This is a preprint of our paper accepted to CSCW 2021: *Kristen Barta and Nazanin Andalibi. Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the "Fun" Platform. (submitted in January 2021, accepted July 2021) Proceedings of ACM in Human-Computer Interaction (PACM), 2021*

Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the "Fun" Platform

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Authenticity, generally regarded as coherence between one's inner self and outward behavior, is associated with myriad social values (e.g., integrity) and beneficial outcomes, such as psychological well-being. Scholarship suggests, however, that behaving authentically online is complicated by self-presentation norms that make it difficult to present a complex self as well as encourage sharing positive emotions and facets of self and discourage sharing difficult emotions. In this paper, we position authenticity as a self-presentation norm and identify the sociomaterial factors that contribute to the learning, enactment, and enforcement of authenticity on the short-video sharing platform TikTok. We draw on interviews with 15 U.S. TikTok users to argue that normative authenticity and understanding of TikTok as a "fun" platform are mutually constitutive in supporting a "just be you" attitude on TikTok that in turn normalizes expressions of both positive and difficult emotions and experiences. We consider the social context of TikTok and use an affordance lens to identify anonymity, of oneself and one's audience; association between content and the "For You" landing page; and video modality of TikTok as factors informing authenticity as a self-presentation norm. We argue that these factors similarly contribute to TikTok's viability as a space for social support exchange and address the utility of the comments section as a site for both supportive communication and norm judgment and enforcement. We conclude by considering the limitations of authenticity as social norm and present implications for designing online spaces for social support and connection.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → Social media** • **Human-centered computing →** Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, social norms, affordances, social media, self-presentation, social support, disclosure

ACM Reference format:

Kristen Barta and Nazanin Andalibi. 2021. Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the "Fun" Platform. In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction,* Vol. 5, CSCW2, Article 430 (October 2021), 29 pages, https://doi.org/10.1145/3479574

2573-0142/2021/10 – 430... $15.00

https://doi.org/10.1145/3479574

1 INTRODUCTION

"To thine own self be true," spoken by Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is perhaps one of the better-known assertions of the value of authenticity in modern memory. The proverb underscores the importance of acting authentically, of behaving in accordance with one's own values and beliefs for avoiding self-deception and disingenuous relationships with others, and aligns authenticity with social values such as honesty and integrity. Since before Shakespeare's time, through to our contemporary moment, philosophers and social theorists have grappled with the question of self—what it is, how it is formed, and how the self exists within society. These investigations have yielded a conceptualization of authenticity as the process(es) through which an individual comes to recognize and understand one's self, including beliefs and desires, make peace with one's self, and behave in such a way that not only aligns with one's chosen self but also upholds broader social values, such as morality (cf. [45]). Prior research has also suggested that authenticity is associated with factors such as self-esteem and psychological well-being [68]. In this sense, behaving authentically in one's daily life potentially facilitates both individual and societal benefits.

As social media continues to become embedded into daily life for millions of individuals worldwide, the question of how to authentically present oneself across online and offline spaces has similarly captured scholarly attention. Scholars have noted the ways that sociality and the self become distributed across social media and other communication channels [52], [78], and investigated associations between online authenticity and well-being [20], [64]. Research has also, however, emphasized the social aspects of authenticity on social media [55], [59] and questioned the ability to enact authenticity on social media [33]; phenomenon such as social positivity bias, or the pressure to post only "highlights" of oneself and experiences [76], and other norms for self-presentation (e.g., appearing attractive or popular; [87]) complicate social media users' abilities to present themselves as complex, sometimes contradictory, and emotional beings composed of myriad identities that speak to social positions, roles, dispositions, and other facets of self.

In this paper, aligned with [33], [75], we conceptualize authenticity on social media as a socially constructed norm and explore how it is enactment on social media in a United States context; to do so we take TikTok as our site of inquiry. Used in China since 2016 under the name Douyin, TikTok exploded in popularity in the U.S. in 2020. As of August 2020, the app reported about 100 million monthly active users in the U.S., an increase of almost 800% since January. An estimated 60% of monthly users in the U.S. are between 16 and 24 years old [65, 89]; consequently, TikTok is largely shaped by and reflective of youth culture [44]. TikTok shares many features with other social media sites, such as user profiles, followers, customizable usernames, user-generated content, and interaction between users (e.g., likes, comments, and features like "duets" that allow one to duplicate and interact with others' content [15]). Yet, a defining feature of TikTok is the "For You" page as a landing site. When users open the app, they are immediately directed to a scrolling feed of content, typically from users they do not already follow, that has been algorithmically selected based on factors such as user interactions with content and accounts (e.g., liked videos, followed accounts, and posted videos), video information (e.g., sounds, hashtags, and how much of a video a user watched), and device or account settings (e.g., language, country setting) [39], [69]. Content is video-based, with most posts consisting of a video, 15-60 seconds in duration, with music, voiceover, or other "sounds" (i.e., recorded audio to accompany videos), and often conveys "goofiness" and mundanity [44].

Because TikTok is relatively new, compared to other prominent social media platforms, and because of its unique features the implications of the platform are still unfolding. Zhu et al. [90] have remarked on the

potential of TikTok as a tool for disseminating public health information, and suggest that the short-video modality of the platform is effective in both providing information and in stimulating a sense of shared emotion between the message sender and recipient. Weimann and Masri [81] note the potential of TikTok to host hate and extremism. The present study views the site's unique affordances (i.e., association between content, perceived anonymity in a highly visual context), range of content shared on the platform (i.e., from health to extremist to goofy), apparently captive audience, and TikTok's relative novelty as making it an ideal site through which to consider social norm development on social media through a sociotechnical lens.

Social norms, or "jointly negotiated rules for social behavior" [17] are formed and enforced through interaction with the members of a social group. On social media, both user behavior (e.g., likes, comments) as well as the materiality of the platform, such as policies, features and affordances, and modality of content, influence the social context from which norms arise [80]. In this paper, we use an affordance lens [18], [22] to identify sociomaterial factors that contribute to the construction, learning, and enactment of authenticity as norm on TikTok.

We draw on interviews with U.S.-based TikTok users to examine how authenticity is enacted on the site. We argue that the perception of TikTok as a "fun" space for relating goofy, quirky, and everyday experiences as well as affordances (i.e., perceived anonymity and association) of platform features (i.e., "For You" page, video modality) and policies (i.e., pseudonymous usernames, multiple accounts), contribute to perceptions of "authentic" content as normalized and valued by TikTok users. We suggest that the perceived anonymity of one's audience and self, in combination with a platform algorithm that prioritizes association between users based on proximity of interest or experience, promotes social acceptance and adoption of a "just be you" attitude that in turn supports authenticity as a self-presentation norm. We present evidence that expressions of difficult emotions and experiences, as well as positive ones, are socially accepted on TikTok, and posit that displays of emotional "rawness" fall within the bounds of normative authenticity. We then provide insights on the comments section as a site of norm validation and judgment. We argue that authenticity on TikTok appears to describe both "unfiltered" content and more selective presentation of a *partial* but *still* authentic self. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of authenticity as norm on TikTok for designing sociotechnical spaces to encourage emotional expression and social support exchange. These interactions between social and material factors carry implications for designing supportive and compassionate social media spaces; we reflect on some of these possibilities and identify areas for further research. Despite the potential benefits of normative authenticity on social media, we are cognizant of the likely limitations of these benefits; artifacts such as social media are inherently political [83] and can perpetuate marginalization of already marginalized identities, as has also been observed on TikTok [12], [43], [56]. In this exploratory paper, we may only speculate, but conclude with discussion of the limits and unintended consequences of normative authenticity on social media.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

To situate authenticity as a social norm that influences emotional expression on social media, we first define social norms in the context of self-presentation and connect this definition to current understandings of authenticity on social media. We then present affordances as a lens for understanding the sociomaterial influences on norm development and perpetuation and review the literature on association and anonymity as potentially salient to authenticity on TikTok. We then connect these social and material factors to speculate as to the potential effects of normative authenticity on TikTok as a space for social support.

2.1 Social norms

A norm refers to a pattern of behavior, acknowledged by members of a group, that "bounds acceptable behavior" [40]. Norms are socially constructed [62], which is to say they are informed by other standards of conduct, such as codified rules, social values, and material constraints [88] and collectively established by a group's members. On social media, factors such as privacy settings, how users connect (e.g., following mechanisms), and modality of content (e.g., video, text) inform the creation of platform norms [80], including self-presentation and emotional expression norms. Norms may vary across platforms [57], [88] due to differing configurations of user demographics, use motivations, and available features [75]. Individuals may observe interactions between other network members to discern norms prior to becoming active on a platform [3], [13], [46]. For example, when deciding how to engage with social media posts about difficult emotions or stigmatizing experiences, people tend to observe and assess others' engagements with the posts [2]. Observing norms in action may be advantageous, as self-presentation and interaction norms are socially enforced; norm violation may be met with sanctions such as confrontation from an/other platform user(s) or loss of use privileges [57].

