

**The Formation of TikTok's Influencer-Led Mental Health Community: A Content Analysis of
Social Penetration Theory**

by

Kellie Ford Stillwell

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

School of Communication & the Arts

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Abstract

The following research used a qualitative content analysis to explore the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities that form around the topic of positive mental health communication on the social media platform TikTok. These characteristics were analyzed in the context of social penetration theory in consideration of how TikTok influencers use thematic messaging and acts of self-disclosure to build and enhance their online communities centered on positive mental health communication. In total, 135 TikTok videos and their accompanying comment feeds were analyzed to identify emergent themes, patterns, and concepts relative to the communicative and communal characteristics that define online communities dedicated to the topic of positive mental health. The findings suggested the existence of common themes across the video messages of TikTok's influencers and content creators, as well as the content feeds of those interacting textually with viewed video content. This study documents the prominent types of mental health messaging that commonly present themselves in the content curated and disseminated by both professional and non-professional content creators and influencers. The possibilities for future investigation that build upon this study's findings are numerous and possess the capability to further illuminate the topic of mental health communication within the academic field of communication on a larger and more specified scale.

Keywords: mental health, content creators, influencers, social penetration theory (SPT), social media, online communities, self-disclosure

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Dedication

This study is dedicated first and foremost to Christ, without whom I would have never been capable of completing the doctoral journey. Thank you for continuous grace, guidance, provision, and unfailing love.

To my husband, Darren Stillwell, who never wavered in encouragement and loved me through the hours of writing and constant stress: You were a pillar of support and the calming force I needed to remain confident in my abilities and myself. No composition of words will ever be able to describe how much I appreciate and love you.

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To my dad, Jay Ford, who always made it known that he is proud of me: You have worked hard your entire life to provide me with the means to achieve my goals, and that has not gone unnoticed. I would not be where I am today without you. Thank you for allowing me to achieve my dreams with your unwavering support.

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Finally, I would like to honor one of my dearest friends Ciera Boheler Porch, who passed before this research came to fruition. She helped me to normalize and prioritize mental health, while welcoming hard conversations and providing unquestioned support. Her friendship is forever cherished.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Using a qualitative content analysis, this study focused on the comprehensive exploration of social penetration theory in its relation to TikTok's mental health influencers' communication of mental health awareness. TikTok is a popular video-sharing app that allows users to create, share, and engage with others via short videos. Many influencers use TikTok to communicate positive messages of mental health awareness and have built a community dedicated to engaging with one another based on the common grounds of sharing and participating in information about mental health in a positive manner (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). By applying social penetration theory to understand this community's formed relationships, this research sought to identify emergent communicative characteristics, patterns, or themes that serve an essential purpose in creating the perceived feeling of closeness through which this community thrives.

Specifically, the application of social penetration theory was used to explain how the communicative interactions and exchange of information between individuals facilitate the development and progression of formed relationships (Tang & Wang, 2012). Relatedly, the existing mental health community on TikTok strongly relies on communicative interactions facilitated through self-disclosure to exchange information as a means of relationship building and community cohesion (Tang & Wang, 2012). Within this context, social penetration theory assisted in identifying how this specific community has formed and the multilayered communicative characteristics (verbal, nonverbal, and environmental) they possess to maintain a level of relational closeness (Tang & Wang, 2012). Additionally, the application of this theory provided context for systematically exploring the concept of self-disclosure and the level(s) in

which it is employed to build and maintain various degrees of relationships within the TikTok mental health community (Tang & Wang, 2012).

Personal Experience Statement

In 2019, the news of COVID-19 entering the United States marked a significant point in history and consumed all forms of communication media. Following this news, the world shifted to adapt to the new rules and regulations governing human interactions and gatherings, business practices, and protocols for safety; many of the emergent regulations implemented a level of mandatory human isolation that drove individuals into the confines of their homes. According to Clair et al. (2021), social isolation is found to directly affect psychological well-being and leads to negative implications for overall mental health, which became evident across all age groups in the wake of the pandemic. Additionally, this social confinement led to an increased utilization of online forms of communication and media to alleviate the negative implications of social isolation and limited physical interactions (Marciano et al., 2022). Experiencing this phenomenon directly, this researcher grasped for any form of social interaction through various social media platforms.

Moving forward from the onset of COVID-19 in 2019, many individuals have maintained their increased use of technological communication for various reasons beyond communicating with friends, family, and colleagues. Through conversations with friends, this researcher discovered that many found solace during COVID-19 by using social media platforms as a means for seeking a community that supports mental health advocacy and awareness. As many of them reported feeling the effects of social isolation on their mental health, they sought individuals via social media with the same experiences and shared support and encouragement

through self-disclosure of their own mental health experiences and methods of care and help-seeking.

Now that COVID-19 is less prevalent and the world has returned to a level of normalcy, many of this researcher's friends still connect with the mental health communities that they found during the pandemic. Upon investigation, it became evident that these communities are more active and vibrant than ever. As someone with professional and personal experience with mental health counseling and who is passionate about mental health advocacy and normalizing the conversation surrounding its implications, this researcher became immersed in this form of media content and latched on to the positive nature many social media content-creators produced in their online profiles. Therefore, this researcher began to develop a personal understanding of these communities and chose to actively participate as a user.

In further discussion with professional colleagues and personal friends, this researcher determined that the social media platform TikTok was often the platform of choice, and many used TikTok when choosing to engage with mental health-related content. After creating my own TikTok profile, friends began to send me content related to mental health support and advocacy. From the initial investigation, this researcher found that many content creators were willing to share their mental health experiences, as well as the coping mechanisms and words of support that they use to motivate themselves when coping with the effects of mental illness. It became evident that many TikTok users were quick to comment and share their similar experiences and words of encouragement within the video comment feed. This interaction between content creators and TikTok users created online dialogue and collaboration that led to an initial indication of a formed online community. With this knowledge, this researcher began to study

social media's perceived relationship with mental health and existing communicative theory and research related to online communities. Thus, the foundation of this study was established.

Background

To adequately understand the full scope of the problem presented by this study, a comprehensive background of mental health, the social media platform of TikTok, online communities, and the act of self-disclosure were contextually developed for increased understanding of all stakeholders discussed in this study's narrative. To comprehend the full scope of the issue at hand, it is essential to provide background information on these topics before introducing the problem in full detail.

Mental Health

The World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Manderscheid et al., 2010, p. 1). This definition frames physical, mental, and social categories of health as essential components in determining the overall well-being of an individual. While this definition includes mental health as a determining factor in overall well-being, mental health has not always been recognized as a societal phenomenon receiving appropriate research, policy attention, funding, or visibility (Tomlinson & Lund, 2012).

Mental health can be defined as the absence of mental illness or the existing mental state of individuals as determined by their biological, psychological, or social state (Manwell et al., 2015). The historical understanding of mental health has vastly developed from the mid-20th century as the modern understanding has shifted traditional interpretations of mental health from diagnosis-focused to person-focused perspectives (Manderscheid et al., 2010). With the person-focused perspective of mental health and the knowledge that individuals are vastly different from

one another in terms of their cognitive development and processing, indicators of negative mental health differ from person to person, and mental illness may produce psychological reactions in a variety of ways; therefore, mental health may produce implications varying in nature between individuals despite a similar diagnosis or lived-experience.

Stigmatization of Mental Health

Traditionally, mental health has been a stigmatized topic, which has detrimentally influenced the level to which people seek help and specialized treatment for symptoms of mental illness (Henderson et al., 2018). Many individuals living with mental health issues expect discrimination and prejudice as a result of seeking treatment and support; therefore, they choose to forego seeking medical care in an attempt to preserve how they are perceived by others and society (Henderson et al., 2018). Many inescapable cultural and social factors influence mental health; without access to support, a rise in generational mental illness has become more evident (Bolton & Bhugra, 2020). With interest in and the prevalence of mental health implications on the rise, various behavioral-focused, anti-stigma initiatives have been instituted in an attempt to reshape how society views and discusses mental health (Stuart, 2016).

Mental Health's Ties to Social Media

One of the social factors prominently tied to influencing the implications of mental health is the use of social media platforms (Faelens et al., 2021). Social media can be defined as web-based channels of communication that enable users to create and share content with the intent to interact, socialize, build relationships, network, or conduct business (Aichner et al., 2021). A commonality of most social media platforms is the ability for connection and interaction between users (Aichner et al., 2021). This connection allows users to associate with others around the globe despite restrictions of time and space.

The rise of social media has created ample opportunity for masses of users to engage in self-presentation and social interaction (Faelens et al., 2021). This type of social engagement has become addictive in nature and interrelated with psychological well-being (Faelens et al., 2021). Psychological well-being as affected by social media holds implications for mental health associated with anxiety, loneliness, depression, and social isolation (Ostic et al., 2021). Recent research has highlighted the problematic nature of social media and noted the platform's negative correlation with outcomes of mental health; however, an increasing number of studies have started to emphasize social media's role in facilitating positive social interactions, forming relationships, and establishing social support and community, which may positively impact an individual's mental health (Ostic et al., 2021).

TikTok

One of the social media platforms recently tied to academic research regarding mental health is TikTok. TikTok is a highly immersive social media platform that gives users the ability to create and share short-form videos up to 10 minutes in length on any and every topic imaginable (Montag et al., 2021). The platform was originally released in China by ByteDance Technology in 2016 and was first known as "Douyin" (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). It was not released on a worldwide scale until it merged with an existing video platform known as Musical.ly, and it was branded with the existing TikTok logo and name in 2018 (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In its relatively short period of existence, TikTok has garnered a large number of users, solidified its place as a global social media phenomenon, and surpassed the user base of other long-standing, video-oriented platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. On record, TikTok has approximately 1 billion monthly active users and has been downloaded more than 2.6 billion times (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

TikTok's User Capabilities

As a media-based social media platform, TikTok centers on the creation and sharing of user-generated content with the intent to produce active participation and content engagement between users (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This participation and engagement is facilitated by a variety of interactive features on the platform; these features include the ability for users to *comment on, like, share or favorite* the viewed videos of content creators and permit users to *follow* one another or to become *friends*. Additionally, users are able to further personalize their profile and video content with *usernames* and *hashtags*, which allow users to create a unique online persona for themselves while associating their content with desired phrases and terms.

Commenting on a video is characterized by a user's ability to interact with content creators by posting a textual remark on the content viewed; creators may then *comment* back, or other platform users may respond to the *comment*. Content creators may turn off *comments* if they do not wish their videos to be interacted with or prefer that users not share feedback.

Liking is a user's ability to click the heart-shaped icon on the right-hand side of the video to express their appreciation of the content or the satisfaction they had in viewing it. The number of *likes* on a video is displayed on the right-hand side of viewed content as a numerical value.

Sharing a video takes place when users send or "share" a video with other users for their viewing pleasure. When users *favorite* a video, they utilize the bookmark-shaped icon on the right-hand side of each video to store the video in their personal profile for later access.

Following takes place when users choose to bookmark preferred content creators' profile to have their content routinely show in their user feed. A user can *follow* a profile yet not be followed back—meaning the profile has no wish or reason to view the content of his or her follower. Users become *friends* on TikTok when they both choose to *follow* each other.

*Username*s are names on social media platforms, which serve as unique identifiers that indicate the name an individual wishes to go by on the platform. Some users simply use their name as their *username*, while others choose more unique identifiers or aliases.

Hashtags are a textual tag preceded by the # symbol. This tag associates content with specific social groups, ideas, or topics (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013).

Enhanced TikTok Features

The initial design of TikTok presented the main user-capability of video-based content creation with basic interactive features; however, the platform now possesses several additional features to encourage users to be collaborative with their audience and the created content of others through platform capabilities that enhance social involvement. These features include capabilities such as *live streaming* or the *stitch* and *duet* functionalities (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Live streaming enables users to record and share videos in real-time as they are being created (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Those watching the *live stream* can then interact with the content creator through *commenting* or *liking*.

The TikTok feature known as *duet* is utilized when a content creator wants to share their video side-by-side with the video of another content creator; both videos appear in the same split frame and play independently of each other as one video (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

The *stitch* feature of TikTok makes it possible for content creators to clip content from existing videos and integrate it into their own, which forms a co-created video mashup (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Additionally, TikTok maintains a computer-coded algorithm that collects data on the viewed content of users. This algorithm then produces driven content feeds and predicts what

types of videos it believes the users may be most susceptible to viewing and with which they might engage (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). The *For You* content feed is where this content is featured, which is a specifically curated feed of videos produced by the TikTok algorithm for each individual user. The algorithm overall serves as a means of data collection to aid in the personalization of content presented to users.

While TikTok maintains its traditional features and has substantially added to user capabilities since its launch, the platform is constantly evolving and being added to continue to increase user participation and content creation, and to promote active engagement between individual content profiles. These features of enhanced interaction have been commonly associated with the facilitation of active social media participation and the formation of cohesive online groups and communities (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013). These online groups and communities significantly impact the success of social media platforms and are valuable in predicting the longevity and overall success of the platform.

Online Communities

Online communities form through peer-to-peer group interactions via online platforms (Dover & Kelman, 2018). These communities have become an integral part of the day-to-day lives of many social media users and vary in size, interests, and communicative characteristics (Dover & Kelman, 2018). Within these communities, individuals participate in conversation, interact with their peers, and are affected by the communicative behaviors they partake in. Active and healthy online communities strive for committed group members, rely on minimal interdependence between community members to produce interaction, and emphasize the marginal return on contribution as primarily non-decreasing (Dover & Kelman, 2018).

Characteristics of Online Communities

Online communities are commonly defined as social aggregations that form on web-based interfaces in which people engage in discussion long enough to form personal relationships with human feelings and behavioral implications (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018).

Online groups and communities strongly rely on communicative networking factors to form and maintain their web-based bonds through patterns of active and passive participation (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013); therefore, social media platforms have become popular communicative mediums because of their technological features that encourage networking, interaction, and participation.

Online social media communities are distinctly different from physical communities in terms of their characteristics, rules, and norms. First, they must maintain an adequate number of members to actively support communication and engagement; communication must be facilitated between group members and remain consistently active (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018). Second, online communities centrally focus on a specific idea, topic, or theme in which community members maintain interest (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018). Third, members are governed by spoken or unspoken rules, practices, or norms that facilitate how acceptable communication and interaction take place (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018). Fourth, participation is necessary for maintaining an online community; without participation, an online group fails to produce active involvement and often loses engagement to the point of failure (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018). Fifth, members should feel a sense of community that evokes feelings of belonging and value; essentially, members should feel at ease and find satisfaction and worth in participating in an online group (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018).

The discussed characteristics of online groups often vary in form between individual online communities; however, these characteristics are essential for their continuity and longevity (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013). Fundamentally, the basic existence of online groups relies on members' willingness to communicate and interact with one another and post content, as well as the mutual exchange of information to build relationships, and the generation of new content and conversation (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018). Focusing on the relational aspect of online communities, one of the main forms of building active relationships that evoke human feelings is the role of self-disclosure, which is facilitated through members' exchange of personal information.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is an intentional, communicative act in which people share information about themselves with others. This exchange of information is often used to strengthen interpersonal relationships and leads to increased levels of closeness and intimacy (Sprecher et al., 2012). Within the disclosure process, there are two central roles: the discloser and the disclosure recipient (Sprecher et al., 2012). The discloser shares information, while the disclosure recipient listens and responds to received information; commonly, these two roles trade between individuals participating in the act of self-disclosure, as each communicator takes turns as both the discloser and the disclosure recipient (Sprecher et al., 2012).

The act of self-disclosure takes place in developing and developed relationships and is commonly associated with attraction and relationship satisfaction, both in romantic and non-romantic relationships (Sprecher et al., 2012). Within these interactions, individuals often share personal thoughts and feelings with the intent to promote the development of liking, understanding, or intimacy (Kreiner & Levi-Belz, 2019). Previous studies have found that self-

disclosure positively impacted mental and physical health and improved psychological adjustment in terms of social adaptation, mental health, and self-efficacy (Kreiner & Levi-Belz, 2019).

Self-Disclosure in Community Cohesion

Self-disclosure is a communicative act commonly found in online communities (Kreiner & Levi-Belz, 2019). Successful online communities facilitate active communication, which serves to build interpersonal relationships of varying depths between individuals. Often, online communities stimulate self-disclosure and encourage members to partake in sharing personal information (Ying-Wei et al., 2015). This exchange has been found to positively impact the perceived strength of friendships between online community members and the overall perception of the community as a safe space for active sharing and support seeking (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Nature of Study

This study used a qualitative content analysis to examine the mental health community formed on TikTok and the content users create and share; emergent themes, patterns, and relationships relative to the communicative features of the community were identified, which counter the current misdirected view of TikTok that suggests it solely impacts the mental health of its users in negative ways. This research sought to explore how self-disclosure plays a role in building interpersonal relationships via TikTok's platform to create a community of individuals interested in positively impacting the mental health of themselves and their peers. The assessment of self-disclosure took place through the qualitative identification of verbal and nonverbal acts of disclosure found within TikTok content and their accompanying comment feeds. Therefore, this method of study was essential in answering the proposed research

questions because qualitative research in the form of a content analysis has served as a valid means of producing intensive, in-depth research data of existing themes and concepts present in communicative messages that assist in determining the overall nature and existing characteristics of interpersonal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Social penetration theory was the theory of choice utilized in this study, and it was intended that this research and application of theory be situated in the socio-psychological tradition. The socio-psychological tradition organizes communication as expression, interaction, and influence and recognizes the importance of observable interrelated relationships that exist within the communicative context (Craig, 1999). Social penetration theory may be guided by this conceptual view of communication because it views relationships in a way that is multilayered in nature, as attributed to the interrelated interactions that take place between individuals (Littlejohn et al., 2021). In the specific context of this research, self-disclosure was focused on as the mediating expression of influence as understood via social penetration theory, which attempts to cultivate and maintain interpersonal relationships on differing levels. Therefore, the socio-psychological tradition provided a framework applicable to social penetration theory to further interpret the communicative behaviors, both cognitive and behavioral, used to process information and interact within relationships (Craig, 1999).

The socio-psychological tradition emphasizes that the truth of a communicative phenomenon is found in observation by paying close attention to the communicative actions that take place between individuals (Craig, 1999). Social penetration theory relies on the observable communicative interaction that occurs between individuals and assesses how those interactions influence the level of closeness achieved in the relationship. Therefore, self-disclosure and the

exchange of information function as communicative interaction driven by human cognition and individual behavioral characteristics with the intent to influence the cultivation of individual and community relationships (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Relatedly, the influence of individual human cognition and behavioral characteristics are emphasized within the socio-psychological tradition as determining factors of interpersonal interaction and influence (Craig, 1999). With this knowledge, the socio-psychological tradition best provided a relative perspective from which to approach the communicative application of social penetration theory in relation to this dissertation research.

Acknowledging Communication Privacy Management Theory

As an extension of the historical framework of social penetration theory—and potentially applicable to this research’s findings—communication privacy management (CPM) theory is a perspective of communication that extends beyond the act of self-disclosure by emphasizing boundaries of privacy and the process in which individuals choose to open and close boundaries to one another (Littlejohn et al., 2021). This theoretical perspective analyzes the permeability of boundaries when choosing to share information; in some situations and contexts boundaries are permeable and in others they are impermeable (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, individuals are constantly managing boundaries based on expected benefits or costs of self-disclosure (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

It is essential that this theory is acknowledged given that study findings are relative to the elements of communication privacy management with consideration of privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence (Littlejohn et al., 2021). This researcher would be remiss in failing to acknowledge CPM’s theoretical expansion of social penetration theory and its

scholarly esteem with regard to furthering the communicative discussion of self-disclosure in the establishment of relational bonds.

Problem Statement

In academic literature, social media is commonly framed as negatively influencing the mental health of its users. TikTok has been subject to this framing, despite its limited time in accessible existence. With TikTok as a global social media phenomenon, it is evident that users spend a substantial amount of time utilizing the platform and engaging in communicative activities that influence them emotionally and behaviorally. This communicative influence warrants further research to better develop the understanding of TikTok's communicative capability to positively shape the conversation surrounding mental health.

Traditional research has strongly focused on the negative aspects of social media platforms; however, emerging, yet limited research has begun to assess the influential power of TikTok in forming interpersonal relationships and vibrant online communities that serve to promote positive mental health (Basch et al., 2020). According to Gu et al. (2022), TikTok hosts more than 1 billion users worldwide and is currently accessible in over 150 countries. As the fastest-growing social media platform, TikTok has been subject to recent academic and societal scrutiny as a platform with opposing implications for the mental health of its users (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). Historical research has identified and emphasized a concurrent rise in social media and negative mental health implications, which have framed TikTok as a platform associated with worsening mental health conditions (Chao et al., 2023). However, newer, emerging research has identified TikTok's significance in the mental health community as a platform that allows an interactive space for users to share their personal stories and provide encouragement for others experiencing or living with mental health illnesses (Gallagher, 2021).

