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Article abstract

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Children and Parents Learning About Transgender Topics Through TikTok

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This paper engages with the question of what childhood studies cares about, and how, in the context of children's experiences with social media. Social media usage is on the rise among children, with 32% of children aged 7–9 using these apps. The study used a reparative versus affirmative framework based in queer theory to analyze 26 TikTok videos addressing transgender issues, with emphasis placed on analyzing the seven videos involving transgender or gender-exploring children. Emerging themes on the transgender experience, teachable moments, providing perspectives on gender, and perpetuating transphobic discourses are discussed with the aim of improving the experiences of transgender and gender-diverse children.

Key words: TGE children, transgender representations, informal education, social media

Recent reports from the US and Belgium show that younger audiences are increasingly using social media, with TikTok being one of the most popular among children as young as six years of age; almost one-third of children aged 7–9 use social media apps more broadly (C. S. Mott Children's Hospital, 2021; De Leyn et al., 2022). This signals a need for researchers to address the content being shared and circulated on popular social media apps such as TikTok. The body of research concerning LGBTQIA+ content on TikTok is relatively small, as the app only became globally popular in 2020, four years after it was created (Iqbal, 2021). Research assessing experiences of transgender and gender-exploring (TGE) youth has shown that this population experiences discrimination from family, peers, and educators (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Garthe et al., 2023; McBride, 2021; Sansfaçon, Boivin, et al., 2024). TGE

children and youth also face an alarming risk of suicide linked to experiencing discrimination and rejection (Austin et al., 2022).

The LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok can be a safe haven for youth who are rejected by their parents, families, and larger community (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023), but creators on the app also spread misinformation, which is well documented in the fields of public, physical, and mental health (see, e.g., Basch et al., 2021; Isaac et al., 2024; Yeung et al., 2022). Little research has explored misinformation and discrimination involving TGE children on the TikTok app. As researchers in early childhood education, we focus our study on middle childhood (7 to 8 years), considering the fact that this age group is increasingly participating in online discourse (C. S. Mott Children's Hospital, 2021; De Leyn et al., 2022) and is often the area of concern when transgender topics are discussed on TikTok. Our study contributes to the developing body of research about online experiences of TGE youth (Cannon et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Selkie et al., 2020). In this paper, we discuss positive and negative discourses surrounding transgender topics and issues related to children and their parents on TikTok. It is important to understand the discourse surrounding TGE children, especially as it is being shared to its underage audience. This

study aims to help parents and educators better understand informal learning on the TikTok app. Our research questions were as follows:

1. What perspectives about transgender individuals are presented on TikTok?
2. How is the transgender or gender-exploring child represented and constructed on TikTok?
3. How are these findings relevant to those engaged with children in their early years?

Theoretical framework

This research uses a gender-reparative versus affirmative framework, based in queer theory, to address our research questions. Research in queer theory applies a poststructuralist critical approach to issues of gender and sexuality to challenge heteronormative and cisnormative discourse. Prominent queer and poststructuralist theorists argue that gender is performative (Butler, 1999) and that gender and sexuality are social constructs rather than innate, unchangeable traits (Foucault, 1990). Through dominant discourse, the gender binary of male/boy/man and female/girl/woman is rigidly created, maintained, and performed. These two categories are constructed as mutually exclusive, based in biology, and stable, with no room for anything else in between or beyond (Marecek, 1995). There is continued reluctance to move away from this understanding of gender based in biology toward an understanding of gender as fluid and personal. For the purposes of this article, the authors use a poststructuralist lens to critique an essentialist weaponization of the socially constructed gender binary that harms TGE youth. The gender binary remains rooted in essentialism and biological determinism, which is heavily reflected in our society. Hawthorne (2018) argues that critical approaches in queer theory are needed to deconstruct the gender binary and allow for an expansion of subjectivity in our understanding of queerness and queer identities. However, this is a contentious position. It is important to mention that many individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community embrace essentialist thought (i.e., being “born this way”) with the goal of proving the legitimacy of their gender and sexual identities (Draz, 2017). Yet, the idea of gayness and transness as being an unchangeable and innate aspect of queer people has been used to argue against the need for reparative practices (Wuest, 2021). Essentialism can also be used to delegitimize queer identities, and essentialist arguments used in support of transgender people can exclude those with fluid gender identities (Draz, 2017; Wuest, 2021)

This study also uses a poststructural lens to look at the construction of childhood innocence and how normative ideas about childhood have affected TGE children. This is a critical framework useful in addressing and understanding the reluctance of adults to believe that TGE children are capable of understanding their own gender identities (Garlen et al. 2021; James & James, 2012; Robinson & Davies, 2017). It can also be used as justification to restrict knowledge shared with children. When trans-affirmative educational policies and law reforms are put in place, they are often met with parental, community, and public backlash, especially for younger children (Bialystok, 2018). Furthermore, parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals can be quick to police and deny children who defy constructed gender norms (Davies et al., 2023; Gansen, 2017; Riggs & Due, 2015). Societal reliance on a rigid belief in the gender binary and childhood innocence leads parents, teachers, and childcare professionals to rely on *reparative*, rather than *affirmative* approaches and forms of care toward TGE youth. Darryl Hill and colleagues (2010) state that the reparative approach aims to restrict the child’s alternative gender behaviours and have the child confined to their assigned gender in both expression and self-identification. This approach uses social reinforcement procedures that police gendered expressions of the child and gendered activities they are allowed to partake in (Hill et al., 2010; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). In contrast, the affirmative approach aims to accept the child by supporting them through their gender expression and potential future transitions (Hill et al., 2010). Engaging in reparative tactics serves to create, restore, and maintain the gender binary by attempting to

reinforce what is believed to be essential and natural characteristics of men and women and therefore ultimately reinforces essentialist “truths” of who is allowed to be a man and who is allowed to be a woman. Affirmative approaches disrupt and deconstruct naturalistic ideas of gender by allowing and facilitating the child in their gender exploration and expression, which often transgresses dominant discourses about gender.

