

Mental health discourse via young adults on TikTok

A Critical Assessment of Mental Health Discourse among Young Adults on TikTok

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### **Abstract**

In the rapidly evolving digital age, TikTok emerges as a significant platform influencing young adults' perceptions and discourses. This research delves deep into the nuances of how mental health is discussed amongst young adults on TikTok. Despite the recognized relationship between social media and mental health, there exists a large research gap regarding the discourse patterns, especially on newer platforms like TikTok. This study begins to fill that void, setting out to explore more than just the existence of a relationship between social media and mental health, but also the intricacies of the discourse – how it is facilitated, stigmatized, and the role of community-building, education and contrastingly negative elements in the conversation.

Through detailed thematic and content analysis of 120 TikToks using hashtags #mentalhealth #mentalhealthmatters, #DepressionAnxiety, and #MentalIllness and 20 random sampled comments, this research uncovers the multifaceted nature of TikTok as a medium: from sharing personal experiences and seeking advice to challenging the prevalent stigmatization surrounding mental health. The findings shed light on TikTok's potential for both positive and negative influences on mental health discourse, highlighted by instances of misinformation, emotional expression, and the delicate balance between support and negativity in the conversation.

The study's conclusions offer actionable insights for researchers and other academics looking to further analyze discussions on the platform. Additionally, by pinpointing existing limitations and gaps, this research sets the stage for future investigations in this critical area of study.

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## **Introduction**

### **A Critical Assessment of Mental Health Discourse among Young Adults on TikTok**

Mental health and social media have been topics of many discussions and studies, both as individual constructs and collectively as people discuss and study relationships between the two. Because TikTok is such a contemporary topic, there is an ‘insufficient’ amount of research-based data being provided where it relates to mental health discourse amongst young adults. Many studies (e.g. Primack et al., 2017 and Twenge & Campbell, 2018) have pointed to there being a causal relationship between social media use and mental health impacts in young adults but few scholars have probed the discourse on these platforms surrounding mental health, and how it shapes or influences interactions among young adults where stigmatisation, acceptance, and finding community are concerned.

Rather than simply attempting to ascertain if there exists a relationship between the two (whether social media causes mental health illnesses), I was interested in evaluating how the conversation about mental health appears on TikTok. In establishing this preliminary approach, I aimed to fill the void in research where mental health discourse on TikTok is concerned, as well as to provide suggestions for future research where the phenomenon is concerned based on my qualitative research findings. The insights that arrive from this study can be extended to fellow academics looking to explore similar mental health discourse on TikTok.

### **Conceptualization of key terms**

When undergoing research, it is imperative to establish conceptual and contextual through lines because the meanings of terms and concepts tend to differ based on context.

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- Mental health – The World Health Organization (2022), defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Good mental health is a basic human right, and it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.
- Stigma – British sociologist, Imogen Tyler describes stigma in present day society as a corrosive social force by which individuals and communities throughout history have been systematically dehumanised, scapegoated, and oppressed (Tyler, 2020). Tyler describes stigma as being manufactured by people in power; for example, government, media, educational and health institutions to authorise the constant or habitual behaviours supporting inequalities and injustices. She contests the available academic literature, for example, Rüsç et al. (2005) and Pescosolido and Martin (2015), as being more psychological/medical in approach and less humanised and relatable. The available academic literature does not focus on feelings associated with stigma and the people themselves who carry it. Stigma is both psychological and social.
- Discourse – Michael Halliday (1976) describes discourse as a “unit of language larger than a sentence and that which is firmly rooted in a specific context. There are many different types of discourse under this heading, such as academic discourse, legal discourse, media discourse, etc.” (p. 20). In my study, discourse includes: TikTok videos



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posted under select mental health hashtags, the vernacular and messaging used in these videos as well as comments made by other users on these TikTok videos.

### **Literature review**

The topic of mental health has been a long-standing issue and has always been a stigmatised topic despite being universal. However, this is changing with the increased use of social media. Social media is now used as a vehicle for enabling the disclosure of mental health discourse. This has led to the creation of what we conceptualise as mental health discourse on social media. Before even beginning the study, mental health discourse amongst young adults was of the utmost interest to me because I believe young adults are a highly vulnerable demographic where mental health deterioration is concerned. This study takes a close look at mental health discourse among young adults on social media, specifically TikTok, because this platform is currently the fastest growing social media platform (Vogels et al., 2022). TikTok is known for its short-form videos and has been one of the most popular social media platforms in the United States since 2018. But it was during the pandemic that TikTok gained much popularity, with over 850 million app downloads reported in 2020 (Drillinger, 2022). All forms of discourse on TikTok have been examined in hopes of explaining how mental health is discussed on TikTok and to ascertain the level to which this conversation addresses the stigma surrounding the topic.

### **Context**

By means of global context, between 10 and 20 percent of young adults experience a mental disorder (Kieling et al., 2011). Since the development of social media, it can be argued that social media now rivals television and all other forms of mass media to become one of the most used sources of media and information (Yang, Zhang, Cheng, et al., 2023). boyd (2014)

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argues a different view, stating that although technology changes as time progresses, social media mainly provides a place for young people to have meaningful conversations with friends and a non-physical yet public place for them to get together, as young adults are still just trying to understand the world outside their homes.

Social media is a collection of networks that allows people to interact and produce content for their enjoyment and the sharing of information. Social media has grown to be more than a space for socialising and keeping up with friends and family to being a fully integrated medium for commerce, education and almost everything one would need. This has led to social media becoming a veritable clearinghouse of human activity.

However, social media has its drawbacks and limitations, which will be discussed below. Although boyd (2014) believes addiction is too strong a term and that there are other ways to describe young people's interactions with social media such as "flow" and "in the zone", and that the long hours young people spend on social media is mainly a product of parental restrictions and not harmful behaviour, this contradicts the results obtained in other studies. These include Twenge and Farley (2020), who found that hours spent on social media and internet use were more strongly associated with self-harm behaviours, depressive symptoms, low life satisfaction, and low self-esteem than hours spent on electronic gaming and TV watching (p. 5). Girls generally displayed stronger associations between screen media time and mental health indicators than boys (p. 5). The authors also added that frequent Internet users were 166 percent more likely to have clinically relevant levels of depressive symptoms than low users among girls, compared to 75 percent more likely among boys (p. 1).

Similarly, other scholars, such as Ferris et al. (2021) have advanced that research has uncovered young adults as being more susceptible to experiencing addictive consequences of

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social media use. Social media addiction has also been shown to have important ramifications for young adults, including decreased community involvement, decreased academic performance, and increases in relationship problems (Ferris et al., 2021). Owing to this, it is important to assess the potentially negative implications among young adults for social media misuse or overuse when discussing mental health discourse on social media. It is key to look at how young adults engage and leverage the openness found on platforms such as TikTok, and question whether this openness and freedom of speech and expression is used solely for positive outcomes.

Emin (2018) conducted a study on social media overuse and addiction in young adults. The findings yielded by the study revealed that participants' reasons for using social media were lack of friends, the social necessity of social media, feelings of fulfilment, fear of missing out, and the intertwining of social media and daily life. The element that I pay closer attention to is the need for fulfilment, which can be connected to the uses and gratification theory. This theory purports that individuals use social media for different reasons and to fulfil particular needs. I think that there is a thin line between healthy fulfilment of needs and overindulgence or, in this case, too much gratification, which may see mental health discourse on social media having negative impacts.

The studies I've cited above illustrate that there is empirical evidence that social media may have a negative impact on the mental health of young people, especially if there is a misuse or overuse of any of the social media networks. However, the objective of this study is not to assess the causal relationship between social media and mental health, but rather, to provide an analysis of the discourse on social media, specifically TikTok, surrounding and about mental health. My research provides an understanding of young adult mental health discourse on TikTok

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by exploring how TikTok discourse influences perceptions of mental health among young adults and gauges the degree to which TikTok discourse increases or reduces stigmatisation about mental health.

### ***Stigma and online mental health discourse***

Extant literature about mental health discourse on social media generally takes the form of a two-edged sword, with its impacts being both positive and negative. Pavlova and Berkers (2020) opine that social media can help to bring awareness to stigmatised topics, as they give marginalized members of society the possibility to share experiences and voice their discontent. On the other hand, mental health discourse on social media may lead to stigmatization as only some are educated on or share standard views on the topic. As previously mentioned, those that engage in mental health discourse on social media, whether they share positive information and comments, or discourse that can be labelled as stigmatising, all belong to smaller demographics popularly labelled as online communities. All social media platforms, including TikTok, are partitioned into different niches and subgroups called communities (Cao et al., 2013). The discourse found in these communities may provide solace or a source of information for those that may be in need of these discussions.

### ***Social media discourse***

Social media platforms, specifically TikTok, are widely used by the younger demographic across the world; of the 130 million downloads of the application in the U.S., 60 percent of the audience is between the ages of 16-24 (Wallaroo, 2022), and as such, TikTok provides the best medium through which to reach young people to have conversations about topics of the utmost interest and importance, such as politics, culture, and many others. My study focuses on the discourse found on TikTok about young adult mental health.

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When used and leveraged correctly, social media can significantly benefit many people from many aspects of life. Adolescents are one specific demographic that can benefit from social media when it is used correctly and effectively (O'Reilly et al., 2018). A study conducted by Michelle O'Reilly et al. (2018) considered the possible benefits of social media among a sample of adolescents living in the United Kingdom. The young people were surveyed to ascertain their perspective on social media and its apparent benefits and dangers as it relates to mental health.

O'Reilly et al. wrote:

Participants in the study discussed this source of information to maintain positive mental health and to help them cope with stress. Furthermore, they considered how social media, and internet sources, might support and educate about mental illness, citing examples of when they had used it in this way for their own conditions, or those of their peers.

(O'Reilly et al., 2018, p. 3)

This suggests that social media may have served to be beneficial because it provides critical and convenient information for young adults who may be seeking knowledge or information about mental health. Even more so, mental health discourse on social media provides a virtual community and support for young adults to connect with others who may be experiencing similar mental health struggles. According to the authors, the community may prove to be very important when seeking to alleviate the pressures of mental illness. Social media appeared to provide release from stress and was often cited as a relaxation method. It was more likely for young people to meet face to face to be social before social media and before the early 2000s. Therefore, any discussion of mental health promotion via social media needs to be considered against the backdrop of the modern construction of children and childhood, recognizing the changing views of adolescents and the position they occupy in society (O'Reilly et al, 2018).

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The literature illustrates positive potential in having mental health discussed publicly and freely since there is historically a negative connotation and stigma placed on mental health issues, and many people risk not getting the help they need for fear of being judged and ridiculed. Social media presents a medium through which this may be avoided. Social media allows affordances tied to anonymity. Through this feature, many adolescents who choose not to disclose their identities for various reasons, including the fear of retribution, are afforded the opportunity to share, vent and receive information while remaining anonymous (Vornholt & De Choudhury, 2021). According to Vornholt and De Choudhury (2021), students expressed both enthusiasm and concern regarding the utility of this feature. Support for the feature ranged from its ability to allow disclosure around stigmatised topics to promoting honest conversation. They expressed that anonymous accounts eliminate components that could make a person easily identifiable, such as a given name and picture or any requirements that could trigger feelings of inadequacy in users. However, many of the respondents in Vornholt and De Choudhury's student group shared a different perspective. Some of the other interviewed students felt anonymity would lower accountability on sensitive issues, leading to counterproductive outcomes for mental wellness. They also brought up issues with not being able to connect with other users on anonymous social media websites, pointing out that the unknown personal factors and anonymity made it hard to feel or form any emotional connection. In the study conducted by O'Reilly et al. (2018) the young people had a generally positive perspective of social media and acknowledged the benefits in regards to discussing their mental health on the platform, while the student who participated in Vornholt & De Choudhury (2021) acknowledged both the positive and negative stand points of anonymity on social media platforms with regards to lack of personal judgement which also comes with lack of accountability. A significant reason people turn to social media

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for mental health issues is that it fosters genuine and candid conversations, offering benefits to those seeking similar support.

### ***Mental health communication***

Social media is described as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the foundations of Web 2.0 to allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Different forms of social media, such as social networking sites, blogs, content communities, collaborative projects, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds, have been created to idealise the engagement, immediacy, and interactivity that Web 2.0 offers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Smailhodzic et al., 2016). Social media is regarded as an essential tool and has significantly digitalized and changed the world as we know it. One of the more important new roles that social media has assumed is that it is now used as a tool for health communication.

Emily Doherty-Torstrick et al. (2016) opine that on social media, people from different countries, races, and backgrounds freely exchange content, with health being one form. Consumers use the internet to research symptoms and ailments for a range of minor to severe health concerns, make contact with medical professionals, learn medication administration techniques, and fill out online questionnaires pertaining to their health (Doherty-Torstrick et al., 2016; Finney Rutten et al., 2019; Fox & Duggan, 2013; Zhang et al., 2019). Like other pertinent information shared on social media, health information also comes from varied sources and channels, including generalist information platforms, lay users, healthcare professionals, and institutions (Crook et al., 2016; Sahin et al.).

Social media can be leveraged to provide effective and more instantaneous health communication, which would have otherwise not been the case with more traditional platforms. I

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have known for some time that health communication on social media is not only limited to physical well-being, but the scope is broadened to include mental health, as mental health is a comprehensive determinant of overall wellness in human beings.

Poor mental health conditions in young people are soaring to alarming new heights; one example of this is shown by the rate of youth experiencing Major Depressive Episodes (MDE) increasing from 11.93 percent in 2017 to 12.63 percent in 2018 (Mental Health America, 2019). Furthermore, according to an article by Twenge et al. (2019), the rate of individuals reporting symptoms consistent with major depression in the prior 12 months increased by 52 percent in American adolescents from 2005 to 2017 (from 8.7% to 13.2%) and 63 percent in young adults aged 18 to 25 from 2009 to 2017 (from 8.1% to 13%). There was also a dramatic increase in young adults experiencing severe psychological distress in the previous 30 days from 2008 to 2017 (from 7.7% to 13%). The rate of young adults with suicidal thoughts or other suicide-related outcomes increased by 47 percent from 2008 to 2017.

The growing prevalence of mental illness among young people and their predominant presence on social media platforms could provide a favourable outcome since they are able to form communities on these platforms, namely TikTok, and are able to share experiences and receive advice about their conditions from professionals and their peers. The important role that social media platforms now play in providing safe spaces for peer support and information is increasingly commonplace and equally undeniable. Naslund et al. (2016) describe social media as a system offering mutual giving and receiving where individuals who have endured the difficulties of mental illness receive hope and friendship and can offer support to others facing similar challenges. Initial studies exploring the use of online self-help forums among individuals with serious mental illnesses have found that individuals with schizophrenia appeared to use



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these forums for self-disclosure and sharing personal experiences, in addition to providing or requesting information, describing symptoms, or discussing medication (Haker et al., 2005).

All forms of mental health discussion and communication that takes place within TikTok and other platforms play a part in constructing mental health discourse on social media and influence the way we see mental health as a phenomenon and how we talk about it. Mental health has traditionally been a taboo topic because there has been a negative stigma attached to it. This stigma may lead to people not feeling confident or safe enough to seek help for their conditions out of fear of being judged or treated differently by others.

