

Finding Butch Identity and (Visions of) Solidarity on TikTok¹

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I graduated from high school in early June of 2020, two months into the first Covid lockdown in Germany. As Covid fully shut down public life, 700 million users, including myself, turned to the newly emerging, though not newly released, short-form video-based social media app TikTok, looking for the comfort and community that was missing from a daily life subdued by lockdown measures (Ryan, Fritz and Impiombato 2020). Feeling isolated and alone, looking for connection, people created videos of their daily experiences and lockdown realities, craving the interaction and relation so void in isolation. In the months following my graduation, a time I had long hoped would redefine my outlook on life was locked down and dull. After having endured my time as an openly queer, butch teen in conservative suburban Germany throughout my secondary education, I suddenly felt deprived of a community I did not yet know and was experiencing the first years of young adulthood in Zoom lectures and FaceTime calls with friends, turning to TikTok daily to escape this reality, if only for a little bit. Here, a budding community of queer users was algorithmically assembling, promoted through TikTok's modus operandi of offering users highly tailored content on their aptly named "For You" page (Sot 2022). I had spent the majority of my teens in online spaces organized around queerness (namely Tumblr and Twitter) and welcomed TikTok as a more personal social network, quickly slipping into a habit of being on the app for multiple hours a day. How I tried to understand people and myself in relation to society was intrinsically shaped by the lives and characters shared with me through these apps, finding a queer community and a type of virtual kinship readily available at any moment, years before I would ever step into any kind of 'real life' queer space. TikTok added itself naturally into the list of the virtual queer communities of my teens and I found comfort in it. As user numbers continued to grow, the queer content I consumed began to

1 I want to express my gratitude to Michael_a Koch, Jara Schmidt, and Clara Rosa Schwarz for creating this space and letting me present within it. Thank you for all your work on organizing the conference and this book that have made space for so many wonderful contributions. I greatly appreciate it and feel very fortunate to have been included.

diversify, and TikTok quickly figured out my desire for trans masculine and lesbian content. The algorithm was offering spaces of recognition and relation that I so desperately needed that I did not think twice about my personal data that was being collected through this. Additionally, my attention span dwindled and I developed a habit of opening TikTok rather than a book, positively intoxicated by the little world of my For You page in contrast to a world consumed by the pandemic.

And then, when public life slowly returned in late 2021, I found myself starting at zero. My queer positionality and relation to the world had to be fully (re-)defined. I blamed extensive screen time for a disconnect from the 'real world' queer community, a community I was now coming to know and cherish so greatly as a young adult living in Berlin. As I attempted to really lay down roots and fully (re-)arrive in my first chapter of adulthood, trying to move away from my pandemic screen time average of multiple hours per day, many regularly devoted to TikTok, I began to reflect how I and the desires I had grown into had been shaped by social media. Here, a particular pessimism took hold of me that made me discount my experiences in virtual spaces as worth less than experiences in 'real life'. Having lived vicariously through social media seemed to mark me as inexperienced and painfully young, and as a 19-year-old I desired nothing more than to be grown.

In this space, standing between childhood and young adulthood, I reread *Stone Butch Blues*, which I had first read 5 years earlier. At 15 and ragingly pubescent, it felt as if I was reading a story about my ancestors, rather than a present community I could locate myself in. My virtual world felt like such an abundance, so radically different that it could, to me, not fit into a continuity of the histories I had been reading about in *Stone Butch Blues*. Outside of the internet, I had rarely encountered queerness at all. A disconnect existed between the queer I could be online and the butch boy I had to be at school, so that when I was confronted by the materiality of Jess' experiences in a time before the internet, I struggled to relate.

Looking back on this at 20, the differences I had once perceived between Jess and myself turned to parallels, inspired by a matured conception of history and community. I had learned to embrace difference and temporal distance as realities of any historical identification process and now knew to treasure similarities despite the large gaps between myself and the butches, lesbians, and queers that came before me. I could now discover similarities in the butchness in Feinberg's story and the butchness in my own. I began to approach my own butch story with much more kindness than before. Now accepting that I could not and did not want to change how I had grown into my own butchness, I had to embrace my history with existing online, which had continued most strongly through my persisting relationship with TikTok. Instead of feeling guilty for the hours spent scrolling during lockdown, I began to see the many butch representations on the app as a part of a historical continuation of lesbian and queer community and spaces of recognition.

