

The Humorless Lesbian in The Digital Age

An ethnographic look into the use of humor by queer women on TikTok

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Master's Thesis

June 2022

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Abstract

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platform TikTok surpassed 2 billion users. The video sharing platform serves amongst other things as a space where marginalized groups of people get together and form communities. One of these groups consists of queer women, who regularly use the digital space to engage in humorous discourses. Humor is considered to be a core facet of human existence and serves as an essential key for understanding cultural and social processes. In this research, I explore the use of humor on TikTok by queer women to communicate their experiences. The research question that guided the analysis is: how is humor used to communicate the female queer experience on TikTok? Digital ethnography was used as a method to collect a useful and extensive set of data. Through thorough thematic analysis, two main categories were found to be present. The first one, called 'out-group humor', refers to humor by queer women that addresses groups outside of the female LGBTQ+ community. The themes making up this category are 'dislike for men', 'calling out the straights', and 'social experiences'. The second category, 'in-group humor', refers to humor by queer women that addresses the own community, and encompasses four themes: 'love for being queer', 'queer awakenings', 'queer struggles', and 'stereotypes'. The findings of this study indicate that queer women regularly engage in humorous discourses on TikTok as a way of addressing and coping with the realities of their queerness and (marginalized) positions in society. There are multiple ways in which this is done. In some instances, humor is used as a tool to subvert misogynist and queerphobic status quos, which carries important implications for queer women's social positions in relation to others (mainly: straight men). At other times, humorous discourses are deployed for means of self-definition and creating queer narratives of realness. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the need for further research and attention (in)to the use of humor by marginalized communities in digital spaces. It is thanks to the Web 2.0 that such humorous discourses can rapidly and globally spread, which could have positive effects on marginalized people all over the world as they might benefit from encountering and engaging in these sorts of 'lighthearted' discourses surrounding their (marginalized) identities.

KEYWORDS: *LGBTQ + community, TikTok, (Digital) feminist humor, Subversive humor, Humorless lesbian*

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1. Introduction

When the COVID-pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, isolation and boredom resulted in a great number of people being drawn to social media platforms. During the initial wave of the pandemic the most heavily downloaded app was TikTok, which surpassed 2 billion downloads (Musil, 2020). TikTok, originally called Musical.ly, is a social networking application that allows users to create, edit, and share videos of up to 3 minutes (Omar & Dequan, 2020). The platform's accessible affordances and global reach make it a perfect place for small creators to post content and gain a following. As with most digital social platforms, TikTok offers marginalized groups a space to unite and form a community (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021).

One of these marginalized groups is the LGBTQ+-community, which includes all people that “[...] identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two- spirit, non-binary or any other gender or sexual identity that falls outside of cisgender heterosexuality” (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021, p. 2). I use this term interchangeably with the term ‘queer (community)’. In particular, gender and sexual minority youth use TikTok for interactive and community purposes in COVID-times (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021). Although the content of their videos differs per creator and video, most videos seem to have a humorous tone and to be made for good laughs. My research will focus on the use of humor by female queer TikTokers and will attempt to answer the question: *how is humor used to communicate the female queer experience on TikTok?*

1.1. Academic and societal relevance

My research takes place at the intersection of humor studies, (social) media studies, and queer studies. The notion of humor has historically been a popular object of study, which has led to a plethora of socio-psychological theories surrounding the topic (Morreal, 2009). However, combined with the more recently introduced Internet, especially the new ‘Web 2.0’, new approaches and perspectives are needed to grasp the complexities of the encounters between the two phenomena (Shifman, 2007). Contemporary research shows that humor easily translates to digital environments, sometimes even transforming into new shapes like memes (Baym, 1995; Burton, 2019). Taking a close and thorough look at humor in the digital space of TikTok could aid in getting a better grip on specific ways in which humor occurs in digital spaces.

Moreover, because of TikTok's recent rise in popularity the scope of research about the social medium is still small and demands more attention. This is especially valid when we consider TikTok is offering new ways of (visual) communication and continuously changing and updating its features. For example, in early 2021 TikTok videos could only be 15 seconds long, whereas today this already is three minutes (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021). Academically, my research will thus also be a valuable addition to the existing canon about the changeable nature of social media sites like TikTok

Not only digital humor, but also the experiences of sexual minorities on social networking sites are understudied (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Since my research is focused on queer women, it offers new and valuable knowledge about digital experiences of this marginalized group, that enriches the field of queer studies. Consequently, as my research will attempt to address gaps in existing literature on the intersecting topics of humor, social media, and queer identities, it will add to the growing line of work on all these topics individually as well as collectively.

Aside from academic relevance, researching digital queer humor carries social relevance. To start, people that are part of the LGBTQ+ community historically have been and still are targeted for their identity. Queer people are at high risk of becoming victims of hate speech and hate crimes, and queer teenagers are significantly more likely to attempt suicide than straight teens (Wuest, 2014). In present-day society, characterized by technological innovation, social knowledge about LGBTQ+ identities is primarily produced and sought out on media sites (Gray, 2009). More specifically, the Internet has the potential to provide queer people with a safe(r) space where they can freely perform their identities and find comfort in digital communities (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Nygaard, 2014). Research has also shown that LGBTQ+ people spend more time online than their non-queer peers (Tropiano, 2014). Consequently, it is “only through critical examination and analysis of queer representations sought out and presented to us for consumption through our digitized screens [that we can] complicate LGBT issues and identities” (Siebler, 2016, p.15). By critically examining female queer representations in the digital space of TikTok, queer identities and social issues might emerge that demand attention.

Furthermore, researching humor also has social relevance as it is a core facet of human experience that serves as a key for understanding cultural and social processes (Martin, 2007; Shifman, 2007). It has been shown to serve multiple psychological benefits, like helping people cope with negative emotions (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Throughout history, marginalized groups have used humor as a tool for community-building, support, and subversion of prevalent (patriarchal) norms (Morrow & Battles, 2015). My research shines a light on digital humor as a support system for specifically queer women, who are historically considered to be fundamentally humorless (Kulick, 2010). Contrary to popular belief, and as will become clear from my research, however, lesbians commonly engage in humorous discourses (Bing, 2007; Streeten, 2020). My research aids in developing a more thorough understanding of the ways in which marginalized communities draw on (digital) humor as ways of communicating their experiences and potentially helping themselves and others navigate (heterosexual) society.

1.2. Chapter outline

The subsequent chapters of the thesis are outlined as follows. In chapter two I present the theoretical framework that was employed for my research. The chapter touches upon important

theories of humor, connections between humor and feminism, humor in the digital age, and the digital queer experience. Once a theoretical structure has been formulated, I move on to a methodological chapter, in which my choice for a digital ethnography to comprehend the complexities and richness of the subject matter is justified. This chapter also includes descriptions of TikTok as a field site, the research procedure, and the used method for data analysis: thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The in-depth analysis is presented in the next chapter, 'results', which is roughly divided up into two parts that each represent a core category that emerged from my research. Finally, I present a conclusion in which I briefly look back on the findings and reflect on their implications and broader meanings. Here, I also note some of the limitations of my research and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework employed to study the use of humor on TikTok to communicate the female queer experience. First, I present three important general theories of humor as well as relevant findings regarding the power of humor and, more specific to my research, the connections between gender, humor, and sexuality. Then I take a closer look at the role humor plays in contemporary digital society, with particular attention to the notion of the meme. Finally, I present theory on the digital queer experience, which will prove to have its positive as well as negative implications.

2.1. Humor theory

Broadly speaking, the term ‘humor’ refers to anything people do or say that can be perceived as funny and evoking laughter (Martin, 2007). Humor usually has a positive and socially desirable connotation. Although it is often thought of as lighthearted or unsophisticated, it is a central part to the human condition (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). The most convincing evidence for understanding humor as a universal aspect of humanity is found in the universality of the sound of laughter (Martin, 2007). Different cultures might have their own norms regarding suitable subject matter for humor and moments to engage in it, but the physical look and sound of laughter is always to a certain extent the same. As Martin (2007) puts it: “being able to enjoy humor and express it through laughter seems to be an essential part of what it means to be human” (p. 3). Consequently, an important question would be why it is that humor is such an essential part of who we are.

2.1.1. Three core theories of humor

Throughout history, three main theories have explained the (social) functions and origins of humor. These theories of humor and laughter are not mutually exclusive, and it is most likely that all are applicable to different (sometimes even similar) contexts. The oldest of these theories is what we now call the superiority theory (Morreal, 2009; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Since humor and laughter can involve social rule-breaking and loss of self-control, a lot of societies have historically been suspicious of these phenomena. Great thinkers like Plato and Hobbes saw laughter as an emotion that overrode rational self-control. Although every thinker had their own specific theories, they all believed that laughter expressed feelings of superiority. Advocates of this theory claim that “when something evokes laughter, it is by revealing someone’s inferiority to the person laughing” (Morreal, 2009, p. 7). Humor thus involved feelings of amusement at the expense of other peoples’ misfortunes, which automatically meant it required an element of hostility (Long & Graesser, 1988). Interestingly, the hostile element of humor and the fact that it positions a person or group as inferior can also lead to reinforcement of unity amongst group members of the ‘superior’ group (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009).

A second theory is the incongruity theory, which proposes that people laugh because something or someone surprises them or deviates from an accepted pattern (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). ‘Human experience’ is based on learned patterns that determine what we expect to happen as a result of certain behavior or occurrences. When these patterns are disrupted, and something happens that violates our expectations, we speak of an incongruity (Morreal, 2009). People laugh at things, then, when those things deviate from what they expect. It is important to note here as well that we cannot speak of The Incongruity Theory as one rationale (Morreal, 2009). Rather, there are multiple humor theories based on the concept of incongruity that fit into the above description.

Finally, in the eighteenth century the relief theory arose, which focused on the physical phenomenon of laughter (Morreal, 2009). The initial version of this theory was focused on the humans’ nervous system, which was thought to be a network of tubes that held some sort of ‘animal spirits’. It was believed that, with emotional excitement, these fluids would build up pressure which they then had to release in the form of laughter. More contemporary versions of this theory seem somewhat more realistic. Admittedly, laughter clearly has a physical element, as it involves activation of multiple areas of the nervous system and brain, as well as many muscle groups (Morreal, 2009). However, in contemporary scholarship the focus is less on actual physical relief and more on psychological relief: it is thought that people engage in laughter and experience humor because they sense this reduces anxieties (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). For example, research shows that cancer patients tend to use humor to cope with their illness and that it positively affects their moods and alleviates their anxiety (Rose et al., 2013).

Although the main theories differ from one another on multiple points, all three have one characteristic in common: one way or another, they theorize laughter as a coping mechanism (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). The relief theory does this in the most obvious way since it quite literally purports humor and laughter as ways to *relieve* oneself of negative anxieties. When people find humor in a stressful or threatening situation, like chronic illness, they can potentially “replace negative with positive affect, thereby giving them an increased ability to cope with negative states of affairs” (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009, p. 349). Humor that is based on incongruities can be useful for reappraising a negative situation and seeing it from a new, less threatening perspective. Laughing at a joke about cancer made by a cancer patient involves deviation from a learned pattern that teaches it is not appropriate to find humor in terminal illness.¹ Disruption of the expected pattern leads to laughter, and possibly also to a way of coping with the (life) threatening experience. Lastly, humor that is used to convey one’s own superiority can potentially also work as a coping mechanism. Laughing at other peoples’ expense, a phenomenon that I will soon return to, can be a way of coping with one’s personal feelings of inferiority (Martin, 2007).

¹ The fact that the example of the cancer joke is applicable to the relief theory as well as the incongruity theory already shows the complexities and overlap of the Main Theories.

Seeing that my research focusses on a marginalized community, that of queer women, the coping aspect of humor is especially relevant. As will become clear from the following sections, the queer experience can be stressful, painful, and sometimes even dangerous. Humor can serve as a way for queer women to cope with the negative aspects of being queer and to lighten the anxiety that surrounds it.

2.1.2. The power of humor

I do not intend to ‘pick’ one of the three main theories as a framework for humor. As mentioned, while each theory explains the origins and functions of humor differently, they coexist and share a considerable amount of overlap. For the sake of my research, it is more relevant to uncover more specifically the forms and functions of humor in today’s society and, consequently, how they potentially communicate the female queer experience. Humor comes in many forms and contexts. The most well-known and relevant form of humor is *the joke*, which Long and Graesser (1988) describe as “anything done or said to deliberately provoke amusement” (p. 37). Some examples of joke material that these authors describe are philosophical, sexual, hostile, demeaning to men, and demeaning to women.

I now turn to the work of Holmes and Marra (2002), who tie the notion of humor to that of power relations. In their research of humor in the workplace, the authors identify two sorts of humor that will prove relevant in my research of queer digital humor. They make a clear distinction between what they call ‘reinforcing humor’ and ‘subversive humor’. The former is characterized by its virtue of maintaining “the status quo of group norms” (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p.70). When humor is used in a way that maintains the status quo of a group, it can enhance social cohesion within this group of people, creating a strong in-group (Martin, 2007). However, this automatically means that other individuals are excluded, becoming part of an out-group. By using humor, the in-group exerts power over the out-group to enhance their feelings of group cohesiveness and solidarity. The out-group becomes the target, or as some would call it: the butt of the joke. Consequently, humor is a powerful tool that can create group identity as well as exclusion.

However, humor does not always have to reinforce the status quo of existing groups. In contrast to reinforcing humor, subversive humor challenges societal power relations and subverts the status quo (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Humor can subvert an individual, a group, or even broader: society. Subversive humor essentially acts as a socially acceptable and strategic cover of critical intent. What this also means is that it is not historically fixed who is part of the ‘superior’ in-group and who belongs to the ‘inferior’ out-group. Historically, it has been mostly marginalized groups of people that fell victim to exclusion by humor (Streeten, 2020). However, this does not mean these groups have always accepted their placement in an out-group. As I will show now, subversive humor is a tool that has often been used specifically by these out-groups to regain some power and challenge the status quo.

2.1.3. Humor, gender, and lesbians

Throughout history, social power has been considered masculine, which consequently located women as the less powerful group of the two² (Streeten, 2020). Moreover, men and male-dominated institutions “have controlled dissemination of humor and determined what is and is not acceptable as humorous discourse” (Case & Lippard, 2009, p. 240). Laughter from men is often considered funny, especially when it is at the expense of women or other marginalized groups; thus, when it punches *down* on them. Historically, comedy has been used to make fun of marginalized groups, like women, queer people, and ethnic minorities (Morrow & Battles, 2015). Through making them the butt of the joke and negatively stereotyping them, dominant groups exert power over and oppress their ‘inferior’ peers (Willet & Willet, 2019).

That is not to say, however, that marginalized groups have steered away from using humor; on the contrary. Throughout history, these groups have used humor as a source of community-building, support, and transgression of dominant ideological norms (Morrow & Battles, 2015). In Holmes and Marras’ (2002) terms: marginalized groups have used subversive humor to challenge the existing misogynist/queerphobic/racist status quo. Broadly speaking, we call this form of humor ‘feminist humor’, which can serve as a powerful tool for marginalized people to redefine gender roles, stereotypes, and other damaging attitudes in society (Case & Lippard, 2009). So, although ridicule has historically been used as a damaging weapon by men, “if well aimed, . . . , it can be feminists’ as well” (Willet & Willet, 2019, p. 27).

There are multiple ways in which feminist humor attempts to address and subvert the status quo. In her analysis of feminist comics, Streeten (2020) theorizes that these visual humorous expressions have been used by feminists to convey political messages about exactly those women’s assumed social inferiority. By using jokes and cartoons, women can reject stereotypes and redirect the laughter towards the initial aggressor: the man (or, even broader: patriarchy). However, women do not necessarily have to reject negative stereotypes all together to regain power over their aggressor: in a lot of instances, women use existing stereotypes in new and creative ways to undermine the old ones (Bing, 2007). For example, Willet and Willet (2019) point to Margaret Cho, who always seems to overplay certain stereotypes, like those surrounding her (Asian) descent and her (queer) sexuality. Cho uses an existing stereotype, but by exaggerating and reappropriating it she sheds light on its ridiculousness. By highlighting existing damaging stereotypes, marginalized groups challenge hegemonic assumptions (Morrow & Battles, 2015).

Contrary to sexist, degrading, anti-feminist humor that is expressed by dominant groups like men, feminist humor punches *up*, taking a swing at the historical oppressor (Willet & Willet, 2019). It

² These expositions are based on a binary view of gender, which is not representative of the actual range of gender-identities that exist in society. I fully acknowledge the notion of gender as a spectrum. However, for the sake of explaining the (historical) argument, I will refer to gender as a binary system, in which men are historically considered superior to women.

could thus be claimed that humor plays a crucial role in the bitter fight against historically discriminatory rhetorics like racism, sexism, and queerphobia. As Case and Lippard (2009) put it: “Humor is a major means by which critics of patriarchal ideologies and structures have gained a voice and an audience” (p. 252). Aside from a voice and an audience, humor has also given oppressed people more control over their processes of self-definition, granting them new ways to express themselves and regain control over their narratives (Case & Lippard, 2009).

My research demographic falls at the intersection of two marginalized groups: the female population and the LGBTQ+ community. Interestingly, both groups have the reputation of being remarkably humorless (Kulick, 2010). As Kulick (2010) puts it: “there is a perception, widespread certainly in much of the English speaking world, at least, that lesbians are humorless” (p. 60). This stereotype of the ‘humorless lesbian’ can be harmful, especially when considering the assumption that humor is an essential part of the human experience (Martin, 2007; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). When a group of people is accused of being humorless, it is essentially asserted that they “lack a fundamental dimension of humanity” (Kulick, 2010, p. 69). However, contrary to popular believe, women in general and lesbians specifically do have humor (Kulick, 2010).

Bing (2004) notices a difference in feminist (‘straight’) humor and lesbian humor. She finds that feminist humor often tends to be subversive, which does challenge the myth of the humorless women, but also in a way reinforces the status quo instead of undermining it. Jokes that target men and negatively stereotype them might feel like ‘victory’, but eventually confirm gender inequalities and maintain hierarchy. For example, Case and Lippard (2009) found that a lot of feminist jokes attempt to discredit men by highlighting their flaws. These jokes used stereotypes that painted men as useless, stupid, hypersexual, or disgusting. Feminist jokes also often tended to entail explicit feminist critique, accusing men of being sexist and abusive, and positioning the woman as superior.