Broadly, social media norms for self-presentation often involve presenting oneself in a positive light, contributing to a perceived social positivity bias in which positive self-expression and content is more common and receives more interaction from others than negative self-expressions [24], [64], [76]. For instance, Yau and Reich [87] found that appearing interesting, likeable, and attractive were powerful self-presentation norms for adolescent social media users. As such, more specific norms, informed by user characteristics and other factors, may contribute to, uphold, and reinforce a positivity bias on a given platform.

An outcome of positivity bias is a perception, reinforced through affirmation and validation (or lack thereof) from other social media users, that expressions of negative or difficult emotions are inappropriate for social media [37]. In particular, negative self-disclosures may be deemed inappropriate for public, undirected (i.e., not targeted at anyone in particular) communication on social media [53], and less visible channels, such as private messages, may be deemed more appropriate for sharing difficult and intense emotions [11]. For example, individuals experiencing distress and stigma find platforms like Facebook, where they are connected to people they know (not strangers) and identified by their names, as a site on which sharing difficult emotional experiences is outside the norm [1]. Certain platforms may also be perceived as more appropriate spaces for difficult emotions than others [5], [54]. In a survey of Dutch social media users, for instance, Waterloo et al. [80] suggest that users perceive negative expressions as more appropriate on platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter than on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Despite variance across platforms, the presence of positivity bias across social media spaces requires users to implement strategies for expressing difficult emotions.

When context determines the propriety of feelings, expressions of divergent feelings must be altered to "fit" the context [42]. For instance, the popularity of "finstas" (a portmanteau of "Insta" and "fake"), secondary Instagram accounts often reserved for smaller, more selective/deliberate audiences and less polished content [77], [88], may be indicative of the pressure to present positively and offer one strategy for circumventing this perceived expectation. The use of humor as a form of expression offers another strategy for managing the appropriateness of negative expressions. That is, humor may "mitigate the gravity of negative emotions" [86] and make negative expressions both less likely to be sanctioned and more palatable to other users. Humorous content, such as memes, may also provide a means of expression on stigmatized

topics, such as mental health [7], [36]. Through similar mechanisms, humor may undercut a pressure to present a curated self and allow a more socially acceptable way of authentically declaring "look I'm a real person, my life is a mess too" [19]. Thus, how people present difficult emotions, via humor or other strategies, in addition to where (i.e., platform), may affect whether such emotional expressions are perceived by others as authentic. This background and the presence of humous content on TikTok informed our attention to these aspects in the analysis we present in this paper.

In the following sections, we define authenticity before considering the material affordances, such as discursive anonymity, and features, such as modality, of TikTok that, as we will show in our analysis, further shape authenticity as a self-presentational norm.

2.2 Authenticity

Scholars trace authenticity's conceptual roots back to philosophers such as Socrates [45], though its modern origins are often credited to Heidegger and existentialism [34]. Such philosophical orientations position authenticity as at once individually and socially determined, and as ultimately affirming social values (e.g., integrity, honesty, morality). Simply stated, authenticity may be defined as "unobstructed operation" of one's true self [45], or "accurate" self-presentation [10], yet these succinct encapsulations smooth over myriad dimensions and sociality influential to understanding authenticity in online contexts. "Self" has also been variously defined (cf. [50]), though here we understand it to mean how one thinks of oneself. We draw on an adjacent construct, self-concept, to position self as referring to the many identities, roles, beliefs, and values that compose an individual (e.g., I am a woman, I am a teacher, I am kind; [49]). What is deemed authentic (and how it is judged) is informed by the identity or aspect of self in question [38], [58].

Psychologists view authenticity as involving interactions between one's experience, self-awareness, and behaviors [8], [84]. Agreement across these dimensions (e.g., behaving in accordance with one's beliefs and values) is thought to increase feelings of authenticity. Understood as such, authenticity may correlate with outcomes such as psychological well-being and self-esteem [20], [64]. However, Jongman-Sereno and Leary [41] have questioned the relationship between authenticity and well-being and argued that inconsistent conceptualizations of authenticity may lead to operationalizations that confound authenticity with similar variables, such as honesty. Hardt [34] also notes that behaving authentically, or in accordance with one's own intrinsic beliefs, requires freedom and may mean acting against dominant social mores. There may thus be limits to authenticity when positioned as unilaterally beneficial, as one may encounter tension between acting as one's true self and the limits of social propriety. Self-assessment of authenticity may be complicated by the fact that knowing oneself (i.e., self-awareness) and identifying intrinsic beliefs may be rather difficult [82], or even painful [45]. Thus, understood as a psychological term, whether authenticity is always desirable or even discernable is debatable [41].

In online contexts, authenticity is similarly conceptualized as multidimensional, but is likened to *performing* authenticity. As Gaden and Dumitrica [26] observe, on social media, "the 'authentic' self appears to be a process of witty narration of an inner personality made available for subsequent consumption by the audience." Gilpin, Palazzolo, and Brody [27] similarly emphasize performance and define authenticity in the context of online political engagement as a performance in which one appears credible (authority), reliable and genuine (identity), forthcoming (transparency), and open to interaction with others such as political constituents (engagement). Understood as performance, the outcomes associated with online authenticity may differ from those identified in psychological perspectives. Reinecke and Trepte [64], for instance, have questioned the association between authentic self-presentation on social media and well-being, given the aforementioned social positivity bias observable in many online spaces, and related associations, such as

that between social comparison and self-esteem (e.g., [79]). In other words, authentic self-presentation on social media may benefit the well-being of those who already experience higher levels of well-being or self-esteem, as they have less of a need to express difficult emotions [64]. While social comparison certainly exists offline (cf. [23]), online spaces may concentrate and amplify expressions of personal success in a way that exacerbates both perceived social positivity and maladaptive comparison.

Authenticity on social media may thus be better understood as an attribute of self-presentation, which, like norms, is shaped through interaction with the affordances and audience(s) of a particular platform [33], [55]. Indeed, previous works emphasize that online authenticity is "dependent on subjective evaluation by participants or observers" [27] and that the ability to create and determine authenticity "does not only reside in encoders or creators, but also in decoders or interpreters" [59], underscoring the role of audience and audience responses (e.g., comments) in determining authenticity [55]. It thus follows that, as authenticity itself is socially constructed, authenticity may also be informed (i.e., amplified or constrained) by other self-presentation norms of a given social media platform. In a comparison of Facebook and Last.fm, for instance, Uski and Lampinen [75] note that "being real," a value shared by users in both spaces, was bounded and qualified by other self-presentation norms, such that "being real" required not oversharing and not seeking attention through profile updates. As previously mentioned, TikTok's user base is reputed to be quite young, and content on TikTok is often understood as "goofy" [44]. These social factors and perceptions have the potential to shape norms for self-presentation on TikTok, including authenticity. We explore these factors in our eventual analysis.

We thus consider authenticity as aligned with scholars such as Uski and Lampinen [75] and Haimson and Hoffmann [33], the latter of whom position authenticity as a socially constructed, artificial category, in which effortless yet sincere presentations of self that conform to the expectations of an audience as well as the context of expression (i.e., social media) are read as authentic by onlookers (e.g., networked others). Given the socially constructed nature of both authenticity and social norms, we ask:

> RQ1: How is the self-presentation norm of authenticity learned, enacted, and enforced by users on TikTok?

2.3 Affordances

We use an affordance lens to better understand the role of platform materiality in shaping authenticity as a TikTok norm. We define affordances as the abilities that arise from interactions between users, their goals, and features of social media, and which enable or constrain behavior [22]. Affordances are not social media features themselves, nor behavioral outcomes, but rather abilities of a technology (or social media feature) that an actor perceives as relevant to their behavioral goals (e.g., a rock may be used as a hammer or as a paperweight, depending on the situation). Affordances are also variable [22] and graduated, such that technologies, as artifacts, may demand as well as allow, discourage as well as refuse, a behavior [18]. Treem and Leonardi [74] argue that persistence, editability, visibility, and association may be especially pertinent to facilitating communication among work team members; these affordances may vary depending on factors such as an actor's perception of a technology's abilities, the actor's communication needs, and cultural (or institutional) norms surrounding technology use [18]. As such, like norms, affordances are dependent on context.

In examining TikTok's affordances and their role in shaping norms of authenticity, we explore relationships between affordances as well as the outcomes affordances facilitate, such as emotional

expression and social support. Given our framing of authenticity as a social norm, in which norms are socially constructed, as well as our interest in emotional expression and social support, we emphasize affordances that directly affect social interaction: association and anonymity. That is, while other affordances certainly have social dimensions (the permanence and searchability of content may adversely affect a friendship, for example), we view association and anonymity as directly related to what one shares about oneself and with whom it is shared, which has implications for authenticity.

