

LGBTQ+ TikTok creators

Strategic visibility negotiation in commercial and activist online spaces

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Abstract

Online platforms have become fertile ground for the emergence of social media personas and trends, blurring the boundaries between personal, professional, and public life. The negotiation of identity and assumption of public roles have undergone significant transformations. This study explores the strategic visibility negotiation of LGBTQ+ content creators on TikTok, particularly within Hungary's increasingly restrictive socio-political landscape, where LGBTQ+ rights are under growing pressure. Drawing on a critical technocultural discourse analysis of 400 TikTok uploads by 4 prominent LGBTQ+ content creator, and 16 in-depth interviews with Hungarian LGBTQ+ youth, this research identifies four predominant roles fulfilled by these creators: Casual Creator, Influencer, Activist, and Influencer–Activist. Creators strategically engage with platform affordances to navigate audience, and market demands while maintaining a central narrative grounded in the lived LGBTQ+ experience. Hungarian LGBTQ+ creators, however, must carefully balance commercial and political roles within an increasingly hostile socio-political climate, often adopting subtle forms of activism and community-driven content to mitigate risks. By leveraging humour, cultural references, and coded messaging, they carve out spaces of resistance while meeting the expectations of their diverse audiences. The study underscores the nuanced negotiation of visibility undertaken by LGBTQ+ content creators, highlighting how they balance online identities to navigate the complex interplay between consumerist and political demands.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; social media; influencers; activism; visibility; platform affordances

1. Introduction

The “Get Ready With Me” TikTok starts with a mirror translation of the popular LGBTQ+ greeting to Hungarian, welcoming “ladies and gents, and non-binary friends.” In this 66 seconds, Hungary's top TikTok influencer, WhisperTon, takes viewers through his hair dyeing process while staying true to his signature editing style and aesthetic (video 321). Restless and lively, he bounces around, delivering puns, and speaking rapidly, all expertly edited with dynamic cuts and humorous memes. WhisperTon candidly

discusses his romantic experiences, evoking a sense of intimacy akin to conversing with old friends, while also integrating the trending Hungarian pop music of the moment. He cleverly pokes fun at locally known right-wing conservative artist, Gabi Tóth, before playfully retracting, declaring himself her “biggest fan.” Ultimately, his TikTok is a straightforward advertisement for hair care products, and serves as a good example, showcasing how LGBTQ+ content creators skilfully navigate complexities to gain visibility on the platform.

The socio-political context of this TikTok is crucial, as Hungary is an increasingly hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people. In recent years, the Hungarian government has passed several anti-LGBTQ+ legislations, including a 2021 law that bans the portrayal of homosexuality to minors in media, effectively censoring queer content. Public expressions of queer identity, such as Pride events, have also faced growing restrictions and state-led opposition. These conditions create a repressive atmosphere in which LGBTQ+ creators must navigate visibility with caution and creativity. Against this backdrop, TikTok becomes more than a platform for self-expression, it is a space of cultural and political resistance, where queer users assert their presence in defiance of systemic erasure.

In the contemporary digital landscape, online platforms have become fertile grounds for the emergence of social media personalities and trends. As “contexts collapse” (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), platforms blur the traditional boundaries between personal, professional, and public spheres, enabling individuals to craft multifaceted online personas. As Marwick and boyd aptly put, “social media collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face” (2011, p. 123). In this digital context, the negotiation of identity and the assumption of public roles have undergone substantial transformations, giving rise to new challenges.

In influencer scholarship, the question of visibility becomes intertwined with that of authenticity. Online content creators must pair visibility with authenticity to foster trust and a dedicated community of followers (see for example, Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy et al., 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Online visibility and discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ community have experienced an upsurge (Abidin & Cover, 2018). However, concomitantly, they have been subjected to scrutiny and attacks from both political actors and the public (Duguay, 2023; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). Being a highly visible LGBTQ+ figure in the online sphere can be seen as a political identity, whether explicitly manifested through online activism or implicitly suggested by being vocal about one’s identity.

To examine this dynamic, a case study is offered of Hungarian LGBTQ+ TikTok creators. The case study draws on a combination of a critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2018) of 400 TikTok uploads by four prominent LGBTQ+ content creator, and 16 in-depth interviews with Hungarian LGBTQ+ youth. The study explores the various roles these content creators adopt to effectively manage their visibility while addressing the diverse expectations of their audiences, sponsors, and the platform itself, all while navigating the challenging political climate they face. The analysis proposes 4 roles that are fulfilled by the TikTokers: Casual Creator role, Influencer role, Activist role, and the Influencer-Activist role.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by examining how visibility on platforms like TikTok enables LGBTQ+ creators in Hungary to construct political identities in a restrictive political environment. By highlighting how creators embody the four roles, the analysis illustrates a fluid spectrum of identity performance where creators strategically blend personal expression, activism, and brand alignment to engage their audiences. Through an analysis of creators’ use of platform affordances, content styles, and community-building tactics, this study shows how Hungarian LGBTQ+ creators navigate these roles to foster visibility and subtly engage in activism, positioning their everyday online presence as both a cultural and political statement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Activism and social media

Present-day political activism is deeply linked to “social media logic”, encompassing the strategies, mechanisms, and economies inherent in online platforms (Dijck & Poell, 2013). This poses questions about how this logic influences the nature of political activism, how platform affordances and vernaculars are entangled with the meanings and symbols of political movements, and what might be the role of highly visible individuals who embody these on social media.

Historically, media technologies have held significant sway within social movements and activism (Barassi, 2018). The rise of the internet, however, has marked a transformative shift in how media activism is conceptualised, understood, and operationalised. Over the past decade, we have observed a noticeable shift in political approaches. There has been a move away from identity-driven politics towards a model that centres on visibility (Milan, 2015a).

This emergent politics of visibility prioritises the continuous public display of action over the consolidation of stable group identities. Social-media expressions turn each post into a material trace that is instantly observable and endlessly reproducible, making recognition through interactions a key reward structure. Social media visibility around a cause often substitutes for long-term organisational commitment, with presence in the feed carrying more weight than formal membership or sustained collective framing (Milan, 2015a).

Visibility, in this context, refers to the extent to which content, information, or individuals are seen or discovered online, a concept that has been extensively discussed in research on content creators (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017). Duffy and Hund (2019) note, the notion of visibility is complex and deeply intertwined with political implications, especially when communication is mediated through various forms of media. While current technologies provide unprecedented visibility for previously unseen events, the nature of the internet makes it difficult to control the circulation of content. This has led to challenges for authorities, including governments, platforms or even brands, seeking to ensure that only specific images are shared with the public. As Thompson (2005) suggests, controlling content dissemination on the internet is a much harder task compared to traditional media, where institutions had greater control over what images were made available. Content creators who engage in activist messaging, therefore, must consider platform affordances, balance their role as creators, and cater to their audiences in order to maintain visibility (Abidin & Cover, 2018).

The role of identity in this context is increasingly strategic. Creators must perform different roles based on the demands of their platform and audience, creating a balancing act between commercial interests and activism. This dynamic is further complicated by the “visibility mandate” enforced by social media platforms (Duffy & Hund, 2019). As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, social media platforms require creators not only to produce engaging content but also to maintain their visibility in order to reap both political and financial rewards. While visibility can amplify significant social issues, it can also lead to shallow, performative political messaging. Creators are often accused of prioritising personal visibility and financial gain over sustaining meaningful activism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This pressure to conform to mainstream discourses risks diluting the political impact of creators’ messages, as they may feel compelled to adapt to trends and marketable content at the expense of their activist aims.

The infrastructure of social media platforms plays a key role in shaping how meaning is made and how activism is communicated. Bucher (2012) argues that social media platforms are designed in such a way that they not only make content visible but also shape how it is understood. The algorithmic structure of Facebook, for example, reconfigures visibility as the platform prioritises content based on user engagement. As a result, users must engage with content through likes, comments, and shares in order to

stay visible. The fear of becoming invisible drives users to participate, reinforcing the idea that visibility relies on constant engagement.