The problem is TikTok is predominantly viewed as a social media platform negatively influencing the mental health of its users; however, emerging, yet limited, research has illuminated TikTok as a means to build interpersonal relationships and connect communities of individuals seeking to promote positive mental health awareness (Basch et al., 2020). Mental health is a topic largely tied in different contexts to the usage of social media platforms. In many of these contexts, the narrative of social media and its connection to mental health is negative (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). However, content creators are now using their profiles on some platforms to impact and influence positive mental health awareness with their online followers through the implementation of self-disclosure and an emphasis on community cohesion. As social media presents a growing impact in the lives of individuals, it is essential to understand how it may be utilized as a means of positive mental health communication by professionals and non-professionals to build vibrant communities that seek to improve social media's historical ties to mental health communication.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this content analysis was to understand the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities forming around the topic of positive mental health communication on the social media platform TikTok. These characteristics were analyzed in the context of social penetration theory in consideration of how TikTok influencers utilize self-disclosure to build and enhance their online communities centered on positive mental health communication. This research sought to establish an in-depth understanding of emergent themes, concepts, and patterns of communication, which was beneficial in establishing social media as a potential tool for positively impacting and driving the advancing conversation regarding positive mental health communication.

Significance of Study

Social media platforms are globally recognized and utilized forms of communication because of their capability to connect individuals despite time or physical location. The extant literature presents a predominantly negative view of social media in terms of mental health because of this inescapable connection; however, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, influencers emerged on TikTok to encourage, support, and share their stories with the masses of viewers experiencing mental health symptoms and illnesses as a result of the pandemic's impact. With the emergence of these influencers, the conversation regarding mental health became one that was no longer taboo, and many individuals, professionals, and nonprofessionals joined the online mental health conversation, which has since formed a community of TikTok content creators dedicated to positively impacting mental health awareness. This community strongly relies on self-disclosure, which is a proven tactic of relationship building and community cohesion.

Specifically, this study attempted to establish an in-depth understanding of emergent themes, concepts, and patterns of communication present in this identified online community in relation to social penetration theory to understand how these communities have formed and the unique characteristics they possess. For future research, this study established a foundation of communal and communicative characteristics of TikTok's influencers and users who have formed a vibrant community built on the positive framing of mental health through self-disclosure and community cohesion; understanding these characteristics may be valuable for mental health clinicians who seek to reach clients and individuals experiencing mental health illnesses on a broader scale beyond in-person, formal meetings and telehealth. Additionally, this study created opportunities for future communication research to explore more than the emergent themes of self-disclosed content by providing a foundation of information to study the effects of

self-disclosure in this context as well as the outcomes for individuals who actively choose to be part of TikTok's mental health communities. This communicative research may be paralleled with mental health communication in the future to advance the literature of both fields and to improve the ways in which social media is utilized to connect and support those experiencing mental health illnesses.

Research Questions

The study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the role of self-disclosure in the formation of online communities based on mental health awareness, advocacy, and help-seeking behaviors?

RQ2: What messages of mental health are commonly shared across the mental health community on TikTok?

Definitions

The following terms are defined to assist readers in understanding how each word is utilized within the context of this study.

Algorithmic Personalization: The platform-based rules and signals that serve to personalize an individual's content feed on social media platforms. Algorithms rely on user surveillance and datafication to produce content the platform perceives as desirable by the user (Schellewald, 2023).

Comment: A user's ability to interact with content by posting a textual remark on the content viewed. This remark is specifically tied to the individual content item.

Communities: A network of individuals who interact and create through discussion, exchange of information, and social support (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013).

Content Creator: Media producers who create and circulate content across social media platforms to generate and drive communicative messages (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020).

Content Feed: The stream of content that users are able to scroll through on a social media platform.

Favorite: When a TikTok user utilizes the bookmark-shaped icon, which appears on the right-hand side of each video in the user feed, to store the video on a user's profile for easier recall and access to the video at a later time.

Follower: A TikTok user who follows an account to view and engage with the produced content of another TikTok user's profile.

For You Page: A content feed on TikTok created by the platform's embedded algorithm; the algorithm is designed to collect and analyze data on each individual's viewing habits to suggest videos it believes the user will be interested in (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Hashtag: A textual tag preceded by the # symbol. This tag associates content with specific social groups, ideas, or topics (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013).

Influencer: Individuals utilizing web-based applications to shape audience attitudes through persuasive messaging embedded in produced media content (Freberg et al., 2011).

Like: When TikTok users utilize the heart-shaped icon, which appears on the right-hand side of each video in the user feed, to express that they enjoy or appreciate the content viewed.

Mental Health Communication: Creating, transmitting and interpreting communicative messages regarding the topic of mental health.

Share: The ability for users to share user-generated content with others. The number of times a video is shared on TikTok is numerically displayed on the right-hand side of the video.

Social Media Platform: A technological, web-based application that allows for individuals to actively participate in online interactions and behaviors through user-generated content and engagement (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2022).

TikTok: A social media platform that allows for interactive, user-generated content in the form of short looping videos and live streaming (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Username: A name used to identify an individual's profile on a social media platform.

Views: The combined number of times individual content has been viewed by platform users.

The definitions provided produce clarity in regard to terms commonly used within the context of TikTok, online communities, and mental health. Defining these terms was crucial for understanding the complexity of TikTok and its distinct characteristics as an interactive social media platform supportive of online communities centered on the topic of mental health. Given the limited existence of the platform, the scholarly exploration of TikTok is still in the early stages; therefore, defining these terms provides a contextual basis from which to discuss TikTok in a manner necessary for academic research and examination.

Summary

Chapter One served to introduce the study and identify essential background information regarding the social media platform TikTok, understanding of mental health, the formation of online communities, and characteristics of self-disclosure. With this background information, a detailed view of the problem was presented, and research questions the study sought to answer were provided. Therefore, through the comprehensive exploration of social penetration theory and its relevance to the communication of mental health awareness by TikTok's mental health influencers, this qualitative study sought to expand upon the existing literature and improve the

traditional understanding of social media platforms, specifically TikTok, as a historically negative influencer of mental health and shed light on the unique communities that form via online social media platforms.

This chapter presented the Background, Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, Significance of the Study, Research Questions, and Definitions relevant to the research. The following chapter will provide an extensive review of literature in relation to social penetration theory, the socio-psychological tradition, and existing research on social media's perceived impact on mental health.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

To adequately explore the problem of interest in this study, a review of the literature was conducted to gather relevant and timely research to produce a cohesive synthesis of existing academic knowledge. This summary serves to provide a comprehensive foundation of understanding to further explore and develop the topic at hand. This chapter opens with this Overview, which is followed by the Theoretical Framework and Related Literature, and closes with a Summary.

Problem and Purpose of Study in Review

As previously presented and developed in Chapter One, the problem is TikTok is predominantly viewed as a social media platform that negatively influences the mental health of its users; however, emerging, yet limited, research has recognized social media platforms as a means to build interpersonal relationships and connect communities of individuals seeking to promote positive mental health awareness and peer-to-peer support (Basch et al., 2020). By assessing this problem within an academic context of investigative inquiry, the purpose of this study was to produce a scholarly understanding of the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities that form around the topic of positive mental health communication on the social media platform TikTok.

In correlation to the purpose of this study, social penetration theory was utilized as a theoretical, contextual basis from which to analyze the communal and communicative characteristics of TikTok's mental health communities—relative to how the communicative act of self-disclosure is used to build and enhance established web-based, mental health systems of support and online interpersonal relationships. To further develop the theoretical scope of this

research, the exploration and application of social penetration theory has been situated in the socio-psychological tradition of communication; this tradition has served to assist in improved comprehension of the role of this theory and its development of self-disclosure within an interpretation of communication that focuses on expression, interaction, and influence as a result of individual cognition and behavioral characteristics (Craig, 1999).

Theory, Tradition, and Paralleled Communicative Research

Despite social media's limited time in existence, as compared to other highly researched and contextually developed phenomena of communication, it is evident that these web-based platforms of instantaneous human connection are of increased interest throughout the academic literature in various fields. This rapid expanse of interest in social media platforms is due, in part, to the ways in which they have altered traditional patterns of human interaction and connection (Adomavicius, 2021). Thriving on connection, society has adopted social media as a primary form of communication that encourages constant dialogue and instant response, which ultimately facilitates human relational association and drives further engagement in the offered capabilities of social media platforms (Adomavicius, 2021).

With the existing and ever-expanding popularity of social media and an overwhelming reliance on its communicative affordances, scholars have initiated extensive and well-developed research on various platforms to assess their varying impact on those who use it; this research has been conducted from a variety of theoretical angles that illuminate social media in different contexts, both positive and negative. For the purpose of this study, literature was assessed in relation to the problem of interest. Therefore, the reviewed literature included that of social media's emergence, its traditional views in terms of human reliance and communicative use, the

positive and negative implications that social media platforms hold for mental health, and the formation of online communities.

Additionally, this literature review assesses the existing scholarly understanding relative to social penetration theory and the socio-psychological tradition. Social penetration theory is an extensively investigated theoretical foundation for systematically explaining and exploring the development and dissolution of interpersonal relationships. The reviewed literature develops the use of social penetration theory in relation to this study's problem of interest as a means for understanding the formation of interpersonal relationships, the communicative behaviors that constitute increased feelings of relational closeness, and the extent to which social penetration theory can present itself as applicable in the online context.

Furthermore, the socio-psychological tradition is further examined and synthesized within this literature review as an interpretation of interpersonal communication and community formation that focuses on the concepts of individual cognition and behavioral characteristics within the communicative context, specifically emphasizing expression, interaction, and influence in parallel to social penetration theory (Maguire, 2006). The explored literature develops this framework of communication tradition to understand the systematic and human-centered approaches of communicative investigation in which social penetration theory can be guided, focused, and interpreted within the communal, online social media environment.

Considering the synthesis of existing knowledge regarding theory, tradition, and communicative research relative to the presented problem, it is the overall intent of this literature review to provide an extensive, contextual foundation of the existing literature that serves to emphasize the significance of further investigating the communal and communicative aspects of TikTok's mental health communities and the potential power they may hold in developing

vibrant, unique systems of support dedicated to mental health awareness and encouragement. The reviewed literature supports the purposeful effort of this research to establish an in-depth understanding of emergent themes, concepts, and patterns of communication, which will be beneficial in assessing social media as a potential tool for positively impacting and driving the advancing conversation regarding positive mental health communication.

The review and synthesis of academic literature in this chapter were systematically conducted over a period of four months. Once the problem of study interest was established, multiple search engines and Liberty University's online library were utilized to search for peer-reviewed articles and published books related to the identified theory and traditions, and existing scholarly research on social media, mental health, and the formation of interpersonal relationships and online communities.

A dynamic Excel sheet was used as a "search diary," in which all relevant articles were documented with their title, author(s), DOI, and a brief description of their relevance to the study. Additionally, each article was coded by the anticipated literature review sections, including "tradition," "theory" and "relevant communication research." These sections were further broken down and sorted by the different topics that are included under each section. Pieces of literature found to be of value were saved as PDFs (when possible) or by website link within a Google Drive folder for further access.

The explored journals and books were filtered to focus on those that related to communication, mental health, and technology—since these were found to be the most helpful and targeted in consideration of the articles they contained. Additionally, effective search terms were established, including "social media," "mental health," "online communities," "self-disclosure," "social penetration theory," "socio-psychological tradition," and "TikTok," to name

a few of the terms found to be most useful. In some cases, terms were combined in an attempt to yield more targeted articles.

At least 15 to 30 articles were identified for each section of the literature review—sometimes more, depending on the section. These articles were then organized to create a cohesive narrative supporting the research of the identified problem and potential gaps in the literature. As further analysis was conducted, some pieces of literature were deemed unnecessary and removed from the search diary; other pieces of literature were found after the initial search and implemented within the literature review as needed.

Theoretical Framework

Communication Tradition

Traditions serve to divide the field of communication in accordance with underlying conceptions of distinct practices and interpretations (or perceptions) of communication; therefore, communication research is often situated within a tradition (Maguire, 2006). Seven traditions were established to better encompass the individual viewpoints and concepts of communication; they are conflicting in nature yet complimentary in acknowledging the differences with which human communication is understood and perceived by different individuals (Craig, 1999). With this knowledge, traditions serve as valid frameworks to approach communication inquiry from a scientific or humanistic manner (Maguire, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the socio-psychological tradition was used as a perceptive framework of communicative interpretation as related to the problem of study.

Socio-Psychological Tradition

The socio-psychological tradition is an interpretation of communication that focuses on the concepts of individual cognition and behavioral characteristics within the communicative

context, specifically emphasizing expression, interaction, and influence (Maguire, 2006). With this tradition, it is often assumed that influential communicative relationships are identifiable through systematic and strategic observation (Craig, 1999). It is believed that these identified relationships are predictive of the communicative results stemming from human interaction. Overall, this tradition views individuals as entities with specific psychological and personal characteristics that play a key role in interpreting their independent communicative actions and behaviors; when individuals interact with one another through the use of similar expressions, a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects are produced (Craig, 1999).

Socio-Psychological Focus

The overall focus of the socio-psychological tradition evaluates interaction, influence, and expression within communicative behaviors (Maguire, 2006). These communicative acts are defined by individuals and their unique perspectives, personalities, and pre-existing knowledge of communicative interaction and the world around them. Therefore, individuals function as socialized entities in which influential relationships define their communicative processing, interaction, and response (Craig, 1999). By focusing on the identified relationships within communicative interactions, the socio-psychological tradition serves as a driving perception of theory in which the success and failure of communicative messaging and behaviors can be evaluated.

Existing Research and the Socio-Psychological Tradition

In consideration of the socio-psychological tradition, an extensive amount of research exists in relation to communicative theory as situated in the tradition's interpretive perspective of communication phenomena. Specifically, this tradition has been historically used in various contexts of communication that facilitate interrelated relationships and the formation of power

dynamics. These existing relationships and interpersonal dynamics have often been studied in consideration of influence, interaction, and expression; the research established by social psychologists dates back to well before the 1900s (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022).

Early Application of the Socio-Psychological Tradition

As found in the collective research of Jhangiani and Tarry (2022), the earliest socio-psychological-related queries of interest and research initiatives were identified and facilitated long before the 1900s; this came as a result of an increased interest into the scientific inquiry of humans' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as individuals and as part of the collective group. At this time, social psychology had not been established as a solidified field of academic and scholarly research. It was not until the 1940s that the work of social psychologists Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger established social psychology as a rigorous field of scientific exploration and inquiry (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). With the solidification of this field, the social behaviors of humans in varying contexts and environments emerged as an increasingly studied phenomena (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). Two of the largest research focuses within the early development of social psychology were that of German dictator Adolf Hitler's mass influence and Philip Zimbardo's exploration of relational power dynamics as emphasized in the Stanford Prison Experiment (Asch, 1952; Haney et al., 1973; Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022; Sherif, 1936).

Foundational Research. Early research, attributed to the formation of the socio-psychological tradition as a communicative perception, served to evaluate the behaviors and overwhelming influence of Adolf Hitler. Researchers sought to understand how Hitler could have produced extreme obedience and horrific behaviors from his followers during World War II (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). They ultimately found that the influence of conformity and the pressure of acting in cohesion with one's social group often played a major role in motivating

and shaping human communicative behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, despite the implications it held for being deemed morally right or wrong (Asch; 1952; Sherif, 1936). Therefore, influence and power dynamics emerged as topics of crucial importance within social psychology at that time.

This increased research interest in influence and power dynamics led to subsequent studies, including the Stanford Prison Experiment, or the “prison study,” led by Philip Zimbardo (Haney et al., 1973). Zimbardo recruited male college students to act in the roles of prisoners or guards; it was the overall intent of this experiment to understand how situational factors influence human reactions and behaviors (Haney et al., 1973).

Zimbardo and his team found that study participants took the prisoner-guard relational power dynamic seriously, and those acting as guards inflicted psychological abuse without hesitation (Haney et al., 1973). This observation was alarming to researchers, and the experiment had to be terminated before its conclusion because the inflicted abuse was becoming increasingly brutal, and those acting as prisoners had to be ethically protected as research participants. Therefore, the study found a situational correlation between human behavior and cognitive processing when examined within the context of relational power dynamics—as emphasized in the socio-psychological tradition (Haney et al., 1973).

Developments for Further Application. From the foundational work of early researchers, social psychology developed quickly as a field and expanded its application to other topics, including the study of human aggression, group behavior, intergroup relations, factors of influence, and other various phenomena of human behavior relative to influential stimuli and the identification of relational power (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). Thus, the latter part of the 20th century exhibited a strong shift within the traditional application of social psychology to

increasingly focus on cognitive processing and identified influential relationships in terms of human behavior within the interpersonal context (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). It was with this understanding and application of social psychology that Craig (1999) established the context of the socio-psychological tradition in consideration of communication research and inquiry. Therefore, the established tradition formulated a perspective in which to situate communication theory as attributed to human behavior relative to interaction, influence, and expression—which exists in interrelated relationships related to human cognizance and communicative behavior (Craig, 1999).

Current Application of the Socio-Psychological Tradition

Since Craig's (1999) identification of the socio-psychological tradition, as found in the framework of social psychology, communication research has expanded in consideration of the environments found to influence human interaction. Currently, research heavily considers the role of technology in facilitating communication and altering the ways in which individuals perceive and process messages—between themselves and others or within broader online communities (Fiske & Taylor, 2008; Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). Therefore, the theoretical interpretation of social cognition has presented itself as a main area of study within online contexts as guided by the perspective of the socio-psychological tradition (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Social cognition lends itself to understanding how knowledge about the world develops through the influence of attitudes, information processing, communicative interaction, and judgment (Fiske & Taylor, 2008; Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022). As communicative action rapidly increases with the utilization of technology, social cognition as situated in the socio-psychological tradition has become of increased interest within the contexts of online environments (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022).

Within the context of social media, the socio-psychological tradition has been significantly utilized in consideration of research that examines influence of the online setting (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Leong, 2022). As found in the research by Leong (2022), social media platforms have altered the capacity in which actors in the social media environment influence the public. Therefore, the socio-psychological tradition is used to situate cognitive-based communication theory relative to how individuals present, accentuate, and omit information as an expression of power dynamics within the online communicative context (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Leong, 2022). In correlation, as found in the research of Aruguete and Calvo (2018), social media platforms are environments conducive to framing information in a way that affects the results of desired interpretation by a viewing audience. Additionally, they serve as mediums of collective perception in which social media users associate with like-minded individuals when interpreting which pieces of disseminated information and content should be of importance (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). In consideration of this research, the socio-psychological tradition becomes of increased significance when interpreting the varying perceptions of social media users and online communities as influenced by interpersonal relationships and individual cognizance.

Socio-Psychological Tradition in Relation to Research

In relation to the research problem outlined in this study, the socio-psychological tradition was the most applicable to understanding the formation of mental health communities on TikTok and the communicative features of self-disclosure that characterize their formation. As previously identified, the socio-psychological tradition emphasizes the existing truth of a communicative phenomenon as found in systematic observation by dedicating meticulous attention to verbal and nonverbal acts of communication that take place between individuals or

communicators and their audiences (Craig, 1999). Therefore, influential communicative relationships are identified. In relation, the communicative discourse taking place on TikTok between content creators and their audiences may be viewed as an observable relationship because communicative action takes place in which a response is elicited from TikTok users in the form of platform engagement and interaction. Observing these interactions will be crucial in understanding how expression, interaction, and influence play a role in the relationship formed between influencers and their audiences and individuals within the broader mental health community on TikTok.

Additionally, self-disclosure and the exchange of information taking place within TikTok mental health communities act as communicative interaction, which is ultimately driven by human cognizance and individual behavioral characteristics; this interaction is initiated with the intent to influence the cultivation of individual and community relationships (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). In relation, the socio-psychological tradition emphasizes recognizable human cognizance and behavioral characteristics as indicators for interpreting the outcomes of experienced persuasion (Craig, 1999). With this understanding of the socio-psychological tradition, it was determined that this perspective of viewing communicative theory was most applicable to situating the theoretical framework of social penetration theory, which will be discussed in the following section.