2.3.1 Association

Association, defined as connections between users, users and content, or content and content [74], describes one way that user networks become solidified on social media. Association between users varies by platform, though can generally be thought of as either reciprocated (as on Facebook, where users must mutually agree to be connected as "friends") or unreciprocated (as with followers on Twitter) by design. Features such as follower lists can also indicate connections between users [21]. Most platforms afford association between content and users, in that content often bears the creator's username or can be found otherwise connected to a user's profile/account. Hashtags on Twitter afford association between pieces of content, in that tagged content (e.g., a tweet tagged #MeToo) will appear in search results, thus associating content with that hashtag and suggesting that similarly tagged posts may be topically related.

TikTok similarly affords association between users, users and content, and content and content. Unlike other platforms, however, association between users may not be the primary mechanism for delivering content. For example, on Facebook, one's "feed" is primarily content shared by established "friends," other users to whom one is reciprocally connected. On TikTok, association between users as a means for providing content appears secondary to algorithmic determination of association between content and content. That is, TikTok's "For You" landing page draws on user data to suggest content that is, ostensibly, thematically proximate to other content liked or interacted with by that user [39]. In other words, it is not necessary to establish connections with other users on TikTok in order to receive content from other users. While building a network is certainly an option (opposite the "For You" page is a "Following" page), the "For You" page as default landing page encourages users to interact with content and build networks based on affinity and similarity of content, rather than promoting users who may be connected to others in one's network (e.g., suggested connections). In this way, association afforded by TikTok appears to function differently from many other social media spaces and may affect the way that self-presentation norms are developed and circulated on the platform—an aspect we explore in this study. Further, as we address in 2.4, encouraging connection on the basis of similarity may have implications for social support processes.

2.3.2 Anonymity

In communication theory, anonymity is understood in terms of awareness of the source of a message and may be defined as the degree to which a message source is perceived to be unknown [6]. Technology scholars, however, are quick to note that perceived anonymity (i.e., feeling as if one is unidentified/fiable) differs from "true" anonymity, as trace data such as IP addresses and other information collected by internet service systems makes identification possible [25]. Anonymity is thus variable and dependent upon contextual factors such as audience (e.g., the author of a comment may be anonymous to another forum user, but not to a forum moderator). Anonymity is multidimensional, comprised of discursive anonymity and visual anonymity [67]. Discursive anonymity aligns with Anonymous' [6] definition of anonymity as lacking attribution to a source, whereas visual anonymity refers to a lack of visual representation, such as

through photographs [63]. These forms of anonymity are also variable, as certain identity cues (e.g., legal name) may be more "identifying" in isolation than others (e.g., location) [6], [63].

Similar to Instagram, TikTok emphasizes visuality by virtue of its content modality; to create a post on Instagram, a user must include an image, and to create a TikTok, a user must include video of some kind. This emphasis on visuality makes maintaining visual anonymity on TikTok more complex than on other platforms (e.g., Reddit which is primarily text-based and pseudonymous). While it is indeed possible for a user to post videos that do not disclose their visual identity, many users do present themselves in content. Consequently, the visual aspect of TikTok complicates what it means to be anonymous on the platform, and challenges expectations informed by anonymity, such as disinhibited communication and emotional expression [5], [72].

Disinhibited communication is a potential outcome of anonymity on social media. The disinhibition effect describes the behavioral phenomenon of people speaking and acting in online spaces in ways that they ordinarily would not in face-to-face contexts [72]. A mechanism informing this effect is reduced risk associated with anonymous communication [5], [20]; that is, disinhibited but identified communication may result in consequences (e.g., employment termination) in a way not possible with anonymous communication. Disinhibition supports both beneficial behaviors, such as disclosure and social support exchange [5], and detrimental behaviors, such as harassment and trolling [72]. Discursive and visual anonymity, as factors contributing to disinhibition [69], may be especially relevant in computer-mediated communication contexts [37]. Indeed, TikTok poses an intriguing case regarding these dimensions, as the platform affords discursive anonymity through features and policies that automatically-generate random usernames on account creation and allow customizable, pseudonymous usernames, as well as multiple accounts, yet is highly visual in that the modality of content is almost exclusively short video. Visual anonymity may also be asymmetrical on TikTok, in that video creators and commenters may have differing levels of discursive and visual anonymity, which potentially complicates how disinhibition manifests on the platform.

Scholarship that explores the effects of visual anonymity on disclosure and disinhibition is growing. In an analysis of blog content, Hollenbaugh and Everett [37] found that visual identification of bloggers, such as a representative photograph, was positively associated with disclosure, meaning that the more identifiable one was, the more information one shared on the blog. This seemingly contradicts the predicted effects of online disinhibition [72], though the authors suggest that "visual cues may go beyond simply identifying someone to instead constituting an important component of self-disclosure overall" [37], and call for further scrutiny of visual anonymity as contributing to disinhibition. Visual presence may also afford a different range of cues through which to self-disclose or signal identity without compromising discursive anonymity. This may be especially impactful in the context of enacting authenticity on TikTok, as video and photographs ostensibly provide visual proof of events and emotions [32], [70].

In sections 2.3–2.3.2 above, we have connected association and anonymity as affordances to features and policies of TikTok, such as the "For You" page, pseudonymous usernames, and video modality. These material factors contribute to TikTok's social context, which informs social norm development, but in and of themselves do not determine norms. We thus ask:

> RQ2: How do the material features and affordances of TikTok inform authenticity degrees as a norm on TikTok?

2.4 Social Support and Affordances

As affordances are variable and dependent on context, the outcomes supported by association and anonymity are similarly multiple. In this section, we define supportive communication before highlighting how association between content and discursive anonymity may potentially facilitate social support solicitation on social media, in addition to normative authenticity and difficult emotional expression, as previously discussed. We define social support broadly as "the things people say and do for one another" [29], and use supportive communication as a lens through which to understand such actions. Supportive communication emphasizes verbal and nonverbal messages intended to communicate assistance to others in need of aid [14], and as such is applicable to an online communication context. In addition to comments, paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs), such as likes and favorites, may communicate support or validation [16], [66]; consequently, comments and other user interactions on TikTok may be impactful for both communicating support as well as for validating or sanctioning content as adhering to/deviating from normative authenticity.

Like acceptable emotional expression, the efficacy or amount of support PDAs communicate may differ across platforms due to factors such as audience and support provider [35]. Indeed, "significant others" (as used by Thoits [73], similar to Granovetter's [30] strong ties) and experientially similar others may offer different forms of support that may be efficacious in differing contexts; broadly speaking, significant others may facilitate a sense of importance (or "mattering" to someone) and self-worth, while experientially similar others may provide empathic understanding and validation of experience/reaction [73]. In a formal support context with experientially similar others, such as online Al-Anon meetings, mechanisms underlying supportive communication may include fostering a sense of belonging in seeing similarity in others' experiences, reconstructing one's self-concept, and contributing resources or other steps for recovery [47]. Relatedly, individuals seeking support on social media tend to have unique expectations about receiving support from significant others compared to anonymous sympathetic strangers, where anticipations of received support shape support seeking decisions [1]. Such findings suggest that association between users based on similarity of interests or experience, as is the case on TikTok, might facilitate support exchange, but that remains to be known. Additionally, anonymity afforded by online spaces may facilitate both disclosure of sensitive information, as previously discussed, and supportive responses to disclosure, in a way that does not necessarily amplify negative disinhibition such as harassment or trolling [5].

The above reviewed literature illustrates the theoretical connections among affordances (such as association and perceived anonymity), normative authenticity, emotional expression, and social support. Given the potential for affordances such as anonymity and association to facilitate multiple outcomes, such as emotional expression and social support, we ask, as our final RQ:

> RQ3: What does the construction of authenticity on TikTok teach us about how to design social media spaces to facilitate the sharing of both positive and difficult emotions for social support solicitation and provision purposes?

3 METHODS

We conducted semi-structured interviews (N=15) with self-identified frequent TikTok users. A recruitment service was used to identify potential participants and administer a screening survey. The survey was used to identify individuals who met minimum eligibility requirements: have used the TikTok app for at least six months, use TikTok at least once a day, live in the U.S., and be at least 18 years of age at the time of the survey. A total of 284 responses were recorded, of which 257 met the eligibility criteria. We invited 27 survey

respondents to participate in interviews and completed interviews with 15 individuals. Participants were selected and invited based on their responses to survey questions; we prioritized participants whose responses we felt suggested the potential for rich data. For example, participants whose survey responses included details and variety in terms of experiences using TikTok were prioritized over those with vague responses. Additionally, we purposefully selected participants to provide a range of perspectives along dimensions of race, gender, sexuality, and age in the final sample. As is common in qualitative research, saturation of themes informed the final sample size [28]. We obtained informed consent from all interview participants. Participants were offered $20 gift cards as compensation. The university IRB approved the study design.

