

"Where Did All the Lesbians Go?" A Content Analysis of the Sense of Community within Lesbian Spaces on TikTok

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As physical lesbian spaces continue to diminish, platforms like TikTok have become essential for queer women seeking community. This study uses deductive content analysis, guided by McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community framework, to examine how membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection are expressed in these digital spaces. By analyzing the top 100 comments on two videos from 11 popular lesbian TikTok creators, whose followers range from 340 thousand to 9 million, the research explores how a sense of community is fostered online. A total of 22 videos were analyzed, with comments coded into key themes. The findings reveal how users express solidarity through mutual support and validation, often rooted in shared language and collective experiences unique to lesbian identity. Commenters navigate issues such as relationships and societal marginalization, fostering a sense of belonging. However, tensions emerge as users grapple with inclusivity and representation, particularly around race, gender identity, and the evolving definition of lesbian identity. These discussions highlight both the unifying aspects of digital lesbian spaces and the challenges of ensuring diverse voices are heard. This research underscores TikTok's evolving role in shaping lesbian identity and community, spotlighting both opportunities and challenges for fostering belonging.

Keywords: Lesbian, TikTok, Social Media, Community

A sense of community is a critical component in facilitating well-being in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer + (LGBTQ+) individuals (McLaren., 2009; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Research in the past 20 years has highlighted the LGBTQ+ community's ability to create a sense of community in virtual spaces (Cavalcante, 2018; Gorkemli, 2012; Gross, 2003). Most recently, the social media platform "TikTok" has appeared to resonate with the LGBTQ+ community as a whole (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023; Simpson & Seeman, 2020), and subgroups within the larger community, including the lesbian community (Gray, 2018; Hanmer, 2013).

However, research examining how this subset of the LGBTQ+ community uses social media to build a sense of community online is sparse and virtually nonexistent when examining TikTok. Due to previous research establishing the importance of a sense of community for LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as research indicating that the community as a whole can benefit from virtual spaces that produce an online sense of community, the present study aimed to identify how a sense of community is created by lesbians on TikTok.

It has been well documented that the LGBTQ+ community experiences higher frequencies of discrimination and victimization due to their LGBTQ+ identity, contributing to higher frequencies of mental

health concerns (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Resilience factors, such as a sense of community, have been identified as a buffer against these outcomes for the community (Frost & Meyer, 2012; McLaren et al., 2013) as well as enhance protective factors, such as social support and self-esteem (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Petruzzella et al., 2019). A sense of community has been defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together," (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Fostering a sense of community is important for LGBTQ+ people, as it serves as an access point for both tangible and intangible resources (APA Task Force on Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons, 2021; de Lira & de Moraes, 2018). Connection to the LGBTQ+ community and its culture also serves as a mechanism to facilitate identity development, with individuals claiming that the community's support results in stronger identity development (Closson & Comeau, 2021; Parmenter et al., 2020). However, the impact of a sense of community appears to vary depending on one's sexual identity, with bisexual people reporting feeling a reduced sense of belonging when compared to lesbian and gay individuals, which may speak to experiencing biphobia within the larger LGBTQ+

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community (Kertzner et al., 2009; Lambe et al., 2017), and suggests that the impact of a sense of community may vary across different sexual and gender identities.

Lesbians have actively contributed to facilitating community connectedness in the larger LGBTQ+ community, specifically regarding their role in the contribution of blood donations amidst the HIV-AIDS epidemic during the 1980s (Hutchison, 2015). Although there is less research on lesbian and queer women, some research has found that a sense of community provides a buffer against adverse mental health outcomes and enhances protective factors for the lesbian community (Busby et al., 2020; McLaren, 2009; McLaren & Castillo, 2021; Zimmerman et al., 2015). Spaces exclusive to lesbians have been valued by the community, with lesbian bars being a cornerstone of lesbian culture and a facilitator of community connectedness (Faderman, 1991). These spaces serve a dual purpose of being a place for in-person connection and the flourishing of lesbian identities while also providing a safe environment against potential discrimination from the larger community (Brown-Saracino, 2019; Corteen, 2002; Hankin, 2002; Hartless, 2018).

There has been a concerning trend of a diminishment of lesbian-specific spaces for the community to meet. In 2021, almost 200 lesbian bars shut down, with 20 remaining (Compton, 2021). Reasoning for these closures may speak to various changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rieger, 2020) and the undermining of women-specific spaces in the interest of appearing non-trans-exclusionary (Stryker & Bettcher, 2016). This is concerning when considering that lesbian bars have historically had either the lowest or second-lowest prevalence rate of all LGBTQ+ bars, second only to bars catering to LGBTQ+ POC (Mattson, 2019).

