"ELDERQUEER IS MORE THAN JUST AN AGE THING": EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ+ INTERGENERATIONAL CO-PRESENCE ON TIKTOK

Hannah Jamet-Lange
Concordia University

Dunja Nešovic
Concordia University

Stefanie Duguay
Concordia University

> …elderqueer is more than just an age thing. It's like a sense of responsibility…
> How can you help other people get to where you are? – Lilac, early thirties

This quote reflects one aspect of how LGBTQ+[1] TikTok users over age 30 view their role on the short video platform. While TikTok garnered much attention for its rapid uptake by youth (Savic, 2021), it has also seen adoption by older age demographics (Pew Research Center, 2024). Given social media's longstanding importance for convening LGBTQ+ publics (Robards et al., 2018) and the rarity of intergenerational offline spaces, this paper examines the intersection of age and sexual identity in interviews with elderqueer TikToker users. It presents preliminary findings indicating that TikTok's affordances and individuals' fluid expressions of age alongside personal narratives of sexual identity give rise to an intergenerational co-presence that recognizes struggles of the past while giving hope for the future.

Background

Sharing LGBTQ+ histories, such as those related to mobilization and survival during the AIDS crisis, has been integral for community formation through collective remembering (Castiglia & Reed, 2011). LGBTQ+ intergenerational dialogue can also counter perceived differences and allow for intergenerational solidarity (Vaccaro, 2009). However, older LGBTQ+ individuals may view themselves as belonging to generations, identity categories, and political struggles differing from those claimed by younger people (Megarry et al., 2022). Further, the gentrification, closure, and dispersion of queer public spaces narrows opportunities for intergenerational mingling (Nash, 2013).

Queer life courses often deviate from heteronormative, or "chrononormative" (Freeman, 2010) expectations, adopting alternative chronologies and temporalities comprising "queer time" (Halberstam, 2005). Amid ongoing struggles for rights and acceptance, expressions of queerness in media and the everyday often gesture toward the future as "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

Across decades, platforms have been sites of queer expression, shaping LGBTQ+ identity construction, interpersonal connection, and civic participation (Robards et al., 2018). Queer platforms can enable a sense of digital co-presence even when users are physically situated in homophobic spaces (Blackwell et al., 2015). However, LGBTQ+ people of different ages experience and use platforms differently, reflecting variations in literacy with newer technologies and comfort coming out (Are et al., 2024; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). Experiences of queer temporality and opportunities for sexual self-representation are also shaped by platform affordances (Cho, 2015; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020).

Our focus on TikTok considers its affordances and platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015). The For You feed's intensive algorithmic curation and continual flow of content influence users' sense of identity, level of engagement, and the visibility of content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Faltesek et al., 2023). Further, TikTok has become a hub for "generational wars" between Gen Z and Millennials or Boomers (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Although the platform can facilitate LGBTQ+ representation, users also experience suppression and censorship of content concerning sexuality and sexual identity (Are, 2024; Simpson & Semaan, 2021).

Methods

This paper is part of a larger project investigating the experiences of "elderqueers" on TikTok (Duguay et al., 2023), adopting a term that circulated on the platform reflecting LGBTQ+ users who consider themselves relatively older than TikTok's predominantly young userbase.[2] This research seeks to understand how elderqueers use TikTok, how the platform shapes their use, as well as whether and how intergenerational dialogue occurs through the platform. From March–December 2024, we recruited interview participants through social media and LGBTQ+ organizations' networks who identify as LGBTQ+, use TikTok, and are over age 30 or see themselves as 'older' than the large population of young TikTok users. Given our institution's TikTok ban, the platform was not used for recruitment. We conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with participants ages 23-55, who identified as bisexual (5), lesbian (5), bi/pan (1), gay/queer (2), gay (2), pansexual (4), asexual/panromantic (1), asexual/heteroromantic (1), asexual/queer (1), lesbian/queer (1), queer (1). Participants' gender identities included woman (6), cis woman (5), trans woman (2), female/nonbinary (1), man (3), cis man (2), and non-binary (5). Most participants were based in Canada (15) and the USA (6) with our exploratory recruitment approach also garnering one participant each in Argentina, Australia, and The Netherlands. Interview transcripts were qualitatively coded according to a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2021), with team

members engaging in rounds of topical, descriptive, and thematic coding, stabilizing themes through consensus (Cascio et al., 2019).

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

While six participants expressed feeling "too old" for a platform populated by "twenty-somethings," age emerged in interviews as an ambiguous identity marker. Age was not always apparent on TikTok due to the prevalence of face filters, minimal requirements for identifying information, and difficulty evaluating it from appearance: "someone looks much younger or much older" (Chris,[3] early thirties). For some participants, this ambiguity minimized the divide between generations; for instance, enabling Daniel, a late-thirties gay man, to feel "like Gen Z at heart." Those who created content felt the imperative to indicate their age – wanting "younger people to know what they're dealing with" (Cowboyjen, late fifties) – and the agency to shape its expression, such as through hashtags and addressing specific audiences. Contrasting with generational "wars," TikTok's affordances, alongside a degree of freedom from chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010), enabled ambiguity and fluidity in their (self)identification of age.

