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“How do we do that?” An analysis of TikToks by lesbians over age 30 representing sexual identity, lived experience over time, and solidarity

Abstract

Lesbians have long turned to digital media and technologies for information, support, and to self-represent sexual identity in ways that have the capacity for building communities and gathering publics and counterpublics. TikTok is a short video platform popular with young people, which has increasingly seen the participation of comparatively older users. This paper investigates the self-representation of lesbians over age 30 on TikTok to understand the themes in their content and how the platform shapes their communication with others. Through sampling tailored to TikTok’s algorithmic curation, ten lesbians’ accounts are examined alongside qualitative coding and analysis of 50 of these creators’ videos. Findings reveal key themes regarding the expression of identity and age, lived experience over time, and bids for connection and community. TikTokers expressed lesbian identity in continuity with longstanding stereotypes to enhance visibility but also incorporated humour and youthful trends to give rise to novel identity expressions. Videos showcasing the passage of time and sociopolitical change demonstrated the resilience of lesbian lives and conveyed hope while advice and statements of solidarity expressed support for young people’s present struggles with homophobia and transphobia. Contrasting with studies of TikTok’s generational wars, this article shows how older lesbians are building generational bridges through their uptake of youth-driven platform practices, sharing of past challenges to support youth in overcoming present hurdles, and by modelling lesbian futures.

Keywords

Social media, self-representation, intergenerational communication, queer time, digital media

“A question that comes up when I post about intergenerational lesbian mentorship is, how? How do we do that?” TikTok user @CountryJane opens her video with this query as she films herself walking across the snow-covered landscape of her acreage. The mid-fifties self-identified “butch lesbian” has garnered more than 100,000 followers through videos showcasing her rural lifestyle, experiences as an older lesbian, and advice for younger lesbians. In this post, she encourages younger and older lesbians to form community by overcoming shyness. She tells older lesbians, “Let them know you’re a lesbian” so young people can spot you. “Wear the hat!” She points to her hat that reads “Le Dollar Bean”—a play on TikTok users’ adapted spelling of *lesbian* as le\$bean to circumvent platform censorship of LGBTQ+¹ content. Her style, content, and use of TikTok’s features (e.g., hashtags, subtitles) render this post into a powerful message about lesbian identity and forging intergenerational connections among lesbians.

Given TikTok’s rapid uptake by youth prior to, and during, the COVID-19 pandemic (Savic, 2021) and that 67% of American teens used the app in 2022 (Vogels et al., 2022), age is a defining element of identity on the platform. As such, research that zooms in on young people’s activity is insightful: Connell, Fields and Chudyk’s (2024) contribution to this special issue shows that young lesbians are appropriating and adapting past generations’ conceptualizations of lesbian feminism in inclusive and intersectional ways through TikToks to build bridges across generations. If young lesbians are remixing elements of the past, then what are older lesbians incorporating into their videos? This study focuses on lesbians over 30 on TikTok to understand how they harness its affordances for self-representation and the kinds of messages they convey across the platform’s multi-generational audiences. Through methods developed to surface the content of LGBTQ+ TikTokers over 30, ten lesbian creators’ accounts were qualitatively analyzed with attention to how TikTok shaped their content. Key themes across these women’s

TikToks included asserting lesbian visibility through traditional signifiers while using humour to disrupt stereotypes, sharing lived experiences to showcase choices that challenge heteronormative life stage expectations, and sharing messages of peer and intergenerational support. These videos employed TikTok's features and functionalities for creating engagement and dialogue while often reflecting dominant platform trends, some of which involved the commercialization of identity and recourse to homogenized terms to bolster algorithmic and audience recognition. Overall, this research contrasts with studies identifying generational conflict on the platform (e.g. Zeng & Abidin, 2021) to also demonstrate lesbian intergenerational bridge-building through older lesbians' uptake of younger people's platform practices, their integration of new trends to update identity representations, and attempts to understand and support youth facing present adversity by reflecting on hurdles overcome in the past. In these ways, the paper's findings reveal how identity and time factor into these mediated self-representations of lesbians over 30 in ways that model possibilities for, and solidarity with, younger generations.

