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Critiquing TikTok as a stage: Investigating Confessional Performance on TikTok and its capacity to cultivate feelings of intimacy and communitas within a community of young adult users

Buckland, Sarah

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Critiquing TikTok as a stage: Investigating Confessional Performance on TikTok and its capacity to cultivate feelings of intimacy and *communitas* within a community of young adult users.

Sarah Buckland

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of The Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Arts by Research in Theatre and Performance.

(Ethics Clearance Number: H22/11/05)

Supervisors:

Neka DaCosta

Jessica Foli

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

School of Arts

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ABSTRACT:

The presence of loneliness, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, is a persistent issue facing young adults in South Africa and abroad. Social media platforms, specifically TikTok, afford a sense of social interaction for those socially and geographically separated. One avenue for this interaction is through the production of increasingly confessional content on the social media platform. In this paper, I identify this presence of confessional content on TikTok and trace its roots to Confessional Performance traditions. I then interrogate the potential of Confessional Performance on TikTok to establish intimacy and elements of *communitas.* Irem Sot's article entitled *Fostering Intimacy on TikTok: A platform that listens and creates a safe space* (2022) provides beneficial insight into the role TikTok's algorithm has in establishing a sense of intimacy and community amongst its dedicated users and is used as a vital point of reference throughout the paper. Through the addition of an autoethnographic creative research approach, supported by thorough desktop research, I can outline the initiation of intimacy and community on TikTok, which begins with a moment of confession and continues when a second party validates this moment. Furthermore, I create and analyse my confessional TikTok series, 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me', paying close attention to audience interaction experienced during this series as a means to a) reflect on the interpretation of intimacy and *communitas* through the lens of both a TikTok creator and viewer and b) determine the capacity of this kind of confessional performance on Tik Tok to successfully (or unsuccessfully) cultivate intimacy and *communitas*.

GLOSSARY:

Duet: Refers to a creator tool on TikTok that allows a user to film a video alongside another video. (Schellewald, 2021)

For You Page: An individual landing page TikTok users are met with when opening the app. The For You Page is an endless stream of videos that are curated through the TikTok algorithm. (Schellewald, 2021)

Meme: A shared cultural unit that usually takes the form of an image or video. Memes are characterized by their reference to popular cultural events or media and their ability for virality.

TikTok: A social media platform that facilitates short-form video creation and distribution (Schellewald, 2021).

Stitch: A creator tool that allows you to combine a video on TikTok with your own. (Schellewald, 2021)

Tag/Tagging: When an individual mentions (in text form) another user or account on a social media platform this is called 'tagging.' When a user is mentioned, this user will receive a notification alerting them that they have been 'tagged' in a comment, post, or story.

TikTok Challenge: A TikTok trend that invites or 'challenges' other users to interact with or create a specific action (Schellewald, 2021).

TikTok Storytimes: A form of TikTok video that involves an individual telling or re-enacting a personal experience. These Storytimes are often announced as 'Storytimes' by the TikTok creator at the beginning of a video.

Vlog: A video diary that captures various elements of an individual's day or week, usually uploaded to a social media platform.

INTRODUCTION:

The first and most stringent Covid-19 lockdown was implemented by the South African government from the 26th of March until the 30th of April 2020 (South African Government, 2021). This lockdown prohibited in-person socialization, restricted national and international travel, and directed non-essential work to be conducted at home (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2021: 257). While social distancing regulations were, for the most part, successful at curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus, they consequentially had a significant effect on the social lives and mental well-being of South Africans during this time (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2021: 257). It is little surprise that the isolation and the prohibition of in-person social interaction, implemented during long periods of the pandemic generated feelings of loneliness. The study, *A looming mental health pandemic in the in the time of Covid-19? Role of fortitude in the interrelationship between loneliness, anxiety, and life satisfaction among young adults* by Anita Padmanabhanunni and Tyrone Pretorius posits that loneliness is "the signature mental health consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic" amongst young adults in South Africa and abroad (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2021: 257).

Simply, loneliness can be defined as an experience or feeling of isolation, detachment, and the lack of social belonging (Hoffman & Jopp, 2022: 2). Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius note the interrelationship between loneliness and other mental health concerns such as anxiety and a decrease in general life satisfaction (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2021). Although loneliness had been a mental health concern amongst young adults pre-covid-19, Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius's study proves that levels of loneliness, anxiety, and life dissatisfaction identified in their sample surpassed previous studies with similar samples in similar populations (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2021: 263). Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius assert that one significant rationale for this increase is due to the social distancing regulations implemented during the pandemic (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2021: 264).

The article, *Loneliness during COVID-19: Development and Influencing Factors* (Hoffman et al, 2022), supports Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius' findings, distinguishing two forms of loneliness experienced during the pandemic, social loneliness and emotional loneliness (Hoffman et al, 2022). Social loneliness is experienced by individuals who are not socially integrated adequately and whose need for peer relationships remains unmet (Hoffman et al, 2022: 3). Social loneliness, which is primarily determined by social interactions, is exacerbated by isolation, thus, a relevant threat during Covid-19 lockdown regulations. As a

result, emotional loneliness, which refers to unachieved intimacy between close companions, is intensified (Hoffman et al, 2022: 3).

Not all of those who suffer from different forms of loneliness do so without recourse, some seek intimacy. Intimacy, discussed by Harry Reis and Phillip Shaver in their text *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process*, is one primary ameliorator of loneliness (Reis et al, 1988). The term 'intimacy' encompasses a diverse range of applications but essentially refers to the process of "making one's innermost qualities known" (Reis et al, 1988: 367). During the Covid-19 lockdowns in South Africa and abroad, intimacy, predominantly physical intimacy, was jeopardized (Sot, 2022: 1492). Without the presence of social interaction and the cessation of artistic and cultural events, individuals who once found solace in these gatherings experienced a lack of intimacy and a sense of community during the lockdown period.

Sot explains in her article *Fostering intimacy on TikTok: A platform that 'listens' and creates a 'safe space'* (2022) that the Covid-19 pandemic prompted socially distanced individuals to seek entertainment, but also a sense of intimacy and community, on social media platforms as a means to combat increased loneliness and isolation (Sot, 2022: 1492). TikTok, a social media platform dedicated to short-form video creation, is one platform that saw an exponential increase in users in the year 2020, the first year of Covid-19 lockdowns (Sot, 2022: 1493). I, an aspiring theatre maker and poet pre-pandemic, was amongst these new users.

Rationale:

In March 2020, I celebrated my twenty-first birthday on the first day of South Africa's national lockdown. My practical theatre studies, as well as my attendance of live performances, satisfied my need for entertainment and community connection, consequentially suppressing personal feelings of loneliness. The Covid-19 lockdown regulations, which prohibited theatrical performances, were devastating for arts and culture in South Africa, financially and otherwise [1]. In addition to the financial impact of the lockdown, artists, such as myself,

[1] The Presidential Economic Stimulus Programme set aside a R300 million emergency fund for South African artist financially impacted by the COVID- 19 pandemic (Naidoo, 2021). This fund was proven mishandled by the National Arts Council (NAC) and in March of 2021 artists began a 'sit-in' in NAC's offices as a means of protest (Mafolo, 2021).

experienced a loss of community. Along with many other theatre makers and performance goers, live performance offered me a sense of cultural and artistic belonging and was my chosen field of study. This sense of belonging was challenged when theatre makers and performers were no longer allowed to present in-person performances during the first year of the pandemic. Mourning a sense of belonging amongst my peers and haunted by a deep desire to fend off a sense of boredom and loneliness, I downloaded TikTok.

TikTok allows its users to create and upload videos up to ten minutes in length. The platform has been popular amongst teenagers since its release in 2016, however, the app saw an exponential increase in downloads in 2020, having gained 319 million new users that same year. By the end of March 2021, the app had acquired a total of one billion users worldwide (Iqbal, 2022). TikTok's popularity during the pandemic encouraged competing social media platforms to develop short-form video creation on their platforms too. Instagram reels, introduced in August of 2020, and YouTube shorts, introduced in March of 2021, are short-form video features that closely mimic TikTok (Hutchinson, 2022).

It is assumed that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant influence on the sudden rise of TikTok users during the year 2020 (Sot, 2022). Although TikTok saw a rise in users at the peak of the pandemic, the popularity of TikTok and the presence of loneliness remains prevalent in the post-pandemic environment, with the loss of life and financial instability amplifying mental health concerns even after the pandemic has ended.

The content on TikTok varies immensely, both structurally and thematically. My time on the platform has introduced me to a type of TikTok video I have called a 'Confessional TikTok'. These videos depict TikTok creators engaging with personal storytelling through TikTok Storytimes, revealing intimate information about themselves through confessional memes and trends, or documenting their day through detailed vlogs. Although I first witnessed Confessional TikToks in 2020, the first year of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the act of confession seemed to continue to gain popularity on TikTok in the years 2022 and 2023. How individuals confess on the platform transforms as TikTok trends develop and the type of content produced becomes specific to the platform. The act of confession is integral in the development of intimacy, described as the 'process' of intimacy, defined by Reis and Shaver.

Thesis Statement:

How does confessional performance on TikTok influence the cultivation of intimacy and *communitas* among young adult users? Furthermore, can this potential intimacy and *communitas* be considered a strategy to combat loneliness, a proven residual of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequential lockdowns?

Research Questions:

What is the relationship between confessional performance and intimacy and *communitas*?

To begin my inquiry, I seek to define confession on TikTok by closely examining key characteristics of confessional performance in front of a live audience. Confessional performance is a type of autoethnographic storytelling whereby a performer shares personal experiences and emotions with an audience, typically in a candid manner (Early et al, 2019). These key characteristics are discussed by Toby Juliff and Jaye Early in their journal article *The self-design of contemporary confessional art* (2019). *Once Blind, Now Seeing: The Problematics of Confessional Performance*, an article by David Terry, contributes to the definition of confessional performance and provides a critical review of the risks involved in the genre. Confessional performance has not only been cited as an art form that involves intimacy but also community. *Communitas*, a Latin term developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, is an idealized notion of community (Sandall, 2011). *Communitas*, like ideas of community, refers to a sense of siblingship and comradery (Bilu, 1988: 303). However, *communitas* is not synonymous with community as it specifically relies on the eradication of social hierarchies and structures (Sandall, 2011: 483).

How does confessional content on TikTok influence intimacy and *communitas* amongst TikTok users?

As *communitas* involves a sense of togetherness and the notion of a shared lived experience, I study its role in social well-being amongst young adults and its ability to alleviate feelings of loneliness. To this point, I question whether *communitas* is present on TikTok and whether confessional content on the platform can nurture *communitas.*

Subsequent to this, I examine TikTok's sociotechnical features and their role in supporting both intimacy and *communitas*. Sociotechnical features, coined by Moa Krutrok in her research article *Algorithmic closeness in mourning* (2021), refers to TikTok features

responsible for interaction and collaboration on the platform such as the stitch, duet, and Q&A features. By analysing confessional content on TikTok as well as its sociotechnical features, I identify and therefore evaluate the degree to which confessional content contributes to the development of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok.

What are the potential benefits and risks of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok?

Once I assess the possible development of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok, I proceed to interrogate the significant benefits and dangers of confessional content on TikTok. The primary objective of this research evaluates TikTok's potential for community growth and the nurturing of intimacy amongst its users through confessional performance. By considering the potential confessional TikTok has in developing intimacy and *communitas* amongst its users, insights into the roles that digital communications have in sustaining communities and relationships are established. Furthermore, the implications that this type of interpersonal interaction has on young adults' social well-being are considered. Although this study does not strictly examine whether vulnerable self-revelation on a public social media platform like TikTok can contribute to increased or decreased experiences of empathy, it partakes in discourse that other creatives and researchers can contribute to. Identifying intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok potentially reveals the ways in which both intimacy and *communitas* may be translated, redefined, or attenuated through content creation and user interaction on social media.

Structure and Strategy:

The findings and reflections collected during the research project are discussed over three chapters of the paper. Chapter One, 'Understanding Intimacy and *Communitas* within the lens of Confessional Performance', presents a Literature Review, contributing to a thorough definition of confessional performance and a brief description of its historical relevance. By reviewing pivotal literature, the risks involved in confessional performance are discussed. The role of intimacy and *communitas* in confessional performance is explored and defined within this chapter.

The second chapter of my paper, titled: 'The Dynamics of Intimacy and *Communitas* on TikTok', is identified by acknowledging creators on the platform who repeatedly preoccupy themselves with the act of confession. I pay special attention to their content as well as the

viewer interaction this content facilitates. I evaluate whether this content, as well as TikTok's sociotechnical features, encourages intimacy and *communitas* by using Reis and Shaver's process of intimacy, as well as Victor Turner's ideals of *communitas* as a framework for evaluation.

Lastly, Chapter 3: 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' outlines the creative aspect of my research. This reflection explains the process of investigation and documents my experience as a confessional TikTok creator. The response attained from viewers during this series is analysed. I use my experience as a confessional creator as well as the viewer interaction I received during the series to determine the potential for intimacy and *communitas* on the platform. Included in this reflection is the consideration of the emotional and mental implications of confessional content creation from the perspective of both a TikTok viewer as well as a TikTok creator.

Methodology:

To investigate and critique intimacy and *communitas* amongst young adult TikTok users, as is the aim of my research, a desktop research approach, as well as a practice-orientated autoethnographic research approach, are utilized in this research. Throughout my investigation, I position myself as a researcher, TikTok viewer, and TikTok content creator. My role as a researcher is sustained throughout the entirety of my study. However, I will favour my role as either a TikTok viewer or TikTok creator at different periods during my autoethnographic approach to my research. When analysing existing confessional content on TikTok I adopt the role of a TikTok viewer. When creating an autoethnographic practice-orientated research approach, which takes the form of a confessional series 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me', I fulfil the position of a TikTok creator.

Desktop research:

Desktop research is a secondary research approach that discovers, studies, and comparatively analyses existing sources to understand the context of a particular topic. These sources can take the form of case studies, completed academic research, and academic journals.

I utilize a desktop research approach to define confessional performance and briefly outline its history. A desktop research approach allows a thorough analysis of confessional

performance concerning its encouragement or role in the development of intimacy and *communitas*. To begin this analysis, intimacy, specifically the process of generating intimacy, is identified. Similarly, by paying close attention to Victor Turner's ideal of a structureless community, *communitas* is defined. The process involved in the development of intimacy, and the definition and ideals of *communitas,* are used as a point of reference and guide for identifying and interrogating confessional performance on TikTok in later chapters. Through a desktop research approach, the influence of confessional performance on the well-being of both the confessional performer and the viewer is explored. Furthermore, the risks involved in the process of intimacy and the experience of *communitas* are suggested in relation to confessional performance both on and offline.

The qualitative data collected during the desktop research phase of the study is used as a vital framework for collecting, displaying, and analysing data uncovered during the autoethnographic and practice-orientated phase of the research project.

Autoethnographic Approach:

Autoethnography is a research approach which adopts elements of both ethnography and autobiography (Adams, Ellis, Jones, 2011: 275). An autoethnographic study relies on the act of immersion and observation, typical in ethnographic research while providing personal accounts situated in a broader cultural context (Adams et al, 2011). In addition to the act of immersion, self-reflection through journaling, an analysis of personal writings, a study of the relevant social context, and dialogue with individuals who share the context in question contribute to the methodology exercised within autoethnographic research (Adams et al, 2011). The information concerning intimacy, *communitas,* and confessional performance is then accompanied by an autoethnographic investigation of confessional performance on TikTok. The definition and characteristics of confessional performance in front of a live, in-person audience are used to discover confessional content creation on TikTok. The desktop research acquired is used to support the explanation of sociotechnical features employed on TikTok as well as other platform-specific terminology.

With the support of desktop research, I position myself as a TikTok viewer when searching for and analysing confessional content on the platform. I position confessional content created by TikTokers' Lana Saint Clair, Aimee George, and Madeline Argy as primary case studies within my research. Furthermore, I highlight confessional TikTok trends,

sociotechnical features available on the platform as well as the TikTok algorithm as further points of inquiry and analysis. Although my analysis of these case studies utilizes the data attained from the desktop research employed, I also adopt an autoethnographic approach by considering my own experience as a viewer of this confessional content. I reflect on my emotional reaction to these instances of confessional performance and assess my own accessibility to moments of intimacy and *communitas* with these confessional creators. Furthermore, I consider my experience with engaging with the TikTok algorithm and assess how this algorithm, with the sociotechnical features of TikTok, influences my perception of intimacy and *communita*s on TikTok.

Autoethnographic Practice orientated Research:

Practice-orientated research aims to answer research questions by adopting a practical/ physical investigation. In this instance of this study, I use a self-created TikTok series, titled: 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me', as a practical means to investigate the influence that confessional content has on the relationship between confessional TikTok creators and their TikTok viewers. During the series, I shift my role within my research from TikTok viewer to TikTok creator. The month-long confessional TikTok series is written, directed, and performed by me and utilizes popular formats for personal self-expression existing on TikTok. These formats include TikTok Storytimes, vlogs, confessional trends, and other moments of confession that are typical examples of self-revelation on the platform. Although I rely on personal experiences as the subject of the series, I also encourage personal sharing from other TikTok users viewing the series. I encourage this participation by verbally inviting personal stories, thoughts, or expressions from TikTok viewers. I reiterate this invite in numerous captions in my videos. Furthermore, the series includes a short informal survey that questions viewers of the series about their experience on TikTok. The survey aims to gain a first-hand evaluation of TikTok viewers' experiences of friendship, interpersonal connections, and a sense of community on the platform. The series also includes four TikTok Live sessions where these questions are reiterated and opened for free and immediate discussion.

The analytics collected during this series, including the number of followers, views, likes, and comments gained during the series are reflected upon in later chapters of this paper. However, the nature of the interaction and comments I received from TikTok viewers during

the series is emphasized in my study. I use an autoethnographic approach to analyse my experience as a participant in the interaction with TikTok viewers. Furthermore, I reflect on my experience with public confession on TikTok in my study. I consider these personal experiences in relation to my perceived intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok, from the point of view of a content creator. I also contemplate my resonance with the experience of enacting confessional performance on TikTok and the relationship developed between the viewers of the series and myself. In other words, I also consider my 'feelings' as relevant points of discovery during my autoethnographic research. During the TikTok series, I record my daily findings in a research journal which later aids in providing vital material for reflection and analysis.

CHAPTER 1:

UNDERSTANDING INTIMACY AND *COMMUNITAS* WITHIN THE LENS OF CONFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

To begin a thorough analysis of confessional content on TikTok, the term confession and how it relates to the process of intimacy and the development of *communitas* must be illustrated. By paying special attention to Harry Reis and Philip Shaver's *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process* (1988) I outline the role self-revelation occupies within the process of intimacy. Following this, the history of confessional performance, which entails a moment of self-revelation, is detailed within this review. By analysing this research confessional performance is defined and its key characteristics are analysed in relation to their involvement with intimacy and *communtias*. Therefore, intimacy and *communitas* are defined and the risk they pose within performance is argued by carefully considering David Terry's critique of confessional performance in his text *Once Blind Now Seeing The Problematics of Confessional Performance*. Finally, the presence of confessional content on TikTok is identified and the potential benefits and dangers of confession on the platform are assessed.

The term "confession" may imply theological associations with the Catholic and Christian church (Manning, 2018). The act of confession involves the revelation of individual experiences, private thoughts, or private emotions (Manning, 2018). It suggests that a figure of authority is in an intimate dialogue with a confessing individual of sin offering absolution to the figure engaged in repentance (Manning, 2018). This definition becomes a rudimentary understanding of confession within this paper, and I consider it a mere starting point within my analysis of confession. The act of confession is often initiated as a means to seek forgiveness, from a figure of authority or otherwise, however, I expand this definition by suggesting that the rationale for the act of confession extends far beyond the desire for forgiveness. The desire to confess also stems from the human need for intimacy between two or more parties.

Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process (1988) by Harry T. Reis and Phillip Shaver, explore the role of confession and personal self-expression in the establishment of intimacy. Inherent in their definition of intimacy is the revelation of self to another (Reis et al, 1988). Although Reis and Shaver suggest that the motivation behind the act of confession can vary dramatically amongst individuals, a common rationale and effect of confession is the development of intimacy (Reis et al, 1988). For this intimacy to be developed successfully, a confessional interaction between individuals should involve acceptance or validation (Reis et

al, 1988). Various social scientists such as Erik Erikson suggest that it is through consistent development of intimacy that the binding of identities amongst individuals is possible (Reis et al, 1988: 370). *Communitas*, a term referencing ideas of community and equality, shares this concern for communal bonding and a sense of belonging (Sandall, 2011). Therefore, the potential that an act of confession has to establish both intimacy and *communitas* is an important point of inquiry within this study.

The History of Confession

Public confession has existed for centuries across various countries. In the first nine centuries of the Christian Catholic church, members of the church would confess in front of a congregation to receive absolution and reconciliation for their sins (Manning, 2018: 488). It was only later that the 'seal' of confession was implemented in the Catholic church and confession was then understood as a private and sacred act shared only with a priest (Manning, 2018: 488). In the world of Art, confession has always been thematic, and it has also been a common activity achieved through artistic practice since the emergence of autobiographical literature and the rise of Confessional Poetry. In this context, the term confession was first used to refer to a school of poetry made popular in 1950s and 1960s America (Hoffman, 1978).

Within the framework of this research, I use confessional performance, as it pertains to Performance Art and Theatre, as a valuable initial framework within my study. Confessional Performance emerges from the understanding of confession as an act toward absolution, it is an art form that prioritizes the act of testimony and autobiography (Early et al, 2019). Confessional Performance is defined by its concern for the personal and subjective, its engagement in self-design, and its presentation of sensitive subject matter (Early et al, 2019). By providing a brief definition and analysis of Confessional Performance within this chapter, I hope to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding Confessional Performance on TikTok, further addressed in the second chapter.

Confessional Performance

Confessional Performance refers to the performance of personal and largely autobiographical stories. This performance is defined by its concern for personalism, its use of self-design, and its inclusion of sensitive subject matter. Although I pay special attention to confessional performance within this paper, confession is well known across varying mediums of art and media.

The Self-Design of Contemporary Confessional Art by Jaye Early and Toby Juliff (2019) highlights the ubiquity of confession and self-presentation as modes of artistic practice in public spaces in contemporary society. Confessional modes of art, including Confessional Performance, have been scrutinized across mediums, yet they have garnered significant popularity amongst audiences throughout their history. The desire for public confession extends beyond the world of performance and is evident in common social media behaviours (Early, 2019). The rationale behind the shared desire for public confession has remained in question, however, the potential that the confessional mode has in establishing a sense of intimacy between the performer and the audience has been confirmed by even critics of Confessional Performance (Terry, 2006). Furthermore, a sense of *communitas*, which suggests the notion of unstructured unity amongst viewers and performers, is highlighted as a potential outcome of Confessional Performance by scholars including Early and Juliff (Early et al, 2019).

Confessional Performance Art, Performance, and Poetry share fundamental characteristics and criticism. Therefore, other artistic modes of confession will be referenced in this chapter when it aids in defining Confessional Performance. Confessional poetry adopts various shapes yet there are key characteristics that help define and anchor this specific style of poetry. These characteristics are mirrored in Confessional Performance. One primary element of confession, including Confessional Performance, is its potential to develop intimacy and *communitas*.

Defining intimacy and *communitas*

The term ‘intimacy’ originates from the Latin word *intimus* which means ‘innermost’ (Reis et al, 1988: 367). The Latin term *Intimare*, which translates to ‘to make the innermost known’ refers to the act of being intimate or the act of developing a sense of intimacy (Reis et al.

1988: 367). The most common definition of intimacy prioritizes notions of physical closeness or sexual interaction. Although the term intimacy can be understood in relation to sexual relationships, this is not always essential to the definition of the term. Intimacy is also commonly defined in relation to the nature of physical space occupied by individuals, romantic and platonic relationships, as well as interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communications (Reis et al, 1988: 367). Ellen Dissanayake's definition of intimacy does not exclude but does not rely on, the element of physical closeness (Dissanayake, 2000). Dissanayake, author of *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (2000), defines intimacy as 'emotional communion' (Dissanayake, 2000). She asserts that intimacy is a space where an individual seems to know and is known by the sensibility of another (Dissanayake, 2000: 4). For Dissanayake, essential to intimacy is the act of offering sympathy and emotional expression, rather than physical or sexual closeness (Dissanayake, 2000: 16).

Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process by Reis and Shaver supports Dissanayake's definition of intimacy by referring to it as an act of emotional communication (Reis et al, 1988: 368). Furthermore, Reis and Shaver acknowledge validation and understanding as crucial within the process of establishing intimacy (Reis et al, 1988). Reis and Shaver position intimacy as a transactional process which occurs between two individuals (Reis et al, 1988). This process is initiated when one individual confesses or reveals personal information or feelings to another individual. It continues when the second individual responds to the first individual in a compassionate and validating manner (Reis et al, 1988: 367). It is then, according to Reis and Shaver, that intimacy is established (Reis et al, 1988: 367). This process is a circular one where intimacy has the potential to fluctuate according to the development of a relationship between two individuals (Reis et al, 1988). In other words, repeated moments of self-expression, acceptance and validation encourage a pre-existing intimacy to be deepened between two parties (Reis et al, 1988). Imperative to the definition of intimacy is the act of self-revelation and the expression of one's innermost qualities (Reis et al, 1988: 367).

Both Dissanayake and Reis and Shaver highlight the importance of intimacy amongst humans and suggest the possible negative consequences individuals may face when they do not experience intimacy. According to Dissanayake, intimacy is a fundamental element within human existence (Dissanayake, 2000). It is concerned with a sense of belonging and effaces feelings of isolation (Dissanayake, 2000). Reis and Shaver point to this fundamental need for intimacy amongst humans and acknowledge intimacy's potential for the development of self-acceptance, constructive personal change, and trust (Reis et al, 1988: 371). Intimacy is not

only created when an individual reveals something personal about themselves to another but also encourages self-reflection and personal growth (Reis et al, 1988: 385). Additionally, acts of empathy and validation are not only elements which enable the development of intimacy but elements that are further deepened by the presence of intimacy (Reis et al, 1988).

It is suggested that the absence of intimacy has had significant negative consequences amongst individuals across various age groups (Reis et al, 1988: 385). The most notable negative consequence of the absence of intimacy is loneliness (Reis et al, 1988). *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process* defines loneliness as "the negative discrepancy between actual and desired social relations" (Reis et al, 1988: 385). The absence of intimacy, according to Reis, has proven to be a stronger predictor of loneliness than other elements of social interactions such as the frequency of social interactions and the number of social companions an individual has (Reis et al, 1988: 386). The presence of loneliness extends beyond mere disappointment in social relations and often contributes to anxiety, depression, and self-deprecation (Reis et al, 1988: 385). These conditions then often further isolate an individual, preventing the development of a sense of belonging (Reis et al, 1988).

As previously noted, *communitas* shares common characteristics with intimacy. However, the terms intimacy and *communitas* are not interchangeable. *Communitas* is a Latin term made popular by anthropologist Victor Turner (Sandall, 2011). *Communitas* is defined as the stripping of social structures and attributes amongst a group of people who, in turn, establish an equal and individuated relationship with one another (Turner, 1973: 216). The ethos of *communitas* concerns the ideals of social freedom, equality, and community (Sandall, 2011: 484*)*. Furthermore, it involves the establishment of comradeship and fraternity (Bilu, 1988: 302). Turner asserts that through *communitas* a sense of 'siblingship' is established amongst individuals who share a system of beliefs (Turner, 1973: 207). The ethos of *communitas* suggests that personal responsibility is not solely the concern of the individual, or even solely the concern of the individual's close familial relations, but is extended to those who share a system of beliefs who are made 'familial' through *communitas* (Turner, 1973: 207). The ethos of *communitas* not only promotes a sense of comradeship amongst a group of individuals but also a sense of love (Turner, 1973). To clarify this, love is not solely extended to close friendships or familial relationships, but to any group of people, even amongst strangers, assuming they share a common belief (Turner, 1973).

Imperative to the understanding of *communitas* is its concern for its 'binding' of individuals into a unit of thinking and feeling (Bilu, 1988). A metaphorical definition of *communitas* equates the term to a 'sea of feeling', a structureless shared experience of emotion amongst a group of individuals (Sandall, 2011: 484). Although *communitas* centres the idea of community, it refers specifically to a community devoid of hierarchies and social status (Sajewska, 2021: 11). Turner positions *communitas* as an ideal or utopian state of social being (Sandall, 2011).

However, it does not exist without significant criticism and risk (Sandall, 2011). Similarly, intimacy is a necessary process for humans to establish, yet it presents a significant risk to those who participate in its process. The risk of *communitas* and intimacy is discussed later in this review and paper, as it pertains to the consequences of Confessional Performance and confessions on the social media platform, TikTok.