Visibly queer and explicitly lesbian TikTok presences have grown massively in the last four years, completely transforming the way I and many others now view themselves and their queerness in a post-Covid world. While this active community is a treasure to many, TikTok also exists as an extremely ambivalent space: while being highly accessible and readily available as a communal space, the app has also repeatedly been criticized for censoring content flagged as LGBTQ+ in a process dubbed ‘shadowbanning’. Content that is shadowbanned can be posted regularly and remains visible to the original poster, while being effectively kept from being shown to other users (Rauchberg 2022). TikTok also lacks sufficient content moderation or protective structures against users’ comments that attack queerness, with the American organization GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) recognizing that the app (as of 2023) had severe shortcomings when it came to deleting hateful comments and messages (GLAAD 2023). On a governmental level, TikTok has also been and continues to be investigated by the European Union, which cites its concerns for privacy and insufficient protection of minors as investigative trigger points. Additionally, the algorithmic nature of the app is a double-edged sword, on the one hand making discovery beyond individual interests possible, while also frequently suggesting content that risks drawing users into (amongst others) right wing ideologies based on dehumanizing non-white, queer, or otherwise othered groups of people (Ozduzen, Ferenczi and Holmes 2023). In light of all this, it is imperative to proceed with caution when considering TikTok as a space for community building, and to not lose sight of the larger dangers and intransparencies inherent to the app and social media at large (Little 2021; Smith 2023). I strongly believe that a nuanced view of the app that does not glorify the app is possible, if caution and care are taken.

In this text, I want to use the intimacy and intuition that I have gained through my years on social media to spotlight virtual representations of queerness and specifically butchness on TikTok. I will center the voices of two active butch creators, Roman (@psychdyke) and Jen (@cowboyjen). In doing so, I want to underline the importance of talking about butch and queer people visibly sharing their lives and engaging in conversations about it on TikTok. This book, united by the celebration of the life and legacy of Leslie Feinberg, allows for the perfect opportunity to do so.

By combining personal reflection, research on TikTok, and excerpts from the two email interviews I conducted with Roman and Jen, I want to provide insight into the impact *Stone Butch Blues* has had on many self-identified butch and lesbian users on the app, and how it influences their content. Throughout my reflective process, I used the app to find active butch creators to speak to about their relationships to *Stone Butch Blues*, social media, and being visibly butch. As I only interact with the app as a user (meaning I, until now, have not posted a video), centering this article on two people who commit to being visible through posting content seems fitting. My

position as user rather than creator shapes how I think on this topic, and I am very grateful to Roman and Jen, two creators I interviewed for this article via questions I sent to them. They then answered in written form, meaning that all quotes used are directly pulled from their responses.² As mentioned, TikTok has a highly personalized algorithm, hence the content shown to me is specific to me, making my choice of Roman and Jen as interview partners a highly subjective one not untouched by the double-edged sword of the algorithm. Here, it is also helpful to note that TikTok allows for three separate access points to content, all influenced differently by this algorithm: You can either rely on the algorithm to show you suggested content on your For You page for you to scroll through, on your 'Friends' tab that only shows you the content of those you follow, or the search option by keyword or hashtag which was only recently rolled out for all users. In capturing a snapshot of TikTok's reception of *Stone Butch Blues*, I have attempted to provide a small metric through noting down hashtag usage. Hashtag usage is the most accessible of the many metrics required to measure trends on TikTok, with the others being hard to come by due to the app's rather elusive algorithm censorship guidelines and hidden data.³

This following part centers on Roman and Jen, as I draw upon quotes from their responses and describe themes in the content made by each creator. In doing so, I show how wonderfully unique and impactful butch identity is on TikTok, and how Leslie Feinberg, both as an activist and through *Stone Butch Blues*, has impacted butch content on the app. In painting a hopeful picture of this butch presence and sketching out a vision of the future of butch self-presentations, I want to be conscious of the issues that come with an online space as censored and precarious as TikTok, not overlooking how much tenacity and solidarity it takes to maintain a space in a hostile and queerphobic world.

Roman and Jen, as you will see, post two very different kinds of content. Roman is in their early twenties, close to my own age, and mostly posts outfit videos, showing off their carabiner, cropped shirts, and mullet. Jen represents the very small number of older butches making content on the app,⁴ posting daily content about her expe-

2 These interviews were conducted via an identical set of five questions that I sent to both Roman and Jen to provide written responses to in their own time. All quotes are direct quotes from these written answers and have not been edited by me.

3 A growing number of researchers are beginning to tackle this issue, using their research to openly call on TikTok to increase transparency and make algorithmic and user data accessible to the public. Recommended articles include but are not limited to: Stefanie Duguay's article "TikTok's Queer Potential: Identity, Methods, Movement" (2023) and Jessica Sage Rauchberg's "Shadowbanned: Queer, Trans, and Disabled Creator Responses to Algorithmic Oppression on TikTok" (2022).