These closures leave the lesbian community to either gather in unwelcoming heterosexual spaces or try to integrate into LGBTQ+ spaces dominated by white, cisgender gay men, with a recent study examining that the remaining 15 owners of lesbian or LGBTQ+ bar in the USA do not prioritize female-only spaces (Mattson, 2020). There is a sense of loss associated with this decrease in lesbian-specific spaces, with multiple documentaries and memorials being created by the community to represent this mourning (Brown-Saracino, 2020; Clements, 2019; Denny, 2015). Moreover, physical spaces that

facilitate a sense of community, such as LGBTQ+ bars, have experienced high closure rates due to the COVID-19 shutdown of businesses (Mattson, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on LGBTQ+ spaces cannot be understated. Scrogg and colleagues' (2020) examination of the impact of social distancing guidelines on LGBTQ+ emerging adults revealed that the guidelines resulted in lower levels of hope and community connectedness as well as higher alcohol use. The pandemic also had a unique impact on LGBTQ+ youth, as many noted that they were restricted to staying in home environments deemed unsafe to express their LGBTQ+ identity (Fish et al., 2020). These numbers have started to rebound as more lesbian bars reopen (Glassman-Hughes, 2023; Hoeffler, 2023); however, they have not recovered to their numbers before the pandemic (Mattson, 2023). These reductions of spaces for lesbians are concerning, as this loss of a sense of community leads LGBTQ+ individuals to be more vulnerable to detrimental mental health outcomes as a result of minority stress due to being unable to benefit from the protective factors and buffers that a sense of community provides.

The need and benefit of establishing spaces that form a sense of community online has been an endeavour that the LGBTQ+ community has historically been invested in, with Gross (2003) noting LGBTQ+ individuals were pioneers in utilizing the internet to find community. For example, drag performers have utilized social media to replace in-person performances to combat isolation (Rieger, 2020). Virtual spaces which bring a sense of community have also been established in response to large-scale discrimination, as illustrated by one study which examined the impact of a virtual forum facilitating open discussion for LGBTQ+ students following the 2016 Orlando mass shooting, an event that has been understood as an LGBTQ+ hate crime (Jackson, 2017). Students from this study noted that the form helped them receive support, disclose their distress associated with the event, and emotionally process the event. These attempts to connect online speak to the resilience and adaptability of the community, as well as the inherent importance of a sense of community.

Research indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals use social media in several ways, including obtaining romantic connections and friendships (Miller, 2015), accessing resources (McInroy et al., 2019),

and existing in accepting spaces they may not have in their offline lives (Higa et al., 2014). In particular, online gay and lesbian associations have been cited as a source of activism, support, and a way to facilitate an online sense of community (Gorkemli, 2012). There is a small body of research examining this phenomenon of internet usage in lesbian communities. However, these findings are promising, as multiple studies state that lesbians also find this sense of community online (Gray, 2018; Hanmer, 2013).

Burke's (2000) study notes that personal advertisements online in the lesbian community facilitate connection and community engagement. Burke suggests that the internet may be unique for lesbian community engagement, as this space may feel safer than a traditional lesbian bar. In recent research, lesbian social media content creators note that their audiences feel more connected and represented when the creators discuss their lesbian identity in their content (Ladegaard, 2023).

In recent years, "TikTok," a social media application focused on video sharing, has gained increased usage (Unni & Weinstein, 2020) and has been identified as a space for LGBTQ+ individuals to feel connected with their community (Simpson & Semaan, 2020). LGBTQ+ youth note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok was a powerful tool for managing family relations, facilitating LGBTQ+ identity development and community belongingness, and sharing resources (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Similar to other online gay and lesbian communities, TikTok appears to have the potential to be a space for activism, possibly through its LGBTQ+ oriented content being an inspiration for users to consider a future where discrimination against the community is eliminated (Duguay, 2023). Explorations on how lesbian and queer women use the platform are minimal; however, there is a small body of research suggesting that the platform can be used for identity expression and activism for this group, particularly through the presence of "sapphic pop" on the platform (McEwan, 2023) and the community label of "Lesbian TikTok". For the purposes of this study, "Lesbian TikTok" is operationally defined as content and interactions on TikTok that specifically focus on lesbian identities, experiences, and issues, including videos created by and for lesbian individuals that promote community engagement, support, and activism.

Methods

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

The research team was composed of several individuals with various backgrounds and experiences with the study's subject matter. The first author identifies as a white, pansexual demigirl who was a first-year Master's student during the data collection process and served as a coder. The second author is a white, lesbian, cisgender woman who was an assistant professor and provided consultation and support with the methods and writing process. The third author identifies as a lesbian autistic woman, was also a first-year Master's student during the data collection and served as the first auditor of the project.

