of (dis)orientation is valuable for my research because viewing a queer TikTok can be understood as a disorienting experience that causes participants to question their default assumptions about their own identity. Disorientation may make a participant realize that they were unknowingly oriented toward an ideal of being heterosexual, cisgender or allosexual.

Cavalcante (2019) describes Tumblr as a queer, digital utopia that enables users to imagine new hopeful futures for themselves. In her doctoral dissertation, Skinner (2023) asserts TikTok’s “utility and significance for queer creators who have taken up the app as a new site for performances of queer utopia” (p. 235). Building on Butler, Cavalcante and Skinner show that the concept of performativity is key to understanding queer, online spaces. Skinner (2023) argues that the phenomenon of people discovering their queerness on TikTok is due to it being a site of queer utopia. I agree that TikTok can be understood as a queer, digital utopia. Queer, digital utopias allow queer people to exist in and “imagine a space outside of heteronormativity” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35). Muñoz and Cavalcante’s work will allow me to understand how TikTok creates a distinctly queer space for users to imagine queer futures. Once one is outside of heteronormativity, they might, like the participants in my study, realize that they are not cisgender/heterosexual/allosexual themselves.

These queer online spaces can be seen as extensions of past queer spaces. Cavalcante (2019) emphasizes the importance of historicizing online queer spaces such as Tumblr, or in my case, TikTok. He argues “that the online space emerged as a queer center in response to the decline and changing character of historic gay institutions—such as the gayborhood and gay bar” (p. 1732). Dame-Griff (2023) describes the trans support groups of the late 1990s and the trans movement’s large network of print publications, which included magazines, journals and group newsletters (p. 10). These spaces offered invaluable information, community connection and movement-building. In my study, it is crucial to view TikTok as an extension of these older queer spaces that similarly acts as a space that enables people to imagine queer possibilities for themselves. This consideration ensures that I avoid technological determinism, which is the “[t]he stance that new technologies are the primary cause of major social and historical changes at the macrosocial level of social structure and processes and/or subtle but profound social and psychological influences at the microsocal level” (Chandler & Munday, 2020f). Put simply, technological determinism assumes that technology is autonomous and inevitably shapes society and users. For example, technological determinism could result in the conclusion that TikTok is turning people queer.

My research understands queer people and TikTok as co-constructing one another, acknowledging the agency that queer people have in their interactions with the platform.

While they study TikTok, Bossen and Kottasz (2020) do not focus on queer people specifically. Using survey data from TikTok users aged 11 to 16 in Denmark, they find that adolescents use TikTok for the purpose of “self-identity creation” (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 473). Bates et al. (2020) focus on LGBTQ+ youth identity, but not specifically on TikTok. They examine LGBTQ+ youths’ narrative identity development on social media using semi-structured interviews with 11 LGBTQ+ undergraduate students (Bates et al., 2020). Bates et al. find that “social media plays a critical and overwhelmingly positive role in facilitating [...] queer youths’ narrative identity development” (p. 76). Lin (2022) studies queer people on TikTok and finds “that the lesbian community on TikTok provides a relatively safe space for teenagers to explore their identity” (p. 2). These three studies emphasize youth identity formation online. Age was an important consideration in selecting my sample; recognizing the different experiences of children, adolescents and young adults informed my decision to focus on people over the age of 16.

Using data from 16 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ adult TikTok users, Simpson and Semaan (2020) examine TikTok’s For You Page algorithm (p. 10, 14). The authors employ “an approach based on grounded theory”, using a computer program to analyze their qualitative data (p. 11). They find that “TikTok affords [...] participants an opportunity to engage in identity work and identity affirmation work” (p. 14). However, they find that TikTok also “inhibit[s] identity work and identity affirmation work” (p. 14). This attention to contradictions differs from many other studies (Bates et al., 2020; Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Lin, 2023). However, Simpson and Semaan (2020) mirror Cavalcante’s (2019) balanced approach to studying Tumblr, where he recognizes Tumblr’s “potential to serve as both a utopia and a vortex for young people” (p. 1732). These works inform my approach to my research. I plan to emulate these scholars’ balanced approach, exposing both the affordances and limitations for queer identity discovery on TikTok. This will ensure that I do not espouse an excessively optimistic or pessimistic judgement of TikTok and its queer potential.

Algorithms and Governance

Multiple articles discuss how algorithms shape users' experiences (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Karizat et al., 2021; Milton et al., 2023; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022; Simpson et al., 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2020; Wang, 2022). Wang (2022) explains that "TikTok is characterized by content-based interactions that depend on personalized video feeds driven by its recommendation algorithm" (p. 60). Wang's work differs from many others by making practical recommendations for how to improve TikTok's algorithm. Like most social media platforms, TikTok's algorithmic recommendation system is a black box. Pasquale (2015) uses the concept of a 'black box' to discuss the knowledge imbalances in society. The term is a powerful metaphor as it dually refers to "the data- monitoring systems in planes, trains, and cars [and] a system whose workings are mysterious; we can observe its inputs and outputs, but we cannot tell how one becomes the other." (p. 3). He further describes how this secrecy is used by platforms: "Internet companies collect more and more data on their users but fight regulations that would let those same users exercise some control over the resulting digital dossiers" (p. 5). This term is useful to apply to TikTok because of the opacity of its algorithmic systems. This is to say that we as users know that our actions are inputted into the algorithm to produce recommendations, but we are not privy to the process that transforms this information. This opacity impacts how queer users perceive their identity discovery on the platform.

LGBTQ+ users have paradoxical experiences with highly personalized algorithms (Milton et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2020). In Simpson and Semaan's (2020) study of how queer adults interact with TikTok's FYP algorithm, participants felt the For You Page algorithm was sometimes affirming and helpful, while at other times transgressing and violating. Having an app clock something as intimate as one's sexual identity made some users feel violated, meanwhile, being miscategorized by the recommendation system made users feel invalidated. In another article, Simpson et al. (2022) describe how LGBTQ+ users attempt to domesticate TikTok and its algorithm, but are never able to do so fully. Their lack of control over their digital selves results in TikTok always being misaligned with their personal values (Simpson et al., 2022). Discussing mental health content, Milton et

al. (2023) found that TikTok's For You Page algorithm recommended content that users could see themselves in, making them feel less alone. However, the same algorithm also recommended content that was harmful to their mental health. Discussing Google's search results, Dame-Griff (2023) writes that "[f]or the questioning user, then, the 'event' of possibly coming into a new identity may be changed by what they find on the [search engine results page]" (p. 128). The same can be said for the TikTok FYP. The fact that this kind of epistemic power is being placed in the hands of corporate platforms' algorithmic systems is something that should be problematized; I address this in my research. Scholars demonstrate that TikTok's highly personalized recommendation system is a double-edged sword (Milton et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2020). This knowledge allows me to understand participants' experiences that are complex and even contradictory,

Algorithms on TikTok are not equitable in terms of what content they push or punish. Duffy and Meisner (2023) examine algorithms as a mechanism of platform governance. The authors use semi-structured interviews with 30 social media content creators across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Twitch. Duffy and Meisner uncover "shared understandings that platform companies allocate visibility in ways deemed inconsistent and often quite biased" (p.16), with marginalized content "being unfairly targeted by both formal and informal punishments" (p. 16). Duguay (2023) asserts that TikTok's governance strategies constrain queer identity work. She explains that "leaked company documents attest to past moderation policies designed to suppress LGBTQ+ users' content" (p. 2). Steen et al. (2023) echo this, explaining that "[d]espite apparently careful content moderation, TikTok is known for having previously restricted content visibility for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ+), disabled, and obese users without present guideline violations" (p. 2).

Duguay describes the hate speech and sexual harassment experienced by queer women on social media platforms. She offers the concept of patchwork platform governance (Duguay, 2022). This describes how platforms fail to address larger toxic cultures of use, instead opting for ad hoc moderation to deal with issues such as hate speech. I will employ this concept to understand how queer user experiences are shaped by platform governance.

The presence of discriminatory algorithms and hate speech challenges a presentation of TikTok as only a queer utopia. Instead, it is a platform that has a fraught relationship with queerness, profiting off of it, pushing it to people's For You Pages while also censoring it and punishing it. This knowledge informs my research, allowing me to recognize the limitations of TikTok as a tool for queer people.

TikTok's algorithmic system also categorizes people based on their gender identity and sexual orientation (GLAAD, 2023). GLAAD (2023) explains that in an attempt to target users with tailored advertising, recommendation algorithms can accidentally out users. Targeted advertising on TikTok is enabled by algorithms that can pose privacy risks for LGBTQ+ users. Micro-targeted advertising is the business model that enables platforms such as TikTok to be so profitable. In fact, social media platforms' design and governance decisions are largely motivated by profit-generation (Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022). Duguay (2022) explains that "governance policies mix with platforms' profit motives and aim to appeal to advertisers" (p. 102). Referencing YouTube's 'adpocalypse', Duguay explains that on YouTube, "LGBTQ users serve as collateral damage in profit- generation strategies" (p. 102).

This is a result of platform capitalism. Platform capitalism is part of digital capitalism. "[D]igital capitalism is a dimension of the capitalist formation of society that emerged in the 20th century" (Fuchs, 2021, p. 27). Structural characteristics of capitalism such as accumulation, extraction, and oppression are reproduced by social media platforms under digital capitalism. Under platform capitalism, "[s]ocial media platforms bring together users with advertisers, effectively selling the users' attention to advertisers" (Smniecek, 2016, p. 43). My research will take into account the structural context of platform capitalism when examining TikTok's algorithms and governance practices.

There are various ways that marginalized users resist discriminatory algorithms. Simpson and Semaan (2020) describe the tactics of resistance employed by queer users in the face of Algorithmic Exclusion. Karizat et al. (2021) similarly discuss resistance to discriminatory algorithms. Using "semi-structured interviews with 15 US-based adult TikTok users", the authors describe how users combat "algorithmic representational harm" by engaging in "algorithmic resistance [...] and efforts to achieve representational belonging" (p. 3). Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) also describes resistance to discriminatory

algorithms on TikTok. Similarly to Lin (2022), Peterson-Salahuddin emphasizes the visuality of TikTok. The author uses “a qualitative mixed-methods analysis that combine[s] visual discourse analysis and [critical technocultural discourse analysis]” (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022, p. 7). Peterson-Salahuddin “examines the ways marginalized creators are employing TikTok’s various medium and technological affordances [...] to evade algorithmic surveillance and oppression” (p. 2).

A specific tactic of resistance that queer users employ is ‘algospeak’ (Steen et al., 2023). “[A]lgospeak is commonly understood as abbreviating, misspelling, or substituting specific words, for example, ‘seggs’ for ‘sex’ or ‘clock app’ for ‘TikTok’, when creating a social media post with the particular goal to circumvent a platform’s content moderation systems” (Steen et al., 2023, p. 1). A common example of algospeak is using the term ‘le\$bean’ instead of ‘lesbian’ (Steen et al., 2023; Franzén, 2022). In their interviews with TikTok users who use algospeak, they found that “participants who created LGBTQ+ videos experienced, for example, rather unreasonable restrictions, such as blocking videos that have the word ‘lesbian’ in it as ‘[. . .] not safe for children,’ [...], or censoring and shadowbanning¹ of videos in which they used the term ‘lesbian’” (Steen et al., 2023, p. 10). Queer users employ algospeak in anticipation of this unfair targeting, finding a way to trick the discriminatory content moderation algorithm.

In her thesis, Franzén (2022) argues that the use of the term ‘le\$bean’ to avoid suppression and censorship is a result of ‘algorithmic folk theories’. Up against the black box, users develop an ‘algorithmic imaginary’: “a way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). This imaginary informs algorithmic folk theories, which are “unofficial theories a user holds to explain how a technological system operates and generates various outputs” (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 2). This is a useful, if inexact, tactic for queer users to contend with TikTok’s discriminatory practices. Resistance strategies are a powerful example of queer

¹ Shadow-bans are an invisible governance mechanism used by social media platforms. Rather than deleting content, shadow-bans prevent content from appearing on followers’ main feeds and make the shadow-banned account unsearchable (Are, 2022, 2023).

users shaping TikTok, rather than being passive victims of its limitations. Overall, TikTok's algorithm and governance strategies are not neutral, making marginalized users feel suppressed, seen, affirmed and violated; I must take them into account in this project.

Privacy

TikTok presents serious privacy risks for LGBTQ+ users (Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022; GLAAD, 2023; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022; Wells & Tau, 2023; Yao et al., 2023). GLAAD's (2023) *Social Media Safety Index* scored TikTok (57%) below both Instagram (63%) and Facebook (61%) in terms of safety for LGBTQ+ users. GLAAD explains that "[TikTok] does not give users full control over the company's collection and inference of user information related to their sexual orientation and gender identity" (p. 19). The Wall Street Journal "describes the allegations made by former TikTok employees that the company categorized users based on whether they watched LGBT content in order to increase engagement" (Wells & Tau, 2023). Wells and Tau explain the privacy concerns that this presents, writing "[t]his data can essentially create a list of vulnerable users in parts of the world where some LGBT people face harassment and violence". GLAAD (2023) asserts that "platforms should reduce the amount of data they collect and retain. They should implement end-to-end encryption by default on all private messaging to protect LGBTQ people from persecution, stalking, and violence. And cease the practice of targeted surveillance advertising, including the use of powerful algorithms to recommend content, potentially outing users" (p. 4). Data collection is where concerns about algorithms intersect with concerns about privacy. Algorithms and surveillance are mutually reinforcing practices employed by platforms. My research examines these concerns as interconnected rather than separate.

These privacy risks are due in part to platform governance and are at tension with TikTok's identity discovery possibilities. Scholars in the field discuss the relationship between privacy and marginalized users (Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). Cho (2018) asserts the limitations of certain social media sites for queer identity expression. Cho's (2018) analysis draws on five years of cyberethnography and multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews with

11 queer youth of colour. He identifies a “design bias toward default publicness” on sites such as Facebook (Cho, 2018, p. 3184). This design bias disregards the risks that publicity carries for marginalized identities (Cho, 2018). Marwick and boyd (2014) offer similar cautions. They discuss an instance of Facebook outing someone to his family because of the privacy settings in groups. Yao et al. (2023) echo this, finding that “‘public-by-default’ design and ‘one-size-fits-all’ settings [of sites such as TikTok, Facebook and WeChat] appear inadequate to help LGBTQ+ people deal with challenges” (p. 733). These scholars demonstrate the importance of platform design; this is something I will take into consideration in my examination of TikTok.

Drawing on Crenshaw (1991), my research will also employ an intersectional framework. Crenshaw (1991) explains that intersectionality is about recognizing differences within groups. An intersectional approach involves acknowledging the various social categories that intersect to affect people’s experiences of oppression and privilege. These social categories include race, gender, body shape, sexual orientation, class, ability, age and immigration status, among others. Crenshaw (1991) explains that the problem lies in the “particular values attached to [these categories], and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies” (p. 16). Especially with the prevalence of anti-trans rhetoric lately, it is important to recognize that within the LGBBTQ+ umbrella, certain groups are more vulnerable. Queer people are not just queer people; they also occupy other social categories. The experiences of a Black, cis, gay woman are not the same as those of a white, cis, gay man.

An intersectional framework is employed by various scholars to understand how the intensity and risk of surveillance compounds for certain people. (Cho, 2018; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). Cho (2018) focuses on the unique privacy concerns faced by queer youth of colour and Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) acknowledges how race, body shape, and disability impact how one is surveilled by TikTok. These studies assert the importance of recognizing that queer people are not a homogenous group. Queer people who occupy other marginalized social categories are more likely to face algorithmic discrimination and surveillance on TikTok. They may also be more likely to face negative consequences if they are outed by the app, depending on their race, class, religion, or physical location. For example, if someone is living in

a country where same-sex attraction is illegal or part of a religious community that is homophobic, the impact of being outed by TikTok is much more dire. In my research, I acknowledge that surveillance and its consequences are not evenly distributed.

At the same time, users can resist surveillance by engaging in privacy-protective strategies. Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) explains that “many young creators who use [...] TikTok have claimed that its underlying algorithm surveils [...] content by Black, brown, fat, queer, and disabled creators” (p. 1). They offer the concept of “‘digital’ dark sousveillance[, which refers to] digital tactics employed to evade detection and inverse structures of power under systems of racializing surveillance” (p. 2). This theoretical basis is useful for understanding how surveillance operates on TikTok.

