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TikTok's queer public culture of mental health support

by Paul Byron

Abstract

TikTok offers LGBTQ+ young people a queer public through which to negotiate mental health difficulties. Data from an Australian survey of LGBTQ+ young people was analysed to consider TikTok-specific mental health support. Five key themes of support related to: 1) sharing experiences; 2) encountering 'people like me'; 3) comfort and safety; 4) mental health education; and 5) feeling less alone. These overlapping themes foreground the affective aspects of TikTok use for many LGBTQ+ young people, reflecting Cvetkovich's theorization of 'queer public cultures'. This can be seen in LGBTQ+ young people's collective negotiations of mental health on TikTok — as a platform that offers new affective connections to queer culture, while continuing an ongoing culture of peer support forged through collective struggle, survival, and creative practice.

Contents

Introduction
TikTok care and support
Queer public culture
Data and methods
TikTok support
Discussion
Conclusion

Introduction

LGBTQ+ young people face mental health challenges far greater than cisgender and heterosexual people, which is well documented (Wilson and Cariola, 2020). This evidence calls for strengths-based research that centres LGBTQ+ people's mental health strategies for resilience and survival. This includes attention to how social media are used by LGBTQ+ young people to foster mental health and well-being — for themselves, their friends, and their communities. Research must also attend to how LGBTQ+ young people frame their experiences of managing mental health, which is likely informed by support from peers (Town, *et al.*, 2022). Doing so can broaden our understandings of how mental health is lived and practiced beyond

individualistic and medicalized frameworks, as seen in queer approaches to community health (Sharman, 2021).

Emerging from a study of LGBTQ+ young people's digital peer support that centres their expertise in negotiating mental health challenges, this paper focuses on informal support cultures on TikTok. Collective LGBTQ+ experiences of social inequities, family difficulties, institutional discrimination, and having to navigate hostile and unsafe environments, are more evident to young people than ever before, thanks to digital cultures of sharing personal experiences on social media (Byron, *et al.*, 2019). In today's digital landscape, TikTok is a key site in which collective struggles, feelings, and strategies for survival are shared among, and offer support to, LGBTQ+ young people (Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023). Since the early days of the Internet, digital media has been associated with a key source of support for LGBTQ+ people (Craig and McInroy, 2014; Dame-Griff, 2019; Hillier, *et al.*, 2001), and TikTok use can further these digital cultures of care (Byron, 2021).

Young people's mental health care is not limited to a formal service provision (Byron, 2023), and, as a concept, care is difficult to define, reflecting its varied cultural aspects (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). While much has been said of how digital media provide vital information, support, and community to LGBTQ+ people, they are rarely discussed as sites of care (Byron, 2021). Centering LGBTQ+ young people's digital cultures, however, can illuminate how collective cultures of care can be central to social media use. For many such young people, 'primary care' from families or health services can be unaccommodating of their needs, concerns, and identities (Newman, *et al.*, 2021; Strauss, *et al.*, 2022; Wilson and Cariola, 2020). In this context, Tumblr and private Facebook groups have been vital sources of care and support (Berger, *et al.*, 2021; Haimson, *et al.*, 2021; Jenzen, 2017; Patterson and Leurs, 2019), and there is a need to better understand how care operates through social media. This need is challenged by ever-evolving digital ecologies, where platforms, like Facebook and Tumblr, have become less central to younger LGBTQ+ people's digital cultures. From survey data, it is evident that we must consider what recently popularized platforms, like TikTok, offer to LGBTQ+ young people in the way of mental health support.

This paper takes a sociocultural approach to mental health and contributes to scholarship that seeks to broaden our understandings of queer cultures of affective living (Cvetkovich, 2003; Love, 2007). This approach is mindful of what is eclipsed or marginalized by the dominance of psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourses of trauma and mental 'illness' [1]. This is not to reject medico-scientific knowledge, but to elicit a wider picture that accommodates everyday practices and vernaculars of mental health, as seen in personal accounts of struggle and survival on TikTok. TikTok offers a space where mental health knowledges are gained and contested through limitless accounts of lived experience. Meanwhile, individualistic understandings of mental illness (as though diagnosed and experienced in isolation), limits our attention to the value of public cultures of support and the digital infrastructures involved.

Formal understandings of mental illness are broadened and recontextualized through how we understand and 'story' our experiences, which often runs parallel to how we come to live and understand our queerness. Digital support for queer and trans people has always emerged from peer communities (Haimson, *et al.*, 2021), yet new platforms — with new modes of communication and affective dimensions — continually emerge.

Informing this paper is a recent history of digital media research that centres the affective dimensions of queer digital publics (Cho, 2015; Michaelsen, 2017; Robards, *et al.*, 2021), along with broader theorizations of digital affect (Paasonen, 2021). These approaches recognize that young people are not simply 'going online' to privately seek support, but exist in everyday digital environments that can feel safer and more supportive than non-digital environments [2].

To explore LGBTQ+ young people's use of TikTok for mental health support, this paper presents findings from the *LGBTQ+ young people, mental health, and digital peer support* project's survey of 660 LGBTQ+ young people from Australia, aged 16–25 years old. The survey gathered data on platforms that were experienced as most supportive and why. Of all social media platforms, TikTok ranked second to Instagram

as most supportive, but more complex details of TikTok support were shared. While mental health support on Instagram mostly related to private communication with close friends, TikTok support mostly involved indirect communication with strangers. This warrants closer analysis.

