

Queered affordances: Gender expressions of Filipino TikTok content creators

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Abstract

Social media spaces have been used as platforms for gender representations and expressions. Therefore, it is essential to define and discuss what features of the platform allow queer individuals to showcase their identities and sensibilities. Moreso, current interest in TikTok has led to scholarly interrogations that define the platform's potential and pitfalls. The paper, drawing from the constructs of social media affordances and the *kapwa* model, examined how queer individuals enact queer expressions through TikTok's social media affordances. Online interviews of queer individuals from mostly urban settings were employed to elicit reflections and experiences of how they queer their social media presence. Moreover, content analysis of TikTok videos was used to understand better how platform affordances enable or restrict the production of queer social media presence. Finally, discussions and recommendations on the potentiality of online spaces to enable the formation of networked publics and communities through the creation of queer content on the social media platform are made.

Keywords: social media affordances, queer expressions, queer social media, LGBTQ+ individuals

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1. Introduction

The rapid rise of TikTok as a go-to app for anything video-able and shareable is a testament to the value of social media in enabling various forms of digital presentations and participation, promoting mundane everyday events as hyper-interactive aesthetic contents, and further popularizing varied forms and pools of socio-cultural and political content. TikTok's addictive and content-after-content algorithm fuels unlimited stimulation that lures one to spend hours selecting, watching, commenting, and engaging in the app's content universe (Romero, 2020). Of course, the app is not only a space for the twistedly mundane and unapologetic content. It is an emerging and refreshing platform for attention (Abidin, 2020), social awareness (Hurley, 2022), belongingness (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2021), product and service knowledge and marketing (Valdovinos Kaye, 2020) without the in-your-face attitude that some social media and social networking sites have. TikTok is seen as a space for peer-based palatable political engagement (Abidin, 2020).

Less is understood, however, about how LGBTQ+ or queer people use these new technologies to afford the construction and representations of queer identities and visibility in the production of a queer social media presence. In the limited literature on the social media use of global south and southeast Asian queer individuals, new digital technologies and media provide positive representations of their queerness (Baudinette, 2019b), impose a legitimate (queer) vision of the world (Hanckel et al., 2019), and demonstrate the “effervescent” quality of public expression (Lorenzana, 2018). In the Philippines, scholars have noted that Filipino gays have learned how to maneuver technology to self-represent (Labor, 2020), connect with members of the LGBTQ+ community for sexual and socialization purposes (Austria, 2013), develop a transnational relationship with gays from other parts of the world (Manalansan, 2003), and counter the hegemonic accounts of gayness from the western world (Labor, 2022; Garcia, 2000). Findings have even revealed that Filipino gay men have approximated the gay white stereotypes and, in the process, have marginalized other gay men (Benedicto, 2008). Situated in a predominantly conservative society, Filipino gays tend to disassociate or be more cautious with the gay collectives or being labelled as *bakla*, which refers to indigenous homosexual men that portray more feminine decency and appearance (Tan, 1995). Many gays try to portray a more “straight”-like or heterosexual act as they believe that being too feminine is disgraceful (Cao, 2021), only proving the existence of heteronormative aspirations as performed by eschewing femininity (Ong, 2017). Social and digital media has been an avenue for gay men to perform

and express their sexuality that only validates notions of masculinity (Ong, 2017).

With many gender scholars theorizing queerness as a fluid expression destabilizing established norms (Warner, 2002), TikTok allows expressions of queerness and creation of queer spaces away from the dominant heteronormative lens and ideologies. Previous research has posited how digital mechanisms have enabled sexual identity expressions to shape one's self-representations (Duguay, 2022; Labor, 2020). TikTok offers new affordances for the formation of queer technocultures, and cultural signaling of one's sexual and gender expressions which facilitates connection-building among queer people (Duguay, 2023). In the paper of Stefanie Duguay (2023), she explained how the platform's affordances enable queer expressions. Firstly, TikTok's video format allows referencing and "stitching" of scenes from another video which enables queer appropriation of a memetic form. Secondly, the "duets" interface enables two videos to simultaneously play, facilitating one's creativity and reflections while calling out homo- and transphobic videos. Thirdly, hashtags (e.g., #transjoy, #queer, #gay) create LGBTQ+ spaces in the platform where individuals can challenge heteronormativity and spark LGBTQ+ dialogues with like-minded audiences. Lastly, the visibility of these spaces on the For You page circulates similar content among users that have been influential to the visibility of platformed self-representations and the formation of networked publics of queer people. With TikTok affording the formation and visibility of queer identities and spaces, Duguay claimed the potentiality of TikTok in realizing and pushing for queer movements and futures.

In this current project, the authors looked into how TikTok, a popular video-sharing app, is appropriated by LGBTQ+ individuals as a queer space, an emerging part of "queer cultural archipelagos" (Ghaziani, 2014, pp. 133). The TikTok app, a combination of Musical.ly and Douyin apps, is a short video-sharing social networking platform where one creates dancing, singing, acting, and lip-synching videos for their supposed followers (Toscher, 2021). In addition, TikTok is a collaborative space with a permanent display of 15-second videos featuring dancing videos, campy filter effects, and trending hashtags (Rocque, 2019). For this inquiry, we use the term "queer" to refer to all LGBTQ+ self-identified individuals, including our participants. This is informed by studies that showed how the term is more neutral, affirming, and radical (Lim, 2015), and a more empowering signifier away from its pejorative signification of identity (Garcia, 2013).

