

Do You Listen to Girl in Red? A Thematic Analysis of Queer Women's Cultural Identity and
Community Building on TikTok

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how queer women on the social networking site (SNS) TikTok are expressing their cultural identity and building community. Previous research has shown that self-expression and self-presentation are important parts of defining one's identity and building community for queer individuals, and this study analyzes details specifically within the unique platform of TikTok. Its popularity and success as an SNS that utilizes an advanced algorithm justifies its examination and highlights its multifaceted benefits, such as ease of community building and accessibility to diverse content.

In a thematic analysis of 66 TikTok videos using the song "girls" by Girl in Red, and consisting of female-presenting individuals, two themes were revealed and defined: color combinations communicating identity and viral trends as queer confirmation or communication. These themes reveal two ways those in the queer community are embracing small content details to find each other and practice cultural identity expression. Study findings outline the social and technological advancements of online community building, while also illuminating how stigma symbols defined by previous studies are continually employed in the TikTok videos examined in this study. Results also support previous TikTok research suggesting that queer users are developing self-organized practices in response to algorithmic functions.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This study examines strategies employed by queer women on TikTok to express their identity and build community with one another. The mobile app, which allows users to post short video clips accompanied by audio, often songs that are popular or coordinated with the message of the video, has become an increasingly important channel of communication for members of various communities. For gender and sexual minorities, self-expression and self-presentation are important parts of defining one's identity and building community. Inspired by the growing popularity online of the Norwegian singer-songwriter Girl in Red, this study analyzes the contents of 66 videos using her song, "girls." The study illustrates how online community building has advanced since early social media, the influence of the innovative TikTok algorithm, and provides context for a popular trend on the app. Results show that queer women recognize and utilize TikTok affordances to their advantage, such as participating in trends or liking specific content to encourage cultural identity connections via the algorithm.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

By September 2021, the mobile app TikTok reported over 1 billion active users, which means many people have found some corner of the rapidly expanding online community that caters to their interests (Wang, 2021). The app, which allows users to post short video clips accompanied by audio, often songs that are popular or coordinated with the message of the video, has become an increasingly important channel of communication for members of various communities. The *New York Times* recently highlighted how TikTok has become a prime destination for the queer female community, creating a hub “where those discovering, questioning and embracing their attraction to other women can find friends, solidarity and even love” (Wilson, 2020).

If you were to scroll through TikTok videos that have used the song “girls” by a young Norwegian singer-songwriter, Girl in Red, you would see over 130,000 videos (Kaplan, 2019). Named a “queer icon” by *PAPER Magazine* in 2019, she has become wildly popular among the queer female community, especially online. Scrolling through TikTok, it is easy to find videos of young girls smiling and dancing, clad in cuffed jeans with brightly colored hair and nose piercings singing her song’s chorus, proclaiming “they’re so pretty it hurts. I’m not talking ‘bout boys, I’m talking ‘bout girls” (Girl in Red, 2018). The popular phrase “do you listen to Girl in Red?” can be seen littering the comment sections of women’s TikTok videos, cryptically asking if the video creator is a part of the queer community (Vaynshteyn, 2020).

As the world of social media and virtual connection continues to evolve, it is important to study these kinds of phenomena to develop a better understanding of how individuals today connect with each other and how they communicate identity on social media platforms. Queer women on TikTok are actively and continually expressing their identities and connecting to each

other, oftentimes without explicitly stating their sexuality. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the evolving strategies of cultural identity communication and signals utilized by queer women to relate to one another.

This thesis employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify and analyze ways that the queer female community on TikTok creates, expresses, and communicates identity. For gender and sexual minorities, self-expression and self-presentation are important parts of defining one's identity and building community (Gray, 2009). This thesis therefore seeks to explore these dynamics.

For communication researchers, TikTok presents new territory in the social media space to study individual identity formation and group community building. The study conducted in this thesis ventures into this little-explored area and contributes to the growing communication research on TikTok communities using the lens of queer theory and cultural identity theory. Thus, this thesis contributes to communication research on social media in general and to the growing body of research on TikTok, specifically. It also contributes to scholarly conversations about queer theory and cultural identity theory.

This thesis begins with this introduction, Chapter 1. Chapter 2 consists of a literature review that covers queer theory, queer community building online, Cultural Identity Theory, the social networking site TikTok and leads to the research questions. Chapter 3, the methods section, follows and includes my thematic analysis of TikTok data. The discussion section is presented in Chapter 4, and it answers the research questions. The thesis closes with Chapter 5, a conclusion that discusses future research and limitations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Queer Theory

Queer theory encompasses a vast and ever-evolving body of literature and is defined as “a collective of intellectual speculations and challenges to the social and political constructions of sexualized and gender identity” (Alexander, 2017, p. 278). Marcus (2005) outlined several core pieces of queer theory, asserting that queer as a label has become a more compact alternative to lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender. Queer also emphasizes similarities and unification over identity labels. The adoption of queer “issued a reminder that complex identifications and differences undermine identity” (Marcus, 2005, p. 196). The more complicated identity-labeling systems adopted by society become, the more difficult and inherently political it is for individuals to choose a label that encapsulates all of their flexible, overlapping identities. Queer supports the idea that sexual identity is both variable and flexible (Marcus, 2005).