TikTok care and support

Researchers have long emphasized the use of online or digital media for seeking health information and locating supportive communities in the process. Targeted help-seeking is an important dimension of mental health and well-being for young people, as found in dedicated online forums (McCosker, 2018; Prescott, *et al.*, 2017). Less explored, however, is organic support that emerges through everyday social media use. Algorithmic systems built into most common platforms can make content feel tailored (Bucher, 2018), as particularly said of TikTok (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Simpson and Semaan, 2021). As such, a focus on mental health ‘help-seeking’ overlooks how support is offered and found regardless of any ‘help seeking behaviors’. Through existing networks, connections, and algorithmic functions, care circulates and finds young people in a “seemingly serendipitous” way [3]. While mental health content is abundant on TikTok (Basch, *et al.*, 2022; Milton, *et al.*, 2023), less is known about TikTok mental health support among LGBTQ+ young people specifically.

Finding and feeling support on TikTok seems to be the case for many LGBTQ+ young people (Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023; Simpson and Semaan, 2021), reflecting common understandings of TikTok as an intimate community space. Schellewald (2022) described TikTok as a “feel good space”, which could be attributed to its “public intimacy” (Mendelson, 2023) or “collective intimacy” (Southerton, 2021). As Southerton (2021) noted, it is important to consider not simply the intimacy enacted by TikTok creators and their content, but “a collective intimacy that circulates on TikTok more broadly” [4]. Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2023) argued that “TikTok not only draws youth together for social action, but also demonstrates the potential to be a community space for youth experiencing marginalization and/or social exclusion” [5]. This is reflected in Simpson and Semaan’s (2021) study, where LGBTQ+ young people discussed TikTok’s ‘for you’ page and algorithm as affording the “feeling of community with alike strangers” [6]. For Skinner (2022), queer intimate publics have emerged on TikTok through “generative play” (particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns) that fosters a sense of queer community [7].

Social media experiences of community and peer support have shifted in recent decades due to increased ‘platformed sociality’ (van Dijck, 2013) where friendships and other connections are largely structured by platforms and their use. Research on queer Tumblr, for example, has demonstrated that many young people have found support with negotiating intersecting aspects of mental health, gender identities, sexual identities, culture and ethnicity, racism, and more, through Tumblr cultures of intimate sharing and disclosure (Byron, *et al.*, 2019; Cho, 2015; Haimson, *et al.*, 2021; Tiidenberg, *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, Tumblr has been described as a ‘trans technology’ due to its features and affordances that would “uniquely enable trans experiences” [8]. Similar discussions now focus on TikTok, described by Rochford and Palmer (2022) as “a window into trans culture” [9]. This reflects Simpson and Semaan’s (2021) observation that certain digital infrastructures are ‘queer-coded’, despite not being designed for LGBTQ+ community [10], contributing to platforms being experienced as queer publics.

Like all large social media platforms, TikTok has evolved through its business model that is not benevolent but driven by commercial logic and market interests that are supported by data mining and an interoperability with other social platforms and data systems (Bodle, 2011). This paper presents an analysis of survey data from LGBTQ+ young people who discuss how social media supports their mental health, yet I do not argue that TikTok itself is a supportive platform. While some participants may suggest this, we can assume they refer to the networks and connections fostered by users, and encouraged by TikTok’s algorithm (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022), rather than the platform itself. It is perhaps a lucky accident that TikTok use has generated queer and trans public cultures of support, and we cannot assume that this will

always be the case, given the political economy in which digital media platforms operate.

Queer public culture

To consider TikTok as an affective site of care and support, I draw upon Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) discussion of queer public culture and its affective dimensions — what she terms, *an archive of feelings*. Through a cultural studies approach, Cvetkovich offers a broad focus on public culture to "keep as open as possible the definition of what constitutes a public in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities" [11]. This foregrounds affective structures — or *structures of feeling*, as termed by Raymond Williams [12] — that are foundational to the formation of queer public culture [13]. Drawing from Berlant and Warner (1998), Cvetkovich situates affective publics as "accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" [14], as is true of queer TikTok.

Tracing queer feelings through lesbian and queer archives, Cvetkovich presents *queer public culture* as not easily known, often poorly recorded, yet strongly felt. This is useful for considering how LGBTQ+ young people may experience TikTok as an archive, repository, or community of shared feelings. According to Cvetkovich, the feeling/felt archive is experienced without being concretely understood as a set of identities or practices. Following her reference to Williams' (1975) *structures of feeling*, I draw upon his 1961 expansion of this in *The long revolution* [15] to consider TikTok's affective culture. Williams positions 'structures of feeling' as one of three general (yet integrated) categories for defining culture: lived culture; documented culture; and culture of the selective tradition (a more abstracted and idealized version of history). Of these three, structures of feeling are part of lived culture, found in present experience. Exploring TikTok's affective aspects for LGBTQ+ young people, I am mindful of how its *structure of feeling* "operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" [16]. As lived culture, yet to become an historic account, structures of feeling emerge through TikTok use, and inevitably shift and change. Williams noted:

> ... the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come 'from' anywhere. [...] the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, [...] feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling. [17]

TikTok publics carry affective forces that can be difficult to describe in current moments of scrolling. While this paper offers analysis of mental health support on queer TikTok, I attempt to not simply document TikTok culture, but to centre its process and affective registers, and how this evolves with the slipperiness of queer culture itself — as more felt than understood. The slipperiness of queer TikTok culture relates to the platform itself, as we witness TikTok culture extending and spilling into wider publics, platformed or otherwise. As Boffone (2022) argued, culture is shaped on TikTok, which "quickly spills into the analog world" [18]. The ease in sharing TikToks through a range of other platforms, together with the affective force of these media, has ensured that TikTok culture infiltrates and informs broader digital cultures (Zulli and Zulli, 2022).

