Storiographies of #HealingJourney: Online Feminist Rhetorical Practices of Healing through Content Creation and Care

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Abstract: Social media users are co-opting the platform TikTok to generate discussions of trauma and to create healing spaces through content creation and platform interactions. In the following, I interview five content creators and document their experiences and motivations in using TikTok and developing healing-related content using the hashtag #HealingJourney. These content creators evoke a feminist ethic of care through specific feminist rhetorical strategies of reflection, community care, and disengagement. I present a framework for understanding feminist rhetorical healing on TikTok and the strategies that allow creators to negotiate their online identities, healing work, and use of technology.

A content creator sitting at a desk stares into the camera lens and reflects on their "day in the life of a grieving college student," narrating the difficulties of returning to college after losing their parent (college-girlkait, 2023). Another creator in a close-up headshot details their experiences of being abandoned by and reconnecting with their birth mother, noting the "most painful part" and how they are "now ready to share it" (Hunterton, 2023). Using video and photo slide shows, another creator documents their journey to sobriety (sober.hag2.0, 2024). One creator posts a video montage of ice skating "fails and bloopers," stating in the caption, "never thought I would recover from my ED [eating disorder] but I did it!!! 2.5 years since my last relapse #edrecovery, #HealingJourney" (the.littlebeast, 2023). These are examples of content shared on the popular social media platform TikTok and tagged #HealingJourney. #HealingJourney is often used across TikTok to label content that discusses creators' experiences with trauma, ranging from domestic violence, friendship breakups, grief, and loss. Though varied in message and mood, these videos offer a brief glimpse into the ways content creators leverage TikTok and content creation to write about trauma and healing.

Many TikTok users are co-opting the platform to generate discussions of trauma and to create healing spaces through content creation and platform interactions using the hashtag #HealingJourney. The exploration of healing practices and discourses online enables examinations of the connections and conversations forming on TikTok and considerations of users' orientations to cultural and social contexts. On TikTok, the outreach of knowledge sharing, community formation, and connection increases drastically, as individuals can meet others almost instantly online without the limitations of location (Rajabi, 2021). Therefore, understanding TikTok users' negotiations of their online identities and use of the platform allows us to consider the unique perspectives, stories, and content choices that effectively link creators. While feminist digital rhetoric, media, and communication scholarship have addressed communities gained from social media, it is still unclear how TikTok and specifically multimodal composition are used to navigate healing and identity between users and across platforms (Mendes et al., 2019; Musgrave et al., 2022). Therefore, I conducted an interview-based study of content creators and their online disclosures of identity, healing, and trauma. By

interviewing #HealingJourney content creators, I attempted to center the voices of content creators, conceptualizing online healing praxis through creators' lived experiences. I present a framework for understanding feminist rhetorical healing on TikTok and the strategies that allow creators to accomplish healing work online.

In what follows, in total I interviewed five content creators, outlining their lived experiences and motivations in using TikTok and developing healing-related content using the hashtag #HealingJourney. I argue that these content creators evoke a feminist ethic of healing through specific rhetorical strategies: reflection, community care, and disengagement, such as muting, blocking, or logging offline. Using these rhetorical strategies, content creators are knowledge producers for how healing can occur online and offline. By healing, I am refering to the ways content creators leverage platforms to work through trauma and to find solidarity online. First, I show how embodied healing practices manifest as creator reflections, framing reflection as a central element to online healing and feminist knowledge production. Second, I situate how content creators invite community care through their video production and comment sections, demonstrating the importance of online community to healing. Next, I point out contradictions and difficulties that these creators note emerge from this genre of content and from the platform itself, and how these creators enact feminist disengagement to protect their healing journeys and their online audiences. Lastly, I explore the possibilities and complications of online healing and healing communities and conclude with implications for future feminist rhetorical research.