Historically, queer theory’s primary interest involved evaluating the emergence and reinforcement of categories like ‘heterosexual’, ‘gay’, and ‘lesbian’ as identities in society, ultimately arguing that these categories are only fragilely upheld by constant successful gender performances. Many queer theorists criticize identity categories and classifications, arguing that they restrict sexual expression (Marcus, 2005; De Lauretis, 1991; Turner, 2000; Watson, 2005). Queer theory explicates categories, like ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, in its attempts to deconstruct the binary divides and reinforcement of them, implying that the overgeneralization of either/or categories hides more than it reveals to those studying them (Richardson, 2000). It should be noted here that attempts to narrowly define queer theory would undermine the tenants of the theory itself, which rejects oversimplifying and categorizing identity labels.

Queer theory's roots stem from feminist scholarship, one of the first movements to champion anti-identarian, anti-normative critiques. In the 1980s, feminist work sought to critique the notion that there was a singular, definitive way to be a woman (Jagose, 2009, p. 160).

Feminism invited debates about coalitional politics, the complex relationships between various categories of identity, and the paradoxical power of political representation. At its core, modern feminism still analyzes and debates the issues of epistemic identification, such as what it means to use the term 'woman' categorically and theorize identities.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist philosopher who made many early contributions to feminist literature, famously stated that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman (Simons, 2001). Postmodern views in feminist studies and elsewhere in the humanities have shifted the definition of gender from a previously stable aspect of identity linked to an individual's anatomy to "an ongoing social process" (Jenkins, 2000). Many queer theorists and researchers, such as Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, constituted gender as socially constructed and individually performed. Sedgwick asserts that 'sex' usually refers to a certain group of "irreducible, biological differentiations between members of the species *Homo sapiens* who have XX and those who have XY chromosomes" (1990, p. 27). These things are usually considered to consist of physical genital makeup, reproductive capabilities, hair growth, hormonal functions, and fat distribution. Therefore, sex can be considered the "raw material" on which socially constructed gender is based. That is, "gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 27).

Butler (1988) introduced the idea that gender is composed of repetitive performances. She argued that an individual's movements, gestures, and clothing "all signify gender at every

moment” (Watson, 2005, p. 72). The performative acts that signify gender, therefore, present what society would consider feminine or masculine traits. To become a woman is to:

compel the body to conform to the historical idea of a woman, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler, 1988, p. 522)

The anti-foundationalist inclination in feminist theory led scholars to apply anti-normative critiques to more categories beyond simply binary gender (Jagose, 2009). In other words, the desire to reject long-standing ideas of what it means to be a woman inspired further examinations of other labels, such as gay or lesbian. Queer theory builds on feminism’s categorical critiques by questioning the “historical, social, and cultural constructions of desire and sexuality intersecting with other identity markers, such as race, class, and gender, among others” (Yep, Lovass & Elia, 2003, p. 2). Queer theory ultimately provides an anti-foundationalist perspective that “focuses on the opposition of fixed identities” (Alexander, 2017, p. 278).

A common illustration of this is queer theory’s focus on “remapping the construction of queer identity within heterosexual spheres” (Alexander, 2017, p. 279). Heterosexuality has long been institutionalized as the most popular form of relationship practice, family structure, and identity (Richardson, 2000). Feminist scholars largely theorized heterosexuality not as an individual biological fact or condition that people are born into, but as “a socially constructed institution which structures and maintains male domination” (Richardson, 2000, p. 20). The resulting occurrence of using heterosexuality as the norm for understanding gender and sexuality is labeled as heteronormativity, commonly critiqued by queer theorists (Warner, 1991).

Heteronormativity often leads to the stigmatization of non-heterosexual identities by referencing and reinforcing differences from normative expectations (Goffman, 1968). The stigmatization of same-sex activity resulted from discourses in Western society that viewed certain sexual acts and identities as “deviant” (Foucault, 1978).

Influenced by these notions, theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1991) first presented the idea of queer theory by underscoring how categories such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ reinforce the male hierarchy by simply replacing the term ‘homosexual’, which positions men as the norm and women as simply a minor variation, all while establishing specific and separate identity categories. This understanding of heteronormative structures suggests that the consolidation of non-heterosexuals into one group reinforces the historical binary, refusing to acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexual orientation as well as ignoring how gender and sexual orientation reveals reflections of social power structures (Foucault, 1978). Queer theory critiques potentially harmful expectations of how relational and familial norms should be seen and felt (Adams & Jones, 2011). In order to subvert heteronormativity, queer theory suggests that “the term queer allowed for the possibility of keeping open to question and context the element of race – or class, age or anything else – and its often complicated, unpredictable relationship to sexuality” (Turner, 2000, p. 133). Essentially, the term queer itself allows for many identities to be at play, leaving their definitions open. This notion is also supported by one of the most influential queer theorists, Eve Sedgwick, who indicated that an individual’s experiences of sexuality and desire are all complexly diverse. Therefore, Sedgwick (1990) promotes the term ‘queer’ as an “open mesh of possibilities” (p. 110).

Consistent with the acceptance of the term queer by previous theorists, this study will focus on queer women and refer to them as such. This identifier will generally include, but is not

limited to, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, and/or transgendered women under its umbrella, allowing for the fluidity of female sexuality and its discrete existence from historically patriarchal structures. Mary Bryson (2004) argued in her work that

queer, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered (QLBT) women constitute a heterogeneous group that remains under-researched despite the fact that, as a stigmatized sexual subculture, its members embody unique characteristics, vulnerabilities, and concomitant requirements that need to be documented and taken into account (p. 239).