Consideration of Different Guiding Traditions

The cybernetic tradition of communication was also considered as a pertinent tradition in which to situate the application of social penetration theory for this research; however, after much consideration and thorough investigation of the core principles of varying traditions, this researcher opted to adopt the socio-psychological tradition.

The cybernetic tradition of communication emphasizes communication as information processing and examines communication in relation to theorized networks of systems; these systems consist of parts or variables that all influence one another and shape the composition of the overall system (Craig, 1999). In consideration of this research, TikTok's use of an algorithm serves as a crucial variable within TikTok's overall system, which possesses the power to manipulate the technological experience of the platform user.

The socio-psychological tradition is closely associated with and impacted by the cybernetic tradition and was selected as the tradition of choice to apply within this research because it emphasizes individuals and their independent actions within the context of communication analysis (Craig, 1999). It is the analysis of the independent action of individuals, which are of specific interest within this study; the cybernetic tradition of communication would be of relevant application in furthering the findings of this study or analyzing the obtained data from a different lens.

Social Penetration Theory

The theoretical framework of social penetration theory (SPT) was utilized as the theory of choice to guide this study. This framework was crucial in further detailing why the problem of research inquiry is of value by connecting the current investigation to existing knowledge in the field of communication and by providing a well-defined basis as to why the research questions are relevant.

Origins of Social Penetration Theory

Developed by Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor in 1973, social penetration theory (SPT) was established as a means to explain how the exchange of information functions within interpersonal relationships (Littlejohn et al., 2021); therefore, social penetration is defined as

“the reciprocal of behaviors that occur between individuals in the development of an interpersonal relationship” (Taylor, 1968, p. 79). This theory is found to be applicable to identified relationships within different stages of formation or dissolution and views costs and rewards in informational exchange as a driving factor in determining the information that individuals choose to share with one another (Carpenter & Greene, 2016; Littlejohn et al., 2021). In terms of costs and rewards, the greater ratio of perceived rewards to costs will produce a more rapid process of social penetration, which drives the formation of more personal and intimate relationships at a quicker rate (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Communicative interactions representative of relationship formation is said to consist of “verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal and environmentally oriented behaviors” (Altman et al., 1981, p. 109).

Altman and Taylor viewed the process of social penetration as a sphere and viewed the personality characteristics of individuals as varying from “common to unique and from high to low visibility” (1973, p. 18). The “core” of the sphere represents the most private aspects of one’s identity, which are often hidden from others in superficial interactions (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Information found within the inner layers of the sphere, near the core, includes information such as fears, spiritual values, secrets or fantasies, and aspirations (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). Moving away from the core of the sphere, one will find information that is increasingly impersonal and widely available to others, such as likes or dislikes (Littlejohn et al., 2021). To reach more personal information, one must penetrate the sphere and surpass the impersonal information to reach the core or the more private and hidden information (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

Penetrating the sphere is achieved in two ways: breadth or depth (Carpenter & Greene, 2015; Littlejohn et al., 2021). Breadth refers to learning a wide range of information about

another person, whereas depth refers to learning more detailed knowledge about one or two shared pieces of information (Carpenter & Greene, 2015; Littlejohn et al., 2021). As relationships develop, partners share more aspects of information about themselves and build breadth and depth in terms of what they know about one another (Carpenter & Greene, 2015; Littlejohn et al., 2021). Without furthering the breadth and depth of a communicative relationship, it is likely that a relationship will never move beyond the superficial stages of acquaintanceship (Carpenter & Greene, 2015).

Differential Contexts of SPT

Social penetration theory lends itself to the process of relational bonding and seeks to characterize the behavioral acts, both verbal and nonverbal, in which individuals attempt to learn about others and produce a feeling of relational closeness within the formed bond (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Therefore, social penetration theory often relates individuals to onions because everyone maintains layers that must be “peeled back” to move relationships from superficial to more intimate levels of relational closeness (Carpenter & Greene, 2015).

Relationships studied within the context of SPT go beyond those that are romantic in nature; besides romantic relationships, SPT is applicable to studying the relational contexts of friendships, social groups, work relationships, and computer-mediated environments (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). These individual types of relationships are significant in that they all develop over time, at different rates, and as means for different social needs in varying contexts (Huang, 2016). No two relationships are the same, nor are the individuals participating in the interpersonal relationship the same; therefore, social penetration takes form within interpersonal relationships at differing levels and rates of informational disclosure and reciprocity (Huang, 2016; Littlejohn et al., 2021).

Application of SPT

Social penetration theory has been widely applied in a variety of contexts throughout academic research. Historically, SPT has served to systematically explain and develop the formation and progression of interpersonal relationships occurring within physical, face-to-face environments (Bylund et al., 2012; Cialdini, 2001; Greene & Carpenter, 2015). However, in recent years, SPT has been of increased academic interest within the context of online environments (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014; Costello, 2018). The application of social penetration theory within both environments has been found to be beneficial with regard to its theoretical foundation of application; however, both environments present different perspectives in which to apply SPT because of the diverse ways in which information disclosure takes place (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014; Costello, 2018).

Application of SPT in Physical Environments

Considering the historical application of SPT, the theory has been revolutionary in guiding research that explores the formation of relationships, both romantic and non-romantic, within physical environments. A large majority of existing research explores the distinct layers of deepening personal information that must be penetrated to build interpersonal relationships between individuals; this penetration of information is often based on the communicative act and expectations of reciprocity (Bylund et al., 2012; Cialdini, 2001; Greene & Carpenter, 2015). The act of reciprocity is characterized by the notion that individuals should attempt to repay what others have provided to them (Bylund et al., 2012; Cialdini, 2001). Reciprocation is found to be a strong motivator of human communicative behavior (Gouldner, 1960). Therefore, disclosure of information becomes a two-way process in which individuals take turns to build interpersonal relationships (Greene & Carpenter, 2015).

An additional area of research regarding the application of SPT within physical environments considers the positive correlation between perceived understanding, relational satisfaction, and face-to-face proximity (Pollmann et al., 2021). Proximity has been found to play a crucial role in the formation of interpersonal relationships because it allows people to become familiar with one another and discover personal information within a private, physical environment; outside of the private environment, some levels of information are deemed too inappropriate to disclose—this often works against the formation of interpersonal relationships (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2015; Lin & Utz, 2017). Therefore, the physical communicative environment is found to be significantly different in terms of social penetration theory's applicability because face-to-face communication is systematically different from communication taking place in an online environment (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2015; Lin & Utz, 2017; Pollmann et al., 2021). Face-to-face communication allows visual cues, proximity, and various other influential features of human interaction to influence the rate of social penetration and the act of disclosure.

Application of SPT in Online Environments

With the increased emergence of technology, social penetration theory has now been applied to the formation of interpersonal relationships within online environments. Within these online environments, SPT is often applied to explore topics of personal disclosure, connection, and intimacy as facilitated by web-based mediums of communication (Low et al., 2022; Pennington, 2021). According to the research of Costello (2018), SPT must be considered differently in the context of online environments; this is due to the broader audience one has an immediate connection to versus the limited audience individuals have access to in their physical lives (Costello, 2018). With access to larger audiences through online environments, one may not

necessarily share information to connect with a sole interpersonal partner; they may disclose information in an attempt to connect with larger audiences with similar interests (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014; Costello, 2018). As found in the Twitter-based research of Baruh and Cemalcilar (2014), individuals who regularly shared more personal information were found to receive increased engagement from viewers. Therefore, the disclosure of information was found to take place more freely and frequently—uncharacteristic of the traditional progression of self-disclosure in physical environments (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014).

An additional area of research regarding social penetration theory and online environments considers the variances between the formations of interpersonal relationships via web-based platforms versus face-to-face interaction. This research often evaluates the application of SPT differently because online environments allow individuals to interact with the textual message of another, whereas physical environments allow individuals to interact within a face-to-face context (Costello, 2018). In consideration of online environments, individuals have the capability of curating their communicative messages to methodically plan, contemplate, and edit their interactions mindfully and deliberately; this form of messaging is severely different than the spontaneous and simultaneous communication that face-to-face interactions require (Costello, 2018). Therefore, social penetration theory must be applied in the online context with the knowledge that interpersonal relationships form differently and at different rates. Despite the differences present in the formation of interpersonal relationships via online platforms, research findings suggest that relationships form and progress in a similar manner as compared to traditional face-to-face relationships (Chan & Wing, 2014).

Self-Disclosure in the Context of SPT

The communicative act of self-disclosure is found to be widely relevant within the study of social penetration theory. Self-disclosure is the intentional communicative act in which individuals share information about themselves with another (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Rains et al., 2014). Existing research in the field of SPT and its association with self-disclosure have found a strong correlation between sharing personal information and positive outcomes of social support, relationship satisfaction, and perceived feelings of relational closeness (Rains et al., 2014). As stated in the work of Costello (2018), self-disclosure is an act of vulnerability in which individuals must be willing to share about themselves to produce the development and progression of relational closeness.

Within the context of self-disclosure, there must also exist the act of reciprocity (Costello, 2018). The act of reciprocity, as identified in the communicative framework, characterizes how one individual's disclosure and openness to sharing information often leads to another individual feeling apt to disclose information on the same level (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Costello, 2018). Therefore, the acts of self-disclosure and reciprocity are strongly utilized within the interpersonal context to continuously develop and solidify relationships, as studied by social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Costello, 2018).

SPT as Connected to the Problem of Study

Within this study, the application of social penetration theory sought to provide a theoretical framework from which to analyze the formation of mental health communities on social media platforms. Specifically, this theory was applicable to further contextualizing the problem of research inquiry and the proposed research questions in consideration of the formation of interpersonal relationships on TikTok. In relation to RQ1, SPT assisted in analyzing

how self-disclosure is used as a communicative act by influencers and content creators, as well as social media users, to form relationships within online communities that seemingly involve the sharing of more personal information. In consideration of RQ2, SPT was crucial in contextually identifying what types of messages, in terms of breadth and depth, are shared across the mental health community on TikTok. Therefore, social penetration theory served as a guiding theoretical framework of existing knowledge in which the outcomes of this study were developed and expanded upon.

Social Penetration Theory as Situated in Socio-psychological Tradition

With social penetration theory as the theory of choice utilized in this dissertation, it was intended that this research and application of theory be situated in the socio-psychological tradition. As previously discussed, the socio-psychological tradition organizes communication as expression, interaction, and influence and recognizes the importance of observable and influential relationships that exist within the communicative context (Craig, 1999). Social penetration theory may be guided by this conceptual view of communication because it views relationships in a way that is multilayered in nature, as attributed to the influential communicative interactions that take place between individuals (Littlejohn et al., 2021). In this specific context of research, self-disclosure was focused upon as the mediating expression of influence, understood in the scope of social penetration theory, which attempts to cultivate and maintain interpersonal relationships on differing levels. Therefore, the socio-psychological tradition provided a framework applicable to social penetration theory from which to further interpret the communicative behaviors utilized, both cognitive and behavioral, to process information and interact within relationships (Craig, 1999).

Related Literature

Literature within the context of social media is vast in nature and contextually developed from various perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Therefore, social media is expansive in its developed communicative correlation to human connection and interpersonal relationships, as well as mental health and individual well-being. The following synthesis of literature solely focused on the concepts of social media, online communities, and mental health communication, in consideration of their identified relationships, both positive and negative, with the problem of study.

Social Media in Academic Research

According to Aichner et al. (2021), the term “social media” was first coined in 1994 in reference to an online media environment based in Tokyo, called Matisse. Since the first use of the term, social media platforms have drastically expanded in consideration of their active users, as well as the number of platforms in existence, which have allowed them to become some of the most significant and influential web-based applications to be accessed on a global scale (Aichner et al., 2021).

Given this rapid growth in social media utilization, multiple researchers have attempted to study this phenomenon from various angles and viewpoints of theory and application. At present, more than 110,000 publications exist with the term “social media” in the title (Aichner et al., 2021). The number of publications only continues to grow as researchers become increasingly interested in people’s social media interactions and the overall inescapable ubiquity and pervasiveness of these platforms in today’s technological society (Shibuya et al., 2022).

Defining Social Media

Across academic research, the term “social media” broadly encompasses a variety of online interfaces and is not solely limited to a singular type of platform (Aichner et al., 2021). Therefore, the study of social media covers a wide-ranging assortment of online interfaces with varying functions and capabilities that differ greatly from one application to the next (Aichner et al., 2021). This array of social media applications includes photo- and video-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as more textual-based platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook. In correlation, Manning (2014) defined “social media” as new forms of media that involve and strongly encourage active and interactive user participation. With this understanding, social media is never completely passive; there is always the potential for communicative interaction, both verbal and nonverbal, to take place—despite the ability to participate in the passive viewing of content on numerous platforms (Manning, 2014).

Social Media Utilization

Throughout academic research, social media platforms are often utilized for either recreational or professional purposes; however, many platforms possess capabilities in managing and encouraging both (Manning, 2014). Under these circumstances, many tasks that were once done without the use of technology now require it as a facilitative medium (Manning, 2014). Therefore, the use of social media seems to feel less optional in today’s society as many individuals continuously migrate to online spaces as their primary forms of entertainment, interpersonal communication, professional networking, and to perform a variety of other everyday social tasks (Manning, 2014). The work of Aichner et al. (2021) reinforced this increased utilization of social media platforms and emphasized that both individuals and businesses have found social media useful in serving the professional and personal purposes of

social connectedness and networking—overall decreasing the view of social media as a platform of optional engagement, while emphasizing its seemingly permanent presence within one’s professional and personal lives.

The Social Aspect of Social Media

While social media is applicable for a variety of purposes, one of the most popular reasons for using such platforms is found in their ability to promote and maintain social connectedness (Ryan et al., 2017). According to the work of Ryan et al. (2017), social media has become one of the most popular tools for engaging in social behavior, and the level of online communication has increased as the traditional dynamics of social interaction have changed in accordance with the accessibility of social media platforms. Allen et al. (2014) supported this evident rise in social media as a preferred tool for communication and found that this social connectedness often leads to implications involving a sense of belonging, psychosocial well-being, and identity development and processes. This upsurge in social media usage and the implications that accompany its presence came as a result of digital technology immersing itself into the everyday communicative lives of individuals on a worldwide scale (Allen et al., 2014).

According to Nguyen et al. (2021), digital communication creates a sense of connection and togetherness that supports the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and the cultivation of social connectedness. The research of Ellison et al. (2014) supported this understanding of digital communication and went further to emphasize how interpersonal relationships are often upheld via social media platforms through a variety of unique behaviors, including maintaining, managing, and grooming one’s social network in an active effort to preserve their online presence and solidify curated relationships. The maintenance of meaningful interpersonal relationships, as explored in the literature of Baumeister and Leary (1995), is critical to overall

human well-being and necessary as a catalyst for ongoing relational bonds. Okdie and Ewoldsen (2018) reinforced the importance of relational maintenance and described how individuals often turn to social media platforms to satisfy their needs for maintaining positive social interactions and communal engagement.

Interpersonal Relationships and Wellbeing

As presented by Cohen and Willis (1985), positive interpersonal relationships have the capability of alleviating psychological ailments and implications; however, Williams (2007) offered a different viewpoint of interpersonal relationships and emphasized the negative consequences of problematic relational ties as unforgiving in their effect on psychological needs, such as self-esteem, sense of belonging, and finding meaning in existence. Considering both viewpoints on interpersonal relationships, current academic research has attempted to understand social media in terms of its negative and positive implications regarding the perceived severity of its impact on psychological well-being, which is explored in further detail throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Traditional Views of Social Media and Mental Health

According to the work of Pellegrino et al. (2022), as psychological well-being presents itself as a common theme in literature regarding the use of social media, many researchers have raised the concern of an existing relationship between problematic mental health and engagement in online social media platforms; an increasing number of studies have paralleled the usage of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, with negative mental health consequences, including suicide, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. The research of Shannon et al. (2022) reinforced the negative correlation between social media and mental health by finding that a heavy screen-based lifestyle revolving around social media

consumption and engagement may come at a significant cost to one's mental health because of the formation of addiction-like, behavioral symptoms that bond individuals to the maintenance of their social media platforms. Social media addiction, as assessed by Kuss and Griffiths (2011), results from an obsessive motivation to establish and maintain formed relationships; additionally, the allure of creating a preferred online identity correlates with egocentric construction, which many social media users become attracted to in an excessive way. According to Beyari (2023), this overuse of social media leads to the severe deterioration of mental health, with a significant connection being found between social networking sites and depression-related conditions.

Identity Construction and Social Media

An additional area of research in the academic literature regarding social media and mental health implications revolves around the formation of online identity construction. Historically, individual identity has been strongly tied to psychological well-being and is often analyzed within the context of an individual's personal and communal sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging (Haslam et al., 2009). With the introduction of social media, individuals are no longer restricted to their physical, face-to-face presentation and formation of identity—they are now able to access online environments in which they can experiment with and obscure their identity at will (Huang et al., 2021).

The research of Huang et al. (2021) framed online identity construction as a highly complex process in which people choose to identify themselves by carefully selecting personal characteristics to be presented within an online space; in simpler terms, individuals present the truth about themselves, but only the truth they wish to reveal. This utilization of social media enables users to present themselves in relation to how they would like to be perceived by others;

therefore, they shape and construct their identity in a way that serves their individual needs (Gündüz, 2017; Jakaza, 2020).

Identity Reconstruction. Beyond identity construction, many individuals participate in identity reconstruction within online environments (Huang et al., 2021). Identity reconstruction goes beyond strategic identity construction because individuals no longer limit themselves to the truth of their real identity—they often tend to stretch the truth, hide relevant personal information, and resort to lying in an attempt to present a form of their identity that is not actually representative of who they really are; under these circumstances, they are participating in reconstructing their identity, while navigating away from their true physical identity (Huang et al., 2021). Gündüz (2017) supported this interpretation of online environments as significant platforms used in malleable identity construction and reconstruction by describing social media platforms as a type of “showcase” that allows individuals to project a desired perception of their position within both their physical and virtual lives. Therefore, online social media platforms function as an environment conducive to extreme acts of self-presentation and identity development (Huang et al., 2021; Mun & Kim, 2021).

Identity Adaptation. As assessed in the research of Brenden (2022), individuals not only construct their online identities within the social media environment—they also adapt their identity in accordance with the content they engage with on online platforms. Ultimately, this adaptation of identity may become problematic as individuals attempt to alter perceptions of themselves in a way that attempts to achieve unrealistic standards, which may consequently affect their mental health and overall well-being (Brenden, 2022). The work of Mun and Kim (2021) expanded upon mental health in relation to online identities and found a significant correlation between individuals who present their identity within the context of a false narrative

and the increased susceptibility to symptoms of depression—unless their false pretenses led to an increase in online popularity.

Social Media's Positive Potential for Mental Health

As social media has been studied in the context of negative mental health implications, it has also been researched within a more positive scope of mental health communication and information dissemination. Emphasized within the works of Longest and Kang (2022) and Han et al. (2018), social media has been found to provide a safe space of social support and a sense of community for marginalized groups of individuals who may not find belonging or acceptance in offline networks otherwise—marginalized groups of individuals include those facing mental health symptoms and illnesses.

As explored by Choudhury and Kiciman (2017), mental well-being in terms of self-esteem and network support is substantially reinforced by communicative cues in online communities; these communicative cues are positive in nature and often possess the capability to reduce forthcoming risks of negative mental health. By understanding the communicative patterns of individuals in an online environment, researchers have found that they are often able to predict and understand the emotional and social state of individuals in regard to their overall well-being (Ríssola et al., 2022). This understanding is crucial as social media networks are increasingly used to communicate information that may not be said in offline environments (Han et al., 2018).

Mental Health Information Dissemination

As assessed and agreed upon by Moorhead et al. (2013) and Alonzo and Popescu (2021), social media has been found to possess an ever-broadening capability for disseminating mental health information that is crucial for improving health outcomes and for reducing the hesitancy

to seek help and support in underserved and marginalized communities. Increasingly, social media platforms have become sources of online information dissemination of mental health-related information due to their ability to connect individuals and allow them to share personal experiences, seek information, and offer peer-to-peer support despite physical restrictions of time and space (Latha et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020).

Specifically, social media platforms are substantial in their reach; as a mass form of communication, platform reach to both community members and nonmembers is sizable, and the ability to reach targeted populations in a short period of time is essential in quick information dissemination (Latha et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020). Thus, social media platforms provide a viable space for implementing the dissemination of mental health communication that serves to promote awareness, engagement, and the encouragement of help-seeking behaviors (Alonzo & Popescu, 2021; Moorhead et al., 2013).