Marwick and boyd (2014) describe how teenagers “appropriate technical affordances and develop different tactics and strategies” to negotiate their privacy on social media (p. 1060). Yao et al. (2023) describe how LGBTQ+ users balance their need to express their gender and sexual identity on social media with privacy concerns. They adjust their privacy management practices depending on perceived context collapse (Yao et al., 2023). Marwick and boyd (2014) explain that, when we post online, we are doing so for an imagined audience. Context collapse occurs when multiple audiences are flattened into one; “[users] must contend with groups of people they do not normally bring together, such as acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 122). The way people negotiate with these concerns is aptly described by Duguay’s (2022) theory of ‘identity modulation’, which describes the process by which queer women and platforms work together to adjust, or modulate, different dynamics of personal disclosure online. Identity modulation is useful for understanding outness as a scale rather than a binary. A queer user may be out on TikTok, but not to their family members. I will use the concept of identity modulation to understand participants’ complex and varying feelings about being recognized as queer by TikTok’s algorithm, advertisers, and other people.

While I have outlined the privacy issues that social media present, privacy was a consideration for queer folks long before TikTok or even the internet. Dame-Griff (2023) describes the privacy risks that transgender and cross-dressing people had to take when attending in-person support groups, calling into

telephone community hotlines or receiving trans newsletters or pamphlets by mail. Queer people have always had to balance a desire for visibility and community with a need for privacy and safety. Queer TikTok users have a unique relationship with privacy due to the social and legal repercussions of being outed as queer. They have to negotiate the tension between community and privacy when using the platform. Once again, this historical context is crucial for avoiding technological determinism. My research must take privacy into account without presenting it as a novel issue unique to digital platforms.

COVID-19 Context

The impact of COVID-19 will also be a key consideration since the rise of TikTok coincided with the global pandemic. Various scholars describe how LGBTQ+ people engaged with social media during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fernández Carbajal, 2022; Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021; Karim et al., 2022; Malmquist et al., 2023; Meyer, 2022; Skinner, 2023; Woznicki et al., 2021). Simpson and Semaan's (2020) study did not take COVID-19 into account. They wrote "we do not believe LGBTQ+ people's experiences on the application changed following physical distancing orders" (p. 14).

Considering its increasing impact in the past three years, I believe it would be illogical to disregard the pandemic. As such, I will take the COVID-19 pandemic into account when exploring this phenomenon.

Queer people were especially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gill & McQuillan, 2022; Miscioscia et al., 2022; Victor et al., 2023). Many queer people were socially isolated and may have been stuck in hostile home environments during lockdowns. According to Gill and McQuillan (2022), "[d]uring the pandemic, only one-third of LGBTQ+ youth reported that they found their home affirming to their gender or sexual identity" (p. 3). Similarly, Miscioscia et al. (2022) report that perceived lack of support and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ identity from family members "may play a role in putting young adults at increased risk for worse mental health conditions following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 17). In their study of 893 LGBTQ+ adults in the U.S., Victor et al. (2023) "found that social disconnection, disruptions in health care, financial strain, and efforts to avoid disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity at home were each associated with poorer mental health" (p. 495).

These studies demonstrate how much LGBTQ+ people needed online support during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meyer's (2022) dissertation asserts that LGBTQIA+ TikTokers used the platform as a relatively safe space for identity exploration and self-expression during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Woznicki et al. (2021) analyze YouTube rather than TikTok and they exclude transgender people from their study. They analyze survey data from "183 [LGBQ] emerging adults [who] were living with their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 231). They examine how "parasocial relationships with LGBTQ YouTubers moderate the relationship between family support, loneliness, and depression symptoms" (p. 230). Unlike Woznicki et al., Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) focus on TikTok and include transgender participants in their study; I also plan to include transgender people in my study.

In their (2022) study of sexual and gender minority youth in the rural U.S. during the pandemic, Karim et al. found that [social media-based] interventions could be leveraged to provide emotional and informational support for rural [sexual and gender minority] youth" (p. 1). Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) examine how "sexual and gender minority [users] between the ages of 15 and 25" used TikTok for support during COVID-19 (p. 6). In Malmquist et al.'s (2023) study of young LGBTQ+ people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, their participants "experienced negative effects on their mental health during the pandemic" (p. 1656). While many of them turned to digital platforms for resources and social support, participants did not feel that online community filled the void of in-person LGBTQ+ events. These studies demonstrate the importance, and insufficiency, of online support for queer people during the pandemic.

In Fernández Carbajal's (2022) autoethnographic essay about being non-binary during COVID-19, they explain that "the various national lockdowns allowed individuals the necessary introspection to confront important parts of themselves, such as their gender identity" (p. 810). Fernández Carbajal writes that "[w]hile the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to be apart from each other, social media has brought together more queer, trans, and non-binary people than ever, across continents and time-zones" (p. 819). Skinner (2023) also emphasizes the significance of the pandemic in people's queer self-discovery on

TikTok. These authors point to the importance of taking the COVID-19 context into account when interviewing participants about their experiences.

I noticed that many of these scholars speak about the COVID-19 context in past-tense. I want to acknowledge that while countries are no longer in lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect everyone, especially immunocompromised individuals. In an article titled, *The COVID-19 Pandemic Rages on for People Who Are Immunocompromised*, Rubin (2022) writes “many of the millions of people in the US with compromised immune systems have felt like an afterthought during the pandemic” (p. 1853). Jay Justice, who is queer and immunocompromised, told NPR “I know that the world is moving on without the sense of safety, the United States has moved on and does not provide safety for anybody. It feels like an uphill battle constantly fighting for someone, anyone to care” (Rajkumar, 2022). Governments and the general population’s absolute disregard for these people’s lives over the past few years has made society’s deeply entrenched ableism impossible to ignore. This is a necessary consideration since, as discussed above, I am taking an intersectional approach in my research. In my research, I will be intentional about acknowledging LGBTQ+ people who were and continue to be, profoundly affected by the pandemic.

My Contribution

My work builds on all of these areas of scholarship: assemblages and affect; identity work; algorithms and governance; privacy; and the COVID-19 context. My research fills a gap because there are very few studies examining queer people and TikTok, specifically (Duguay, 2023; Franzén, 2022; Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021; Lin, 2023; Meyer, 2022; Simpson et al., 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2020; Skinner, 2023). Further, I have not come across any studies that focus on this phenomenon of TikTok users discovering their LGBTQ+ identity via TikTok. Overall, my work will contribute to the scholarship on queer people, TikTok, and queer people using TikTok. This research will benefit the LGBTQ+ community by sharing people’s experiences and examining the possibilities and risks that platforms like TikTok can offer the community.

Chapter 2: Method

Sample

I conducted semi-structured interviews with five people living in Canada who discovered a facet of their LGBTQ+ identity on TikTok. By going to queer events, I had already come across three people who experienced this phenomenon and agreed to be contacted for a future interview prior to beginning the research project. The other two participants were acquired by sharing my call for participants with members of my social network, who, in turn, shared the call with people they knew who might be interested. Thus, my participants were a convenience sample. Convenience sampling refers to selecting “a group of people that is convenient to access” (Davis & Lachlan, 2017, p. 151). A drawback of this sampling method is that it produces a sample that is not very representative of the population being studied. I selected this method because convenience sampling is useful for studying hard to reach groups (Elliot et al., 2016). My study required people with such a specific experience, so it would have been inefficient to cast a very broad net. I also asked the people I already recruited if they knew anyone else who would like to participate, but they did not.

I made a concerted effort to ensure a sample that was diverse in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity and race-ethnicity. If I noticed a large gap in my sample, I would have intentionally recruited participants from missing categories. My study includes participants ranging from 19-26 years old. Their sexual orientations include bisexual, grey-ace/grey-romantic, asexual/panromantic, and “attracted to queer people”. Interestingly, there were no monosexual people in my sample. Monosexual is a term that refers to people who are attracted to only one gender or sex (Donnelly, 2023). Since “[o]ver the 2015-2018 period, [...]1.8 percent of Canadians identified themselves as bisexual, and 1.5 percent of them as lesbian or gay” (Statista Research Department, 2023), the lack of monosexual people in my sample may be representative. The participants’ gender identities included cis woman, grey, genderless and transmasculine. There were no cisgender men in my sample. The participants were living in five different Canadian cities, four in Ontario and one in BC. There was only one person of colour in my

study. While I made an effort to recruit other people of colour, I only had a limited time to complete my interviews.

To select participants, I used three eligibility criteria: 1) live in Canada; 2) are 16 or older; 3) identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community; and 4) discovered at least one facet of their LGBTQ+ identity via TikTok. I decided to focus on people who live in Canada in order to be more specific. Also, I have gained an understanding of the social and political context of Canada through my schooling and my lived experience as a queer person in Canada; this helped me understand where my participants were coming from.

I decided to exclude people under the age of 16 because their identities are uniquely emergent, and I think that a study specifically concerned with the experiences of queer youth would more adequately address their experiences. Further, interviewing people under the age of 16 requires parental/guardian consent; this is a potentially perilous prospect for many LGBTQ+ youth. Sims and Nolen (2021) argue that parental consent requirements, which are supposed to protect youth, can put LGBTQ+ youth at risk. They explain that “involving parents may put potential participants at risk for negative consequences ranging from non-acceptance or abuse to being kicked out of their homes” (Sims & Nolen, 2021, p. 40). Due to variations in parental approval, this can also result in low response rates and unrepresentative samples (Sims & Nolen, 2021). While I do think studies about queer youth under 16 are important, I did not feel equipped to seek parental consent for youth to participate, which could at best bias results and at worst do real harm.

I only included people who currently identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community because those are the experiences I wanted to capture. I recognize that sexuality and gender identity are fluid, and someone may have discovered a facet of queer identity on TikTok, but no longer identify with that identity. I was seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of people who are currently queer; I believe that people who do not currently identify as queer would be outside of the scope of my research, though future studies could examine this. Thus, I chose to focus on the experiences of those who currently identify as LGBTQ+.

Finally, participants needed to have discovered a facet of their LGBTQ+ identity via TikTok. While this may seem specific, I actually worded it as broadly as possible. I was seeking to include those who discovered one of various identities via TikTok. I also worded it to include those who made this discovery as a result of TikTok in combination with other factors. I needed people with this specific experience to answer my research question, but I intentionally left room for the multiplicity and messiness involved in discovering one's queer identity.

Semi-Structured Interview

Brinkmann (2020) writes that “[h]uman beings are conversational creatures [...] conversations are therefore a rich and indispensable source of knowledge about personal and social aspects of our lives” (p. 425). Interviews are effective methods for collecting “descriptions of how interviewees experience the world” (Brinkmann, 2020, p. 437). Since I am seeking to learn about my participants' experiences discovering one or multiple facets of queer identity on TikTok, this method is well-suited to my purpose. When conducting a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a set of predetermined questions but also allows for follow-up questions and conversation (Brinkmann, 2020). As a result, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while keeping the conversation on topic (Brinkmann, 2020). I was able to follow a participant's lead without the conversation straying too far from the topic I am studying. An interview guide (Appendix A) allowed me to ensure that the conversation stayed focused and that the same questions were asked to every participant. Semi-structured interviews also make visible the co-production of knowledge that is taking place (Brinkmann, 2020). Rather than hiding behind predetermined questions, the researcher and the participant are in dialogue; this creates a more balanced and reciprocal power dynamic (Brinkmann, 2020). Various scholars use interviews to study TikTok (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Karizat et al., 2021; Lin, 2023; Simpson & Semaan, 2020) and others used them to study queer people (Bates et al., 2020; Byron et al., 2019; Cavalcante, 2019; Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022; Kitzie, 2019; Raun, 2015). Therefore, this seemed to be an effective method in my area of research.

In order to “maximiz[e] the ethical and methodological advantages of semi-structured interview research practices”, Brown & Danaher (2019) recommend that researchers use the CHE principles. This

stands for connectivity, humanness and empathy. Connectivity refers to building rapport with participants through things like attentiveness, open body language and a friendly tone of voice. Rapport should make a participant feel more at ease and trusting of the researcher. Humanness refers to the 'reciprocal symbiotic relationship' between the researcher and participant. Brown and Danaher urge researchers to try to maintain an equal balance of power by being informal, expressing their own humanness and being open to participants' opinions. I have certainly tried to position myself as an equal rather than an expert — my participants are the experts on their own experiences. The principle of empathy involves practicing humility and being open to and appreciating the participants' point of view. I employed the CHE principles when planning and conducting my interviews.

Zoom

These interviews were conducted over Zoom. Zoom interviews offer most of the affordances of in-person interviewing. Video interviewing “enabl[es] a full verbal and non-verbal exchange, including eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures and body movement” (Dawson, 2019, p. 268). Participants in Archibald et al.'s (2019) study “generally rated Zoom above alternative interviewing mediums such as face-to-face, telephone, and other videoconferencing services, platforms, and products” (p. 1). Unlike in-person interviewing, Zoom enabled me to include “a [more] geographically diverse sample inclusive of some participants who may not have been able (or willing) to meet in-person” (Olliffe et al., 2021, p. 6). This meant that my study could include people in more rural areas and those who may be unable to meet in-person due to mental health issues or disability, which made my sample more inclusive. In fact, at the time that I was conducting interviews, COVID cases in Ontario were spiking (Dangerfield, 2023; Global News, 2023). By conducting interviews remotely, I was able to keep myself and participants safe. This meant that participants who are immunocompromised or living with immunocompromised people were able to be included. Along with being accessible, Zoom interviews are more efficient, convenient, cost-effective and flexible for both researchers and participants (Archibald et al., 2019).

Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) argues that Zoom offers a new form of intimacy that can be valuable for interview research. He explains that “[b]ecause of the ability of both interviewer and interviewee to

choose their spaces of interaction and their self-presentation, Zoom interviews tended to feel more relaxed and comfortable than their face-to-face equivalents” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021, p. 5). Oliffe (2021) echoes this, saying that Zoom can be more comfortable for participants. Being in their own space can put participants at ease (Oliffe et al., 2021). Especially in comparison to being in a coffee shop, discussing such intimate topics as sexual orientation and gender identity can be much easier in the privacy of one’s home. Zoom also facilitates attentive listening that would be more difficult in a busy public space (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Another logistical affordance of Zoom that saved me time is that it enables video and audio recording (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). As a result, Zoom can make the jobs of both researchers and participants easier.

At the same time, interviewing via Zoom presents potential problems since participants may join the video call from a location where they could feel uncomfortable or face physical, emotional, or financial harm as a result of their queer identity. To mitigate this risk, I urged participants to participate only if they were in a safe environment where they felt comfortable discussing LGBTQ+ experiences. Another downside of this medium is that I cannot protect my participants from the privacy invasions performed by the Zoom platform. Dawson (2019) emphasizes data protection and privacy as concerns that must be addressed when conducting online interviews. There is little I can do to mitigate this risk. However, I did inform participants of the risk of surveillance by the Zoom platform. I also utilized the “robust but simple privacy and security options” that Zoom offers, such as secure recording and storage of information on a local device (Archibald et al., 2019).

A limitation of Zoom that I did not predict is that participants sometimes did not show up at the scheduled interview time. I spent weeks being stood up and rescheduling with a participant. This was due in part to the participant forgetting that we had a meeting scheduled, which I believe would be less likely if we had a concrete, in-person, meeting planned. Their repeated absences were also partly due to technical difficulties on the participant’s end. The issue of malfunctioning technology is a significant drawback of Zoom as a medium for interview research.

Transcription and Analysis

The interviews were video and audio-recorded and then transcribed into text. I used Zoom's software to record the audio and video of the interviews. Rather than relying on Zoom's transcription, I used Descript to transcribe the interviews into text. Brinkmann (2020) explains that humans "give away much information in terms of gestures, body language, and facial expressions" (p. 442). As per his recommendation (Brinkmann, 2020), I transcribed the interviews very quickly after conducting them in order to remember the non-verbal nuances of the interviews; I also took notes during the interviews regarding these non-verbal expressions. I was able to add these notes alongside the automatic transcriptions.