Lesbian identity and queer temporalities

Much scholarship has developed theory and research regarding lesbian identity and the role of time in queer and lesbian lives. Jagose (1994) highlights that the invisibility and instability of lesbian identity stems from its disruption of dominant cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, she emphasizes that the term 'lesbian' is a discursive construction embedded within structures of power that it subverts and to which it is subjected. These definitional complications have long been felt within lesbian lives, giving rise to practices of self-identifying (or not) with a range of terms depending on one's social and

physical context (Valentine, 1993). Certain identity labels (e.g. butch, femme) also become associated with particular styles of self-representation despite a range of characteristics exhibited by women across identity labels (Walker et al., 2012). Despite sociopolitical shifts, such as the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights in some countries, identity terms still invoke deliberation and reflect potentially powerful statements. Research shows that individuals of different ages select terms associated with the political struggles most salient for them (Ben Hagai et al., 2022). Further research demonstrates that individuals across age ranges identify as lesbian for multiple reasons, including connection with community, history, and political commitments (Megarry et al., 2022).

Considering differences and similarities across age points to the focal role of time in lesbian lives. Halberstam (2005) conceptualizes “queer time” as departing from normative temporal frames of “bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (p. 20). Queer time is tied to “queer space” constituted by place-making practices of queer subcultures, which can give rise to counterpublics. Queer time can also challenge “chrononormativity” as the “use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman, 2010, p. 3) across society. Thus, queer time opens the possibility of doing things differently from traditional or expected sequences over the life course.

Studies of lesbian aging reflect these departures, highlighting how lesbians often cultivate kinship networks through strong friendships, community groups, and “chosen families” as alternatives to biological families (Ariel, 2008; Traies, 2015). Such connections provide a buffer from homophobia and remain important over time (Traies, 2015). However, breaking from heteropatriarchal trajectories has held difficulties, such as for women in the 1990s coming out in middle-age, who lacked information and support for leaving marriages and changing their

lifestyles (Jensen, 1999). Subsequently, digital platforms have emerged as outlets where queer time and space are on display, potentially enabling greater visibility and community among lesbians across generations.

Lesbian (re)mediation and digital sociality

While representation has diversified over time and sometimes resists heteronormativity (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012), broadcast media representations of lesbians still frequently uphold stereotypes, heterosexualize lesbian roles, and saddle lesbian characters with traditional narratives idealizing marriage and reproduction (Smith & Tyler, 2017). Media representations are often unfavourable of older lesbians, with films depicting them as isolated, terminally ill, and relegated to inevitable unhappy endings (Krainitzki, 2015). Even shows like the recently rebooted *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019-2023), which has been hailed as a corrective to one-dimensional representations of the past (Baker & Rutherford, 2020), depict younger characters as fixated on marriage and family while the older generation battles addiction and illness. Social media enable fans to speak back to problematic representations, such as the “bury your gays” trope wherein lesbian characters meet their inevitable demise (Waggoner, 2018), and to create their own representations.

Lesbians have been active online across decades, first as early adopters of Bulletin Board Services and web portals, followed by apps and platforms (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Correll, 1995). Beyond rendering oneself visible, digital self-representations invite engagement from others (Thumim, 2012). Thus, lesbian activity on social media not only renders sexual identity visible, but it also circulates these representations in ways that can forge relationships, gather publics, and galvanize counterpublics (Duguay, 2022). However, such social media activity

renders a discursive construction of lesbian identity that is not exempt from the power relations and structures within which it is created and shared.

Platforms afford particular routes of action that arise among digital features, user practices, and audiences. For example, the hashtag is a key feature of Instagram for organizing and locating content but, when paired with dominant user practices, only hashtags relating to specific identity labels (e.g. #lesbian, #lesbiancouple) become popular, rendering them into prevailing modes of signalling a legible lesbian identity (Herrera, 2017). Platforms' commercial interests as purveyors of entertainment and their monetization programs also incentivize users' adoption of celebrity styles alongside references to popular culture to bolster engagement through homonormative representation (Lovelock, 2017). Lastly, platforms' governance policies and their enforcement mechanisms are often hostile to sexual minorities, such as through strict bans on nudity and sexual content (Byron, 2019) as well as algorithmic curation that queer users experience as reducing their visibility (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). While many studies of lesbians and LGBTQ+ people either focus on youth or overlook age as a focal element for analysis, Robards et al. (2018) indicate the enduring relevance of social media for LGBTQ+ people's identity development and sense of community. As such, a closer look at the social media representation of lesbians over 30 is warranted.