According to literature on the topic, social media can be used as an effective tool in reducing stigma and discrimination about mental health. Betton et al. (2015) share a vital example of how mental discourse can be leveraged on social media in the fight against mental health stigmatisation. The authors provide a striking illustration of how social media can be used by people with mental health problems to challenge stigma through a protest on Twitter that took place in September 2013. Thousands of people who were offended by a 'mental patient' Halloween costume advertised on the website of UK supermarket Asda's George clothing collection tweeted to show their disapproval. The topic went viral, with hundreds of tweets made quickly and across social networks. The story was the lead item on the national news the next day, with mainstream media sourcing their information from Twitter. Asda and other retailers removed the costumes for sale, apologised, and made donations to England's 'Time to Change' anti-stigma campaign (Betton et al., 2015).

This is a profound example of the potential power of social media and is an indicator that not only is there growing discourse on social media about mental health, which points to the fact that people are now more freely speaking about the matter, but this discourse can have positive

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results. I have observed that many young adults turn to social media to either use the platforms to share experiences and advice or to partake of others' input silently or leaving comments, altogether contributing to mental health discourse on social media. TikTok, in particular, has provided a platform for many people to be able to voice their views and experiences on mental health in quick and creative ways.

Whether it be TikTok trends, campaigns geared toward mental health, or the many hashtags that are intended to spread awareness about mental health or breaking barriers erected by the stigma surrounding mental health, social media channels are increasingly used by anti-stigma programmes to share their work and influence public attitudes (Betton et al., 2015). For example, New Zealand's 'Like Minds, Like Mine' Facebook page entitled 'Stigma Watch' allows members to post and discuss media articles of concern because of their stigmatising content, thereby providing a space for conversation. 'Beyondblue', Australia's national depression and anxiety initiative, uses the hashtag #SmashTheStigma whenever stories of hope and recovery are posted and have led to others using the hashtag to share anti-stigma efforts (Betton et al., 2015).

An abundance of hashtags and campaigns geared towards mental health discourse can similarly be found on TikTok, and they encourage youth to speak up about their struggles with their mental health or even to take precautionary measures to prevent mental deterioration and strain. These hashtags include #traumatok #mentalhealthmatters #endthestigma #mensmentalhealth #womensmentalhealth #mentalwellness and a multiplicity of other hashtags all geared towards encouraging free and open mental health discourse on the platform. The hashtag #mentalhealth, in particular, has amassed 20 billion views as of 2022 (Amato, 2022). TikTok has now become a platform for thousands of healthcare professionals, including

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psychiatrists, therapists, and mental health advocates, who use the app's widespread reach to talk to audiences about everything from depression to ADHD (Drillinger, 2022).

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

The theoretical lens through which TikTok and mental health discourse on TikTok is assessed in this thesis include affordance theory, Imogen Tyler's stigma theory, and the uses and gratifications theory. Using affordance theory, boyd (2014) explains that the features and properties of an environment, in this case, particular technologies, enable the possibility of certain actions by young adults. The uses and gratifications theory advances the idea that people use the media, in this case, TikTok, for different reasons but all beneficial to them and for their own purposes and gratification. According to Scherr and Wang (2021), research has revealed that TikTok has had such a meteoric rise due to the new concept and means of interaction that it provides its users. TikTok's algorithm continues to present new trends and new creative means of expression that was not the case for other social media platforms.

Gallagher (2021) views TikTok as a source of support and empowerment for those struggling with mental health matters. She opines that TikTok appears to be helping to remove the stigma placed on mental health and mental health conditions because it sheds more light on what they look like and highlights the fact that many people face similar struggles. Someone may not know they have a problem until they see another person experiencing something similar, and then realise this is something that other people deal with and something they can get help for (Gallagher, 2021). Gallagher (2021) describes the interactions and discourse about mental health on TikTok, wherein she opines that people with certain disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), record their rigid routines and rituals that they undergo every day. There are others who face depression and everything that comes with it, and they share their experiences

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on TikTok, which serves to raise awareness and show others that they are not alone. She speaks to the familiarity that can be found on the platform by asking, “ever wondered if you've ever experienced a panic attack? You can find that on TikTok, too, and it's served up alongside actual mental health experts doling out advice” (Gallagher, 2021).

Gallagher’s statements, as well as many other observations above, bring to the fore the possibility that TikTok discourse can be instrumental to not only breaking the stigma surrounding mental health, but also might play a pivotal role in providing information that could possibly save lives. Many people share their experiences and what they do when they have depressive episodes or other failings with their mental health. This information may come from everyday people with mental health concerns or those who are advocates of the same. There are also trained professionals on the platform who share research-based advice, but not every discourse or bit of information shared on TikTok is credible, which sets the stage for the matter of verification and credibility to be discussed.

### ***Dangers of user generated information***

Abbasi and Liu (2013) posit that social media provides useful information, but one pressing problem is to distinguish true information from misinformation and rumours. In many cases, social media data is user-generated and can be biased, inaccurate, and subjective. Furthermore, some people use social media to spread rumours and misinformation. Abbasi and Liu (2013) further explain by stating that it is easier to check for and ensure credibility of more traditional or conventional media sources as opposed to social media. The online credibility issue lies in the fact that those sharing information can do so anonymously or by providing a username; hence, removing the need for accountability. In the case of conventional media sources, such as newspapers and magazines, the owners and publishers take responsibility to fact

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check information prior to publication because they can be held accountable for spreading misinformation. The same cannot be said about TikTok, wherein not every account or TikTok user who posts about mental health and engages in other related discourse is credible. This form of discourse can prove to be detrimental to those who cannot differentiate between credible and false information about mental health.

It is evident that social media and TikTok discourse about mental health is increasing in prevalence and is perceived to have a plethora of benefits where mental health communication, providing support, and empowerment is concerned. However, there may be drawbacks as not all mental health discourse found on social media is accurate, positive or helpful. My study explores whether mental health discourse on TikTok is beneficial to breaking stigma and what that process looks like.

### ***Misinformation and information seeking online***

A study was conducted in the United States to determine the internet-based health information-seeking behaviour of children and adolescents ages 12-14 years old (Maitz et al., 2020). This study focused on examining the ways in which children and teens utilized the internet to gain knowledge and information regarding health information. According to Maitz et al. (2020), “very few children and teens actually know how to find accurate information from reliable sources, although they’re surrounded by smartphones, tablets, and computers and know how to search the internet for almost any information” (p.1).

Safe internet and social media use are not something that children and teens are often taught, and this results in them taking what they view on websites and through social media to be the truth. This issue is not limited to this age group; many young adults and adults fall prey to this as well. The aim of this internet-based health information-seeking study was to “assess how

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children and adolescents rate their internet-based health literacy and how their actual literacy differs from their ratings” (Maitz et al., 2020, p.1), and included a workshop that was attended by 14 boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 14 (Maitz et al., 2020).

In 2015, 82.8% of adolescents in the United States reported internet use of one to four hours per day (Maitz et al., 2020). The results from the internet-based health information-seeking behaviour study included that “all students indicated that they know how to find helpful health resources on the internet. In contrast, their answers regarding the availability of health resources on the internet suggested that they did not know which resources were available...” (Maitz et al., 2020, p. 4). There were no notable differences found between the results of boys in the study compared to the girls (Maitz et al., 2020).

Internet and media safety and the knowledge of reliable available resources is a significant issue for internet users, and especially for children and adolescents. Maitz et al. call for additional research and knowledge-based teaching on this topic with this demographic so that they remain safe online and knowledgeable about which websites and information to trust. Overall, the results from this study indicate that children and teens in the United States believe that they are safer online than they truly are.

### ***Health information seeking behaviour***

"Health Information Seeking Behaviour (HISB) is commonly known as a process of gathering information about health" (Basch et al., 2018, p. 1094). HISB can be used to describe the behaviour of individuals who turn to TikTok for mental health information. With a worldwide population of 8 billion people, 3.0 billion regularly access the Internet (Basch et al., 2018). In the past, information about health was limited to visiting medical professionals. However, with the use of the Internet, research suggests that this influences HISBs (Basch et al.,

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2018). "When individuals engage in HISB, they have a variety of information at their disposal that is easily accessible, available, and free of cost" (Basch et al., 2018, p.1094). With the advances in technology and the use of social media, individuals can easily access information about health and medical issues by simply doing a quick search online, which provides immediate gratification for whatever need for information they have. Therefore, HISB can be viewed from a theoretical perspective of uses and gratification, where the need for health information is satisfied through search engines or internet applications. Whether that information is accurate and reliable is another story. Still, the available information is free to access for those who are seeking it. This includes social media applications such as TikTok which are free to download and can be accessed anywhere that an internet connection is available.

Basch et al. (2018) examined the Health Information Seeking Behaviour of college students at a public university in New Jersey, USA. The aim of this research study was " (1) to identify and assess the sources college students use when exercising HISB; and (2) to examine perceptions and behaviours regarding adoption of online tools" (p.1095). For this study, a questionnaire was developed and presented to a sample of college students in New Jersey.

There were five main parts or sections of this study. The first section included examining the demographics of the sample students. This included determining the students' age, gender, race, and other identifying factors. The second section included information regarding how these college students went about finding information regarding health and wellness. The third section examined the students' Internet and social media usage patterns. The fourth section attempted to determine the accuracy of the information provided in previous sections. Finally, in the fifth and final section, "respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on if the number of followers and/or who is within the same network influences the accuracy of information

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presented, and if the Internet and social media provide helpful resources for health information" (Basch et al., 2018, p. 1095).

There were a total number of 258 students who completed the questionnaire (Basch et al., 2018). The findings showed significant differences between the results of females and males. For example, "females were more likely to use the Internet for health information, to consult a health or medical professional and to confirm the health information they find with a health or medical professional (p.1094). Results also showed differences among females and males regarding time spent on social media, with females reporting higher usage time. There were also discrepancies found between white students and non-white students. According to Basch et al. (2018), "non-white students were significantly more likely to often use the Internet to find health information, while white students reported spending significantly less time on the Internet and social media" (p.1094).

The findings from this study concluded that the majority of students in the sample trusted the health information found on the Internet for the most part (Basch et al., 2018). However, there were differences between their opinions on the Internet in general and social media information. "While 53% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the Internet provides helpful resources for health information, only 14% agreed or strongly agreed that social media provides helpful resources for health information" (p.1097). According to Basch et al. (2018), "...college students found information on the Internet to be helpful, and reportedly, the Internet is being used to self-diagnose medical issues" (p.1098). The use of the internet and social media to self-diagnose medical issues is certainly problematic in certain situations, and one should not rely solely on information online to receive a diagnosis for their issues. However, there is also the factor of access to medical health professionals that may be an issue or a barrier for individuals



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in receiving accurate and reliable information from a professional who can personally diagnose their issues or cause for concern.

Overall, according to Basch et al. (2018), "the results show that college students were more likely to visit the Internet for health information than they were a health or medical professional" (p.1097). The results from this study certainly do not represent the whole population, and additional research needs to be conducted in order to properly determine health information seeking behaviours among college students. However, this study does provide a good glimpse into Internet and social media use among college students in the US in 2018 and the trends in health information seeking behaviours.

***Why is discourse about mental health on social media important?***

Support groups found online and on social media, in particular, have become an increasingly popular resource for those who experience mental and behavioural issues/challenges. These resources provide readily accessible and valuable sources of information and support. A noteworthy driving factor behind the use of these resources found on social media for mental health concerns is the fact that they encourage open and honest discourse, which proves to be beneficial to those in need of the same. Self-disclosure acts as an important factor where healing is concerned and has been proven to improve physical and psychological well-being (Pavalanathan & De Choudhury, 2015).

Online discourse, including that found on social media, has become increasingly important as we now live in a digitalized world where a significant percentage of people turn to online sources for news, information, and communication. I agree with arguments made by Magnan (2008) in which she advanced the idea that online discourse is of tremendous importance today because of the seismic shifts in the ways we communicate. She opines that the

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way we communicate influences how we learn and how we process knowledge, and online discourse influences societal development. She argues that online discourse and communication has a significant impact on most societal requirements, such as learning. Online discourse proves to be helpful when learning languages, for example (Magnan, 2008).

Taking these statements by Magnan (2008) into consideration and against the backdrop of previously cited studies, it may be argued that online discourse, and specifically that found on social media platforms like TikTok, plays an important role influencing the socialisation of mental health among young adults. Online discourse influences political views and opinions on other institutions. My intention in this study is to uncover ways in which the power or influence that social media discourse has can be transplanted to address stigmatisation and other key elements under the topic of young adult mental health.

### ***Positive and Negative Impacts of TikTok Affordances***

Looking at the information provided by Basch (2018) on HISB occurring using the internet paired with the discussion of online discourse on mental health of today's society by Magnan (2008), an opportunity is provided to explore whether the openness of discourse on social media has positive or negative impacts. The first point that I would like to raise under this topic is that of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment. There is a consistent relationship across studies between cyberbullying and depression among young people (Hamm, Newton, Chrisholm et al., 2015). I think that this could be a result of the openness and freedom of speech found on social media that many scholars speak about so positively. Sharing such important parts of their personal lives on social media opens individuals to vulnerabilities (Stoller, 2013). The ways in which individuals can be bullied on such platforms has become limitless.

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This ties back to anonymity. While it protects those suffering with mental illnesses, it also protects individuals doing the bullying. This same anonymity makes it difficult to punish offenders, and bullying is encouraged by the lack of consequences. Even though individuals can freely share their experiences with mental illnesses and provide or receive support, this same openness may not always be used positively and reinforces my previously raised idea that social media and social discourse act as a double-edged sword, owing to the fact that cyberbullying is just as significant a product of mental health discourse on social media as is support and community.

TikTok user behaviour can be analysed using theoretical frameworks such as uses and gratification theory and affordances theory. The uses and gratifications theory focuses on how individuals identify that they have a specific need, and their steps taken to actively fulfil that need. There has been a growing need today to fight stigma, and social media is being used as an instrument in this fight. However, as we see with most aspects of social media, fighting stigma also comes with both positive and negative effects that must also be mentioned and accounted for. The affordances theory, another focal point of our discussion, delves into the ways an environment or tool offers specific capabilities or affordances. In essence, it postulates how certain features or characteristics of an environment or apparatus can facilitate or constrain potential actions, thereby influencing how individuals interact with or utilize them.

### **Uses and gratification theory**

As I mentioned earlier in this literature review, people use different media for different reasons and with different ends in mind. Rubin (2002) further explains this notion by stating that uses and gratification is a theoretical approach that looks at how individuals engage in actively

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seeking ways to fulfil their needs. The key arguments at work in the uses and gratifications theory are that media users actively make decisions regarding how to satisfy their needs, people's psychological and sociological build influences those choices, and that media competes with other sources of need fulfilment, which may have more influence than the media when examining possible effects or consequences (Rubin, 2002).