A synchronicity between TikTok mental health discourse and the 'trauma cultures' that Cvetkovich (2003) explored can also be traced. As a cultural studies theorist, Cvetkovich seeks to expand 'narrowly medicalized' understandings of trauma and therapy, citing queer archives that are not (and resist being) confined to this [19]. Difficult life experiences that are common to LGBTQ+ people can be shared in ways that reject or elaborate on medico-scientific accounts of 'mental illness,' as seen in 'lived experience' discourse common to accounts of queer and trans mental health negotiations. Such discourse, common on

TikTok, can inform our experiences of queer life, which can be felt and understood as shared culture (Malatino, 2022).

Data and methods

The data analysed in this paper are qualitative survey responses in which participants describe why they have experienced TikTok as the most supportive social media platform for mental health. Of 641 survey respondents, 57.3 percent (*n*=378) indicated experiencing mental health support from social media, and those 378 participants were then asked a series of questions about this support. When asked the multiple-choice question: “Which, if any, social media platforms have you found to be supportive for mental health?”, 51.6 percent (*n*=195) indicated TikTok. This was second to Instagram (72.5 percent; *n*=274) and followed by YouTube (50 percent; *n*=189) (Byron, 2023). A follow-up question asked the same participants to name their ‘most supportive’ platform, to which 75 participants named TikTok (see Appendix for demographic details of these participants). Of these participants, 66 gave reasons for why TikTok supported mental health, and these responses are the focus of my analysis of TikTok’s queer public culture of peer support.

These 66 responses ranged from 1–181 words in length, and were thematically coded through an inductive process (Braun and Clarke, 2006), seeking to capture diverse experiences of TikTok support. To best consider the expansive aspects of support, sentiments or topics that featured in three or more responses were counted as themes. To focus on shared discourse and experiences of TikTok support, I did not attach demographic details when presenting excerpts from participant statements. As evident in the data presented, participants offered common statements and sentiments, suggesting that TikTok support is a collective experience. Statements from 46 of these 66 respondents feature in this paper, wholly or in part, ensuring a wide representation of participant accounts of TikTok support (see Appendix).

TikTok support

The aforementioned coding process resulted in 14 overlapping themes (see Figure 1) mentioned three or more times. Most of the 66 responses crossed multiple themes. Five key themes featured in ten or more participant statements, relating to TikTok cultures of: 1) sharing experiences; 2) encountering ‘people like me’; 3) finding comfort and safety; 4) mental health education; and 5) feeling less alone. These five themes will be the focus of my analysis, with reference to minor themes throughout (see Figure 1).