In a society historically characterized by homophobia and heterosexism, disclosure of sexual identity can sometimes be scary, unsafe, or unwelcome for many who do not subscribe to status quo gender and sexuality norms (Lucero, 2017). Queer-theorist Sedgwick (1990) describes “the closet” as a metaphor defining homosexuality’s oppression in Western cultures. “Being in the closet” refers to an individual hiding their sexual orientation, while “coming/being out” suggests they are open and public about their sexuality (Laukkanen, 2007, p. 83). Remaining “closeted” can inhibit individuals from forming allies and friendships with other queer individuals, which would otherwise benefit areas such as their identity formation, support community, and safe spaces for sharing (Dugay, 2014).

Often, an important part of being out as a queer woman is clothing and appearance choices as identity expression. Clarke & Spence (2013) conducted a qualitative survey with thirty female participants about lesbian and bisexual women’s appearance and dress. They found that dress and image for lesbians and sometimes bisexuals are highly regulated. Survey respondents expressed feeling negative about the coding of lesbian visibility as masculine. However, being recognized as a member of the queer community as a woman requires work, and therefore many respondents report “their conformity as active and strategic, a means to an end

(subverting normative assumptions of heterosexuality, being recognized by other non-heterosexual women) or as an almost unconscious expression of their inner dyke” (Clarke & Spence, 2013, p. 2). There was some optimism regarding broadening ideas on how queer women should dress to belong to the community. The present study builds on this optimism by observing the identity performances of queer women, including their physical presentation in TikTok videos. Next, I will discuss the history of building queer community online.

Building Queer Community Online

Communication scholars increasingly recognize the validity and influence of online interactions, and a new wave of research focused on the virtual world, shared meaning, and community building is emerging (Watkins & Lewis, 2014). More than ever, a “new, accessible and dynamic landscape for the construction of identities” exists (Lucero, 2017, p. 118). Mary Bryson (2004) posited that the Internet is “particularly significant as a contemporary site of cultural transformation, identification and community participation, as well as a means of access to and production of capital” (p. 239). An Associated Press story in 1996 reported in the early days of web development that “it’s the unspoken secret of the online world that gay men and lesbians are among the most avid, loyal and plentiful commercial users of the Internet” (Weise, 1996).

Historically, cyberfeminist research online has focused on the analysis of gender, while cyberqueer research has focused on non-normative identities, social groups, and cultures (Karl, 2007). In 1995, Correll conducted an ethnographic study of an electronic lesbian bar that operated through a computer bulletin board system online, known as the Lesbian Cafe. Correll’s study depicted how a community could be produced and supported through online interactions only, investigating its functions and ultimately demonstrating that a community can be viable in

online spaces alone. Correll's work presents valuable evidence of the positive impact interactive online spaces can have on groups of women that face possible stigmatization and isolation (1995; Bryson, 2004). The sense of having a common reality with others provides users with a space to maintain a community that serves many of the same functions and features of a geographically anchored community, such as moral support, recreation, meeting friends, having fun, and flirting (Correll, 1995).

In 2000, OutProud and Oasis Magazine surveyed 6,872 queer young people. Overwhelmingly, respondents reported that being online helped them with acceptance of their sexual orientation, and many reported coming out online before doing so in their physical reality (Kryzan, 2000). Online communities via SNS can be important spaces for those in the queer community to create, experiment, and express their sexuality (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Queer women are constantly negotiating both the intensity and salience of their queer identity in the world, and TikTok is one example of a space where they have strong control over disclosure decisions and the prominence of this identity. Because of this affordance, some individuals may choose to disclose their identities by displaying stigma symbols in an online context, which are identity indications intended to be understood only by friendly and chosen audiences (Goffman, 1968). Research by Dugay (2014) revealed some SNS users heavily utilize stigma symbols in their online content to indicate sexual identity. By exploring the female queer community on TikTok, this thesis will further understanding of how TikTok connects communities together, helps queer women express identity, and build community.

While there are many queer community spaces online now, there have also been moves to shrink or silence queer identities in online social spaces (Simpson & Semaan, 2020; Karizat et al., 2021). Research by Simpson & Semaan (2020) evaluated queer SNS users' experiences with

algorithmic systems through interviews regarding their everyday experiences on TikTok. Digital algorithms can promote or conceal various identities, which can influence people's access to both viewing and sharing queer expression. They concluded that "TikTok's For You Page (FYP) algorithm constructs contradictory identity spaces that at once support LGBTQ+ identity work and reaffirm LGBTQ+ identity, while also transgressing and violating individual user identity intersection" (Simpson & Semaan, 2020, p. 2). The FYP algorithm operates by categorizing users into pools, allowing for contradictions when multiple identities are at play. Simpson & Semaan (2020) ultimately define a new term, algorithmic exclusion, as "the ways in which algorithms construct and reconstruct exclusionary structures within a bounded sociotechnical system, or more broadly across societal structures" (Simpson & Semaan, 2020, p. 24). Study participants' observations indicated that the TikTok FYP algorithm does, in fact, "categorically construct and shape the kinds of identity that are visible through its content delivery system and prioritization of certain kinds of identity routines." (Simpson & Semaan, 2020, p. 25). However, they also found that queer users continued to develop self-organized practices in response to this encroachment. Study participants described practices such as reposting, recapping, and recreating removed content, along with utilizing affordances to filter out unwarranted content in their space and highlighting toxic normative practices upheld by popular content. Thus, research shows that SNSs are important sources of identity expression.