Healing as a Rhetorical Practice

The field of feminist rhetorical scholarship has long investigated and developed rhetorical theory related to women's experiences of healing, with close attention to mental and physical health. For example, rhetoric and composition scholar Tamika L. Carey (2016) has extensively defined rhetorical healing as "the persuasive messages, performances, and curricula writers deploy to teach individuals in states of crisis or discontent how to undergo the types of transformation the writer considers essential to wellness" (p. 2). Carey's work explored Black women's relationships to and experiences with self-help and wellness campaigns. Similarly, feminist rhetoricians have explored the rhetorics of healing and care in health activism (Novotny & Opel, 2019) and health information-sharing forums and platforms (Singer, 2019). More recently, feminist rhetoric and composition scholars have identified social media platforms as key sites for rhetorical inquiry regarding expressions of healing and trauma. Megan Schoettler (2023) has identified rhetorics of "feminist affective resistance" on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and WordPress as forms of advocacy for survivors of sexual assault (1). Krista Speicher Sarraf (2023) examined the connections between trauma, memory, and the #MeToo hashtag through interviews with Twitter users. These feminist rhetorical works, among others, have called attention to the ways feminist rhetorical approaches are applied to a wide range of healing-related contexts and how users' relationship to and use of digital tools is changing how we use and view technology and healing. However, as feminist rhetorician Cathryn Molloy (2016) wrote, "Less is known about what becomes of written emotional disclosures once they are shared with publics and what happens to writers' social and intimate relationships once they begin to circulate their narratives for public consumption" (p. 135). To address what happens in relationships once healing narratives are made public, I use inter-

views to explore the rhetorical strategies employed by healing creators to tell their stories and interact with audiences.

To further understand healing as a concept and digital phenomenon, it is important to situate healing as a rhetorical practice. Embodied rhetorics is a productive framework for understanding healing as a rhetorical practice on TikTok. As Maureen Johnson et al. (2015) have posited, "*All bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function" (p. 39). This viewpoint is useful in considering the ways creators often blend music, movement, and narration via the embodied form as a means to express themselves and connect with audiences. Creators often use their bodies to write and tell their healing journeys through monologues, performances, and reenactments. For example, one #HealingJourney video features the creator looking directly into the camera, reflecting on their previous addiction struggles and the sobriety strategies they currently maintain (@sober.hag2.0, 2023). #HealingJourney creators physically write and record videos and often take embodied approaches to expressing their joy, anger, and sorrow through speech, text, or movement. These practices mediate and communicate content creators' experiences with audiences. In their discussion of solidarity movements for Iranian women on TikTok, scholars Heba Sigurdardottir, Majid Imani, and Zahra Edalati (2024) have argued that "the body can be applied *rhetorically* through staging visual narratives via the body conveying specific bodily experiences (such as pain and sorrow)" (p. 531). As noted by participants later, these embodied expressions are serious forms of healing work. Feminist rhetorician Melissa Stone (2019) has noted, "Through our embodied choices, we have the agency to create rhetorical action that can empower or disempower our bodies" (p. 677). Content makes space for creators to reflect on their experiences, share with others, and navigate their journeys through their own agentic choices of disclosure.

Feminist rhetorics of embodiment also consider the relationship between technology and bodies (Smith & Swartz, 2022). For example, as Lisa Melonçon (2013) has argued, "The instrumental nature of technology means that human bodies exist as tool-beings that use a variety of equipment, or technology, to move through each day" (p. 71). Furthermore, Stone (2019) has written, "We are inextricably linked to technologies through our bodies and lived practical experiences" (p. 678). Healing via content creation often mediates the daily interactions and relationship between healing and technology, challenging notions of how we use technology for our physical and mental health. Many of the #HealingJourney videos focus on practices of self-care and resemble vlog-style diaries or "DITL" (Day In The Life) videos, chronicling creators' everyday experiences on their "healing journeys" and processes. They entail an embodied rhetoric that generates innovative ways to understand healing, trauma, and technology. Understanding healing as an embodied rhetorical action better informs how content creators articulate healing online.