2. Literature review

The explorations and inquiries within the scholarship of queer digital and online media have been diverse and expanding. Most literature has delved into the construction and “placemaking” of queer spaces in different social media platforms and SNSs (Baudinette, 2019a; Cavalcante, 2018; Solis, 2020; Unipan, 2021). Moreover, the literature has highlighted the importance of queer (and LGBT with disabilities) visibility and queer representations in these types of media (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Labor, 2021; Miller, 2017) through intimate storytelling (De Ridder & van Bauwel, 2015) or conversational selfies (Duguay, 2015). For instance, Tobias Raun’s (2012, 2016) works on trans self-representation in video blogs have extended how YouTube can become an avenue for trans people to assert their narratives and visibility through this performative tool, dismantling gendered signifiers and create new views of transsexuality.

Establishing queer presence in online spaces is part of the cyberculture acts that mainstream queer identities, educate individuals, empower members of the queer community, and combat gender and sexuality-related socio-political issues. In the age of digital media, the rise of the internet and other mobile communication technologies provided opportunities and platforms for the LGBTQ+ community to connect and communicate among themselves and the larger heterosexual communities. These social media platforms, which elicit co-created and re-configured openly shared digital content (Pain, 2022; Selwyn, 2011), allow individuals to share multiple photos and images of themselves in their curated profiles (Facebook and Instagram) and blogs (WordPress, Tumblr). The content also enables users to locate other queer individuals for companionship and sex (Grindr, Tinder) and, most notably, to create impressions and content for a wider audience (YouTube, TikTok). The rise in queer cultural production has resulted in a transformative queer cultural practice that enables various forms of visibilities (Pain, 2022), inspires a variety of vivid performativity of the self (Harper et al., 2016; Labor, 2020), and impacts the showcasing of contemporary socio-cultural identities (Craig et al., 2021; Labor, 2021).

Despite the seemingly positive role of online spaces in queer identity development, some feel that social media usage adds a burden to members of the LGBTQ+ community (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Doss, 2018). For instance, Maxwell Crowson and Anne Goulding (2013) observed elements of overexposure to negative and traumatic experiences and homophobic attacks among homosexual men exploring various virtual communities. In addition, online chat rooms where sexual exploration happens expose teenagers to more sexually explicit content, which produces more obscene words and a sexualized environment (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006). These

findings are related to other results that show how adolescents could be prone to experience sexual harassment on the Internet (Smahel, 2005) and unwanted sexual solicitation (Mitchel et al., 2011). Finally, in terms of the gaming community, Kishonna Gray (2018) revealed how black lesbians often feel isolated and excluded, and surprisingly experience being discriminated against by other minorities.

In the Philippines, LGBTQ+ people were said to be generally accepted by society despite the discrimination and prejudice they encounter daily (Austria, 2004). However, this notion is only negated by the numerous suspected anti-LGBT hate crimes (Philippine LGBT Crime Watch, 2012), that in some cases, resulted in physical mutilations and even death among the members of the community (Umbac, 2011). This only affirms how the Philippine society only provides a degree of passive tolerance towards the LGBTQ+ community where no legislation equates an equal protection against marginalization for its members (Soriano, 2014). Aside from experiencing discrimination and physical violence, the marginalization of queer people can be seen through their self-loathing caused by the dominant aspirations towards heteronormativity. In a society where homosexuality is ridiculed and detested, heteronormativity causes many queer individuals to adopt a negative view of their queerness (Hodges & Hutter, 1974), and erasure from social and political discourses issues raised by those who do not fit the heterosexual norms (Olson, 2009). With society's high tolerance for those who conform to the heterosexual norms, queer individuals tend to shift to more heteronormative expressions where they can "pass" as straight people (Go, 2020).

With the emergence of digital and social media, queer individuals are confronted by the need to perform heteronormative expressions to be accepted, or at least tolerated, in these platforms (Ong, 2017). Jan Gabriel Melendrez Castañeda (2015) argues how these emergent technologies have influenced the way gender and sexual minorities explored their sexual identities within these heteronormative values and practices that pervade the conservative society of the country. In the study of Ruepert Jiel Cao (2021) on the Filipino Twitter "alter community" or a collective of anonymous Filipino Twitter users consuming and creating amateur porn videos, it was revealed how members of this community make sense of their sexuality by performing traditional notions of masculinity in their sex narratives. Their expressions disassociate with the notions of effeminacy or *bakla* where masculinity pertains to dominance and violent tendencies. Moreover, the study of Randy Jay Solis (2020) on the Filipino online gay cruising in Grindr, a gay dating app, showed how many "out and loud" gays were still being discriminated for being flamboyant by the "straight-

acting and discreet” ones conditioned by the heteronormativity mentality. However, in recent findings, there is an emergence to contest and negotiate queer identity through online play that infuses a non-monolithic identity, integrating notions of *bakla* and reclaiming their spaces (Solis, 2022).

