

TIKTOK TURNED ME GAY

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Since its release in 2016—growing more popular in the last two years—TikTok has been an important feature of pop culture, particularly for Generation Z. The app features 15-60 second videos on a variety of topics, vastly differentiating between social groups, based on what content is repeatedly “liked.” With the impacts of COVID-19 moving people into a time of self isolation, the app grew in popularity, as it provided easy to access entertainment. One of the trends I noticed in the app, notably within my own “side” of it, was a new openness and focus on inclusion, especially within the LGBTQIA+ community. As I interacted with more videos made by and for queer folk, my For You Page (FYP) quickly became full of queer content, in the form of jokes, education, shared interests, and more. Around this same time, seemingly in conjunction, I made the discovery that I was a lesbian, whereas I had previously been identifying as bisexual. It is my belief that I was able to make this discovery, in part, due to the influence of the TikTok app, through the content I was regularly interacting with. By analyzing the algorithm and FYP and its grouping strategies, the lack of heteronormative societal pressure due to COVID-19 isolation, and the community created through TikTok, I will discuss how TikTok aided in my discovery of my sexuality, as well as countless others’ discoveries surrounding gender and sexuality. One of the most prominent aspects of TikTok is the For You Page, abbreviated as FYP. This is the main aspect of consumption on the app, where posted videos appear. Although used in other forms of social media, the algorithm on TikTok is a huge part of the app and influences quite a bit of how content is viewed. Because of this, different “sides” of TikTok have been created, in a way forming different communities in each one. Examples of sides of TikTok I have been on are Frog TikTok, Cottagecore TikTok, Gay TikTok, Non-binary TikTok, Bread TikTok... and the list goes on. This video¹ shows how different “sides” of the app can be indicative of people’s interests beyond the app. It is this occurrence I want to focus on. Through the content we interact with, users of the app are able to express themselves in like-minded communities.

While many people end up on different “sides” because of facets of their identity they are already aware of, as this TikTok² references, sometimes the algorithm gives people videos they do not

immediately connect with, that then provide an opportunity to learn and potentially discover something new about themselves, in this case, about their gender and or sexuality. For myself, this was definitely the case. After having the app for a couple months, and using it an increasing amount at the end of last spring, I found my content being very focused around queer women, and importantly for me, women discovering their sexuality as lesbians. Not only did the app provide a space for me to interact with other queer individuals, but it provided stories of others’ experiences³ that others and I could connect with, and information about different resources surrounding discovery of gender and sexuality.

One of the things discussed quite frequently on the app was compulsory heterosexuality (comphet)—such as this video,⁴ which makes the argument that Cher from *Clueless* is a closeted lesbian, and discusses what that means. Watching videos discussing the issue, as well as reading comments about different further resources (such as the “Am I a Lesbian Masterdoc,”⁵ which I found through the app), is a huge part of what helped me discover my sexuality.

Another important aspect of TikTok and how the app created a community for people to express and discover themselves is the isolating outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-March, when people began to isolate, many of my peers and I took to social media as a way to fill our days and pass our time. For some it meant creating content, and for others it meant taking in that content. With the self-isolation and worldwide quarantines, many people found themselves taken out of the society they had grown up in and lived in, instead getting the opportunity to create their own reality through TikTok and their communities within the app. So, by allowing teens and young adults to foster their own world of creativity and self discovery during a time when they are essentially only seeing each other through their screens, it is no surprise that so many people like myself made discoveries about their gender identity and sexuality. By essentially removing the society which enforced heteronormative agendas onto youth, and giving them a space to be authentic, many identities were unsurprisingly discovered and fostered through the app. As discussed above, with a lot of content on the app focused around education and sharing experiences, it seems the perfect space

1 <https://www.tiktok.com/@rcoveringhetero/video/6883495589271620869?lang=en>

2 <https://www.tiktok.com/@bluenbroke/video/6887128233637203201?lang=en>

3 <https://www.tiktok.com/@teoisthey/video/6885712518006721793?lang=en>

4 <https://www.tiktok.com/@justellysa/video/6889197221900733701?lang=en>

5 <https://www.docdroid.net/N46Ea3o/copy-of-am-i-a-lesbian-masterdoc-pdf>

was created for queer people to be queer.

As I have mentioned many times, an important aspect of TikTok and my discussion is the community which has been fostered in the app. This community has done many things—spreading awareness about political issues, sharing thoughts and ideas, creating a safe space, and discussing the communal need for media which represents queer people in normalized, positive ways. As discussed in the article “Normalizing of Queerness and Modern Family,” author Steven Edward Doran critiques modern shows, namely *Modern Family* for their inclusion of queer people and gay couples only in the realm of homodomesticity.

The same grievance for the way queer people are portrayed in blockbuster movies and popular TV shows can be seen on TikTok, where the gay community has rallied in a way behind the want for positive, normalized queer representation in media. This want comes out in many ways on TikTok, such as TikToker Emily, @emskindafit-kindagay, who has a few videos⁶ tracking the Gay Christmas Rom-Com starring Kristen Stewart and Mackenzie Davis titled “Happiest Season.” Since the movie was announced and minor details and photos were released, members of the queer TikTok community were overjoyed with the promise of a Rom-Com which seemed to be like any other Christmas Rom-Com, just about queer women. Hopeful viewers were disappointed, however, when the trailer⁷ was released to show it is another coming out story, just as “Love, Simon”⁸ was. In the search for positive, normalized queer content, TikTok creator Anna @anna.writes began a series of short video episodes titled “Dyke the Halls,”⁹ which will hopefully turn into a cheesy, gay, take on a Hallmark Christmas movie. It is indicative of how much the queer community (namely on TikTok) wants movies and media they can relate to, even in, and sometimes especially in, the most cheesy, low production-value way.

TikTok has created a space during the COVID-era for people of similar interests and identities to come together and connect across physical and virtual space. In fostering this community through the algorithm and FYP feature, along with less contact with the outside world than before, TikTok inadvertently led to many Gen Zers discovering their gender identity and sexuality. And, due to this community and the increased awareness of similar needs and desires in our media, it also led to a movement to see more positive and normalized queer content on our screens, both big and little. Due to the discussed factors, I was able to discover my sexuality, as well as many of my peers, on the app. Discussions of gender and sexuality have been

increasingly brought into the mainstream in recent years; however, I believe that with the existence of TikTok and the app’s features and prominence, we are likely to continue seeing discussions of gender and sexuality come into mainstream discussions and media in a more positive and inclusive way.

WORKS CITED

Doran, Steven Edward. “Housebroken: Homodomesticity and the Normalization of Queerness in *Modern Family*.” *Queer Love in Film and Television*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 95–103.

6 <https://www.tiktok.com/@emskindafitkindagay/video/6888331041115802886?lang=en>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL0Pf5gYWww>

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0cbWdlQg_8

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0cbWdlQg_8