Locating and analyzing lesbians 30+ on TikTok

TikTok is a short video platform that emerged from the Chinese technology company ByteDance's acquisition and rebranding of Musical.ly (Kaye et al., 2021). While Musical.ly already attracted youth, who were drawn to its features for overlaying content with music, young people turned to TikTok in droves to stave off boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic (Savic,

2021). With growing popularity, the app has seen an increase in users of various ages, sometimes leading to clashes among individuals of different generations (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Such “generational wars” take the form of memes and platform-wide trends through which content creators build and express generational identity, sometimes by excluding, ridiculing, or criticizing other generations (Vickery, 2022).

Despite TikTok’s appeals to LGBTQ+ users, such as through a Pride campaign called “You belong here” (TikTok, 2023), the platform has a track record of censoring and obscuring queer content. In 2019, journalists revealed moderation policies that suppressed the circulation of LGBTQ+ users’ videos (Biddle et al., 2020). While the company claims to have retracted these policies, studies of LGBTQ+ TikTok users reveal enduring experiences of censorship and reduced visibility (colloquially termed “shadowbanning”) (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Users’ awareness of this targeted moderation has given rise to practices of “algospeak,” through which they adapt hashtags and content to elude algorithmic detection, such as through euphemisms and altered spelling (Klug et al., 2023). While little TikTok research focuses on lesbians, a study of content posted to lesbian-related hashtags found that lesbian identity was *networked*, drawing on technological features to form networked connections, and *performed* in relation to others’ identity performances with reliance on garnering audiences through imitation (Nešović, 2021). This tendency toward imitation is reflected across TikTok, given that the reuse of sounds, filters, and hashtags leads the platform’s algorithmically personalized For You Feed (FYF) to aggregate videos in ways that give rise to “imitation publics” (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Users reinforce imitation publics through further activity, such as by tagging content with #LesbianTikTok to engage with the interconnected users and content representing lesbian identity.

TikTok's intensive algorithmic personalization raises methodological problems for the study of niche content, such as videos by lesbians over 30. User hashtagging is inconsistent since the hashtag is not the main mechanism for content discovery. Instead, users rely on personalized algorithmic curation of TikTok's FYF, tailored through multiple data inputs, including device settings and interactions with content (TikTok, 2024). This paper stems from a larger project examining LGBTQ+ TikTokers over 30 (Duguay, Acar & Jamet-Lange, 2023), which adapted persona methods in app studies (Dieter et al., 2019) to surface these users' content. This involved compiling lists of data inputs, specifically, usernames of popular LGBTQ+ creators over 30 and relevant hashtags (e.g. #lesbiansover30), to train two new TikTok research accounts. One account was created on an Android device with the age set to 35, configured to follow users from the list ages 30-49 and their hashtags, while the other account was created on an Apple iPad with the age set to 60, following users age 50+ and their hashtags. These decisions aimed to capture differences in TikTok's software functionality across devices and app versions as well as a wide range of relevant content.² Training was completed after approximately one week when both accounts' FYFs predominantly served content by LGBTQ+ users over 30. FYFs included a wider range of users than those on the initial input list and more recent and extensive content than what TikTok shows in hashtag searches. Videos and their metadata were collected from the FYFs concurrently with preliminary data analysis to identify recurring topics and trends until theoretical saturation. Data collection for this larger project took place from February 1-March 1, 2023, forming a sample of 247 videos by LGBTQ+ TikTokers over 30.