3. Theoretical framework

Understanding TikTok’s social media affordances, we used the concept of affordances as a framework to investigate how strategies of producing queer social media presence take place in the context of the video-sharing app. This concept use is also similar to some scholarly outputs that inquire about the social media platform affordances used by queer people (e.g., Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019). Originally termed by James Gibson (1979), Donald Norman (1988) appropriated “affordances” as the “perceived and actual properties of the thing” (p. 9) that fundamentally determine its possible use. The definition was then modified into “the range of functions and constraints an object provides for” (Davis & Chouinard, 2017, p. 1). Through social media use, for instance, a Twitter post might afford a conversational debate on LGBTQ+ issues among peers and strangers. In contrast, a dating app, like Grindr or Tinder, might afford connections that lead to relationships or intimacies. To further operationalize affordances in the inquiry, Davis and Chouinard proposed a model of interrelated concepts: (a) “mechanisms of affordance” refers to how digital objects can *allow, restrict, encourage* and *discourage*; and (b) “conditions of affordance” refers to the subject’s context where they engage in the mechanisms of affordance.

To situate the analysis within the production of Filipino TikTok content creators, we made use of the notion of *kapwa* to conceptualize how their Filipino identity relates to the ways they enact and perform their sexual expressions in the platform. Introduced by Virgilio Enriquez, the *kapwa* model refers to the social interaction distinct to Filipinos (Clemente et al., 2008), where the practice of *pakikipagkapwa* pertains to how one accepts and deals with other persons as equal (Desai, 2016). The model explains how the Filipino identity of interacting with other people is influenced by how one views them as *hindi ibang tao* (one of us) or *ibang tao* (outsider) (Enriquez, 1992), where nuances of these types are communicated discursively and behaviourally (Enriquez, 2007). With recent studies on online spaces, the model has been appropriated in various contexts such as framing of online discourse of LGBTQ+ student activism (Labor & San Pascual, 2022) and mediated communication practices of Filipino activists (Pineda, 2022). For this inquiry, we used this model to provide a more nuanced analysis on how the Filipino queer content creators were able to use TikTok’s affordances to claim and create an online queer space for safe expressions and interactions.

4. Research questions

Because of the recent emergence of TikTok as a social media platform, the literature that interrogated its affordances and encounters has been limited (e.g., Kaye et al., 2021; Serrano et al., 2020), particularly among LGBTQ+ users of the platform (e.g., Cohen, 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). The current study extends the critical discussion on the social media platform's affordances as an online space where individuals can share and post content that freely expresses their gender and sexuality. Furthermore, by situating the study in the experiences of Filipino LGBTQ+ individuals, the study contributed to the expanding literature on the affordances of social media and mediated technologies for gender expressions (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019) and identity presentations (Labor, 2020). Drawing from the constructs of social media affordances and the *kapwa* model, the paper mainly aims to answer two questions. First, what are the social media affordances of TikTok that enable gender expressions? And second, how do queer TikTok content creators use the affordances of the app to queer their social media presence? With this, the study offers culture- and gender-specific perspectives on how these social media platforms are used.

5. Methods and procedures

The study focused on LGBTQ+ individuals' uses of TikTok and examined how this social media platform became a place for queer identity expression. We used a qualitative multiple-case study methodology (Yin, 2017) to conduct structured interviews ($n=20$) in September 2021. Because of the ongoing restrictions of face-to-face interactions, the interviews were conducted using an online technology platform that was accessible and convenient to the informants. Before the beginning of the interviews, informants were asked to complete a written consent form where they were briefed on the study's rationale and the use of the data for derivative works. All participants were granted their consent and agreed to participate voluntarily in the study with the knowledge of utmost confidentiality and anonymity. Importantly, with the physical restrictions, interviews were done to accommodate all the informants' needs and availability so they could have a safe space to discuss topics around their LGBTQ+ identity freely. The research got an ethics clearance.

The structure of the interview questions allowed the informants to discuss and describe how they could use TikTok as a platform for their queer identity expressions. For example, informants were asked about the kind of content they usually post on the platform and how this content express their own identities. In addition, participants were asked to describe TikTok's

affordances and how these affordances help create an online space for the LGBTQ+ community.

Aside from the interviews, with the consent of participants, content videos ($n=60$) of the informants were analyzed to understand the visual components of their queer identity expressions and how TikTok's affordances enable them to create their content. The informants recommended the content videos as the best descriptions of their queerness on social media. The qualitative content analysis allowed the study to analyze audiovisual elements to discern critical themes, expressive choices, and platform affordances – primarily video editing characteristics and filters (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Further, the content analysis expanded the description of how the social media platform enabled its users to queer their social media presence.