The fourth author identifies as a queer Indigenous person, was also a first-year Master's student, and served as a second coder. The final author is a white queer woman who was a social media consultant at the time of data collection. Our team consisted of members with varying degrees of involvement with social media, with some members being frequent users of LGBTQ+ TikTok in particular and others being more passive consumers of LGBTQ+ social media in general. These varying engagement levels allowed the team to consult and review the data from multiple vantage points.

We approached this study with a shared interest in the importance of a sense of community for lesbians, specifically exploring how social media can play a role in facilitating this sense of community. The research team extensively discussed how our experience with social media and the LGBTQ+ community would impact the study. Despite all researchers sharing an LGBTQ+ identity, their experience with social media varied, specifically with TikTok. Due to their first-hand experience of being LGBTQ+ and engaging in social media, as well as their previous work examining the LGBTQ+ community's experience with social media, the first author approached the study with the belief that social media can function as a way for lesbians to obtain a sense of community. However, they also acknowledged that social media can also be a space for LGBTQ+ content creators to experience discrimination from other users, which they remained cognizant of throughout the coding process.

Data Sources

The research team collected the top 100 comments on two videos from 11 popular lesbian TikTok content creators. These accounts predominantly featured

individual creators; however, two accounts featured lesbian couples who shared ownership of the account. During data collection, these videos had a subscriber range of 340 thousand to 9 million. There were no pre-established relationships between commenters, content creators, or the research team. However, one member was familiar with the content creators through their usage of TikTok, which helped inform the coding team of current events on the platform and provided context to certain comment sections.

Procedure

Prior to any data collection, the team received an exemption from the Research Ethics Board for analyzing the comments due to all data being publicly available. The team's criteria for the video was that (1) the video was made within the last year prior to analysis (from February 2022 to February 2023), and (2) the video directly addressed lesbian/queer women's experiences. The third author (primary auditor) then selected fifteen lesbian TikTok content creators by cross-referencing four online articles that listed popular lesbian influencers for review. Then, the auditor looked up the creators to determine if their content met the aforementioned criteria. Four creators from the original list were excluded from the analyses because their content did not meet the criteria or their account was removed from the platform, resulting in a final list of eleven content creators who produced content that met the study's criteria.

Following this review, we identified a maximum of two videos from each content creator. In situations where more than two videos from the creator fit the criteria, the videos with the most comments were selected, based on rationale that these videos had the most user engagement. This resulted in a final 22 videos being analyzed by the coding team. We then extracted the top 100 comments pre-sorted by TikTok with comments with the most likes or responses using Apify's TikTok Comments Scraper software program. The program scraped comments from TikTok videos, including comment text, user ID, timestamp, number of replies, replies content, and number of likes. In instances where videos had fewer than 100 comments, all comments were extracted and analyzed on NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Neither the content creators nor commenters were engaged at any point in the selection and collection process.

Analysis

Guiding Theory

The purpose of this study was to better understand how a sense of community is demonstrated on Lesbian TikTok. While different theoretical models exist for conceptualizing community, we selected McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community framework due to its longstanding application in both offline and digital spaces. Their model, which identifies four key components—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection—provided a structured foundation for analyzing community building in an online context. This framework has been widely applied to digital communities, including social media, online support groups, and virtual activism spaces, demonstrating its adaptability to non-traditional, technology-mediated interactions (Blanchard, 2008; Obst et al., 2002).

Prior research has shown that McMillan and Chavis' model effectively captures how users express belonging and influence within online platforms, making it particularly relevant for examining TikTok's role in fostering community among lesbian users (Chen et al., 2013). The model's emphasis on shared emotional connection is especially applicable in digital spaces, where community members rely on text, video content, and interactive comment sections to build social bonds and validate identities (Oh et al., 2014). Recognizing the unique affordances of TikTok, including its algorithm-driven engagement and participatory culture, we adapted McMillan and Chavis' framework to analyze how community manifests in this dynamic online space. The coding team conducted a close reading of McMillan and Chavis' original article (1989), carefully aligning its four core components with observable user behaviours on TikTok. Through a series of three iterative discussions, the research team refined the codebook to ensure that the framework adequately captured the nuances of online interaction, identity expression, and community-building behaviours specific to Lesbian TikTok.

Deductive Content Analysis

Deductive content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017) is a type of content analysis in which the coding framework originates from a theory, operationalizing the theory within the coding process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Deductive content analysis' utility for the present study resides in its ability to analyze data on a previous-

ly identified framework (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Initially, the first auditor created a codebook of 22 potential subthemes based on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community framework and a preliminary review of the data. During the coding process, the first auditor and two coders engaged in discussions to refine the definitions and applicability of the subthemes.