Lesbian humor, on the other hand, was found to be less divisive and more often about topics that were only of interest to lesbians (Bing, 2004). Lesbian jokes often do acknowledge outside definitions and lesbians’ disputed place in society, but at the same time they undermine these definitions and the expectations of dominant (heterosexual) culture. In other words, Bing (2004) finds that while (straight) feminists often use humor to define themselves in relation to their binary opposites, lesbians use humor for self-definition without necessarily positioning themselves in relation to others.

2.2. Humor in digital spaces

2.2.1. The age of the prosumer

As human language, technology, and culture have evolved, new ways and styles of communicating humor have arisen throughout the years (Martin, 2007). In contrast to previous decades, humor does not only exist in our embodied ‘offline’ world anymore. Thanks to invention of

the Internet, it can now be found in digital spaces. Here, humorous discourses can spread like never before, seeing that the Internet has allowed for the “effortless transcending of national borders” (Shifman, 2013, p. 152). One of the most important features of the Internet is that of interactivity, which is a reciprocal process in which people can take up the role of sender as well as that of receiver, consumer, and producer (Shifman, 2013). Another crucial trait of the Internet that Shifman (2007) highlights is its multimedia character: the Internet can store a multitude of communication morphologies like sound, pictures, and moving images. Third, the Internet is characterized by a global reach, a quality due to which some call it the ‘World Wide Web’.

Ever since a little under twenty years ago, the Internet gained new features that lead to people prompting this ‘newer’ Internet the Web 2.0 (Hine, 2017). One of the most well-known and relevant components of Web 2.0 is that of the social networking site (SNS). At its core, an SNS is based around a (personal) profile, a home page, and possibilities for people to communicate with each other through text or video (Boyd, 2007). One aspect that distinguishes these platforms from other types of computer mediated communication is their public nature. SNS are in theory accessible to anyone who belongs to a privileged category. According to Boyd (2007), one of these privileged categories is that of the ‘adult’. In contemporary times, marked by an increase in accessibility of technological devices and by an abundance of social media sites that seem to be specifically catered to children and young adults, I don’t consider adults a privileged category anymore. To illustrate: it is estimated that a large percentage of TikTok users is under the age of 18 (Doyle, 2022). That being said, there are certainly other privileges needed for SNS access, like (safe) Internet access and technological skills.

Another key feature of Web 2.0 is its participatory nature. Shifman (2013) emphasizes that we are now part of a ‘participatory culture’, where boundaries between “interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, [and] bottom-up and top-down communications” (p. 6) are blurred. Everywhere around the world, people with access to the Internet and its endless tools can write, talk, create, share, and respond to almost anything they wish. Social networking platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Reddit are especially suitable for engaging in participatory trends (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Milner, 2013). These platforms offer users certain affordances, like comment sections and spaces for editing content, which make creation and spread of bottom-up content easy. The consumer has transformed into a ‘prosumer’ who does not passively receive content anymore, but now actively creates and spreads it (Burton, 2019).

2.2.2. The Internet Meme

These interactive and participatory features of computer-mediated communication make the internet a suitable place for humorous performances (Baym, 1995). One of the most well-known incarnations of digital humor might be the ‘meme’. In 1976, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word to describe “small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (Shifman, 2013, p. 2). Ever since the development of the Internet, especially Web 2.0, the

spread of ‘units of culture’ has gotten increasingly easier. Nowadays, when we speak of a ‘meme’, we almost always are alluding to its contemporary version: the Internet meme. In the context of the Internet, the ‘meme’ refers to a digital object that is based on a certain textual, visual and/or auditory form and that is reappropriated to make a ‘unique’ version of the original form (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014).

More specifically, Shifman (2013) suggests defining the Internet meme according to three conditions, the first one being that there is a “group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance” (p. 7). Secondly, the items should have been created with an awareness of one another. The final condition requires the items to be circulated, transformed, and/or imitated through the Internet by many people. Although Shifman (2013) does not allude to it in her definition, most memes include a humorous aspect (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Drakett et al., 2018; Kodak & Oduor, 2020). Consequently, an Internet meme consists of an image, text, video and/or audio that includes humor and is spread through the Internet. The notion of the meme is relevant in my research because I propose most TikTok videos can be considered memes. It is a very common phenomenon on TikTok for ‘trends’ to arise that introduce a certain format (often with specific sounds and/or visual effects) and that are performed by a huge amount of TikTok users. As will become clear from my analysis, trends like this play an important role in the articulation of the queer experience of female TikTokers.

Although memes are often made for humorous purposes, there is more to it. Research has shown that, aside from their function as funny content, memetic discourses also serve social purposes (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Burton, 2019; Kodak & Oduor, 2020). For example, Ask and Abidin (2018) found that memes about student issues played a role in forming a collective student identity. Through self-deprecating humor and shared pain, memes established a shared relatability of the intense stressful study life. The authors even go as far as to claim that, because of the formation of collective identities and shared experiences articulated in the student memes, a counter-public has arisen. In line with this research, Burton (2019) found that young, marginalized groups facing mental health issues used memes to speak out about their problems and identify with each other through shared experiences. More research by Kodak & Oduor (2020) about memes during COVID-times alludes to a similar conclusion. It turns out that, in these frightening times, memes about the threats and worries of the virus helped create a sense of community and companionship amongst group members.

All these findings prove that the coping functions of humor are still very relevant when it comes to memefied discourses (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Moreover, since these discourses are often circulating in and representing certain groups, they can also give us insight into marginalized stories from communities that face certain societal issues (Ask & Abidin, 2018). Burton (2019) points at the LGBTQ+ community as being one of those marginalized groups that may benefit from memes.

2.3. The digital queer experience

2.3.1. The Internet as a safe space

The LGBTQ+ community, within which queer women are situated, has historically been - and to this day still is - marginalized as a group. Heterosexuality is the norm in almost all spaces of society: heterosexual scripts are embedded in fairy tales, movies, television, advertisements, and all sorts of (media) productions (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Research shows that people from the LGBTQ+ community are more at risk of being victimized and suffering negative consequences than people that are not part of the community (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021; Tropiano, 2014). Especially queer youth is vulnerable for homophobia, which is still very much present in, but not limited to, the school classrooms and hallways (Tropiano, 2014). In 2013 it was reported that queer youths were four times more likely to attempt suicide than straight teens (Wuest, 2014).

Considering these alarming facts, it does not come as a surprise that queer people seek space where they do not have to deal with the negative experiences of belonging to a marginalized group. And thus, because they are excluded from certain discourses and privileges in the physical world, “the internet may provide the possibility of new and potentially liberating alternatives for the building of new forms of culture and community” (Hillier & Harrison, 2007, p. 83). These possibilities have only increased since SNS brought all their public, interactive, and participatory features to the table (Boyd, 2007; Shifman, 2013). Again, these potential advantages are especially relevant for younger LGBTQ+ people, who do not only have to deal with (fear of) harassment at school, but also might be experiencing this at home (Tropiano, 2014). For a lot of queer people, the Internet provides them this much needed space.

In existing research on this topic, the Internet is framed as a ‘safe’ space for LGBTQ+ people (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Nygaard, 2014). In a safe space, marginalized people can be themselves without fear of persecution for their ‘difference’ and encountering damaging stereotypes (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Considering all the interactive and global features the Internet has introduced (Shifman, 2013), it has undeniably offered queer people space to express and perform their identity. There are a few ways in which this has been established.

First, the Internet aids queer people in their journey of self-discovery (Fox and Ralston, 2016). Online, they can read and watch videos, ask fellow queer people questions, and observe or practice behaviors that are associated with their identities. In his research of coming out videos on YouTube, Wuest (2014) found that these videos aided queer people’s identity development through practices of visibility and acculturation. Visibility alludes to queerness being openly shown and represented. Queer narratives that circulate online can offer LGBTQ+ people comfort and familiarity, which is something the mainstream media often still fails in (Gray, 2009). Acculturation means that, thanks to the internet, queer people can receive information about queer culture and experiences. It is often the younger

queer people that tend to look for role models, which makes sense considering a lot of them “have no built-in support or education structure and may not have other visible queer people in their lives to act as role models” (Wuest, 2014, p. 20).

The implications of digital visibility and acculturation of queer people can be significant. In her work on coming-out stories of rural young LGBTQ+ community members, Gray (2009) has argued that digital media contributes to ‘identity work’ of this marginalized group. The author defines identity work as “the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities” (Gray, 2009, p. 1170). Compared to straight cisgender people, queer people come to face a divergent path that challenges them to consciously explore the intricacies of their identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Thus, queer people (especially those who lack role models or access to queer narratives in their direct environment) can strategically use the Internet as a site for seeking queer narratives of realness. These narratives can help them explore and push the boundaries of their own identities. In other words: queer stories that circulate online, like coming-out stories, play an important part in the identity development of (young) LGBTQ+ people. This finding is important for my research: humorous queer narratives on TikTok could play a role in helping to explore and shaping the identity of queer TikTok users.

Another advantage of the digital space is the formation of communities. The Internet provides queer people sites to interact with each other and create bonds (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). A marginalized community like the LGBTQ+ community can unite on sites like TikTok through use of shared hashtags (e.g., #lgbt and #gaytok) and following fellow queer creators. Especially when union in ‘real’ life has its obstacles, this can be valuable. Research by Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) shows how during the COVID-19 pandemic, sexual minority youth used TikTok to form a safe and supportive community where experiences were shared. They conclude that queer youth has been able to “utilize the strength of the TikTok algorithm to create an environment composed of positive gender and sexual minority content on a main-stream social media app” (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p. 14). My research will build on theirs and take a more detailed look into the specific humor-related practices and discourses queer TikTokers use to communicate these experiences.

2.3.2. Safe(r) Space?

Unfortunately, the notion of the Internet as a ‘safe space’ for queer people does not come without its nuances and limitations. Although it is true that digital platforms have offered queer people space for learning, identity development, and community building (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Wuest, 2014), participation in digital culture has also brought with it certain vulnerabilities. As Baym (2006a) reminds us: “the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the ‘offline’ world and the activities and structures in which we participate” (p. 86). Seeing that the ‘offline’ world is still very much dependent on (cis) male heterosexual norms, and that Web 2.0 has made the Internet accessible for many people, it comes

as no surprise that digital spaces are no short of misogynistic and queerphobic discourses (Drakett et al., 2018). ‘Offline’ harassment of marginalized groups is thus translated and adapted to online space.

The harassment that takes place on digital platforms like SNS comes in many shapes and forms. A lot of these threatening discourses are presented through humorous narratives; more specifically, they are expressed through memes. Memes often “reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators (typically White, privileged young men)” (Gal et al., 2015, p. 1701). So, memes generally tend to express and replicate existing hegemonic stereotypes. For example, on digital platforms like Reddit and 4chan (both contested controversial social networking sites), a lot of memes circulate that express racist and sexist ideology (Milner, 2013). In their critical feminist study of digital humor, Drakett et al. (2018) found that Internet memes often expressed heteronormative, masculinized views that stereotyped women in degrading ways. While these memes were often framed as ‘just a joke’, they could be considered hurtful and damaging to women and – more specifically – queer women. As a result of the potential negativity that marginalized groups can encounter in digital spaces, I would propose calling the digital environment a safe(r) space.

Although the digital harassment of (queer) women in digital spaces is worrisome, these problematic discourses do not go uncontested. Milner (2013) argues that the harmful memetic images on platforms like Reddit and 4chan can be challenged. He alludes to the fact that memes, just like ‘regular (offline) humor’ can be used to subvert norms. Similarly, Drakett et al. (2018) argue that the troubling Internet discourses can be combated by developing counter-discourses. It is exactly this idea of subversion of problematic sexist and queerphobic humor that will prove relevant in my analysis of queer humor by female TikTok creators.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

3.1.1. Digital ethnography

To adequately and optimally answer my research question, I opted for digital ethnographic research. At its core, ethnography is “all about listening to other people’s stories and to how they make sense of a changing world ... [and] retelling such stories to others” (Barendregt, 2021, p. 186). Consequently, ethnography as a method is appealing because of its depth of description and its ways of addressing the complexities and richness of social life (Hine, 2000). Seeing that my research is focused on a specific community, which is itself a complex matter with multiple dimensions that demand exploration, it is relevant to use thick description and an eye for complexities. Furthermore, ethnography allows the researcher to approach these complexities of life without a reliance on a priori hypotheses, since the method is mostly based around their description of their experiences and findings (Hine, 2000).

Traditionally it is the researchers’ own body that poses as the main instrument in the immersive fieldwork that ethnographic research demands (Barendregt, 2021). Importantly, an ethnographic researcher should always acknowledge that the objects of their findings and descriptions are of their own making (Hine, 2000). As far as objectivity goes, then, ethnographic research cannot be said to conform to this principle. Rather, ethnographies can be seen as “written and unavoidably constructed accounts of objects created through disciplinary practices and the ethnographer's embodied and reflexive engagement” (Hine, 2000, p. 3). The personal and more subjective nature is what makes ethnography as a method unique as well as valuable. To approach a community and/or phenomenon without pre-set hypotheses and with the intention of fully experiencing its richness and complexities aids in gaining truly authentic knowledge about how the community/phenomenon is potentially experienced by others.

Because my research focussed on social media platform TikTok, my ethnography took place digitally. Moving an ethnographic approach from the ‘offline’ to the ‘online’ poses challenges that should be addressed (Hine, 2000). According to Caliendo (2017), these challenges are twofold. Theoretically, because of the Internet’s fluid and dispersed characteristics, traditional ethnographic categories such as the field and ethics should be reconsidered. Methodologically, social media environments inhabit pre-set tools that organize the digital space and interactions, which might restrict the researchers’ freedom and scope of action.

Redefining classical ethnographic notions for digital ethnography is a challenge, but essential. The notion of ‘the field’ traditionally referred to a tangible field site defined and limited by geographical and material boundaries (Hine, 2000). It was common practice for the researcher to

physically travel to the field site and have face-to-face interactions with subjects of their study. In contrast, digital ethnography does not have to involve physical travel. The Internet is not restricted by physical boundaries and can be visited from many places at practically any time, since researchers and their (digital) subjects do not need to be simultaneously present in the digital spaces (Hine, 2000). Practically, this means the digital ethnographers' field site can be accessed from almost anywhere and always, which can be a big advantage.

Despite these benefits, the dynamic features of the digital field site make it difficult to determine where the digital field of research begins and where it ends (Barendregt, 2021). These field sites are emergent, which means that they are being delineated as the ethnographer works their way through online spaces, finding out as they go which ones are significant (Hine, 2017). This can be a challenge, especially because digital (social) media platforms are very complex, fragmented and fluid spaces (Caliandro, 2017). I will shortly return to the implications of these challenges in my research.

3.1.2. TikTok as a field site

As a starting point for my research, I defined my main field site as 'queer spaces on TikTok'. TikTok is a complex social media platform that allows people to easily create, share, watch, and engage with user generated content (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Originally, users could create and post videos that lasted no more than 15 seconds. When I started my ethnographic fieldwork, the maximum amount of time for a video had already gone up to three minutes. TikTok also offers tools for people to creatively edit their videos. Aside from a constantly changing and evolving selection of filters, there is a vast array of TikTok audios that people can use and playback to. These audios often consist of snippets of movie scenes or lines from famous songs.

As for the lay-out of the platform, TikTok consists of two main feeds that users can visit (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021). The first one is a space where people can view videos from TikTok creators that they 'follow'. The second one is called the 'for you page' (fyp) and presents the user with "an ongoing stream of TikTok videos that algorithms have highly curated to be of interest to the user" (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021, p. 4). Every TikTok user also has a personal account page that shows a profile picture and short bio³ (if installed) and the entire collection of videos that they posted (if they posted anything). In terms of functions and affordances, TikTok shares a lot of features with Instagram (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Just like the latter platform, TikTok provides a 'like' button for videos and a comment section for each video that allows people to respond and engage in conversations with one another. Similar to Instagram, individual comments can also be 'liked'. In contrast to Instagram, however, TikTok has a special page that each user can personally access to find all the videos that they

³ The term 'bio' refers to the small area present on every personal social media account, which is usually placed underneath a profile picture. People commonly use the space to briefly introduce themselves by means of a short sentence and/or emojis.

previously 'liked'. This feature turned out to be especially useful in my research since it allowed me to go back easily to TikToks that I had previously come across and needed for my analysis.

Another characteristic of TikTok that played an important role in my ethnographic research on the platform is its algorithm. Although a lot remains unclear about TikTok's algorithm, it is known to track user interactions, which can consist of followed accounts, 'liked' videos, amount of time spent watching specific videos, and more (Newberry, 2022). From the following section it will become clear how I efficiently used the algorithm throughout my fieldwork.

3.1.3. Procedure

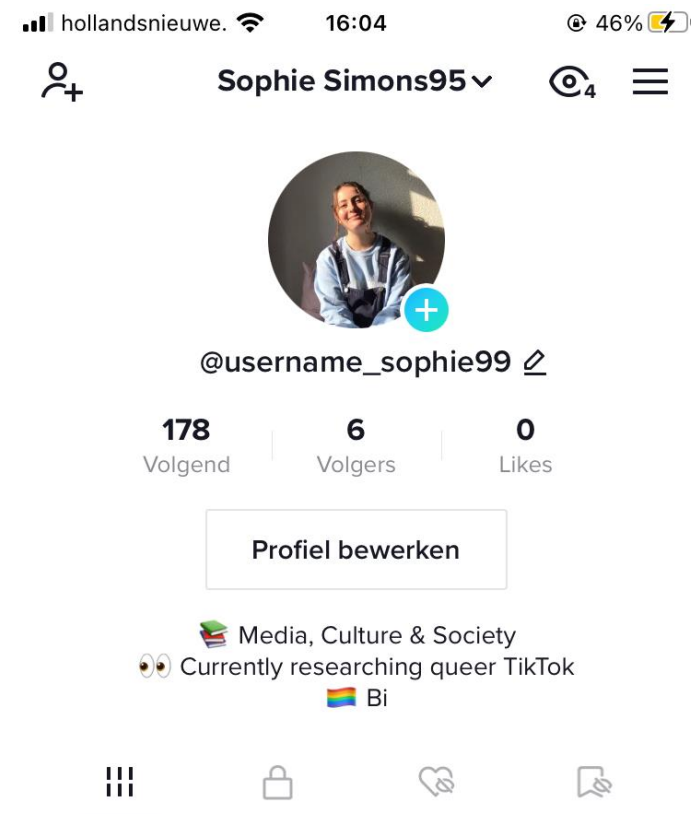
My digital ethnographic research took place over a period of approximately two and a half months. Before delving into the platform and community, I made an overview of my pre-existing knowledge about the spaces I was about to immerse myself in. This overview functioned first of all as a tool of self-reflexivity towards my relation to the research, which Thompson et al. (2021) recognize to be a key ethical consideration since it acknowledges "the way in which the researcher's knowledge about the world influences research claims ... [and] what the researcher brings with them in terms of personal and social biases to the object of inquiry" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, as cited in Thompson et al., 2021, p. 679). Another advantage of this overview was that it offered me a useful gateway and starting point into my field work. My notes consisted of knowledge that I had gained from my private time spent on TikTok's queer spaces, ranging from broad observations to more specific information regarding user accounts and hashtags that could be relevant for my research. The information turned out to be especially useful at the beginning of my research journey, which I will now address.