The uses and gratifications theory can be used to explain social media discourse about mental health in young adults as it can be argued that many people turn to social media to find or provide solace, support, or information about mental health. The need to share or receive is being met by these platforms, namely TikTok. In agreement with Rubin (2002), I think that the fulfilment of the need for information is being met. In a study done by Whiting and Williams (2013), three of the uses and gratifications themes surrounding the use of social media included information seeking, expression of opinion, and information sharing. The authors found that 80 percent of participants mentioned information seeking, 56 percent expression of opinion, and 40 percent information sharing. Therefore, due to the large number of people using social media to seek information, this relatively new medium of communicating and sharing information can play an integral role in the healing through sharing experiences, treatments, and other useful information for leading a healthier life where mental health is concerned.

Interestingly, there have been campaigns across several social media networks that encourage people to use social media less frequently, stating that social media is "not real life". These campaigns are geared towards addressing internet and social media addiction in young people. Social media addiction and campaigns centred around the same are an interesting element of the mental health discourse on TikTok and can be viewed through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory. Ferris, Hollenbaugh, and Sommer (2021) argue that given the

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prevalence of social media and its potential integration into users' daily lives, young adults may be more at risk of addictive consequences of social media use. A study by Zhang (2022) found that Chinese youth with social anxiety, who are lonely, or have decreased wellbeing were more susceptible to developing a TikTok addiction. These factors were also related to escapist behaviours, which also led to TikTok addiction. TikTok is a way to overcome or escape their daily lives or fears, enabling them to find distraction, make friends, and find a place of belonging. Having taken into consideration previously cited studies, I think that this increased integration of social media into young adults' daily lives, for reasons or needs they may be seeking to fulfil, inclusive of finding information or support, can also have negative impacts as there can be cases of misuse, overuse, and misinformation.

This review has offered an overview of mental health discourse on the social media platform TikTok and has explored whether it provides a favourable environment for individuals to learn and have discussions about mental illnesses, and share to their experiences with it. In addition to this, I have set the stage for studying mental health discourse on TikTok. However, a number of studies demonstrate that the increasing hours spent on social media have been linked to several mental health conditions, and an alarming increase in mental health conditions in youth in America (Twenge & Farley, 2020; Mental Health America, 2019). There is not only a concern of overuse but also one of misuse since TikTok is a social media platform and not held to a high credibility standard as print, television or radio journalism. Some research findings outline that when used correctly, young adults can benefit from social media, finding a non-judgmental, supportive community to have mental health discourse with, or to learn from individuals and peers (O'Reilly et al., 2018) and with instant and humorous content that can be relatable and easier to make emotional connections with. According to O'Reilly et al. (2018),

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there is a general acceptance on social media platforms that mental health is no longer stigmatized, and that it has become easier for young adults to open up about mental health struggles thereby alleviating some of the pressures, stresses, and labels that generally come with it. My research evaluates how stigma is addressed on TikTok. TikTok communities have been known to come together in the past to effect change and protest the stigma and offensive content and products surrounding mental health issues, with online protesting and movements sometimes in the form of hashtags (Betton et al., 2015). These studies have begun to provide insight into how TikTok is also a place where you can find doctors and mental health experts sharing information, discussing mental illness and giving advice (Gallagher, 2021).

Researchers currently know relatively little about the different ways in which social media is used to help people with mental health illnesses. My study begins to fill the gap in the literature by providing a better understanding of TikTok users' behaviours and factors related to them using the platform successfully to deal with mental illnesses, then examining how successful and unsuccessful users use the platform is critical. Future research can investigate how users who have used TikTok successfully to find a supportive online community find credible advice and information that helped to manage their mental health issues.

## **Stigma**

This study seeks to explore whether mental health discourse on TikTok is beneficial to breaking stigma and what that process looks like. However, before one seeks to explore mental health and stigma as it relates to young adults and social media, a deeper understanding of stigma and its ramifications must be established. In order to understand the current discourse surrounding mental health, we need to gain insight on its history and the themes and theories that

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encompass it. According to Tyler (2020), stigma has been used as a political tool by government and media to create social group prejudice, to deliberately make certain groups undesirable due to class, race or colour. Overall, stigma is used to create and perpetuate social inequalities. Tyler argues that stigma is used by capitalist governments and leaders as a weapon to increase social division, making it easier for the stigmatised population to be seen as other and less than.

Tyler (2020) argues that stigma in fact functions as a form of power- and like many other types of power, when one possesses it, another falls victim. Tyler (2018) discusses Goffman's four claims regarding stigma. These four claims can be summarized follows: stigma is a perspective; we combat the effects of being stigmatised by using strategies of identity management; historically speaking, stigma is specific in its forms; and stigma functions as power. She writes about how the existing literature and anti-stigma movements focus on blaming the victims, encouraging them to overcome the stigma barriers and doesn't hold society, government or leaders accountable. Similar to the socio-political effects that stigma poses as explained by Tyler, young adults that face stigma due to their mental health or for having mental health conditions may have been deemed undesirable to others. Social media, and TikTok in particular, may play a role in reducing the negative impacts that stigma may pose.

Depending on your use of the platform and content you engage with, the presence of mental health-related videos occurring on one's TikTok feed may be rather frequent, which provides a sense of normalcy and understanding surrounding these issues and the number of people who are living with them. It is a key human need and desire to feel as though we are seen and known; therefore, by repeatedly viewing videos on the TikTok platform that discuss issues related to ones we may face ourselves, provides us with the sense that maybe someone else does

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understand. As Tyler (2018) says, “shattering stigma on mental health starts with simple conversations” (p.730).

Tyler and Slater (2018) studied the Heads Together movement created by the British royals Princes William and Harry and Princess Catherine, which was formed to end the stigma surrounding mental health. Their use of websites and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram along with their use of hashtags, #oktosay and #thereforme, encouraged people to publicly share their experiences, which can be likened to what takes place on TikTok with the use of hashtags based on mental health.

However, this phenomenon may present itself as a double-edged sword wherein Tyler and Slater (2018) share how these anti-stigma campaigns led to the forming of other organisations which cautioned stigmatised individuals about sharing their story since it would be searchable on the internet. This is so because the story would last forever and affect their future, job opportunities, leasing, loans and may lead to the same stigmatisation they were trying to avoid/fight. These anti-stigma organisations cautioned others that the mental struggles of princes and famous individuals may be well received but it may not be the same for less renowned members of society. This is an example of stigma and its power. Individuals living with being stigmatised are being held under the power that says that if they share their experiences, they will suffer consequences due to this. Limiting one’s ability to share their struggles and experiences- especially concerning mental health issues- certainly poses a detrimental effect on their mental health and overall wellbeing.

In addition to stigmatization being an issue that affects the general population, there are certain groups that are disproportionately affected by stigmatization and its harmful effects. One of the groups that are disproportionately represented are Black individuals and groups (Tyler,



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2020). Along with the stigma that already accompanies living with mental health issues, Black individuals have the stigma of racism on top of that (Tyler, 2020). The stigmatization of Black people through racism includes the reduction of Black sociological thought (Tyler, 2020). This combination of stigma from racism as well as mental health issues represents the concept of intersectionality, in which various things in one's life work together to either place someone at a disadvantage or an advantage. According to Tyler (2020), stigma functions "as a dehumanizing praxis of subjugation" (p.270). Therefore, people in racialized groups such as Black people, are not only dealing with stigmatization due to the colour of their skin, but also due to the state of their mental health.

Having discussed the uses and gratifications aligned with social media usage as well as the institutionalized stigmatization of mental health in marginalized communities, it is important to provide a supplementary perspective, in this case, the affordance theory that provides an understanding of the functions, benefits and other elements afforded users engaging in mental health discourse by TikTok.

### **Affordance theory**

In addition to the uses and gratifications theory, affordance theory offers a useful approach to studying social media discourse on TikTok from the perspective of the affordance theory. According to Gibson (1979), affordances of the environment are what it offers, provides or furnishes, whether for good or bad. Daily, we are presented with opportunities to interact with things within our environment. The way in which these things appear useful or viewed to have potential to be useful to us are described as affordances (Gibson, 1979). It can also be argued that some of the interactive experiences social media affords are socialization, association,

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collaboration, information sharing, communication, navigability, and personalization (Eshraghian & Hafezieh, 2017). boyd (2014) focuses on four affordances in her research, which include persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability. Although she spoke of social media generally, her four affordances can be used to describe TikTok as well. Persistence and visibility refer to digital permanence, once something is posted to the internet, it will be there forever, and posts being accessible and potentially shared to a large audience. Spreadability and searchability refers to the ease at which posts can be “shared”, “reposted” or “forwarded” to others and searched using search engines and a few key words.

As it pertains to using affordance theory to explain TikTok discourse about mental health in young adults, I argue that these young adults utilize or rely on social media since it affords a community where people can interact socially with those having similar experiences, share and learn things from each other and anyone who takes part in the online conversation. Users can find common ground, similarities and unite for a joint purpose, or common goal. This study aims to discuss TikTok, which affords an easily navigated application, where one simply needs to watch or interact with. This will prompt the application algorithms to tailor a personalised experience for users based on what videos they watch completely, what videos they like, share comment on and what hashtags follow or use watch most (Smith, 2022).

The theoretical framework of affordances, which includes affordance existence, affordance perception, affordance actualization, and affordance effect, can be used to assess the mental health discourse on TikTok. Users realising that they can interact with objects, where there is potential for actions, describes affordance existence (Tang et al, 2018); in this case interacting with TikTok where the potential actions include a platform for mental health discourse. Affordance perception is when users realise what may or may not be possible

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(Norman, 1980). TikTok is a web application, which means it isn't physical and depends on perceived affordance. Affordance actualization, according to Strong et al. (2014), is when advantage is taken of one or more affordances by actors using technology to come to a definite result in support of organisational goals. This goal-oriented behaviour leads to action and the last step of affordance effect, which creates more of a cycle, where actions, reactions and feedback lead to adjustment of affordance actualization for different kinds of outcomes. A goal of making a post on TikTok, the mental process and the steps to be taken, for example, in the making of a post with the intention to share information regarding a mental health experience/illness would follow affordance actualization. The action of posting on TikTok and the feedback, whether it be positive or negative would, in this case, be affordance effect, which would lead back to affordance actualization where one would then adjust according to your actualization based on the feedback you received to get a better outcome or reach another goal.

Of course, there are critiques to affordance theory, as there are in many theories. Affordance theory does not view opportunities or affordances as solely physical or psychological and they are also viewed as neither objective nor subjective (Gibson, 1979). Affordance does not take into consideration the thought process or the intentions behind needs. So, while TikTok affords users the opportunity to post a great many things, affordance theory does not account for the different reasons behind posting a mental health awareness video versus a dancing video.

The existing scholarship on the topic all address different elements and perspectives of mental health and mental health discourse on social media, and specifically TikTok. The scholarly conversation mental health discourse is highly nuanced and as such it is important to discuss each idea in an attempt to set the stage for discussing questions that my study has sought

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to answer. The following chapter provides a comprehensive outline of my methods and methodology which are indicators of my overall thought process as I conducted this research.

### **Research questions:**

Having set a background and context for the study in addition to reviewing existing literature on the topic, I have established that the following are questions that my study will set out to answer in attempts of contributing to the scholarship on mental health discourse on TikTok.

### **The research questions that guided this study are:**

**RQ1: What does mental health discourse on TikTok look like?**

**RQ2: How is mental health discourse on these platforms encouraged or discouraged?**

**RQ3: How is TikTok challenging stigma around/about mental health?**

## **Methodology and Methods of Analysis**

This chapter critically examines the various alternatives of, and gives acceptable rationale for, all methodological decisions made in this thesis by thoroughly outlining the research process in light of the study aim, research objectives, and research questions.

In my effort to satisfy the requirements of this study's main research question and answering the secondary research questions, I declare my pragmatic nature and decision-making process as it regards my methods and provide sufficient explanation for the choice of the combined uses and gratifications and affordance theory perspectives. The employment of the qualitative approach adopted in this study is justified. Among the available qualitative data collection methods, the chapter proceeds with providing detailed rationale for the choice of thematic content analysis. A section on content analysis design follows, addressing discussion

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strategy and approach, a technical walkthrough of TikTok is undertaken to provide an illustration of the ins and outs of the app and create a better understanding of its display methods and aids in substantiating my chosen method of analysis. The chapter proceeds to describe the choice of the sampling method, as well as the actual sampling process employed. Further on, the chapter provides adequate information on the content analysis, the number of TikToks analysed and what element of each TikTok that was chosen for data collection, management, coding, and analysis, as well as briefly discussing saturation, including several other considerations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues related to the generalizability and transferability of findings, and with a discussion on the methodological limitations of this study.

### **Research Aims, Objectives, and Questions**

The literature review revealed that there is a substantial number of studies that set out to describe the impact of social media on mental health. However, the majority of these studies focus on a causal relationship between the two as well as employing a micro approach to the issue. Additionally, there are not adequate studies that focus on TikTok. Most studies reviewed focus on whether social media worsens or improves mental health among a wide demographic of users. Despite the apparent benefits of taking this approach and trying to provide preventative or reactionary advice, the picture or idea of how young adults use TikTok, particularly, to discuss the topic of mental health and whether or not there is a perpetuation of stigma surrounding mental health, remains unclear.

Moreover, the gap in the literature is further deepened by the fact that adoption levels and usage behaviour of social media are in a state of constant change (Universal McCann 2008; 2009; 2010; Madden et al. 2013; Dewey 2014). Therefore, it seems that there is a need for a

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comprehensive study that focuses on user behaviour on TikTok as it relates to young adult mental health. My study focuses on this by painting a picture of the discourse of users on the social media application and focuses a great deal on all elements that contribute to the discourse.

The research aim of this study is to explore the use of TikTok to facilitate mental health conversation, whether it comes in the form of knowledge and information sharing, sharing experiences, providing support, sharing opinions, chastising, bullying and all forms of behaviour or discussion that would form the overall discourse on the application and track the impact if any, that it has on the stigmatization of the issue of mental on the application.

To achieve this aim, the study pays keen attention to users' interactions on TikTok during all stages of the discourse process, ranging from the sentiments shared by the content creator, the comments left by users and as well as evaluation metrics. Evaluation metrics in this context cover the number of likes, shares, comments, and saves that each TikTok received as I believe that these metrics also provide an added layer to the exchange and the discourse being had on the platform.

Following the establishment of the research aim, the following objectives have been formulated:

1. To explore young adults' TikTok usage and gratification as well as their behaviour.
2. To reveal the functions of TikTok within the online mental health conversation.
3. To propose a theory that will act as a framework for understanding the discourse on TikTok regarding mental health and possibly stigmatisation.
4. To start the conversation regarding the phenomena and encourage future studies on the topic.

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### **Research Paradigms**

Paradigms in research were introduced and normalised in philosophy of science vocabulary by Thomas Kuhn (1962). A paradigm in the research community is a theory, along with self-awareness shared by its members (Given, 2008), on the best way to go about conducting research. These theories are made up of a set of assumptions that researchers follow, these paradigms influence researchers' methods and perspective, and how best to carry out their particular research in their specific discipline. There are many paradigms, in social sciences positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, critical theory, participatory/cooperative, and pragmatism are the most cited (Fotis, 2015). Paradigms address personal beliefs, values and morals in research; these are called axiology. The axiology of each theory includes ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology studies how we determine the existence of things and how they are classified; it attempts to establish the reality of abstract contents. According to Kaushik and Walsh (2019) and Fotis (2015), ontology is the assumptions about the nature of reality. Epistemologies are assumptions about the source of our knowledge, how we continue to gain this knowledge, and how we perceive the world. Epistemology also covers the relationship between the researcher/knower and what is known or can be known (Fotis, 2015). Methodology is the way in which knowledge is gained in the world and isn't only a general or singular guideline on how to go about conducting research, but it uses ontology and epistemology to formulate the guidelines to collect data and analyse it (Fotis, 2015). Each paradigm has a different viewpoint on ontology, epistemology and methodology.