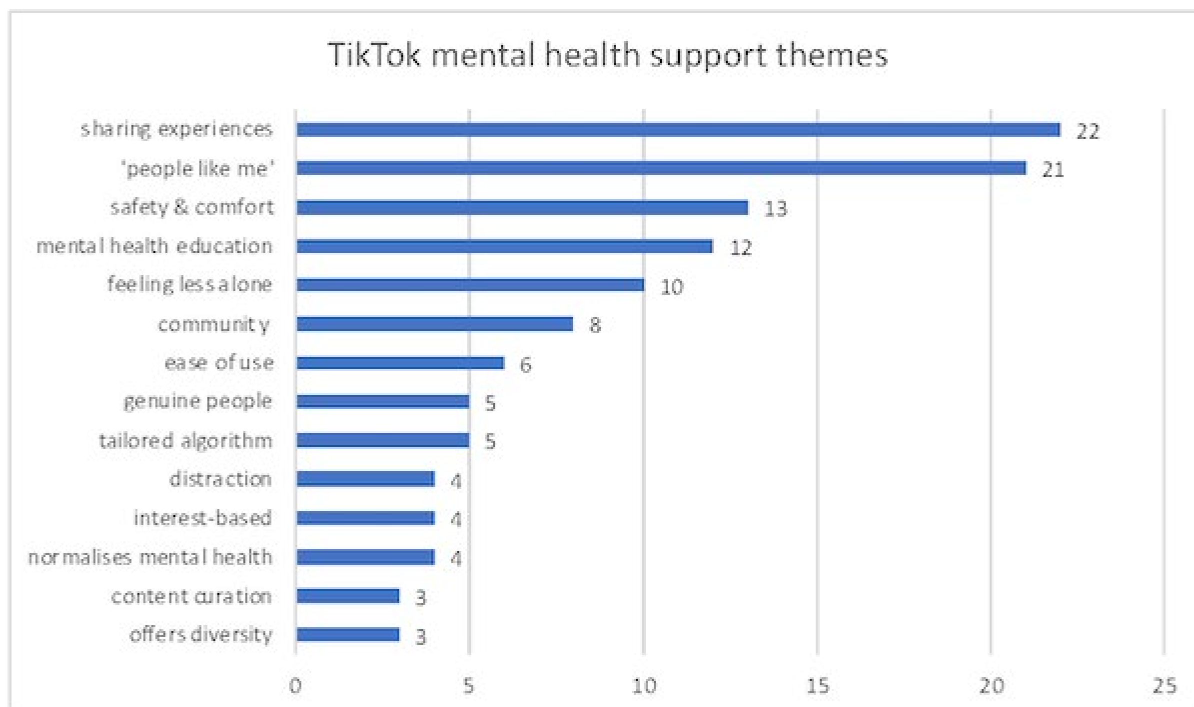


Figure 1: Themes of TikTok mental health support from 66 participant statements.

Sharing experiences

The most prevalent theme of TikTok mental health support relates to people sharing their personal experiences, featuring in one third of responses (*n*=22). Participants commonly refer to the value of witnessing others sharing their experiences and feelings.

> "there are people dealing with the same things as I am and I feel like I'm not alone"
> "there are people out there who are feeling the same way that I am, or who can explain how I feel when I could not do that myself."

Within these data, several respondents characterize mental health experiences as 'struggles'.

> "TikTok is the [platform] i find most supportive, mainly because the algorithm is designed to be made specifically 'for you' and therefore a lot of the online creators i see on there experience similar struggles to me"

In this case, witnessing people experiencing similar struggles is associated with the algorithmic dimensions of TikTok (Simpson and Semaan, 2021). It is not always clear whether these struggles relate to mental health or gender/sexual identities, or these combined. Similar applies to a discourse of 'problems'.

> "it's allowed me to find others that deal with the same problems as me, and experience similar lives."
> "it helps to hear about problems and see people on the other side of them which has really helped me want to drag myself out of this ditch and to the finish line"

Mutual sharing of one's struggles/problems evokes a longstanding culture of queer solidarity built on shared 'negative affect', as discussed by Hil Malatino's (2022) argument that trans communities are built on shared affective experiences. This argument is informed by Silvan Tompkins' suggestion that "sociality — the bonds that hold us together — is always brokered through shared and inevitable bad feeling" [20]. Despite their weight, these shared feelings offer a "trans affective commons" that can "modulate negative affect" [21], as is reflected in these data.

Data also highlight the value of learning from, and finding inspiration in, LGBTQ+ people who share their experiences. This can encompass an ' It Gets Better' style of posting (Michaelsen, 2017), where LGBTQ+ peers offer an account of their survival as a guide for others, and a sign that they too can "get through it".

> "TikTok has people's life experiences firsthand and shows u can get through it"
> "[I] saw that others are experiencing similar things to me and [it] inspired me to be open and accepting to myself"

Experience sharing was not only framed as providing support, but as contributing to cultural change through a shared goal of destigmatizing mental health issues. As one participant stated, "a lot of people share their own stories and normalize mental health issues." Others referenced the sheer volume of mental health experience-sharing on TikTok, implying that this was greater than on other platforms.

> "many people from all around the world share their experiences with mental health/other issues and majority of the time people can relate and offer their support"

This statement firstly indicates that supportive content is readily available to LGBTQ+ young people on TikTok, and secondly suggests that LGBTQ+ young people's mental health struggles are part of a queer (global) culture. In the queer culture suggested, everyday life is infused with negotiations of mental health alongside trans/bi/homophobia, which underscores a digital public culture of supporting and learning from LGBTQ+ peers.

TikTok creators are not the only ones sharing their mental health experiences — so too are audiences who respond, relate to, and affirm these experiences in the comments section — for creators and onlookers alike (Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023). These affective circuits of care muddy hierarchies of care, since support is not only offered by creators (as those visibly representing LGBTQ+ experiences) but by a wider platformed community, where creators and commenters also receive support and validation through audience responses (Hooper, 2022).

'People like me'

In participant responses, phrases such as 'people like me', 'people like you', or 'your people' were common, and the practice of witnessing, engaging with, and learning from 'people like me' featured in 21 responses. Many of these responses cut across the *sharing experiences* theme, for example: "It showcased people like me and their experiences." This data also cut across the theme of community.

> "there are communities for everyone and they give you an opportunity to see people like u so you don't feel alone"
> "it caters to your interests so the community can be really tight with people like you"

Included in this theme are references to 'relatable' people — for example: "I find people I can actually relate to", or "I find I can relate to more there." Others gave more detailed accounts:

> "The video style also allows for people to share stories in a way that feels more personal and easy to relate to than a photo with a long caption."

This suggests that TikTok's video format encourages more relatability than Instagram. It also connects to the minor theme of TikTok's ease of use. Within their full response, this participant states that TikTok feels "more personal" and easier to relate to than Instagram, which is echoed by others:

> "there are strangers that have the same issues that i can relate to without the social pressure"
> "it allows for short videos of people that you are able to relate to in a casual way without commitment."