Literature review

Outcomes of each approach: Home and school

When faced with a child exploring their gender, parents and childcare professionals will fall somewhere along a spectrum of “repairing” or affirming the child’s gender behaviours and expressions. Many concerns have been raised about the reparative approach. As demonstrated by researchers Hill and Menvielle (2009), TGE children show an increase in internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression) after their parents restrict their gender exploration. When reflecting back on childhood experiences of rejection by their parents, transgender youth described the profound, negative impact these experiences had on their mental health (Morgan et al., 2023). Healthcare providers recommend against reparative approaches because they have been shown to increase suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety and have proven to be ineffective (i.e., they do not result in the child identifying with their assigned gender) (Coleman et al., 2022). In a recent study on North American transgender adolescents, it was found that over half of the participants had attempted suicide and only 14% had not considered suicide in the previous six months (Austin et al., 2022). Emotional neglect by the family and experiencing interpersonal microaggressions were found to be significantly related to suicidality in this sample (Austin et al., 2022). Conversely, TGE children described improved mental well-being when their parents partook in affirmative approaches, such as using their chosen name and seeking trans-affirmative health services (Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2023, Pollitt et al., 2021). Furthermore, after partaking in specific training related to trans-affirmative parenting, over the course of nine to ten sessions, parents reported a greater ability to connect with their transgender or nonbinary child (Dangaltcheva et al., 2021). Affirmative medical care (i.e., pubertal hormone blockers, hormone replacement therapy, and, for those over 17, gender-affirming surgery) can be lifesaving for TGE youth as it is shown to improve mental health and body satisfaction and decrease suicidal ideation (Vandermorris & Metzger, 2023).

Despite the clear positive effects of the affirmative approach, parents struggle to adopt this form of care due to a variety of factors. Studies over time have shown and continue to show that parents often have little to no support from spouses and extended family members, have difficulty accessing affordable and trans-affirmative healthcare services, and have a lack of knowledge and understanding of their child’s gender identity (Morgan et al; 2023; Riggs & Due, 2015; Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015). Parents struggling to affirm their child’s gender identity and expression often describe a sense of loss and claim to experience grief (Morgan et al., 2023).

The failure to provide trans-affirmative care to TGE children and adolescents is an issue in the home and in schools. Parents have reported instances of transgender-based discrimination and violence by both school peers and staff, as well as structural issues (e.g., gendered spaces, uniforms, and registration forms) that prevent their child from expressing their gender identity (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Garthe et al., 2023; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Development of trans-inclusive school policies is currently lacking in most North American schools, and school staff must instead rely on insufficient anti-bullying policies that fail to address trans-specific discrimination (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Peter et al., 2021). Research also shows teachers participating in discriminatory practices such as outing TGE students and forcing them to use washrooms and wear uniforms of their assigned gender (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Even school leaders who provided

affirmative care and fostered structural change for their TGE students reported that these actions were heavily dependent on the consistent and active involvement of the parents (Mangin, 2020).

Informal learning on social media

As noted, research on the implications of gender-diverse media constructions of transgender children and youth is lacking in the current literature, despite this being one of the most vulnerable populations. The experiences of transgender adolescents and adults who use social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and X (formerly Twitter) are somewhat similar across platforms. TGE users have cited informal learning as one of the largest benefits of using social media, specifically when seeking information about transitioning (i.e., hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment therapy) and how to come out and explain their identity to family and friends (Cannon et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Selkie et al., 2020). This body of research has also found that TGE users experience hate, discrimination, and harassment while using these social media platforms (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Selkie et al., 2020). Few studies have documented the experiences of younger TGE users on TikTok, a popular app among children (De Leyn et al., 2022).

TikTok is a video-posting app that allows users to create content, share audio, and follow other users. The app allows any user to create a maximum 10-minute video with either their original audio (called “sound”) or through borrowing audio from another source. Videos play automatically, and users can scroll through videos of people they follow or videos on their “for you” page, which displays individually curated content based on an algorithm. This app can afford its transgender users the opportunity to create short clips that document their life journeys, transitions, and challenges. TGE children can access this online community and receive the support that may otherwise be lacking from their caretakers (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023). Children, transgender or not, are also exposed to dominant perspectives of current socio-political issues, which can have important implications regarding their understanding of topics on gender diversity. Users of any age and gender can be exposed to real-life, first-hand experiences of situations they have never experienced before (Shelton et al., 2022), including parenting a transgender child or coming out to one’s parents. Alongside these affordances, however, TikTok’s algorithm is based on its invasive data collection used to create tailored content (Shin, 2024). Here, profit is prioritized over the well-being and safety of its users, and despite a large portion of TikTok’s demographic being under 18, the app has been shown to contain misinformation in fields of public, physical, and mental health (Basch et al., 2021; Isaac et al., 2024; Yeung et al., 2022). The app has also been criticized for allowing far-right hate speech that serves to radicalize its young users (Boucher, 2022; Shin, 2024; Quintal, 2022)

Individuals use TikTok for various reasons, but for this study we focus on two uses of TikTok: learning and teaching. According to Sivakumar et al. (2023), social media usage increases levels of knowledge sharing. In our study, content on TikTok that speaks about transgender issues, whether based in the content creators’ own experiences or their opinions, is regarded by the researchers as educational material for the viewer. As early childhood researchers, our analysis of the TikTok content is inclined toward its impact as a form of childhood education. The use of social media apps has revolutionized our connection to strangers through video, and with that, our access to knowledge is pushed beyond the traditional systems of learning through relational discourse (i.e., through teachers, parents, and peers). This newfound source of informal learning has important implications for the level of openness and acceptance individuals have for TGE children. Due to its relatively new emergence in the world of social media, research on the app is limited. This study aimed to uncover common themes and messages regarding transgender individuals and gender diversity on TikTok with the purpose of helping parents and educators frame conversations about gender diversity with young children.