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My personal worldview influences my desired research paradigm, which is pragmatism because it maintains that knowledge is both produced and constructed via the reality we encounter in the world we inhabit (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009b).

Having established my research paradigms allows me the opportunity to segue into outlining my reasoning behind conducting my study in keeping with the qualitative school of thought.

### **Qualitative approach justification**

The decision to employ the use of the qualitative research method depended on the specifications of the study as it relates to aims, objectives and research questions. My study does not set out to test an existing theory nor test causal relationship between two or more factors but aims to paint a picture and create an illustration or explanation of a phenomenon. Therefore, it does not take a deductive route or other processes that would necessitate the use of a quantitative approach.

In order to give an explanation and description of TikTok users' experiences and their environment, the study aims to investigate phenomena from a broad perspective in an effort to contribute to the development of a theory. Towards this goal, the discussion on mental health discourse on TikTok did not focus on any specific model or theory, but rather, as Creswell (2009) and Holloway and Wheller (2010) suggest, the theories of uses and gratifications along with affordances theory provided a general orientating lens for the research.

Qualitative research is characterised by almost always using words, sentences, pictures, etc. This strategy is preferred when the aim is to produce a rich and in-depth picture regarding some aspect of the social world (Leavy, 2014). The qualitative research strategy was chosen



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because the study requires a deep description of mental health discourse on TikTok. A study of this nature requires a multiplicity of key elements to be considered and explored in order to produce comprehensive findings and conclusions.

The elements that have been brought to the fore include the way in which young adults communicate their experiences and perspectives of mental health on TikTok, the vernacular they employ, and the method of delivery that they choose to do so. For example, I analyse whether they try communicating their messages using satire or in a more serious manner. In addition to messaging and delivery styles, the study takes a close look at comments left on each TikTok. I believe that taking into consideration comments on the TikTok videos used in the sample provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the discourse surrounding mental health because this enacts a conversation between the poster of the TikTok and those who engage with the content.

Qualitative research is known for its ability to take an in-depth and personal look at something or a phenomenon in its natural environment and aiming to interpret it as well as to give it some sort of significance and meaning (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Taking into consideration all elements of the study, the chosen design type is exploratory. The objective of the study is to explore mental health discourse on social media and begin to understand the influence that it may have on the stigmatization of mental health. Qualitative research proves a valuable asset especially in this study where the understanding of mental health discourse on social media needs to be comprehensive and contextualized.

The study of discourse on TikTok was conducted by gathering data from randomly selected and anonymized TikTok videos from which transcriptions were created and emerging themes and other key patterns taken into consideration, ultimately allowing for a theory or

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theories to be drafted from the findings of the study. In addition to the aforementioned method, the study employs the use of the walkthrough method to further explore young adult mental health on TikTok.

As previously mentioned, the affordances that TikTok provides may have some bearing on the users' motivation for their utilization of the app and may play a role in shaping their creative processes and interactions. Therefore, this necessitated undertaking a step-by-step walkthrough of TikTok as a whole then before delving deeper into setting out to explain user behaviour in the TikTok videos chosen for review throughout the study. The walkthrough method also serves as a guide to exploring and explaining cultural cues and references used/found within the platform in order to paint a picture of users' motivation. Below, I have conducted a technical walkthrough of the platform that will be later supplemented by deeper analysis of conversations happening on the platform.

### **Data Collection**

This study used qualitative data collecting techniques and is grounded on a qualitative epistemological premise that emphasizes the value of situating the research within a particular social context. It was important to consider both the social production of these settings and the distinctive characteristics that participants and observers established in relation to them.

Data was drawn from existing scholarship on the subject matter as well as thematic content analysis done on TikTok videos. These two methods represent my primary and secondary data sources. The study constituted of drawing data from a purposive sample of 120 participants over a roughly two-month period starting from April to May who were all identified as TikTok users engaging in mental health conversation. I discuss details of the sample below.

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The study is informed by a research focus to evaluate the mental health discourse on TikTok as well as determining its impacts on the historically stigmatized topic. The purpose of analysing data from TikTok is to reveal, among other things, the users' behaviour, reactions, thought processes, expressions and overall dialogue. This aids in the understanding of the arguments surrounding the perpetuation of mental health communication online.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis as a research method began within the realm of communications research and has since become one of the most popular and important communications research methods (Krippendorff, 1989). Content analysis seeks to analyse data within a specific context in view of the meanings someone, a group or a culture attribute to them. Communications, messages and symbols differ from observable events, things, properties or people in that they inform about something other than themselves; they reveal some properties of their distant producers or carriers, and they have cognitive consequences for their senders, their receivers and the institutions in which their exchange is embedded (Krippendorff, 1989).

#### ***Rationale for the selection of content analysis***

The aim and objectives of the study aids in providing a direction or guide for the choice of data collection method employed. Content analysis has been proposed as a data collection method when the researcher seeks to gather data from digital sources much like TikTok and sets out to reveal a range of ideas and explore people's experience and opinions navigating a digital space. Content analysis was deemed ideal for data collection in this study because it allowed me to take an in depth look at all levels of engagement and elements of the dialogue concerning mental health on TikTok.

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Content analysis allowed me to observe and critically assess data and ideas presented by content the TikTok user shared on their platform as well as allowed me the added advantage of assessing comments left on each TikTok, which provided the opportunity to take note of the exchange back and forth. This exchange creates a two-way stream of communication, which is characteristic of a conversation, and allows me to paint a picture of what the conversation or discourse looks like on the application. In conducting the content analysis in this study, elements such as number of likes and shares received by each TikTok post were taken into consideration as they may act as indicators of how deeply a sentiment expressed resonates with others who interact with the post.

### *Limitations of content analysis*

Despite content analysis providing a multiplicity of advantages, there is no perfect data collection method and in keeping with this, there are limitations to this method.

One main limitation of content analysis is the expectation to contribute to social theory. If categories are gathered from material being analysed, findings are not generalizable beyond the given data. If they are derived from a general theory, findings tend to ignore much of the depth and uniqueness of the data in hand. The compromises content analysis seeks are rarely easy ones (Krippendorff, 1989).

### **Research Sample**

In contrast to quantitative research, non-probability samples are frequently used in qualitative research. Instead of placing focus on participants' equal odds of selection, it is preferred that they be chosen based on specific qualities that are relevant to the study's purpose and objectives and enable them to offer rich data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Studying information-rich

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situations produces insights and in-depth comprehension rather than empirical generalisations, as Patton (2002, p. 230) postulates.

The sample examined for the purpose of this research are TikTok posts taken directly from the application, from any gender, race or ethnicity that engages with or shares mental health content. Young adults in the context of the study are inclusive of those who are between the ages of 19-25. Based on the previously discussed demographic information on TikTok that states that the vast majority of users on the platform are between the ages of 18 and 25, we can make the assumption that most user TikToks drafted in the study were between ages of 19 and 25. It is next to impossible to receive information regarding age on the platform. Therefore, I used my judgement to assume whether a user was within the age range based on their physical appearance. Despite 19 being a very ambiguous age in terms of appearance, which made it slightly difficult to judge, I made sure to not use content from anyone that seemed to be younger than 19. The data gathered from this sample is stored and managed using the data processing tool MAXQDA.

This study utilized the purposive sampling technique. In this type of sampling, the researcher chooses the participants based on his or her own judgment, keeping in mind the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2009). It uses the judgment of an expert in selecting cases or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind. The main desire of this study is to explore mental health discourse on TikTok, paint a picture of what this looks like and perhaps determine whether it might impact stigmatization of mental health in a digital space such as TikTok.

The biased nature of a purposive sampling technique will be useful in assessing this because this sampling technique allows for the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a non-random technique that does not need underlying

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theories or a set number of participants (Bernard, 2011). More so, this technique was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study. Owing to this, I chose TikTok content/videos that are closely aligned with the study and are better suited to address the research questions. Being able to purposefully choose my sample allowed me the opportunity to take a more direct look at the phenomenon as opposed to random sampling, which would force me to take a wider or a blanket approach that would prove to be cumbersome to identify themes arising from the TikToks.

Within the context of this study, the sample may be defined as TikTok users that take part in the mental health conversation being had on the platform. Participants in this study were selected on the basis that their TikTok content was posted under the hashtags that I have chosen based on relevance to the study. The TikToks came from the hashtags #mentalhealth #mentalhealthmatters, #DepressionAnxiety, and #MentalIllness.

These specific hashtags were chosen for analysis because they have millions of videos, views and other forms of engagement, hence, providing the opportunity to generate a content-rich study according to (tiktokhashtag.com). I manually selected 30 TikTok videos from each hashtag and the comments made on these videos. These TikToks were posted mostly between 2022 and 2023. The 30 TikTok videos were randomly selected from each hashtag without taking into consideration elements such as the number of likes and shares that each TikTok received as popularity or “virality” may not necessarily be an indicator of data relevant to the study.

In order to ensure randomization and no personal biases whether conscious or unconscious in the selection of TikTok and comments for review, I went to each hashtag on the app and selected every 10th video for review. In addition to this, I selected every 5th comment where comments were not plenty and every 10th comment when handling a more popular post. I also chose the 10 most liked comments, equalling 20 comments for each of the 120 TikToks.

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I conducted a content analysis of the 120 TikTok videos, which ranged from 30 seconds to a minute in duration in addition to reviewing 10 popular comments and 10 random comments posted to these TikTok videos. In total, I analysed 2400 comments. I chose to review 120 TikToks over the span of five weeks because I believed this would allow me to take an in-depth look at the phenomenon without reaching data saturation. Saturation in this context refers to a state where the researcher arrives at a point in the data collection process where he or she begins to hear information being repeated. Hence, there is no longer an opportunity to learn anything new (Seidman, 2006). Data from these TikToks were scraped manually, which proved to be a tedious and labour-intensive task but afforded me the opportunity to submerge myself deeply into the data and gave me a better sense of the dialogue, even before I commenced the coding process. As aforementioned, the coding process took place using MAXQDA. MAXQDA allowed me to assess each line of the transcriptions and assign them codes which were then colour coded which made for ease of grouping when creating themes from the codes. An example of the coding setup can be seen in figure 1 (See the appendix).

### **General walk-through of TikTok**

Please refer to Appendix B for the explanation of the general walk-through of TikTok. This Appendix presents a step-by-step walkthrough of TikTok and explains each of its functions. A solid understanding of the platform should be established in order to understand its affordances as well as the ways in which it facilitates discourse. The walkthrough method, developed by Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2016), offers a structured framework to understand the nuanced aspects of digital platforms. It provides detail into the technological structure, functionalities, and policies of platforms, explaining how they influence user experiences, actions, and content

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sharing. The decision to utilize the walkthrough method in this study stems from its ability to provide a profound insight into TikTok's inherent design principles and features. This method aids in a sound understanding of how the platform's structure may shape and direct mental health discourse, especially amongst young adults.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Bryman and Bell (2015) presented several principles of ethical considerations. These principles are similar to those considered in the process of doing this study. Research participants should not be subjected to any harm or uncomfortable measures whatsoever. The participants (in this case, those who posted the TikToks and those who commented on the selected TikToks) are my primary concern as the researcher and steps have been taken to protect their identities. These steps include avoiding direct quotes and sharing their TikTok handles or usernames in order to ensure as much anonymity as possible. In keeping with this, though TikToks are available for public viewership and may be considered public documents, steps were followed to remove information that may lead to the identification of a user (Wiles, 2013).

Additionally, any type of misleading information, as well as representation of primary data findings in a biased way must be avoided (Bryman and Bell, 2015). I acknowledge that as the researcher, I have a responsibility to the public and therefore must always present accurate and valid information. The responsibility to self describes the need to be mindful of personal security and safety within the field. These principles were followed to not only ensure the validity of the data but also the ethical considerations for all parties involved.

I acknowledge that data presented on Web-based platforms were not published particularly for research purposes. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has produced



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ethical guidelines for online research (Ess and AoIR, 2002; AoIR, 2012) and for treating situations of this nature where a differentiation between public and private information must be established. These principles have been adapted to fit the scope of my study. I did my best to ensure as high a level of anonymity and privacy as possible when studying online communities on TikTok through my content analysis (Beckman, 2005).

Finally, all data gathered for this research have been stored on a password protected device to be destroyed after thesis approval.

### **Analytical methods**

This research employed thematic analysis, supplemented in part by content analysis as the methods for treating the data collected from the TikToks. The main objective of the study is to explore mental health discourse in TikTok and to investigate whether the platform addresses/combats stigma surrounding the topic of mental health. In the field of social sciences, thematic analysis is a simple, reliable, and clear approach of analysis that is frequently used to analyse qualitative research.

This analytical method systematically examines data to identify particular patterns, recurrent themes and expressed or implied meanings. Thematic analysis can be utilized irrespective of theoretical positions and the methodologies that are being employed to carry out the research—a characteristic that makes this method quite convenient when analysing qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2012). There exist two methods of thematic analysis: inductive and deductive. With inductive analysis, the various themes are inductively identified, which means that the study proceeds from specific details to collect information and draws a

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general conclusion from what is observed in the information collected. In this instance, the coding of themes is dependent on what is contained in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

In the case of deductive analysis, the study is guided by specific research questions and a theoretical framework is oftentimes employed. Here, the process of coding the data into identifiable thematic groupings is heavily dependent on the theoretical understandings and position of the researcher. However, this is not only always unique to deductive analysis. Brown and Clarke (2006) explain that with both the inductive and deductive approaches to analysing data, the researcher plays an integral part in identification and selection of the themes.

According to these scholars, an inductive thematic analysis provides a more in-depth explanation of the data when the process involves searching for possible themes. On the other side of the coin, the deductive form of analysis is more effective when the researcher is looking to retrieve a comprehensive understanding of characteristics of the data collected. Following this, the selection of any one type or both forms of thematic analysis will depend on the objectives being pursued in the study.

Unlike the analysis of quantitative data, it is imperative to appreciate that the analysis involved in qualitative studies cannot be simply regarded as a direct method involving precise procedures. Rabiee (2004) puts forward that in some cases, the analysis of the data occurs at the same time as the other steps of data collection and coding. Nonetheless, it proves quite beneficial to follow a set procedure when analysing the data that is collected for a particular study. Research scholars Brown and Clarke (2006) outline a useful step in analysing qualitative data using thematic analysis. The steps involved in this process take into consideration:

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- a. Transcribing and reading the information collected through interviews and other sources to get familiar with the data.
- b. The creation of codes through the organization of the data into groups displaying familiar themes.
- c. Conducting a review of the themes identified in the data to ensure that the coded groups correctly reflect the themes.
- d. Identifying and selecting the themes to be reflected in the analysis.
- e. Compiling the report by explanation of the data. This involves presenting the data that is most often than not quite extensive in a manner that will be easily understood by the reader.