Cultural Identity Theory

A focus on identity performances and fluidity leads to a consideration of cultural identity. Originally introduced by Collier & Thomas (1988), cultural identity can be defined as "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (p. 113). It involves all types of identities

relating to social and cultural groups (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) was developed by Collier & Thomas (1988), who merged communication ethnography and social construction (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The complexity of cultural identity is broken down into three parts: scope, salience, and intensity (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Scope refers to the size of a group that shares a particular identity. Salience refers to “the relative psychological importance an individual feels with respect to the various aspects of identity in a specific interaction” (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p. 197). Finally, intensity is the level to which an individual openly and explicitly expresses a part of their identity in certain interactions. Of these three dimensions, scope tends to be rather stable, while salience and intensity vary across situations. The more or less salient an identity becomes in a particular context, the more likely intensity is to vary as well.

Identifying as a member of the queer female community can be contextualized within CIT and its components. For example, salience refers to the personal significance attached to one’s identity as a queer woman, while intensity refers to a queer woman’s level of open expression and association with the queer community. Queer women must constantly negotiate both the salience and intensity of this cultural identity, which includes navigating how much to disclose about their sexuality to others.

Cultural identity is informed by several attributes. Some explicit factors include nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, and gender. A person’s cultural identities can also be informed by a variety of more fluid factors, such as self-perception, caretakers’ guidance, early associations with peers, physical appearance, language tendencies, educational experiences, and self-image (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 214). Collier (2005) remarked how early work on CIT may have oversimplified or minimized “issues of unequal privilege” and relied too heavily on

“assumptions of equal agency across individuals” (p. 240). Consequently, Collier (2005) has supported more researcher reflexivity and theory expansion on broader social structures, privileges, hierarchies, and dominant ideologies that are at play within cultural identities (p. 242). Thus, the opportunity for considering queer theory’s emphasis on subverting historically heteronormative labels fits into Colliers’ (2005) call to expand CIT by exploring historically dominant structures, such as heterosexuality.

CIT also recognizes avowed and ascribed cultural identities that can be at play in identity formation (Sha, 2006). Avowed cultural identity refers to an individual’s self-identification with a cultural group and claiming membership within it. In contrast, ascribed cultural identities come from a reference group assigned to an individual by another person. This means that avowed and ascribed identities may not always align because one is personally defined, while the other is externally imposed (Sha, 2006). Cultural identities are therefore constantly evolving due to the “internalization and negotiation of ascribed identities by others” (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Within the context of the queer community, choosing to be out of the closet and forthcoming about one’s sexuality would classify as a person’s avowed identity. Yet, that individual may be ascribed various identities by external viewers that may or may not correspond to the individual’s avowed identity. These kinds of complexities position queer theory to investigate how narrow identity reference categories, such as straight, gay, lesbian, etc., function as ascribed identities that reinforce heteronormativity.

Some cultural identities can be seen developing when “a pattern of conduct across individuals demonstrates membership in a group or groups” (Collier, 2005, p. 239). An individual’s cultural identities, while they endure through both time and space, are jointly formed through relationships and are then visible in communication. Sha (2006) further explained that

“communication is how individuals and groups negotiate, cocreate, reinforce, and challenge cultural identity... Cultural identities emerge in communication contexts” (p. 51). Building on Collier’s (2005) suggestion that cultural identities can be formed through relationships and then become visible in communication practices, this study seeks to spotlight evidence of these identities through online communication and community. The following section discusses the online community of TikTok.

TikTok

Research done in the last decade by scholars in the communication field regarding social networking sites (SNS) has created a vast and rapidly growing pool of information (boyd & Ellison, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I will adopt boyd & Ellison’s (2008) widely accepted definition of SNS, which is the following:

[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

TikTok qualifies as an SNS under boyd & Ellison’s (2008) description because users create a public/semi-public profile, follow other users, and view videos one at a time by scrolling through a newsfeed. Users can ‘like’ and comment on videos, share videos within the app, utilize hashtags, and visit user profiles to see all of their content in one place.

Early popular SNSs include Friendster, launched in 2002, Myspace in 2003, and Facebook in 2004 (Drushel, 2010). Friendster encountered rapid growth, but ran into many technical glitches due to ill-equipped servers. When it was finally shut down in 2011, the majority of U.S. users had long left the site for competitors such as Myspace or Facebook (boyd

& Ellison, 2008). Myspace founders looked to attract individuals as they left Friendster and became home to many teenager users, a group that had been scarce on Friendster. When Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook in 2004, he formulated the platform to connect with Harvard classmates. However, it soon expanded beyond closed networks and found positive growth while Myspace hit its decline due to an overfocus on big advertisements and sponsorship deals. Out of these early platforms, Facebook was able to adapt to each shift in user preferences and desires, most recently boasting over two billion monthly active users (Meta, 2022).

In 2007, the iPhone was launched, featuring a full touchscreen interface and easy internet connection capabilities. As smartphones became commonplace soon after, SNSs became mobile and accessible wherever a person went. In our modern era, mobile application SNSs are created constantly for an endless list of uses and populations. Some of these are able to rise in influence and maintain longevity, like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Other SNS mobile applications eventually collapse due to newer competitors or dying trends, such as Path or Vine.

TikTok, which absorbed its similar predecessor Musical.ly in 2018, is a mobile app for making and sharing short videos (Tidy & Galer, 2020). With more than a billion active users, it is one of the most prolific SNSs. On TikTok, the video content users generate consists of a wide range of production values and content, with some simply presenting a person talking in their car or bedroom. On the other hand, some user videos are made of multiple video clips cut together, with text, visual effects, and background music to tell a story. This easy access to TikTok effects makes content creation quite simple by clicking on the effect or audio in another video's caption (Del Rosso, 2021). One of the most prominent features TikTok offers is the ability to use background music to "represent the core message that the users want to convey" (Serrano, et al.,

2020, p. 258). Creators can choose virtually any song or audio to accompany their video, with the option to even make their own original sounds.