I engaged in a thematic analysis to determine common and divergent experiences among participants. Thematic analysis is well-suited to the task of comparing and contrasting participant perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell et al. (2017) describe thematic analysis as an accessible and "highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (p. 2). Specifically, I conducted inductive thematic analysis, which "is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). This meant that I let the codes emerge as I went through the transcripts. I manually coded the transcripts and then grouped the codes into themes. Brinkmann (2020) argues that "the 'meanings' that qualitative interviewers are commonly looking for are often multiple, perspectival, and contradictory and thus demand careful interpretation" (p. 439). Thematic analysis enabled this kind of complex interpretation and allowed me to follow the lead of my participants rather than trying to fit their experiences into neat, predetermined categories.

Limitations

The sample size of this study is not large. While it is not the purpose of a Master's thesis project to be generalizable, a larger sample would have strengthened the study. My ability to include a larger sample of participants was constrained by time and resources. Despite the small size of my sample, it was diverse. However, my positionality as a bisexual, White, neurotypical, able-bodied, cisgender,

woman undoubtedly impacted the questions that I asked, what the participants felt they could talk to me about and how they chose to describe their experiences.

My sample could have been much more representative in terms of age. I made the choice not to include people under the age 16 in my study. While this an intentional decision I made about the focus of my study, I do recognize that this is not very representative of TikTok's user base. In 2022, 20.2% of TikTok users in the U.S. were under the age of 18 (Insider Intelligence, 2022). Therefore, future studies should examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth on TikTok. Despite my efforts, I was unable to include anybody older than 26 in my study. I was hoping to include the experiences of people in their thirties, forties and above who discovered a facet of their queer identity on TikTok. While I have met older people who fit the criteria, none of them responded to my call for participants, even when I reached out to them directly. The 19-26 age range is clearly a result of using convenience sampling. My positionality as a 23-year-old meant that those in my personal networks were likely to be close to my age, and those in their networks were too.

A significant limitation to my method is that people who are not open about their sexuality or gender identity would not be likely to participate. For someone who does not want to be public about their queerness, participating in a research project like this would feel very exposing, even though it is anonymous. As such, my sample may be biased towards people who are open about their queer identity, at least in some parts of their life.

Ethical Considerations

I was and continue to be very conscious of the ethical concerns surrounding interviewing queer participants. Since I interviewed people about a very intimate and sensitive topic, I used Leahy's (2022) "three ethical safeguards to minimise the risk of ongoing distress when dealing with potent material": self-interview; interview follow-up; and reciprocity (p. 786). Self-interview is also an effective way to practice the principle of empathy that Brown and Danaher (2019) recommend. I practiced self-interviewing by having somebody else interview me with my own interview guide. This allowed me to realize that some very personal questions were asked too early in the interview and get a sense of what

my participants might be feeling throughout the interview. This was very useful both for interview design and for being a gentle interviewer.

I practiced interview follow-up by letting participants know at the end of the interview that they can contact me at any time if they feel distressed by the topics we discussed. I even followed up via Instagram direct message to check in with a participant who seemed particularly emotionally drained after our very lengthy conversation. I had to balance following up with not pestering people or unexpectedly reaching out to them. I was cognizant that some people may not want a message about their participation in a queer study popping up on their screen without warning. While nobody needed to be comforted or linked to supports after the interviews, it was an important ethical consideration.

I practiced reciprocity by sharing some of my own intimate experiences as a queer person. It would be unfair to expect my participants to share personal experiences with me and offer nothing in return. I believe that this made my participants feel more comfortable sharing with me since they could see that I understood some of their struggles. Reciprocity was a great way to implement Brown and Danaher's (2019) principle of connectivity. Being engaged and vulnerable "increase[d] the levels of trust and rapport-building" (p. 81), showing participants respect as I asked for access to their personal experiences. Brown and Danaher's principle of humanness also involves reciprocity. They recommend "speaking in an informal tone, referring to a personal story equivalent to a point that a participant might make, engaging in light banter or adding humour to a response" (p. 82). Practicing humanness removed some of the distance between me and the participants and positioned us as equals. This made the conversations very meaningful for me as I was able to relate to the participants, laughing, sighing, and shaking our heads about our shared queer experiences.

Chapter 3: Analysis

Through an inductive thematic analysis of my interview transcripts, four themes emerged. The themes are as follows: discovery; connection; algorithms and governance; and privacy concerns (or lack thereof). In this chapter, I discuss each theme and their various sub-themes, describing and sharing my participants' responses. I also explain how their thoughts, feelings and experiences relate to existing scholarship.

“I never even had space to think about that stuff”: TikTok as a Tool for Queer Discovery

Limited Options

Most of my participants had never considered their queer identity to be an option or possibility for themselves. Ahmed (2006) explains that we are more likely to follow paths that are in close proximity to us, “that we take what is given as simply a matter of what happens to be ‘in front’ of us” (p. 14). “The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are ‘in front’ of us, also make certain things, and not others, available [...] When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach” (p. 14). My participants were unknowingly orientated toward cisheteronormativity because this was the path that they could see right in front of them. Whether in school, their community, their family, or traditional media, this line or path seemed natural and accessible. As Ahmed (2006) explains, compulsory heterosexuality can be understood as “a straightening device” (p. 23) that directs us to conform to cis/allo/heterosexual identities. When one follows this line of cisheteronormativity, the concept of non-binary identities or queer attraction, become unreachable. Borrowing from Butler (1990), categories of gender, sex and sexuality are produced by discursive acts and cultural norms. Therefore, one's social and cultural context limits the kinds of gender and sexual expression that are seen as real, natural and possible. Unbeknownst to them at the time, Participant B's religious upbringing orientated them toward cisheteronormativity and limited their ability to imagine a queer future for themselves.

I didn't grow up with queer people. I didn't know, [...] I grew up thinking gender was binary. [...] I think it was very intentional from my family. A lot of queer people don't have a relationship with my family. Also, coming from an abusive household [...] the manipulation is very intentional. They didn't want me around queer people, specifically my dad, didn't want me around queer people. Um, like, always going to church events and I also went to Catholic school and they acted

like queer people didn't exist, and if they did exist, it was wrong, or like, it was questionable. So, very brainwashed. I was very much transphobic and homophobic.

This participant was isolated to the point that they were not even aware that most queer identities existed. When they were made aware, they were forced to internalize homophobic and transphobic beliefs. When someone is exposed to society's transphobic and homophobic perceptions, they can start to adopt those beliefs and see others and themselves through an anti-queer lens (Villines, 2021a, 2021b). This kind of upbringing undoubtedly complicated Participant B's self-discovery, making it a distressing experience.

Other participants explained that their rural location limited their exposure to and knowledge of certain queer identities. Participant C explains how she felt isolated in her small town. She describes

the small town mentality where [...] you were either one thing or another and there's never any in between [...] You're like, 'huh, okay, my experiences that I'm having aren't necessarily matching up with people around me or what I'm kind of told I should be having' and that can lead to some further sort of confusion or even isolation

Participant A also experienced being limited by the attitudes in the rural location in which they grew up:

"I grew up in a rural town where people did not accept who I was. It took me a long time to actually find solace with myself and not with other people."

These findings align with Gray's (2009) discussion about the experiences of queer rural youth. Gray explains, "[r]ural communities' material dependencies on structures of familiarity and the value placed on conformity as a sign of solidarity intensify the visibility of compulsory heterosexuality's hegemonic sexual and gender norms" (p. 1181). As a result, rural youth "are unlikely to run across [commercially or subversively produced LGBTQ] images in their rural public spaces" (p. 1164). Gray explains that queer rural youth rely on internet-based depictions of real queer people to feel validated and imagine queer possibilities in their own location. My participants' experiences demonstrate that the binary and bigoted attitudes in people's physical environments can delay or prevent their queer self-discovery.

Disorientated by Information

Queer representations can disorientate us and allow us to imagine new possibilities. As Ahmed (2006) explains, "[w]hen we are orientated, we may not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think 'to think' about this point" (p. 5). For my participants, TikTok was part of what opened up the

space for them to even question their identity. Previously, they were unknowingly orientated towards being cisgender, heterosexual, and allosexual.

Participant B “discovered what being non-binary was on TikTok.” Growing up in a queerphobic household and religious community, Participant B explained how TikTok allowed them to question their identity, which they had taken for granted: “I never even had space to think about that stuff. [...] TikTok was like a safe space. And I was just constantly learning, questioning.” This feeling of disorientation can feel just that, disorientating. Participant B explained that “[w]hen I first realized [I was queer], I felt like a bit of community, and I was scared. I had to let go of these other ideas.”

While isolation can limit people’s ability to imagine a queer future, it can also give people a chance to self-reflect. Participant B explained, “I started using [TikTok] during the pandemic. I also, like most people, realized I was queer during the pandemic”. Participant B shows an awareness of the large number of people who realized they were queer during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Various press articles observe this phenomenon, which is largely attributed to people having the time and space to self-reflect when isolated from their usual social life (Iovine, 2021; Klein, 2022; Mastroianni, 2020). Meyer (2022) also finds that LGBTQIA+ TikTokers used the platform for identity exploration during the COVID-19 lockdowns. As a result, I predicted that COVID-19 would be a significant factor for my participants. However, Participant B was the only participant who mentioned the pandemic. Future research would have to limit their time frame of study to target people who discovered their queer identity during the lockdowns in order to address this specific phenomenon. The fact that four of my participants did not discover their queer identity during the pandemic suggests that the power of TikTok for queer self-discovery goes beyond 2020. This shows that people discovering facets of their queer identity on TikTok was not a trend that was limited to when people were in physical isolation.

Participant D described their experience discovering their bisexuality on TikTok as “[e]ye-opening [...] Yeah, like, ‘whoa, this is real.’” Participant C also used the term ‘eye-opening’ to describe her self-discovery. Participant D explained that “from an educational point of view, there was a lot of information about different types of sexualities and genders [on TikTok].” This shows the importance of

the education and information that TikTok offers queer users. Beyond visceral feelings of connection, TikTok opened up these three participants' knowledge of what was possible.

Participant E described TikTok as “a factor” in her queer identity discovery rather than the sole catalyst for the discovery. She cited Megan Thee Stallion music videos as an earlier cause of her questioning whether she may be attracted to women. While Participant C discovered their grey-ace/grey-aro identity on TikTok, she had previously identified as bisexual. These examples show that TikTok is often not the sole catalyst for someone reflecting on queerness. Rather, it can be step in their self-discovery. “Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view. If such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction. [...] Bodies are ‘directed’ and they take the shape of this direction” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16). This is to say that once someone has started turning away from cisheteronormativity, they are able to see queer possibilities. The more that they turn towards these queer possibilities, the more open they become to exploring different facets of their queer identity.

Participant C explained that she had heard about asexuality before, but she only saw herself in it on TikTok: “So I was 14 when I first heard it and I'm 24 now, like it's been 10 years, I've been hearing this term kind of sprinkled and it just never made a connection.” For Participant C, TikTok gave her the language she needed to describe her Grey-Ace/Grey-Romantic identity.

[TikTok had] the language I think I needed, where Tumblr kind of failed to do so. [Being] from a small town, I didn't get [the language]. [...] I didn't like have a desire to look further. I'm like, ‘well, that's just it’. [...] With TikTok, hearing more people vocalize their experiences, [...] gave me more of the language and like the visual aspect too.

She describes how TikTok allowed her to see a space outside of the binary of being completely uninterested in people and completely allosexual:

[Learning about] the spectrum of asexuality where there's a lot more different experiences that I thought [was] kind of conflicting [with the way] that a small town would describe asexuality, which is very much like someone who doesn't even know what sexual attraction is like they've never even thought of another person honestly. [...] Hearing other people, seeing other people existing in their spaces being like, I'm not this or that, but I'm here somewhere and I'm okay and this is how I navigate life and that's a totally okay way to do it.

For Participant A, TikTok was also a space for discovering new information. The information he found on TikTok made him realize that not everyone was suffering with feelings of dysphoria. He describes this realization:

Being like, I can be perceived in a way that feels good. I don't have to live feeling bad, you're not supposed to live life feeling bad. That was so, it sounds so silly, but that was very much my reaction. When I realized life isn't supposed to be feeling bad and I can change things to feel good.

This shows the profound impact that TikTok can have on queer users. Participant A was reorientated toward a path that would allow him to feel comfortable and happy in himself.

Cavalcante (2019) argues that Tumblr, as a queer, digital utopia, enables queer users to imagine queer futures for themselves. For the queer TikTok users in my study, the platform and its content acted as a “catalyst” and a “stepping stone to universal future hopes” (Dickel & Schrape, 2017, p. 53). Muñoz (2009) explains that

utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities [...] More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.

TikTok disorientated my participants, making them realize that what they have been told is normal and possible is not all that is out there. They were able to imagine a future for themselves outside of the cisheteronormative constraints of mainstream culture and their immediate environments.

Diverse Representation

Four participants described TikTok’s diverse representation as a key contributor to their queer self-discovery. Duguay (2023) writes that “TikTok enables expressions of queerness and the formation of queer publics in contrast to dominant heteronormative publics and ideologies” (p. 1). I argue that it also enables expressions of queerness that challenge and go beyond mainstream LGBTQ+ ideologies and representations. Participant E attributed this to the platform’s openness.

Historically, there's been less representation in general and that representation has been controlled by straight gatekeepers and often male gatekeepers, especially when you're looking at sapphic queer people. [...] I feel like with TikTok you get a lot more, you get a lot more diversity in terms of who's posting, a lot more balanced perspectives, because you don't have the sort of traditional gatekeeper who's there like, well, this seems marketable or this is what we've seen before, compared to, you know, traditional media like movies or books or TV shows.

In media studies, we know that networked communication has democratized the ability to publish content, undermining the mainstream media's gatekeeper role (Chandler & Munday, 2020c). Participant E demonstrates an awareness of the ways in which different media platforms gatekeep what content is shared. She understands the way in which the internet has shifted who has the power to produce and disseminate content. She recognizes the openness of TikTok as a key affordance for queer users. Participant E thinks critically about what different media can offer queer people. This demonstrates that queer people have agency when it comes to deciding where to seek out representative queer content.

As a non-binary person of colour, Participant B felt especially invisible in traditional media:

In movies, like, non-binary people are not really, um, they're only kind of just coming up. So even outside of, like, my life, I didn't see it in media. Let alone like diverse non binary people.

Muñoz (1999) observes that under a white supremacy and anti-queer culture, “[t]he survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering” (p. 37). Cho (2018) further demonstrates the unique experiences of queer youth of colour when navigating the online space. It is crucial to acknowledge how race affected my participants' experiences with representation. Mainstream representations of queerness are often homonormative. Homonormativity is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179, as cited in Duguay, 2022, p. 9). Homonormative representations are made to be palatable; they are often white, cisgender, monosexual, able-bodied and desexualized. By using Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality, we can see how queer people in various intersecting social categories experience different levels of marginalization. It is evident that Participant B's identity as a queer person of colour made it even harder for them to see themselves in traditional media. On Tumblr, Cavalcante (2019) observed “a diversity of queer identities represented on Tumblr not seen in other digital spaces, because young people are creating deeply intersectional identities in new ways on the platform.” (p. 1721). I argue that TikTok similarly enables intersectional queer representations. TikTok's diverse representations meant that Participant B was able to see people who were similar to them, and thus, they were able to see themselves in the non-binary identity.

Participant A described the diverse and specific subgenres of queer culture that he has observed on TikTok:

I'd say there are multiple [queer cultures on TikTok]. [...] There's definitely also like the, I want to say like, not subcultures, exactly, genres, I guess, of TikTok that people seem to end up on, whether it's like the political side. [...] I don't know if anything can really be lumped together because it's very distinct groups.

This participant finds that queer culture on TikTok is so diverse and multiple that he cannot even trace one overarching queer culture. His observation cautions us against viewing queer people as a monolith.

Further, this diversity is significant since queer users who identify with very specific intersecting identities can see these possibilities in TikTok creators. For example, a transmasculine, panromantic, asexual person like Participant A can find people who share his specific identity. Participant A explained, “especially when I was first getting onto TikTok, everyone I followed was like, older trans creators that I looked up to”. He was able to see these older trans people and imagine himself having a similarly happy queer life. Using Gray’s (2009) concept of queer realness, which refers to the authentic and diverse stories told by real queer people on the internet, we can understand the impact of these diverse representations. The queer realness performed by trans TikTok creators allowed Participant A to imagine a queer future for himself.