For the data analysis, the study used inductive thematic analysis, which is the identification of themes through critical reading and evaluating data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) to describe a particular phenomenon (Daly et al., 1997). Essentially, this analysis aims for pattern recognition where analyzed categories become emerging themes within the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In the initial stage, the data collection process is done and serves as a means of linking the current state of the study with the analysis. In the second stage, the collected data is organized in a meaningful way. This stage used a template analysis to identify all instances where queer identity expressions were enacted or discussed in the TikTok platform. In template analysis, a priori codes are developed based on the affordances of digital media (Davis & Chouinard, 2017). In the last stage, connections were made between codes to create themes. Finally, the data was translated into a series of themes about how participants express their queerness on the platform and how the platform affords these expressions.

In selecting the informants, the study determined the eligibility criteria for participation in this study. The participants must be: 1) 18 years of age or older; 2) of Filipino descent; 3) a regular TikTok user and content creator; 4) a self-identified LGBTQ+ individual, and 4) willing to participate in interviews remotely. In recruiting the informants, they were emailed and messaged directly on their social media accounts if they were willing to participate in the study. After four weeks of talking to potential informants, 20 individuals responded to participate. They are between 18 and 36 years old. Of the 20 participants, 14 self-identified as gay, two self-identified as bisexual, two self-identified as trans woman, and two self-identified as queer. In addition, these participants were allowed to choose their preferred pseudonyms for the study. Table 1 provides their profiles.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

No.	Pseudonym	Pronouns	Trans	Sexuality	Age	Occupation
1	Taule	they/them		Queer	21	Student
2	VR	he/him		Gay	23	Acting coach
3	Cassandra	he/him		Gay	29	Teacher
4	Nadine	she/her	Trans	Straight	27	Partnership consultant
5	Mike	he/him		Gay	32	Office staff
6	AMK	he/him		Bisexual	23	Mechanical Engineer
7	Mikmik	she/her		Gay	30	Call center representative
8	Elaine	he/him		Gay	20	Fast food server
9	JL	he/him		Gay	19	Unemployed
10	Mark	he/him		Gay	30	TV producer
11	Jae	he/him		Bisexual	18	Customer service representative
12	Tom	they/them		Queer	21	Unemployed
13	Tootsi	she/her	Trans	Straight	27	Supervisor in a BPO Company
14	Niko	he/him		Gay	21	Working student
15	Bryle	he/him		Gay	27	Quality assurance officer
16	Gem	he/him		Gay	22	Student
17	Archie	he/him		Gay	29	Nurse
18	MAB36	he/him		Gay	36	Performer
19	Mariana	he/him		Gay	18	Student
20	Cass	he/him		Gay	30	Lecturer

Based on Table 1, one of the limitations of the study is that the majority of the participants were self-identified as gay men. However, as above mentioned, we refer to all the LGBTQ+ individuals included in the study

as queer individuals as it provides a more neutral and empowering signifier. Regardless of their sexuality, participants agreed that they can be categorized as queer content creators as they believed that they unapologetically present their sexual identities in the social media platform.

6. Results and discussion

The study presents how TikTok allowed the participants to engage in identity work and expression, utilizing these affordances to queer their online social media presence.

6.1 Affordances of TikTok

In particular, TikTok offers its users the affordances of easy content production, personalized and creative editing options, and direct user interactivity. The first affordance, easy content production, refers to the platforms' accessible and easy process of video creation (Cohen, 2021). In the interface of the platform for video creation, the default setting activates the device's front or rear camera with several editing options on the margins, like "filters," "timer," and "effects" (Kaye et al., 2021). These optional components can include one or multiple elements, depending on the user's vision of their video content. In addition, TikTok offers its users opportunities for visual storytelling with added options for adding text and audio to their videos (Cohen, 2021). The affordances of this social media platform reflect user functionality, architecture, and design (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Because of the variety of effects and filters that a user can use, TikTok can afford personalized and creative editing options for its users. For example, VR, an acting coach, mentioned, "I usually use filters to state that this filter is not only for girls or... is not only for mas [masculine] men." Also, JL, a self-identified gay man, shared, "I am just posting videos with filters because I think it adds the flavor to my content, and it makes me more beautiful." Among the participants, the use of «filters» is highly preferred. In the «effects» settings, this displays visual effects, filters, and stickers relevant to local aesthetics, popular culture, and internet memes (Kaye et al., 2021). The use of these filters afforded the cultivation of queer technocultures where distinct digital and cultural signaling of one's sexual identity is facilitated by queer people (Duguay, 2023).

Moreover, adding text, such as a caption, embedded in the video can create more visually appealing and easily understood content for its users. Another important aspect of personalization among TikTok content creators is the way they can select a wide array of sound choices. Because the app revolves around music (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), usual

trends in this platform involve short music excerpts frequently repurposed and remixed by creators (Kaye et al., 2021).