The TikTok interface has five buttons at the bottom that navigate to five different pages in the app: a home feed, the user's profile, a page to create videos, a place to send videos, and an explore page with popular hashtags and videos to discover. The "Home" button is where the "For You Page" (FYP) is located, which operates as a news feed to view videos that the app curates to a specific user's interests by utilizing a complex algorithm. TikTok explained the process of curation for this page recently on their website, stating that "these systems (FYP algorithm) suggest content after taking into account user preferences as expressed through interactions with the app, like posting a comment or following an account. These signals help the recommendation system gauge the content you like as well as the content you'd prefer to skip" ("How TikTok," 2020). To curate the FYP page, it also outlines easy steps a user can take when you join the app to help the FYP tailor content the most effectively. When a new user joins, they are prompted to select categories of interests for the app to develop an initial feed. As the new user interacts (likes, comments, shares, downloads) with videos that appear, the system will continue to recommend new videos of similar content. The more one interacts with content that is recommended, the more information the program accumulates about their habits in order to continue to cater to them ("How TikTok," 2020).

Omar & Dequan (2020) conducted research on TikTok user motivations via an online survey of users. Their results showed that motivations for participating in TikTok included self-expression, interaction with others, and escapes from everyday life (p. 130). Similarly, Bucknell & Kottasz (2020) found through their surveys of young TikTok users that motivations for contributing to the platform through content creation included a wish to expand social networks,

fame-seeking, self-expression, and identity-creation needs. Furthermore, Barta & Andalibi (2021) suggested that the

the perceived anonymity of one's audience and self, in combination with a platform algorithm that prioritizes association between users based on proximity of interest or experience promotes social acceptance and adoption of a 'just be you' attitude that in turn supports authenticity as a self-presentation norm. (p. 3)

They also present evidence from their interviews that support TikTok as a site for openly expressing emotions and receiving authenticity validation (Barta & Andalibi, 2021).

Serrano et al. (2020) analyzed political content and commentary on TikTok by collecting over 7,000 videos under specific political hashtags and conducting a content analysis on the textual, aural, and visual information of each video. Their study found that "TikTok users do not just merely circulate content and comment it; they become the content" (Serrano et al., 2020, p. 264). Unlike some previous SNS systems such as Facebook and Twitter, where users can choose to simply share news articles or videos, TikTok depends on users to become "active presenters of political information" by creating and performing their own political spectacles (Serrano et al., 2020, p. 264). They ultimately concluded that political content is a relevant aspect of TikTok's ecosystem.

TikTok's dependency on user content creation and discovery allows for engagement in meme culture as well. Memes, defined by Ross & Rivers (2017), are situated at the "nexus of language, society, and digital communication," which presents "a relatively new form of participatory culture that can offer certain demographics an opportunity for political expression, engagement and participation which otherwise might not have been accessible" (p. 1). Also focusing on memes, Del Rosso (2021) investigated how memes and viral internet content build

community and culture, especially focusing on political communication on TikTok. Results suggested that users often sought to legitimize their political positions and influence their peers by utilizing some or all of Theo van Leeuwen's (2017) (de)legitimization strategies – authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis (mythmaking). Del Rosso's (2021) research supports the previous assertions from Serrano et al. (2020) that suggest TikTok's relevance and cultural successes depend on users becoming the content, known as participatory culture.

Based on previous research, this thesis seeks to expand knowledge regarding the interactions and connections between queer theory, cultural identity theory, and SNS usage. TikTok has provided a new and rich space for queer women to interact virtually and express their identities, presenting an opportunity to describe and categorize the ways they are doing just that. By answering the research questions proposed next, this thesis will explore queer women's identity presentation and community building on TikTok.

Research Questions

RQ1: *How do queer women communicate their cultural identity to each other on TikTok?*

RQ2: *What do the themes identified from queer women's TikTok videos suggest about building community on SNS?*

Chapter 3: Method

This study utilized the methodological approach of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2012). Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). The goal of thematic analysis is to identify and interpret significant details of the data, in relation to the research questions. The method guided the systematic collection of data, its thick description, and data analysis. Data analysis resulted in the identification of two key themes that reveal how queer women on TikTok express identity and build community.

Thematic analysis is an established qualitative method in communication research. For example, Caplan et al. (2017) applied thematic analysis in their qualitative study on personal accounts of poverty on the social media site Reddit. They collected popular archived posts that responded to a question about poverty. Then, two researchers inductively coded the data and worked as a team to refine codes and create a codebook. As they studied the data, they refined, combined, eliminated, or expanded identified themes. After this tedious process, researchers yielded four major themes from their analysis and discussed each theme in the written report, using examples directly from the data to back up their conclusions. They explain, “researchers have found that social media discussions were a rich source of data on personal accounts of lived experiences, especially concerning sensitive or stigmatizing subjects” (Caplan et al., 2017, p. 436).

Similarly, Xiong et al. (2019) utilized thematic analysis for one of their research questions regarding the framing of hashtags on social media. They collected data by using a third-party technology that filters online content by keywords, narrowed down the sources searched by keyword and downloaded the data (Tweets) into a spreadsheet to analyze. After

identifying themes, the researchers listed their definitions, and provided an example in a table. They identified six themes and several subthemes.

In a final example, Brouwer & Hess (2007) employed thematic analysis in their study of military blog responses to Westboro Baptist Church military funeral protests. Their data included vernacular responses to the protests on fifty milblogs, defined as blogs “that host discussions on war and military issues and are maintained by active-duty, inactive-duty, or veteran members of the military, their spouses or family members, or supportive civilians” (Brouwer & Hess, 2007, p. 70). The authors used prominent themes that the Westboro Baptist Church emphasized to help organize and guide their analysis of milblog responses to the church’s inflammatory discourse about military funerals.