Participant A also observed that queer representations were becoming more prevalent in traditional media. Unfortunately, he explains that these representations were not available to him when he was struggling with his identity. Discussing a non-binary character from a Rick Riordan novel, he explained, “I only found this after I'd already transitioned and already began my transition and already solidified my own identity to myself. And so I wonder what would have happened if I had found it before.” This shows that the state of queer representation is constantly changing. It is possible that queer people discovering themselves today, rather than a few years ago, might be more able to see themselves in television, books and movies. TikTok acts as just one of various paths for queer self-discovery.

Participant C discussed the limited and stereotypical representations of asexuality in traditional media, which delayed her queer self-discovery:

It's based on a very binary, limited perception of what [asexuality] is. Like in that movie, I find that like, with men and women portrayed as asexual, like women are cold and men are traumatized. [...] I remember another really big character was Sheldon Cooper from the Big Bang Theory. If you relate to Sheldon, that's awesome. Really happy for you, but I feel like that was the image of what asexuality was. It's like you're either Sheldon Cooper or [...] I think there was a character in Star Trek [...] who's a robot, which is another one too, where it's just like cold and unfeeling. And it's like, I feel so much all the time and my connections are so deep. Um, whereas that kind of coldness doesn't represent [me], but one of the ones that I found that's not at all canon, but I like to think of in my head [is that] Jim Halpert from The Office is obviously demisexual.

Participant C recognized the limitations of traditional representations of queerness. Further, she illustrated that social media and traditional media are not separate. She explicitly mentioned the practice of identifying queer subtext and projecting queerness onto a character, such as Jim Halpert, who is not canonically queer. She identified TikTok as a place where this queering of characters can be shared with other queer fans. She explained, “what I find with TikTok, especially in fandom communities, [...] you're able to extend upon what Hollywood is too afraid to show”. Participant C engaged in a queer reading of the office, transforming the meaning of the text in order to see her identity in Jim Halpert. This practice is similar to how LGBTQ+ fans use fanfiction to rework texts as queer, resisting cisheteronormative narratives (Llewellyn, 2022). This kind of fanfiction “alters statements from the source text through reiteration with variation, using hints, lines and references to create alternative explanations and expansions, which are then read back onto the source text” (Fathallah, 2017, p. 31). Jenkins (2006) describes transmedia storytelling as a narrative that “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole” (p. 95-96). This fan engagement can be understood using active audience theory, which argues that consumers of media are not passive; instead, their active engagement with, and reception of, content can transform its meaning (Chandler & Munday, 2020a). Participant C shows that queer people can use TikTok to transmediate and transform traditional media content for queer ends.

Interestingly, these four participants all understood the representations offered by TikTok as alternatives to the normative representations they had come across in traditional media. Rather than being passive consumers, these queer people are critical of the representations that they have seen in traditional

media. Participant C even compared the representations offered by TikTok to those offered by Instagram. She explained, “Instagram feels like [...] you're back in your small town, whereas TikTok kind of feels like you have access to the world”. These participants recognize the multiplicity and diversity of queer representation on TikTok as a key affordance of the platform. This aligns with other scholars’ findings that queer people make strategic decisions about where to seek out and engage with queer content online (Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2022; Jenzen, 2017).

Revelatory Content

Three participants pointed to specific content creators that drove their self-discovery. Participant B explained that their self-discovery was fuelled by an intense connection with the content of model and content-creator, Diya. Participant B recounted seeing this content for the first time:

I saw someone who was genderqueer, like, on that spectrum. And I was like, they're not a girl, but they look like a girl, but they're not a boy, and why am I attracted to them? [...] They were talking about gender and I was like, I've never met anyone like you. I don't know people like you... it's only me.

Participant B cited a connection in terms of both relatability and sexual desire; these forms of connection will be discussed further in the second theme. Using Butler’s (1990, 1993, 2004) concept of performativity, we can see how Diya’s content offered Participant B a roadmap for enacting their own gender. In Diya, they saw behaviours and expressions of gender that they felt connected to. They were able to see a future for themselves in this other young, non-binary, person of colour’s performance of queerness. This further illustrates the importance of diverse representation.

Participant B also pointed to the highly-shared ‘lesbian masterdoc’, which was discussed by Joho (2022) in her Mashable article. Participant B told me, “[t]hrough TikTok, through Kehlani, I also learned about the, what's it called? Like the lesbian doc? [Lesbian master doc] yeah. I constantly reference it in my brain.” This is a 31-page Google document entitled *Am I a Lesbian?* that enables people who were socialized as women to differentiate between compulsory heterosexuality and real attraction to men. In 2018, Angeli Luz authored this document and posted it anonymously on Tumblr (Olivia B., 2023). This document circulated widely, eventually going viral on TikTok in the summer of 2020 (Raga, 2020). “The

document lists examples of how women are influenced from a young age to see desire and approval from men as the goal [...] The Masterdoc then goes on to list various ‘you might be a lesbian if...’ scenarios.” (Skinner, 2023). This piece of content serves a highly educational purpose. Through a TikTok posted by pansexual musician, Kehlani, Participant B was able to access this document and learn about Rich’s (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality. They were able to realize that they are not attracted to cisgender, heterosexual, men. Participant B’s experience aligns with the findings of Skinner’s (2023) doctoral dissertation, which included a participant who, through TikTok and the Lesbian Masterdoc, realized that she was being influenced by compulsory heterosexuality. This document functions to disorientate readers, helping them recognize that they are unknowingly orientated toward cisheteronormativity and allowing them to self-reflect and reorientate. The Lesbian Masterdoc would be a productive subject of future research.

Figure 1

Diya’s TikTok page



Figure 2

The first page of the Lesbian Masterdoc



Participant C also traced her realization to a specific TikTok creator, Acecheeseboard (n.d.). She explained her experience of discovery:

[Acecheeseboard's] content was so eye-opening and, um, connecting because of the way that she makes very short vlog-type style videos where she just has a thought and she runs it and then going to the comment section after and reading people being like 'I thought I was the only one that thought this way like, oh my gosh, this is like a universal experience among people that identify this way' and [...] we all kind of work through identity together. And that's so refreshing.

Acecheeseboard performs queer realness for her audience by sharing her intimate and authentic experiences, thus enabling Participant C to “embrace [her] non-normative desires” and translate them into a queer sense of self (Gray, 2009, p. 1182). This statement shows that the participant's discovery was fuelled not only by Acecheeseboard's queer realness, but by other people sharing their own self-discoveries in the comment section. Thus, it is not simply a one-way exchange between the viewer and the TikTok creator. Instead, TikTok enables queer users to engage in a form of collective self-discovery, sharing their experiences with each other and the creator.

Figure 3

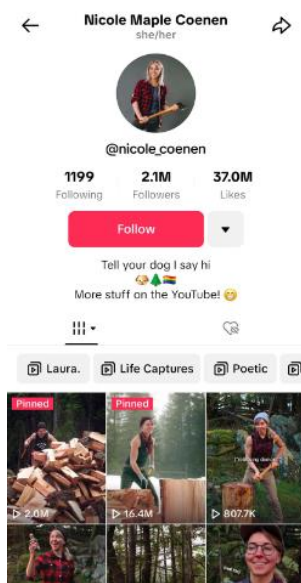
Acecheeseboard's TikTok page



Participant E felt a connection with a lesbian woman who chops wood on TikTok. She explained, “TikTok keeps sending me videos of this hot lady chopping wood. [...] I've seen them. I get every single one of her videos.” This hot lady is Nicole Coenen (n.d.), who posts videos of herself chopping wood, often wearing a tank top that exposes her muscular arms. Participant E describes these videos as “thirst traps” because they evoked sexual desire in her. Duguay explains that the colloquial term “‘thirst trapping’ [refers to] the posting of selfies or self-representations with the intention to ‘trap’ or capture the sexual attention of one’s audience” (p. 91). These videos stood out to Participant E because they were representations that she described as “for queer women by queer women”, which she did not see in other forms of media. Participant E’s queer self-discovery was fuelled by her affective connection to these tacitly sexual videos.

Figure 4

Nicole Coenen's TikTok page



“There are people out there who understand”: Affective Connections on TikTok

Validation

Most of my participants had an inkling about their identity before using TikTok, and the content on the platform fuelled their self-discovery and validated their feelings. Three participants explicitly used the word ‘validating’. Participant A said, “[TikTok knowing I am queer is] very validating”. Participant D explained that her experience discovering she was bisexual on TikTok “confirmed the feelings [...] [It felt] validating [...] I think that would be the best word to describe it”. Similarly, Participant E explained, “I think [TikTok] sort of like validated [my queer identity] [...] I see my sexuality better reflected on [TikTok] and it was easier to sort of like, like explore”.

Participant E also described how this content challenged her own feelings of self-doubt. “I often sort of like devalue my own identity to myself. Like I would never to someone else, but to myself [...] And [TikTok content] makes me feel like I'm not the only one and like I'm valid”. This kind of imposter syndrome is a common experience for queer people. “Imposter syndrome is a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behavio[u]r wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud” (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019, p.

403). Queer imposter syndrome describes queer people's worries that their identity is not valid and that they will be rejected or disbelieved by other members of the queer community (Crosby, 2022; Deelen, 2023; Mental Health America, n.d.). This feeling that one is not legitimately queer or queer enough can be very distressing. However, this self-doubt can be combatted by engaging with queer content on TikTok. Participant E explained that getting queer content on her FYP "feels a bit like external validation in a way that it's like, okay, well, I can't be a fake gay because TikTok keeps sending me videos of this, this hot lady chopping wood". This aligns with Simpson and Semaan's (2020) findings that TikTok's FYP can "support LGBTQ+ identity work and reaffirm LGBTQ+ identity" (p. 2). Participant E's identity as a bisexual woman was affirmed by her FYP, giving her a more secure sense of self.

Relatability and Belonging

Kanai (2018) describes "relatability as an affective relation" (p. 3-4). She explains that relatability requires labour and relies on personal experiences being presented as general (Kanai, 2018). The feeling of common or shared experience is pleasurable and desirable (Kanai, 2018). On TikTok, shared queer experiences, practices, jokes and symbols can elicit feelings of relatability. Participant B explained that "[content on TikTok] was relatable. It made me feel... actually, looking back, it made me feel seen."

Similarly, Participant A describes relating to content on TikTok, and the resulting feeling of belonging:

[TikTok] kind of had a nice, it had a sense of, of connection of like, this is real. [...] My town isn't the only one that exists. There are people out there who understand what it's like to feel this way and who also feel this way.

Kanai (2018) asserts that the "promise of belonging" (p. 6) shapes the pleasure of participating in certain intimate publics. This belonging is, of course, working together with relatability to give participants an enjoyable experience where they feel included. This feeling of inclusion for queer people is very powerful because they are so often excluded from mainstream spaces and even normative LGBTQ+ spaces. Kanai (2018) explains that "[b]elonging is premised on the ability to 'read' oneself into the zone of relatability offered in the public" (p. 18). Similarly, Lee et al. (2022) found that TikTok users "felt a sense of connection towards other users encountered through the algorithm because they were able to recognize parts of themselves refracted in other users" (p. 19). When Participant B saw Diya, a young, Canadian,

non-binary person of colour, they felt seen and were able to read themselves onto Diya's performance of queerness. As a result, they felt a sense of belonging to the queer community.

Authenticity enables these feelings of relatability and belonging. Participant C explains how authenticity operates on TikTok:

Tumblr was very focused on curation and aesthetics, whereas TikTok is a lot more raw in some aspects, like not all aspects, but sometimes I find when people are just kind of sitting and chatting in their living room or walking around and you're seeing all angles of their face and all angles of their space, it's more relatable as opposed to kind of Tumblr[, which] had a very curated whimsy image.

This comment shows that Participant C perceives TikTok content as more authentic than Tumblr content. Raun (2018) cites authenticity as the most important attribute that an online micro-celebrity must signal. Raun (2018) argues that authenticity and intimacy are forms of affective labour that are rewarded with fame and money. The authenticity and queer realness performed by TikTok creators enables Participant C to form an intimate connection with them, seeing herself in their experiences. Thus, the genres of authenticity and intimacy on TikTok enable queer connection. TikTok's culture of use, which encourages authenticity and realness, is a key affordance of the platform for queer people.

Humour is another dominant genre of content on TikTok. Relatability and humour combine to give queer users a feeling of affective belonging and being 'in on the joke'. Kanai (2018) describes how humour can be used to amplify the relatability of a post. Duguay (2022) explains that relatable humour on social media can create a feeling of shared identification for queer women. She also describes how TikTok's looping videos, similarly to Vines, "[enable] users to foster intimacy and relatability through narrative and humorous self-expression" (Duguay, 2023, p. 1). Participant E describes a TikTok video made by Makayla (2023) which uses a sound from Lego Batman. The sound says, "Computer, how do I put the joker in the Phantom Zone? Quickest route. No freeways... 'Puter, do you hear me?'" This trending sound is an example of an audio meme. Zulli and Zulli (2022) assert that TikTok, through its design and logics, encourages repetition and imitation on the platform. This makes TikTok a memetic space (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) where audio-visual memes flourish. The 'internet meme' refers to "content items such as jokes, [rumours], videos, or websites" (Shifman, 2013, p. 362) that spread from person to

person on the internet. Memes, in their humorous and parodic nature, are powerful in their subversiveness (Huntington, 2013). TikTok enables queer users to queer mainstream memes, using them as a vehicle for “cultural signaling of sexual identity” (Duguay, 2023, p. 1). This audio meme from the Lego Batman Movie was made queer by Makayla with subtitles saying “Computer, how do I get gay girls to know that I’m gay? As a fem. No septum piercing. Puter, do you hear me?”. Many other queer TikTok users repeated and remixed Makayla’s TikTok. This demonstrates the power of TikTok as a queer memetic space. Participant E explained how she connected with this TikTok because she related to the struggle of trying to be recognized as queer as a feminine-presenting person. Participant E’s knowledge of the septum piercing as a “cultural [signal] of sexual identity” (Duguay, 2023, p. 1) made her feel like she is in on the community’s shared knowledge. She said, “it’s fast, relatable, funny. I sent it to like five different people”. Not only did this make her feel like she belongs in the queer community, she also used it to connect with queer friends, fostering a sense of connectedness.

Figure 5

Makayla’s TikTok video



Music is another way in which queer people connect on TikTok. As the audio meme discussed above illustrates, TikTok has various audio affordances. Keeling (2019) explains that “the growing significance of sound and audio culture is among the many important transformations one might trace

with(in) the digital” (p. 59). Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022) describe TikTok’s audio memes and music as core features of the platform. TikTok enables users to attach songs to their original videos. Taylor (2012) argues that popular music contributes to queer identity work. She describes the consumption of music as performative: “[m]usic is a way for us to translate, perform and intensify through our bodies, intimate thoughts, feelings and desires of the body” (p. 43). As a result, music on TikTok has the potential to enable queer self-discovery.

Participant A explained how he felt connected with the queer community through the music that circulated on TikTok:

there was kind of a consistent trend throughout TikTok because music is so interconnected with the content of a lot of vent posts. [...] And so because I would listen to that type of music, I think that that [content] was more tailored to me. I think a lot of vent posts related to queerness and to dysphoria really connected with me. And did help me to be like, ‘whoa, I’m not alone in these emotions’. [...] I think especially [...] music like cavetown [and] Mother Mother [were] not necessarily more targeted to trans and queer folks, but just music that a lot of us resonated with. And so, we’re able to bond over having that shared interest.”

Participant A’s experience aligns with Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin’s (2022) assertion that, on TikTok, the “aspirational project of belonging to a group is enhanced by trends that challenge people to recognize songs, evaluate the degree of affiliation, or share musical tastes.” (p. 903). Duguay (2022) finds that “with TikTok’s prominent music integration, responding ‘Yes’ to ‘Do you listen to Girl in Red?’ — a queer musician— has become shorthand for coming out” (p. 106). For queer people, music circulated on TikTok can be a key space of relatability and connection.