The third affordance of the platform is its strong facilitation of an interactive user-audience interaction. Tootsi, a trans woman supervisor in a business process outsourcing (BPO) company, mentioned, “I am active in commenting on videos that I like and expressing it more by liking or even sharing the videos.” Taule, a queer student, also shared that this is a way to “comment *to my co-tiktokers* and support [the] rising queer Tiktok community.” For context, TikTokers are what users of this platform call themselves. These interactions can be between different TikTok users (Serrano et al., 2020) or users to their followers. This interaction is prominently seen in the “duet” feature of the platform, where an original video can be posted with an audio-visual response video, playing simultaneously (Cohen, 2021). This reality can be seen in videos that involve online challenges, like “Can you pass the prompter test?” (See Figure 1) or other voice challenges. Aside from interacting with other users, TikTok also allows users to communicate directly with their followers. This feature allows TikTok users to connect and interact with each other in different ways. For instance, there is a “Q&A” button in the users’ profiles where followers can send questions or comments to the content creators. The content creator can answer these questions through a video post. In this way, there is a direct interaction between the user and their audience. This experience is also common among the participants when they comment on other content creators.



Figure 1.
A TikTok content video that shows the duet feature of the app

Using TikTok's affordances to queer online presence

Previous studies have looked into how Filipino LGBTQ+ individuals use different online technologies (e.g., social media platforms or dating apps) to enact sexual self-presentations (Castañeda, 2015; Labor, 2020) and to mobilize political movements (Labor & San Pascual, 2022; Soriano, 2014). In TikTok, the current inquiry found that LGBTQ+ individuals could do the following: a) produce a variety of representations of queer expressions and b) connect with people to create an inclusive queer space.

6.2 Producing representations of queer expressions

One of the strategies that these TikTok content creators employ in producing queer online presence is deliberately creating video content with LGBTQ+ representations that express information about various gender and sexual identities. VR mentioned, "I create videos and post pictures of mine that I believe would question people on their standards of queer men. It is not always 'maskulado' (masculine) gay men, but we also have the other side, the 'skinny legends.' Queerness is so grand that we need to explore the whole spectrum." Such representations include drag performances where content creators transform into their drag personas, narrations of love stories (either their own or a fictionalized story) involving homosexual relationships, and coming-out stories of these LGBTQ+ individuals. Also, TikTok content videos have allowed the participants to challenge notions of gender and sexuality. Niko, a 21-year-old working student, explained, "By showing them that an individual or a queer individual can express themselves freely by dancing and wearing whatever they want." Action such as demonstrating their talents in dancing or singing and showcasing their creativity through fashion and make-up enable queer individuals to produce representations of the community away from the heteronormative standards typically accepted in a conservative country like the Philippines.

Similar to previous studies (Cohen, 2021; Hanckel et al., 2019), the affordances of social media allow these individuals to have full agency over their self-image concerning the identifiability and visibility of their identities in these platforms. By producing different queer content from these individuals, they could create representations that portray their definition of queerness and gender expressions. One example is where individuals could inform and impart knowledge about different genders and sexualities by creating content for their everyday lives using their personal stories in mundane situations or contexts to challenge social norms (Hanckel et al., 2019). There can be many reasons that prompted motivations for creating content among the participants, but it can be inferred that the consistent lack of good representations of the community on various platforms is a

defining factor (Baudinette, 2019a; 2019b; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; Randazzo et al., 2015). Moreover, production of queer content humanizes the distinctiveness of the stories and narratives of queer people by spreading awareness where they exemplify the concept of pakikipagkapwa through manifesting social acceptance.

As Diane Raymond (2003) argued, queer representations are more than the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the media. Representation means creating media content to complexify this increasing exposure that allows a shift in viewer expectations while producing new role models for younger LGBTQ+ people, emphasizing the existing homophobia and hate crimes, and recognizing the demands for civil rights of the community. For example, TikTok content videos made by the participants, all self-identified queer people, exemplify authentic queer narratives that recognize complex experiences, from their coming-out stories to stories of their romantic relationships, divergent to the common stigmas and stereotypes against the community. In online spaces, the users' choices for personal or informational disclosure can be a reflection of the performative nature of authenticity (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016). Disclosing details of one's life, from filling out online profiles to engaging with others, can be seen as a representation of one's "personal branding" (Banet-Weiser, 2012). However, it has been pointed out how self-presentation can be more difficult to identities or subjective preferences which are socially and culturally marginalized, for example, the identities of members of the LGBTQ+ community (Banet-Weiser, 2012). These types of content allow users of the app opportunities to view different facets and perspectives of gender and sexualities that may not be present in their immediate environment, thereby creating exposure to underrepresented stories and reaching more unfamiliar audiences. Therefore, content creation requires a negotiation between the app's affordances and possible audiences in the platform to cultivate authenticity (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016).

In producing queer representations in TikTok, content creators can create an online space where individuals can freely express their gender and sexuality. Cass, a university lecturer, shared his insights on how TikTok enacts this emergence of queer representation. He stated, "It is an open platform that is readily available to anyone who wishes to modify it according to their liking and thus is safe to express one's queerness." Elaine, a fast-food server, expressed the positive influence of the platform on other queer creatives. He said, "Tiktok helps us boost our confidence by seeing different race showing their talents in a creative way that influence the other TikTok users to do their own." VR credited this creation of LGBTQ+ online space to the different queer users of the platform. He shared, "I think the queer users

make the Tiktok space safe to express one's queerness. The people make this space a safe space for everyone from all of the toxic and homophobic people around us." Cassandra, a high school teacher, seconds this when he mentioned, "I think TikTok a safe space to show our queerness since it accepts a diverse set of users. There are a lot of famous TikTok content creators who are gay." Gem, a 22-year-old student, shared his observation of the platform. He said, "As I can see on TikTok, individuals share their talent in everything they like, and that expresses their individualities."