However, these embodied rhetorics are deeply tied to technological artifacts, such as TikTok videos, and we must also consider the rhetorical implications of these ties. Sarah Hallenbeck (2012) has argued, "Practices gain strength and traction as rhetorical actions through their articulations within the networks that support or subvert them" (p. 22). TikTok potentially serves as a space where creators/users/writers can build communities of support, increase civic engagement, and narrate their lived experiences. However, it is also a

space where trauma, racism, and oppression exist and are often perpetuated (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). For example, TikTok's algorithm has recently been accused of promoting and only circulating specific Western beauty ideals and aesthetics (Raiter et al., 2023). Algorithms, content moderation, and online interactions affect users of color differently across platforms, and these realities have a direct effect on creators who share healing-related content. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that platforms have inherent power dynamics that affect users from marginalized communities disproportionately. Being able to navigate digital spaces in a way that has a positive effect on users is a privilege. Additionally, TikTok is dependent on Internet access, is constantly changing in design, and is at risk of being banned in countries such as the United States (Executive Order, 2020). Feminist rhetorical studies of TikTok should consider how platform dynamics enact or subvert creators' rhetorical moves and understandings of healing and trauma.

In this article, I center an embodied perspective that considers women's experiences of their healing journeys, as they are lived and felt, as the basis for online rhetorical healing. As Malea Powell et al. (2014) have recognized, rhetoricians have a tendency to "fetishize texts," turning bodies into texts in a way that "disconnects them from their relationship to humans and to place/space" (Act 1, Scene 2). Additionally, I echo Johnson et al. (2015) and their call that "feminist rhetorical commitments…deman[d] an ethical reading of bodies and recognition of bodies as *people*—not objects" (p. 40). Therefore, my contribution engages with people rather than just their content. I also acknowledge Johnson et al's (2015) claim that as researchers, we incorporate "the meaning-making *our bodies* carry with and through *our scholarship*" (p. 40). Thus, I also reflexively consider my positionality as a researcher. I interview creators who actively encounter and traverse TikTok and discuss the impact of their embodied and rhetorical choices on the platform and their healing journeys. I further explore how #HealingJourney can become a rhetorical act that encourages knowledge creation through reflection, community care, and disengagement strategies.

Methodologies, Methods, and Participants

To attend to the ways #HealingJourney has been rhetorically mobilized for healing-related content and purposes, this study questions: 1) the impact of TikTok and content creation on content creators' healing processes; 2) what strategies content creators use to narrate their healing journeys and support their viewers while minimizing vicarious trauma to themselves and audiences; and 3) how #HealingJourney creators negotiate their identities and healing. In the following sections, I detail my methodological framework and note the procedures taken to interview #HealingJourney content creators.

For this study, I prioritize narrative storytelling using Black feminist and technofeminist methodologies and interview methods, demonstrating how interdisciplinary and bricolaged methodologies better inform intersectional research practices. I engage with technofeminist scholar Kristine L. Blair's (2018) "technofeminist storiographies," a framework for using women's stories as a method to reveal the ways we use and are used by technology. Blair defines feminist storiographies as "a re-writing and re-telling of women's technobiographies to disrupt and talk back to larger cultural narratives that have excluded their voices and contributions" (p. xii). This frame is particularly useful when investigating the ways content creators post healing-related content on TikTok, a platform with a documented history of exclusion and suppression (Biddle et al.,

2020). Furthermore, storytelling as a methodology also emerges from Black feminist praxis. Black feminist scholar Sarojini Nadar (2019) has argued that storytelling as a methodological practice gives research a "human face" (p. 20). Black feminist approaches to healing are critical to the survival of Black women and Black communities in a world where anti-Blackness continually proliferates. A Black feminist lens pushes me to consider how marginalized people are affected in digital spaces and how such factors influence their healing processes. These methodological lenses also consider how knowledge-building and community-forming practices play out for communities with members from different genders, races, sexualities, and other social categories. I use Black feminism and technofeminism to account for positionality and to study healing *through* race and identity.

These methodologies also push me to consider my positionality as a feminist rhetorician. For this study, I, a white academic woman, understand that many of the participants will experience barriers I will not, and many may not feel comfortable sharing their stories with me. Thus, I prioritize the Combahee River Collective's (1977) values of reflexivity: "As feminists, we do not want to mess over people in politics…We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice" (p. 218). For my work, this means continually considering and collaborating with others within and outside of my research fields. This also means paying close attention to my relationship with my participants, making an effort to connect and foster a relationship, and considering how my positionality affects those relationships (Haywood, 2022). These are points that I considered while writing my interview protocol, recruiting participants, and interviewing content creators.