For this paper, the researchers focused on users in this dataset who identified as lesbian or queer women. They purposively sampled ten creators who self-identified as over 30, or—if their age was not stated—who positioned their content in contrast to TikTok's youthful population, and

who regularly posted about sexual identity in relation to age. Across this sample, stated ages ranged from mid-thirties to mid-eighties, locations included Australia, Canada, and the United States, and users had follower counts ranging from approximately 4,000-160,000. The sample included one account (@LesBeFortunate) operated by a couple in which one woman identified as Black Caribbean and the other as Puerto Rican, and the user @Palefruit's videos often featured her wife, who is a Black woman. The remaining creators appeared to be white (though this cannot be verified by appearance alone) and race did not emerge as a topic in the videos studied. These demographics reflect a limitation in this study's sampling that is also reflected in other digital research approaches, as algorithmic curation and platform governance often impose racial bias while white users co-opt the trends and hashtags of creators of color, resulting in attention economies that reinforce the visibility of whiteness (Rim, 2023). The prominence of homonormative identity expressions on social media also reinforces the circulation of whiteness to normalize otherwise deviant sexualities (Lovelock, 2017). These conditions are thus surfaced in data collection approaches, whether through conventional sampling of popular hashtags and users or newer approaches enlisting algorithmic curation. Even so, our approach aimed to center accounts whose content is likely to circulate to audiences of lesbians over 30, who may otherwise be absent in hashtag searches or non-personalized FYFs.

For each account, we reviewed many videos to gain an overarching sense of the user's content, and then collected five videos that were reflective of this content more broadly. Two rounds of qualitative coding were conducted with this corpus of 50 videos, applying descriptive and categorical codes leading to the emergence of themes (Saldaña, 2021). Coding applied a constructivist grounded theory lens, which involved inductive analysis of each video and consideration of how users construct meaning within TikTok and in relation to broader

sociocultural structures (Charmaz, 2017), including attention to platform affordances and incorporating audience comments into analysis when relevant. Both authors examined videos and reached consensus through iterative discussion and writing about themes (Cascio et al., 2019). Although these accounts are public and have substantial followings, usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms to safeguard user privacy. While some popular users may still be recognizable in how they are described here, this recognizability accords with their projected level of publicness, as creators who circulate content widely to audiences of thousands of users. Ethical fabrication has been used to alter some quotes to reduce the searchability and identification of individual users (Tiidenberg, 2018) while still including sufficient detail to support the analysis. This study has received ethical approval from Concordia University (certification number 30016788).

Findings and Discussion

The following sections discuss emergent and overlapping themes in the videos examined and TikTok's role in shaping this content. First, we examine how sexual identity and age, or temporality, were interwoven in these users' self-representations through references to recognizable tropes alongside novel remediations. Second, we analyze how the passage of time and changing social contexts are reflected in these users' videos, indicating breaks from chrononormativity and representing possibilities for queer aging and futures. Lastly, we discuss videos that shared advice with audiences imagined to be peers, such as other lesbians in need of guidance, and declared support for LGBTQ+ youth in their contemporary struggles.

Algorithmic and temporal co-constructions of identity

A range of sexual identity terms appeared across videos. These included variations on lesbian identity, such as “women loving women” (wlw), and often combined sexual identity with references to gender identity (e.g., cis, trans) or gender expression (e.g., butch, stud). Many TikTokers referred to sexual identity and age together, such as in hashtags like #lesbiansoftiktokover30 or the phrase “late in life lesbian,” implying that coming out took place at a life stage later than one’s youth. “Lesbian” was the most prominent identity term and lesbian visibility was a central theme in many videos, often accomplished through reference to common signifiers and stereotypes. One creator, @PaleFruit, tells a story about how—despite having a short haircut that is “freshly stereotype-lesbianed up”—she was mistaken for a man in a heterosexual relationship when walking out of a large chain store alongside her wife. In disbelief, she states, “Read the room, Karen!” out of the mistaken employee’s earshot, asserting that it should be clear that she is a lesbian. The need to state, and sometimes overstate, lesbian identity speaks to its enduring invisibility (Jagose, 1994) and spurs TikTokers to claim this identity unambiguously. A commenter on @PaleFruit’s video empathetically recounts a similar situation in which a medical professional asked her and her wife if they were “sisters or friends.” These experiences speak to Ahmed’s (2006) observation that such instances constitute “the disappearance of lesbian desire [that] simultaneously involves the erasure of signs of difference” (p. 96). While onlookers entrenched in heteronormative ways of seeing assimilate lesbian couples into heterosexual or non-sexual relationships, TikTok provides an outlet for asserting and affirming lesbian identity.

