IT'S THERE FOR YOU, BUT IS IT #FYP?: A METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION OF RESEARCHING QUEER CONTENT, COMMUNITY, AND EXPERIENCE ON TIKTOK

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Introduction

With each new online platform comes a new set of methodological challenges when studying its content and inhabitants. This paper presents a methodological reflection of studying the exchange of information and building of community and safe space amongst queer youth within the app. Initial research questions investigated: How are LGBTQIA+ youth using the platform to care for each other through the sharing of health-related information? Further, how prevalent is content of this nature? In encountering challenges related to affordances within the app, further questions began to emerge. How do we go about studying the nature of content that users, especially those who belong to historically marginalized communities, will come across in their day-to-day engagement with the app? And how might this lead to them exchanging information and support with one-another?

LGBTQIA+ Youth, Social Media, and Health Information Seeking

Social media platforms prioritize users, centering them in ways unlike more traditional media (Manduley et al., 2018), allowing users to challenge hegemonic narratives. Users are able to form communities based on information and experiences related to health issues (Sendra & Farre, 2020), and adolescents in particular have been able to cultivate a safe space and ask for advice related to sexual (Yeo & Chu, 2017) and mental (Yeo, 2020) health. Social media has also provided a beneficial space for sex-education among marginalized communities who are typically left out of such conversations (Manduley et al., 2018; Burns, Chakraborty, & Arnault, 2021), further filling gaps in schools' sex-education curricula that pose disadvantages based on race (Farkas et al., 2015) and sexuality (Mitchell et al., 2014).

FYP: Not Your Average Tag-Based Architecture

Hashtags have become increasingly used across platforms to link and continue ongoing conversations. In earlier platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, hashtags have been vital in creating and locating visibility, "indicat[ing] not only content but also audience, intent, and self-identity" (Dame, 2016). The use of hashtags is not necessarily straightforward, which has been acknowledged in literature suggesting that more attention should be paid to "large-scale patterns…nuanced practices" moving beyond the hashtag itself (McCosker & Gerrard, 2020). Still, hashtags have long been a central aspect of the most popular social networking sites. Also used as the mechanic of a social system, tags are used for both "information organization and conversation promotion" (Dame, 2016).

Narratives are essentially what makes sense of all of the data and categorization. Tagging can be seen as a way that users of large social media platforms further define what a tag means and signifies, through their addition of narrative to the post and the tag (Dame, 2016). This is the foundation upon which I had been constructing my method, but this was quickly challenged in a conversation with my informant, an avid TikTok user, as she walked me through the app and its functionality.

Blended from a 2014 app Musical.ly launched in Shanghai, then purchased by the Chinese company ByteDance in a rebranding of their 2016 Douyin, TikTok thrives on its "extraordinarily powerful algorithm, which learns what content users like to see far faster than many other apps" (Tidy & Galer, 2020). My informant began to discuss the FYP (for you page), the home feed in one's TikTok account. This is where videos are recommended by the app based on videos shared, followed, created, and commented on; video information such as captions, hashtags, and audio; and basic settings such as language and location (TikTok, 2020). The algorithm goes deeper than what is described, and at times seems to simply know what a user will like. My informant, impressed by the system, described that a video appearing in her FYP does not have to be from an account that she is actively following, and does not always have any hashtags, thus complicating common assumptions that hashtags are essential markers of content and indicators of community.

Pilot Data

Given these constraints, and the broad nature of content on TikTok, my initial data collection was largely exploratory. The initial plan was to conduct this exploratory data collection followed by a content analysis of the nature and prevalence of videos related to health information sharing and community building, alongside an analysis of interactions within the comment sections of these videos. I conducted searches of hashtags that were broadly connected to LGBTQIA+ communities on TikTok (i.e. #queertiktok, #lgbtq), coding each video on a spreadsheet for hashtags, themes, and tone/affect. The initial data set is very spread out in terms of theme and affect, and with the already existing concerns of replicating users' actual experience and access to the content, I paused data collection in order to re-evaluate the best path forward. Only twenty coded videos in, I had already logged 57 different hashtags and 28 different themes. There was also not a noticeable trend of one theme, tone, or hashtag

appearing more frequently than others. There is a gap in understanding, or replicating, how the user actually would come across this content, and to what capacity, that is left unaddressed.

Moving Forward in Studying and Replicating User Experience on TikTok

Attempts to replicate the FYP of a typical LGBTQIA+ TikTok user comes with its own insufficiencies. It is difficult to attempt understanding what will appear in individuals' feeds, let alone how much health-related content will actually be seen by a user without them having to actively search for it.

A potential solution for a singular researcher or small group of researchers would be to create a TikTok account, seek similar content to view, favorite, and follow. It should presumably generate an FYP with relevant content for study, regardless of captions or hashtags used. However, it would still be understandably difficult or even impossible to replicate the user experience and FYP of users among a specific audience. This could also risk essentializing members of a marginalized group and generating assumptions that all members would be seeking the same or similar content.

For TikTok users, the platform is a customized and even communal experience. As a researcher, the app's affordances pose some significant challenges as a space to be studied. This begs the question of whether content on this platform can truly be studied or understood, even in terms of a simple content analysis, without the direct involvement of users. This concern is particularly relevant when working with content shared among historically marginalized communities.

Such issues should be considered when researching this newer digital space, as traditional platform assumptions no longer apply. One can and should research the content that exists on TikTok, especially given its rise in popularity and prominence, as well as the potential health-related implications (physical, mental, social, and beyond) associated with said content. However, we need to acknowledge the difficulties in replicating user experiences, and in figuring out who sees what, and when, and how. There is a lot left to consider and to contend with on this platform, and others that may come after, with continuing changes in trends, affordances, and user experiences.

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