

**Narrative Identity, Visibility, and Community: Theorising
“QueerTok” as a Digital Consciousness Raising Space**



A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the Master of Arts degree in
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Bungcwethi Zanele Hlongwane (1597360)

Supervisors: Prof. Shireen Ally and Prof. Srila Roy

I hereby declare that this dissertation, completed in fulfillment of the Master of Arts in Development Studies, is my own work. I have referenced all intellectual property which is not my own.

Signed: Bungcwethi Zanele Hlongwane

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Abstract

This dissertation explores “QueerTok” as a site for identity formation, LGBTQIA+ visibility, and raising of digital consciousness. This dissertation examines TikTok as an avenue for communication, information sharing, and political organising both online and offline, and examines how its unique affordances such as the For You algorithm, comment sections, duet, and stitch functions are utilised to share personal narratives, facilitate identity formation, negotiate Queer visibility, and build digital communities. LGBTQIA+ users on TikTok make use of information to discover and understand sexuality and gender. The ‘Am I a Lesbian’ Masterdoc became a tool for analysis on TikTok and it represents queer counterpublics and domains of cultural intelligibility. The platform's accessibility and the bounds of user generated content expand the dissemination of information and the multimodal tools enable this information to be shared in personable and interesting ways. Through an interpretative video content analysis of a sample of 400 TikTok videos collected between June 2021 and March 2022, the dissertation investigates how these digital practices facilitate identity exploration and community formation while mitigating risks such as context collapse. Employing an intersectional lens, this dissertation examines intersectional discourse present within QueerTok, emphasising the lived experiences of queer individuals and the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. Despite the challenges of censorship, especially of Black queer users, TikTok provides a crucial space for exploring and embracing diverse identities within a postcolonial framework. This dissertation asserts that as well as being a site for entertainment, QueerTok is a rich locus of political and social engagement, illustrating how the personal is political and offering a real-world exploration of theoretical concepts related to identity, intersectionality, and community.

Key words: Queer; QueerTok; LGBTQIA+; Visibility; Identity Formation; Digital Consciousness Raising; TikTok; Social Media; Intersectionality; Activism.

Introduction: TikTok Made Me Gay

In March 2020, I was at the beginning of my postgraduate journey when the outbreak of COVID-19 changed how the world engaged and interacted against the backdrop of a global traumatic event. I remember downloading TikTok to escape the boredom of not being able to go outside, and as an extrovert, not being able to see my friends in person or meet new people. Additionally, scrolling on TikTok and seeing people outside of my immediate space provided a way to escape the anxiety stemming from ferociously monitoring COVID infection and death rates which felt inescapable. As an internet kid raised on Facebook, Tumblr, WeHeartIt, and YouTube, TikTok presented an entirely new landscape altogether. TikTok's unique algorithm immediately felt like it knew me, my interests, and even introduced me to new topics, news, and facts I had never known but immediately enjoyed. I quickly found my way onto the Queer side of TikTok, which sparked my interest in understanding the QueerTok community's distinct culture. My engagement with QueerTok made me curious about how users enacted community building strategies within the confines of the TikTok algorithm and mobilised it for information sharing using multimodal storytelling through audio, video, images, and memes. Queer creators on TikTok were hilarious in their approach to sharing personal narratives and in their advocacy, their use of audios, meme references, and typical Gen Z humour felt distinct from any other experience I'd had on the internet. Highlighting this queer digital space felt important to me.

Social media has revolutionised much of how we receive and disseminate information in the digital age. Social media platforms such as Facebook groups, Twitter,¹ TikTok and Tumblr have shaped community building online. Le Roux and Parry (2020) utilise the metaphor of a 'town square' to describe social media, highlighting that these spaces are often referred to as places one 'visits' in informal language. An example of this is people saying they have *left* Instagram (Le Roux & Parry, 2020). On TikTok, the town square metaphor is extended to highlight the various sides of the social media app with various 'town squares' such as LesbianTok, QueerTok, FrogTok, DanceTok and several other communities within the same platform. These communities are unified by the TikTok algorithm, which primarily presents users with content rather than requiring them to seek out spaces of interest as is common on other platforms. Le Roux and Parry (2020) highlight that an important feature of the

¹ In 2022, The platform Twitter was acquired by the entity X Corp, which rebranded it to X. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be referring to X (Formerly known as Twitter) by its original name, Twitter.

metaphor of social media as a town square is that it brings attention to the augmented reality which has become more prevalent with the ubiquity of mobile devices. Augmented reality refers to the increasing integration of the digital and physical worlds in our permanently online and connected lives, in contrast to digital dualism, which frames the digital world as virtual and the physical world as real. Le Roux and Parry (2020) argue that framing social media as a physical location, the metaphor of town squares, forces us to critically consider this meshing of multiple realities and its effects for identity formation/negotiation and well-being. This dissertation aims to contribute to the exploration of the impact of augmented reality in how TikTok facilitates identity formation, community building and consciousness raising.

The short video sharing platform, TikTok, has been a prominent space for political activism, trolling², and ideological and narrative identity formation (Herrman, 2020). “QueerTok”, as it has been dubbed, represents the LGBTQIA+ side of TikTok which is characterised by videos created by the queer community with various themes and objectives. Some of the themes include coming out stories, anecdotal messages, educational narratives aimed at the queer community and people who are not knowledgeable about the queer community, funny videos dealing with navigating and negotiating queer identities, “thirst traps”,³ and videos aimed at finding other queer individuals with similar interests and experiences. The comment section of TikTok, “duet” and the “stitch”⁴ function present the opportunity for active engagement and discourse around queer identity, experiences, and encourage community building. This dissertation aims to understand and explore how LGBTQIA+ users utilise TikTok to explore their identity, chronicle their lives, establish community, and make use of the platform for visibility and representation.

This dissertation will outline how users employ TikTok’s comment section and the stitch function in creating a space for community engagement and encouraging discussions about personal narratives and experiences as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Lastly, this dissertation explores QueerTok as a space which facilitates digital consciousness raising

² Trolling refers to a form of engagement baiting, this could be doing something controversial on video or deliberately saying something controversial. Often the goal of trolling is to make the viewer believe that you really mean what you are doing or saying to provoke a strong reaction.

³ A thirst trap refers to a flirty video which is posted with the intention of displaying desirability or attracting people.

⁴ The “duet” and “stitch” function of TikTok allows users to engage with another content creator’s video with their own video response. The duet function displays the videos next to each other, whereas the stitch function allows users to utilise a part of the original video in their own video.

through multimodal storytelling while presenting a platform to understand one's identity and experiences as shaped by various social and cultural forces. Community building and consciousness raising as they relate to TikTok are closely tied to how users engage with one another. Social networking sites such as TikTok present an interesting and rich locus for LGBTQIA+ engagement and community in the digital world, not only in the context of COVID-19 which had greatly limited opportunities for in-person engagement, but also for queer people in countries in which homosexuality is criminalised or simply do not get to regularly interact with other queer people. For this dissertation, 'Queer' refers both to the popular use of the term as an umbrella for LGBTQIA+ people and a political ideology aimed at the liberation of all oppressed people (Kornak, 2015). TikTok presents a unique arena to explore the themes of engagement, queer visibility and information sharing as it presents a unique format to social media engagement, set more as an entertainment platform where users primarily share short format videos. In chapter one, I will introduce the various forms of media available on TikTok, outline the landscape and usage of the platform, highlight how creators 'queer' the algorithm, and discuss the various forms of engagement and definitions of what queer means.

Chapter two will explore the changing nature of visibility and invisibility on the TikTok platform, where creators primarily share pictures and videos of themselves and build communities among their followers. Visibility on TikTok means users must put their faces 'out there.' Unlike Facebook and Twitter, TikTok's algorithm based 'For You' homepage is tailored uniquely to each user (Matsakis, 2020). According to Matsakis (2020), TikTok relies "on a complex set of weighted signals to recommend videos, including everything from hashtags and songs to the kind of device a person is using." The 'For You Page' (FYP) on the application uses hashtags, captions, and audios to categorise videos and recommend videos with similarities (Matsakis, 2020). In this way, the algorithm plays a major part in forming communities tailored to the users interests and engagement with videos they see on their For You Page. The algorithm allows for TikTok to form a community for users, without users looking for groups or spaces on the app such as they would on Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr. Furthermore, in a manner similar to the blogging app Tumblr, TikTok allows users to join with anonymous usernames which to an extent provide a level of anonymity for users and prevents many people who engage with QueerTok from being outed.

Chapter two outlines the concept of visibility on TikTok particularly by discussing the experience of being 'out' on TikTok while not necessarily being 'out' in the physical world displaying the tension between augmented reality and digital dualism, exploring the visibility of queer people's lives and relationships, and examining the 'bad' side of TikTok. Being outed online is a central anxiety for users on various social media platforms (Dey, 2019; Doss, 2018; Meresman, 2021). However, there have been incidents of LGBTQIA+ video creators' content being leaked onto other social media platforms resulting in them being outed as queer to those in their personal networks. The fear of being outed on TikTok creates some risk with creating videos around queer topics on the app. This dissertation aims to outline various strategies and affordances⁵ users utilise to protect themselves from context collapse⁶ and the potential of being 'outed' amongst various other anxieties users may experience around content creation and interacting on TikTok. Overall, the possibility of utilising an alternative username to your name creates a level of anonymity for some users on the app, combined with the unique TikTok algorithm makes QueerTok a space for community building and engaging with Queer people from around the world on various queer issues and experiences.

Lastly, the third chapter of this dissertation explores the 'Am I a Lesbian' Masterdoc as an avenue for consciousness raising, community building and discussion on TikTok. Research has been conducted on the usefulness of various social media platforms for community building and engagement (Murphy et al., 2019) and (Cavalcante, 2019), this dissertation explores TikTok and QueerTok potential to provide a safe space and community for LGBTQIA+ users on the app utilising narrative identity. This dissertation investigates the variety of LGBTQIA+ visibility within the app which plays a vital part in building these virtual niches within the space such as #queertok, #gaytok, #transtok. Furthermore, this dissertation examines how representation on the app plays a significant role in allowing users to find creators who share the same (often) intersecting identities they do. Thus, creating a space in which creators can engage in a form of modern consciousness raising and community building.

⁵ Affordances refer to the manner in which people on social networking sites utilise settings, hashtags, or the general functions of the site to meet their own needs. An example of this is Mehdi who utilised Facebook settings, which allow you to restrict certain individuals from interacting with your posts, to avoid context collapse and being outed as gay (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016).

⁶ Context collapse on social media refers to an instance where a large group of people exist in one place and information which was meant for a certain group of people ends up with another group of people causing confusion or disruption. This is often referred to as the "wrong side" of Twitter or TikTok.

Background

TikTok's cultural relevance grew significantly during the Coronavirus worldwide lockdowns.⁷ It became a platform which facilitated identity exploration for queer youth. In South Africa alone, TikTok has over 17.46 million TikTok users (CSA Sha-Izwe, 2024). The TikTok algorithm provides an opportunity to engage with communities which are meaningful to the user across geographical borders.⁸ QueerTok provides an often safe and informative space for queer users (Unipan, 2021).

TikTok presents four defining features which separate it from other social networking sites while also contributing to its unique platform culture. Firstly, TikTok is dominated by short form videos.⁹ This allows users to convey information quickly and its video centric design provides users with a dynamic experience (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Secondly, the platform's main distinguishing aspect is its algorithm driven content curation. TikTok is then able to identify each user's unique interests which constantly refines the content provided to them the longer they engage with the application. Thirdly, the app is conducive for a wide range of creative expressions with its wide range of music and sounds, effects, and filters. Lastly, TikTok has played a significant role in democratising engagement and virality for users, its algorithm and global reach has led to videos gaining popularity very quickly and without additional support such as paying to boost your posts or already having a large number of followers, unlike most other platforms where virality is follower dependent (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). The various communities which have sprung up on TikTok have benefited from the algorithm. TikTok's features distinguish it from other social media platforms and also creates a different way to keep users and creators engaged on the app.

Individuals typically do not need an account to view videos on the app, however, to access the more personalised features of TikTok such as the For You Page (FYP) one does require an account (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). TikTok's FYP algorithm is a unique aspect of the app as users do not have control over the content they will encounter. The algorithm studies users'

⁷ Kale, S. (2020 April, 26).

⁸ It is important to note that several countries have banned TikTok. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have officially banned TikTok in those regions citing concerns around pornographic or inappropriate content on the site, India banned TikTok in response to a military clash with China and concerns around data privacy (Onyxia, 2022).

⁹ In 2020 Instagram first introduced Instagram Reels, later its sister application Facebook released Facebook Reels in 2022. YouTube Shorts were released in 2021. These social media applications launched their own short video options to compete with TikTok.

behaviours such as the videos they choose to interact with based on hashtags, the videos they watch in full and various other aspects to present users with videos they've demonstrated they want to watch (Simpson & Semaan 2021).

The rise of Queer TikTok has become an important tool in educating users on the app about the LGBTQIA+ community. Queer users are given access to a variety of videos by a wide range of creators on the app. Videos on TikTok vary in themes and goals.¹⁰ Primarily these are crafted through the creators' main interest areas. Some videos may be directly educational, aiming to share more information on the LGBTQIA+ community with most videos being anecdotal experiences from creators. The comment section of TikTok presents a rich area of study, allowing users to engage with the content of the creator's video, share experiences, and even offer their own advice and educational tips on topics around queerness. Additionally, TikTok also offers a range of engagement affordances to respond to videos with your own videos including video responses, stitches and duets. Please see the table below for a list of TikTok engagement features:

Table 1: TikTok Features and Common Uses (Meyer, 2022, p.34)

Feature	Description	Common Uses
Lives	Real-time streaming that will appear on other users' FYPs.	Connecting with viewers directly, sharing a hobby (e.g., video gaming, painting), reacting to current events as they occur, speed dating.
Duets	A split-screen effect where Creator B makes a video alongside Creator A's original TikTok. Both will play simultaneously for the viewer, with Creator B usually shown on the left.	Amplifying another creator's content, sharing one's reaction to a video, building upon the content of the TikTok (e.g., adding an acting role to a sketch or harmony to a song).
Stitches	Taking a small snippet of another users' video to serve as the beginning of a TikTok.	Responding to a request for information, critiquing an idea, reacting to the first clip.

¹⁰ The 'For You Page' also includes images with audio added. TikTok has since released an explore page as of 2025 which is primarily for images with the option to mute any audio.

Replies	A video response to a comment on a previous TikTok. Only the original creator can make a video reply and it will link back to the first video.	Answering a question or comment that is too long to type, making a reaction video to a hurtful comment, following up on a story so that users can find the next videos in the series easily.
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TikTok has been studied for its use as a tool for activism in Southeast Asia, particularly how young users in Indonesia used the platform to protest the controversial labour laws (Jalli, 2021) and in the United States to disrupt a Trump rally (Hermann, 2020). This dissertation is crucial for understanding TikTok as a space to facilitate political discourse, combining the personal with the political, through the lens of narrative identity and storytelling. TikTok's use for storytelling is seen in the videos posted, and the engagement affordances in the form of the comment section, duet feature, and the stitch function. The stitch and duet functions allow users to post video responses to other videos posted by users, thus fostering active engagement. TikTok is an important app for online engagement and information sharing.¹¹ This dissertation explores the role of QueerTok in facilitating the growth of an online queer community, providing representation for various members of the community, and enabling narrative identity construction within the app. TikTok is an important and rich area of study due to its unique algorithm and its effect on creating various communities which span across geographical borders. The combination of TikTok algorithm's community building abilities combined with the effects of the pandemic presented a unique opportunity to understand the nature and effects of online interactions and communities on users. For LGBTQIA+ youth, there are limited spaces to engage with LGBTQIA+ identity and meet like-minded individuals. The internet plays a fundamental role in providing such spaces.

On a theoretical level, I was interested in understanding the role that social media plays in the lives of marginalised groups and the use of social media for queer activism, consciousness raising, and the role social media plays in creating communities. On a personal note, as a researcher, I had an interest in spotlighting the conversations on TikTok due to the impact of radical storytelling, in all its forms present on TikTok, had on me and my understanding of my gender and sexuality. The greatest impact being on TikTok had on me was providing

¹¹ Li et al. (2021) looks at the way the app was used to spread information about Covid-19.

access to diverse thoughts and experiences that planted a seed for more imagination and interrogation of what I understand about myself. QueerTok serves as a reminder that essential questions of theory and praxis are universally relevant. While not always explicitly framed as such, QueerTok users actively engage in questioning and unpacking Queer theory as a form of liberation theory, often presented alongside hilarious trending audio and random meme references. After joining TikTok, engaging with queer creators from all around the world talking about themselves, their identities, genders, sexualities, and queer history in a way I had never experienced, I started to question my own identity, how I came to understand myself. I realised for the first time that I didn't identify with, what still feels like, a very limiting definition of my gender which does not reflect who I am and how I navigate the world. More importantly, it made me question how I was socialised to understand myself in the world. An important factor in this realisation was the diverse and beautiful community I had the privilege to engage with and be a part of which provided affirmation and comfort through a screen.

Context and Literature Review

Research has been conducted on the relationship between social media and activist campaigning; Gerbaudo (2012, 2014) describes how social media is utilised to re-appropriate the public sphere to allow citizens to mobilise for physical protests, spread information about a cause, and encourage discourse. Social media's ability to allow users to post and propagate information in real time ensures that information can be rapidly publicised in real time, reaching viewers while the information is still topical (Housley et al., 2018). TikTok allows users to create videos in an easy and accessible way, features such as the live feature allow for real time engagement with current events. With regards to the use of social media for consciousness raising in a manner like the second wave feminist movement, Gleeson and Turner (2019) highlight the use of social media, looking specifically at #MeToo, and argue that online spaces are a valid form of modern consciousness raising.

This dissertation contributes to the literature of social media as consciousness raising spaces. Simpson and Semaan (2021), present a discussion focussing on the TikTok algorithm and how it affects the engagement and everyday online encounters LGBTQIA+ youth have with the platform. Finding that as a response to transgressions and violations, users on the app have developed self-organising practices in response (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). This

dissertation builds on Simpson and Semaan (2021) research to understand how users react to algorithmic exclusion and utilise hashtags to create and curate safe spaces within the app. With a focus on the use of TikTok's platform affordances and how these are leveraged by both users and creators. It is important to begin this dissertation by understanding the effects social media has on LGBTQIA+ youth identity formation.

This literature review will begin by looking at research on the effects of various social media platforms in the development of LGBTQIA+ identity formation. This will serve as context and background on social media platforms and LGBTQIA+ identity to understand the unique culture of TikTok, and the form of discussions and engagement created in this space. The second part of this literature review will look at the formation of digital communities and prioritise research on interactions within these digital communities. This section will analyse the development of LGBTQIA+ communities online, looking at how these are maintained and the characteristics and organisation strategies of these communities. The final part of this literature review will look at studies which have been done on the social media app, TikTok and its effects on LGBTQIA+ users and creators.

Social media and LGBTQIA+ identity formation

While there is significant public and scholarly concern about social media, many scholars have emphasised the important role it plays in providing a safe and accepting space for many people. Social media platforms can provide LGBTQIA+ people with a safe online environment and the ability to make platonic and romantic connections with like-minded individuals who may not be available offline. In addition, the ability to utilise social media anonymously or with a pseudonym provides users the opportunity to engage with people with less inhibitions. This can have both negative and positive effects. This can enable users to fully explore their identities without anxiety (Dey, 2018). On the other hand, this can encourage the unrestricted spread of harmful messages and hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2020). For this dissertation, it is important to focus on the role of social media in identity development. Bates, Hobman, and Bell (2019) highlight the integral role social media plays in the identity and social development of LGBTQIA+ youth. Due to the nature of social media applications, LGBTQIA+ youth are presented with a wide range of opportunities for identity exploration and development which may not be available offline. Utilising the narrative identity theory, Bates et al. (2019) present a study which displays the transformational effects of social media on LGBTQIA+ youth. Particularly, the level of

acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identity online to a degree which may not be available offline. This promotes identity exploration in a safer environment and allows participants access and the ability to represent themselves online with less inhibition. Furthermore, within the context of heteronormative society, Bates et al. (2019) highlights the benefits of having queer spaces online as the sharing of similar experiences with other people allows users a space to explore their developing LGBTQIA+ identity in a space which allows for open dialogue both with other users and themselves as they define and understand their identity.

Doss's article (2018) builds up on Bates et al. (2019) through its engagement with the social media experiences of trans youth. Doss (2018) highlights the heteronormative attitudes upheld by society which largely excludes and isolates trans youth. This isolation is also compounded by various racial, mobility, geographical and socioeconomic factors which leave trans youth, specifically, with less access to support and community offline (Doss, 2018). This is a significant issue in the identity formation and well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals due to the importance of social support. Doss (2018) argues that social media can provide users avenues, which may not be available offline, to connect with various communities on a range of subjects which encourage the sharing of information and experiences while providing social support. Furthermore, Doss (2018) highlights the importance of visibility of other trans people online on the lives of trans youth. This is important as it can be affirming for trans youth, reduce feelings of isolation and contribute to identity development.

Meresman (2015) highlights the importance of understanding how the internet can assist or hinder the identity formation process of individuals who are questioning their sexual and/or gender identities. Meresman's research (2015) validates previous findings on the positive effects of the internet in identity formation amongst LGBTQIA+ people as it argues that the internet provides users with the opportunity to seek out stigmatised information and provides them a safe space to explore and test out their identity in an authentic manner. The internet's capacity to provide users with the opportunity to engage with their identity is greatly based on affordances provided by social networking sites, such as allowing users to join and interact on the network or site anonymously. This has significant benefits for the LGBTQIA+ community as it allows individuals access to information and community with reduced worries of being outed (Meresman, 2015). Meresman's (2015) research displays the importance of conducting and utilising anonymous methodologies when researching marginalised communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community. This is particularly important

for this study as a majority of TikTok users utilise the app anonymously or use pseudonyms. While users often show their faces and share their stories on the platform, presenting videos to users without sharing additional identifying information is key to maintaining anonymity.

The research presented by Bates et al. (2019), Doss (2018), and Meresman (2015) all present arguments on the importance of social networking sites on identity development for the LGBTQIA+ community. They highlight various affordances which provide LGBTQIA+ youth the ability to explore their identity and engage with people who they share similarities within safe spaces which may not necessarily be available offline. However, a significant limitation to these studies, is the lack of representation as most of the participants involved are white from a largely North American and European context. Very little research concentrates on the queer community beyond western geographical borders or offers an intersectional perspective on identity formation and the effects of social media on a diverse range of LGBTQIA+ individuals in various geographical and socioeconomic contexts. Dhoest and Szulc (2016), attempt to bridge this gap in literature as they provide a study aimed at understanding the social, cultural, and material contexts of social media use amongst diasporic gay men in Belgium.

Focusing on Facebook and various gay dating sites, Dhoest and Szulc (2016) look at the experiences of European second-generation immigrant internet user participants and sexual refugees from various parts of Northern, Eastern and Sub-Saharan Africa and Russia. The data collected displays how anonymity and context collapse are significant issues faced by both groups of diasporic gay men when using Facebook. Both second generation immigrants and sexual refugees exercised discretion, even with varying levels of “outness”, with the disclosure of their sexuality online. Participants also used affordances provided by Facebook, such as adjusting their privacy settings to manage which groups of people could see posts about their families, sexuality, or engagements with other gay people to reduce the likelihood of context collapse. Dhoest and Szulc (2016) also display the effects of various social and economic factors which affect the participants' use of social media such as the existence of the family in their networks, economic self-sufficiency, psychological security, physical safety, and most importantly private internet access. It is important to note, that gay dating sites such as Grindr presented less anxiety around context collapse and balancing queer identity with various networks as these sites provided participants affordances for anonymous interactions. This study provides important nuance, and an intersectional understanding of

how various social, economic, and cultural factors can affect LGBTQIA+ engagement with the internet and the effects this may have on hindering identity formation utilising the internet as a resource especially if this is not possible offline. Furthermore, the concept of context collapse is a particularly prominent issue on TikTok which this dissertation explores and outlines an understanding of how this affects LGBTQIA+ users.

Online communities and consciousness raising

Blevins (2018) presents a theoretical argument that consciousness-raising groups are thriving on social media and extends this argument to highlight the formation of a fourth wave of feminism based on online media. Blevins (2018) presents five characteristics of online activism which highlight its value for a reimagination of activism. Firstly, the ease of engaging in activism utilising a personal device has several benefits such as encouraging users to engage with campaigns around social and political change without attending physical spaces while providing continuous and updated access to information. Furthermore, social media allows users to generate their own content which circumvents the gatekeeping of big media and allows widespread access to information and most importantly, the shift to digital media reduces the reliance on centrally organised offline organisations to “guide and produce activism” (Blevins, 2018). Blevins (2018) highlights the positive benefits of online activism such as providing a space where collective identity can be built with individuals regardless of geographic limitations. Anonymity on social media also allows for physical distance between an individual and causes they support which is an important benefit for users who may be reluctant to publicly endorse a cause. This is especially beneficial for marginalised groups and LGBTQIA+ youth who may not be “out.” This study presents an important theoretical underpinning for this dissertation as it illustrates the value of social media activism while contributing to research theorising online interactions as a space for consciousness-raising.

Social networking sites have the capacity to serve as important spaces for online community development particularly for marginalised groups. Dey (2019) presents a study exploring Facebook groups as spaces which facilitate identity construction and encourage social activism amongst the LGBTQIA+ community in India. Dey (2019) utilising social identity theory, social identity model of deindividuation effects, and the theory of counter publics displays the importance of Facebook groups for participants in providing a space for identity questioning, access to information from people they share similarities with, and ultimately identity formation as an individual and within a community. Although anonymity was found

to be a significant factor in LGBTQIA+ interactions on social media (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016), (Meresman, 2015), data collected from participants (Dey, 2019) displays that regardless of the open, closed, or secret settings of Facebook LGBTQIA+ groups, this did not affect participants' engagement on the groups although it was noted that participants preferred groups which are closed or secret. It is also important to note that participants utilised various strategies in their engagement with Facebook such as adjusting privacy settings and employing multiple Facebook accounts to express their queer identity freely or to protect their identity among various networks.

Concentrating on Facebook groups, Dey (2019) examines the role played by these groups in sharing information around media and resources which highlight the issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in India. This is a significant aspect in constructing collective identity and serving as an important source of information around LGBTQIA+ activism underway in India. An example of this is the role played by various social media spaces, especially Facebook, in building awareness and gaining support to repeal Section 377.¹² Ultimately, Dey (2016) argues that alongside existing physical organisations, social media presents an essential space for advocating and gaining support for issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in India.

Dey (2019) presents a paper which affirms scholars who argue that online communities can only be considered “true” communities when they are tied to physical spaces (Driskell & Lyon, 2002; Hampton & Wellman, 2003). On the other hand, Unipan (2021) embraces social media sites as valid places for placemaking as they can serve as important sites for community building and political organising for marginalised communities who may lack political or economic resources to occupy spaces offline (p. 9). Unipan's (2021) research focuses on LBQ women and trans and gender non-conforming people (TGNC) constructing and performing community across 15 social media sites such as Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, etc. LBQ women and TGNC people are marginalised groups who face restrictions in placemaking within physical spaces and thus employ non-traditional strategies to construct safe spaces. Unipan (2021) identifies four main types of placemaking, material-constant (such as gay bars which have exclusive ownership of physical spaces), immaterial-transient (such as queer friendly parties which only hold physical space momentarily), immaterial-constant spaces

¹² Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised consensual same-sex relationships.