The above mentioned are steps that I followed closely in my analysis process for best practices. Additionally, data was collected over a two-month span. After doing so, the data collected was organized and analysed using MAXQDA. By doing so, I was able to organize the codes into themes, these themes have contributed to answering my outlined research questions.

Thematic analysis was quite useful in the analysis of the qualitative data obtained in this study. While the data analysis utilized both inductive and deductive thematic analysis, the study leaned heavily on the techniques of inductive thematic analysis in analysing the data. I found that the inductive thematic analysis approach allowed me to identify relevant and applicable themes.

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The discussion below features quotes from the data I collected from TikTok and further describes the relationship among the identified themes.

I also considered other types of data analysis methods that would have been applicable to the interpretation of my data. One such is grounded theory. This theory is based on the identification of themes that already exist within the data contained in empirical material. The epistemological standpoint forwarded by grounded theory is that there exists within the data an already existing objective truth as well as defined meaning (Levers, 2013). Usually, within research that is guided by grounded theory, the theoretical approach is not clearly defined before the study takes place. As an alternative, the thematic analysis is drawn from the data and the associations or connections made to existing theories are generated later (Seaman, 2008). Grounded theory is by and large an inductive methodology that has clear guidelines about how data ought to be collected and subsequently analysed.

This study utilizes thematic analysis rather than grounded theory, due to the fact that it employs both inductive and deductive coding techniques to identify themes in the data collected. Importantly, the study is guided by specific theoretical frameworks, uses and gratifications and affordance theories, as presented in chapter two. In addition, I also wanted to discover other factors that arose in the data that reflect some importance in clarifying the research questions. The study also draws on the techniques employed in content analysis to act as a supplement to the thematic analysis done. Content analysis is used as research analysis to identify the appearance of certain words, phrases or concepts within the data. Once this is completed, a quantification of these concepts is considered and an analysis of the existence, significance and relationships of these concepts is carried out in order to make an inference about the meanings contained within the texts.

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Additionally, this method is quite useful in that it is cost-effective, given that the material required to conduct the study is quite accessible and inexpensive. Furthermore, content analysis provides a means through which the researcher can study events and processes that occur over lengthy periods of time (Babbie, 1998).

Having established a detailed roadmap of the analysis process and steps taken, the stage is now set to present findings coming out of the study as it relates to the elements of mental health discourse that have been revealed.

### **Presentation of Findings**

This chapter outlines the results garnered from the research conducted on mental health discourse on TikTok. The data was taken from the selected TikToks was presented in themes based on the research aims and objectives as well as the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks. The data collection process lasted roughly two months between the months of May and June and all the discourse happening in all 120 TikToks were transcribed and recorded. This includes what the creators said in their videos as well as 20 comments left on said videos by other users. In an attempt to create a concise description or illustration of the data collected, this section comprises a variety of carefully chosen quotes from the TikToks, their comments, as well as excerpts from the literature. In addition to this, the TikToks selected to be shared in this chapter reflects the number of likes and shares they received as this plays a part in further explaining the discourse. In keeping with the walkthrough and in attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the discourse, insofar as there is a song/sound attached to the TikTok video, it has been also taken into consideration as I believe that is also part of the communication

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on the topic. The rationale for choosing and highlighting these quotes lie within the fact that they illustrate recurring views or a unique and profound statement. As previously mentioned, the study uses thematic analysis when coding data, and quotes were assigned to corresponding codes.

This research highlighted a multiplicity of themes associated with the study of online mental health discourse. Nevertheless, in keeping with the focus of the research, it is more noteworthy to examine the central themes that will aid in the analysis of the phenomenon being studied. They are: TikTok as a platform for sharing experiences; strangers as personal sources of inspiration/support; TikTok as a medium for information exchange; TikTok as a platform for advice solicitation or provision; realization/self-diagnosis; religion and the mental health discourse; and, TikTok against stigmatization. This section highlights the ways in which these themes are highlighted and the means by which they assist in painting a picture of the discourse surrounding mental health on TikTok. Before we delve into the discussion of the data uncovered by this study, it is imperative to reiterate the research questions in order to prove whether or not the data, codes and themes answer the research questions.

### *TikTok as platform for Sharing Experiences*

The theme "sharing experiences" was derived as a combination of the codes 'experience-sharing' and 'sharing similar sentiments or experiences. I combined these codes to generate this theme as is consistent with thematic analysis because that has been arguably the most prevalent exchange or discourse that happens on the platform based on the data, I analysed from 120 TikToks, featuring approximately 2400 comments. In correspondence with the uses and gratifications theory that has been selected as one of the guiding schools of thought of this study,

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I found that many people that use TikTok to share their experiences about their mental health or share experiences of those they have interacted with, which presents gratification.

Of the 2400 comments analysed, 303 of them were coded as sharing similar experiences/sentiments and 317 as experience sharing. The difference between these two codes lies within the fact that experience sharing is normally the initial communication where a creator makes a post talking about their experience with mental health, and sharing similar experience normally occurs when a commenter would make a comment speaking about an experience similar to the initial topic. This is a key factor of the discourse.

The content of those experiences can be shared on TikTok, in several forms of delivery styles; for example, satire or sharing in a more thoughtful and sensitive manner, which will be highlighted below. In any case, it provides the creator and the commenters the platform to vent, share advice or raise awareness as has been observed as being the most common occurrence. The two following posts illustrate an exchange between a TikTok creator and commenter where the commenter shares an experience in accordance to that of the initial sentiment.

*“here's a lexapro review for you I am off the f\*\*\*ing freeway with the flat tire I feel nothing nothing I'm just chilling actually I'm I'm literally just chilling 6 months ago I would be crying hyperventilating panic attack now what like enjoy the view b\*\*\*\* I'm here I'm chilling what the f\*\*\*”* Anonymous TikTok creator

(This post received 290.9k likes, 3937 comments and 31.8k shares)

*“Or my parents were great. My mom told me I was fat and never good enough but I had a great childhood.”* Anonymous commenter

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The quoted transcription and comment from the dataset serve to illustrate the process of information sharing on the platform on a first-hand basis regarding the popular depression medication, Lexapro. Taking this into consideration, I argue that the openness and freedom of speech enjoyed on TikTok, as well as the platform it provides to each user, greatly encourages young adults that would have otherwise been silenced by lack of a medium/platform to share mental health experiences to actively engage in the conversation, hence advancing the discourse on surrounding the topic.

TikTok further enhances the role of individuals, whether they are acquainted or strangers, in sharing experiences. TikTok acts as a platform for individuals to be heard, which is indicative of the creation of a two-way mode of communication about mental health, and which may not have been as prevalent in years before social media and in this case, TikTok. Consequently, TikTok may also enhance individuals' role as influencers in the mental health awareness community as there have been instances where popular TikTok accounts have been analysed where the creator has a large following and their content is geared solely towards championing the cause of raising awareness about mental health. Prior to the development of social media and TikTok, the interactions between people who are suffering from mental illnesses and those who would like to speak on the topic or are experts in the field was limited due to constraints regarding accessibility of information and the ease of having a platform to lead this conversation and advance the discourse.

### ***Strangers as Personal Sources of Inspiration/Support***

I discovered that creators share their experience about their mental health via TikTok or share the experience of someone that they know. This has been met by a multiplicity of positive



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comments and feedback from commenters, which has been deduced as an offering of support which has been coded as the same, “show of support” from strangers in the comment section.

The following TikTok transcription and two randomly selected comments that follow serve to paint a picture of this key element of the mental health discourse present on the application.

*“you can always tell before someone wants to end their life” 1 Month Before 2 Weeks Before 1 Week Before 5 Days Before 2 Days Before 24hrs Before Caption: this was all two years ago this month... mental health is a silent killer, check up on the people around you. a smile can hide a thousand words. it's scary and so sad. looking back at this breaks my heart as nobody knew how broken i really was. i hid it so well with a smile and a mask every day, still turning up to work and too scared to reach out bc i had just given up”*

Anonymous TikTok creator

(This post received 294.9k likes, 650 comments and 1561 shares. In addition to this, the sound selection is titled as “Hold on – Extreme Music” and evokes a feeling of sadness.)

*“The last pic, I could almost feel the smile wasn't what you were feeling inside. Bless you.*

*So glad you got through it. I understand you”* Anonymous commenter from popular comments

*“oh my i'm so glad you survived love. you're beautiful, you have so much potential”*

Anonymous commenter from random comments

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In the physical world, there is direct, unfiltered and unobscured exposure to a stranger's mental health experience or the experience of someone they've been in contact with is shared and is not affected by time, place, context, comfortability and other primary factors that may affect someone sharing this experience. In the realm of social media, users can have direct access to strangers who may have had similar experiences, which creates an element of like-mindedness. They are able to create a two-way communication system where the commenters have the ability to share positive reinforcement and positive comments, and a show of support and sympathy. It must be noted that this is not always the case; the study uncovered that users from the sample have received negative or potentially damaging comments and skepticism.

However, positive comments and show of support was the more dominant occurrence of the two with show of support being split into parent and child codes. The parent code being show of support (coded 160 times) and agreement (coded 260 times) being the subsidiary code, coded a sum of 420 times across the 120 TikToks analysed during the data collection process.

Contrary to in the physical world, such characteristics of social media and social media discourse increases considerably the amount of support and positive reinforcement that users receive from personal sources, owing to the fact that the number of people that they can receive support from is not limited to family and friends but is now extended to a very large number of strangers or members of the TikTok community.

In addition, the relevance of the support is also higher owing to the fact the TikTok creator is able to curate the kind of comments that they receive. To an extent. This is so because they can delete comments that they deem negative or unwanted and can "block" commenters who leave negative remarks on their posts. The fact that a two-way communication channel that is afforded by TikTok creates a discourse that is acceptable by the user in contrast to what

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happens in the physical world. In other words, creators are able to approve or delete comments and interactions that they receive online as opposed to in “real life”, which increases the impact of TikTok. Creators have the ability to passively receive support from strangers by allowing and maintaining dialogue with these commenters insofar as they deem fit, which may increase the quality and control they have over the discourse being had in response to their experience sharing. Taking this into consideration, my analysis reveals that TikTok may encourage users to engage in mental health discourse with fellow users due to the fact that there is an outpouring of support. However, there are nuances to consider, such as receiving negative comments, that while being the less frequent occurrence, may stand to discourage the discourse.

### *TikTok as a Medium for Information Exchange*

Due to the previously discussed two-way communication channel that TikTok allows, it is easy to exchange thoughts and ideas. During the data collection process, I came across an exceedingly interesting occurrence where there was an information exchange between creator and commenter. In instances such as this, a creator posts a TikTok video sharing information about mental health with their audience, which may range from tips to deal with mental health issues in times of a breakdown or resources that one can benefit from (for example, therapy or a helpline one can call in times of need). Owing to the two-way communication channel affordances, this information exchange also goes from commenter to creator. Based on the research data, this occurs mostly after a creator shares their experience (previously coded as experience sharing) as it is often met by users in the comments providing information for the creator and other users. For the purpose of the study, this process was coded as “information exchange”, which was coded 184 times across 120 TikTok videos. This serves to further answer the research question “what does mental health discourse on TikTok look like?” as it illustrates

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an educating/informing process, which plays an important role in the description of the discourse about mental health on the platform. This thinking is also in keeping with previously mentioned health information seeking behaviour as advanced by (Basch, 2018). Below is an example of this information exchange taking place on the platform.

*“In March 2023, the Government of Canada will be passing a law pertaining to assisted dying. This law will allow people with a mental illness to access medically assisted death. According to guidelines, this person has to have a clear mind to be able to make this decision- which is highly controversial, because people with a mental illness don’t necessarily have a clear mind compared to people who are accessing this service because of a cancer or another physical illness and still have a clear mind on it. Basically with this law, Canada is allowing people with a mental illness another way of committing suicide- but this one is just more legal and medically assisted. And I have no doubt in saying that this is definitely something that taking a step towards the wrong direction of placing importance on mental health and getting help when you need it.”* Anonymous TikTok creator

(This post received 281.6k likes, 6917 comments and 24.4k shares)

In the above quoted TikTok, the TikTok creator shares pertinent information regarding the plans the Canadian Government has in place to treat individuals who may request assisted suicide. Below is an example of a licensed therapist as verified by TikTok’s blue check mark, also sharing mental health information but from a point of perceived authority on the subject

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being that they are a mental health professional. A graphical illustration (figure 2) is provided in the Appendix.

*“Difficult mental health struggles we don’t talk about enough (as told by a licensed therapist). Feeling lonely and at the same time wanting to be alone. Worrying about everything and also caring about nothing. Feeling so tired and yet not being able to fall asleep or rest your mind. Avoiding things because you’re anxious and feeling anxious because you’re avoiding. Getting enough sleep and never feeling rested. Wanting to be with your friends and not wanting to socialize. Wanting to stop feeling anxious and feeling anxious about not feeling anxious. You are not ALONE. Follow along for more mental health content.” Anonymous TikTok creator  
(this post received 121k likes, 4018 comments and 6251 shares)*

My data reveals that there are individuals who claim to be licensed therapists, as is the case in the above coded TikTok, who then proceed to share mental health information from a position of authority, which led me to question the integrity of these claims of authority on the topic of mental health and if users on the platform believe these claims and may accept information more willingly or more freely believe information that these self-proclaimed mental health professionals provide. Verification might be the answer to this query. TikTok’s verification processes allow for accounts that are deemed credible by the platform to receive a verification tick which may serve to augment their authority on the topic because TikTok deems them credible based on the platform’s criteria.

***TikTok as a Platform for Solicitation or Provision of Advice***

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Similar to information sharing, another key element of mental health discourse on TikTok is advice sharing. This theme was created after seeing multiple occurrences of users sharing and/or asking for advice with/from other users on the platform. I decided to code these occurrences as “sharing advice” and “asking for advice”. Both were coded equally at 20 times each. Before I delve into advice sharing as a theme and as an important function of mental health discourse on TikTok, there must first be a differentiation made between advice sharing and information exchange. As previously discussed, information exchange can range from sharing pertinent information regarding mental health support resources to educating fellow users about mental health symptoms and effects. However, the difference between information exchange and advice sharing lies within the fact that advice sharing and solicitation often presents as a recommendation and is not always based on facts. On the other hand, information appears to be factual and not based solely on someone’s point of view or perspective.

*“Please give me some tips to overcome this please”* Anonymous commenter

*“Hi, help please! You just explained me completely. How do I heal?”* Anonymous commenter

Above are examples from the data that depict commenters on the platform soliciting advice from other users. As previously mentioned, this often occurs when users are in need of advice regarding a solution or treatment for mental health issues that they may be experiencing. The online discourse that takes place on TikTok possesses a great deal of nuance as there exists both positive and negative elements such as solicitation and sharing of information and advice

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regarding the topic of mental health. On the inverse of asking for advice, many users share information initially in an attempt to educate and provide support for fellow users on the platform, coded as “sharing advice”.