Thirst traps and Desire

Bronstein (2020) asserts that “our digital spaces have become the primary places where we interact with others and engage in processes of sexual self-discovery and self-actualization” (p. 251). Thirst traps and other sexually-charged content are a popular genre on TikTok. Duguay (2022) defines ‘thirst traps’ as “selfies or self-representations with the intention to ‘trap’ or capture the sexual attention of one’s audience” (p. 91). She explains that this kind of content can build intimacy and aid in the formation of a queer digital counterpublic (Duguay, 2022). Prior to its 2018 porn ban, “[Tumblr] had been a welcoming online multimedia home for pornography and many in the LGBTQ, kink, and queer

communities since its establishment in 2007” (Bronstein, 2020, p. 241). Tumblr provided a space for representations of queer and trans pleasure and non-normative bodies (Bronstein, 2020). TikTok does not provide the uncensored space of pre-2018 Tumblr; the platform’s guidelines state “[w]e do not allow sexual activity [and] [w]e do not allow nudity, including uncovered genitals and buttocks, as well as nipples and areolas of women and girls” (TikTok, 2023). This necessarily limits the queer sexual expression on TikTok. However, TikTok does allow sexual content that does not show explicit nudity. As a result, TikTok enables queer sexual self-discovery.

Participant D described watching “those short like little 30 second videos and you're like, ‘yeah, I love this person’”. She explained how her feelings of desire affirmed her identity:

“I was intrigued and interested in watching these types of videos and wanting attention from certain types of people that were not typical to who I would want attention from, I think that solidified it a little. Like, it gave me a lot of aha moments”

Similarly, Participant E describes how TikTok thirst traps enabled her sexual exploration, saying, “I think it's a good way [...] to figure out what I'm actually attracted to in girls.” These videos allowed her to self-reflect and explore her own attraction to women. These participants’ experiences demonstrate that thirst traps on TikTok can be the catalyst for queer identity exploration and discovery.

Participant B, discussing their intense connection with Diya’s content, said,

I don't know, it just made me question what I was attracted to, because they weren't a girl or a boy. So I was like, hmm. I've told myself I've only been attracted to men. And now this person is not too close to women, where I'm like, ‘oh, I'm gay’. So I was very confused.

Their intense connection with a non-binary person’s thirst traps demonstrates the importance of diverse sexual representations. Bronstein (2020) explains the importance of the positive representation of trans bodies that Tumblr once offered. I argue that TikTok, albeit in a much less naked fashion, enables queer people to see representations of trans bodies. Seeing trans bodies as sexual and desirable allows queer users to experience feelings of sexual desire that can help them recognize their own sexual orientation, and in Participant B’s case, their gender identity as well.

As mentioned above, the authenticity of queer TikTok content enables queer users’ feelings of relatability. This authenticity is also found in thirst traps and other sexual content on TikTok. Maina

(2015) uses the term ‘queer realism’ to describe certain pieces of alternative, or non-normative, pornographic content (p. 86). As Mondin (2017) explains in her study of Tumblr porn, “[a]uthenticity is made by the aesthetics of many everyday, ‘imperfect’ bodies as well as personality and chemistry, where relatability is the sticky affect that feeds the fantasy of the real” (p. 288). While Diya’s content is not pornography, their authentic and non-normative presentation was relatable and sexually desirable to Participant B, intensifying their connection with the content. This illustrates how relatability and sexual desire combine to make sexual content on TikTok more meaningful for queer users

Notably, ‘thirst traps’ do not need to be sexually explicit. As discussed in the previous theme, thirst traps of a “hot lady chopping wood” were a large part of Participant E’s identity discovery. While these videos may seem to be innocuous to an outside observer, for Participant E and many other queer women, they are sexual. This is an example of social steganography, which “is the process of encoding content, hiding meaning between the lines” (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Marwick and boyd (2014) explain that social steganography is used by teenagers to negotiate context collapse online. Duguay (2022) explains that queer women use this strategy to adjust the salience of their queer identity online. In order to control “how recognizable this information is to others and, specifically, who recognizes it”, queer users can make references or send signals that non-queer people may not understand (Duguay, 2022, p. 19). Nicole Coenen’s wood-chopping videos are read as queer and sexual by Participant E, allowing her to experience desire, but they are not necessarily explicitly queer or sexual. Thus, TikTok content does not need to be explicitly queer or sexual for queer users to experience desire and sexual connection.

Thirst traps can enable queer connection and a sense of belonging. Duguay (2022) describes how queer people engage in sexual sociability. “Sexual sociability comprises sexual exchanges as well as friendly activities with sexual undertones, such as chatting [and gives] rise to intimate communities and connections” (Duguay, 2022, p. 92). She theorizes queer women’s thirst traps on Vine as an example of sexual sociability (Duguay, 2022). She writes that “[t]hirst traps constituted highly salient self-representations of sexual identity that brought women close together, serving the counterpublic purposes of regroupment and building solidarity” (Duguay, 2022, p. 92). I argue that thirst traps on TikTok serve a

similar function. Participant E was able to engage with Nicole Coenen's thirst traps and feel an intimate connection with her content and with the queer community on TikTok. Queer thirst traps on TikTok enable queer users to experience collective desire that makes them feel connected with the broader queer community.

When interacting with implicitly or explicitly sexual content, different levels of desire are experienced by queer TikTok users. Participant C connected with how Acecheeseboard experiences desire:

Fanfiction, it can get a little, like, there's some spice. [...] What I found, hearing her experiences where she's, like, you can still consume that kind of content and enjoy it and not desire it in real life. Just kind of her talking about her relationship to fandom and her understanding it's more of an interest [...] it's not like I'm seeking out this content because this is what I want in my real life and this is what I feel. It's more of like an observation and an interest.

While Participant C previously felt that her interest in erotic fanfiction invalidated her grey-ace identity, Acecheeseboard's TikTok content assured her that her low level of sexual desire is valid and she is still welcome in the fanfiction community.

Queer Assemblages

The content that my participants felt intense connections with demonstrate the circulation of queer assemblages on TikTok. On TikTok, sound, popular music, visuals, and text are combined to create distinctly and specifically queer content. These queer assemblages contributed to my participants' discovery of a facet of their queer identity.

These are assemblages because each component on its own would not have the same meaning. This content is made salient only when various audio-visual elements are combined. A video of a model with a beautifully non-binary aesthetic could not be communicated through text alone. A Lego Batman sound without queer text added would have no queer meaning. A song by the band 'Mother Mother' is not explicitly about the trans experience, but attaching it to video and text that show a trans person's struggles makes it salient. If one component was removed, these assemblages would lose their meaning.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain that in an assemblage, "there is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity

(the author)” (p. 23). By understanding TikTok as circulating queer assemblages, we can understand how the content creators, the content, the surrounding culture and the audience work together to produce meaning. These audio and visual components combine with shared queer cultural knowledge to produce queer assemblages. As queer assemblages, these TikToks become catalysts for queer self-discovery and intense queer connection.

Comparison

While TikTok can open queer possibilities for its users, it can also draw lines around queerness, defining what is valid and what is not. Participant A explained how he actually sometimes felt invalidated when consuming the content of other transmasculine people on TikTok:

I think a lot of people like to act like beauty standards and such are a very gendered thing, and so don't apply to trans and queer individuals. Um, but, pardon my French, that's complete bullshit. There's such a specific standard for being a trans person, for being a queer person, for any label that you have, there are stereotypes. [...] There was such an issue, I think, of invalidation.

Participant A demonstrates an awareness of the normative standards that different queer people are held to. Unfortunately, these standards affected his own self-esteem and caused him to question whether he was doing transness properly and if he was trans enough:

It was invalidating on a deeper level than I think people might expect. That invalidation was less, 'Oh no, other people don't like who I truly am', and it was more, 'Oh no, who am I?' Like, 'Oh no, other people must be right'. And I don't know who I am. If I don't fit this, I must truly not be this person. Like, I must not be trans, because I don't fit this. I must be wrong about myself.

Participant A shows how deeply existential this invalidation is for queer people. He was made to feel like he must not be trans at all since he did not fit the standards that he was seeing on TikTok. This is another example of queer imposter syndrome. Rather than combatting Participant A's self-doubt, his FYP contributed to his anxiety about not being trans enough.

Participant A traced a lot of the toxic standards for trans men to Calvin Garrah (n.d.), an online content creator who pedals transmedicalist views. Transmedicalism views dysphoria, “generally described as a feeling of distress originating from the incongruence between one's assigned gender and gender identity” as a prerequisite to being legitimately trans (Hendrie, 2022, p. 54). It also views moving from one binary gender to the other as the only authentic way to be trans, excluding non-binary people

(Konnolly, 2022). Lastly, transmedicalism understands undergoing medical treatment and passing as cisgender as the sole goal of all trans people (Hendrie, 2022). Participant A noticed these views making their way around trans TikTok while he was discovering his identity:

“Essentially, [Kalvin Garrah] was a trans individual who had a lot of harmful opinions about what it means to be trans. It was a lot of like, if you are trans, for example, say you're a trans guy, you have to fulfill these stereotypical standards. [...] Um, and then that [...] was a big element in a lot of the discourse online between like, like 2019 and 2022. [...] Um, and it sucks when there's so much, like, discord within a community when you're already being attacked by everyone outside of it. [...] So, I think that definitely had an impact on me growing up. [...] there was a lot of like, ‘Am I worthy to use these pronouns?’ ‘Am I allowed to use these pronouns?’ More than anything, all I ever wanted is to be seen as myself.”

Johnson (2016) employs the term ‘transnormativity’ to describe “the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people’s presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable” (p. 1-2). He explains that transnormativity “structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards” (Johnson, 2016, p. 2). Participant A experienced distress because he felt that he did not fit the transnormative standards he was seeing on his FYP. Thus, TikTok can serve to invalidate queer users just as easily as it can validate them. While I am happy that only one of my participants reported these feelings, it is not an experience limited to Participant A. His experience aligns with Simpson and Semaan’s (2020) findings that TikTok’s FYP can invalidate queer users’ identities, making them feel as if their unique experiences are not legitimate. Cavalcante (2019) describes Tumblr as a queer vortex that creates a kind of information bubble. He writes that “[o]ne of the clearest risks to life in the digital queer vortex is the limited range of opinion and information present and the potential for one to inhabit an echo chamber of ideological homogeneity” (p. 1729). I argue that TikTok trapped Participant A in an echo chamber where he was seeing transnormative standards repeatedly reproduced. This had an effect on him because of his constant and all-consuming, or in other words, vortextual, interactions with TikTok. In this way, TikTok orientated Participant A away from cisnormativity toward transnormativity. Once again, because of this orientation, he was temporarily unable to see a path for himself as a transmasculine person.

Offline Community

Two participants understand the queer community on TikTok as something that has served its purpose and is no longer of use to them. Participant D explained, “I would rather go to a meet up, regardless of the community, than do something online”. Participant B describes TikTok’s queer community as something that she no longer needs: “Now that I know that I exist and I have like a physical community, like in my circle, I feel like [TikTok has] had its time”. These participants discovered their queer identity on TikTok, but they no longer rely on it to feel a sense of queer belonging. This aligns with Cavalcante’s (2019) argument that queer users intense engagement with a digital queer vortex is short-lived and fleeting. The intense vortextual engagement that these participants had with the platform was all-consuming, but ultimately unsustainable.

Participant A outlined the stark difference between online life and offline life for a queer person. He explained that the community and sense of belonging on TikTok can lull queer people into a false sense of belonging:

It's just a very strange feeling, to go from having everything the same, tailored to you, and feeling like that's what the world is like for everyone, and then you step outside and it's like, this is not good. And so, [using TikTok is] almost a bit like fantasizing or daydreaming. It's a bit unrealistic to have your feed so targeted towards one group when it's not in real life. [...] It just fucks with your brain, and it fucks with your emotions.

It is understandable that one would experience whiplash going from a highly personalized and inclusive online space to their very cisheteronormative physical surroundings. As Cavalcante (2019) explains, for those entering queer digital vortexes, “[t]here is the fear of “forgetting” about the outside world, the risk of creating a misleading agreeable bubble” (p. 1730). This illustrates that scholars must study people’s online and offline worlds as inextricably linked. Zimmerman (2017) asserts that we must not view online and offline as distinct spaces. She asserts that “separating the online from the offline is neither possible nor desirable” (p. 55). A binary distinction between the online and offline prevents scholars from understanding the complex lived experiences of social media users, especially those who are marginalized. For queer users, existing in a comforting bubble online, but a hostile environment offline is sure to “fuck with your brain”.

‘I just want to eat all the cookies’: Perceptions of TikTok’s Algorithm and Governance

TikTok’s highly personalized FYP algorithm is one of its most prominent features (Wang, 2022). An algorithm is “[a]n automated set of rules for sorting data” (Chandler & Munday, 2020b). TikTok’s FYP employs a content filtering algorithm. “Content filtering algorithms are used for data analytics, such as in displaying search results and newsfeed posts, and in online behavioural advertising” (Chandler & Munday, 2020b). Wang (2022) explains that TikTok’s recommender system is widely regarded as outstanding compared to other recommendation algorithms. TikTok’s massive collection of user data allows them to offer a more tailored content recommendation algorithm (Wang, 2022). The algorithm tailors its recommendations using trace data, which are “the digital remnants people leave of themselves through their interactions with a system, such as through their clicks, likes, follows, and engagement with video content” (Simpson et al., 2022, p. 2). TikTok’s FYP uses this algorithm to show users content that will keep them engaged and scrolling on the app. Wang (2022) asserts that “TikTok's capability to read its users with the powerful recommendation algorithms contributes a lot to engage users” (p. 62).

Stumbling Upon Queer Content

Many of the participants described stumbling across queer content on their FYP rather than seeking it out. They recognized the FYP’s stream of new, personalized content as something that contributed to their queer self-discovery on the platform. Participant E said, “the algorithm keeps sending me videos of a hot lady chopping wood”; thus, she understands the algorithm as a catalyst for her feelings of queer desire, self-reflection and validation. Participant D explained, “having the algorithm and not having to search for something... I didn’t know what I was getting myself into essentially, it was coming to me. [The algorithm] has just opened a lot of doors”. These participants took these recommendations as signs that they may be queer, leading to their self-discovery. This aligns with French’s (2018) findings which indicate that a user’s self-perception can be shaped by algorithmic recommendations.

Similarly, Participant C describes stumbling onto grey-ace content on her FYP. She posited that TikTok’s algorithm recognizes a user as queer and leads them toward the queer side of TikTok:

there's so much content just constantly being filtered that you're able to find something and then once you've engaged with enough then it just brings you more and that changes the experience [...] I find the algorithm has a very sneaky way of finding you and leading you to the right places.

She demonstrates a kind of mystical belief in the FYP algorithm's ability to lead queer users to their community.

Participant C also explained that "[being queer,] how I interact, it definitely has shaped my algorithm." She felt that TikTok knew she was queer and brought her queer content as a result.

I think that TikTok picks up on kind of who you are, which is maybe a little concerning, but it's nice to not have to deal with female gaze Kevin, I guess. But then it also recommends me creators who have similar experiences to me and have put those into better words than I have ever been able to.

While she found TikTok's intimate knowledge slightly creepy, she ultimately felt appreciative. She credited the algorithm with creating the feelings of relatability and belonging that were discussed in the previous theme.

Participant D contrasted her experience with TikTok's algorithm with how she perceives Instagram: "[On TikTok,] you just scroll rather than like on Instagram, you have to go search, type something in". Participant C similarly recognized TikTok's FYP as a key affordance of the platform:

I think because on Instagram, you choose your followers, it sometimes recommends you new people, but not really [...] [P]eople just kind of use [Instagram] to watch and observe and to kind of post about your life. Whereas [on TikTok], you have the option to engage with what people you follow post, but then you also have the option to not and just kind of consume the stream of content that it thinks that you want to see and it leads you there eventually. And I think through that it's a lot more open for potential to discover new like creators or hobbies or identities.