In interviews, we asked participants about their TikTok usage habits, including production and consumption of content; understanding and conceptualization of the app; navigating the functionalities of the app, including how they sought out content; and perceptions of the algorithm and recommendation mechanisms of TikTok. We conducted all interviews via Zoom's video/audio calling services; we invited participants to have the app open during interviews to more accurately relate their experiences and how they made sense of them or to provide examples where possible. We recorded and transcribed all interviews. Interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes, ranging from 48 to 107 minutes, depending on participant responses.

Table 1. List of study participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Education
P1	21	Female	Bisexual	Black	Some College
P2	23	Female	Straight	Black	Some College
P3	36	Female	Bisexual	White	Some College
P4	44	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Undergraduate
P5	42	Male	Straight	White	Postgraduate
P6	26	Male	Gay/Queer	Hispanic/Latino	Some College
P7	19	Female	Straight	White	Some College
P8	50	Female	Straight/Asexual	White	Postgraduate
P9	45	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Postgraduate
P10	18	Male	Heterosexual	Asian	High School
P11	18	Female	Straight	Indian	Some College
P12	20	Female	Straight	Black	Some College
P13	28	Male	Gay	Black	Undergraduate
P14	18	Female	Asexual	Multiracial Asian	Some High School
P15	21	Female	Straight	Asian	Some College

We coded all interview transcriptions using Dedoose, a qualitative coding software. The second author and two research assistants (RA) (involved in the larger project of which this study is a part) used line-by-line open coding to establish initial codes; the RAs and the second author independently open-coded one transcript [71] and compared resultant codes, leading to refined codes through detailed discussions. Following this coding check, one RA coded the rest of the data, and the second author discussed developing codes weekly with them and iteratively and collaboratively refined the codes. The first author then reviewed all the interviews, confirmed coding, and used memoing [51] to identify connections across codes. That is, based on the confirmed codes and memos, the first author developed themes that focused more explicitly on

platform utility, features, affordances, and audience/network structure. Emotional rawness, authenticity as valued by users, and a "just be you" attitude emerged as themes in codes regarding perceptions of TikTok and comparisons to other platforms, addressing RQ1. Further analysis of codes regarding specific features of TikTok, such as the "For You" page and network structure, surfaced affordances that appeared influential to users' experiences with emotionality and authenticity, and addressed RQ2. The first and second author discussed discovered themes during this process on a weekly basis and refined the themes and connections between them by going back to the data iteratively as needed. Discussing the potential outcomes of sociotechnical affordances addressed RQ3.

4 FINDINGS

Participants reflected on myriad attitudes regarding behaviors exhibited on TikTok. In the following sections, we draw on these insights to suggest that particular features and affordances of the platform—the "For You" page, commenting mechanism, association between content, and perceived anonymity—contribute to and uphold authenticity as a self-presentation norm on TikTok. We emphasize association and anonymity as affordances of interest given the aforementioned implications for sociality, norm development and judgment, disinhibited communication and expression of difficult emotions, and social support. We suggest that normative authenticity becomes further apparent through consideration of TikTok as the "fun" platform, as well as a "just be you" attitude and emotional rawness as valued qualities of content. As normative authenticity is socially constructed and enforced, we also show how user comments can be a site of norm judgment and sanctioning, as well as a potential site of social support provision.

In responding to RQ1, we first consider participants' overall perceptions of TikTok. We find agreement with others who describe TikTok as "fun" and as supporting "goofy" or mundane content [44]. More specifically, we identify a "just be you" attitude that appears to apply generally to content on TikTok. As social and material factors are mutually influential in norm development, we then present findings in response to RQ2 to consider participants' perceptions of audience and network on TikTok, and show how perceived anonymity—discursive (but not necessarily visual) anonymity of oneself and of one's networked others—as well as association between content uphold this "just be you" attitude and further construct authenticity as a self-presentation norm. We then show how these factors interact to support the expression of difficult emotions on TikTok, and how these expressions also fall under the umbrella of normative authenticity. We also consider the comments section as a feature of TikTok influential in norm judgment and enforcement and extend this discussion to respond to RQ3.

4.1 Perceptions of TikTok as "fun"

In responding to RQ1, we focus on user perceptions of TikTok as a space for "fun" content. TikTok describes its mission as "to inspire creativity and bring joy" [60]. As P8 explained, "[TikTok] it's just completely different because I feel like it's more for fun." Perceptions of platform utility, as suggested by this comment, contribute to the range of behaviors deemed appropriate for a social media space. Perceptions of TikTok as "fun" also coincided with perceptions of the app as facilitating freedom of personal expression. P3 explained,

> "I would say that it's [TikTok] a place where you can be silly. You can be funny. If you want to be a different person, you can be a different person. If you want to be yourself, you can be yourself."

In the context of this conversation, being a "different" person was linked to costume play (cosplay), which again suggests room for identity play and sharing hobbies and interests on TikTok. In this case, being a

different person does not necessarily equate to inauthentic self-presentation; rather, a user might communicate an authentic interest in cosplay by sharing their work.

Like other platform values, "fun" is perceived, learned, and internalized by other users [62]. P1 touched on the process for learning site norms by explaining that observing others, "seeing other people having fun in their own way and making it their own," led them to the realization that "I should just be me, that's what's fun. That's what people want to see." Others similarly remarked on a learning curve for the app and arriving at more personal content through trial and error. P6 reflected,

> "I guess I wasn't getting the flow, so to speak. So I was trying to make funny things that weren't really funny. And then I just switched over to [...] I started making videos just of me talking, sharing my really embarrassing, funny hookup stories and such."

This example underscores the importance of authentic self-expression to the "fun" value on TikTok. That is, P6 found greater success in sharing personal stories with humor than in imitating others' content or pursuing humor that wasn't naturalistic or otherwise in harmony with their personality and identity.

Related to the overall perception of TikTok as a "fun" platform, an attitude of "just be you" also appeared prominent. This attitude manifested in part as disinterest in participating in TikTok trends, as some users viewed following social trends as inauthentic or otherwise discordant with their understanding of self. P12, for example, explained that they do not recreate trends in their own videos, "because it's just not what my page is about. [...] I don't mind watching other people and I'll even interact with liking and comment[ing], but I don't really want to post that. That's not me." P10 similarly expressed an appreciation for originality as connected to authenticity, noting,

> "I want to be a content creator, not a copier, right? [...] I feel like that's the artist in me being like, 'Yo, you got to do your own thing. You got to be yourself.' I don't just want to copy someone else's audience. I want my own."

In invoking others' audience, P10 may be alluding to a perceived consequence of TikTok's emphasis on association between content (discussed further in the next section), in that individuals who post similar content or about similar topics may attract similar audiences. Thus, being an authentic individual on TikTok may also extend to one's audience, in that gathering an audience perceived to be "my own" reflects successful enactment of "being myself."

That said, as on other social media, the pressure to self-present an ideal version of oneself exists on TikTok. However, we find that this ideal self may still be linked to and informed by a value for authenticity. P9, for example, explained that they made TikToks depending on how they felt that day: "If I'm happy, I do one. I don't do one when I'm sad or when I'm depressed. [...] Because I want people to see me as being happy, not see me as being depressed. [...] Because that's me." In this way, showing oneself being happy was still understood as being authentic or true to oneself, albeit a partial representation of a more complex authentic being. This example aids in underscoring the connection between authenticity on social media and self-presentation by demonstrating that authenticity can be selective—authentically presenting socially desirable facets of oneself does not necessarily require similarly presenting facets perceived as less socially acceptable or undesirable.

Social media users seem to be aware of positivity biases on platforms and the pressure for users to curate accounts that display only "highlights," rather than emotional complexity. This awareness of skewed self-presentation may similarly underlie perceptions of authenticity on social media. As P10 explained,

> "I don't know, to me, it's like, if you're going to try to go viral or be a content creator, at least be honest with yourself about it. …People want to go viral. People want attention. That's just what social media is for."

This assessment of social media's broader utility lends complexity to our understanding of authenticity on social media. More specifically, it suggests that, as a norm, authenticity is socially constructed and promoted as valuable, yet individuals retain some agency in determining what their authentic self looks like. That is, some users may find authenticity, as a norm on TikTok, to be freeing and resultant in disinhibited self-presentation in a way that feels authentic, while some users may find authenticity as valued on TikTok to be simply another lens through which to filter self-presentation, as evident in posting only content that authentically shows one as happy. In other words, authentic content on TikTok is not necessarily synonymous with unfiltered content, though we find that there is room for both on TikTok.