In order to start with an entirely clean algorithmic slate, and to ensure that personal and academic TikTok use would not overlap, I created a new account on the app which was exclusively dedicated to my research purposes. After countless trials and errors to claim an account name, I settled on '@username_sophie99'. In terms of transparency, it was crucial to actively manage my research position and presence (Thompson et al., 2021). When gathering data from online communities, one of the ethical considerations should be to disclose one's own professional persona (De Seta, 2020). On top of using my name and birth year in my username, I included a profile picture showing my face and part of my upper body, and a small bio. The limited space for the bio resulted in me having to be creative and selective about my choice of words. I ended up placing the following three short sentences underneath each other: '[books emoji] Media, Culture & Society' (to signal my field of study), '[eyes emoji] Currently researching queer TikTok' (to signal my research position), and '[rainbow flag emoji] Bi'⁴ (to signal my being a part of the queer community, as well as my account being a safe space for queer people) (see Figure 1). Once my account was created, I started my

⁴ The term 'bi' is short for 'bisexual'. I opted for the abbreviation purely because of the limited word count.

Figure 1

Screenshot of @username_sophie99 TikTok profile



research journey into queer TikTok.

As previously mentioned, TikTok’s algorithm is based on user interactions on the platform, like followed accounts, ‘liked’ videos, and amount of time spent watching specific videos (Newberry, 2022). Algorithms do not have a coherent and stable existence but are rather shaped and culturally enacted by the ways in which people engage with them (Seaver, 2017). Throughout my research I strategically engaged with TikTok’s algorithm and used it to my advantage. When I started my field work, I attempted to nudge the app in the right direction by following the queer accounts I had previously written down, and by ‘liking’ videos that I deemed appropriate for further analysis. Two main requirements for these were that they must be made by a queer woman (often detectable from the use of hashtags, their bio, and/or the content itself) and include a humorous aspect. What is important to note here is that I excluded any content from my analysis that was made by people identifying as non-binary. This was tricky at times, seeing that not all non-binary people present in an androgynous way. However, by thoroughly checking creators’ bios for information signaling a gender nonconforming identity (e.g., ‘they/them’ pronouns) and looking at used hashtags (e.g., ‘#non-binary’ or ‘#enby’) I ensured this selection was done properly. From here on, the platform algorithm quickly

picked up the hints I had been feeding it and before I knew it, I was plunged into the wondrous world of queer TikTok.

In the following two and a half months I visited TikTok almost daily. The usual routine would consist of switching from my personal account to @username_sophie99, then visiting the fyp and the ‘followed’ page. Thanks to the challenges of the digital field site, from here on the research process got less predictable and organized (Barendregt, 2021). In the words of de Seta (2020), it is a lie that the digital ethnographer moves through the field in a controlled and all-overseeing way. Rather, I found myself “building my ‘field as network’ by grasping at straws, and immediately cutting away most of what came along with them” (de Seta, 2020, p. 83). Although this description could make it seem like the research process was messy and random, I believe this approach was perfectly suitable for my research, seeing that it is exactly the rather chaotic process and unset boundaries that characterize authentic ‘amateur’ social media use.

In reality, this meant I had different experiences and followed different flows of movement through the digital spaces every time I went on TikTok. Sometimes I spent most of my time scrolling through the fyp, ‘liking’ suitable videos that I came across and spending time in their comment sections. At other times, when I encountered trends, users, or hashtags that stood out, I devoted my time to thoroughly diving into that specific element. Trends were often easy to find and follow. As soon as I noticed a certain format or audio was used in multiple videos, I could click on the audio of an individual video, which brought me to an entire separate TikTok page dedicated to showing every video using that sound, as well as the original video. Thanks to TikTok’s affordances, trends that were relevant for my research were often easy to trace and map.

Aside from trends, hashtags also proved to be helpful tools in my research. A hashtag is essentially a marker “through which users develop a specific thread of conversation or self-categorize their own contents” (Caliandro, 2017, p. 567). Throughout my digital fieldwork I used the hashtag as a methodological tool for filtering suitable content. As mentioned, already before I started my ethnographic research, I was aware of some popular and prevalent hashtags that were regularly used for queer or lesbian TikTok. Some of these were the hashtags ‘#lgbt’, ‘#lesbian’, ‘#wlw’⁵, and ‘#queer’. Especially at the beginning of my data collection phase I combined these hashtags with ones that signaled humor (e.g., ‘#funny’ and ‘#joke’) to find relevant queer content for my research. As my research progressed, new useful hashtags emerged that I also started using as instruments to access relevant queer TikTok videos (e.g., ‘#girlswholikegirls’ and ‘#lesbiantok’).

Although it is true that Web 2.0 has led to a huge increase in participatory digital practices, a large percentage of everyday online interactions is still characterized by practices that are not explicitly participatory, like watching, reading, and querying (De Seta, 2020). In my fieldwork I attempted to find a realistic balance between the former active and the latter more passive forms of

⁵ ‘Wlw’ is an abbreviation of ‘woman loving woman’ and can be considered a synonym for the word ‘lesbian’.

participation. Throughout the research I tried to steer away from becoming too much of a ‘lurker’, which refers to a researcher who invisibly searches and mines digital spaces for data without engaging in any interactions or being transparent about their researcher position (Thompson et al., 2021). As previously discussed, my TikTok account showed full transparency about my student and researcher identity. Moreover, I made sure to regularly interact with the contents I came across during my fieldwork by ‘liking’ videos and comments and following accounts. These activities can be seen as the first steps in moving away from being a passive lurker.

Despite my efforts and precautions taken to prevent quiet lurking as well as to ensure certain participation, it is important to acknowledge the fact that there is no such thing as a perfect ‘eager participant-lurker’, because a researcher herself participates:

just like our ‘research participants’, through a wide range of modes of participation tightly connected to social dynamics and technological affordances, that go from the choice of shutting down one's smartphone to the visceral need to sustain one's presence in a tense online discussion. (De Seta, 2020, p. 88)

In actuality, doing digital ethnography is based around several layers of involvement, which include multiple modes of participation and observation. I experienced this firsthand during my hours spent on TikTok, which were sometimes dedicated to merely lurking and observing, and at other times to actively following leads, people, and engaging in practices of ‘liking’. As I chose to move through the queer spaces of TikTok in a way that mostly imitated amateur social media use and that was characterized by a semi-interactive nature, I decided not to engage in conversations in comment sections or direct messages. Although interactions like these are a valuable and efficient method for gaining more insights in personal opinions and motivations of TikTok users/creators, I chose to focus on the more passive receiver-perspective. This allowed me to truly immerse myself in the user experience and follow natural flows of the platform, without having to pause, interact, and maintain relations with others.

Regardless of my exact practices each day, I consistently made fieldnotes of every observation and experience I had encountered. These fieldnotes ranged from simple notation of common words and hashtags I had come across to larger and more in-depth observations about interesting tendencies I had noticed. At the end of the field work phase of my research, my data consisted of an extensive array of ‘liked’ TikToks that met the previously described requirements, as well as an abundance of useful fieldnotes. Taken together, these contents provided me with valuable information about the use of humor by the lesbian community on TikTok, which consequently led me to move on to the next phase: that of data analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

I analyzed my gathered data using thematic analysis (TA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis is a method for “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). TA was considered suitable for my research because it would allow me to get a grip on my rather extensive and chaotic set of collected data and make sense of the collective experiences and meanings across its entirety. My analysis combined an inductive approach with a deductive approach, which is a very common tendency in TA (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the initial phases of coding, the approach was mostly inductive, which means that the codes that were conceived were driven and inspired by the data itself. However, it is important to acknowledge that a researcher always brings certain knowledge with them throughout every stage of their research. Already during these phases, certain frameworks of knowledge and theories played a role in my decisions. For the following stages of data analysis, a mostly deductive approach was taken, which means that I applied relevant theory to the gathered data to position it in an existing framework of knowledge. Such a combination of an inductive and deductive approach to research is what some would call an abductive approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

As a first step in the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data I had been collecting for several months (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I started off by rereading all the written fieldnotes and adding new comments whenever things came to mind. I also looked through all the ‘liked’ TikToks and briefly summarized most of these videos to organize them and prepare them for systematic analysis. Most of the fieldnotes I had written at this point were more of a “stream of consciousness” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60) than organized and precise observations. This phase of the research was complete as soon as I was intimately familiar with every inch of my data set, after which I moved on to step two.

The second step consisted of a “systematic analysis of the data through coding” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). This meant I thoroughly worked my way through all the gathered data and labeled every piece of information that could be important for answering the research question. Aside from all my fieldnotes, I separately coded the ‘liked’ TikToks I had previously summarized and put them in a table (see Appendix A). Some of the initial codes could be considered more descriptive, while others lean more towards the interpretative side. Most importantly, every single code was already carefully and systematically thought out to accurately reflect the data. At this point, almost every piece of the data was considered relevant because I opted to code in an inclusive manner to prevent prematurely disregarding information. As previously mentioned, the data I had collected during the fieldwork phase consisted of multiple sorts of fieldnotes, which ranged from straightforward observations to streams of consciousness and descriptions of individual videos. This made the coding process challenging at times, seeing that not all notes were of the same size and ‘weight’. After

taking considerable time to ensure relevant coding, a useful framework for further analysis was established.

Thirdly, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012), I started looking for themes. Generally speaking, a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Applied to my research, this meant that I explored the initial codes and attempted to find more general themes that could be connected to the use of humor by the female queer community on TikTok. Whenever I came across codes that reflected similar issues or tendencies, I grouped them together. Moreover, during this stage I started to explore potential relationships between the broader themes, which already helped me form a basic understanding of the broad “overall story about the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 65) that would be fully developed in the following stages. Because of the abundance of data, I first created two main categories: one for *out-group* humor and one for *in-group* humor. Each of these categories consisted of multiple themes (e.g., ‘dislike for men’ in the out-group category and ‘love for being queer’ in the in-group category). Most of the themes were also further divided into subthemes as a way to categorize and analyze them even more precisely. For example, the theme ‘dislike for men’ was made up of the two subthemes ‘men are the problem’ and ‘queer sex > straight sex’. All categories and (sub)themes were put into a thematic and organized coding tree (see Appendix B).

Before naming the themes and starting the writing process, it was important to review the freshly formed themes in relation to the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I did this by checking all themes against my entire data set and carefully considering whether they accurately reflected the data. As an extra act of control, I also went to spend a bit more time on queer TikTok to see if the content I came across was compatible with the created themes. Both these steps confirmed the validity of the themes, which led me to move on to the next step: defining and naming them (Braun & Clarke, 2012). First, this step included making sure that all themes were focused and clear, not overlapping or repetitive, and addressing the research question. It was at this point that I also selected relevant extracts from my data that could potentially be used as a way of strengthening and illustrating each theme and the surrounding narrative. These extracts ranged from literal quotes from personal fieldnotes to citations from saved TikTok videos and comments. Finally, the (sub)themes were accurately named to reflect their contents.

As a final step, I wrote the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2012) thoughtfully note that “although the final phase of the analysis *is* the production of a report . . . , it is not a phase that only begins at the end” (p. 69). Truthfully, during each step of the thematic analysis, I was already creating a narrative about the (meaning of) the data and writing notes that would become integrated in the final version of the analysis. To go back even further, the writing of this narrative had already started as soon as I had opened the TikTok app and created @username_sophie99. With each minute spent on queer TikTok and with each fieldnote that I wrote, I was essentially crafting a compelling narrative

about the use of humor by the female queer community on TikTok. Having said that, the steps of TA were immensely helpful in ordering and sharpening the countless thoughts making up this narrative.

In terms of writing the analysis it is important to briefly touch upon the ethical considerations that accompanied this stage. As established, digitally collecting ethnographic data poses new and unique challenges for researchers (Caliandro, 2017; de Seta, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021). For example, it has become an important question how to represent the gathered data and whether people should be anonymized (Barendregt, 2021). Importantly, there are no strict ‘one size fits all’ ethical requirements in digital research, which means a lot of decisions are based on (well thought-out) judgement calls by the researcher (Franzke et al., 2020). In my report of the research, I decided to include screenshots of relevant TikToks that were used for analysis, and of which inclusion would add valuable (visual) information to the reader. All TikToks I came across and sought out during my field work were publicly available. Hence, I did not anonymize them. Having said that, I decided to only include screenshots from videos by creators who had a relatively big following on the app.⁶ The higher a person’s following, the more ‘visible’ they often are in the digital space, and the less necessary it seems to ‘protect’ their identities in an academic piece of research. I will now turn to the results.

⁶ The minimum amount of ‘followers’ that I maintained in my selection was 30.000 followers

4. Results

4.1. Outgroup humor

Part of the data gathered from lesbian TikTok showed a clear tendency of referring to other groups, or *out-groups*, through humorous discourses. In this content, female queer creators address multiple groups that differ from theirs. The three themes found within this broad category are: ‘dislike for men’, ‘calling out the straights’, and ‘social experiences’. In the following section these themes will be addressed and connected to theory on feminist and subversive humor.

4.1.1. Dislike for men

Some of the out-group-directed TikTok humor showed a very explicit negative attitude towards men. In TikToks and comment sections humor was found to be a prevalent and effective way of declaring the entirety of the male species unworthy, incompetent, or disgusting. The first of two subthemes is ‘men are the problem’. This category encompasses all jokes, comments, captions, and other content that positions men as, simply put, jerks. For example, one TikTok shows a woman looking into the camera, while the following text appears on screen: “do you think you’re ever gonna date a man again?”. Shortly thereafter, she starts smiling and mouths the words to a TikTok audio saying “fuck no”. It becomes very clear that she has no intention of ever dating men again. The dislike for (dating) men can be found in a large amount of the data in the out-group category.

In one particularly telling TikTok, a woman shares her thoughts on bisexual girls dating men, stating: “If I see another beautiful celestial bisexual girl dating a crusty-ass skinny cishet white man with long hair, I’m gonna lose it. Ain’t no way, ain’t no way they deserve this.” Although these thoughts are brought to us in quite the amusing manner, the message is clear: bisexual girls should not be dating (‘crusty-ass skinny cishet white’) men, because they deserve better than that. The better option in question: dating women. A sentiment that is related to this, and that seemed to reoccur throughout my fieldwork, is that of sexuality *obviously* not being a choice, because, as one commenter put it: “you think we CHOOSE to be attracted to men? Honey... [crying laughing emoji]”. By positioning men as the lesser option in relation to women, these TikToks reverse the historically common practice of the ‘dominant’ male species to degrade women through humor (Case & Lippard, 2009; Morrow & Battles, 2015; Willet & Willet, 2019).

Some TikToks make it seem like dating women is ‘the’ option, ‘the’ solution, like never dating men will solve any problem. Can seem a bit harsh at times but could also be very true and based on real experiences.

Fieldnote

Even though the above examples show clear aversion towards men from female queer TikTok, they could be classified as rather innocent. However, some of the content belonging to the ‘men are the problem’ category addresses more serious issues. For example, when a specific trend arose, lesbian TikTok was quick to jump on the bandwagon and reappropriate the meme-format for purposes of social critiquing. The trend was based around an audio clip that sang the words “hey, isn’t this easyyy”. All over TikTok, people used the sound to call out people that managed to mess up in following presumably easy social norms and rules. Because the trend encompassed a clear format that was used and reappropriated to fit certain messages, it can be grouped as a meme (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shifman, 2013).

In the case of lesbian TikTok the meme was often used to call out men for inappropriate behavior. One of the videos shows a girl looking into the camera, mouthing the audio, while the words on the screen read: “pov⁷, you feel attraction towards women but you have never had the urge to touch them inappropriately”. The creator is calling out men for sexually harassing women and blaming it on the fact that they cannot contain themselves. In these TikToks queer women use humor to address the serious issue of male harassment towards women. In other words: this marginalized group of people uses humor to address and challenge an existing misogynistic status quo (Holmes & Marra, 2002). The critical condemnation of male (sexual) violence is also very much present in the comment sections of videos from this meme trend. As a response to this video, one commenter wrote rather ironically: “you would almost think that men are the problem”. Like in the videos themselves, men are here being called out for their faulty behavior, albeit in a jokingly and ironic matter.

The second subtheme in this category is called ‘queer sex > straight sex’. The gathered data in this category is very straight-forward in its message: men cannot sexually pleasure women even half as good as women can pleasure woman. For example, in one TikTok the creator writes: “when a cis het man realizes I’m queer and tries to give me advice on how to go down on a woman”. Then, the audio goes “why would I listen to you?”, implying that cis straight men do not know how to sexually pleasure women. This idea seems to be generally shared by a lot of queer women on the platform. Jokes about the incompetence of men in bed to pleasure women can also be found in comment sections. As a response to a TikTok that joked about men thinking they are feminists after going down on a woman for more than a minute, one commenter wrote: “they do it once a year on your birthday for 2 minutes then brag about how they eat [cat emoji] 24/7 on social media”. Again, in the videos as well as the comments, queer women express clear disgust and dissatisfaction with men, hereby subverting the status quo of the latter being superior to the former (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Of all analyzed content, the ‘dislike for men’ theme seems to show the most signs of superiority. The humor that was used in this category was often at the expense of men and involved

⁷ ‘Pov’ is an abbreviation of ‘point of view’ and is generally used by people to signal that they want to show a situation from a certain position, or that the video is about *their* perspective (which is the case in this particular TikTok).

elements of hostility (Long & Graesser, 1988). By focusing on men and their (bad) behavior, these jokes tend to make “man rather than women the center of attention” (Bing, 2007, p. 27). However, seeing that it is the historically oppressed group that is laughing at their oppressor, this sort of humor gives them a chance to redefine their marginalized place in society. This humor used by female queer TikTokers that undermines and sometimes even attacks men could be categorized as feminist humor (Case & Lippard, 2009). Throughout history men have been punching down toward and owning the humorous discourse surrounding the existence of (queer) women (Case & Lippard, 2009; Morrow & Battles, 2015). By claiming space in the digital world of TikTok and making jokes about their historical oppressors, queer women take back some power. Just as Willet and Willet (2019) argued, ridicule – which has been used mostly by men *against* queer women- can become a feminists’ weapon as well.