Online Mental Health Communities

According to Liu and Kong (2021), online communities provide an essential network in which many individuals seek mental health assistance and support. This utilization of online communities is essential for those facing mental health symptoms and illnesses because long-term support and communication have served as proven methods for improving medical outcomes and the decreased probability of recurrence (Liu & Kong, 2021). The research of Lu et al. (2021) reinforced this interpretation of online communities as viable avenues of mental health support because of their capability of decreasing stigma and encouraging acts of self-disclosure. As stated by Subu et al. (2021), multiple types of mental health-related stigma influence the lack of help-seeking behaviors and positive mental health communication, including public stigma, self-stigma, institutional stigma, and professional stigma. These varying types of stigma are often

alleviated in online mental health communities because community members dedicate themselves to providing emotional and informational support, in addition to sharing their own mental health experiences as a means to helping other community members navigate mental health-related symptoms or diagnoses (Liu & Wang, 2021).

Naslund et al. (2016) found that many people with mental illnesses report increased benefits when interacting with peers online because they form a greater sense of social connectedness and group belonging, which assists in coping with the day-to-day struggles of living with mental health implications. Therefore, as found in the research of Chung (2013), online support groups are becoming the preferred method of support because online communities often allow individuals to build social relationships and receive needed support not found in their existing offline communities.

Mental Health Content Creators

According to Gammoudi et al. (2022), influencers and content creators are regularly defined as individuals with an online presence who communicate information, ideas, and opinions through carefully curated and systematically disseminated web-based content; these individuals seek to ultimately influence those around them by changing behaviors, beliefs, actions, or patterns of conversation. Within social media environments, content creators and influencers often exist to support the cause and interests of online communities through the active creation and facilitation of targeted content and participatory conversation (Gammoudi et al., 2022). Therefore, many influencers and content creators drive community development in online environments by offering a lifeline of support to social media users in the form of informational, esteem, emotional, or network-related content and interaction (Gammoudi et al., 2022; Koinig, 2022).

Emergence of Mental Health Influencers and Content Creators. Recently, an increasingly emergent group of content creators and influencers has become more prevalent in their presence on social media platforms and within the research of academic literature: mental health influencers and content creators (Koinig, 2022; Pretorius et al., 2022; White & Hanley, 2022). This group of content creators and influencers centers the content focus of their social media profiles on mental health advocacy, support, and help-seeking (Koinig, 2022). The prevalent emergence of these individuals across social media platforms is largely attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance many individuals have developed on social media's connectivity, which is found to be a direct result of social restrictions enforced during the height of the pandemic (Koinig, 2022; Marciano et al., 2022). Existing research presents a significant and undeniable relationship between negative implications of mental health and the level of social isolation that COVID-19 forced upon individuals worldwide (Clair et al., 2021; Koinig, 2022).

Current research indicates that many young people often take to social media platforms to pose health-related queries, especially those related to mental health, versus seeking in-person consultation (Pretorius et al., 2022). This dependency on web-based resources as a means for mental health literacy and help-seeking has produced numerous professional and non-professional mental health influencers and content creators who overall work to engage and improve the mental health literacy of their audiences (Pretorius et al., 2022).

Non-Professional Mental Health Influencers and Content Creators. Non-professional mental health influencers and content creators have emerged as “peer mentors” on social media (McCosker, 2018). As peer mentors, non-professional mental health influencers and content creators work to provide support, advice, and encouragement in regard to mental health through

the basis of credibility established in accordance with lived experience versus professional credentials (McCosker, 2018). Therefore, these individuals have become community champions in terms of how they drive and modulate interaction and participation within online social media communities (McCosker, 2018).

Professional Mental Health Influencers and Content Creators. According to White and Hanley (2022) and Pretorius et al. (2022), social media platforms have also provided mental health professionals with the means with which to act as influencers themselves. Under these circumstances, mental health professionals have increasingly begun to use social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, to share psychological information and advocate for social change in regard to the stigmatization of mental health (White & Hanley, 2022). It is the intent of these professionals, acting as social influencers, to shape the behaviors of their followers and influence the perceptions of mental health in a way that defies the stigma of society (Pretorius et al., 2022; White & Hanley, 2022).

Gaps in Literature

In a review of academic research relative to the problem of study, several gaps in the literature became significantly evident. First, a substantial gap in research regarding the lack of comprehension present in understanding the role of content creators and influencers in building effective digital environments to support mental health was illuminated (McCosker, 2018). It is not enough to know that these types of content creators and influencers exist; further research is necessary to understand how these individuals form cohesive online mental health communities, in consideration of the employed communicative interactions and thematic messaging utilized. Therefore, this study sought to identify and analyze emergent themes and patterns in which the

communicative role of influencers and content creators was identified and developed within mental health communities.

The second gap identified is the lack of understanding attributed to “how” and “why” the causal process between self-disclosure and psychological well-being is so intricately interrelated within the communicative context of social media platforms (Luo & Hancock, 2020). Thus, this study closely examined messages of self-disclosure as exhibited in the disseminated content of mental health influencers and content creators, as well as in the textual responses of their audience. By examining the contextual and textual features regarding messages and content related to self-disclosure, the correlation between self-disclosure and psychological well-being was better defined and expounded upon.

Through identifying these gaps in literature, the study’s central problem of focus and research questions were carefully formulated to assist in further exploring and explaining this phenomenon of communication. It is the intent of research to supplement information with which to help fill the identified gaps and to provide additional targeted investigation into an already identified scope of inquiry.

Summary

In review, the presented literature has served to contextually develop a synthesis of existing academic inquiry and investigation that documents the theoretical framework, communication tradition, and existing research viable to supporting the further examination of this study’s problem of focus. Additionally, gaps in literature were identified and developed as contextual openings presented in the field of communication that warrant further scholarly attention and consideration.

In the following chapter, Chapter Three: Methodology, the research design of this study will be introduced and justified in consideration of this study's analytical needs. Step-by-step procedures for the study was conducted will be provided, and the protocol used for data analysis will be expounded upon. Overall, Chapter Three will serve to contextually develop the research design in consideration of a qualitative content analysis method of data extraction and examination.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter Three serves to systematically develop the methodology in which the problem of this study was investigated. Specifically, this chapter explains the overarching strategy and rationale for the research approach and achievement of the objectives of this study's focus. Additionally, data collection and analysis, as well as methodological choices, have been evaluated and justified to emphasize the purposeful selections made to conduct and execute reliable and valid research. By outlining and contextually expounding upon the methodological choices made concerning this study, it is the overall intent of this chapter that the research at hand be navigable and replicable.

Problem and Purpose

As previously stated in Chapters One and Two, the problem is TikTok is predominantly viewed as a social media platform that negatively influences the mental health of its users; however, emerging, yet limited, research has illuminated TikTok as a means to build interpersonal relationships and connect communities of individuals seeking to promote positive mental health awareness (Basch et al., 2020).

The purpose of this content analysis was to understand the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities that form around the topic of positive mental health communication on the social media platform TikTok. These characteristics were analyzed within the theoretical framework of social penetration theory in consideration of how the communicative act of self-disclosure is employed by influencers and content creators to construct online communities focused on the positive presentation of mental health. Therefore, this study intended to establish a thorough, contextual understanding of emergent themes,

concepts, and patterns of communicative interaction, which were found to be valuable in assessing social media as a prospective tool for positively facilitating and further developing online conversation regarding positive mental health communication.

Research Method

In consideration of the scope of research presented within this study, a qualitative methodology in the form of a media content analysis was adopted as the methodology of choice to guide the identification, selection, processing, and analysis of collected data. A content analysis is specifically used as a tool of investigative inquiry that is essential in determining the presence of themes, patterns, and concepts within the context of communication research (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). For this specific research, a media content analysis was employed to develop a contextual understanding of emergent themes, concepts, and patterns of communicative interaction that occur within TikTok's constructed mental health communities.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research systematically assesses the use of words and their meanings with the purpose of exploring concepts and experiences in further detail to formulate a theory or hypothesis (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). This methodological approach relies on data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, and literature reviews—investigated through scholarly procedures of examination, including content, thematic, or discourse analysis (Ahmad et al., 2019). Therefore, it is the attempt of this methodology to comprehend concepts, thoughts, or experiences of human understanding through gathering in-depth data relative to the phenomenon of interest.

In the academic field of communication, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to exploring scientific areas of inquiry regarding human behavior and

communication, both verbal and nonverbal (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This naturalistic approach requires qualitative researchers to study phenomenon in their natural, undisturbed settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, researchers make sense of and interpret communicative behaviors in consideration of the true, raw meaning that humans bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Content Analysis

For this specific study, a content analysis was the methodology chosen to guide the research. A content analysis is a widely used tool in qualitative research that is traditionally employed to thoroughly examine various documented features identifiable in artifacts of content found to be relevant to specified research interests; in studying these artifacts, it is the intent of a content analysis to deepen the understanding of the human experience, as found in the textualized and contextualized meanings unearthed in the analysis of varying forms of content (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Examined content can vary in form and may take shape ranging from simple words, phrases, texts, or pictures to more complex journals, books, websites, or social media posts. These individual types of content are often studied to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or patterns within collected data to construct meaning, identify relationships, or contextualize theory-related concepts found within content; this form of analysis serves to manifest latent meanings of the human experience from examined, literal content (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Media Content Analysis

To further narrow the methodological development of this study, a media content analysis was of significant relevance to the specific research at hand. A media content analysis is

a sub-set of a content analysis that seeks to study content produced by mediums and platforms related to mass media (Macnamara, 2005). The study of mass media became relevant in the early 20th century when social theorist Max Weber proposed the analysis of mass media as a means for assessing and observing the cultural climate of society (Macnamara, 2005). The cultural climate of a society is often defined as the socially learned behaviors that are shared by members of a group; these behaviors may be improved, changed, or discontinued over time in relation to successive episodes of continuous social learning (Heyes, 2020). Therefore, mass media is a subject of major research focus because of the perceived influence it possesses over society in impacting, altering, or reinforcing socially learned behaviors determined to be acceptable in mass contexts (Macnamara, 2005).

Application of Methodology in Relation to Research

A qualitative content analysis was chosen for this study because of the complexity of raw data in the form of TikTok content that served as the sample of investigative inquiry. The sample content utilized for analysis was collected with the intent to identify emergent themes, patterns, and concepts relative to the communicative and communal characteristics defining online communities dedicated to the topic of positive mental health on the social media platform of TikTok.

As identified in prior research, qualitative content analyses are relevant methodological choices of scholarly investigation when attempting to produce a deepened understanding of the human experience; human experience is intangible in nature but may be contextually developed through research practices that seek to identify communicative trends present in individual, group, or institutional interactions (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Therefore, by systematically analyzing sample data in relation to the study's problem, the human experience as characterized

by acts of disclosure within online mental health communities was further contextualized through the application of a qualitative content analysis; in turn, an in-depth understanding of emergent themes, concepts, and patterns of communication in relation to TikTok's mental health communities was beneficial in establishing social media as a potential tool for positively impacting and advancing the conversation regarding positive mental health communication.

Narrowing the methodological scope, a media content analysis was of relevant application because TikTok is a prominent social media platform that assists in shaping individual and public opinion through disseminated content. Therefore, produced content often serves to frame certain messages embedded in the content of influencers and content creators. The framing of social media content refers to the ways in which social media messages are organized and understood in the public context; with this understanding, framing is characterized by the organization of ideas, words, images, or themes that contextualize a topic of interest (Saraisky, 2015). In correlation, this study sought to address how content creators and influencers frame communicative messages of mental health through acts of disclosure to aid in constructing vibrant and cohesive communities of TikTok users who are dedicated to positively advancing the conversation regarding mental health advocacy, peer-support, and help-seeking.

Theoretical Relationship - Social Penetration Theory

In relation to the theoretical framework of social penetration theory, a qualitative media content analysis was beneficial in establishing individual units of communicative behavior that constitute the facilitation of relational closeness. By specifically examining content within the context of relational disclosures, as found in the framework of social penetration theory, themes, patterns, and interpersonal features of communication were identified and further explained in consideration of how mental health influencers and content creators construct cohesive

communities on TikTok. As found in other studies of similar methodological procedures, the data collected in this study were representative of how disclosure content may affect relationship outcomes (Mangus et al., 2020). Therefore, a content analysis—as developed in tandem with the theoretical guidance of social penetration theory—was valuable in exploring the human experience relative to how acts of disclosure found in the examined content may attribute to and reinforce the construction of relationships within TikTok’s online mental health communities.

Research Questions

In correlation with the identified problem of this study, the following research questions were postulated and designed within the guiding context of a qualitative content analysis:

RQ1: What is the role of self-disclosure in the formation of online communities based on mental health awareness, advocacy, and help seeking behaviors?

RQ2: What messages of mental health are commonly shared across the mental health community on TikTok?

Sample Selection

In qualitative research, a sample refers to the subset of data that is representative of a larger culmination of data. Therefore, the act of sampling describes the process that takes place in which data are systematically identified and selected for research in accordance to set parameters conducive to sufficiently addressing the problem of research interest. It is essential that content utilized in analysis be thoroughly described to ensure content included in the sample is easily identifiable in the context of its characteristics, parameters, and setting.

Sample

To analyze the communicative and communal themes and patterns found in the produced content of TikTok’s mental health influencers and content creators, sampled data were in the

form of TikTok videos and the comment feeds that accompany each video. All videos were produced within the last three years, between the period of 1/1/2021–12/31/2023.

Videos chosen for sampling had the set parameters of at least 1,000+ views, 500+ likes (favorites), 100+ shares, 150+ bookmarks, and 30+ comments. These parameters allowed for only the sampling of data that maintains a level of sufficient engagement and interaction appropriate for studying the problem of interest in this study. To identify the videos relative to the problem of research, the following hashtags were utilized to narrow the amount of content eligible for analysis: #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #mentalhealthjourney, #mentalhealthtiktok, #mentalhealthtok and #selfcaretiktok.

Setting

For this study, the social media platform of TikTok was the contextual setting in which sampled content was identified and analyzed. This setting was of research interest because of its public context and the unrestricted accessibility to viewing, saving, downloading, and sharing the platform's content. In having limitless access to content on a public platform, the research was as unobtrusive as possible, and contact was not made between the researcher and content creators, influencers, or platform users. Additionally, by using the social media platform of TikTok as the setting of choice, data were generated in a much broader environment that expanded the overall scope of the study and improved the analytical power of research findings in parallel to today's technological society.

Methodological Practices

Methodological procedures are essential in providing a detailed plan of data collection and analysis in which to guide the facilitation of scholarly inquiry throughout all stages of the

research process. Carefully identified and applied procedures of research establish the legitimacy of research findings and provide a step-by-step framework for supplementary studies that attempt to replicate research results. In this study, data collection and analysis were outlined in detail to ensure that the study is replicable and found to be of sound scholarly implementation in terms of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

Data Collection

Guided by the methodological framework of a content analysis, this research began by identifying content in the form of TikTok videos that relate to the problem of study. First, a new TikTok profile was created to ensure the platform's algorithm was clear of preexisting rules that may influence the visibility and prevalence of some videos versus others. TikTok's algorithm has been determined to be the most important driver of the platform's success because of its ability to recommend targeted video-content per user preferences (Boeker & Urman, 2022). With this understanding, it was essential that this research began with a new TikTok profile to ensure preexisting user preferences on the personal profile of the researcher did not corrupt the algorithm's presentation of data relevant to the problem of research focus.

Next, *hashtags* were selected and added to the *favorites* list to assist with shaping the algorithm, so it would produce content relative to the problem of study. These *hashtags* included: #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #mentalhealthjourney, #mentalhealthtiktok, #mentalhealthtok, and #selfcaretiktok. Specifically, these *hashtags* were chosen because they commonly appeared in videos related to mental health advocacy, awareness, and peer support. Without selecting pre-identified *hashtags*, TikTok only showed the most recent videos posted to TikTok.

Datasets

To achieve data saturation, 135 TikTok videos from different influencers and content creators were identified for use in this study. Identifying and analyzing 135 TikTok videos was set as an initial, minimum threshold to achieve saturation, due to the analysis of datasets utilized in other studies of similar scope.

The 135 videos selected for data analysis were broken down into three distinct datasets. The first dataset consisted of 45 videos created between 1/1/2021–12/31/2023; the second dataset consisted of 45 different videos created between 1/1/2021–12/31/2023, and the third dataset consisted of an additional 45 videos, different from the first and second datasets, created between 1/1/2023–12/31/2023. As videos were identified to be utilized as part of the research sampling, they were bookmarked on TikTok. By bookmarking videos, they were saved for later recall and viewing as needed.

Data Collection Process

As videos were selected to be part of the research sampling, they were documented and eventually coded utilizing the form in Figure 1.

- **Account Username:** The account username connects the video content to the specific content creator or influencer.
- **Date Posted:** The date posted will ensure that the video content was produced during the specified time period.
- **Date Coded:** The date coded will provide a time stamp of when video content was coded during the duration of data collection.
- **Video Number:** This assigned number will represent which piece of data the video content is in the sequence of sampling.

- **Context of Video:** Using one distinct statement the purpose of the video will be defined.
- **Number of Views:** The approximate number of times that the video has been *viewed*.
- **Number of Likes:** The number of *likes* the video has.
- **Number of Comments:** The number of *comments* the video has.
- **Number of Bookmarks:** The number of times a video has been *bookmarked*.
- **Number of Shares:** The number of times a video has been *shared*.
- **Number of Followers:** The number of *followers* a content creator or influencer has on their account.
- **Video Caption:** The caption utilized on the posted video.
- **Hashtag(s) Used:** The *hashtag(s)* utilized on the posted video.
- **Visual Notes:** Notes made on the visual content of the video (e.g., setting, imagery, mood, etc.)
- **Verbal Notes:** Notes made on the verbal words of the content creator or influencer; if the influencer/content creator did not speak, notes will be recorded on the audio of the video.
- **Nonverbal Notes:** Notes made on the nonverbal body language of the influencer or content creator (unless the video is solely compiled of visual content that does not feature the influencer/content creator).
- **Video Link:** A copied and pasted link of the video for later recall.
- **Video Coding:** The code(s) assigned to each video will be recorded here.
- **Comment Coding:** The code(s) assigned to each snapshot of the comment feed will be recorded here.
- **Video/Comment Coding Reason:** A brief reasoning of why code(s) were assigned will be recorded here.

Figure 1*Example Coding Form*

Account Username:	Date Posted:	Date Coded:
Video Number:		
Context of Video:		
Number of Views:		
Number of Likes:		
Number of Comments:		
Number of Bookmarks:		
Number of Shares:		
Number of Followers:		
Video Caption:		
Hashtag(s) Used:		
Visual Notes:		
Verbal Notes:		
Nonverbal Notes:		

Comment Notes:		
Video Link:		
Video Coding:		
Comment Coding:		
Video/Comments Coding Reason:	Video:	Comments:

Once all the necessary analytics were obtained from each TikTok video and recorded on the coding form, the researcher viewed each content sample again for coding purposes. In this second viewing of sampled content, the researcher utilized the Coding and Coding Reason at the bottom of the coding form to assign codes to each video and their comments. Additionally, during this second viewing, screenshots were taken of the 10 most recent comments found in the comment feed. Taking screenshots of these comments allowed the research to further detail the most immediate narrative of the conversation taking place on the comment feeds of TikTok's mental health influencers and content creators. All videos and screenshots were saved to an online drive and carefully labeled by the corresponding video number initially assigned on the coding form.

Procedure

The *For You Page* on TikTok was used to search for videos relative to the problem of study. Any videos not relevant to answering research questions were eliminated from the 135 video samples.

Viewed videos were included in data collection if they meet the following criteria:

- The initial posting of the video must have taken place between 1/1/2021–12/31/2023.
- Videos must include one or more of the following *hashtags*: #mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthinfluencer, #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthtok, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #selfcaretiktok, #selfdisclosure, #mentalhealthinfluencer, #selfdisclosure.
- Videos must have 1,000+ *views*.
- Videos must have 500+ *likes*.
- Videos must have 30+ *comments*.
- Videos must have 150+ *bookmarks*.
- Videos must have 100+ *shares*.

Videos that are found to fit the criteria were saved to the favorites tab on TikTok. Next, the coding form, as pictured in Figure 3, was utilized to record notes on the viewed video content and their immediate comment feed; the sections on the coding form for coding and coding reason were left blank until all video analytics had been initially recorded. Then, the video was coded based on themes relative to the act of self-disclosure and communicative behaviors of relational closeness in the context of online mental health communities.

Data Analysis

To assist in analyzing content, a coding frame was constructed to identify themes, patterns, and relational ties between collected data. Data analysis began after the coding form had been used to note necessary information about each video selected as part of the sampling.