The role of highly visible content creators is indispensable in the context of activism, as Milan (2015a) suggests. Social media, with its focus on the individual rather than the collective, empowers singular actors over groups, fostering loose, affect-driven connections rather than consensus-based decision-making. Milan (2015b) also argues that the transformation brought about by social media in organised collective action is material. This transformation affects not only the platforms themselves, which are increasingly relied upon for communication and organising, but also the messages, emotions, and relationships that unfold on these platforms. Tufekci (2013) describes this process of networked microcelebrity activism as “politically motivated noninstitutional actors who use affordances of social media to present their political and personal selves in order to garner public attention for their causes, typically through a mix of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism” (p. 850). It is therefore essential to examine the political engagement of highly visible individuals on social media and its implications for activism.

For political movements that are underrepresented in mainstream media due to asymmetrical power structures, visibility is crucial. Brighenti (2010) introduces the “visibility as recognition” framework, which emphasises the importance of being seen for identity formation and societal acknowledgment. This concept plays a key role in identity politics and digital activism. For example, during the Arab Spring, online visibility was critical for recognition and influencing public discourse (Uldam, 2018). Today, for political movements, visibility is no longer just about exposure but about being recognised as a legitimate cause. While mass media previously determined the legitimacy of movements through attention, social media has shifted this dynamic by creating more participatory and distributed mechanisms for garnering public attention.

This evolution of visibility also ties into the expectation that the internet can empower civil society and foster grassroots political participation across borders. Social media platforms initially arose with the promise of egalitarian principles dominating content creation and distribution (Hutchinson, 2021). However, despite efforts to promote inclusivity, commercial entities and platform providers increasingly prioritise the visibility of their own content. This dynamic complicates the democratic ideal of social media as a space where all voices are heard. Activists must adapt to the vernaculars of social media and engage actively in content creation to ensure their digital activism remains visible in an overcrowded online environment.

2.2 *Visibility-driven activism on TikTok*

Research into digital activism increasingly highlights how platforms like TikTok have changed the ways in which young people engage with and amplify social issues. TikTok, in particular, offers a unique blend of audiovisual features that allow users to communicate complex messages through creative, shareable formats. This blend feels accessible and engaging, especially among younger audiences. TikTok's editing tools, collaborative features like duets and stitches, and trend-based templates enable users to remix and personalise content, transforming activism into an interactive and participatory experience (Cervi et al., 2021, 2023; Cervi & Divon, 2023; Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022; Divon & Eriksson Krutrok, 2023, 2024; Primig et al., 2023; Zhao & Abidin, 2023). For instance, creators may use familiar formats such as makeup tutorials, challenges, and popular music tracks to weave personal stories or social critiques into their posts. This approach helps to make serious topics more engaging and impactful, appealing to a broad audience (Byron, 2024; Duguay, 2023). Through the use of visual markers like emojis, colour schemes, and fast-paced editing, they capture and hold the attention of viewers, particularly on TikTok's algorithmically curated “For You Page”, which recommends content according to users' past interactions with videos. These approaches encourage engagement and increase creator's reach (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar, et al., 2022; Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido, et al., 2022).

Creators' playful practices, such as lip-syncing, dancing, and makeup tutorials, serve to amplify their sociopolitical messages (Zhao & Abidin, 2023). These practices demonstrate how creators transform TikTok's platform dynamics into powerful tools for visibility-driven activism, challenging stereotypes and sparking conversations around pressing social and political issues. This approach underscores the power of TikTok as a medium for activism, where digital performances and creative content strategies enable everyday users to connect with others, share experiences, and raise awareness in ways that align with their personal identities and values.

In this environment, creators frequently use their bodies and personal expressions as tools to convey resilience, identity, and community values (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024). They engage their audiences not only through verbal or written messages but also through embodied performances that resonate emotionally and culturally. The concept of "playful activism" captures this dynamic, as Cervi and Divon (2023) explain. They describe how creators use game-like engagement to communicate resistance, even in moments of conflict, through meme-based challenges that construct shared political narratives. While ongoing discourse centres on the efficacy and sustainability of these mobilisations, the use of digital forms of civic participation is becoming increasingly pervasive across global contexts. However, visibility-driven activism is not without its tensions. Creators must reconcile their activist identities with the commercial demands of the influencer economy. A qualitative study on feminist online activists, for example, suggests that the involvement in online content creation often leads to a perceived dilution of one's activist identity, particularly when creators are viewed primarily as social media influencers (Scharff, 2023). Many creators face the challenge of balancing the need to produce engaging content for visibility with the desire to adhere to activist standards, often referred to as the "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007). Consequently, online activists are often caught between the imperative to create consumer-oriented content that broadens their reach and the responsibility to remain true to their activist principles by using their platforms to advocate for social causes (Caldeira & Machado, 2022).

The structure of social media platforms, such as TikTok's collaborative tools like duets and stitches, shapes the way content is created and shared, influencing how activism manifests online (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). These tools enable users to directly respond to content or participate in widely recognised audiovisual trends, creating a networked community of engaged individuals. Furthermore, platforms such as TikTok encourage "templatability" (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) where users remix and repurpose content to convey their personal perspectives on broader social issues. Through these strategies, creators can make personal stories resonate with public discourse, thus transforming their microcelebrity presence into a form of activism. This is evident in the way creators emphasise immigrant perspectives, for example, transforming personal narratives into shared dialogues that elevate issues of identity, belonging, and rights (Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido, et al., 2022).

The strategic use of hashtags, audio remixes, and visual storytelling allows creators to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach a wider audience. Their content makes marginalised communities more visible, reshaping cultural and political discussions in ways that are both intimate and accessible. These creators position themselves as modern-day advocates for social justice, using their digital influence to broaden the recognition and understanding of marginalised communities across a global platform. Expanding on this, Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2023) introduce the concept of "war influencers" in Ukraine, illustrating how social media activists combine platform affordances with personal expressions of trauma. They distinguish between two types of influencers: celebrities who use their fame for activism and everyday users who gain visibility by sharing personal experiences of trauma (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2025). This highlights how both public figures and ordinary individuals use social media to convey powerful, context-driven narratives.

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the convergence of digital activism and influencer culture. Murru, Pedroni, and Tosoni (2024) term this phenomenon "influ-activism," examining the dynamics of online activism through the lens of influencer culture. This concept explores the roles of "influ-activists" as communicators, the discourses they engage with, their audiences, and the ecosystems

that amplify their influence. Similarly, Ruiz-Gomez and colleagues (2024) examine the social media practices of parents of children with Down syndrome, highlighting the tension between commodification and advocacy. These examples underscore the complexities and ethical considerations that arise when personal narratives become integral to public campaigns.

As visibility becomes increasingly important in digital activism, new challenges and tensions arise. Since content creation, identity, political engagement, and financial interests intersect, the boundaries between these roles blur, making it more difficult to categorise digital activists. Nonetheless, recognising and exploring this interplay remains crucial to understanding the evolving landscape of digital activism.

2.3 LGBTQ+ and minority branding activism

Building on these discussions, LGBTQ+ activism scholarship reveals how social media has enabled LGBTQ+ individuals and communities to achieve unprecedented levels of visibility (Vivienne, 2016). LGBTQ+ communities were among the first to appropriate the Internet to experiment with identities and socialise outside of mainstream society (Myles et al., 2023). Digital spaces offer a global stage where LGBTQ+ voices can be amplified, leading to the emergence of highly visible LGBTQ+ people who play pivotal roles in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. The authenticity and relatability of these online personas resonate with a diverse audience, transcending borders and forging connections among individuals who may otherwise have felt isolated or marginalised (Vivienne, 2016).

Through social media, these highly visible individuals use their platforms as powerful tools for advocacy, mobilising support, raising awareness, and effecting change in the face of LGBTQ+ inequality and discrimination. Their online presence often involves sharing personal stories, organising and participating in grassroots movements, and leveraging their digital reach to influence political agendas and legislation (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). Social media's role in LGBTQ+ activism holds particular significance for minority youth by providing a supportive and inclusive online environment. Studies show that LGBTQ+ youth are 1.5 times more inclined to use social media for self-expression rather than mere entertainment compared to their heterosexual and gender-conforming peers, underscoring its importance within this demographic (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Charmaraman et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016).