Methodology

Research design

This study's qualitative research design was an adaptation of the methods Chang-Kredl and Colannino (2017) used in their research on Reddit users' perspectives on best and worst teachers using a form of discourse analysis. For this study, the researchers identified and analyzed TikTok content on TGE individuals and issues. The sample included videos made by TGE adults and youth as well as parents of TGE children; clips from recorded news and interview shows; and videos made by cisgender adults. Creators shared their opinions, experiences, information, and responses to other TikTok videos, interviewed strangers in public, and created skits.

Sampling selection procedure

TikTok's algorithm is important to understand for the sampling selection of videos, or content, for this study. As explained above, TikTok collects data on its users to create a personalized algorithm, displaying content that is specifically tailored to each individual. This was advantageous to the data collection process because the more we interacted with transgender content (e.g., by liking, sharing, saving the video, or watching it in its entirety), the more the app showed us transgender content. To ensure that the algorithm did not produce a skewed representation of the available content, the first author used two TikTok accounts on one device, with one designated for more affirmative content and one designated for more negative or "reparative" content. Hashtags such as *transgender*, *transchildren*, *transparent*, *conservative*, and *antitrans* were used to search for initial videos, and then the researchers continued to search for videos through the "for you" page. The goal was to use hashtags that would allow for any type of TikTok videos about transgender issues and people to appear. Data collection ended when the "for you" page and search results became saturated with the same content, meaning the types of messages in the videos were being repeated and limited new content was being found. Between April and September of 2022, 35 TikTok videos were collected. The videos were evenly distributed between outsider (18) and insider (17) perspectives, overwhelmingly from North America. For the purpose of this study, a TikTok creator was considered an *insider* if they explicitly mentioned they were transgender or nonbinary in the video or on their profile and an *outsider* if this was not mentioned or if they explicitly identified as cisgender. Consistent with our theoretical framework, videos fell along the affirmative/reparative spectrum. All 17 of the insider creators and 6 of the outsider creators were supportive of transgender people, leaving 12 creators from the dataset (all outsiders) who were not supportive.

Data coding and analysis

This paper focused primarily but not exclusively on seven videos that addressed experiences or stories of transgender childhood, including transgender adults reflecting back on their experiences as TGE children. An additional 19 videos from the initial set of 35 that we felt were pertinent for child users on TikTok were also included in the analysis, for a total of 26 videos. Inductive coding with first- and second-level coding was used to analyze the videos on a qualitative research program called Quirkos. Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) argue that inductive coding is best used when there are few to no prior analyses of the phenomenon, which describes our dataset. Part of the inductive process was to primarily use in vivo first-level codes directly from the data in order to highlight the creators' perspectives, supported by descriptive, emotional, and values first-level codes (Saldana, 2021). In the second-level coding, first-level codes were grouped into categories based on similar sentiments and properties. From there, four themes emerged from the data: documenting the transgender experience; TikTok videos as presenting teachable moments; delegitimizing transness; and forms of hatred. The inductive coding process allowed us to be open to finding meaningful themes about transgender discourse in social media, an area which would be helpful for families with TGE children and for which there was limited published research.

Reflexivity

Both authors are researchers in an early childhood education and child studies university program. The first author is of Canadian and Lebanese descent and is white passing. She is a cisgender woman who uses she/her pronouns. Although she is an outsider when it comes to transgender and gender-diverse individuals, she has many personal experiences with close friends who are nonbinary or transgender, which has ignited her passion for the topic. As well, her academic background consists of child studies and gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. She acknowledges, however, that her educational and personal experiences on topics of gender diversity do not negate her implicit biases as a cisgendered individual. The second author is an academic in teacher education and early childhood education who teaches courses in childhood diversity, media literacy, and qualitative research inquiry. She supported the first author in a supervisory role. She is a Chinese Canadian, cisgender woman and a parent.

Findings

A critical discourse analysis of the data revealed four emerging themes centering around contradicting messages about transgender topics on TikTok that may be useful for parents and educators: (1) how the transgender experience is documented, with transgender creators or parents of TGE children and youth talking about their lived experiences; (2) teachable moments for families, friends, and allies where transgender creators and parents of TGE children and youth demonstrate ways to support transgender people; (3) delegitimizing transness, where creators deny the transness of transgender people either in general or featured in their videos; and (4) forms of hatred, where TikTok creators demonstrate transphobia on the app itself or film instances where they are transphobic in public. Table 1 provides a brief description of each TikTok video.