For these participants, seeing relatable strangers on TikTok feels easier and more "casual" than on platforms where they feel social pressure to communicate or actively respond. This connects to other research findings that TikTok mental health content is experienced as more raw and relatable than on other platforms (Milton, *et al.*, 2023). These statements also suggest that TikTok creators can feel close yet distant — intimate and relatable in what they share, yet safely distant from any social obligation to respond. This highlights how strangers felt to be 'people like me' are affirming, easy to access, and easy to learn from in a context of low social pressure.

Comfort and safety

The theme of comfort and safety features in 13 responses. Not all of these explicitly refer to comfort or safety, with many suggesting this through metaphors used, such as 'home'.

> "it's generally supportive of everyone, and I've felt almost 'at home' while scrolling through the app"

For others, TikTok offered reassurance and a sense of feeling welcome, cared for, and warm, which relates to previous themes discussed.

> "there are people like me with similar issues and life experiences to me, and sharing there feels safe and welcoming"
> 'It's mostly an easy-going platform that has good digestible content that feels a lot warmer than other platforms I've used for a long time"

References to comfort and safety (and 'warmth' and 'home') communicate the affective dimensions of TikTok for these participants. Comfort also relates to being in good company and finding your people.

> "I feel comforted knowing I'm not alone"
> "i just have noticed that you can find your people there, like really niche groups that are really loving and caring"

Data on this theme includes references to laughter, smiles, and happiness — accounts that do not necessarily refer to *sharing experiences* or content from '*people like me*', but can refer to a general experience of the platform as a comfortable and comforting site.

> "It's always there to make me feel better and to laugh"
> "it makes me laugh even when I feel awful"
> "TikTok just makes me smile even on the shit days"

In these statements, the platform itself is suggested as agentic in ‘making’ participants feel better. Further, these statements remind us that TikTok is fun, easy, and pleasurable. These responses suggest that comfort and safety are not simply found in platform content or interactions, but in the platform’s culture. These affective experiences of TikTok suggest a queer public culture in which shared humor and memes are key, and where community building can happen through humor referencing shared struggles or ’bad feelings‘ (Malatino, 2022). Arguably, relatable humor (Zeng and Abidin, 2021) is a key component of TikTok’s queer public culture, and TikTok can be experienced as fun while also offering space for sharing, listening, and learning about serious issues. TikTok’s meme culture (Zulli and Zulli, 2022) lends itself to community building through culturally-informed humor that is recognized and enjoyed through shared experiences of struggle and joy. This not only connects and supports LGBTQ+ young people on TikTok, but can foster a greater sense of safety in this space.

> “it feels safer because there are different sides of tiktok that most people stick to and a lot of the stuff I watch includes LGBT+ people and mental health stuff”
> “it allows me to essentially curate a mostly safe space from negative content (to a certain extent, it’s not perfect) and that space I have curated often has very sincere and helpful reminders of my own self worth despite a lot of my anxieties”

The minor theme of TikTok providing a sense of *content curation* can be seen in the quote above, and elsewhere, including one participant having “made a space free of most negativity”, and another saying, “it is easier to cultivate a ‘for you page’ which is supportive.” This reflects an ongoing practice of LGBTQ+ young people curating safer experiences of social media (Hanckel, *et al.*, 2019; Vivienne, 2017) — personally and collectively.

TikTok use for distraction is another minor theme intersecting with *comfort and safety*. Of TikTok support, two participants simply stated “it’s a distraction”, two others stated “it takes my mind off things”, and another said it “lets me ... change what’s on my mind by laughing at some funny videos.” These participants refer to the immersive aspects of TikTok, as another affordance that can offer comfort and feelings of safety.

Mental health education

A culture of *sharing experiences* and encountering ‘*people like me*’ on TikTok, commonly overlaps with the theme of *mental health education*. Participants (*n*=12) indicate that “TikTok has a lot of mental health education.” Here, education is said to come from peers, communities, and/or health professionals.

> “I watch videos from Mental health professionals about understanding mental health (anxiety, depression, trauma)”
> “a lot of the videos on my for you page are either members of the LGBTQ+ community, therapists, or other mentally ill people who I can relate to and make me feel less alone”

The range of mental health education sources on TikTok offers multiple dimensions of experience-based knowledge. Content from health professionals is also likely to offer ‘informal’ education in line with TikTok’s culture of personalized address (Hartung, *et al.*, 2023), where health professionals also deploy camera techniques and a delivery style that cultivates intimacy (Southerton, 2021). As Rauchberg (2022) argued, TikTok offers the “ability to spread knowledge at a level that mimics the interpersonal” [22]. In addition to tropes and practices of intimate address, MacKinnon, *et al.* (2021) highlighted that TikTok’s platform features, such as the ‘stitch’ and ‘duet’, through which creators can publicly respond to each other, support new forms of communication that “are especially conducive to community-engaged knowledge exchange” [23]. This has contributed to “new peer cultures of learning” on TikTok [24].

As a site for mental health advocacy, personal experiences are shared on TikTok alongside content from health professionals, with tips and explanations from all such creators.

> "people are advocating for mental health if you find the right people, and it is full of tips"
> "TikTok [is] helpful in explaining things and knowing everything will be ok"

This shared information is beneficial because it is relatable, easily understood, and affirming. It can encourage viewers to know that "everything will be ok". The following statement goes into greater depth about mental health education on TikTok, which can intersect with learning about one's sexuality (and gender).