In contrast, Participant B did not feel like they stumbled upon queer content; they tailored their FYP on purpose. They said, "[h]onestly, [...] I perfected my algorithm really well. Yeah. It was a combination of a lot of things like informational stuff, beauty things, mental health things, positive videos... But I was very intentional with making it informative as well." Participant B's experience demonstrates that queer users have agency while interacting with the algorithm. By interacting with the kind of content they wanted to see more of, Participant B was able to tailor their FYP to be queer. This shows that queer users are not passively being taken down certain paths or into certain bubbles, which is what technological determinists would argue. Instead, queer users are working together with the platform,

consciously or unconsciously shaping the content that they see on their FYP. This aligns with the experiences of the queer TikTok users in Simpson and Semaan's (2020) study who "describe actions they have taken to deliberately shift the FYP algorithm when it presents them with content they do not wish to see" (p. 24). Simpson et al. (2022) similarly describe how queer TikTok users are able to "take systems that were designed for specific purposes and tailor them to their own needs and values" (p. 20). However, they also warn that the volatility and opacity of TikTok's algorithm makes it difficult for users to maintain control of their FYP. Lee et al.'s (2022) findings "indicate the potential for users to not only be aware that this personalization process is occurring, but also to want to bring their algorithmic self into alignment with their actual self" (p. 8). Participant B similarly believes that users have the power to manipulate TikTok's algorithm to align with their actual self.

Folk Theories

TikTok's algorithm is a black box, "preventing users from understanding the details of [its] functionality" (Eslami et al., 2016, p. 2371). As a result of its opacity, users have to operate using theories about how the algorithm *might* work. These 'algorithmic folk theories' are "unofficial theories a user holds to explain how a technological system operates and generates various outputs" (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 2). Algorithmic folk theories are created and circulated by non-expert users (Karizat et al., 2021). Karizat et al. (2021) assert that these theories are "a powerful way for users of online platforms to make sense of what they see and experience on these platforms". Algorithmic folk theories have the power to influence user behaviour and can even cause a platform to make changes to its algorithmic recommendation system (Eslami et al., 2016). This confirms the agency of users and emphasizes the way in which users and platforms co-construct each other. The participants in my study had their own theories about why the algorithm sent them queer content.

Participant D explained, "I think, I guess the algorithm [knew I was queer], however that works [...] the algorithm definitely figured it out." When asked how it figured it out, she posited, "I think it's just similar people liking similar things". Evidently, Participant D is aware that TikTok collects demographic

information about her, and thinks that the algorithm just gives her content that similar people enjoy rather than really knowing her intimately.

Explaining how she thinks TikTok knew she was queer, Participant C said, "I think it knows by building off of your small interactions and then creating a bigger picture of you, but it's kind of weird how it kind of gets it really spot on." She explained further,

Like I have a couple creators that I follow quite closely because I just like to hear what they say and then sometimes I get recommended people that they follow and like that shapes further, kind of curating my own experience, even though I don't know how much control I actually have, or if that's kind of an illusion that TikTok gives you.

Participant E believed that the algorithm did not *know* she was queer, but was learning what content she interacts with:

I'm very clear that it knows that I'm interested in that sort of content and which I'm sure most people will be there like, okay, yeah, that's, that's knowing that you're gay, but once again, semantics. Yeah, I don't know what the difference is.

Participant A similarly felt that TikTok did not know he was queer. Rather, he believes that it showed him queer content because he engages with content in that genre: "that subculture of queerness is what I engage with. I think, not necessarily that TikTok's watching you or that they know your sexuality or that they track individual identities, but that there's this subgenre [...] that this community revolves around."

Both of these participants rejected the idea that TikTok knows that they are queer.

Participant E explained her perception of how the algorithm works:

So my impression is it starts by just kind of throwing general popular stuff at you and seeing, like, what do you spend the longest time watching? [...] I don't think it's necessarily tracking me on like, other apps, or anything like that, maybe it is, I have no idea, who knows.

Participant C and Participant E's theorizing about how the algorithm works aligns with the algorithmic folk theory of personal engagement. Eslami et al. (2016) describe how users in their study theorized that their interactions with people or content on Facebook affected what the algorithm showed them in their feed. This same folk theory was observed by Lee et al. (2022) in TikTok users who "believed that the algorithm learned who they were and what they liked by analyzing traces of their behavior" (p. 6).

Participant B did not know how the algorithm works, but they felt like they had control over it. They explained, "Yeah. I wanted it to know [that I am queer]. I'm sure there's like a real process. Like, the

algorithm, I don't know what it actually does, but I'm sure it does something.” The black box does not prevent Participant B from feeling like they have control over the algorithm. Once again, Participant B’s perception of control aligns with those of Simpson and Semaan’s (2020) participants. Despite having no knowledge of what the algorithm “actually does”, Participant B is confident that they are able to manipulate the algorithm to serve their needs.

None of the participants had an explanation of how the algorithm *actually works*. They expressed their theories, but most were caveated with “I don’t know what it actually does”, “I have no idea”, or “however that works”. Notably, participants blamed themselves for not knowing how the algorithm works. Rather than saying that nobody is able to know the inner-workings of TikTok’s algorithm, they phrased it as them not knowing something that they should know. This shows that queer users do not recognize the opacity of TikTok’s algorithm as an intentional decision made by the platform. They assume that people with more technical knowledge know how it functions, but in reality, that information is not available to any members of the public. Eslami et al. (2016) explain that algorithms’ “opaqueness often exists to protect intellectual property, it also stems in part from the merits of ‘seamless’ design, where designers hide details from users to make interactions effortless” (p. 2371). This seamless design also prevents users from thinking about how the algorithm is collecting their personal data and using it to feed them certain information, all with the goal of keeping them engaged for as long as possible. These participants’ self-directed blame points to the need for more digital literacy education. Martin (2005) explains,

Digital Literacy is the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process (p. 135).

These participants are lacking awareness of the motives of TikTok and how it designs its algorithm accordingly. Digital literacy education could teach them to evaluate the mechanisms of TikTok and reflect on whether they want to use it as a tool for queer exploration and connection. Following a narrative of individual responsibility, these participants think about their relationship with TikTok on an individual

level rather than recognizing the platform as part of a system of profit-motivated data-collection. If these participants understood that the FYP algorithm is an intentional black box, they could be more aware of TikTok's profit-motivations, and perhaps more concerned about how it is using their data.

Repetition

TikTok's FYP uses a highly "personalized algorithm which repeatedly confronts [users] with various aspects of their own personas" (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 9). Whether in advertising or disinformation campaigns, repeated exposure to content tends to have an impact on a content consumer (Corneille et al., 2020; Kronrod & Huber, 2019). The more times that someone sees a message, the more likely they are to believe it and internalize it (Corneille et al., 2020; Kronrod & Huber, 2019). I argue that the FYP's repetition has similar effects on queer TikTok users. For two participants, the algorithm's repetitive nature contributed to their queer self-discovery.

Participant D explained that her discovery was fuelled by "constantly seeing and being reminded that you want to pursue someone or something, or like the idea of the sexuality". This constant and repetitive exposure to queer content makes it difficult for users to ignore their own questioning of their identity. She described "the quick and repetitive and accessible exposure of the content" as leading her down the path of self-reflection and queer self-discovery. Participant D offered a wonderful analogy to describe her journey discovering that she is bisexual:

Like, if you saw a recipe for cookies, you're like, 'cool'. But then you see another recipe, and you're like, 'oh, okay, yeah, I could probably make that'. And then you see another recipe, and you're like, 'I kind of want cookies now.' And then you keep seeing recipes of cookies, and you're like, 'I love cookies'. At first I was like, 'eh, I don't need them', but now [I'm] like, 'I just want to eat all the cookies'.

This participant uses the idea of becoming progressively hungrier for cookies to describe her feelings of desire for women. Her experience demonstrates how the FYP repeatedly shows people queer content, each exposure compounding and breaking down the mental barriers caused by compulsory heterosexuality.

Participant C described how repetition shaped her experience:

It took seeing it a couple times and realizing that I had saved an abundance of videos from different creators about different experiences I was having, and how the same terms and words and stuff were coming up, and then processing that. [...] I think it kind of started to happen, but then, you know, when something starts to happen, you're kind of uncomfortable, you're like, 'let's move on'. 'Let's change the subject', but then you're like, I've saved a lot of, like, content about grey asexuality for some reason. Why would I save that otherwise?

Participant C points to how uncomfortable it feels to be disorientated. The repetition on her FYP stopped her from repressing her feelings when she got uncomfortable.

Cho's (2015) concept of queer reverb can be employed to understand the function of repetition on TikTok. He explains that "reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain" (Cho, 2015, p. 35). He uses this concept to "consider the ways that intensity builds on Tumblr through user practices of repetition in various forms" (p. 47). Repetition functions similarly on TikTok. This is true in terms of its memetic characteristics, wherein users replicate and remix each other's content, and also in terms its short looping videos, which play over and over until you scroll away. As discussed above, repetition also operates on TikTok in terms of users being repeatedly exposed to queer content on their FYP. Each time a queer user sees a trend replicated, a video loop, or another thirst trap come onto their FYP, their affective connection is intensified. My participants experienced "a 'queer reverb' of repeat and repeat" (Cho, 2015, p. 47) that sparked and sustained their queer questioning and self-discovery.

Miscategorization

Despite the impressive accuracy of TikTok's FYP algorithm, it does not always show users the content that they want to see. Participant A's FYP shows him a lot of political content, and not always content that he agrees with. He explained, "[b]ecause my content is mostly like queer and trans related stuff, most of what I see will either be other trans creators or the opposite: people bashing on trans creators. So it's a lot of real world politics.". Seeing anti-trans content is distressing for a trans TikTok user. Participant A's experiences align with Jenzen's (2017) argument that the internet is cisnormative. He explains that cisnormativity is built into the digital mechanisms of the internet and transphobia is rampant in online spaces, such as social networking (Jenzen, 2017). Trans youth can strategize around these

limitations by forming safe subcultural spaces online (Jenzen, 2017), but in TikTok's case, the FYP algorithm can violate trans users' safe space. Participant A vented,

Honestly, the algorithm just sucks. I've never been able to find a steady algorithm, which is really frustrating [...] I think [that] because [transphobic content] gets a lot of views and it gets a lot of attention, and people who have similar feeds as me will engage with that more. I see it and it's hard to not engage with, so [the algorithm is] like, 'Oh, you clicked on this video and you stayed on it, we're gonna show you more of it'.

This is an example of TikTok misinterpreting a user's engagement with content as a signal that they want to see more of it. Understandably, Participant A is frustrated that TikTok is showing him hateful content, but he also finds it hard to resist engaging with it. Simpson and Semaan's (2020) participants had similar feelings: they "perceived the injection of unwanted content onto their For You Page as violating" (p. 19).

Participant A believed that TikTok miscategorizes people in a dangerous way:

Say, someone's like really, really homophobic and they're like constantly engaging with all this content just to be shitty or maybe making a bunch of their own content that's like attacking these communities. Um, I think TikTok might mistake them for being queer also and continue recommending them [this] information.

This is concerning because it puts queer content creators in danger. When their content is fed to hateful people, they are opened up to abuse. In order to protect himself when attending a trans counter-protest, Participant A did not add any tags that could cause the post to be fed to transphobes FYPs. He explained, "I went to the counter-protest, so I made like a TikTok of [...] some safety tips. And I purposely didn't add any tags." This is similar to the strategies that Jenzen (2017) found queer internet users employing. His participants used the tag feature on Tumblr, tagging posts with #transgender, to try to keep them within the safe community space (Jenzen, 2017). Participant A used an inverse tactic, yet it served the same goal of keeping his content from travelling beyond the safety of TikTok's queer community.

While Participant A blames these 'miscategorizations' on a confused algorithm, I posit a more nefarious explanation. Since TikTok profits from user engagement, it likely shows anti-queer people queer content and queer people anti-queer content in order to garner an emotional reaction. Munn (2020) explains that, on Facebook, one's personal feed is organized based on engagement. Unfortunately, "incendiary, polarizing posts consistently achieve high engagement" (Munn, 2020, p. 3). TikTok's recommendation algorithm is also based on engagement. Users are more likely to engage with content

that makes them feel a strong emotion, especially anger. Using the concept of the ‘emotional economy’, Petersen (2022) describes “the influential actors in this economy and the techniques used to attract and monetise users’ attention, which rely heavily on harnessing the emotions and exploiting emotional labour” (p. 34). This desire to harness users’ emotions is motivated by the platform’s monetary goals. Modern corporations have “the single-minded goal of maximizing profit” (Rowland, 2019, p. 57). They are designed to maximize profit, and external considerations are only of concern to them if they affect the profit goal (Rowland, 2019). TikTok, then, is required to prioritize profit, so it is designed and governed to benefit advertisers, not users. Thus, it cannot be expected to serve queer users’ interests. When Participant A is distressed by transphobic content, TikTok only notices that his attention is being held and he is engaging with content. TikTok sells his attention to advertisers and his increased engagement allows TikTok to sell advertisers more user data. Therefore, I argue that these violations are not an error, but an intentional design choice and an externality of TikTok’s business model.

Content Moderation

Gorwa (2019) explains that “content policies, terms of service, algorithms, interfaces, and other socio-technical regimes form the governance mechanisms of today’s online infrastructures” (p. 856-857). DeNardis and Hackl (2015) explain that blocking or deleting content is one of the ways in which companies directly exert their power over online rights. Social media platforms’ content moderation mechanisms are often “so opaque, unclear and inconsistent that they encourage censorship, hate speech and disinformation” (Are, 2023, p. 825). Duguay (2023) explains that “[LGBTQ+] creators [on TikTok] speak out about suspicions of shadow banning and censorship [and] leaked company documents attest to past moderation policies designed to suppress LGBTQ+ users’ content” (p. 2). Various scholars similarly observe unfair targeting of queer and other marginalized users’ content by TikTok’s content moderation mechanisms (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022; Steen et al., 2023). Three participants shared their perceptions of TikTok’s content moderation practices.

As a consumer, Participant C found TikTok to be fairly good at moderating hateful content:

[There are] conservative views on TikTok, but I find that, like, TikTok is also so fast to like ban and shut down and [...] you can filter it to kind of be your own echo dome, which I don't know if that's always a good thing

This differs from other queer people's experiences on social media platforms. Duguay (2022) explains that queer users observe patchwork platform governance on social media platforms. This refers to the way in which platforms try to address issues using content moderation after they occur without addressing toxic cultures of use (Duguay, 2023). She explains that these governance mechanisms fail to protect queer women from harassment and hateful abuse on platforms (Duguay, 2022). Notably, Participant C's experience also contradicts with Participant A's experience of being shown transphobic content on his FYP. Participant C found TikTok's governance practices effective in protecting her from anti-queer views. This illustrates that experiences with TikTok's FYP are so highly personalized that different queer people perceive different affordances and limitations.

Participant B observed the platform's content moderation practices but felt that TikTok's censorship was easy to resist:

even though sometimes there was, there was like instances of like censorship. It was like talking videos, right? So it's not as easy to censor it than like a photo and also like people started using like code words. Instead of 'sex', they would say 'seggs'.

Participant B recognizes that there are instances of unfair censorship on TikTok. However, they believe that TikTok is not very good at moderating what people say verbally in videos. In terms of text, they perceive algospeak to be an effective tactic for evading censorship. The use of 'seggs' instead of 'sex' is an example of algospeak. "[A]lgospeak is commonly understood as abbreviating, misspelling, or substituting specific words [...] when creating a social media post with the particular goal to circumvent a platform's content moderation systems" (Steen et al., 2023, p. 1). Steen et al.'s (2023) participants used algospeak on TikTok in response to the following flaws in the platform's content moderation process: "non-contextuality, randomness, inaccuracy, and bias against marginalized communities" (p. 9). In their study, most of the participants found algospeak to be an effective mechanism for avoiding punishment by TikTok. Algospeak is a useful evasion tactic, especially when it comes to queer topics, which are often unfairly censored.

Participant C described her experience as a creator with TikTok's content moderation:

I post on TikTok. I got a shadow banned recently because I get a little excited and I post too much. And I think that I was reading because I was like, how do I get on shadow ban? And they're like, well, TikTok thinks that you're like a robot."

Shadow-bans prevent content from appearing on followers' main feeds and make the shadow-banned account unsearchable (Are, 2022, 2023). Are (2022) finds that Instagram employs "shadowbans to hide pictures and videos they deemed inappropriate without deleting them, preventing freelancers, artists, sex workers, activists and, largely, women from reaching new audiences and potentially growing their pages" (p. 2003). While her content was not shadow-banned because it was queer, Participant C's experience demonstrates the precarity of TikTok as a platform for queer self-expression. Without warning and without reprieve, Participant C's ability to have her TikTok's seen by other members of the community was taken away.