Through this iterative process, two additional subthemes emerged that were not fully captured by the original 22 subthemes. Specifically, the team identified a need to differentiate between explicit expressions of identity affirmation and implicit forms of community validation, leading to the addition of the subthemes "Identity Affirmation" and "Community Rituals." The final codebook consisted of 24 subthemes, reflecting a more nuanced representation of how users engaged with the content. Additionally, comments where the intended meaning could not be determined—either due to language barriers or ambiguity in context—were categorized under a 25th code titled "Unknown." This ensured that un-codable data was systematically accounted for without forcing interpretations that could misrepresent user intent.

After establishing the codebook and coding the videos, it was decided that comments could be coded two to five times to capture the nuances of the established subthemes. The two coders were then assigned different comment sections to code independently. In this process, the coders also used memoing to document and reflect on the process during each coding session, which helped inform several discussion points. Upon finishing the coding, the auditor and two coders met to discuss the findings and the process, informing the initial results.

Methodological Integrity

Perspective management in data collection was established through ongoing discussions between the coding team about how their own identities and perspectives may influence the analysis, maintaining awareness of these perspectives throughout the process. As recommended by Levitt and colleagues (2018), we utilized memoing and engaged in extensive conversations before and during the analysis process. These conversations included establishing agreement on the codebook between the two coders and the auditor before analysis and reviewing all coding by the first auditor to ensure the codes aligned with the subthemes.

While a formal interrater reliability check (e.g.,

Cohen's kappa) was not conducted, the research team took multiple steps to ensure coding consistency through these discussions and ongoing reflection. The second author, who served as a consultant, also suggested restructuring the findings. Given the constructivist paradigm of this study, which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge and subjective meaning-making, these changes significantly modified the results section to reduce the emphasis on the frequency of each subtheme. Instead, they emphasized how the most common subthemes manifested in the comments. This restructuring was discussed extensively by the research team and was agreed upon as being best aligned with the study's goal of better understanding how a sense of community is presented in lesbian TikTok content creators' comment sections.

Results

Through the results, we identified codes aligning with each of the original four tenets established by McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of a sense of community: membership, shared emotional connection, influence and integration, and fulfillment of needs. All subthemes in our codebook guided by this theory were identified in some capacity, with prominence varying greatly between subthemes. A total of 2,070 comments were coded. However, we elected to explain the most salient subthemes from each theme to illustrate better how commenters experienced more prominent subthemes of a sense of community.

Membership

Membership was exhibited through commenters' sense of belonging within the lesbian TikTok community and expressed feelings of belongingness. Specific methods that commenters expressed this theme included users disclosing their own experiences, their investment in current events relevant to the lesbian community, and noting that they felt accepted by content creators and fellow commenters. To illustrate this, we selected three of the most salient subthemes that arose through our analysis: an investment of the self, shared importance of events and tasks, and emotional safety.

Investment

The subtheme of investment of the self was presented through users expressing personal sentiments regarding their lesbian identity and lived experiences. In comments with this subtheme, users often provided insight into their own experiences of being a lesbian

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and mentioned their struggles with coming out. These conversations were often extensions of the video content itself, with users contributing their narratives and similarities to the lesbian experiences that the videos highlighted as well as their attraction to the content creators. For example, one user mentioned their previous same-sex attraction before coming out with the comment, “haha! my friend and I would play house at 10yrs & my mom caught us kissing like parents do. she freaked! I didn’t get to play with her anymore after.” (AveryCyrusV1, reference 16). Overall, this sub-theme reflected the relationship between user and creator experiences and their vulnerability in expressing these experiences online. This subtheme occurred 196 times and was found in 9.47% of all comments.

Shared Importance of Events and Tasks

The subtheme of shared importance of events and tasks was demonstrated through users expressing their sentiments regarding current topics of interest regarding popular topics amongst the lesbian community both on and off TikTok. Relationship speculation was highlighted as an important topic for users. In particular, one creator, speculated to be in a relationship with another popular creator in the videos extracted during the analysis, resulted in many users discussing this rumoured relationship in their comment sections. This discussion was also had on the other content creator’s videos, with one user stating “It’s my favourite drama show...Jojo, if u see this... we need u to stop for the sake of all lesbians...u know the lesbians are lesbianing too hard when king princess says so” (Kingprincessofficial69V1) on a video that referenced this situation. This overlap of discussion across videos demonstrates how prevalent the shared importance of events and tasks relevant to the community is expressed throughout multiple creators’ videos. In total, the shared importance of events and tasks was mentioned in comments 132 times, making up 6.38% of comments.

Emotional Safety

Emotional safety refers to the security that users felt and expressed within the comment sections explicitly. Emotional safety consisted of the overt disclosure of the users in the comment sections feeling secure and a space for inclusion, which helped facilitate moments of investment by disclosing their personal experiences. One user expressed their adoration for a creator being a safe space for them by saying, “You’re such a safe person I love this.” Another comment also addressed how they

appreciated that a creator made a video about going no contact with family due to their lesbian identity as the content itself became a space to alleviate their isolation in the matter. They expressed this gratitude with the following comment: “i always have felt so uncomfortable about this topic and alone. this helps so much.”