(these are distinctive online spaces such as queer Facebook groups and QueerTok), and immaterial-transient spaces (these only momentarily occupy digital spaces such as an online live pride event).

Unipan (2021) argues that young LBQ, people of colour, and TGNCP people actively work towards creating spaces guided by “radical intersectional advocacy” and often turn to the internet to create these spaces when physical spaces fail to meet these requirements. Important to the discussion around online communities, Unipan (2021) displays how, like physical community spaces (material-constant), immaterial constant spaces are often close knit and allow for regular and frequent interpersonal interaction.

Since interactions in these spaces are not physical, participants reported greater levels of comfortability and the ability to share more vulnerable information and thus form more intimate bonds. Furthermore, for older LGBTQIA+ individuals especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, immaterial constant spaces provided greater access to diverse communities of queer individuals than in the past. Ultimately, immaterial-constant placemaking presents young LGBTQIA+ people with the opportunity to form more inclusive and intersectional environments online. Unipan (2021) presents a critical outline of the placemaking strategies employed by LGBTQIA+ users to safeguard their space which is often vulnerable to context collapse due to the lack of barrier to entry from the algorithm.

Otu’s (2021) article, *Queer slacktivism as silent activism? The contested politics of queer subjectivities on GhanaWeb* builds on some of the placemaking strategies employed by queer people online, in this context however, within a country which criminalises homosexuality such as Ghana.¹³ Otu (2021) acknowledges that digital elitism operationalised by the inequity triggered by an uneven distribution of internet access in several parts of the world, including Ghana is a concern, the internet however, still remains an active and relevant site for sociopolitical discourse and transformation. Through the examination debates and conversations within the news, information and entertainment website GhanaWeb, Otu (2021) highlights how Ghanians police homosexuality, specifically through the use of christianity, and how this is challenged by those supportive of queer rights, this is how online spaces become a place for both pro-queer and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourse collide. Otu (2021)

¹³ The Ghanaian 1992 Republican constitution criminalises homosexuality in Section 104 of the Criminal Code (Otu 2021).

highlights that GhanaWeb has generated a counterpublic, bringing Ghanians into a space where they engage in a wide range of conversations which flattens hierarchies and allows for voices that deconstruct hegemonic heteronormative ideologies that inform ideas about homosexuality. Ultimately, Otu (2021) displays that although social media sites have also enabled the spread of homophobia, they present a unique platform for LGBTQIA+ individuals to respond to homophobic representations and counter these with their own representations, experiences and desires

Andrews (2020), article *YouTube Queer Communities as Heterotopias: Space, Identity and “Realness” in Queer South African Vlogs*, contributes to Otu’s (2021) discussion on social media platforms as an avenue for the self-representation and responses from the LGBTQIA+ community. Through the discussion of the video sharing app, YouTube, Andrews (2020) highlights three LGBTQIA+ pages Mosa and Siya, “SuburbanZulu”, Azania Realness and Babalwa Mtshawu, Lasizwe Dambuza, to show YouTube as a site which facilitates the visibility of queer voices on the platform, and the queer communities which have formed around different aspects of LGBTQIA+ lives and experiences, particularly against the backdrop of limited mainstream Queer representation or stereotypical queer representation. YouTube hosts multiple different online communities and allows for the free flow of ideas and information, queer YouTube creators create spaces for the wide recognition and celebration of their lives (Andrews 2020).

Andrews (2020) argues that queer videos and communities online constitute heterotopias, these can be defined as spaces where queer people enter online communities where they can find solidarity and community which may not be available online while challenging social hierarchies. Heterotopias are spaces which speak back to mainstream cultures and display the repressions and marginalisation experienced by queer people in South Africa (Andrews 2020). Furthermore, (Andrews 2020) argues that these videos by queer South African YouTubers function as a space of knowledge creation as they present a space for theorising and presenting new visual vocabularies for their communities, by offering a kind of truth telling of experiences ignored in the mainstream, this creates a space for archiving stories about queerphobia, rejection from communities and families, and love and self-acceptance. Andrews (2020) displays the communities that exist online and the role of self-representation in creating opportunities to archive and present stories of queer lived experiences.

TikTok, Digital Activism and LGBTQIA+ individuals: Similar studies

Research has been conducted on the interactive nature of discourse around key political issues on TikTok (Medina Serrano et al., 2020) the harmful spread of hate and harmful messages on the platform (Weimaan & Masri 2020) and the use of the app to spread information about the COVID-19 pandemic and encourage the use of facemasks (Basch et al., 2020); (Basch et al., 2021).

Cohen (2021) contributed to literature on LGBTQIA+ experiences on TikTok through looking at the affordances queer women on TikTok employ to fight against sexual objectification. Looking specifically at the “Girls who like girls”¹⁴ audio which trended on gay TikTok and was later appropriated by cisgender heterosexual men to sexualise women, Cohen (2021) highlights three strategies utilised by activists to safeguard queer spaces. These strategies include calling out problematic behaviour on the app, engaging with the community to create queer spaces, and providing representation through creating videos and thus producing visibility for queer people. This is seen through the employment of TikTok affordances of easy video creation which allows reclaiming of (queer) sounds and trends, and the use of hashtags to categorise videos and reclaim them into queer spaces on the app (Cohen, 2021). This article presents an important understanding of the various ways in which TikTok’s features are utilised by LGBTQIA+ users to maintain queer spaces. Cohen’s (2021) research provides an important basis for researching queer activism and the various ways it takes form on TikTok.

Simpson and Semaan (2021) focus more broadly on the daily experiences of LGBTQIA+ users on TikTok. Through interviews with 16 queer TikTok users, Simpson and Semaan (2021) argue that the FYP algorithm “constructs contradictory identity spaces” which support identity construction and reaffirm LGBTQIA+ identity through the presentation of relatable and informational queer content. The FYP algorithm simultaneously can violate and transgress the identity of queer people, this is often seen through context collapse which TikTok users are vulnerable to as the app does not have any barriers preventing engagement from people who are not part of the community. Like Cohen (2021), Simpson and Semaan (2021) display the importance of TikTok affordances employed by queer users to fight

¹⁴ This was an audio featuring a snippet of the song Girls Like Girls by Hayley Kiyoko (2015). The trend featured queer women interacting with the camera by themselves or with a partner usually lip syncing the audio snippet. Later on, cisgender heterosexual men would post videos reacting to queer women under the trend and generally sexualising them.

algorithmic exclusion (Fox, 2020) and to avoid interacting with harmful content and users. Simpson and Semaan (2021) provide an important paper on the possible effects of the FYP algorithm on the identity formation work of queer individuals. Filling an important gap in research on the effects of the app on identity development and displaying the community construction techniques employed by users to safeguard and create queer spaces.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

One of the central components of this dissertation is the exploration of narrative identity in the construction of the self and building connections on TikTok. Storytelling is a tool which can be utilised to make sense of the self and share knowledge. The way stories are constructed is influenced by pre-existing sociocultural contexts which an individual relies on to place their individual experiences within a wider social world (Bates et al., 2019; Bamberg, 2006). Social media, particularly TikTok, presents users with the platform to share experiences about their lives, seek friendships, and create content which centres them and their interests. The TikTok algorithm is particularly important as it allows content to be shared widely, giving users the opportunity to find an audience who can relate to their story. The use of narrative identity to understand the content and interaction within TikTok is an important way of understanding the role of digital storytelling in establishing community, providing visibility, and assisting in identity configuration. On TikTok, digital storytelling is facilitated through multimodal means including body movement, facial expression, gestures, writing, speaking and audio and music use. The presentation of videos explored in this dissertation also include the use of the audio, gestures, movement and writing in the storytelling utilised by the creators to present more detail and context for the overall messaging. Chapter One uses these videos to highlight the form storytelling has taken on TikTok and connects these with social factors and TikTok culture in influencing how creators tell their stories for algorithmic engagement and to unpack their identity.

The second concept to be explored will be that of visibility through self-representation. Visibility refers to the degree at which a person's LGBTQIA+ identity is a part of their self-presentation on TikTok. Butler (1990) views self-presentation as a performative act which impacts how we define sexual and gender identities. Social media visibility is largely related to how users on social media choose to perform their sexual or gender identity on social media. TikTok provides the opportunity for LGBTQIA+ people to be visible on their own terms. The self-representation and thus visibility of queer users on TikTok is aimed at an

audience of other queer people. This kind of visibility which allows creators and users to self-represent on their own terms is an important aspect for consciousness raising and establishing safe spaces online. This dissertation looks at the role of self-produced visibility in assisting users in finding a community of people with similar experiences and intersecting identities. Visibility on TikTok is looked at through the videos created and the interactions through engagement affordances on the app. This study also outlines the role of race, gender and sexuality and geographical virality¹⁵ in creating or diminishing visibility on TikTok. This is outlined in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

The concept of community, particularly looking at virtual iterations, can be described as a group of people who are emotionally bonded to one another through a sense of belonging and collective identity (Unipan, 2021). TikTok's unique algorithm plays an essential role in facilitating community building on the app as it aims to match users and creators with a like-minded group of people. Once a user interacts with videos on QueerTok, they will be recommended videos which the algorithm believes will be of interest to them. This facilitates an environment which develops collective identity amongst users and keeps presenting users with similar content keeping them within that niche of TikTok.

Consciousness raising is the central concept of this study. Consciousness raising refers to the collective reconstruction of identity and consciousness (McCammon et al., 2017). Consciousness raising in the 1960s and 1970s was implicitly and explicitly practised within various feminist movements in the United States (McCammon et al., 2017). Central to consciousness raising is the practice of reinterpreting one's individual experiences and understanding how it is influenced by various social forces and identifying with a group of people with shared experiences. Blevins (2018) presents a few criteria of consciousness-raising groups online which will form the basis of this theoretical framework. Firstly, and most importantly, Blevins (2018) argues that consciousness raising spaces should be places where members come to vent about everyday experiences. This aspect of consciousness raising encourages the sharing of what might be considered minor issues and ultimately this process is essential in encouraging empathy and community building (Blevins, 2018). Chapter Three of this study utilises the videos by creators highlighting their own experiences, thoughts and opinions and analysing the comment section where relevant to

¹⁵ Geographical virality is a key influencing factor on TikTok with videos from the United States

understand how this manifests for consciousness raising. Another aspect of consciousness raising groups is the objective to convert individuals into feminist/queer politics (Blevins, 2018). Lastly, consciousness raising groups should be non-hierarchical in which all members have equal footing, and all comments, responses and engagement can be seen by all (Blevins, 2018). This non-hierarchical structure is usually an aspect of all social media sites, on TikTok this is also a feature, even in cases where creators may delete comments, users are able to create their own videos to continue discussions.

The TikTok algorithm is a central feature for identity exploration on the app. Smith (2021), presents an article explaining the TikTok algorithm highlighting the main difference between TikTok and most social media apps is that it serves more as entertainment than to connect people with their friends. Smith (2021) attributes much of TikTok's success to how easy it makes content creation for users as it provides users with background music to dance to or create humorous content instead of having to fill space such as on YouTube or Instagram. This enhances creativity in expression through TikTok videos. The TikTok app collects trace data on each user, which it then uses to establish preferences and steer users towards its many "sides" or communities such as Conservative TikTok, QueerTok, or even CorporateTok (Smith, 2021). Looking into how the algorithm can make these decisions, TikTok shared that it considers factors such as likes, comments, video captions, sounds, and hashtags into consideration for its recommendations. This means that the algorithm essentially steers the experience of users on the app, in combination with the trace data it collects. Thus, TikTok can identify some users' interests and utilise these interests to make users addicted to the platform (Smith, 2021).

TikTok like any social media app is aimed at achieving its goals of setting up a successful business model which utilises users as capital and part of this is ensuring that users spend as much time as possible using the app. Kannengießer (2012) details the use of digital storytelling as feminist practice and highlights the use of workshops run by organisations such as The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) aimed at empowering marginalised women with skills to produce and distribute their stories through digital media. Part of these workshops is teaching women how to use technology to share their stories. TikTok's model is able to bypass traditional ways in which digital storytelling is understood as the system simplifies storytelling and empowers users to share their stories by simply having a device they can use and the app.

Another empowering aspect of digital storytelling is allowing women to use storytelling as a form of self-representation, this is another use of TikTok which enables users to oversee their own stories and representation, despite the app suppressing queer content.

For Queer users, the TikTok algorithm presents a contradictory space. Simpson, Hamann, and Semaan (2022) state that TikTok had been in articles due to its suppression of marginalised identities although it is also a space for queer identity work and activism. On one hand, online TikTok facilitates spaces for social development and identity work; allowing users to engage with themselves in ways they previously may not be able to or felt safe to, however, TikTok also presents a space which sometimes violates this safety. This is illustrated by a problematic trend on the app which saw videos of men dancing and lip-synching to a song about women loving women this spurred the queer women of TikTok to utilise the apps affordances to protest the objectification of queer women (Simpson et al, 2022). This is an aspect of the contradictory space which allows users to see themselves through the videos presented to them on the For You Page (FYP) while also experiencing a violation of their identities in other ways.

The algorithm presents users with discomfort as some describe it as being able to “figure out” their identity which may be experienced as a violation of their privacy and raises concerns about what it means for an algorithm to identify and collect these details in its presentation of content (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). According to Simpson and Semaan (2021), this discomfort is further exacerbated by the version of LGBTQIA+ content they are presented with which is mostly monosexual, cisgender, and white. So, while TikTok is a space which facilitates LGBTQIA+ content, it also excludes other aspects of Queer users’ identities. Semaan and Simpson (2021) coined the term algorithmic exclusion which is defined as how algorithms “construct and reconstruct exclusionary structures within a bounded sociotechnical system or more broadly across societal structures.” This reflects the aspect of LGBTQIA+ users who feel that certain aspects of their identity are silenced or excluded. Despite efforts by TikTok to present users with a limited representation of their identities, queer users utilise various affordances to domesticate the app such as reposting or recreating content which was created and then removed from the app, they also push back against unwanted content on their FYP through utilising the app to indicate their lack of interest or blocking the user. This ultimately displays that QueerTok users are aware of algorithmic exclusion and work to domesticate the TikTok algorithm to maintain communities, explore their identity, and construct a digital world which suits them. Although these functions are not

intended to be used in that way, TikTok users find ways to utilise them to better their experiences online. This study explores this in dealing with the concepts of algorithmic pleas on the app.

Considering these unintended consequences, I would like to highlight the difference between QueerTok and TikTok. For the purpose of this dissertation, TikTok will refer to the app, and the term QueerTok refers to the community which has been created and maintained by LGBTQIA+ users on the app. The differentiation between QueerTok and TikTok seeks to highlight the political use of TikTok by users to foster connection, community, and self-representation of their identity and narratives. This speaks to the revolutionary act of using an application which excludes certain users through their algorithm and aims to highlight how queer users seek to use the app for their benefit. I would also like to ground this study in Queer Theory, first used by De Lauretis (1991) to make sense of ‘an already deeply entrenched set of questionings and abrasions of normality’ (Watson, 2005). Queer Theory has emerged from the idea that there are naturalised accounts of human identity as they relate to nature or biology (Turner, 2000, p. 37), building on feminist thought and other liberation movements.

It is important to emphasise that queer theory is not a theory about and for lesbian and gay people, instead, it is a framework which encourages us to confront hegemonic perceptions of gender and sexuality as inherent or natural and presents an opportunity to confront gender stereotypes as they relate to greater societal structures (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). This relates to the understanding of QueerTok as a community which is not stable, but one which explores the vastness and fluidity of identity and self-representation in storytelling. This understanding of Queer theory is important in framing the arguments and contradictions within the app. Access to discussions on queer theory both direct and implicit are highlighted through several videos discussed from TikTok in this video. Additionally, this dissertation defines ‘creators’ as the main subject of the video created, this refers exclusively to the people making the video. Additionally, creators will be identified as ‘C’ when referring to creator comments or responses. Additionally, the term ‘user’ is used to describe the ‘audience’ of the creator or people engaged in the content. Both users and creators engage with concepts of visibility, queer theory and identity.

Foucault (1978, 1989) presents a vital framework for the emergence of queer theory through the notion of discourse. Discourse can be understood as “a set of rules for the constitution of

conceptual objects and the production of statements about those objects” (Turner, 2000, p. 51; Watson, 2005). This means that discourse forms us as objects as well as how we come to understand ourselves as gendered and sexual beings. This also means that understandings of gender and sexuality are not pre-existing, waiting to be discovered, instead, discourse creates us and presents an artificial unification in our understanding of gender and sexuality (Watson, 2005). Discourse is also something which we do not have control over as we are constructed as men or women, black or white, through a system which precedes us and is all around us. In this way, discourse acts as disciplinary power (Gulson et al., 2015). This dissertation adds to research exploring the utilisation of discourse as it relates to identity on social media as a vehicle which enables discourse (Milner, 2012; Howarth et al., 2000; Bouvier & Way, 2021).

Thus, queer theory can be articulated as a means of resistance. The project of queerness is to disrupt and challenge any attempt to define identity as singular, natural, or fixed (Watson, 2005). Watson (2005) describes queer as a process of problematising the genealogy of categories and shows how it allows us to scrutinise the inadequacy of binary distinctions in how they refer to diverse experiences. This relates to how we think about the very construction and enactment of identity; its various aspects of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class and how power relations circulate within these groups (Watson, 2005). The act of queering in this dissertation is a core element in confronting how we understand and articulate identity, how it is influenced by the algorithm and how users understand, navigate, and narrate various identities.

Aim

This dissertation seeks to achieve its general aim of exploring the use of the short video app TikTok as a consciousness raising space by focusing on these objectives:

1. To theorise TikTok’s LGBTQ+ community as a space for consciousness raising in which communities are created and organised by the algorithm.
2. To explore how the LGBTQIA+ community utilises TikTok to create and maintain community, navigate visibility and how they respond to context collapse.
3. To explore and describe the use of TikTok educational and narrative videos as a tool for understanding and exploring gender and sexual identities amongst users.

Research Questions

1. How has TikTok been mobilised as a tool for LGBTQIA+ narratives and knowledge sharing and how does this affect how users come to understand and negotiate their identities?
2. What role does TikTok play in creating safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ users who are coming to understand their sexual orientation or gender identities? In what ways have LGBTQIA+ TikTok users utilised the app to form communities and form connections?
3. In what way do the engagement features and app affordances on TikTok enable users to create interactive dialogue about their experiences and share knowledge about themselves within the app?

Methodology

The videos which will be analysed for this study have been gathered through my personal TikTok account. The TikTok algorithm is specifically tailored to each individual user; to monitor trends on TikTok it is important to create an account to assist the algorithm in showing you content which is relevant to you. Between June 2021 and June 2022, I collected 400 video samples by LGBTQIA+ creators or aimed at LGBTQIA+ users. These videos were presented to me on the “For You Page.” All videos collected either used hashtags which were related to the LGBTQIA+ community, utilise sounds which are popular or trends on QueerTok, or have queer content or themes. QueerTok hosts a wide variety of videos which range from funny stories, and thirst traps to videos which aim to educate audiences about the LGBTQIA+ community and videos which appeal for help in raising money for gender affirming surgery. In the collecting of the videos, I aimed to collect all videos with an LGBTQIA+ focus, I excluded videos which were too similar or entirely repetitive in the same trend.¹⁶ I did choose to include some videos which used similar trends when they provided different nuances on the meaning of the trend.

One of the challenges I found with data collection on TikTok is that some creators may choose to make their videos untransferable, this seems to be for the purpose of reducing the likelihood of their content being posted on other social media apps or directly sent to outside

¹⁶ TikTok trends can be based on a side, dance, challenge, or hashtag. There are several videos which can form one trend.

parties. This makes it difficult to return to the videos and analyse discussions on the content posted especially if they have been deleted or removed by TikTok. It is also important to acknowledge that since the algorithm presents each user with content tailored to them, this inherently restricts the scope of the data gathered. A clear limitation of this is that through using my own For You Page to gather data, there is a significant risk of algorithmic personalisation affecting the sample. Furthermore, as the FYP algorithm is designed to present users with a personalised feed of videos, it is difficult to anticipate and replicate videos which various groups of queer users come across. In my discussion of the videos, I aim to present users and creators' discussions on TikTok, identifying themes aligned with or contradictory to the presentation of visibility, creating community and consciousness raising. This unpacking of these videos and these themes in line with the conceptual framework of this study was an essential step.

This dissertation aims to provide a textual and discourse analysis on both the videos produced by creators and responses to that content. I aim to offer a multidimensional examination of the context of the content presented, forms of discourse, narrative presentation and affects.¹⁷ In line with research ethics, I utilise interpretative video content analysis to ensure the privacy of content creators and TikTok users.¹⁸ Interpretative video content analysis consists of descriptions of the video, discussions and users' arguments and interpretations of the videos within the context of this study without utilising screenshots. Furthermore, race, gender, and sexuality, when available, form a part of the context considered when looking at the data gathered to provide a greater context of the conversations and content being created across TikTok and investigating its impact on this study. As TikTok is a video-based platform with a wide range of music and audio, along with text, this dissertation includes analysis of the audio where relevant to add colour to the multimodal storytelling presented by users.

Another significant aspect in adding context to the TikTok videos is understanding the use of memes and internet culture used in participating in trends, use of language and overall meaning. The descriptions and analysis of this data includes context of the memes and connection to the overall meaning. All the comments included in this dissertation are directly

¹⁷ Dines (2003) presents the importance of providing deep intertextual analysis of media. This dissertation centres meaning and how it is created and conveyed within the Queer community on TikTok to better understand the space created, discourse emerging and the use of platforms and algorithms for the community. This approach also relies on the methods derived from semiotics to understand meaning creation in the multimodal presentations utilised on TikTok

¹⁸ Khattab (2019) utilises this method in their research on body (re)presentations on TikTok.

transcribed from the videos and utilised to showcase engagement, where comments are limited or repetitive, they are not included in this study, these comments are represented without including user names to protect users' privacy. Language use on TikTok is also distinct in avoiding language algorithmic exclusion, as such, in the description of these videos, language which is primarily utilised on TikTok as part of avoiding algorithmic repercussions will be presented in this dissertation as used by the creators and users. The comments and the interactions to the videos will also be analysed to address the research question aimed at understanding interactive dialogue on the app.

Chapter One: “Why Are You Gay? *pause* Who said I am gay? You are Gay”: LGBTQIA+ Narratives, Identity, and Knowledge-sharing

Social media presents a variety of perspectives on different identities, ways of being, and manners of understanding yourself. Unlike Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, TikTok exists more for entertainment than for connection with friends (Smith, 2021). This chapter is named after an audio which was taken from an interview on a Ugandan morning show. I chose this audio for this chapter because it was from an uncomfortable situation, for the interviewee, with the video eventually turned into a meme. This audio felt representative of the nature of TikTok and the way QueerTok users choose to narrate their identity and lives for their online communities. TikTok is a unique landscape which showcases “Gen Z humour” which is characterised by post-irony and meta-irony (oliSUNvia, 2021). oliSUNvia (2021) in her YouTube video essay titled, “what makes gen z humour so interesting?” argues that Gen Z humour is post-ironic, meaning irony is followed by sincerity before leading back towards irony; and meta-irony, which is sincerity hidden behind several layers of irony which can make the true meaning difficult to detect. This presents the concept of Schrödinger’s meme¹⁹. Ultimately, oliSUNvia (2021) argues that Gen Z humour, particularly on TikTok, displays intimate exhibitionism, presenting the necessary context for the intimate and shocking nature of the honesty and vulnerability in the TikTok videos which will be discussed in this dissertation. It is also important to note that Gen Z humour is differentiated from past generations’ humour by the absurdist nature of the humour, characterised by nihilism with a tinge of light-heartedness. This can be seen in several videos which feature text which can be perceived as sad that share vulnerable intimate details or traumatic events while the user dances in the background to a pop song.

Queering the Algorithm

What initially sparked my interest in TikTok was the phenomenon of people declaring that TikTok made them gay. That they came into their sexuality because of the app and the algorithm “figured them out”. One of the videos which came up on my FYP for this project, utilises a popular audio from TikTok in 2021, Doja Cat’s song in collaboration with SZA, “Kiss Me More.” The clip of the song with a particular chime became a trending audio on the

¹⁹ Schrödinger’s meme concept suggests that the origin of the comedic product should be known for the audience to know whether the humour must be ironic or not. (oliSUNvia 2021).

platform with queer users using the chime to make the gesture of a limp wrist indicating that they are gay. The following video begins with a person in frame in what appears to be their living room, with the song playing in the background, the text in the foreground of the video states:

“Me spending 20 years figuring out and reconciling my sexuality” [the next frame is the person wearing a strawberry hat, with a peace sign, and with the chime of the song the text reads], “The TikTok algorithm in 20 minutes” [around the text are fruit emojis].

This video, particularly the song choice, the fruit hat and emojis, is a message which communicates the creator’s queer identity and is a clear use of representational strategies to align themselves with the queer community on the app. This video is interesting in its use of stereotypes and even derogatory terms and symbols which are associated with the queer community and are now combined to show kinship within the community and represent the QueerTok community. This is also an example of the use of multimodal messaging to indicate the creator’s sexuality while indicating the impact of the algorithm in their journey. This video had several comments which highlighted the role the TikTok algorithm played in their identity discovery, as one user stated:

@userID: “Been struggling with this for my whole life, not knowing what it was. But here we are ... (It wasn’t just TikTok, but it did help)”.

Other users discussed how the QueerTok community allowed them to reconcile with parts of their identity that they had chosen to ignore. This is one of several videos and comment sections which attribute the discovery or the reconciliation of their sexuality to the TikTok algorithm. Macgowan (2020) presents an article detailing her experiences with the TikTok algorithm and how it alerted her to parts of herself she hadn’t embraced yet. This she describes, was due to interacting with queer content and slowly receiving more content geared towards the queer community. Macgowan (2020) describes how although she always had an inkling of her sexuality, QueerTok was instrumental in helping her understand the expansive nature of queerness and exposed her to “the glorious breadth of identity, presentation, and sexuality in the world.”

The TikTok algorithm is effective in providing users with personalised content which users can relate with in an endless stream. Most of the content provided to users on the FYP comes from accounts which users are not following thus TikTok relies on algorithmic interference to

display to users' content which interests them (Cotter et al., 2022). Algorithms are utilised in a variety of social networking sites but are usually utilised in a way which is not fully known or understood by the user. The TikTok algorithm is uncanny in presenting users with content which is interesting to them; this is key for the identity and engagement online (Cotter et al., 2022). To make sense of the algorithm and how it works, users develop algorithmic folk theories which enable them to explain how a system operates. It is important for users to make sense of algorithms and their experiences with it (Karizat et al., 2021). Identity is a useful construct concerning algorithmic folk theories as algorithms and user identities interplay in online spaces in various ways (Karizat et al., 2021).