My study extends thematic analysis into the realm of cultural identity and social media. The data collected for this study consisted of videos created by active users on TikTok that met the following criteria: a) video is original content posted publicly to the TikTok app, b) the user presents as female, c) the video uses the song “girls” as the background sound of the video. The TikTok interface allows users to view all videos that use a specific song in the background. There are currently over 130,000 videos using the song “girls” by Girl in Red on the app, and I collected the first 70 videos that utilized the song. This sample was large enough to have a variety of videos but small enough to allow for thick description analysis.

To comply with the governing Institutional Review Board (IRB), a full application for this study was completed and submitted to the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). The HRPP determined that this study meets the requirements for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 4(i) due to its focus on existing public data. TikTok users agree to a privacy policy upon account creation that asserts any public posts may be publicly used, thus granting researchers the opportunity to study the content.

Once data collection was completed, the thematic analysis process began and followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phases. These phases include familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. The following section will detail each step of the data collection and analysis process.

Data Collection and Analysis

All data collected for this analysis was found on TikTok under the song tag "girls" by Girl in Red. The first phase of thematic analysis, familiarization, was accomplished throughout the data collection and the note-taking processes. The researcher watched and saved the first 70 videos under the song tag. TikTok videos are aggregated under a song tag by popularity. The first 70 videos had significant interactions (45,000+ likes), which implied the content resonated with an audience because of the high engagement. Once these videos had been viewed, identified, and saved, the coding phase began. Using an excel spreadsheet, each video had notes taken under the following points: username, date posted, number of likes, on-screen text, dialogue, video content and visible purpose, subject details, hashtags, and any other notes. The familiarization phase allowed the researcher to identify the major kinds videos created under the song, and that was used to decide the most common video types. These video types included art, coming out, trends, etc. The data was organized this way in order to make coding and theme finding smoother. This conceptualization can be equated to similar organizational strategies on video platforms like YouTube, where videos are sectioned into types of content like "music," "DIY," and "fashion." Videos where the main character presented as male were coded for originally, but they were ultimately removed from the data before theme searching began (four videos). Thus, 70 videos were initially selected and four were omitted from the analysis, leaving a data set of $n = 66$.

After the spreadsheet was filled with thick descriptions under each data point, the theme searching process began by highlighting similar notes that recurred throughout the data set. By highlighting similar notes in matching colors, visually it was clear what came up the most and if there was overlap within videos. After reviewing highlights in the data, the researcher did another viewing of all the videos in the data set to verify consistency across textual notes and highlighted detail. This step was repeated four more times until the point of saturation was reached. Saturation means that the researcher engaged in watching the videos, defining and refining themes, and looking for consistencies until no new information could be ascertained. There were ultimately two recurring themes identified and defined, which are outlined in the following section.

Chapter 4: Results

Theme 1: Color combinations communicating identity

The most obvious and reoccurring video detail to appear was the use of colors to convey sexuality. The rainbow flag has historically been a symbol of LGBTQ+ individuals, dating back to pride parades of the late 1970s (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2014). Designed originally by Gilbert Baker in 1978, the rainbow flag has become a prominent component in queer pride rallies, art, politics, and expression. In recent decades, specific sexualities have adopted certain color combinations to communicate their sexual identity. Besides rainbow, which tends to be more generally and liberally utilized by anyone in the queer community, a few others can be seen often now. A blue, pink, and purple combination traditionally signal bisexuality; seven different shades of orange, pink, red, and white represent lesbian identity; and blue, pink, and white represent transgender identity. The rainbow, bisexual colors, and lesbian colors were present in 30 of the 66 videos analyzed. Many of these instances were connected to a viral trend that some users were participating in, which is discussed in the next theme. However, there was also a lot of usage of color for identity signaling in general. Several users had a rainbow pride flag hanging up in the background of their videos, such as @cali.is.gone and @spoophye. This was sometimes a subtle detail of the video but not the main focus, illustrating how the color combination can be casually utilized within broader content to connect with friendly, ally audiences.

Further, the rainbow was incorporated more prominently and intentionally in videos where queer women addressed their coming out with others. Users such as @ohokaygirl, @kaitlyn.ford, and @jenn_leann shared videos about their “coming out photos.” As the song played, a montage of these individuals getting ready played until a series of photos flashed, all showing the smiling subject in a variety of poses holding a pride flag. These photos offer

individuals a way to communicate their sexuality to others without having to use words or explanations. By displaying the pride flag as the prominent object of the picture, individuals draw attention to their intentional communication of sexuality.

More creatively, pride colors were included in many art creation videos or more subtle coming out videos. One video posted by @._.swaggy featured a hand painting some small spots on a pair of jeans in rainbow and lesbian pride colors. The text on the video says “day 1 of dropping hints until i have the courage to come out,” implying that this user is incorporating pride colors to begin communicating her sexuality. Members of the queer community and even allies would be able to recognize the color combinations as an indicator of queerness automatically, but some of the general public may not immediately recognize or decipher that just from a colorful jeans design. Other usages of pride colors incorporated into art included canvas paintings, ice cream swirls, an energy drink can collection, and various sticker designs.