However, as Raun and Christensen-Strynø (2022) point out in their study of feminist self-branding on Instagram, minority branding is “inscribed in self-commercialisation, both in the capitalisation of content and in the particular way [influencers] behave in front of the camera and address their audience to attract attention and increase their visibility” (p. 10). This observation invites reflection on Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) argument that in brand culture, marketers use brands as platforms for social activism while social movements, in turn, leverage brands to address specific political issues (p. 16). LGBTQ+ creators often use their content and branding to connect with audiences, while also leveraging their minority status and political causes for commercial gain, highlighting a complex interplay between political motives and commercial interests.

In addition, previous research from Hungary highlights how the scapegoating of LGBTQ+ communities has further complicated the relationship between activism and commodification (Szabó & Gáti, 2023). In the Western context, LGBTQ+ campaigns by companies are often critiqued as performative or commodified (Guidotto, 2006; Holmes, 2022), yet in Hungary, where LGBTQ+ communities face significant marginalisation, commercial entities sometimes serve as critical intermediaries. With government restrictions curtailing grassroots organisations and NGOs, corporations with the financial resources to fund public campaigns can offer essential visibility. Similarly, content creators in this environment must navigate these pressures, balancing commercial and activist roles as they perform different personas to meet the expectations of their audiences and respond to platform algorithms.

Ethical considerations arise around the intertwined dynamics of advocacy and commercial interests, especially when minority identity is used as a branding strategy. Research on LGBTQ+ content creators

suggests that those who engage audiences through personal narratives and life experiences often succeed in fostering online communities and brand collaborations, which contribute significantly to LGBTQ+ community building and education (Abidin & Cover, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). Troye Sivan's YouTube career exemplifies this synergy: his content creation and brand partnerships enable him to have meaningful discussions about his personal identity and LGBTQ+ community issues that might otherwise be inaccessible to his audience (Abidin & Cover, 2018). A recent study focusing on non-binary individuals further highlights that the careful negotiation between branding and advocacy on social media can result in an authentic online identity, one that is positively perceived by users who seek affirmation and representation in digital spaces (Meston & Williams, 2025).

Digital storytelling also supports “everyday activism,” which Vivienne (2011, 2016) defines as the sharing of personal stories in public spaces to challenge the status quo. While parallels exist between the ways people share their stories online and in daily life, digital tools remediate these narratives, leading to both unique opportunities and challenges such as reaching unknown audiences (Gray, 2009). Publicly embracing one’s minority identity can be interpreted as a political act, especially in contexts where such identities are under scrutiny. As anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments continue to grow, simply being visible online as an LGBTQ+ individual can become a form of activism. This potential for outreach and community building through social media is particularly significant where LGBTQ+ issues face limited visibility or contentious public discourse.

TikTok has emerged as a nuanced space for LGBTQ+ expression, with both empowering and challenging dynamics for community building and activism. Research into TikTok’s queer culture highlights its role in supporting mental health, community connectedness, and identity formation for LGBTQ+ youth (Byron, 2024). Through popular hashtags like #genderidentity and #lgbtmentalhealth, TikTok serves as a vital platform where LGBTQ+ users find comfort, solidarity, and educational resources, contributing to an inclusive community space (Paciente et al., 2024).

Despite these benefits, TikTok’s algorithmic structures can create complex challenges for LGBTQ+ users. Studies reveal that TikTok’s “For You Page” algorithm, while facilitating connections, can also suppress LGBTQ+ content through algorithmic and human moderation (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). This dual role of TikTok in affirming and simultaneously excluding LGBTQ+ identities requires users to adopt self-organised practices to resist moments of exclusion. Further, research by Simpson, Haaman, and Seeman (2022) describes how LGBTQ+ users “domesticate” TikTok, attempting to adapt its algorithmic outputs to align better with their personal values, which underscores the tensions inherent in relying on digital platforms for self-expression and community.

Finally, TikTok supports “queer worldmaking” (Otis & Dunn, 2021) through the sharing of personal narratives and LGBTQ+ joy, contributing to a form of LGBTQ+ activism that is less explicitly linked to political goals but is nonetheless significant. Vivienne (2016) emphasises the storytelling power of social media, where sharing LGBTQ+ joy and experiences creates solidarity and a sense of community. In a cultural landscape where minority identities are increasingly scrutinised, being visible on a platform like TikTok can be seen as a form of resistance and advocacy.

3. Methodology and materials

3.1 Context

The context of this research is Hungary, where the LGBTQ+ community have faced widespread backlash from the government and the public in the last years (Béres-Deák, 2020; Szabó & Gáti, 2023). Within the framework of anti-gender movements, Hungary stands out as a prime illustration of “democratic backsliding” (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Populism and the anti-gender movement has exerted a profound impact on the country’s political landscape and public discourse (Kováts, 2020).

While anti-gender movements are considered a global phenomenon, contextual differences are rather important. In the Hungarian case, unlike in many other countries, it is the government that initiated the movement (Kováts, 2018). The government fuels the anti-gender discourse through media campaigns that attack gender equality initiatives and in particular the LGBTQ+ community. These government campaigns not just rhetorical but have also resulted in a number of policies that directly affect and limit LGBTQ+ people's rights (Political Capital, 2022). Of heightened importance here is the limitation of visibility of LGBTQ+ issues and people in public spaces and the media.

3.2 Research question

Against the backdrop of the Hungarian anti-gender movement, this empirical study explores the political potential of social media content creators, mapping the complexity of visibility negotiation. The research questions are as follows: What strategies do Hungarian LGBTQ+ content creators employ to establish their presence on TikTok, and how do these strategies intersect with commercial and activist activities on the platform? How do these creators navigate visibility and negotiate their roles as influencers and activists within the TikTok ecosystem? Additionally, what are the perceptions and interpretations of young LGBTQ+ young TikTok users regarding the activism and influencer roles of LGBTQ+ TikTok creators?

To answer the research questions, a case study of Hungarian LGBTQ+ TikTok creators is offered. A critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA, Brock, 2018) was conducted based on audiovisual TikTok content, examining how elements work together, considering the platform vernacular, including prominent topics, effects, filters, and trending sounds. Additionally, interviews with LGBTQ+ TikTok users informed both the selection criterion for influencers in the study, as well as interpretation of the data.

3.3 Sampling and material: Qualitative interviews

For this critical analysis, insights were derived from a series of interviews conducted prior to the current study, involving 16 Hungarian LGBTQ+ youth aged between 14 and 25 (see Appendix Table 1). These interviews were conducted between November 2022 and March 2023, as part of a research project focused on the role of social media affordances on the negotiation of LGBTQ+ identity. The primary objective of these interviews was to explore various aspects of the participants' experiences as young LGBTQ+ individuals both online and offline. Interview topics covered the use of online platforms, challenges and opportunities encountered in both digital and physical spaces considering the Hungarian political climate, the influence of media on self-perception, participation in LGBTQ+ communities, and future aspirations.

During the interviews the participants habitually reflected on the roles of influencers and online activists and offered their perspective on their visibility, inspiring the current study. The interviews were used as starting point to select relevant TikTok content creators for analysis. All content creators in this study have been spontaneously mentioned by interview participants. However, not all interview participants discussed all content creators that this case study examines, nor were the interview participants asked to reflect on the content creators that the current study examines. Rather, these interviews were used in the preparation and interpretation of the TikTok content analysis to offer a critical understanding of what kind of visibility is achieved, as experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in Hungary. At times, the interview participants reflected directly about the content creators this study examines, while at other times they talked more generally about their opinion on LGBTQ+ influencers and online activists.

3.4 Sampling and material: TikTok content

The material for CTDA comprises the most recent 100 TikTok upload of selected TikTok creators, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of LGBTQ+ visibility and role

construction on the platform. The TikTok data was captured on 26 November 2023, using 4Cat through Docker, and Zeeschuimer v1.4.0 on Firefox web browser (Peeters et al., 2023). An overview of the analysed TikTok content can be found in Table 2 of the Appendix.