Cotter et al. (2022) attempt to define how users view the algorithm's behaviour and interaction with themselves through the idea of algorithmic conspiritoriality. Algorithmic conspiritoriality refers to users' perceptions of the TikTok algorithm as capable of "sophisticated knowledge of human life," able to identify aspects of identity users may themselves not be aware of particularly with regard to gender, sexuality, disability status and mental health issues (Cotter et al., 2022). Recent research indicates that users interpret algorithmic outputs and inputs as accurate reflections of their inner traits. For example, Fisher (2020) highlights the role of algorithms in shaping musical preferences, suggesting that they are understood to "help us formulate our musical taste, revealing to us what it is actually that we like to listen to" (pp. 115–116), evidenced through the Spotify algorithm and users' engagement with it. Similarly, the TikTok algorithm is interpreted as revealing users' traits.

TikTok users actively contribute to the process of algorithmic identity formation through what's known as "consumptive curation," where users signal their preferences to the algorithm by engaging with specific content and accounts they wish to see more of (Bucher, 2018; Davis, 2017; Cotter et al., 2022). Consumptive curation exists within the context of the use of algorithms as a tool for making sense of the world. Cotter et al. (2022) argue that the greater use of algorithms is due to greater investment in quantification and statistical analysis, thus algorithmic ways of knowing result from their capacity to synthesise insights from large amounts of data. This shift in positioning algorithms as tools for self-knowledge is key in understanding the relationship between the TikTok algorithm and the 'TikTok Made Me Gay' phenomenon.

The positioning of the TikTok algorithm as a tool for self-knowledge is aligned with the understanding that users can utilise the content presented to them to learn about themselves.

Recognising this input, creators can utilise TikTok to disseminate information on queer identities on QueerTok through various mechanisms which impact identity formation and the nature of the content users can access. This can be seen in the way content creators present and express their identities online and viewers then interact with content related to their identities, interests and curiosities which is facilitated by the algorithm. It is important to note how the TikTok algorithm enables identity formation by presenting users with information about their identities and knowledge about the community. Social media platforms can be important spaces for identity work, particularly for marginalised communities.

TikTok's ability to deduce aspects of a user's identity which might not be fully realised by them is interesting within the context of algorithm biases. Algorithms serve as gatekeepers of content within TikTok, but they are often imbued with biases of those who create and operate them. The nature of algorithms as non-neutral code requires more investigation into their impact and consequences and the way they are experienced by users of various social networking sites. Karizat et al. (2021) highlight that algorithmic biases are expansive in their impacts due to the ubiquity of algorithmic systems.

For TikTok in particular, algorithmic bias against LGBTQIA+ creators has been described through a form of censorship referred to as shadowbanning of creators and their content (Factor, 2020).²⁰ TikTok suppresses queer content within countries with homophobic legislation following requests from local enforcement officials (Factor, 2020). This was outlined after the head of policy for TikTok in Europe, Middle East and Africa apologised for censoring queer content in 2020 (Factor, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok has also been accused of displaying algorithmic bias against black content creators and perpetuating algorithmic hegemony which refers to the algorithmic discriminatory process which is the privileging of white content within digital spaces. Karizat et al. (2021) find that LGBTQIA+ content creators are subjected to invisibility within the app with the algorithm privileging forms of queer representation which reinforce stereotypes about the LGBTQIA+ community. Despite the censorship experienced by queer content creators on the app, the LGBTQIA+ community is thriving on the app.

²⁰ Shadowbanning refers to instances where TikTok censors creator content. Shadowbanning is used by creators to express concerns of their content being suppressed by the algorithm. This process is performed by the algorithm to moderate the platform through identifying variables such as hashtags that are unwanted on the platform. When these variables are identified, TikTok works to remove them or hide them from being discovered on the For You Page. Shadowbanning can also be used to hide a user/creator's account from being found when searched (Cotter, 2021).

Queer and Black content creators on TikTok utilise various methods of algorithmic resistance to remain within QueerTok and safeguard their experiences and engagement with others in the LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok. Due to the nature of TikTok as a platform which provides users content based on interest, creators on the platform have an assumed level of safety due to reliance on the algorithm steering engagement towards users interested in Queer topics. Although the algorithm is interest based, users may still be vulnerable to context collapse, particularly when their content is shared on other platforms (Meyer, 2022). When context collapse occurs, creators utilise strategies to ensure their content is received by their desired audiences to avoid the distribution of their content to audiences misaligned with creators' content (Bartz, 2020). Creators utilise methods such as the 'algorithmic plea' which is aimed at informing their audience of a shadowban or exposure to misaligned audiences and asking for engagement to return to their desired audience.

Meyer (2022) highlights the use of the 'algorithmic assistance plea' which entails creators reaching out to the audience asking for those who fall into their desired audience to interact with their content. This is a key aspect of algorithmic resistance utilising TikTok tools of engagement to ensure safety for creators. Algorithmic pleas usually include statements such as 'if you are queer and POC please interact with this video.' Creators make the algorithmic plea with the understanding that increasing engagement with people within their desired communities will enable them to influence the algorithm to share their content to desired audiences, thus lessening the chances of remaining on the 'wrong side of TikTok.'²¹ Engagement with content is a key form of algorithmic resistance with creators and users working to ensure that their content is shared with people with shared interests. Enabling engagement to videos is a key strategy utilised by creators to combat censorship due to the algorithm.

Social media platforms such as TikTok are generally used by LGBTQIA+ individuals to share information, opinions, experiences, and current news topics related to the LGBTQIA+ community and facilitate discussions around key topics within the community. TikTok presents an informal learning environment with technical engagement affordances, such as the stitch and duet function, to facilitate discussions and give users and creators an opportunity to create content which allows for greater engagement compared to other social sites. The stitch function allows users to respond to another TikTok video with their own

²¹ The 'wrong side of TikTok' is a subjective term utilised by creators and users on TikTok to generally provide a description of the content of TikTok they do not desire to see or engage with. This concept is further explored in chapter two.

video response and the duet function allows users to record their video next to another video, side by side (Sainsbury, 2021). These technical affordances provide users with wider access to different forms of engagement with LGBTQIA+ content in addition to comments on videos. These technical affordances allow information to be passed around in larger scales compared to other platforms; this is also amplified by the ‘repost’ function which allows users to repost videos they are interested in into the FYP of their friends. TikTok’s technical affordances allow users to engage in activism and educational discussions around social and political topics (Sainsbury, 2021).

Simpson and Semaan (2021) highlight in their interviews with LGBTQIA+ TikTok users, various perspectives and engagement with the algorithm. Firstly, users described actively engaging with LGBTQIA+ content to manipulate the algorithm into displaying similar content throughout their FYP. This form of algorithmic domestication allows users to seek out creators who are similar to them which enables participants to engage in identity work. Engaging in this type of identity work is facilitated by the algorithmic domestication of the app by users ‘queering’ the algorithm for self-knowledge. Cotter et al. (2022) outline that while users can use the content presented to them to learn about themselves, when the algorithm delivers users with content which does not accurately reflect their interests, they are likely to become frustrated and a failure on their part to domesticate the algorithm. The queering of the algorithm creates a space which allows users to learn about their identity and explore aspects of their gender or sexual identity (Sainsbury, 2021).

In my understanding of the #tiktokmademegay phenomenon, the phenomenon is a result of users utilising social media as a tool for self-learning, the structure and nature of TikTok videos as both entertainment and informative enable the process of self-learning. The content users discover in domesticating the algorithm is relatable to them and provides a space to understand the multitude of ways in which Queerness, sexuality and gender can be expressed which may not necessarily be apparent or available through mainstream LGBTQIA+ representation. In my exploration of my gender identity, I did not fully grasp what nonbinary identity meant and the variety of ways people who are nonbinary can present and exist as all my encounters with it on television were restricted to white people who are androgynous. This did not fit in with my presentation as a feminine Black person, so my idea of what gender looks like was still very restricted. Engaging with different Black gender nonconforming people on QueerTok transformed my understanding of gender and encouraged me to interrogate my understanding of myself and how I navigate a gendered

society. Although QueerTok presents an opportunity to unpack one's identity, it can also feel transgressive and violating to have an algorithm work out your identity (Simpson & Semaan, 2021).

Central to the work on working out your identity is the role of knowledge sharing and sharing experiences on TikTok. For me, finding out more about the lives of other Queer people and how they understood themselves was pivotal in enabling me to work on myself and gather knowledge on Queerness. Similarly, Simpson and Semaan (2021) outline how participants' identity work was influenced by exposure to the intricacies of other queer people's lives on TikTok and their perspectives on queerness. QueerTok presents an opportunity to gain insight into the everyday lives of other people through the intimate nature of the content. Furthermore, QueerTok learning is experienced through engaging with LGBTQIA+ topics through multimodal media such as personal narratives, anecdotes, viewpoints, experiences, and the daily lives of users, although there are a few videos which are aimed at presenting history or facts these are less popular.

These personal narratives are particularly useful for individuals with limited access to other queer people in their personal lives or similar to contexts such as the Covid-19 pandemic which led to increased isolation (Nowaskie & Roesler, 2022). I chose to include an impactful example of personal narratives in influencing queer narratives, to begin the TikTok video presentations within this dissertation, highlighting aspects of shaping engagement with desired audiences on the platform. This particular video is interesting to me within knowledge sharing on TikTok, this is an aspect of the vulnerability, storytelling and impact videos can make. This video is from an intersex activist on TikTok who details the story of how they found out that they were intersex at the age of 17. Sitting in what appears to be her bedroom the creator of the video recounts the story. She states:

Don't be freaked out but I'm going to share some information with you about my genitals. I swear it's not creepy or sexual or anything, this is a purely anatomical conversation with all humans with bodies and we should talk about that, I think. And part of me is like I really hope no one I know in real life sees this but a part of me is also like so what. I am being the person and the resource I needed years ago. There are a lot of misconceptions about what it actually means to be intersex but broadly it is a condition in which your reproductive or sexual anatomy does not fit in with the typical definitions of male or female. That can be differences in genitalia or hormonal

differences. It really is a broad category. For me being intersex relates to my condition of having [being] born without a vaginal opening. I didn't know this about myself until I was 17 years old [chuckles]. If that is not a failure in our public education system, I don't know what is. Women are not encouraged to know about their own bodies. It is a shame, it's really a shame. So, to speak more technically, I have what is called a micro perforate hymen, where your vaginal opening is the size of a urethra or, in my case, even smaller than that because the hymen is just large, and it covers the entirety of the vaginal opening. When this was discovered by myself, I- of course – saw a doctor, and no one believed me. I was telling the doctor; I was like, 'I googled it and I have a micro perforate hymen' and everyone was like, 'No you don't. It's like normal to not know things about yourself.' And I was like, 'No, I checked. I know what I got.' The doctor didn't believe me, and they were like, 'OK, OK, let's take a look,' and so they did, and the doctor was immediately like, 'Huh, that's weird,' and I was like, 'That's what I'm saying — it's weird.' She'd never seen this before, and they called in other people like, 'Is it cool if we ask other people, like the office lady, the secretary, to come back here? She's been in this business a long time, and we got a med student.' The med student comes in and she's like, 'Well, I saw this in one of my textbooks,' and I said, 'Take a picture. It'll last longer.' I'm notoriously hilarious in my gyno appointments. I really bring out a lot of one-liners.

At this point, the creator had made a 2:40-minute-long video and ran out of time. She makes part two which covers her experience of getting a hymenectomy and finding out if her reproductive organs were healthy. The creator also details her experience with different hormone levels, birth control, and menstruation. This video was particularly informative, and I was struck by the creator's ability to share information about themselves and provide information about what it means to be intersex. This video is an example of how QueerTok knowledge sharing presents itself through personal experiences and in intimate ways. Although this video is not purely technical and covers the nuances of what it means to be intersex, it presents a starting point for a conversation about different bodies and the failures of health and education systems in making this information accessible. QueerTok sometimes bridges this information gap. The creator of this video also started by stating that although she is worried about people that she knows finding this video, it was important for her to serve as a resource that she needed. This is interesting as users do not usually know who will access their videos but still choose to be open and share knowledge about their experiences

and personal details about their lives. Simpson and Semaan's (2021) findings on how users engage with information on TikTok, uncovered that the phenomenon of users creating personal content can be attributed to the ease of creating videos, but more importantly, the safety users feel as they viewed TikTok as a safe space to post content especially due to the high volumes of LGBTQIA+ content on the app.

QueerTok and the algorithm facilitate knowledge sharing and identity work for users. One of the ways it does this is through its technical affordances which encourage engagement and simplifies the making of content for its users. The abundance of videos about LGBTQIA+ content and the various forms it takes also contributes to the ease of making videos and engaging in identity work as users are confronted with a multitude of representations and varieties of expression of queerness which they may not have been exposed to before. It is also important to note that users play a central role in queering the algorithm through domesticating the algorithm and engaging with content which is LGBTQIA+ friendly to ensure they receive content which is useful for them. QueerTok also creates a space which allows users to connect to the LGBTQIA+ community by exposing them to the content they can relate to thus offering them a space to understand and explore their identity. For people who are not queer, knowledge sharing on TikTok is also useful in helping people understand more about the LGBTQIA+ community and their experiences. Ultimately, QueerTok and the algorithm make learning easy and low effort as the content is presented to users rather than them having to seek it out as they would have to on other platforms (Sainsbury, 2021). How the algorithm on TikTok works is useful for the LGBTQIA+ community in understanding and grappling with their identity as it presents a space which can be inaccessible for people who do not have queer friends or people in their lives, or particularly during the pandemic in which everyone was isolated.

Sexuality and Gender Identity: What is Queer Identity on TikTok?

Davids and Matebeni (2017) present a discussion on contemporary queer politics in South Africa, particularly in Cape Town. This is a discussion centred around contextualising queer politics within existing exclusionary Pride celebrations which occur in Sandton in Johannesburg and Green Point in Cape Town. Both these locations signify exclusionary politics as they are centred in white affluent suburbs which raises questions on inclusion within the South African context. This discussion presents an important starting point in unpacking what queerness is in contrast with gayness. This is an important discussion to

centre this section, as queerness and gayness are contested within LGBTQIA+ communities on TikTok.

Davids begins by asking Matebeni what the point of departure between queerness and gayness is; this presents a particularly significant ontological question on being, resistance, and relations to systems of power. Matebeni argues that the point of divergence between gayness and queerness stands in the moment of intersectionality. This is presented through the story of Simon Nkoli who, as Matebeni states, was representative of multiple intersecting identities as he was a gay, a gay black man, a gay black man living with HIV and a gay black man living in the township who was also poor and working class and ultimately challenged apartheid and white gay people (Davids & Matebeni, 2017, p. 163). From this history, there seemed to then be a focus on Simon Nkoli as a gay man, rather than an acknowledgement of these intersecting identities, this is where the divergence between gayness and queerness is located. This separation in contemporary South African politics is seen in the celebration of Pride in affluent areas which are inaccessible to many queer people in South Africa. For Matebeni, talking about Pride importantly involves talking about land and access within the South African context. The discussion between Davids and Matebeni (2017) presents an important starting point in my discussion on queer politics in contrast to gayness and articulates an important point of discussion on resistance and how we come to understand our queerness within dominant homonormative structures which aim to promote gayness instead of the liberatory politics potentially presented by subscribing to queer politics.

I want to dive a little deeper into what sexuality is and its various portrayals and understandings on TikTok. QueerTok is a space where there can be a critical discussion on race, gender, and sexuality. These discussions on the spectrum of gender and sexuality and how it is influenced by a variety of factors under racial cis heteropatriarchy. Being on QueerTok encouraged me to begin to unpack and explore what queer identity is, how queer people understand themselves, and the way queer folk choose to tell our stories. I do not aim to present TikTok as a platform which is ideal in its presentation of queerness, the platform's biggest weakness as a platform for connection is its prioritisation of a specific white, cisgender, able-bodied and Western demographic regardless of where you are scrolling in the world, although there are different kinds of creators with different perspectives on being. I aim to offer a story of these various ways of being and how it relates to an understanding of queerness and the discussions held about queerness. I also aim to unpack what queer identity is in comparison to queer politics. The category of identity is important in this dissertation as

a political project. Identities are not stable or coherent and individuals within various identity groups occupy different and multiple positions (Matebeni, 2011). I aim to explore the slippery nature of identity within TikTok, and its usefulness in providing avenues for self-development, identity formation and exploration within TikTok. The category of queerness takes on a variety of contested positions within QueerTok.

One notable discussion on queerness on the app is about what it means to present or “look” queer. This discussion is particularly prominent on lesbian and bisexual TikTok. The notion of presenting as “straight” is prominently used against bisexual women or femme lesbians to indicate that they look straight because of appearing feminine. There are several articles which aim to give tips on how to look or signal that you are a member of the LGBTQIA+ community (Troisi, 2017; Gray, 2019; Compo, 2021) all of which feature various clothing, piercing, and accessory ideas to make yourself appear more “queer.” All these articles utilise the issue of femme erasure within the LGBTQIA+ community for bisexual or femme lesbian presenting women. This relates to feminine devaluation within the queer community where femmes are made to feel inauthentic or are belittled due to their presentation (Blair & Hoskin, 2014). Feminine-presenting nonbinary people may also be subject to femme erasure within the community due to heteronormative standards which place them as not “queer enough” to be nonbinary identifying. What I found interesting on TikTok was the presentation of tips on how to dress as a femme person to signal that you are part of the LGBTQIA+ community alongside counter-discourse which affirmed femme existence just as is. One such video features a creator discussing what it means to look straight, sitting in their room with the camera focused on them they state:

So as a very feminine presenting lesbian I get a lot of questions like does it bother you that you look straight or that no one can tell that you’re gay? But here’s the thing, I don’t look straight. I am physically incapable of looking straight. Because I’m gay and therefore everything I do is gay. I take straight things and they are gay when I do them. For that reason, I radiate gay vibes and if you can’t pick up on that, that’s on you. If you really cannot tell that I am a raging homosexual that’s a personal problem. So to answer the questions, I don’t worry about “looking straight” cause I’m not.

I find an interesting theme that has emerged amongst the TikTok videos I have discussed so far in this chapter is the perceived audience who is receiving these messages. All these TikTok speak from a place of defending identity and pushing against the dominant

hegemonic stances in ways of being. This TikTok video is interesting in reaffirming femme representation of queerness by stating that everything that they do becomes inherently gay by nature of them as a gay person doing it. This TikTok presents a queering of femininity. This TikTok also speaks to the invisibility of femme presenting people within a heteronormative world where they are made invisible both within and outside the queer community. The concept of a normative queer person is suggested by content which is focused on signalling to present queer or affirming the vast manners in which queer identity is expressed and embodied. Fuller et al. (2009), present a definition for unintentional “passing”²² as the result of other’s assumptions of heteronormative standards of gender expression. Femme-presenting people, such as the person who made the TikTok, and bisexual femmes often deal with managing feelings of being “queer enough.” This argument is based on heteronormative norms on what queerness should look like and how one should present to be believable as a queer person. This TikTok presents a resistance against these norms and a call to recognise femininity as queer without expecting queer femmes to change themselves.

In *Queering Femininity Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Representation* McCann (2018) begins by clarifying that the term femme does not only mean feminine, instead, it also represents a specific designation of queer femininity which is self-aware and subversive; it is a celebration and a reconfiguring of femininity. This TikTok video also represents the celebration of femme visibility in response to the manner queer femmes are not recognised as queer within either LGBTQIA+ spaces or heterosexual spaces, hence the importance of emphasising that their actions are inherently queer. Femininity is largely absent from queer theorising aside from discussions on queer femme and when it is considered, its value is framed within the context of its relationality to masculinity. McCann (2018) argues that femininity is only read as oppressive or subversive when it is viewed as a masquerade through terms such as ‘camp’ and ‘drag’ which suggest underlying masculinity (p. 82). Although femmes might enjoy some benefits of passing as straight whilst butch queer people are subjected to greater social and political discrimination in society due to their gender and sexuality; femmes, however, also experience discrimination and invisibility within lesbian communities.

²² Passing generally refers to the process of being recognised by others as a member of a social identity group that is incongruent with one’s self-identity (Fuller et al., 2009). Passing as a heterosexual for members of the queer community may provide access which is not usually available to members of the queer community, but it also has adverse effects on an individual’s sense of belonging within the community and their ability to navigate the community in the way they would like to.

This can be seen through the femmephobia experienced by femmes in the form of being treated as “tourists” within the queer community, and even the nature of biphobia experienced by feminine bisexual women. McCann (2018) highlights that although butch women experience homophobia from greater society, it also paradoxically entails recognition as queer; this is not intended to pit the experiences of queerness between femmes and butches against one another. Instead, the aim is to display the various forms of homophobia one experiences which are grounded in the same root which influences the politics of presentation. McCann (2018) argues that where masculine presenting lesbians fail to make the connection between sex and gender which breaks expectations and thus signals queer, femmes appear to adhere to the rule and thus fail to signal queer. However, being a femme goes beyond just how one presents as TikTok also alludes to, it is an essence of being which informs how one interacts and navigates the world. Similarly, McCann’s (2018) interviews with femme-identifying participants revealed that femme is understood as an identity and not just a sense of style. It is also key to note that other participants noted having to turn “the volume up” on their femininity to get noticed as femmes. Hyperfemininity comes up several times on TikTok, particularly utilising hyper femininity to signal queerness although key visual elements used to communicate queerness with the perception of some of these as heterosexual can be a hindrance to the expression of queer identity. This displays an awareness that being femme is paradoxically about appearance but also not about how one presents. One of the comments on this TikTok reads,

@userID: “Also ‘looking straight’ only happens when we perpetuate straightness as the default!!!”

This comment reads especially true when looking at the existence of stereotypes which drive perceptions of what queerness looks like instead of allowing queerness to self-define, ultimately, the embodiment of femme requires active identification that requires specific knowledge of oneself and how one navigates and negotiates political identity. Femme requires feminine embodiment with a certain political awareness (McCann, 2018). Often in femme spaces norms about being “queer enough” are battled and TikTok is no exception. This video is important in its affirmation that femme identity is enough, especially within the background of queer theory which affirms existence in its various forms and rather calls for a subversion of dominant narratives and norms.

The notion of being ‘queer enough’ is prominent within some aspects of the queer community, particularly with bisexual people and femmes. This notion of being the right kind of queer enough is also one which I have encountered since coming out as nonbinary. As a femme nonbinary person, I often experience being misgendered or told that I do not “present” as a nonbinary person even within queer spaces. These comments are based on stereotypes and norms of what queerness is meant to look like. It is possible to hypothesise that these norms on what queerness should look like are also founded in homonormativity which privileges a specific presentation of queerness. A TikTok video on this starts with the creator of the lip-syncing²³ to the audio “you’re asking me about my theories? I’ve waited years for someone to ask me about my theories” on the screen words in pink font read:

“You’re asking me about how the gaydar²⁴/ “a queer aesthetic” is based in yt²⁵ super macy²⁶”

This TikTok presents no more nuance on the topic but presents an entryway into looking at what factors inform our understanding of what makes up a queer aesthetic and how these norms are based on white cis-hetero patriarchal structures. Griffin (2007) in *Sexing the Economy in a Neo-liberal World Order: Neo-liberal Discourse and the (Re)Production of Heteronormative Heterosexuality* presents a starting point for the discussion of this TikTok video as she argues that the discursive separation of sex and gender is inherently power-laden and a “binary discursive practice designed to bring coherence, unity, and intelligibility to the figure of the ‘person’” (p. 223). This is contextualised within the neoliberal heteronormativity project with one of the effects to frame successful human behaviour within the context of dominant heterosexual masculinity. Using Butler (1990) as a starting point, Griffin (2007) argues that the separation between sex and gender exists as a disciplinary one which aims to make bodies intelligible. Thus, the separation of sex and gender primarily exists as a manner for the dominant system of heteronormativity to govern and make sense of personhood.

Gender is not merely the cultural inscription of meaning on to pre-given sex, rather it is the very apparatus whereby the sexes themselves are established (Butler, 1990, p. 10). Thus, gender exists as a regulatory mechanism which produces and naturalises notions of masculinity and femininity where it acts as a normalising principle, explicitly or implicitly,

²³ Lip-syncing is a popular manner of storytelling on TikTok. Usually, creators lip-synch to audio which compliments the story that they are telling or tells the story itself. (Tait, 2020)

²⁴ “Gaydar” refers to the ability to recognise intuitively if a person is gay (Lehmiller, 2017)

²⁵ The use of “yt” in this context, is the shortening of ‘white’ to refer to people of the white race.

²⁶ The use of “super macy” instead of supremacy by this creator is their attempt at ensuring their video is not taken down or suppressed by the TikTok algorithm.

within the social practice (Griffin, 2007). Ultimately, ‘sex’, ‘gender’, and ‘sexuality’ are sometimes incoherent and discontinuous categories of identity with their apparent coherence predicted and (re)produced by prohibitive and disciplinary discursive practices (Griffin, 2007, p. 224). This provides much-needed nuance on this TikTok video as it displays how practices of gender and sexuality are based on neoliberal meaning-making strategies which ultimately influence the LGBTQIA+ communities understanding of the self and how meaning-making is made within the community especially within the definition of the “queer aesthetic” as ultimately under neoliberal discourse gender as a norm governing reality is regulated and reproduced by the mechanism of heteronormativity.²⁷

Heteronormativity is thus a hegemonic system of norms, discourses and practices which construct heterosexuality as natural and superior which then constructs homonormativity as the belief that sexual minorities should and can conform to heteronormative structures to gain greater acceptance into dominant society (Robinson, 2016). Homonormativity significantly impacts our understanding of what queerness looks like and has roots within white privilege and white supremacy which under neoliberalism situates white, cisgender monosexual men as the image of what queerness looks like. Carmen H. Logie and Marie-Jolie Rwigema (2014) in the article *“The Normative Idea of Queer is a White Person”: Understanding Perceptions of White Privilege Among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women of Color in Toronto, Canada* argue that white privilege is constructed and maintained within the LGBTQIA+ community in and through socio-political discourse, media representation, scholarship, and daily interactions which positions white identity as normative and central to LGBTQIA+ identity. Utilising Goffman’s (1977) framework and intersectional theory, Logie and Rwigema (2014) discuss how established patterns of social interaction signify social identity. Meaning, that systems of gender identities such as voice, hairstyle, clothing, and mannerisms are socially structured and indicative of larger social hierarchies of gender and sexuality. These social structures inform what being LGBTQIA+ should present as, how one acts, and signals their identity within the structures of homonormativity. Logie and Rwigema (2014) argue that homonormativity is a threat to the politics of alliance within the community as it is aimed at

²⁷ Heteronormativity as articulated by Berlant and Warner (1998) refers to the ‘institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent’, but also ‘privileged’ (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). “The ‘reality’ of heterosexual reproduction is produced and maintained through a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the duality of man and woman, and where sex is (re)produced as ‘prediscursive’, ‘natural’ and binary. Neo-liberal discourse articulates human identities through apparently coherent gender norms in which the oppositions ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ can only be understood as the expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (Griffin, 2007, p. 224).

securing privilege for gender-normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant constructions of gender and diminishes the scope of potential resistance to oppression.