Methods

I selected TikTok for this project because of the role its recommendation and ranking system plays in its user experience design and its impact on content, creators, and content circulation. TikTok has also been used as a space to share healing practices and experiences, and I argue that its unique affordances and algorithm both enable and complicate the ways content creators share and make sense of their healing journeys. TikTok is a video-sharing app and "one of the fastest-growing short video platforms in the world" (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872). Essentially, what makes TikTok so popular is its position as an entertainment app and its accessibility to content creation. The popularity of video content is not a new trend, and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram have features that allow users to livestream, create, or upload short videos (Anderson, 2020). However, TikTok's affordances allow users the opportunity for more creativity and flexibility with content creation. Users can select different filters, effects, background music, texts, images, and sounds for their videos. TikTok differs from other platforms in that users do not depend on followers to see or circulate content. TikTok's algorithm circulates content via the "For You Page" (FYP) and Discover Page.

One purpose of interviewing #HealingJourey creators—rather than using another method to learn from them—was to focus on their voices and first-hand perspectives. I selected #HealingJourney because it provides a substantial data sample and is representative of an ongoing, continual movement that aligns well with the tenets of healing work. I viewed videos tagged #HealingJourney and began recruiting their creators. I was

interested in content creators' stories and how they utilize TikTok's interface and affordances to create interactions through healing content. I use the term "content creator" or "creator" to reference users who generate platform content through various multimodal composition practices. My use of content creators differs from the term "influencer," which has also developed specific rhetorical boundaries (Maddox, 2024). Media scholar Sophie Bishop (2025) has defined influencers as "ostensibly ordinary platform users who accrue followings on social media via 'authentic' (yet stylised) coverage of their everyday lives" (p. 2110). Bishop further clarifies that influencers often market their content as "aspirational and commercially viable…and consistently upbeat" (p. 2111). In my preliminary viewing of the participants' videos tagged #HealingJourney, I found that they varied in tone, message, and production quality, often lacking a "stylized" delivery. The term influencer is also often linked to reach and monetization, and only one participant noted that they earn money from posting content. Due to the varied nature of posts, I felt that the term content creator most appropriately applied to participants.

Aligning with my methodology, I wanted to include a diverse range of voices to demonstrate how content creators navigate platforms. I initially wanted to prioritize recruiting and interviewing BIPOC content creators and LGBTQ+ creators, as these marginalized groups are most likely to be excluded from TikTok's algorithm and ranking system (Raiter et al., 2023). A developing concern by content creators of color and creators in the LGBTQ+ community on TikTok is that their content is not distributed by the algorithm due to racism and discrimination. In their study of Black content creators' experiences on TikTok, Harris et. al. (2023) identified shadowbanning as a "common challenge" Black content creators often face (p. 1). Shadowbanning occurs when a platform "hides" content from a user's audience without the user's knowledge. While TikTok has denied instances of shadowbanning, many Black content creators noticed a decrease in their video engagement via likes, comments, and shares when they posted content supporting the Black Lives Matter movement or any related #BLM hashtags (Harris et. al., 2023). Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) has also done extensive work in characterizing algorithms as active participants in racism that privilege whiteness. Additionally, scholars such as Jess Rauchberg (2025) have documented the ways that TikTok promotes "algorithmic ableism" or "disability-related discrimination as a platform logic that reifies long-standing western biases of who belongs in public life" (p. 1). As noted by participants later, platform visibility directly impacts their healing journeys and how they engage with their audiences. However, I ultimately had to expand my recruitment criteria to include a wider range of perspectives and backgrounds. By interviewing content creators about their experiences navigating TikTok, this project uses first-person accounts to address identity and accessibility.