To reiterate, intimacy and *communitas* are possible effects and components of Confessional Performance. By investigating Confessional Performance's core characteristics, both offline and online, its potential for intimacy and *communitas* can be assessed. The fundamental characteristics of Confessional Performance include personalism, the act of Self-Design, and the inclusion of sensitive subject matters. Steven Hoffman's *Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic* (1978) provides a clear framework for understanding the confessional school of poetry (Hoffman, 1978). Although Confessional Poetry and Confessional Performance are not synonymous, the concern for personalism is evident in both art forms. (Early, 2019). The term personalism simply references themes of individualism and subjectivity. The inclination to create work largely, or even solely, based on an artist's individual experience is rooted in the belief that an artist cannot write beyond themselves and their unique existence (Hoffman, 1978). *The Isolation of Modern Poetry* (1949), by Delmore Schwartz, highlights the limitations present in a modern poet's pursuit to produce work outside of their lived experiences (Schwartz, 1949). This belief was maintained by the school of Confessional Poetry (Hoffman, 1978: 688). Schwartz states that the only 'life' available to modern poets is their own cultivated subjective experiences and sensibilities (Hoffman, 1978: 688). Both Schwartz and Hoffman suggest a society devoid of a sense of cultural belonging is an influential factor in the popularity of personalism in poetry (Hoffman, 1978).

The centering of the artist's individual experiences, over the experiences of the community, provides a basis for one of Confessional Poetry's key characteristics and one of its most repeated criticisms (Molesworth, 1976). Charles Molesworth is particularly critical of the confessional school of poetry in his text *The Origins and Consequence of Confessional Poetry* (Molesworth, 1976). Due to the heightened sense of personalism in Confessional Poetry, the belief that Confessional Poetry became an act of self-indulgence, art not for the audience or the reader but for the artist themselves, became a point of scrutiny for critics of the school of poetry (Molesworth, 1976). Furthermore, there was a belief that the artist presented a single narrative for the reader or audience and in doing so denied the possibility of alternative patterns of thought (Hoffman, 1978: 687).

This criticism is echoed in David Terry's *Once Blind Now Seeing: The Problematics of Confessional Performance* (Terry, 2006). Terry explains the unbalanced power dynamic between the performer and the audience in various Confessional Performances (Terry, 2006). He reiterates that the personal nature of Confessional Performance positions the audience as either close friends or mere eavesdroppers of the performer. This implies that an audience member is either emotionally bound to the performance and performer or simply a witness to an intimate moment of confession. Both roles compromise the audience's agency in the performance, as the audience may feel the need to keep silent during and after the performance out of respect for the performer (Terry, 2006: 212, 213).

Reis and Shaver suggest that intimacy can only be developed if the confessor receives an appropriate, caring, or supportive response from the listener (Reis et al, 1988). Therefore, understanding intimacy engendered through performance, either on stage in front of an audience or online, becomes complex. A performance that does not engage audience participation and adheres to the presence of the fourth wall and the critical distance it promotes encourages silence from the audience (Terry, 2006). Reis and Shaver suggest that when an individual who has performed the act of confession receives no response from the listener, their silence is understood as a negative response and does little to develop intimacy (Reis et al, 1988). This belief justifies Terry's concern and critique of intimacy within Confessional Performance. To counter this, Reis and Shaver explain that an appropriate, validating, or supporting response within interpersonal communication can involve non-verbal communication (Reis et al, 1988). Therefore, it can be suggested that silence from an audience, when expected due to a particular performative convention, may be read as an appropriate response in the process of developing intimacy in performance.

The concern surrounding the risk of personalism is especially prevalent when investigating Confessional Performance's concern for self-design as interrogated in *The Self Design of Contemporary Confessional Art* by Jaye Early and Toby Juliff (Early, 2019).

Defining and Critiquing Self-Design

Self-design, a recurring feature in Confessional Art, refers to the construction or careful "staging of personalized realities, experiences and situations" (Early, et al, 2019: 343). Early and Juliff (2019) assert that Confessional Art (poetry, performance or otherwise) is not concerned with being sincere, but with the construction of sincerity (Early, 2019: 344). It is suggested that a confessional audience will do little to question the objective or relative truth of a sincere or insincere confessional piece of performance due to the intimate relationship encouraged by the artist. However, according to Early and Juliff, self-design is not an entirely negative feature of Confessional Performance. Confessional Performance has the potential for liberation and the eradication of shame because it allows the performer agency to construct themselves in their own narrative (Early et al, 2019: 316). Nevertheless, although this element of confessional art can be understood through a positive lens, confessional art, whether it is in a written or performed medium, is a mode of meaning-making that involves a significant level of risk for the audience and the performer. This risk arises due to the assumption that the appearance of sincerity entails truth (Early et al, 2019). Boundaries between what is real and what is representational, and what is autobiographical and what is self-design are blurred in confessional performance (Early et al, 2019). In turn, this makes it challenging for audiences to decipher between reality and performance and between the appearance of sincerity and objective truth. Although this risk exists when enacting a confessional performance, the audience attending a confessional performance is aware of the performative nature of the confession and therefore accepts that within the performance there will be moments when sincerity is constructed. However, this risk is exacerbated when a moment of confession is enacted on TikTok, which largely exists outside of the frame of performance.

Sensitive Subject Matter in Confessional Performance

The risk of Confessional Performance is heightened further when considering its prioritization of sensitive subject matters (Hoffman, 1978). As Hoffman admits, critics of Confessional Poetry argue the psychological risk the audience undertakes when consuming the Confessional Art form due to its sensitive subject matters (Hoffman, 1978: 687). As mentioned previously, a defining feature of Confessional Art is its allusion to, and exposing of, subjective experiences that are understood as taboo or shameful by the community it is situated (Hoffman, 1978). These topics include divorce, strained romantic and familial relationships, and suicidal thoughts, as seen in the work of the self-defined Confessional Poet Anne Sexton (Molesworth, 1976). More recently, experiences such as depressive episodes and abortion have been centred in Confessional Art, most notably in the work of the prolific Confessional artist Tracy Emin (Smith, 2017). Even though the subject matter within Confessional Performance is often triggering, it presents the opportunity for the audience to identify with the Confessional Performance, and, therefore, share in the confessional artist's experience of empowerment (Terry, 2006). Additionally, the nature of Confessional Performance offers the performer and the audience a moment of 'purging' (Early et al, 2019). This 'purging' can be understood as catharsis (Early et al, 2019).

Catharsis, or *katharsis*, is a term associated with Aristotle's notion of tragedy (Shephard, 2004: 175) Although the term catharsis has proven a challenge to define, it is commonly believed to be a "therapeutic discharge of strong emotion" (Shepard et al, 2004: 175). Halliwell (1987) explains catharsis as a "powerful emotional experience" that allows an individual to conduce feelings of pity and fear to their rightful functioning, to understand and respond to occurrences in the human world (Shephard et al, 2004: 176). Thus, whether the confessional artist believes that their experience is shameful or sinful, the act of confessing this experience provides the artist with the opportunity for their experiences to be purged or resolved of shame through the experience of catharsis (Early et al, 2019). Furthermore, this act of therapeutic "purging" is shared among audience members (Early et al, 2019). When an audience and performer both engage in a cathartic experience, they enable a sense of *Communitas*. However, Roger Sandall's *Dreams of Communitas* (2011) reveals that the notion of *Communitas* is not a perfect imagining. He warns of mass hysteria and the possible loss of individualism when engaging in a moment of *Communitas* (Sandall, 2011:485). However, it can be argued that this synchronization of thoughts and emotions, whether it presents a significant risk or not, can prove to be therapeutic (Sandall, 2011). Furthermore,

the public display of this content, in the face of possible judgment from society, provides the opportunity for healing and forgiveness for both the performer and the audience (Early et al, 2019).

Consequently, a sense of shared empowerment, suggested by both Early & Juliff, may be possible for both performers and audiences of Confessional Performance. In turn, the level of intimacy Confessional Performance offers may create an environment that feels supportive to its audience. Thus, as Hoffman suggests, whether or not the performance encourages active audience participation, the audience and the performer may find a communal purging of emotion during the performance (Hoffman, 1976: 691). This element of confessional performance does not eliminate the presence of risk but simply acts as one social benefit of the art form.

Introduction to Confession on TikTok

Early and Juliff note the hyper-visibility that individuals in contemporary society experience by using social media (Early et al, 2019). Hyper-visibility references a blurring of boundaries between public and private life (Early et al, 2019: 345). Personalism, self-design, and the inclusion of sensitive subject matters, evident in confessional performance in front of a live audience, are now reflected in confessional social media practices (Early et al, 2019). These confessional behaviours can be seen most notably in TikTok Storytimes and vlogs. Although the type of confessional content on social media is not necessarily identified as art, it does share similar characteristics to the confessional mode of art and poses related questions concerning audience risk.

One of the core elements of the process of intimacy is the act of confession (Reis et al, 1988). Therefore, intimacy is a prevalent point of inquiry when addressing confession on a social media platform such as TikTok.

CHAPTER 2:

TIKTOK: A CONFESSIONAL

The definition of confessional performance established thus far can aid in identifying examples of confessional content creation on TikTok. Confessional content created by popular TikTokers, including Lana Saint Clair, George Aimee, and Madeline Argy are considered vital case studies within this chapter. The type of self-revealing content they create illustrates the various forms of confessional content available on the platform and how these forms of confession operate. These case studies are not only analysed in relation to the form their confession takes but also their relationship with their audience. I study these relationships according to how they follow the process of intimacy as outlined in Harry Reis and Philip Shavers' *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process* (1988) and *communitas* as it is presented by Victor Turner (1969). In addition to these core case studies, I also outline and examine popular TikTok trends that are confessional in nature, again determining how they affect the presence of intimacy and *communitas* amongst TikTok users. When addressing the relationships that form between TikTok users, specifically but not limited to TikTok creators, the sociotechnical features on the platform and its specific algorithm will be addressed.

Confessional TikTok creators and their audience

The rise of the internet beginning in the late 1990s presented a new platform or 'stage' for self-expression and representation (Early et al, 2019). For individuals to communicate and share personal moments of their lives more broadly on the internet social media was introduced and adopted by the masses who had access to the internet. Social media is considered to be a collection of internet-based platforms that facilitate the online sharing of information, images, and aspects of daily life. Since the early 2000s social media has experienced a surge in popularity marked by the introduction of the American-based social media platform Myspace released in 2003, and the global social media platform Facebook, released in 2004. These particular social media sites, as well as their successors, consequentially rendered social media users increasingly visible to the online public (Early et al, 2019). Furthermore, these platforms marked the introduction of increasingly interactive features enabling a broader scope of online connection among users.

The hyper-visibility that Early and Juliff acknowledge in their text *The Self-design of Contemporary Confessional Art* can be partially attributed to the prevalence of personal sharing

online (Early et al, 2019: 345). It can be argued that the sharing of personal content online fulfilled one of social media's central goals and has been commonplace since its inception (Schellewald, 2021). However, the frequency of personal sharing online, as well as the medium and nature of social media content itself were significantly influenced by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic (Sot, 2022). Social media's ability to provide insight into the lives of others became increasingly prevalent for its isolated and socially distanced users. During this time, TikTok, a social media platform that promotes short-form video creation, provided content involving progressively personal stories, thoughts, and daily experiences of users. It is perhaps for this reason, as well as the prevalence of personal sharing online, that TikTok experienced an exponential rise in downloads and users in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 (Sot, 2022). It can be argued that the sharing of personal content online fulfilled one of social media's central goals and has been commonplace since its inception (Schellewald, 2021). However, the frequency of personal sharing online, as well as the medium and nature of social media content were significantly influenced by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic (Sot, 2022). Social media's ability to provide insight into the lives of others became increasingly prevalent for its isolated and socially distanced users. During this time, TikTok, a social media platform that promotes short-form video creation, provided content involving progressively personal stories, thoughts, and daily experiences of users. It is perhaps for this reason that TikTok experienced an exponential rise in downloads and users in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 (Sot, 2022).

Self-design, which is the careful presentation or construction of personalized realities, and testimony, evident in Confessional Performance in front of a live audience, is also regularly reflected in content on TikTok. Andreas Schellewald's study, *Communicative Forms on TikTok: Perspectives from Digital Ethnography* (2021), identifies confessional behaviours on TikTok. These moments of personal self-expression can be seen in TikTok Storytimes, vlogs, and transforming self-revealing trends (Schellewald, 2021). Although there are significant differences between Confessional Performance and confessional content on TikTok, questions around whether and how intimacy and *communitas* are fostered are relevant in both forms of meaning-making. Furthermore, the benefits and risks connected to the creation of intimacy and *communitas* on social media are important points of investigation, especially considering the hyper-visibility of content creators.

TikTok: A Brief History

The year 2020 saw a worldwide increase in social media use (Sot, 2022: 1493). The number of global social media users increased by 9% between the years 2019 and 2020 (Sot, 2022). TikTok was one platform that experienced significant popularity during this year (Schellewald, 2021). Although TikTok was fairly popular upon its release in 2016, it saw an exponential increase in downloads in 2020, accumulating 319 million new users in the same year, positioning TikTok as the fastest-growing social media platform to date (Schellewald, 2021). TikTok exceeded both Instagram and Twitter in the number of total downloads in the year 2020 and the year 2021 (Curry, 2022). Additionally, TikTok acquired 1.1 billion monthly users by September 2021, exceeding the growth rate of Facebook, which acquired a billion users over 8 years (Doyle, 2023). Furthermore, in 2021 users dedicated an additional 9,7 hours on TikTok in comparison to Facebook, and 17,8 hours more compared to Instagram (Doyle, 2023). This popularity likely kickstarted the short-form video trend now reflected in popular app features on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Before TikTok became the social media platform we recognize today, it first merged with the popular social media platform Musical.ly (Jennings, 2019). Musical.ly was essentially TikTok's predecessor and merged with TikTok in 2017 when it was bought by the Chinese startup company ByteDance (Jennings, 2019). The inclusion of short-form video creation is not new to the world of social media. Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Vine, the latter of which shut down in 2016, encouraged short-form video creation. However, TikTok attained more downloads than either of these popular social media platforms. One of the reasons why, according to an article by Vox, is due to TikTok's algorithm and the variety of audio-visual features available to TikTok users (Jennings, 2019). Due to the variety of accessible audio-visual effects the platform affords its users, TikTok facilitates vast and diverse forms of meaning-making (Schellewald, 2021). This multifaceted content is then displayed through the TikTok For You Page. Each user on TikTok has a unique For You Page which identifies patterns and themes from user engagement and in turn finds users particular videos which relate to these patterns and themes (Schellewald, 2021: 1438).

TikTok: A home for Self-Revelation and Confession

Communicative Forms on TikTok: Perspectives from Digital Ethnography (2021), a study conducted by Andreas Schellewald, outlines the type of content TikTok promotes and the various ways in which users on TikTok conduct meaning making. Schellewald identifies numerous categories of content on TikTok. One of these categories includes the Documentary TikTok (Schellewald, 2021: 1445). Documentary TikToks are videos which "express the self, talk about one's life circumstances, or document a current event" (Schellewald, 2021: 1445). According to Schellewald, Documentary TikTok can adopt various forms, however, they are usually presented through personal Storytimes or vlogs (Schellewald, 2021: 1446). Schellewald proposes the label 'Documentary TikTok' to encompass videos that involve anecdotal storytelling, or the personal documentation of a lived experience. Schellewald's understanding of Documentary TikTok shares similarities with my definition of Confessional TikTok. Therefore, within this study, I consider confessional TikTok a form of Documentary TikTok. Like Documentary TikTok, I identify Confessional TikTok as videos that centre personal self-expression. Furthermore, I consider key characteristics of confessional performance, including personalism, self-design, and the inclusion of sensitive subject matters, as defining features of Confessional TikTok. I identify various forms that confession adopts on TikTok, involving confessional memes, Storytimes, and vlogs. Simply, TikTok videos that participate in the act of self-revelation are labelled as Confessional TikTok's within this study. The act of self-revelation and documentation constructs an appearance of sincerity and authenticity. Therefore, a defining element of Confessional Performance is not only its concern for the personal but also its promotion or curation of 'truth'.

The concept of truth can be interpreted in various ways. Typically, truth, as used in 'everyday' ordinary language, is understood to be a presentation of an objective, factual reality (Overvold, 1973). However, truth can also exist beyond this definition and account for individual perspectives and feelings. This consideration of personal experiences can be understood as subjective truth (Overvold, 1973). Subjective truth suggests that something may be true for a particular person and not universally true due to their worldview, emotions, and interpretations of real experiences. When an individual expresses their subjective truth, they are engaging in a moment of sincerity and authenticity, even if their expression cannot be considered objectively true. Therefore, Confessional Performance supports and relies on subjective truth. Although necessary for Confessional Performance, the promotion of truth

can be dangerous when subjective and objective truth is confused by audiences. Alternatively, audiences of Confessional Performance can confuse fantasy inspired by subjective truth for subjective truth itself.

This focus on subjective truth, as well as other key characteristics present in Confessional Performance, as a live form of theatre, are reflected in Confessional TikToks, despite the difference in medium. These characteristics include personalism, self-design, and the inclusion of sensitive subject matters. Considering the context of this study, I have identified four diverse vehicles for Confession on TikTok including Vlogs, Get Ready With Me's, TikTok Storytimes, and Confessional TikTok Trends, all self-revealing in nature. Although these forms of videos differ according to their structure, style, and their inclusion of TikTok features (such as filters and editing tools), they all centre personalism and include moments of self-design. I have identified three TikTok creators who engage with one of these four forms of confessional content creation mentioned above. These young adult creators are based in various countries around the world and form useful case studies within my investigation. Lana Saint Clair (@lanasaintclair), George Aimee (@georgeaimee), and Madeline Argy (@madelineargy) include the various confessional creators I have followed throughout a three-month period beginning in January 2023 and concluding by the end of March 2023. Although my study of these content creators was formally conducted within this period I do not limit my analysis to content made within that period and other characteristics of their content and their account on TikTok will form part of my discussion. All creators utilize various forms of content creation to participate in confession. I have investigated each creator's TikTok account to analyse their content, the form this content subscribes to and their engagement with viewers. By pursuing this exploration, I endeavour to uncover the presence and fostering of intimacy and *communitas* between these TikTok users and their audience. This analysis will aid in identifying the mechanisms responsible for the creation and curation of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok. Paying considerable attention to the involvement of self-revelation within these TikTok accounts, I can discern and critique confession's role in the establishment of said intimacy and *communitas*. Furthermore, I consult these particular TikTok accounts, and additional occurrences on TikTok, to carefully consider the risks involved in confessional performance on TikTok. By analysing these case studies, I identify strategies for developing my confessional series and how this series may nurture relationships between me, the confessional content creator, and my audience.

@lanasaintclair and Get Ready With Me's

'Get Ready With Me' videos reference a type of TikTok video that displays a TikTok creator getting ready for their day or a particular event. A TikTok creator utilizing a 'Get Ready With Me' video will essentially invite their viewers to join them as they apply skincare and makeup, get dressed, or do their hair. Due to the nature of 'Get Ready With Me' videos, the locations of these videos are usually in creator's bedrooms or bathrooms. Therefore, these videos invite viewers into their private spaces. I would not consider all 'Get Ready With Me' videos to be inherently confessional in nature. However, I believe the act of inviting audiences into personal spaces where they can watch a creator undergo a visual transformation, typically conducted in private, presents the opportunity for intimacy. As Melanie Kennedy suggests in her article *TikTok celebrity, girls and the coronavirus crisis* (2020) the transformation of spaces previously conceptualized as private into public spaces has become common practice on the app, especially among young women (Kennedy, 2020: 1069). As of February 2023, the hashtag #getreadywithme has acquired over 11, 9 billion views. Although many of the videos under the hashtag are created by wealthy and conventionally attractive individuals preparing for a formal event, a large majority of the videos under the hashtag are created by 'ordinary individuals' who fall into various class categories and who have diverse physical appearances. A 'Get Ready With Me' video is not created exclusively in anticipation of an exciting event. A popular 'Get Ready With Me' trend involves individuals getting ready to break up with their boyfriends. The images located below show examples of this.

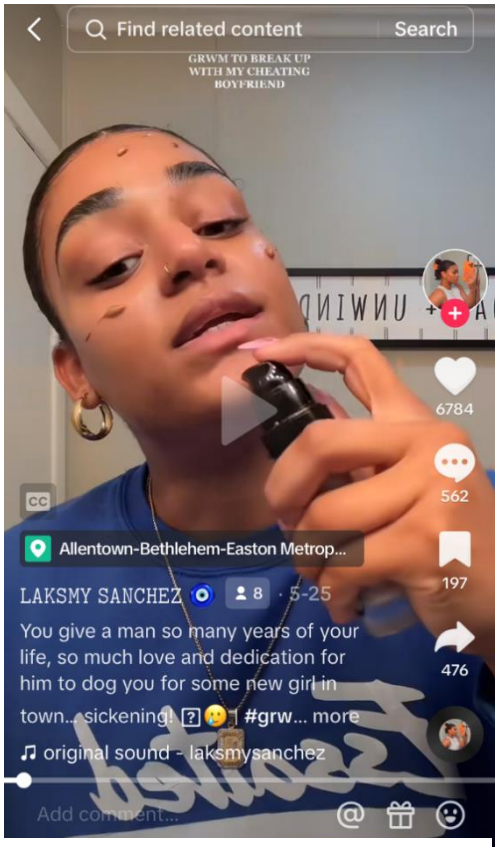

Figure 1: Screenshot of TikTok video: Sanchez, L. [@laksmysanchez]. (2023, May 25). You give a man so many years of your life, so much love and dedication for him dog you. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM263Fckh/

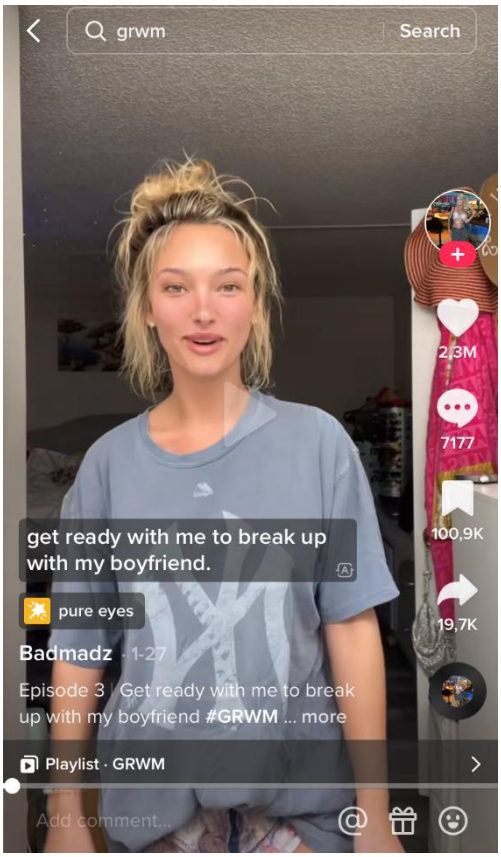

Figure 2: Screenshot of TikTok video:Diez, M. [@madelinediez]. (2023, January 27). Episode 3: Get ready with me to break up with my boyfriend #GRWM #perriconemd [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26cyshB/

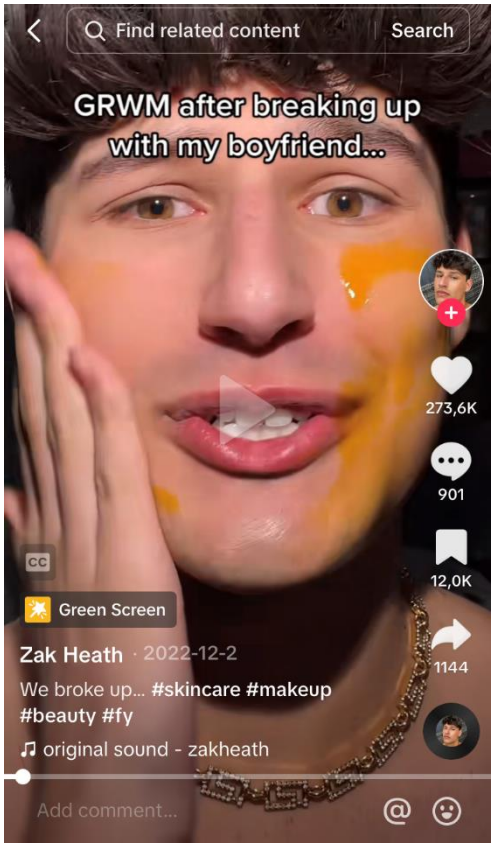

Figure 3: Screenshot of TikTok video: Heath, Zak. [@zakheath]. (2022, December 2). We broke up… #skincare #makeup #beauty [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26c3rBf/

It is also common for these ‘Get Ready With Me’ videos to be accompanied by a personal story or explanation from the creator. ‘Get Ready With Me’ videos vary in their level of self-revelation and confession. Lana Saint Clair (@lanasaintclair) is one TikTok creator who frequently creates ‘Get Ready With Me’ videos that act as a format or vehicle for confession.

Lana Saint Clair is a twenty-five-year-old American TikTok creator whose account revolves around clothing and fashion. Although her account centres on styling, it is laced with numerous and frequent videos which are confessional in nature. Her TikTok bio states that her account is used for “documenting [her] shopping addiction and hoarding recovery” (Saint Clair, 2023). Apart from videos concerning fashion and styling, Saint Clair’s content, whether it is delivered through ‘Get Ready With Me’ videos or other moments of storytelling, is primarily concerned with her own life, including how she feels, her everyday happenings and her personal opinions. For example, in a video posted on the sixth of February 2023, Saint Clair invites her viewers to get ‘unready’ with her. In this video Saint Clair shows herself getting ready for bed while casually talking about her opinions about doing laundry, coming off her antidepressants, and habits she is trying to employ in her routine (Saint Clair, 2023). Therefore, Saint Clair’s content centres and promotes personalism, a key characteristic in various forms of confessional art including Confessional Performance.

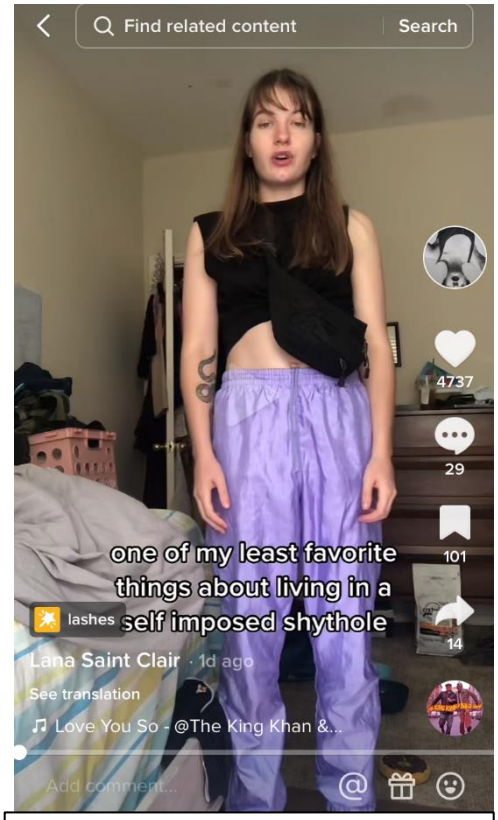

Figure 4: Screenshot of TikTok video: Saint Clair, L. [@lanasaintclair]. (2023, March 1). Part 11. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26T2tLf/

Since her account has been public, she has been open about her struggles with mental illness and in 2022 she began a series where she sorted through over 227 kilograms of thrifted clothing that she accumulated over two years due to a shopping addiction. ‘Get Ready With Me’ videos take up a large percentage of her content and see her getting ready for various events in her life including her birthday and more recently visits to her father in hospital. Often Saint Clair does not announce what she is getting ready for, however, these videos still tend to be confessional in nature. During her time as a TikTok creator, Saint Clair has

addressed topics concerning her struggles with Borderline Personality Disorder, her financial situation, her relationship with her family, her relationship with religion, and even her tendency to pick her nose. Furthermore, Saint Clair often mentions when she is on her period, when she hasn't washed her hair or when she has forgotten to brush her teeth. The topics Saint Clair introduces in her videos are not only personal but could be considered taboo, especially when presented to the public. Therefore, Saint Clair includes another key characteristic of Confessional Performance in her videos – the presence of sensitive subject matters.

Saint Clair embeds personal, sensitive subject matter into her content, which not only helps her audience know her better but also makes her relatable to like-minded audiences. Saint Clair's account has 328,9K followers as of March 2023 and her videos receive hundreds of comments from people expressing that they find her content relatable. Often Saint Clair's audience may pass judgment about her stories or actions in a video but these comments typically adopt a playful tone. It is unclear whether Saint Clair deletes negative comments in her comment section so I cannot confidently assume that their presence is low. However, what I can assume from her videos is the fact that her content has a dedicated and niche following that finds Saint Clair, her behaviour, or her stories relatable.