Homonormativity inherently presents an antagonistic relationship between homonormative identity and queer identity politics as one represents conforming to dominant social structures under neoliberalism while queer politics pushes us to reimagine how we can push against the boundaries of sexual and gender presentation under a system which aims to make personhood intelligible under binary gender and sexuality constructions. Homonormativity has also taken the shape of lesbian subcultures which ground themselves in biological determinism as the only legitimate basis of gender identity and thus position 'woman' and 'lesbian' as ontological categories rather than political (Logie & Rwigema, 2014). This explains the existence of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) and LBG groups which oppose the rights of trans people under the guise that lesbians, in most cases, are going extinct.²⁸ The third implication of homonormativity is the misconstruction of trans identities as a distinct gender separate from men and women or as a sexual orientation. This means that trans people are considered a different type of gender, this can be seen in the growing number of forms which are meant to include trans and list it as a different category of existence (Logie & Rwigema, 2014). Another way this is presented through the category of 'womxn' which is aimed to show inclusion of trans and nonbinary people but falls short of this representation as it does not include nonbinary people as they are separate from the category of 'woman' and inherently excludes trans women through the implication that the category of 'woman' needs to be restructured to include them when they are also women.

Furthermore, trans is misconstrued as a sexual orientation category which constructs trans people within the LGBTQIA+ community as a group which is attracted to each other based on enjoying specific sexual practices in the same way that gay men are attracted to men or lesbians are attracted to women, thus trans is constructed through homonormativity as a distinct group with a different sexual orientation than lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. Homonormative implications on trans people are seen through daily practices, particularly on social media which positions attraction to trans people as requiring a different sexual orientation category. This is expressed by several trans TikTokers. One TikTok which is of a trans man utilising the audio, "Come and get your girl, we [be trying] to flirt, so I tell her wait, woah." This audio is used to show when someone is acting offensively. The person in

²⁸ Stahl (2021) describes this as a transphobia which is often articulated by LGB groups in their argument that the growing presence of trans identities poses an existential threat to lesbian identity. This is ultimately a false concern as it is simply not happening.

the video is shown sitting in the foreground of the video with the words on the screen reading:

“*Getting with a girl and telling her I’m trans*”

The next shot reads [her saying] “Oh it’s cool I’m pan/bi” with the creator shaking their head and lip-synching ‘woah.’

The caption of the video reads,

“I’m a whole man? What’s that gotta do [with me] 🙄”.

This shows how the implications of homonormativity affect the understanding of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly the existence of people with varying gender presentations and transgender identities. Ultimately, homonormativity presents a significant threat to queer liberation and queer politics. It forces adherence to heterosexual norms which are tied to structures of neoliberalism and white hegemony which inherently exclude queer people from racial, class, gender, and varying sexualities. Creating a particular image of what queer is and should look like. This calls for embracing queer politics which is intersectional and inclusive, aware of various contexts and identities.

Blackness and Queer Identities

I did not grow up having conversations about sexuality or gender. As such, I did not understand how broad queerness is and its expressions until I had more exposure to queer people which was enabled on TikTok by interacting with people and content I did not readily have access to offline. I realised the great breadth of my identity as a non-binary person who is also lesbian and realised that these aspects of my identity can coexist. This can be attributed to the relative invisibility of the nonbinary lesbian and its rejection within some feminist and lesbian groups.²⁹ A video which reflects this experience on QueerTok shows a person sitting in frame with the words:

“When you try and explain that you identify as both nonbinary and a Black woman cause for you, they aren’t mutually exclusive identities”

On the screen, while a clip from the song “Quiet on Set” by Sirk Slob plays in the background, this audio clip conveys the message of other people feeling confused by what

²⁹ This is in reference to continued efforts by trans exclusionary radical feminists who deny the validity of trans identity and people including nonbinary or genderqueer folk (Burns, 2019).

you said. In this video, the audio and the creator convey the message that the idea of identifying as both a Black woman and a nonbinary person are identities which are understood to be contradictory, and they are misunderstood by people when explaining this to them. This video is interesting to me because of the conversations in the comment section with users resonating with this message, highlighting political ties to Blackness, or highlighting how they are racialised and gendered in that way, so in part, Black womanhood has become a cultural identity instead of a gender identity. Some comments on this video featured some users agreeing with the creator some stating:

@userID: “You are so valid love! You cannot separate gender and race when you live both every day!”

@userID: “well damn the algorithm strikes again”

@userID: “as an afab black person i've grown up dealing w experiences black women have and i'm not going to denounce that just because i'm nonbinary ❤️”

@userID: “I thought for the longest time I had to pick one over the other because there wasn't nuance on how”

In addition to these comments validating the creators experience, users also highlight how this video provides affirmation for their identity and experience in society as gendered and racialised individuals. Some comments from users also explained with the racialisation of black women and their relationship with womanhood and its impact on how users come to learn about themselves with some users remarking:

@userID: “I read this article about how the idea of femininity doesn't [resonate] with a lot of black women because society doesn't make that space for us”

@userID: “Makes sense when you view womanhood as an experience and umbrella term.”

@userID: “[I'm] genderfluid and [I don't] feel connected to the BW³⁰ experience as a part of who i am but what i was treated as”

Additionally, users also highlight the nature of black women's engagement with femininity and the impact this has on how society also understands womanhood, these comments aim to further highlight the creator's point of view. Some users stated:

³⁰ Black Woman.

@userID: “also people don't seem to understand that Black womanhood has been untethered from societal understandings of (white) womanhood. we've been ungended”

@userID: “Sojourner truth talked about this a bit by mentioning how [femininity] was taken from black women”

From a theoretical lens, looking at the essay, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Spillers (1987) articulates a theory of African American female gender construction as she argues that Black gender is always gender which is done wrong and in a way which is not normal. This is attributed to slavery and its afterlife, which were dehumanising and ungending to African people. Spillers argues that historically, Black gender has not been used to indicate a shared womanhood or manhood within white society, rather, it has been used to highlight the way Black people are out of step with womanhood and manhood (Ziyad, 2017). This is illustrated through her reference to the Moynihan Report which established the “absent black father trope”; Spillers argues that the lineage of slavery which positioned black women as patriarchal figures and black men as ungended beings who could be invaded by men or women removes Africans from patriarchal white gender and places them in a position to overthrow the patriarchy, not by joining normative gender, but by operating from the androgynous boundary they have been placed under the “American Grammar” symbolic system. This, she argues, can be done by Black men embracing the female within and Black women “claiming the monstrosity of a female with the power to name” (Spillers, 1987, p. 80). This requires an acceptance of Black gender as expansive and utilising it to create a different and freer understanding of gender (Ziyad, 2017). The video by the creator on TikTok is particularly interesting as they engage with this concept and are challenging users on the app to consider what it would be to accept an understanding of gender which is beyond the binary while also acknowledging the very different way Black genders are constructed in a white cis-hetero patriarchal world.

In the essay, “My Gender is Black”, Ziyad (2017) builds on Spillers (1987) as they argue that we feel pressured to salvage gender in an anti-Black world and insist on “proving womanhood or manhood which was never ours to have in the first place at the expense of trans, non-binary, and queer Black folks.” Furthermore, they argue that any attempts to fulfil gender roles are futile in gaining Black people human treatment, additionally, any attempt at normalising queer existence without dealing with the specific role of Blackness outside of

this system reinforces anti-Black violence (Ziyad, 2017). Finally, Ziyad (2017) concludes that gender identity under whiteness is a tool, not an end. This requires an acknowledgement that under the white cis³¹ heteropatriarchal capitalist system which shapes society and affects how we understand ourselves; we need to rediscover an expansive understanding of gender which is conducive to freedom. I would also argue one which allows for self-understanding and self-exploration in a space which acknowledges the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. The TikTok video referenced above presents an engagement with people who may not recognise non-binary genders as valid gender; however, they treat non-binary gender as a third gender instead of a variety of genders and experiences which are classified under the non-binary label. The creator of this video is calling upon users to further trouble their understanding of gender and recognise the unique role race plays in how we come to explore gender identities.

Building on this, another TikTok video displays a Black person sitting in their bedroom, in frame with the words,

“Having to constantly defend your identity/who you are while people sit there and dissect it is so draining. This is why I don’t interact with people who are at conflict with my identities (i.e., lesbian, non-binary) because when I do, it reminds me that the world I live in will never accept me for who I am and leaves me in an overwhelmed and sad state. So, no I will not try and educate you on my identity, No I will not sit there while you pick apart who I am. I will not be made to feel bad about setting a boundary.”

This video is interesting because it presents a troubling of sexual and gender identities while calling on the viewer to question their understanding of gender. This presents an opportunity to better understand the expansiveness and intersections of non-binary genders. What is even more interesting is the use of the TikTok platform to express these boundaries and the seemingly contradictory identity of being both nonbinary and lesbian. As a person who also identifies as lesbian and nonbinary, I often receive confused reactions from other LGBTQIA+ people about these ways I express myself. Being on TikTok and having my identity affirmed by other queer people is exciting. It also raised questions about what this means for how we understand sexual identity in a world with boundless gender identities and what the future is for sexual identities such as homosexuality or heterosexuality while acknowledging that the

³¹ This relates to a person whose gender identity corresponds with their assigned sex at birth (Zambon, 2021).

concept of gender non-conforming lesbians is not new. On the nonbinary lesbian, Hord (2022) in their paper titled “Specificity without Identity: Articulating Post-Gender Sexuality through the “non-binary lesbian,” argues that contrary to the belief that lesbian identity is threatened by a shift from binary gender, “lesbian specificity stands to be liberated and strengthened once it is removed from the binary gender systems” (p. 616). Hord (2022) challenges the notion that lesbian identity is founded based on exclusion, specifically that the definition of lesbian is founded based on identifying as a woman or being born a woman.

The argument that Hord is making here is essential in understanding how understandings of nonbinary gender can challenge the exclusionary notion of the ties between lesbian and traditional understandings of womanhood. Tracing the history of perceived threats to lesbian group identity, Hord (2022) argues that the exclusive definition of lesbian has presented several identity types which are seen as a threat to the stable group identity such as the butch, the bisexual, the transwoman, the transman, and the queer (p. 618). From a historic perspective, the nonbinary lesbian affirms the historical origins of lesbianism as a category which was not only about women loving women but acknowledges a diverse subset of people who did not necessarily gender themselves as women but are attracted to non-men. Effectively contrasting the narrow and essentialist definition of lesbian which presents queer as the antithesis to the identity of lesbian. This is because queer presents a seemingly endless possibility of understanding the self within social and historical contexts. QueerTok presents a non-academic space to discuss sexual identity and create a world in which we can reject the exclusionary identity model. I view TikTok as displaying how the personal is political through access to various creators and users discussing their personal experiences of identity, sexuality, and race as inextricably tied to social structures and inequality. Engaging in this, a Black TikTok creator, uses the sound, “but it’s not santana,” which is commonly utilised to express a situation in which the other person was mistaken, the creator uses the sound to create a humorous video sitting in the back seat of the car, on the foreground of the video the words

“I know y’all would like to have thought that lesbianism is about v@ginas [vaginas]” the next shot has the words “And it probably would be a thing if all lesbians were cis” and finally “But gender ≠ genitalia”.

This video is interesting as it calls for an understanding and acknowledgement of lesbian identity as a rebellion against a heteronormative system which aims to erase trans identities within our understanding of sexuality.

Furthermore, this video defends non-cisgender lesbians and calls upon the reader to consider a definition of lesbianism which acknowledges the identity of loving people who are non-men rather than the essentialist and cisgender understanding of lesbians. This video reflects the acknowledgement of lesbian identity as moving away from the “I am this because I am not that” understanding of identity, and more towards an understanding of identity which does not seek to exclude but seeks to understand and expand our understandings of gender, how it intersects with race and sexuality. This concept is further emphasised in a video response by the creator of the video to a comment which read:

@userID: “but isn’t the identity of lesbian abt [about] being a woman/woman identifying attracted to other women (?) transmasc lesbians are valid, but bc they’re afab.”³²

The creator responds to this by stating they decided to respond to the comment because a lot of cis lesbians think like this and a lot of them are transphobic. The creator argues:

“Lesbianism has never been about just women being only attracted to other women, but it doesn’t exclude it either, lesbianism is about non-men loving non-men which also means that if you identify as a man, you cannot be a lesbian.”³³ If you are talking about AFAB you’re talking about sex and when you are talking about sex you are talking about genitalia and genitalia does not equal gender. Gender is a social construct which means it’s made up, not that it is not real, a lot of lesbians who think like this do not see transmen as real men because they have a vagina which is harmful for these marginalised groups. We trans lesbians are more than our genitalia and it’s time you cis lesbians start acting like it.”

I want to emphasise that historically, lesbian identity has been theorised as a rebellion against gender essentialism and heteronormativity. Central to this rebellion were Black Lesbian

³² AFAB refers to a trans/nonbinary person who was assigned female at birth.

³³ I would like to note here that although the creator makes several significant points here, the category of he/him lesbians is one which should be acknowledged within the history of lesbian identity. Existing as a lesbian already challenges traditional gender expressions of womanhood, lesbians often subvert gender identity and utilise a variety of pronouns such as he/him some lesbians may even get top surgery, take testosterone to present more masculine but do not necessarily identify as men this is because they experience a masculinity which is different from manhood (Rylan, 2020).

Queers. This response by the creator to the comment shows the use of TikTok to have critical discussions about gender and sexuality, and the real people whose identities are marginalised. The content on TikTok presents personal stories tied to theoretical concepts presented by authors such as Wittig (1979) who argues in the essay, *The Straight Mind*, that lesbians are not women as this category derives its meaning primarily from the category of man, this is to show the identity of “not” being a man rather than a self-contained identity with its meaning within the cis heterosexual binary of thought.

From the South African perspective, sex and gender is conceptualised in various ways although there are gaps in understanding how African people’s lives and realities are not limited to the gender binary. The dominance of Western terminologies, especially on TikTok, overshadows African expressions of gender and sex diversities.³⁴ This context has been created by a history of rigid binaries brought about by Christian colonialism which enforced norms about what is normal and “closest to the image of God” (Matebeni, 2021). Matebeni (2021) argues that many societies operate within the confines of a gender binary and even when opportunities to break these binaries exist, the starting point is to acknowledge their existence. Matebeni (2021) offers an exploration of gender, androgyny, and gender-ambiguous people through the notion of *nongayindoda*, and this offering presents an opportunity to reconceptualise our understanding of gender diversity within the South African context. The term *nongayindoda* refers to masculine women or women who are like men physically, socially, or culturally (Matebeni, 2021). The term has also been used in a derogatory manner to refer to women who want to be men and this has seen a decrease in the use of the term amongst Nguni speakers.

Matebeni (2021) argues for the recognition of the powerful form of existence encapsulated by the term *nongayindoda*; the term is useful as it unpacks complex “gender, social, and cultural relations, power struggles, and norms on beauty” (p. 10). Matebeni (2021) argues that *nongayindoda* and transgender occupy similar zones differently with the term existing beyond the confines of gender. The term *nongayindoda* offers an opportunity to define gender within the South African context. TikTok is useful in the way it exposes its users to discourse on gender and sex, however, this is limited due to the Western hegemony which inherently restricts conversation which is presented most often on the FYP to the West and deprioritises Black and African stories. Searching the term *nongayindoda* on TikTok presents limited use of it as envisioned by Matebeni. *Nongayindoda* presents an important opportunity to define

³⁴ The dominance of Western terminology and representation on TikTok is further broken down in chapter two.

gender expression in a way which may resonate more than English words which are situated in the binary and often present nonbinary identity as a third gender instead of a term which exists on the margin of gender.

Ultimately, QueerTok presents a space in which we can discuss the personal being political and begin to unpack beyond a theoretical perspective, the impact of colonialism, racial oppression, and marginalisation for instance in how we conceptualise gender within blackness and consequentially, sexuality and how it intersects with gender. QueerTok presents a space which provides a display of intersectionality as it refers to the lived experiences of black lesbian nonbinary folks and encourages the community to embrace the visibility of different ways of being within a postcolonial mindset. Although TikTok is responsible for the censorship of primarily Black queer users, it presents a new space on the internet in which we can engage with Blackness and its intersections with sexuality and gender.

Chapter Two: Bi wife energy. He has bi wife energy: Visibility, Narrative Identity, and the “Wrong” Side of TikTok

This chapter draws on a popular audio clip on TikTok by Cringe and the Lizards, which was used to display mostly heterosexual husbands who are married to women who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The song is used as a reference to men who are sometimes mistaken to be queer themselves but in actuality are simply allies to their bisexual or queer partners. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“Well, to be honest, I'm a hetero guy/But I really try to be a good ally/And it ain't no secret, let me tell you why/It's 'cause I love my wife and my wife is bi/Bi wife energy/He has bi wife energy/Bi wife energy (yeah)/He has bi wife energy.”

This popular tune and its use on TikTok inspired this chapter, particularly in the contradictory way it presented visibility for me. While the tune was used in a playful manner with bisexual people using it to show appreciation for their boyfriends, the use of the audio encourages investigation into who is represented and how. The tune has different interpretations based on the way it is used, it can celebrate one's partner, satirise their relationship and sometimes both. This audio made me think of the way we understand sexuality in a relationship and the role queer people play. Beyond that, it made me consider the way we understand the representation of ourselves and relationships in the future. This chapter outlines the nature of visibility on TikTok, who is represented and how they are represented both by themselves, their reception within the queer community and sometimes beyond their intended audience. This chapter utilises creator narratives on coming out and documenting their stories from transition to the nature of identity to unpack visibility. Additionally, this chapter explores context collapse through the lens of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side of TikTok, its impact on who is visible and to who, and the politics of digital visibility.

What is visibility on TikTok: Coming out on the internet and in real life and navigating and documenting Queer fluidity and stories

Previous research has focused on queer representation in mainstream media (Dines, 2003; Kohnen, 2015; Rodriguez, 2019), exploring the increase of representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media, limiting queer tropes and perception of queer identities by third parties. Social media platforms offer all users the ability to generate their own content and play a role

in their representation. Social media platforms and technologies, including algorithms, can enable or inhibit self-generated queer visibility (Mwaura et al., 2023). For LGBTQIA+ individuals, TikTok presents a variety of tools for self-expression and presentation for queer users without the limitations imposed by mainstream media, allowing them to create visibility for themselves and present unique manners of self-presentation.

Lasser and Tharinger (2003) state that visibility management refers to the process that LGBTQIA+ individuals or couples use to manage their decisions about disclosing their sexual orientation to others. This ongoing process is often carefully planned, rooted in the ability to monitor exactly to whom, and how, they disclose (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). An important aspect of visibility management includes careful consideration for the level of perceived safety within societal contexts such as at home, school, work and within social and familial dynamics (D'Augelli, & Grossman, 2001). A notable aspect of visibility on TikTok is the shift in the meaning of 'coming out' online compared to in person, with some users choosing to be out online but not in their physical lives. This is particularly interesting on TikTok where most creators will share videos with their face visible and representing themselves and the contradictory and fluid nature of identity and engagement in different spaces. The following creator's TikTok follows Lasser and Tharinger's (2003) definition of visibility management quite closely, displaying the concepts of safety management in sharing your sexual or gender identity with others. The creator below highlights the importance of age and financial ability when disclosing sexuality due to safety concerns of potentially facing discrimination and retaliation which leaves them vulnerable to homelessness. The creator highlights these factors as he provides advice for other Black and African people who want to come out and seek advice on when to do this. The creator states:

“Hey guys, and to whom it may concern, I hope y'all [are] good and happy Pride month. I want to quickly address something, so a few days ago I received a DM from someone in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Saying *ukuba*, they are highly inspired by what I do and they want to come out to their family. Babe, all I can say is, as long as you live in Zimbabwe, do not come out. As long as you live with your family, do not come out. As long as you are financially dependent on your family, do not come out. Only come out when you have a job, when you are financially independent, and when you have a business that you are running and it's successful. Also, when you are living alone because no one can tell you shit and even if they disown you, you know you

have got yourself financially. One thing about African parents, they'll never accept you as long as you don't have money. The things you see on social media are not true. The stuff that you watch on Netflix doesn't happen in real life. *Mina* I can put on nails because firstly, I can afford and then secondly, I am financially independent. I pay for my own bills, I do my own shit. So nobody can tell me nonsense. So there's no way you can tell me you are inspired by me because you don't know the real me. You know the person that you see on social media but you don't know the real me. 17 April 2021 I was chased away from home. I know the shacks *aseAlex* like my bank balance. *Ngiyazikahle imkuku yaseAlex yonke* because I lived there for five months, five good months. Until I was in a position to make money, move out of Alex and get myself a place in Johannesburg. Today's the first of June 2022 and no one has even bothered to apologise, a year later. No one has even thought about the abuse I went through or how I survived during those five months. So basically, people don't care. You don't owe anyone a coming out statement or coming out message or whatsoever. Babe, you see that closet that you are staying in? Stay there. *Gara pano*, don't stress yourself."

LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter violence in various forms due to persisting social stigma and anti-LGBTQIA+ laws. Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2020), outline the implications of the numerous issues of violence LGBTQIA+ Africans face due to ignorance, hatred and rejection from their families and society. The creator of this TikTok video outlines two forms of violence LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter in African contexts, exclusion and rejection within society. According to Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2020), LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing exclusion and rejection can be damaging to their well-being and safety, this reasoning is expressed by the creator against 'coming out.' LGBTQIA+ people can experience rejection from their families and within their daily experiences, with LGBTQIA+ youth particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation following disclosure to their families (Moagi & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020). Rejection could lead to detrimental emotional, financial, and physical consequences for individuals. Additionally, exclusion is also a form of mental violence which can limit LGBTQIA+ people in the workplace and reduce access to economic opportunities, healthcare or safety.

This video highlights two important things about how Queer people choose to make themselves visible and what factors are encountered within that negotiation. Firstly, the

TikToker above highlights the importance of strategy in being visible in personal spaces and online and highlighting the intersectional factors which LGBTQIA+ individuals need to consider within the African context in making themselves visible. This includes financial security, familial support, and housing insecurity including the mental and physical harm which is encountered by unhoused queer people. This video received 2882 comments with some users expressing their agreement with the creator's message:

@UserID: "out of all the languages in this world & you chose to speak FACTS!!"

@UserID: "I appreciate the fact that you are brutally honest 🙄♥♥♥you don't give people false hope"

Other users also expressed some disagreement:

@UserID: "mara [But] this [is] killing the inside and not living the truth"

Some comments expressed support for the creator by stating:

@UserID: "you so strong, keep going 💜💜💜💜"

Other users shared their thoughts about coming out, echoing the creator's message on safety and financial security shaping decisions to come out:

@UserID: "👏 I was ignorant once and believed everyone should come out. Now I'm certain it's about safety."

@UserID: "This is true 😊 I haven't came out and I will never maybe if I am monied I will. In black families they accept anything as long as you are monied"

Other users also shared their positive experiences and support:

@UserID: "😂😂 Guys I'm from Zim. I came out to 98% of my relatives. It has been so so refreshing, uyaz [you know]... Even the community where I stay ay soku mandi bethuna [it is now nice guys].."

@UserID: "My mum laughed when I told her and said she knew. Plus half of the fam around my age are bisexual. Hope some of y'all's families accept you too. ❤️"

The creator also answered some questions in the comment section with one example including:

@UserID: “[Is it] true that in Zim they arrest you if you come out?”

@CreatorID: “Nope it’s not true, because there are LGBTQIA+ organisations as well. They wouldn’t be there if they would be arrested for coming out”

Due to how much engagement the video received, the comment section also featured elements of homophobia with some users sharing sentiments such as:

@UserID: “u are a very handsome man. honestly my heart is aching over wat [what] you are doing.”

This video provides insight into the conversations between users on the platform, highlighting the impact of homophobia on the creator’s life and some of the user’s experiences. The comments in this section also show an element of unlearning the perceived restrictions to expressing African queer sexuality, in some ways disagreeing with the creator. The comment from the user highlighting that they are from Zimbabwe and are out to their relatives and expressing their joy from receiving support from their relatives and community is one example of this. Additionally, the creator also uses their platform to clear up misinformation by sharing with a user that there are LGBTQIA+ activist groups in Zimbabwe. The user and creator of this video disrupt the idea of heterosexual Zimbabwe despite the prohibition of same-sex relations in the country, making queer Zimbabweans visible (Ncube & Sibanda, 2024). Additionally, the popularity of this video also highlights the increased likelihood of the creator's videos receiving negative comments. Overall, this video and the comment section offer insight into discussions about visibility on QueerTok and the use of TikTok for participatory dialogue.

The internet presents an immaterial space in which LGBTQIA+ go through a similar process and considerations in managing their visibility and representing themselves and their identity online. The following video speaks to themes of coming out, highlighting the creator’s being out on social media but not in their physical life. The video utilises an audio which goes as follows:

“I’m gay” (Pause and cheers in the background) “Actually I’m not”³⁵

The video begins with the creator in the frame and the creator limps their wrist during the first part of the audio which says “I’m gay” with the following caption above them in the video:

“Me being fully out on social media embracing my sexuality, living with my partner of 6 years”

The creator has two rainbow flags behind them and is carrying a rainbow tote bag which they show off during the pause and cheering part of the audio. As the “Actually I’m not” part of the audio plays, the words above the creator change to read:

“Me with my family.”

This TikTok is interesting to look at in contrast to the earlier TikTok and highlights some of the differences in existing on a platform like TikTok in contrast to real life, it is also important to note that unlike the creator in the first video discussed, this creator does not live or come from an African country. Referring to Lasser and Tharinger’s (2003), definition of visibility management, individuals aim to create spaces in which they can manage their identity based on their perceived levels of safety. Platforms like Facebook usually ask for real names and are commonly used for open disclosures. One of the biggest ways in which social media has had a positive impact on individuals is providing them a space to be anonymous and engage with people openly without the fear of being outed. This has typically been a key aspect of understanding queer safety online (Craig et al., 2021). TikTok videos like the one above are prevalent on the platform, users are shifting their perspective on visibility management with the trusted source as their online communities and creating safety by leveraging the algorithm to keep individuals within their determined ‘safe spaces’ online while sharing your face openly throughout several videos. Usernames may not include actual names on TikTok, but videos usually showcase the users’ likeness and anecdotes from their lives. In another example, using the same audio, another creator creates a similar video highlighting their openness with their sexuality at home as opposed to at school. The video unfolds as following:

³⁵ This audio comes from a 2010 clip of the artist Pink’s acceptance speech for the Human Rights Campaign’s Ally for Equality Award. The particular clip utilised is the artist proclaiming that she is gay and then retracting that statement immediately after in her attempt to use the speech as a teachable moment to normalise sexuality and gender diversity.

During the “I’m gay” portion of the audio, the following words are shown above the creator:

“Me at school”

As the “Actually I’m not” portion of the audio plays, the words are now above the creator:

“Me returning to my religious first gen latina household”

This video is similar to the first, highlighting the spaces in which queer individuals may feel safe being visible as a queer individual, for both creators, being out in the online space was a method they used to find safe spaces and community, for the speaker above, their school also provides them a sense of control and safety over their visibility. Another video which is seemingly in conversation with the videos above features a creator highlighting their concern over creators who are visible as LGBTQIA+ online but aren’t in person. The video begins with the creator in the foreground of the video speaking to the camera. The creator states the following with a concerned expression and shouts into the camera:

“You know who scares me, people who aren’t out to their parents but are out online. But maybe I’m just Indian and the community talks, but are you not afraid?”