This sub-theme described the level of security that users felt when engaging with creators and other users on the platform. This subtheme often overlapped with the previous two subthemes, yet was distinct in that it facilitated users expressing themselves. In particular, emotional safety was intertwined with the level of comfort and vulnerability users stated when expressing their connection with creators and their content on TikTok. This sub-theme occurred 130 times, accounting for 6.28% of all comments.

Influence

The key component of influence refers to the degree to which community members are able to impact and shape the community’s decisions, activities, and outcomes. It reflects the extent of individual and collective power and control within the community. In the current dataset, influence was represented by members extrapolating their own lesbian/queer woman identity from the video content in the form of comments, expressing their own opinions and views within the context of the video, and meshing into the larger lesbian TikTok community by expressing the same sentiment as a larger theme of comments on the video. By doing this, users expressed personal sentiment and conformity to the video’s messages. The three most common themes identified included consensual validation, personal stake, and conformity.

Consensual Validation

The subtheme of consensual validation was displayed through members expressing validation or approval of the creator, which was not predatory in nature. Some of these comments spoke to the physical appearance of the creator, such as “You look so cute, Avery! Hope you are doing well,” and “You are like a female young Ralph Macchio in the best way possible.” Additionally, consensual validation was illustrated by the praise of users for the content creators’ relationships, with some comments stating, “You are a stunning beautiful gorgeous couple and very jealous off you both ❤️❤️❤️❤️🥰” and “All my love to you, you’re a beautiful soul with a beautiful partner. 🥰🥰.” Consensual validation in this

context appeared to speak to approval of the “fit” of the couple, as well as their attractiveness to the commenters. Consensual validation was identified 290 times, encompassing 14.01% of all comments.

Personal Stake

Users depicted the subtheme of personal stake by expressing personal opinions of their investment and attraction to creators. One user expressed their attraction on a video with a creator mentioning that they would “spoil” the viewer if they were in a romantic relationship with them by stating, “I’m not spoiled, but I’d definitely get spoiled by you.” Additionally, the deep commitment to the TikTok creators’ lives was illustrated by the quote: “The courage you have shown has been such an inspiration to so many of us! Life after no contact can be beautiful! Thank you for proving that.” Personal stake was also illustrated by creators expressing their own opinions regarding lesbian TikTok creator “drama.” One specific example of this iteration of personal stake was through the quote of one commenter who felt sympathy for one of the creators amidst the drama, stating:

“it’s not funny she’s trying her best hopefully you don’t take this offensively but some things get hard so remember if you We’re in the situation and someone thought it was funny you wouldn’t be very thankful about that so just remember what you say can hurt someone but if they were to say to you you would really be hurt also don’t take this offensively I’m sorry just supporting”

Another user retorted to this comment with their personal opinion, stating, “No. You don’t get out of a two year relationship and go date someone else the week after..... I don’t care if you’re hurting, you don’t do that.” Overall, users felt that they were valid in expressing their personal stake in the content creators’ lives through the comment sections of their videos. This subtheme was enlightening, as it demonstrated the vulnerability the community held in expressing their opinions associated with content creators on a public platform. This subtheme was seen 175 times, which reflected 8.45% of all comments.

Conformity

The subtheme of conformity was often coded with the phenomenon of “atting(=)” oneself by saying, “This is totally me,” or “Me.” These comments would include commenters announcing their conformity with the video’s content, suggesting that the video was

a representation of themselves and their views. Other comments would feature their conformity to the opinions within the comment section, with several members expressing similar sentiments. One example of this was a video containing a lesbian couple who falsely teased a pregnancy announcement to reaffirm their childfree status, with multiple commenters reaffirming the video by stating “you tell em!! your entitled your privacy and your own life outside of social media!” and “I understand where you’re coming from in wanting to be apart of their journey and we’ve all come to enjoy that yes...but EVERYONE deserves privacy too.” Overall, conformity was illustrated through the consensus of opinion displayed in each comment section and occurred 196 times, representing 9.47% of all comments.

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

The key component of integration and fulfillment of needs refers to the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging and connection within a community and the degree to which their social and psychological needs are met within that community. Although the sub-themes of integration and fulfillment of needs were less prominent than the sub-themes exhibited throughout the other four themes, all sub-themes occurred at least once. This theme manifested through commenters expressing how the content has helped them become well-versed in topics relevant to the lesbian TikTok community and users expressing willingness to provide and accept support from other users or the creators in the comment sections. The three sub-themes that will be explained further include group and individual competence, need fulfillment, and mutual aid.