Theme 2: Viral trends as queer confirmation or communication

The most common video type under the song “girls” by Girl in Red was a trend employed by many users. TikTok constantly produces new video filters and lenses for creators to utilize in their videos, one of the many reasons so many people create content on the app. A filter called “Reality Ripple,” which has been used in over 2.4 million videos on TikTok, became a trend for some to reveal or confirm their sexuality. The filter displays a colored ripple effect behind the person on screen when they move, revealing a random color combination. Often, the color combinations are one of the pride color categories discussed above: queer rainbow, bisexual, or lesbian colors. However, this filter also utilized a black and white color scheme, which many users recognized as “heterosexual colors,” such as @cxrnsyrxp and @sabyphilis. The videos that revealed black and white behind the user created a shocked and/or laughing reaction, with the

user expressing that those colors did not accurately reflect their identity. When some variation of pride colors came up, usually the user smiled to confirm a queer identity. In two cases, the user moved to reveal pride colors and laughed or shook their head. These two women both showed photos of themselves with a male partner and asserted that the filter was incorrect. However, their recognition of the colors representing sexuality shows they understood the applied meaning, even if they did not identify as queer. The trend provided an opportunity for users of any sexual identity to participate and acknowledge their identification in an informal, casual way.

Individuals who were not queer were still active in the trend, so participating in it could present as nothing more than a user's desire to be relevant on the app. A total of 17 videos in this dataset utilized this video filter in conjunction with the song "girls." The discussion section will break down these two major themes in the context of my original research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

After completing the thematic analysis and defining themes, the research questions can be addressed.

RQ1. How do queer women communicate their cultural identity to each other on TikTok?

TikTok proved to be a richly detailed and utilized site for queer women looking to express their sexuality and/or connect with others. On a manifest level, color combinations played a big role in queer women's TikToks when referencing sexuality. While the average TikTok viewer may not have the insight into what specific color combinations intend to signal, there is some clear indication that the colors are important because of how often they were pointed out or reacted to by video subjects. However, if you are actively looking to connect with queer women, seeing the use of these color combinations is an immediate indicator that the video creator is in the queer community. This strategy is a distinct utilization of stigma symbols, allowing queer women to indicate their sexuality to intended, friendly audiences. The same goes for the use of the song "girls" itself. Research has suggested that semantic and melodic aspects of communication are processed separately in the brain, quite independent of each other (Besson et al., 1998; Bonnel et al., 2001). While many people may tap their foot along to the upbeat melody of the song, understanding the lyrics as a proclamation of women's romantic view of other women takes more focus and intentional listening. Therefore, queer women can quickly recognize the song, interpreting its meaning in a particular way, and integrate it into their TikTok content to communicate their sexuality, without blatantly spelling it out for any general viewer to discern.

Another way queer women were able to share their identity, without explicitly saying or writing it out, was through utilizing TikTok trends. With trends in general, users are allowed to

share something about themselves without waiting for a specific question or prompt from followers. Using a popular filter and participating in a trend can mean a lot of things for different users. Some users of the Reality Ripple effect just incorporated it as simply a fun effect on their dance or comedy video. However, queer women chose to embrace the filter for more than just a visual effect. They used it to signal their cultural identity to others by reacting to the colors that appeared and by including the “girls” song. The trend simply reveals colors behind the moving video subject, yet queer women and allies acknowledge the color combinations as indicators of sexuality.

Furthermore, both themes highlight the importance of art and context in online identity communication. To any app user casually scrolling through TikTok, the inclusion of a rainbow or specific song may not carry significance in regard to their understanding of the content creator and the video. Contrarily, a queer woman watching the same video on their FYP may spark inspiration for their own sexuality expression or provide some level of personal validation.

Results from this study provide a unique example in Cultural Identity Theory, which deals with the “identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct” (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 113). Specifically, we know that cultural identity is broken down into three components: scope, salience, and intensity. Using the themes revealed from the thematic analysis, we can use these components to understand how queer women are expressing their identity on TikTok.

Within the app, queer women are able to largely determine the salience and intensity of their queer identity based on their individual perceptions and expectations of the platform. A queer woman can choose to be engaged without ever addressing her queerness at all because she controls how she presents herself and her content. For women still searching and experimenting with queer identification, they get to decide how much to disclose or include every time they

upload something. In physical reality, intensity is determined and adjusted based on social contexts and situations. Their queer identity may be more intense and obviously salient around a group of friends compared to distant relatives. When an individual logs on to TikTok, they get to decide that for themselves and adjust their expression as they see fit.

Further, when both themes were present in a video, cultural identity was more intense. The base level of intensity for these videos was incorporating “girls” into a TikTok. In a few instances, the song was used as a background track to a video of someone drawing a portrait or fan art. In these scenarios, it is not very clear if the user is queer or just chose a popular song to put on their video. However, the intensity was higher when a user coupled the song with pride colors because it more intentionally communicated their connection to queerness. Even more, the intensity was highest with the song, pride colors, and active singing/dancing to the song. When users chose to sing along to the song, they were more directly acknowledging the lyrics. TikTok allows users to post a response video to a comment on any of their videos, so some of these videos were comment replies that asked “do you listen to Girl in Red?” The user rarely did anything else in the video but smile and sing the song in order to answer the question.

RQ2. What does this analysis of queer women’s TikTok videos suggest about building community on SNS?