4.2 Authenticity as emotional "rawness"

As the previous section suggests, the attitude of "just be you" accompanies both "fun" in humor, dance trends, and other forms of creative expression, as well as more intimate expressions, such as relating dating experiences. In another sense, "just be you" also manifests in emotional "rawness" or expression of difficult emotions/emotional experiences. P11 referred to reactions they'd seen to TikTok *on* TikTok, explaining, "TikTok, [creators] say like, 'Y'all have no filter,' or, 'Y'all are too comfortable on this app.'" They continued,

> "They're telling details, really intimate details or just really personal things that had happened to them. […] That's what our generation does. They make jokes about important events and important life changing things that happen in their life, whereas on Instagram, people are a lot less personal. It'll be just a cute picture of them somewhere and that's it, but no caption, no nothing."

As this example suggests, the emotionality of TikTok is perceived as heightened in comparison to other social media spaces, such as Instagram. Additionally, P11 links humor on TikTok to personal disclosures regarding momentous (and not necessarily beneficial) events and experiences. As discussed, humor may be a tactic for making otherwise difficult emotional expressions more palatable to others and less likely to violate norms of social positivity and expression. In this instance, humor is linked to generational affect more broadly, such that humor may not be employed to soften negative expressions, but rather to further communicate authenticity through humor as a signal of generational belonging.

Participants considered the ability to openly express emotion, particularly difficult emotion, as fairly unique to TikTok as well as an outcome of perceived anonymity on the platform (discussed further in relation to RQ2). P3, for example, expressed surprise at this quality of TikTok, saying,

> "Just the ability they have to open themselves up and just share with people that they don't know, just their raw emotion. … It's surprising because sometimes I have trouble doing that, and they seem to be able to do it."

P4 also distanced themself from the practice of opening up on TikTok, but drew a connection between freedom of emotional expression and relative lack of consequence, explaining,

> "I think it [TikTok] makes them feel more comfortable, because they were like, how can they judge me? I'm just showing raw emotion, the only thing they can do is send me a bad comment, but I don't have to check those comments."

As both of these comments imply, "raw emotion" is apparent and normalized on TikTok; consequences of expressing difficult or raw emotion appear to be tempered by qualities of the app, such as an audience

perceived and felt to be anonymous and user control over the visibility of comments. We expand on these factors in the next section.

More broadly, the ability to express emotion without or with less fear of judgment may facilitate more intimate disclosures as well as more mundane communication than generally supported on other platforms. In illustrating the former, P12 commented,

> "Now, there's no fear anymore. So, people post freely and just are frustrated and they want to get the word out. So, I feel like, especially on TikTok, they post a lot more about problems they've been facing for who knows how long. Now, TikTok is a[n] outlet for them to speak up about it and get the word out."

In the context of this comment, P12 refers to social issues, such as police brutality and violence perpetrated against Black communities in the U.S. In this way, TikTok may facilitate disclosure of negative emotions motivated by desires to vent about issues affecting oneself or one's community as well as to raise awareness or educate others [2].

In another sense, the acceptability or lower stakes associated with disclosure may also support relatively mundane disclosures. For example, P6 noted, "TikTok is [for when] there was a moment in my day where I just wanted to share this with you." Similarly, P3 reported sharing details of a recent hospital stay on TikTok:

> "I told them what was going on. Well to a point. Some of it was TMI. But I just kind of was like, 'If you guys want to talk, message me. I'll try to do some videos,' which I did. I tried to kind of give them a sneak peek into what is going on just in a normal person's life."

While a hospital stay may not be a "mundane" activity for many, and may in fact be quite stressful, P3's emphasis on sharing "a normal person's life" and P6's desire to share moments in their day provides support for authenticity as a norm of expression on TikTok, regardless of how novel or exciting the event precipitating that sharing may be.

4.3 Constructing authenticity: Affordances and features of TikTok

In responding to RQ2, we found that participants' perceptions of TikTok, particularly as they pertain to platform functionality (e.g., information seeking, social connection, entertainment) and audience, contribute to the salience of authenticity as a norm. Function and audience perceptions also aid in illuminating how TikTok differs from other social media spaces. Our findings highlight anonymity, as both audience perception and affordance, and association between content as factors further contributing to TikTok's reputation as a "fun" social media site.

4.3.1 Anonymity to an audience

Participants' networks on TikTok varied, but many indicated that friends and known others were not part of their network or audience. Responses varied as to whether and to what degree audience composition was determinable by users, and to what extent this audience was simply an outcome of the platform's structure. As P3 explained, "On TikTok, [my audience] it's people I don't know. It's strangers." P1 similarly characterized TikTok broadly as "just a bunch of strangers." Others noted a convergence between the difficulty of finding known others and a disinterest in connecting with them on TikTok. "I wasn't able to find my friends on here, and I don't plan on doing that," P11 explained. They continued, "I guess it is different

[from other social media] because it's harder to find people." The prominence of strangers as a perceived audience contributed to a sense that TikTok was more anonymous than other platforms, where participants were connected to family, co-workers, and/or friends—in other words people with whom they had pre-existing ties.

Participants also alluded to profile information and audience size as potentially contributing to perceptions of anonymity, though these were less commonly explored features. P8 suggested that users provide relatively little personal information on their profiles, explaining, "I don't think they can learn much about you on TikTok. It's really a hard way to do it because I don't think you really give a lot." This comment intimates the influence of discursive anonymity on broader perceptions of anonymity; information disclosed through content (e.g., visual identity, physical location or surroundings) was not a factor in this participant's assessment of anonymity on TikTok. Connections between anonymity and disinhibition were also apparent. P10, for instance, noted the disinhibiting effect of having a small audience, saying, "I don't have big enough of a following to worry about security yet. So I'm chilling." Here, "chilling" implies a lack of perceived audience risk associated with posting content. These comments suggest that anonymity on TikTok is informed both by audience composition and size; the ability to have an audience of previously unknown others that is also small may contribute to a sense that one is also anonymous, which in turn may reduce perceived risks associated with self-expression and encourage disinhibited expression.

4.3.2 Anonymity and association

Perceptions of anonymity were further supported by a perceived lack of association between accounts; features like the "For You" page as a default landing page upon opening the app and limited visibility of association between TikTok users contributed to this overall sense of anonymity. Association, or ties between users, users and content, and content and content [74], on TikTok was often explained through comparisons to other social media platforms. For example, P4 compared association on Facebook to TikTok, saying, "on Facebook you have to be friends with that person, to see that emotion or to see what's going on. On TikTok as soon as you pull it up, there's people you ain't even following." In other words, Facebook's reciprocated association stands in stark contrast to the ability (by design) on TikTok to view content from non-networked others. Similarly, P8 characterized Facebook as

> "People stay on there to stay connected. TikTok is, there's no connection. You can just look at videos all day. You can follow someone, but that's the extent of your knowledge of them. They could be anyone. You're just amused."

P8 thus also alludes to the interaction between association and anonymity in defining the functionality of TikTok. It is not a space for connection, like Facebook; rather, it's a space for amusement and that is all one "knows." As these examples make clear, we find that TikTok "feels" different from other social media spaces in the sense that content may be consumed without much awareness or consideration of users or even one's network in the space. As such, anonymity of both oneself (i.e., discursive anonymity) and one's network may contribute to both disinhibited communication as well as a network based on experiential similarity rather than extant relationships (i.e., significant others).

The emphasis on association between content, in that the "For You" page is algorithmically curated based on a user's previous interactions with content, rather than association between users, also supports a perception of TikTok's utility as almost a break from one's pre-existing and other social networks. P7 explained,

> "[On TikTok] it's less looking at what my friends are posting and more just looking at things that people post in general that are interesting to me and that I enjoy. Whereas on other social media, I feel like I'm just focusing on my friends and what they're doing."

As such, TikTok content can feel more personal or personally relevant, regardless of connection to the creator. P7's comment also suggests that there may be a social obligation to keep track of information about friends and engage with their content. That connections to creators are not emphasized by TikTok's structure (though following others is possible and a "Following" feed is available opposite the "For You" feed) appears to instead emphasize one's connection to content.

Some participants explained that this emphasis on content being thematically proximate to a user's interests can result in different or more meaningful feelings of connection between viewers and content, or spark recollection or reflection on one's personal experiences. For example, P9 expressed appreciation for content about grandmothers: "Just the love that people have for their grandmother. And how much I love my grandmother, how much I cherish her. Things that they talk about with their grandmother moves me." Although this content is not unique to TikTok (as the participant went on to explain), the availability of such content—through the "For You" algorithm—may be, and was notable for the participant. Similarly, P7 related a connection to content posted by a former American Girl Doll store employee:

> "I used to go to the American Girl Dolls store and salon all the time to get my doll's hair done. I just connected to that because it was a childhood memory that I don't really think about often, but it was interesting to see."