> "the [accounts] I do find post needed/valuable education for me. And the education is clear, simple and often personal which makes it very easy to relate to and not feel alone. It's help[ed] me recognise my sexuality, mental illness and so much more all while supporting me and giving me help in how to manage or understand things."

The following statement offers further reminder that TikTok support themes are not discrete, with *mental health education* often dispensed by *'people like me' sharing experiences*.

> "There are many creators with similar experiences who can help me understand my own. I've discovered a lot about mental health and my own mental health through TikTok"

This respondent points to the two dimensions of learning about general health knowledge, and specific, personal knowledge ("my own mental health"). Four participants also mentioned the value of TikTok content *normalizing mental health* (a minor theme), which relates to the mental health education discussed. Elsewhere, participants highlight that "lots of creators talk about it openly."

The minor theme of a *tailored algorithm* overlaps with statements about mental health education, with some participants highlighting how TikTok's algorithm makes it a supportive, comfortable, and easy environment for learning that is "more personalised to you." TikTok's algorithm was discussed as a positive aspect that ensured content felt of interest, and where educational content would often feel tailored.

Feeling less alone

References to 'feeling less alone' or 'feeling not alone' are common — as seen in many statements presented. Ten participants explicitly mention this.

> "a lot of people on my for you page ... are going through the same struggles as me it makes me feel less alone"
> "Gay TikTok makes me feel not alone"
> "I mostly am on there to be a part of the community and not feel alone"

This intersects with the theme of *community*. As seen in the latter statement above, a sense of community eases a sense of isolation. Statements of community cut across all key themes, with TikTok offering "a large supportive mental health and LGBTQ+ community." Another participant states that it "definitely has helped with being able to be surrounded by the queer community all over the world."

As with the theme of *safety and comfort*, statements about *feeling less alone* centre the affective

experiences of TikTok, rather than accounting for specific content or support practices, although these are entangled. Statements of feeling less alone gesture to shared spaces in which to exist in the company of other LGBTQ+ people — *i.e.*, a queer public culture accessible to teens who may not yet exist in queer public spaces beyond social media (Craig and McInroy, 2014).

The theme of encountering *genuine people* on TikTok also relates to feeling less alone, with one participant stating that "you can gain a lot of support from some very sweet and genuine people." Elsewhere it was said: "the creators on this app feel the most genuine. You can see their facial expressions through video and maybe hear them speak about things they care about." Again, this references the intimacy of video format, offering a clearer sense of creators as present, authentic, and relatable. Encountering genuine people who offer support is an important aspect of feeling less alone and part of a queer/trans community, and is fostered through shared experiences and their circulation and resonance.

Discussion

The above findings show how TikTok support is experienced in multiple, intersecting ways, through its queer public culture. For these participants, key aspects of this public culture include easy access to relatable people and their shared experiences, feelings of comfort and safety, mental health learning (whether general or personal), reduced isolation, a sense of community, and more. References to TikTok support are multidirectional and variably associated with TikTok's content, communities, affordances, and culture.

A significant minor theme that crosses all others is TikTok's *ease of use*. This theme links the functionality of the platform, its video format content, and the reprieve from pressure to create, or respond to, content. It was said that video format "feels easier to connect with rather than reading something," and as mentioned, one participant felt that short videos made it easy "to relate to in a casual way without commitment". Another participant stated: "i don't have to interact with people [on TikTok] to feel socialised." With other statements presented, this highlights how the social aspects of other platforms (such as Instagram) can make those spaces less amenable to mental health support — at least in a community sense, since Instagram was commonly used for private friend-based support (Byron, 2023). Social media platforms oriented to content creation and everyday sociality among friends can be felt as less comfortable and safe, and offer less learning through vulnerable public disclosures, since they afford less distant intimacy with relatable strangers. Other participants referred to the value of not having to craft self-presentations on TikTok, unlike Instagram, with one participant stating: "it feels like there is less pressure to be picture perfect or to present an image of yourself as you would on Instagram for example."

While not the focus of this paper, it is noteworthy that alongside the 195 participants (51.6 percent) who named TikTok as supportive to their mental health, 81 (22.4 percent) participants named it as unsupportive. This includes 18 participants who indicated it was both supportive and unsupportive. The main reasons given for being unsupportive related to 'toxic' or 'negative' content, and concerns about TikTok's impact on self-esteem and body image (though this was more commonly associated with Instagram). Several participants pointed to TikTok having a negative impact on mental health due to being time-consuming or 'addictive', reflecting another aspect of its immersive affordances.

In terms of mental health support, TikTok's algorithm was felt to ensure a more tailored experience for participants, potentially making it feel safe and 'like home', where content is relevant, useful, and specific to one's interests. This experience of TikTok is contoured by 'algorithmic imaginaries' (Bucher, 2018), with a sense that TikTok offers a more sophisticated algorithm than other platforms where unwanted and negative content felt more common, and more difficult to avoid or control. Together, imagined algorithms and communities can make TikTok feel safe and comfortable. This feeling is likely to be 'more felt' by LGBTQ+ young people who face mental health conditions or concerns, and is informed by participants'

comparisons to other platforms.