*“TW Suicide. Sunday 1st May I left the house with full attention of never returning. I had given up on my life I felt like there was no way out. Hours later I decided it wasn't the thing to do. My friend had found me let me cry in her arms for hours”. I dread to think were I would have been if I didn't open up and talk to her. After this chat I decided to go to the doctors and what the next steps were. I now take medication that has really helped me out. I never believed it when people would say “speak up”, but after that evening of opening up to my friend, I felt like a massive weight had been lifted. What my point is if your suffering please try speak up if you don't feel comfortable with speaking to people you know try the numbers. If I didn't open up I would of left my fiancé and my 2 children behind. It breaks my heart the thought of it. I promise there is always other options”*

Anonymous TikTok creator.

(This post received 41.5k likes, 604 comments and 89 shares)

*“Hi, I'm here to check on you. I know some stuff didn't pan out the way you wanted it to, and you're confused, and sad, and pissed at the world. And yes! Absolutely be that. For a second, or a day, or a month. But, do not let it consume you. Do not let it become part of who you are. It doesn't deserve that permanent spot in your life, and it definitely doesn't deserve to hold that spot in your mind. So, have the second, have the day, have the month. But we're not gonna let it have our life. One day, we're gonna take that weight off our*

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*chest and we're gonna throw that baby into the abyss of eternal darkness where it belongs. And it's gonna feel so good! But it doesn't have to be today. I know it'll happen, you got this. I love you, bye"* Anonymous TikTok creator

(This post received 1.7M likes, 15.9k comments and 118k shares)

The above are instances where TikTok users share with their followers and other users on the platform advice for dealing with mental health issues and the effects that they may pose.

### ***TikTok as a Platform for Realization or Self Diagnosis***

Discussing TikTok as a platform for information exchange allows the opportunity to segue into discussing TikTok as a platform for realization and self-diagnosis. Once information is shared, oftentimes information regarding symptoms synonymous to a certain mental illness, there are a multiplicity of ways users interact with or use the information. One very interesting finding coming out of the data collection and coding processes is that of self-diagnosis or realization. In the context of the study, I conceptualize realization or self-diagnosis as users receiving information or hearing an experience that resonates with them on a personal level in the sense that they believe that they may have that same mental illness based on hearing information regarding symptoms shared by the user.

*"Y'all telling me it's not anxiety? I have OCD? What!?"* Anonymous commenter

The above quoted comment is in response to a user sharing information regarding symptoms and effects of certain mental illnesses, and the user has been experiencing these particular symptoms, which has led to them question whether they may have a disorder themselves. This has been a



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reasonably popular occurrence as this form of discourse has been coded 71 times. This sheds light on yet another element of the mental health discourse on TikTok, which highlights that users may turn to TikTok voluntarily to receive information that may lead them self-diagnosing with a mental illness or learn more about symptoms of the same.

Not only does this paint a picture of a crucial part of the discourse, hence serving to address my first research question that asks what mental health discourse on TikTok looks like, but it may also open the door to further questions or spark research curiosity into measures to ensure validity of mental health information or on the platform as there are users that may turn to the platform for mental health information to answer questions that they may have.

### *Negative Feedback/Negative Discourse*

The study revealed that most of the discourse surrounding mental health on TikTok has been largely positive up until the time of data collection, which serves as another indicator that TikTok may actually encourage mental health discourse. However, the conversation on the topic is extremely nuanced. There were several instances of negative comments being coded in the sample. These comments tend to be in response to TikTok creators sharing their experience with mental health. Similar to previously discussed codes and themes where users are offered support, advice, information and other forms of positive feedback and positive reinforcement, the same is true for negative feedback. This element of the discourse is nuanced and as such codes that can be deemed as negative were consolidated in order to derive a common theme that encompasses this element of the discourse as best as possible. From the data, the codes that have been deemed negative are skepticism, bullying and negative comments, all coded a total of 26 times.

The majority of TikToks in the sample reflect users sharing their experiences with mental or sharing information and advice. As previously mentioned in this chapter, despite there being a

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largely positive response to this, the study has shown that there are instances where commenters use the platform to make negative comments and even bully users in response to hearing about their mental health stories or hearing information or perspectives that they do not approve of or agree with. The same two-way communication system that the platform allows has a lot of benefits but also allows for there to be backlash, skepticism and bullying, which is indicative of the myriad of differing elements and responses found within the conversation on the platform. Additionally, though show of support in the form of agreement is also largely popular amongst the coded comments, it must be mentioned that the inverse is also true. There have been 30 instances where there has been a disagreement or rejection of information and/or ideas. This serves to further concretize the idea that the discourse is highly nuanced. While “agreement”, which is conceptualized as supporting the thought, idea or information shared was coded 240 times, this was not the only response to information and advice exchange on the platform.

*“Did he run away for nothing or is there a reason behind it? Could we get his side?”*

Anonymous commenter

The quote above was taken from a comment in response to a mother sharing her experience with her son running away from home. There were many comments that were supportive in nature and wished the mother and child well. However, this was not the case across the board and there were comments that were very skeptical in nature and questioned the mother’s possible role in causing her child to run away from home. This illustrates an element of the discourse that suggests that users are also susceptible to cross questioning and criticism just as much as they are likely to receive support.

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There also exists a dark side to mental health discourse on TikTok, which has been coded as bullying for the context of the study. Much like the other recorded instances of negative comments, bullying has been recorded as happening in response to a user sharing their experience with their mental health.

*“u wanna die hahah that's a joke for sure ik it bc I been through it if u wanna die just jump in to the pond and watch ur self fighting for ur life”* Anonymous commenter

This quote coded as bullying was taken from a comment on a post where again, someone shared their experience and discussed the feeling of wanting to die. There was a subsequent outpour of support and sympathy shown to the user but the multifacetedness of the discourse is reflected in the way that this commenter did not show support and quite possibly encouraged the user to attempt suicide. This is a very interesting finding in the sense that I believe it addresses research question two, which asks “how is mental health discourse on this platform encouraged or discouraged?”. Though the data has revealed that the discourse is often encouraged and supported, there are nuances and outliers where comments are made that would discourage discourse out of fear of receiving comments of a nature similar to the above quoted.

### ***TikTok as Medium for Emotional Expression***

The study also revealed that displays of emotion or emotional responses are also a notable part of the mental health discourse on TikTok. Explicit displays or emotional responses have been coded throughout the coding process. The first explicit emotional response to be discussed is grief/sadness. Coded 122 times, grief/sadness is a common theme associated with mental health discourse on TikTok and often comes after a user shares sad experiences that came

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as a result of mental health issues or the users sharing the experiences themselves often display sadness and grief when sharing their ordeals or experiences. It must also be mentioned that grief/sadness was also been expressed as a symptom of mental illnesses such as depression.

*“I have no rage or outbursts, just sadness & crying.”* Anonymous commenter

In the above quoted comment, the user shares their experience with their depressive episodes in response to an initial creator sharing their experience with the same. Interestingly, this can be labelled as sharing similar experiences with the common theme being sadness/grief.

On the other hand, another explicit and important emotion noted during the coding process is satire/comedic relief, which have been coded as such. In the context of the study, these are instances where users, whether TikTok creator or commenter, have used satire to express their experiences with mental health and its related effects and/or symptoms. Satire/comedic relief is the second of two explicitly stated emotions. It must be noted that in my thought process as a researcher maintaining utmost objectivity, I chose not to attempt to deduce or assume an emotion unless it was explicitly stated or glaringly obvious.

Sadness, satire and other emotional responses directly speak to the research question which asks “what does mental health discourse on TikTok look like?” in the sense that it reveals that the platform is used as a medium for mental health related self-expression in discussing their experiences. For the purposes of this study, self-expression is considered as the projection of one’s own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world (Kim and Sherman 2007; Kim and Chu 2011).

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Based on the above and taking into consideration the context of the study, TikTok enabled self/emotional expression may be viewed as the projection into the world or in this case, the algorithm of your own personal thoughts, values and feelings about mental health in young adults.

*“Hello, and welcome to the mental health hotline. If you are obsessive-compulsive, press 1 repeatedly. If you are codependent, ask someone to press 2 for you. If you have multiple personalities, press 3, 4, 5, 6. If you are paranoid, we know what you are and what you want. Stay on the line and we will trace your call. If you’re delusional press 7 and your call will be transferred to the mothership. If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully and the small voice will tell you which number to press. If you are depressed, no matter which number you press, nobody will answer you. If you are dyslexic, press 6,9,6,9,6,9. If you have a nervous disorder, please fidget with the hash key until the beep. After the beep, please wait for the beep. If you have short-term memory loss, please try your call again later. And if you have low self-esteem, hang up.”* Anonymous TikTok creator  
(This post had 12.4k likes, 702 comments and 9619 shares)

The above quoted is an excellent example of satire as it relates to the context of mental health in the study. It reflects a user sharing symptoms and characteristics aligned with a wide spectrum of mental health disorders or illnesses, but does so in a light-hearted, satirical manner while still maintaining accuracy regarding the information being shared. This is an interesting finding as it paints a picture of what the mental health conversation on the platform often looks like. On one hand, it is usually commonplace for the mental health discussion to often be synonymous to grief

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and other closely related emotional expressions but also can come in the form of comedic relief.

This serves to further augment the argument that mental health discourse on TikTok is extremely nuanced and is never one-dimensional.

### ***Religion and the Mental Health Discourse***

Discussing the perceived freedom of emotional expression afforded by TikTok provides the opportunity to segue into the notion of religion being perpetuated within the discourse surrounding mental health on the platform. For the context of the study, religion has been deemed as any mention of God or other beings that users may have made mention of, including keywords such as “pray” and “prayer”. Following this conceptualisation, religion was coded 41 times throughout the data collection and coding process.

Religion is an important phenomenon to take into consideration when studying mental health discourse because the freedom of religious expression comes as a part of the affordances that the freedom of speech on TikTok allows. Much like previously mentioned freedom of emotional and self-expression, freedom of religious expression shines light on the different aspects of the discourse. Another interesting finding and an added justification for why religion is an important part of the mental health discourse on TikTok lies within the fact that many people and in this case, users, use religion as a coping mechanism when dealing with mental health issues as seen below.

*“I have all these problems... seen many doctors, therapists and been on many meds. All i know is God helps me the most when i struggle on my bad days”* Anonymous commenter

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This instance reflects the experience of a user who has tried doctors and other conventional forms of medication in coping with their mental health but have not received the ease that God provides them. This is an important finding because it reveals that there are religious communities within the mental health community and discourse on TikTok that place greater trust in their religious belief systems than they do to traditional medicines and treatment.

Another user further concretizes this idea in sharing advice that is based upon religion and their belief in God as opposed to medicine and treatment.

*“Only God can save you. Surrender your worries to him and he will definitely save you. Just trust him God loves you very much keep praying”* Anonymous TikTok commenter

The study reveals that within the discourse, there are many instances where information and advice is being shared regarding mental health and coping with mental health symptoms and effects, which further reiterates the themes of TikTok being presented as a platform for information exchange and advice sharing. Importantly, it must be noted that the information shared is not limited to traditional healing and/or coping methods but religion also plays a factor.

I found that there are smaller religious communities within the mental health community or “mental health tok” as highlighted above. This idea of smaller groups being present within the larger mental health activist community generally is supported by the literature on the topic by Wilkstrom, et al. (2022) , which states that “social media platforms have facilitated the emergence of online communities built around professions, political beliefs and other forms of identity (Mahrt, Weller, & Peters, 2014).

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The perpetuation of community forming on TikTok, notably, the religious sub-community that lies within the mental health activism community serves to holistically answer research question 2 which asks “how is mental health discourse on TikTok encouraged or discouraged?” in that the existence of community may have a positive effect on willingness to participate in the discourse due to the existence of other like-minded users who may agree with and support your thoughts and ideas.

### *TikTok against Stigmatisation*

Surprisingly, the study has revealed the perpetuation of stigma and comments that may be considered as such were very limited. The topic of mental health has for a very long time been considered taboo and attracted great deals of stigma before the social media era. I began this study with the intention of probing the nuances regarding the stigmatization of the topic of mental health and whether a TikTok has aided in reducing the stigma or on the inverse, contributed to its increase as I believe people online, especially in the younger demographic, tend to be harsher and lack empathy in their interactions.

However, there was not much talk on the topic that could be deemed as stigmatizing. “Stigma” was only coded an underwhelming 13 times throughout the data collection and coding process, which led me to think about what was happening on the platform that caused users to be more mindful of making comments that could be deemed as the perpetuation of stigma or persecution of someone’s mental illness experience. I thought it could be either that TikTok is mitigating the stigma surrounding mental illnesses due to the short form information filled content that is being shared or mental health professionals such as counselors and psychologists have turned to the platform and are raising awareness regarding mental disorders and may be educating users. I believe that education and awareness can serve as drivers for the reduction of



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stigma associated with any topic or finally, they may be wary of the fear of being “canceled”. As social media evolves, so do its governance systems and one very prevalent element of social media and TikTok governance is “cancel culture” where users may lose followers, be banned or be subject to verbal abuse for making controversial comments.

According to the data, though stigma associated with mental illnesses may now be shunned by TikTok, there are still small pockets where comments are made that can be coded or deemed as such.

*“she's crazy it's that simple.”* Anonymous commenter

The above coded TikTok comment depicts one blatantly stigmatizing remark made in response to a user sharing their account of living with mental illness. However, according to the study, the vast majority of the mental health community on the platform prove to be seemingly in support of the discourse rather than shunning those with related illnesses. This may be another significant way in which TikTok challenges the stigma surrounding mental health by using the influence that it has. It is no secret that social media plays a significant agenda setting role in today’s society. Owing to this, it can be argued that if social media, in this case, TikTok, embraces those with mental health illnesses, then this influence can be and has been transplanted to mitigating the stigmatization online.

Having presented a number of key findings emerging from the study, this perfectly sets the stage to segue into a discussion about the previously highlighted findings which allow for deeper analysis of the findings against the backdrop of existing literature and set out to comprehensively answer each research question.

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### **Discussion of Findings**

Upon concluding the thematic analysis of data drawn from 120 TikTok videos and 2400 comments analysed from the hashtags, #mentalhealth, #mentalheathmatters, #mentalillness and #depressionanxiety I have drawn the following conclusions from the study:

#### ***What Does Mental Health Discourse on TikTok Look Like?***

The study has found a myriad of ways in which mental health discourse on TikTok is enacted as well as shone light on the different elements of the discourse, hence painting a picture of what it looks like. Across the four hashtags, multiple coding categories provide an illustration of what the discourse looks like. Some of these include “experience sharing”, “information exchange”, “asking for advice”, “sharing advice”, “religion”, among others that all constitute the overall mental health communication on the platform.

Both the literature and the data agree that the mental health discourse on TikTok has many nuances and is enacted in many different ways. The most frequent or the most popular shape the discourse takes, according to the study, is experience sharing and information sharing with both codes being recorded 303 and 184 times respectively. This is indicative of the fact that though the discourse comes in many forms, the most common occurrence happens to be a sharing process among users, which most often lies between TikTok creator and commenter.