4 With almost 1.6 billion monthly users worldwide, TikTok is the fifth most used social media platform behind Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Statista 2024). Only a good 15 % of users are aged 45 and over (Doofinder 2024).

riences with her grown-up kids and her role in helping younger butch and lesbian identifying people. Both openly identify as butch, forging spaces of belonging and recognition through videos that reference butchness and queer communities.

Roman (@psychdyke) first appeared on my For You page in February of 2023. The style of video Roman most frequently makes is very common on TikTok, sharing personal style inspiration and self-expression by filming themselves starting the recording, stepping back to pose on camera and show off the clothing and make-up they have chosen to wear that day (Dare 2023a). From classic menswear to goth clothing, to seasonal trends, many different people belonging to many different communities engage in this trend. The format transcends the simple function of showcasing clothing, with lifestyles and identities being communicated through the medium of fashion, creating belonging and allowing for viewers to desire as well as recognize the lifestyles pictured. This desire to relate and identify with well-dressed people through these videos is popular amongst queer users looking to build relations predicated in their queerness.⁵ Engaging with historic queer clothing trends builds a direct connection to non-virtual communities and affirms one's own desire as not singular, therefore being a powerful medium of inspiration (Zimmerman 2018).

5 As TikTok does not release the numbers of users marked as being interested in 'queer' content, it is difficult to provide concrete numbers. The number of likes, followers, and content of the comment sections of videos by creators such as Roman or Jen provide a good look into how many are interested. However, researchers have found methodological approaches that bridge that gap (e.g. Simpson, Hamann and Semaan 2022).

Fig. 1: Screenshot of Roman's (@psychdyke) TikTok video from 28 April 2023.



Roman's videos feature many style choices now commonly recognized as lesbian and butch styles: carabiners, sweater vests, forearm tattoos, eyebrow-slits, and combat boots (Tobin and Cundall 2024). My understanding is that through their self-presentation, a feeling of intimacy and kindness is established, in which potentials of queer aspiration and admiration can grow. The comment section under Roman's videos allows for a small look into what makes this trend so compelling: whether people relate, aspire, desire, or simply want to express their compliments, Roman created a space where queer creativity and butch aesthetic is championed. Roman regularly engages in conversations with other users that grapple with gender and masculinity within lesbian identity, extending the space into a type of forum. When I asked Roman whether their presence as a butch creator influenced how they carried themselves in non-virtual spaces they said the following:

The beauty of TikTok is that when I get home and post a video, even if it's just a silly video of a silly outfit, I have a whole community of people right in my phone who see me for me. In my experience, there isn't a lot of love for butches in the world, but I have found a lot of love for butches online. TikTok is one of the few places where I feel embraced, valued and like I belong. I try to carry that energy with me when facing the reality of being butch in the non-virtual world.

This captured the energy I felt interacting with Roman's page so well. In creating these spaces of admiration and desire we forge bonds, providing a type of community care through a simple "so fine!" or "wow". These interactions foster a community that praises butch identity outside of hegemonic beauty standards and opposes the queerphobic tone so prevalent on the internet today. Recognition and affirmation therefore take care of the queers we interact with, encouraging them to continue making content that feels authentic to them. Speaking on what it took to get to a spot where they felt attractive, Roman highlighted the feeling of dressing as they desired, saying:

I always felt ugly to my core. I felt as if the world could feel it too, people knew that I wasn't quite... 'right' as a feminine presenting person. Eventually I cut my hair, bought myself all the secondhand men's clothes I wanted, and began living authentically as myself. Suddenly, despite a lot of the world being more hostile than before, I felt attractive for the first time.

I believe that Roman's experience stands in continuation of the desires Jess articulates regarding their appearance in *Stone Butch Blues*. The two videos by Roman that I want to highlight here (shown through pictures) expand on this experience. The first video (Fig. 1) demonstrates their signature video style of showcasing their outfit. Video two (Fig. 2) is different from the usual format. Here, Roman is responding to a comment under a different video in which Roman had used the word lesbian in regards to themselves. One user had commented "lesbian...?" with another responding to that with "...you [Roman] have a mustache", doubling down on the first user's doubt about Roman being able to use 'lesbian' as a label while also having facial hair. Conversations around gender stereotypes and the intersection of trans identity and lesbianism are also commonplace on TikTok, similar to other social networks. In these discourses, preconceived notions often lead to comments like the one shown here. Roman's response is both playful and affirmative of a certain butch experience and is engaging mostly for others who may face these comments instead of giving any thought to the commenter's doubt that lesbians supposedly do not get to have facial hair (Dare 2023b).