Participant suggestions, that TikTok offers safety and protection from unwanted content, and a public space that can feel personalized, or perhaps partitioned from 'StraightTok', brings TikTok close to well-documented experiences of Tumblr (Tiidenberg, *et al.*, 2021), as a safer public for queer sharing, community, creativity and support. This, despite obvious differences including TikTok's video format and its common presentation of user faces that directly address others — as though friends, but typically not. This intimate feature of TikTok arguably brings a greater sense of intimacy that is felt to be authentic and assuring, yet providing a safe distance from any social pressure to respond.

At other times, support is associated with the platform's affordance of immersion. For some, TikTok supported a sense of escape or retreat to a mediated experience that felt warmer or safer than other spaces. This could help displace current feelings or struggles, to disengage, or to find a new point of focus. As with the use of other popular media, TikTok can offer displacement that also affords entertainment and learning. A related affordance of lurking is also available, where users can connect to people, information, and queer culture anonymously and invisibly (Mendelson, 2023). This reflects Zulli and Zulli's (2022) observation that "Users do not need to discursively communicate or express sentiment to find themselves on a TikTok 'community'" [25]. TikTok's offering of immersion in personalized content *for you* can feel easy and comfortable, since this platform does not command interaction but offers many experiences of connection, affiliation, and affirmation.

While these interpretations may not apply to all respondents, and certainly not to all LGBTQ+ young people, the affective aspects of these data can inform how we consider young people's broader practices of negotiating digital connection to queer life in their use of social media. Despite TikTok's rapid flow of content (which has the potential to feel stressful), algorithmically organized content that feels tailored *for you* can orchestrate a less jarring experience that feels nourishing and supportive. The flow of content can also enculture the user to platform rhythms, practices, and norms, where they may feel part of a queer public culture without pressure to perform such queerness.

Conclusion

In data presented, references to TikTok's supportive content, creators, affordances, and cultures are knotted together through affective forces that hold many LGBTQ+ young people in this space. Here, TikTok is experienced as a 'felt space' that can be more comfortable, safe, and affirming than most other popular platforms. In the wider dataset, only Instagram was more commonly associated with mental health support, but this was more oriented to everyday friendship communication on that platform. Mental health support on TikTok was mostly found among strangers [26], with this platform affording more expansive access to 'people like me', communities, shared experiences, and peer learning. Through this platform, many LGBTQ+ young people can quietly negotiate their affective connections to queer culture, finding themselves in good company.

Cvetkovich explores a queer archive of feelings "to represent examples of how affective experience can provide the basis for new cultures" [27]. This resonates with LGBTQ+ young people's affective experiences of TikTok, including its contribution to broader, historical queer public culture. As said of Tumblr, intense engagement with a queer-coded platform is generative of queer counterpublics (Byron, *et al.*, 2019; Cavalcante, 2016; Jenzen, 2017). Through their affordances, such platforms hold opportunities for queer publics to form, bringing new dimensions to queer life. Queer cultures of Tumblr, TikTok and other platforms echo and draw from far-reaching queer archives, yet are differently composed due to the shifting architecture of queer life — in this case, the digital platforms and communicative practices that foster new modes of knowing and expressing selves, relationships (including care relationships), and politics. But these infrastructures are market-driven, always evolving, and may shift away from affording

access to queer culture, as we saw with Tumblr (Byron, 2019; Tiidenberg, *et al.*, 2021).

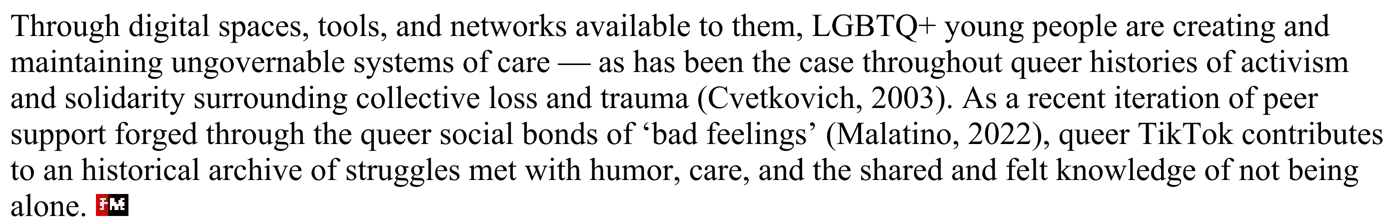
As Michael Warner highlighted, a queer counterpublic is marked by its distance from heteronormative culture, and its circulation of queer expression is strategically angled toward an imagined audience comprised of people who can see (or feel) themselves in its discourse [28] — the ‘people like me’ that participants commonly refer to. TikTok’s queer (counter)public culture not only addresses a queer public, but fosters one through its unfolding, collective structures of feeling. Queer TikTok can be understood as a “self-creating and self-organized” public that is not overly determined nor easily understood — “and herein lies its power as well as its elusive strangeness” [29]. But this is for now, and is likely to change, given that platform cultures are not horizontal, and are deeply informed by business models that reflect a competitive media market, therefore ensuring ongoing platform developments that will shift the social affordances of such platforms (van Dijck, 2013).