4.1.2. Calling out the straights

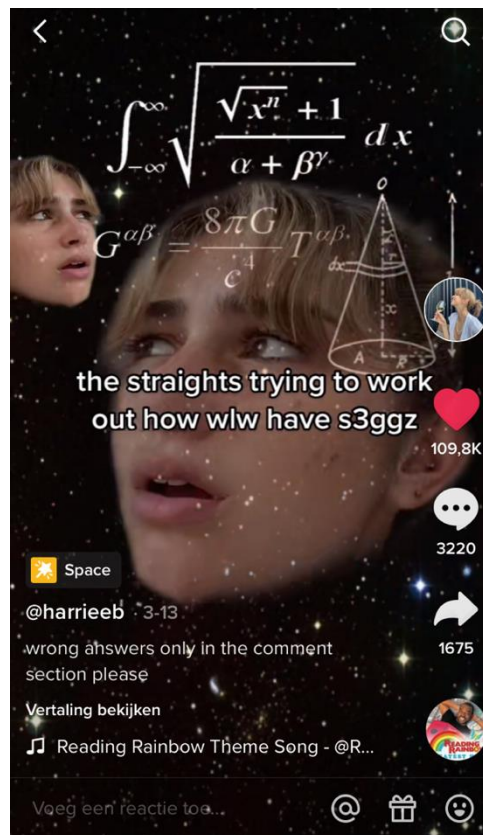
The second theme within the out-group humor category is ‘calling out the straights’. While the theme is similar to the previous one in that it addresses people outside of the female queer community in a predominantly negative tone, it distinguishes itself by its broader focus on heterosexual people in general. The first subtheme is ‘straight confusion’. This subtheme encompasses all the contents that appear to make fun of straight people and their ignorance and general lack of knowledge regarding the female LGBTQ+ community. One TikTok shows a woman standing in front of the camera while the text “when people ask if I’m dating the girl I spend most of my time with and occasionally share a bed” appears on the screen. The audio that plays states: “we’re just friends, what are you saying”. The creator is jokingly referring to the common dismissal of a lesbian couple as partners, because people often assume that they are ‘just friends’.

One TikTok trend appeared to be very suitable for this category. The basic format of the trend was based on a TikTok filter that filled up the screen with intriguing mathematical equations. On top of this, multiple versions of the face of the person in front of the camera floated through the screen, while a funny sounding audio was played throughout the video. The meme format was often used by TikTok creators expressing their confusion about a certain matter. In the case of lesbian TikTok, the trend was reappropriated to make fun of straight people not understanding queer culture.

In one of these memes, shown in figure 2, a woman can be seen doing the trend, her face looking very confused as multiple versions of it moved throughout the screen. The text reads: “the straights trying to work out how wlw have s3ggz”, wherein the term ‘s3ggz’ refers to ‘sex’. TikTok has strict community guidelines prohibiting sexually explicit content (*Community Guidelines*, n.d.). Social media users can learn very efficiently how to “navigate a platform in all sorts of ways and

Figure 2

Straight confusion



they know how to break the rules” (Gerrard, 2018, p. 4499). TikTok users regularly talk in certain codes, for example by misspelling words (e.g., ‘s3ggs’ for ‘sex’ and ‘b00bs’ for ‘boobs’), to avoid getting silenced or banned (Lea, 2021). The TikTok from figure 2 that used such code was captioned with the phrase “wrong answers in comments only please”, which lead to the comment section being full of comedic remarks. Some of the comments got very creative, stating “we don’t, we stare at each other for hours”, “Rock Paper Scissors battle”, “we do arts and crafts”, and more innovative ironic answers to the question of how two women could possibly have sex.

The second subtheme is called ‘POV: Being queer is the norm’. On multiple occasions during my fieldwork in the digital realm of queer TikTok, I came across sketches of people pretending that ‘being queer was the norm’. In these videos, a lot of commonly used stereotypes for queer women are reversed. For example, a phrase like ‘so you’re straight, that’s hot’ seemed to call attention to the general oversexualization of women loving women and show how bizarre such a remark sounds. Some other phrases that pointed out the absurdity of such rhetoric were ‘how long have you been straight?’, ‘You’re straight? Do you know Jacob, he is also straight’, and ‘you look to pretty to be straight’. By converting these phrases to a straight context, queer creators call attention to the absurdity of the statements in general. As Morrow and Battles (2015) pointed out, highlighting

existing hurtful stereotypes can help marginalized groups challenge the patriarchal status quo. The POV jokes thus seem to attempt to show that stereotypical phrases like ‘so, you’re gay, that’s hot’ are in fact strange and generally unnecessary.

4.1.3. Social experiences

‘Social experiences’ makes up for the third theme in the out-group. The data belonging to this category is connected to experiences that queer women have had in society. The first subtheme is called ‘homophobic Karens’. Some of the humor addressed homophobic sentiments that have been and still are very much present in the world. In one video, a masculine presenting queer woman can be seen entering a room, while the screen reads “walking into a female toilet”. Then the words change to “the Karens...” and the audio goes “leave, leaveeee”. The term ‘Karen’ is commonly used to refer to uptight, privileged people; the type that wants to ‘speak to the manager’ (Nagesh, 2020). The TikTok is thus presenting a social experience that masculine presenting lesbians have where they are assumed to be men and judged or even feared for it by straight prejudiced people. Another telling example of a TikTok that falls under this category is presented in figure 3, which shows a woman standing in front of the camera while text appears on screen that reads “when you’re a lesbian AND left-handed [spiral eyes emoji]”. While a male voice can be heard saying “in the olden days, this woman would have been tied to a stake and burned alive”, she does a funny dance move.

At their core, both the historic tragedy of queer women being brutally murdered and the harsh judgement and condemnation by public figures are severely serious issues. However, by joking about these situations, queer women seem to lighten the weight of them. In a way, they are using humor to cope with the unpleasant and sometimes threatening reality of their existence. In these TikToks, humor is used as a coping mechanism (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). By making fun of originally negative social experiences, queer female TikTokers might have found a tool to help them cope with the trials and tribulations of their life. Moreover, thanks to the presence of comment sections of these videos, people can interact with each other, regardless of their geographical location (Shifman, 2013).

Because of the humorous tone in the videos, people seem very eager to respond, share their experiences (sometimes also in a funny way), makes it easier to partake in discourse about ‘serious’ topics, because no expert knowledge/jargon is required. Kind of feels like having a fun conversation with friends.

Fieldnote

In these interactions, just like in the videos themselves, humorous discourses can flourish. For example, people in the comment section of the ‘left-handed lesbian’ TikTok started jokingly sharing what would have made them been burned alive ‘in the old days’. Comments ranged from “I’m a

Figure 3

When you're a lesbian and left-handed



lesbian and Jewish, so definitely same” to “I’m not left-handed, but I’m trans, I have ocd and I’m latino lmaooo”. The feature of the comment section thus seems to be a suitable place for queer people to share about their personal situation and experiences by engaging in humorous conversation.

‘Dealing with the family’ takes up the second subtheme of this theme. Every TikTok, comment, and trend in this category is about queer women’s experiences with their family, be it positive, negative, or neutral. In one of the more serious TikToks, a girl can be seen opening a door, stepping out of the filmed room, then slamming the door. The text on screen reads: “14 year old me after getting into an argument with my homophobic family about LGBTQ+ rights”. As soon as the door shuts, ‘I kissed a girl’ by Katy Perry is blasted through speakers. The addition of the song makes the TikTok seem lighthearted, but the message is very saddening: the woman, who is queer, grew up in a homophobic household. In similar fashion, one video shows the words “what does homophobia taste like? .. My dad”. Content like this, as well as that of the ‘homophobic Karens’ category, illustrates the painful reality of being queer today (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021; Tropiano, 2014; Wuest, 2014).

The comment sections of these videos are filled with people sharing their own experiences with homophobic families. The TikToks about negative social experiences seem to be instigators of online community-forming. Like memes, these funny videos can tackle serious issues, which can

result in the formation of a feeling of identification and community (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Burton, 2019; Kodak & Oduor, 2020). Participation in the discourse can vary from regularly posting videos to simply commenting ‘same’ on videos that one identifies with. These findings show that queer women potentially use the ‘queer corner’ of TikTok as a safe(r) space where they can discuss and cope with serious issues in a more playful matter. The content that was placed in the social experiences category consequently can be connected to the relief function of humor: laughing at these experiences could reduce anxieties of queer women related to their identity (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009).

Aside from the heavy ‘family experiences’ videos, some TikToks appear more lighthearted. For instance, one TikTok shows a girl in front of the camera, while the following words appear on screen: “when my mom walked in on me half nakey kissing with a girl and asked if I was g@y”. The audio states “nice job officer fuckface, you really connected the dots on that one”. This video shows clear similarities with the ‘straight confusion’ subtheme, but is placed in this category because of the focus on family. The TikTok plays into an experience that is assumably familiar to some queer women; getting caught being intimate with another woman by one of their parents. In another similar TikTok that jokes about this experience, depicted in figure 4, a girl is doing a sketch that depicts the awkward experience of watching a movie with your parents when a lesbian sex scene comes on and having to hide your excitement. Although the described family experiences can be awkward and not necessarily desirable, they seem very innocent. These TikToks might be addressing an out-group, but they are not necessarily accusing said group of anything severe. Instead of being used as a coping mechanism, humor here seems to be used as a tool to share a queer experience from people’s youth.

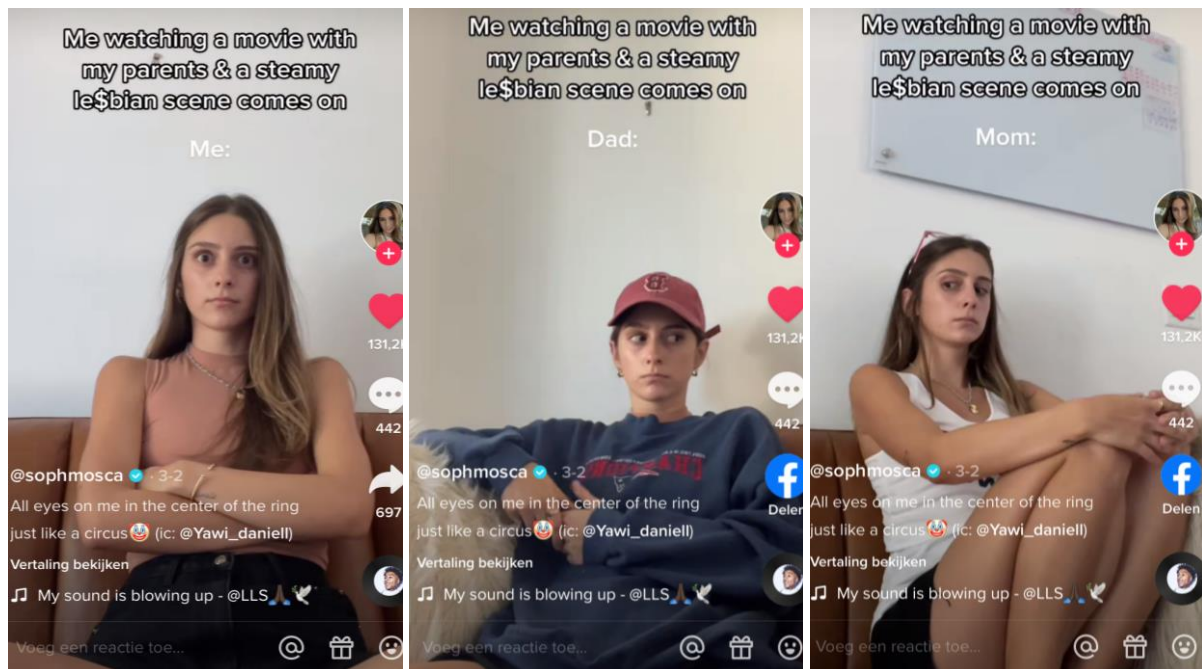
Taken together, the out-group humor that I was able to map throughout my research shows a range of tactics used to communicate the female queer experience. While some content was lighthearted and focused on more innocent experiences, most of the humor in this category was subversive, since it challenged the heterosexual, misogynistic, male norms normally present in society (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). A very common tendency was that of demeaning or even ‘attacking’ men, declaring the entire male species as unworthy and disgusting. Other content focused on an even broader group: that of straight people. In both instances, these groups were positioned as an inferior out-group, thereby reversing the status quo (Holmes & Marra, 2002). In the words of Willet & Willett (2019): “in the process of subversion, humor can transform a politics of anger and resentment into a politics of joy (p. 35).

This humor might be subversive, but also runs the risk of positioning the community even further outside of society, giving in to stereotypes of feminists/lesbians hating men. Punching up is better than punching down (maybe it’s their turn now!!) but it is still punching towards an out-group, creating an ‘us’ and a ‘them’.

Fieldnote

Figure 4

Watching a lesbian scene with the parents



As opposed to oppressive humor by dominant groups, this sort of feminist humor punches up (Willet & Willet, 2019). Notably, however, it still punches toward an out-group, creating a seemingly superior ‘us’ and inferior ‘them’. By referring to groups outside of one’s own, differences might be even more emphasized. In the next section, I will discuss the second category, called ‘in-group humor’, which shows that referral to an out-group is not necessary for humorous discourse to develop surrounding female queer experiences.

4.2. In-group humor

The second set of themes that emerged throughout my analysis of lesbian TikTok is characterized by its tendency of referring to *in-groups* through humorous discourses. The four themes present in the in-group category are: ‘love for being queer’, ‘queer awakenings’, ‘queer struggles’, and ‘stereotypes’. Although some of these themes might seem to overlap with themes from the previous category, the main and crucial difference is that the contents making up this category are all about queer women making fun of themselves and/or their own community. In the following section the themes will be addressed and connected to theory about lesbian humor and queer narratives.

4.2.1. Love for being queer

The theme ‘love for being queer’ encompasses all data that shows female queer TikTokers expressing positive feelings about their gay identity. The first subtheme is called ‘I’m so gay!’. The

data in this subtheme shows a tendency of emphasizing one's own queerness. For example, throughout my fieldwork I encountered one specific popular audio on multiple occasions, which spoke the words: "so, a lot of you have been asking about my tattoo. Ehm, this symbolizes for me when I'm... when I'm... gay". The original audio is from a video by a girl showing the audience her a tattoo of a sexy woman, while speaking the aforementioned phrase. A deep dive into the use of the sound presented me with about 1475 videos of queer women showing their tattoos, ranging from small rainbow tattoos to huge portraits of sensual/provocative women placed on all sorts of body parts. In this trend, queer women are essentially using their tattoos as a marker of their queerness, linking it to their identity. The audio entails a somewhat surprising effect: after the build-up the audience might expect a deep personal explanation of the person's tattoos, but they are instead met with the rather simple explanation of the person being very, very gay. Since the final reveal deviates from an expected pattern, we can speak of humor through incongruity (Morreal, 2009).

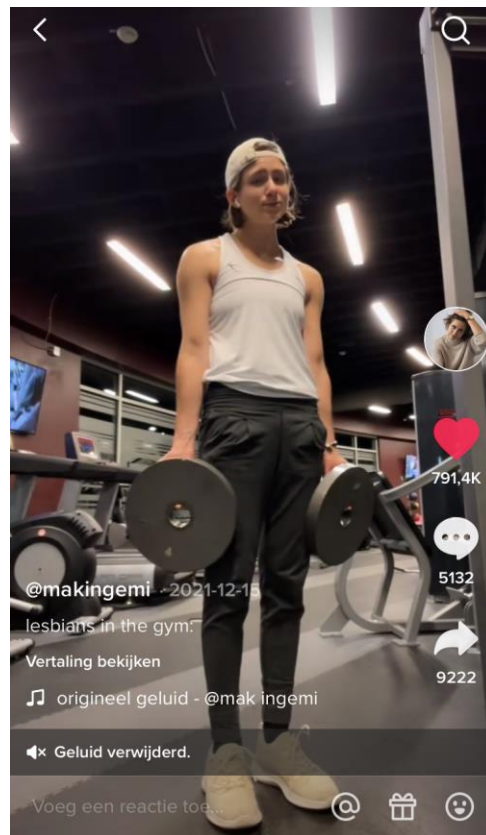
During my time spent on female queer TikTok, I encountered another popular and much-used audio that fits particularly well into the 'I'm so gay!' category. The audio entails some seconds of merely music, followed by a male voice saying "yo, I'm a fucking homosexual". There are many interpretations to be found of this trend, but the overall tendency is clear: women share something that draws attention to or emphasizes their queerness. For example, some phrases that accompanied the sound are "when I saw a girl n@ked for the first time", "8 year old me watching Harry Potter and seeing Hermione", and "POV: you just went down on a woman and now you know why the d*ck just doesn't do it for you". Through this trend people are sharing the things that make them queer.

In all the contents from the 'love for being queer' theme women are very visibly and proudly presenting their queerness as part of their identity to the world. Already in this theme we see a clear difference from the previous out-group category in that the humor here focusses on the queer community itself and queer identities instead of outside groups. The humor that is present in these in-group categories appears to be less aggressively subversive, since it does not attack people outside of the queer community (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Here, Bing's (2004) theory about lesbian humor being often focused on lesbians themselves, instead of men, seems to be applicable. As I will show now, the following findings of the in-group humor data confirm these tendencies as well.

The second subtheme is called 'all about that [cat emoji]'. The cat emoji is regularly used by queer women on the app to refer to the vulva. As previously explained, using the emoji instead of writing the full word for the body part is a result of TikTokers trying to bypass the platform community guidelines (Gerrard, 2018; Lea, 2021). As one could expect, the data in this category is all about lesbian sex. During my research I noticed that a lot of videos I came across on my fyp were sexually themed.

Figure 5

Working hard to please you



I see a lot of jokes about queer/lesbian sex. Women joke about their fingers, strap-ons, sexual positions, and other things potentially involved in sex between two female (identifying) partners. Although some jokes could come across as quite vulgar, especially for a younger TikTok audience, joking about queer sex might be a good way of normalizing it and make people get used to the fact that it, believe it or not, happens.

Fieldnote

Because of its important and global presence in society, sex has historically always been popular topic for joking material (Shifman, 2007). For lesbians on TikTok this seems to be no exception. For example, the TikTok shown in figure 5 shows a woman at the gym, lifting weights with both her index fingers, while she sensually looks into the camera and lip-syncs to the audio: “just working hard.. working hard to please you”. It is clear she is referring to the fact that her fingers ought to be trained for sexually pleasing other women.