Table 1: Descriptions of TikTok Videos

Creator	Description
@nicoleamaines Nicole Maines	Insider using masculine filter to make a joke about how bad it would have been if she had not had trans-affirmative care when she was younger.
@thelandonpatterson Lana Luxx	Insider comparing photos of herself in boys' and girls' cheerleading uniforms. Explains importance of trans people playing in the sport of their transitioned gender.
@dylanmulvaney Dylan Mulvaney	Insider going to yoga for the first time as a girl and expressing fear of the locker room situation. After the class, she concludes that it went well.
@landoandrew Landon McNee	Compilation of pictures and videos of an insider's transition throughout the years followed by a real-time video of him talking about his hopelessness and perseverance.
@basicstransguy	Insider arguing that grieving the assigned identity of transitioning children is harmful to their well-being. He says that parents need to provide unconditional love and support instead.
@nolandintheworld	Video of insider holding cake while family (except sister) sings happy birthday using his deadname.
@chrispaulrainbows	Insider speaking about loving your child unconditionally in response to a comment saying "No kid of mine will be transgender."

@liammagan Liam Magan	Insider explaining how his best friend went back to change his name on all photos that displayed his deadname in the captions on Facebook, unprompted.
@jonathanjoly Jonathan Saccone Joly	Insider showing their transgender daughter exploring gender throughout the years; the video ends with a delayed gender reveal party.
@cam.jam94 Cameron James	Insider coming out as transgender to their parents in a restaurant. They accept it immediately and provide comfort.
@scampscallywag	Insider acting out a skit of meeting new people and subtly trying to find out if they are transphobic.
@conservativeheat2.0	Interview with outsider (Ben Shapiro) explaining that, for the sake of “objective truth” and “correct speech,” in public, he uses pronouns that match a trans person’s “biology.”
@politicsasusual_	Outsider (Candace Owens) stating on her podcast that she believes being transgender is a mental disorder and comparing it to her uncle who has delusions about his race.
@miapolitics	Outsider watching TikTok 7 and labelling it child abuse. Argues that the mother made the decision for her son. Believes children should not be allowed to make decisions about permanently altering their bodies.
@jencaitlee Jennifer Lee	Old clip posted by outsider of her cutting her trans son’s hair for the first time. Mother is very hesitant, and son is persistent and impatient.
@magadon2.0.	Outsider arguing that intentionally misgendering people is not discrimination since using “they/them” is not proper. Believes trans people are emotionally damaged.
@unpopular_opinion_queen	Outsider pretending to come out in a mocking way as a form of ridicule.
@thebillsquire Bill Squire	Outsider telling the story of his trans son coming out. He describes his son’s gender exploration early on and talks about his testosterone injections as an older teen.
@realjamesklug James Klug	Outsider interviews stranger on street about Florida’s Parental Rights in Education bill. Interviewee is against bill.
@frankniu Frank Niu	Outsider arguing that transwomen should not be allowed in female sports due to a biological advantage.
@dandydemon	Outsider disproves TikTok 17 with real-life examples of transwomen in sports and argues that this controversy uses hypothetical situations to mask transphobia.
@bambeasters.tshirts	Young boy sets off paper cannon that blows out blue confetti at a Pride event. He runs to his mom (outsider) who embraces him lovingly as she cries and congratulates him.

@Jodie.difranco Jodie DiFranco	Outsider talking about her tomboy phase as a child and implying that transgender boys are simply going through a phase.
@aikidohustler	Outsider asking stranger on street “What is a woman?” and interviewee arguing that only women (trans or cis) know the answer. Interviewee leaves after being ridiculed.
@great_men_great_quotes	Outsider (Jordan Peterson) being interviewed about his refusal to use pronouns of a transgender person. He talks about freedom of speech and the legitimacy of trans people.
@notanzaa	Outsider explaining why he feels he doesn’t need to respect the pronouns of his interviewee.

Documenting the transgender experience: Children and their parents

Parents of young TGE children created TikTok videos that documented parenting experiences and experiences of their child’s gender identity and presentation. The content in these videos was analyzed through the reparative versus affirmative lens. The parenting experiences included accounts of their child’s persistence and consistency in expressing their gender when their parents insisted they conform to the norms of their assigned gender. In a video of a mother cutting her elementary-aged transgender son’s hair for the first time, her son impatiently reassures her when she expresses fear and doubt about the decision to let him cut his hair; the reassurances occurred eight times before the mother finally cuts her son’s hair (Lee, 2021). In another TikTok, a father recounts stories of his transgender son at age four insisting that he be referred to as a boy and called James (Squire, 2021). TGE creators also expressed their past and present feelings of gender dysphoria on the app. These creators shared a common sentiment that their gender dysphoria had persisted from an early age after they had to present as their assigned gender. A transgender woman reflected back on an image of herself in the boys’ cheerleading uniform at school and described her feelings of discomfort in the uniform. Her tone of voice shifted as she switched to a picture of herself in the girls’ uniform with longer hair and makeup; she said: “And *this* is how I got to start my senior year. As the woman I always wanted to be” (Luxx, 2021). Another creator cried when reflecting back on the loneliness and isolation he felt before he was able to fully transition. This person used TikTok to create a slideshow of his entire transitional journey, with the goal of giving hope to other transgender viewers who may be struggling with similar feelings of isolation. He ends his video by saying:

And that video brought me back to centre and reminded me I fucking did it. Um. I felt so alone, and I hope that this video shows you that it’s fucking possible. Happy Pride month guys, we’re in this together. (McNee, 2022)

This type of video could give hope to transgender users who are currently not being supported and affirmed by parents; it also shows cisgender users what a transition can look like (e.g., hormone replacement therapy, gender reassignment therapy, a legal name change), which, in turn, can reduce misinformation about the transition process. One creator falsely claimed that affirmative parents of transgender elementary-aged children allow them to permanently alter their bodies with trans-affirmative procedures (miapolitics, 2021). This shows that the reluctance of many to support trans-affirmation for TGE children is sometimes based in misinformation; therefore, videos that show the transition timeline, such as the one mentioned above, are important.