Recent research has revealed that common motivations for TikTok users to create content include self-expression, identity validation, and expanding social networks (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Bucknell & Kottasz, 2020). The FYP algorithm prioritizes grouping users based on interests and interaction similarities, requiring minimal work for participants to see the content they want (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). On veteran platforms, users have to utilize features like the search bar or filters to get involved in specific communities. The innovation of the FYP

algorithm makes it even easier for queer users to find each other and connect by embracing certain trends and songs. The results of this study show how much easier and more accessible community building online has become since the days of the Lesbian Cafe (Correll, 1995). Queer women can find each other without really altering their SNS habits at all because the algorithm works to cross their paths. As queer women embraced “girls” as an anthem or jumped on a popular trend, the algorithm was able to show users each other simply because they both created or liked a similar video. Therefore, queer women seeking community can intentionally capitalize on these signals and can let the algorithm do the rest. This supports previous research that suggests queer TikTok users develop self-organized practices in response to algorithmic functions (Simpson & Semaan, 2020).

The combination of establishing common signals and advanced algorithms also emphasizes how TikTok can be impactful for individuals still questioning their sexual identity and expression. Without ever specifically searching it, a user may trigger the algorithm to boost queer content and creators into their feed after liking a video with rainbow art and a Girl in Red song. A TikTok user may find themselves in the midst of this queer community without specifically looking for it, providing them an opportunity to observe how women are expressing their cultural identity and finding support online. All the while, they don't have to actively create content that expresses their queerness if they are not ready or choose not to. This affordance of a more passive existence in an online community can help individuals form their own preferences on sexual identity expression, especially if they have limited access to diversity in their physical reality.

When a video is aggregated to a user's FYP feed, there are options to click on various details of the video, including songs, effects, filters, hashtags, and creators. If a queer woman on TikTok was seeking out users that identify the same way, she could click on the song “girls” or

the hashtag #wlv (Women Love Women) to see every public video posted with that detail. This provides users with a more direct route to community building as an option. For young women with restricted access to a queer community, TikTok provides a direct link to many.

Through this study, data analysis revealed that queer women are active on TikTok and using specific details to connect with each other. They have developed ways to signal their cultural identity to one another in a comfortable way under their control. Repeatedly, women incorporated specific colors into their content to signify their connection with the queer community, whether subtly or explicitly. While some queer women casually included colors in their art or clothes, others incorporated colors into cakes or photographs to announce they are coming out boldly to the audience. Both methods were effective, whether explicitly verbalized in the video or not, due to the combination of themes present.

This research expands understanding of community building in an SNS context by analyzing a popular SNS. It also reveals how queer women express cultural identity through details like color and song to seamlessly form an online community for validation, support and inspiration. While this study revealed valuable details regarding online expression and usage, there are some shortcomings that future researchers could seek to address.

Limitations

This study does have limitations. First, only one researcher (myself) transcribed and analyzed all 66 videos in depth. While 66 videos may seem like a small sample size at first, saturation was reached and therefore justified the size. Data saturation refers to the depth of the data chosen and occurs “when there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1408). For every study, the amount of data for saturation

varies due to study purpose, types of coding, and nature of the data (Kahldoun & Le Navenec, 2018). This study required detailed thick description and looked for general themes, so the sample size had to be small enough for one researcher to evaluate those details.

Second, the method of thematic analysis, like many qualitative methods, requires the researcher to be the instrument of analysis. Instead of numbers or algorithms analyzing the videos, I personally watched and noted everything I could. Because of this, overlooking or missing detail was potentially more likely than if analysis occurred via a computer software program or if multiple researchers were doing the analysis. However, despite these limitations, qualitative research often benefits from self-reflexivity since the researcher is the vehicle for data digestion. I, myself, identify as a queer woman and have found a great sense of comfort regarding my own sexuality within the TikTok community over the last several years. I recognize that my personal lens can be a potential factor in the process. Nonetheless, my connection to the community can also be considered a strength of this study because I have had extensive interactions with and surveillance of queer women on TikTok for some time.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis investigated and evaluated the blooming community of queer women on TikTok by looking at videos that used a song in common, “girls” by Girl in Red. The song’s chorus, utilized in all 66 videos analyzed for this thesis, proclaims “they’re so pretty it hurts. I’m not talking ‘bout boys, I’m talking ‘bout girls. They’re so pretty with their button-up shirts” (Girl in Red, 2018). Some videos consisted of subtle signaling of a user’s queerness, like including a rainbow or other significant color combination, while others took a more direct approach by singing along and participating in trends.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the communication of queer cultural identity by women on TikTok. Research has shown that self-expression and self-presentation are important parts of defining one’s identity and building community for queer individuals (Gray, 2009). As Mary Bryson pointed out almost two decades ago, queer women are an under-researched, heterogeneous group, even though they hold unique “characteristics, vulnerabilities and concomitant requirements that need to be documented and taken into account” (2004, p. 239). While the past twenty years have seen a rapid growth of scholarly research on queer individuals, some within an online context, this study is the first to my knowledge that analyzes queer identity and community on TikTok. The platform’s popularity and continued success as an SNS utilizing an advanced algorithm justified its examination and highlighted its multifaceted benefits, such as ease of community building and accessibility to diverse content. TikTok provided a modern and detailed place to study queer women communicating their cultural identity because of its combined use of video sounds, visuals, special effects, hashtags, trends, user interactions, and more. This thematic analysis produced two important themes, color combinations communicating identity and viral trends as queer confirmation or communication.

These themes reveal two ways those in the queer community are embracing small content details to find each other and practice cultural identity expression.

Future research could expand on this study in many ways, two of which I will address here. First, each theme defined in this study could be broken down into subcategories and evaluated on a micro-level to identify more specific and detailed ways queer women signal to each other online. Second, this study did not dive deeply into the history of each specific signal used, such as color combinations that have been attached to varying sexualities. My goal for this study was to provide a broad overview of these phenomena in the hopes that future research will be able to build upon this study's findings about queer communication online.

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