While the identity of the creators behind the content may not be memorable, the emotional responses to content that stem from one's memories and personal experiences may be impactful for TikTok users. TikTok's emphasis on association between content makes these moments more available to users and as such shapes users' perceptions of the platform overall.

The prominence of association between content on TikTok also interacts with perceptions of anonymity to further facilitate perceptions of authenticity or genuine self-expressions. As P3 explained,

> "They [creators] feel like they can be more open because people that can make comments and change what your video is about, they're not seeing it. It's being seen by people who have never met this person. I feel like you could be more of a genuine person that way because your video isn't being, I guess I want to say corrupted, you know what I mean?"

This participant implies that social media content is often shaped by one's assessment of others' expectations, particularly known others' (e.g., significant others, co-workers) expectations. That is, social networks exert a powerful influence on what types of self-expression, opinions, and self-presentations are determined to be acceptable, and potentially in a way that suppresses or overrides the creator's original intention. P15 also noted that strangers' opinions, especially negative reactions, were less impactful than known others' or friends' opinions. In reflecting on posting images related to personal weight loss, P15 explained:

> "I personally wouldn't post that on my Instagram, just because if my family or friends from high school follow me, I don't really want them to see my before and after pictures. But on TikTok, I didn't really care because I didn't know who was following me. So it just felt more comfortable."

This comment presents an intriguing contradiction for authenticity, in that responses from strangers are not as influential or "corrupting" as responses from known others, which facilitates disinhibited self-expression and ostensibly more authentic self-presentation. That said, and as we explore in the following section, authenticity as a site norm is indeed socially policed, and comments from (unknown) others do shape what content and modes of expression are perceived by creators as likely to be positively received by an audience of strangers. As these experiences suggest, anonymity and association between content afforded by TikTok's features, such as the "For You" page and general emphasis on association between content rather than association between users, are interlinked and potentially inform each other in supporting a space that users perceive to be less judgmental and more accepting of "interesting" and varied content than other social media platforms. Future research could explore these potential connections through additional methods.

4.3.3 Audience and comments as enforcing authenticity

As discussed, social media norms arise from interactions between users as well as between users and material features of a platform. On TikTok, interactions between users commonly occur through heart-shaped "likes", direct messages (private, one-to-one communication), and comments. Unlike platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, comments on TikTok are not immediately visible or previewed on posts, though a link to the comment section is part of every post, by default, in the form of a comment icon (i.e., image of a speech bubble). The number of comments on a TikTok video is visible on that video, as is the number of likes. Users click on the comment icon to access the comment section. This additional step required to view comments provides some separation between both creators and viewers as well as creators/viewers and comments. As P6 summarized, "I feel like because the comments are kind of tucked away in the corner, you kind of have to go out of your way to look at them." This separation was also remarkable in light of the reality that comments on TikTok, as on other social media, can perpetuate hateful judgment, including racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic views. As such, a number of participants, such as P1, noted, "in general I just don't check the comments." It should be noted that users may also disable comments for a particular video, providing an additional layer of separation between creator and audience. While none of our participants reported turning off comments, some observed it and perceived it as strategic. As P11 explained,

> "I've noticed that, so that they can't get any negative feedback, because if you are putting yourself out there, I understand why they've turned the comments off. They don't want any negative feedback, which I feel like it makes sense. I would do that too."

Strategic disengagement of comments further highlights the role of comments sections as sites of judgment of and reaction to personal vulnerability as authentic.

While the relative invisibility and likelihood of comments as a site of judgment complicate the meaningfulness of comments on TikTok, some participants did attend to comments in a way that suggests interactions with other users through comments serve to enforce authenticity as a norm. P3, for instance, drew on comments as a guide for content:

> "I think I come across to people as a little bit awkward, but I genuinely want to help people, and people have commented on that. They've looked through my videos and they're just like, 'You have your moments where you're kind of awkward,' which I agree with. I have my moments where I'm trying to show emotion and that you can just tell I'm faking it. …And when it comes to videos where I'm really trying to help somebody, you can see the actual emotion. And they're like, 'We need to see more videos like this because the ones where you're trying to act, your awkwardness comes across.' So, it's

> like, I think I've put up this persona of...People prefer to see me as my real self, not as faking it or whatever."

In this way, P3 received validation for their "authentic" self directly from their audience via comments. Importantly, P3 aligns awkwardness with faking emotion, such that both they and their audience align awkwardness with faking with inauthenticity. (In other words, this example does not necessarily imply that all awkwardness is inauthentic.) This experience suggests both the reinforcement of emotional rawness as authentic as well as the reinforcement of awkwardness (i.e., faking emotion) as inauthentic; the commenters aid in upholding the norm of authenticity as both raw and effortless, in effect further reifying "just be you" as an attitude guiding self-expression on TikTok.

This functionality extends to enforcing authenticity in a more literal way, that of calling out duplicative content or content "stealers." In interviews, content thieves were generally regarded as more popular accounts that recreated content from smaller, less visible accounts in an effort to maintain or gain attention. As this behavior is viewed as undesirable on TikTok, users may sanction content thieves through comments. P10 explained, "If enough people have seen the smaller creators [who originated the content], they will call them out in the comments when they are creating copies." Cases of duplication are perhaps easier to verify, given a record of visual proof or similar content as a point of comparison.

Determining the authenticity of personal and vulnerable expressions is a more complicated and error-prone process, and, for better or worse, one in which comments are influential. P4 recalled,

> "I've seen people post something, really [personal], 'I lost my brother, he was everything to me. He died. It was the four of us.' And then it was fake. I am like, got to be kidding me. My heart was aching for it. Then you go into comments, it's like, 'This is fake. You should see his other page.' Now, I'm like, what? Why would you do that? I go into comments and make sure it's not fake."

The judgment of other TikTok users, as manifest in comments, may thus be understood as more authentic or grounded in truth than a personal experience related through video. In this case, additional videos provided support for determining such content inauthentic. In cases where such content is not available, other metrics must be used for determining authenticity. P3 recalled an incident in which comments judging authenticity appeared to incorrectly cry "fake":

> "There was a girl that did a video where she was talking about being suicidal, and she is very known for clout chasing. [...] And unfortunately, she was actually trying to do an actual video from her heart, expressing the need for help. But because she's known as a clout chaser, a lot of the comments were just, 'This is fake, this is clickbait, blah, blah, blah. She's not like that.'"

In this way, one's persona, cultivated through content, can interfere with the ability to "authentically" communicate emotional distress, and by extension social support needs, particularly when such distress seems out of character. This friction underscores the difficulty individuals may face in appearing as complex beings on social media; consistency in presentation becomes a double-edged sword in which one comes to be "read" as authentic through congruent self-presentations, yet deviations from one's typical self-presentation are read as inauthentic, despite conformity with one's authentic experience or true self. Thus, normative authenticity on TikTok may require or be enhanced by consistency in self-expression. Indeed, Gilpin et al. [27] note that "narrative coherence" is required for shifting identities to be determined authentic.

More broadly, consistency of communication may be influential in inferring group norms [61] and, when observed, is evidence of group norms functioning [62]; inconsistent communication may inadvertently challenge established group norms or raise uncertainty in others in terms of how they should behave in a group. This example thus underscores the social aspect of authenticity, as "clout chaser" may be an authentic identity (and reflect an authentic motivation for using social media) of an individual, but one that is perceived as undesirable and inauthentic by one's audience. We explore how this example complicates authenticity's implications as a norm in the Discussion.

Participants also suggested that engaging with comments on their videos functioned to support authenticity and to perpetuate their own values and hopes about the platform. P12, for example, commented that not getting responses to comments could be a disappointing experience. "So I try to respond just to show that I care," they said. "I'm an artist and yeah, that doesn't make me anything but human and I care and bleed just like you." P5 also valued showing care, saying, "I want them [my followers] to know that I care and that I see what they comment on my videos." Acting as they hoped others might, by interacting with commenters, appeared to cement perceptions of self (e.g., I am a caring human) as well as reinforce authenticity through self-presentation (e.g., showing others that I am a caring human).

Responding to comments from the audience further underscored authenticity by encouraging ongoing engagement and interaction between the posters and their audience. "I feel like if you show that you appreciate it, they'll continue to engage with you," P15 said. Similarly, P3 explained,

> "I feel like if they're going to comment and they're going to like then they found something important in the video. Then, you know, if they found something that they need to speak on or something like that, then I should engage with that because that's the whole point of the video."