Recruiting directly through TikTok proved to be challenging and required flexibility. I recruited interviewees by direct messaging via TikTok, and I emailed potential participants if they included an email address in their TikTok bio line. Specific recruitment criteria included that the content creator had to be at least eighteen years old, post from the United States, and post content using #HealingJourney at least once. TikTok's privacy settings restrict users' capabilities of direct messaging, so while the videos in this study were public, not all of the content creators' DMs and inboxes were publicly available to message. TikTok also restricts the number of direct messages users can receive from someone they are not following. Even though

I followed all of the accounts I attempted to recruit, they did not follow me, meaning I either could not send them messages or was restricted in the number of times I could send messages. Over a five-month period, I sent out inquiries to accounts that had email addresses posted in their bios and directly messaged the accounts that allowed messaging. I was able to successfully recruit five participants. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, and participants received the interview questions in advance of their scheduled interviews.

In designing and coordinating these interviews, I incorporated Black feminist scholars Patterson et al., (2016) theorization of Black feminist methodology in interview practices. They argue, "[B]lack feminist researchers commit to: making multiple truths visible, incorporating the interests and values of participants as a collective, and creating opportunities for self-definition and self-determination, all while emphasizing the importance of Black women's lived experiences" (p. 60). While participants received interview questions in advance, I began each Zoom session by positioning our time as a conversation and encouraged participants to decline to answer any question throughout the conversation or feel free to move our conversation in the direction of their choosing. My goal in sending interview questions in advance was to reduce any anxiety or suspicion participants could have had when agreeing to participate in academic research, as universities have a history of extracting and taking advantage of various communities and members for academic benefits and research (da Cruz, 2018).

I spent time at the beginning of each session learning more about each participant and building a relationship before asking questions. I also gave participants opportunities to ask me questions about myself, my healing journey, and the project. Methodologically, these practices allowed for a breakdown in some way of the rigid roles of interviewer and interviewee and created a flow between participants and me where we simultaneously learned from each other (Patterson et al., 2016). Participants consented to having their interviews recorded and transcribed; however, I acknowledge that the act of recording could negatively impact participants. The introduction of recording devices reinstates a power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, whether intentional or not. While I encouraged participants that they most definitely could decline to have their session recorded, some participants may have felt pressure to accept because of my initial role as the interviewer and someone in academia. I attempted to address this concern by continually checking in with participants and asking if they would like to continue our conversation, dialoging with them rather than simply asking questions, and anonymizing participants' names. I also resisted creating universal generalizations about wellness and healing practices and recognize that this content was captured at a particular time for each creator. Healing is a fluid process, and the experiences of creators documented here can and will likely change. Finally, I attempted to navigate inherent power dynamics within interviews by giving participants opportunities to respond to my analysis. After each interview, I continued correspondence with participants and sent them excerpts from my analysis. Participants were encouraged to send feedback on how I portrayed them and their experiences. Through this practice, participants were able to maintain levels of agency over their stories beyond TikTok and interviews. These challenges and concerns push me to consider how to improve how I prioritize care for research participants.

While the five content creators/participants share similar experiences related to their healing content and

platform interactions, they each have unique and specific positionalities and experiences. The purpose of this article is not to discuss their individualized trauma or traumatic experiences, nor is it to make broad assumptions about healing, healing-related content, or platform interactions about marginalized or underrepresented communities. Rather, I attempt to uplift their stories to recognize the critical labor of content creation and how their different positionalities mediate their experiences on TikTok in meaningful and important ways. Table 1 includes participants' demographics and pseudonyms, including in their own words and capitalization, how they identify their race and gender. In Table 2, I include positionality statements written by each participant because I recognize the role that individual positionalities play in creating environments of care. When initially discussing positionality with participants, I read aloud and sent my own positionality statement, which was written in the third person, to them via the chat feature on Zoom. Participants were able to write out their positionality statements and send them to me using the Zoom chat feature during our interview. Including the ways that participants identify and describe themselves humanizes participants and allows for their voices to be more fully represented.