Although Saint Clair seems to portray an extremely authentic version of herself, she does participate in the act of self-design even if she is not aware of this. How Saint Clair behaves in her videos suggests that she is extremely comfortable on TikTok. Saint Clair has a general sense of playfulness in her videos and most of her content is comedic in tone. It is apparent that when Saint Clair begins filming her videos she has planned what she will say even when she has not exactly planned what clothing she will be changing into or how she will be styling her hair etc. Furthermore, Saint Clair's content is performative even if her online persona portrays a seemingly close likeliness to Saint Clair off camera. Saint Clair possesses a dual awareness of both herself and her audience, thus Saint Clair, like other TikTok creators, enacts a kind of performance, whether the content is confessional or not. Saint Clair's performative TikTok persona and the unofficial script she adopts in her videos contribute to the act of self-design. Highlighting how Saint Clair practices self-design is not a critique of her content but rather a way to highlight how Saint Clair's content shares a likeness to Confessional Performance performed in front of a live, in-person audience.

I argue that the concern for personalism, the inclusion of sensitive subject matters, and the act of self-design, evident in Saint Clair's content, creates a sense of intimacy and *communitas* between herself and her audience. Reis and Shaver's article, *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process,* explains that the process of intimacy begins when one individual reveals their 'inner self' to another individual (Reis et al, 1988). Confession can be considered an act of revelation of the inner self and is therefore a key aspect in the development of intimacy. Saint Clair's content often involves the act of confession. Take, for example, her sharing in one video, posted on the third of June 2023 personal stories from her time in a psychiatric hospital. Therefore, it can be surmised that her content, which concerns personalism, has the potential to initiate intimacy. Reis and Shaver clarify that the next step in the intimacy process begins when the listener responds to the confessor in an appropriate, supportive, or encouraging manner (Reis et al, 1988). Most of the comments left under Saint Clair's videos often validate Saint Clair's feelings or stories, they are supportive in nature and, sometimes, they offer Saint Clair advice. Therefore, their response contributes to the next step in the intimacy creation process. Reis and Shaver explain that a listener does not necessarily have to confess something about themselves as a response to another's confession, however, when a listener feels as if they have the freedom to confess, it strengthens the chance of establishing intimacy. It can be assumed that Saint Clair's audience on TikTok experiences this sense of freedom, often responding to Saint Clair's confessions with their own confessional anecdote. Intimacy, as defined in *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Relationship,* is developed further when these intimate interactions are repeated and a relationship is established between people (Reis et al, 1988).

Although Saint Clair has a dedicated following, it is difficult to assess the nature of the relationship she has with her followers. Saint Clair's videos receive numerous, sometimes even hundreds, of comments and she often replies to many of these comments. However, it is difficult to determine whether a short exchange of words in a comment section can form the basis of an intimate relationship or develop a sense of *communitas* between herself and her audience.

By confessing through a TikTok video, Saint Clair encourages confession in her comment section. This verbal or non-verbal invitation for confession suggests the deconstruction of conventions and social structures that are evident in conventional in-person performance. This deconstruction avails the potential for *communitas* amongst Saint Clair and her audience. Although there is a sense of heightened social freedom within the exchange

between Saint Clair and her audience, Saint Clair still has more agency over her account and her content than her followers. Conversely, Saint Clair's account can be heavily impacted by her followers, their choice to like, unfollow, comment, stitch, or scroll past her content will influence the success of her content and may influence what content she chooses to post on TikTok in the future. Saint Clair has been honest about the fact that she has profited off her TikTok account, therefore, Saint Clair may feel encouraged to create videos which seem to gain financial success over videos which receive less recognition. Therefore, both Saint Clair and her audience have a strong sense of agency on the platform and in their engagement with her content. A shared sense of agency amongst followers and content creators may seem to be aligned with the ideal of *communitas*, however, this shared agency does not necessarily equate to the eradication of social hierarchies or equality amongst a group of individuals imperative to the establishment of *communitas.* Perhaps then, the relationship between Saint Clair and her followers does not display a deconstruction of social structures, but rather a reconstruction of social structures and hierarchies unique to TikTok.

Having watched a large portion of Saint Clair's content every week for the sake of my research, I feel a sense of connection to her and her content. However, I have not commented, stitched, or duetted Saint Clair's videos or sent her a direct message. Furthermore, Saint Clair does not follow my account on TikTok. Therefore, I can say with certainty that Saint Clair is not aware of my presence. Additionally, although I sometimes found myself relating to what her followers expressed in the comment section, I did not feel that a relationship was established between her followers and me. A sense of siblingship is associated with *communitas* and, without it, the establishment of complete *communitas* is unlikely. Therefore, the lack of siblingship I experienced amongst Saint Clair's group of followers does not support a sense of *communitas*. However, because Saint Clair directs her confession to her followers as a unit, an essence or echo of *communitas*, and not complete *communitas* as proposed by Victor Turner, can be argued.

Although I may feel a sense of intimacy towards Saint Clair, and Saint Clair toward her audience generally, this intimacy is only momentary without the establishment of a reciprocated relationship. This feeling of unrequited connection that I feel with Saint Clair could be described as a parasocial relationship. Within a parasocial relationship, one individual contributes interest, time, and emotional energy while the other individual is oblivious to their existence (Giles, 2010). Commonly this type of relationship is initiated by fans of celebrities or social figures (Horton et al, 1956). Integral to the concept of parasocial

relationships is the notion of assumed interaction established when an individual participates in multiple parasocial encounters with a character or social figure (Horton et al, 1956). These parasocial encounters include watching a TV program or listening to the radio (Horton, 1956). When an individual begins to view a TV program or listen to a specific radio host, they may develop a parasocial relationship with them (Ballantine et al, 2005: 198). This parasocial relationship is deepened when the viewer positions these parasocial interactions as a ritual within their day (Ballantine, 2005: 198). A parasocial relationship often affords the viewer a feeling of intimacy, however, Horton highlights the fact that this intimacy is an illusion. This implies that for real intimacy to exist, both parties need to reciprocate communication and interaction. However, what constitutes communication within online contexts may diverge from in-person interactions.

Parasocial relationships in an age of social media often include one-sided relationships online (Ballantine et al, 2005: 197). Parasocial relationships initiated on social media bring the individual offering interest and emotional energy closer to their unaware subject. This sense of closeness is more convincing online due to the popularity of personal sharing on social media platforms. Furthermore, personal content creation on social media is often framed as being inherently truthful, in turn, convincing the interested individual that they are paying close witness to an objectively truthful, real, and relatable presentation of their subject.

This can be attributed to the direct interaction social media influencers initiate with their audience. It can also be attributed to the fact that social media influencers exist outside of the confines of online world and, therefore, the stories or snippets of their life shared with their audience is perceived as genuine human expression. Furthermore, I suggest the sense of closeness social media content creation can offer users is superior to the closeness celebrity interviews and media appearances may offer interested individuals. I make this claim because social media, especially TikTok, acts as a channel for seemingly direct communication between followers and content creators, availing direct interaction between followers and content creators that does not exist when watching a celebrity interview. The sense of closeness encouraged on social media, more specifically TikTok, is supported by the language and curated form of address repeatedly adopted by content creators. This specific use of verbal and non-verbal language is noted in Irem Sot's study *Fostering Intimacy on TikTok: a platform that 'listens' and creates a 'safe space'* (2022). Numerous participants in Sot's study claim to adopt certain forms of address, such as positioning themselves close to the camera, looking straight at the camera, and addressing their audience as if they were their

family (Sot, 2022: 1499). This way of address not only aims to convince audiences that the content creator is speaking directly and specifically to them but also positions the audience as a close confidant of the creator (Sot, 2022: 1499).

This direct and personal form of address can be identified in Saint Clair's content. It can be assumed, due to the number of followers Saint Clair has acquired, that she does not know many, or even most of her followers. Despite this, Saint Clair still addresses her audience as her close friends. In this way, Saint Clair initiates a relationship with her audience as a unit, even if she is not aware of every single audience member individually. Furthermore, Saint Clair has stated that making videos and more specifically speaking about her life has made her feel less lonely. It is suggested in Saint Clair's statement that personal content creation on TikTok affords different experiences of intimacy for the creator and the viewer/audience. Saint Clair's statement proposes that, although sustained intimacy is often not achieved through TikTok content creation, it may still succeed in alleviating feelings of loneliness on a momentary basis.

In a TikTok posted on the 12th of February 2023, Saint Clair invites her audience to 'get ready' with her as she gets ready to visit her father in hospital. Although Saint Clair points to the problematics that filming a 'Get Ready With Me' video to see her father in hospital may elicit, she explains that she does not only make TikTok videos for the sake of entertainment. In her video Saint Clair states:

> *I don't just make these videos for entertainment; I make them because they're real-life documentation of where I am. Maybe it is messed up for me to be making this but when I talk to somebody, even if it is just my face staring back at me, I feel okay. Like I don't feel lonely. I hope that when you watch somebody do real life you don't feel lonely either. (Saint Clair, 2023).*

Although, this quote suggests that Saint Clair sees the process of making her videos as 'talking to herself', it does suggest that making these confessional videos fends off a sense of loneliness for her.

@georgeamiee and vlogs

In his text *Communicative Forms on TikTok,* Andreas Schellewald identifies a type of video on TikTok that shares aspects of someone's everyday life (Schellewald, 2021: 1446). I believe this type of video identified by Schellewald encapsulates vlogs. Like a 'Get Ready With Me' video, a vlog concerns documenting an aspect of one's life. However, a vlog usually depicts video clips from various moments in a day. Essentially, a vlog documents what the content creator did from the moment they woke up to the moment they went to bed. It is common for vlogs to span a day or a weekend. Vlogs first became popular on YouTube but are now a popular form of content creation on TikTok. As with 'Get Ready With Me' videos, vlogs are made popular by various and diverse content creators spanning different countries and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, vlogs sometimes depict a particular exciting day for the creator, such as a birthday, wedding day or the day a creator gives birth. However, numerous vlogs depict a creator's seemingly uneventful or ordinary day. Andrea Schellewald highlights the ability these types of videos have to establish relatability for their viewers (Schellewald, 2021: 1446). If an audience can relate to a content creator, they are more likely to feel a sense of closeness or connection with the creator.

Various forms of vlogs can be identified on TikTok. Content creators frequently narrate their day through voiceovers while the video shows different moments from their day, such as waking up, eating breakfast, doing exercise, etc. Other times content creators involve personal storytelling. These types of vlogs see creators' film various aspects of their day while they tell a story or express their feelings through a voice-over. Some videos on TikTok show clips of someone's day but they do not include any speech. In this case, viewers are invited to follow as the content creator goes through their day as a voyeur, receiving little to no explanation from said creator. The various versions of vlogs can engage in the act of confession to varying degrees and they all present the opportunity for self-expression.



Figure 5:Screenshot of TikTok video: George, A. [@georgeaimee]. (2023. February 12). VLOG 177 BRUXELLES 4 DA WEEKEND. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TFDHS/

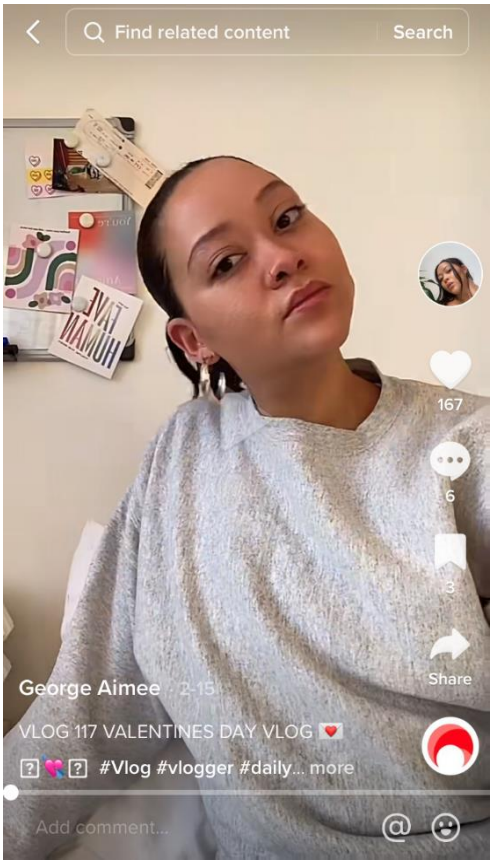

Figure 6: Screenshot of TikTok video George, A. [@georgeaimee]. (2023, February 15). VLOG 117 VALENTINES DAY VLOG. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TjNMo/

Aimee George (@georgeaimee) is a twenty-six-year-old South African TikTok creator currently studying in the Netherlands. Her TikTok account is dedicated to documenting her life through vlogs and her first vlog was uploaded in February of 2021. So far in her vlogging journey, she has created 117 vlogs and acquired a following of 2842 users. Many of her vlogs either span a day or three days, filmed over the weekend.

Vlogs are inherently personal as they focus on the activities and experiences of a specific creator, made by that particular creator. Therefore, George's vlogs centre personalism and her content is presented as a kind of video diary and documentation of her journey as a young adult South African living abroad. George's content considers personalism by depicting her journey from a recent graduate living in Cape Town to a student studying in the Netherlands. Her dedicated followers have witnessed her experience of unemployment, have been given insight into her romantic life, and have watched her begin a life-changing journey to another

country. Her videos mainly consist of her showing clips of her day, which she talks about in a voice note accompanying the video.

George's videos concern her activities for the day but also include how she is feeling the day she filmed the video or the day she posted the video. Although George's content is slightly less obviously confessional when compared to Saint Clair's, as she rarely includes explicit confessional Storytimes typical of Saint Clair, she does not shy away from sensitive subject matter. George is open about her struggles with mental health and often admits when she is anxious. She also speaks of her feelings towards her vlogging and admits that content creation sometimes provokes her anxiety (George, 2023). Not only does George reveal her feelings but she has also included video clips of herself crying in her vlogs. This can be seen in a vlog posted by George on the 13th of April 2023, where George shows herself crying on camera after her dinner. George states in her voice-over: "I had a full-blown crying session because everything's the same but everything is different and I don't do well with change, okay bye love you" (George, 2023). The act of self-revelation initiates the process of intimacy; thus, the sensitive content George includes in her video presents the opportunity for intimacy to be established between herself and her audience.

George utilizes an element of self-design in her videos through the language she utilizes and the aspects of her day she chooses to include in her videos. George begins her vlogs by saying "Nobody gives a fuck but here's a vlog" (George, 2023). Like Saint Clair, George's content is often comedic in tone, her voice-over, and the video clips she includes in her vlogs portray George as a very bubbly, energetic, and friendly individual. Although George mentions that she is stressed, miserable, or sad in numerous vlogs, her voiceovers consistently include a sense of positivity or humour. Furthermore, George's standard introduction acts as a frame for her content.

A frame, according to Keir Elam is a structure, conceptual or cognitive, imposed by participants and viewers to afford meaning to a particular occurrence or behaviour (Elam, 1991:87). A set of unspoken but agreed upon conventions produce a frame, which in turn directs participants' expectations and understanding of that particular occurrence (Elam, 1991:88). Arnold Aronson (2007) extends this understanding of a frame by outlining a frame as a mechanism which grants a creator control over the spectacle as well as the spectator (Aronson, 2007:36). In this instance George can be understood as the creator, using her introduction, as well as the chosen snippets of her day included within the physical frame of

her camera, to erect a spectacle of self-design and situate other TikTok users as her audience. George's introduction, which can be understood as a frame, acts as a moment of performance. This moment of performance contributes to her self-design. Although George's content, like Saint Clair's, can be understood as moments of performance, it is important to clarify that this does not invalidate the subjective 'truthfulness' of her content. George may curate, perform and design her content but this does not necessarily mean she fabricates her stories and vlogs.

TikTok allows users to create videos on the app up to 10 minutes in length. Due to this time constraint, those using TikTok as a platform for vlogging must be selective about the parts of their day that they choose to film or talk about. Thus, vloggers can harness the content they include in their vlogs to actively shape their design. George shares both exciting aspects of her day as well as ordinary and ritualistic aspects of her day, such as her breakfast and her visit to the gym. Even though George's vlogs seem to outline every significant occurrence of her day, it is understood that she excludes various moments of her day in vlogs. The video clips George decides to include in her videos portray a certain curated version of herself to her audience. Like Saint Clair, George's personality and behaviour depicted in her videos appear to reflect a sincere portrayal of herself. This portrayal may present George's subject truth, but the audience still has the potential to confuse her performance of her subjective experiences with objective truth. Self-design concerns the presentation of subjective truth and is, therefore, almost inescapable for content creators on the platform. It is important to reiterate that self-design is not an entirely negative feature of performance (Early et al, 2019). George's participation in self-design contributes to the relatability of her videos. George's use of language in her videos not only seems like a comfortable choice for the creator but also positions her audience as friends of George. George speaks directly to her audience and casually refers to them as 'guys' (George, 2023). This manner of address George has established for her audience has intensified the perceived intimacy between herself, as the creator, and her audience.

George further cements her audience as her friends by repeatedly asking them to tell her about how they are doing or asking them to "spill the tea" in the comment section (George, 2022). The comment sections of George's videos confirm this relationship, depicting numerous comments in support of George, with some followers commenting that George is their 'bestie'.

As Reis and Shaver have stated, the process of intimacy is developed when the confessor receives an appropriate and supportive response from their listener (Reis et al, 1988). Therefore, George's comment section suggests that a process of intimacy is being followed to some degree. Due to the TikTok For You Page and its ability to introduce users to creators they do not follow, many individuals may only pay witness to one or two vlogs created by George, unlike followers of the creator who may religiously watch George's content and observe George's journey on TikTok. In this case, individuals may experience an ephemeral sense of intimacy with the creator, if any intimacy at all. This is because the process of intimacy is developed when intimate moments occur continuously (Reis et al, 1988). Thus, intimacy may have been initiated between George and a first-time viewer and this viewer may even respond in a supportive manner, but this intimacy will not develop unless a relationship is established between this viewer and George. Following George and getting access to many of her videos, not only initiates intimacy through consistent watching and commenting but also provides the opportunity for George and her consistent audience to establish a relationship with one another. Dedicated followers of George's vlogs have paid witness to both the small occurrences in her life, such as coffee dates with friends and visits to the gym, but have also seen potentially life-changing events, such as moving to another country. George essentially invites her audience to follow her throughout her life and consistent followers of her vlogs have seen not only her vlogs grow but also George herself. This sense of companionship and self-revelation apparent in George's relationship with her followers supports intimacy. It can be said that this sense of companionship reflects an element of *communitas*, however, it is unclear if the companionship identified between George and her audience is shared between her followers. George's followers comment similar remarks in her comment section, and, thus, seemingly share in a unit of thinking and feeling integral to *communitas*. However, the shared responsibility which accompanies a sense of comradeship within *communitas* is not evident between George and her followers. George's followers are evidently supportive of George and her journey, however, they cannot directly assist her beyond offering her encouragement and online friendship. Although this may develop intimacy between George and her followers, intimacy is not the sole establisher of *communitas*.

@madelineargy and Storytimes

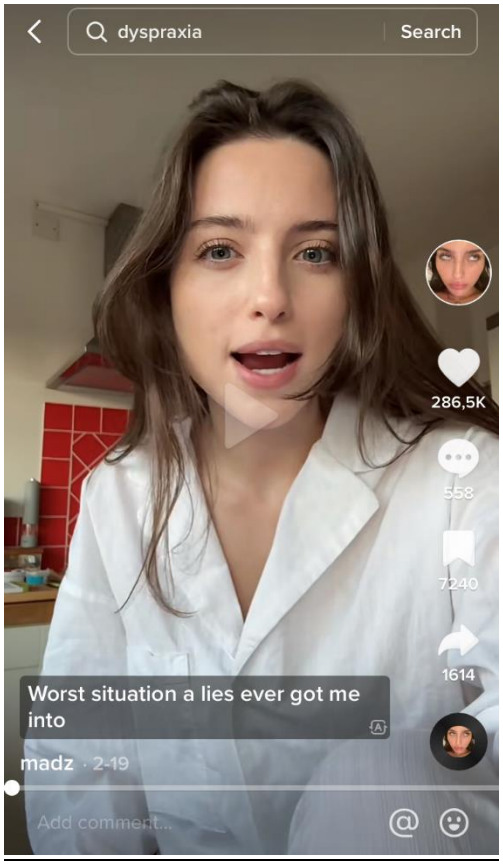

Figure 7: Screenshot of TikTok video: Argy, M. [@madeline argy]. (2023, February 19). [Video] TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26T2vP1/



Figure 8: Screenshot of TikTok video: Argy, M. [@madeline argy]. (2023, February 25). u ask I deliver. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TNatd/

Another way in which confession is presented on the social media platform TikTok is through TikTok Storytimes. A TikTok Storytime refers to a type of TikTok video that involves an individual telling or re-enacting a story or an experience. Storytimes on TikTok commonly concern personal stories about the storyteller. The subject matter addressed in Storytimes varies immensely and can range from dating stories to stories about one's traumatic childhood. Although some TikTok Storytimes do not concern the individual telling the story, a large portion of Storytimes act as personal testimonies. Therefore, TikTok Storytimes are often confessional.

Madeline Argy (@madeline argy) is a twenty-two-year-old British creator currently living in London, who has amassed a TikTok following of 3, 6 million viewers since March of 2021. The content that Argy promotes on her account includes videos of herself showing off her outfit, participating in comedic TikTok trends, and sharing makeup tricks. Since September 2021, Argy has implemented personalism in her content and has consistently created TikToks

involving personal storytelling. These moments of personal storytelling include her experience going to therapy, stories from her childhood, and embarrassing moments from her day.

Like Saint Clair, Argy does not shy away from including taboo and sensitive subject matter in her videos. She has revealed that she often feels at war with herself and is open about her loneliness, even claiming in one video that her viewers on TikTok are her only friends (Argy, 2022). Argy also speaks about her past relationships and her sexuality. In a TikTok posted in October of 2021, Argy tells a story about how she accidentally added numerous pornographic videos to her public Twitter account because she wasn't aware that liked Twitter posts reflected on a Twitter timeline (Argy, 2021). In another video, Argy admits to having 'shat' herself on a date but couldn't leave immediately because she had been drinking (Argy, 2021). Not only does Argy reveal stories about her personal life, but she also shares her opinions about various topics on her account such as her opinion about celebrity gossip. Argy's participation in 'silly' TikTok trends makes her platform seem less serious and, thus, more relatable to her audience.

Argy has a seemingly extreme openness in her videos yet she inevitably partakes in an element of self-design, even if this is not purposeful. Like George and Saint Clair, Argy's videos are often comedic. Many of the stories Argy tells are comedic in-and-of themselves, however, even when Argy is telling a story that deals with more sensitive topics, she delivers these stories in an entertaining and funny manner. Comedic content does not inherently suggest the act of self-design, however, the element of comedy that Argy, as well as George and Saint Clair, include in their content seems to contribute to their personal branding. Personal branding involves developing a consistent and typically deliberate impression of oneself (Chritton, 2014: 2). Personal branding, in this instance, involves establishing an online persona. Therefore, it can be understood as an act of self-design. Consequently, the comedic tone these creators adopt aids in entertaining and relating to their viewers. Argy has some videos in which she employs self- deprecation as a comedic tactic and other videos where she is overly confident and refers to herself as 'perfect' (Argy, 2023). Argy is playfully mean, referring to her followers as 'bitches' (Argy, 2023). Although Argy sometimes admits when she is in a bad mood or when she feels as if she is not 'doing well', these different 'versions' of herself seem to be an exaggerated version of herself and her feelings. This exaggeration, or theatricality, may make Argy's videos arguably more entertaining, but blurs the parameters between art and life. Michael Kirby's *On Acting and Not Acting* provides a

useful scale that displays various degrees of acting, beginning from not acting to true acting (Kirby, 1972). Kirby suggests that even when an individual is performing themselves they may still be acting if they perceive an audience and exaggerate their emotions and personality for the sake of their audience (Kirby, 1972:43). By adhering to Kirby's scale of acting, it is clear that Argy is participating in what Kirby has coined as 'simple acting'. Simple acting should be not mistaken for fabrication or falsehood, but rather as a selection and projection of certain emotions or personality traits in front of an audience (Kirby, 1972: 43). The simple acting that Argy partakes in contributes to her self-design. It can be determined that self-design rarely exists without simple acting from the performer.

Since Argy talks about embarrassing moments of her life, such as showcasing her old, 'smelly' car or acknowledging her pimples, her videos seem to be highly relatable to her young adult audience. I cannot assume that Argy is fabricating the information in her videos, however, it should be noted that Argy has a massive following of 3.6 million users and has achieved influencer status. This is evident in her attendance at the 2023 Brit Awards, an annual British music awards ceremony. Therefore, it is easy to assume that Argy lives a very different life to many of her 3.6 million followers. Despite this, Argy rarely addresses her fame in her videos, choosing to focus on the more relatable aspects of her life. Many of the comments left under Argy's videos show that her followers find her content relatable, even if they live a vastly different life from Argy. Argy's exclusion of the glamorous elements of her life is an aspect of her self-design. Although Argy's followers seem to think they have been allowed access to intimate details of Argy's life, therefore, intensifying a perceived bond between them and her, Argy's TikToks only portray one version of the creator. Argy's content has a strong sense of sincerity, however, the life she shares with her audience is still a curated one.

Confessional TikTok Trends

Not only do 'Get Ready With Me' videos, vlogs, and Storytimes provide users the opportunity for confession, but there are numerous TikTok trends that encourage the act of confession. Andreas Schellewald explains that TikTok has a multitude of formats with pre-existing scripts that offer users the opportunity for self-expression (Schellewald, 2021: 1446). TikTok audios, which utilize pre-existing media, provide a format that Schellewald speaks of

in his text. These formats can be used to express an array of meanings but are often used for confession.

Confessional TikTok trends see users adopt popular audios and manipulate them to express something personal about themselves, their experiences, or their emotions. TikTok creators may change a line spoken or sung in the original audio to make the audio more relevant to their situation. Other times TikTok creators will merely lip-sync to the audio, suggesting that the audio already closely resembles their emotions or circumstances.

For example, 'Damage' is a TikTok audio that has been used in over nineteen thousand videos. It uses an excerpt from the animated TV show *BoJack Horseman*. The audio is taken from a scene where the character Diane Nguyen, voiced by Alison Brie, explains that she must finish an anthology of essays she has set out to write because if she does not that means that all "the damage [she] got isn't good damage, it's just damage". In the popular audio, Diane says:

> *I have to. Because if I don't that means all the damage I got isn't good damage, it's just damage. I have gotten nothing out of it and all those years I was miserable was for nothing, I could have been happy this whole time and written books about girl detectives and been cheerful and popular and had good parents, is that what you're saying? What was it all for?* ('Diane' in the TV show *Bo Jack Horseman* produced by Raphael Bob-Waksberg)

The audio on TikTok layers Diane's monologue over the song *Sea, Swallow Me* by the Cocteau Twins. This audio has become a popular format of self-expression for thousands of TikTok users. TikTok users who have adopted the audio 'Damage' in their videos express their feelings towards their dream job, their exhaustion but determination in their current jobs, their desire to find a diagnosis for a mental illness, or their desire to be a good mother to their children, to name just a few examples.