Phase 1

The researcher reviewed each of the finalized coding forms to ensure they had been completed (apart from the *Coding* and *Coding Reason* sections) and to familiarize herself with

the data. By familiarizing herself with the data, the researcher began to determine the possible type and number of themes that may emerge from viewing the collected data of each video (Dawadi, 2020). Brief notes were made to record initial observations about potential codes that needed to be created.

Phase 2

The researcher reread through each coding form and began to generate initial codes, using the Coding and Coding Reason sections on the bottom of the coding form. The codes assigned to each video and their comments were compiled into a codebook to eventually assist in collating codes and assessing the presence of relationships or patterns across the entire set of data.

Phase 3

The researcher collated sampled content in association with particular codes. Once they had been grouped, the researcher documented the frequency of codes to assist in establishing their overall relevancy within the context of research.

Phase 4

Once codes have been finalized, they were sorted into potential themes. These themes reflected trends and patterns found within the sampled data. Documented codes were grouped into master themes, main themes, and sub-themes.

Phase 5

The researcher reviewed, revised, and finalized themes as needed. Similar themes were merged, and themes lacking supportive data were removed. These themes were represented on a thematic map to visually represent the relational ties of all identified themes. This step of data analysis was crucial because it went beyond broad themes and began to analyze data within the

context of research questions; therefore, a level of patterned response or meaning became evident (Dawadi, 2020).

Phase 6

Once the themes were solidified, the researcher began formulating them into a narrative. This narrative was written in detail to tell the story of collected data.

Role of the Researcher

Within qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be a key instrument in the collection and analysis of data. Qualitative data is often representative of the thoughts and feelings of individuals, groups, communities, cultures, or society, which ultimately leads to the increased understanding of how meaning is applied to experiences or to how the world is interpreted through varying, unique perspectives (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Therefore, qualitative research requires researchers to study phenomena from the perspectives of others and to be true to interpreting and reporting data in a way that accurately reflects these perspectives (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Within this specific study, the analysis of compiled TikTok content must be objectively approached to preserve the integrity of research findings. Thus, researcher bias must be recognized and understood before attempting to conduct research (Galdas, 2017). Bias in the context of research possesses the capability of distorting research findings. With this understanding, the researcher must be transparent and reflexive in terms of their own preconceptions, relationship dynamics and analytic focus before attempting to collect, analyze and present data.

Additionally, as the researcher, it is pertinent that study findings are reported and acknowledged even if they are negative or contradictory to the overarching premises for

originally conducting research. Therefore, the researcher should openly and honestly report study findings whether they are aligned with or supportive of prior evidence guiding the research initiative, or they are contradictory and negative in correlation to the studied phenomenon.

Personal Bias

It is essential that the researcher disclose any existing bias relative to the research study. This researcher is heavily involved in mental health advocacy and peer-support on a personal, professional, and academic level. Therefore, a high level of objectivity will be maintained when analyzing and interpreting the themes, patterns, or relationships found within mental health related content on the social media platform of TikTok. Although the researcher maintains a personal stance on the position and influence of TikTok influencers and content creators in the mental health community, this research requires the removal of personal interpretation and experience to clearly articulate the objective findings of analyzed research data.

To avoid the potential of researcher bias, a thorough research plan for data collection and analysis was created. These outlined procedures were reviewed and approved by institutional advisors and served as a credible framework in which the objective meaning of data will be preserved and presented. Additionally, all research findings were summarized and interpreted within the original context of analysis. Relaying research findings in this manner ensured that the researcher's subjective interpretation of data did not distort the context in which themes, pattern, concepts, or relationships are identified and developed. At the conclusion of research, all findings were peer-reviewed to ensure that the bias of the researcher did not manipulate any of the research findings.

Rigor of the Study

Within qualitative research, rigor refers to “the degree of confidence in data, interpretation and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (Connelly, 2016, p. 435). Therefore, rigor is often associated with the overall trust of a study. The notion of *trust* is an essential component of validation in ensuring the sufficient, high-quality findings of scholarly investigation (Peels & Bouter, 2023). Therefore, the trustworthiness of a study is contextualized within research as the reassurance of reliably produced research findings through the collection of sound data and the utilization of solidified research methods; thus, trustworthiness often attributes itself to the replication of a study (Peels & Bouter, 2023). Overall, trustworthiness lends itself to the degree of confidence in which scholarly practices of research are used within a study to ensure the quality of the study’s findings. Qualitative research is a highly variable experience; therefore, rigor or trust is essential in assuring that the established protocols and procedures of this study are valid in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Connelly, 2016).

Credibility

The credibility of a study is often framed as one of the most important criteria in determining if the performed research is trustworthy. Credibility is defined as the overall confidence in the truth of the study and its findings (Connelly, 2016). Therefore, to some degree, the researchers themselves and the utilization of selected research methods play an essential role in determining credibility.

Within the context of this study, credibility was ensured by implementing solidified methods of scholarly investigation as found in comparable research. With this understanding, the widely used framework of a content analysis, in terms of principles, methods, and practices, was

essential in ensuring that the findings of this study were credible. This required that content be assigned clear units of meaning and conceptual categories of organization; additionally, rules of coding were developed in accordance with similar rules that have been successfully used in existing studies that utilized a content analysis as their methodological design.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the notion that the findings of research are repeatable if the problem of study is explored again—utilizing the same methods and with the original data set or population of study; additionally, this criterion of research reinforces that the stability of data will remain consistent, despite the continuum of time and varying conditions (Forero et al., 2018). Within this study, the concept of dependability was applicable because TikTok content is continuously created based on topics and trends popular in present day society. With this understanding, it is evident that TikTok will be ever expanding in terms of created content relative to the problem of this study's research focus. Therefore, this research study included a highly detailed, textual description of the procedures utilized to conduct the content analysis.

It is essential to note that all content analyzed in this research remained on TikTok past the point of research's initial conduction; therefore, likes, shares, bookmarks, and views are subsequently changing and multiplying. Additionally, comments may be edited or deleted, or video content may be removed from the platform. Despite this historical analysis of produced content that is ever changing, the videos chosen for this research will still hold value in relation to the study's findings at the time of analysis because they contribute to the progression of studied TikTok communities and offer an interpretation of data then as compared to future research of the same scope.

Transferability

The concept of transferability as applied to qualitative research ensures that study findings are applicable and transferable within similar research contexts or settings (Forero et al., 2018). Within this study, transferability was ensured through providing readers with substantial evidence that research findings could be applicable to similar populations and settings. Therefore, the context of this research and the assumptions that were fundamental to its development and facilitation were carefully textualized in consideration of those who may want to “transfer” the results to research being conducted within a similar context. With this provision of contextual information regarding the development of this study, the potential for extrapolation persisted in relation to this study’s findings and the findings of other comparable studies.

Confirmability

Within qualitative research, confirmability reinforces confidence in research findings by characterizing them as confirmable and corroborative by the work of other researchers (Forero et al., 2018). The criterion of confirmability overall serves to verify that study findings have been shaped by the study’s careful and accurate analysis and interpretation of data versus the potential bias of the researcher. For this particular research study, an audit trail was utilized as a technique to establish confirmability. An audit trail is the detailed process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation; while detailing this process, the researcher recorded her thoughts about coding, a rationale as to why codes were merged and the explanation of identified themes. This textual trail of research rationale ensured that the study’s results were written in accordance to actualized findings versus the subjective interpretation of the researcher.

In addition to the audit trail, the researcher utilized reflexivity to reinforce confirmability within this study. The incorporation of reflexivity requires researchers to reflect on what is

happening within the research process in consideration of their own values and interests.

Therefore, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal in tandem with the audit trail to ensure that this study's research was confirmable to the highest degree of accuracy. Within this specific study, the reflexive journal was of increased importance in ensuring that the researcher's professional, personal, and academic ties to the problem of study did not distort the objective reporting of research findings.

Ethical Considerations

In consideration of this study's research focus, ethical concerns must be evaluated to identify potential challenges relative to the moral principles and standards that serve to govern the facilitation of the study at all stages (Sanjari et al., 2014). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), ethical considerations are necessary to ensure that no harm is brought to those participating in research, in addition to safeguarding the nature in which data is collected and interpreted.

Data Sample

Specifically, this study did not directly utilize the interaction with human research subjects within data collection procedures. The collected data used for this research were public posts that influencers and content creators uploaded to the social media platform of TikTok. When posting content on this platform, these individuals are aware of the public nature of their posts and the access of platform users to be able to view, save, or share the content outside of the platform. Therefore, all content was accessed freely in the public realm of disseminated social media content. At no point in research did the researcher have contact with the content creators or influencers of the collected content. Additionally, at no point in the research were platform users who had interacted with the sampled content contacted or engaged with via content feeds.

This public provision of sampled content led to minimal ethical concerns in regard to infringing upon the privacy and entitlements of human research subjects.

The Researcher as a Research Instrument

Considering the role of the researcher as a research instrument, an ethical evaluation was conducted in relation to the pre-existing perceptions and bias of the researcher; qualitative research often faces the ethical implication of researchers as research tools because the researcher may affect how data samples are analyzed, interpreted, and shared when consciously or subconsciously applying their subjective perspective to collected samples of data. Therefore, it was essential that the researcher be aware of the preexisting bias that is reflective of her perceptions and lived experiences, which may ultimately impact and distort the development of research findings and results. With this knowledge, every effort was made to ensure that data collection, analysis, and interpretation were meticulously and objectively performed as appropriate in the procedural context of a qualitative content analysis. With this consideration of ethical implications in regard to the researcher's role as a key instrument of data collection and analysis, the research was held to a higher standard of performance when conducting research.

Summary

Beginning with a brief review of the problem and purpose of study, Chapter Three provided the context in which a qualitative methodology in the form of a content analysis was conducted to systematically explore this study's problem of research focus. Step-by-step procedures for data analysis and collection were expounded upon, followed by the theoretical framework of social penetration theory in which the communicative act of self-disclosure may be understood. Next, the role of the researcher and parameters for ascertaining the trustworthiness

of the study were identified, in addition to the presentation of ethical considerations necessary for ensuring that every aspect of research is ethically dignified.

Chapter Four will serve to report research findings after conducting and executing the methodological procedures outlined in Chapter Three. This chapter will present the overall culmination of research in relation to the research questions through the textual and visual delivery of a high-level summary of collected and analyzed data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter One introduced the overall intent and nature of the presented study and identified essential background information relative to conceptually understanding the social media platform of TikTok in consideration of today's societal interpretation of mental health, the cohesive formation of online communities, and the highly personal act of self-disclosure exhibited across technological platforms. Supported by this background information, a thorough contextualization of the problem of research interest and research questions, which were developed to guide the study's appropriate utilization of methodological procedures, were presented. Overall, readers were provided an overview of the compelling case used to drive this research's investigation.

Chapter Two presented related literature connected to the problem of research interest and developed contextual information of scholarly inquiry that expanded upon social penetration theory, the socio-psychological tradition, and existing academic research centered on social media's perceived impact on mental health. Additionally, gaps in literature related to the study were identified and developed as contextual openings in the field of communication that need further scholarly attention and consideration.

Chapter Three provided the context in which a qualitative methodology in the form of a content analysis was conducted to analyze the study's problem. Step-by-step procedures were explained in detail for the intended collection and analysis of data, followed by the theoretical framework of social penetration theory in which the communicative act of self-disclosure may be understood. Additionally, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and parameters for ensuring the trustworthiness and overall quality of data were identified.

Chapter Four will serve to relay the detailed process used by the researcher to conduct the data analysis of this study. Additionally, the comprehensive findings from concluding this study's investigation of TikTok creator-disseminated mental health content will be thoroughly expressed in terms of emergent themes, relationships, and commonalities that were discovered, both through textual explanation and supporting visual graphics.

Research Questions

Studying the disseminated video content of TikTok's mental health influencers and content creators is essential in understanding the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities forming around the topic of positive mental health communication on TikTok's highly connective platform. Therefore, this study was designed and performed to adequately explore and answer the following research questions as related to the problem of research interest:

RQ1: What is the role of self-disclosure in the formation of online communities based on mental health awareness, advocacy, and help-seeking behaviors?

RQ2: What messages of mental health are commonly shared across the mental health community on TikTok?

More specifically, these research questions were formulated to understand the utilization of self-disclosure within TikTok's disseminated mental health-centered content, as well as to identify the types of mental health messages shared across the platform's user profiles. Study findings, as discussed below, provided conclusive information relative to answering both proposed research questions while illuminating the application of social penetration theory as situated in the socio-psychological tradition within this study's research context.

Sample Selection

To adequately explore the problem of research interest and to focus on the research questions presented by this study, the researcher began by identifying the appropriate research setting and features of content samples eligible for inclusion in data analysis.

Setting

The research utilized the social media platform TikTok as the contextual setting in which sampled content would be obtained. This setting was of research interest because of its public context; the public nature of the platform allowed for unrestricted accessibility in viewing, saving, and downloading content of research interest. Additionally, the unrestricted access to the content found on the platform allowed for the researcher to remain unobtrusive—with no contact being made between the researcher and content creators, influencers, or platform users at any point throughout research.

Sample

TikTok video content and their accompanying comment feeds, which focused on the 10 comments found at the top of each sampled video's feed at the time of data collection, were used as the sampled data analyzed within this content analysis to investigate the communicative and communal themes and patterns found in the disseminated content of TikTok's mental health influencers and content creators. All videos were produced within the timeframe of the last three years (1/1/2021–12/31/2023), and set parameters required each piece of content eligible for inclusion in the sample to have at least 1,000+ views, 500+ likes (favorites), 100+ shares, 150+ bookmarks, and 30+ comments. Additionally, all videos included in the sample were required to include one or more of the following *hashtags*: #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthmatters,

#mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #mentalhealthjourney, #mentalhealthtiktok, #mentalhealthtok, or #selfcaretiktok.

Research Specified Sample

In total, 135 videos and 1,350 comments were included in the research sample. This collective sample was broken down into three different datasets consisting of 45 videos each and their accompanying comments—resulting in 450 comments attributed to their corresponding videos within each dataset. This was done to compare the similarities in the emergence of themes across three datasets of different content and comments. Content and comments provided different themes due to their different functions within the TikTok platform, so comments and themes were coded independently. With this method of analysis, themes specific to the messaging within the sampled TikTok video content and the themes specific to the textual responses of content viewers were identified.

Research Sample Demographics

The TikTok comments and video content utilized in this research were found to be from a wide range of demographically diverse content creators, influencers, and platform users. Both men and women of diverse ethnic, racial, and professional backgrounds were found to produce content and interact textually within this community. Due to the limited information about content creators, influencers, and platform users contained on their individual profiles, it was essential that nothing be assumed when determining solidified factors of their demographics without reinforcing evidence; however, it was concluded that the mental health community on TikTok is diverse in nature and not attributed to one narrow description of the individuals composing this population.

Data Analysis

Before data collection, the researcher created a new TikTok account to use throughout the study. By creating a new user account, the TikTok algorithm was clear of any pre-existing rules that would influence the visibility and prevalence of some videos versus others. Next, the researcher selected pre-identified *hashtags* to add to their profile's *favorites* list. These *hashtags* included #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #mentalhealthjourney, #mentalhealthtiktok, #mentalhealthtok, and #selfcaretiktok. By pre-identifying *hashtags*, the researcher indirectly tailored the algorithm of their created TikTok profile to produce videos related to the problem of research interest on the researcher's *For You Page*, which they would then use to find videos eligible for utilization in the research sample.

Phases of Data Analysis

Data analysis was executed through distinct methodological phases to ensure sampled content was correctly and thoroughly evaluated and coded. Initially, all videos identified for inclusion in the study's sample were reviewed for numerical analytics, as well as textual and contextual features using a Coding Form. This form was also used to record contextual notes on the collected comments that accompanied each video sample. All videos analyzed with this Coding Form were *bookmarked* on the researcher's TikTok profile for later recall. At this point in the research, comments had not been screenshotted and saved—they had only been reviewed on the TikTok platform for the purpose of taking notes on initial observations and the emergence of possible themes. A note was made on the Coding Form to identify the profile username of the individual who was commenting and the date in which they posted the comment to identify where the 10 comments utilized in analysis started; this was done with the consideration of

additional comments that would be added to the video's *comment feed* after the initial date of data analysis.

Figure 2

Example Coding Form

Account Username:	Date Posted:	Date Coded:
Video Number:		
Context of Video:		
Number of Views:		
Number of Likes:		
Number of Comments:		
Number of Bookmarks:		
Number of Shares:		
Number of Followers:		
Video Caption:		
Hashtag(s) Used:		
Visual Notes:		
Verbal Notes:		
Nonverbal Notes:		

Comment Notes:		
Video Link:		
Video Coding:		
Comment Coding:		
Video/Comments Coding Reason:	Video:	Comments:

After completing the initial sample review of collected videos and their accompanying comments (apart from the *Coding* and *Coding Reason* sections) using the coding form, all forms were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet where data were viewable as a collective composition—referred to in this study as the Master Coding Index. This collective view of data allowed the researcher to familiarize herself with the data and to begin determining the possible types and numbers of themes that may be ingrained throughout the data.

Sampled videos and the notes regarding collection of the 10 most recent comments accompanying each video were separated within the Master Coding Index to create two individual tabs within the Excel sheet—one to code thematic elements of videos and the other to code thematic elements of comments because the video content and the accompanying comments serve two distinct purposes on TikTok's platform. Disseminated video content serves to provide their audience with some form of message, information, or entertainment. In contrast, comments allow platform users to engage with video content and respond freely as they see fit.

Phase 1

Research began with a comprehensive review of compiled data and the notes entered into the Master Coding Index—both from videos and comments. Brief notes regarding the emergence of possible themes were taken on the initial observations found within the data, which were determined to be relative to the study’s posed research questions. Additionally, notes were made of any distinctive outliers identified within the collected data.

Next, each content sample was sorted into one of three datasets. Figure 3 shows which piece of sampled content was assigned to each dataset. Numbers listed under the content sample column correlate with the assigned number given to each piece of content.

Figure 3

Sample Organization by Assigned Dataset

Dataset Number	Content Sample
Dataset 1	1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37, 40, 43, 46, 49, 52, 55, 58, 61, 64, 67, 70, 73, 76, 79, 82, 85, 88, 91, 94, 97, 100, 103, 106, 109, 112, 115, 118, 121, 124, 127, 130, 133
Dataset 2	2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62, 65, 68, 71, 74, 77, 80, 83, 86, 89, 92, 95, 98, 101, 104, 107, 110, 113, 116, 119, 122, 125, 128, 131, 134
Dataset 3	3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 27, 30, 33, 36, 39, 42, 45, 48, 51, 54, 57, 60, 63, 66, 69, 72, 75, 78, 81, 84, 87, 90, 93, 96, 99, 102, 105, 108, 111, 114, 117, 120, 123, 126, 129, 132, 135

By sorting content into these three datasets, the researcher intended to triangulate data to support the overall credibility of research findings. The distinction of these datasets was used to perform a comparative analysis of emergent themes amongst three similar data sets identified within the same timeframe and data parameters.

Phase 2

Each coding form was reviewed, and preliminary codes were generated—first for all video content samples and then for the collected comments. Concept coding was inductively used throughout coding procedures; therefore, words or short phrases were applied to the analyzed data, which symbolically served to represent a suggested broader meaning in observed social themes and ideas—resulting in the bigger picture of analyzed data (Saldaña, 2021).

Sample Video Content. Beginning with the sampled video content, the *Coding* and *Coding Reason* Sections on the Coding Form were used to enter preliminary codes and the reason why those particular codes were assigned. Coding Forms were then divided into three piles representing the dataset to which they belonged. The researcher then created three tabs within the Master Coding Index that represented each dataset; these tabs were labeled *Content—Dataset 1*, *Content—Dataset 2*, and *Content—Dataset 3*. The number assigned to each video and the TikTok profile username that corresponded to the video were listed within the dataset tabs that they were previously allocated to in Phase 1 of the research; this was done to assist with the organization of themes associated with each video. The researcher then entered the preliminary codes generated and the accompanying reason why those codes were assigned in correlation with each video.

Sample Comments. Next, preliminary codes were assigned to the comments of each video. The notes had previously been recorded on the Coding Form and were then entered into

the Master Coding Index, were found to be insufficient in accurately coding each set of the video comments due to how broad in generalization they were. The researcher decided if she attempted to code this broad generalization of comments accompanying each video that she might lose the true context as to why the comment was actually posted. Therefore, the decision was made to code each comment separately.