Table 1. Participant Demographics, including race and gender

Pseudonym	Race	Gender
Danielle	Filipino, Black	female
Mary	Black	Woman
Jodie	white	Queer woman
Nicole	African American	Female
Chloe	white	Female

Table 2. Participant Positionality Statements

Pseudonym	Positionality Statement
Danielle	Identifies as a Filipino and Black first-generation immigrant. Her mother was born in the Philippines and her father is American. She was raised in a small town near western central North Carolina, close to the Appalachians. She is the oldest sibling also, and feels like that is the embodiment of her content.
Mary	Identifies as an African American single mom of two from South Jersey. She was raised in a two-parent household, and she has her MSN. Growing up watching YouTube videos, she feels a deep connection to TikTok and the ability to create content that connects with others.
Jodie	Identifies as a white, queer woman from rural Iowa. She was raised by her father in a single-parent household, noting her mother lost custody of her when she was a child. She wants readers to know that she is a recovering addict and creates content pertaining to recovery and mental health.
Nicole	Identifies as an African American woman originally from the East Coast who has lived many places and had many different experiences with different groups of people. She notes this has led her to her mission, purpose and passion to help others through empowerment, creative inspiration, and motivation.

Pseudonym	Positionality Statement
Chloe	Identifies as a white woman who was raised by her dad in a single-parent household. She is from Texas and is an internet personality. She is a full-time digital content creator and enjoys sharing her personal mental health, relationship, and health journeys.

Findings and Discussion: Rhetorical Practices of Healing and Care

Across my interviews, content creators articulated their motivations for posting healing-related content and how their content creation impacts their healing processes. In the following analysis, I focus on three main rhetorical techniques related to my research questions of how healing occurs online and how creators mitigate discussions of trauma for themselves and their viewers. I also explain that notions of healing apply differently to different people based on factors such as race, gender, (dis)ability, class, and their intersections, and these factors affect the rhetorical strategies content creators utilize.

To better understand TikTok as a healing space, I begin with how these creators each uniquely perceive the platform as a space for creativity, connection, and labor. In this section, I describe responses to the guiding question: How would you define your relationship with TikTok and content creation? Almost all of the participants described their experience on TikTok as positive but complicated. Danielle notes the complex relationship with posting content online on a public platform: "You know, sometimes I'm just like, okay, I feel good about this video. Let me just post it. It's very surprising when you read the comments about how many people have not only watched your video but can relate… So just being able to really hear from different people is just very eye-opening." Nicole describes TikTok as an "instrumental tool" for her work and passions: "It really has been an amazing instrumental tool in reaching the very specific groups of people I desire to help and who feel called to my mission and vision. I would describe it in short as very fluid, effective, and efficient." Similarly, Chloe describes TikTok as "a wonderful platform to not only connect with others but to share my journey, and it most of the time is a positive place." However, not all participants described their interactions as positive.

A common theme that emerged was the challenge of navigating popularity and online followings. For example, Mary notes that her experience changed when she reached a level of popularity on the platform: "I'll speak for when I was creating healing content. I had maybe about 5,000 followers. I didn't really have much of an issue. Currently, as a, I guess, bigger creator, I have 100,000 followers. The experience is a little bit different. You meet a lot more negativity." Similarly, Jodie also notes, "All around, it's been good. It is kind of a hard app to navigate, and it is hard to make content that flows and, I don't know, is aesthetically pleasing. That's difficult. It's a lot harder than it looks. So that's probably where I struggle the most in my experience." While the participants described their overall experience as positive, their comments serve as reminders that they are real people feeling and experiencing life in real time. Their comments also note the risk they take in putting themselves and their stories in digital and public spaces. I provide detailed examples of these risks later. Situating these creators' perceptions of the platform better informs the gravity of their content and choice to share their stories through #HealingJourney. Their perceptions of the platform also account for

the ways content creators from marginalized communities or "vulnerable rhetors" navigate their identities and employ resistance techniques to mediate online experiences (Molloy, 2016, p. 2). My conversations with #HealingJourney content creators describe how they engage with healing online and offline. I reflect here on the emerging rhetorical strategies from my study that push our understanding of how healing can occur through reflection, community building, and online disengagement.

Rhetorical Reflections

While each creator's content differs in topic, all note they began posting healing-related content for themselves as a form of reflection and not for a public audience. For example, Mary discussed how she initially viewed her profile as a type of digital journal: "When I was first posting healing content, I was actually talking to myself. So, it was geared toward advice, but it was advice that I needed to hear. I connect in that way, just because I still feel like it's stuff that I need to hear as a person." Similarly, Chloe describes using #HealingJourney as a "journal for [her]self." She notes, "I want to be able to look back at that content and see how far I have come in my healing process." Nicole sees #HealingJourney as an inspiration for her own healing: "The hashtag #HealingJourney inspires me to speak about the concepts and ideas that I needed to hear when I was on certain parts of my journey." For Jodie, #HealingJourney is a way for her to mark milestones in her sobriety and recovery journey by making TikTok playlists. Creating and posting healing-related videos is a form of catharsis and reflection for these creators.