Then, I also found a trend that was based around one specific audio clip that several queer women were using for sexual jokes. The audio consists of a snippet of singer Sia’s hit single ‘The

Greatest', in which she sings the words "whoah-oah, running out of breath but I, I got stamina". In one of the videos using the sound a woman is sitting in front of the camera, mouthing the words to the sound, while the text on screen reads "when my arm is dead but she starts shaking". Again, the woman in the video conveys a sexual message: she wants to pleasure her female partner, even though she is physically exhausted. People in the comment section show clear appreciation of and identification with the video. They post responses like "well worth the pain [suffering emoji]", "You gotta power through. The reward is worth the pain [smirky emoji]", and "It's about drive it's about power". These comments are all liked by the creator of the video, who also regularly responds to comments. The possibility of interactivity makes it possible for people to join in on the discourse and jokes about queer sex (Shifman, 2013).

Some of the sexually themed humorous videos that I came across included not one, but two queer women. For example, one video shows a woman in front of the camera, while the words on screen read: "what do you eat to get abs like that? I want to make mine pop by summer" (Figure 6). Then, another woman who is looking innocently at the camera appears in the frame. The joke that is made here implies that the first woman 'eats' the second one, which, to put it more directly, refers to oral sex. Once again, just like with the tattoo trend, there is a surprising element to this TikTok: one does not necessarily expect a person to appear in frame when someone is about to show what they eat to get abs. In this case, we can also speak of incongruity, or deviation from expected patterns, which is what makes the content (potentially) funny (Morreal, 2009). In another couples' TikTok, one of the women is holding the phone while she is filming her partner. "My love", she says, "your face is a work of art. I think we should frame it with my legs". Her partner looks slightly shocked, but simultaneously exited, responding "ohhh, that one's dirty. I agree, I think it should be framed right.. there. Forever and always."

The fact that there are female queer couples on TikTok openly discussing and joking about their sex life could mean that queer sex, and with that potentially queerness in general, is on its way to become more normalized. Considering the power of humor to address or challenge societal beliefs (Holmes & Marra, 2002), making fun and lighthearted jokes about training index fingers, being part of each other's diet, and other fun and positive sexually themed topics, these topics could gain more space in popular discourses. Overall, the 'love for being queer' theme is all about showing positive experiences with queerness. By emphasizing 'fun' and happy experiences that can come along with being queer, this is being normalized. Queerness is historically positioned as something negative, an unnatural diversion from the status quo (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). However, by presenting it as something fun, something that people enjoy, a new perspective is created. The use of humor is important here, seeing that it has historically been a powerful tool used to challenge the status quo, and because it seems to present the discourses of queerness in a less serious and more accessible manner.

Figure 6

How to get abs



4.2.2. Queer awakenings

The second theme in the in-group category is ‘queer awakenings’, which entails all the gathered data that describes processes of coming out and getting aroused by other women. The first subtheme is called ‘hetero to queer pipeline’. The content placed in this specific theme is all about the journey of queer experimentation and coming out. In a lot of TikToks, women jokingly spoke about the things that they used to do that make total sense now that they are out of the closet. Even though the title of this subtheme could lead one to assume that it belongs in the out-group category, the content in this subtheme is very strongly focused on queerness and queer people, more so than on heterosexuality or heterosexual society. Therefore, I opted to place the subtheme in the in-group category. To illustrate, in one of the TikToks belonging to ‘hetero to queer pipeline’, a woman asks herself and the audience “how did I scream these lyrics and still think I was straight”. The lyrics in question are those belonging to the song ‘Rude’ by Mag!c, which are “can I have your daughter for the rest of my life, say yes, ‘cause I need to know”. The woman alludes to the fact that her screaming

these lyrics should have made her realize that she was, in fact, very queer. Although she mentions her 'straight phase', the focus of the video is on her queerness.

One trend I deemed particularly suitable for this category was a trend formed around an audio that gained a lot of popularity throughout multiple corners of TikTok. The audio fragment was taken from a scene in a Harry Potter movie where Hermione utters the words "I had you looking in the wrong section, how could I be so stupid!". Queer women used the sound to illustrate their own initial ignorance of their sexuality. In one of the TikToks using this sound a woman sits in front of the camera, while the words "me a few years ago wondering why I hated dating so much" appear. Then, a few seconds later, those words disappear and are abruptly replaced by the word "Gay!", clearly indicating that the woman's queerness was the reason she did not enjoy dating men. A look at the comment sections of these videos indicates that a lot of people recognize these experiences and identify with people talking about it. For example, as a response to this particular video, one commenter wrote in all capitals "YOU JUST SUMMARIZED MY ENTIRE HIGHSCHOOL LIFE". Again, the possibility of interaction in the comment section of these TikToks allow everyone on the platform to join in on the discussion and share, for example, how they had similar experiences.

Similarly, one TikTok shows a girl role playing a conversation, pretending to talk to herself. "Do you have girl crushes", the text on screen reads, after which the audio goes "yeah-yeah". Secondly, she asks herself "and do you want to kiss girls?", which is again answered with the same audio confirming the question. Lastly, she asks herself: so you're [fruit emojis]?"⁸. Then, while the text changes to: "me for 22 years", the girl is pretending to look foolishly in the distance, implying that, despite her longing for female affection, she did not realize she was queer until she was 22 years of age. What this girl, and a lot of others on TikTok, is saying, is that she absolutely should have known that she was queer. Or, in the words of one particularly sassy commenter: "the closet door was made out of glass babes".

What all the content in this subtheme has in common is that queer TikTok creators are making fun of their own experiences and ignorance regarding their sexuality. By making jokes about how they could have possibly missed out on the fact that they were queer, they might be helping others in their own journey of discovering their sexuality. Just as the more serious coming out videos Wuest (2014) analyzed, these shorter and lighthearted contents that queer women post on TikTok not only create visibility but also might lead to acculturation. Although the messages are brought to the viewer in an amusing manner, they do include useful information about coming out and being queer that could help (especially) younger queer woman come to terms with their sexuality or learn more about it. Simultaneously, because the 'straight to queer' pipeline is not necessarily presented as something negative - as is the case in most popular media content and parts of society (Hillier & Harrison, 2007) - this again could help create a more positive perception of queerness in general.

⁸ 'Being fruity' is an expression used to signal queerness.

The second subtheme belonging to the theme of ‘queer awakenings’ is called ‘TikTok knows’. This subtheme shows some comparison to the previous one, seeing that it also includes people sharing how they came to realize that they were queer. However, the focus in this subtheme is on the fact that it was TikTok (or, rather: its algorithm) that helped them recognize their queerness. TikTok’s algorithm is based on tracking user interactions on the platform, ranging from the videos someone watches to the accounts that they follow and the comments that they leave behind (Newberry, 2022). In the contemporary social media landscape, algorithms seem to have become extremely good at offering people the exact content they want to see (Barendregt, 2021). More strikingly, as will become clear from the following section, the TikTok algorithm seems to be able to offer people content that they did not even know they wanted to see. As turned out from my intensive fieldwork, a lot of women came to realize that they were queer because of TikTok.

During my time spent on the app I repeatedly came across content that addressed the accuracy of the algorithm to predict or determine users’ sexuality. As one queer creator puts it in a video: “are any other girls like.. kind of aggravated that it took more than 20 years to figure out we were bisexual, but it took my TikTok algorithm like 37 seconds. Would’ve saved me so much fucking time!”. Although there is a hint of frustration to be found in the message, the humorous tone of voice and the clear over exaggeration (TikTok would have needed more than 37 seconds to figure it out), it is clear the woman is not necessarily mad but more so impressed by TikTok’s ways of figuring out her sexuality. These sentiments can also be found in comment sections. As a response to a TikTok where a queer woman jokingly welcomes all the ‘new gays’ to the “greener side”, one commenter wrote: “tiktok knew better than me [blushing emoji] [rainbow flag emoji]”. All over the queer corner of TikTok people seem to be aware of and making jokes about the algorithm’s perfectly effective gaydar.

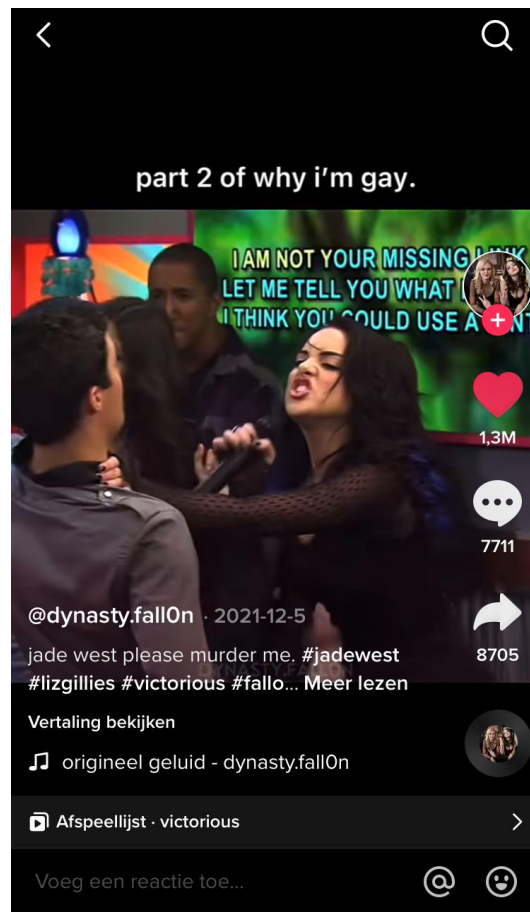
The previously mentioned Harry Potter sound also turned out to be a fitting format in this subtheme. In a video that plays that specific sound (“I had you looking in the wrong section, how could I be so stupid!”), the phrase “this app before it dropped you deep into le\$bian tiktok” can be read on screen. The use of the audio for multiple diverging messages is exemplary of how TikTok trends could be described as memes (Shifman, 2013). All the content in this subtheme shows queer female TikTok users being aware of the TikTok’s algorithm and, in a way, thanking it for figuring out their sexuality.

The third and final subtheme making up the ‘queer awakenings’ theme is called ‘queer turn-ons’. All content belonging to this category is about queer women talking about and/or showing which women turn them on, or - in other words - fully *awaken* their queerness. Mostly, people are referring to specific individuals. For example, one TikTok, seen in figure 7, shows a fragment from Nickelodeons’ hit show ‘Victorious’ in which two female characters, Tori Vega and Jade West, sing a duet. The text accompanying the video reads: “part two of why I’m gay”⁹ and the caption “Jade West

⁹ Indicating that there was a part one, which I unfortunately was not able to retrieve.

Figure 7

Jade West



please murder me”. The person who created the video is an obvious fan of Jade, who, as my fieldwork has come to confirm, is regularly presented as a fictional character that turns queer women on. For example, she is also named in another TikTok in which a woman offers a whole list of fictional characters and famous women who are assumed to be queer icons (even though they are not all queer). Other people that made the list are Santana Lopez from Fox’s *Glee*, Velma from *Scooby Doo*, actress Sarah Paulson, and Rikki Chadwick from the Australian show *H₂O: Just Add Water*.

Some other content that fits into this category is not about one or more specific women, but more about certain types that queer TikTok creators have. In one video, a woman stands in front of the camera, and mouths the words to an audio saying determinedly “I am not an object, I have a voice and something to say!”. Then, the words “fems in blazers”¹⁰ appear on screen and as the woman starts looking excited, the audio goes: “I am an object”. From the first half of the video, people might expect a feminist or empowering message to follow. However, the actual message deviates from what is expected, creating an incongruity: fems in blazers make the initially determined and confident girl

¹⁰ The term ‘fem’ refers to lesbians that look and dress very feminine.

weak and lose her principles. The love for women in blazers is shared by multiple female queer TikTokkers, for example in a TikTok with the audio “name something you might hurt yourself riding on”. The answer then appears in written form on screen: “women in suits”.

The entire theme of queer awakenings shows a clear focus on the in-group of queer women. By emphasizing one’s personal coming out journey or turn-ons, women put their own queerness at the center and present it in a positive, fun way. As Case and Lippard (2009) theorized, humor can grant oppressed people the opportunity to gain control over their processes of self-definition and personal narratives. Almost all the contents that are discussed in the in-group section includes the use of humor by queer women for self-definition, be it in a positive or more negative way. On top of that, as Bing (2004) emphasized, the data in this category shows how lesbians often define themselves through humor without having to attack or ridicule others.

4.2.3. Queer struggles

As opposed to the previous two themes, the content of the third theme of the in-group category, ‘queer struggles’, shows a less positive stance towards being part of the LGBTQ+ community. The data that makes up this theme consists of in-group humor that describes the more unfavorable aspects of lesbian existence. The first subtheme is called ‘It’s totally platonic?’ and entails videos, comments, and trends that describe a common struggle of women who date women: not knowing whether a relationship is platonic or romantic. My thorough research of queer TikTok led me to one trend that perfectly captured this sentiment. The basis of the trend was an audio of a female voice repeatedly singing the words “it’s totally platonic”. The audio was used by multiple queer women to communicate their confusion and struggles about dating other women. One TikTok, captioned “Le\$biens who claim they are only “friends””, plays the audio in the background while every few seconds a new phrase appears on screen. These phrases are: “holds hands”, “gm & gn texts”, “pays for each other’s food”, “cuddles”, and “tell each other “I love you” 24/7”. The creator of the TikTok is clearly implying that there is more to these acts than merely friendship.

The confusion about relationships between two women appears to be universal across the queer community on TikTok, as the comment sections of videos that depict the struggle regularly show people recognizing it. As a response to one TikTok in which a girl shares her struggles of being on a date with a girl but not knowing if “she thinks it’s a date, so you just play it safe and act like it’s not a date”, a considerable amount of people expressed identification with the issue. One commenter showed relief to have encountered the video, writing “ah, so this is a universal experience”. Another user seemed to be all too familiar with the experience, commenting “me two weeks ago [crying laughing emoji]”. The confusion about female queer relationships is in itself not necessarily funny and can be assumed to bring many frustrations. However, as the previous description shows, queer women do not shy away from making jokes about it and, in a way, calling themselves out on their own behavior in these situations. Especially thanks to the comment sections, TikTok users get acquainted

with other peoples' experiences of dating woman. These humorous narratives about queer issues might help people new to the community understand queer culture, including its more negative or frustrating aspects (Wuest, 2014).

The second subtheme that makes up the 'queer struggles' category is called 'It's no bed of roses' and entails content in which women express general struggles that come with their sexuality. Most of these issues do not necessarily seem to have big societal significance; they are more so about smaller bumps in the road of queerness that people experience. For example, in one TikTok a woman expresses the struggle of trying to flirt with women in public by making eye contact. In the caption, she writes: "how do I explain I'm a lesbian admiring you not a jealous girl judging you [frustrated emoji]". In another video, a girl looks straight into the camera, while the screen shows the words "when people think that dating women is easier than dating men". The audio is what adds the humorous tone: "My god that takes so much energy and dedication. I hesitate. I hesitate if this is for me." The creator of the TikTok seems to challenge the myth that I repeatedly encountered in other queer TikToks: the one that poses that dating women instead of men will automatically make all your dating struggles disappear. Instead, she admits that dating women is also not a bed of roses; it takes dedication and work, just like any other relationship.

As opposed to some TikToks, other ones seem more 'realistic', not over-romanticizing the experience of dating women. Yes, being queer is fun, but yes, it can also be very very painful and stressful, and you can still get your heart broken!

Fieldnote

When compared to the previous themes of the in-group category, there seems to be an ambiguity in how the lesbian community wishes to present itself on TikTok. The first two themes emphasize queer relationships, sex, and love as something inherently positive and almost exclusively fun. The contents of the 'queer struggles' theme presents a nuanced narrative of being a queer woman: it might be fun, but it brings with it its own struggles and obstacles to overcome, like figuring out whether a relationship is platonic or romantic, or learning how to properly flirt with other women. Here, queer women seem to use TikTok to share their everyday struggles and frustrations with fellow LGBTQ+ community members. These digital realms within which this happens can be described as 'safe(r) spaces' where queer woman can be themselves and perform their identity in connection to people from their own community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Nygaard, 2014).

What both subthemes in the 'queer struggles' theme have in common, is that the messages they represent do not present being queer as 'the solution' to everything. As opposed to the out-group humor, in which dating women is continuously suggested as the 'better option' in comparison to dating men, these contents seem to offer a more realistic image of queer experiences. The contents of

this theme could be described as ‘narratives of realness’, which present the queer experience in a true and personal way (Fox & Ralston, 2009). Navigating through life as a queer woman can be tough, but by becoming familiar with these narratives through platforms like TikTok, people might become more accepting of and comfortable with their own queer identities.

4.2.4. Stereotypes

The fourth and final theme in the in-group category is called ‘stereotypes’. As the name of the theme would suggest, the data in this category consists of TikToks, comments and other findings that communicate stereotypical ideas and/or images of queer women. Since there is a broad range of such stereotypes to be found, I decided to group them all under one overarching theme, making subcategories unnecessary. What is important to note about this theme, is that all the stereotypes I will be discussing are brought forward by queer women themselves.