Indeed, LGBTQ+ people often find safe and accepting communities and environments online, which has become helpful in their psychological well-being (Fox & Warber, 2015; Labor & Alcazaren, 2021). Furthermore, these online communities have helped LGBTQ+ members to positively develop their queer identities through communicating with other LGBTQ+ people that share their experiences and struggles (Mehra et al., 2004). Marjo Laukkanen (2007), for example, observed an increased level of comfort and expressiveness of one's queer online identity among adolescents in spaces they perceived as being safe, such as online chat spaces. In turn, Tiktok has become a specific kind of utopia that is both queer and digital. Digital utopias are spaces that prompt changes in behavior among their users or a new political order that may not bring about real social change but becomes a tool for bringing about a presumed transition of challenging existing conditions (Dickel & Schrape, 2017). Aside from being a digital utopia, Tiktok opens a possibility for a queer utopia. Queer utopias are spaces divergent from the standards of heteronormativity that allow the conceptualization of new worlds that offer a critique of the present and an ideal picture of the future (Muñoz, 2019). As Angela Jones (2013) argues, these queer utopias may not result in complete emancipation or even self-actualization of individuals but suggest a potentially brighter future for them, queers.

The participants also make sure to produce good queer representations in their accounts. Previous research observed that the lack of queer representation resulted in consuming available queer content that is "good enough" to satisfy one's needs (Case & Given, 2016), even if it means accepting a lower value of quality and quantity (Floegel & Costello, 2019). Here, however, participants demonstrate a practice of ensuring that their contents speak of their authentic experiences and true selves. Aside from ensuring a good representation of what it is to be queer, they also ensure that their content is entertaining and informative. For example, Tootsi shared, "I would like to think that the contents that I post, people would consider that my profile is a safe space for anyone regardless of race, gender or beliefs."

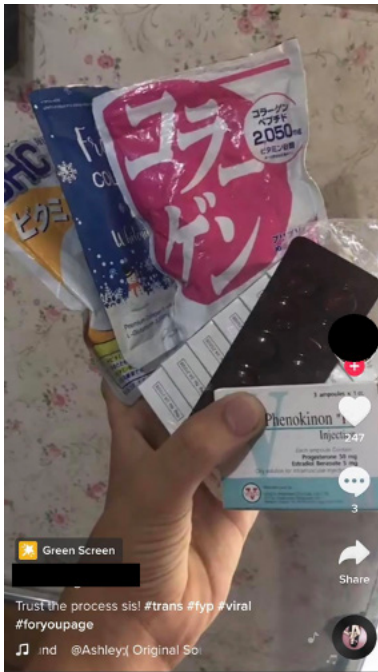
Similarly, Archie shared, "I always make it a point that the clips I upload are filled with gay spirit." In addition to creating good queer representations,

participants make appropriate content for all age groups. Cassandra shared this when he said, “Though the content is all about expression and having fun, we always make sure to make it as wholesome as possible.” In her essay entitled “Queer OS,” Kara Keeling (2014) writes about practices to queer an operating system by seeking changes in this system through social activism and scholarly inquiry. As an analogy, the creation of these TikTok content videos enables the participants to queer the norms of viewership in the app by inciting representational change for the LGBTQ+ community that challenges stigmas and stereotypes. Through these practices, LGBTQ+ stories and narratives are made visible that orient a diverse set of audiences, queer or straight social media consumers, of content with anti-stereotyping and complex themes tempered by concepts of human dignity (Cover, 2022).

In the data, one notable video is about a participant’s experience of her transitioning process (See Figure 2). As a trans woman, she captioned the video “Trust the process sis! (sister).” Furthermore, she included pictures of her medical pills and vitamins. In the video, she presented various pictures of herself since the day she started transitioning up to the present. This type of content represents the real experiences and struggles of

Figure 2.

A video that shows pills taken by a participant for her transitioning process



trans people in their transition process manifested in a 15-second video. In some ways, this is how the participants achieved equitable visibility for their marginalized identities in the platform (Karizat et al., 2021), where algorithms tend to limit their representation and may enforce stereotypical presentations of LGBTQ+ identity (Simpson & Seeman, 2021).

Furthermore, there are content videos that show gay romantic relationships which feature homosexual couples travelling and enjoying personal, romantic moments. These types of content represent a dream held by many LGBTQ+ individuals, wherein their romantic relationships can be normalized and accepted by a predominantly conservative society that often discriminates. This type of content videos only enforces the claims for the potentiality of TikTok to become a digital queer utopia where new conceptualization of an ideal condition for LGBTQ+

members can be asserted and recognized (Dickel & Schrape, 2017; Jones, 2013; Muñoz, 2019).