Specific criteria were developed for the selection of TikTok creators. The creators included in the study are self-identified Hungarian LGBTQ+ individuals with high visibility on social media. This was assessed by focusing on those with paid advertorials and collaborations. At the same time, the creators selected also perform activist expressions through association with LGBTQ+ movements and campaigns.

Additionally, diverse perspectives encompassing different LGBTQ+ identities were focused on for selection. Generally, the Hungarian-speaking social media space is relatively small, and while LGBTQ+ activism on social media gained visibility, explicit LGBTQ+ content creators with wide reach and visibility are scarce. Even so, most of the popular LGBTQ+ content creators are young gay men. For the purpose of conducting a critical and comprehensive study, content creators who are diverse in their LGBTQ+ identity while still maintaining a substantial audience were chosen, rather than solely selecting the most popular ones.

3.4.1 Selected content creators

Following the established criteria for content creators, four individuals were chosen for inclusion in the study. The creators included in this study were prominent public figures at the time of the analysis, actively engaging across both social and traditional media platforms. Their visibility was underscored by their presence in magazines, public events, and television. Consequently, the study discloses the identities of these creators. TikTok usernames are used throughout the article, instead of their personal names to highlight that they are viewed here as professional content creators rather than their private selves. Additionally, recognising the fluidity of identity, it is important to highlight that the creators may not necessarily align with the social markers that they were inhabiting at the time of data collection. Consequently, the information provided in this article reflects the self-descriptions of the creators at the time of data collection and analysis.

The first TikTok account, ApaApu, is a gay couple who position activism as their primary online endeavour, emphasising their marriage and their family life.

The second content creator, FajtAlex, is a transman whose celebrity status is evident not only through his involvement in paid collaborations but also his participation in popular television shows.

The third account, LadySzomjas, is a bisexual woman with significant popularity, who advocates for LGBTQ+ visibility, while she is actively engaged in various commercial activates online.

Lastly, WhisperTon, the most prominent LGBTQ+ content creator at the time of the study, is a gay man with the largest following and engagement among the selected TikTok creators, participating in commercial activities as well as actively highlighting his LGBTQ+ identity.

3.5 Analysis

This empirical study uses Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), examining online discourse through users' perspectives (Brock, 2018). As emphasised by previous TikTok studies (Avdeeff, 2021; Lee & Lee, 2023), it is imperative to focus not only on TikTok content but also on the platform's role in content creation and sharing. CTDA offers a comprehensive framework, examining both user-generated content and how technology shapes identity (Brock, 2018). As such, it focuses on how TikTok's unique features influence storytelling among LGBTQ+ TikTok creators. The coding system, based on CTDA principles, encompasses discursive, material, and symbolic aspects of technology use. The codebook used in this study was initially based on previous TikTok research (Primig et al., 2023) and was subsequently developed further to specifically align with the Hungarian political context and the focus on LGBTQ+ content creators and online activism. Codes were refined and expanded

during the analysis to better capture the nuances relevant to this study. The final codebook is detailed in Table 3 of the appendix.

The analysis of the dataset used both horizontal and vertical coding approaches to capture the nuanced roles creators assume in relation to their content. Horizontally, the analysis focused on identifying broader patterns, themes, and discourses spanning different data points. Vertically, each TikTok video was examined individually to understand its unique qualities, revealing how creators shift between roles while producing distinct types of content. This approach enabled an exploration of how creators perform various roles aligned with specific content types, highlighting that these roles are not mutually exclusive but instead reflect a fluid, gradual shift in identity and engagement styles.

The research intentionally avoided categorising content by type, as the primary research question centred on understanding what influencers do rather than analysing what content they produce. Emphasis was placed on the influencers' identity performance and how it relates to the content they create. Accordingly, particular attention was given to the use of TikTok specific vernaculars, such as skits, lip-syncing, stitching, and duets, to observe how these platform-specific features support the creators' evolving roles and the narratives they craft with their audiences.

4. Findings: Four roles of LGBTQ+ TikTok content creators

The analysis reveals that the content creators assume all these roles simultaneously, selectively highlighting certain aspects at different times and using specific platform affordances to engage with their audiences. These roles, along with the affordances used, are not mutually exclusive; rather, the creators strategically employ a broad repertoire to interact with their audiences in diverse ways. This approach demonstrates how creators leverage their online visibility to communicate a range of messages, including political, and commercial content, thereby engaging with their followers through layered, multifaceted identity performances.

4.1 Influencer role

The deductively developed influencer role is oriented towards visibility through commercial engagement and self-branding. Content within this role is shaped by the logic of the platform economy: creators adopt current trends, refined editing practices, and familiar aesthetic conventions to enhance their marketability. LGBTQ+ identity may be present but is not foregrounded as political; rather, it is embedded within broader appeals to authenticity, relatability, and lifestyle branding. Commercial intent is typically explicit, with brand collaborations often central to content production.

4.2 Activist role

The second deductively conceptualised role, the activist role, is centred on explicit political messaging, advocacy, and community education. Content in this category directly addresses issues relating to LGBTQ+ rights, identity, and lived experience. It avoids commercial indicators such as branding or sponsorship and instead focuses on communicative authenticity and collective visibility. Creators in this role frequently engage in educational or advisory formats, often using platform features such as comment replies or direct address to foster trust and solidarity.

4.3 Influencer-activist role

The third, hybrid influencer-activist role emerged inductively during analysis and refers to content that deliberately combines commercial and political aims. In this category, creators integrate LGBTQ+ advocacy within monetised content, often through brand partnerships that align with inclusive values. Although the content carries a political message, it is carefully crafted and designed to maximise visibility, leveraging the creator's existing influencer status to support activist aims. What characterises

this role is its deliberate integration of activism and branding, allowing each to enhance the other. In contrast to the purely activist role, the influencer-activist acknowledges and employs the commodification of identity as a strategic means of gaining attention and promoting advocacy.

4.4 Casual creator role

Lastly, the casual creator role was inductively conceptualised and refers to content focused on everyday life and relatability. It includes posts such as vlogs, outfit videos, food tutorials, and humorous clips. While this content appears non-political and non-commercial at first glance, it plays a significant role in ambient identity work. By presenting queer life as ordinary and unremarkable, creators subtly challenge normative assumptions and contribute to soft forms of cultural advocacy. Although the content avoids explicit political messaging or monetisation, it often performs a form of affective labour that normalises LGBTQ+ presence within the cultural logic of the platform. This role is characterised by low-stakes, high-frequency posting that sustains audience engagement and leaves space for future political or commercial developments. It reflects a mode of participation in which the personal becomes quietly political and potentially marketable over time.

4.5 Contextualising the four roles in Hungary

The four roles outlined in the typology were consistently identifiable across the TikTok content of all four creators analysed. As this study is based primarily on TikTok videos rather than interviews with the creators themselves, their voices are accessed through the audiovisual elements of their posts, this includes captions, spoken texts, hashtags, and editing choices, all of which function as expressions of identity and intent. To contextualise how this content is received and interpreted within the Hungarian socio-political landscape, quotes from the interviews with LGBTQ+ youth are incorporated throughout the analysis. These perspectives offer insight into the perceived meanings, limitations, and impact of the creators' content, thereby complementing the TikTok data.

Although each creator embodies the abovementioned four roles to varying extents, the way in which these roles are influenced by TikTok's specific affordances and vernaculars remains uniform, clearly indicating that the platform itself affects how content is presented. Each of the four creators maintains a unique voice and brand, not only aligning with the type of niche they predominantly occupy but also shaping the approach to their content creation. This consistent branding distinguishes them from other creators, helping in their presence within the saturated TikTok landscape and enhancing their visibility. At the same time, Hungarian LGBTQ+ TikTok creators face a unique challenge due to the 2021 'anti-paedophile law,' which restricts public discourse and media depictions of LGBTQ+ lives (Kovács, 2021). This legal backdrop influences the extent to which creators can engage in activism without facing potential backlash, leading to potential self-censorship and the use of covert signals of LGBTQ+ identity.