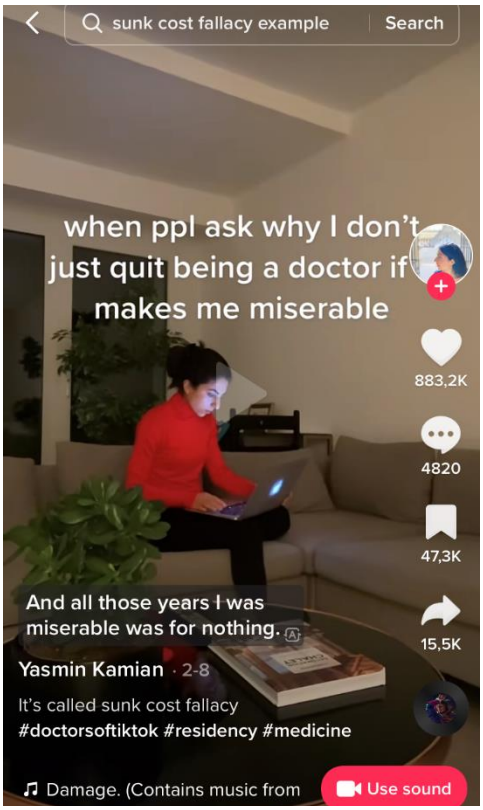

Figure 9: Screenshot of TikTok video:Kamian, Y. [@yasminkamian]. (2023, February 8). It's called sunk cost fallacy #doctorsoftiktok #residency #medicine. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TaQsG/



Figure 10: Screenshot of TikTok video:Stone, K. [@b0rd3rl1neb1tch]. (2023, January 24). TW!! [Video]. TikTok. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TGVoQ/

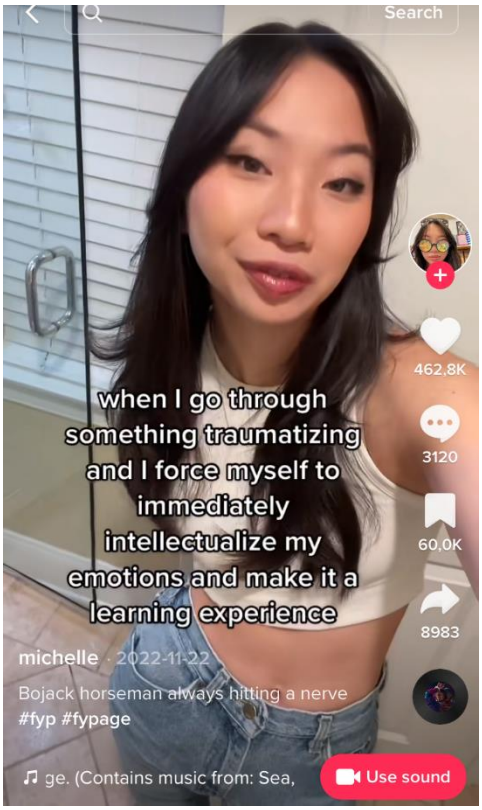

Figure 11: Screenshot of TikTok video:Athena, M. [@e.llehcim]. (2022, November 22). Bojack horseman always hitting a nerve. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TXE3u/

A video created by the user @yasminkamian, a practising doctor, includes the audio 'Damage'. Her video includes video clips from her day as a doctor with text over the video reading "When ppl ask why I don't just quit being a doctor if it makes me miserable". In another video created by the young adult user, @b0rd3rl1neb1tch sees the creator lip-synching 'Damage' while the text over her video reads "I don't want them to fade". The caption on the videos involves a Trigger Warning for self-harm, suggesting that her video refers to her self-harm scars. A video created by @e.llehcim uses the audio to explain why she has to "force [herself] to immediately intellectualize her emotions and make [them] into a learning experience". These users form part of the 19 thousand creators who have created a confessional trend with this audio. There are dozens if not hundreds of confessional trends similar to this one. Once one confessional trend has lost popularity amongst users, it seems that another is created in its place.

Not only do these confessional trends provide the opportunity for intimacy through the act of self-revelation, but access to all public videos that use shared audio may encourage a sense of community. By clicking on an audio on TikTok a user can gain access to other videos utilizing the same audio, and, thus, usually a similar story or expression of emotion. This creates a network of videos that express or explain similar experiences, creating a kind of online community. Not only do these networks create a sense of relatability for individuals on the app, but it provides the opportunity for a shared catharsis of these common stories and experiences. Looking under a particular audio that has been commonly used in confessional content gives a user access to a 'sea of feeling' or an archive of shared emotion. It is this emotional archive that contributes to the possible creation of *communitas.*

Algorithmic closeness

TikTok users have multiple avenues for partaking in intimacy and community on the platform. Not only do TikTok trends create a network of individuals who share a common experience, emotion, or opinion, but the TikTok algorithm is an invisible socio-technical system that customizes user's content feed and largely influences user interaction on the platform (Evans et al, 2021: 84).

In *Fostering Intimacy on TikTok: A platform that listens and creates a safe space*, Irem Sot interviews 14 TikTok users between the ages of 22 and 32 (Sot, 2022). Many of the interviewees involved in the study applauded TikTok's algorithm, which they believed to be able to 'listen' to the users on TikTok (Sot, 2022: 1491). In turn, participants in Sot's study testify that the intimacy they believe to experience on the platform does not solely originate from their interaction with other TikTok users, but more evidently with their For You Page and the TikTok algorithm as a whole (Sot, 2022). The TikTok For You Page, which is controlled by the algorithm, is designed to present users with videos that it has determined the users will more likely watch and engage with (Evans et al, 2021). The algorithm is fuelled by the behaviour of the TikTok user, tracking their time spent watching a certain video and the frequency of their interaction with this video (Evans et al, 2021). The algorithm then uses this information to offer similar videos to the user through their For You Page. Although indirect, there is communication between a TikTok user and the TikTok algorithm, where a TikTok user expresses what they are willing to engage with and what they avoid through their

behaviour. In turn, the TikTok algorithm interprets this behaviour and validates the TikTok user's expression of interest through the For You Page.

As both Sot and Krutrok display, the algorithm's ability to predict what a particular user may entertain often aids in developing perceived 'safe spaces' on the platform (Krutrok, 2021: 4). An interviewee involved in Sot's study explained their experience in creating a safe space on the platform, which they believe is possible with the support of TikTok's algorithm (Sot, 2022). This interviewee, who is in her early twenties, is a cosplayer and explains that TikTok has enabled her to attract supportive and like-minded individuals (Sot, 2022: 1501). Not only does this interviewee explain that she experiences a sense of intimacy on the platform because of this, but she also expresses the fact that the algorithm present on TikTok has protected her content from ridicule from users who do not appreciate her lifestyle (Sot, 2022: 1501). This perceived protection also makes TikTok seem more intimate to the interviewee as intimacy relies on feelings of safety (Sot, 2022: 1501). A perceived 'safe space', which encourages intimacy, in turn strengthens the possible development of *communitas*.

Although Sot's participant experienced a sense of safety fostered by the TikTok algorithm, the broader implications of this perceived intimacy should be analysed. Furthermore, the definition of intimacy, as presented by Reis and Shaver, may need to undergo revision to account for a new online context. TikTok users may feel a sense of intimacy between themselves and the non-human algorithm, however, this intimacy is not supported by Reis and Shaver's definition of intimacy. A vital 'step' in the creation of intimacy outlined by Reis and Shaver, a pattern of self-expression and validation, can be identified between a TikTok user and the TikTok algorithm. However, the process of intimacy outlined by Reis and Shaver cannot exist without human-specific interaction. For felt intimacy between a TikTok user and the TikTok algorithm to be validated, the process of intimacy needs to be redefined within the context of technological advancement and sociotechnical systems. The risks involved in potential felt intimacy between human and non-human systems need to be analysed in light of strengthening algorithms and the growing presence of artificial intelligence. Whether or not intimacy between TikTok users and the TikTok algorithm can truly be identified, I suggest that the TikTok algorithm is a tool for connecting like-minded individuals, consequentially inviting the potential for both *communita*s and intimacy.

Interaction on TikTok

The TikTok algorithm influences the sociotechnical features available on the platform. These sociotechnical features facilitate interaction among TikTok users. The interactions between TikTok users fuel the potential for intimacy and *communitas* on the platform.

TikTok users can respond to content on TikTok through the comment section of videos. If these comments are in support of a TikTok creator, then this exchange enables an intimate interaction between the TikTok creator and their viewers. Often, content creators on the platform, such as Argy, George, and Saint Clair, address their followers as if they are their close friends. This in turn encourages their followers to respond accordingly in their comment sections. The type of relationship cautioned against by David Terry in his text *Once Blind Now Seeing: The Problematics of Confessional Performance*, one that is frequently established between confessional performers and their audience, is evident on TikTok (Terry, 2006). This close, or alternatively isolating relationship, is established between many confessional TikTok creators and their followers. Thus, Terry's concern remains a relevant one. Although the TikTok comment section allows TikTok viewers to respond to or challenge the content they are presented, this does not mean that they are above manipulation. The comments left under the creators I have investigated in this paper have all reflected appreciation for the content creators they follow. This reveals that even though TikTok users can challenge TikTok creators, the TikTok algorithm presents content that a particular TikTok user finds interesting and so is more likely to appreciate rather than challenge. This may affect the likelihood of TikTok users commenting negatively on a particular video. Although this reveals that TikTok creators and TikTok viewers are not above manipulation, the supportive interaction that often takes place between creators and viewers on the platform fosters the potential for intimacy and *communitas*.

The Stitch feature on TikTok presents another avenue for interaction between a TikTok creator and their followers. The stitch feature on TikTok allows TikTok creators to combine their video with another creator's video. TikTok users stitch another user's video to add their own opinion about a video, challenge another user, or encourage another user. A video posted by @shae_bella.03 sees the young adult creator in tears, venting about a failed relationship. @danisha.carter, a popular young adult TikTok creator with over 1.8 million followers, stitched @shae_bella.03's video, offering the TikTok user firm advice and support. The advice Carter presents in her video is not only addressed to Bella but to those watching her

video who have been in a similar situation as Bella. Thus, this exchange not only initiates intimacy between Danisha Carter and Shae Bella, but it is through their exchange that intimacy is established. This intimacy is then extended to their respective viewers. Bella comments on Carter's response, progressing the development of intimacy. Furthermore, Carter replies to numerous responses from various TikTok users in her comment section, cementing a moment of intimacy with many of her commenters.

The stitch feature is also commonly used in TikTok Storytimes. Many TikTok Storytimes begin with the TikTok creator stating, "Tell me about a time when…" followed by "I'll go first", inviting other individuals to stitch their video with their own stories. The prompts presented in these videos concern anything from experiences with romantic crushes to individuals recounting the moment they realized they lived below the poverty line. This creates a network of users who share different, yet relatable stories, supporting the development of a TikTok community. However, stitching may also be used to express distaste or distrust about another's video, thus, fracturing the possibility of intimacy between the TikTok creator who stitched the creator and the creator of the original video.

Duetting a video on TikTok can be used for the same purpose as stitching a video on the platform. The duet feature on TikTok allows users to film a video alongside another video. (Schellewald, 2021) Frequently this is used by musicians on the app to contribute their specific musical skills in another user's video. This use of the feature allows musicians the opportunity for collaboration and, thus, supports the development of community. Like the stitch feature, the duet feature allows TikTok users to express support or distaste for another creator's content. TikTok users who use the duet feature to either express their support or distrust for another TikTok user's video will often physically gesture their agreement or their distaste in their own video. Sometimes individuals will simply film themselves listening to the original content. This is often done to increase visibility around a specific topic. Therefore, like the stitch feature, the duet feature is both a TikTok tool that can support and disrupt the presence of intimacy and *communitas* on the platform, depending on the context.

As has been noted by Schellewald, Sot, and Kennedy, TikTok is mostly perceived as a comfortable platform for its users, due to its algorithm and interactive features. This perceived comfort and safety encourages self-revelation and confession. The act of self-revelation and confession may contribute to the presence of intimacy, which is essential to the social well-being of humans. However, the presence of this intimacy also presents

significant risks to the TikTok creators and their followers. The presence of self-revelation may present an opportunity for intimacy but also poses privacy concerns and the risk of attracting stalkers.

Argy, who often uses her TikTok account as a public confessional, has admitted that she has gained stalkers in the past. The public yet intimate nature of her content, as well as the normalization of parasocial relationships online, may grow not only her TikTok following but also the likeliness that she will have online stalkers. On a video posted in February 2023, Danisha Carter, a popular TikToker, uploaded a video advising against sharing personal information online (Carter, 2023). Carter explains that users who admit to their favourite restaurant or include identifiable locations in their videos are putting themselves at risk to stalkers, especially if they have large followings (Carter, 2023). Carter states in her video that when TikTok creators reveal aspects of their personal lives, like their neighbourhood or their place of work, they are essentially "giving people [their] location" (Carter, 2023). Carter also asserts that this danger is especially relevant to well-known TikTokers who are popular enough to be on the receiving end of parasocial relationships, but not famous enough to have private security (Carter, 2023). While these risks are adverse, they reveal the significance that perceived intimacy between TikTok viewers and creators, whether parasocial or otherwise, holds in their lives.

The case studies and examples discussed in this chapter reveal that TikTok allows for the development of community and an ephemeral sense of intimacy amongst its users. The establishment of a sense of community and ephemeral, sometimes imagined, intimacy is permitted through user interaction on the platform, influenced by the TikTok algorithm and the sociotechnical features implemented on the platform. The confessional nature of many videos on the platform, seen in Get Ready With Me's, vlogs, and Storytimes, plays a vital role in encouraging a sense of intimacy and community amongst TikTok users. Confessional TikTok trends and the network of shared experiences it builds contribute to a sense of *communitas*, albeit not pure *communitas*, as defined by Victor Turner. However, I question whether felt intimacy and *communitas* derive from the interaction between TikTok creators and their viewers or whether it is a result of the TikTok algorithm, which can understand users' online behaviours and respond to them accordingly through their specific For You Page. My analysis in this chapter considers the experience of intimacy and *communitas* from the point of view of a TikTok viewer. Although I mention and address statements from TikTok creators, the third chapter of my paper hopes to provide a first-hand account of the

experiences of a confessional TikTok creator. The creative investigation, discussed in the following chapter, aims at fulfilling the investigation of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok, by providing an autoethnographic account of the perception and experience of intimacy and *communitas* on the platform.

CHAPTER 3:

'I WANT TO TALK TO YOU, I WANT YOU TO TALK TO ME': AN EXPLORATIVE CONFESSIONAL TIKTOK SERIES



Figure 12: Screenshot of TikTok video Buckland, S. [@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23]. (2023, February 20). I want to talk to you. [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26Ttr9V/

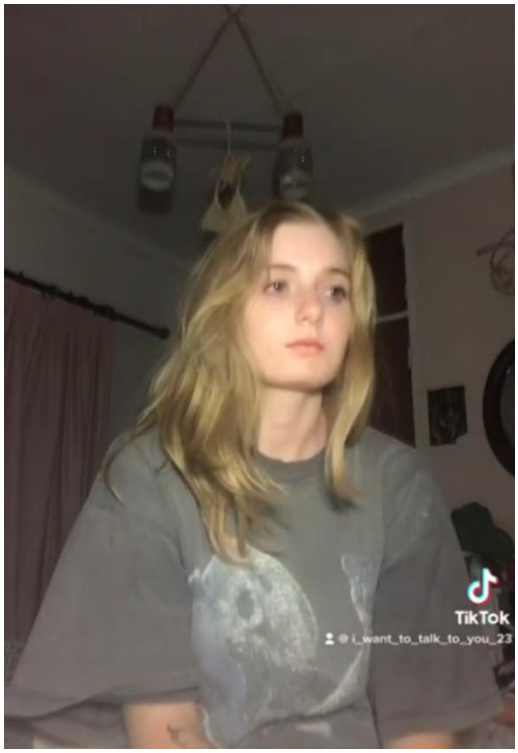

Figure 13: Screenshot of TikTok video Buckland, S. [@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23]. (2023, February 21). How was your day? [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TVQhF/

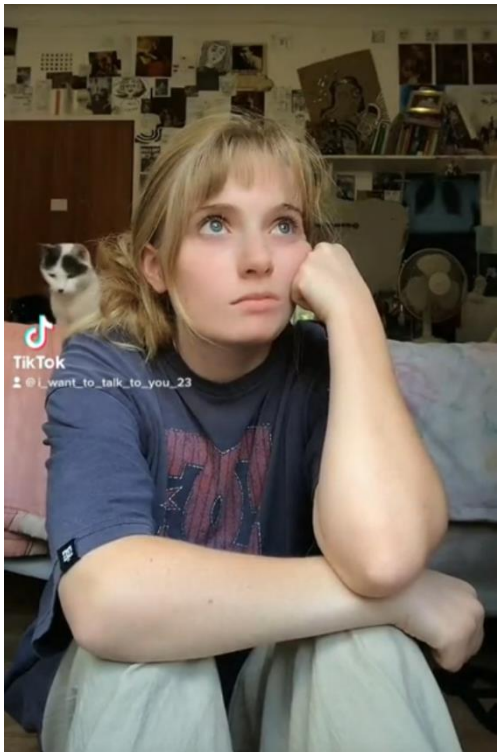

Figure 14: Screenshot of TikTok videoBuckland, S. [@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23]. (2023, March 16). Disclaimer: This account is dedicated to research... [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26TVtH4/

The case studies illustrated in the previous chapter showcase the various roles that a TikTok user may adopt on the platform. One of the roles available to a TikTok user is that of a passive audience member or viewer. This type of user can be understood as a voyeur, simply scrolling through content introduced to them via their For You Page. A 'passive viewer' may press the like button on certain videos but will rarely comment on content on the app. TikTok's are typically linked to other social media platforms, introducing an additional passive viewer, one who may access videos on TikTok but cannot interact with the content in any other way. Alternatively, there are TikTok users who are 'active audience members' on the app, who refrain from posting their content but who regularly comment on the content that they see on the platform. 'Creators' encompass another kind of TikTok user. These users not only pay witness to other's content on the platform but also post their own content on the

platform. Often, these three roles are not concretely defined and each user on TikTok may shift from one role to another during their time on the platform. Nevertheless, I hypothesize that the different roles that TikTok offers its users afford several diverse experiences of intimacy, *communitas*, and community.

In the previous chapter, I situate myself as a passive viewer of confessional content on TikTok. Although I analyse Saint Clair, George, and Argy's confessional content, I also address my own experience watching and engaging with this content. To thoroughly investigate the presence of intimacy and *communitas* amongst young adult users, I must examine the differing experiences of these TikTok users. This is because different types of TikTok users experience different kinds of interaction on the platform and I hypothesize that this influences their perceptions of intimacy and *communitas*. Although I consider confessional content creators in the second chapter of my paper, I cannot make claims about their feelings towards confessional content creation or their perception of intimacy and *communitas*. Therefore, by implementing a confessional TikTok series as an element of my research project I can provide experiential insight from the point of view of a confessional TikTok creator. In turn, I aim to use this TikTok series to offer a nuanced view of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok. Furthermore, the confessional TikTok series allows me to analyse the real-time interaction that I received during the series and assess the immediate impact of this interaction and how it influences my perception of intimacy and *communitas*. I use the process of intimacy defined by Reis and Shaver and the definition of *communitas* introduced by Turner as a guideline when analysing my experience as a confessional TikTok creator. However, as invited by autobiographical creative research, I allow more emotive and nuanced reflections within my analysis. Thereafter, a comparison of the different user roles and their view of intimacy and *communitas* can be instated.

I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me: An introduction.

To consider a first-hand experience of a confessional content creator, I introduced a TikTok series named 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me'. The TikTok series aimed to investigate the presence of, or potential for, intimacy and *communitas* amongst young adult South African TikTok users from the point of view of a confessional TikTok creator. The series specifically interrogated the role confessional content on the platform had in establishing said intimacy and *communitas*. I determine whether the project was successful in

constructing intimacy by using Reis and Shavers' process of intimacy as a guideline. Essentially, I analyse the interactions I received during the series by assessing whether or not these interactions fulfilled the steps required for creating intimacy. When considering the development of *communitas* throughout the series, I use Victor Turner's ideals of *communitas* as a point of analysis when considering the interaction I received during the series. Additionally, my own perception of intimacy and *communitas* is used as valuable qualitative data in my research. I also consider testaments from viewers of the series, reflecting on their own perception of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok as well as through the series. I analyse the analytics of the series to numerically track viewer engagement and as a means to identify the predominant demographic watching the series. The demographic of my followers as well as viewer engagement received during the series is outlined in the following graphs:

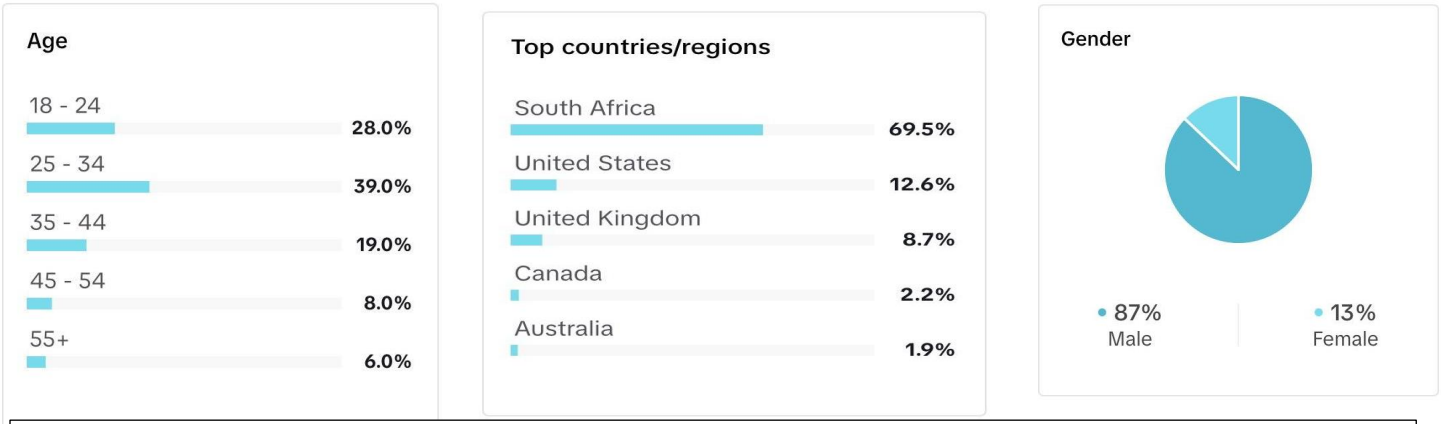

Figure 15: Screenshot of @I_want_to_talk_to_you23's follower demographics

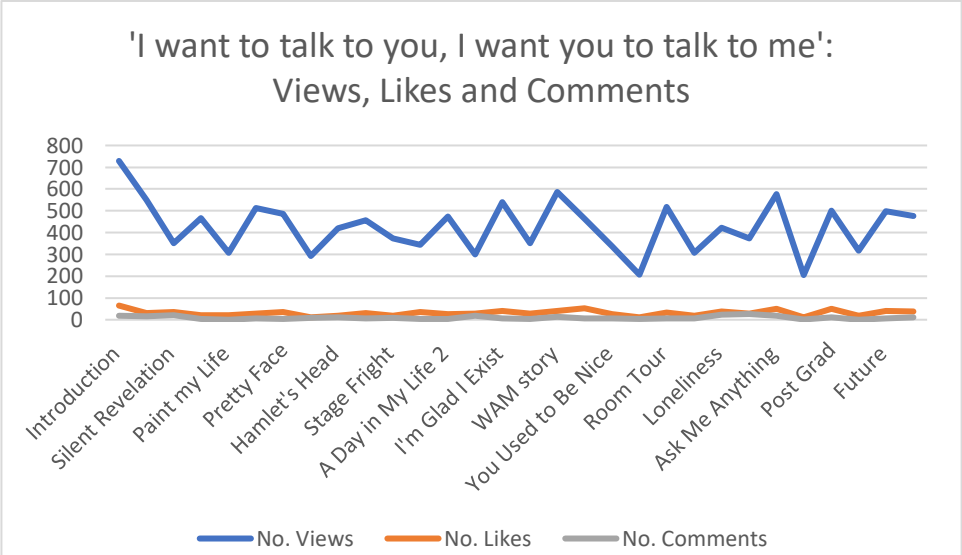

Figure 16: Graph (D) showing the number of Views, Likes and Comments 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

The target audience of the series was young adult TikTok users, and the subject matter, which involved my experience as a young adult university student, considered this. However, besides creating content potentially relatable to individuals within this demographic, I could not control who watched the series as once it was posted it was accessible to anyone on TikTok. Although the series was made accessible to the larger TikTok community, there was a need to gain a considerable number of viewers and followers to receive a satisfactory response and engagement from viewers. For this reason, I posted the TikTok series on my pre-existing TikTok account with 2444 followers. It would have been ideal to create a completely new TikTok account for the specific purpose of the study, however, this could not ensure that the series would gain suitable visibility, or any visibility at all, within the span of a month. 90% of the followers that I gained before the series are strangers, thus, reducing the potential for a particular bias. Although I used a pre-existing TikTok account to house the series, I do not consider any comments or responses acquired from viewers outside of the research series. However, I do consider the numerical differences between the engagement received before the series and the engagement received during the series. The graph below depicts the comparison between the number of followers acquired by my TikTok account before and after the series began.

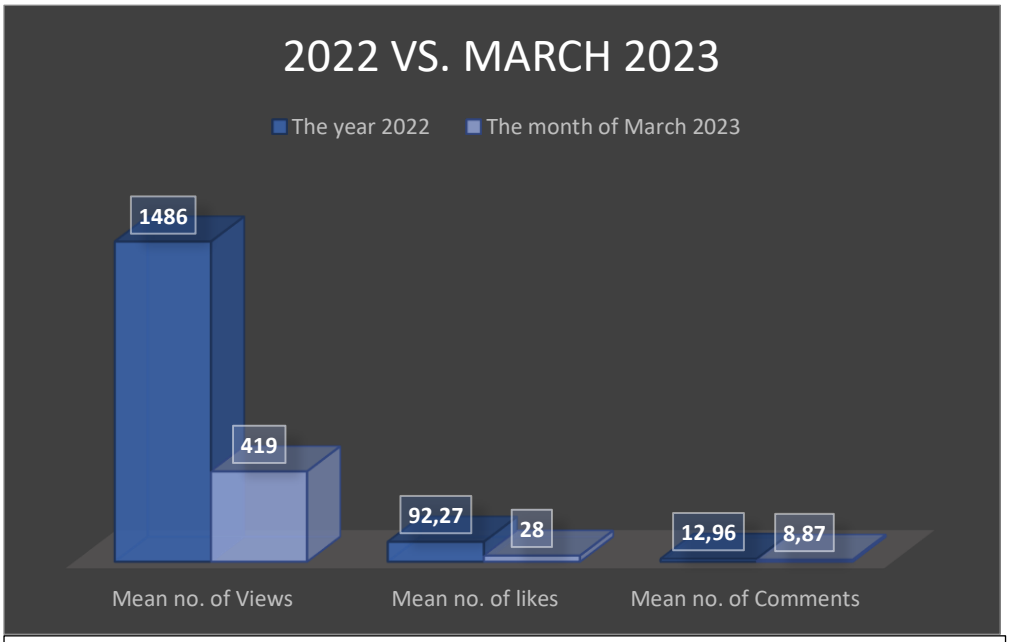

Figure 17: Graph (E) showing comparison in the number of views, likes and comments accumulated by @I_want_to_talk_to_you23

I began the series with several followers, however, the viewers of the series were not chosen. Rather, TikTokers who watched, liked, and interacted with the series became participants in the study. A disclaimer introducing the study was situated in every caption of each video within the series to notify viewers that the account was dedicated to research and that if they chose to interact with the series in any way they would be considered participants in the research study. This disclaimer was reiterated in the bio of the TikTok account used. Furthermore, viewers who I directly quote in this chapter gave written consent for me to use their words within this paper, their signed consent forms are located in a separate document.

'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' consisted of thirty videos and spanned a month from the 20th of February to the 21st of March 2023. Within the series, I reflected on friendships, mental health challenges, feelings of loneliness, familial situations, personal fears, and aspirations for the future. When presenting moments of confession within the series I included the core characteristics of confessional performance, namely self-design, personalism, and the inclusion of sensitive subject matters. I used common forms of TikTok confessions identified in the previous chapter, including Get Ready With Me's, vlogs, and Storytimes. Confessional TikTok trends were also included throughout the series as they reflect a common form of confession on TikTok. Some alternative forms of confession were included within the series, however, these alternative moments of confession still reflected a common type of confessional content on the platform.

In addition to the creative study, I included a short, informal survey within the series. This survey was presented verbally across five different videos, each video asking viewers a particular question. The questions from the survey aimed at inquiring about TikTok viewers' experiences on TikTok and their experience with communities and relationships on the platform. These questions read as follows: Why did you download TikTok? When did you download TikTok? How has TikTok influenced your day-to-day? Do you feel like you are part of a TikTok community? Do you feel close to other TikTok users? These questions were reiterated during TikTok Lives which I facilitated four times during the series. These Live moments presented these questions and then invited viewers to openly and informally answer and discuss these questions in a manner that more accurately reflects an immediate conversation.

Besides generating valuable information from participants, the informal survey also encouraged audience participation. This helped strengthen the possibility of developing

intimacy and *communitas* on the platform. To encourage interactions with viewers further, I consistently asked the viewers of the series questions about themselves or their experiences, or I invited viewers of the series to share their thoughts, feelings, or stories in a form they saw fit. I also invited viewers to make use of the Q&A function on TikTok, which allows TikTok viewers to directly ask TikTok creators specific questions. I frequently encouraged participation verbally, however, I regularly asked a question in the caption of my video. The image below shows an example of this:

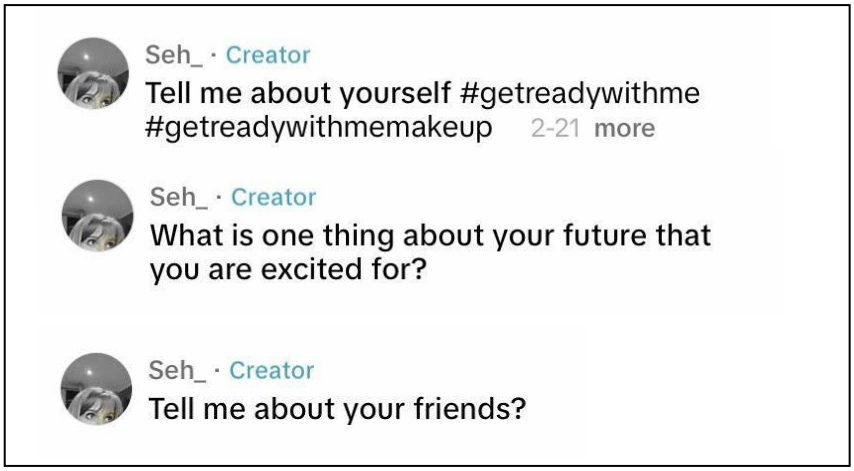

Figure 18: Screenshot of captions included in the TikTok series 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me'

Although TikTok viewers had the option of stitching or duetting videos within the series, interaction from viewers during the series took the form of comments and a few questions delivered to me via the Q&A section on TikTok. Below is a screenshot of the TikTok Q&A section.