Fig. 2: Screenshot of Roman's (@psychdyke) TikTok video from 28 April 2023.



Comments like this, I believe, make clear why the presence of people like Roman on apps such as TikTok really matter. Roman identifies both as butch and as trans, representing a group of butches that have used their presences on social media to reformulate their expressions of gender and the words they use to describe it. Being able to reference a historical tradition of transmasculine butchness is an essential part of this presentation, as Roman articulates themselves when referencing *Stone Butch Blues*. Moving beyond a binary understanding of gender and sexuality in a space as reactionary and open as TikTok frequently leads to ignorant or discriminatory reactions like the ones shown in the comments, as people fail to understand or willfully reject self-identification and fluidity. By choosing to visibly push against these reactions, Roman authentically stands against this widespread ignorance. Speaking on what this visibility brings with it, Roman said:

I think when you are visibly butch it guides your life in a way that you don't have control of. I see the way people take double glances at me in the bathroom, look at me like I'm a freak of nature, feel confused, feel angry all because of the way I look and carry myself. This can be hurtful of course, but ultimately it gives me strength. I've had to break myself down and rebuild myself into who I want to be. I feel such power in that and TikTok is one of the few places in the world that celebrates that identity with me. It is also somewhere I find comfort in seeing other butches. I get to listen to their opinions, the way they hold themselves, the way they style themselves and the way we celebrate with each other. Other butches inspire me and whilst I will never stop getting excited passing another butch on the street, butches on TikTok are far more accessible to those of us who are butch starved.

This invaluable mode of recognizing a version of yourself in others, especially in an individual-driven space as TikTok takes on an affirmative role. Desires and feelings previously concealed are stirred and encouraged to be shown openly, with butch rolemodels leading the way.

Jen (@cowboyjen) is another butch creator and rolemodel generously providing content for the 'butch-starved' masses. Jen has been sharing content about her life long before TikTok came around, having kept alive both a Tumblr account and a YouTube channel filled with stories of past relationships, identity, farm repairs, and family life for over ten years. Greeting her viewers with a "Happy lesbian good morning!" almost every day, Jen carries an infectious sense of joy towards life (Cowboyjen 2023). In her response to my questions, Jen described how her gender identity guides her content:

The world, and often the LGBT+ community, wants to tell butches we must fit particular criteria that actually have little or nothing to do with our butchness. We are expected to strike a balance between our masculinity and our lesbianism that is palatable to the greater world by fitting the stereotype that they think is butch. I want to show that we do not need to change ourselves to make others understand our butchness. I want all those young butches to find me and know that I, or other older butches, have been where they are now and we have made it to a steadier and more stable life. More precisely, I use clips of my real life to bring a sense of hope into the lives of young butches.

One of Jen's videos does just that: through letting us peek into her steady but turbulent farm life, characterized by family, dogs, and jobs, Jen gives viewers hope by providing material proof of a fulfilled life not refuted by her butchness. Imaginations of the future become tangible and in turn counter the queerphobic rhetoric of disgrace, shame, and loneliness being the only outcome of an openly queer life (Cover 2017).

Fig. 3: Screenshot of Jen's (@cowboyjen) TikTok video from 27 April 2023.



Reflecting on her use of TikTok and other platforms, and their conversational and communal nature, Jen said:

I take being a role model of sorts very seriously and I have learned what I can share and how to share it so as to be relatable. When I read a comment that says “I love seeing older butches like you because I know I can be like you someday” or “You give me hope for a happy future as a butch” I know my time on the internet is not wasted. My jobs are often a mix of interaction with people and solitary work. When I am alone working, I notice my mind is in constant motion, drafting the next one minute story to share. Being butch forms the way I relate to women of all kinds and that is one of the most lovely parts of being butch. I try to share parts of that feeling in stories and show that not only do I enjoy the way I interact with women but how much I appreciate the women in my life, especially those that acknowledge my butchness. I read all comments and answer all DMs. I pay attention to what other butches are saying and what younger butches are seeking and at-

tempt to respond in relatable terms to let them know they are not alone and I understand their struggles, from coming out to breakups to interactions with friends who don't quite get their butchness. And I want to share their joy when they have a first date or get that first super short hair. I celebrate with them as they embrace themselves.