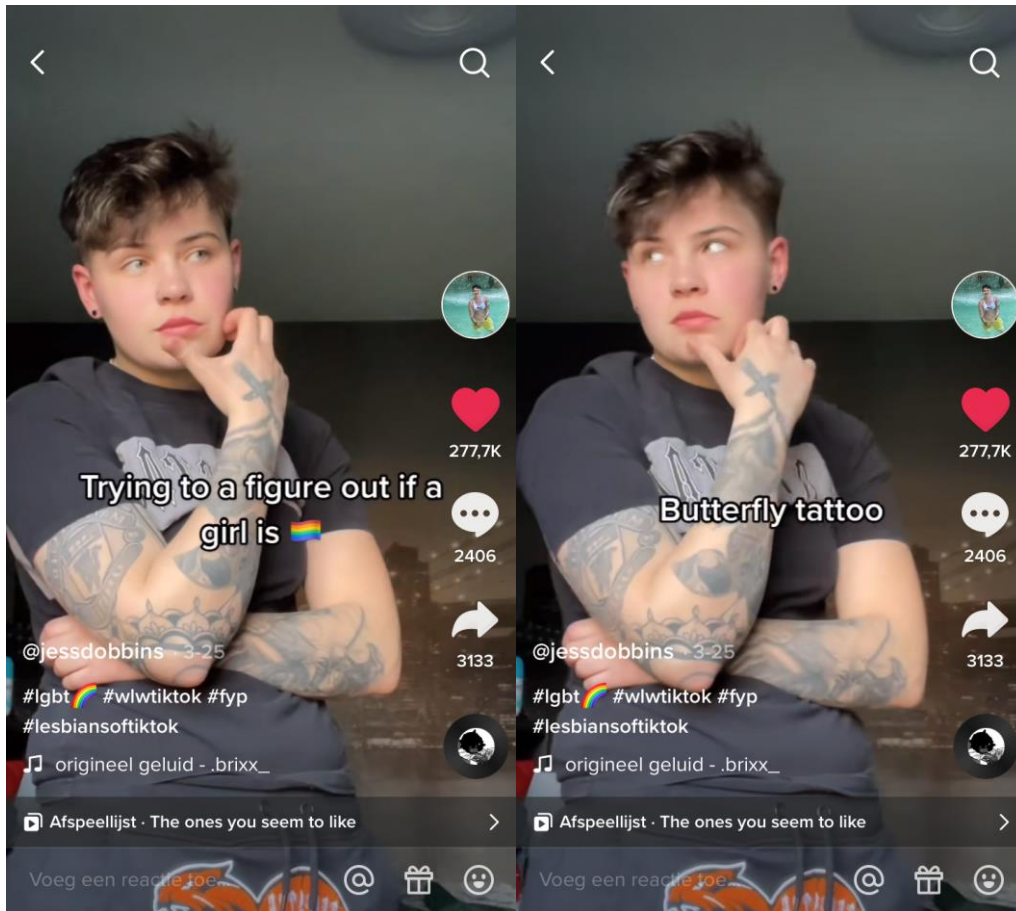
First, some stereotypes I came across are about specific behavior that is linked to queer women and relationships. For example, a stereotype that frequently popped up in my research was that of lesbians being friends or in love with their exes. In one TikTok, a queer woman jokingly calls out these lesbians. While she looks somewhat arrogantly in the camera, the text on the screen reads “being a lesbian that isn’t friends with their ex” and the previously mentioned audio sound of a woman singing “hey, isn’t this easyyy” plays throughout the video. In the caption she writes “we do exist btw”, positioning herself as – presumably – one of the very few lesbians who is not friends with her ex(es).

Another recurrent stereotype was that of lesbians moving in with each other after an extremely short period of dating. This is for example the case in a video that shows the sentence “lesbians move in together after only knowing each other for 6 months”, which is followed by an audio clip that sings the words “all the rumors are true”. The creator ironically captioned the video with “my gf and I took it slow and waited to move in together after 8 months.” Similar sentiments can be found in the comment section, where one person responded: “I waited 3 weeks and packed up and moved to New York lol”. Queer women are clearly having fun sharing their experiences with quickly moving relationships and, quite probably, overexaggerating the stereotype of lesbians moving in after no time.

Other stereotypes that came to the forefront were more about features related to appearances. During one of my deep dives into queer TikTok, one specific creator stood out to me. She seemed to have created a trend for herself, using the same simple format for multiple TikToks that all communicated appearance-based stereotypes about queer women. All these videos begin in a similar way: the woman is standing in front of the camera, while the following text appears on screen: “trying to figure out if a girl is [rainbow flag emoji]”. Then, in every video a characteristic is written on the screen, after which the creator agreeably nods, implying that that characteristic confirms a girl’s queerness. Some of the features she presents are: wearing a septum piercing, having a butterfly tattoo, and having two dyed strips at the front of one’s hair. An example can be found in figure 8.

Figure 8

Lesbian stereotypes: butterfly tattoo



These sorts of stereotypes were present in a lot of content that I came across. While looking confused at the camera, one creator writes in a TikTok “when she cuffs her pants but has no tattoos yet has a septum piercing but her nails are long”. The voice of the audio says “I’m extremely confused. You’re confused? I’m confused bro”. It is not a given fact that everyone who comes across these TikToks about lesbian stereotypes will understand what they are about. As Morrow and Battles (2015) emphasize, comic discourses are based on certain cultural meanings and codes that the joke teller and receiver both must understand. If a person who was unaware of these stereotypes (lesbians cuff their pants and have tattoos, piercings, and short nails) came across this TikTok they would not understand the joke: the creator of the TikTok has a hard time telling if the girl she describes is queer because of her conflicting characteristics. Being part of this in-group that gets the joke could have a positive effect on queer women, especially because they historically have been considered an out-group that fell victim to popular humorous discourse (Morrow & Battles, 2015; Streeten, 2010).

As established, stereotypes can be very harmful when they are unwillingly projected upon (members of) a community and when they are negative (Gal et al., 2015; Milner, 2013). However, as we can see in the case of lesbian TikTok, when people from an in-group are the ones highlighting the

stereotypes about their own community, this can have a positive effect. As Bing (2007) notes: women can use existing stereotypes in creative new ways to undermine old ones. By taking lesbian stereotypes and creating new, lighthearted conversations around them, women reclaim and redefine the discourses surrounding their identity. Lesbians that make fun of lesbian stereotypes is a perfect example of in-group humor: through humor, they are referring to and making fun of their own people, therein not punching down or up, but at people on their own level (and, automatically, at themselves).

The lesbians on TikTok that are part of the in-group themes are not punching up or punching down, more like punching straight (isn't that ironic) forward.

By ridiculing themselves and other people like them they do not hurt an out-group but instead have a fun(ny) time with their own people.

Fieldnote

The TikToks in the stereotypes category show that it is indeed possible for queer women to joke about certain stereotypes, like having tattoos and piercings and moving in with each other after the first date, without necessarily tearing other people down. These stereotypes are almost all very harmless and communicated in a fun and light matter. Instead of having other people stereotype them, humor seems to give queer women a tool to define themselves and their community (Fox & Ralston, 2016). By defining their own stereotypes, queer women are taking some power back from people that initially were responsible for creating harmful stereotypes about them.

My analysis of the in-group category shows once again that humor can be a useful tool for queer women to communicate their experiences. The following quotation from Case and Lippard (2009) seems very appropriate here: “Humor can be a subversive and an empowering tool for women and feminists in the ideological battle to symbolically redefine gender roles, attitudes, and stereotypes” (p. 240). By creating humorous discourses around love for being queer, queer awakenings, queer struggles, and queer stereotypes, queer women gain power in the process of writing and redefining their own narratives. Contrary to the out-group category, the in-group content shows that queer women do not need to tear others down, be it deservingly or not, in order to create these discourses and write these narratives.

5. Conclusion

My research has focused on the use of humor by the lesbian TikTok community. More specifically, it has attempted to answer the research question: *how is humor used to communicate the female queer experience on TikTok?* Digital ethnography was used as a method for gathering a relevant and profound set of data. I analyzed the data set using thematic analysis, which allowed me to organize the rather chaotic data set that had emerged from the fieldwork. The analysis brought forward new and relevant findings, which I will now discuss before turning to their implications and the limitations of my research.

5.1. Key findings

First, a category emerged from the analysis that I called ‘out-group’ humor. The contents in this group showed queer women addressing other groups outside of their own community. These contents often showed queer women punching *up* at their historical aggressors, like men and queerphobic (straight) people, and asserting superiority over them (Willet & Willet, 2019). By jokingly, but often negatively, referring to people and social groups that have historically punched down on them they appear to take back some power. All the videos, comments and trends that were put in this category are forms of feminist humor that helps queer women redefine their marginalized position in society (Case & Lippard, 2009; Holmes & Marra, 2002). These findings support the idea that humor and ridicule, which have historically been men’s weapons, can also be employed as a useful tool by marginalized groups (Willet & Willet, 2019). However, while these sorts of humor can help address problematic discourses in society and strengthen the in-group of queer women, they also have the potential to widen the gap between them and the out-group. Feminist humor by queer women might be calling attention to a damaging status quo, but it also reinforces it by confirming gender differences and inequalities and maintaining certain hierarchy (Bing, 2004).

Secondly, I established an ‘in-group’-category, which included all sorts of humor by queer women that referred to the queer community itself, be it in a positive or more negative/realistic way. These contents ranged from jokes about sex and queer crushes to those about daily struggles and stereotypes. In this category the female queer experience was communicated through humor that was self-aware and focused on the (queer) self and community (Bing, 2004). Here, humor does not seem to be used as much to address queerphobic and misogynistic status quos, but more so for light fun and defining personal queer narratives. Instead of punching toward an out-group, like in the previous category, this humor punches to its own level (Bing, 2004; Willet & Willet, 2019). Lesbians who use this sort of in-group humor on TikTok prove Bing’s (2004) point that they can define themselves by engaging in humorous discourses without having to relate to their social ‘opposites’. More than the out-group humor then, the in-group humor by queer women on TikTok truly offers them a way to (re)define their own narratives in a way that does not take itself too seriously, and that focusses mainly

on the relationship to the self instead of the other. In other words: here, humor helps define and tell queer narratives of realness, often in a lighthearted but honest manner (Fox & Ralston, 2009).

Although both categories show different ways of communicating the female queer experience, they are not to be conceived as entirely separate and distinct sections. First, they are both valid representations of humorous communications by queer women on TikTok. As my analysis showed, there is not one way in which lesbians choose to joke about their identities and experiences. Moreover, I would argue that in both categories humor is partially used as a coping mechanism (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Because queer women are a historically marginalized group that has been targeted by harassment (Kortes-Miller & Hiebert, 2021; Tropiano, 2014; Wuest, 2014), humor has served as a useful tool to help them relieve some of these anxieties that come with their existence (Streeten, 2020; Willet & Willet, 2019).

The out-group humor shows the most obvious signs of coping strategies, as it clearly addresses the historical ‘oppressor(s)’ in a humorous way, replacing “negative with positive affect, thereby giving them an increased ability to cope with negative state of affairs” (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009, p. 349). The in-group humor also hints at coping aspects: it addresses the occasionally challenging personal queer experience in a lighthearted manner and uses it to build a realistic narrative of the self and the community. Making themselves the butt of the joke could help queer women cope with their anxieties and find joy in their queerness. The humor that I analyzed shows an overall tendency of making more serious topics a bit lighter, which appears to create an open and safe(r) environment for (queer) people to learn and share about personal experiences (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Wuest, 2014). Taken together, I claim the female queer experience is communicated on TikTok through multiple humorous discourses that either refer to an out-group or in-group, and that tend to highlight as well as alleviate the complex queer existence in present-day society.

More broadly speaking, both categories have another important thing in common. By using humor as a way of communicating the lesbian experience on TikTok, queer women are by definition challenging the myth of the humorless lesbian (Kulick, 2010). Regardless of the exact content, the very notion of lesbians not having humor is challenged and subverted by every single queer woman engaging in humorous discourse on TikTok. Simply by doing so, those women confront the unjustly invented and dehumanizing status quo that purports them as humorless (Martin, 2007; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009).

5.2. Academic and societal relevance

The findings of my research carry important societal as well as academic implications. Academically, my research can be perceived as a valuable addition to existing literature on humor, social media, and queer issues. Although it is known that lesbian and feminist humor have existed for

a long time (Bing, 2004; Kulick, 2010; Streeten, 2020), my research shows that the interactive and participatory features of Web 2.0 have allowed for such humorous discourses to spread faster and further (Hine, 2017; Shifman, 2013). It has highlighted the importance of interactive features like comment sections that platforms like TikTok offer their users: these affordances are to be taken seriously and studied more thoroughly, since they seem to encourage open (humorous) discourse surrounding complex queer existence. Furthermore, my analysis has brought forward two separate, but not entirely unrelated categories of humor that queer women use in these digital spaces of TikTok. As Bing (2004) argued, the lesbian humor often tended to address the in-group of fellow women-loving-women. However, as became clear from my research, queer women on TikTok also do not shy away from addressing out-groups in rather aggressive and negative ways. As such, my research has broadened the understandings of (digital) humor as a tool for subverting (cis) status quos and for coping with the complexities of queer existence.

Moreover, TikTok has proven to be a space in which, just as Milner (2013) and Drakett et al. (2018) theorized, marginalized people can address problematic discourses and counter or subvert these by engaging in funny (memetic) discourses. The findings of my research have proven again the value of safe(r) spaces on the Internet where marginalized people can freely engage in discourses surrounding their identities. These findings could be used as prove for the importance of maintaining and protecting such spaces. Altogether, this study has demonstrated the need for further research and attention (in)to the use of humor by marginalized communities in digital spaces.

It is important to note that, however promising the use of humor by queer women on TikTok to address and define their queerness might seem, these practices also have their limitations. While humor might briefly lift people's spirits, some might argue that "it cannot feed the hungry, claim justice for the discriminated, or right the internalized shame, blame, helplessness, and mental stress" (Ask & Abidin, 2018, p. 846) that queer women face. In other words: memes and other humorous discourses circulating on digital platforms might not be sufficient for creating meaningful social change. For real and long-lasting change to occur, it would presumably be necessary to also take action in the 'offline' world, where the effects of misogyny and queerphobia are still felt daily.

5.3. Limitations and further research

It is furthermore important to acknowledge the fact that my fieldwork, although thorough and far-reaching, was limited by multiple factors. First, because of the limited amount of time I had to immerse myself on lesbian TikTok, it is fair to assume that I have not captured every aspect of humorous communications by queer women on the platform. The inability to capture every aspect of queer female TikTok is an inevitable consequence of using digital ethnography as a method and the online space as a field. Furthermore, my fieldwork was characterized by lurking, actively following relevant leads, and engaging in semi-interactive behavior like 'liking' and 'following'. Although these

strategies, inspired by ‘amateur’ practices of the average TikTok user, have brought an abundance of useful data and findings, they also fall short on a more proactive and truly interactive level.

A suggestion for future research would thus be to conduct a more intensive ethnography in TikTok’s queer spaces that also seeks out communication with TikTok users. This would allow for a more comprehensive look into the uses of humor as well as, potentially, perspectives from the sender point-of-view. To build on that: it would be of high relevance to interview queer creators that use humor in their digital contents, as this would allow for a more in-depth look into the motivations and functions of humor as a potential tool for coping, community-building, and activism. Moreover, it would be very useful to extend the research to other platforms, like Reddit and Instagram, which are known for their (problematic) memetic discourses and intimate communities (Drakett et al., 2018; Milner, 2013).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Coding table TikToks

Nr.	Code	Additional notes
1	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stereotype: watching ‘the L word’, Shay Mitchell, denim jackets - Comment creator: "I watched the L word for the plot [content emoji]" - Comment: “the closet door was made out of glass babes” (code: hetero to queer pipeline)
2	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lifting weights with fingers in the gym
3	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - #bitok - Comment: “you think we CHOOSE to be attracted to men? Honey... [laughing emoji]
4	POV: being queer is the norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reversal of stereotypes - “you don’t look straight”; “you look like siblings” - #lgbtq; #lgbt
5	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - old people don’t get it
6	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sexually active → can’t get pregnant? - my method of contraception: lesbianism (incongruity) - comments calling out ‘transphobic’ joke” “trans femmes exist... I don’t think you realize how harmful it is to make a joke like that”
7	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: “running out of breath, but I got stamina” - #lesbian; # funny
8	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: Euphoria (you’re fucking Nate, are you kidding me?) - #lesbian; #queer; # funny
9	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - convincing parents we’re not “[gay flag emoji; scissor emoji] friends [scissor emoji; gay flag emoji]
10	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “Mom: “why has your friend slept over for a week straight” - Code: queer hand signal
11	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: ‘being closeted in high school and trying to act hurt in front of family after a breakup with a bf’ (first, she looks heartbroken, sad.. then she does a funny motion and smiles) - caption: “I wasn’t heartless, I was just [gay flag emoji]” - #lgbt; #lgbtq - closeted experience
12	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jodie Comer - audio: “that’s my wife and she did nothing wrong” - comments: “she’s actually my wife”
13	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jade West (Victorious) - Caption: “Jade West please murder me”
14	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gay couple - sexual aspect
15	It’s no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people ‘only want to experiment’ - “match 29485733 miles away” - #lesbiansoftiktok

16	Queer sex > straight sex	- Sound: "make me.. come" - #wlv
17	All about that [cat emoji]	- gay couple - cc: "what do you eat to get abs like that? I want to make mine pop by summer" → [innocent looking girlfriend appears in frame] (incongruity) - sexual aspect - eating pussy
18	I'm so gay!	- "Straight vs Queer" - Straight looks more 'normal', queer looks more alternative, confident, happy
19	Stereotypes	- Stereotype: all lesbians are friends with their exes - Trend: sound "hey isn't this easyyy"
20	Hetero to queer pipeline	- process from straight to gay - #lesbiansover30; #wlv; #jokes; #lesbian; #comphet - calling out compulsive heterosexuality - I used to date men :(
21	Stereotypes	- trend: sound "hey isn't this easyyy" - cc: "us in a lesbian relationship without being in love with our exes bc we are exes" - unexpected twist at the end - #wlv - All Lesbians are friends with their exes
22	All about that [cat emoji]	- sound: whistle - cc: "her: I didn't shave [smiling sad emoji]" → "that's even better" → incongruity, maybe also with heteronormative ideas and tradition of men finding bodyhair on women disgusting
23	All about that [cat emoji]	- cc: "me ranting to my gf about having a horrible day" → "her knowing what that means for tonight" - no mentioning of men or anything else than the relationship: normalizing queer relationships without tearing others down - #fyp; #funny; #queer; #lesbian
24	All about that [cat emoji]	- audio: "running out of breath, but I got stamina" - cc: "when my arm is dead but she starts shaking" - caption: "talking about the blender ofc nothing sexual [peace sign emoji]" - shows awareness of TikTok guidelines
25	Men are the problem	- trend: sound "hey isn't this easyyy" - cc (translated): "pov: you feel attraction towards women but you have never had the urge to touch them inappropriately" - #lgbtq; #fyp - Comment (translated): "you would almost think that men are the problem" - Comment (translated): "but no, our outfits are the problem, right? [4x thinking emoji]" - Societal critique
26	Stereotypes	- "the romours are true.." - stereotype: lesbians move in together after only knowing each other for 6 months