The repetition of lesbian, as a specific term, and similar content across videos renders lesbian identity datafiable for TikTok’s mechanisms of algorithmic personalization. Different from many other platforms which, even while integrating algorithms, are still largely centred

around follower networks, TikTok's intensive algorithmic curation is particularly useful for identity and interest-specific content discovery. Through the FYF, similar videos are served to users in an experience often described as arriving at a niche part of the app (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). This experience is reflected in @MysticalLes's video responding to a user's comment on one of her past TikToks. Pinned to the top of the video through TikTok's functionality, the comment reads: "I'm not sure how I ended up here but I'm here questioning my sexuality." @MysticalLes explains that the COVID-19 pandemic led many women to join the platform and discover LesbianTikTok, meaning that through these users' activity, their feeds became tailored to serve a flow of lesbian videos, possibly reflecting something previously unrealized about their sexual identity. Media articles further reflected this phenomenon, recounting women's experiences of identifying their non-heterosexuality due to TikTok (e.g., Naftulin, 2022), illustrating the importance of lesbian representation to such realizations. @MysticalLes's video also recognizes the mutually reinforcing role of TikTok's algorithmic curation and user practices, which give rise to experiences of LesbianTikTok. Within these sociotechnical arrangements, users may default to "lesbian" due to its widespread use and networked legibility, similar to the dominance of #lesbian on Instagram (Herrera, 2017), while the platform reinforces the term's use through its algorithmic recognizability and wider circulation of associated content.

The TikToks we examined also drew on the practice of incorporating humor into short video to poke fun at stereotypes (Calhoun, 2019) while temporally situating creators. @WorkerViews, a self-described feminist posting frequently about labour issues, made a video on Lesbian Visibility Day purporting to dispel common myths about lesbians. While listing stereotypes that supposedly do not apply to all lesbians, such as having short hair, wearing flannels, and owning a copy of *The L Word*, her words are juxtaposed with visuals displaying her

with a short haircut, in a flannel shirt, and next to a stack of *The L Word* DVDs. Such a video recognizes but also jokes about what have now become traditional markers of lesbian identity. Through specific trappings of lesbian culture, such as a DVD set of *The L Word* (2004-2009), the video locates this individual within a temporality of lesbian representation, particularly, that of the early 2000s. Similarly, in a duet (a TikTok format that enables videos to be shown side-by-side) @CountryJane mimics the gestures in a younger lesbian's video showing off attributes that reflect both users' identities as self-described butch lesbians, such as overalls and a muscular build. Juxtaposing these videos demonstrates continuity in lesbian identity construction between generations while also providing younger butches with representation of older butches.

Videos that draw on stereotypes and show continuities among identity markers but still leave room for other forms of identity expression reflect Freeman's (2010) notion of temporal drag. She integrates dual meanings of "drag," first acknowledging how the past can drag into the present, as reflected by the continuation of particular styles. However, referencing Judith Butler's invocation of performative drag to elucidate gender as a performance, time can be performed as "repetition with a difference" (Butler cited in Freeman, 2010, p. 63) wherein "the crucial difference seems to be novelty" (Freeman, 2010, p. 63). Therefore, while these videos demonstrate how signifiers of lesbian identity drag into today's self-representations, including those of younger lesbians, they can also irreverently dislodge stereotypes and make way for new identity expressions. For example, a video by @LesBeFortunate welcomes viewers to "the DINK (Double Income No Kids) Lesbian Side of TikTok, where we travel when we want, fly business class, sleep in, regularly go to the spa, eat at top restaurants, spend and still save money!" Following decades of political and media focus on LGBTQ+ people's access to the traditional institutions of marriage and family-rearing, this subset of DINK lesbian accounts

celebrates the lifestyle afforded by resisting heteronormative expectations for women to bear children. Further, these specific creators demonstrate financial success in the face of enduring racialized economic inequality in the US where they are based (Caliendo, 2021). TikTok also plays a role in these new identity formations, facilitating the crossover of lesbian content and DINK videos by heterosexual couples. What emerges is a genre that queers heteronormative familial obligations, even if it does so through the valorization of consumption. DINK lesbian videos, such as those by @LesBeFortunate, encompass a duality, defying stigmas concerning sexual and racial identity that have long affected individuals' financial efficacy while also reflecting the commercialization of identity through social media (Lovelock, 2017).