Creators also demonstrated an important part of the transgender experience, which is to achieve moments of self-actualization. Many transgender creators and parents of transgender children discussed feelings of self-

actualization that resulted from receiving or adopting the gender affirmative approach. The son who was so eager to cut his hair exclaimed that it was the happiest day of his life (Lee, 2021); another parent of a six-year-old noticed the immediate shift in their daughter's mental health after they allowed her to wear dresses and grow out her hair (Joly, 2022).

Another important part of one's transgender experience can often be when they come out to friends, family, and strangers. This process is ongoing due to our current cisnormative society, and children may prefer to wait until they are older to come out for the first time. Older transgender creators sometimes used TikTok to document or reflect back on experiences of coming out. Navigating social spaces and family members after coming out was often a fearful event for some creators anticipating rejection or discrimination. One transgender creator showed through a comedic skit that when choosing to come out to a new group of people, it can be difficult to foresee whether it is safe to do so. He demonstrated this by reenacting a scenario in which he was trying to decipher whether a group of people was transphobic prior to coming out to them (scampscallywag, 2022). There were also creators showing the fear that they or their loved one experienced when coming out to family members. One TikTok creator filmed his parents' reactions as he came out to them as a transgender man. The shakiness in his voice is evident as he says the words "Ummm. I'm coming out." The viewer can hear him crying as his father reaches out to hold his hand and provide support. The caption of the TikTok reads, "I wasn't exactly expecting the worst however I sure as hell wasn't expecting this" (C. James, 2022). This video captures the vulnerability and emotional toll that can come with coming out as TGE youth anticipate their parents will reject, rather than affirm, them (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Although these videos contained coming-out experiences of older transgender individuals, the examples may serve as the first and perhaps the only source of representation for TGE children who view these TikTok videos. This representation is also important for cisgender children on TikTok who may lack what researchers call a "pedagogy of exposure" to transgender people in their physical lives that often helps create empathy (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Parents of young TGE children and older transgender individuals documented or recounted these experiences, often with the goal of educating or showing others what it is like to navigate situations and spaces as a parent of a TGE child or as a transgender person. In fact, many direct teachable moments were seen on TikTok, which we discuss in the next section.

TikTok videos as presenting teachable moments

Teachable moments for loved ones and allies are discussed in our findings in terms of what to do and what not to do, which focuses largely on adopting an affirmative approach and avoiding reparative tactics. Two parents made TikTok videos showing their initial reluctance to support their young child's gender exploration. The hesitant mother mentioned above acknowledged her mistake of initially resisting her child's choice to cut his hair short (Lee, 2021). She wrote, "This was 100% wrong of me to say. He knows I am very sorry." Another parent admitted they were wrong to police their child's clothing and showed how doing so harmed their child's well-being (Joly, 2022). They explain that in the beginning, they only let their child, Eduardo, dress as a girl at home even though dressing in "boy" clothing made their child noticeably upset. They then spoke of the moment they realized they were wrong (Eduardo was six):

And then we had a pandemic, and we were all told to stay at home. And Eduardo asked me, "Does this mean I get to be a girl all the time now?" And that's when I realized the mistake we made. (Joly, 2022)

Finally, a transgender actress made a joke in order to spread her message of supporting transgender children having access to trans-affirmative care: "You don't support trans kids having access to healthcare? Look at me in a man bun. Think of the bullet you dodged. Support trans kids, bruh" (Maines, 2021). The creator had put a TikTok filter on during the video that masculinized their face and put a "man bun" on top of their head. The creator was

poking fun at the idea that they would have been unattractive as a man, which would have happened had they not had access to puberty blockers as a pre-adolescent and then later undergone hormone replacement therapy.

Creators demonstrated different ways to support and affirm transgender people of all ages, from early childhood to so-called emerging adulthood, and discussed harmful rhetoric and actions that can hurt transgender people. For example, one transgender man spoke to the grief that his family expressed to him when he was a transitioning teenager; he stressed that expressing grief during one's child's transition is detrimental to their mental health (basicstransguy, 2021). Creators also demonstrated the hurt they felt when being misgendered and deadnamed (i.e., using one's birth name instead of their chosen name) by family members. One transgender man posted a video of this instance on his birthday. You see his expression and body language change drastically when his family uses his deadname while singing Happy Birthday (nolandintheworld, 2021). These videos demonstrate to a large public audience how reparative tactics and actions of parents and family members of TGE children can be harmful, including deadnaming, misgendering, doubting and policing them, grieving their assigned gender, and blocking their access to healthcare.

TGE TikTok creators also modelled ways for friends and allies to support and affirm them. A clear example came from a transgender man explaining how grateful he was that his friend actively changed his name on older Facebook posts. He explained:

And so, it really meant a lot to me that he took the time to go back and change something seemingly so small, um. But like that's something you can do as an ally to a queer person who's changing their names and pronouns: go back and start changing captions so that when these memories pop up, they get to feel affirmed. (Magan, 2022)

Other creators stressed the importance of transgender people playing sports in the correct gender, accepting their new name, affirming TGE children and teenagers in their gender expression, providing trans-affirmative healthcare, and advocating for them in public spaces like school and medical settings. Here, creators spoke about or demonstrated the importance of unconditional love. One TikTok creator responded to a commenter who stated they would not support their child if they were transgender by saying:

And I was saying to my husband "I don't know how people have kids, if I love a dog this much, I can't imagine what the intense feeling of love would be when having a child." Like I feel like it would be overwhelming. And the responsibility of having that child. It would be like having a piece of your heart walking around on the planet. So, my question is, why would you create that little piece of heart if you're not willing to love it unconditionally and protect it at all costs? That's my question. (chrispaulrainbows, 2022)

Another video posted by a parent of a young transgender child wrote in her caption: "Charlie wanted to announce to the world that HE is Officially a boy. Congratulations my brave boy you will always be loved" (bambeasters. tshirts, 2022).