In fostering a space of celebration, Jen and Roman create a place of safety for butches and queer people navigating the often hostile and difficult environments. Their accounts offer solace and confirmation that we are not immoral, unnatural, or sick, much like *Stone Butch Blues* and other cornerstones of queer media have confirmed for many decades of butches and queers.

Towards the end of this article, I want to briefly highlight what place Leslie Feinberg's work inhabits in the greater TikTok cosmos. The number of views on the hashtags I have chosen, are, as I mentioned, not enough evidence to reason what is and is not popular on the app. They are however very good starting points for assessing the prominence of a subject. For reference, hashtags such as #lesbian or #queer have view numbers in the billions, which should not take away from #stonebutchblues' impressive two million. The hashtag #lesliefeinberg has around 938.000 views, while #butch soars in at just over half a billion views. What the popularity of these tags show is that the conversations and interactions with this book are alive and active on the app. The cultural impact of *Stone Butch Blues* on butch culture is undeniable, and many creators, through their content, seek to extend on the visions Feinberg painted 30 years ago. In this spirit, I also spoke to Roman and Jen about whether they had read the book and what it meant to them, my question garnering two different, but powerful responses, both symbolic for butch culture(s) on the app. Jen had a difficult first experience with the book as a young butch. She told me:

The book reinforced my mistaken idea that butches were all one way and I was, most definitely, not that way. Of course, I eventually, mostly through older butch friends who I met and spoke with, shared stories with and learned to trust, came to realize that *Stone Butch Blues* was not supposed to represent *the* way to be butch but *one* way to exist as a butch. I reread it late, in my mid-thirties and understood the book to be about her life and her take on how she experiences the world as a stone butch. This is all not to say that she did not inspire me. The book absolutely planted the seed in my head that eventually grew into my desire to be publicly out and visible as a butch so others would not have to struggle with stereotypes and self-doubt as long as I did.

Roman on the other hand felt seen by Feinberg's protagonist Jess, explaining:

I finished reading *Stone Butch Blues* when I was working nightshift and I'll never forget it because I cried and cried and cried. I had never in my entire life felt I could

relate to a character, to a community and to the experience of growing up queer as I do with Jess. The way Feinberg discusses gender expression and identity helped me understand the way I was feeling and had felt my whole life in regard to my own gender. It made me feel like I was a part of something much larger than myself and for a long time, especially growing up, I have felt alone.

I believe that an understanding of being a part of a larger community, united in fighting against society's hostility to butch differences, unites both experiences. Roman and Jen's accounts, to me, have both very much succeeded in continuing the butch tradition of tending to those still coming to terms with and building their butchness, be it through sharing relatable, aspirational outfit videos or daily vlogs (video blogs) from the farm. They are what can make TikTok such a nurturing, powerful place for butchness, and provide us all with a vision of what butch visibility and self-representation can look like.

In understanding how getting suggested queer content through an algorithm on a quite accessible app is valuable for those seeking guidance, I also understand how the very same algorithm can lead to intense radicalization within various communities (Ozduzen, Ferenzci and Holmes 2023). TikTok as a company and administrative body should and is the subject of heavy criticism that I thoroughly support. I do not ever seek to honor the app, but rather the creators on it. There also exists a tendency, at least in German media, to frame TikTok as a very teenage focused app devoid of meaningful content for adult life, a framing that I feel passionate about pushing against and seek to complicate.

In considering the precarity and vulnerability of the content discussed in the face of censorship, data theft, and targeted campaigns of queerphobia, it becomes imperative to enable a culture of preserving the content and communities created by people like Roman and Jen. Here, projects such as queer community archives can, in collaboration with creators, safeguard TikTok videos outside of the app. This can then grow our understanding of the ever-evolving queer spaces around us, especially those that exist online. Much like *Stone Butch Blues* now serves as a point of cultural and historic recognition, the videos of butches like Roman and Jen should be able to serve as points of recognition for queers in the future. As expressed by both creators, Leslie Feinberg's work has laid invaluable foundations for these practices and was a guiding light in cherishing butchness throughout my work on this article. These spaces of solidarity and love are precious, with comment sections filled with appreciation and joy. In a comment under one of Roman's videos, user @ragingfemm3 captures this spirit most fittingly: "bless butches, bless trans masc lesbians, bless all lesbians with facial body hair – a femme who's in love with y'all". I hope to be a part of the effort that preserves them for generations to come. Should you ever find your way over to TikTok, I can only recommend seeking out Roman (@psychdyke) and Jen (@cowbojen), and the butch positivity they radiate.

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