Even so, participants did not perceive TikTok as facilitating interpersonal connections across generations. Emma, a mid-thirties trans lesbian, echoed sentiments that TikTok inhibited connections because "you can just scroll past things really quickly" among the platform's constant flow of content, much like passively watching television (Faltesek et al., 2023). TikTok's algorithmic curation tended to skew participants' feeds toward younger creators, with Kristin, an early-forties bisexual non-binary person, noting that TikTok "doesn't necessarily do a great job of cross-pollinating generations." Platforms' algorithmic bias toward normative, dominant, and popular representations (Gibbs et al., 2015; Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020) therefore extends to age, as participants had to actively train their feeds to show older LGBTQ+ creators.

They did so by engaging with conventions of personal narrative and storytelling that circulate prominently on TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022). @hookslaybae, a mid-thirties asexual non-binary creator, observed peers using TikTok's stitch and duet features to share personal responses to younger users' questions, such as, "How did you learn to be comfortable with yourself?" Similar to Lilac's quote above, participants shared their own stories or circulated TikToks about the past "because there's a giant wedge taken out of our history that we have to honour" (Jeannelle, mid-forties). Simultaneously, younger TikTokers' content enabled participants to reflect on changes over time, with Lilac fascinated by "how open the younger generation gets to be with their identities."

These findings point to elderqueer engagement with TikTok's platform vernaculars and affordances to develop co-presence across generations, despite TikTok's skew toward popular content and endless content flow. Elderqueers' engagement in looking back as well as forward contributes to collective remembering, repurposing TikTok into a site of queer futurity.

Endnotes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other diverse sexual and gender identities.
2. Differing from associations of "old" or "elder" with surpassing a specific age, such as Statistics Canada's (2025) use of "older adult" to indicate 65+.
3. Participants selected preferred names or pseudonyms.

References

Are, C. (2024). Flagging as a silencing tool: Exploring the relationship between de-platforming of sex and online abuse on Instagram and TikTok. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241228544

Are, C., Talbot, C., & Briggs, P. (2024). Social media affordances of LGBTQIA+ expression and community formation. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241296628

Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241

Blackwell, C., Birnholtz, J., & Abbott, C. (2015). Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. *New Media & Society*, *17*(7), 1117–1136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814521595

Cascio, M. A., Lee, E., Vaudrin, N., & Freedman, D. A. (2019). A Team-based Approach to Open Coding: Considerations for Creating Intercoder Consensus. *Field Methods*, *31*(2), 116–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X19838237

Castiglia, C., & Reed, C. (2011). *If memory serves: Gay men, AIDS, and the promise of a queer past*. Minnesota University Press.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide*. Sage.

Cho, A. (2015). Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked Affect* (pp. 43–58). MIT Press.

Dhoest, A., & Szulc, L. (2016). Navigating online selves: Social, cultural, and material contexts of social media use by diasporic gay men. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672485

Duguay, S., Acar, Ö.E., & Jamet-Lange, H. (2023). Dear baby gays: Investigating the sociotechnical practices of older LGBTQ+ TikTok users. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research.* https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2023i0.13415

Faltesek, D., Graalum, E., Breving, B., Knudsen, E., Lucas, J., Young, S., & Varas Zambrano, F. E. (2023). TikTok as Television. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231194576

Freeman, E. (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press.

Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., & Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(3), 255–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a Queer Time and Place*. NYU Press.

Hearn, A., & Banet-Weiser, S. (2020). The Beguiling: Glamour in/as Platformed Cultural Production. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119898779

Kaye, D. B. V., Zeng, J., & Wikstrom, P. (2022). *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video*. Polity.

Megarry, J., Weiss, C. O., Tyler, M., & Farhall, K. (2022). Women who prefer "lesbian" to "queer": Generational continuity and discontinuity. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *26*(1), 53–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2021.1950271

Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. NYU Press.

Nash, C. J. (2013). The age of the "post-mo"? Toronto's gay Village and a new generation. *Geoforum*, *49*, 243–252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.11.023

Robards, B., Churchill, B., Vivienne, S., Hanckel, B., & Byron, P. (2018). Twenty years of 'cyberqueer': The enduring significance of the Internet for young LGBTIQ+ people. In P. Aggleton, R. Cover, D. Leahy, D. Marshall, & M. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *Youth, sexuality and sexual citizenship* (pp. 151–167). Routledge.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (4th ed.). Sage.

Savic, M. (2021). From Musical.ly to TikTok: Social construction of 2020's most downloaded short-video app. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*, 3173–3194.

Simpson, E., & Semaan, B. (2021). For You, or For "You"?: Everyday LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *4*(CSCW3), 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1145/3432951

Pew Research Center. (2024, January 31). Social Media Fact Sheet. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

Statistics Canada. (2025). *Older adults and population aging statistics*. Government of Canada. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/older_adults_and_population_aging

Tiidenberg, K., & van der Nagel, E. (2020). *Sex and social media*. Emerald Publishing.

Vaccaro, A. (2009). Intergenerational Perceptions, Similarities and Differences: A Comparative Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Millennial Youth with Generation X and Baby Boomers. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *6*(2–3), 113–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361650902899124

Zeng, J., & Abidin, C. (2021). '#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers': Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(16), 2459-2481. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2021.1961007