The findings, as well as the literature, supports that mental health discourse on TikTok takes many forms but mostly comes as sharing information and advice as well as having a show of support and encouragement and raising awareness through education and openness on the platform. The ideas of Naslund et al. (2016), where they argue that social media provides a system of offering and receiving mutual support for individuals enduring a mental illness as well

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as forging online friendships with those facing similar challenges, closely coincide with findings uncovered by my study where coding categories such as “show of support” and “agreement” were coded 192 and 240 times respectively and serve to highlight this positive interaction found on the platform as it relates to the conversation surrounding mental health. This phenomenon is the preliminary strokes from the brush as I set out to paint a picture of the mental health discourse on TikTok.

Furthermore, the uses and gratifications theory also come into play as I describe the discourse as both the literature and the data highlight the fact that users employ the use of social media as a platform to provide and receive input from fellow users on the platform, which may come in the shape of information and advice sharing. Highlighting the notion of using the platform to satisfy the need to receive and share input with fellow users perfectly sets the stage for me to discuss another key factor of the discourse, which is the need or desire for self-expression that social media, specifically TikTok, allows.

Still viewing the data and the overall study through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory, the literature affirms that there are generally three gratifications that rule under the theory as it relates to social media research. These are information seeking, expression of opinion and information sharing (Whiting & Williams, 2013). For the purposes of this section of the discussion, I now pay closer attention to the gratification received from expressing opinions and other forms of expression. The data supports the literature in the sense that there were many forms of self-expression present in the data collection and coding processes. Namely, satire/comedic relief and grief/sadness, with both coded as such.

These codes, introduced in the previous chapter, represent different emotional expressions that have been recorded by users in the dataset. Users often used the short form

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video model present on TikTok to share their experience with mental illness in a light-hearted and comedic way, which can be argued as being a step away from the sad connotation that is often synonymous with mental illnesses. Satire/comedic relief was coded 33 times throughout the data collection process, which is not an overwhelming figure in comparison to other more popular codes, but I believe that it is interesting to highlight the nuances in mental health communication revealed by the study. This shows that the sample also speaks about mental illness in a light-hearted and satirical manner.

On the other hand, grief/sadness is still commonplace in the online discourse surrounding mental health. Grief /sadness was coded 122 times and this is indicative of the fact that there is an air of sadness surrounding the topic of mental illness and the impact it has on individuals and their families. This is communicated on TikTok where people explicitly stated that they were sad or crying, which is also a common symptom of many mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

Therefore, it can be argued that sadness/grief expressed by users on TikTok is evoked either in response to hearing experiences, their own personal experiences or is generally a symptom of their specific disorder. It is important to mention this aspect of the discourse because emotional expression and other forms of expression are of utmost importance when trying to describe what the mental health discourse on TikTok looks like.

However, not everyone agrees with every bit of information and education provided by other users on the platform. This is an element of the discourse that I personally did not think of before embarking on this study. In conducting a review of existing literature, I also did not come across any scholarship that made mention of the blatant rejection of ideas that also takes place on the platform. Coded as “disagreement/rejection of ideas”, there were 30 instances where users

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expressed their disagreement with ideas and information shared by their counterparts. This was an unexpected finding and something that I would not have given much thought about but what this says to me is that there is still a level of free thinking that occurs within the mental health discourse where users do not accept or believe every form or source of information that is offered to them on TikTok.

I believe that this is important because the mental health space on social media is also riddled with misinformation and falsities. Abbasi and Liu (2013) opine that due to the massive user generated information found on social media, it may be difficult to tell what is accurate and what is false information. It was easier to fact check information when the traditional media channels were the only source of information. Additionally, traditional media sources have an obligation to maintain their credibility. This is not the same with social media. Though rejection of ideas is not one of the most common codes across the four hashtags analysed for this study, I appreciate that there exists a level of independent thinking within the discourse. This is also an important part of the mental health conversation on the TikTok as this finding speaks to a variety of responses to information shared and the overall nuance of the online dialogue.

### ***How is Mental Health Discourse on TikTok Encouraged or Discouraged?***

Assessing modes of encouragement on TikTok as a whole, the study concludes that active TikTok users receive stimuli that may serve to both encourage and discourage mental health discourse on the platform. According to the literature, since the prevalence of the social media era, there has been the formation of several groups and movements geared towards encouraging people to publicly share their experiences with mental health in order to raise awareness as is the case with Heads Together movement, formed by the British Monarchy to end stigma surrounding mental health (Tyler & Slater, 2018).

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This and other movements geared towards encouraging participation in the mental health conversation represent more explicit ways in which the discourse is encouraged. However, the study revealed a myriad of other ways in which the discourse is being encouraged on a daily basis. To reiterate the sentiments of Naslund, et al. (2016), social media provides a safe space for peer support and information exchange. This was reflected in this study and came in the form of showing sympathy, which was coded 50 times, show of support coded 192 times, sharing and asking for advice both coded 20 times each, as well as other codes. These modes of positive reinforcement and offering of support as discussed in previous chapters act as a source of encouragement as suggested by the study.

Another key element that TikTok affords users is the option to remain anonymous when sharing experiences, seeking advice or any other aspect of the discourse that one might decide to participate in. This coincides with the literature wherein Vornholt and De Choudhury (2021) put forward findings from a study conducted on adolescent mental health communication where it was found that the young people were enthusiastic about the benefits of anonymity when it comes to discussing mental illness online. Not all users wish to have their identities broadcasted online when participating in the conversation. The anonymity allows for them to not be excluded but also can keep their identities private. This shines light on the nuances present when considering TikTok as a medium for encouraging mental health discourse.

On the contrary, there also exists elements that might serve to discourage users from freely participating in the mental health discourse on TikTok. The study describes these elements as negative comments, skepticism, bullying and other related elements that provide a negative experience for users who would otherwise want to share their experiences and take part in the discourse. I believe that the anonymity that TikTok affords can also pose a negative effect

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wherein users are able to bully and make negative comments in response to other users talking about their mental illnesses, hiding behind anonymous accounts that may discourage them from engaging in the discourse.

### ***How is TikTok Challenging Stigma Around Mental Health?***

One very interesting finding coming out of the study is the fact that stigma is not prevalent in the data sample. This came as a surprise to me as I personally expected there to be more comments that could be labelled as stigma against mental health, but this was far from the truth with stigma and other related codes being coded an underwhelming 13 times. A number of these comments were also not overt occurrences of users making stigmatizing comments but were users making mention of stigma in their experiences. Upon making this discovery from the study, it led me to question if social media, TikTok specifically, has really been making significant progress towards reducing stigma around mental health among young adults.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I began to wonder if TikTok has been eroding the stigma around mental health one short form video at a time? Is it due to large number of mental health professionals and influencers now using the platform to engage users about mental health, hence raising awareness about the topic? Is it due to the number of initiatives and campaigns now geared towards reducing the stigma such as the popular “#EndTheStigma” and “#SmashTheStigma”? According to Gilardi et al. (2021), social media introduces new actors to the political conversation, removes the gatekeeping power held by traditional, government-controlled media outlets that historically were the sole source of information and have made room for actors on social media platforms to weigh in on matters of public and societal importance.

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Social media is rapidly becoming the main source of news and more and more people look towards social media for information to form opinions on a myriad of topics and mental health is no exception. I argue that this influence that social media now holds plays an integral role in users' perspective of mental health and other previously stigmatized topics. This idea is also backed by the literature on the subject matter wherein Pavlova and Berkers (2020) are of the view that social media significantly raises awareness to stigmatized topics through providing marginalized members of society the opportunity to share experiences. Hence, encouraging free and open discourse on TikTok regarding mental health which can aid in reducing the formerly negative connotations.

Another element to consider when on the topic of reduced stigma of mental health is health communication and education. As I mentioned before, I was surprised when I realized that there were not many occurrences of stigma toward the topic of mental health, which has led me to question this phenomenon. Another plausible explanation for the seemingly reduced levels of stigma in response to users in my sample sharing their experiences and speaking freely about their battle with mental illness could lie in the fact that there are increased levels of mental health education (including users and mental health professionals) and health communication present on the platform.

Upon completing the thematic analysis, I argue that increased levels of education on mental health can serve to reduce the stigma attached to it. Crook & Sahin et al. (2016) opine that information shared on TikTok comes from a multiplicity of sources, such as generalist platforms, healthcare institutions and healthcare professionals. Scrolling through anti-mental health stigma TikToks, one finds no shortage of awareness raising and conversation sparking content that aims to provide acceptance or tolerance of those with mental illnesses. This new



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abundance of knowledge on the topic being shared by people with authority may very well be a key factor behind TikToks' ability to mitigate stigma.

However, as mentioned in previous chapters, TikTok is employed as a platform for disclosure to enable users to speak on the topic of stigma around mental health as well as addressing things that may be considered as such. This allows me to reiterate a point provided by Betton et al. (2015) in the literature where they describe a huge online protest that took place on Twitter that was sparked by a mental patient Halloween costume that a clothing retailer had on sale which offended people with actual mental illnesses.

The topic achieved virality, which is a key social media currency across all platforms, and this occurrence made it to national news stations across the United States the very next morning (Betton et al., 2015). This shows the strength of the influence that social media has and the lack of tolerance for stigma towards mental illness currently present on TikTok. This also prompts me to view TikTok and my study from a similar standpoint wherein I am now led to think that the absence of stigmatizing comments present across the hashtags that I studied is owed in part to the fact there is little to no tolerance for stigma across social media platforms including TikTok and there is potential for uproar if these unwritten social contracts are breached.

This can be considered as TikTok activism, an idea advanced by Wilkstrom et al. (2022) which describes the ability of TikTok to champion societal change and create a shift in thinking about topics such as mental health and even climate change. I argue that going against these previously mentioned unwritten social contracts can lead to being "canceled", which is apparently a valid form of online punishment or sanctioning where users face losing their

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platforms, their following, likes and other forms of engagement which are important forms of currency in the digitized world that we live in.

This is even more damaging to microcelebrities or influencers on TikTok so you'll find that they and other users as well as corporations are more intentional in weighing their words in order to not face pushback from activists and other involved parties in the mental health communities. I argue that these elements are the reason why there was little to no stigma found across the hashtags that I assessed in this study and potentially right across the board on the topic of mental health on the platform.

Taking these elements into consideration, I believe it is then safe to conclude that TikTok challenges stigma in both latent and active ways. TikTok latently addresses and reduces stigma by raising awareness through providing education on the topic. Being more informed on a topic can significantly alter someone's initial opinion on a topic. TikTok also provides a community where users are able to connect with like-minded users and users going through similar experiences as well as providing them a platform to break the silence and engage in the discourse. TikTok actively tackles stigma through activism where there are hashtags and movements that are geared towards ending the stigma around the topic. This represents a more intentional approach to stigma on the topic. Informal social contracts and sanctions on TikTok as is the case on other platforms also contribute to the reduction of stigma on the platform.

### **Conclusion**

Undergoing this research process has been a very insightful and eye-opening experience. I decided to pursue this topic because of my personal interest in mental health awareness. I have people close to me who are suffering from mental illnesses or have had experiences where their

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mental health has been compromised. This being a topic so personal to me, I was careful to pay key attention to findings that this study has yielded. This study has also changed my thinking and my perspective on many elements of mental health research on social media.

This study intended to provide an understanding and in-depth illustration of the mental health discourse on TikTok. I employed the use of the walkthrough method and thematic discourse analysis of data drawn from the platform. The capabilities, motivations, deterrence, consequences and nuances of mental health discourse on the platform were examined. Four questions were asked, answered, and discussed in an effort to uncover how users communicate about their mental health on TikTok and to determine whether this online dialogue addresses stigmatization on the topic.

I believe that the findings derived from the study have done well in painting a picture of what mental health discourse on TikTok looks like. I originally planned on scraping 50 TikTok videos split across two hashtags but after being presented with new ideas and perspectives, I decided to increase this to 120 videos and 2400 comments across 4 hashtags with videos and viewership in the hundreds of millions as we believed that this would be better suited for taking a more comprehensive look at the topic and allowing for more credibility in drawing conclusions and generalizing.

Having this larger sample size allowed me the opportunity to derive a plethora of codes and themes that provided me a clearer illustration of the mental health discourse. I found that there are many differences in approaches, rationales and responses to mental health discourse on TikTok. Firstly, the existing literature on the topic speaks generally about the openness and the provision of a platform for individuals to engage in the dialogue but I argue that my research delves deeper and creates an illustration of just how the platform is used.

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According to the data in my study, TikTok members utilize the platform mainly for an information exchange, which in this context encompasses sharing, soliciting and receiving information and advice from their online peers and within their online communities. This goes hand in hand with experience sharing, which has been identified as users giving their accounts of living and dealing with mental illnesses or sharing the experiences of others that they may have encountered.

The discourse always takes the shape of emotional expression where users on TikTok share these similar experiences or respond to the experiences of others in an emotional manner. The two emotions discussed in this were grief/sadness and satire/comedic relief. I decided to only use these two emotions as they were the only two explicitly shared emotional expressions. I do not feel I am equipped to deduce or assume someone's emotions if they were not obvious or explicitly stated by the account/individual. The study revealed many other shapes that the discourse took and contributed to the body of knowledge in exploring in more detail what mental health discourse on TikTok looks like.

The study advances that mental health discourse on TikTok is both encouraged and discouraged in different ways. Based on findings yielded by the study, the platform's short-form video function as well as the modes of communication it allows, the platform for sharing and the activism now taking place on the platform creates a situation where mental health discourse on the platform is more encouraged than discouraged. However, the platform and its functions are not perfect and there are factors such as bullying behind anonymous accounts, for example, may actually discourage users from sharing and participating in the dialogue.

The findings suggest that the ability of TikTok to address stigma around mental health is attributed to its role influencing opinions, providing community, raising awareness through

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education and experience sharing and activism. Before beginning this study, I hadn't deeply considered the informal social contracts on social media or the ramifications of "cancel culture." As highlighted in the previous chapter, these dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping mental health discourse on TikTok. Recognizing their influence is crucial for an in-depth analysis of how mental health topics are presented and perceived on the platform. The study revealed that the fear of losing engagement and relevance may also act as deterrence to users who would have otherwise made comments stigmatizing mental health with impunity.

The influence of TikTok is far reaching and continues to grow as TikTok is currently one of the fastest growing and most popular social media platforms, which I argue will continue to grow its agenda setting abilities, and which will see to its influence further being transplanted to addressing stigma around mental health.

### ***Opportunities for Future Research***

The study of social media and other forms of online discourse is a very broad topic. I decided, however, to zone in on mental health discourse on TikTok. Having conducted this research I have identified that the discourse may differ based on culture, geographic and demographic considerations. Having played my role bringing the importance of TikTok mental health discourse and advancing the conversation, I would like to see more research and literature coming out that addresses the different elements that might affect the dialogue. In reviewing existing literature, most of the studies that I came across were based in developed countries, mostly in North America and Europe. There are hundreds of other societies with different societal norms and online usership behaviours that may serve to impact the way these users communicate despite the globalized effect that social media has.

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Another opportunity that I have identified is the fact that the majority of the scholarship that looks at mental health and TikTok and social media, generally, tend to focus on a causal relationship between the two. The majority of the research on the topic is geared towards evaluating how social media may impact mental health positively or negatively but not much attention is placed on how users communicate about it. This would be useful because I argue that social media is changing the way in which we learn and how we communicate. Therefore, it is important to evaluate these dynamics. My study begins this research trajectory.