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - caption: “my gf and I took it slow and waited to move in together after 8 months” → wit/irony - #uhaullesbian; #uhaul; #wltiktok; - comment: “6m is kinda taking it slow” - Comment: “I waited 3 weeks and packed up and moved to New York lol”
27	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stereotype: (secretly) watching the L word - hiding sexuality from mum - #lesbianproblems; #wltwuk; #lgbtqiaplus; #gaygirlsoftiktok - comment: “headphones one ear on one ear off [laughing emoji]” → comment creator: “hahahahah 100%” - shared (fun) memories of being closeted gay, community! - being closeted
28	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - girls are pretty - you’d be a lot happier - this video lasted longer than your man - stereotype: men can’t perform well sexually/don’t last long - in sex: women>men - #gayngels; #androgynous
29	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “girls will be like oh my god you’re so pretty I love your style that sweater is so cute.. rip it off of me then. Rip it from my body. Did you mean that? Did you like the sweater? Ok you should see me without it” - popular sound → 1103 videos that used it (16/04)
30	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - femmes are expected to act shy, but dominant femmes: are not. - sound: “I’m not shy, I’ll say it. I’ve been picturing you naked” - comment: “respectfully, step on me” → creator “gladly” - #femme; #funny; #gay; #queer; #lesbian - Dominant femmes are bossy - in-group stereotype
31	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: sound “hey isn’t this easyyy” - cc: “meeting a lesbian and not saying “maybe you haven’t met the right guy yet” - #lesbians; #gay; #qlq - People invalidating lesbians
32	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stereotypes: lesbians do the uhaul thing too soon, get married, hate their spouse, then file for divorce - code: “the uhaul thing” → moving in together - comments: “I like to say, I got my practice marriage out of the way [laughing emoji]” - lots of support and similar stories in the comments
33	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strap on as element of lesbian sex - #wltw; #lgbt - gay couple

34	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “When I’m supposed to be the top, but SHE puts the str@p on” → audio “someone come and rescue me” - top vs bottom - strap on
35	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching movie with parents and steamy lesbian sex scene comes on → them looking at you - ‘innocent’ lesbian experience, not too harmful - Awkwardness with parents I
36	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “trader Joe when he sees the lgbtq+ community entering his store” - combined with dance and audio: “major bag alert” → points to rainbow washing critique - social critique
37	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: sound “hey isn’t this easyyy” - implying that masc lesbians normally cheat (stereotype?) - in-group stereotype
38	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “her hyping up my pen1s during seggs” → “Me: don’t be dramatic it’s only some plastic” (in sync with the audio) - #gay; #girlswholikesgirls; #ledollardbean; #fruity; #wlw
39	POV: being queer is the norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reversal of stereotypes - making a big deal out of coming out - they like any guy - “you look to pretty to be straight”
40	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - role played conversation - cc: “but how do two girls have sex?” → person standing up, walking away and mouthing the audio “who, that’ll do it. You do not have to worry about me. You do not have to worry about me.” - #lesbiansoftiktok; #lgbt - comment: “better... the answer is better.” (4745 likes) - comment: “we do it very well ty [laughing emoji]”
41	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - role played conversation - people asking how lesbian people have seggs → reversal: “how do you have seggs?” → other person being confused, “I just mean like you can’t have real seggs yk?” → audio: this place about to blow
42	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “in a le\$bian relationship, there is no such thing as top and bottom. We have who’s first and who’s last.” - #lesbian; #gay; #queer - comment: “there are tops & bottoms in some relationships and that’s totally fine ☺” → critical response
43	Straight confusion/ All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how do lesbians have sex? - cc: “but neither of u have a [eggplant emoji] so how does that work?” → slowly showing scissor - scissoring as element of lesbian sex

		- comment: “wait till they hear about [twinkle emoji] the strap [twinkle emoji]”
44	Queer turn-ons	- cc: “when she starts undressing to change her clothes in front of you not knowing your bi” - audio: “.. keep it cool”
45	It’s no bed of roses	- Lesbian flirting with woman → woman thinking she is judging them - caption: “how do I explain I’m a lesbian admiring you not a jealous girl judging you [frustrated emoji]” - Lesbian struggles
46	POV being queer is the norm	- straight people being disgusted/put off off by lesbians on the screen (happiest season) - societal critique - role playing straight person: “it’s a little different than what I’m used to” → shows micro aggressions/hurtful comments and instances of queerphobia that seem innocent but can be harmful - straight disgust
47	Men are the problem	- cc: “being Pansexual and liking people of all genders” → “liking men” ☹ [sad sound] - comment: “like it’s how I KNOW sexuality isn’t a choice. I would never” - caption: “don’t take this too seriously lol it’s a joke” - #queer; #pansexual; #nonbinary
48	All about that [cat emoji]	- cc: “when I’m not wearing a bra and my girlfriend wants to see her friends” - normalizing queer relationships; simple fun - sexual
49	Queer stereotypes	- stereotopes (lesbian things that just make sense) - pictures of women above bed - lots of flannels - pride merchandise - Rainbow accessories - #lgbt; #lgbtq+; #wlw; #lesbiansoftiktok
50	Hetero to queer pipeline	- going down on a girl for the first time is scary (audio “am I scared... no. .. I’m scared” - people in the comments: sharing own stories/memories - comment: “I was so scared but it was better than I ever imagined” - Comment: “go slow, communicate your fear, only do as much as you feel comfortable with at any given moment, maybe try a dental dam, it helps with the anxiety” → education! Meaningful discourse as response to lighthearted joke
51	Hetero to queer pipeline	- congratulations, it’s so much greener on this side - implies that being straight is less fun/interesting - comment: “tiktok knew me better than me [blushing emoji] [pride flag emoji] → shows awareness of algorithm - Welcome to the (queer) club
52	Straight confusion	- surprise: she is ‘the dad’ - caption: “plot twist”

		- incongruity (social expectation that the father is a man)
53	Men are the problem	- trend: sound “hey isn’t this easyyy” - cc: “being attracted to women and not grabbing their waist when I walk past them” - societal critique
54	Hetero to queer pipeline	- trend: pomegranate - waiting to have a husband .. it’s gonna be a wife!
55	Hetero to queer pipeline	- Stages of coming out: I’m gay!; I’m a terrible daughter; accepting my masculinity; internalized homophobia [I need therapy]; is that a le\$bian bar? - coming out
56	Queer turn-ons	- cc: “when she’s sporty, ambitious, dresses tomboy femme and asks me to stfu” → hand gesture: closing mouth - caption: “my toxic trait is doing anything for a tomboy femme” - code: tomboy femme - #preferences; #dating; #mytype; #gaygirl
57	All about that [cat emoji]	- licking fingers to a fitting sounds - comment: “periodttt. I’ll never turn down a meal” → response creator: “no leftovers”
58	It’s no bed of roses	- Trend: sound: “hey isn’t this difficult” → another play on easyyy meme - hard to find a girlfriend when you are a fem who likes other femmes - code: femme - #girlswholikegirls; #fruity; #lgbt; #gay - queer struggles (in-group)
59	Straight confusion	- cc: “when you tell a straight girl your g@y and she automatically assumes you have a crush on her” → audio: “fuck no” - #queer; #lesbian; #lgbt
60	It’s totally platonic?	- Trend: sound: “hey isn’t this difficult” → another play on easyyy meme - cc: “making it clear that I’m asking a girl to hang out in a date way and not in a friend way” - are we just friends? - queer struggles
61	All about that [cat emoji]	- joke: set up: why don’t humans lick each other to show affection - punch line: “lesbians do” - some people used the audio - eating p*ssy
62	Dealing with the family	- trend: sound “hey isn’t this easyyy” - cc: “guiding my parents on how to handle my little brother coming out as trans so that he doesn’t get childhood trauma” - #queertiktok #trans
63	Hetero to queer pipeline	- trend: pomegranate - People used to call me a tomboy → now I’m a lesbian

64	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "I'm going out tonight so hide your men. Not because I want them but because I don't want to see a singular man on my outing" - Sound is popular: used by 4017 people (some queer, but also some maybe not (Selena Gomez))
65	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: pomegranate - thinking you'll have a boyfriend in college → turns out it is a girlfriend - caption: "found out I was a fruit lover" - #lesbiansoftiktok; #wlw; #fruity
66	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - telling the doctor you're a virgin because you don't want the "I'm a lesbian" talk
67	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when they ask if y'all are sisters" when we : 1) show PDA 2) have different features 3) have the SAME name - audio: I'm extremely confused
68	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "my gay panic used to be: do I want to be her or do I want to be on top of her. Now I know my answer. I want her on top of me."
69	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: "that was a hot mess inside a dumpster fire inside a train wreck" - caption: "1 year down. Might cancel my subscription." - Comment: "don't you dare cancel – don't make me remind you what the other option is [relieved/anxious emoji]" → response creator: "LMAO don't worry I'm not going anywhere!! For the love of god don't remind me" (men are the problem) - disgust for 'the other option' (men)
70	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lesbian : Never having a husband.. oh no → plot twist: never having a husband.. yay!
71	POV being queer is the norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - asking everyone if they support straight marriage - as long as you don't make it your whole personality, I don't encourage it, but I do know people that are straight.. - reversal of stereotypes and roles
72	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when no fruity girls like me because I look straighter than a pole" - 'looking too straight' - solution: getting an undercut (stereotype) - #girlfriend; #funny; #gay; #bi
73	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pasta is a meal.. YOU are a SNACK
74	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "you have really nice fingers, can I borrow them sometime?" → being cute together - normalizing
75	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "dance if you prefer [cancer emoji] to the strap" → she dances - 69 > strap
76	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mom asking if you looked up "girls kissing" on the computer - youth
77	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people asking "are you sure you're gay" - queer struggles

78	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when people ask if I’m dating the girl I spend most of my time with and occasionally share a bed” → audio : “we’re just friends, what are you saying” - gay couple - irony
79	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when my mom walked in on me half naked kissing with a girl and asked if I was g@y” - audio: “nice job officer fuckface, you really connected the dots on that one”
80	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: pomegranate - Im not a tomboy → I’m gay!
81	Queer sex > straight sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when a cishet man realized I’m queer and tries to give me advice on how to go down on a woman” - audio: “why would I listen to you?” → implying that men do not know how to pleasure a woman
82	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: “I am not an object, I have a voice and something to say! Cc: “fems in blazers..” - audio: “I am an object” → plot twist: fems in blazers make me weak!
83	POV being queer is the norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reversal of stereotypes - ‘not for my kids, but if other people engage in that lifestyle, it’s not hurting me..’ ‘keep it out of the schools, think of the children”
84	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “testing the waters around my friends before I came out - testing the homophobic waters
85	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: ‘butterfly in the skyy’ [math equations], confused floating heads - cc: “the straights trying to work out how wlw have s3ggz” - caption: “wrong answers only in the comment section please” - comments: “we don’t. we stare at each other for hours” - comment: “Rock Paper Scissors battle” - comment: “we do arts and crafts” - comment: “they listen to girl in red and paint idk”
86	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - positive experience of being gay - caption: “being tall and gay is my personality now”
87	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when I say I’m bisexual I mean:” → video where bi flag is almost colored pink, except one small blue corner - wish I were fully gay - men are disgusting - 99% lesbian, 1% bi
88	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when someone brings up the time period when you were straight” → audio :shut the fuck up - caption: “this is a hate crime” - men are disgusting - I used to date men ☹️
89	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - after 2 days queer women have fallen in love - Gay relationships move fast

90	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All my friends knew already - I should've known - #comingout; #latebloomerslesbian
91	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trend: sound: "hey isn't this difficult" → another play on easyyy meme - labels
92	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: 'lesbians after the first date: Sound: "I had so much fun, I love you. Do you talk to other people? Be honest, please don't lie." - queer relationships move fast
93	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - queers don't understand it when straight people talk about straight sex → reversal stereotypes - Implies that queer sex > straight sex
94	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: 'butterfly in the skyy' [math equations], confused floating heads - cc: "my str8 friend group when I explain them the different types of lésbeans:" - also implies codes: straight people just don't get queer culture, norms and values
95	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trend: sound: "hey isn't this difficult" → another play on easyyy meme - it is very hard to find hot masc wlw who are ready for a committed relationship
96	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: 'what type of gay are you' (queer criteria) - do you wear your hair in a bun? - slit eyebrow? - septum piercing? - triple hoop earrings? - still obsesses with your ex? → answers from creator: no → calling out existing stereotypes, do I still fit in when I don't comply?
97	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - blasting "I kissed a girl" after having an argument with your homophobic family → making light of a heavy situation - homophobic family - queer struggles
98	It's totally platonic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not telling her - reinforces the stereotype of lesbians always liking their girl friends
99	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ".. but I'd fuck if she asked nicely :)" - simping
100	It's totally platonic?/ straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when no one knew I was dating my ROOMMATE..." - sound: "don't be suspicious..don't be suspicious.." - comment: "historians will say they were best friends [relieved emoji] [sassy emoji]" - comment: "OMG, they were roommates!!" → these comments show knowledge of certain codes and language that is used by queer women. Points to the historical erasure of queer people (especially women)

101	Dealing with the family	- uncle being inclusive in language (boyfriend or girlfriend) → audio “and I wonder if you know”
102	I’m so gay!	- coming out during quarantine - audio: “I’m gay.. any questions”
103	Stereotypes	- trend: pomegranate - cute granola gay → no, darling.. she’s a church girl - comment: “what’s a granola gay?” → response creator: video in which she explains: she rock climbs, owns a jeep, outdoorsy, owns birkenstocks, loves to hike - Educating the baby gays! Codes
104	Stereotypes	- code: listening to girl in red = gay - at the girl in red concert: a lot of queer women
105	It’s no bed of roses	- getting into your first lesbian relationship [audio: “this is cutee”] - a few months later: drama - Queer struggles (in-group)
106	Hetero to queer pipeline	- cc: “My icks before I realized that I was not bi and was in fact a lesbian - planning a future with me - trying to be sexy or romantic - any of their shows but especially flipflops - calling me “baby” or “babe”- - eye contact or emotional intimacy in bed - having feet → men in general giving the icks - comment: “a boy one told me that he wanted to grow old with me and I just thought “Isn’t that a little much Kyle?” [623 likes] - men are not it
107	POV being queer is the norm	- reversal of stereotypes - weird reactions when coming out: my niece is also a heterosexual! I could introduce you two!
108	Hetero to queer pipeline	- I am not gay! (audio and cc) → camera tilts to mirror - Okay, you know what, I am gay
109	I’m so gay!	- cc: “when you are the cool/ONLY lesbian in the family” - audio: “now this looks like a job for me” - positive experience, happiness, dancing
110	Dealing with the family	- cc: “when someone says I should come out to my religious parents” - audio: “I have a better plan, I’ll marry a wealthy man” - making light of tough situation - homophobia
111	Hetero to queer pipeline	- having seggs with a woman for the first time - audio: “oh my gosh, look at that..put my hand in there... alright!”
112	It’s totally platonic?	- straight girls saying “if they were gay they would be gay for me” → audio: “that made me want to die” - Queer struggles (in-group?)

113	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - megan fox in transformers? - middle school best friend? - female football team? - that scene from cruel intentions? - Sharpay Evan's in HSM2 forcing troy to sing her rendition of "you are the music in me" → building suspense - comments: jade from victorious, Velma in scooby doo, keira knightley in pirates movies, Megara from Hercules - stereotypes/awakenings
114	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trend: sound "hey isn't this easyyy" - cc: "seeing two people hold hands/kiss and not feeling the urge to ask them if they're related"
115	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "women thinking that dating other women saves them from toxic masculinity" → enters the frame → "misogynistic lesbians.." - societal critique - not all lesbians are automatically great±
116	I'm so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rainbow tattoo - sound: "so a lot of you have been asking about my tattoo.. ehm, this symbolizes for me when I'm.. when I'm.. gay."
117	TikTok knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trend sound: "I had you looking in the wrong section, how could I be so stupid!" - cc: "this app before it dopped you deep in le\$bian tiktok:" - algorithmic awareness
118	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when she only uses two fingers" - audio: "nah ah ah" - creator signing no no no
119	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "how is a g@y couple kissing going to confuse or influence your child? I've been seeing straight people kiss my whole life & still want girls.." - calling out queerphobic rethorics in society
120	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - preferring masc lesbians over boys - men are not it - code: masc lesbians - bisexual
121	I'm so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "have you ever tasted a vegan girl before?" - you're missing paradise
122	TikTok knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: pomegranate - I must be bisexual because I've dated guys → no, it was the comp het - comment: "I have been questioning my sexuality so much that I created my account without content, just to figure things out [sad emoji] [crying emoji]" → shows power of TikTok in guiding people through process of discovering their sexuality - societal critique
123	Queer sex > straight sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "I have myself convinced that I can use a strap better than any man could use his [eggplant emoji]"
124	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: 'butterfly in the skyy' [math equasions], confused floating heads

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “my doctor when I say I’m sexually active but there is a zero percent chance I’m pregnant” - comment: “not my old gyno asking me if I want birth control just in case I “change my mind about men” WHILE I’M MARRIED TO A WOMAN”
125	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sound: “I hate all men” - caption: “that’s it” - comments: some agree, others: “and then they wonder why straight people despise them and refuse to give them any ground.”
126	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “if you need proof that sexuality is not a choice, look no further than the fact that straight women and bisexual women still like men” - implies that dating men is horrible
127	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: ‘butterfly in the skyy’ [math equations], confused floating heads - cc: “straight people after lesbians explain that nine months equal 10 lesbian years” - stereotype: lesbian relationships move quick
128	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: (translated from Dutch): “me, doubting if I’m really bi. Is is a phase? Am I doing it for attention?” → My family: [sound: “I’m not surprised]”
129	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “POV: ur bisexual, so you can choose between getting a husband or a wife!!! And you are dating a man” - audio: “I’m gay but I’m stupid”
130	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - used to make girl barbies kiss with each other
131	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “me trying to calculate how I ever thought I liked men in any capacity and why I even attempted to date them” - audio: calculation sound, she looks like she’s calculating something on her screen - I used to date men :(
132	POV being queer is the norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reversal of stereotypes - so you’re straight? That’s hot - how long have you been straight?
133	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “why do you always go for girls with a lot of trauma?” - Sound: “I like good pussy”
134	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stereotype: butterfly tattoo - Figuring out if a girl is queer
135	TikTok knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “are any other girls like.. kind of aggravated that it took more than 20 years to figure out we were bisexual, but it took my TikTok algorithm like 37 seconds. Would’ve saved me so much fucking time!” - awareness of algorithm
136	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What kind of gay are you? (criteria) - Super short hair? - an undercut? - are you sporty? - eyebrow slit? - a nose piercing? - still in love with your ex? - NO!