This video also speaks to a concern and confusion I also encountered engaging on TikTok and seeing individuals discuss not being out in their material spaces and only choosing to be visible online. Often these videos also include personal and identifying details of the creator. Additionally, this user also speaks to the impact of videos being shared offline and distributed within their community. This video had over 3292 comments³⁶ with some users aiming to answer the question to the video. Some comments include:

@userID: “I live life on the edge”

@userID: “I am deathly afraid, thanks for asking”

@userID: “I live in fear every damn day”

@userID: “We are afraid but we are also having a fun time”

@userID: “I simply have found my parents [accounts] and blocked them ❤️”

³⁶ At time of writing.

The last user comment highlights a strategy for online safety that individuals utilise to protect themselves from potential violence for identifying as LGBTQIA+ such as finding and blocking people they do not want stumbling over their accounts. This displays a level of visibility management outlined by Lasser and Tharinger (2003), although TikTok does not give users complete control over who sees their content and how it may be shared beyond its context.³⁷ Ultimately, TikTok provides an arena for individuals to share their identity and their experiences. The various creative tools provided to creators such as audios, filters of various forms and complementary applications enable individuals to share their coming out stories in different ways.

TikTok provides several juxtapositions of various elements of the queer community. In the previous video, several comments highlighted that although some users are out to their online communities, they may not be out to their parents as well. This is juxtaposed not only in creators not being out in their personal lives but also in the discussions and strategies various users utilise to determine how they engage with the online community. Another example of the differences on coming out and social media identity is represented through one Kenyan transmasculine creator on TikTok who consistently shares videos of himself only wearing a surgical mask with an unrelated username to any of their names. This creator ultimately shares their journey transitioning and dating challenges they encounter in Kenya. This is in stark contrast to other videos where users display their faces while expressing that they are not out.

The following video utilises the audio, “I’m extremely confused/You’re confused? I’m fucking confused bro,” this is taken from a part of the dialogue from the popular drama series, *Euphoria*, this is an example of when the audios are unrelated to the main subject matter or their origins even though they help convey the meaning of the video. TikTok users manage to use these audios in a manner which is specific to their contexts; this is true for all sides of TikTok where users utilise similar audios but with different meanings and markers for their community. In this case the video is similar to other videos which highlight the creator’s friends or family feeling shocked in discovering they may be queer. This video also stands a jumping point in understanding the fluid nature of identity and exploring sexuality without ‘coming out’. The video goes as follows:

³⁷ It is important to note that TikTok does provide an option for creators to remove the option for videos to be downloaded or shared off the platform. However, this does not provide users with complete assurance that their videos will not be distributed as TikTok still allows for phones to create screen recordings which ultimately capture creators’ videos regardless of their settings.

The creator is lip syncing the words as the following words are displayed above them. At the “I’m extremely confused” part of the audio, the caption in the video is as following:

“My followers on IG when I popped out with a gf.”

During the “You’re confused? I’m fucking confused bro” part of the audio, the creator displays the following caption in the video:

“Me who never came out.”

This video also highlights the varying nature of visibility management and sharing sexual or gender identity online and in person, particularly the different manners in which this is displayed on the platform. In some ways, individuals who are ‘out’ online and not in person, present space for themselves and others online to expand their manner of expression, perceived choices on how they can or should express themselves.

Exploring the fluid nature of identity and sharing this through the internet- visibility and knowledge/narrative sharing

Similar to the fluid nature of managing self-visibility and navigating safe spaces, individuals on TikTok highlight approaches to understanding and managing fluid identity through their video documentation, contrasting it with stable understandings of identity. Dines (2003) highlights the contrast between modernist understandings of LGBTQIA+ identities and queer as they highlight the shift from concentrating on queer identities as stable with a focus on nature and nurture towards a more expansive theory of being. There are several variances in the manner in which sexuality and gender identity and fluidity can be expressed, impacted by culture, geographical and political contexts. Intersecting identities such as race impact the manner in which content creators and commenters on TikTok discuss queerness in contrast with homosexuality and the fluid and ever-changing nature of identity. The following video is a starting point for this section as it highlights the fluid nature of identity and expression beyond labels and a focus on connection. Additionally, this is an incredible highlight of the different interpretations of “Bi-wife energy” beyond a heterosexual man who is deemed queer by association to his wife as well as his ‘big ally’ approach towards a general comfortability with queerness. The video begins with the creator making kissing noises while putting their fingers together to imitate kissing. The creator then says:

“and it’s two boys comfortable enough with themselves to experiment with each other without fear of judgement because they both know they’re attracted to women. But have always been curious about guys and don’t want to limit their human experience or ignore their insatiable appetite for flesh. Hayo! The two of them believe that beauty manifests itself in different shapes, shades and vessels. They don’t want to leave behind a stone unturned in this short, crazy roller coaster called life.”

The video ends with the creator making kissing noises while putting their fingers together to imitate kissing.

The creator in this video aims to highlight both the complexity and simplicity of self-awareness and exploration. Ideas of sexuality have been strongly tied to labels and one's personal understanding of themselves. Early mainstream presentation of queer relationships in 1990s and early 2010s social media highlighted distinctions between homosexuality, lesbianism and other labels while also presenting largely negative representations of LGBTQIA+ people and limited bisexual and pansexual representation (Cook, 2018). While mainstream media representation was important in setting the groundwork enabling discussions about sexuality, this TikTok outlines the concepts of sexual fluidity, challenging the rigid boundaries of sexual orientation and how it is often represented (D Camilleri & G Camilleri, 2023). Self-representation on TikTok can provide an acknowledgement of the diversity and fluidity of queerness.

The creator above emphasises the understanding of sexuality as fluid while exploring what may be interesting or even just pleasurable at any point. This provides a characterisation of queerness as a sexuality anarchist term, critiquing exclusion and limitations. The following creator explores the fluidity of their queer identity, narrating their journey through the “entire alphabet.” The creator outlines their experiences in exploring their identity and understanding the contradictory nature of stable and unstable identity. The video begins with the creator sitting back on a chair and talking to the camera. The words “Gender and sexuality are confusing” are written above them. The creator states the following:

“I am pretty sure that at some point in my life, I have identified as every letter in LGBTQ. When I first started questioning my sexuality I thought I was bisexual but then I realised that I might not be attracted to dudes and I came out as lesbian to everyone I know. Like I was a full-on raging lesbian. And then I chopped off all my

hair and started dressing all androgynous and masculine. Then around the ages of 14/15, I discovered what nonbinary [identity] was and I started identifying as nonbinary and using they/them pronouns and I was like, ‘yeah I don’t fuck with gender. That feels right.’ Uhm and the more I got into [my] gender exploration I thought I was a transman for a while. Like FTM. So I was like a straight trans dude for a little bit. And then at a certain point, I realised I was attracted to guys [still] so I was like, ‘am I a gay dude?’ So that was a whole confusing time. But at a certain point, I realised, I still liked aspects of my femininity. Like some days I want to chop my tits clear off and other days I want to get a boob job. Like I was in this really weird in-between phase where I didn’t wanna be a dude but I didn’t want to be a girl so I went back to being nonbinary. Then I realised I had a really big crush on this guy in my school but he’s like this super straight dude and I was like, ‘I will never be able to get any male attention from this straight dude looking like a boy.’ So I started dressing much more feminine and using she/her pronouns again because I wanted this male validation. Then I started identifying as bisexual. Uhm, and now I realise that was not me, so I went back to being nonbinary. I’m comfiest with that identity and my sexuality is who the heck knows. So I have gone on a journey through the alphabet.”

The creator’s journey is interesting in their sharing of their experiences and affirming their queer identity as a non-stable and always changing experience. Goodman (1977) in his categorisation of queerness describes “promiscuity” as a democratising value in which it is characteristic of “queer life.” Goodman (1977) was critical of homosexual communities of the 70s for being exclusive and also uses the term “queer” as a tool to tackle monosexual politics and the rigidity of labels. The point he makes is that promiscuity represents alternative values and an alternative way of building relationships and communities. These principles are highlighted by both creators in this section. The following video presents a different aspect of the journey of identity development and exploration, using audio to emphasise their shock and the overall message. The video displays the video describing various phases of their life using an audio snippet from the Doja Cat song “You Right.” The song is used to emphasise the creator's progression from understanding to shock. The video begins with the creator smirking and doing a peace sign while the following words are shown above the creator’s head:

“comes out as bis3xual”

The next shot of the video has the following words displayed while the creator biting their lower lip:

“then comes out as lesbi4n”³⁸

Then next shot has the following caption above the creator while they flex their arm:

“finally comes out as trans”

The final shot of the video shows the following words above the creator while the creator is now wearing sunglasses and turning their head to face the camera. Then, reacting to these words the creator acts shocked and starts acting as though they are about to cry:

“starts feeling attracted to men again”

The responses to this video include users conveying their support and affirming the creator’s identity exploration. Some comments to this effect include:

@userID: “It’s the gender. Gender influences us more than we think. The more we’re sure of ourselves the easier it is to like other people 🧑”

@userID: “thank you for being living proof that this happens to people other than me so my mum can stop telling me [I’ve] “went through the whole alphabet””

Other comments highlight the feelings users have in navigating their sexual and gender identity, with some users sharing strategies related to coming out and not using identity labels. Some of these comments include:

@userID: “The coming out as lesbian then being attracted to men feels like such a self betrayal”

@userID: “That’s why I don’t come out as anything, I feel what I feel. If I like a woman or a man it doesn’t matter what my gender is as long as I’m happy.”

@userID: “I stopped using labels and just live in the present moment, aware that I’m never the same person and always changing.”

³⁸ TikTok creator’s often change the words ‘lesbian’ and ‘bisexual’ to counter algorithm censorship on TikTok (Devlin, 2022).

While it is important to acknowledge external interaction with someone else's identity which is a key part of queer representation, this video also grapples with the internal battle of experiencing the flux within one's identity. Interestingly, this TikTok and its comments highlight the community politics of 'gayness' and the complexity of queerness and identity exploration within a state of constant flux in self-understanding. The comments in response to the creator's video above also highlight the influence of gender identity in troubling sexuality. Conversations on gender and sexuality can be one dimensional in their presentation in mainstream media, visibility of LGBTQIA+ creators on TikTok display alternatives to this presentation. The creator in the following TikTok video sets their video to a distorted version of "Send my love to your new lover" by Adele highlighting the theme of fluidity even when utilising certain labels for self-description. The aim of most TikTok videos is to be humorous and entertaining which is necessary in harnessing the algorithm to share content widely, the audio this creator uses in this video adds to its humorous interpretation and can also be described as relatable based on the comments to it. The TikTok is set on a train with the creator in frame with the following text in the video:

"Having to go home from uni because you have £9 to your name, [can't] stop fighting people drunk and keep shagging men even [though] you're a lesbian"

The creator effectively highlights the contradictions in the lived reality of label stability. This video also demonstrates how our life circumstances can dictate our experiences and shows the diverse ways in which sexuality can be expressed. The concept of lesbians, who identify as lesbians but still have sex with men is commonly presented in TikTok videos. Similar to this video, the following video deals with the themes of sexual identity and sexual experiences in a more granular manner. The following TikTok video is a stitch to a video by another content creator. The stitched video is set to the audio, "he looks at me. I look at him." This audio is used to depict a confrontational scene where two people, or a person and an object, stare at each other because something weird or awkward is happening. The original video is set to this audio and has the words "when I get home from hooking up with a guy because I was horny." The first shot of the video displays a lesbian flag which appears to be hung in the creator's bedroom. The next shot of the video flashes to the creator making it appear as though the flag is staring at them while they stare at the flag. The rest of the video is a stitch by a different content creator contributing to the original video, the creator begins their stitch by stating:

“The comment section [of the original video] broke my brain a little bit. I am so very sorry people do not understand what internalised biphobia means and no one knows when to use it properly. And I am very sorry that people just don’t believe lesbians when they say that they are lesbians. I am a lesbian and I slept with a guy because it was Wednesday and I wanted to do it and see if I was good at it. I’m not. Uhm, and I was a lesbian the entire time. I was not attracted to men and I did it anyway. This [referring to the comment section on the original video] also removes the historical context of lesbians who did not have the label of lesbian to stick with, that were married to men. This removes the context from sex workers who are lesbians but still sleep with men. How about we just start believing people when they give themselves a label and if they start calling themselves bi, that’s okay too. But this is giving the same vibes as telling people that they are not trans because they do not perform transness the same way that other trans people do. That they don’t get the same gender-affirming surgeries, that they don’t experience the same dysphoria. This is invalidating.”

This creator highlights several important aspects of identity. First, sexuality is not necessarily always tied to whom people choose to engage with sexually. Second, the video underscores the central issues with understanding labels as stable and consistent identities. Third, it addresses the invisibility of people who may not fit into stable assumptions of LGBTQIA+ labels, such as those who have sex with men due to their context or occupation. While labels are important for sense-making, validation and empowerment (Abraham, 2022), the QueerTok community is engaging in discussions encouraging fluidity while utilising labels for understanding. Additionally, updating and evolving personal understandings of gender and sexual identity. These last two videos tie into the first video in this section, highlighting the concept of pleasure as an aspect of how we may navigate sexual experiences, and the democratisation promiscuity can provide in creating alternatives for existing while queer.

Documenting journeys through/of transition

TikTok creators and users who share their stories through navigating their identity and documenting their lives as LGBTQIA+ can affirm and acknowledge others experiences, share valuable information and also empower other users (Lucassen et al., 2018). TikTok has emerged as a long-term platform for documenting and following along with individual’s gender transitions. The documentation of gender identity and transition on TikTok has been

used to spread awareness on gender affirming care available to individuals, the different journeys which exist and the different ways in which this process can unfold for individuals, including barriers and challenges and also triumphs. The following TikTok video is one example of several trends on TikTok which feature individuals documenting their trans experiences, this particular format of this video has often been used by Trans men to document changes to their voice and appearance on testosterone. This trend on TikTok usually involves creators filming a snippet of the video every month which they will later upload as a compilation. This video begins with the creator speaking to the video which is the form of all the clips in this video.

This video portrays the creator speaking to the camera. The creator says “Hello, my name is Theo and this is my voice pre-T.” The next shot is of the creator again at a different point wearing different clothes. They say “Hello, my name is Theo and this is my voice, one month on T.” The next shot of the video is the creator again and they simply say “two months on T.” The last shot of the video is the creator who now has different hair, they say, “So I definitely forgot about this, but this is my voice like nine or ten months on T. But I am so fucking happy and so grateful for this journey. [I’m] sorry past me [who] wanted to document this and I told myself I wouldn’t get back on this app but..”

Another creator also shares their journey on testosterone:

“This is my voice one day on T. Finally! 50 years in the making. My journey starts”

Another creator shares a video of themselves top less the following words are read out by TikTok’s text reader:

“Today I’m two years post top surgery. Feel free to ask me questions!”

These videos sometimes include creators who aim to document their transitions for users on the app and also encourage them to ask questions to enable information sharing. This is also empowerment for users who may only be able to access this information online. The following video is a longer form video of what individuals may choose to document about their lives and transition. This TikTok video follows the creator as she goes through

gender-affirming care. The video is filmed in a ‘follow along’ format as we got through the creator getting ready for her surgery.³⁹

The video begins in the creator’s bathroom and she says, “Okay, I am getting male-to-female gender reassignment surgery tomorrow. I have to clear out my bowels today so, let’s take some laxatives. The creator continues, “I’m going to start by drinking this whole bottle of magnesium citrate and three of these Dulcolax laxatives, oh god” as she shows the bottle of magnesium citrate and the pack of Dulcolax. The video continues and shows the creator taking the medication, and then a scene in which she simply states, “and now we wait.” The next shot of the video has the creator informing us of the time while holding a bowl of what looks like jelly, “It is currently 12 pm and I am also on a clear liquid diet today so I can only eat and consume clear liquids and jello.” The video continues with the creator in the bathroom using the toilet while they use the toilet, the words on the screen simply say “this is not pee by the way.” In the next shot of the video, the creator starts by saying “I’m sorry. I am so sorry I made y’all listen to that but it’s for the experience and I have to take more laxatives at 10 pm, and at 4 am I have to take an enema. Then I’ll be done. My surgery is at 6 am. Jesus Christ!”

The next video features the same content creator. This following video is shot three weeks after the first one was posted. This video is filmed as a response to a comment which read “Are you fully healed now?” The response TikTok video is shot in the bathroom, and she begins by saying:

“It is officially three weeks post-op, [both] top and bottom and no I am not even close to being fully healed yet. I just got ready and did my make-up for the first time since surgery and I feel so good! So, when it comes to the healing process, shit’s pretty insane right now. I think you can tell my right boob is a little bit higher up than my left because it’s still a little bit swollen. But eventually, they’ll drop down and be even but for three weeks, this is good progress. Now when it comes to bottom surgery AKA my new punani, she’s very high maintenance like, very. I say this because I currently have to dilate four times a day. Now let me explain what that is.” The

³⁹ Follow along videos are commonly presented in the form of ‘day in the life’ videos which usually include several snippets from the creator’s life. This format allows for the creation of a narrative about the creator’s day or a particular area of interest. Follow along videos are captivating and a popular way to share stories about routines on TikTok (Hotchkiss, 2023).

creator then shifts to a close-up shot of her face and says, “And TikTok this is for educational purposes to educate the world on transgender individuals. So, fuck you if you take down this video, you’re transphobic.” The creator goes back to the wider shot and continues, “To put it simply, I have a brand-new vagina, I have a brand-new vaginal canal like there is literally a hole, a canal inside of me, that was not there before. Like when you get your ears pierced, that’s a brand-new hole and if you take the earring out, it’ll close up and tighten and the same thing will happen if I don’t dilate my vagina. So, four times a day for twenty minutes, I have to stick a medical dilator inside of myself which looks like this and I am currently dilating to the fourth dot.” The creator continues and shows the medical dilator to the camera. She then continues to state while showing a drawer full of lube tubes, “This is all my lube for when I dilate. No, it does not hurt, it’s just very time-consuming. My whole day revolves around dilating. But the 27th is the last time I have to do it four times a day, then after that, it’s three times and then after it’ll go down to two times, then one time a day. Then one-year post op I will only have to do it once a week. I can’t sit down comfortably unless I use this cushion. I am also at the stage of recovery where there is a lot of discharge because everything is healing, cleaning and flushing itself out. So, I go through about four or five of these a day. These are adult diapers. Also, I can pee and poop normally on the toilet, they’re just for the discharge. I’ve been showering every day once or twice a day and that’s about it. It sucks. I can’t wait to have my life back and be able to go out. It will be all worth it in the end. I am so happy because I finally feel like myself, I finally look like myself. I feel good, I look good. So, yeah that’s my surgery update. Thanks for coming, thanks for watching.”

What is most important to showcase in this section is the autonomy of queer people to speak and represent their journeys in a manner most meaningful and authentic to them. From discussing the spectrum of sexuality and gender identity to documenting trans journeys, trans lives and trans joy is important. TikTok creators use the platform to democratise self-representation and share individual and community narratives. One of my favourite phrases, often commented on videos on QueerTok and encountered in my internet explorations, is ‘there is no original thought or experience.’ This sentiment is affirmed by the way queer people present themselves, giving users the opportunity to engage with and name feelings and thoughts they may not have realised are shared within their community.

Exploring Biwife energy: Visibility in Relationships within QueerTok

Queertok is used by members of the community to document their lives, part of this documentation is showcasing relationships and their experiences within them. TikTok presents a new avenue to explore queer relationships through the use of multimodal storytelling and the vast amount of video content about relationships from Queer creators. YouTube has served a similar role as an autobiographical platform for queer vloggers, allowing South African creators to share their stories, give their subscribers insight into their relationships and validate experiences (Andrews, 2020). TikTok allows users to create videos easily and the shorter length of TikTok videos also requires less editing from content creators, this allows more users to create their own videos. Documenting queer love is a form of subverting heteronormativity both online and offline (Duguay, 2023). TikTok allows users to express their identity and also engage in discussions about relationships and LGBTQIA+ people. A prominent conversation on Lesbian or WLW TikTok has concentrated on understandings of masculinity and femininity and how heteronormativity has influenced LGBTQIA+ relationships and identity (Van der Toorn et al., 2020). The first video which illustrates an aspect of this ongoing dialogue features two people who self-identify as masculine lesbians, dancing together with the following text appearing throughout the video:

“When she stops dating guys for studs until she realises” above them. They then dance away from the camera to a song unrelated to the context of the video, while text with the phrases “We can't change a tire”, “Get overly emotional,” “Steal your tampons,” “We cheat too,” each appears on the screen. The video ends with them still dancing and the text “We ain’t shh either” above them.

This video offers a response to two main aspects of the conversation about masculinity and the gendering of sexuality. Firstly, the video acts as a response to conversations from people who suggest that it is ‘better to be a lesbian’ and contrasts dating masculine presenting women with cisgender men, particularly highlighted through the, ‘we can’t change a tire’, ‘we cheat’ and ‘we ain’t shit either’ texts from the video (Love, 2016). Secondly, the video challenges the gendering of masculine presenting women and highlights that masculine women or lesbians have emotions and ultimately in all the other statements that they are women as well through similar institutions, socialisation, and prevalent ideologies (Van der Toorn et al., 2020). This video highlights an important discussion on masculinity and gender roles within queer relationships. The assumption that masculine presenting women should act

like men, these are typically attributes which are assumed every man should be capable of. This video highlights how the typical ‘date women instead of men’ narrative is often misleading, improperly attributing aspects of traditional masculinity and gender roles to people.

Additionally, the video disrupts this expectation by highlighting how the inherent assumption of queer people as less likely to hurt someone is important, highlighted in the “We ain’t shh either” statement by creators. Following on the core themes from the video above, the following TikTok video by another creator utilises audio and the viral nature of TikTok queer culture easily identified by the community to emphasise the impact of heteronormativity in gendering masculine queer women.⁴⁰ The video depicts a masculine lesbian gesturing and lip-syncing to the phrase/ audio “ I’m a mother-f-ing City Girl,” the text show in the video is in all capital letters:

“WHEN SHE EXPECTS ME TO DO MANLY STUFF BECAUSE I'M MASC”

The audio is particularly useful in presenting the point of the creator, the original audio comes from the song “Double CC's” by City Girls. The use of this song is interesting in highlighting the femininity of this individual in discussing how she experiences gendering in a lesbian relationship, using a feminine song through the lyrics and its trend use on TikTok. These videos highlight the equating of masculinity with manhood and how it often negatively impacts masculine presenting women.

The following TikTok video follows along on the discussion of heteronormativity in LGBTQIA+ relationships and the heteronormative gendering of individuals within them. The creator of the video presents another aspect of this discussion, highlighting their perspective on the impact of hypermasculinity and power dynamics within lesbian relationships. This video depicts a femme presenting person recording themselves on screen sharing a personal reflection:

⁴⁰ Queertechnoculture refers to the intersection of queerness and technology, particularly social media and social platforms created through displays of queer fashion or references to LGBTQ+ celebrities enhanced through hashtags, filters, emojis, and GIFs (Duguay, 2023; Chang, 2012). Duguay (2023) states that digital cultural signals can be identified through signalling of sexual identity which is facilitated by queer people’s ability to find each other and connect. TikTok’s affordances have enabled the creation of new queertechnocultures, an element of which is the propagation of trends throughout the platform creating a general template for videos which users can then personalise for their own experiences and interpretations of the trend templates.

“Baby gay chronicles once again. One thing I realised I wasn't ready for is this whole ‘stud culture’,” [air quote gesture]. They continue, “What’s that whole thing about? The whole hyper-masculinity. The power dynamics. Shunning anything that makes you look remotely feminine. God forbid you let your femme dominate you. God forbid you're seen shaking your ass in the club. Perpetuating the very same heteronormative dynamics that you're running away from. Mmm. You studs are not ready to hear that. You’d rather go for straight girls and bisexual girls because these straight girls emphasise and validate your masculinity.”

The creator speaks to various aspects of heteronormativity in queer relationships and the way it affects masculine presenting individuals themselves and perpetuates heteronormativity. The comment section of this video received mixed reactions among users. Some users agreed with the messages in the video with some users stating:

@userID: “you do have a good point here 🥰🥰🥰”

@userID: “It's so boring *hle*.”

@userID: “Accurate😂😭 esp shaking your ass”

@userID: “*Batshele!*”⁴¹

@userID: “Dawg imagine dating a hun with toxic masculinity 😭😭😭 anever no ways.”

Other users critiqued the creator’s framing of ‘stud culture’ with some users arguing that the creator aims to shame masculine presenting people. Some comments include:

@userID: “You really thought you ate 😏 perpetuating the same misogyny and gender conformity”

@userID: “Some of us are just naturally dominant, I was dominant when I was a stem/fem. Clothes I wear are just to make me feel comfortable”

@userID: “Why are you shaming people for how they present themselves ? It’s not like it’s a choice they make, the dynamic is just comfortable for them...”

⁴¹ Contextual translation from isiZulu: “Tell them!”

These comments and those similar to them in this video are interesting as they present contradictory engagements with the post and shed light on different perspectives on the perceived legitimacy of self-presentation and power dynamics within lesbian relationships. Additionally, the last two comments which highlight choice and ‘natural’ predispositions are contrasted with the original creator’s statement on power dynamics and heteronormativity, directly challenging the perceived individual choices on dynamics which are constructed systemically. Furthermore, one user’s critique of the creator’s own perpetuation of misogyny and gender conformity in the video is affirmed in the following comment:

@userID: “I’m bisexual and definitely don’t do studs...I’m attracted to women so I want some femininity because I’ll never validate masculinity in a FEMALE”

This comment highlights ideals rooted in gender conformity and how the user interpreted the creator’s video as endorsing conformity within one’s assigned gender at birth, this is highlighted through the use of ‘female’ in the comment. Other users were also critical of other elements in the video with some users questioning:

@userID: “*Kante* what did bisexuals do?”

@userID: “Which stud are y’all meeting cos studs be the most softest masc lesbians! All of what you’ve said I have witness in butches”

The first comment above highlights the inclusion of bisexual women as an option for heteronormative studs as suggested by the creator and questions the creator’s intent. This comment did not receive any responses. The second comment highlights the users own dating experiences as different from that of the creator. The creator also joins the comment section in response to the gender exclusion some users point out in the comment section and the creator clarifies:

@creatorID: “Before I catch smoke, I said Studs. Not non-binary or trans people abeg.”

This comment section presents different perspectives and experiences within the same community. The comment section also provides insight into a variety of experiences and interpretations to the video and the individual and community impact of heteronormativity. This video was also interesting from the perspective of a self-proclaimed ‘baby gay’ and their

experiences in dating masculine presenting people as a feminine presenting person. This particular video and comment section provide important insight into discussions LGBTQIA+ people on TikTok understand heteronormativity and its impact on relationships. Furthermore, this discussion provides insight into the manner in which queer relationships are reproduced within the cisheteropatriarchy and how individuals who are sexualised and gendered on the outside of the system construct meaning, identity and critique to both the community, social constructs and societal and interpersonal power dynamic.