### *Limitations*

The size of the sample reflected in the units of analysis and observation selected for the study does not constitute a true representation of the whole mental health discourse on TikTok. There are millions of TikTok users as well as there are thousands of TikToks under the stipulated hashtags. However, the study focused on a select 120 TikToks and 2400 comments. Following this detail, it proved difficult to make a comprehensive generalization based on the TikToks and comments reviewed, but it will begin the conversation.

There is also a small amount of existing research done on this topic, making it difficult to find specific secondary data to support the study. With the completion of this portion of my studies and research, I believe that my work will participate in filling the gap.

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## Appendix A

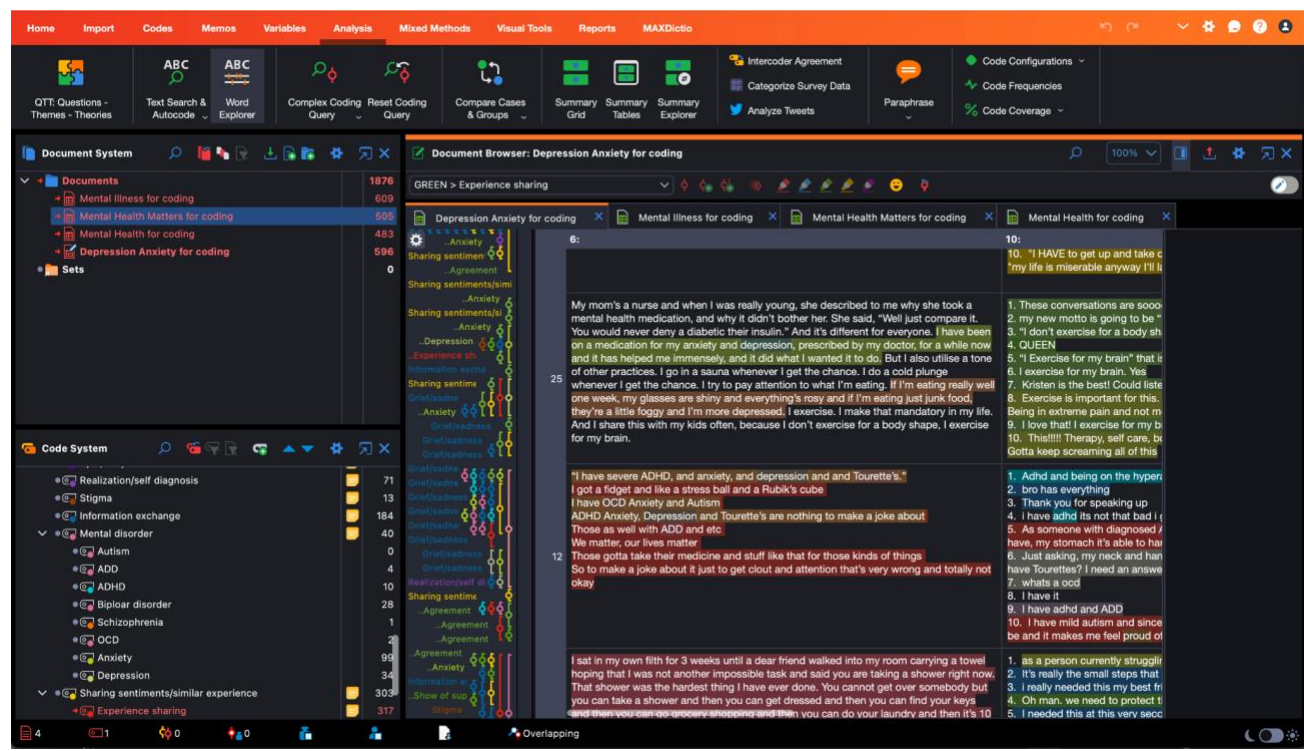


Figure 1. coding setup in MAXQDA

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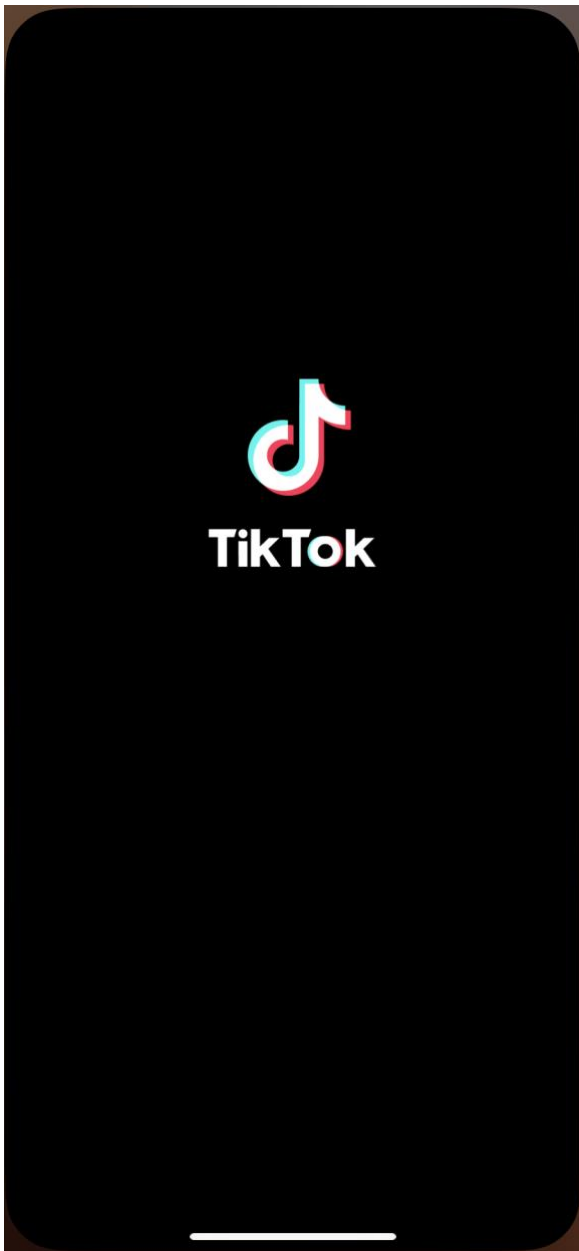


Figure 2. psychologist (Dr. Julie Smith @drjuliesmith) sharing information from her verified account.

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## Appendix B

Entrance page



## Mental health discourse via young adults on TikTok

1. After selecting the TikTok application on your mobile device, an animation is presented with a dark background and the TikTok logo in the centre of the page. The logo resembles a musical note and lower case “d”, as TikTok is known as Douyin in its founding country, China. The black, blue, pink spotlight like colour scheme of the logo is reminiscent of a rock concert.

### 2. Media page

After passing the entrance page, the user is directed to the media page where video and image content is presented across the entire screen. This is where most time on TikTok is spent, and where most engagement takes place. Videos are displayed here and at the bottom of the screen there are icons and text beneath them to describe what they represent. These include Home, Friends, Plus/Create icon, Inbox, and Profile.

#### 1. Following and For You pages

At the top of the screen on the media page there are the “Following” and “For you” options next to each other, and either one can be selected based on what the viewer wants to see. “Following” shows content from the creators that users are following, while “For you” shows content tailored by TikTok’s algorithm to the users’ preferences based on what they watch, like, share and follow.

#### 2. Profile

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The profile of the creator of the video being watched is shown in this button; it is a link to the creator's profile where all their content is displayed. The small red plus button below the shown profile allows you to follow the creator of the video.

### 3. Likes

The heart button can be selected to like the video or content and it will appear red when selected. Users can also double tap anywhere on the screen to like the content. Whichever method of liking is used, once the content is liked a red heart will appear briefly on the middle of the screen. Beneath the like button shows how many users have liked the video/content.

### 4. Comment section

The comment button is the chat icon with three dots. It is used to reveal the comment section at the bottom of the screen, which usually isn't readily visible while watching videos. Users can comment on creators' content using a variety of emojis, text, using the "@" to mention other users and they can like other users' comments as well.

### 5. Flag Icon/Favourites

By selecting the flag icon users can add the video to their collection of favourites. A pop-up window will then show that the video has been added to favourites. A "Manage" option will also appear on the right of the pop-up that allows the video to be added to a pre-existing collection or the creation of a new collection.

### 6. Share

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When the share icon is selected, it reveals sharing options that are also seen at the bottom of the screen. There are three rows and a variety of sharing options that include: “Send to”, the first row, which allows you to share with friends and followers on the TikTok app; “Share to”, the second row, which allows you to share on other social media platforms; and, the third row, which includes functions such as report, not interested, save video, duet, add to favourites, and live photo. At the very bottom below the three rows is the cancel option.

### 7. Music disc

The music disc icon is reminiscent of a vinyl record; it can be seen turning clockwise while music notes pop up from the turning icon in an animated way of showing how music would come from a vinyl record. If the music disc icon is selected, the app takes the user to the page of the sound being used in the video. On this page users can view who the uploader of the song is, play the song, see how many times the song has been used, and view all the videos in which the song was used. At the bottom of this page in red is a video recorder icon and the text “Use this sound”.

### 8. Interactive text

At the bottom of the screen are five icons and above them is where the interactive text can be found. The interactive text is below the creator username and houses a description of what is in the content. It may include text, mention of other users tagging them using the ‘@’ symbol, and hashtags using the ‘#’ symbol. Other users are able to click the mentions and hashtags to find the other creators mentioned in the video and more content that uses the same hashtag. When the mention is selected, the app takes users to another creator’s TikTok page, while when a hashtag



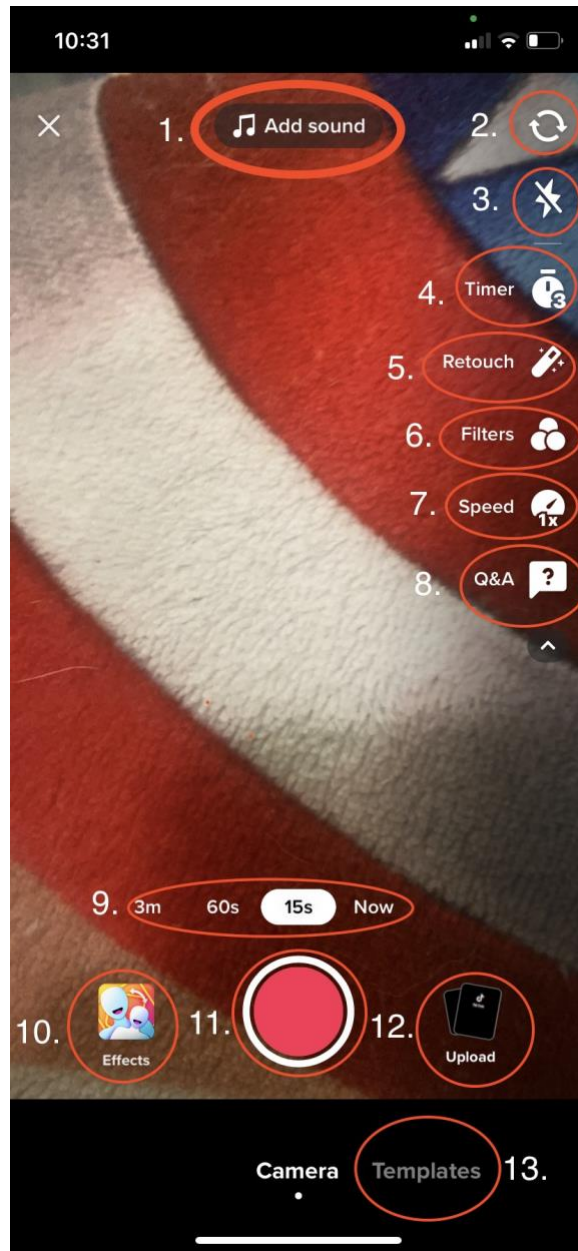
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is selected, it takes users to a page filled with content that has the same hashtag in the description.

#### 9. Scroll

Users are able to interface easily with TikTok on this media page by simply scrolling. Scrolling up using fingers will change the current video to the next video, while scrolling down goes back to the previous video.

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10. Video creating page

1. Sounds

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At the top of the video creating page there is a music note icon followed by the text “Sounds”, which can be selected to access all the sounds TikTok has to offer. When selected, it takes users to a separate page where sounds and music can be found. Users can search any sounds they want, of any genre, and of different lengths and have the option to save them to favourites for later use.

### 2. Flip

This reflects a general camera feature which users can choose from; it allows the switching from back camera to front camera.

### 3. Flash

Another similar camera feature is the flash, it gives the user the ability to control the back light on their device/cell phone when the back camera is being used.

### 4. Timer

The timer can be used in two ways, as a countdown before the beginning of filming or to dedicate a pre-allocated number of seconds for each clip filmed. Users can choose a countdown of three seconds or 10 seconds to take place after they’ve pressed the record button. Another option is that users can divide their videos by setting their recording time for a specific number of seconds or minutes to ensure each aspect they want to record for their video is able to fit since there is a time limit.

### 5. Retouch

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The retouch mode can be used along with other filters. The retouch mode blurs texture on users' skin providing blemish free, smoother and brighter looking skin.

### 6. Filters

By applying a filter, users can change the colour, saturation, contrast, brightness, and vibrancy of videos by applying a group of settings to them. Users can apply filters before filming or during the editing process. TikTok provides different types of filters based on what creators are filming. These include "Portrait", "Landscape", "Food", and "Vibe".

### 7. Speed

Five different speed options are provided for users to choose, ranging from slow motion (0.3 and 0.5), normal speed (1x), and fast motion (2x and 3x).

### 8. Q&A

This option provides users with the ability to add a question box to their content and allows their viewers to provide an answer.

### 9. 3mins, 60s, 15s

Users can swipe right to choose whether to record a video that is three minutes, 60 seconds, or 15 seconds.

### 10. Effects

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Effects are tools users can use to customise and add detail to their content. These include animations, decorations, hall of mirrors distortions, and games. TikTok provides numerous categories of effects including, “Trending”, “New”, “TikTok Picks”, “Community Favs”, “Games Editing”, “Green Screen”, “Appearance”, “Atmosphere”, “Interactive”, “Accessories”, “Funny”, “World”, “Music”, “Holidays”, “Animals” and “Events”. Each category includes hundreds of effects. Some effects can be added before and after you record a video, however, some effects are only available before recording and others are only available after.

### 11. Recording

The circular red button at the bottom centre of the screen is the record button. Pressing the record button will start the video recording and pressing it a second time stops the recording. When the video recording process is complete, users are taken to another page automatically where the video can be edited. The next option button is available for users to select how to post their videos.

### 12. Upload

The “Upload” button to the right of the record button allows users to upload pictures and videos already in their camera roll to create content.

### 13. Templates

Users can select the “Templates” option found beside “Camera” at the very bottom of the screen to use templates provided by TikTok for a quick video making experience using selected photos from their camera roll.

## Mental health discourse via young adults on TikTok

The walkthrough method which presents an in-depth analysis of the platform as it relates to functionality and operability led me to identify and to think of other ways in which discourse on TikTok is facilitated. Approaching the study from the perspective of the walkthrough method necessitated the evaluation of the number of shares, likes and comments as an additional indicator and further element of the discourse as this may determine the extent to which a thought or idea resonated with users on the platform.