Group and Individual Competence

This sub-theme encompasses commenters knowing relevant community-specific information. In the comment sections, group and individual competence were shown through users responding to current TikTok drama. For example, several users shared their knowledge and opinions associated with a relevant TikTok lesbian influencer couple who was experiencing controversy by saying “I mean the last 24 hours alone is enough to fill the 2022 drama quota. Period.” and “i think they lesbian’d a little too close to the sun.” Additionally, commenters also expressed that the content they consumed helped them maintain their insight of relevant news for the community on TikTok, with another commenter saying, “This is

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pretty accurate and needed because I am in my mid-20s and so busy with work to get the TEA.” These comments highlight the inherent desire for users to stay connected to culturally relevant events, such as influencer drama, as well as express their opinions surrounding these recent events. This subtheme was identified 99 times, making up 4.78% of all comments.

Need Fulfillment

The sub-theme of need fulfillment was exhibited, with commenters expressing how the content consumed benefited them. Examples include expressions of what content engagement means to the commenter, such as “I’m following u because Im inspired and that’s it.. Idc about your marriage or relationship.” Users also expressed gratitude for the content, as one user said, “I always have felt so uncomfortable about this topic and alone. this helps so much. thank you.” Lastly, some comments specifically mentioned how the creators’ video will benefit the user in real life, with one comment stating, “Coming out soon and needed this reminder that it will get better ❤️.” This sub-theme helped demonstrate the utility of creator videos in validating and fulfilling emotional needs. Needs Fulfillment was coded in 33 comments, or 1.59% of the total comments analyzed.

Mutual Aid

Lastly, the sub-theme of mutual aid featured commenters who were both willing to receive and provide help to other group members. Some of this aid manifested in the form of emotional support offered by other members, with one commenter expressing, “I’m a 40-year-old mother with three kids. I have a grandchild on the way. I am a part of the community. Please do not hesitate to message me about anything.” A noteworthy interaction was when one creator voiced their desire to help a commenter when they requested a video on tips to come out, saying, “I would love to talk about this more, I’ll pin your comment in a video soon 🥰.” Other commenters expressed their need for aid, “I need tips. My whole biological and foster family are toxic, but I always end up talking to them again. But I can’t keep doing this to myself.” These comments highlighted the community’s ability to provide and accept support, as well as their comfort of doing so in the comment sections. Mutual aid was seen in 14 comments, equating to 0.68% of comments analyzed.

Shared Emotional Connection

The key component of shared emotional con-

nection refers to the degree to which community members feel emotionally connected to one another. It reflects the extent to which community members experience a sense of empathy, caring, and support from others within the community. Commenters exhibited this theme through their investment in the lesbian TikTok community, connections with others in the community through comment sections, and the positivity expressed in their comments. The three most salient sub-themes that were identified included personal investment in the shared lived experience, peer relations, and positive regard.

Personal Investment in the Shared Lived Experience

This sub-theme refers to the shared lived experience, referring to the commitment that the community has (and will continue to share) a history, common places, shared events, time together, and similar experiences. Commenters expressed this sub-theme through their investment in both the content of the video and the creators’ lesbian identity. On a video that spoke about familial rejection, users shared the commonalities in their experiences with the creator, saying “Yep felt this. Just hit my one year too. It gets better baby so proud of u,” and “You’re truly an inspiration, having gone through this myself it’s amazing to see the confidence once you start doing what’s best for YOU!” Another creator made a video which discussed the stigma associated with expressing their sexuality as fluid, with commenters noting their shared experience by saying “Agreed! I’m tired of explaining my \$exuality and I just don’t want to have to explain myself 🥲 if that makes sense ✨,” and “Thissss is why I’ve been using queer, bc bisexual doesn’t feel right and I think it’s fluid/a spectrum.” Overall, it appears that commenters used the universality of the lesbian/queer experience to connect themselves closer to the content and content creators. Seven percent of the comments analyzed included this subtheme, with 145 occurrences in total.

Positive Regard

Positive regard refers to positive experiences among group members. Commenters expressed this positive regard through acceptance of creators and their appreciation for them. For example, commenters expressed this appreciation for two creators who announced their wedding by stating, “No matter what my mood is any video that you post showing how happy the two of you are together being married and happy just puts

a smile on my face!” and “WOW. you both look spectacular in your wedding dresses! love your strength to live YOUR lives!” Other commenters expressed positive sentiment for the creators by posting comments supporting their life, saying, “I hope life just keeps getting better for you ❤️,” and using heart emojis (❤️) to express this positivity. Positive regard appeared to encapsulate feelings of approval and acceptance from commenters to creators. This sub-theme, occurring 334 times, was coded in 16.14% of the total comments.