To do this, screenshots were taken of the comments found in each comment feed, which were utilized in the initial collection of data (as outlined in the preparation leading up to the initial analysis and coding of data). This was done in an attempt to assess each comment individually and to write notes on the screenshots regarding applicable themes observed; however, available computer storage would not allow for so many large files to be saved.

Therefore, while quite tedious in nature, each comment included in the research sample was copied and pasted into the Master Coding Index. Three new tabs were created that were labeled *Comments—Dataset 1*, *Comments—Dataset 2* and *Comments—Dataset 3*. Each of these tabs contained the number assigned to each video and the TikTok profile username that corresponded to the video. The 10 comments necessary for coding purposes were listed next to the video number and profile username to which they belonged to assist with identification. This form of capturing comment data worked well because the cell for each comment could be color-coded. The color codes were assigned to the preliminary themes that were recorded. A key was made to identify which color corresponded with the assigned theme.

Phase 3

Starting with sampled video content, preliminary codes that were identical or similar in nature were collated. After grouping these initially assigned codes, the frequency in which the codes appeared amongst each dataset and as a collective whole was documented. Grouping codes

in this manner was done to assist in allowing the researcher to understand their overall relevance within the context of research.

The same grouping procedure was then repeated with the initial codes assigned to comments. Codes that were similar or identical in nature were collated, and their frequencies were documented as individual datasets and as a collective whole.

The researcher then reviewed the grouping of codes for videos and comments to ensure the codes were relevant in how they were grouped. Additionally, notes were made on outliers found within the coded video content and comments.

Phase 4

After the collation of codes had been finalized, the researcher worked through each dataset and evaluated the identified codes to sort them into potential themes. Starting with the first dataset of video content, codes were evaluated for relevant trends and patterns in which a categorical theme could be assigned. Themes were then grouped into master themes, main themes, and sub-themes. This method of assigning themes was then repeated with the second and third datasets of sampled video content.

The same procedure was then applied to the datasets of sampled video comments. Starting with the first dataset of video comments, the researcher evaluated each of the noted codes to place them into potential themes. These themes were then organized into master themes, main themes, and sub-themes. This method was then repeated with each of the remaining datasets regarding video comments.

Phase 5

Starting with the themes found in the sampled video content of the first dataset, emergent themes were reviewed, revised, and finalized. Similar themes were merged and themes that were

found to be lacking in support were removed. This procedure was then repeated in the remaining two datasets of sampled video content.

The researcher then reviewed, revised, and finalized themes found in the datasets of video comments. Starting with the first comment dataset and then working through the second and third comment datasets, the researcher merged and removed themes as necessary.

Next, the researcher created thematic maps to visually display the prominent themes that emerged from analyzed datasets. This visualization allowed the researcher to view all themes that were found to be the most prominent and relative to the proposed research questions.

Additional Areas of Data Interest. After concluding data collection and analysis, the researcher decided to go back through the sampled video content and mark the individual videos that exhibited some form of self-disclosure—meaning that the content creator or influencer shared some form of highly personal information about themselves, not normally revealed to strangers or broad audiences. These videos were bolded in green text within the Master Coding Index. Noting self-disclosure as found in these videos was intended for a greater purpose as exhibited in the research findings.

Phase 6

After analyzing each of the collected samples of data and solidifying relevant themes, the researcher created visual interpretations of the collective data and wrote detailed explanations of findings, as well as an extensive narrative of conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations, as related to the problem of study and the research questions of interest.

Findings

Utilizing conceptual, inductive coding, the 135 TikTok videos included in the research sample were thoroughly analyzed for emergent themes, commonalities, and patterns.

Additionally, the 10 most recent comments in each video's comment feed, at the time of data collection, were recorded and analyzed to evaluate the responses that videos elicited from their audiences—resulting in the coding of 1,350 video comments. Sampled video content and their accompanying comments were coded separately.

The coding of video content and the comments that accompanied them produced two distinct sets of themes—one that related to the messaging of disseminated mental health videos and another that characterized the elicited response these videos produced from their audiences.

Video Themes

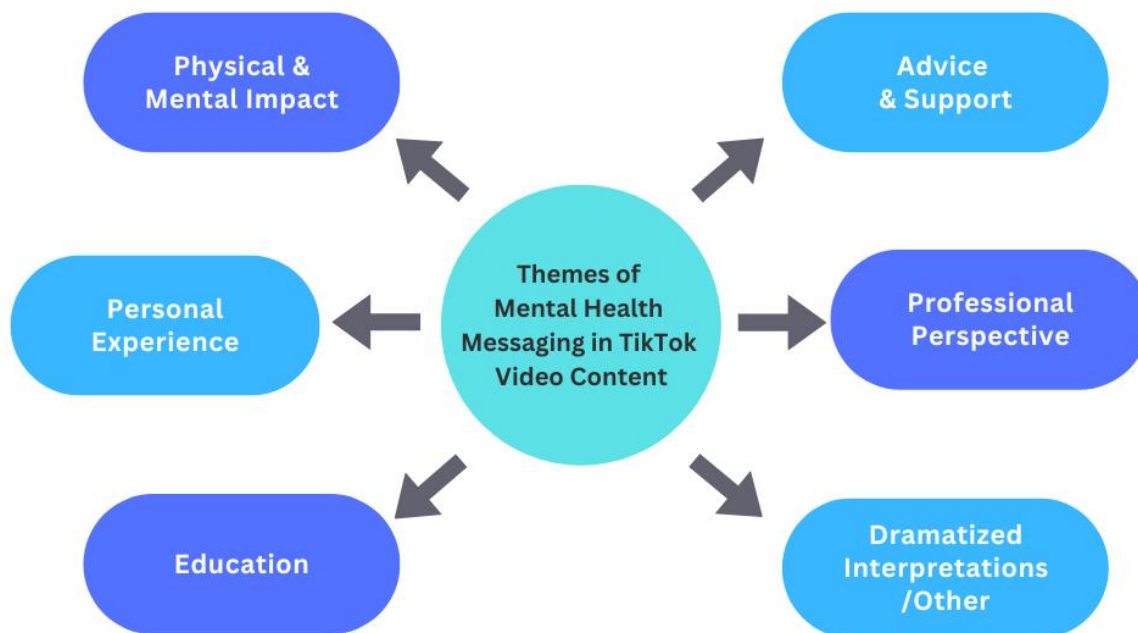
The analysis of sampled video content led to the emergence of several predominant themes, which consistently appeared across the study's datasets. By coding inductively these themes emerged from the creation of codes, which were naturally derived from data—meaning that all codes were formulated from the data itself versus using predetermined codes, which are generated prior to conducting analysis (Saldaña, 2021). The formulated codes allowed for the designation of themes, which guided the conceptual categorization of videos based on the shared similarities in overall content message that videos projected—as related to RQ2.

The identified themes were: Physical & Mental Impact, Personal Experience, Education, Advice & Support, Professional Perspective, and Dramatized Interpretations/Other. These themes were found individually and collectively throughout the analyzed video content; therefore, videos were paired with multiple codes, which resulted in individual videos possessing multiple themes. For example, a video shared by @borderlinedbabe discussed the physical and mental impact of borderline personality disorder; however, she also shared the personal experience she has had thus far in a psychiatric ward and how she is having a hard time handling

it; therefore, the themes of Personal Experience and Physical & Mental Impact were assigned to the video.

Figure 4

Mental Health Messaging in TikTok Video Content Themes



As a result of the coding process, the following six themes were identified.

Theme 1: Physical and Mental Impact

The Physical and Mental Impact Theme consisted of content creators expressing messages relevant to mental health's physical and mental impacts. These physical and mental impacts included behaviors, symptoms, and thought patterns reflective of varying mental health diagnoses or experiences. In some cases, the shared or discussed physical and mental impacts were directly reflective of the content creator or influencer's experience with mental health. In contrast, others were shared to explain or share the personal experience that they encountered with a loved one experiencing a mental health-related situation. Additionally, some videos

served as educational and informational pieces relaying mental health implications' physical and mental impacts.

Figure 5

Physical and Mental Impact Theme Example

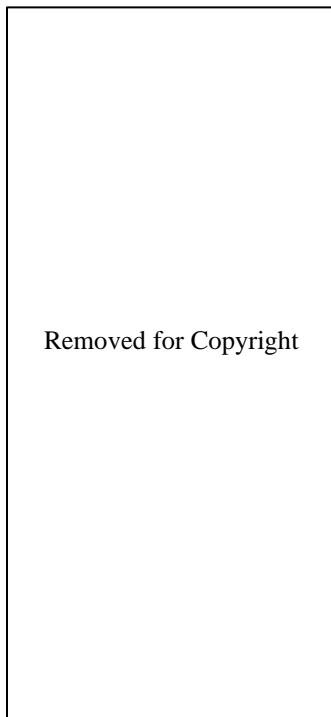


Figure 5 serves as an example of the Physical and Mental Impact Theme applied to analyzed videos. In this data sample, the TikTok user, @kayls170, produced a TikTok video that shows the physical change that occurs in the dilation of her pupils when experiencing a manic episode linked to her borderline personality disorder. This video also fell under the Personal Experience Theme and the Dramatized Interpretations/Other Themes. The Personal Experience Theme was applied to this video because the video showcases her personal experience with borderline personality disorder, and the Dramatized Interpretations/Other Theme was applied because the video took a different approach to showcasing her physical symptoms through dramatic editing and sarcastic text.

Theme 2: Personal Experience

The Personal Experience Theme consisted of TikTok videos with content creators or influencers sharing their direct experiences with mental health. These experiences directly reflected situations that they experienced or someone close to them experienced, which impacted them as a result. The messages related to this theme discussed symptoms, their personal mental health journey, information they learned and applied to their mental health diagnoses, and other pieces of personal information that were insightful and related to their individual experience.

Figure 6

Personal Experience Theme Example



Figure 6 is an example of the Personal Experience Theme. Posted by @joeuk, this video relays a message where a personal experience is shared of an intended suicide attempt. Additionally, the Support and Advice Theme was applied to this video because his emotional story was shared in support of World Suicide Prevention Day.

Theme 3: Education

The Education Theme consisted of video content with messages related to educating others about various topics regarding mental health. Messages shared included those that discussed societal stigma, mental health treatments, methods of healing and recovery, and different behaviors or symptoms representative of mental health illnesses that were delivered or framed in an educational or informative manner. Ultimately, the videos that related to this theme served to deliver some type of information that would be beneficial for the audience to provide a better understanding of different topics relating to mental health.

Figure 7

Education Theme Example



Figure 7 is an example of the Education Theme. Posted by @themrimpulsive, this video provides information about an at-home remedy used for stabilizing and calming those experiencing an anxiety attack. @themrimpulsive describes step-by-step how to utilize the at-

home remedy and the type of relief or potential impact it may have on someone experiencing an anxiety attack. This video was also coded with the Advice & Support Theme, due to the end message shared by @themrimpulsive. In the end of the video, the content creator takes a moment to share with the audience how much they matter, how strong they are and how they have the power to fight through their anxiety.

Theme 4: Support and Advice

The Support and Advice Theme was applied to videos that contained messages of support, advice, and words of encouragement regarding mental health. Messages in these videos were uplifting in nature and delivered by content creators and influencers with the intent to share kind, uplifting, or empowering words of support to those experiencing negative mental health or having to watch their loved ones experience mental health implications.

Figure 8*Support and Advice Theme Example*

Represented in Figure 8, the video posted by @lilsnoozivert47 serves as an example of the Support and Advice Theme. In this video, the content creator provides textual overlay on her video that reads, “In honor of Suicide Awareness Month, I’d like to recognize someone I’m proud of for still being here...” The video then flips to a black screen, which is a common feature TikTok’s content creators and influencers use to mirror the reflection of the one watching the video. With this usage of editing, @lilsnoozivert47 was alluding to being proud of those watching her video.

Theme 5: Professional Perspective

The Professional Perspective Theme was applied to video content that showcased messages of a professional’s perspective on varying mental health topics, both directly and indirectly. These professionals were often found to be therapists, nurses, or doctors. In most

cases, the professional was the content creator. However, some videos were created as secondhand accounts of what was shared with them by their mental health professional.

Figure 9

Professional Perspective Theme Example



Figure 9 is an example of the Professional Perspective Theme. This video was posted by @jenna.overbaugh, who is an OCD and anxiety specialized therapist. In this video, she discussed her professional interpretation of OCD, its characteristics, the impact it has on mental functioning, and the demystification of OCD as a mental illness. This video was also categorized under the themes of Education and Physical & Mental Impact.

Theme 6: Dramatized Interpretations/Other

The Dramatized Interpretations/Other Theme was applied to videos that seemed to be outliers amongst the datasets. Many of these videos were not inherently positive or supportive in context as the other themes were; however, they approached mental health through a sarcastic or

humorous lens, or they over-dramatized re-enactments of mental health-related encounters.

These videos were those that sometimes seemed to be a cry for help more than anything else.

Additionally, the videos categorized within this theme, which were not viewed as inherently negative in nature, seemingly took an unrealistic approach to mental health topics—meaning the content creator physically over-dramatized or acted out mental health scenarios in a way that is not typically applied to the context of mental health. In other words, they served as a different interpretation or representation of mental health messaging, as opposed to the representations that other videos in the dataset commonly applied to their mental health-related messages.

Figure 10

Dramatized Interpretations/Other Theme Example



Figure 10 serves as a video example of the Dramatized Interpretations/Other Theme.

Posted by @notryanprimer, this video shows a humorous interpretation of mental

overstimulation. In the video, a text overlay describes how he is over-stimulated after engaging in prolonged technology engagement. He is then seen punching his pillow and glaring at it as he attempts to get comfortable so he can sleep.

Individual and Collective Findings from Analyzed Video Content

The themes, which were applied to each sample of video content, were first compiled for visualization based on their assigned dataset. The researcher then combined the thematic findings of all video content analyzed in each of the three datasets to create a visualization of the sampled data as a collective whole.

Figure 11

Graphic of Video Content Themes Broken Down by Dataset

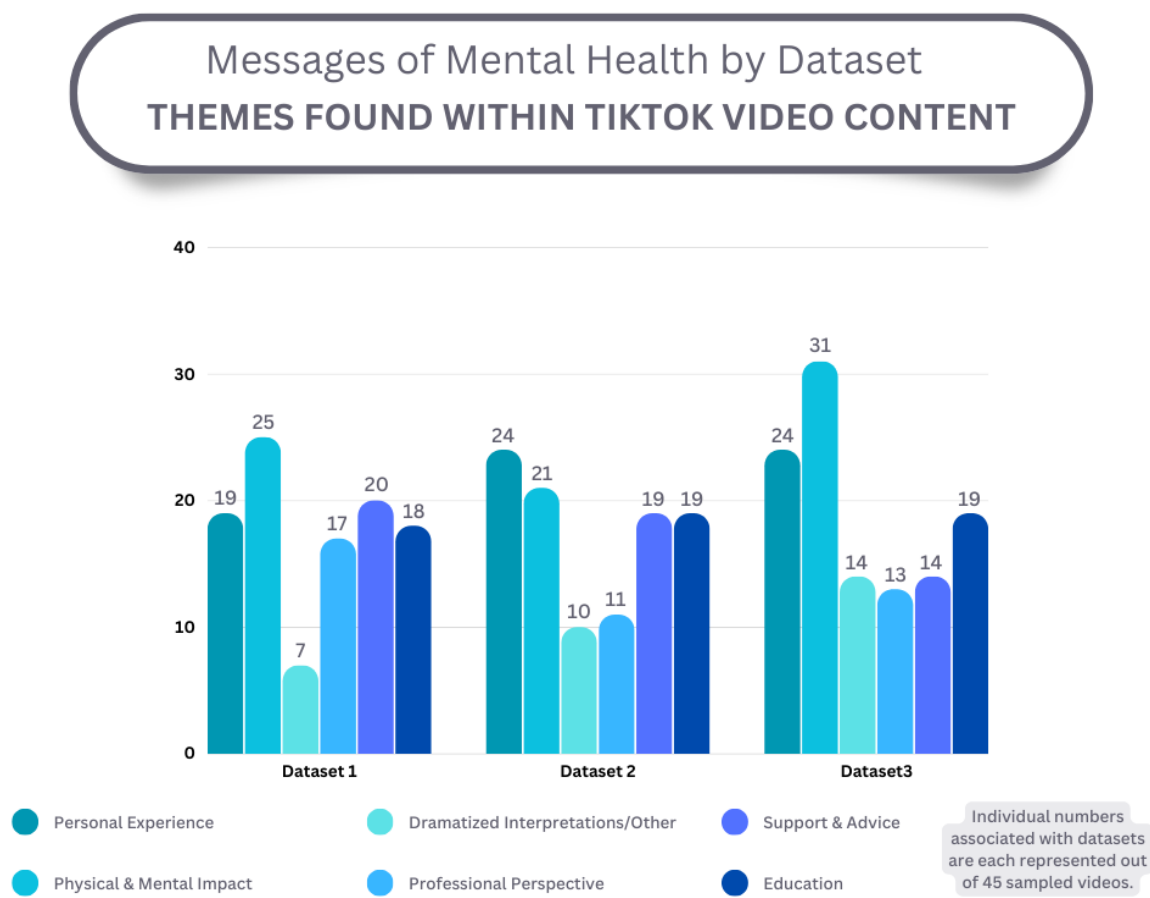
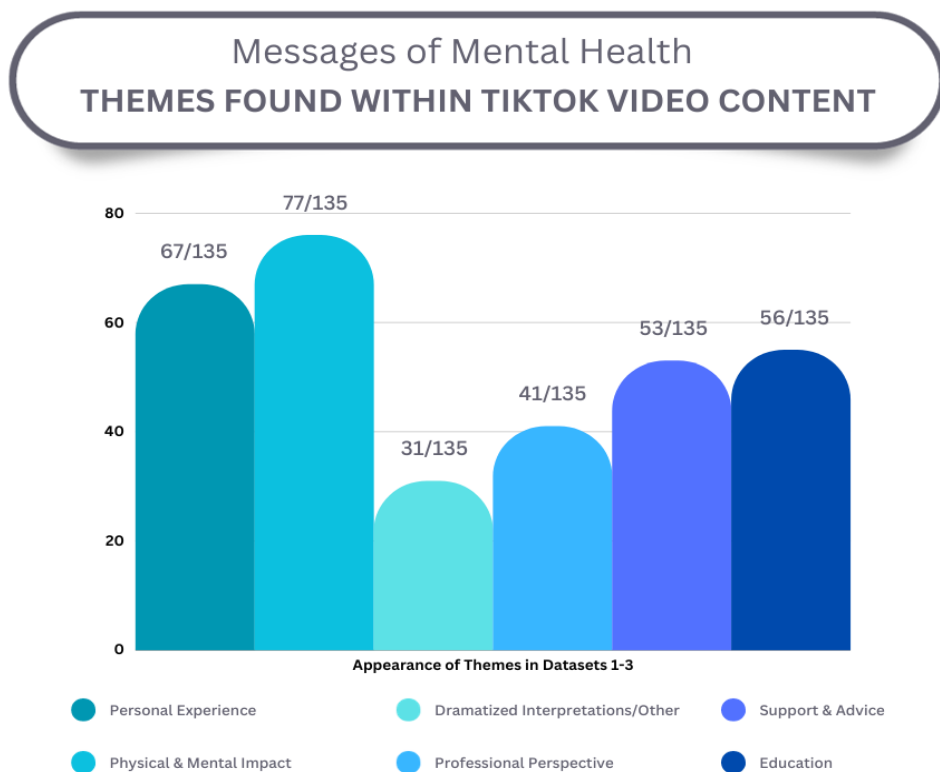


Figure 11 provides a visual interpretation of themes found within each dataset. Sampled videos were coded to have multiple themes due to the existence of compound messages within sampled video content. Therefore, all numbers listed in the colored bars are out of 45, which represents the total number of videos in each dataset. For example, referring to the first bar of Dataset 1 in the graph, 19 videos out of the 45 sampled within the dataset possessed a content message related to the Personal Experience Theme.

From viewing the visual interpretation of themes found within each of the three datasets, it is evident that identified themes were emergent and relevant within each of the datasets analyzed. While videos possessed different content, they still proved to consistently reflect similar messages of mental health.