A view of TikTok's affordances for queer content shows how LGBTQ+ individuals mediate this social media platform for their personal use and agenda. One factor that appeared to mediate participants' approach to TikTok is how they formed queer representations in the application (i.e., trans-inclusive experiences and normalization of queer relationships). Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender and sexuality are made through iterative performances and ongoing "performativity" assumes that digital identity representations are diverse, fragmented, and consumed by distinct audiences. In the review of Jesse Fox and Rachel Warber (2015), they determined specific affordances of these social media platforms: a) Connectivity that allows users to have a single online network among their offline networks, having a broader reach of their posts; b) Privacy customization that enables users to manage their social media presence; and c) Anonymity that allows users to be anonymous in different online communities and spaces. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals can curate their social media accounts for "selective visibility" (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018) and identifiability, where they carefully regulate and negotiate the visibility of their posts to family and peers (Hanckel et al., 2019). This finding also entails posting LGBTQ+ content for intentional visibility, as the participants have discussed in the interviews and evident in their respective TikTok profiles. Many of the participants sought to educate about diverse genders and sexualities, which can be regarded as "everyday activism," which is characterized by sharing everyday life and personal stories to challenge social norms (Vivienne, 2016). Sharing these personal stories in a video format, embedded with captions and audio clips, allows the users to construct networked possibilities for their content. This type of content can hold various values and self-concepts that can affirm belongingness and solidarity among the community (Soriano, 2014). The findings of the current paper are in parallel with Nadia Karizat et al.'s (2021) study that revealed how LGBTQ+ people expressed algorithmic resistance in TikTok through using the app's affordances of the technological environment (i.e., following targeted users, sharing of content) in attempt to reconfigure the perceived lack of representation of the different social identities in TikTok.

6.3 Connecting with people to create an inclusive queer space

There is also a desire among queer content creators to communicate their TikTok videos to an audience. Since the TikTok features enable chats and comments between the TikTok account owners and their audience, the content creators may interact with their viewers. Queer TikTok users have

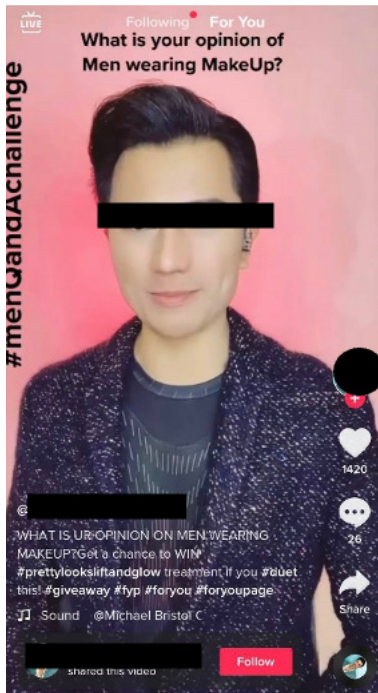
stated that they maximized the feature to create an inclusive queer space. To achieve this goal, they employed the affordances for posting comments and answering questions from different users. Their followers can comment on their content videos based on the participants' accounts. JL shared his experience when he said, "I do not have that many followers, but I have viewers. They are free to comment, tell what they want, and express themselves in the comment section regarding the video I posted." This experience is also shared by Tootsi when she said, "Aside from posting videos, I find myself having conversations in the comments section with other users on certain topics." Mark, a TV producer, mentioned how TikTok had become a safe space for queer people to interact. He said, "You let people know you are. TikTok is a safe space for queer people because this has become an avenue for expression and acceptance. More people understand and accept it." Positive engagement between content creators and their audiences enables healthy conversations about safe and creative gender expressions (Craig et al., 2015). Popular social media content provides an opportunity for LGBTQ individuals to find and foster a strong sense of queer community. The platform's interactivity leads to supportive content among LGBTQ members and their cis-gendered allies.

Another way of creating an inclusive queer space is spreading awareness and visibility regarding the different sub-sections and societal issues of the LGBTQ+ community. With more than 800 million TikTok active users (Mohsin, 2021), the virality of LGBTQ+ TikTok content may be harnessed by the users to expand reach and influence. Many participants exemplify this through their content videos of celebrating their queerness through their art and unapologetically celebrating their gender identities and sexuality. For example, Cassandra said he contributes a positive space in TikTok by "showing the fun side of me with my friends." For VR to have an inclusive queer space, awareness of the community is essential. He said, "I make sure that my TikTok profile is a safe space not only for my followers but for everyone. I make sure that I create videos to make people aware rather than make them hate the queer community." TikTok's technological configurations and affordances, such as its content creation capacities, interactivity, and algorithmic content distribution model, may be strategically used to make LGBTQ+ content more visible vividly. Queer TikTok users may also be able to create content that may further mainstream familiar and cohesive symbolic queer narratives in the global south. Further, the complementary use of hashtags and the engagements in TikTok duet configurations may enable familiar and binding narratives by queer content creators and their audiences to create aspirations discursively for the community. In TikTok, a group of digitally connected individuals

may be able to constitute rituals (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Among the participants, a couple of content videos spread awareness about the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, there was a discussion on the stigma and misconceptions of men wearing make-up (See Figure 3). These content videos provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ people to discuss topics on gender and sexuality that their straight counterparts might not be familiar with. This move allows a continuing discussion of these topics within and outside the community. The enabling power of TikTok to create pathways for communication and interactions among users and their public may be used as a large-scale socio-political force that can facilitate understanding among people more than division. Scholars have observed that the memetic properties of TikTok have the potential to engage users and audiences in healthy political and social discussions (Zhu et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Figure 3. A video explaining opinion on men wearing make-up