TikTok was found to be a space where parents of young TGE children and transgender adults can share and reflect back on concrete instances that either hurt or helped their children or themselves. TikTok was also found to allow users to discuss more abstract and sometimes harmful ideas on gender itself.

Delegitimizing transness

Anti-transgender creators discussed different theories that serve to delegitimize transgender identities, especially for young children. Many of these creators used these theories to argue against affirmative tactics for children. They

argued that children choose to transition due to personal preference, that it is a temporary phase, that it is pushed onto them by their parents, or that they are mentally ill (see miapolitics, 2021; politicsasusual, 2021; magadon2.0., 2022; Niu, 2022; notanzaa, 2022). One creator explained that she had been a tomboy as a child because it was easier to be a boy than a girl:

When I was a little girl, I had two brothers who I was close in age group with and I wore their underwear, wore boys' clothes, tried to pee standing up, tried out for the football team, the whole nine yards, dressed as a boy, told people to call me Joe when we were in public. Um, and my parents never were like "Do you want to be a boy? Jodie, do you want to be Joseph?" ... But then I grew the fuck up. I— it, it was a phase, it was literally a tomboy phase. (DiFranco, 2022)

Another creator expanded on the idea of transgender identities being a choice and accused supportive parents of young TGE children of child abuse (miapolitics, 2021). She accused parents of making decisions about transitioning for their children and indoctrinating them with transgender beliefs, under the impression that young children can permanently change their bodies (miapolitics, 2021).

Those delegitimizing transgender identities often used essentialist rhetoric to naturalize the gender binary and undermine transgender affirmation. Essentialism used in this context argues that gender is biologically determined into the two rigid and discrete categories of man and woman (Butler, 1999). Here, essentialism and biological determinism work together to negate anyone who identifies otherwise and to deny their rights to affirmative care, especially when the person in question is a child. The speakers in the dataset often determined one's "true" gender on the basis of biological characteristics, not self-identification.

Biology was also brought into debates about transgender female athletes and their involvement in women's leagues. One user argued that transgender female athletes should be barred from playing in women's sports solely out of fairness to "naturally born" women (Niu, 2022). Another user made a response video with statistics showing that transgender women are not dominating female sports to demonstrate that his arguments were transphobic, hidden under the veil of "fairness": "Why are we talking about hypotheticals when we could be talking about real-life issues? It seems like some of you only care about female sports when it gives you an opportunity to be transphobic" (dandydemon, 2022). These examples of essentialist arguments about gender identity are subtle in their transphobia as they attempt to deny transgender people and TGE children the care they need through the use of biological determinism. This study also found creators posting TikTok videos that were more blatant in their transphobia, as well as disrespectful toward anyone who allied themselves with the transgender community.

Forms of hatred

Regarding overt hatred within the dataset, creators demonstrated different ways to be hateful and different rationales for being hateful. One creator made fun of LGBTQIA+ individuals with a skit of her acting as if she was coming out in a mocking tone:

Hey guys. I think it's about time that I really come out and be honest with you all. I now identify as a non-Bidenary amosexual. And my pronouns are *fucking* American. I hope you all understand and respect my decision. Trump 2024. (unpopular_opinion_queen, 2021)

Mockery was also exemplified when creators interviewed the public on transgender issues. In one example, the creator asked a transgender ally what it means to be a woman. The creator used visual sarcasm in the caption "What is a woman? We FINALLY have the DEFINITIVE ANSWER" and juvenile-sounding audio overlaid onto the video. This displays the creator's attempt to ridicule and mock his interviewee's affirmation of transgender people as they defined a woman based on personal identification and not biological factors (aikidohustler, 2022). Again,

male/female/man/woman are implied to be the only valid gender identifications and believed to be essential to one's being. The creator of this TikTok insinuates that to believe otherwise signifies a lack of intelligence. Another TikTok creator mocked his interviewee when asking them about Florida's Parental Rights in Education bill, colloquially known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which forbids educators to speak of or instruct students on gender identity and sexual orientation between kindergarten and third grade (The Florida Senate, 2022). The caption of the TikTok read: "*laughing emoji* Worst take on Florida's Parental Rights in Education Bill goes to:" after the interviewee explained why they disagreed with the bill (Klug, 2022).

Different reasons were given to explain why transgender people should not be supported, often surrounding the use of they/them pronouns. Sometimes the posters aligned themselves with popular conservative commentators, including Ben Shapiro and Candace Owens, with well-worn arguments for "the validity of truth" and freedom of speech (conservativeheat2.0, 2021; great_men_great_quotes, 2022). These posters were therefore more concerned with essentialist thought in support of biologically determined gender. Other creators argued against affirmative tactics by saying that using they/them pronouns was linguistically incorrect in the English language. In responding to a TikTok of someone asking the public to respect their pronouns, one creator says: "Look, you can't just cry discrimination for hurt feelings regarding pronouns that clearly don't adhere to proper English within a proper context they're going in" (magadon2.0, 2022). Creators would preface their transphobic arguments with disclaimers of good intent, modelling to the viewer how to disguise hate, for instance, by claiming to be sensitive to people with mental disorders (politicsasusual, 2021). Another creator said "respectfully, it doesn't matter" regarding the requested use of they/them pronouns to refer to his nonbinary interviewee (notanzaa, 2022).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that TikTok can provide a forum for debate and rich information on the lived experiences of transgender people and young TGE children, as well as provide teachable moments for parents, friends, and allies. Alternatively, it can allow for the delegitimization of transgender identities, especially of gender-exploring children, and be a space to spread transphobic sentiments and arguments.