The casual content creator role was observed as a substantial part of all four creators' feed, which underscores the integral role such content plays in shaping their online presence. The creators used sustained storytelling, which is centred closely around their personal lives, deliberately choosing to highlight certain aspects that ties together all their content. For instance, ApaApu's online activity revolves around highlighting their life as a rainbow family. Essentially all content, whether branded, activist, or slice-of-life, is interconnected with this overarching theme. Although occasional TikToks may seem unrelated to their rainbow family narrative when encountered on the For You Page in isolation, a comprehensive examination of the creator's online presence shows a cohesive representation of their everyday life within the rainbow family context. Numerous of ApaApu's content explicitly depict their family life, showing their children with one of the parents in everyday settings, such as vacations (for example videos 12, 42, 54, 55). For example, in one of the TikToks we see one of the fathers playing with the children while their dog, Walter, is running around them (12), the overlay text reads

"Boring content / Just a happy family .

To those unfamiliar with the context, this might simply appear as a heartwarming moment on the For You Page. The LGBTQ+ experience is marked with the emoji and further contextualised in the caption: “This was taken over the weekend, and I guess it doesn’t mean much to most people, but to me, it means everything. ❤️🌈👤 #acsaladazsalad [family is family] #nekedbelegyen [for you] #fyp #nekedbe [foryou] #lgbtq #rainbowfamily 🏳️🌈”.

Based on the audiovisual content alone, the unfamiliar audience would miss a significant contextual meaning behind such videos, that is to depict and show the family life, which is not dissimilar from that of heterosexual couples. But this all happens in a country where LGBTQ+ families are continuously attacked by the government.

Parallel to this, ApaApu produce content which shows similar audiovisual storytelling of everyday family life, but explicitly showcases them as a rainbow family, for example video 40 garnered some attention, showing their son pointing out each family members on photos, saying:

“Walter [their dog], dad, Andris [the son], daddy”.

In their casual content creator role, the profile includes humorous TikToks of Walter edited to trending sounds (for example video 41,61). The presence of the dog functions as a cohesive element in their content, highlighting the pivotal role of the causal creator in establishing familiarity and intimacy with the audience.

LGBTQ+ creators navigate and challenge dominant societal discourses through creative storytelling and representation. LadySzomjas exemplifies this approach by crafting a consistent narrative centred on a fictional Hungarian-Latino family, inspired by her own Hungarian-Cuban heritage. Within these sketches, the bisexual identity of one character, presumably reflecting her personal experiences, is subtly depicted in a supportive environment. By maintaining this narrative over several years, she seamlessly integrates paid advertisements into her storytelling, showcasing her skill in blending commercial elements with her creative vision. Her content thoughtfully intertwines her queer and mixed Hungarian identities, using humour to challenge the dominant nationalist narrative that defines Hungarians as exclusively heterosexual and white.

LadySzomjas and WhisperTon published considerably more monetised content and embraced TikTok affordances and vernaculars to a higher level to adjust their content to platform specificities in comparison to ApaApu and FajtAlex. As the most popular TikTok creator, WhisperTon navigates the platform a distinct adherence to mainstream TikTok vernacular, marked by a profusion of paid advertisements. His profile generally focuses on make-up and fashion content, with additional vlog-style performances of travels and life events. His stylistic choices, akin to prominent global LGBTQ+ content creators, underscore a conscious alignment with broader trends in the TikTok community. WhisperTon consistently produces familiar content for his audience using vibrant colours, dynamic shots, deliberate cuts matched to background music, regardless of the subject matter. This illustrates how the creators attempt to seamlessly weave monetised content into their profiles through sustaining aesthetic choices and vernaculars, and continuous stories about their personal lives.

Monetised TikToks predominantly engaged with make-up companies, fashion brands, and workout-related activities. While some of these collaborations overtly incorporate LGBTQ+ identity into their branding strategies, the majority remain generalised, typically featuring product introductions in haul videos. For example, video 157 is a cinematic ad from FajtAlex, depicting him at a beach where he overcomes his fear of heights as we see him putting on perfume before making a jump into deep water. The caption reads:

“#ad Pushing my limits is my essence. I know that growth comes with pain and stepping out of my comfort zone, and that fear is not a bad thing, but an emotion needed to activate my resources. Today, I’ve grown again. Thank you to @Prada for lending a helping hand in overcoming one of my biggest fears! #pradalunarossaoccean #pradafragrances #openingnewhorizons 🎥”

In this influencer role, the creator completely disconnects from his usual explicitly LGBTQ+ coded content. Inherently, such content raises questions in terms of its LGBTQ+ subtext, FajtAlex writing, “I know that growth comes with pain and stepping out of my comfort zone” gets a different layer of interpretation once the audience knows that he is a transman. The choice of implicit or explicit marking of identity holds significance, especially for commercial content. While not all content is expected to emphasise LGBTQ+ identity, the absence of such representation and the overwhelming presence of more generalised commercial content can have adverse effects on certain followers, as discussed in the interviews. Commenting on WhisperTon, Veronika said: “I actually don't like what he's doing because—that's what I hate about social media in general, –it's just about being perfect” (22 November 2022). When influencers show a life that is unattainable, it can considerably harm their perceived authenticity, which is crucial for their audience engagement. But the creators are aware of this; in a “Get Ready With Me” TikTok, WhisperTon even uses the story of the unattainable social media influencer as a hook for a skincare advertisement (video 389).

In contrast, ApaApu’s TikTok account in the analysed period only includes one overt advertisement (video 7), while for example their Instagram profile featured more paid content. Recommendations for products and participation in corporate events are subtly embedded within the TikTok content (for example video 14, 38) without explicit markers of paid promotions. Despite the absence of explicit calls for consumer action, the account exhibits a keen awareness of its substantial following, leveraging their status to provide product recommendations and voice opinions. The creators continuously use a specific aesthetic visually, and an “inclusive we” verbally, to establish an intimate relationship with followers. Through this they signal that their audience is a part of their everyday lives and could achieve the lifestyle they have through buying the things they presumably use.

Activist content mainly featured direct influencer–follower interaction in forms of stitches and answers to comments. Explicit LGBTQ+ content predominantly featured educational and informational videos in ApaApu’s and FajtAlex’s case, with ApaApu’s occasional call for mobilisation. Educational content stands out, as public information on LGBTQ+ identity is not widely discussed in Hungary, young people use social media to inform themselves, as also highlighted in the interviews. In other contexts, educational or advisory content may not be seen as political messaging. However, in the Hungarian political climate, such information is difficult to access, and even restricted, in public spaces, especially when directed towards younger audiences, such as in public schools. Consequently, LGBTQ+ non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups in Hungary have taken on an educational role, with content creators contributing through their online content, as observed in this analysis. While this content may lack overtly political messaging, it inherently connects these creators to activism.

While WhisperTon’s and LadySzomjas’ LGBTQ+ identity is visible, their advocacy remains implicit, with a notable absence of active political messaging on governmental matters, despite their attendance at LGBTQ+ events, such as Budapest Pride. Notably, WhisperTon maintains a conscious delineation of his platform as a safe space for self-expression, articulating gratitude for followers and familial support. He was also invited to a dinner prior to 2023 Budapest Pride at the US Ambassador Residency to discuss LGBTQ+ issues, and while he created several “Get Ready With Me” videos mentioning this, he never explicitly discussed the dinner, maintaining that his participation is fun and fashionable, but not political.

Findings derived from interviews conducted with LGBTQ+ youth revealed a prevailing normative expectation regarding the political role of influencers. In relation to the perceived role, Veronika described that she could not fully endorse Hungarian influencers: “It's great that they're so 'out and proud', but I'd like to see them give voice to more important things, because I don't think I've seen any of them campaigning for anything, maybe there was something with the rainbow families with LadySzomjas, but not much” (22 November, 2022).