Figure 12

Graphic of Video Content Themes Collectively Found in Datasets 1–3



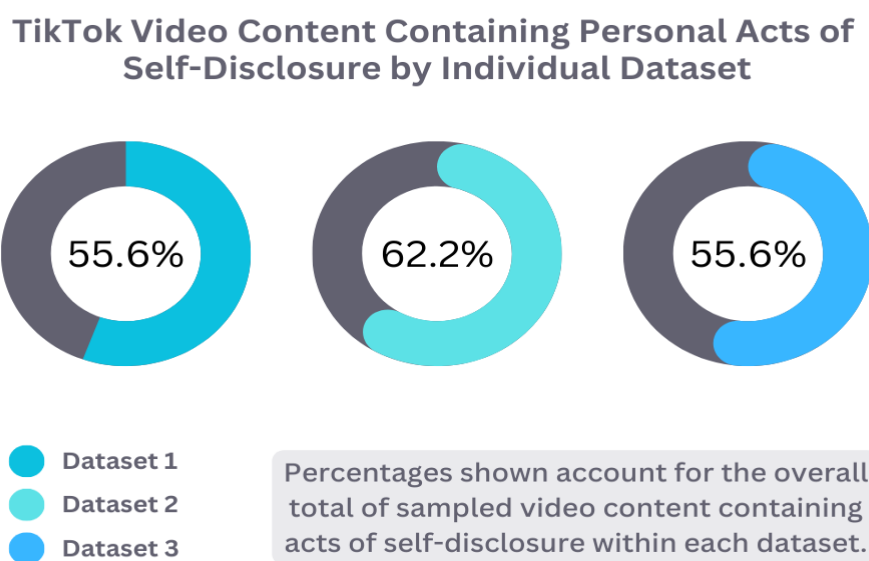
As seen in Figure 12, a collective view is provided of Datasets 1–3 regarding how many times each identified theme appeared within video content. As noted, videos were coded to have multiple themes because of the existence of compound messages within sampled video content. Therefore, all the numbers listed above the colored bars are out of 135, which represents the collective number of videos included in all three datasets. For example, referring to the first bar in the graph, 67 videos out of the 135 sampled possessed a content message related to the Personal Experience Theme.

Additional Video Content Analysis—Self-Disclosure

As an additional point of analysis and to explore the question posed by RQ2, all sampled videos were analyzed for acts of self-disclosure as individual and collective datasets. The researcher found that self-disclosure was not technically a message being conveyed of mental health, however, it was an act utilized in many of the videos to share the message of the influencer or content creator.

Figure 13

Graphic of Video Content Containing Acts of Self-Disclosure



In Figure 13, it shows the overall percentage of videos in each dataset that were found to contain acts of self-disclosure. Each dataset consisted of 45 videos; therefore, the percentage shown is representative of the number of videos out of 45 that contained the act of self-disclosure. For example, looking at Dataset 1, the pie chart shows that 55.6% of all 45 videos sampled in the dataset were found to have some form of personal self-disclosure. Percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth.

From viewing the pie charts representative of each dataset, it is evident that content creators and influencers utilized self-disclosure in more than half of the videos contained in each dataset. This finding is important when compared to the type of comments elicited by videos with self-disclosure.

Comment Themes

The analysis of sampled comments associated with each video in the study's sample led to the observation and solidification of several distinct themes. These themes were representative of the typical, conceptual responses, in the form of textual comments, elicited from viewers of each of the videos sampled. Comments were varied in response and possessed distinct thematic elements, which were found to be vastly different from the themes found in the video content they were posted to—this is due to the individual purposes that comments and videos serve on the TikTok platform. Videos are intended to disseminate some type of information by the influencer or content creator, and comments serve as individual user responses to video content.

Comments were studied within their individual datasets and as a collective whole, so the researcher could analyze the sheer number of comments attributed to individual themes. Themes emergent within each dataset associated with one another, and common types of responses to video content related to topics of mental health were found. The identified themes were: Self-

Disclosure, Confirmation, Affirmation, Expressions of Despair and Sadness, General Mental Health Comments and Questions, Off-Topic and Indecipherable and Challenging Opinion. Given the short and targeted nature of posted comments, only one code was applied to each comment analyzed—this application of a singular code is different from the application of multiple codes to sampled video content as previously discussed.

Theme 1: Self-Disclosure

The theme of Self-Disclosure was assigned to comments, which were primarily centered on directly sharing highly personal information, such as the commenter’s thoughts, fears, experiences, or emotional responses as related to the specific video viewed. In many cases, these comments disclosed personal information atypical of disclosure with strangers.

Figure 14

Self-Disclosure Theme Example



Figure 14 is an example of the Self-Disclosure Theme found in the comments. In this comment, the user responded to viewed content with his own experience of anxiety and how it relates to holding a job; additionally, he shares his current situation of not having monetary income or a job, which has placed him in a negative state—“killing me.” This comment is directly reflective of an act of self-disclosure in a public environment with unknown audiences.

Theme 2: Confirmation

The Confirmation Theme was applied to comments that primarily focused on expressing general relation to and acceptance of the message found in viewed video content. These comments were generally characterized by the user agreeing with the video content through posted comments, such as “silent repost,” “facts,” “real” or “me every day.” Additionally, some comments showed a general relation to video content through responses that did not disclose highly personal, in-depth information, yet they commented that they felt seen or perfectly described, or they shared very general information about themselves relative to the video. Information shared in these comments was not highly personal; however, they did show that the commenter related to the video content or agreed with its message—in other words, the commenter is confirming what the influencers or content creators are sharing through their content.

Figure 15

Confirmation Theme Example

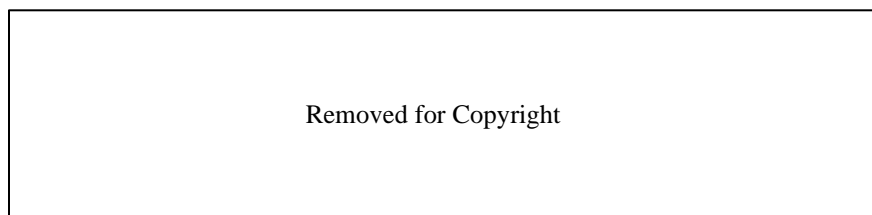


Figure 15 is an example of the Confirmation Theme because this commenter is confirming what is being said in the viewed video by saying he feels perfectly described by the video’s message. He does not share highly personal information, yet he accepts the message of the content creator or influencer and relates to it on a very basic level.

Theme 3: Affirmation

The Affirmation Theme was applied to video comments that were overall centered on being positive in nature; this theme was characterized by commenters' words of support, appreciation, or encouragement regarding the video's message or the content creator or influencer sharing the video. These comments were generally uplifting and delivered in a manner that showed genuine support for the content creator or influencer. Many comments categorized into this theme were quick to thank the content's creator for posting the video, provide support for the video's overall message, or directly encourage the video's speaker. Overall, comments were affirming of posted video content.

Figure 16

Affirmation Theme Example



In Figure 16, an example of the Affirmation Theme is shown. In this comment, the user shares a supportive message in response to the video content viewed. She encourages the content creator or influencer to “keep fighting” and says, “You got this” and “it gets better” as positive words of reinforcement to what the video's creator had shared.

Theme 4: Expressions of Despair and Sadness

The Expressions of Despair and Sadness Theme was applied to video comments that were very succinct in expressing sadness, despair, or negative emotion as a response to viewed video content. Many of the comments were not more than a single sentence and lacked

supporting context—they were direct and often shared very little information as to what the commenter truly meant or is insinuating.

Figure 17

Expressions of Despair and Sadness Theme Example

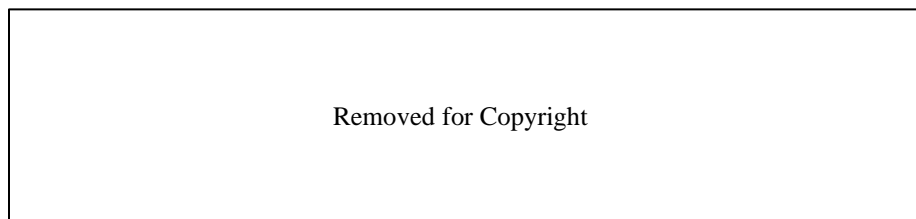


Figure 17 is an example of the Expressions of Despair and Sadness Theme because the user responds to the viewed video content with a stark, general comment of his confusion with his current state. The comment does not provide deep context into the commenter's situation, yet there is something implicated regarding how the commenter feels about himself and his current situation.

Theme 5: General Mental Health Comments and Questions

The General Mental Health Comments and Questions Theme was applied to comments that served to share general information or ask follow-up questions related to video content. These comments tended to be impersonal and simply posted with the intent to make a common conversation or to share general opinions about the video content viewed.

Figure 18

General Mental Health Comments and Questions Theme Example



Figure 18 is an example of the General Mental Health Comments and Questions Theme because of its focus on sharing general mental health information—it is not highly personal in nature, and it overall served to provide extra information related to the video’s message.

Theme 6: Off-Topic and Indecipherable

The Off-Topic and Indecipherable Theme was applied to comments that were not related to the video’s message. These comments were often random, unreadable, or lacking in the possibility for textual analysis; these videos were grouped because of their unrelated nature to the video’s central message(s).

Figure 19

Off-Topic and Indecipherable Theme Example

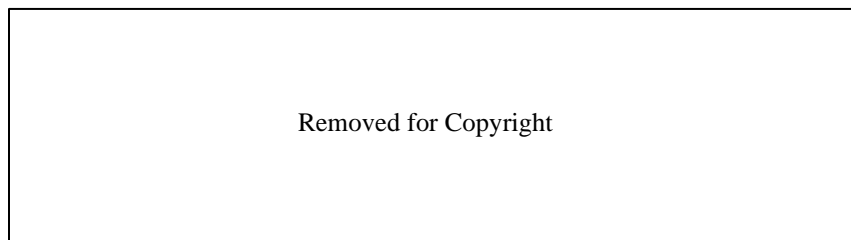


Figure 19 is an example of the Off-Topic and Indecipherable Theme as it was unrelated to the video’s message to which it responded in its post. The video it responded to shared a personal experience of mental health; however, this commenter decided to comment on the technological filming of the video rather than the message of the video itself.

Theme 7: Challenging Opinion/Against Content

The Challenging Opinion Theme was applied to comments that challenged the message of the video viewed. These comments shared opinions, comments, or concerns that directly projected a different interpretation of the viewed video’s message, or they sarcastically replied to the video with snarky remarks.

Figure 20*Challenging Opinion Theme Example*

Figure 20 is an example of the Challenging Opinion Theme because this user shared a comment that was not shared to simply provide general follow-up information—it was directly shared as an opposing view of the information or message shared in the video.

Individual and Collective Findings from Analyzed Video Comments

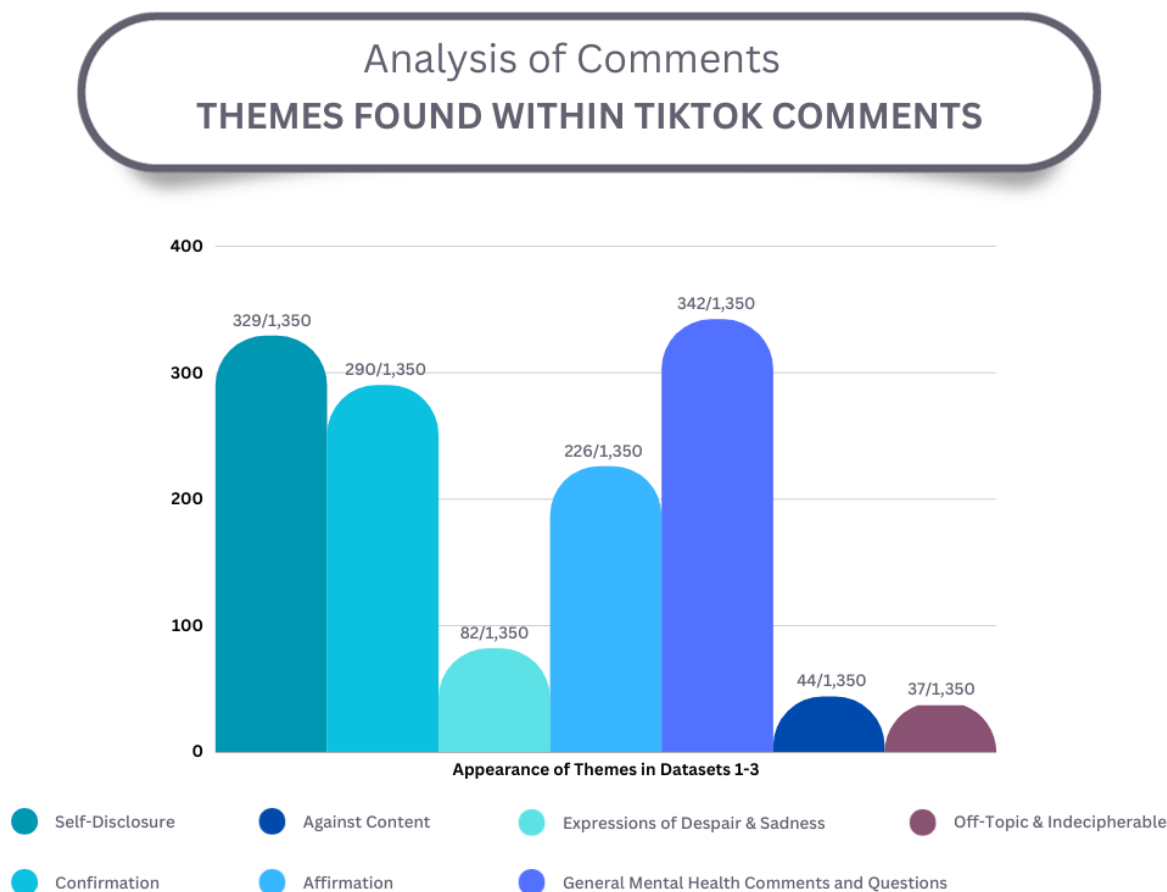
The themes, which were applied to each of the 1,350 comments included in the research sample, were first compiled for visualization based on their assigned dataset. The researcher then combined the thematic findings of all video content used in each of the three datasets to create a visualization of the sampled data as a collective whole.

Collective Findings

Figure 21 shows the collective themes applied to the 1,350 comments included in the research sample. A singular theme was applied to each comment to conceptualize the overall intent and projected message of the comment. The researcher made the choice to apply singular themes to each comment because of their concise and limited context textually—as opposed to the more lengthy and multilayered messages characteristic of video content, which required the application of multiple themes to truly capture the nature of their central purpose and intent in being disseminated to audiences.

Figure 21

Themes Found in the Analysis of Comments Collectively



As viewed as a collective whole in Figure 21, the themes of Self-Disclosure, Confirmation, Affirmation, and General Mental Health Comments and Questions emerged as the predominant themes across all sampled comments. These themes were found to collectively represent more than half of the comments included in the entire research sample.

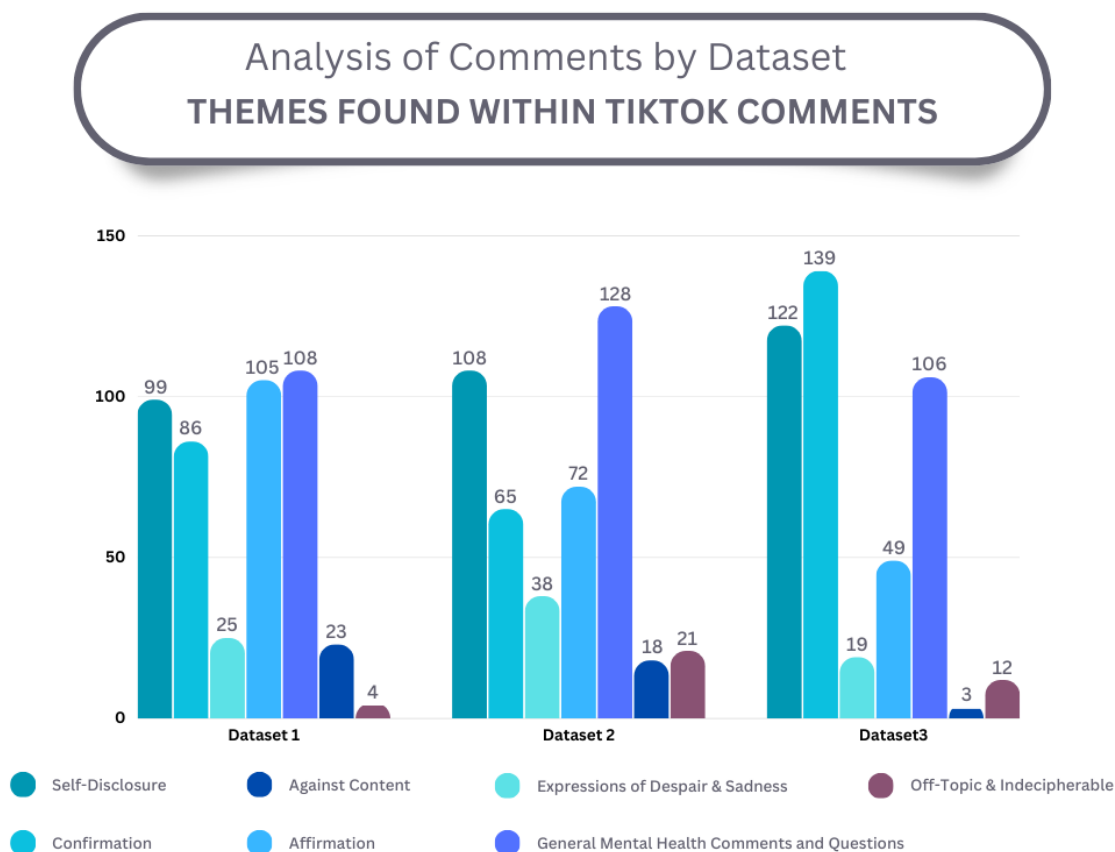
Individual Findings by Dataset

Figure 22 shows how the established themes emerged across each of the individually studied datasets. These established themes became evident in Dataset 1 and were reinforced in Dataset 2 and Dataset 3. In each dataset, 450 comments were included—the 10 comments

appearing first in the comment feed of each of the 45 videos utilized in the dataset, without the researcher having to scroll, were utilized in data analysis.

Figure 22

Themes Found in the Analysis of Comments by Dataset



As viewed in Figure 22, the individual findings in Datasets 1–3 were associated with the collective findings of the combined datasets, with Self-Disclosure, Confirmation, Affirmation, and General Mental Health Comments and Questions as the predominant themes that emerged through analysis. These themes were characteristic of the most common responses that videos elicited from their viewers and accounted for more than half of the comments in all datasets.

Summary

Chapter Four served to discuss the study's sample and method of data analysis, as well as the study's overall findings. Findings were relevant to establishing themes of mental health messages found within video content disseminated by influencers and content creators on the social media platform TikTok. Additionally, findings supported the emergence of conceptual themes related to user comments associated with the sampled video content.

Chapter Five will provide interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations regarding the findings of this study's facilitation and execution. The researcher will focus on contextually and narratively interpreting the study findings to develop a scholarly synthesis of conducted research relevant to the study's problem, purpose, and research questions. Additionally, the limitations of the study will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be suggested.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

Chapter One introduced the problem of research interest and research questions, which were conducive to providing a foundational understanding of the overall intent and nature of the conducted study. Chapter Two presented related literature necessary to contextualize the problem of research interest and developed detailed, scholarly interpretations of communication theory, tradition, and existing academic inquiry relative to the perceived relationship between social media utilization and mental health. Chapter Three developed the qualitative methodology of a content analysis, which would be used to examine the study's problem of research focus—carefully explained through step-by-step procedures of anticipated data collection and analysis. Chapter Four collectively displayed research findings through the utilization of textual and graphic features to develop a foundation of understanding to present a discussion of findings as found in the body of Chapter Five.

Chapter Five will provide interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations relative to the findings derived from the facilitation and execution of this study's qualitative content analysis of influencer-created mental health content on the social media platform TikTok. The study findings will be contextually developed and thoroughly discussed to originate a scholarly synthesis of conducted research that will directly examine findings within the context of the study's central problem, purpose, and research questions. After discussing the findings, limitations of the study will be examined and recommendations for further research regarding this topic in the scholarly field of communication will be considered.

Summary of Findings

The produced research utilized a sample size of 135 total videos and 1,350 comments. This collective sample was broken down into three different datasets consisting of 45 videos each and their accompanying comments—resulting in 450 comments attributed to their corresponding videos within each dataset. All videos utilized in the sample were produced within the last three years (1/1/2021–12/31/2023), and set parameters required each piece of content eligible for inclusion in the sample to have at least 1,000+ views, 500+ likes (favorites), 100+ shares, 150+ bookmarks, and 30+ comments. Additionally, all videos included in the sample were required to include one or more of the following *hashtags*: #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthawareness, #mentalhealthmattersmost, #mentalhealthjourney, #mentalhealthtiktok, #mentalhealthtok, and #selfcaretiktok.