Currently, TikTok offers support that many formal and material interventions cannot, such as coming to realize that you are not alone in a particular set of struggles, or offering access to a community without pressure to perform as a member of that community (though with the potential to do so). Participants here are not ‘help-seeking’ as much as they are finding themselves in helpful spaces. While I do not have full details of participants’ TikTok use, it can be presumed from these data that mental health support is not produced by actively seeking it, but that this environment and its algorithmic logic can be felt as supportive. TikTok was not designed for queer mental health support, yet queer life on TikTok can be felt and understood as supportive, home-like, safe, warm, and comfortable. TikTok support is constituted by its affective dimensions more so than offering any neat membership to bounded, homogenous communities of practice or identities. In this environment, queerness and mental health are ill-defined and slippery concepts, and this manifests more creative approaches to understanding or further complicating these experiences, in ways that might feel more resonant, and more useful.

TikTok provides opportunities for LGBTQ+ young people to not only connect and learn about queer culture, but its public interface can afford a sense of belonging. This aligns with Cvetkovich’s (2003) account of queer public culture as an archive of feelings that provides a rich yet unstable source of connection to queer culture. TikTok can be experienced as a vital queer resource. As seen in these data, TikTok connects many LGBTQ+ young people to queer life, queer feelings, peer support, and an ‘affective commons’ of struggle and survival (Malatino, 2022). Simultaneously, it can usefully entertain and distract LGBTQ+ young people from other structures of feeling.

TikTok publics are recent, and our uses of this platform are modulated by an affective force that is difficult to describe. Yet TikTok research certainly attempts to do this, documenting user experiences and practices and what these mean or produce — thereby producing an account of TikTok culture that is far tidier than TikTok’s felt experiences. I, too, am reporting on research in which I asked LGBTQ+ young people to account for their experiences of TikTok support, before coding these for analysis — documenting lived culture and abstracting it in the process. But all research is abstraction, and within this paper and its theoretical approach, I have attempted to focus on TikTok’s affective culture to situate participants’ statements within TikTok’s ongoing, evolving, queer public culture. This specifically reveals details of how and why TikTok use offers a public culture of queer and trans support.

Through digital spaces, tools, and networks available to them, LGBTQ+ young people are creating and maintaining ungovernable systems of care — as has been the case throughout queer histories of activism and solidarity surrounding collective loss and trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003). As a recent iteration of peer support forged through the queer social bonds of ‘bad feelings’ (Malatino, 2022), queer TikTok contributes to an historical archive of struggles met with humor, care, and the shared and felt knowledge of not being alone.



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Notes

1. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 17.

2. Byron, 2021, pp. 2–4; Craig and McInroy, 2014.

3. Simpson and Semaan, 2021, p. 17.

4. Southerton, 2021, p. 3,259.

5. Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023, p. 802.

6. Simpson and Semaan, 2021, p. 20.

7. Skinner, 2022, p. 80.

8. Haimson, *et al.*, 2021, p. 349.

9. Rochford and Palmer, 2022, p. 89.

10. Simpson and Semaan, 2021, p. 6.

11. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 9.

12. Williams, 1975, pp. 57–70.

13. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 10.

14. Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 562.

15. Williams, 1975, pp. 57–70.

16. Williams, 1975, p. 64.

17. Williams, 1975, p. 65.

18. Boffone, 2022, p. 7.

19. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 10.

20. Frank and Wilson, 2020, cited in Malatino, 2022, p. 9.

21. Malatino, 2022, p. 9.

22. Rauchberg, 2022, p. 158.

23. MacKinnon, *et al.*, 2021, p. 3.

24. Abidin, 2020, p. 85.

25. Zulli and Zulli, 2022, p. 1,883.

26. Byron, 2023, p. 17.

27. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7.

28. Warner, 2002, pp. 86–87.

29. Warner, 2002, p. 52.

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Appendix

Table 1: Demographic characteristics for survey respondents featured (*n*=75).

Demographic details	*N* (%)
Age	
16 years	27 (36.0)
17 years	24 (32.0)
18 years	14 (18.7)
20–25 years	10 (13.3)
Gender	
Female	53 (70.7)
Male	10 (13.3)
Non-binary	8 (10.7)

Other terms used	4 (5.3)
Gender differs to what was recorded at birth	
Yes	19 (25.3)
No	52 (69.3)
Unsure	4 (5.3)
Sexual orientation (multiple choice)	
Bisexual	43 (57.3)
Queer	27 (36.0)
Lesbian	16 (21.3)
Pansexual	16 (21.3)
Gay	7 (9.3)
Questioning	7 (9.3)
Asexual	4 (5.3)
Straight	2 (2.7)
Other, not listed above	7 (9.3)
Location	
Urban	50 (66.7)
Regional/rural	24 (32.0)
Born in Australia	
Yes	71 (94.7)
No	4 (5.3)
Cultural background/ethnicity	
White/European	65 (86.7)
Asian	4 (5.3)

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	3 (4.0)
South American	2 (2.7)
Middle Eastern	1 (1.3)
Disability	
Yes	1 (1.3)
No	61 (81.3)
Unsure	13 (17.3)
Mental health conditions	
Yes, medical diagnosis	33 (44.0)
Yes, self-diagnosis	11 (14.7)
Unsure	25 (33.3)
No	6 (8.0)
Medical diagnoses	
Anxiety	30 (40.0)
Depression	23 (30.7)
PTSD	6 (8.0)
Eating disorders	5 (6.7)
ADHD	4 (5.3)
Dissociative identity disorder	2 (2.7)
Other	8 (10.7)

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