Peer Relations

This sub-theme encompasses the relationships and bonds between members of a group. This sub-theme appeared to emerge with commenters engaging with one another instead of directly with the content creator. This was achieved through commenters “atting” their friends or partners to share the content with them as a form of communication. Other times, commenters would have organic interactions with each other regarding the video topic. In particular, the aforementioned video with the fake pregnancy announcement included this interaction “damn not gonna lie they had me thinking they were gonna have a kid,” and “oh ya. lol totally thought they were announcing.” In general, peer relations were driven by users sharing the content to connect with others, as well as responding to already posted comments to form a connection. In total, 234 comments demonstrated peer relations, which was 11.30% of all comments.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the sense of community experienced by lesbians within LGBTQ+ specific TikTok accounts. Results demonstrated that the four foundational components outlined by McMillan and Chavis’ sense of community theory (1986) were displayed through the various subthemes. These findings highlight TikTok’s potential as a platform for nurturing this sense of community, indicating that the “queer potential” suggested by Duguay (2023) regarding TikTok’s role in social movements and the future of the LGBTQ+ community extends to the lesbian demographic as well. However, this study also deepened our understanding of how a sense of community may vary in digital realms, suggesting that this piece of research is foundational in further expanding our understanding of this topic.

The manner in which a sense of community was

exhibited demonstrates the unique ways that commenters on lesbian TikTok videos facilitate spaces of acceptance and belongingness, particularly with the platform and the content creators themselves being a conduit for certain subthemes to be expressed. For example, the subtheme of group and individual competence was established by users discussing relevant topics associated with lesbian TikTok content creators. Similarly, a parasocial sort of connection with the content creators was found in the sub-themes of need fulfillment and a personal investment in the shared lived experience, as users would often praise creators in their comments and express how the content made them feel less alone regarding their lesbian identity. The relationship between isolation and parasocial relationships aligns with previous literature suggesting that parasocial relationships moderate loneliness and depressive symptoms (Woznicki et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate how TikTok, as a platform and its content creators themselves, appear to be a mechanism to facilitate a sense of community for its user base.

In contrast, other sub-themes appeared to align more with traditional displays of a sense of community. In particular, mutual aid was expressed through individuals offering assistance and support to other users through direct messaging, similar to what one may see in a physical space, which establishes a sense of community (Baiocco et al., 2012). Similarly, peer relations were sustained through users’ conversations through the “reply comment” function on the app and by tagging friends in the comments. It is important to note that although peer relations pertained to interactions between users, these conversations were related to the content creators and “atting” (the practice of tagging others to a piece of content for them to view) as a way to share these creators and their content with others. This newly identified space to facilitate a sense of community may benefit lesbians who do not have access to traditional physical spaces, such as individuals who live in rural areas or do not feel comfortable visiting these spaces. These findings highlight how the content of the videos created on Lesbian TikTok interplays with how a sense of community presents on the platform.

However, it is essential to recognize the role of TikTok’s algorithm in shaping how a sense of community manifests within this space. The platform’s recommendation system curates content visibility based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments,

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which may amplify dominant voices while deprioritizing marginalized perspectives (Okoronkwo, 2024; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). This has implications for digital community-building, as highly engaged content may reinforce existing community norms while limiting the visibility of dissenting or less mainstream voices.

Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm is known to promote viral content over more niche or marginalized narratives, meaning that certain perspectives within the lesbian community may be systematically underrepresented. Previous research suggests that algorithmic bias on social media platforms disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ users, particularly those at the intersections of race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). As a result, the representation of community interactions in this study may be influenced by the algorithm's selection mechanisms rather than reflecting the full diversity of perspectives within Lesbian TikTok. Future research should investigate how algorithmic visibility structures shape online queer communities and whether alternative digital platforms offer different or more inclusive community-building experiences.

In addition, users also expressed their gratitude and the positive impact of having these spaces online to express their lesbian identity, suggesting that these videos and comment sections may serve a role in facilitating well-being for users. These bolstering effects align with previous research suggesting that digital spaces play a role in minimizing stressors associated with one's LGBTQ+ identity and reaffirming social identities (Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2023; Wagaman et al., 2020). They also reaffirm Burke's (2000) findings that lesbians may use the internet to feel a higher sense of engagement with the community. This identification of TikTok as potentially bolstering for lesbian users' well-being is promising, although future research is needed to examine the relationship between use and well-being outcomes.

Limitations

Turning attention to the limitations of the present study, they reside in the methodologies and context of the selected videos. The content in the selected videos varied between personal stories, humorous videos, and educational content, which impacted how a sense of community was expressed. Additionally, the significant variance in video views, ranging from 37.8 thousand to 3.3 million across all videos, sug-

gests differing levels of video circulation and unequal exposure, which also may have limited certain comment sections from exhibiting a sense of community due to a lack of user engagement with these videos.