Lived experience over time and nonnormative life paths

While personal address is a common way to build intimacy through digital video formats (Lange, 2019), accounts in this study largely shared personal experiences related to coming out, being in same sex relationships, parenting from a lesbian perspective, and responding to shifting societal contexts. The notion of time underscored these videos, approached through lenses of nostalgia and memory, social and political change, and departures from normative life paths. Several creators showcased memories and encapsulated a sense of nostalgia through stylistic choices indicating the passing of time. For example, @PaleFruit posted an old portrait of her and her wife from the 1990s fading into a current-day clip of the two in the same pose. Using TikTok's sound feature, the visuals were accompanied by lyrics about time flying.

Similarly, the account @LesGrandmas showcases the lives and relationship of two lesbian grandmas in their 80s, featuring in TikToks that are often filmed by their granddaughter. Videos range from depicting simple domestic scenes of "dinner at grandmas" to recounting one

of the women's first forays into a gay bar, and the two of them dancing together. Such content provides an alternative to broadcast media's negative depictions (Krainitzki, 2015) and may be a source of inspiration for younger lesbians who may not otherwise encounter older lesbians (Jensen, 1999), enabling them to imagine their future. Chance encounters among lesbians of diverse ages became even more imperative due to the COVID-19 pandemic, given the shuttering of LGBTQ+ venues, queer youth being confined to their homes – many with unsupportive family members – and young people turning to online spaces to find community (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023). Thus, TikTok re-creates happenstance encounters among lesbians of different ages that can be difficult to access in other public spaces.

TikToks recounting older lesbian's lived experiences also expose younger audiences to lesbian histories and changes in LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance. In a TikTok by @LesGrandmas, one of the women recounts a call with her bank during which she was asked, "Who is [this person]?" prompting her to respond with the words "my wife" for the first time in her life. She acknowledges that being able to say "my wife" may not be as notable for younger lesbians who grew up in a context of relative LGBTQ+ acceptance, but that it is a special moment for her as it is "hard to teach an old dog new tricks." A similar sentiment about social acceptance emerges in @WorkerViews's TikTok about the word "pride." When she first came out "in the dark ages," she jokes, pride meant acting in defiance of society's expectations; it was a way of finding strength and resilience in community. She observes that pride is more focused on celebration now and reflects, "Don't get me wrong, a lot still needs fixing. But for me, the fact that the word 'pride' includes all that joy, is progress." These and other TikToks that draw on the past mobilize the capacity of memory to "challenge the inevitability of dominant constructions of 'reality'" (Castiglia & Reed, 2011, p. 12) while also constituting "communities

assembled through memory” (p. 27). Older lesbian TikTokers share memories that resonate with one another while demonstrating to younger audiences that present-day hurdles are not inevitable.

Lastly, videos showcasing personal experiences challenged heteronormative expectations for life stages, reflecting the nonnormativity of queer time (Halberstam, 2005). Our dataset contained many videos by self-described “late in life lesbians” or “late-blooming lesbians,” terms used mainly by women in their late 30s, 40s, or older in content focused on users’ experiences of realizing they were lesbian after being married to men and/or cultivating a nuclear family. By describing experiences of coming out later in life, these TikToks draw attention to compulsory heterosexuality and break with heteronormative conceptions of lifepaths. In one video, @Felix4040, who self-describes as a “baby gay,” a (self-)identifier for queer people who have just recently come out, discusses the tension between mourning the time lost while she was living as straight while also feeling glad that she married her husband and had children. She felt that she needed to be in a heterosexual marriage to have children, and despite her mixed feelings, hopes that discussing coming out “late in life” opens the possibility for others watching to feel less constrained by these expectations.