Across these responses is a sense that commenting in a genuine way is an effortful and deliberate act. In this sense, authenticity perceived by viewers and commenters encourages authenticity of both content and in interactions between content creators and viewers, and perpetuates authenticity as a norm governing multiple behaviors (e.g., content creation, interaction) on TikTok.

4.3.4 Comments as a site of social support

In response to RQ3, we find that the mutual influence and reinforcement of authenticity of expression undergirds much of the potential for TikTok to be a site of social support exchange. Genuine or authentically appreciative and supportive comments facilitate connections between users with similar interests and experiences, which "makes you feel like you're not so lonely, and there's so many people out there who relate to you as well," as P7 explained. Finding similar others is a powerful basis for social support [73], [85]. For some, the ability to find relatable content, as afforded by association between content and the "For You" page algorithm, as previously discussed, intersected with perceptions of anonymity (both in terms of discursive anonymity and an audience of strangers) to reduce inhibitions and fear of judgment; this appeared to also result in supportive exchanges. As P11 explained, "Strangers can be so positive and uplifting, and sometimes they'll have similar life experiences...It's nice because they know nothing about your life. You can talk about this one specific thing and that's it. They can't judge you." This example helps to illustrate the connections among anonymity (both discursive and of one's audience), proximate experience, social support, and perceived risk of expression; in combination, these quotes suggest that comments simply relating to a personal experience may be effective in challenging feelings of isolation and providing meaningful validation.

Indeed, in discussions of TikToks on sensitive personal experiences (e.g., addiction, abuse, sexual assault), participants reflected that the majority of comments appeared to be supportive. As P15 reflected, "Usually, when someone finally makes a more personal content, all the comments are supportive." They continued, "I've never seen a negative comment on a personal video like that [about sexual assault]." This comment contrasts with the experience of P3, previously related, regarding the treatment of a "clout chaser" expressing difficult emotions. A comment from P8 intimates that motivation of expression may also inform assessments of authenticity:

> "I don't think many people would be vulnerable in a video and cry if they just wanted likes, if they just wanted followers. I mean, that's something you're sharing pretty raw emotions. Most people are going to do that and they're genuine."

Thus, expressions of raw and difficult emotions may be read as authentic if interpreted to be motivated by a desire to vent, seek support, or raise awareness, while expressions motivated by an interest in growing one's audience may be read as inauthentic. While a detailed analysis of motivation as a criterion for evaluating authenticity of expression is beyond the scope of this paper, we note it here to further outline audience's role in enforcing and sanctioning authenticity as well as to highlight evaluation of authentic expression on social media as an area for future work.

In interpreting responses perceived as offering support, participants also alluded to authenticity in responses themselves. P12, for example, explained,

> "I see a lot of those people [in comments] relating to the topic at hand. And I also see a lot of people trying to be inspiring. Trying to uplift the person. Like I said, the 'you're not alone in this. We're all here for you. We care about you. We love you.' [...] Because they don't like seeing a person in pain."

In this case, supportive comments are attributed to a genuine, empathic response to witnessing distress, and thus may authentically reflect a desire to support the creator. (Whether sentiments such as love for an internet stranger are similarly authentic emotional expressions is a slightly different question.) P11 spoke to another way that authenticity influenced such interactions, saying,

> "I feel like it's important to comment because these people are putting out details of their life and the struggles that they went through. They're sacrificing some of their own privacy and going out of their comfort zone to post these things. I feel like these people should be appreciated because things like this happen in people's lives and the fact that they're sharing it for other people to see means a lot to me."

In this comment, P11 acknowledges the vulnerability associated with sharing difficult emotions and experiences and intimates a responsibility to assume such content is authentic and engage with it accordingly. Similarly, P8 expressed a value in sharing personal stories and finding similar others that also assumes such stories are authentic:

> "I think that's how we develop empathy and compassion is, we learn people's stories, and we learn that they have things in common with us, and they have struggles that are horrible, and we can identify with them."

In these examples, authentic self-presentation and finding commonalities, including difficult emotions, on TikTok facilitates empathic communication; this connection underscores the potential relationship between normative authenticity and social support.

Although the examples included here contrast with instances of harassment informed by commenters' determinations of in/authentic content, we view the potential for and demonstrated presence of social support on TikTok as encouraging. As P14 summarized, "There's always going to be people who are trolling, A-holes that really think they need to ruin everyone's day. But there's a lot of really pure and good heartfelt comments there too." Indeed, these examples make apparent the viability of strangers as support providers, as well as underscore the role of interactivity (e.g., through comments) in constructing and maintaining normative authenticity, both in policing seemingly inauthentic content and in affirming emotionally raw content as authentic through provision of authentically (i.e., genuinely) supportive comments.

5 DISCUSSION

We make the following contributions to the CSCW and social computing literature:

- An in-depth understanding of how the self-presentation norm of authenticity is learned, enacted, and enforced on TikTok
- Identify the sociotechnical affordances that support authenticity as a self-presentation norm on TikTok
- Theorize connections between the construction of authenticity, sharing both positive and difficult emotions, and social support, and providing implications for designing social media to facilitate social support exchange

We argue that the social and material factors of TikTok support authenticity as a self-presentational norm. As a norm, authenticity may result in disinhibited self-presentation that feels authentic to users as well as provide a lens through which to filter self-presentation; we reiterate that "authentic" need not be synonymous with "unfiltered," but note that this is one way authenticity may manifest on TikTok. We also argue that the factors that contribute to normative authenticity also contribute to acceptance of a broader range of emotional expression, particularly difficult emotions, than may be perceived on other social media, such as Instagram. More specifically, we argue that user perceptions and TikTok's own branding of the platform as a space for creativity and "fun" support an overarching attitude of "just be you" that also serves to establish authenticity as a self-presentation norm. TikTok's algorithm and design afford association between content, rather than users, as well as perceptions of anonymity of both oneself and one's audience; these affordances, we argue, facilitate finding similar others (e.g., similar identities or experiences) and may encourage disinhibited communication due to reduction of perceived risk associated with self-expression. These outcomes indicate the potential for TikTok as a site for social support requests and provision, and our findings regarding the comments section as a site of both norm judgment/enforcement and support provision provide further evidence of this potential.

The ability of a particular configuration of social media features, affordances, and norms to support a user's perception that they can be themselves, share difficult emotion, and share interesting or mundane or intimate personal experiences—without a constraining fear of judgment from others—carries remarkable implications for designing technology for social support. In the remainder of this section, we argue that the intersection of three factors—perceived anonymity, association between content, and video modality of TikTok—is an especially fruitful one to consider in this regard. We then consider the limits of normative authenticity and for whom such authenticity is available. Limitations of the present study follow.

5.1 Material factors facilitating authenticity and social support

How norms arise from sociomaterial factors of social media platforms is critical to examine regarding authenticity on social media as well as designing spaces intended or used for social support exchange. This study contributes to both bodies of work by 1) identifying user perceptions, platform features, and affordances that work together to create and uphold normative authenticity on TikTok; and 2) mapping the aforementioned factors to social support processes. That norms vary across social media platforms is well established in research literature [57], [75], [88]; we leverage Waterloo et al.'s [80] understanding of social context as composed of social and material factors and an affordances lens to identify specific factors—anonymity, association, video modality—and attitudes—"just be you," "fun" content—that contribute to authenticity as social norm. Our findings demonstrate not only the interactions between social and material factors, but also the ways in which affordances may interact with each other. Building on our work, future research could explore these interactions in more depth to present an affordance-based model of norm formation on social media.

Anonymity, both of content creators and of one's audience, potentially affects the intimacy and depth of personal expression and disclosure of personal experiences on TikTok. That is, we argue that anonymity upholds normative authenticity on TikTok by reducing the risks associated with personal expression and disclosure. In online contexts, anonymity has been associated with a disinhibition effect, in which individuals may express themselves more freely and perhaps with more intimacy of depth of disclosure, than in a face-to-face, offline context, if they believe their identity to be anonymous [72]. Furthermore, believing oneself to be anonymous to an audience, or further, as in this case, to an audience of strangers, may lower perceived risks, such as negative judgment, associated with disclosure [5], [72]. As one participant explained, negative consequences arising from TikToks are generally limited to "bad comments." We address this generalization further momentarily. Indeed, both discursive anonymity of oneself and anonymity of one's audience appears to affect risk perception, as strangers who "don't know you" are deemed unable to "judge" you. Consequently, both anonymity of self and anonymity of audience may contribute to the viability of "just be you" as a behavioral guideline on TikTok, and thus uphold authenticity as a self-presentation norm.