Further, as we were unable to access demographic information on participants, findings may not reflect the diversity of community-related experiences for lesbians of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, the context of when the videos selected were posted may have impacted how themes were expressed. In particular, we noticed that the videos collected coincided with a period of TikTok "drama" concerning the breakup of Jojo Siwa and Avery Cyrus (i.e., celebrities in the lesbian/queer community). As such, many comments were discussing this topic, and some of the examples in the results section referred to this specific event. This event was of importance to the community, with multiple videos and comment sections referring to it. This significant occurrence in the lesbian TikTok community may have influenced the comment sections to express group and individual competence surrounding this matter.

Another potential limitation of this study is the selection bias inherent in analyzing only the top 100 comments for each video. TikTok's algorithm prioritizes comments with high engagement, such as those receiving the most likes or replies, potentially amplifying dominant voices while underrepresenting the perspectives of less engaged users. This may result in an overrepresentation of more dominant viewpoints within the community while minimizing the voices of those with less visibility, such as marginalized users or those who engage with content in more passive ways (e.g., scrolling without commenting). As a research team, we prioritized collecting data from a range of influencers; however, future research could incorporate a broader sample of comments, including those with lower engagement or those posted across different timeframes, to capture a more diverse range of community interactions.

Lastly, due to the study's focus on publicly accessible comments on TikTok videos, additional areas of investigation remained unanswered. For instance, the tone and intent of comments could not be accurately inferred solely from their content, potentially leading to miscoding based on the comment's explicit content rather than the underlying intent of the creator. Additionally, TikTok's "direct message" feature

allows users to privately communicate with creators, which might produce different components of a sense of community. This is of particular interest due to examples of the mutual aid sub-theme, suggesting that users may privately message each other after an initial interaction on a public video. The lack of analysis of this feature on TikTok limits the study's capacity to comprehensively explore how a sense of community is nurtured for lesbians on the platform.

Future Directions

Results from the current study help establish a promising avenue of future research exploring the Lesbian TikTok community. Our suggestions for future research reflect the unexplored potential of this novel research topic. Firstly, future studies should aim to look at how a sense of community is longitudinally created on TikTok for the Lesbian community. This more widespread exploration may aid in the understanding of how a sense of community develops over time. Similarly, the exploration of how certain types of videos influence how sub-themes are expressed would be a valuable endeavor, particularly when comparing comedy versus more personal content. These future investigations would help better understand how context and content influence how users express a sense of community on TikTok.

Alternatively, research exploring the perspectives and experiences of Lesbian TikTok members may help deepen our understanding of a sense of community in this realm. Qualitative interviews may assist in understanding how consumers and creators of Lesbian TikTok content experience a sense of community online. The benefits of qualitative interviews are twofold, as they would both deepen the understanding of how Lesbian TikTok content creators and commenters conceptualize a sense of community, as well as explore potential strengths and weaknesses that TikTok possesses as a platform for this phenomenon. Such research may also inform the policies and procedures that TikTok employs to improve the well-being of its users.

Due to the findings that, although a sense of community can be created online, the manner in which it presents is unique, research exploring how these spaces are created and maintained is important. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of Lesbian TikTok and how a sense of community is forged in this space requires further investigation into how relationships between creators and community are

formed. Specifically, delving into the psychological aspects of online engagement, including the formation of virtual identities and the dynamics of parasocial relationships, could provide a deeper comprehension of why specific elements of a sense of community struggle to translate effectively within comment sections. Such explorations could be beneficial in establishing a newfound understanding of what a virtual sense of community looks like and the mechanisms behind forging and maintaining these spaces.

TikTok as a platform appeared to be a key piece of context in the expression of certain subthemes, and further research should encompass examining the experiences of lesbians on various social media platforms they currently engage with. This broader perspective could offer insights into how a sense of community is cultivated online within this community. Similarly, investigating the feedback received by content creators across different social media platforms could shed light on whether distinct platforms facilitate different facets of a sense of community. Lastly, conducting a comparative analysis between fostering a sense of community in public versus private communication settings could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how this sense of community develops on the TikTok platform.

Conclusion

Studying online lesbian communities can inform our understanding of how LGBTQ+ individuals build a sense of community in a post-COVID society. It provides insights into how online platforms connect, share information, and provide support within the lesbian/queer women community at large. Further, understanding online communities helps researchers comprehend the factors that shape these communities and the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within them. However, despite the decline of lesbian-centred spaces, there continues to be a need for safe and inclusive spaces for lesbian-identifying people to gather, connect, and develop a sense of community.

The current study found that social media platforms, such as TikTok, can foster a sense of community. To our knowledge, this is the first endeavour looking at a sense of community for lesbians on TikTok. The understanding of the lesbian community on TikTok needs to be further explored to gain further insight regarding how the type of content disseminated and the timeliness of relevant issues for

the community further impact how it is established.

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