Sexuality and its impact on how LGBTQIA+ individuals are gendered in interpersonal relationships is a recurring discussion on TikTok. Heteronormativity shapes the manner in which LGBTQIA+ individuals engage in their interpersonal relationships and how they perceive themselves within relationships with partners. The TikToks in this section have included examples of individual responses and experiences encountering the manifestations of heteronormativity in their relationships. The gendering of queer individuals in relation with their sexuality has always created interest in how queer people navigate their romantic lives within this lens (Marecek et al., 1982). This also has an impact within the community in how relationships are negotiated and structured.

A key concept in this discussion is highlighting the gendering of individuals within lesbian relationships, highlighting the impact on interactions interpersonally. The next TikTok video presents another perspective of this discussion as this creator also presents their own reflections of their role in their relationships and also how it impacts their desires and expectations in relationships. The TikTok video is a stitch video, creating a direct response to another video. The video begins with the original video it is stitched with, showing the original text of the video stating: “what's one thing you wish you knew before your first WLW relationship?” The creator begins their response video saying:

“I wish I knew that being a masculine-presenting person does not mean that I need to play a masculine role. I know we have an ongoing problem with misogyny in the lesbian community, but I wish I would [have] known that it doesn't have to be like that. Like, I should be able to want flowers. I should be able to want to be taken out on a date. I'm allowed to be held. I'm allowed to show emotion and concern. And anybody that wants to perpetuate any other idea on me, is not for me. You don't have to act a certain way, and you shouldn't be treated a certain way based on how you present. Simple as that.”

This video follows along the learnings of a masculine presenting individuals' perception of engagement within queer relationships. This video presents insight into how heteronormativity shapes how users and creators understand the relationship between presentation and gender and sexuality perception. Furthermore, the video presents perspective on the impact of toxic masculinity in how masculine presenting people feel pressure to engage within their romantic relationships along heteronormative lines. This video also highlights the impact of toxic masculinity in shaping desires and engagement based on presentation and assumed models of how relationships should function. The heteronormative construction of men influenced perceptions of masculinity and also highlighted how heterosexual men are expected to engage (McCutcheon, 2022). Perceptions of expectations of men within heteronormative relationships colour how masculine people themselves also understand their role in their relationships. This video also highlights aspects men are expected to meet romantically and how the heteronormativity impacts construction of other relationships within the cisheteropatriarchy in lesbian relationships as masculine people should not be romanced, allowed to share their feelings or gifted flowers (McCutcheon, 2022). The next creator also engages on these themes in a humorous video which depicts two people, one sitting on a chair and the other standing in front of them. Both alternate between looking at each other and the camera, with the person standing lip-syncing to the viral audio:

“That girl treat you like a young man and not a pretty pretty princess because she not gay, she like boys”⁴² playing in the background. The text above them says ‘*before I pulled my girl I had to pull her from the clutches of straight women.*’

This video is interesting for two reasons, firstly, the video discusses the treatment of masculine people in general and how they are treated and what they can expect to be treated in relationships, particularly how they are also gendered within relationships with heterosexual women. Secondly, the video likens the description in the viral audio to the treatment experienced by their partner as ‘a young man’ and not a ‘pretty pretty princess’ because the person treating this person is not gay and likes men. This also highlights how dichotomies like bottom vs. top, fem vs. masc, and fem vs. butch are understood as stable terms used to make sense of queer relationships.

⁴² This was a popular audio created by a TikTok creator from their video talking about the mistreatment of masculine presenting women by women.

Cisheteronormativity greatly shapes relationships by positioning heterosexual norms as the ideal, thereby delegitimising relationships between people of perceived 'similar categories.' For instance, partnerships between two masculine or two feminine individuals are often seen as uncommon and unusual in the context of romantic partnering (Wallace, 2022). The following couple on TikTok documents their relationship on the platform and challenges stereotypes about how relationships are formed. The popular TikTok couple often share content showcasing their love for each other, engaging in TikTok relationship trends and challenges, and generally showcasing their lives and other relationships. This couple is interesting as they are ultimately in a heterosexual presenting relationship as it is between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman, however, what subverts this seemingly stable construct is the man's feminine presentation juxtaposed with his girlfriend's masculine presentation. One of the videos they shared depicts the feminine presenting man with eyelash extensions and painted nails, lip-syncing along to the audio:

“Oh don't let my class fool you, I love a good hood jam”, with the text, *"Don't let my style fool you, I very much have a girlfriend"* above, as their partner, a masculine presenting woman in a white vest and wearing a chain, comes into the frame.

It is clear from the framing of these videos that the two creators have an understanding of the manner in which they are received as a couple which falls outside the norm within gender performance and sexuality. This video in particular highlights the creator problematising the assumption that gender presentation and sexuality are connected. TikTok is important in sharing and bringing to light different forms of relationships, meaning making, and exposing people to more diverse people. The next video from the same couple is a response to an audio prompting users to share five of their favourite pictures, and is a picture collage of the two of them together, showing their style. The man is wearing typically “feminine clothing” and the woman and typically “masculine clothing.” They are also posing in an assumed feminine or masculine way complimentary to the way they present, for example, with the masculine-presenting woman carrying the feminine-presenting man as he wraps his legs around her waist.

This couple's video continues to play against assumed narratives of femininity and masculinity and how one should be treated based on these categories and their connection to their sex. This couple showing this masculine white woman carrying her feminine black boyfriend shifts understanding of the subtext around sexuality and relationship formation. A

subversion of relationships, this is also interesting to speak about this relationship, which is ultimately heterosexual, but ultimately encapsulates the importance of queerness as a politic.

Weaponising visibility: Exploring the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ side of TikTok

QueerTok offers a space for users and creators to share and learn about their identity with the ability to reach large audiences. Visibility on TikTok is a central aspect for creators as they often show their faces in their videos and share their vulnerabilities. Creators utilise the platform with the aim to be received by their imagined audience, the Queer community within the site. While TikTok allows users to gain access to other user’s experiences, TikTok is not always a safe space for queer individuals and creators may encounter negativity online. Meyer (2022) highlights that this can happen in two prominent ways, firstly, users may have their content shared outside the TikTok app to other platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, this creates a situation which removes the creator from their original context and imagined audience. Secondly, creators may have their content algorithmically distributed to hateful groups within the app, this may be due to the algorithm picking up a negative comment with significant engagement and thus distributing the content within those groups which ends up exposing creators to outside groups outside of Queertok, thus ending up on the wrong side of TikTok.

TikTok creators often create their content and engage in communities with their perceived audiences. This facilitates the creation of content specifically tailored towards particular groups and is reflected through the perceived safety users may feel online as opposed to in person. This audience composition may lead to a dependence on an imagined audience as it may be difficult to cognitively attend to different people at once. On TikTok, tailoring content for particular audiences also creates a sense of safety for users to avoid context collapse and maintain their community. The TikTok app adds challenges to people’s audience understanding (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2013) as context cues are often less abundant especially as subcommunities are algorithmically constructed and content is constructed through layers of community context through audio, memes, and various visual and body cues. Additionally, algorithms and preferences play into audience compositions further contributing to communal silos (Bernstein et al., 2013). While the algorithm is TikTok’s most successful app system and value, it has also contributed to the increased polarisation of individuals on social media, these groups are beneficial in creating community

for those who seek it online while also increasing opportunities for context collapse due to the increased lack of context and insight to various subcultures on the app.

A significant aspect of visibility management and community building is based on the ability of people within a digital space to communicate and feel safe expressing themselves (Talbot et al., 2022). Unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, TikTok users have little control over the spread of their content, who is able to respond to it, and the people who can interact with it. This requires creators who choose to be visible on TikTok to find methods to navigate the issue of context collapse. Another aspect of TikTok is that queer or LGBTQIA+ trends may not always be easily understood by members outside the community or outside of the individual's personal networks, this creates an additional issue when content which is not intended for certain audiences engage with that content negatively which may be difficult for creators (Simpson et al., 2022). Visibility in the form of identity management, relationship building and community engagement are some of the reasons that QueerTok creators choose to remain on the platform. TikTok creates an opportunity for greater inquiry of how queer users may choose to utilise the algorithm and other technical affordances from the app to manage who engages with their content or create spaces to alert other individuals when they feel unsafe on the platform.

Meyer (2022) distinguishes TikTok from other social media apps due to its algorithm which privileges connections based on interest over pre-existing connections outside of social media. Due to the prioritisation of interests over knowledge of individuals offline, communities on TikTok can have distinct cultures and information which is not aimed at those outside of the group. The algorithmic structuring of videos on TikTok also enables creators to reach larger audiences in a shorter span of time. Thus, creators are likely to experience context collapse if their videos become viral and different audiences flatten into that singular context. This leads unfamiliar audiences to react negatively (Arsheep, 2023). The video from the following creator presents reactions to social media content by groups outside of the intended audience. This is an example of the creator ending up on the wrong side of TikTok and thus encountering negativity. The video depicts a person looking at the camera and lip synching to the audio, "*I'm so happy, I'm so sad.*"⁴³

⁴³ "I'm So Happy, I'm So Sad" refers to a viral clip of Mari from the mobile game *Love Live! School Idol Festival ALL STARS* saying "I'm so happy!" and smiling then "I'm so sad" with a sunken head, one after the other. The clip was uploaded to TikTok in early October 2021 and its Original Sound went viral in lip-sync skits over the course of the month leading into November, mainly used to describe or illustrate moments of joy quickly followed by moments of worry or sadness."

The following text is displayed on the screen, the first text “Going viral on tiktok for criticising Drag Race” is lip synced during the *I’m so happy* part of the audio, then “A bunch of TERFs showing up in the comments” appears on the screen during the *I’m so sad* clip.

This TikTok video displays some of the groups which creators can encounter on the app. Within this creator’s context, encountering the wrong side of TikTok exposed their video criticising Drag Race to TERFs. Creators appreciate their content becoming viral for various reasons, including the reach of their video, and for creators who have monetised their content, going viral means they are likely to earn more money from that video.⁴⁴ There are several benefits for the creation of communities bound by similar interests on TikTok, especially the ability for creators to earn money while producing content they care about and reaching audiences with similar interests. An interesting aspect of TikTok is its potential to blend people of various backgrounds and geographical positions into a single audience. TikTok also primarily creates visibility and introduces creators to new ways of engaging that they may not have previously been aware of or had interest in.

This is important in understanding how TikTok users may work to create more security in their engagements online and finding other people who may understand. TikTok is an unstable platform for users who may face censorship, shadowbanning or suspension of their accounts making it difficult to maintain consistent communication with users. Thus, users will move to other platforms to engage with the community. However, QueerTok has increasingly become a significant pillar for community support and sharing fundraising initiatives for queer individuals and helping direct users to other sites and organisations aimed at assisting or convening Queer people (Holloway et al., 2023). An example of the use of TikTok for community support and sharing information is displayed in this next video. The video is set to a mashup of the Black Eyed Peas’ Imma Be audio.

The video depicts a person at their desk with the text “A few years ago I got into the vintage le\$bean magazines”. The video then shows them paging through a copy of ‘On Our Backs’ [the first women-run erotica magazine in the United States] with the text “They had hot personal ads in the back”. They show a phone and open the

⁴⁴ The TikTok Creator Rewards Program is aimed at providing monetary incentives for creators who produce high quality content which generate significant numbers of views. The rewards program has strict requirements on the length of videos, the types of videos which are eligible to generate views and is only available to creators in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, South Korea, France, and Brazil (TikTok 2024).

Instagram app with the text above saying “I started an IG and asked people to submit their own personals” and “I had no idea it would blow up” showing the different personals people had written. They then show their process of working to create an official app, going on to write “I decided this needs to become an app, so I hired a 100% queer team, fundraised money via donations from the community, and got to work.” Finally, the creator shows the completed and launched Lex app on a phone, saying “Lex launched right before COVID and now has queers all over the world finding dates, friends and more. I'm so grateful for our community.”

This TikTok presents an unexpected value of TikTok for queer users, providing access to other methods of engagement and access to an online archive and network of queer creators. The QueerTok community is important for creators and users, giving them access to connection, knowledge, community, and support. The above TikTok also serves as an advertisement for the app while also sharing stories of queer people and the use of this app, connecting historical ways in which queer people met each other and blending modern tools for communication. TikTok creators thus identify tools and mechanisms to maintain effective use of the app. One of the tools available to creators and users within TikTok is the use of hashtags and captions to appeal to the algorithm and allow their videos to be easily accessible to all users. This includes the explicit use of hashtags such as #queer #gay etc, however, users may also use other hashtags to indicate their targeted audiences (Simpson et al., 2022). Users will also utilise language which can be easily recognised by their intended audience such as Le\$bean and may even begin their videos by requesting that only people in their target audience should continue watching the video, an example of this can include, “everyone who is not a gay or a girly scroll, this video is not for you.” This would then be followed by a statement acknowledging that now that they are gone, they would now share this information or ask a question aimed at this group (Steen et al., 2023). The use of algospeak is also aimed at circumventing algorithmic suppression of content about the LGBTQIA+ community.⁴⁵

Users also utilise TikTok’s various affordances to ensure that they ‘train’ their algorithm and see the content that is primarily of interest to them. This includes features such as blocking or muting the user of a particular video. Another affordance on TikTok is the ‘not interested’

⁴⁵ Algospeak can be defined as internet speech in the form of shortened, misspelt or substituted words utilised to specifically circumvent algorithmic suppression of content. Steen et al. (2023) argue that algospeak on TikTok is a result of users experiencing algorithmic content moderation as non-contextual, random, inaccurate, or biased and therefore unjust.

option. This allows users to indicate that they are not interested in a particular video, this is with the hope that the algorithm will, over time, stop showing these kinds of videos (Karizat, 2021). The TikTok algorithm is efficient and fascinating in its ability to present me with creators and content which I have not seen before, it also offers access to new creators and different opinions. The algorithm is not always accurate when presenting users with content which is relatable to them and can occasionally share videos which may not be aligned with the users' beliefs. This can include videos on topics which would be seemingly contradictory to the users' interest, or TikTok videos which are trending across the platform and are thus presented to users due to their popularity.

Content creators and users on TikTok encounter the 'wrong side' of TikTok when the algorithm presents them with content which is contradictory to their values, for queer users the 'wrong side' of TikTok is characterised by conservative views and content or responses which are often harmful, perpetuating hate speech and misinformation. The United States of America has around 148 million users on the app, making up the largest number of users on the app worldwide. The political and user population composition on TikTok have significant impact on the nature of content shared, with content primarily coming from the US (Kemp, 2024). The cultural wars on TikTok are a manifestation of greater political and ideological negotiations both locally in the USA and globally. The TikTok algorithm can amplify and reinforce divisions, resulting in users primarily engaging in tailored content based on the users' existing beliefs and interests.

Gao et al. (2023) present a comparative analysis of short video platforms, Douyin, TikTok and Bilibili, and their algorithm's influence in creating online echo chambers and the spread of information.⁴⁶ Gao et al. (2023) argue that the overuse of algorithmic technology by short video platforms are likely to push users into homogenous echo chambers which can contribute to the spread of false news or rumours with negative social impacts. Algorithms function by classifying users' preferences by collecting behavioural data and matching users with relevant and endless content (Gao et al., 2023). Furthermore, social media platforms lend themselves to creating echo chambers due to the limited geographical restrictions in sharing information, anonymity which reduces social costs of sharing fringe beliefs and

⁴⁶ Douyin is the original version of the TikTok app initially launched in 2016, this app is only available in China. The short video platform is also owned by ByteDance, the same company which owns TikTok (Kolsquare 2022). Bilibili (B Site) is a video sharing platform based in Shanghai. Some content is free on the platform for viewing while some requires a membership. The site also offers a premium membership subscription with content mostly focused on anime and gaming (Concannon, 2023).

access to more individuals who may share similar perspectives and beliefs (Gao et al., 2023). TikTok presents a platform for cross-cultural short videos with reach across over 45 countries and regions. Gao et al. (2023) found in their investigation of short video platform echo chambers that TikTok clustered groups were limited due to language or cultural differences which may limit the communication of likeminded groups thus reducing the formation of echo chambers, however, several communities sharing extremist beliefs exist on the app. Short video platforms and their algorithms impact the propagation of information across various regions. Regarding TikTok, although the app has limited echo chambers, extremist information and clusters can still go viral both on the app and other platforms.

Some examples of harmful videos and extreme ideological echo chambers in other countries include impacts on transgender individuals in Bangladesh and impact on public sentiment leading up to the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in March 2023. Zami (2024) highlights transgender people's concerns about the increase in transphobic sentiment across social media platforms, highlighting social media platforms lack of engagement in tackling hate speech. Trans Bangladeshis embraced Facebook in its earlier days for communication, connection and community, proving gender queer people an opportunity to find their voice. The increase of anti-trans sentiment has fuelled fears among rights campaigners that anti-trans sentiment online could lead to rollbacks in legislation and society (Zami, 2024).

Mwesige (2023), in the article, *TikTok's Algorithm of Gay Hate and Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill*, highlights the use of TikTok by Queer Ugandans for exploration of interests, expression, and visibility. Visibility for Queer Ugandans also included non-queer people engaging with Queer creators on TikTok. While TikTok is able to provide Queer Ugandans with community and visibility, similar to other platforms, TikTok amplifies hate and divisiveness to promote engagement on its platform (Mwesige, 2023). Increasingly, Queer people on TikTok have been utilised for content farming by other creator's utilising divisive issues in politics to boost engagement, this is typically done by downloading their videos and sharing them in different contexts.⁴⁷ Mwesige (2023) argues that content farmers often imitate legitimate media outlets to boost the spread of misinformation and hate speech. Furthermore, Mwesige (2023) attributes the amplification of anti-queer sentiments by content farmers on TikTok leading up to the passage of the Anti Homosexual Act of 2023, citing the

⁴⁷ Content farming shares several similarities with engagement bait, referring to posts designed to create engagement in terms of likes, comments, or shares. Engagement bait may include sharing videos and images of individuals and encouraging users to share their perspectives on these people.

conversations and unverified references to queer people which Ugandan lawmakers discussed leading up to the bill. The TikTok algorithm also ensured the continuous supply of this content to gather views and engagement. While TikTok utilises a combination of technology and human moderators to identify hate speech and remove harmful content and accounts, TikTok moderation has not managed to effectively remove videos that contain speech in Luganda, the most spoken language in the country's capital, leaving this content up for weeks before several reports prompt TikTok to remove it (Mwesige, 2023).

In my experience on TikTok I occasionally receive content which is not suitable for me and sometimes includes harmful messages, in these instances I would indicate that I am not interested in these videos in order to push the algorithm to reduce recommending these kinds of videos or report these accounts or videos. However, my experience of TikTok is generally positive and the algorithm is attuned with my interests and directs me to new communities and interests. To foster the "Better Together" narrative, TikTok conducted an in-app survey in South Africa to gain insights into users' emotions and their perception of the platform's role in their lives, particularly in combating loneliness and developing connections. The survey found that 61% of the 4 026 participants had built meaningful relationships and 68% of users expressed a sense of belonging on TikTok (Ramalepe, 2023). TikTok is becoming increasingly popular in South Africa with a reported 17.46 million users aged 18 and above in early 2024 (Kemp, 2024). South African TikTok creators may not have access to the TikTok Creator Fund, but are able to earn money through accepting 'gifts' on the platform, primarily when streaming live content or brand partnerships. There is access to a significant amount of content from South African creators, communities and niches.

The TikTok experience is still greatly shaped by American culture wars on sexuality and increasing right wing politics which has found a home on TikTok. Libs of TikTok on Twitter is an example of one of many pages which consistently target queer creators on TikTok and share their content on X, exposing these creators to a large number of harassments by these communities and also removing creators' videos from their original context for engagement farming. Libs of TikTok also has a social media presence on Facebook, the page reposts videos and photos on various conspiracy theories related to vaccines, alleged child trafficking rings and members of the LGBTQIA+ community who share their videos on TikTok. The account not only exposes creators and individuals to harassment, but it also shares misinformation and alt-right propaganda. The Libs of TikTok page has gained an

unprecedented number of right-wing media and political attention. Similar to the increase in homophobic rhetoric on TikTok in Uganda leading up to the Anti Homosexual Act of 2023, talking points from Libs of TikTok have also been utilised to advance anti-LGBTQIA+ talking points to garner support for legislation such as The Parental Rights in Education Act (HB 1557), 2022, commonly referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law (Sultan, 2022; NEA, 2022).

TikTok as it is currently only monetises specific content from particular countries (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, South Korea, France, and Brazil) which presents challenges in creating a truly equitable space for the all to share their content, with particularly no African countries being able to monetise their content. This presents significant challenges to TikTok's use as a space for decolonising Western heteronormative structures within queer discussions. Asante and Hanchey (2021) highlight the importance of post-colonial studies and queer theory to understand how colonialism has silenced marginalised groups. The intermingling of US imperialism and gay rights raises concerns that queerness may be co-opted into liberalist and nationalistic agendas instead of challenging these systems of oppression, these rights become tools of maintaining imperial power (Asante & Hanchey 2021).⁴⁸ Gore (2022) argues that queer oppression is shaped by interconnections between multiple axes of oppression, not exclusively sexual orientation or gender identity but including that sexual injustices have material bases and drivers. Visibility for African Queer users becomes complex considering the lack of recognition or incentivisation for these creators' videos on TikTok.

While TikTok offers an opportunity for queer users to engage with their identity, be visible and vulnerable, the algorithm and the potential for context collapse can threaten creators and their safety both online and offline. In this chapter I aimed to highlight these key factors and their interconnected nature in the contradictions and nuances of online visibility on a video sharing platform. In engaging with their identity, it is particularly interesting to observe the shifting nature of coming out, with creators feeling safe and sharing their sexuality online, the creators imagined audience in this instance seems to be perceived as one which allows them to feel safe, this can also be targeted with explicit captions and hashtags to ensure that it is directed to their in group. Additionally, visibility on queer relationships and representation is

⁴⁸ An example of the co-option of queer rights for the maintenance of imperial power is best represented by online rebuttals to queer pro-Palestinian advocates, advocating that mostly American users should support Israel as it is enacting legal protections for LGBTQ folks and is therefore the only safe place for queer individuals in the Middle East, this is akin to pinkwashing. (Bohrer, 2014).

important for queer people in seeing the different kinds of relationships that can exist, the ways we can exist in relationships and perceived ideas of gender performance. Existing in a cisheteropatriachal society can limit our imagination of the possibilities of our potential and ability to love radically and enact that in how we engage broadly, this is what I feel QueerTok also helped me unlearn in understanding myself. This was particularly impactful during the pandemic and TikTok came to define Gen Z and how we engaged with ourselves.

Ultimately TikTok has also become a landscape for the ongoing cultural wars and the internet can expose users to negativity and harm online. Creators on TikTok have an awareness of these risks and utilise their platforms to share with their audiences, engage with causes that matter, document their experiences navigating their sexuality or gender identity. For me, creators which engaged with how this intersects with race, ethnicity and various other identities was key in opening my horizons in understanding myself. Additionally, it is interesting to see how tiktok creators also engage with their platform to bolster ideas of community with their imagined audience. This is primarily through supporting fundraisers such as sharing their issues and appealing to the community to assist them or engage with the video in order for them to potentially make more money through the creators fund. Users also ask their imagined audience to engage with their content to ensure they remain on the side of TikTok they aim to be. For TikTok creators and users, TikTok is a key space for engagement and visibility.

Chapter Three: I just wanna say I am part of the LGBTQ community, and this is my best friend, Valentina, she is an ally. Talk Valentina! “Ally!”: QueerTok Community and Consciousness-raising.

In this chapter I aim to outline the role of TikTok in creating spaces for community and consciousness raising online. This is within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growth in TikTok users over a short space of time which facilitated a space for consistent engagement and discussion on identities. The QueerTok community offers opportunities to learn, share and engage in community. In this chapter I hope to highlight the various discussions about identity as they relate to the Lesbian Masterdoc and how these various creators and users on the app utilised the virality of the ‘Am I A Lesbian?’ Masterdoc. TikTok content creators leveraged the virality of the masterdoc to share their experiences navigating their gender and sexuality utilising the master doc or community discussions, engaging in critical discussion about lesbianism, compulsory heterosexuality, and their experiences.

The origins of the masterdoc make it an interesting framing reference for the conversations on TikTok, the internet allows people to engage with theory and present opportunities to further explore how these apply to existing sentiments in society. The masterdoc became a viral piece of queer theory, identifying how compulsory heterosexuality, gender socialisation and social norms, shape sexual identity. The spread of the masterdoc on TikTok provided access to lesbian identifying people and questioning people’s exploration and understandings of themselves, igniting conversations about queer theory, self exploration, patriarchal influence on identity formation. This section also includes some of the tensions that arise in unpacking queer theory online and as interpreted through vernacular popular approaches, reckoning and exploring shifts in identity and engaging with community online.

What is the Masterdoc?

The *Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc* was written by Angeli Luz and initially published anonymously on Tumblr in 2018. Luz states that the intention of the document was to offer a tool for self reflection on “nuanced, confusing, and contradictory” feelings about men, acknowledging that cultural reinforcement plays a role in reinforcing heterosexuality (King-Miller, 2020). Due to misogyny and the gender socialisation of women, marriage is often portrayed to be the ultimate goal for women or an essential part of their life, which may

present difficulties in recognising attraction; Luz states, in the first part of the document under the heading *What is Compulsory Heterosexuality?*,

“Our magazines are full of sex tips on how to better please men, our movies are about how we’re supposed to fall in love with men. We literally cannot exist in public without men loudly grading us on how well we’re pleasing them visually. So... what happens if you want to be with women? What happens if you’re not attracted to men at all? When you’re trained from childhood to see romantic/sexual relationships with men - and only men - as major life goals, how do you separate that from what you want?”

Building from this, Luz utilises Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality, popularised in the essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980) to outline the difficulty in navigating queer identities. The Masterdoc is further broken down under the following headings:

What is Compulsory Heterosexuality?

How do I know if I'm a lesbian?

But I like fictional men/male celebrities..

But I think I've Liked men before?

Conflicting Feelings About Men

Signs of Compulsory Heterosexuality

'Attraction' to men

Relationships with men

Sex and Intimacy with men

Early interest in women

The 'straight' version of you Exploring attraction to women

Gender Feelings

Considering lesbianism

Attraction VS. Compulsory Heterosexuality

Nervousness and Blushing

Hypothetical Attraction

Sexual Fantasies

You might be a lesbian if TL; DR⁴⁹

Conclusion

The complete document is over 30 pages long and does not include Angeli Luz's name but credits a few accounts on Tumblr including links at the end. The document offers a long winded blog writing style popular on Tumblr. Luz includes examples of nuanced explorations of attraction and societal expectations and acknowledging gender diverse lesbians. The document has been an internet archive and recently gained renewed interest on TikTok in 2020.