Participant A, a TikTok creator with 6000 followers, also experienced shadow-banning. He explained,

"I wouldn't get as many views or comments or followers, etc. when I had more explicit sexualities and labels in my captions, which was interesting to notice because I found this happening for a lot of people. And there were some people who were being shadow-banned. [...] I did notice that being a problem when I was younger and definitely something that was common".

While his content was not being deleted, he said he "learned" from this shadow-banning. He stopped including these words in his captions so that he could reach more people. This shows that the threat of shadow-banning intimidates and coerces queer TikTok users into anticipatory self-censorship. They can internalize TikTok's governance practices to the point of adjusting their behaviour.

It is important for queer people to be aware of the governance practices of platforms that they rely on for queer connection. Discussing Tumblr, Cavalcante (2019) warns queer people about the dangers of relying on corporate platforms: "Crucially, the user experience on [Tumblr] underscores the profound vulnerability of queer individuals and communities in digital, corporatized space" (p. 2). Referencing YouTube's 'adpocalypse', Duguay (2022) explains that on YouTube, "LGBTQ users serve as collateral damage in profit-generation strategies" (p. 102). The governance decisions made by corporate platforms

are designed to benefit advertisers, not users. Duguay (2022) explains that “governance policies mix with platforms’ profit motives and aim to appeal to advertisers” (p. 102). Bronstein (2020) argues that “secure, lasting digital spaces for LGBTQ users may require public ownership and control” (p. 251). As on YouTube and Tumblr, queer TikTok users are in a precarious position. In general, relying on corporate social media platforms for queer expression and connection is fraught.

“It’s kind of refreshing to be understood, even if it’s by a big bad computer”: Privacy (Un)Concerns

Privacy is a theme that arose in each of the five interviews. I did not mention privacy specifically, but when asked “how do you feel about TikTok knowing you are queer”, every participant took it in that direction.

Privacy vs Publicness

Three of the participants discussed privacy in terms of the exposure of their identity to people in their offline life. Participant C said, “I tell people [I am queer] if it comes up, but [in] online spaces, it’s a little easier, especially on places like TikTok, where your family and friends aren’t like following you, to be more open about that.” Participant B echoed this, explaining,

it’s not like I had a fear that someone was going to know [I am queer] because again, it was very geared toward Gen Z, so I wasn’t afraid that like my parents would somehow find out, but like maybe on Instagram or Facebook, that would have been more because it was geared more towards like older people, like my parents’ generation, yeah, I would have been scared that TikTok knew. I was fine with it. I liked it. I was intentional with it.

This aligns with Cho’s (2018) argument that certain platforms are designed with a bias toward “default publicness”. In fact, Cho (2018) describes Facebook as a platform designed in such a way. The design bias that Participant B points to is that the “[d]emands of platform membership include mapping one’s connections on the platform onto previously extant offline networks” (Cho, 2018, p. 3191). Cho (2018) found that this was the design feature that caused the queer youth of colour in his study the most anxiety. Participant B, who is not out to their parents, recognizes that Facebook and Instagram are designed to connect you with people you know in your offline life. Participant B also perceives Instagram and Facebook as places where older people, such as their parents, might frequent. Their observation is correct since the user demographics of Facebook skews much older than TikTok and Instagram’s skews

somewhat older than TikTok (Ortutay, 2023). As a result of these platform differences, they feel safer with their queer identity being visible and known by TikTok.

This is an example of Duguay's (2022) theory of 'identity modulation'. This refers to a process wherein the platform and the user work together to adjust, or modulate, different dynamics of personal disclosure online (Duguay, 2022). One dynamic of identity modulation is salience (Duguay, 2022). Participant B adjusts the salience of their identity, meaning how recognizable it is to others, based on the platform they are using. This is similar to how Marwick and boyd (2014) find that teenagers negotiate with the technical affordances and social norms of social media platforms to manage their privacy in networked publics. Marwick and boyd (2014) and Duguay (2022) find that social media users employ strategies, such as identity modulation, to negotiate with context collapse. Context collapse is when multiple audiences collapse into one on social media platforms (Marwick and boyd, 2014). Participant B recognizes that on Instagram, their actions are visible to not only their queer friends, but also their queerphobic family members. As such, they make a conscious decision about what to post on which platform depending on the imagined audiences observing them on each one. I argue that the queer people in my study exercise agency in their interactions with TikTok. This participant is aware of the affordances of each platform and intentional with how they maintain privacy on each platform.

Participant A recognized anonymity as an affordance of TikTok:

"[On] TikTok and YouTube, you don't need to create content to enjoy. The primary purpose is to consume content, not to create content. Discord, Snapchat, Instagram, the primary goal is to be creating your own content. So I think it's easier to consume content when that's the goal without any pressure to be creating your own. [...] Like with YouTube, you don't even need an account to watch. [...] So you can just be anonymous, and I think it's also just easier to explore possible parts of your identity when you think that's anonymous. And when you don't think anybody's going to be knowing that about you."

On both TikTok and YouTube, users do not need to create an account to consume content. However, on TikTok, a user must create an account in order to post content, like videos, write comments, and access a personalized FYP (Simpson & Semaan, 2020). If a user decides to create an account, then TikTok allows them to use a pseudonym. Cho (2018) describes how the pseudonymity of Tumblr made it feel like a safe space for his participants. Similarly, Participant A recognizes the ability to consume content without

producing content, and without sharing your name as a powerful affordance. As with Tumblr, a TikTok user is able to create a username of their choice, and other users would be unable to link this pseudonymous account with their real identity. This differs from Facebook, which, at one point had a 'real name' policy and today asserts that "[t]he name on your profile should be the name that your friends call you in everyday life (Facebook, n.d.). This is an example of personal identifiability, a dynamic of identity modulation (Duguay, 2022). TikTok allows you to use a pseudonym and this is also the norm on the platform. Therefore, queer users and the platform can work together to ensure that the user's queer identity is not personally identifiable, and will not be traced back to them. On TikTok, queer users are able to explore their identity without risking the legal, economic, and social consequences of being outed.

Clocked by the App

The other three participants discussed privacy in terms of TikTok as a platform knowing they are queer. Two of these participants were very unconcerned about their privacy on TikTok. Participant E said,

I don't think me sometimes looking at, you know, videos of girls chopping lumber is gonna be high up there on the Chinese government's concerns, because I feel like that's whenever people talk about like TikTok, you know, it's like, 'oh my god, Chinese government'! It's like, I don't think that they care about me.

This kind of apathy is reflected in privacy research (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016). Hargittai and Marwick (2016) observe that people experience apathy, cynicism and fatigue when it comes to online privacy. They found that these feelings were due in part to participants "recogniz[ing] that [privacy-protective behaviours are] likely insufficient in the face of online data mining, widespread identity theft, ever-changing privacy settings, and highly networked social situations". It is understandable that many participants have opted for apathy rather than worrying about privacy issues that cannot be fixed by their individual actions.

Similarly, Participant D said, "Some people care about the internet knowing things about them. In my opinion, I'm just a number in a super huge database. [...] I don't care at all that a robot algorithm AI thinks that I might like girls. I don't care [...] I don't care. I got nothing to hide". In this statement, we can

see the “nothing-to-hide” argument, which Solove (2011) argues “pervades discussions about privacy” (p. 1). Solove (2011) asserts that “the problem with the nothing-to-hide argument is the underlying assumption that privacy is about hiding bad things.” (p. 2). Participant D’s argument ignores the fact that a power imbalance is created between them and TikTok as a corporation when their data is collected.

Participant D also stated “I don't care about my security whatsoever. Um, people say, you know, the app is owned by China. I don't care. They can know whatever they need to know about me. I don't post my bank details and my naked pictures, so I don't care.”. This statement shows that she does care about her security, but she feels that TikTok is only accessing things that she is willing to share. She is unaware that TikTok and third-party data collectors are able to aggregate various bits of data. Solove (2011) explains aggregation: “the fusion of small bits of seemingly innocuous data. When combined, the information becomes much more telling. By joining pieces of information we might not take pains to guard, the government” — or, I argue, a corporation — “can glean information about us that we might indeed wish to conceal.” (p. 2).

Justifying her lack of concern, Participant D explained, “I don't think TikTok will register that [content is] queer, I think they just register that it's content that is liked by someone similar that likes similar content. So, I don't think that TikTok or any social media understands that the content is directed to or associated with queer people.” She did not believe that TikTok could pinpoint her as a queer person. However, former TikTok employees alleged that “the company categorized users based on whether they watched LGBT content in order to increase engagement” (Wells & Tau, 2023). Thus, Participant D might actually be on a list of people who watch queer content. Cho (2018) explains that social media platforms’ design decisions are a result of platform capitalism. Under platform capitalism, “[s]ocial media platforms bring together users with advertisers, effectively selling the users’ attention to advertisers” (Srnicsek, 2016, p. 43). In their single-minded pursuit of profit, platforms such as TikTok exploit users, mining their data and selling them to advertisers in order to accumulate ever-increasing revenue. Thus, it is naïve for queer users to believe that a corporate platform will act in queer users’ best interest.

Interestingly, Participant E justified her lack of concern by comparing Canada to countries that are more repressive and anti-queer. She said,

If I lived in a country where it was, like, illegal to be gay, I would be a lot more worried about, like, 'what if someone opens my phone and, like, they see a video and they're like, oh my, this is a lot of videos about gay people'. But obviously for me personally, I live in a country that's very tolerant, you know. [...] I don't care, but I can see why other people, especially in repressive countries, might be concerned, especially because it's something that is a bit harder to control. You know, it's not like you can sort of, you don't choose what you follow on TikTok, right? If I was on Twitter in a repressive country, I could just be there like, well, I won't follow gay people. Right? I can just make that choice, but there's no way that I could go to the TikTok algorithm and be there like, Okay. You know, I would have to try and game it, like actively try to game it, and it might not work.

Participant D echoed this sentiment, saying “You can just be who you are in certain countries. So, in Canada, we're lucky”. These participants’ observations demonstrate that they recognize their own privilege as queer people living in Canada. Participant E points to the specific dangers that a highly personalized algorithm that can clock a queer user poses to those living in countries with anti-queer attitudes and laws. The idea that someone could be outed by their FYP is very plausible. While Participant E is empathetic to those in more dangerous contexts, she does not acknowledge that in Canada, we are not immune to anti-queer legislation. The idea that our government could never target queer people may be a result of homonationalism. “Homonationalism, as defined by Jasbir Puar, refers to the growing embrace of LGBT rights by (mostly Western) nations, as well as the parallel complicity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and associations with nationalist politics” (Dhoest, 2020). “Muslims constitute the most prominent out-group in homonationalist discourses, although other groups and regions also appear [...] In each case, a simplistic opposition is set up between a homogeneously modern and LGBT-friendly ‘us’ and an equally homogeneous antimodern homophobic ‘them’” (Dhoest, 2020). Violent nationalist political actions are often justified by this argument that certain other countries and cultures are backwards and homophobic. This participant seemingly understands Canada as the stark opposite of certain repressive and anti-queer countries.

Both of these privacy unconcerned participants explicitly mention China. They express their lack of concern about the Chinese government having access to their data. I believe that this focus on

surveillance by the Chinese government could be a response to past year's rampant news coverage of potential TikTok bans in the U.S. and Canada (CBC News, 2023; Maheshwari & Holpuch, 2023; Thorbecke & Fung, 2023; Wendling, 2023). The participants' dismissal of this concern was quite casual. "Although homosexuality is legal in China and major cities can have thriving LGBTQ social scenes, same-sex marriage and adoption are not allowed and LGBTQ people are not legally protected against discrimination" (Gao et al., 2023). Further, China's current president has been cracking down on advocacy groups and according to Yale Law School Senior Fellow, Darius Longarino, many Chinese government officials think that homosexuality is "a malign foreign influence that is stopping youth from getting married and having children" (Gao et al., 2023). We cannot expect China's government or the corporations operating under it, to have any concern for protecting queer user's sensitive data. I argue that we should be hesitant about creating queer spaces on platforms that are operating under a repressive, non-LGBTQ+-friendly, government.

As discussed in chapter 2, my research sample is biased toward people who are out and less privacy concerned since a privacy-protective person would likely not want to share their personal information with a researcher. Altogether, I posit that the participants' lack of concern about their privacy on TikTok points to their privilege as people living in Canada and a lack of awareness about the fluidity of laws and governments. This demonstrates that the experiences of LGBTQ+ people with TikTok are not homogenous. These participants' location in Canada intersects with their marginalized queer identity to put them in a position of relative privilege compared to LGBTQ+ people in many other countries.

These participant's responses also point to a lack of education about the dangers of data collection. None of the participants spoke to the specific dangers of TikTok collecting their personal data. Various scholars explain that data collected by corporations can be sold and used to discriminate people in their offline life (boyd & Crawford, 2012; O'Neil, 2016; Pasquale, 2015). This data can be used by insurance companies, potential employers, police, and political actors to target or discriminate against people (O'Neil, 2016; Pasquale, 2015). For example, political parties can target certain people with

propaganda based on the highly personal data collected about them by social media platforms. As mentioned in Chapter 3, surveillance and its consequences are not distributed equally. GLAAD (2022) explains that the dangers of targeted advertising are more significant for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Further, being discriminated against by an employer due to personal data is more harmful for queer people, who already face employment discrimination and homelessness (CMHC, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022). Statistics Canada (2022) states that LGB individuals tend to have lower incomes and face discrimination and barriers when it comes to employment. CMHC (2022) explains that “[h]istorically, 2SLGBTQIA+ Canadians have accounted for a disproportionately large percentage of Canadians who are: homeless; at risk of becoming homeless or; in core housing need”. This is even worse for members of the community who are also members of other marginalized groups, such as “youth, seniors, Indigenous people, newcomers, or people with mental health or addiction issues” (CMHC, 2022). An intersectional approach allows us to see that LGBTQ+ people should be more concerned about the collection of their personal data than non-LGBTQ+ people. Further, those who are part of other marginalized groups and LGBTQ+ are in even more danger.

Concern and Comfort

One participant illustrated the paradoxical relationship that queer people can have with online privacy. Participant C expressed concern about her privacy on social media platforms:

I didn't get Facebook 'til like my first year of university [...] because I was like worried that like strangers were going to come and kidnap me because that's what I've always been told. So I think like with an app that just knows so much about you and it encourages you to share like, yeah, it's a little like disturbing? But like, not like, I don't know if disturbing, like it's a little strange."

She went on to explain, “I think I'm trying to take a positive spin, like I know that [...] TikTok's had issues in the past with selling data and stuff too”. This demonstrates that she understands some of the dangers of platforms collecting her data. She felt a sense of uneasiness about how well TikTok seemed to know her. This aligns with Simpson and Semaan’s (2020) findings that queer TikTok users sometimes found the accuracy of the FYP with regard to their sexual identity to be violating.

At the same time, Participant C felt strongly about the benefits of TikTok's highly personalized content:

If you can find a sense of community and find some comfort, that's important too. Like, be safe on the internet. Don't expose everything, [...] but I think that as much problems as [TikTok] causes, it also has a pathway that could possibly lead to hope. And yeah, I think that's a good thing if it makes someone feel less alone and kind of gives people the tools to move forward to maybe create something better than TikTok in the future.

This participant recognizes the drawbacks of TikTok, but she also espouses its affordances. Her response demonstrates that queer people are often willing to sacrifice some of their privacy for community and comfort. Dame-Griff (2023) illustrates that this is a trade that queer people have long had to make, whether it be risking being outed by subscribing to a trans zine, or attending an in-person support group that someone might see them walking into. It is important for queer people to be aware of the privacy risks that they are taking when using TikTok and other platforms, but many of us would still choose to make the trade. As Participant C aptly stated, "it's kind of refreshing to be understood, even if it's by a big bad computer."

Chapter 4: Findings and Implications

The research conducted for this project has produced three main findings: queer assemblages operate on the platform; users describe paradoxical experiences with, and perceptions of, TikTok; as a corporate platform, TikTok is limited in what it can offer queer users. Each of these interconnected findings concerns a different dimension of my exploration. The first finding focuses on the content dimension of queer identity discovery on TikTok. The second finding is about the user experience, based on my participants' complex and contradictory experiences discovering a facet of their identity on TikTok. The third finding is regarding the platform itself, discussing TikTok's political economic limitations and what an ideal platform for queer self-discovery might look like. In this section, I will discuss each of these findings and their implications for the queer community and future research.