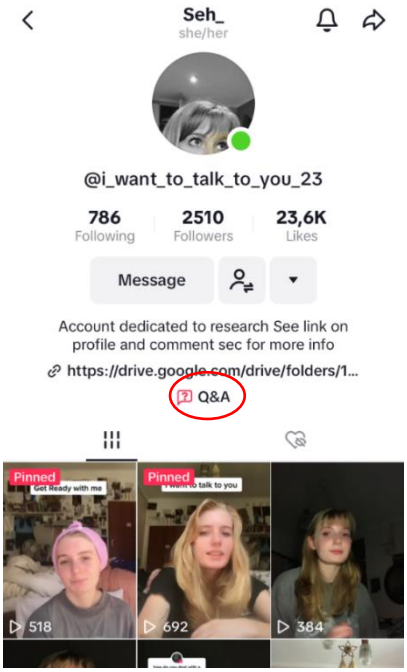

Figure 19: Screenshot of @i_want_to_talk_to_you23's account home page

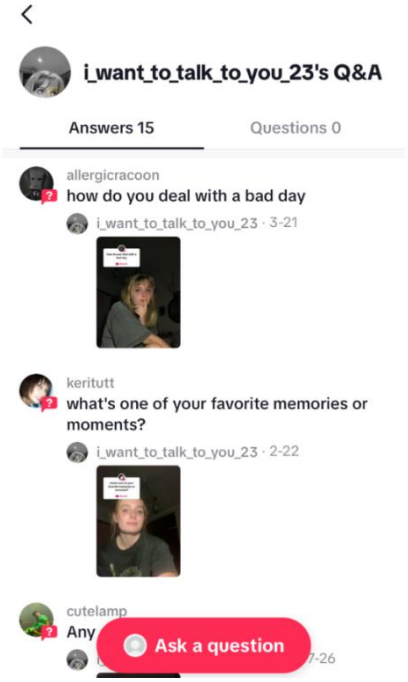

Figure 20: Screenshot of @I_want_ to_ talk_ to_ you23's Q&A section

To record my findings from the series, I documented thoughts and observations regarding the series in a journal, which I updated daily. A copy of this journal can be found in the appendix section of this document. This journal documented my experience as a confessional TikTok creator, the nature of the engagement I received from every video, and the quantity of this engagement. Not only do I reflect on the emotional impact of creating and posting confessional content on an online public platform, but I also used the journal to consider the impact that receiving engagement from viewers had on me.

I used the creator tool available on TikTok to access the analytics of the series. The creator tool on TikTok is a feature accessible to all TikTok creators regardless of their follower count, which allows creators to monitor viewers' interaction with their content. These analytics are presented in the form of graphs and tables, located in the appendix of this document. I used these analytics to document the demographic of my followers as well as the number of views, likes, and comments I gained from each video. These analytics provided a valuable opportunity to identify my viewers and give insight into a potential community. Furthermore, these analytics outline the development and growth of my account since the start of the series. Although this development is potentially influenced by the confessional content introduced to the account, the TikTok algorithm analytically contributes to the series. Although I suggest reasons for the fluctuation in the number of likes and comments throughout the series, accurately identifying the precise cause of the varying engagement

levels remains inaccessible to me as the researcher. Thus, an analysis of the nature of the engagement received from the series will be prioritized in the study.

Self-Design and Scenography

In addition to verbal encouragement, I utilized self-design and scenography as another tool to invite viewers to share their own experiences during the series. I used self-design throughout the series as a means to amplify my personality, express my subjective truth, and create a sense of safety for the viewers of the series. To establish an inviting and comfortable environment for viewers of the series, I employed self-design to create an appearance of sincerity. This appearance of sincerity was not an illusion in my case, however, this sincerity can be considered an example of simple acting, which Michael Kirby identifies in his text *On Acting and Not Acting*. I partook in self-design to encourage viewer engagement. My chosen scenography, 'costume', and use of language all contributed to my self-design and its intended purpose.

Although self-design was considered and implemented throughout the entire series to varying degrees, the employment of self-design can be seen most notably in the confessional TikTok Storytimes within the series. The majority of these Storytimes were filmed in my bedroom, which takes the form of my chosen scenography. These videos depict me sitting on my floor in comfortable clothing usually with no makeup on. I enacted self-design by refraining from 'dressing up' for these videos in order to accomplish an impression of sincerity. I used this self-design as a further act of self-revelation. As Reis and Shaver suggest, self-revelation can be committed both verbally and non-verbally (Reis et al, 1988: 369). Therefore, I avoid makeup and the use of face-altering filters in most of my videos as a non-verbal act of self-revelation. Although the presentation of myself on TikTok closely resembled my offline persona, I utilized self-design to curate a specifically open, accepting, and vulnerable version of myself to honour my own life stories in a manner that feels cathartic to me, and also in a manner that may arouse feelings of intimacy and invite *communitas* between my viewers and me.

As Andreas Schellewald and Melanie Kennedy assert in their respective texts, TikTok is perceived as a comfortable, relaxed platform by its users (Schellewald, 2021). I considered comfort when participating in self-design. Therefore, I treated TikTok as a platform that promotes comfortability throughout the series. I purposefully designed a sense of comfort on

the platform, to consequently encourage viewers to share in this comfort. I assumed that if my viewers were comfortable, they would experience feelings of safety significant enough to invite interaction. To instil this feeling of comfort between my participants and myself, I purposefully used casual and friendly language by repeatedly referring to my participants as 'friends'. Although an outlined plan for the TikTok series is used as a guide throughout the series, I also spoke to my viewers openly, without the use of a finalized script. I chose to retain vocal disfluencies, or 'filler words' such as 'umm' and 'like' within my content as I believe it mimics an organic conversation with my viewers.

Get Ready With Me's and Storytimes

Get Ready With Me and Storytimes within the series concerned personalism, as they reflected my own experiences as a young adult university student. Get Ready With Me videos within my series included the act of storytelling and confession. These Get Ready With Me and Storytime videos included recollections concerning my relationship with friends, the state of my mental health and my social experiences.

While filming personal moments of storytelling, either during Get Ready With Me Videos or TikTok Storytimes, the theme of loneliness seemed to be revealed. This was predominantly unintended and the topic seemed to arise naturally as an addition to the core stories presented. This seemed to uncover a consequence of confession. The simple act of confession, whether it was performed publicly on TikTok or recorded in a private video, offered me greater insight into my personal experiences and how I felt about them. As I spoke openly and intuitively, my true thoughts and feelings seemed to be revealed. Even if the filmed confession was not presented to an audience, the simple of act of verbally confessing something offered a sense of catharsis. As someone who has found myself socially isolated at various moments during my studies, participating in verbal confession was often not readily available. TikTok confessional videos offered me an opportunity and reason to speak. The act of verbal confession afforded a sense of imagined companionship. As I created TikTok Storytimes I automatically and without intention imagined that I was speaking to another individual. This sense of companionship, even when it is imagined, played a small part in

curbing my sense of loneliness. However, this sense of companionship was fleeting, lasting only the time that the confession took place. Nevertheless, the simple act of verbal confession provided a brief comfort.

Moments of confession, facilitated through the series' Storytimes, asked participants to leave their own stories or thoughts in the comment section. In many cases, participants, who are simply TikTok users scrolling through the app, obliged. The questions that I asked participants allowed them to leave comments with or without a great deal of detail. For example, in the second video of the series 'Tell Me About Yourself', I adopted a popular Storytime trend that sees TikTok creators reveal facts about themselves while performing a daily routine such as applying makeup. This video is accessible via the following link:

> https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7202577988750265605?_r=1&_t=8fz3ux5Q6Hm

This video acted as a crucial introduction and reveals various facts about me, including my self-perceived negative personality traits such as my tendency to abandon my goals, my laziness, and my indecisiveness. In this video, I asked viewers to tell me a fact about themselves. Some viewers responded with one brief, undetailed fact about themselves while others used the opportunity to provide an in-depth reflection about themselves, their emotions, or their habits. Although each comment on TikTok is limited to 150 characters, many commenters often replied to a video over multiple comments. One viewer, whom I have named Joe for the sake of anonymity, provided written consent for me to present his comments from the series within this paper. Joe responded to 'Tell Me About Yourself' with three comments. Joe's moment of confession reveals that he has "anxiety, PTSD, and depression". See a screenshot of these comments below:

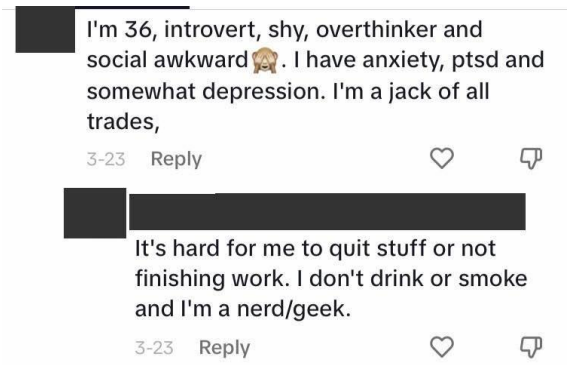



Figure 21: Screenshots of ‘Joe’s ‘comments left under @I_want_to_talk_to_you23’s TikTok videos

Joe is not someone who I know personally but a TikTok user who began following me at the start of this series. It is important to note that Joe did not follow me before the research series began and, thus, had little introduction to me before commenting on this video. Even though I am essentially a stranger to Joe, he willingly shares personal information about himself. Joe’s engagement with my content develops throughout the series and is discussed later in this paper. Having received comments on this video confirms that someone listened to my confession but also chose to take time out of their scrolling to respond to my confession. The pseudo-companionship experienced during the moment of confession was realized and confirmed in this moment. At this point, I experienced a brief sense of intimacy.

Although Reis and Shaver suggest that intimacy is present when the steps in the intimacy process are fulfilled, they also explain that intimacy is developed when intimate interactions between two people are experienced repeatedly. Thus, it is important to understand that an interaction that involves confession, validation and mutual sharing may ignite intimacy, but this intimacy may not be sustained unless the steps in the process of intimacy are frequently followed and repeated (Reis et al, 1988).

There were numerous moments throughout the series where commenters responded to prompts with personal stories or thoughts. I aimed to reply to these comments in a supportive, inquisitive, or appreciative manner. The images below illustrate this attempt.

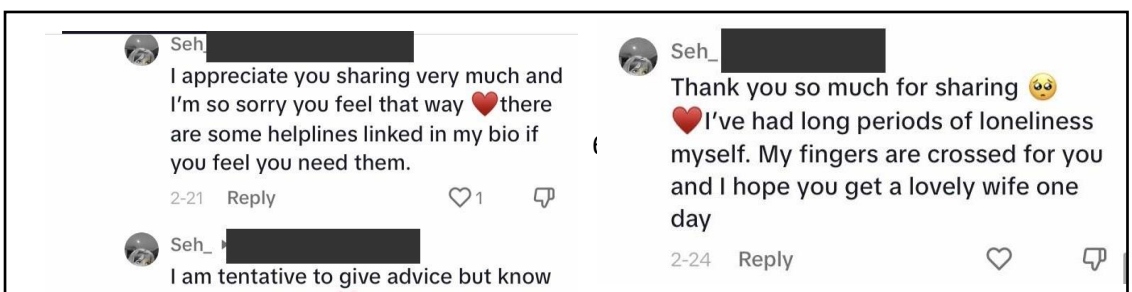

Figure 22: Screenshot of @I_ want_to_talk_ to_ you23's response to viewer's comments

As Reis and Shaver explain, the potential for intimacy is heightened when both the confessant and the listener feel welcome to participate in self-revelation. Reis and Shaver assert that intimacy can still be established even if only one individual confesses, however, it is important that both individuals feel invited to confess (Reis et al, 1988). From the comments I gained throughout the series, I believe that the many participants felt welcomed to confess, thus, achieving a vital prerequisite for the development of intimacy.

The other Storytimes included in the series concerned various topics relevant to my time as a university student. All the Storytimes posted to the series were acts of confession and adhered to the defining features of confessional performance including the concern for personalism. Like confessional performance, my Storytimes often included sensitive subject matters. However, some Storytime's, albeit confessional, were considerably light-hearted.

In one video, which I have labelled the "WAM Story" reflected on an embarrassing experience from my second year of university where I revealed that I stole leftover food in the Wits Arts Museum café and got caught. This video can be accessed through the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7208528849393503494?_r=1&_t=8fz4NDEh9Tp

Those who commented on this video acknowledged the embarrassment of this moment in a playful manner. Other viewers decided to playfully support my behaviour finding a positive outlook to the story.



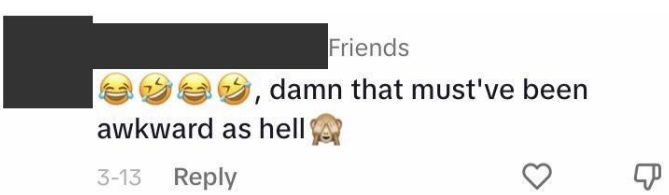

Figure 23: Screenshot of a comment left under 'WAM Story' posted by @I_want_to_talk_to_you23

Figure 24: Screenshot of a comment left under 'WAM Story' in the TikTok series @I_want_to_talk_to_you23

Sharing an embarrassing but arguably funny moment with strangers felt as if I was partaking in communal laughter. This in turn fostered a sense of community.

In another video, which I have named 'Stage Fright', I revealed an embarrassing moment from a first-year performance where I forgot a line on stage. In the caption of this video, I invite my viewers to share their own embarrassing stories. I received a few comments on the video, with some commenters revealing embarrassing stories about themselves that would be considered taboo. Like my first Storytime video, those who shared their own stories in the comment section of this video were not familiar with me offline and some of them did not follow me. Still, they proved to be comfortable enough to share their own embarrassing stories. This video and the comments left under the video can be accessed through the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207038910571023621?_r=1&_t=8fz4GhKu1OI

Arguably, other Storytimes within the series referenced more serious subject matter. In a Get Ready With Me video I have labelled 'I am glad that I exist', I introduced sensitive and arguably taboo subject matters.

This video can be accessed through the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207854630389271813?_r=1&_t=8fz4KHt1Bpt

The subject matter included in this video is commonly considered taboo or triggering. For this reason, verbal and written trigger warnings were posted alongside the video and toll-free

numbers offering mental health support were posted in the caption of the video. The sensitive subject matter included in the video addressed my experience with disordered eating and self-harm during my undergraduate studies. The video reflected on a moment in my life that I found particularly shameful. Therefore, publicly sharing this experience induced feelings of anxiety. I expressed in my research journal "feelings of nakedness and hypervisibility". Simultaneously, I experienced feelings of self-forgiveness and liberation. To post this video and feel a sense of relief after posting this video, I needed to find a sense of acceptance. Acceptance of both my past and my confession itself. This acceptance offered me a kind of catharsis. My feelings of acceptance were strengthened after receiving supportive and kind comments from TikTok viewers.



Figure 25: Screenshot of comments left under 'Stage Fright' posted by @I_want_to_talk_to_you23

The video received 540 views, 41 likes and 7 comments. Although only 7,5 % of TikTokers who viewed the video liked the video, and only 1% of these viewers commented on the video, the fact that three of the commenters were dedicated followers of the series who provided consistent and encouraging responses to videos engendered a sense of felt intimacy with these followers. I suggest that my heightened sense of vulnerability strengthened my perception of intimacy with my followers. Furthermore, by adhering to Reis and Shaver's process of intimacy as well as my autoethnographic response, the intimacy I experienced with these commenters was not simply roused by my personal confession, but through consistent support and validation from dedicated followers of the series, initiated by self-revelation.

In the twenty-third video posted to the series, which I have labelled 'Loneliness', I addressed the loneliness I experience as a postgrad student. This video, as well as the comments left under this video, can be accessed through the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7211170477904071941?_r=1&_t=8fz6XzwZyC5

In this video, I speak about the isolation I sometimes succumb to and admit to spending most of my life in my bed. I couldn't help but cry in this video. This video received 37 likes, slightly higher than the mean number of likes for the series, which was calculated to be 28 likes. However, it received a large number of comments when compared to the average number of comments from the series.

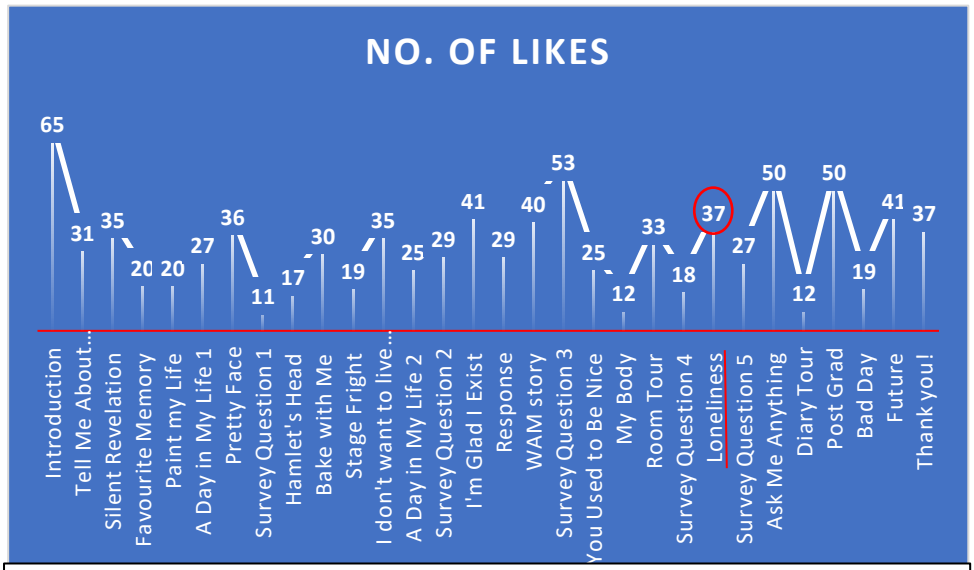

Figure 26 Graph depicting the number of likes 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received

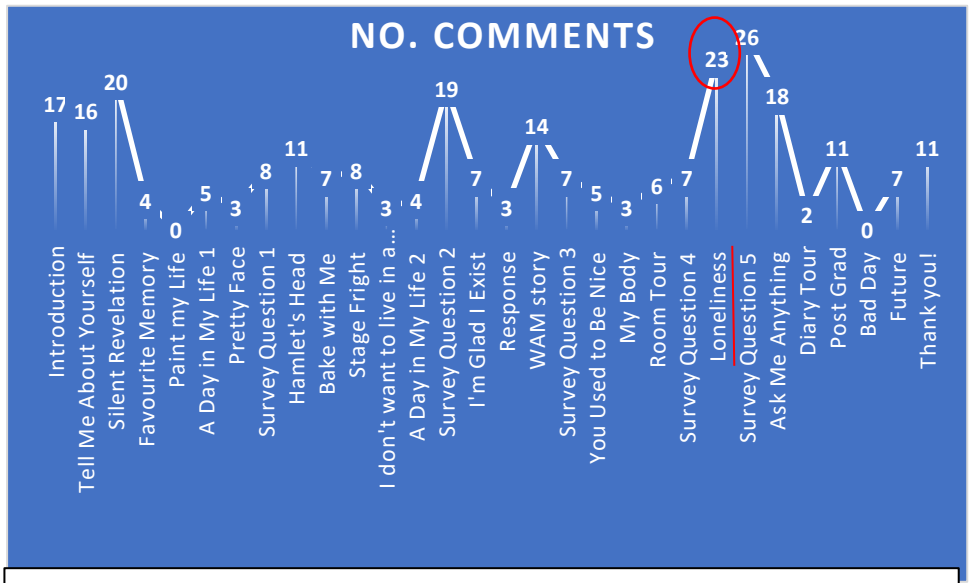

Figure 27: Graph depicting the number of comments 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

I suggest the reason for gaining a larger number of comments from this video stems from the authentic emotions displayed in the video, as well as the relatable subject matter included. Many of the comments left under this video were empathetic, with one viewer assuring me that "it will get better". The comments left under this video revealed that the feeling of loneliness, especially the feeling of loneliness as a young adult, is a relatable experience for many. Joe, who has commented on numerous videos within the series, used the comment section of this video to sympathize with me and share his own experience. Joe commented:

> *This actually brought some tears as I can't stand it. I'm exactly the same as you it appears. I have friends, but none that's true friends…* In another comment on the same video, Joe extends support to me commenting *I'll do my best to listen and help where I can for as long as you need, you are not alone.*

Receiving Joe's account of his experience with loneliness sparked a great feeling of empathy from me. In this moment, Joe and I laid bare our confession. Inevitably, this moment facilitated and encouraged intimacy. This brief moment of intimacy established between Joe and I developed as the series progressed.

'Loneliness' also prompted two viewers to adopt a therapist role. Promptly after having posted this video, I received two comments from viewers suggesting that I suffer from ADHD. One of these viewers also sent me a private DM suggesting that I have ADHD and that I may be on the autism spectrum. It is important to note that I did not know these viewers personally, in fact, they only started following me once the series had begun. Therefore, it is fair to assume that these followers are only familiar with the content I have posted online. Although these viewers seemingly offered this advice out of their goodwill, they reflect a possibly negative aspect of intimate sharing online. TikTok, as Andreas Schellewald explains, is a platform typically considered 'comfortable' by both the user and the viewer (Schellewald, 2021). Additionally, as Terry argues, confessional performance has the potential to situate audiences as close friends of the performer, a relationship that is frequently understood as comfortable. Therefore, it is unsurprising that viewers interacting with confessional content on TikTok feel comfortable enough to not only respond with support but advice. Suggesting that an individual may be dealing with a condition similar to one's own experiences can prove to be beneficial in some scenarios.

The article *TikTok's sick-role subculture and what to do about it* by Jane Harness and Hayley Getzen, explains that the public disclosure of mental health struggles and disorders may

contribute to the de-stigmatization of these disorders (Getzen et al, 2022). Furthermore, in some instances, suggesting that a creator might have a certain disorder may prove accurate and may prompt this creator to seek advice from medical professionals. However, the chances of a viewer misdiagnosing a stranger on TikTok are high. I have never been diagnosed with ADHD and, according to health professionals, I am not on the autism spectrum. Feelings of loneliness and social anxiety, the topic of conversation in this specific video, is a common experience amongst young adults whether they are neurotypical or neurodivergent. Furthermore, Getzen and Harness also highlight the popularity of mental health topics on TikTok amongst the youth. Getzen and Harness point to the possible danger involved in the frequency of discussion concerning mental illness and mental disorders on social media, specifically TikTok (Getzen et al, 2022). They explain that young social media users, especially TikTok users, have the potential and tendency to romanticize mental illness and disorders (Getzen et al, 2022: 351). Getzen and Harness explain that the support that TikTok creators receive from their viewers when they post content concerning mental illness and disorders may encourage them to 'perform' their symptoms for popularity and viewers' sympathy (Getzen et al, 2022: 351). The danger involved in adopting TikTok as a platform to discuss mental health is not limited to TikTok creators. Getzen and Harness elucidate that TikTok influencers, or TikTok creators with a large following, have great influence over their viewers' behaviours and opinions concerning their mental health. Therefore, influencers have the potential to affect viewers in healthy or unhealthy manners (Getzen et al, 2022: 351).

I suggest that the 'sick-role subculture' that Getzen and Harness identify in their article is supported by the presence of confessional content on the platform and the ability that this platform has to connect users to strangers who share similar interests. Furthermore, I hypothesize that the presence of intimacy and *communitas*, imagined or otherwise, may encourage TikTok creators and viewers alike to provide mental health diagnoses to their followers or their beloved creators. I suggest that perceived emotional bonds as a result of numerous intimate interactions between TikTok creators and viewers may establish a strong trust between these viewers. This sense of trust can lead users to seriously consider mental health advice offered by TikTok creators or viewers. The establishment of safety and trust amongst users on TikTok can be intensified by elements of *communitas* available on TikTok and encouraged by confessional content on the platform. This is because a notable risk of *communitas*, proposed by Roger Sandall (2011), is its potential to generate mass hysteria. The 'sick- culture' discussed by Harness and Getzen can be an example of online mass hysteria.

Vlogging as a form of confession.

Vlogs invite viewers to pay witness to the daily activities of content creators. A vlog, which refers to a video blog, is a video that documents an extended moment from a content creator's life. Vlogs typically outline activities that a content creator will experience within one day, however, it is common for vlogs to record significant activities over a week or weekend. Vlog's rise in popularity began on the video platform YouTube and is also a popular form of content creation on TikTok. *You Are Known by How You Vlog: Personality Impressions and Nonverbal Behaviour on YouTube*, an article written by Joan Biel, Oya Aran and Daniel Gatica-Perez, emphasizes the involvement of self-expression in the act of vlogging (Aran et al, 201: 446). The act of self-expression typically embedded in vlogs repeatedly lends itself to confession.

Using TikTok user @georgeamiee, as addressed in Chapter 2, as a reference, I embraced vlogs as a form of confession within my TikTok series. Like Storytimes, filming vlogs lends an illusion of company. As I film a vlog I feel as if I am inviting someone to 'share' my day with me. Every activity I deem significant was filmed and posted in the hopes that someone will pay witness to 'a day in my life'. The vlogs posted within the series depicted arguably uneventful, mundane days in my life. These vlogs were also filmed on considerably lonely days, where socialization was minimal. Filming a vlog on a day when little to no socialization occurred alleviated feelings of loneliness. Although I did not speak when filming vlogs, I was compelled to imagine myself talking through my actions of the day. Imagining myself describing and verbally sharing my day provides a heightened illusion of intimacy, albeit intimacy with an imagined companion. What I imagined saying when filming the vlog was later recorded in a voice-over at the end of the day and included in the video. These voice notes explained the activities of my day and also provided the opportunity to express my feelings and opinions.

Although filming a vlog provided a sense of imagined intimacy, which eased feelings of loneliness, it also influenced my behaviour and mannerisms. Whilst journaling about my experience of filming a vlog, I wrote that I feel as if 'I am performing my life instead of simply living it' (See page 106). I note the heightened self-design inevitable when filming yourself throughout the day. I could not avoid adjusting my mannerisms, my facial expression and my posture when filming myself. Often I would purposefully occupy certain

spaces in my home and garden because they offered better lighting for filming. At times I found myself partaking in activities that I would not have done if I had not been filming myself. Therefore, the vlog no longer documented my day but rather directed it. Therefore, I considered vlogging as an invasive form of content creation, where mundane and usually private aspects of my day are documented for public view. Although this form of confessional content offered me the satisfaction of an illusioned company, it also offered me hyper-surveillance over myself. The frequency with which I filmed myself and my confessions provided an often unhealthy and self-concerned perspective of myself. This is something which I believe hinders the creation of community and, therefore, *communitas* and intimacy with others on the platform.

Due to the limitations I felt when involving confession in vlogs, I also included videos that involve elements of both confessional Storytimes as well as vlogs. These videos were confessional in nature but could not occupy a specific label. Under this unlabelled category, I included videos which filmed me engaging in a daily routine or partaking in an activity such as baking. Afterwards, voiceovers were added to the videos. Unlike vlogs, these voice notes did not directly reference the activity filmed but rather reflected on an experience or feeling largely irrelevant to what is visually taking place in the video. For example, the tenth video in the series, 'Bake With Me' saw me bake ginger biscuits. The video visually documented the entire process of making the biscuits, however, the audio uploaded with the video only briefly referenced the baking process. Rather, the audio reflected on my relationship with the friends I made during university. The visual elements included in the video were not random but referenced information provided in the voiceover.

To elaborate, I did not aimlessly choose to document the act of baking. The recipe used in the video is one I acquired from a friend whom I mention in the video. In this way, I simply chose the visual aspect of the video to support the spoken element of the video. Thus, the verbal confession was prioritized in the video. In the caption of this video, I ask my viewers to "tell me about their friends". Two viewers replied to this video, with one user providing three comments explaining their relationship with their friends. Although the number of commenters for this video was low, these commenters seemed comfortable sharing their own experiences, perhaps because I too engaged in a moment of confession.