Notably, the interview participants who are highly active on social media expressed the view that influencers bear a responsibility to convey information to their audience. They are viewed as pillars of the LGBTQ+ community, who can facilitate safe exploration of LGBTQ+ identity, while disseminating

knowledge about sexuality, healthcare, and particularly mental health. In response to what influencers should use their platforms for, Erik stated: “I think it should be used to show the real thing, so to speak, and to come up with videos that can help people with the same LGBTQ+ identity who are in a bad state of mind” (2 November 2022). The interviewees offered criticism of the content observed on social media, asserting that Hungarian LGBTQ+ content creators appear inauthentic when compared to their Western counterparts. They contended that Hungarian influencers are excessively commercialised and sexualised, thereby falling short of meeting expectations: “Most people whom I come across on TikTok, are not the ones who should be representing gay people. They put up overly sexualised videos, and it seems that every second gay guy has a link to OnlyFans in his bio, they're just showing off their bodies and wearing tight boxers” (Noel, 15 December 2022). The content of WhisperTon and LadySzomjas content resonates with this to a certain degree, while they do not engage in online sex work, they strategically use the framing of their conventionally beautiful bodies as hooks for engagement, frequently posing and dancing in underwear or revealing clothing.

While all TikTokers explicitly and continuously emphasise the significance of LGBTQ+ mental well-being and the creation of safe spaces, they do not actively attempt, through their TikTok content or profiles, to provide mental health resources or reflect on the characteristics of safe spaces. Their declarations regarding the safety of their TikTok and fan communities lack elaboration on whether such safety is actualised through the monitoring of comment sections or the establishment of private groups, among other strategies. This is particularly puzzling, as these creators frequently discuss topics such as mental health and sexual health, aligning their content with activities often undertaken by NGOs and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, yet they seem hesitant to fully disclose information or provide direct links to reliable (mental) healthcare resources.

For instance, FajtAlex’s profile combines fashion and causal creator content with practical and mental health advice for trans individuals. He frequently talks about his work, opening a restaurant, in his casual content creator role, and in his influencer role he shares content about fashion and grooming. Importantly, FajtAlex makes use of TikTok platform features as he interacts frequently with his followers, answering questions about his identity. This continuous narration of his own experiences and the extensive use of TikTok affordances (e.g. stitching, replying to comments, green screen videos) permits him high visibility. In these answers he mostly talks about his own experience and provides detailed accounts of his own transitioning and mental health journey.

As demonstrated before, in commercialised TikTok content, creators persistently integrate TikTok-specific language and seamlessly incorporate it into their profiles and the platform as a whole. However, this level of integration is notably absent in content that foremost political. ApaApu, despite enjoying a substantial following across various platforms, appears to use TikTok with less intentionality. They do not exert similar efforts to produce activist-oriented content that uses TikTok vernacular to the same extent as, for example, WhisperTon does for brand collaborations. Consequently, the visibility of activist content is weaker. At the same time, such content seems more authentic and spontaneous, providing an unfiltered, candid look into the creators’ life, which in turn may strengthen their roles.

Simultaneously, as identified and discussed by the interview participants, the highly visible commercial content produced is misaligned with articulated audience expectations. While a certain hybrid influencer–activist role is apparent, and the content creators leverage their platforms to generate narratives pertaining to LGBTQ+ identity, there is still a notable absence of explicit and continuous engagement in educating and/or mobilising audiences. Veronika articulated that: “It's really important that they're coming out and that they're getting visibility, that they're giving visibility to the community, but that there's also, for example, LadSzomjas who came to Budapest Pride and she was the host last year, which was really cool, but I think it's easy for these influencers to be LGBTQ+, or easier than, say, a gay guy from the countryside” (22 November, 2022). Despite using the TikTok affordances, particularly “stitching,” and directly responding to comments that either pose genuine questions about LGBTQ+ identity or attack the creator for their LGBTQ+ identity, the influencers generally refrain from overtly

expressing their political views. As they continuously engage in portraying LGBTQ+ identity as “fun”, and seemingly disconnected of political realities, they fell short in addressing their diverse audiences.

Notably, they draw upon their personal lived experiences to accentuate specific aspects, particularly addressing medical inquiries related to transitioning, as exemplified by FajtAlex, and legal queries concerning adoption, as evidenced in the case of ApaApu. Such content is inspirational for young followers: “I am following this Hungarian gay influencer couple, who have now been able to adopt two children. I think this is a source of hope or at least show that having my own family would be possible in Hungary” (Levi, 14 March, 2023). While the creators talk freely about their own experiences, becoming the source of information for followers, this does not necessarily mean that they would actively share further resources or connections to professionals who would be able to further help with, legal, mental well-being, or medical questions on their TikTok profiles.

Zooming in on the Hungarian context, it is apparent that TikTok creators must navigate these different roles strategically to achieve desired visibility. Given the political constraints and limited market for Hungarian-speaking social media users, content creators need to strike a balance. They need to ensure that the content remains relatable to the majority market, without causing controversy for the brand or facing potential political consequences. At the same time, they also need to navigate demands of their LGBTQ+ followers to create space for visibility and advocacy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Navigating visibility in a hostile political climate

The analysis of the four roles undertaken by LGBTQ+ TikTok creators highlights that the creators skilfully and strategically navigate visibility across influencer and activist online spaces. Diverse TikTok vernaculars are used for the specific roles, while the creators manage to maintain a central narrative of the self in their content to establish coherent online personas. This process is particularly crucial in Hungary, where the continuous anti-LGBTQ+ push by the government shapes creators' content strategies. The creators must carefully adapt to the legal and social environment, balancing personal expression with a need for caution.

The creators make use of trends (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), hashtags (Jacques et al., 2023), and audio memes (Abidin, 2020; Gleason et al., 2019) to expand their reach, which is in line with what has been established in previous research. However, in Hungary, these tools also serve a dual purpose of subtly navigating censorship while engaging with broader global queer movements. The TikTokers in this analysis creatively engage with different aspects of the platform to simultaneously reach wider audiences with single-video branding on the oversaturated For You Page (Abidin, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022), while creating familiar content for their devoted fanbase. Often, particularly in their roles as influencers, creators' LGBTQ+ identities are either concealed or subtly referenced in the subtext. This is likely done to avoid the platform's marginalisation of LGBTQ+ creators while also navigating the socio-political landscape, especially regarding content through which they earn a living.

Through what Jaramillo and colleagues coined as “hashbaiting” (2022, p. 214), the creators intentionally take advantage of popular TikTok campaigns. Usually organised through hashtags, or alternatively “affective audio networks” (Primig et al., 2023, p. 6), the creators reach wide audiences through commonly recognisable formats, without sacrificing thematic coherence in their personal content. In Hungary's increasingly repressive climate, these tools allow for subtle advocacy, cleverly sidestepping any potential state censorship while leveraging TikTok's affordances for LGBTQ+ visibility. This highlights that creators have a deep understanding of the sociotechnical nature of TikTok algorithm and online visibility.

Furthermore, the creators' choice of specific vernacular is intentional. The creators show remarkable consistency in their use of recurring visual and verbal cues. Specifically, their video editing style is

consistent, as seen with WhisperTon who uses a recognisable template with dynamic cuts, or the contrasting calm narrative style of FajtAlex. In a political environment where the expression of LGBTQ+ identity is fraught with risks, these subtle, yet purposeful choices allow the creators to signal their alignment with LGBTQ+ issues without openly confronting hostile societal forces. Embodied identity performance is also consistent, in terms of body language, such as in WhisperTon's signature bouncing movements; or clothing, such as the recurring use of customs that identifies each character in LadySzomjas' sketches. This use of recurring visual cues, help the creators to build a visual identity (Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido, et al., 2022).

Beyond adeptly navigating TikTok's algorithm, the creators also skilfully adapt to global trends, weaving these into the local socio-political context. This ability to blend global and local trends enables them to connect with a wide-ranging audience, positioning them as active participants in the transnational online queer movement. Their "glocalised" content not only amplifies their visibility on the platform but also allows them to resonate with diverse communities both locally and internationally, reflecting the intersection of global and local queer cultures.