The 'Am I a Lesbian' masterdoc was a central feature in the 'TikTok made me gay' phenomenon at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic with multiple articles written about users questioning their sexuality after engaging with content on TikTok. The masterdoc's greatest feature is in its presentation of the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, offering readers insight into the role of heteronormativity in shaping universal understandings of sexuality, gender identity and upholding social hierarchy based on sexual orientation and normative gender. Godard (2023) in the article, *Compulsory Heterosexuality, Past and Present: Adrienne Rich and the Lesbian Masterdoc*, addresses a central critique of the masterdoc, namely its individualisation of compulsory heterosexuality which presents a departure from its conceptualisation by Rich (1980). According to Godard (2023), Rich refers to compulsory heterosexuality not only as the inaccurate assumption that women are innately attracted to men, but as the erasure of lesbian existence. Lesbian existence encompasses the historical presence of lesbians, beyond the limits of lesbianism, and the constant evolution of lesbian existence as it may evolve to mean different things at different moments as women adopt new ways of relating to the world and with one another (Godard, 2023).

Lesbian existence exists on the lesbian continuum which defines the range of 'women-identified' experiences beyond sexual experiences and involves actions central to lessen the power of men economically, politically or socially regardless of orientation (Godard, 2023). The masterdoc offers a narrow understanding of compulsory heterosexuality, limiting its use for people who are attracted to more than one gender or do not experience sexual attraction and restricting the definition of lesbianism only to physical

⁴⁹TL;DR stands for too long; didn't read: and is used online to present a summary of a lengthy text. In the Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc, the TL;DR section includes several checklist points to determine if you might be a lesbian.

intimacy, moving from Rich's description which aims to describe how the world is organised. However, the conceptualisation of compulsive heterosexuality in the masterdoc is how it has commonly been understood on TikTok, while its definition is limited, it presents an interesting opportunity to engage with how theory is utilised once it becomes popular beyond academic spaces.

The Lesbian Masterdoc and Identity on TikTok

In the following TikTok, the creator touches on a fundamental aspect of the master doc which aims to outline and identify behaviours which could be "queer." This is a significant goal of the master doc which aims to assist readers in understanding and identifying attraction. In the section, *Early interest in women*, Luz identifies behaviours which indicate same sex attraction stating, "when a female friend is treated badly by a man, having your protective thoughts turn in the direction of "if I was him/a man I'd never do that to her/my girlfriend." The following TikTok outlines an example of this thought process in sexual exploration with the video unfolding as follows:

The creator in frame, utilising the audio, My Shit by A Boogie Wit Da Hoodie in background. Text above the creator reads "Middle school me always saying 'I'd be such a good boyfriend. I would treat a girl so well.'" The creator then flicks their wrist as the audio says 'see the flick on my wrist.'

This video acts as an entry to the objectives of the Masterdoc, particularly understanding queer behaviour and understanding them within the confines of identity exploration in a heteropatriarchal society. A key value of the Masterdoc is its use as a reflective guide on thoughts or experiences that prioritise heterosexual relationships, women and people socialised as women are then taught to centre men and understand their path as people who are moving towards marriage and tied inherently to centering men within these contexts (Deliovsky, 2005). The Masterdoc aims to provide a lens for identifying complex experiences in identity investigation and the role of societal norms in order to explore their identity beyond the structures of socialisation as women.

Similarly, the Masterdoc creates opportunities to examine other behaviour in the context of the learnings within it, compulsory heterosexuality, and the effect it has on how women interact and understand their own sexuality and how it relates to other aspects of society, this TikTok focuses on two Christian content creators. Users and creators on Lesbian and

QueerTok utilise the Masterdoc in examining the language used by the creators in the following TikTok video. The video is a response to a comment:

UserID: “They waited to kiss until marriage 🤔 🤔”

The purpose of the TikTok video is to share a clip providing more context for the quoted comment. The clip featured in the TikTok video is from a Christian lifestyle blog featuring the two creators in conversation. The video goes as follows with the caption, “Girl Defined accidentally describing comp⁵⁰ when talking about the men they married.”

Person 1: “I remember when you were walking down the aisle with Zack and you whispered over to me ‘But I’m not attracted to him but I’m going for it’”

Person 2: “Here I go!”

(Clip skips ahead)

Person 1: “I was just like not attracted at all you know.”

Person 2: “Like zero?”

Person 1: “Yeah I would say like zero.”

Person 2: “Did you find him unattractive?”

Person 1: “I mean I didn’t find him unattractive there just wasn’t anything there. There wasn’t that spark.”

Person 2: “Okay”

The responses to this video include a mixture of users highlighting the role of compulsory heterosexuality in not only defining marriage to men as the ultimate goal, but also in reinforcing aspects of gender performance.

The ‘Am I a Lesbian’ Masterdoc highlights the inextricable tie between the personal and the political, highlighting the influence of social conditioning in how women understand their sexuality, and how gendered people engage in relationships and society. The Masterdoc utilises some elements of Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980) description of heterosexuality as an innate sexuality. Cuesta (2014) highlights in the article, *Social Exclusion and the Stigmatization of Lesbians*, that the marginalisation of women is

⁵⁰ Internet abbreviation for Compulsory Heterosexuality

shaped by patriarchal structures which form the basis of gender definitions, and the binary of expected and suitable roles and behaviours based on gender. The ‘Western labelling machine’ strives to create a hetero-centric structure, under this structure lesbian identities are labelled as deviant and made invisible (Cuesta, 2014). The TikTok video from the following creator speaks to experiences of embracing lesbian sexuality within a heteropatriarchal society. The video is formatted with the creator in frame with different text surrounding them. The main caption of the video is as follows:

“Things they don’t tell you about realising you’re lesbian (kinda depressing)”⁵¹

The rest of the text in the video includes:

“Losing access to a prominent topic of conversation among women/nonmen who date men”

“The mourning period. The dream of being a wife to a man in a nuclear family setting dies slowly”

“In many cases, it will feel like you are a lesbian before you are a woman. your relationship to the patriarchy gets complicated and your perception of gender shifts drastically”

“Men hating you and fetishising you at the same time”

“Comphet is self harm. The willingness to be in pain and never feel love and be with a man just to feel normal and in control”

“Never feeling safe”

“Society will either paint you as hyper sexual or sexless there is rarely a healthy medium”

“having healthy relationships with men gets complicated”

The creator is making use of this video to express their experiences navigating society while queer. This creator displays in sharing their thoughts and experiences, how compulsory heterosexuality shapes how engagement is structured in a heteropatriarchy, particularly, the consideration to engage in heterosexuality for access to normalcy and a sense of control.

⁵¹ This format of video creation is popular on TikTok. Creator’s utilise these primarily text videos to express their views on a particular subject. These descriptions may include a tag on the emotion or theme of the views.

The creator of the video also mentions a ‘mourning period’ for the dream of a nuclear family and a husband. Similarly, the following video by another creator also engages with the concept of lesbian loss of the heteronormative dream. The creator utilises a popular audio on TikTok, ‘I Love You So’ by The Walters. The video begins with the creator in the frame with text above them reading:

“Me realising I might be a lesbian.”

This video is a ‘point of view’ video, showing the creator with tears in their eyes.

The next frame shows the creator still in frame. The caption above then now reads: [“The dream” of a husband and kids] while the creator lip syncs along to the audio snippet, “but I love you so (please let me go)”

Thompson (1992) explores the concept of loss through the lesbian coming out experience, highlighting the loss of “rites and privileges” available to the heterosexual majority and by virtue of the lesbian experience, isolation from the heterosexual community (p. 176). Additionally, Thompson (1992) highlights that lesbians are socialised to value the heterosexual lifestyle and can experience grief when letting go of the heterosexual status and self (p. 178). The TikTok video displays the creator grieving the loss of the “heterosexual blueprint to life” (Berzon, 1988). The video is captioned in the description as follows:

“Comp het be kicking my ass making me cry real tears.”

The video and the creator’s caption contributed to the conversations in the lesbian community at the time, focusing on the masterdoc to acknowledge lesbian experiences. Some users responded to this video to validate each other's experience, while acknowledging the role of compulsory heterosexuality patriarchy in crafting, instilling and valuing heterosexual desires.

@userID: “this comment section is really comforting 💕 I'm so glad it's not just me that struggles with this”

Other users used the video to share their experiences in grieving the desire to have a heterosexual relationship with users stating:

@userID: “when i started liking women i thought this too, but then i realised it was never even my dream, never had been my dream. just told it had to be”

@userID: “I can't really relate to this bc ever since I can remember I've always dreaded the idea of marrying a man. felt more like a task than a dream for me.”

The second comment alludes to a critical aspect to the functioning of the social system constituting compulsory heterosexuality, particularly how it mandates heterosexuality and penalises those who violate its norms (Fraser, 2018), while this user does not relate to the grief described by the creator, they highlight how they encountered compulsory heterosexuality in the ‘dread’ experienced with the ‘task’ of marrying a man. Several other users agreed with this comment to describe heterosexual marriage as a task they felt they had to engage especially within their families. Familial relationships and physical spaces also complicate the process of engaging with your identity in person, with TikTok providing an alternative space to share experiences and engage with people who share similar experiences. Some users highlighted their experiences stating:

@userID: “I never want to tell my parents, I love them so much and I know it would change their opinion on me”

@userID: “I'm just scared of the judgement I'd get from my dads side of the family. if i ever married a woman, they wouldn't go to my wedding or even talk to me”

TikTok users under this post also discussed their own confusion in using the masterdoc and the parameters of sexuality as either porous or rigid in both self-description and understanding in the LGBTQIA+ community. One user describes their experiences and considerations in navigating society as a lesbian as it relates to the original creator's video:

@userID (multiple comments): “Idk if I just want a dad or I wanna be a guy... It's so hard to get men out of my mind but I know myself and irl⁵² I could never be with a guy. It's just that all my life people have told me I'm just bisexual and it gets me thinking maybe they're right but they can't be. I'm thinking of just calling myself queer instead so nobody has to tell me who I AM.”

This creator engages with a core exploration in labelling themselves and how they self-identity with the label queer which they feel enables them to engage with their identity in a fluid manner which allows for self-description without limitations or restrictions. The creator's caption in the video experiencing grief coming out as lesbian, is a central theme in this video which triggered other comments about the restricting nature of labels. The creator allows users insight into their experience and identity management. This journey the creator takes their following through is interesting because of the nature of the TikTok algorithm, users are shown videos at random which may result in older videos resurfacing, this allows

⁵² Internet abbreviation for the phrase ‘in real life’.

new users to engage with older videos. On this TikTok, one user reached out two years after the video was posted to ask the creator how they navigated the process of grief and self-defining, the comment exchange went as following:

@userID: “it's been 2 years I wanna know did u figure[yourself] out? I'm just curious also ur gorgeous 🥰”

@creatorID: “i did 🥰 i identify as queer now but this video still means a lot to my identity and definitely helped shaped me also thank you so much :)”

Lesbian sense-making within a cisheteropatriarchy society is greatly affected by the institute of compulsory heterosexuality, presenting complications in how desire and identity exploration. The ‘Am I a lesbian Masterdoc’ presented an opportunity to gain insight on the nature of discourse on sexuality, lesbianism and patriarchy. The discourse and personal experiences shared on TikTok while this document was trending on the platform gives insight into lesbian discussions, experiences and debates. Engagement on TikTok in this manner can be a key aspect of consciousness raising and critiquing tools of self-understanding forms a key back bone in understanding society and selves in these contexts.

Consciousness Raising on QueerTok: Discourse on the Lesbian Masterdoc

The lesbian masterdoc served as a validating experience, both in engaging with the document and TikTok videos, for users negotiating their identity. The Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc format and content validates individuals who may feel isolated while providing them knowledge to inform their decision-making process and provide them with a sense of community and belonging (Skinner, 2023). I am part of the generation that Googled “How to know you are gay” (obviously on incognito mode) and took as many am I gay quizzes, these quizzes offered little nuance and there were limited spaces for identity negotiation. The lesbian masterdoc provided the TikTok community with a knowledge base when it went viral in late 2020, catalysing conversations about compulsory heterosexuality, sexism, and gender diversity within the lesbian community particularly due to the masterdoc’s inclusion of lesbians of various gender identities.

The internet and social media platforms have served as sites for connection and community building particularly for the LGBTQIA+ community. Feminist consciousness-raising was a rhetorical strategy utilised to enable women to share their personal experiences through personal testimonies in small groups, allowing them to generalise experiences and relate to

each other (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Consciousness-raising aims to draw attention to the systemic nature of oppression and connect marginalised groups with people and knowledge, providing a basis for the collective organising (Skinner, 2023). The *Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc* connected TikTok users and creators to knowledge and language for exploring compulsory heterosexuality as a pillar of patriarchy. The multimodal storytelling nature of TikTok facilitates the sharing of personal testimonies, with its algorithm amplifying the reach and resonance of these experiences.

The Masterdoc was useful in providing an engagement source on sexuality, the community utilised the TikTok platform to both affirm and share their perspectives on the masterdoc. The following TikTok, on the other hand, presents a critique of the masterdoc and its use in queer spaces. The creator highlights some issues with the masterdoc. The video features the creator's pet lizard⁵³ in frame with a generic audio, the video is formatted as mostly text surrounding the lizard in frame. The TikTok video is a response to the following comment:

@UserID: "could you explain your thoughts on the masterdoc? I've read it myself but I'm interested to learn more :)"

The creator's reasons are displayed in texts in the video stating:

"I don't like how its very white cis woman centred... and its main focus again is comphet so it really fails to truly highlight other good even better indicators of sexuality"

"The masterdoc is very generalised and focuses a lot on EVERY ATTRACTION TO MEN YOU'VE EVER EXPERIENCED EVER IS COMPHET!! when some ppl [are] just bisexual or in the past felt attraction to men no longer do"

"It doesn't really give solid advice on HOW to realise you're a lesbian or how to self assess.. it just throws information at you and you have to make sense of it yourself"

"Which is why I'm such a big advocate for baby lesbians to seek out more experienced lesbians and ask for help and guidance!!"

"At the end of the day it's just not very reliable and doesn't factor in as many components of the lesbian experience as I'd like it to :)"

⁵³ The creator likely chose to use their lizard in the video to avoid showing their face in sharing their perspectives.

A core critique of the "Am I a Lesbian" Masterdoc from this creator is its exclusionary nature and limited perspective on lesbian and queer identity formation. The creator advocates for broader access to diverse tools for self-discovery and identity formation, including more opportunities to engage with other lesbians and queer individuals. The following creator also presents their perspective engaging with the masterdoc as a bisexual, tying in with the previous creator's comment on how exclusionary the masterdoc may be for people who are bisexual. The TikTok video is a stitch, adding to another video which features the original creator laying in bed with their eyes closed. The caption in the stitched video is as follows:

"Bisexual women going to sleep after a long day of feeling confident in their sexuality."

The next frame is the creator opening their eyes wide as the caption changes to read: "The idea of compulsory heterosexuality."

The creator then begins their stitch standing in frame and stating:

"Do you know why that video has me all the way fucked up? Because it's so damn true. 99% of the time I exist accepting the fact that I am bisexual, I have a strong preference for women and non-binary people and then I do also happen to enjoy men from time to time and that is my burden to bear.

And then I learned about compulsory heterosexuality and I was like wow this is so amazing and so important and has helped so people realise like, "oh wait I don't actually like men at all I just want men to like me because of the way we've been conditioned to you know equate our worth to how men perceive us."

And I definitely did sit with myself for a while, like okay do I really like men or is this comphet? Unfortunately I do really like men but that doesn't change the fact that that other 1% of the time I'm really riding myself because I'm like but do I? And it's like yes bitch, unfortunately you do but like do I? the answer is yes but is the answer yes. No the answer is actually yes I'm just saying this video perfectly outlined the struggle. So I guess, I guess I'm just glad that I'm not alone."

This TikTok video is notable for outlining the individual process of identity formation and internal consciousness-building using collective experiences and information in the QueerTok community. The earlier video presented in this section critiqued the Masterdoc for its limited use in identity exploration, this TikTok also highlights community conversations about

compulsory heterosexuality as presented in the Masterdoc and personal experiences utilising it for identity negotiation and exploration. This also reflects Godard's critique of the 'Am I a Lesbian' Masterdoc as an entry point into understanding compulsory heterosexuality, limiting users' understanding and application of the concept, and thus limiting community conversations about compulsory heterosexuality. The Masterdoc is regarded as a stepping stone for introspection and engaging with gender and sexuality on TikTok.

The next TikTok further illustrates this, featuring users sharing their experiences with the Masterdoc and the insights it provided, particularly the validation it offered. The process of understanding and exploring one's identity is confusing and difficult due to societal norms. Additionally, while this TikTok highlights the creator's relationships with men, it also emphasises the importance of understanding what works for individuals beyond the constraints of the cisheteropatriarchy. This underscores the role of access to diverse information in shaping individual contexts. The Masterdoc served as an accessible resource that could trigger discussions and offer information on identity and the hegemonic structures that support systems of oppression for TikTok users. The following video begins with the creator in frame speaking to the camera. The creator states:

"The other thing that the lesbian masterdoc kind of validated for me, was this idea of kind of being bored by the prospect of like having to be with men because I often feel that I have to dumb myself down for them in the sense of the things I talk about are things they really don't understand.

To the point where they get annoyed with me for bringing up patriarchy and intersectionality and how systems of oppression work together. Things that they don't want to hear about because their understanding of stuff like that or patriarchy at least is usually pretty elementary and so they're very upset with you, they get very upset with you when you know a lot about something that they completely misunderstand, right? I've always had to like tiptoe around the way I talk because their egos are so fragile and they get so upset when they feel stupid.

And so the prospect of like really really being with a man forever has recently been very frightening and boring to me because when I really start talking they always seem just upset or offended or and it's like I just don't wanna have to slow myself down or dumb myself down or not be as articulate and to the point as I regularly am."

The creator utilises TikTok to share their experiences navigating the Masterdoc and the nature of their interactions in the physical world. This video shows the diverse and contrasting ways TikTok users interpret and utilise the master doc. This perspective is further explored in the next video, where the creator delves into their personal journey of self-discovery using the Masterdoc and how it helped them navigate their identity in a society that marginalises non-heteronormative experiences. Furthermore, the following creator emphasises how the Masterdoc presents ideas that, while not inherently radical, seem so in a lesbophobic world. The creator begins in the frame of the video with the video responding to a comment stating:

@userID: “That master doc will pay.”

The creator begins:

“I am so excited to talk about the lesbian master doc so let's just get right into it. Now all the lesbian master doc is, it's a document that tells you if this and this and this is true, you might be a lesbian. However, the ideas in it seem so radical, they are not radical. The world is just lesbophobic but the ideas in there seem so radical that a lot of people when they are done reading it, their sexuality will be changed or determined or anything of the sort. But I'm gonna tell you about how I found out I was lesbian using the lesbian master doc.

So for a good chunk of my life I thought I was straight but that's just because I didn't know what queerness was and then once I realised no no no, I am definitely queer, I was somewhere between bi, pan, open and fluid. Like I just really didn't know. But I always did know that I had a preference for women or non-men and I always did know that I wanted to end up marrying a non-man. I remember dating my boyfriend at the time and being like Mmm [creator shakes head] I really hope that we can break up so that I don't have to marry a man. Yet I did not realise I was a lesbian [creator laughs] and lets just clear it up.

You do not have to be a woman to be a lesbian, you do not have to date or like only women to be a lesbian. It's the decentering of men within your romantic and personal life. A lot of people can actually choose to be a lesbian so if you've been very, very traumatised by men, you're probably not going to enjoy dating them and you're probably not going to be compatible with a lot of men or most men or all men but that still makes you a lesbian.

Anywho I would notice certain patterns with myself. Like I would only date guys where there were so long distance that I could only see them like once a month, maybe twice a month or I wouldn't really like a guy but when I saw another girl, or another non man liking a guy I'd be like oh you know what? I want him now. Don't get me wrong I'm not messy, I'm not messy but you know what I mean. And I would just have a lot of these super close relationships and friendships with my female friends where now that I look at them I'm like no that was gay, that was a baby relationship and honestly sometimes I would think about the type of guy I would want in my life and it would be this hodgepodge Frankenstein of a man that could literally never possibly exist. I also only really had crushes on men who were in movies and tv shows and I really only ever ended up dating guys because I saw everyone else doing it around me.

Then I saw a TikTok where someone was like if you see a man and your first question is oh my god I hope he likes me and not on my god I really like this man then you are probably a lesbian. So I read the master doc and I realised yeah I'm a lesbian. Uhmm [creator chuckles] there's no way around it and I realised how lesbophobic the world is and I realised how little education there is on lesbianism so read that and educate yourself."

The comments responding to this video engage with the concept of choice as it relates to sexuality and trauma, looking at how these two experiences may colour identity formation and how sexuality is understood according to the masterdoc. The creator in the above TikTok engages with a key aspect of self-exploration, lesbianism and labels for self-definition, and navigating relationships. One comment chain in particular involved a discussion among users regarding the creator's use of 'choice' in describing sexuality and how it relates to trauma, the following is a brief outline of the comment exchange:

@userID1: "hi kj, i really liked most of what u said in this video, but saying that ppl can 'choose' to become lesbians bc⁵⁴ of trauma, isn't true."

@userID2: "queering sexual violence is a really good book that talks about this there are people who do choose to date certain partners based on trauma!"

@UserID1: "ty for this! but the point i'm trying to make is that it isn't a choice"

⁵⁴ Because.

@userID3: “hey! you should watch lisa diamond’s ted talk on why emphasising that lgbtq+ identities are not a choice is actually rooted in deep homophobia 🙄 it totally changed my perspective on so much re: my own queerness in relation to society, i am so so grateful a prof showed it to me”⁵⁵

In this exchange, we see users discuss sexuality as a choice and we also see users point each other to resources while engaging with the subject matter and the concerns raised by other users. Due to the nature of the algorithm, TikTok encourages conversations with people who are interested in the same kinds of videos, TikTok video comments can be a space for affirmation, validation, engagement and criticism. Other users mentioned the validation of the masterdoc in playing a role in their identity formation and others viewed the video as validating stating:

@userID: “it made me realise I’m a lesbian and then I came out as trans masc lmao”

@userID: “Nothing like refreshing the master doc to affirm I am bi 🐱🐱🐱 also confirm the realness of bpanic 🙌”

@userID: “not the political lesbian validation discourse...”

Additionally, the use of the TikTok app in facilitating areas for conversation includes the ability for creators to shape the kind of conversations they engage with on the app due to affordances on comment management. As a result of transphobic comments on the post which had accumulated due to the creator’s mention of the fluidity of the use of the label lesbian, the original creator highlights in a comment to the video:

@creatorID: “just so you guys know i will be deleting all transphobic/terfy and ableist comments! so pls keep that in mind and be kind 💕”

In this manner the creator attempts to shape engagement and make the space safer in their comment section for their target audience. The users in this comment section further unpack and considering what sexuality means and the impact of labels in how people express and understand their identity, while highlighting the impact of rigid labels and understandings of labels in how people choose to identify and criticise these uses:

⁵⁵ Dr. Lisa Diamond presented a Ted Talk in September 2018 titled, *Why the “Born This Way” argument doesn’t advance LGBT equality*, where she outlines three problems with the ‘born this way’ argument. Firstly, it is not scientifically accurate, it is not legally necessary and finally, it is unjust. Dr Diamond highlights her research focused on sexual orientation conducted by tracking women of different sexual orientations across 20 years and noting these changes which yielded insight into the fluidity of sexual attraction as people progress through their lives.

@userID: “These comments are exactly why some people chose no label because why all the debates?”

@userID: “Reminder we create the labels we choose to identify with, your unique human experience comes first so don’t stress if a label doesn’t fit exactly”

Finally, this TikTok video and the comments highlight the importance of sexuality education in their discussion of identity management. The TikTok algorithm allowed for the virality of the ‘Am I a Lesbian’ masterdoc, making it a key aspect of how TikTok users engaged with their sexuality and began to use the app to share information with one another. The creator responds to this comment:

@userID: “I wish I had known about and read this while I was questioning!! it would have saved me a bunch of trauma :(“

- @creatorID: “I hope you are better now 💖 I'm sorry there is so little education on lesbianism out there!”

The creator in this TikTok describes society as lesbophobic to highlight the impact the masterdoc makes on people on TikTok, this is affirmed by this comment. This TikTok video and the discussions in the comment section show QueerTok used to validate, challenge, and expand users' understanding of their identities within an exclusionary society. Sibanda and Ncube (2023) through the argument that the visibility of Zimbabwean TikTokers in a society which wishes to render queer people invisible, the platform and its participatory dialogue presents a platform to challenge Zimbabwean societal portrayal of queer people as invisible while offering these creators an opportunity to express their queerness and their connection to their culture and Africanness. Furthermore, they argue that if Zimbabwe is considered compulsorily heterosexual, queer Zimbabweans challenge this idea through “corporeal reiterations”, their bodies and their presence of TikTok provide empirical evidence of a queer Zimbabwe and queerness in Zimbabwe and contributing to the understanding that there are no singular ways to be African and queer. This expands our understanding of sexuality and its intersections with geography, the political superstructure, culture, and race.

The exploration of consciousness-raising on TikTok, particularly through the lens of the *Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc*, shows the QueerTok community’s use of the platform for identity formation, community engagement, and sharing of personal experiences. Narratives shared by users and creators enable others on the platform to connect personal experiences with

broader socio-political contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of concepts such as compulsory heterosexuality and other avenues for identity exploration. While the concept of compulsory heterosexuality may not be particularly new, its use in the *Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc*, reconceptualised in the vernacular, catalysed conversations in online queer social spaces allowing users to explore it beyond an academic context. TikTok has various ‘sides’ which users navigate through as they scroll through the platform and consistently engage with the algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Creators and users consistently shape and redefine discourse on sexuality, gender and identity, TikTok serves as a vehicle to share and engage with each other, this positions QueerTok as a pivotal site for contemporary consciousness raising. The ‘Am I a Lesbian’ masterdoc catalysed conversations about lesbianism, the influence of the patriarchy in identity negotiation, compulsory heterosexuality and gender identity. The popularity of the document on TikTok reinvigorated interest in the document and its concepts, reflecting the importance of more information about sexuality and gender exploration. The algorithm played a key role in facilitating access to information, the spread of content and engagement. The interactions on TikTok regarding the masterdoc also emphasised the importance of accessible information for exploration of identity.

Being in Community on QueerTok

TikTok facilitates expressions of queerness and the formation of queer counterpublics (Duguay, 2023). The TikTok platform allows access to this space while also presenting barriers to queer expression, making it a site of political contestation. Collins (2010), in the article, *The New Politics of Community*, explores reframing the political construct of community to provide new avenues to investigate social inequalities. Collins (2010) highlights that community has served as a site of ‘affirmation, identification and political expression’ and have been utilised by emancipatory movements as tools to combat social inequalities (p. 10). The construct of community is central to people organise and experience social inequality, community is utilised as a site to engage with politics, serving as an organising principle of political behaviour and a system of meaning for political understandings (Collins, 2010).