A self-described activist, @DaringDaria explains in one of her videos that while growing up in a small conservative, Christian community, she was taught that “you find someone, settle down, get married, have kids, and continue the cycle.” However, she knew she was queer at age 17 and moved away. When she and her partner decided to have children much later, she admits that she was worried her sons would also be queer and experience homophobia. She was able to relinquish this fear by teaching them “to look at the world and people in it through love,” allowing her to also accept whoever they love. This TikTok is not only about @DaringDaria

breaking from heteronormative life stages but also about her struggle to fight the reproduction of heteronormativity across generations.

Advice and intergenerational solidarity

Several accounts disseminated information about different aspects of lesbian identity and lifestyles, answering viewer questions about recognizing one's attraction to women, coming out, and dating. @MysticalLes shares advice from her perspective as a long-time lesbian who can light the way for newly out "baby gays." In one video playfully discussing "eating the grapefruit," she gives tips about how to have oral sex with a woman, drawing insights from her past sexual experiences. In another video, she warns newly out lesbians not to assume that the first woman they fall in love with will be *the one*, countering the trope that lesbian relationships need to become serious quickly. These videos continue traditions of lesbians leaning on a "chosen family" or community for support (Traies, 2015) while accessing information about sexual identity and sexuality online (Robards et al., 2018). They also fit into TikTok's broader genre of advice-giving, from make-up tutorials to therapists advising on healthy emotional expression (Blum, 2021), in which users incorporate microcelebrity practices of personal address and conveying relatability to build a relationship with viewers (Marwick, 2016). The TikTokers we observed used empathic statements, such as "I know how you feel," combined with humor to create an affective bond with audiences, one that can give rise to a sense of community while boosting engagement metrics. Thus, TikTok's context as a social entertainment platform that could be potentially lucrative for creators becomes evident—for example—in @LateLes's videos that point users to her website where she sells a support program for women coming out late in life. The use of euphemisms, such as "grapefruit" as a stand-in for vulva, recognizes that certain

terms might be subject to algorithmic moderation and reductions in visibility (Klug et al., 2023), countering intentions to reach broad audiences. Following in the footsteps of platform influencers, these users' practices for garnering attention co-exist alongside gestures toward community-building (Lovelock, 2017).

Other videos focused on support for queer youth. Several of @CountryJane's videos promoted intergenerational communication, such as the clip mentioned at this article's outset advising younger and older lesbians on how to build friendships. In a video discussing the pressures that young lesbians may feel about achieving certain goalposts (such as dating or having sex), she reassures viewers that they do not have to follow specific timelines. This assertion again challenges chrononormativity by speaking against the transfer of heteronormative temporal expectations to lesbian lives (Freeman, 2010). Using TikTok's stitch feature to integrate another user's clips into a new video, @CountryJane responds to a younger lesbian expressing difficulties with finding community by telling her, "You're okay just as you are, you will find people to help you...and look at this—you have this big world of TikTok...and we're here for you." She underscores the community lesbians have created on TikTok and calls on them to support each other, especially across generations. This exchange reflects the desire many lesbians express for intergenerational friendships with other lesbians wherein young lesbians can experience guidance and support from older lesbians (Stanley, 2002). TikTok's stitch and duet functions allow for direct engagement among lesbians of different ages and their use by creators such as @CountryJane encourages other older lesbians to reach out to younger lesbians, and to be in community with them.

Some videos expressing support for queer youth call on other LGBTQ+ adults to stand with them. A TikTok by @MarcieWilson, a trans lesbian in her early 40s, debunks a politician's

claim that adults giving out “mom hugs” or “dad hugs” (hugs from people who are parents) at Pride events pose a threat to young people by persuading them toward homosexuality.

@MarcieWilson clarifies that these gestures are not for children whose parents are in their lives but are instead for people who “no longer have parents, because they’re queer and their parents disowned them.” She tearfully recounts finding solace in the support provided by someone wearing a “free mom hugs” t-shirt who comforted her when she was disowned by her parents. She encourages her viewers to consider wearing such shirts and giving out hugs to queer youth. With similar conviction, @WorkerViews notifies viewers of a queer youth event that her municipal council cancelled due to “threats from neo-Nazis and anti-LGBTQ groups.” She emphasizes that the queer kids who were going to attend “are who matter,” rather than the hate groups, and she wants them to know that “they are loved.” Her followers chime in throughout the comments expressing support for queer youth, encouraging adults to stand with and rally for young people. Such videos reflect that older lesbians care deeply about the conditions that queer youth are facing and they contribute to an intergenerational counterpublic that can speak back against hate.