I followed a similar format for self-expression in the twenty-seventh video posted within the series, which I have named 'Post Grad'. In this video, I spoke about my experience as a

postgraduate student and the most difficult aspects of the degree I have encountered thus far. Like ‘Bake with Me’, the visual elements are not irrelevant to the voiceover incorporated into the video but do not take precedence over the verbal confession. Instead, it acts as a way to support the content delivered in the verbal confession. This video, like ‘Bake with Me’ saw viewers comment detailed personal reflections about their time as young adults. Within the caption of the video, I asked viewers “How do you/ did you feel in your early 20’s?” Joe, a dedicated viewer of this series, presented a comprehensive revelation about his time as a young adult and the struggles he faces socially. He states:

> *It was freedom for me as I was done with school as I hated it immensely, studies tour guide and learning what I could on the net. So, the 1st part of the 20s was fun, but the second half was hard and it’s still getting harder. It’s so awful to struggle to make good friends as I don’t drink or smoke, don’t party or hang at pubs, plus I lived and still do live 30km outside of towns. Plus I’m quite shy, and social awkward* (‘Joe, 2023)

Although this format seemed to encourage viewers to participate in self-expression, the reason for this self-revelation may be more strongly attributed to the subject matter explored in the video and who views the video. The viewer insight TikTok affords its creators revealed that 63% of views attained from this video came from individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.

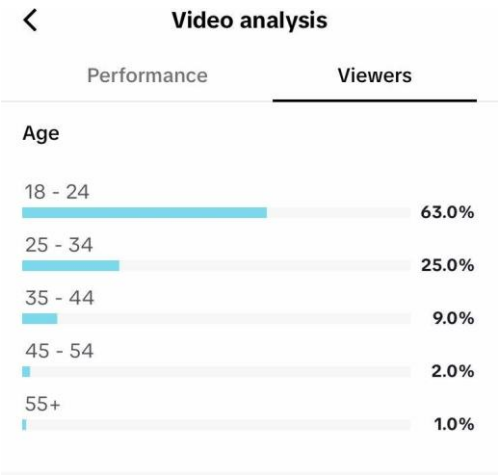

Figure 28: Screenshot depicting the age demographic of @I_want_to_talk_to_you23’s viewers

I observe in my research journal that the topics of loneliness and the uncertainty felt as a young adult seemed to acquire many personal reflections from viewers. Although this may be attributed to the focus on young adult experiences within my content, it is important to note that young adults are situated within the predominant demographic of users on TikTok and this plays a significant role in this phenomenon (Kennedy, 2020).

My relationship with TikTok viewers.

As my series progressed, I began recognizing familiar usernames in my comment section. By the end of the series, I was able to recall, by name, viewers who I considered having initiated intimacy with. This perceived intimacy was developed by repeatedly initiating and continuing the process of intimacy, mainly by engaging with viewers in the comment section of my videos and occasionally in direct messages on TikTok. Although the series was confessional and, thus, partly self-concerned, I was able to learn a considerable amount from my viewers. Joe, who has given me written consent to reference him in this paper, is one individual who openly shared his own stories and experiences in the comment section of my videos. Numerous viewers shared openly in the comment section but none as frequently as Joe. For this reason, I became acquainted with Joe. Near the end of the series, Joe sent me a direct message on TikTok explaining more information about himself and his feelings towards my confessional series. Since the series ended Joe and I have kept in touch and regularly 'check in' with one another. Consequently, I consider Joe a friend of mine. Furthermore, Joe has received more personal information about me than most of my frequent acquaintances and some of my friends. In turn, I know more information about Joe than I know about said acquaintances. I suggest the reason that Joe and I formed this bond is due to the loneliness we both admit to experiencing. As Joe has expressed, he found the confessional series significantly relatable and the topic of loneliness raised in the series may have prompted him to share his own experience with loneliness. This intimate friendship that Joe and I have established is a testament to the potential TikTok has in fostering intimacy amongst viewers. Although Joe and I may grow apart in the passing years, this does not invalidate the intimacy we shared during the series and the emotional comfort it provided during that period.

Multiple factors nurtured this relationship between Joe and I. Firstly, As Terry explains, confessional performance can position the audience as close friends of the performer (Terry,

2006). Additionally, TikTok, the platform chosen for this confessional performance, aids in connecting audiences (or viewers) with performers. As the series discovered, once the confessional performance was posted for viewers to watch, these viewers then had the potential to contact me, the performer, by leaving a response in the comment section of the confessional video, sending me a direct message, or adopting the various sociotechnical features available on the platform. The opportunities for viewers to connect with content creators on TikTok are typically not available to audiences watching a confessional performance in a live, in-person theatre setting. Although Joe did not stitch or duet any of my videos, he frequently contacted me through the comment section and direct messages. In most confessional performances and theatre experiences, this level of correspondence would not be feasible, as an avenue for communication outside of the performance is not readily available.

Although the act of self-revelation, as well as TikTok itself, contributed to the act of confession completed by both the confessional performer and the viewer, the engagement that happened between Joe and I was rare when compared to the engagement between most of the viewers of the series and myself. Like Joe, numerous viewers of the TikTok series used the comment section to share their own thoughts, feelings, or experiences. For example, the ninth video posted to the series, 'Hamlet's Head', was a reading of a poem I wrote in the first year of my studies. After reading the poem I ask my viewers if they would like to share their writing. One viewer considered this invitation and shared their poetry in the comment section. In 'Future', the second last video of the series, I expressed my concern for my future and a viewer expressed their own concern. These viewers not only validated my confession, beginning the intimacy process but also partook in their own self-revelation, allowing this process of intimacy to continue. However, the moment of intimacy that was established was fleeting and an intimate relationship could not be formed.

Although I feel I only formed one friendship during the series, I did feel that a sense of community was beginning to develop. Joe was the only viewer who provided in-depth and frequent comments during the series, however, many viewers of the series were consistently supportive throughout, even if they chose to keep their testimony to a minimum. Receiving communication from a group of consistent viewers encouraged me to view these users as a community. However, these viewers are likely unaware of the community's existence. This is because the correspondence that took place within the series existed between me and the viewers and not between the viewers themselves. Although some viewers' comments

received likes, no comment left under a video within the series received a response from other viewers. I began to regard my viewers as a collective community but I am doubtful they perceived themselves as such. By positioning myself as a viewer in the first half of my research I can confirm that even when I felt a sense of intimacy with a specific content creator, such as Lana Saint Clair, those who commented on her videos, expressing their felt intimacy towards her, bared little to no significance to me outside of research. It is unlikely that true *communitas* can exist if it is only experienced by one member of a community.

Survey

To further investigate my viewers' opinions regarding both community and intimacy, I dedicated five videos within the series to an informal TikTok survey. In these videos, I asked my audience why they decided to download TikTok, when they chose to download the app, how it has changed their everyday activities, whether they feel they form part of a TikTok community and whether they feel close to any TikTok creator on the platform. These questions were also asked during TikTok Lives, which occurred four times throughout the series. This survey contributed to the study by assessing users' expectations of the platform, how the platform may shape their social interactions, their experiences of community belonging and whether a sense of emotional closeness is felt. All these discoveries aid in assessing the presence or potential of intimacy and *communitas* on TikTok.

By considering responses attained from both the videos and the live sessions, a common reason viewers downloaded TikTok was due to simple curiosity. An additional reason repeated by numerous viewers was their desire for distraction. Two viewers referenced a strong desire for distraction after considerable emotional pain. None of the reasons given referenced the desire for community or connection with others. This video can be accessed via the link below:

> https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7205579155906268422?_r=1&_t=8fz47YZcpa2

When asked how TikTok has influenced their day today, only one viewer expressed receiving comfort from other creators on the platform, with most viewers regarding TikTok as a tool to

broaden their perspective and knowledge of the world. The responses to these two questions do not allude to intimacy or *communitas*. This video can be accessed via the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207811534976765190?_r=1&_t=8fz4KAX6eRy

However, when directly asked if they find themselves a part of a TikTok community, a mixed response was collected. Two viewers stated that they believe TikTok communities exist but they do not consider themselves a part of any. Two other viewers named the communities that they participate in. When I asked these viewers why they consider themselves a member of this community, I received no response. I infer from their response, as well as TikTok's explanation of community, that forming part of a community on TikTok means sharing a common interest with others and interacting with related content (TikTok, 2023). This video can be accessed via the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7211155423439768837?_r=1&_t=8fz6Wbv0C3h

It can be suggested that the notion of community on social media, specifically TikTok, requires its own definition. I suggest that even when viewers pay little attention to one another, they can still be considered as members of the same TikTok community. This is because these viewers, who may or may not have an acknowledged relationship with one another, feed a shared community by engaging with creators who can be considered spokespersons for these communities. Therefore, I argue that TikTok facilitates communities consisting of both passive and active members. However, the answers collected from this question do not confirm the presence of *communitas*. Although no sense of *communitas* was communicated by participants of the survey, a sense of community can still be beneficial to overall social satisfaction and well-being. These participants may not express a sense of siblingship, however, existing within a community can promote feelings of belonging.

The last question posed in the informal survey asked viewers whether they feel close to content creators on the platform. This video can be accessed via the link below:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7212284784586820870?_r=1&_t=8fz6Z35GItx

This question was posed in hopes of discovering whether viewers of the series felt a sense of intimacy with creators on the platform. Like the previous question, this inquiry seemed to

evoke a varied response from viewers. Two viewers explain that they feel close to TikTok creators and other viewers who return their attempts at communication. Joe explained that he feels that it is easier to connect to people online due to his social awkwardness. However, he also explained that although this connection is an easier one to establish, the lack of frequent engagement with those he has found a connection with makes the question difficult to answer. Two viewers expressed feeling a sense of connection to my content. One user pointed to the vulnerability apparent in the series as a reason for this connection. Two users denied the possibility of connection available on TikTok. One of these viewers explained that they feel TikTok live may offer a greater sense of connection between viewers and creators. This sentiment was reiterated by several viewers partaking in the TikTok Lives included in the series. These viewers explained that communication on TikTok live bears a closer resemblance to a conversation offline due to its immediacy. According to these responses, immediate communication seems to heighten the potential for intimacy. In my journal regarding the study, I note the effect that delayed posting has on feelings of intimacy. When it was possible, posting a confessional video shortly or even immediately after creating it provided a greater chance of experiencing an element of intimacy, as it more closely resembled the immediacy available in conversations offline.

TikTok Live:

Not only did TikTok Live offer immediacy, but it also allowed viewers to enact greater influence on the content delivered. Originally, TikTok Lives were to be used in the study as an opportunity for discussion concerning the survey questions. However, I found it very difficult to steer the conversation in the direction of answering these questions. Although a few viewers answered the survey, most viewers ignored the question and asked their own questions instead. I did not feel that ignoring these questions would adhere to the spirit of the study and, thus, allowed the viewers to dictate the topic of conversation, but I did refer to the question when I sensed a lapse in the conversation. Besides briefly answering the question, the topic of conversation varied immensely. Some viewers simply flirted with me, others used the Live as a chance to interview me and during one live session, viewers confessed intimate information about themselves. Often one viewer and I would have a conversation

while others simply watched. Although I regularly felt as if I was simultaneously entertaining many one-on-one conversations with multiple people, it was common for viewers to respond to one another. Occasionally I simply paid witness to viewers having their own conversation in the comment section of the Live. During these TikTok Lives, I was invited to join other creators Live's. Although these Live interactions with other creators were unfortunately very brief, primarily due to technical difficulties, the potential to have a live, spoken conversation with other creators is available and common on the platform. The immediacy that the TikTok Live offered, as well as the interaction between the viewers and myself, and amongst the viewers themselves, presents a higher potential for the development of both intimacy and community. Furthermore, the potential that viewers have in influencing the live interaction highlights an agency David Terry suggests is missing in confessional performances conducted within 'traditional western mainstream theatre'.

Critiquing Intimacy and *Communitas* on TikTok:

The TikTok series 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' and the live moments within the series presented both elements of intimacy and *communitas*. However, the research series, as well as the supporting desktop research, uncovered the parameters, limitations and dangers of intimacy and elements of *communitas* on the platform.

The intimacy I have identified on the platform is primarily established by and predicated on creators' and viewers' self-revelation, the sociotechnical features available on the platform as well as the specified algorithm that directs viewers' For You Page. Despite the feeling of trust, acceptance, and validation I experienced through communications with my followers, I must note that this experience is not a guarantee for all TikTok creators. Although I refrain from making definitive assertions in regard to this phenomenon, I speculate that the presence of the disclaimer in my account, outlining the research- orientated nature of the series and its potential to be examined by external parties might have deterred potential harassment, bullying, or general negativity from viewers. Furthermore, I hypothesize that elements such as physical appearances and audience demographics may significantly impact the nature comments received.

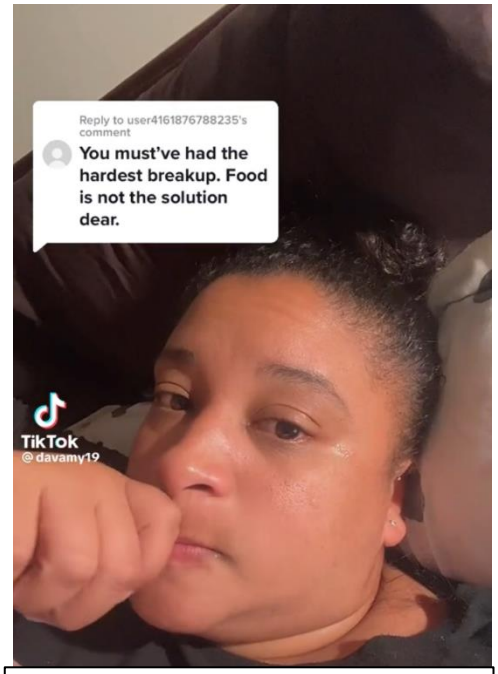

Figure 29: Screenshot of TikTok video: Davids, A. [@davamy19]. (2023, April 7). [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM26T7JD1/

A recent video created by popular South African TikTok creator @davamy19 or 'Amy D' illustrated the potential risk of self-revelation on the platform. On a video posted on the seventh of April 2023 Amy D, who has acquired 89 thousand followers since September 2023, posted a video referencing her recent breakup. The video includes short clips from her day. Later that day Amy D posted another video responding to a comment left under the first video which criticized her eating habits and her appearance. In the video, Amy D admits:

"I receive on the daily negative comments about the way that I look, comments on my videos, TikTok DMS (direct message), Instagram DMs, emails about my appearance".

The response Amy D received from her video is vastly different to the feedback that I received from my audience during the series. I do not use this example from Amy D's content to disprove the existence of intimacy on TikTok. Rather, I point to the dangers of public content creation, a danger that could be even more prevalent when considering confessional performance on the platform. Irem Sot's study, *Fostering Intimacy on TikTok: The platform that listens and creates a safe space*, proves that TikTok users often acknowledge TikTok as a 'safe space', a 'space' that encourages self-reflection and confession (Sot, 2022). This 'safe space' has the possibility of encouraging increasingly sensitive confessions from the creator. Further, this 'safe space' has the possibility of being fractured, introducing the creator's content to a new, unsupportive audience (Krutok, 2021).

When this happens, TikTok creators often admit that they have found themselves on the 'wrong side' of TikTok. The anonymity that TikTok often affords users, specifically those who do not partake in content creation, may encourage confession. However, this anonymity may also encourage hateful comments from users who believe they will receive little to no consequences for their online actions. The hateful comments that a content creator may receive may cause significantly more harm when they reference a confession that a creator finds particularly sensitive. Furthermore, the hate that a content creator may receive may

cause damage to their mental well-being, especially when they use their TikTok account for therapeutic means.

Both Terry's *Blind, Now Seeing the problematics of Confessional Performance* as well as Reis and Shaver's *Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process* assert that intimacy, or the initiation of intimacy, involves a considerable amount of risk. Reis and Shaver suggest that a negative response from the initiation of intimacy through self-disclosure may result in an expectation of rejection, which has the potential to discourage further self-revelation in other scenarios (Reis et al, 1988: 378). From my personal experience as a confessional TikTok creator, TikTok may foster a sense of intimacy which repeatedly, albeit temporarily, curbed a sense of loneliness. However, as Reis and Shaver explain, a feeling of loneliness can be reinforced when an attempt at intimacy is met with rejection or possibly 'hate' (Reis et al, 1988).

Besides supportive or unsupportive feedback from viewers on TikTok, content creators can also be met with a third possible form of feedback; silence. There are various reasons a confessional content creator on TikTok may receive little to no attention from viewers. One of these reasons could be due to TikTok's algorithmic concern for aesthetics. In 2020 it was revealed in a leaked internal moderation document that TikTok algorithmically punishes 'unattractive' and 'impoverished' content creators (Krutok, 2021: 4). Thus, TikTok creators who are not regarded as attractive to TikTok's ranking system may not receive the support that other 'attractive' creators may receive, leaving their moment of self-revelation possibly invalidated.

Even if a TikTok creator avoids hate, overcomes algorithmic punishment, and establishes intimacy, this intimacy often does not satisfy social needs in the same way that in-person 'face-to-face' communication can. Joe, the most dedicated of my followers during the series, admitted that although he finds online communication easier, his sense of loneliness has not been alleviated. Although at times I felt a sense of intimacy between my viewers throughout the series, at moments I also believed that daily confessional content creation distracted me from potential social interaction offline. Despite this, the presence of intimacy and its positive consequences exist on the platform, albeit as a diluted and sometimes illusionary definition of intimacy.

As well as intimacy, the presence of community on the platform can be strongly argued. Communities on the platform are sometimes referred to as 'sides' of TikTok or include the

term ‘Tok’ or ‘core’ in the community label, such as ‘Booktok’ and ‘Cottagecore’. These labels, as well as the sociotechnical features available on the platform, foster connection, and community development. However, the presence of *communitas*, by Victor Turner’s definition, is not perfectly realized on the platform.

It has been established that *communitas* is experienced during a period of liminality whereby social hierarchies are eradicated and total equality is achieved amongst a community of people (Sandall, 2011). Although the power dynamic between a performer and an audience member is reimagined on TikTok due to the sociotechnical features of the platform, social hierarchies are still present. The article *Social Hierarchy in Online Communities*, by Hayley Rodgers, explains that within online communities, influencers hold a superior position than other members of that community (Rodgers, 2021). Furthermore, Rodger identifies ‘currencies’ used in communities to attain a higher ranking within that community (Rodgers, 2021). This currency regularly takes the form of knowledge. Thus, individuals in the community who have more knowledge about that community’s interests may be awarded a higher ranking (Rodgers, 2021). According to Rodger, this form of currency is one of the most popular forms of currency within online communities, however, popularity, as well as perceived dedication to a community’s interests, can also exist as online currency (Rodgers, 2021).

Despite this, elements of *communitas* on the platform can be identified. Leticia Cesarino’s article How *Social Media Affords Populist Politics* suggests that social media allows a great sense of influence and assimilation amongst its users (Cesarino, 2020). The presence of influence on social media binds members of a community as a unit. This, according to Cesarino, affords an element of *communitas* as there exists not only shared interests but a shared sense of identity and collective. (Cesarino, 2020). Irem Sot’s study *Fostering Intimacy on TikTok: The platform that listens and creates a safe space* highlights another element of *communitas* on TikTok. Content creators interviewed in Irem Sot’s study explain feeling like a member of a family within their respective communities (Sot, 2022: 1495). Some TikTok creators interviewed in Sot’s study admit to positioning themselves as older siblings to their audience and community (Sot, 2022: 1499). The presence of ‘siblingship’ identified on the platform is also evident in Victor Turner’s imaginings of *communitas* (Bilu, 1988: 303). The presence of siblingship can create a sense of trust, care and belonging, all of which are beneficial to an individual’s social well-being (Reis et al, 1988). Additionally, siblingship may often strengthen influence on the platform. However, Sandall warns in *Dreams of*

Communitas, like intimacy, elements of *communitas*, can involve danger (Sandall, 2011). Although *communitas* can create a sense of belonging amongst members of a community, it may have the potential to reduce individual agency (Sandall, 2011). Furthermore, the dangers of influence on TikTok are most evident in Getzen and Harness's article *TikTok's Sick-role Subculture* (Getzen et al, 2022).

My studies' practical investigation, which took the form of a confessional TikTok series, identified the potential for intimacy and a limited essence of *communitas* on TikTok, as well as their consequences. The presence of intimacy and elements of *communitas* is encouraged by the confessional content available on the platform, the sociotechnical features available, and the communities sculpted by the TikTok algorithm. Although confessional content on the platform may foster some elements of both intimacy and *communitas*, certain social limitations and risks are evident. Although the consequences of intimacy and partial *communitas* on the platform could alleviate feelings of loneliness by developing a sense of belonging amongst TikTok communities, it also exposes content creators to the potential of hurtful comments from viewers. Therefore, TikTok can both nurture intimacy and elements of *communitas* as well as suppress it. Furthermore, it must be clarified that the intimacy and elements of *communitas* initiated on TikTok cannot surpass or replace the social benefits involved in face-to-face intimate relations and community gatherings. Despite these limitations and dangers, the research series is a testament to the potential for the creation of a supportive and occasionally intimate TikTok community, however temporary.

CONCLUSION:

Through a desktop, creative and autoethnographic research approach, my study investigated the potential that confessional content on TikTok has to develop a sense of intimacy and *communitas* amongst its young adult users. The desktop research aspect of the study aided in defining intimacy and *communitas* and how they positively contribute to the social wellbeing of young adults. Furthermore, through a desktop research approach, confessional performance was defined and analysed in relation to its ability to foster intimacy and *communitas*. TikTok users, namely Lana Saint Clair, Aimee George, and Madeline Argy, provided valuable examples of the forms that confessional performance adopts on the platform and illustrated the types of creator-viewer relationships typically found on the platform. An additional analysis of popular confessional TikTok trends enriched an understanding of confession on TikTok and illustrated the various tools on the platform that aids in user connection. Besides considering the confessional trends on the platform, identifying sociotechnical features on the platform provided insight into alternative user interaction and the avenues that the platform has available to it to foster community growth. The creative aspect of the study, which took the form of a confessional TikTok series, entitled 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me', highlighted the process of confessional content creation on TikTok from the perspective of a creator, exploring whether feelings of intimacy and a sense of *communitas* could be fostered. The series also invited viewers of the series to share their own experiences and stories, as well as their thoughts and feelings towards TikTok.

By reviewing the literature, confessional performance, intimacy and *communitas* were defined. It was concluded that confessional performance, which is characterized by personalism, the inclusion of sensitive subject matter and the act of self-design, is a potentially cathartic form of performance (Early et al, 2019). Alternatively, confessional performance was determined to be a form of performance and storytelling that involved a considerable amount of risk. Although the act of confession has the potential to initiate intimacy, it also involves a considerable amount of vulnerability (Reis et al, 1988). When this vulnerability is validated and cared for by the other party, intimacy is likely established. However, if this vulnerability is received negatively by the other party, it can be mentally and emotionally detrimental to the individual attempting to initiate intimacy, disrupting the process of building intimacy (Reis et al, 1988). However, intimacy, especially when constructed through confessional performance, presents its own set of risks. David Terry's

Once Blind Now Seeing explains how intimacy sustained through confessional performance may position audience members as close friends of the performer, therefore, reducing their agency within that performance, as only one party in the pseudo-friendship is afforded a voice (Terry, 2006).

Communitas is also a potential result of confessional performance. Like intimacy, *communitas* possesses its own risks. *Communitas* centres the ideals of community, siblingship, and a sense of belonging and refers to a moment of general bonding (Turner, 1969: 360). This social bonding may support loyalty. The social bonding and loyalty involved in *communitas* may enact a loss of audience agency through the influence of social modelling. These risks are not irrelevant on social media platforms like TikTok. Rather, the platform and the confessional content on the platform introduce new risks to TikTok users. These risks were determined by analysing the content of confessional TikTokers.

Lana Saint Clair, Aimee George and Madeline Argy are well-known TikTok creators whose content typically takes the form of confession. The analysis of these TikTok accounts aided in defining confessional performance on TikTok. More importantly, these examples provided insight into the relationship formed between confessional creators and their viewers on TikTok. By following Saint Clair, George, and Argy's content on TikTok diligently, personalism, the inclusion of sensitive subject matter and self-design were discovered in their confessional content. Content from these creators not only proved that not only highly personal sharing is a common practice on TikTok, but it is also exceptionally popular amongst viewers. This popularity is reflected through the number of views and likes the content gains and in the nature of the comments these videos acquire. The comments under videos created by the confessional creators in question suggest that followers of the creators deem their content relatable. This relatability is one possible reason confessional content on TikTok has become popular. This relatability also supports the friendly relationship between the creators and the viewers.

Although a relationship between the creator and their followers is present, the presence of intimacy and *communitas* between the two parties is arguable. According to Reis and Shaver, the process of intimacy begins with a moment of self-revelation and continues when this moment is validated by the other party (Reis et al, 1988). Essentially, for the process of intimacy to succeed, the initiation of the intimacy must be reciprocal. Therefore, intimacy on TikTok is instigated through confessional content, however, what constitutes reciprocation on

social media is arguable. Although simply liking a confessional video may qualify as reciprocation on TikTok, it is presented through an accumulation of numbers. A high number of likes acquired from posting confessional content may confirm that the confessional creator is seen, heard and, to a certain extent, supported. However, solely liking a confessional creator's content does little, or even nothing, to develop an interpersonal and intimate relationship between the creator and the viewer. Compared to liking a confessional video, the communication which occurs in the comment section of TikTok videos has a greater potential for fostering intimacy and an essence of *communitas*. Commenting on confessional content can extend beyond simply acknowledging the creator's story and could provide the creator with support, encouragement, and validation. Furthermore, viewers of the confessional content can choose to share their own stories in the comment section of the video. This element adheres to a vital requirement for the process of intimacy – the notion that intimacy can only be formed if both parties feel welcome to participate in self-revelation (Reis et al, 1988). Communication on TikTok can extend beyond commenting on confessional videos and can be facilitated through the sociotechnical features that the platform avails. These features include stitching, duetting, and tagging other creators, as well as utilizing the Q&A section on TikTok. These sociotechnical features allow users on the platform to verbally address other users. These elements support the development of intimacy by providing users with tools to connect to one another. Popular TikTok sounds are tools for self-expression on the platform and link creators by using the same sound and possibly the same trend on the platform. Therefore, creators who use a particular sound will have access to other videos using the same sound and expressing a similar experience. This network of shared experiences nurtures the potential for partial *communitas*.

Studying confessional content on TikTok proves that intimacy, albeit ephemeral or imagined, is present on the platform. However, although TikTok has the potential for intimacy and *communitas* to be developed, confessional content creation and communication which follows it still presents considerable risk to users. As confessional performance in front of a live, in-person audience positions the audience members as close friends of the performer, so confessional content on TikTok does the same. The risks involved in confessional performance are intensified on social media because the element of performance involved in confessional forms of TikTok, such as Storytimes and vlogs, remain largely undetected by viewers on the platform. Therefore, the noticeable critical distance that performance typically creates between the performer and audience member is disrupted by confessional

performance on TikTok. This sense of truth that confessional performance on TikTok constructs encourages viewers to trust the confessional creator. This is not necessarily a negative feature of confessional content, however, it does imply that users are more suspectable to influence.

Confessional TikTok creators are not excluded from risk on the platform. The relationship between creators and viewers, and the sense of trust constructed through confessional content creation, makes popular TikTok creators accountable to their followers. Additionally, the presence of a digital footprint remains a prevalent concern for creators on TikTok. A trusting environment or a 'safe space' developed on social media may encourage personal sharing online to escalate, thus, potentially affecting a creator's digital footprint. As a creator continues to share increasingly personal information, the boundary between public and private life is blurred. If viewers believe that a confessional creator has crossed this boundary, they might react negatively to a moment of confession and vulnerability. Consequently, this rejection may disrupt the potential for intimacy and *communitas*. Furthermore, Reis and Shaver explain that rejection experienced during vulnerable communication is likely to lead to feelings of humiliation which can affect future relationships. To exacerbate this feeling of rejection, the public nature of the confession and the realization that this confession might not be able to be removed from the internet might magnify feelings of rejection and humiliation for the confessor. Not only do popular confessional TikTok creators face psychological risks, but physical risks as well. Popular content creators on TikTok are susceptible to dangers such as stalking and confessional content creators may even be more vulnerable to stalking due to their ability to foster intimate moments online. Despite these risks, Irem Sot's study reveals that content creators on TikTok still regard the platform as a safe environment for self-revelation when compared to competing social media platforms such as Instagram (Sot, 2022:1501).

The experience of sharing confessional content online is further explored in a confessional TikTok series, titled 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me'. The series was designed to explore the prevalence of intimacy and *communitas* amongst young adult users from the point of view of a confessional content creator. This provided a first-hand and nuanced account of confessional content creation. I utilized content from Saint Clair, George, and Argy as vital references when creating the series. Although I had a preconceived outline for the TikTok series, a finalized script was never constructed and I spoke openly in most of my videos. Speaking freely about a particular topic as well as continuously documenting my

experience in a journal format revealed emotions and opinions that I did not consider before the series began, offering me insights into my own experiences. This compels me to acknowledge the act of confession, particularly confessional performance, as a medium for self-revelation. Furthermore, the series offered me a feeling of companionship and at times, intimacy, instigated by the initial act of confession. Although the sense of intimacy is both fleeting and largely imagined, it does offer brief emotional comfort and the alleviation of loneliness. This sense of intimacy is sustained when the moment of confession is validated by viewers who comment on the confessional video.