The TikTok algorithm is a powerful aspect of the platform and plays a role in how users experience community, particularly who gets access to what kind of content. Skinner (2023) highlights that TikTok culture and content moderation mechanism serve a discriminatory function, which makes Queer women and gender diverse people vulnerable to being

algorithmically excluded or silenced on the platform, this makes queer creators struggle to form networks and share information. TikTok creators engage in creating community and engaging with their followers by sharing their experiences for consciousness-raising and intra-community education, engaging in discussions with users in the comment sections or through video responses, creating accountability by calling each other in and out in instances of discrimination (Skinner, 2016). The Queer community on the app also utilises the app for community organising based on key issues on social media at the moment, highlighting instances of queerphobia, and claiming space (Ncube & Sibanda, 2024). The community is filled with necessary frictions that have developed in response to the perpetuation of queerphobia and other structures of oppression on the app. TikTok has emerged as a space to witness the politicisation of community to engage in dialogue of oppressions and discriminatory practices both outside and within the community.

The form of community support and organising on QueerTok greatly varies, these forms include sharing crowdfunding initiatives, these are sometimes aimed at covering medical expenses, gender affirming therapy, or social and safety needs. The QueerTok community also utilises the platform to highlight queer news and celebrate personal achievements. TikTok creators also depend on the QueerTok community, utilising an algorithmic assistance plea to the community when they are facing harassment (Meyer, 2022).

The lesbian community on TikTok aims to provide protection for queers and guidance as they navigate their identity and sexuality online. The TikTok lesbian community creates opportunities to collate perspectives to support lesbian people who are just coming out and engaging with society and other queer spaces, particularly online. The following video is an example of how some spaces are managed, the video is formatted to share a sizeable amount of text with users under the theme highlighted at the top of the video:

“Red flags in lesbian spaces for baby lesbians to be aware of!!”

The video includes the following text with the user in frame spotlighting them:

“Anyone who strongly identifies with the term “radfem” (radical feminism)”

“People who label themselves as “mspec”lesbians”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ ‘Mspec’ refers to multi-spectrum, attraction to multiple genders. ‘Mspec’ identifying people outline multispectrum orientations. There are multiple reasons someone may use ‘mspec’ as an identifier, the most common one is if they utilise the Split Attraction Model (SAM), that separates romantic and sexual attraction meaning they may experience romantic attraction differently from how they may experience sexual attraction. (Kory, 2023; bi-lesbian, 2020).

“Lesbians who use the labrys flag even with knowledge of its history”⁵⁷

“Lesbians who insist transfems will never be “real” lesbians”

“Older lesbians who encourage labelling of “pillow princess” etc.”

“Lesbians who discourage conversation about lesbian identity and gender”

“Lesbians who value the “gold star” label”

“Lesbians who discourage exploration in terms of sexuality and labels”

“Lesbians who strongly believe the masterdoc is the answer to everything and refuse to acknowledge its faults”

“People who pride themselves on being “elder” lesbians but won’t offer their help!!”

The creator of the video is outlining signs to be aware of for newly out or other lesbians engaging in online. The list provided in the video also aims to be informative to ‘baby lesbians’, this refers to someone discovering the lesbian community and its culture, by providing information which is linked to some acceptable norms and values held in some aspects of the community, particularly represented by this creator’s suggestions. Lesbian culture online is decentralised with creator’s also sharing diverse values and perspectives even if they may agree on intersectional advocacy and intra-community engagement. The video by this creator shows an aspect of community building on TikTok by asserting community engagement principles and behaviour, values, and language which is not acceptable.

The Covid-19 pandemic worldwide quarantine, shaped the form of community building on TikTok, due to restrictions to meeting online, TikTok was the primary platform that creators engaged in through dancing, skits, and for connection (Khan, 2020). QueerTok during the lockdown was an area to share knowledge about the LGBTQIA+ community, the comment sections were a rich area of debate and accountability (Skinner, 2023). The landscape for TikTok’s use is shifting post-Covid-19 lockdowns, with queer creator’s choosing to engage in online debates less (Skinner, 2023). TikTok has increasingly become a space to share

⁵⁷ The Labrys Pride Flag was the first well documented lesbian flag, it was created by Sean Campbell in 1999. It features a white double-headed axe, known as a labrys, set against an inverted black triangle with a purple background. The purple background is said to be inspired by Sapphic Violet, with the inverted triangle serving as a reminder of women who were labelled by the Nazi Regime as ‘asocial’ which included lesbians. The labrys is a symbol linked to matriarchal societies such as the Amazons (Bauer, 2023). The Labrys Pride Flag has been adopted by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) which has led to many choosing to adopt the Sunset Lesbian Pride Flag, created by a nonbinary lesbian named Emily Gwen in 2018 (Bauer, 2023).

information about local meet ups, queer events, and bars. This is shown in the format of videos announcing meet ups and sharing the details for these meetups utilising footage from previous gatherings.

Community can play a key role in validating queer experiences and providing access to information and representation. Trans and gender diverse creators are instrumental to validating queer experiences and sharing information and resources through documenting their gender transition journeys on TikTok (Meyer, 2022). Trans people face stigma accessing gender affirming care, and trying to access knowledge about gender affirming healthcare (MacKinnon et al., 2021). Trans and gender diverse TikTokers' content vary and so does the insight into their journeys, these different perspectives offer access to knowledge about different gender affirming healthcare available, support, and needs of each creator, playing a key role in sharing gender-affirming knowledge. Additionally, intra community education plays a key role in validating the experiences of other trans and gender diverse creators on the platform, allowing them access to people with similar experiences, mutual support, and educational resources (MacKinnon et al., 2021). Trans and gender diverse creators and users on TikTok form a key role in intra community learning on the platform and resource sharing.

The following TikTok video is an example of a viral trend video on QueerTok utilising the song "1-800-273-8255" by Logic ft Khalid and Alessia Cara. A snippet of the song with the lyrics, "It's the very first breath/When your head's been drownin' underwater" became a viral audio on TikTok, the songs title is a suicide hotline and the lyrics are from the perspective of someone calling the hotline and telling the counsellor they don't want to live (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2021). Creators utilised this audio often when highlighting the positive impact of receiving gender affirming healthcare had on them. The TikTok features a creator duetting their friend's profile. This TikTok trend and the video display the use of music and visuals in storytelling and sharing information. The video features a duet with a caption reading:

"When him and I started a few days apart and seeing us change around the same time"

The video then shows both creators in frame. The creator on the right side of the duet has text above them that reads:

"what it felt like to start testosterone"

Both creators are lip syncing along to the audio with the lyrics:

“now let me tell you why/It's the very first breath when your head's been drowning underwater”⁵⁸

The use of this particular song displays the use of multimodal tools to emphasise the creator's message. The creator is utilising the meaning of the song, displaying that HRT played a key role in their survival. Trans and gender diverse creators play a key role in increasing visibility of underrepresented people on the app, allowing them to control how their identity is represented (Dawson, 2021). This video is one example of how creators use TikTok to inform their audience, share their experiences and information utilising the multimodal tools to enhance their message and narrative.

The QueerTok community is concerned with providing users with information and sharing resources. The ‘Am I a Lesbian’ masterdoc is an example of how TikTok creators can provide users access to other work written by queer people which tackle aspects of systemic oppression and navigating marginalised identities within this. The TikTok community operates similarly to the masterdoc, acting as a locus for self-exploration, affirmation of thought, guidance and information sharing. The following TikTok is a representation of a popular trend which blends users' narratives with the audio to participate in trends. The trend utilises the audio, “Country Song” by Bo Burnham, the trend utilises a segment in the song with the following lyrics, “good girl in a straw hat with her arms out in a cornfield/That is a scarecrow.” The song is overall representative of mistaking something for something else like thinking that there is a girl in a cornfield but it is actually a scarecrow. This audio is utilised by creators to share an experience where they realise that what they initially thought is not true, creators change the last line of the audio, ‘That is a scarecrow’ to express their realisations while contributing to a larger trend connecting them to other users in the community using the same audio to express similar experiences. The following TikTok video is an example of a video using this audio, it begins with the creator is in frame looking to the right with a caption underneath:

“Young me: “I wish I was born a man so I could like guys in a gay way””

The next shot shows the creator looking at the camera with the caption underneath saying:

“Me now: that is a trans thought”

This trend is similar to the lesbian masterdoc, it creates a template for creators to highlight their experiences and how it relates to how they understand and explore their identity. In this video, the creator identifies the desire to ‘like’ men in a ‘gay’ way as a trans thought, highlighting their desire for a different way of engaging in attraction with men based on gender. Using the trend, creators affirm and shape them into narratives which may be

⁵⁸ The entire line is “You don't gotta die, now let me tell you why” with the following line beginning to share why. The audio on TikTok does not always include the first line, likely to avoid videos being taken down by TikTok for mentions of death or suicide (Skinner, 2021).

relatable within the community. Another TikTok under the same trend begins with the creator in frame with a caption on the screen:

“Young me: I wish I was born a guy so I could like girls in a guy way”

The next shot shows the creator closer to the camera with a new caption:

“Me now: that’s a trans thought”

This TikTok falls under the same theme of videos in acknowledging seemingly random and often assumed normal and popular thought only to reveal this is an aspect of a queer person’s exploration of themselves. Similarly, this trend is also utilised to highlight creator’s identity negotiations, highlighting the thoughts they explored. Using the same audio and trend, the creator of the following video is also in frame with their caption stating:

“I’m bisexual with a preference for girls, and i only like fictional guys and celebrities”

The next shot has the creator close to the frame with the caption:

“that is a lesbian thought”

TikTok enables users and creators to utilise the application for information seeking and affirmation. Creators are able to share their experiences on the app, in doing so, they are able to model queerness and test out new ways of being through a relational lens with other queer people. Yep et al. (2023) in the article, *Mapping Queer Relationalities: An Exploration of Communication at the Edges of Cultural Unintelligibility*, present a mapping of queer relationalities, highlighting the work of sexual and gender non-normative people in developing and practising different ways of engaging and connecting with others under the heteropatriarchy. Queer relationality challenges the dehumanisation of those deemed ‘unrecognisable and unintelligible’ in culture by making queer lives, connections and practices intelligible through the development of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility (Yep et al., 2023). TikTok provides an alternative domain to explore queerness in community with other users in a way which enables users to assess their queerness and what it means to them within their community.

The following video also follows the format of the previous trend highlighted above. This trend also uses the same audio format, the creator highlighting a thought or anecdote which relates to gender and sexual identity exploration. The trend is based on an audio that was shared on YouTube, the audio goes as follows, “I don't know it just seems so silly to me/I

mean everybody feels this way/What the poor naïve dingbat did not realise was that most people in fact did not feel that way.” The video begins with the creator in frame with the caption:

“wanting to remove your bobs [sic] with certain outfits and have them for others”

The audio turns to the following part:

“I mean everybody feels this way.”

The next shot shows the creator at different angles play as the audio continues accompanied by sitcom music

“what the poor, naïve, dingbat did not realise was that most people in fact did not feel that way.”

These two audio trends reflect a recurrent theme on Queertok, this is the exploration of thought and internal identity formation and placemaking with a heteropatriarchy as a person exploring non-normative gender and sexuality. Queer creators and users on the app share their internal processes and engage with users and each other on these experiences, additionally, they share how they make sense of themselves in relation to the world around them. Users and Creators on TikTok sharing their realisations about their experiences and how they navigate the world is affirming and contributes to alternative domains of queer cultural intelligibility, while TikTok features enhance the nature of dialogue through multimodal tools, forms of expressions and sharing of the personal narratives.

TikTok has a wide range of content creation tools which enable creators to find creative ways to present their stories and structure their content on the app. The creator in the next TikTok video presents a series of signs that they were ‘gay’ as a self-described ‘ex-straight’. The series includes several videos where they share their anecdotal experiences and thoughts, the following video is one from their series, the video received several comments. The video begins with the creator in frame holding a cowboy boot glass. The creator begins,

“Hi, my name is Marisa, I am ex straight and I’m back again with more signs I was gay but I didn’t realise until now. So something I’ve assumed my entire life is that if I was gay I would have known the entire time so I’ve always second guessed myself and been like, no I couldn’t be gay cause if I was I would know but I had that

conversation with myself like a lot so [creator makes an face] yea I dunno. That's the time though."

These videos aim to share the creators' own thoughts in their journey. In this video, the creator shares an aspect of their thinking process in understanding their queerness. Part of the creator's thoughts briefly touches on how society defines sexual identity and identity negotiation, and how we expect to feel in navigating narrative identity, the users in the comments of the video share similar thought processes, highlighting their journey in understanding their sexuality. This video encouraged other users to share some of the thoughts on their queerness similar to the creator with some users highlighting similar thought processes, stating in the comment section:

@userID: "I thought being queer felt a kind of way and I never felt what I thought I should. Hard to explain but it turns out you're just you"

@userID: "same! I was jealous of my lesbian friends and would say- wish I had a girlfriend, but I'm straight so I can't 😊"

Another user highlights having the same thought process as they try to navigate through their bisexuality stating:

@userID: "this but when you're bi... 😊 like yea you second guess [yourself] but you don't have the verification of not being attracted to men.."

Some users in the comment section also highlighted the role that family and community play in their ability to explore the sexuality, one user shared:

@userID: "Yeah same! Every time I'll try to think about it I'll imagine having to come out and the thought would go away real quick haha 😊"

This user illustrates the role that family and community can play in affording one to explore their identity without fear of ostracisation. The creator of the TikTok expressed their similar journey in exploring their sexuality and explains the role of family in their identity exploration:

@creatorID: "Legit just was having this same conversation omfg. I get you, I'm only partially out for now. My religious family doesn't know yet 😊"

TikTok plays a key role in providing users with access to a community which also is actively exploring these questions both internally and on the platform through videos, stitches and

comments. The phenomenon of being out on TikTok but not in real life is explored in Chapter One of this dissertation, this is a consistent theme across QueerTok as users explore and engage with each other as they understand and explore their sexuality in community with others. The discussions in the comment section of this video display ongoing conversations about identity and self-understanding in the confines of a heteropatriarchy.

Being in community with others on TikTok enables users to have an online collection for information seeking on queer experiences while testing their ideas and thoughts (Smith, 2023). This is enabled through consistent access to trends, hashtags, and audios which are particularly popular within Queertok. The trend, “I need to talk to a gay person” utilises this statement in an audio, the trend was used to highlight contexts in which the creator felt it is necessary to speak to a queer person, this trend was used in a humorous way with users using it to describe the desire to engage with another queer person. The audio was also utilised to highlight the importance of community engagement in navigating your queerness with some users highlighting themes of coming out, understanding sexuality and gender and navigating these contexts both online and in person. The audio is as follows:

“Person 1: I need to talk to a gay person

Person 2: What do you need?

Person 1: I need to talk to a gay person”

The following TikTok uses the audio to navigate themes of community and coming out while engaging with straight people who don't understand, hence the creator's need to speak to a gay person. The video begins with the creator in frame with text both above and below them. Text goes as following:

When a men started flirting with you cause your bi but he doesn't realise that means you've fought between bi and lesbian since you were 15 and use men as more of a form a validation and self harm than love and [you're] pretty sure you're a lesbian but like what about those femme tattooed bi guys you like sometimes, but like the lesbian manifesto lists that as a sign you're a lesbian and these men date you view more as a close friend then a partner

Text below states:

and at this point you're only seeing girls and NB people, and find yourself 100% more attracted to them, because I'm like 98% sure because like am I just traumatised by men so much I can't be attracted to them anymore or am I coming to terms with my sexuality.

Similarly, this TikTok is also using the audio and leveraging its shared meaning to highlight their experiences and the manners in which they can navigate their identity and grapple with these questions. This TikTok video provides rich insight into the discussions on the app as users grapple with their identities and the various ways that individuals and communities come together to understand themselves, in this case it is particularly important to highlight the role of community to enable users to express themselves and engage. TikTok is also where users seek validation and affirmation in their thoughts and beliefs on the app, users in the comments also affirm their journeys and their identity exploration. Some of the comments include affirmations of the users' insights with users stating:

@userID: "I feel so validated after reading this ty [thank you]"

@userID: "Wow, you just put all of my feelings into words. You are valid and I understand"

Another user stated:

@userID: "PLS I FEEL SO MUCH THE LAST PART, AM I TRAUMATISED OR A LESBIAN 😭😭😭"

Users are able to engage with their community to highlight their feelings and feel validated in their exploration of their identity in engaging with other users' videos. Godard (2023) outlines the difference in the conceptualisation of compulsory heterosexuality presented in the 'Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc' compared to Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, noting the difference between 'lesbianism' and 'the lesbian continuum'. The Masterdoc had an impact in shaping conversations about lesbianism on TikTok, reflected in this video and the creator's expression of what lesbian identity is. Being in community on TikTok does offer some opportunities for affirmation for both the creator and the user and it plays a useful role in displaying to all community members the validity of their expression. Additionally, being in community also provides users the ability to explore the variations of their queer identities and seeing it expressed in all its multitudes. In response

to this video, other users also provide affirmation on these feelings but also highlight how they utilise labels:

@userID: “oh this. This is exactly why [I only] ever call myself queer. it's so COMPLICATED”

The queer community online is complex and contradictory, this is reflected in the different videos on the platform. Understandings and navigations of queerness are layered, contradictory and sometimes oppositional. This last TikTok is interesting to me for two reasons, firstly, it provides an insight into the use of the ‘Am I a Lesbian’ Masterdoc as a basis of lesbian understanding and exploration on the app. The masterdoc reads as a self-help piece but can be limited in its conceptualisation of sexual identity which can be limited for exploration of bisexual sexual identity or asexual people and presents a limited conceptualisation of compulsory heterosexuality. Its use as a definitive guide for exploration can be limiting especially as sexuality can be fluid and ever evolving (Katz-Wise et al., 2023). Secondly, this TikTok video reflects the role of the TikTok community in creating its own queer counterpublics and modes of expression enabled on the application. The comment section and engagement on the platform plays an important role in how users on the app engage and find their place online.

Collins (2010) identifies communities as vehicles which link people to social institutions, this makes the concept of community ubiquitous and multifaceted, able to drive people into action which is key for political action (p. 12). People’s experiences of their identity can be varied, the internet has played a role in how members of the LGBTQIA+ community discover information, explore their identity and gain access to community (Allen-Young, 2019). TikTok has become a platform for various forms of activism and information sharing, additionally, for LGBTQIA+ people, other creators sharing stories from their lives, struggles they have faced, funny anecdotes and participating in trends, encourages them to share their own stories, affirm their experiences or provide a space for questioning. While the form of activism on TikTok is akin to ‘slacktivism’, Otu (2020) best presents a definition of slacktivism which best encapsulates the functioning of activism on TikTok, this is activism which through videos and dialogue in the comment sections, transgresses and challenges the hegemonic constructs of sexuality and being, slacktivism falls within the spectrum of activist endeavours. While this form of activism may have limited impact in the physical realm, pro-queer and expansive dialogue of queerness in community with others offers an

opportunity to challenge heteronormativity while engaging with users across several geographies. TikTok has a large number of users which has changed the scale of representation on the platform and access to a wider range of people. The construct of community on TikTok provides an avenue to explore social inequity for the creators discussed in this section, this is displayed through discussions of identity and impact of heteropatriarchy.

Conclusion: *All laughing* “But it’s not funny at the end of the day, is it? It’s serious”

LGBTQIA+ videos on TikTok were an incredible enabler of imagination for me, finding queer theory in its popular form and community on the platform expanded my understanding of the world. In this dissertation, I aim to present an exploration of the LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok and the strategies utilised to counter context collapse. The LGBTQIA+ community face algorithmic challenges on the platform, engagement with content is a key form of algorithmic resistance with creators and users working to ensure that their content is shared with people with shared interests. Enabling engagement to videos is a key strategy utilised by creators to combat censorship due to the algorithm, utilising the algorithm to ensure that their content is shared amongst the community. The TikTok algorithm’s use of engagement to provide users with content on their FYP is utilised as a form of safeguarding against context collapse and playing a key role in influencing the algorithm. The community’s capacity to ‘queer’ the algorithm underscores the innovative ways in which users navigate and subvert digital spaces to assert their identities and build communities.

TikTok is an excellent platform for communication, information sharing, and political organising both offline and online. This is seen through the role users played in amplifying messages of the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide, more recently in sharing critical information about the genocide in Gaza (Haslem, 2022; Ferrari, 2023). This is enabled by the information sharing on the app. For LGBTQIA+ users on TikTok, information plays a critical role in discovering and understanding sexuality and gender. The ‘Am I a Lesbian’ Masterdoc became a tool for analysis on TikTok and it represents queer counterpublics and domains of cultural intelligibility. The platform’s accessibility and the bounds of user generated content expand the dissemination of information, and the multimodal tools enable this information to be shared in personable and interesting ways.

While TikTok presents a platform to explore identity, gender and sexuality on the app, it is not necessarily a safe space due to the format of the platform for the susceptibility of context collapse. This space is facilitated and maintained in the content shared by users on the platform, which plays a key role in affirming users’ identities and providing access to tools to understand or explore their gender identity or sexual orientation. QueerTok learning is experienced through engaging with LGBTQIA+ topics through multimodal means which can

take the form of personal narratives, anecdotes, viewpoints, experiences, and the daily lives of users. This includes the growing accounts which are dedicated to sharing information about Queer current affairs and history. TikTok can also be an important space for reflection, disagreement and critique, shown through the use of the comment section and the stitch function which have expanded the scope of engagement, and responses.

This dissertation showcases the thoughts and opinions and trends utilised by people on TikTok, showing a continuation of discussions about central issues within the queer community. These discussions are centred at creating an expansive understanding of queerness with users highlighting the limits of labelling and rigid categorisations of gender and sexual identity. The political and user population composition on TikTok have significant impact on the nature of content shared, with content primarily coming from the US (Kemp, 2024). The cultural wars on TikTok are a manifestation of greater political and ideological negotiations both locally in the USA and globally. The TikTok algorithm can amplify and reinforce divisions, resulting in users primarily engaging in tailored content based on the users' existing beliefs and interests. The algorithm plays a key role in TikTok discussions, this has been reflected in the context of the videos highlighted throughout this dissertation. The LGBTQIA+ digital divide is an important consideration for future research on the impact of social media platforms for identity negotiation and community building.

This dissertation has highlighted the nature of intersectional discourse present within QueerTok, emphasising the lived experiences of Black queer individuals and the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. Despite the challenges of censorship, especially of Black queer users, TikTok provides a crucial space for exploring and embracing diverse identities within a postcolonial framework. This exploration highlights the importance of considering the intersections of race, colonialism, and marginalisation in our understanding of gender and sexuality. This has implications in understanding the role of the digital divide in limiting access to LGBTQIA+ narratives (Johnson & Deutch, 2024). Ultimately, engagement from diverse creators is critical for discussions and visibility on QueerTok. The internet plays a crucial role in how members of the LGBTQIA+ community discover information, explore their identities, and gain access to community (Allen-Young, 2019). TikTok has become a platform for various forms of activism and information sharing. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, seeing other creators share stories from their lives, the struggles they face, funny anecdotes, and participation in trends encourages them to share their own stories, affirm their

experiences, or provide a space for questioning. TikTok's large user base has changed the scale of representation on the platform, providing access to a wider range of people.

For me, creators who engage at the intersections of race, gender, and queeress have been key in broadening my understanding of myself. The construct of community on TikTok provides an avenue to explore social inequity for the creators discussed in this dissertation, particularly through discussions of identity and the impact of heteropatriarchy. Muñoz (2009) in his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, emphasises the importance of queer collectivity and redefines queerness within utopia stating:

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain.” (p. 1)

This quote alludes to the potential role of QueerTok in bringing us closer to the radiance of queer ideality, which can be difficult to envision in the context of intra-community betrayals in favour of investment in white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy. The community on the platform provided me with a glance into queer praxis, through community commitment towards supporting mutual aid, sharing of experiences, highlighting resources for other queer people and also supporting videos from queer creators. These methods of community engagement and support are important in moving towards more discussions about LGBTQIA+ lived experiences. These interactions also highlight the importance of the space TikTok provides for discussions.

I chose to utilise the popular audio, “but it’s not funny at the end of the day, is it? it’s serious,” as a title for this conclusion as it perfectly encapsulates the nature of QueerTok. The audio is from a sitcom called *Yonderland*, and it is utilised on TikTok by creators to make videos sharing dark humour. This audio is a classic example of how Gen Z on TikTok use humour to share and understand their experiences. This audio also feels fitting considering the shifts on TikTok with an impending ban of the app in the United States of America⁵⁹ and

⁵⁹ In April 2024, The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA) was signed into law which grants the American government the authority to ban foreign-owned apps that it

the degradation of online spaces with the integration of AI.⁶⁰ Additionally, it is quite serious at the end of the day as we witness pushbacks and expanded criminalisation of LGBTQIA+ Africans such as Uganda's expansion of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2014⁶¹ and the free expression of anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and threats to repeal legal protections reflected in the comments of former South African president Jacob Zuma⁶² (Gore, 2022; Nonyukela, 2024). In the West, queer activists have faced renewed constraints on their freedoms, in Poland the ruling conservative party made anti-LGBTQIA+ politics core to their re-election campaign and in June 2020 saw the adoption of 'pro family' resolutions adopted in over 100 municipalities (Gore, 2022). While TikTok has been a place to share personal narratives in a humorous way, discussions shared by queer users speak to central issues in society and obstacles and discrimination LGBTQIA+ individuals face which are quite serious at the end of the day. While the sharing of content on TikTok primarily takes on a humorous tone, the platform offers a site for engagement with real people and their experiences which speak to greater systems of oppression. QueerTok is not just a platform for entertainment but a rich locus for political and social engagement. It illustrates how the personal is inherently political, offering a real-world application of theoretical concepts related to identity, intersectionality, and community.

deems a threat to national security. This means that it will be illegal for TikTok to operate in the United States of America after 19 January 2025 (Treisman, 2025).

⁶⁰ AI images and assistants have become ubiquitous across all social media applications, making discerning which images are real or fake difficult and degrading functions such as the search function on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Sinha, 2024).

⁶¹ The Ugandan Parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act in March 2023, criminalising consensual same-sex conduct with penalties of up to life imprisonment, attempted homosexual acts with penalties of 10 years in prison, and the death penalty for those convicted of "aggravated homosexuality," this is described as "repeated same sex acts and intercourse with a person younger than 18, older than 75, or a person with a disability." (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

⁶² During an MK party rally in Maqongqo near Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal, the former president labelled the legislation of LGBTQIA+ rights a disgrace and stated that these were not laws the people of South Africa have ever supported. (Nonyukela, 2024)

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Appendix



HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

Registration number: REC-101114-044

04 August 2022

Re: Miss Bungcwethi Hlongwane (1597360)

Waiver letter number: HRECNMW22/08/03

To whom it may concern,

Miss Hlongwane is a registered Masters student at the School of Social Science at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This letter is to confirm that, at the time of writing, Miss Hlongwane does not need ethical clearance for her Masters study entitled '*Narrative Identity, Visibility, and Community: Theorising "QueerTok" as a Digital Consciousness Raising Space*'. This decision has been reached based upon a description of the project supplied by Miss Hlongwane to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), which has been evaluated by the Chairs and Deputy Chairs. If, however, if Miss Hlongwane changes the methods of data collection and analysis for this study, this decision may no longer be valid. If such changes take place, this should be communicated to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) as soon as possible. This waiver letter is valid until 03 August 2025.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,
S Schoeman

Shaun Schoeman (Administrative Officer)

Solomon Mahlangu House, 10th Floor, Room 10004, Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050

T + 27(0)11 717 1408 | E Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za | hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

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