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DEAR BABY GAYS: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIOTECHNICAL PRACTICES OF OLDER LGBTQ+ TIKTOK USERS

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Introduction

On a video hashtagged #transisbeautiful, a woman explains that a TikTok filter, which enables people to see what their current self would look like as a teenager, is growing in popularity among transgender users. Such a feature, she says, is important for “those of us that transitioned later in life.” She continues, “I started at thirty-two; I didn’t get to see this person.” She applies the filter and tears up, eventually breaking the silence by exclaiming, “She would have been such a pretty girl.”

Meanwhile, a self-identified butch “dyke” records videos for those who have just come out. In one, she addresses her audience broadly: “Dear baby gays...” warning them that “the first woman you meet isn’t necessarily going to be the one you spend the rest of your life with.” In another video, she responds to a follower’s request for tips for having sex with a woman for the first time. She declares, “Don’t do what you see in corn! We have to say CORN on TikTok because if we say the *other* word, it gets flagged.” She then provides advice for sexual encounters.

Although differing in subject matter, these posts reflect perspectives that stem from experiences accumulated over time, as these users appear to be older than the dominant TikTok demographic of individuals aged 24 or younger (Statista, 2023). They use this vantage point to share regarding gender and sexual identity while also drawing upon TikTok’s affordances for such self-representation. These examples reflect this

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paper's focus on the sociotechnical practices of LGBTQ+¹ TikTok users over age 30 as they emerge from, and are shaped by, the platform and its user cultures.

Literature and Background

LGBTQ+ people have long used online technologies to develop and express their identities, connect with others, and speak out against homophobia and other forms of systemic discrimination (Campbell, 2004; Gray, 2009). However, the rise of social media platforms has posed many challenges for LGBTQ+ self-representation. Platforms' algorithmic and automated content curation leads to hierarchies of visibility (Bucher, 2012), which can render queer content less visible or circulate it to homophobic audiences who then target creators (Duguay et al., 2018). Further, broad policies prohibiting sexual content, and commercial incentives from advertisers to avoid "controversial" topics, can lead to LGBTQ+ users experiencing censorship, demonetization, and deplatforming (Southerton et al., 2021). Nonetheless, LGBTQ+ social media users develop strategies of self-protection and identity curation that deliver their self-representations to desired audiences (Cho, 2017; Hanckel et al., 2019).

The short video app TikTok presents new affordances for self-representation while collapsing boundaries between younger and older audiences. In 2018, the Chinese technology company Bytedance acquired Musical.ly and rebranded it as TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022). Since Musical.ly was already popular with youth as a tool for creativity, performance, and play (Savic, 2021), younger users have remained the platform's largest demographic (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). TikTok affords dialogue among audiences through innovative tools, such as the "duet" feature that shows a new video side-by-side with an existing video allowing for a direct response or reaction. Such tools have been deployed in intergenerational critique and conflict between self-identified "Gen Z" and "Baby Boomer" users (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). While Zeng & Abidin's (2021) study is one of the few to include older users' content, further investigation is necessary regarding older LGBTQ+ users, whose content may be less antagonistic given offline instances of queer intergenerational sociality and support (Emmer, 2012).

Despite studies showing that queer people have found community on TikTok, especially queer youth during the pandemic (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2021), the platform has a reputation of hostility toward LGBTQ+ users. A 2019 investigation found that TikTok's policies advised moderators to suppress videos of LGBTQ+, disabled, and lower socioeconomic status users (Biddle et al., 2020). While TikTok claimed to abandon this policy, LGBTQ+ users still experience exclusion through regular removal and reduced visibility of their videos (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Users attempt to counter these issues through multiple strategies, such as by obscuring references to sex and sexual identity with coded terms like "corn" instead of "porn" and "le\$bean" for "lesbian" (Delkic, 2022). As such, a volume of LGBTQ+ content can be found that harnesses TikTok's features while evading punitive moderation mechanisms.

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other diverse sexual and gender identities.

Methods

This paper presents an analysis of older² LGBTQ+ users' TikTok videos. While some users employ hashtags, much content is discovered through the highly personalized For You page (FYP) (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). Building on emerging approaches to studying algorithmically curated information flows (Bounegru et al., 2022), the research team collected TikToks by training two new accounts to deliver this niche content to the FYP. This was done by following older LGBTQ+ TikTokers and the hashtags they use while liking associated content. Once the FYP for each account showed mostly LGBTQ+ content from older users, researchers spent one hour per day manually collecting video links and recording metadata (likes, shares, etc). This approach ensured that the study examined content circulated to a (hypothetical) user and included videos that would not be surfaced through hashtag searches.

Data collection occurred from February 1 to March 1, 2023, with the final data set including a total of 247 videos. The authors engaged in high-level analysis, sorting data to uncover the most circulated content and identifying prominent platform trends (Highfield & Leaver, 2016) followed by multiple rounds of qualitative coding. This analysis attended to videos' messages, aesthetics, and formats to identify recurrent themes and approaches to representation while also examining users' negotiation of TikTok's affordances.

Preliminary Findings

While this is still work-in-progress, initial analysis uncovered recurrent themes in user content, which include:

- **Older queer representation** – the construction and discussion of identities at the intersection of age and sexual identity, such as “late in life” lesbians, queer parents, gay grandpas and others;
- **Advice giving** – videos aimed toward younger audiences and individuals who have newly come out, describing what to do in situations specific to LGBTQ+ people;
- **History and education** – although related to advice videos, these TikToks draw more specifically on memory. Some include personal life stories while others discuss queer historical events, underscoring a desire to share experiences and pass historical knowledge along to a younger generation;
- **Counter-discourses and solidarity** – many videos leverage TikTok's features to counter homophobia and transphobia, calling out discriminatory users or drawing attention to oppressive sociopolitical developments (e.g. parents fighting anti-trans legislation that affects children). Other videos express solidarity with those targeted by discrimination, such as lesbians dismissing trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) views in support of transwomen.

² Those identifying as, or appearing to be, approximately older than 30 years of age, who can be thought of as 'older' relative to TikTok's predominantly younger user base.

Across these themes, TikTok is not merely a neutral host of content but shows up in how these users represent themselves and even through platform-specific commentary (e.g. “say corn”). Further analysis will reveal the extent to which TikTok shapes these LGBTQ+ users’ sociotechnical practices. It will also provide a deeper understanding of the above themes, revealing how those, who are often overlooked in scholarly and public discourse centering young TikTokers, use the platform to concurrently represent age and sexual identity.

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