Although TikTok users who commented on my content do not know me personally offline, their comments often contained their own personal and, sometimes embarrassing, experiences. Receiving these kinds of comments on videos that saw me partake in a moment of self-revelation provided me with a sense of support. This form of interaction and communal confession continued the process of intimacy and established a community that was visible from the perspective of the creator. The feeling of intimacy experienced in reciprocated moments of confession was extended when this occurrence happened repeatedly. This can be seen in the relationship developed between me, the TikTok creator, and Joe, a follower of the series. Like most of my followers, Joe did not know me before the start of the series, yet he continuously supported and responded to my content within the confessional series. Joe's continuous contribution and sharing fostered the process of intimacy and is a testament to the possibility of intimate online friendships. However, it is important to note that this was the only lasting friendship gained from the series. This does not invalidate moments of confession experienced with other followers of the series, however, it does suggest that lasting intimacy on the platform is rare. Although I only sustained an interpersonal relationship with Joe, as the series continued, I felt as if a community was beginning to form as a result of the series. However, according to the comments I received during the series, the followers of the series were not aware of this perceived community, as they did not interact with one another. Communities on TikTok may exist, such as BookTok and DanceTok, however, I cannot confidently confirm that the confessional series in question developed a sense of community or *communitas*.

Besides posting confessional content, I used TikTok Lives as an opportunity to speak to my viewers. TikTok Lives afforded a sense of immediacy that more closely resembled in-person conversation. Furthermore, TikTok viewers seemed to have a greater opportunity to enact agency during live moments when compared to typical pre-recorded TikTok videos. This is

because the TikTok viewers were able to direct the flow of conversation during the live, instead of simply responding to it. Unlike the comment section of my videos, viewers participating in the 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' lives regularly interacted with one another, sometimes instigating a conversation that does not involve me, the creator. Thus, I suggest that TikTok live sessions offer a greater opportunity to foster a sense of community among viewers compared to standard TikTok video posts.

'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' cultivated some intimacy and to a smaller degree *communitas*. Although I assert that this intimacy and *communitas* exist on TikTok, I note that lasting intimacy, one that can develop into an intimate and socially satisfying relationship is rare on the platform. I conclude that *communitas* is not as readily accessible on the platform, however, elements of *communitas* such as a sense of belonging, community and bonding through shared lived experiences can be seen in the confessional TikTok series and other user interactions on the platform. Intimacy, even if experienced briefly, and *communitas* both contribute to higher levels of social satisfaction (Reis et al, 1988). Furthermore, experiences of intimacy and *communitas* both prevent and ease feelings of loneliness (Reis et al, 1988). During the series, I received no negative comments and the negative response I experienced was reflected in the reduction of views and likes a particular video received. Despite any low number of likes, I seemed to have discovered a safe space for self-revelation on TikTok. I also believe to have facilitated a safe space for TikTok users who have shared similar experiences to mine to share their own thoughts and stories. Despite this perceived safe space, the danger of self-revelation online remains prevalent. Although I have not received any negative attention from my confessions on TikTok, the content is available for anyone on the internet to view and consequently open to critique. This danger is not only relevant to me but my followers who partake in self-revelation as well.

My experience creating and sharing this confessional series proved that this danger is not the only negative aspect of online personal sharing. An additional negative aspect experienced during the series includes the vulnerability felt because of continuous personal documentation. Although daily documentation, particularly vlogging, provided me with a satisfying experience of illusioned companionship, it also interrupted my day, isolating me from my daily experiences and distracted me from potential social interactions offline. *Social media and loneliness – Forever connected?*, a study by Ariel University School of Education, explains that intensive social media use typically leads to a decline in face-to-face interaction amongst close friends and family (Davidovitch, 2019: 11). Although other studies

such as *Don't put all social network sites in one basket: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and their relations with well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic* suggest that active social media use may increase social wellbeing, they are specifically referring to individuals geographically and physically distanced from their peers (Bourguignon, 2021). Furthermore, they do not suggest that the sense of well-being that social media may afford users can compete with in-person interactions.

Besides these negative aspects mentioned, I question the monetization of confession, intimacy and a sense of community that could occur on a social media platform like TikTok. If this study were to be extended, the role of capitalism and its influence on social media platforms would be a valuable point of inquiry. Furthermore, the effect that influencer marketing has on the understandings of intimacy and *communitas* provides a pertinent area of exploration. The looming presence of social media and influencer marketing may position intimacy and *communitas* as tools for monetization instead of tools for social connection and well-being. Alternatively, the use of self-design for the purposes of attracting financial gain may present an obstacle to the development of intimacy defined by Reis and Shaver, and *communitas* as introduced by Victor Turner. The monetization of intimacy and *communitas* is an existing concern. As Jaron Lanier states in the Netflix documentary The Social Dilemma:

> We've *created a world in which online connection has become primary, especially for younger generations, and yet in that world, anytime two people connect the only way it's financed is through a sneaky third person who is paying to manipulate those people. So, we've created an entire global generation of people who were raised within a context with the very meaning of communication and the very meaning of culture is manipulation.* (Lanier, 2020).

This manipulation that Lanier speaks of impacts the experience of intimacy and *communitas*, how individuals understand these concepts in the context of online communication and the online dangers that intimacy and *communitas* may contribute to. Interrogating these concerns presents a crucial step towards discovering and fostering mentally and socially beneficial forms of connection during an age where online sharing is a primary form of communication.

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Appendix A

Link to google drive containing videos from 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' :

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1lD-BzSeUXjxmFr02RQ3q68X33Y-2gamc?usp=drive_link

List of 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' videos with links:

1. Introduction: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7202143763391696134?_r=1&_t=8fz3tuKZFMD
2. Tell me about yourself: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7202577988750265605?_r=1&_t=8fz3ux5Q6Hm
3. Silent Revelation: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7202675015676906757?_r=1&_t=8fz3zVCyM7x
4. Favourite Memory: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7203040751721172229?_r=1&_t=8fz42X0bP5q
5. Paint my Life https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7203206696028638469?_r=1&_t=8fz43pdWjET
6. A Day in My Life: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7204501681508207878?_r=1&_t=8fz44nKPvJm
7. Pretty Face: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7205290902129036550?_r=1&_t=8fz45W9uyOr
8. Survey Question 1: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7205579155906268422?_r=1&_t=8fz47YZcpa2
9. Hamlet's Head: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7206039569341418758?_r=1&_t=8fz4Epjci9e
10. Bake with Me: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7206274799310474502?_r=1&_t=8fz4EhyoQCc
11. Stage Fright: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207038910571023621?_r=1&_t=8fz4GhKu1OI
12. I don't want to live in a hole anymore: https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207124120444620037?_r=1&_t=8fz4HnvsTN0
13. Day in My Life (2): https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207479122728160517?_r=1&_t=8fz4Jj1ipl7
14. Survey Question 2:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207811534976765190?_r=1&_t=8fz4KAX6eRy

15. I'm Glad I exist:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207854630389271813?_r=1&_t=8fz4KHt1Bpt
16. Response:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7207861845703576838?_r=1&_t=8fz4MsmRoCk
17. WAM story:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7208528849393503494?_r=1&_t=8fz4NDEh9Tp
18. Survey Question 3:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7208943278505446662?_r=1&_t=8fz4NuYWuww
19. You used to be nice:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7209931516441756 22?_r=1&_t=8fz6RHvCSmb
20. My Body:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7210668403328158982?_r=1&_t=8fz6UcffWsf
21. Room Tour:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7210751528909425926?_r=1&_t=8fz6V69hdTi
22. Survey Question 4:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7211155423439768837?_r=1&_t=8fz6Wbv0C3h
23. Loneliness:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7211170477904071941?_r=1&_t=8fz6XzwZyC5
24. Survey Question 5:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7212284784586820870?_r=1&_t=8fz6Z35Gitx
25. Ask me Anything:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7212652849208052998?_r=1&_t=8fz6a1HM4JS
26. Diary Tour:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7212860661267811589?_r=1&_t=8fz6bipGkSL
27. Post Grad:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7212955683682045189?_r=1&_t=8fz6d6FOIZK
28. Bad Day:
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7213056285552528645?_r=1&_t=8fz6dBpiurV
29. Future:

https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7213059568673377541?_r=1&_t=8fz6elHF6Xu

30. Thank You
https://www.tiktok.com/@i_want_to_talk_to_you_23/video/7213061633277496581?_r=1&_t=8fz6ginERb4

Appendix B

Analytics (Last Updated September 2023)

The information below provides the numerical results from the research series. This section organizes these results in the form of graphs and tables and is referenced in chapter three of this paper.

Follower insight:

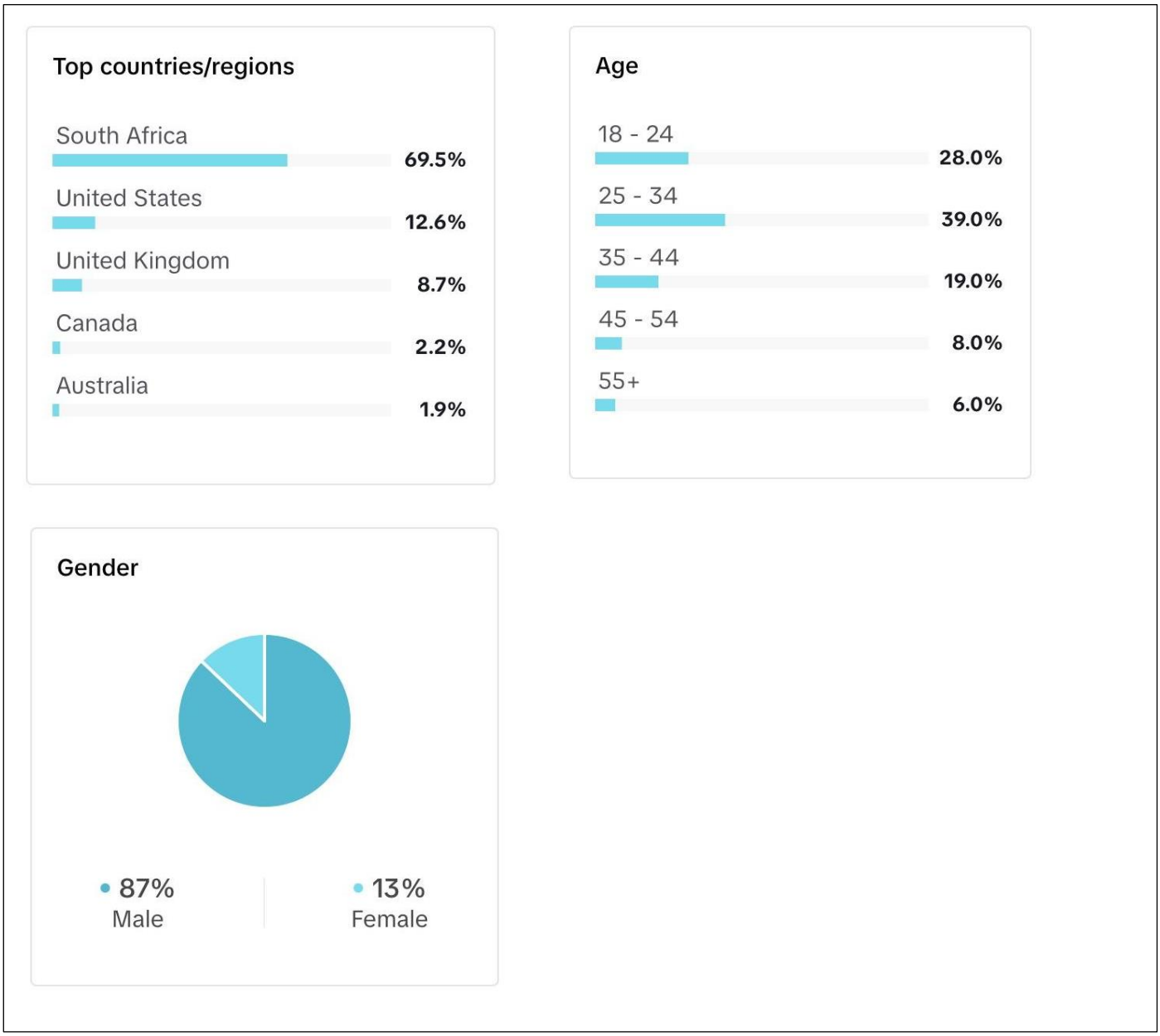

Figure 15: Screenshot of @I_want_to_talk_to_you23's follower demographics

This table outlines each video, what type of video it is, the subject matter included in the video, and the number of views, likes and comments each video received.

Table A
'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' video data: Content Description and Engagement

	Title of Video	Subject matter	No. Views	No. Likes	No. comments
1	Introduction [Informative]	Introduction to research series	729	65	17
2	Tell me about yourself [Get Ready With Me]	Facts about myself with getting ready for my day	550	31	16
3	Silent Revelation	Video filmed in silence, non-verbal display on emotion	325	35	20
4	Favourite Memory [Response to question left in Q&A]	My favourite memory from undergrad	466	20	4
5	Paint My Life [AI trend]	AI paints me and messy parts of my bedroom.	308	20	0
6	A Day in My Life (1) [Vlog]	The happenings of my day	514	27	5
7	Pretty Face [Storytime]	Perception of my appearance during undergrad	486	36	3
8	Survey Question 1 [Survey]	Why did you download TikTok?	292	11	8
9	Hamlet's Head [Confessional Poetry]	A poem I wrote in undergrad about boredom and lack of life satisfaction	419	17	11
10	Bake With Me [Baking vlog and Storytime]	Reflection on friendships from undergrad	457	30	7
11	Stage Fright [Storytime]	Embarrassing story about forgetting a line on stage.	373	19	8

12	‘I don’t want to live in a hole anymore’ [Confessional Trend]	Revelation about my experience of anxiety	343	35	3
13	Day in My Life (2) [Vlog]	Happenings of my day	474	25	4
14	Survey Question 2 [Survey]	How has TikTok influenced your day to day?	301	29	19
15	I’m glad I exist	Mental Health struggles and personal improvement	540	41	7
16	Response [Response to question left in comment section]	Responding to the question : “Why did you download TikTok?”	351	29	3
17	WAM story [Storytime]	Embarrassing story about stealing left over food in WAM	586	40	7
18	Survey Question 3	When did you download TikTok?	463	53	7
19	You used to be Nice [Confessional Trend]	Negative self-worth	336	25	5
20	My Body		207	12	3
21	Room Tour	Showing different things in my bedroom	517	33	6
22	Survey Question 4 [Survey]	Do you feel like you’re part of a TikTok community?	307	18	7
23	Loneliness [Storytime]	My experience with loneliness now having completed undergrad studies	422	37	23
24	Survey Question 5 [Survey]	Do you feel close to other TikTokers?	373	27	26
25	Ask Me Anything	A ‘Heads up’ for the research series ending soon.	576	50	18

26	Diary Tour	Showing my person visual diary to viewers	205	12	2
27	Post Grad [Storytime]	Loneliness and anxiety experienced during postgrad	501	50	11
28	Bad Day [Response to question from Q&A section]	Responding to question asking me how I deal with a bad day	318	19	0
29	Future	Reflecting on anxieties around my future	499	41	7
30	Thank you!	Wrapping up the series and thanking those who watched and interacted with the series	477	37	11

The graphs below visualize the number of views, likes, and comments the series received.

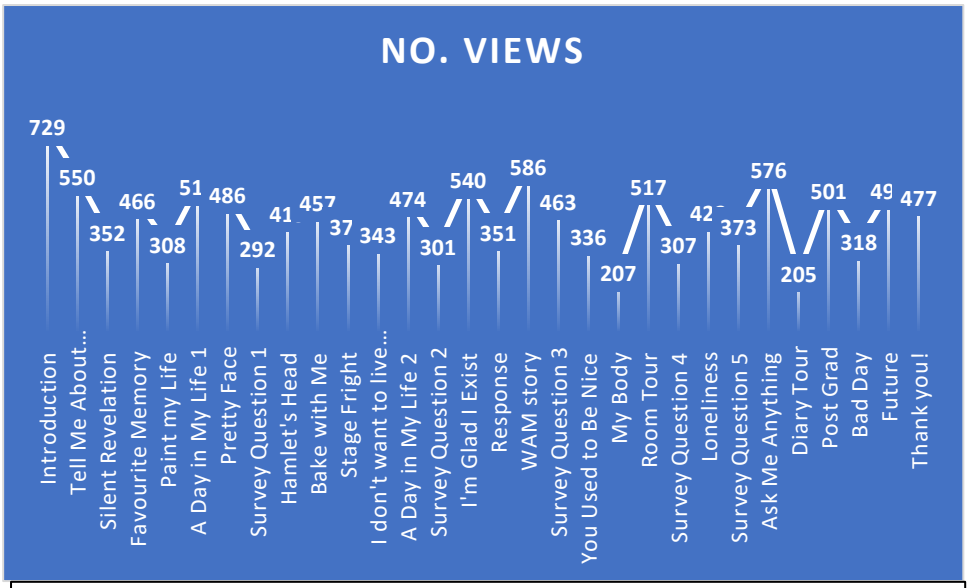

Figure 30: Graph(A) showing Number of Views 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

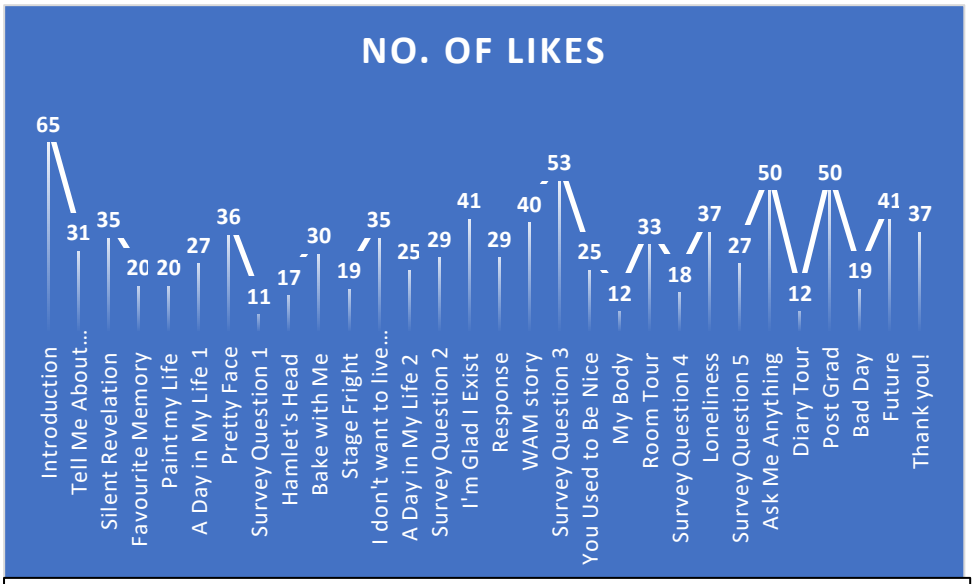

Figure 26: Graph (B) showing Number of Likes 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

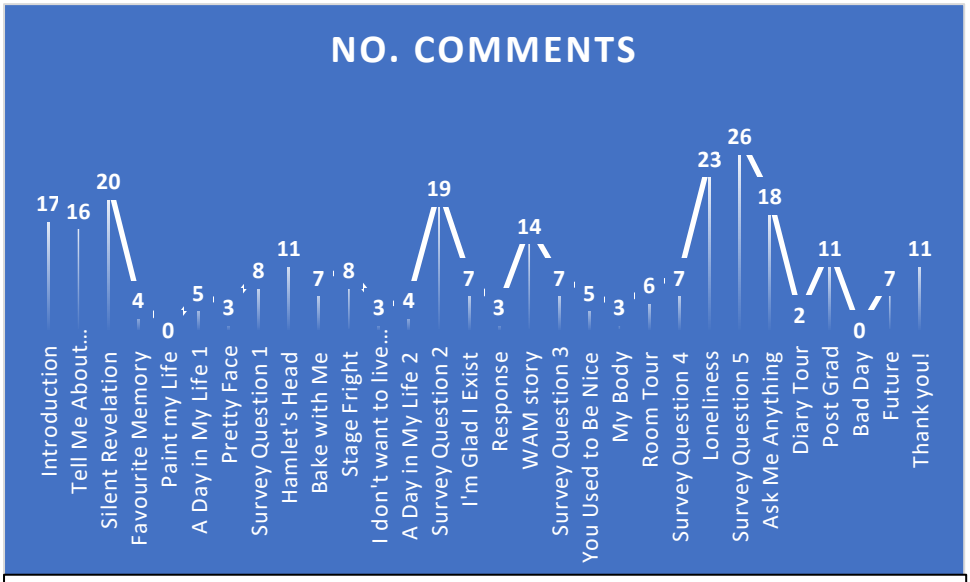

Figure 27: Graph (C) showing number of comments 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

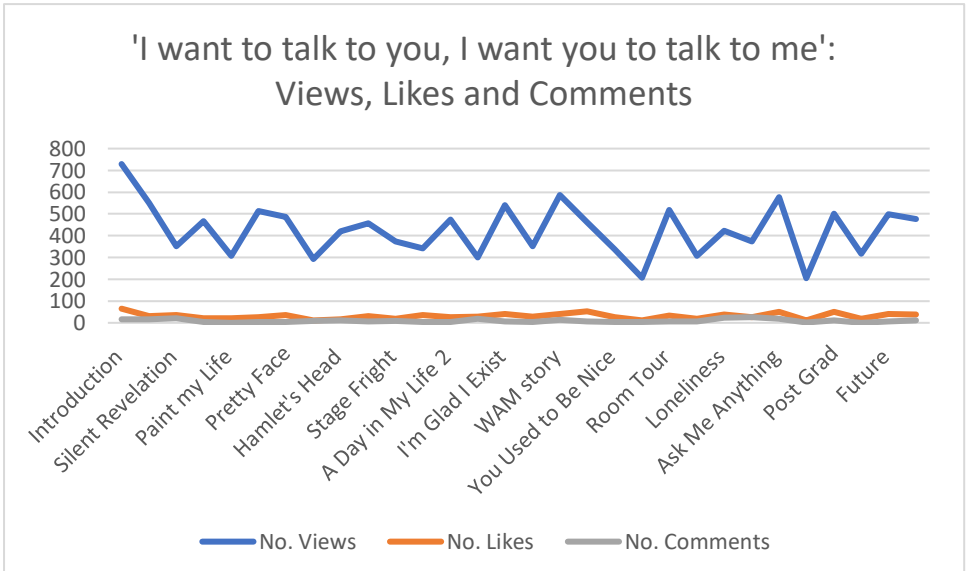

Figure 16: Graph (D) showing number of Views, Likes and Comments 'I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me' received.

The Graph Below compares the mean number of views, likes and comments between videos created in the year 2022 and the month of March 2023 (The month the series took place).

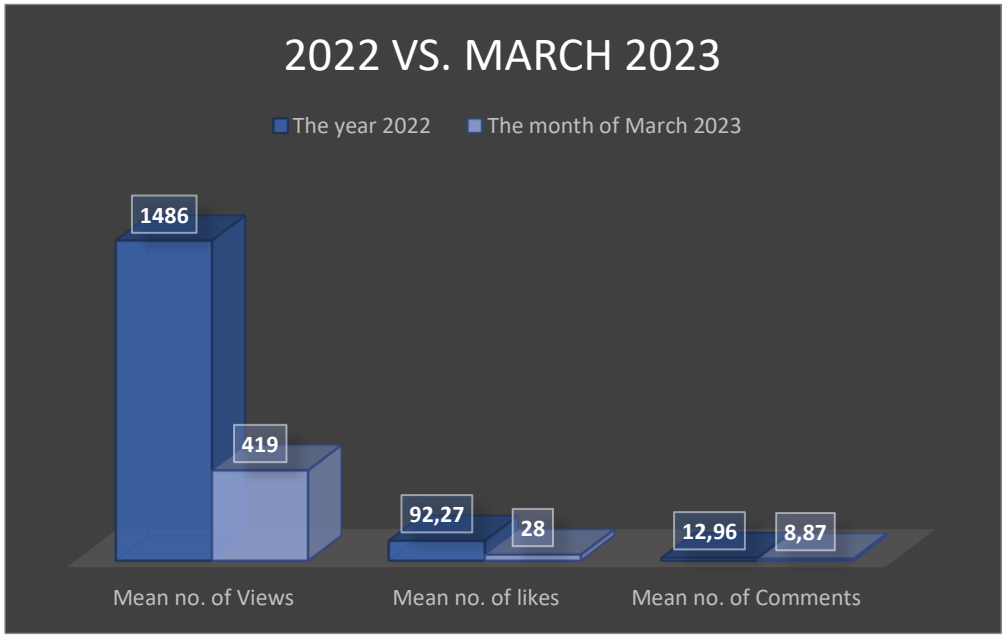

Figure 17: Graph (E) showing comparison in the number of views, likes and comments accumulated by @I_want_to_talk_to_you23

Appendix C

‘I want to talk to you, I want you to talk to me’ Journal

Introduction video:

(20/02/2023)

I felt a sense of vulnerability filming the first introductory video. The reason for this can be attributed to the lack of a confirmed script for the series, an intentional element of the research project. There is a basic plan for the series, and a few stories I have written in preparation for the series but I aim to speak freely for the most part. I worry that a fully scripted and rehearsed series would distance myself from my viewers as I feel it adds an additional mask to the performance. Secondly, I feel that a sense of vulnerability feeds a sense of intimacy. I found that leaving in awkward ‘ums’, filler words and grammatical errors presents an unpolished version of myself, one that is not only confessional in regards to storytelling, but also reveals my personality. I have started the series at a ‘work in progress’ level in hopes of creating a space for other TikTok viewers to influence and contribute to the series (Through commenting, stitching, and duetting videos). I aimed to speak with my ‘everyday’ voice but I found this a little difficult, I think once I start speaking about my personal experiences in more detail this may encourage more natural speech.

Before beginning this series the number of views I received on my videos averaged about 1000. It has been about 2 hours since I posted my introductory video and so far the number of views and likes have been much lower than my average views and likes. At first this worries me and makes me feel as if I am talking to myself. However, I have begun receiving a few comments on the video and although there are only about 5 or 6 comments they are very encouraging. These positive comments are very comforting and I feel very supported. Only one comment is from someone I know personally, and the fact that I am receiving such kind comments from strangers warms my heart.

I am not sure if I feel as if there is a sense of intimacy yet but this is merely an introduction and outline of the series so little observation can be made.

(21/02/2023) (Uploaded at about 13:50)

Tell Me About Yourself

I felt quite vulnerable creating today’s video because I did not use any kind of beauty filter and half of the video saw me without makeup. Again, the views were low in number and I only received two comments (so far). I find this interesting considering my number of followers.

I filmed the video on my normal camera out of the app and edited it off the app. I then exported it to TikTok. There were some technical issues before the upload was successful. These issues as well as

filming outside of the app made me feel a distance to both TikTok and the audience. Perhaps this is because it was less immediate than it usually is? I only uploaded the videos hours after I created it.

TikTok allows you to see who viewed your video and therefore I can see who viewed my video but did not like it. This makes me feel slightly disheartened- especially when I recognise a username in the list and they have not liked my video. Each video has an analytics tab and within this tab I can see how long the average viewer watched my video for. Therefore, I can see a drop in viewers after the 15 second mark.

Why does the number of likes and comments matter to me? Does affect the feeling of intimacy on the app (from a creator's perspective?). Does a higher number of likes mean more validation and therefore a stronger feeling of intimacy?

(21/02/2023) (Uploaded at about 19:30)

I posted Silent Revelation because I wanted to share how I feel but I did not want to talk. I also wanted to see how a silent video (or rather speechless) video may perform on TikTok and the kind of interaction it may receive.

Self- reflection, according to Reis, is includes non-verbal communication and this according to the reading initiates the process of intimacy. Can intimacy initiated through nonverbal communication foster a sense of intimacy on TikTok when most confessional content happens through storytimes (communicated verbally?) does this still count as intimacy?

I did ask one thing is the caption and that was 'How was your day?' No one has responded to the question but I have received two comments so far. A viewer commented on this video sharing what seems to be a kind of confession, although it's a little confusing- I think the commentor shortened it to fit within the word limit for comments on TikTok. I asked a simple question and I was silent in my video yet this viewer felt the desire to confess (over 3 comments) how they feel- not about the content of my video but about their life. I feel a lot of empathy for this commenter and I relate to a lot of what this commentor said. I do feel a sense of intimacy with this commenter but this commenter is faceless- and a stranger. So, this closeness I feel is very momentary and fleeting- but I do feel as if it is there.