The creators consistently engage in the "perceived interconnectedness" of creator and follower, building an intimate relationship that goes beyond parasociality (Abidin, 2015). As opposed to parasocial relations (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), "perceived interconnectedness is mediated via a more democratic and equalising infrastructure of social media platforms, which stimulate a flat organisation of actors where influencers and followers co-produce and shape the conversation" (Abidin, 2015, p. 11). In Hungary, where direct political engagement on LGBTQ+ issues can lead to negative repercussions, this type of connection is not just about influencer appeal, it becomes a subtle form of community-building in a repressive political context. The creators know that they must sustain a careful relationship with their followers to navigate the online space effectively without risking backlash. This is often performed using questions and hashtags in captions, inviting followers to participate in challenges and audio templates.

Lastly, the creators consistently use the inclusive 'we' to address the audience, emphasising the intimate and familial relationship that is built through the mediated performance. This relationship, while performing entertainment and education, also becomes a form of activism, one that operates within Hungary's harsh political environment while still communicating essential LGBTQ+ messages to a broader audience. This marks the creator's deep understanding of the multimodal elements to promote interactions with followers beyond views, and their knowledge of the challenges of algorithmic visibility on social media platform (Bishop, 2019).

5.2 The politics of platform branding and strategic identity work

At the same time, the strategic use and concealment of LGBTQ+ identity reflects what Raun and Christensen-Strynø refers to as minority branding (2022), carving out space online to use minority identity markers to engage in commercial activities. In Hungary, where the legal landscape has become increasingly hostile toward visible LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, this form of strategic branding allows creators to work within a system that may view their identity as a liability.

Following the argumentation of Abidin (2020), Jaramillo and colleagues (2022) highlight that creators who build consistent profiles rather than primarily engaging in single video-based popularity tactics engage in less branded content. However, in the case of the four analysed TikTok creators here, it is apparent that consistent profile-based branding is part of the video-based branding, as creators such as WhiperTon and Lady Szomjas skilfully navigate single video-based promotion while building a consistent narrative on their profiles. Nevertheless, importantly, these two profiles also engage with less explicitly activist content compared to the other two analysed creator accounts, ApaApu and FajtAlex. In turn the content of ApaApu and FajtAlex was less commercialised and professionalised, but more political. These two accounts actively involve their audiences in political mobilisation, engaging their audiences in current political debates and informing them about the on-going LGBTQ+ issues in

Hungary. They strategically mix such content with light-hearted and platform-friendly expressions, especially through their casual creator role, presumably to keep visibility and engagement with their established audiences and to not get shadowbanned (Rauchberg, 2022; Steen et al., 2023).

This dynamic highlights how the creators all add entertainment value and strategically maintain audience attention while creating educational content for their followers in different formats (Abidin & Cover, 2018). As explicitly activist self-expression necessitates deeper engagement from the audience with the political context, arguably this is challenging to achieve when the creators aim to reach a broad, generalised audience. As such, while there is clear profusion of activist and influencer roles in LGBTQ+ TikTok creators' content, it is also apparent that the creators are engaging with either influencer or activist niche and create content in adherence to the vernacular that is predominantly associated with that area.

However, it is also worth noting that creators may integrate paid advertisements into their content without clear disclosure, blending sponsored content with personal posts. This kind of hidden advertising is a grey area that often goes unnoticed by followers, as the creators use subtle cues to present the content as organic while it serves a commercial purpose. As pointed out in recent research, this is especially concerning when creators use their children for commercial activities (Divon et al., 2025). While this phenomenon was not observed in the context of this current study, it is important to acknowledge that such activity adds complexity to the typology of the four roles politically active social media creators perform.

The TikTokers negotiate a careful selection of brands and sponsors, as paid collaborations are not only a form of endorsement of a certain brand, but these also actively reinforce the existing brand of the self. Therefore, campaigns where the message centres around 'staying true to oneself' or 'stepping outside of the comfort zone' (as in the example of FajtAlex perfume ad, video 157) is desirable, as this message is compatible with LGBTQ+ identity, but broad enough that it can be marketable for broader audiences. However, this strategic use of minority identity underscores why those who predominantly identify as activist social media content creators, would align themselves with influencers cautiously (Scharff, 2023).

The LGBTQ+ messaging in the commercialised instances become shallow and almost apolitical, highlighting the LGBTQ+ experience as "fun", reflecting neoliberal feminist themes of self-actualisation, empowerment, and authenticity (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Caldeira & Machado, 2022), while placing the LGBTQ+ self in a context seemingly void of political realities. Influencers face significant pressure from their clients and sponsors, who are keen to embrace progressive values such as diversity and liberalism to reach a wider audience and increase profits. This often leads LGBTQ+ content creators to combine their sexual and gender identities with capitalist ideals such as independence and entrepreneurship. However, this fusion typically fails to challenge the dominance of heterosexual norms or address the emotional struggles experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals (Abidin & Cover, 2018; Lovelock, 2017).

At the same time, it might not be useful to condemn commercial influencer activities and label them as inadequate to activism. As Scharff points out, focusing on the "the differences between 'influencer' and 'activist', and the attribution of monetisation and commercial pursuit to influencers, underplays the ways in which market logics structure contemporary forms of activism that take place in the neoliberal digital economy" (2023, p. 2). As highlighted by research in the Hungarian context, given the increasingly hostile Hungarian political context, publicly embracing LGBTQ+ alliance can be regarded as an activist undertaking (Szabó & Gáti, 2023).

In a context where opportunities for LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves and build community are increasingly limited, the presence of openly LGBTQ+ individuals among the most popular TikTok content creators, successfully amassing large followings while openly showing their LGBTQ+ identity, is noteworthy. This phenomenon should not be overlooked; rather, it should be recognised as an essential component of contemporary social media activism.

6. Conclusion

This study offers a nuanced perspective on how LGBTQ+ content creators engage with self-promotion and activism. The evolution of platform culture has transformed the traditional boundaries of influencers and activists, blurring the lines between the consumerist and the political. As LGBTQ+ individuals embrace social media platforms for representation and advocacy, they forge new avenues for political engagement while grappling with the tensions inherent in self-presentation, visibility, and authenticity. Recognising the intricate interplay between influencer culture and LGBTQ+ activism is crucial for understanding the contemporary dynamics of digital society and the potential of social media platforms as catalysts for social change.

The analysis highlights four predominant roles that LGBTQ+ content creators perform on TikTok to navigate platform, audience, and market demands and achieve the desired visibility: casual content creator roles, influencer roles, activist roles, and influencer-activist roles. The creators strategically engage with TikTok's platform affordances and vernaculars to embrace each role while maintaining a central narrative based on the lived LGBTQ+ experience to create consistent profiles. While the sustained narrative allows them to seamlessly interweave commercial and political roles, the heightened visibility comes at the cost of navigating challenges. These individuals must cope with the demanding expectations of their diverse audience, negotiating a delicate equilibrium between personal authenticity, meeting the anticipations of their followers, and fulfilling commercial needs. This becomes especially pronounced in contexts where anti-gender sentiments have been on the rise, making the decision to openly embrace their LGBTQ+ identity a courageous undertaking fraught with potential risks. The research in Hungary assumes particular significance within this context, offering a unique opportunity to examine the strategies, resilience, and adaptability of LGBTQ+ online activists and influencers.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. This research is based on a small sample of four content creators, whose online work was observed and analysed within a specific time and space, resulting in limitations in terms of generalisability. However, the aim of this study is to provide an in-depth, exploratory analysis that highlights the complex dynamics of the roles LGBTQ+ content creators may perform on TikTok. As social media is often viewed as a globalised space where transnational LGBTQ+ activism rooted in content creation can flourish, it is crucial to recognise contextual differences. This study serves as a foundation for future research that could further investigate these dynamics, particularly by examining the relationship between creators, audiences, and platforms over time, as well as studying the local specificities of transnational LGBTQ+ activism through content creation. Hungary is often regarded as a “textbook example of democratic backsliding” (Enyedi, 2018, 2020), however, recent global political developments underscore the importance of examining regions where political tensions and anti-gender movements are actively promoted by the government. Analysing these contexts is crucial for critically understanding and effectively countering such narratives.