These queer content creators, however, are also prone to negative comments or harmful content about the community in interacting with varied audiences. Gem mentioned how he handles this type of situation. He said, “I comment on homophobic videos, ensuring I educate these people.” Taule seconded this when they said, “As much as possible, I wanna encourage them [followers] to post positive content instead of negative energy in my profile.” Tootsi shared her experience on this topic. She said, “TikTok users have evolved to the point that when a user makes a mistake, other users would... educate them in the comment, not particularly just bashing them. I would see users educate others too. More than spitting hate, they would give you facts of the matter. And, I think that it is a very mature way of dealing with people on social media.” This camaraderie of giving out constructive criticisms among content

creators manifests a safe space where one can learn and be educated without being hated or disrespected. These findings are similar to other studies that showed how online environments had become safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals to develop their queer identities through online discourse and

expressions (Fox & Warber, 2015; Labor, 2022, Laukkanen, 2007; Mehra et al., 2004;).

Another factor that mediates the use of TikTok is the queer community's call for a safe queer space (i.e., that in which individuals can express themselves freely). Previous studies have discussed negative repercussions of social media use among LGBTQ+ people, such as trans/bi/homophobic content brought by a predominantly heteronormative society (Hanckel et al., 2019), transgressions and violations among members of the community (Simpson & Seeman, 2020), and even sexual objectification (Cohen, 2021). As LGBTQ+ people continue to experience alienation in social media, the participants use the affordances of social media (Labor, 2021), particularly TikTok, to share and create queer content that problematizes these heteronormative norms among the community to reach a wider audience of different age and gender groups. The concept of creating and sharing queer content on the platform played an essential role in the way participants constructed an inclusive and safe queer space in TikTok. Through this, pakikipagkapwa was established by the intentional act of valuing Others through cultivating inclusivity in a fragmented society where marginalization of certain communities exists (Meneses, 2019; Pineda, 2022). As Enriquez (1993) argued, pakikipagkapwa emphasizes the highest form of humanness.

7. Conclusion

This study asks, what are the social media affordances of TikTok that enable gender expressions? Furthermore, how do queer TikTok content creators use the affordances of the app to queer their social media presence? We found that social media affordances and motives for queer identity presentations were considered units of analysis among queer content creators from the Philippines. Discussion of the findings revealed that the application has built-in functions that enable affordances such as easy content production, personalized and creative editing options, and direct user interactivity. These affordances enable queer individuals to utilize the app for self-representation and enact connections and relationships with their audiences. TikTok, as a digital object, allows and encourages conversations among queer folks, allies, and other audiences. Further, these queer content creators need to self-present, educate, and expand spaces for queer identity formations are contexts that push them to use the app for their motives. This study found that the participants produced a variety of representations of queer expressions and connected with people to create an inclusive queer space. The creation and development of identity politics and cultures were facilitated by the creative affordances of TikTok (Lee & Abidin, 2023). For instance, it allowed queer people to advocate for

diversity by using its various filters (Simpson & Semaan, 2021); establish social awareness through meme cultures (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), and enable collaborations of queer people from various age groups (Hood, 2020). Further, future studies about queer individuals in TikTok should be able to unpack the empowerment that each queer group (cisgender gay men, cisgender gay women, transwomen, etc.) undergo when they engage in TikTok. In this way, we can look into the nuanced experiences of various queer groups in producing representations that dispel homonormativity.

With TikTok's affordances for user interactions, the social media platform has become a legitimate space for networked collaboration that allows content creators and their followers to communicate and even learn from each other as shared by the participants. It enabled the LGBTQ+ users to enact *pakikipagkapwa* through social acceptance that highlights and humanizes queer stories and narratives. Moreover, the creations of queer content for LGBTQ+ individuals constitute an inevitable disclosure of one's exploration of gender identity and self-expression. This exploration tries to address different societal pressures (i.e., society's heteronormative norms, stigmatization of the community, etc.) and internalized predicaments (i.e., assumptions of what it is to be queer in this society), which would allow collective identification of values among users of the platform. The study's findings contribute to the scholarly discussions on the reconceptualization of the queer community through new digital technologies. It argues for the materialization of online spaces for the placemaking of LGBTQ+ people (Bloustien, 2007; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Unipan, 2021). As the study gleaned in the case of TikTok as a queer online space, the notion of community extends from the physical space to an online realm where geospatial networks exist, and its users regulate representations. This capacity of online spaces to bring together diverse and geographically dispersed LGBTQ+ individuals with shared values and experiences creates arenas for togetherness and puts voices to the voiceless members of the community (Labor & San Pascual, 2022; Soriano, 2014).

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