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stereotypes - caption: “you don’t have to look or act a certain way to be who you are [heart emoji]” → bit of support for gay (questioning) people
137	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bi, but will not date men..
138	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “never understanding the hype around One Direction, Justin Bieber, etc. when I was younger” → queer
139	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - being pan and attracted to all genders, but refusing to date cis men
140	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trend: sound “hey isn’t this easyyy” - cc: “being insanely attracted to women, still never having the urge to touch them inappropriately” → introducing male stereotype
141	It’s no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “queer people when they get their periods” - audio: “thank you so much for this, it was entirely unhelpful..” - Queer struggles
142	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “a good relationship with my dad” → being gay slaps her → sorry dude - homophobic parents - being gay is a problem - Queer struggles
143	I’m so gay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “every family needs a youngest child that is lesbian” - audio: now this looks like a job for me - caption: “I take the role pretty seriously”
144	Dealing with family/straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - me being queer → running through screen - parents.. see nothing - ignorance/invalidation
145	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tattoo - sound: “so a lot of you have been asking about my tattoo.. ehm, this symbolizes for me when I’m.. when I’m.. gay.”
146	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “how did I scream these lyrics and still think I was straight” - audio: “can I have your daughter for the rest of my life, say yes, say yes, ‘cause I need to know.”
147	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “do you think you’re ever gonna date men again”” - audio: “fuck no” - never dating men again
148	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “heterosexuality” - audio: “it’s just never been my thing.. not into it.. so, not approved by me.” - comment: “tried it. Hated it. Never again.” (men are the problem)
149	Straight confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mom not finding out → because I’m an actor
150	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “if I see another beautiful celestial bisexual girl dating a crusty-ass skinny cishet white man with long hair, I’m gonna lose it. Ain’t no way, ain’t no way they deserve this.” - some comments agreeing, but also:

		“maybe he has a great personality and wouldn’t shame the woman for her choices [thinking emoji]”
151	It’s no bed of roses	- coming out but then being single for 3 years - Queer struggles
152	I’m so gay!	- girl outside filming herself in front of a rainbow, shouting “I love being gay!”
153	Homophobic Karens	- are you guys homophobic? - Testing the waters
154	Homophobic Karens	- masc presenting gay creator - cc: “walking into the female toilet..” - “the Karen’s...” - audio: “leaveeee, leaveeee”
155	Queer turn-ons	- halsey - Santana Lopez - Velma from Scooby Doo - Jade West - Sarah Paulson - Rikki from H2O - stereotypes, in-group jokes, awakenings
156	Stereotypes	- lesbians can’t sit straight
157	POV being queer is the norm	- reversing the stereotypes - You’re straight? Do you know Jacob, he is also straight - I also know someone else who is straight and she is really nice
158	All about that [cat emoji]	- cc: “when you realize her panties hug her [cat emoji] all day & my face doesn’t” - sexual
159	Queer stereotypes	- how do you hint that you are bi? - (ear) piercing - converse - codes
160	It’s totally platonic?	- .. but when we’re alone
161	TikTok knows	- cc: “tell me why I thought this was a viral sound but in fact I’m just a raging le\$bean and it only had 3k videos” - Audio: “instead of meat I eat veggies and pussy” - awareness of the algorithm
162	Men are the problem	- Men.. sound: “its just never been my thing, not into it.. so not approved by me.”
163	Homophobic Karens	- cc: “when a biphobic girl from highschool asks for advice on sleeping with a girl” - audio: [screams] “the tables have motherfucking turned - signals critique of people being queerphobic, then turning around
164	Hetero to queer pipeline	- Trend sound: “I had you looking in the wrong section, how could I be so stupid!” - cc: “me a few years ago wondering why I hated dating so much” → “gay!” → plot twist element - #wlw; #lesbian; #lesbiantiktok; #lgbt; #queer

		- Comment: "YOU JUST SUMMARIZED MY ENTIRE HIGHSCHOOL LIFE" → signals community element, people recognizing themselves
165	It's totally platonic?	- cc: "when my straight friend shows me her new bikini knowing I'm a lesbian" - stereotype: being in love with (straight) best friend
166	All about that [cat emoji]	- trend: filter that changes cat picture every time screen is touched - cc: "y'all need 2 hands? I'm just a raging lesbian" - focus on fingers (sexual)
167	Dealing with the family	- audio: Bridgerton sound: "every scandal has.." - cc: "Every coming out story has: kid sister (ultimately), older sister (just wants to watch it all unfold), family pup (just wants snuggles, my ex boyfriend (sorry hottie), my mom (didn't spill to my dad, queen), [audio: "the rake at the center of it all", creator in front of camera flexing, being 'cool']
168	It's totally platonic?	- cc: "when you're on a date w/ her, but you don't know if she thinks it's a date. So you just play it safe and act like it's not a date" - struggles of not knowing whether something is a date - audio: "I'm gay but I'm stupid" - comment: "ah so this is a universal experience"; "exactly"; "me two weeks ago [crying laughing emoji]" → comments show supportive aspect, people recognize this struggle - Queer struggles
169	Stereotypes	- cc: "I hate the idea that bisexual femmes are just straight girls looking for a little attention. I am not a straight girl looking for a little attention. I am a bisexual looking for an assload of attention!" - audio used by 76 others - plays into a stereotype, we expect she will make a serious point, then she surprises us: by making the stereotype even bigger (and funnier) - queer struggles - incongruity
170	It's no bed of roses	- cc: "me falling for another emotionally unavailable girl" - audio: "if you're gonna be stupid you better be tough" - she looks in the mirror and tells the words to herself - Queer struggles
171	Queer turn-ons	- Glee girls (everyone expect Santana) - Keira knightley in pirates (Elizabeth Swam) - Lauren Jarengui (Fifth Harmony) - Sam Puckett (Icarly) - Alex Russo - Bella Swan - Rihanna and Shakira and in the 'can't remember to forget you' music video - comments: proposing other awakenings: "it was Lexa from the 100 for me [crying laughing emoji]"

		<p>“Okay but what about Shego from Kim Possible [eyes emoji]”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - awakenings, stereotypes
172	Men are the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “I hereby sentence you to never be allowed to date or marry a man” - she sits in a chair, hand behind her back, looking up → then she starts smiling - Implies that dating men is something she would never want - comment: “I just wanna say that I am so proud of you your TikTok videos help me so much you have no idea I look up to you just you’re so amazing Hi love [heart face emoji]” → response creator: “and I’m proud of YOU” → shows how these funny videos can actually help people come to terms with their sexuality/support
173	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when you just r@iled tf outta her & she goes to big spoon u first.” - audio” Oh my god, I’m never leaving. I am never leaving. I’m in this shit forever - normalizing (female) queer experience
174	Queer sex > straight sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “men when they eat [cat emoji] for more than a minute” - Audio: “what the.. what the fuck man. Am I, am I a feminist?” - comments: “if they do it for the length of a song they really think they’ve done something [crying emoji]; “they do it once a year on your birthday for 2 minutes then brag about how they eat [cat emoji] 24/7 on social media” - comments show the audience engages with humorous content and also makes jokes
175	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “trying to see if a girl is [gay flag]” → “septum piercing” → creator nods agreeably - septum piercing stereotype
176	It’s no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc (translated from dutch): “when people think that dating women is easier than dating men” - audio: “my god. That takes so much energy and dedication. I hesitate. I hesitate if this is for me” - Queer struggles
177	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - looking up ‘girls kissing’ on the computer → mutual experience for a lot of young closeted queer women - comment: “Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried scene in Jennifer’s Body was on CONSTANT repeat for me” - queer awakenings
178	It’s no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “coming out as a le\$bian after my first queer relationship” .. “she comes out as straight [cat emoji, heart eyes emoji, wink emoji with tongue]” - Queer struggles
179	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when ppl used to tell me I’m going to hell for liking bewbs” - audio “what you say” Jason Derulo

180	Straight to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when people ask lesbians who “turned them” - audio: “I actually did it myself.. yeah..” (popular sound of Julia Fox) - bit of societal critique about people asking invasive questions and assuming that people have to be ‘turned gay’
181	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two dyed strips at the front of her hair - stereotypes
182	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “I really don’t need a relationship right now” .. “a sporty femme slides in my DM” - Audio: “.. here we go” - code: femme
183	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “when I saw a girl n@ked for the first time” - audio: “yo.. I’m a fucking homosexual”
184	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - put a finger down for every stereotype that you do not fall into, LGBTQ+ edition - can drive - good relationship with dad - good at math - prefer dogs to cats - don’t die hair/only dye hair natural colours - only piercing that you have are plain ear piercings - girl with long hair - favorite teacher from high school was not English teacher or drama teacher - didn’t go through pop punk phase or 1D phase - do not listen to girl in red - listen to taylor swift - if you don’t know how to pronounce Hozier → every criterium reversed is a stereotype
185	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “me wondering why my back hurts so much” .. “the weight of being the hot queer in the family” → painting queerness as something positive/also heavy
186	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “everytime I see [rainbow emoji] things that I can queer code myself with” - video: she puts on more and more queer things, like coloured rings, rainbow scarf - struggle: I need to queercode myself because I look straight
187	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - one of them holds the camera and says: “my love, your face is a work of art, I think we should frame it with my legs” - she responds in a cute/dirty way - shows ‘normal’ queer relationship in a funny way
188	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: ‘when you say it’s just a “casual coffee” but you’re wearing a matching set just in case’ - audio: “I’m just thinking with my dick”

189	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: "put a finger down, disaster bisexual edition. Put a finger down if you identify as bi but you're scared that maybe you're lying to yourself because you like men and women differently, you're not sure if one of your attractions is real and one's fake, because maybe you're a lesbian and you've secretly trying to syke yourself out this whole time and pretending at least to yourself that you're a little bit straight. Or maybe you're actually straight and you've been lying to yourself and everyone this whole time just for like.. attention or something? But nobody knows that you're bi so how can it be for attention? And you're experience with both genders are either limited or very specific so you can't actually compare the two and you're stressing yourself out because you fon't know which one is the truth." - video: creator is walking, listening to the sound, and at the end puts a finger down
190	It's no bed of roses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "comes out as a lesbian" .. audio: "I'm gay" - "feels what its like to be hurt buy a woman" audio: "actually I'm not" - comment: "I went right into the closet besties" - Queer struggles
191	Queer sex > straight sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "POV: you just went down on a woman and now you know why the d*ck just doesn't do it for you" - audio: "yo.. I'm a fucking homosexual" - positive experience, framing being queer as something fun!
192	Queer turn-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: "name something you might hurt yourself riding on" → answer: "women in suits" (pictures of Jodie Comer in suits)
193	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when she cuffs her pants but has no tattoos yet has a septum piercing but her nails are long" - audio: "I'm extremely confused. You're confused? I'm confused bro" - response comment: "I know it's crazy but this is a joke about stereotypes"
194	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - role play sketch - Lesbian first date: talking about exes all the time
195	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "you don't look like a lesbian.." "what do you mean?" "just that you're a bit.. short" "well.. there's no dress code as far as I'm aware" - calling out the stereotyping by using a 'funny' sound - societal critique
196	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "do you have girl crushes?" - audio: "yeahhh" (yeah all the time) - cc: "and you want to kiss girls?" - audio: "yeahh" (YEAAH)

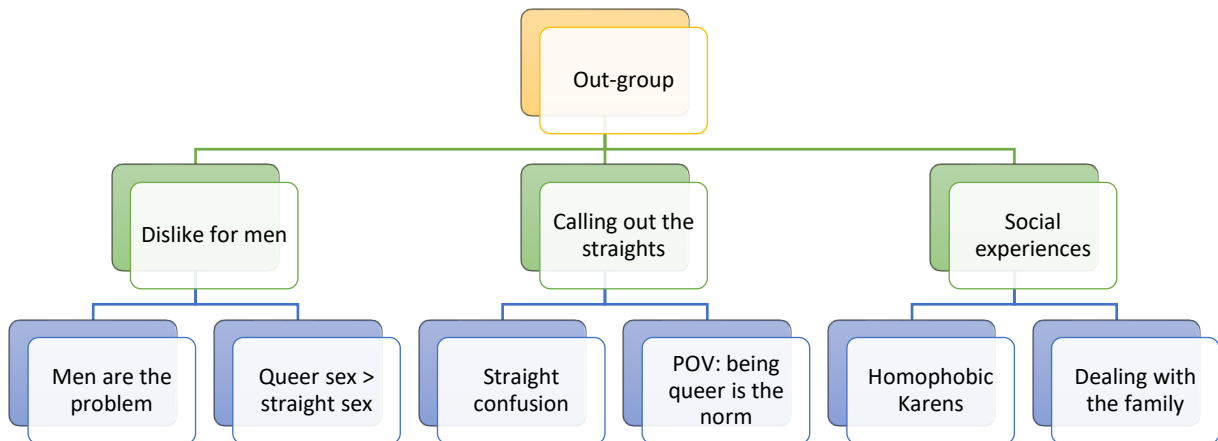
		- cc: “so you’re [fruit emojis]?” .. “me for 22 years” [she’s looking dumb in the distance], implying she was blind for not seeing she was gay
197	Dealing with the family	- cc: what does homophobia taste like? - my dad - a lot of people in the comments: “same”
198	It’s totally platonic?	- cc: “Le\$biens who claim they are only “friends” - audio: “It’s totally platonic, totally platonic, totally platonic..” - text appears on screen: “you text her good morning and good night texts”, “hold hands in public”, “call her pet names”, “fall asleep on facetime”
199	Straight confusion	- cc: If you like kissing your bestie for male validation let me hear you say hell yeah” - audio: “hell yeah!” - audio (girl mouths): “got ya, get these motherfuckers” - caption: “glad you as a straight woman can freely kiss your friend in public and have it be called “hot” :)” → calls out straight people for kissing each other for male validation, while queer experience is often scary
200	Men are the problem	- cc: “the more boys that I meet in my life honestly make me realize yeah I’m definitely lesbian. In fact, I think I even turn more lesbian after I meet a guy” - I’m so gay? - implies men are turning her more lesbian
201	It’s no bed of roses	- cc: - “wait so you like girls” – yeah - “so do you like guys too?” – I don’t know - “are you a lesbian” – I don’t know - “oh so you’re bisexual?” – I don’t know → addresses confusion queer people can have with labels and their identity. - support in comments: “and the best thing is, you don’t have to [hands up emoji] glad to see you doing you [pink hearts emoji]”
202	All about that [cat emoji]	- cc: When I put on the strap - audio: “how do I politely say suck my fucking dick” - Strap-on humor
203	I’m so gay!	- cc: “do you still wish you were born str@igt?” - audio: fuck no - it get’s better, happy being gay
204	Straight to queer pipeline	- audio: “most teenagers start off with marihuana, then they decide to see if heroine has any kick. It does.” - cc: “most girls start of dating boys [disgusted emoji]. Then they decide to see of girls have any kick [tongue emoji]. It does... [winking emoji]” - men are the problem?
205	It’s no bed of roses	- cc: “me admiring how good she looks” (creator sits in front of camera, stares into the distance). “that little bit of internalized homophobia” [audio: that’s gay]

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - internalized homophobia (self awareness of this phenomenon) - comment: Lmao this is very accurate [laughing crying emoji, sad emoji] → people recognize themselves → community
206	I'm so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "Mom: Erin you need to eat more fruit" "Me: becomes one"
207	All about that [cat emoji]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "when she complains about how stressful her day was" - audio: "you need head" - meanwhile, the creator can be seen nodding and starting to tie her hair in a ponytail - in-group
208	Dealing with the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: me anywhere (audio: "I'm gay") - cc: when family comes over (audio: "actually I not)
209	Straight to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: coming out to everyone as bisexual → audio: "there's no way this could get any worse" → visual: creator opens up a cupboard, where the text "actually it was lesbianism" is placed Audio: "it's worse" - caption: nothing more awkward than the bisexual to lesbian pipeline - comment: "it's okay, I have lesbianism too. We'll get through it together. Lol" → shows shared experience, making a joke out of it ('having lesbianism)
210	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cc: when you're a lesbian AND left handed [spiral eyes emoji] - audio: "in the olden days, this woman would have been tied to a stake and burned alive" - girl standing in front of the camera, doing a funky cute move, smiling - comment: "I'm a lesbian and Jewish so definitely same", "my fyp getting a bit to personal (algorithmic awareness); "im not left handed, but I'm trans, I have ocd and im latino lmaooo"
211	Homophobic Karens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "ruining h0m0ph0bes holy Christian holiday by being the sinful lesbian couple kissing in the park" - making fun a heavy situation, homophobia in public spaces - video: a couple is sitting in a park, showing affection, laughing at the camera - a 'fuck you' to all the homophobes
212	It's totally platonic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: "Le\$biens who claim they are only "friends" - audio: "It's totally platonic, totally platonic, totally platonic.." - text appears on screen: holds hands, gm & gn texts, pays for each other's food, cuddles, tell each other "I love you" 24/7 - MEME/trend
213	It's totally platonic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: "It's totally platonic, totally platonic, totally platonic.."

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: (appears one by one, while creator does funny movements) “me and my best friend holding hands, always hugging, winking at each other, constantly flirting, grabs each others’ thighs, carries each other around, sleeps in the same bed, spoon in bed, have showers together, gets dressed together, calls each other babe, kisses each other” - creator has in bio: “Fruity (an, ace, aro and poly)
214	I’m so gay!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio: “name three continents ..” - cc: “what makes you ghey [nail emoji, gay flag emoji]?” .. “1. Women” - Audio: Asia.. that’s what I’ve got mate
215	TikTok knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: before downloading TikTok: - cc+ audio: “you ever been interested in women?” - cc: “uhh no not like that” (she tucks her hair behind her ears, pretending to be unknowing) - cc: my FYP → audio: “HA, HA HA HA” (she mouths the words) - comment: “straight → bi boy pref → bi girl pref → lesbian” (shows the pipeline very well!!) - queer awakening
216	Straight to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: thinking I was asexual when I was “straight” .. “I’m just g@y and like women” - comment: went through this phase [guilty face emoji] turns out I’m a lesbian [crying laughing emoji] → comment shows community, recognition (a lot of other comments say ‘same’, ‘me’ , OMG YES’ = shared experience - awakenings
217	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: “I’m not going to be a typical lesbian & become obsessed with her straight away” ... “does exactly that” - stereotype: gay girls always fall in love so quickly
218	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: for every le\$bian couple there’s always a well dressed one and a homeless looking one - video: pretty and dressed up girl in front of the camera, then a women in grey sweats appears, both do funny/cute dance. - normalizing relationships, creating new stereotypes (but not very damaging), in-group
219	Hetero to queer pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cc: POV: after kissing a girl for the first time - audio: what is the biggest takeaway from this experience - cc: The biggest takeaway from this experience? Is that Imma do it again! - awakenings

Appendix B: Coding trees

Appendix B1: Coding tree 'out-group' category



Appendix B2: Coding tree 'in-group' category