Conclusion

Overall, this study illustrates how lesbians over age 30 are self-representing on TikTok in ways that diverge, and are often absent from, mainstream media while they incorporate, and interact with, youthful platform practices and expressions. Our findings reveal the significance of such representations in relation to three main thematic areas. First, TikTokers in our study expressed lesbian identity in ways that reflect coherent continuity, such as through longstanding stereotypes, to facilitate visibility while also making room for new identity expressions. These

expressions draw on the past and present of lesbian representation to expand who is recognized as lesbian while asserting visibility despite continued circumstances in which lesbians are invisibilized or desexualized. Second, TikToks in which lesbians showcase life experiences, the passage of time, and a celebration of aging allow them to become role models for young lesbians, providing a sense of futurity that is otherwise lacking in media narratives of decline and death (Krainitzki, 2015). These videos also highlight changes in societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, providing a collective sense of hope rather than individualized notions of progress. Lastly, videos in which lesbians share advice for peers or youth, and videos expressing solidarity with LGBTQ+ youth, have the capacity to build and sustain a sense of community. Such outlets for obtaining information and finding support have become even more integral to LGBTQ+ people's wellbeing given the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and socioeconomic factors that diminish lesbians' ability to occupy public spaces and find each other offline. Therefore, our study shows how TikTok is being used by lesbians for focal expressions of identity and age, lived experience over time with the capacity to challenge heteronormativity and chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010), and to provide youth with historical perspectives and solidarity as they encounter new attacks on LGBTQ+ rights.

TikTok facilitates and shapes these expressions of identity and bids for intergenerational connection. While it enables heightened algorithmic discoverability of lesbian content, its rendering of "lesbian" into data for personalized recommendations has the potential to encourage homogenized, imitative content. Even so, the emergent experience of LesbianTikTok enables individuals – young and old – to see their sexual identity reflected on the platform and for different generations to integrate longstanding and novel expressions of lesbian identity in their content (Connell, Fields, & Chudyk, 2024). The platform's many features, such as stitches,

duets, sounds, and captions, enable engagement with others as well as imbuing videos with emotion, nostalgia, and attention-grabbing enhancements. However, dominant platform practices, alongside the potential for monetization and the imperative toward microcelebrity, may propel some creators to share advice or circulate bids for connection as strategies more so for accumulating followers than building community. While these platform dynamics may contribute to the homonormativity and commercialization of content (Lovelock, 2017), this study shows that they do not preclude the creation of compelling lesbian representations.

While the study's methods present limitations, such as the propensity of algorithmic curation to surface some accounts over others or the paper's relatively small sample, it also points to future directions for research. Subsequent studies may employ large-scale data collection, using bespoke digital tools or programs that query TikTok's Research API,³ to consider the significance of certain forms of lesbian representation (e.g., hashtags, songs) across the platform. Alternatively, interviews with lesbian TikTokers over 30, especially narrative inquiry approaches that invite sharing life stories in relation to digital representation, could foster deeper understandings of these users' experiences, motivations, and intentions. While much focus has been placed on the generational divides that exist on TikTok (Vickery, 2022; Zeng & Abidin, 2021), this study has uncovered how lesbians over 30 are using the platform to model the possibility of cultivating fulfilling lives while building bridges of solidarity to support youth into the future.

Notes

1. We use LGBTQ+ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other diverse sexual and gender identities. “Lesbian” and “queer” are used in relation to how they appear in the literature and how users describe themselves.
2. Device locations and connection to wifi networks pose limitations for this approach in that FYFs may have been more likely to surface content related to the researchers’ location, especially at the beginning of the training phrase.
3. API stands for Application Programming Interface. TikTok’s Research API is presently limited to researchers in the U.S. and Europe who meet specific criteria, raising barriers for some scholars and modes of research while presenting the potential of commercial interference in research protocols. See <https://developers.tiktok.com/products/research-api/>

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