The three datasets utilized in this research were examined individually and collectively to assess whether findings of thematic messaging and communicative acts of self-disclosure would be consistent across datasets of varying video content used in the research sample. With the set parameters guiding the inclusion of video content eligible for utilization in this study, the collected video content and their accompanying comment feeds were found to yield significant findings in terms of thematic messaging and communicative acts of self-disclosure.

Video Findings

The analysis of sampled video content led to the emergence of six predominant themes, which consistently appeared across the study's datasets: Physical and Mental Impact, Personal Experience, Education, Support and Advice, Professional Perspective, and Dramatized Interpretations/Other.

Sampled video content was coded under multiple themes because of the presence of several messages embedded within most videos. Therefore, multiple themes were found to apply to each video as discussed in Chapter Four.

Additional Findings

Outside of thematic messaging, videos were analyzed for communicative acts of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure was not necessarily a thematic message being conveyed in analyzed content; however, it did emerge as a communicative act used in video content to help drive the impact or delivery of the video's overall message. Upon investigation, it was determined that more than half of the videos in each dataset utilized a communicative act of self-disclosure in delivering their message.

Comment Findings

The analysis of sampled comments associated with each video in the study's sample led to the observation and solidification of several distinct themes: Self-Disclosure, Confirmation, Affirmation, Expressions of Despair and Sadness, General Mental Health Comments and Questions, Off-Topic and Indecipherable, and Challenging Opinion. These seven established themes are representative of the typical, conceptual responses, in the form of textual comments, elicited from viewers of each of the videos sampled.

Themes found within comments were noticeably different from those embedded in the messages of video content, due to the distinct individual purposes that video content and comments serve on the social media platform of TikTok. Video content is disseminated for a content creator or influencer to share a curated message, whereas comments are reactive in nature and serve as a user response to viewed video content. Therefore, the thematic messages

found in TikTok's mental health video content serve to produce an array of thematic responses through user comments that are contextually different, yet related.

Discussion

The findings derived from the conducted study were rich in context and provided insight into the thematic messaging taking place within TikTok's mental health content; additionally, self-disclosure was found to be a prominent communicative act embedded in video content as well as in the comment feeds of mental health-related videos.

Two research questions were initially presented as the focus of research in this study. These questions will be further discussed in detail as they relate to the findings of this research:

RQ1: What is the role of self-disclosure in the formation of online communities based on mental health awareness, advocacy, and help-seeking behaviors?

RQ2: What messages of mental health are commonly shared across the mental health community on TikTok?

RQ1 Discussion

RQ1 focused specifically on self-disclosure and its role in forming online communities based on mental health awareness, advocacy, and help-seeking behaviors. This content analysis established the communicative presence of self-disclosure in both the videos and comments sampled.

The communicative act of self-disclosure was found to be present in more than half of all videos sampled. Therefore, it became evident that this type of disclosure was relevant and heavily relied on communicative behavior utilized within the mental health community. Content creators and influencers often used self-disclosure in their video content to share their personal

mental health experiences or the experiences they have had with family and friends experiencing mental health implications.

Self-Disclosure in Sample Videos

While self-disclosure was present in the majority of sampled videos, it was not established as a thematic message. In video content, the role of self-disclosure served to further develop the central message of the influencer's or content creator's video content—it often provided context to the message being delivered or it provided a relatable example as to why the influencer or content creator was sharing that particular message of mental health. Under these circumstances, self-disclosure was used as a method for solidifying the credibility or relatability of the content creator or influencer when sharing their mental health content.

Overall, this finding led to the conclusion that self-disclosure was often used in a subjective manner. Subjectively, self-disclosure was associated with videos that relied upon some level of personal experience, perspective, or interpretation of shared mental health messages by the influencer or content creator. Video content found to be more objective in nature relied upon solidified and recognized facts, theories, or existing notions regarding mental health as supplemental context to support the video's overall message.

Self-Disclosure in Sample Comments

In consideration of the video comments, self-disclosure was indeed characterized as a theme that consistently emerged throughout the analysis of sample comments. Comments that were thematically categorized as relating to self-disclosure were often found to solely focus on sharing some sort of personal information that was directly related to the video content.

Therefore, these comments were those in which the user watched the video and felt immediately

compelled to post a textual response disclosing personal information about themselves in relation to the video.

This finding led to the conclusion that users felt comfortable sharing personal information about themselves that related to the message of the viewed video. Under these circumstances, users are foregoing the build-up of disclosing more surface-level information before immediately disclosing information that is determined to be more personal or private in nature.

RQ2 Discussion

RQ2 focused on the different messages shared via video content across the mental health community on TikTok. This question was posed with the intent to characterize what type of mental health messages are commonly curated and disseminated by content creators and platform influencers.

Through this content analysis, it was found that six distinct types of messages were commonly produced and shared. These themes included: Physical and Mental Impact, Personal Experience, Education, Support and Advice, Professional Perspective, and Dramatized Interpretations/Other.

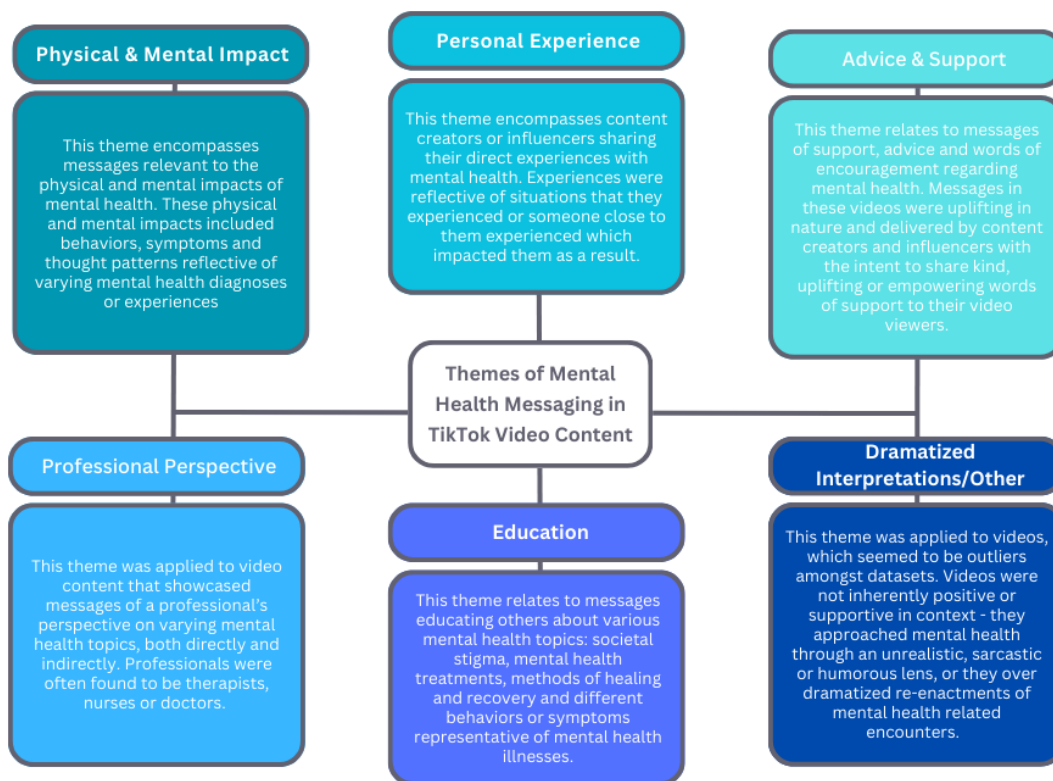
Figure 23*Themes of Mental Health Messaging in TikTok Video Content*

Figure 23 provides a description of each theme found within the sampled data. These themes emerged from inductively coding with all codes being formulated naturally from analyzed data—meaning that no predetermined codes guided the development of themes or data categorization. Initially, numerous codes were established and categorized into themes; however, it was soon found that many of the codes could be merged and conceptually categorized as a singular theme prevalent in the analyzed data. These themes were found to exist within each of the three datasets analyzed, as well as the collective sampling of data. While all videos were found to possess different forms of content, they still proved to consistently reflect similar messages about mental health.

Video Responses Via Comments

Messages embedded in video content were successful in garnering a response from content viewers in the form of comments. These comments were found to have common themes representative of their central communicative messages as well. Comments posted in response to the sampled mental health video content were found to present the following themes: Self-Disclosure, Confirmation, Affirmation, Expressions of Despair and Sadness, General Mental Health Comments and Questions, Off-Topic and Indecipherable, and Challenging Opinion.

Figure 24

Themes Found Within TikTok Comments

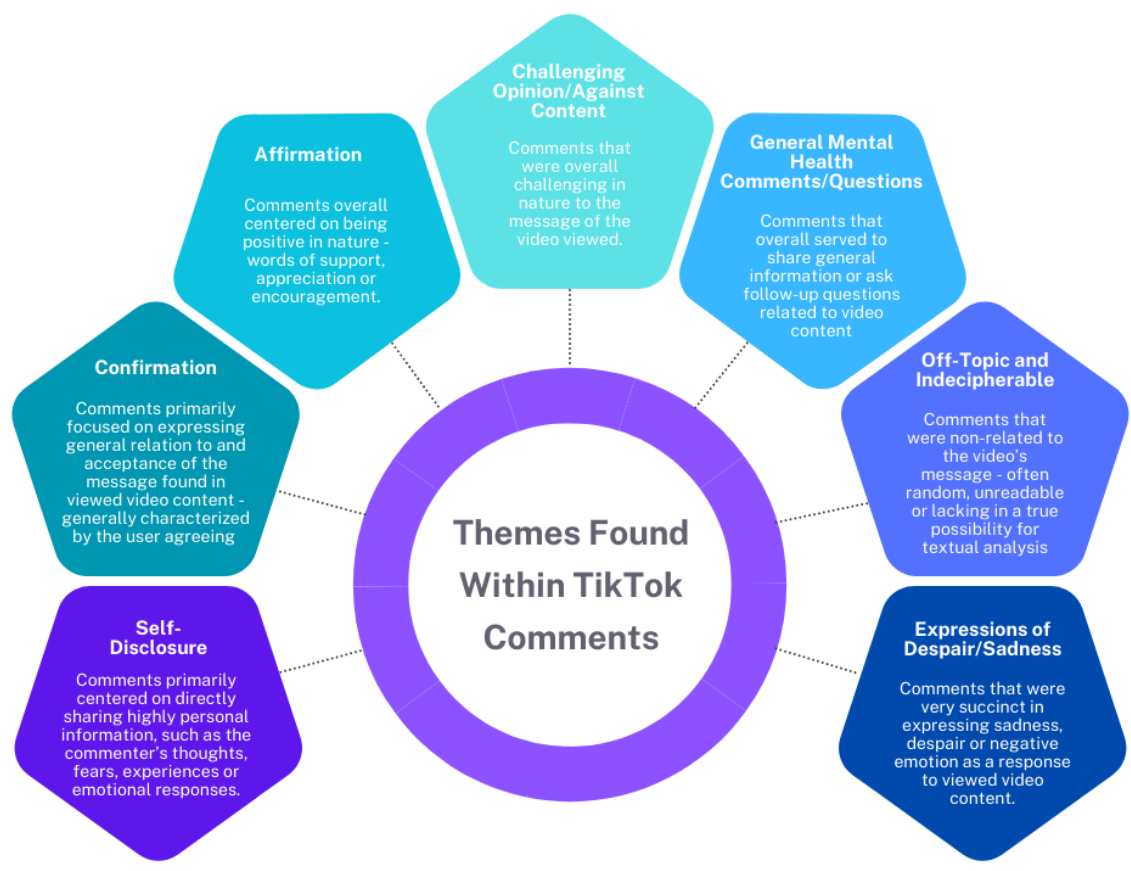


Figure 24 provides a brief description of each theme found within the sampled comment data. As with the process of coding video content, emergent themes found within sampled

comments were initially coded inductively with all codes being formulated naturally from analyzed data. These established themes were found to be present within each of the three datasets utilized within this research, as well as the collective sampling of comment-related data.

The comments posted to sample video content were essential in understanding the overall responses that certain messages of mental health illicit from content viewers. The thematic messages emergent from video content have a relationship with the thematic messages produced from user comments; therefore, an association is formed between the messages of mental health video content and the impact they have in producing certain audience responses.

Implications

The purpose of this content analysis was to understand the communicative and communal characteristics of online communities forming around the topic of positive mental health communication on the social media platform TikTok. Upon successful facilitation of the study, the findings resulted in theoretical and practical implications that are relevant to the foundational solidification and the continued development of this research topic within the scholarly field of communication as applied to theoretical and practical perspectives.

Theoretical

This research utilized social penetration theory (SPT) as a guiding theory of perspective from which to consider the methodological facilitation of this study and the research findings produced. This theory was selected because of the way it views the establishment of relationships and the progression of those relationships from surface-level interactions to deeper, more intimate connections.

Social penetration theory views relationships as multilayered in nature due to the influential communicative interactions that take place between individuals (Littlejohn et al.,

2021). As observed within this study's findings, the specific video messages of mental health-related content were successful in evoking responses from the viewers of the content; thus, an interrelated relationship is formed between those creating and disseminating a message and those responding to the message. Under these circumstances, an exchange of information takes place; the information shared via video content was found to vary in complexity and often ranged drastically in surface-level messaging versus that of more personal, intimate messaging.

Additionally, social penetration theory focuses on the mediating expression of influence, which is associated with an individual's attempt to cultivate and maintain interpersonal relationships on differing levels. In the context of this research, the intent to influence was evident. Many influencers and content creators curated mental health messages that were intended to perform a variety of functions when posted for audience viewing. These functions of shared video messages included to educate, inform, explain, share, relate, etc. Most videos were very intentional in their intended purpose and delivered a message in a way that made it obvious what the content creator or influencer intended to deliver to their audiences.

Further Developing Theoretical Application

It is essential that the development and understanding of social penetration theory be further investigated and adapted to address how relationships form and progress in an online environment. Online environments provide the capability for people to share information with strangers and friends alike; thus, there is no difference in the complexity of shared information—meaning whether the information disclosed is that of an impersonal or personal nature. As viewed in research findings, both the creators of videos and their audiences felt comfortable disclosing varying levels of personal information and curating messages via video content or

posted comments that may not be typically shared in a face-to-face environment with acquaintances or strangers.

Under these circumstances, theoretical significance is found in social penetration theory's current applicability to online environments. The existing theory views relationships as multilayered and formed through the careful disclosure of varying personal levels of information; however, online environments seemingly provide users with a higher level of confidence, which results in them sharing more personal and intimate information that defies the preconceived notion of building a relationship and then disclosing information that is perceived to be more private. Therefore, this theory may need to be expanded upon to acknowledge the formation of relationships and the disclosure of information as influenced by the environment, rather than focusing on the level of familiarity with an individual.

Practical

The practical implications of this study's findings build upon existing research in the field of mental health communication and result in the solidified knowledge that content creators and influencers are indeed creating and participating in a mental health community on the social media platform TikTok. This community is active and ever-expressive in the different types of mental health messages that are produced and disseminated, as highlighted through the established themes that emerged in the analyzed video content and comments. Therefore, this research is influential in establishing a foundation of understanding that expands upon the messages shared within this community and the response procured from content viewers.

Practical Implications in Action

With the understanding that this research brings to the online conversation occurring on the topic of mental health, a broad opportunity is provided to both mental health professionals

and communication scholars in terms of how social media platforms can be strategically utilized to share and disseminate carefully curated and targeted information that has the capability of positively impacting and supporting those who may rely on online environments for community and mental health-related advice or treatment.

Additionally, with self-disclosure identified as a common communicative behavior used within the mental health community—as found within both the video content and comments sampled within this research—it is evident that an obvious link exists between mental health and the increased and unrestricted disclosure of information. This finding is imperative for acknowledging the impact and utilization of self-disclosure regarding TikTok’s mental health community because the communicative act is consistently relied upon to support disseminated video content and the textual responses provided via comments.

Limitations

It is essential to discuss the limitations of the produced research to acknowledge the presence of weaknesses within the research design that may overall influence the outcomes and conclusions drawn from the study’s findings (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). More specifically, recognizing study limitations is crucial for understanding the research findings within their existing context; additionally, they assist in establishing the validity of research, as well as serve to produce a level of credibility relative to the study’s conclusions (Loannidis, 2007).

Sample Data

One prevalent limitation of this study is found in the analyzed sample data of influencer-created TikTok videos and their accompanying comments. TikTok content and comments are public and easily accessible, however, they possess the capability to be altered or deleted by the influencer, content creator, or platform user who created them. Under these circumstances, the

utilized sample data may be unretrievable at a later date. This impacts the potential of this research to be reproduced using the exact same sample of TikTok videos and comments.

User Profiles and Capabilities

Another limitation relative to the sample data utilized within this research is associated with user profiles and capabilities. TikTok users can delete their profiles, change their usernames, or alter the text captions associated with their accounts and disseminated content. These capabilities may make it difficult or impossible for future researchers to retrieve or identify the exact pieces of content utilized in this study's sample.

Historical Relevance

An additional limitation of this research exists within its historical relevance. At different points throughout history, society holds shifting opinions and views of controversial topics—one of those topics being mental health. As previously discussed, mental health is a topic that has not always been welcomed in everyday conversation; it was once a taboo topic that was not commonly talked about or acknowledged. Therefore, it is likely that if a researcher decides to conduct similar research to this study, years from now and using a different set of sample data with the same parameters, they may find different themes embedded in analyzed data that are more representative of mental health's current state in modern day society.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research regarding the topic of this specific study is essential due to the many ways in which the study findings and conclusions may be expanded upon to provide further clarity and potential methods of change within the scholarly context and field of communication.

Professional Utilization of TikTok

First, further research may be developed to specifically focus on the professional dissemination of mental health messages and the utilization of self-disclosure and interpersonal behaviors exhibited by clinical professionals to attract TikTok audiences who are interested in mental health content. The study findings were conclusive in establishing that many content creators and influencers creating mental health content were actual mental health professionals, including therapists, psychologists, nurses, and doctors. By focusing specifically on these professionals, their utilization of TikTok, and the responses their content elicits from viewers, it is plausible that research could establish best practices for implementing TikTok as a professional tool of mental health messaging, support, and community formation. Under these circumstances, professionals will be provided with research findings to better target their content to their audiences in a positive way that is conducive to reaching and supporting individuals leaning on social media for mental health support.

Narrowing Broad Parameters

Another recommendation for further research is to narrow some of the parameters utilized in data collection and sampling. This study utilized many different *hashtags* to produce videos of interest on the *For You Page* of the researcher's TikTok profile. However, as research was conducted it was found that there were many different topics included under the broad mental health *hashtags* utilized; therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to focus on specific topics and the messaging associated with those topics.

For example, many of the videos were found to focus on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder (BPD), depression, anxiety, trauma, or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). By using a *hashtag* that is more targeted, such as

#mentalhealthanxiety, researchers will find that they are exposed to content that is still relevant to mental health; however, the content is focused on a specified subtopic under the main topic of mental health. Conducting research in this way will assist researchers in identifying relevant data that is associated with individual mental health disorders and topics versus data associated with the broader or more general topic of mental health as assessed in this study.

Summary

Chapter Five discussed interpretations, implications, and conclusions relative to the findings established by the conducted study, which served to methodologically explore mental health messaging and acts of self-disclosure exhibited by influencers, content creators, and users of the social media platform TikTok. The research was relevant to establishing contextual themes regarding both video content and the comments posted in response to sampled videos. These themes were essential in developing a foundation that expressed the types of mental health messages disseminated, the responses they elicited from audiences, and acts of self-disclosure as a prevalent communicative behavior spanning across mental health content and their accompanying video comments.

In consideration of these conclusions, this research is not without limitations, which present potential weaknesses and vast potential for future research to expand this study's scope and overall conclusions. This study provides an essential foundation of prominent types of mental health messaging that commonly presents itself in the content curated and disseminated by both professional and non-professional content creators and influencers. The possibilities for future investigation that build upon this study's foundational findings are numerous and possess the capability of further developing the topic of mental health communication within the academic field of communication on a larger and more specified scale. As mental health

becomes a topic more widely acknowledged and discussed within society, it is essential that the various aspects tied to the nature of its communicative context are further analyzed and pursued to ensure that the topic is more thoroughly understood and addressed in a way that produces positive change for those disseminating messages of mental health and those engaging with them.

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