Playing With Gender: Patterns Of Identity Expression On TikTok

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Introduction

The social media platform TikTok conveys a broader cultural shift in people's–especially queer youth's–conception of gender being an essential biological trait to a conception of gender as performance, and has produced a unique proliferation of condensed performances of gender and sexuality. The video format of the platform allows users to "try on" queer identities and behaviors not represented in popular media and allows viewers of these performances to become exposed to alternative identities and lifestyles they may be unlikely to encounter offline.

Methodology

I watched ~10 hours of videos posted to TikTok via the desktop website, searching within queer/LGBTQ+ tags and often viewing a particular user's other videos if their content was relevant to this research. Each video I found relevant was recorded in a table with: a link to the video; a description of its content such as what was said, on-screen text, movements of the subject, etc.; a designation of whether the video is meant to be regarded humorously or seriously; themes that I extracted from the content and subtext of the video/text; and a discussion of the video's content in reference to the project. This table was then analyzed as a whole to extract themes and behaviors that were proliferated across numerous users and tags.

Literature Review

Judith Butler developed the concept that some cultural mechanisms produce a "fabricated unity" between sex and gender, though gender is in fact a performance which is arbitrarily extended from the highly variable forms that human bodies appear. Gender is consequentially naturalized within the individual via repeated unconscious attempts to recreate it (2011, 188). Matthew Carrasco and Andruid Kerne posit that online spaces produce a unique style of these performances, in which the need to "constantly articulate" one's identity is largely absent (2018, 2). Mary Gray, in her ethnography about queer youth in rural America, concludes that people cannot articulate their identities without "drafting and redrafting narratives gleaned from others". She writes that queer identities are mediated by "social, racial, and economic realities" and therefore do not exist in a vacuum (2009, 167&172). In Annamarie Jagose's introduction to queer theory, she explains that, as sexualities like "gay" and "lesbian" become increasingly normalized within popular media that portray white, monogamous, middle-class gay/lesbian people, these identities may become less "queer" because queerness (though virtually impossible to define) draws "attention to the assumptions that…inhere in the mobilisation of any identity category, including itself" (1996, 126). Meg-John Barker writes that "[q]ueer is something that we do, rather than something that we are", and therefore anything which is loaded with cultural expectations–such as a social media platform–may be "queered" by subverting naturalised cultural mechanisms (2016, 14).

Anthropological literature has yet to extensively analyze the manner in which gender, sexuality, and other notions of identity are performed in online spaces such as social media platforms. There is a need for anthropologists to understand how cultural processes are changing due to the novel forms and functions of digital media–and how people constantly subvert expectations by using them.

Analysis

TikTok is a video-focused social media platform that was launched in 2017 and has since become a behemoth of global interaction with a billion users worldwide of which 41% are between the ages of 16 and 24 (1). The app is available in 155 countries and in 75 languages; Its unique "For You" page provides content from both people a user follows and content that is curated by an automated algorithm which is designed to discover and exploit users' interests. For these reasons, there is a greater chance that a user views content from a wide array of users, many of which may be culturally distinct from the user. This novel form of cross-cultural exposure is of great interest to anthropology. Behaviors of particular online cultural niches is of interest as well, and this poster will explore the niche of queer identities on the app.

How queerness is performed on TikTok

Keeping in mind Judith Butler's analysis of gender as something that is performed and later naturalized within the individual, users on TikTok display a self-awareness of gender-as-performance, being willing to "try on" various indicators of gender without necessarily naturalizing these performances. To put it casually, many young people are using TikTok to "have fun" with their expressions of gender, aware that they are denying handed-down conceptions of gender. Users show off alternative presentations of the self, like ways of dressing, using makeup, speaking, gesticulating, sitting, styling hair, etc. that may be sources of unpleasant or even threatening attention offline, and are instead praised within these queer niches of TikTok. These videos read as particularly performative and playful because the subjects are simply existing in their bedrooms, lip-syncing to a song or popular clip of audio, or speaking directly to the audience about some aspect of their identity/sexuality/queerness. The audience does not receive a peek into the subject's life–going to work or to school, practicing hobbies, spending time with family and friends, etc.–but is perfectly aware that the subject has curated their appearance to achieve some particular expression of gender. If a vlogging YouTube channel may be analogized to a memoir, a queer TikTok user's profile is a wandering collection of brief, monologic vignettes, none of which propose to indicate a "true" self.

What is the utility of these transparently performative vignettes? I posit that these videos are a tool for individuals to make sense of gender as action, rather than as an aspect of the self which is passively received. For example, one user shared a video of them responding to a comment which insisted that people can "tell" they are trans by simply smiling to the camera with on-screen text which reads "I don't care if people know I'm trans" (2). This sentiment, and the sentiment reverberated in the comments among other users, signals a desire not to pursue a gender identity that snugly aligns with cisgender or normative appearances, but instead suggests a willingness to occupy a dynamic, multilayered, queer gender identity as a trans person. The subject and the commenters indicate that their identity should not be read as an emulation of cisgender people, but as another conception of gender entirely.

In this way, the activity of queer youth on TikTok acts as a microcosm of broader cultural processes: a plethora of performances are proliferated and viewed by the individual who in turn emulates these disparate performances by constructing an idiosynchcratic one via videos of their own. These videos become additional performances which are viewed and partially emulated by others, and the web of cultural "raw material" becomes ever more extensive (Benedict 1959, 251).

Social media is new, mediated expression of identity is not

TikTok is one of the newest tools that humans have developed to create objects of meaning, many of which serve to articulate pluralistic expressions of identity. These expressions allow people to make sense of the relationship between the self and one's cultural environment, of which gender is only one component of many. Across the globe, social media tend to be used to reproduce "dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity" (Miller 2016, 116). However, gender operates in an interesting fashion within TikTok, which facilitates a cultural exchange of gender expression that is notably more extensive, more productive, and more cross-cultural than any tool that has existed before.

It is helpful to contrast the function of social media platforms with cultural activities of the past in order to understand how these new tools may precipitate real possibilities in the lives of individuals. Before the Internet (and social media platforms in particular) one could "play" with queer expressions of gender by, for example, dressing in a queer manner in one's privacy, gazing at oneself in the mirror. In some ways, these TikTok videos of people experimentally performing gender is similar, but with an incredibly important difference: the performance is shared, and potentially widely shared at that. The performance is still private in some notable ways, as these queer performances need not bleed into one's offline identity, but the individual also experiences the sensation of sharing this distilled expression of gender and in a context where the timely response approaches that of "real life". An individual who can hardly imagine going out in public wearing clothing, sporting makeup, or behaving in such a way that will code them as "queer" may produce and share a video in the privacy of their home that allows them to "try on" these cultural signifers without many of the risks and consequences of a "real life" performance.

That being said, the fact that these performances exist in a digital realm does not exclude the possibility of precipitating effects outside this realm. For example, one user posted a video of themself trying on "trans tape" (a chest binding alternative) for the first time, with their elated reaction to seeing themself flat-chested in a t-shirt set to upbeat music (3). The over eleven-thousand comments compliment the subject, discuss the commenters' own desires to try "trans tape", and share information about the product with others. The moments shared on TikTok are indeed experimental–as all performances are–but they also contain "real life" and affect offline lives. This digital realm is new to humanity, but it also seems oddly familiar because it is only another tool that people use to make sense of who they are and share this self with others–even if these "others" are usernames on a screen–because the self hardly makes sense if it goes unseen (Adams and Plaut (2003, 334).

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