Trans love

Although the implications of transphobic videos on TikTok require our attention, the app also allows transgender creators and allies to inform others and connect with each other. Among the positive videos we viewed, creators used various methods to talk about allyship and their personal experiences. Thus, TikTok can be useful because it provides a way for the LGBTQIA+ community to connect; it can also reduce misinformation and promote understanding for users outside of the community. Storytelling is argued to be beneficial when teaching about LGBTQIA+ topics; stories can invoke empathy and increase children's knowledge of diverse views (K. N. et al., 2023; Ryan et al., 2013). Furthermore, Ames (2017) argues that storytelling in media can be a source of connection for marginalized communities whose members are isolated and ostracized in society. The findings derived from the experiences shared in these videos align with previous literature. For example, in videos that discussed or showed the process of coming out for the first time, some creators suggested that coming out can be dangerous for transgender people because of the possible reactions of transphobic individuals and groups (Mulvaney, 2022; scampscallywag, 2022). This finding is consistent with research showing that coming out for a transgender individual is an ongoing process and is dependent on the anticipated reactions from others and safety of the space involved in the interaction (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Therefore, the storytelling component of various TikTok videos in our dataset not only can inspire empathy but provide accurate information about commonly shared experiences of TGE people to the cisgender user. Our study found that TikTok provides a space

for transgender individuals to share common experiences that they may have thought were only experienced by themselves. Through their sharing, an online community is formed where knowledge and advice is passed down to younger generations and to newly out transgender people. This normalizes the transgender experience and fosters a sense of belonging (Ames, 2017; Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023).

This sense of belonging to a community can be crucial for TGE children because many parents only adopt a trans-affirmative approach years after their children come out to them (Morgan et al., 2023; Riggs & Due, 2015). TGE children who find themselves in living situations where it is unsafe to be out, who have little to no support, and may have limited access to affirmative services, can use TikTok for connection. In studies on other social media apps, transgender participants have stated that social media helps them feel less isolated, even when they are surrounded by supportive family and friends (Cannon et al., 2017; Selkie et al., 2020).

Our findings suggest that trans-informative TikTok content can inform parents and teachers' practices of children's sexuality education, particularly in terms of its consciousness-raising potential and teachable moments for allies. Creators spoke about things that were harmful to them but also provided specific and active ways to provide trans-affirmative support to loved ones. One example includes the idea of grieving a person who is transitioning or has transitioned, which some creators in our dataset regarded as harmful. Researchers have shown that grief is a common reaction from parents of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and that expectations set on them based on their gender are deeply ingrained into family members' understanding of their personhood (Morgan, 2023; Riggs & Due, 2015; Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015). This intense connection to gender may partially explain parents' reluctance to provide affirmative care to their children. Several videos by transgender creators in this sample mentioned the importance of using the correct name and pronouns, providing specific examples of how to do this beyond personal conversations, such as the Facebook status example. Recent research shows a significant reduction in suicidal ideation and depressive symptoms and a significant increase in self-esteem when parents, caregivers, and educators use the chosen name of the TGE child (Pollitt et al., 2021). Since creators on TikTok are not only arguing that trans-affirmative support and education is crucial to allyship but showing to the viewer examples of how this can be done, TikTok can be used as a tool in fostering harm reduction for TGE children. Finally, several videos by parents discussed or demonstrated the unconditional love they had for their TGE children. Research has shown that parents with no prior knowledge or experience with transgender individuals can become motivated to understand, support, and affirm their child's gender expression and transition by the unconditional love they have for their child and through education on transgender concepts and the negative impacts of "reparative" parenting (Frigerio et al., 2021; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Morgan et al., 2023).

Trans hate

Despite TikTok being regarded as a safe online space and community both for gender and sexual minority youth (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023) and increasingly for young children, the presence of trans-specific hate and cisgender essentialism cannot be ignored. For instance, some creators in this sample argued that TGE children are passing through a temporary phase, are being brainwashed by their parents, or are mentally ill. The idea that being transgender is a choice served to justify reparative tactics, in this case, misgendering transgender people either online or in person. We posit that the strong reluctance to believe and affirm children who do not identify with their assigned gender comes in part from our society's attachment to childhood innocence. TGE children are believed to be too young to understand their transness, even though the cognitive capabilities of cisgender children to understand their gender remain unquestioned. Here, we see that the social construction of the essentialized gender binary and of the innocent child work together to deny TGE children the right to access affirmative care. Clearly this denial affects how care can be conceptualized. This understanding of childhood may explain why

many parents initially adopt a reparation approach toward their TGE child and often take years to move toward affirmation (Morgan et al., 2023; Riggs & Due, 2015). Some of the TikTok creators in this dataset labelled parents who affirm their TGE child as child abusers and expressed concerns about “child-appropriate content” when discussing Florida’s Parental Rights in Education bill. The idea of the innocent, asexual, and unknowing child is deemed by many childhood researchers and feminist poststructuralists to be socially constructed and used as justification to control and restrict the knowledge we share with children (Garlen et al. 2021; James & James, 2012; Robinson & Davies, 2017), as well as the care that is conceived as possible. The need to control information children receive constitutes a form of delegitimization of TGE children and is often disguised as providing age-appropriate content. Due to the moralistic idealism surrounding age-appropriate gender and sexuality education (Robinson & Davies, 2017), progressive models of education such as Ontario’s sexuality education program, reformed in 2015, are often followed by public panic and protest (Bialystok, 2018). The tense conflict that arises from comprehensive sexuality education discourages schools from providing trans-affirmative care and can further harm the transgender child. Even without policies that attempt to erase transgender identities, school professionals will actively avoid discussing gender diversity in the classroom in an attempt to stay “neutral” (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021). Some researchers stress the need for a “culture of conversation” in schools to foster safe spaces for open dialogue and critical self-reflection about gender and sexuality (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). In this way, TGE children are acknowledged and not ignored, but further effort is required to affirm students in schools.