(22/02/2023)

I was happy to see that someone left me a question in my Q&A section and so I decided to film a video of me answering this. I have named this video 'Favourite Memory'.

I struggled fitting in a moment to film today. I was finally able to fit in a time to film around 15:30 however I experienced some technical difficulties and I had to scrap that video. I ended up filming the video around 20:00 with no technical difficulties. So far, the video has not received many views or likes and there are no comments on the video. I worry about the low number of views in my videos so far and wonder exactly why these videos are receiving less views than my previous videos outside of the research project. I am considering measuring the number of likes and comments in comparison to the number of views I receive as a baseline analysis- the nature of the comments will still be an important and imperative part of the study.

I have attempted to reply to most comments I receive, and I have found responding to a comment- apart from just liking the comment, makes me feel closer to the commenter and to the project. I feel seen and validated when someone comments, I respond, and they comment again. Most commenters do not reply to my response except though a like. I question whether people have commented on my previous videos because I have announced that it is for research purposes and viewers who would like to support my research are perhaps sharing more that they typically would. If this is the case, then I feel it is quite kind of them to support me despite their own TikTok practices and the fact that they do not know me outside of the app.

23/02/2023

I filmed a vlog today documenting my day from the moment I woke up until the moment I went to bed. Filming the vlog throughout the day made me feel as if I had someone to talk to throughout my day- it almost felt like company. (The feeling of company seems to be a common side effect of vlogging as people on TikTok have mentioned that they feel as if they have a friend with them when they film a vlog (Lana Saint Clair mentions this).

I wonder if there is a close correlation between the feeling of company and the feeling of intimacy. Although I don't feel a sense of connection to viewers while filming the vlog I do feel as if I am sharing, speaking to someone close- but almost like an imaginary friend. Although this feeling of company can be pleasant it also makes feel constantly watched- even if I am alone. This perception of company- and the knowledge that I will upload my 'day' for the public to see results in altering my natural state. I feel as if I am performing my life instead of living it.

Today I also decided to film and post a second video- which I have named 'Paint My Life'. The paint AI is a popular feature on the app and people on TikTok use it to see what they would look like as a painting. I used the feature to participate in the trend but still "invite" people into my room- an intimate setting. I was expecting comments about the messiness of my room, but this particular video received no comments or interaction. I think one reason for this is because I did not ask a question-

like I have been doing in my previous videos, so viewers may feel that although they are allowed to comment on the video they aren't invited to? A second reason I believe I did not receive any comments on this video because there wasn't much reason to comment- I was not sharing a story or verbally pointing out the messiness of my room so there wasn't many people could comment on. A third reason I believe the video received no comments is because it did not receive high visibility.

26/02/2023

I uploaded the vlog I filmed on Thursday the 23rd today. I did not get a chance to upload it before now. Strangely I feel a bit guilty that it seems like I filmed the video today- I feel as if I am lying to my audience but I am aware that this is a very common thing vloggers do because they have to consider editing etc. I just uploaded it so I am awaiting to see the comments and likes it gets.

Reflection about first week of TikTok series:

There are a few things I am finding challenging at the moment. My biggest grievance is the technical issues that sometimes occur- videos not uploading or glitches in videos- I find this not only annoying but I find it limits the intimacy I feel or anticipate when I make the videos. If I take a bit of time to fix a technical issue the way I am feeling when making the video does not correspond to how I feel when posting the video. The sense of immediacy present when I immediately post a video after filming lends itself to a feeling of intimacy. These technical issues are mainly due to my phone which is quite old, and also the amount of space left on my phone- so the second half of this problem I have begun working on.

The next challenge I face is time management. I often feel like I did not have enough time to film a quality TikTok video. On the other hand, I feel it forces me to focus on establishing connections with others on the app rather than aesthetics. However, I wonder if the aesthetics of a video can influence both the creators and the viewers perception of intimacy. To combat the obstacle of time management I am planning on skipping days when I feel it is necessary. I would like to post about 6 videos a week (I won't post any less than 4 videos a week and no more than 8 a week).

The last challenge I face is the vulnerability I feel posting a video of myself almost daily. This challenge isn't necessarily something I believe needs to be 'fixed', but rather a reflection I have made in my journey. Although I had an active TikTok before this series I posted once in a blue moon and often when I thought I looked pretty. But this week I filmed a video every day except the weekend and showing myself off to strangers everyday made me feel a bit self- conscious. I have struggled with an acne breakout this week and normally I would not have posted anything until my skin has cleared. This doesn't feel like an option for me because I don't know how long this would take and it

also feels disingenuous to the nature of the study. Watching these videos back make me feel a bit exposed.

Once I posted a video showing my skin, I anticipated negative and mean comments in my comment section but so far no comment has mentioned my looks (apart from one saying I looked good). This has given me a feeling of belonging and acceptance- both of which I believe to nurture the beginnings of intimacy.

I plan to start a TikTok live tomorrow night and I feel nervous about that because here there is no archive- comments show up on the screen and when the live ends the video and the comments it receives will disappear. Due to the fact that I cannot edit or retake any part of the live makes me feel hyper visible to my viewers.

27/02/2023

I facilitated a TikTok Live. I asked the question "why did you download TikTok?" in my caption and verbally repeated the question numerous times throughout the live. Although a 700 people joined the live there were never more than 12 people on the live at once and only about 3 or 4 people answered the question. One viewer said it was a way to keep with the times and have access to the trends and lives of people like her. Another viewer said they joined TikTok because it is constantly new and they perceive it to be a place of fun. Another viewer said "cars" implying that it is away to fuel their pre-existing hobbies. Although I specifically introduced one question I allowed for other conversations to developed.

I had questions and comments about my tattoo which I provided context about. I also received a few compliments and what I think were attempts at flirting. I carried out a longer conversation with one viewer in particular who had a username excluding any name. I asked this viewer why they chose to exclude their name and they said they didn't want personal information about themselves on the app and also that they were conducting their own, personal research on the app to do with reputation. I also asked this viewer why they like TikTok lives and they said they like realistic responses and reactions and also there is a chance that something crazy could happen. Most of the other viewers watching the live did not sustain long conversations. I got a notification stating that some comments were filtered to protect viewer's entertainment- so I am assuming there were a few more comments that did not make it onto the live because they did not adhere to TikTok's user guidelines.

Someone asked me in the comment section if they could join me as a host in the video so I added them- they didn't chat for long and soon left the hosting role in the live. Another viewer invited me to join their live and I joined- unfortunately I experienced some technical issues.

Most of the people who joined the live seemed to be from South Africa, but there was viewer who claimed to be from California in the comment section, who playfully invited me to come stay in California. I was surprised that even though I didn't have many people watching my live I still had someone international viewers watching me.

The live was awkward at the beginning but once I was able to sustain conversations with some commenters it felt quite intimate. The fact that the live is in fact Live also makes me feel quite vulnerable and thus I feel intimate when viewers of the live sustain a conversation with me.

28/02/2023

In a video I have named 'Pretty Face' I spoke about my image of myself and my body. This has been the most confessional video yet. I created the voice over and posted the video when I was very exhausted and a bit overwhelmed with my work and making the voice over and posting the video felt like a cathartic experience.

I used the audio from a popular TikTok trend called "She lives in me" where mostly women post videos of themselves when they were children. Although I didn't exactly participate in this trend this trend inspired me to make the video- and inspired me to reflect on the past versions of myself. When I first posted the video I felt anxious- but eventually this anxiousness was alleviated, and I almost felt like I didn't post it. I feel this is due to the fact that TikTok seems to offer a sense of immediacy. Creating and posting this video did feel like a purging of emotions. Doing this publicly

I received three comments on the video. One stating that the video was "real", one offering advice, and one simply expressing support. The number of my views are still relatively low but now that I have lowered my expectations I have focused more on the engagement I get on videos (mainly through comments) and even if I get just one comment I feel quite supported especially considering the fact I don't know most of the commenters.

Juggling writing, tutoring, working, and making these videos has been a bit difficult. This does not inherently hinder feelings of communitas and intimacy. However, it does reveal how consuming creating TikToks daily can be. I find at times that when I give attention to TikTok I miss out on potential human interaction outside of the platform- in turn generally hindering my experience of human intimacy and *communitas*.

01/03/2023

I filmed and posted a video asking my viewers why they chose to download TikTok. Unfortunately, only four people replied to the question. The reason for this could be attributed to the fact that in this

video I am not on camera- I simply took a video of the sky and asked the question via text. Secondly people might not be up to interrupting their scrolling to answer the question? The TikTok algorithm is another factor that influences a video's visibility, therefore I caution myself from making large assumptions about the rationale behind audience engagement.

One commentor explained that they joined TikTok out of curiosity and because of its popularity. One person said they downloaded it to connect to someone already on the app. Someone else explained that they wanted to "be involved" with app due to the viral content on the platform. Another explained that they download it out of spite but now is on the app often.

I am hoping the next video that introduces a survey question will receive a higher frequency of engagement so that I am able to get more perspectives- but I feel that doing the live asking the same question was advantageous so I will do the same for the next question.

03/03/2023

I decided to share a poem I wrote when I was in second year. I have named this video Hamlet's Head. It was a new experience sharing poetry in the series as I felt I was open to more criticism. I felt sharing my poetry was quite an intimate thing to initiate especially because I am unsure of my skill as a writer. However, after having posted the video I felt like TikTok is a good place for me to share my progress with things that I enjoy even I am not a master at it. Although I am aware of the 'trolling' and bullying people can receive on the platform, I also understand why the platform is considered a safe space for so many viewers as I received encouraging comments from the video. At the end of the video I invited people to share their own poetry. I was not expecting people to share anything because of the low number of views, comments and likes that were acquired in the previous video. However, one viewer shared their poem in the comment section. I was very surprised by this, and very grateful that someone felt comfortable enough to share their poetry. This, I felt, was an intimate moment as it felt like an emotional exchange- I shared my poetry and they did too. It made me feel less separated from my audience. It felt like I was facilitating a moment of self- revelation rather than performing it. I have also begun noticing repeated commenters and likers- and this makes me feel like I am creating a small network of followers. I can think of four consistent likers and commenters on the top of my head and I feel very grateful to them (most of them don't have names in their username… this might point to why they share so freely perhaps? They don't have any personal information in their username or their accounts?).

03/03/2023

I filmed a video baking and added a voice note to it talking about my friends from University. I have named this video 'Bake with Me'.

Filming ‘vlog like’ videos have the tendency to make me feel quite conscious of myself. Vlogs often give the illusion that the content creator is not performing but just carrying on with their life while a camera rolls. However, I feel as if I cannot help but Perform in front of the camera and I am very aware of how my face, body and my movements look on camera. When I share my life online I feel a bit like I am performing my life rather than living it.

Despite this negative feature filming vlogs or ‘get ready with me’ videos or ‘bake with me’ videos also provide a sense of company. Although I am not speaking to anyone in the vlog (I add voice note after filming) I have a preconceived idea of what I will be saying and so when I film the video I have that preconceived idea or monologue in my head. This make it feel like I am talking to someone.

Creating the voice over for the video felt quite therapeutic. Creating videos reflecting on my time at university has made me reflect on this special moment in my life. At the same time filming frequently has been rather emotionally taxing on me. Many TikTokers theorize that the more frequently they post the more success they will receive on the app- however for me personally filming almost every day is a bit anxiety inducing. I do feel like I have someone to talk to and this has helped curb a sense of loneliness, but at the same time I feel like I’m being watched. I understand that this is partially due to the fact that I know I will be examined on the content and therefore I am nervous about what I am posting.

I can’t help but feel disappointed about the low number of views and likes on my videos. The number of views and likes my videos are receiving are considerably lower than they were before the study. Before the study my content involved thrift hauls, style videos, funny trends, some dancing videos, and videos of me expressing my opinions about dating. Although some of my videos were acts of self- expression and included me expressing my feelings, they were never framed as a part of a series. They were also much less confessional in nature than my current content. I note that I behave quite differently in my older videos. I am a lot more open to being silly and self- deprecating. My more recent videos are a bit lower in energy and perhaps a bit more serious, and a bit more careful. This was not necessarily my intention.

However, the number of comments left of videos within the series remains considerably high when compared to the number of comments I acquired in the previous year. Furthermore, there is a considerable difference in depth and detail between the videos before the study and during the study. ‘Bake With Me’ received comments from only two people, however, these comments spoke about their friends like I did in my video. One viewer commented over three different comments, essentially stating that they can relate to my experience. They also shared their fears about growing apart from their friends which is something I spoke about in my video. After reading that message I felt seen, I felt a sense of connection with that viewer. However, this is not a relationship that is sustained and therefore it is a very short-lived experience of intimacy.

06/03/2023

I filmed ‘Stage Fright’ a Storytime about a time when I forgot a line in play. This was the first time I introduced a prompt to encourage other viewers to stitch the video. No one has stitched the video yet and I think there are at least 3 reasons for this. The first reason is due to the low number of views and likes the video got. Storytime prompts are usually stitched when they have a high number of views. Secondly, I think perhaps the phrasing and delivery of my prompt was a bit clumsy. Lastly, the video exceeded a minute and therefore people can’t stitch my prompt unless they screen record my video. This is something that is done often on TikTok, however, it requires more effort from the person stitching the prompt.

Although people did not stitch the prompt two viewers commented under the video. One viewer confessed something embarrassing about themselves and another viewer asked me a question and then offered advice. I was surprised that the first viewer commented something I regard very personal and also very embarrassing, but I was honoured that someone felt comfortable enough to comment something like that on my video. This commentor doesn’t have any content of their own and doesn’t have a name in their username. I wonder if this anonymity is another reason why this viewer felt comfortable sharing this information about themself.

The second viewer offered me advice, which I feel appreciative towards. This viewer has their own content and I scrolled through a few of their videos on their account. I find that when I can see the person and see how they behave in their videos and see what their interests are, I feel closer to that person than I do with someone who does not have their own content as cannot attached a face and a person to that comment.

Confessional TikTok Trend:

I used a popular TikTok audio taken from The Fantastic Mr Fox. I named this video ‘I don’t want to live in a hole anymore’. I used the audio as a template to express my frustration with feeling anxious all the time. I found that using a template gave me an easy and accessible vehicle for self- expression and confession. I found that it is a much easier channel for confession compared to verbally expressing and explaining my experiences and feelings. Using a preexisting template allows me to hide behind the audio- it’s as if the confession has already been made- I am just showing that I relate to it. This is not to say that the confession made in the audio is not my confession, but rather I adopt that expression to cater to my own confession, and others do the same.

07/03/2023

I replied to a comment left under a previous video asking my followers how TikTok has influenced their day-to-day life. This follower asked me why I downloaded TikTok and due to the desired openness of the series I replied in a video. I explained that I downloaded TikTok to curb my boredom

during lockdown. I then received two comments relating to my experience, with one individual commenting that it seems like many people downloaded TikTok during the pandemic. I plan to respond to this comment in a follow up video and ask others when they downloaded TikTok. This question is not one of my original survey questions but I wanted to develop a kind of conversation with this follower and with those watching my videos so I felt it would be beneficial asking this question.

Later in the day I filmed and posted a video reflecting on my experience of self- harm and disordered eating habits. I named this video 'I'm glad I exist'. When I began creating the voice over for this video I felt a desire to find a sense of positivity in the video. I think I felt this desire because I did not want to emotionally burden the viewers of the video. Finding a sense of positivity in the story was very liberating and encouraging for me. I feel like I made peace with this past by filming the video.

Posting the video felt less peaceful. I felt vulnerable posting the video as it concerns things I have not spoken about with close friends. I felt a sense of nakedness and hypervisibility when clicking post. This anxiety I felt was soothed when I began receiving supportive comments. I feel 'held' by these commentors and feel even more intimate with them because of my heightened vulnerability. Although the experience having posted the video is an overall positive one- I fear the consequences that may arrive if people I know view the video as it is something I do not feel entirely comfortable with talking about offline. Perhaps this is a risk of confession on TikTok. Although it feels safer to confess on TikTok in front of strangers, I also wonder if confessing to close friends or family would be more beneficial to me.

09/03/2023

I told an embarrassing story about stealing left over food in Wits Arts Museum. I have named the video 'WAM story'. Although this moment felt mortifying in the moment, speaking about it publicly helped me make light of the experience and reduced it to nothing more than a funny story. I also felt the video added a moment of humour and 'light' to the series as a whole. The video received a much higher number of views compared to my other videos. It also received higher engagement. I theorize that this is perhaps because this video is less serious than my other videos. It is a story that is easy to laugh at openly especially because I am pointing to its humour. Most of the comments were laughing at/ with me in good humour but others comforted me saying things like "finders' keepers" or commenting that they have experience something similar. There is a joy in laughing at embarrassing stories with strangers. I am finding that TikTok feels like it has the ability to curb shame about moments of my past. This makes TikTok feel like a safe space, so far in my series I haven't received

any mean comments or even negative comments. I felt a sense of communal laughter after posting the video and this lent itself to a feeling of *communitas*. I consider this a positive aspect of TikTok. However, my videos are public and it is possible that at any moment someone who does not appreciate my videos, or someone who hates my videos may find them and express their opinion about them in the comment section. The more TikTok feels like a 'safe space' the more I feel comfortable to post increasingly confessional and vulnerable content. This I believe could have negative consequences.

10/03/2023

I posted a video responding to a comment I got on a previous video (on the 07/03) asking my followers when they downloaded TikTok. I received a few comments with varying responses. One follower downloaded the app in 2018, one in 2019, and two in 2020. Although the video received a lower number of views it received a higher number of likes. I can't help but wonder if this is because I am wearing makeup in this video, unlike most of my other videos.

13/03/2023

I participated in a viral TikTok trend that used audio from a popular movie- The Banshees of Inisherin. The audio says "You used to me nice… or did you never used to be? God you never used to be"- I adopt this as the title of the video.

I simply lip synched the video. One clip in the video shows me looking into the mirror, suggesting that I am talking to myself. Even though I have a background in performance I sometimes find lip synching to audio a bit embarrassing compared to using my own words and speaking intuitively as I find it requires some kind of acting. At the same time creating a video using pre-existing audio is a fast and easy way to express myself.

15/03/2023

I posted a video concerning my body. Not with how it looks necessarily but how I am familiar with it and how I use it. For this video I used a black and white filter because it provided a square frame that helped isolate body parts. I simply showcased different parts of my body and then spoke about how I feel as if I don't use it to its full potential. The video took me a long time to make and only received

about 100 views and only 8 likes in total. I attribute the low number of views and likes to the fact that the video is a bit directionless

Due to the amount of effort that went into the video it felt disheartening not receiving a positive response from the video. Reis and Shaver explain that silence, following a confession, is often perceived as a negative response and therefore obstructs the process of intimacy. This felt accurate in my experience. It is difficult to completely define what silence is on TikTok, however, I suggest that it is experienced when the expected number of views and likes for a video are not met.

Although I found the response to this video disheartening, I still appreciate what TikTok offers regarding its video features and its ability to act as a visual diary. Even if a small number of people watched this video it still forms part of my personal journey. The simple act of confession is therapeutic in itself- similar to journalling in a diary.

15/03/2023

I posted a video of a bedroom tour. The aim of this video was to invite the audience into what I believe to be my most personal 'intimate' space. In this way I invited my followers to see what I see daily. The video was not necessarily confessional, however, I did use the tour as an opportunity to become 'closer' to my followers but showing them my environment and showing them things in my room that I find sentimental. I captioned my video with a question, asking viewers if they are sentimental, however, I received no answer to this question. Instead, I received a few comments complimenting me on my room or aspects of my room.

16/03/2023

I completed the fourth question in the survey. In this video I asked followers if they feel as if they are part of a TikTok community. I aim to appear friendly and relaxed in my videos, especially in videos where I ask questions, so it does not seem like I am quizzing my audience but simply making an inquiry that will help me get to know them.

Answers:

One commentor said that they do not feel as if they are part of a TikTok community but they do feel as if they are communities on TikTok. Another commentor said that they are not part of a community but would love to be. Two others listed the communities that they are part of.

What I find interesting is that viewers don't tend to speak to each other in the comment section of my videos. Instead, they speak directly to me. Perhaps a stronger sense of community could be established if viewers had discussions in my comment section.

16/03/2023

I posted a video of me speaking about my loneliness and spending most of my life in room. I have named this video 'Loneliness'.

Filming the video provided me with a moment of catharsis. In my experience the simple act of confession seems to elevate negative feelings. Filming myself talking without a script provides a feeling of company- I feel as if I am confiding in a friend. It is not usually planned but when I begin filming a video that addresses a negative aspect of my mental state I feel the need to say something hopeful near the end of the videos. I think I do this for two reasons. Firstly, I feel adding in an uplifting conclusion helps me to console the feelings I addressed in the beginning of the video. When I begin to confess I also begin to reflect on my experiences in ways that I wouldn't be able to without confessing them. When I start talking through my experience I feel as if I am awarded some retrospection. Anticipating an audience viewing my confession censors me slightly, but it also encourages me to consider my experience from another point of view and sometimes this point of view is a more logical and hopeful one. Secondly, I feel as if there is an unspoken duty to not burden my audience with my own hardship- if I provide an uplifting moment in the piece not only do I personally feel consoled by my own words but I believe I am inviting others to console with me. I cannot be certain that the viewers are consoled but as a creator it is easy to think that these viewers are due to the nature of the comments and interactions offered by viewers.

This video received the most amount of engagement from followers and viewers thus far. One person in my comment section suggested I have a particular mental illness. Another person sent me a private message stating that they thought I might have autism or ADHD. Although these people are merely suggesting that I explore these possibilities I wonder if there is a danger in this kind of diagnosing. There is a positive aspect to getting advice from others who have similar experiences, if I do have these disorders and I am properly diagnosed I can become more equipped with how to deal with these disorders. However, miss diagnosing an illness may cause me to 'miss' another underlying factor. It also may cause me to think differently about myself and my experiences.

This video also prompted many followers to either signal that they relate to my content or vent about their own situations and their own loneliness. Receiving confessional content from others, specifically directed to me, has made me feel as if I have a sense of duty to support these followers. In some sense I feel as if I bare their stories and their emotions.

19/03/23

I asked my followers and those watching my videos whether they feel close to other TikTok viewers or creators. I received a considerable number of comments on this video. One commentor said it depends on whether the creator returns the feeling. I have asked them how they know when a creator returns the feeling – they haven't responded yet. Another viewer explained that they can feel close to another viewer if they have established communication through dms. This viewer explains that this is not a frequent occurrence, however, it is an easier form of communication than face to face communication because they have more time to think of what to say and it eradicates a sense of awkwardness face-to- face interaction sometimes involves. Another viewer feels as if there is a lack of engagement on TikTok (which is sort of the opposite of what I am suggesting). This viewer explains that they feel closer to twitch streamers because they are live- and highlighted that the liveliness lends itself to closeness. Another, viewer explained that they feel as if engagement on TikTok is sort of like a 'pen pal', especially when they both communicate in dms. Another viewer said that they do not feel close to anyone or any content on TikTok because comments can be interpreted in various ways and thus communication is stunted in some way.

If I were to answer this question, I would say that I feel a heightened sense of closeness/ intimacy as a TikTok creator than a TikTok audience. Having a record of your engagement on your personal account makes it feel more permanent than leaving a comment on another's video- which is difficult to access again. Once I've swiped to the next video any sense of intimacy, I felt for the previous individual has faded. It is only if the individual is frequently on display on my FYP that I feel a stronger sense of intimacy with them. I do feel close to those commenting on my videos, especially with the individuals who comment often.

20/03/23

I made a video giving my followers a heads up that I will be finishing my TikTok series in the next coming days. I have named this video 'Ask me Anything' as I wanted to give viewers a last opportunity to initiate a conversation with me.

I felt a duty to warn my followers that I will taking a break from making content instead of simply disappearing. I am sure many followers would not notice my absence but I felt a desire to say goodbye because I developed a sense of friendship and community with my frequent and engaged followers.

I also thought that this would allow followers to ask any questions about me and the study. Two followers asked if I found anything interesting, and one asked how the research was going. I didn't expect questions even though I invited them but receiving questions made me think that those followers were genuinely interested in my study.

21/03/23

I looked through old visual diaries that I created over 2020 and 2021. I felt as if I was participating in a moment of self- revelation as these diaries are filled with personal and intimate information about me, my life, and my thoughts. The written contents of these diaries were not shared with anyone before this video. This video received the lowest number of views yet. I uploaded a similar video the day before however it had multiple glitches and I deemed it largely unwatchable, so I deleted it and refilmed the video the next day. Perhaps the repetition was a deterring factor for some views who saw the original video. I also think that the video was perhaps too self-involved, and perhaps only interesting to me. Perhaps the video was merely me displaying myself reminiscing, instead of me sharing my life with my followers. I received one comment on this video admitting that they don't keep diaries but they would like some of their memories to disappear. Even when I do not ask followers to 'confess' or to vent, they seem to still be comfortable doing so.

<u>Postgrad video:</u>

I created a second video today, 'Post Grad'. This video concerned my postgrad experience and spoke about my feelings towards my everyday routine. I spoke about the loneliness that accompanies my postgrad studies as well as personal events that took place at the start of my MA journey. Lastly, I addressed my fear in choosing to further my studies instead of looking for a full-time job. Like my other confessional videos, having a platform to confess, to express, feels liberating, even if no one had to see it. I feel a human desire, or even need to self- express and confess and TikTok provides this opportunity. Personally, confessing on TikTok is not nearly as satisfactory as confessing to someone who cares in person, but because I am at a particularly lonely time in my life, turning to TikTok does provide some kind of satisfaction.

In the beginning of this series I felt more inclined to confess to someone who knows me well. However, now nearing the end of the series I feel more comfortable confessing on TikTok than I do offline. I think this is due to the fact that followers on TikTok are more inclined to offer simple words of support. Followers may also offer suggestions but I feel no obligations to follow through with this advice. I find that my followers on TikTok are less likely to challenge what I have said. Confessing to people I know in my personal life invites certain challenges. People from my everyday advice are

more likely to challenge me to make changes in my life. This is definitely a positive thing, however, it can be an uncomfortable one. They are also likely to push me to see my situation from a different perspective because they have more context concerning my situation, my history, and my capabilities. Therefore, TikTok feels like it is a more comfortable platform for confession, however, in my case it cannot provide a 'tough love' approach which is often beneficial in life. I suspect that if this series had to continue for another month TikTok would be the first place I would confess, which could isolate me further from friends and family.

TikTok definitely provides a certain degree of support, however, through this series I believe there needs to be a clearly defined balance between on and offline support.

I received a question in my Q&A section today so I chose to film another video responding to this question. I have named this video 'Bad Day' because a viewer asked me how I deal with a bad day. Not only did this question make me reflect on my coping mechanisms but also encouraged me to actively search for what makes me happy in my everyday life. I felt the need to almost offer encouraging advice to my followers. This made me feel a great sense of responsibility. The number of followers I have and the amount of visibility my account gets is considerably low when compared to other TikTok creators. Even still I wonder if I have any considerable influence over my dedicated followers. I am very hesitant to offer advice to my followers because I am not a health coach and my own coping mechanisms are probably not the healthiest. I found it important that I did answer the question in order to nurture a conversation between me and my followers. However, I also admitted that it was something I hadn't given much thought to and that I am not giving my followers an example to follow.

In the comment section of this video I had another follower ask me how to get over a breakup. I had no answer to this as I have never been in an upsetting breakup, yet I felt it was important to grant this question and this follower some attention. I explained that although it is a cheesy answer being patient and giving yourself time can prove beneficial.

Finale Confessional Video:

I filmed a third video today, 'Future'. This video concerned the way I feel about my future. I spoke about how many members of my family have immigrated and how I am being strongly encouraged to immigrate once I finish my degree. I also spoke about how I felt South Africa as my only home. I admitted that I have no idea what to do. As usual having a platform to speak about my situation is comforting. This topic in particular is one that is difficult to discuss with people who are close to me as I am either pressured to stay or pressured to leave, it has also proven to be an upsetting

conversation to have with people close to me. Making that TikTok is the first time I fully expressed my feelings about this topic and it is the only place I feel comfortable enough to speak about this topic.

There have been numerous South African TikTok creators who have expressed their desire to leave South Africa. A few have bragged about having citizenship or a passport for another country. These videos have received considerable backlash from other South African TikTok creators and viewers. The videos that see viewers brag about their ability to leave the country have understandably been perceived as tone deaf. I anticipated that there maybe one or to comments that challenge me. I only hold a South African passport but I am still privileged and financially secure enough to be able to consider travel. I wonder now having already uploaded the video if I should have pointed to my privilege.

Despite my concern I did not receive any challenging comments. In my caption of my video I asked my followers what they look forward to in their future. Only one follower answered the question positively. Other followers expressed their own worry for their futures. I feel a strong sense of empathy towards those who reflected their own concerns or feelings of hopelessness. Although I can offer words of encouragement or support I cannot help them anymore than this. This highlights the limits of online communities and friendships.