Queer Assemblages

In terms of content, I found that queer assemblages circulate on TikTok. TikTok's affordances, including the ability to combine sound, music, visuals and text enable the creation of queer content. This content was a source of queer connection and self-discovery for my participants.

Trending sounds on TikTok can be used to produce humour and relatability. The queer experience often feels so heavy, but these audio memes allow queer users to commiserate in a way that feels light and fun. Creators can use these sounds for queer ends, even when the sound is not explicitly queer. This shows that the ability to attach trending sounds to videos is a key affordance of the platform.

Popular music can be used in TikToks to evoke feelings of connection. Explicitly queer songs can be used to signal queerness to other users and create spaces for connection and belonging. Similarly to audio memes, songs that are not explicitly queer can be reworked for queer ends. As with fanfiction, queer users can read their own experiences onto popular songs. Creators can queer these songs using TikTok's other components, and queer users can share in this queer understanding.

TikTok's visuality enables the circulation of queer visual aesthetics. A hot lady chopping wood, combined with queer cultural associations of lumberjacks with lesbianism, is a decidedly queer visual. Queer visual aesthetics enable the affective circulations of queer sexual desire on TikTok. Queer users can

quite literally see themselves reflected in the visuals on TikTok. In these visuals, they can also see the objects of their previously undiscovered queer desires.

TikTok enables users to add text to their videos. Users are able to type text, then adjust the size, font, colour and placement. Unlike a caption, this on-screen text is the focus of the TikTok video. Text in these queer assemblages is used to enhance or transform the meaning of the other components. This text enables users to write in their own voice to get their specific expressions across.

My participants' queer self-discoveries were catalyzed by queer content on TikTok. The creation and circulation of queer assemblages is a key affordance for queer users. When evaluating potential channels for self-expression and connection, the queer community must recognize this as a strength of the platform. This finding illustrates the importance of finding online spaces that enable highly customizable and networked audio-visual queer expression. While these audio-visual affordances are inherent to the platform, queer people should also recognize the agency employed by queer creators in remixing and reworking trends to serve queer ends. We must recognize our power to creatively engage with content on any platform in a queer way.

My participants' descriptions of TikTok content demonstrate that this area of research is rich. Future research could examine each component of these queer assemblages separately and together to understand how queer content operates on the platform. Scholars could examine the way in which queer cultural references and queer audio-visual aesthetics circulate on TikTok. Future research could also examine elements involved in this phenomenon of queer self-discovery on TikTok. Since thirst traps were such a prevalent genre of content for my participants, future research could also focus on the role of thirst traps in contributing to queer self-discovery.

Paradoxical Experiences

Another finding that my research produces is that queer TikTok users have highly paradoxical experiences with the platform. Even within my small sample, participants had perceptions that seemingly contradicted with others they held and experiences that contrasted with those of the other participants.

My participants demonstrate that queer TikTok users can have a highly contradictory experience navigating between the online and offline world. In their descriptions of their offline lives, it is clear that TikTok offers a utopian space that is in stark contrast to the offline world. It is understandable that queer TikTok users experience a kind of whiplash when they leave the online safe space and realize that much of the world is still anti-queer. This demonstrates that the offline and online are connected, and can be incredibly contradictory spaces.

My research also illustrates that while queer content can make some people feel seen and validated, the same content can make others feel invalidated. Queer content can be comforting in its relatability. However, when a user does not relate to an experience that is presented as general, they can feel like they are not 'legitimately queer' or 'queer enough'. This shows that even the same content could produce paradoxical experiences for queer users.

A similar contradiction was present in my participants' experiences with the algorithm. Some participants found that the algorithm tailored them with very relevant content that contributed to their queer self-discovery and sense of belonging. On the other hand, another participant felt that the algorithm failed to serve them relevant content and was accidentally miscategorizing them. Corroborating Simpson et al.'s findings, this illustrates that TikTok's highly personalized algorithm can simultaneously affirm queer users' identities and misunderstand them.

My participants also had contradictory theories about how the algorithm works. One Participant believed that users have a lot of control over the algorithm, while others felt largely unaware of how it worked. Another participant felt that they had some control, but was suspicious that TikTok was just making them think they have control. This shows that queer users have various and different perceptions of how the same algorithm works.

While some participants understood TikTok's content moderation as protecting them from hate, others recognized how it suppresses queer content. Those who observed that the platform is often unwelcoming to queer content also identified easy strategies to evade this content moderation. This demonstrates that queer users recognize the power that TikTok wields through its governance practices,

but they also believe that queer people have the power to strategize around and against these biased practices.

Participants expressed a lack of privacy concern, but then touted the value of TikTok's pseudonymity. My participants largely expressed a lack of concern about the corporation and China collecting their data. However, they also recognized TikTok's lack of publicness as an affordance of the platform for queer people. They saw TikTok's pseudonymity and the fact that their families were not on the platform as an important consideration. Even the participant who expressed concern about data collection decided that she was willing to trade her privacy for queer connection. This illustrates that queer users are actually privacy concerned, just less about data privacy and more about keeping their identity from being exposed to extant ties. This also shows that queer users are not mindlessly accepting TikTok's invasion of privacy. Instead, they are weighing the benefits and risks, and making a considered decision that it is worth it.

These findings have implications for the queer community. These paradoxical experiences demonstrate that we must be critical of how these platforms protect us, but also exploit us. We must make collective and individual decisions about which platforms are serving us. This suggests that the queer community should be more educated about how algorithms, content moderation and data collection operate on platforms, and the risks that this poses to us. We should continue to make deliberate decisions about where to cultivate our online communities.

This finding emphasizes the importance of a balanced and nuanced approach to evaluating an online platform. As scholars, we must avoid an entirely utopian or dystopian perspective. Future studies of TikTok must recognize that the platform is simultaneously beneficial and harmful to queer users. Further, this finding acts as an argument against technological determinism. Scholars must recognize how queer users' unique positionalities and actions shape the platform. As a small research project, my research offers a useful springboard for future studies. A future larger study could examine queer TikTok users' paradoxical experiences further.

Imagining Future Platforms

This research demonstrates that the limitations of TikTok are largely a result of its profit imperatives. Experiences of TikTok shadow-banning queer content are a result of TikTok's desire to please advertisers by ensuring that their ads do not appear alongside 'inappropriate' content. The issue of queer users being shown anti-queer content and queer content being pushed to transphobes is also a result of the platform's profit-motives. I argue that my research demonstrates the need for an alternative queer platform.

Dame-Griff (2023) outlines the ideal trans platform: "[a] real trans technology would be designed specifically by and for trans people, outside of capitalist frameworks, with features enabling trans experiences and policies allowing trans content in the service of intersectional community building" (p. 142). Similarly, an ideal queer platform would need to be non-profit, serving as a form of public social media. This is because a corporation is required to prioritize profits and the desires of shareholders; even if a corporate platform wanted to serve queer interests, that would have to be secondary to their profit imperatives. The ideal queer online space would be a co-operatively owned and governed social media platform. Users would be involved in governance decisions, such as community guidelines and content moderation processes. Ideally, this platform would operate out of a country that is currently democratic and less suppressive than China. Examples of platforms with this ownership structure include Wikipedia, which is run by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation and Archive of Our Own, a non-profit fanfiction repository run by the Organization for Transformative Works (Dame-Griff, 2023; Wikimedia Foundation, n.d.).

As Participant C suggested, TikTok gives us the tools "to maybe create something better than TikTok in the future". I agree that various affordances of TikTok would be valuable for a future queer platform. TikTok's highly personalized algorithm is a significant strength. A future queer platform could use a personalized algorithm that responds to the users' actions. This would allow queer users to stumble upon new possibilities and lead them toward a queer subculture to which they feel they belong. An ideal queer platform would differ from TikTok by having a more transparent algorithm. This could make

people feel like they have more control and allow them to adjust the recommendation system when it is showing them distressing content. Since the platform would not prioritize advertising revenue, it could let people decide not to be shown content, even if it is content that increases their engagement.

A queer platform would have to be designed intentionally to serve the multiple and diverse interests of the queer community. My participants demonstrated their concerns about publicness on a social media platform. The platform would have to be designed for privacy rather than publicness. This would mean allowing pseudonymity. It would also have to not force users to connect with people who they are connected to on other platforms or in offline life. Further, an ideal queer platform would not be designed around data collection. While TikTok's collection of user data is its main value to advertisers, a non-profit platform could protect user data. A platform designed for queer people would be cognizant of the risks of data surveillance, which are more severe for queer people, and data privacy could be built into its design.

Notably, one of the strengths of TikTok is that it is not an exclusively queer platform. My participants would not have stumbled upon their queer self-discoveries if they had to seek out a specifically queer platform. In this way, a queer platform would lack the broad appeal that enables TikTok to give people queer revelations. Further, a specifically queer platform could be a target for harassment and abuse. These are considerations to take into account when designing a future queer platform.

My research offers valuable insights for the queer community. This finding shows us what affordances and limitations to look for when evaluating whether a platform is a safe space for queer connection. Further, this gives a map for creating our own community-owned and governed platform in the future.

For other scholars, this finding offers a set of characteristics to evaluate other platforms against. Future research could measure how other platforms, such as X, Threads, and Instagram, score in these areas. Further, this could be used to assess new platforms that arise in the future.

Conclusion

All knowledge builds on previous knowledge. In this thesis, I was in dialogue with previous research in the following thematic categories: assemblages and affect; identity work; algorithms and governance; privacy; and the COVID-19 context. My work built upon the key works and concepts in these areas of social media studies and queer studies. I sought to fill in the gaps of previous research and satiate my own curiosity about the phenomenon of queer self-discovery on TikTok.

Embarking on this research project, I made thoughtful methodological decisions, including my use of: convenience sampling; the semi-structured interview; zoom as a medium for interviewing; and automated transcription and inductive thematic analysis. These decisions were made with an awareness of their limitations and the ethical considerations that must be taken when working with a marginalized community and discussing sensitive topics.

Through interviews, I was finally able to find some answers to the questions that have been running through my head since watching Alayna Joy's video in 2020. I found answers to questions that I never ever thought to ask. I uncovered four themes through an inductive thematic analysis of my interview transcripts. First, I found that my participants used TikTok as a tool for queer self-discovery. Using concepts such as disorientation (Ahmed, 2006), queer utopia (Cavalcante, 2019), and queer realness (Gray, 2009), I found that these queer TikTok users had been previously orientated toward cisheteronormativity by their environments, then they were disorientated by queer representation on TikTok. They saw the diverse, intersectional representation offered by the platform as one of its key affordances and described the specific content that led to their revelations.

Second, I found that my participants used TikTok as a space for intense connection. It was this affective connection that catalyzed their queer self-discovery. They described feelings of validation. I also found that my participants felt that authenticity, audio memes, and music were affordances that enabled relatability and belonging on the platform. To examine feelings of relatability and affective belonging, I employed Kanai (2017, 2018). Further, using Duguay (2022) and Bronstein (2020), I traced the affective flows of sexual desire that my participants experienced on TikTok. I found that users also experienced a

feeling of comparison and invalidation from some TikTok content, as well as whiplash when leaving the safe space, or queer vortex (Cavalcante, 2019), of TikTok and being confronted by the queerphobic offline world.

The third theme that arose was algorithms and governance. I found that my participants felt that the algorithm allowed them to stumble upon content that led to their queer self-discovery. Using the concept of algorithmic folk theories (Karizat et al., 2021), I describe my participants' perceptions of the inner-workings of TikTok's FYP algorithm. Using Cho's (2015) concept of queer reverb, I describe how the repetitive nature of the algorithm shaped my participants' experiences. One participant also described how the algorithm can miscategorize people and content, an issue which I argue is a result of TikTok's profit model rather than an error in the algorithm. I found that my participants had different perceptions of TikTok's content moderation practices and strategies to circumvent unfair censorship.

The fourth theme that I uncovered was privacy. My participants made a decision to trade their privacy for this space of queer connection and self-discovery. They expressed their various concerns, and lack of concerns regarding different privacy considerations on TikTok. Using Cho's (2018) concept of default publicness, I describe how my participant's perceived pseudonymity and lack of connection to offline ties as affordances of the platform. My participants expressed a lack of concern about TikTok and China having access to their data, often attributing their apathy to their privileged location in Canada. Finally, aligning with Simpson and Semaan (2020), I found that TikTok's deep knowledge of queer users could make them feel violated but also comforted, pointing to the paradoxical experience of being seen.

Based on these themes, I identified three broader findings. These findings allowed me to identify the consequences and significance of the discoveries made in my thematic analysis. Each finding concerns the content, the user, and the platform, respectively. First, I discovered that the queer assemblages on TikTok enabled my participants' experiences of queer self-discovery and connection. These queer assemblages are composed of sound, popular music, visuals, and text which intersect to create viscerally queer content. Second, I found that the queer users in my study had complex and paradoxical experiences with, and perceptions of, the platform on and through which this queer content

circulates. Finally, I found that TikTok can be used to imagine an ideal queer platform. The users' consumption of content, which is mediated by and through the platform, can illuminate the affordances and limitations of TikTok. I was able to uncover the ideals that could be implemented into the design and governance practices of a future platform. Evidently, each finding is connected with the others. There are significant implications of these findings for the queer community and scholars.

It is important to amplify the voices and experiences of queer people through academic research. This thesis has demonstrated that the intersection of queer people and TikTok is a fertile area of research. I have mapped out various areas for further inquiry. Future research could focus on analyzing specific kinds of queer content or TikTok's individual affordances, including affordances that my participants did not mention, such as mobility. A larger and more diverse study could examine the benefits and drawbacks of TikTok for queer users in a way that is more generalizable. A more specific study, for example about rural trans people or Black lesbian teenagers' experiences with TikTok, could highlight unique intersectional queer perspectives. This research provides a map for evaluating which characteristics enable queer self-discovery. Future research could build on this, exploring how queer users are simultaneously shaping and shaped by the different social media platforms that they engage with.

For the queer community, I hope that this research can empower others to see that they have the power to critically evaluate the platforms they use, and make strategic choices based on what they want to get out of them. I would not judge another queer person for trading their privacy for a sense of queer belonging, but I hope that this can be an informed decision. More, I hope that we can go beyond accepting what we are offered by corporate platforms and demand more. Based on my research, I have outlined the characteristics that would create an ideal queer social media platform. I implore any queer readers to imagine what an ideal queer platform would look like for them. As attacks on trans rights are rampant across the U.S. and Canada, and anti-queer groups are on the rise, it is imperative that we secure online queer spaces. We cannot rely on a corporate platform like TikTok for queer self-discovery, connection and mobilization, but we can learn from it.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. What is your age?
2. What city do you live in?
3. What are your pronouns?
4. How would you describe your gender?
5. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
6. How often do you use TikTok?
7. What do you use it for?
 - a. Do you post or only consume content?
8. Do you think there's a distinct queer culture on TikTok?
 - a. Can you describe it to me?
9. Do you feel that being queer has shaped your experience with TikTok?
 - a. If yes, in what ways?
 - b. If no, why not?
10. Do you feel like TikTok has shaped your relationship with your own queerness?
 - a. If yes, in what ways?
 - b. If no, why not?
11. Do you think TikTok knows you are queer?
 - a. How do you think it knows?
 - b. Does the language of TikTok "knowing your queer" make sense to you? Why or why not?
12. Was there content on TikTok that you felt an intense connection with?
 - a. Tell me about it.
 - b. How did this content make you feel?
 - c. Did this content change how you thought about your own identity? How so?
13. Why do you think this content changed how you thought about your own identity? Or why did it not?
 - a. Have you seen this identity represented elsewhere? If yes, why was this different?
 - b. If no, why do you think that is?
14. Do you use other social media platforms?

- a. Which ones?
 - b. Why do you think you discovered your queer identity on TikTok rather than on other social media platforms?
15. How did you feel when you when you learned this about yourself?
16. Are you openly LGBTQ+?
- a. Out to friends? Family? Coworkers?
17. How did you feel about TikTok seeming to know this about you?