We found that association between content, rather than between users, further supports perceived anonymity and upholds "just be you" as an attitude on TikTok. In combination, anonymity (of self and of others) and association between content may facilitate reduced risks associated with expression, finding experientially similar or like-minded others, and potentially encourage empathy in responding to individuals sharing difficult emotions. In this way, association, afforded by network structure and the "For You" page algorithm, and anonymity are mutually influential in affecting perceived risks associated with content sharing, including emotional expression, and by extension, mutually influential in supporting authenticity as a self-presentation norm. We also note that association between content allows users to connect with content on the basis of similar interests or shared experiences, which can provide a basis for social support and empathy [73], [85]. A caveat to this, however, is the notion that anonymity may undermine credibility in support contexts, in that individuals may worry about or be susceptible to taking bad advice or taking a disingenuous suggestion seriously [9]. This risk may be assuaged by a third factor, modality of content.

The video modality of TikTok also interacts with and affects site norms, in that it is common for users to be present in their videos; many TikToks simply consist of a creator facing the camera and speaking directly to an audience. As noted, video may provide "proof" of emotion or experience [32], [70], which may in turn be influential in assessing authenticity. The video modality of TikTok may support a higher degree

of nonverbal cues than other modes of content. This richness potentially supports authentic emotional expression and evaluation thereof by providing dynamic visual evidence of emotional states (e.g., crying), experiences (e.g., scars, hospital), and oneself. As our findings show, this visual evidence may encourage interpretation of such content as authentic as well as facilitate empathic responses and social support provided via comments.

Indeed, video presence that simulates eye contact may also reduce negative disinhibited communication, such as flaming or harassment [48], which may also encourage empathic response to emotional expression. (As participants indicated that comments on TikTok still perpetuated harassment, however, the effects of simulated eye contact via asynchronous video communication on disinhibited communication warrants further study.) By extension, we argue that TikTok may be especially well-suited for *providing* support to viewers via nonverbal immediacy cues in videos. This may be particularly impactful for "lurkers," or those who do not directly engage with content via likes, comments, or messages, as viewing a high-immediacy message may not require direct solicitation of support. These connections warrant further study, as emerging work already indicates the potential of TikTok in effectively communicating other forms of health messages and resources [90].

We conclude that social media that relies on hyper-visual content, such as video; that affords anonymity through features, like pseudonymous usernames, and affordances, like privileging association between content over association between users (which further supports anonymity, within networks); *and* that affords association based on shared experience or similar interest, could facilitate computer-mediated social support in a way that other platforms have less successfully captured. On TikTok, these factors interact with each other as well as with other perceptions of the platform (e.g., youth-oriented, mundane topics) to support authenticity as a self-presentational norm, which in turn appears to challenge (or at least not recreate) emotional sharing norms such as social positivity bias and instead value expression of both positive and difficult emotions.

This study also contributes to the argument that social factors are also design considerations. It supports the idea that social norms can be influential in bounding spaces conducive to disclosure and support seeking. Further research could explore social support exchange on TikTok specifically through an affordance lens, including how exchange might occur outside of the comments field. Further research is also needed to explore the efficacy of masspersonal video messages as vehicles for supportive communication. Additionally, interaction via comments and messages continue to be vexing from a social support design perspective, given the potential of comments as a means of providing emotional and informational support as well as harassment and vitriol. Constraining the visibility of comments, as discussed in our findings, may help in providing a barrier between creators and comments, such that creators may limit their exposure to potentially harmful comments. We suggest that future scholarship on designing digital spaces for social support emphasize the importance of interaction for social support as well as authentic self-presentation, and design mechanisms for interaction with these considerations in mind.

5.2 Authenticity and identity

Though not an emphasis of this study, for whom authenticity is available and how authenticity is evaluated remain crucial considerations. Our small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings and restricts our ability to discern if differences in perceptions of authenticity are individual in nature or indicative of broader differences that recreate social biases and marginalization. In other words, what is considered authentic expression, how it is evaluated, and by whom it is evaluated likely differ across communities and social identities, as well as across platforms. Indeed, Haimson and Hoffmann [33] argue that authenticity, as

it pertains to one's identity on Facebook, is not viable for users with shifting or non-normative identities, such as transgender people and survivors of abuse. Others have argued that while individuals marginalized along axes of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and/or body size [43] or gender and sexuality [69] are able to form solidarity on TikTok, they also face what is referred to as "algorithmic symbolic annihilation" [43] (i.e., how algorithms perpetuate normative narratives about phenomena in which what is accounted for has power, and what is not does not [4]) or similar concepts such as "algorithmic exclusion" [69]. Like all design choices, the policies and features that shape identity expression on social media are political [83]. While our findings do not speak directly to experiences of marginality, the experience related by P3 regarding a "clout chaser" indicates that social evaluation of authenticity (i.e., by other users) is fallible and may rely on imperfect evaluative criteria, such as consistency of expression.

Despite the attitudes expressed by some participants that a negative comment is a minor consequence of content creation, harassment via social media constitutes real harm, often against members of marginalized communities, and this harassment may be facilitated by factors such as anonymity and disinhibited communication [31]. Beyond comment sections, there is a "dark side" to TikTok [44], [81] that also warrants further scholarly consideration. The sociomaterial factors that afford beneficial freedom of emotional expression may similarly afford expression of "authentic" (i.e., reflective of one's beliefs) ideological views (e.g., homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, white supremacist attitudes) that pose harm. Relatedly, the association afforded by features such as the "For You" page may contribute to the formation of new social networks that share these views and unintentionally amplify them to the detriment of other users and social groups. In designing spaces for connection and social support, potential consequences such as facilitating authentic expression of hostile ideologies must be taken into account and is an area for future work. This is not to say that designing with authenticity in mind is without merit, but to instead highlight the additional components of platform design and context, such as contend moderation and policy development, that are influential in this regard.

5.3 Limitations

In considering how the norm of authenticity is supported by TikTok's features, affordances, and users, this paper takes a narrow view of the platform. There are certainly additional aspects of TikTok that differentiate it from other platforms, such as a young user base, that further shape social norms, expectations, and perceptions of the platform. In other words, the factors we identified may not fully account for the formation and perpetuation of authenticity as a norm of self-expression, and future research could explore the intersections among anonymity, association, and content modality in more depth. We also did not explore a prominent expression norm of TikTok, the mimetic use of "sounds" by multiple users and lip-synching, and how the replicability afforded by this feature affects perceptions of authentic self-expression by the creator and audience. Similarly, content creation mechanisms on TikTok afford editability of videos, such that creators can add effects, transitions, and otherwise alter raw footage for posting. Beyond content modality, modes of storytelling likely also impact expectations and perceptions of authenticity on social media and warrant further scholarly consideration. While generalizability is not the goal of in-depth interview studies, an additional limitation of this study is the small number of interview participants, which limits the generalizability of findings. However, participant responses suggest the potential of TikTok for supportive communication; future research could explore this potential by focusing more explicitly on the myriad communities intentionally engaged in destigmatizing, normalizing, and providing mutual support

for difficult experiences on TikTok. Additionally, we did not differentiate between practices of content creation and consumption; future research could explore the distinctions between user experiences of creating TikTok content and consuming content, and how such practices affect perceptions of norms and social support on the platform. Finally, while experiences of harassment did not surface prominently in our data, we acknowledge that comments on TikTok may also facilitate harm via harassment and interpersonal judgment that may be further impacted (amplified or ameliorated) by the video modality of TikTok and visual identification of content creators. We did not screen participants based on positive or negative experiences on TikTok, but suggest that examining experiences of harassment on TikTok and the role of the affordances we identified in this study is an area for future work.

6 CONCLUSION

We draw on users' experiences with TikTok broadly to consider how authenticity, as a self-presentational norm, is learned, constructed, and enacted on TikTok. Drawing on the factors that comprise social context as well as an affordance lens, we identify material factors—the "For You" page, policies allowing pseudonymous usernames, and video modality—and sociotechnical affordances—perceived anonymity (of oneself and one's audience) and association between content—that support normative authenticity on TikTok. We find that these affordances, in combination with a "just be you" attitude, inform user perception of both goofy content and "raw" emotionality as authentic. This range of acceptable emotionality (i.e., from goofy to difficult) suggests that normative authenticity on TikTok may make the platform conducive to both the expression of difficult emotions and experiences leading to social support exchange. Our findings provide preliminary evidence of user comments as a site of norm judgment and sanctioning as well as social support provision. In identifying sociomaterial factors contributing to authenticity on TikTok, this paper illustrates how an affordance lens may be used to trace norm development and perpetuation on social media. We identify avenues for future work, including analysis of how identity and marginality affect perception, judgment, and sanctioning of normative authenticity. We discuss implications of normative authenticity for designing social media for social support.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the participants of this study for sharing their thoughts and experiences with us. We also thank Nadia Karizat, MSc for her contributions to the study and data collection that informs this paper.

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Received January 2021; revised April 2021; accepted July 2021.