Some creators in the dataset also blatantly mocked and ridiculed transgender people and allies. This slightly more targeted form of transphobia found on the app is consistent with other studies that documented instances of discrimination and transphobia on other social media apps, where participants reported other users going out of their way to harass them online (Cannon et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Selkie et al., 2020). Austin and colleagues (2022) found that interpersonal trans-specific microaggressions are significantly associated with increased suicide attempts among transgender youth. Therefore, if microaggressions are permitted to spread on an interactive social media app like TikTok, it may have severe consequences for the app’s young TGE users. Furthermore, users who are being introduced to ideas on transgender issues, as well as people using TikTok for the first time, can be exposed to essentialist thinking and potentially commit microaggressions themselves. Transgender youth continue to experience discrimination from their peers (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Garthe, 2023); thus, anti-transgender sentiment conveyed through social media apps is alarming.

Implications for practice

This study found that transgender content on TikTok ranges significantly in sentiment, theme, and message. The study’s findings highlight the educative potential for informal learning present on the app about transgender experiences and people. Informal learning about these issues on the app offers parents and educators a unique opportunity to teach media literacy skills to young children and youth, especially considering TikTok’s popularity among young audiences. RobbGrieco (2014) argues that media literacy is achieved when we develop critical awareness of messages from the media we consume rather than becoming passive receivers of information. Furthermore, Riesmeyer and colleagues (2019) emphasize the need for children to critically analyze the media they consume and to assess its credibility, intentionality, and morality. They also found that children were more critical of media when their parents fostered high levels of warmth, allowing for trust and open communication. Therefore, the presence of hateful opinions about gender and transgender people on TikTok requires parents, childcare professionals, and educators to equip children with the tools to help them navigate what they consume on the app and to keep dialogue open and safe.

Parents and educators can also introduce and discuss with their children and students comprehensive theories that

position gender as a social construction that can be fluid and internally experienced rather than an objective and permanent characteristic directly connected to biological features, as well as discuss transgender and nonbinary identities early on. Research has shown that elementary students are receptive to comprehensive sexuality education that includes materials on gender diversity, gender fluidity, and transgender and nonbinary identities (Ryan et al., 2013). Woolley and Airton (2020) argue that children are continuously exposed to transgender issues and personalities in the media and in popular culture, and therefore we must introduce concepts of gender diversity starting at the kindergarten level, if not earlier. Doing so is needed to foster inclusive and safe school environments for TGE children. Content across all grades can include terminology related to gender diversity, exploration, and deconstruction of gender stereotypes and unpack and deconstruct gender and sex binaries (Woolley & Airton, 2020).

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for parents and educators to support children's developing and critical knowledge of gender identity while navigating social media apps like TikTok. We examined how cultural beliefs and social attitudes about the transgender child are constructed on TikTok and uncovered a range of perceptions of transgender issues from a sample of TikTok creators. The study's findings confirm previous research showing that online communities can be supportive spaces for LGBTQIA+ youth, especially when in-person support is inaccessible. The study also contributes to the existing literature with findings documenting the hateful side of social media. Anti-transgender discourse on TikTok may be detrimental, not only to the mental health of TGE users but also to the formation of acceptance and understanding in young cisgender users. Research on hate speech generally focuses on adolescents (see Kansok-Dusche et al., 2023, for systematic review). Given the rise of internet usage by children aged 6–9 (Holloway et al. 2013; Chaudron et al., 2018), future research is needed on young children's exposure to online hate.

Limitations

The sampling technique combined with a relatively short period of data collection is a limitation of the study. The potential issue with the sampling technique lies with the hashtags used to find videos with transgender content. Searching hashtags such as *transgender* and *genderdiverse* provided videos that were generally positive; therefore, to access a range of videos, the first author used search terms such as *conservative* and *antitrans*. Even outside of TikTok, the concept of the transgender individual is often a polarizing topic of debate. We might assume that if one is neutral about a certain topic, they will not create content about it on social media. Despite this, the search terms used in this study may have led to somewhat divided areas of the issue. A longer period of data collection would have allowed the “for you” page to provide transgender-related videos over time on multiple accounts to ameliorate this potential limitation.

Another limitation of this study is our exclusion of the comments section on the TikTok videos. While this study focused on the rich data of the TikTok videos themselves, the comments sections may have provided useful information on whether the videos were being praised or rejected. This information could give us further insight into public perceptions of TGE children and topics.

Future directions for research

This study provided valuable information on TikTok content accessible to all viewers on the app related to transgender topics. Future research could examine the direct beneficial or harmful effects that such messages can

have on viewers, especially younger ones, after watching such videos. Research is lacking that includes the voices of transgender children and youth. Even in this study's data, perspectives directly related to TGE children either originated from an outsider or a transgender adult reflecting back on their past experiences. It is important that future research includes the opinions and perspectives of TGE children and adolescents in every aspect of the transgender experience. Finally, research on TikTok as a tool for critical pedagogy should be explored further, specifically in relation to consciousness-raising about transgender issues. The app provides a potential starting point for critical engagement with dominant cisnormativity and oppression of TGE individuals.

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