In conclusion, this study highlights the nuanced and multifaceted negotiation of visibility undertaken by LGBTQ+ content creators. The results underline that, rather than treating highly visible individuals as either activists or influencers, we should consider them as both, recognising the fluidity of their online identities as they navigate the intersection of consumerist and political demands.

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of interview participants

	Pseudonym	Pronoun	Gender	Sexuality
1	Abel	he/him/his	cisman	gay
2	Ada	she/her/hers	ciswoman	lesbian
3	Alex	she/he/they	non-binary	lesbian
4	Anakin	he/him/his	transman	heterosexual

5	Daniel	he/him/his	transman	heterosexual/biromantic
6	Don	he/him/his	transman	heterosexual
7	Emma	she/her/hers	ciswoman	LGBTQ+
8	Erik	he/him/his	cisman	gay
9	Levi	they/them/theirs	cisman	bisexual
10	Linda	she/her/hers	ciswoman	questioning
11	Martin	he/him/his	cisman	gay
12	Max	they/them/theirs	non-binary	LGBTQ+
13	Noel	he/him/his	cisman	asexual/homoromantic/aromantic
14	Nora	she/her/hers	questioning	lesbian/LGBTQ+
15	Romeo	he/him/his	cisman	gay
16	Veronika	she/her/hers	ciswoman	bisexual

Table 2. TikTok videos sampled for this study

ID	Creator	Link
1	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7298800167610862880
2	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7296188186282200353
3	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7295716549724310816
4	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7292432260085681440
5	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7273382854657264929
6	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7264114888442793248
7	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7252966733315591450
8	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7248490046540614938
9	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7245898243463253275
10	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7245308461616074011
11	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7241262567488867611
12	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7239294782957178139
13	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7207498496314723590
14	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7198603036808301829
15	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7188562596155411718
16	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7185135605976780038
17	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7181449124619848965
18	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7180825697928187141
19	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7174453447893208326

20	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7174122145767902469
21	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7136940214609530118
22	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7132018149876190470
23	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7081938514396450053
24	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7074827910594530565
25	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7047574961266904325
26	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7047143479851502854
27	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7045967333600283909
28	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7044111748999204102
29	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7041218787240185094
30	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7040048969241677061
31	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7039242458596642054
32	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7032618889490091270
33	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7028643354841779461
34	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7028172438143831301
35	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7027506868423642373
36	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7026058594491698438
37	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7025549727936630022
38	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7021120231900777734
39	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7019563787657170182
40	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7016003852730158342
41	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7014896378115673350
42	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7013738677218086150
43	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7011791842308017413
44	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7009722813288336646
45	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7007342446807928069
46	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7006263430701206789
47	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7001884317152562437
48	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7000805474522238214
49	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7000051678263217414
50	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6998822944059215110
51	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6998420176823667974
52	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6997428427959569670
53	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6997275159489023238

54	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/7013738677218086150
55	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6984472670461005062
56	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6982907197655174406
57	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6978768203459693829
58	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6974685552566193413
59	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6974012343156067589
60	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6973276962106264838
61	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6972519956600704262
62	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6971324979258363142
63	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6970018432876154117
64	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6967995764941393157
65	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6966684290935557382
66	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6962940410004032774
67	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6962822913351290118
68	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6957651773452520710
69	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6953471371615735045
70	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6952596013316082950
71	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6952193261255527685
72	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6951825527728655622
73	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6946983959284796677
74	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6946264740817603845
75	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6945505110739012870
76	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6944022861896060166
77	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6942926318115753221
78	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6939975235533950213
79	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6939556262032002309
80	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6934400001699368197
81	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6933562632473431301
82	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6931790532070952198
83	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6931428939470621957
84	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6930594899469356293
85	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6928839522339900677
86	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6928135389462940934
87	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6923947118788873477

88	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6915835044376448261
89	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6913621297427762438
90	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6911251234288700677
91	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6910080334235208966
92	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6908012300272241922
93	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6907314841673846017
94	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6905779378794384641
95	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6905436226757709057
96	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6905041036033150214
97	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6904750659027864833
98	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6901697763524840706
99	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6900600492511055105
100	ApaApu	https://www.tiktok.com/@apaapu/video/6898756469756267777
101	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7290969088556404001
102	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7290597434315558176
103	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7280868670245440800
104	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7274598055276596513
105	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7272709060057632033
106	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7272028845031689504
107	FajtAlex	https://www.tiktok.com/@fajtalex/video/7270877180500921633
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352	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7249783555662925083
353	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7246061652955680026
354	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7245694292604292379
355	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7245283006879976731
356	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7244987665190374683
357	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7244871502376520987
358	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7244132624787066139
359	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7243476020697812251

360	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7243413824471158043
361	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7242652905767996698
362	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7242362175241637147
363	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7242345859235548442
364	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7239400127272635675
365	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7238582164319767834
366	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7238548358288215322
367	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7238527482733923610
368	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7238287393957219611
369	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7237918072747707674
370	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7237818772067716379
371	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/723744497792077082
372	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7236745803463806234
373	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7236435726253034779
374	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7236048661925334298
375	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7235970977593691419
376	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7232712718715735323
377	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7232340135487065371
378	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7231955433001422106
379	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7230807900308983067
380	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7230101514155543835
381	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7229011779966274843
382	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7228631713075793178
383	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7226429394594647322
384	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7226339821516541210
385	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7226062015968709914
386	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7225962396014185754
387	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7225259663535705370
388	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7224873286696537370
389	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7224163364539256091
390	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7223793623152872730
391	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7223079435774266650
392	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7222672446493592858
393	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7222332605570600219

394	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7217896246030224667
395	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7216773058948828442
396	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7216003263542431002
397	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7215507351313616155
398	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7214143946958671109
399	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7213773156501261573
400	WhisperTon	https://www.tiktok.com/@whisperton/video/7212703905719782662

Table 2. Codebook

	Category	Explanation
Platform		
Context	User Profile	What is the overall „look and feel” of the user’s profile (user that posted the content)? Who is the user (what can we know about them by their profile)?
	User interaction	Is there any type of user interaction (e.g. call for action or response in comments?)
	Justification	Justification (How do people justify the making of this video? E.g., claiming to have been asked)
Action in front of Camera		
Narrative	Where	Where does the scene take place?
	What	What happens in the scene? What is being shown (people, things, food) and in what state (in action, on images, dancing, just sitting and talking etc.)?
	LGBTQ+ Identity	Are there LGBTQ+ themes? (e.g. embodied, narrative, symbols, political, mention or depiction of LGBTQ+) What else is used to signify queerness (e.g. habits, objects, etc.)?
	Actors	Who is being shown on screen? What do they look like (e.g. What social status/identity could be ascribed to the person on screen? Are they young/old, etc.)?

Production	How	Body & Practices (Is the body used to construct queerness? What does their appearance and behaviour tell us about who they are? How do they behave (mimic, gestures)? What is the interaction between actors?)
	Intentionality	Intent (is it a self-commodifying video? Is it activist? Does it combine the two? None of the above)
	Audience	Audience (Who is the imagined audience?)
Camera Action <i>Use these to make sense of the narrative categories above (platform specific)</i>		
Crew	Who and how many people are visibly involved in the making of the content? Is the creator filming themselves or is there someone else involved?	
Angle	What camera angle(s) are used?	
Cuts	How was the video cut (long vs. short, fast cuts; length of video)? Is there anything interesting about the deliberate choice of the sequence of images (e.g. template/format)?	
Sound	What type of sound was used (speech and/or music; emotive effect of music; does sound fit the action on screen)?	
Sound Remix	Is the sound original sound produced by the user posting it? If not, in what context is the same sound used by others?	
Filters and Effects (trends)	What types of (visible) filters or special effects were used? Is the video a “trend” (sound and/or action reused from original user)? Note: For filters, look at meta data, if meta data do not state a filter but you feel like there is one, note that	
Footage Remix	Is the footage original content produced by the user that posted it?	