Critical reflection has often been identified as a key feminist rhetorical practice. bell hooks (1994) has posited, "Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it usually forms the base of our theory-making" (p. 70). Creators within this study initially utilized their content as a means to do self-reflective healing work. In their rhetorical deliveries, these creators utilize TikTok's affordances, whether it is creating playlists like Jodie, filming emotionally expressive monologues like Chloe, or using a hashtag to chronicle their personal healing journeys. They document, record, and publish moments and stories that mean something to them, regardless of public interaction initially. These creators are making embodied and agentic choices that allow them to express themselves in the manner/content of their choice.

Participants also use first-person asynchronous reflections to form connections grounded in sharing emotions. This aspect of their compositions aligns with what Digital Black feminist scholar Catherine Knight Steele (2021) has cited as an "appreciation of Black feminist principles for dialogue, such as personal ways of knowing, validation of emotion, personal accountability, and a preference for narrative and dialogue over debate" (p. 49). For instance, Chloe described how her content is a vlog space to share her experiences of being raised by a single parent and feeling "abandoned by [her] birth mother." Steele has also reminded us that Black feminists have often used blogging as an avenue to create alternate narratives, express themselves, and create community through "long-form blogging" on sites like "Twitter and Instagram" (p. 79). I argue that this activity is also occurring on TikTok. These creators transform content creation into a specific outlet for their personal storytelling that directly intersects with their healing.

Furthermore, I found that participants created messages and meaning about healing as a process, as well

as a state of being, inserting an educational bent to their content. For example, Jodie feels a level of responsibility for her following, which determines how she organizes her TikTok posts: "I mostly post content about being in recovery and healing from abuse. That's really where my healing journey content comes in. I would use hashtag healing journey if I made content related to how I was doing in recovery outside of just the addiction, or how I was healing from abuse or what I was doing to get my life back." Jodie often shares content labeled "what I wish I would have known" about healing and recovery. In this kind of content, she shares advice and techniques she has learned throughout her sobriety. Jodie shares her personal experiences to potentially educate viewers. Thus, engaging with reflection is a feminist action that has an immense impact on the self and others. As Audre Lorde (2020) has noted, "As they become known to us and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas" (p. 5). Creators, like Jodie, exemplify the power of examining and recording their emotions and feelings as a means to radically heal and share knowledge with others. Through short-form multimodal composition, these creators take on roles as knowledge producers through their self-reflections. In the next section, I discuss community building and the rhetorical strategies creators use.

Community Care

Participants also identified how creating content encourages community and connections with other TikTok creators and users. Specifically, they cite the nature of healing content as being one of the biggest influences on digital and community relationships. Nicole stated, "I have fallen in love with using TikTok as a content creator because it allows you to connect with so many people organically and easily." Jodie similarly noted the power and connections that are formed by posting healing-related content: "It's really cool when people react with [my] content because you get to build a community. That's kind of how I got my platform, and a lot of people are there…It's more of a safer space where people are only viewing it if they're trying to heal or are healing." All of the creators shared their experiences posting healing-related content, noting how it requires a level of vulnerability that makes healing content real and relatable for many users. Nicole posited, "Healing content as a whole on the platform builds stronger connections, experiences, and furthers love amongst each other. It reminds us as people that we are not alone, and not the only one going through certain situations." As revealed by participants, the practice of content creation and the enjoyment of connecting with others are valuable to creators and reasons to post healing-related content. Community building motivates participation on the platform and healing journeys.

One of the ways communities are formed on TikTok is within the comment section of videos. Social media, and particularly affordances such as comments, enable users to communicate and share with others "they would not have met otherwise" and "provide capacity to create networks…from many different backgrounds and contexts in ways that physical gatherings cannot" (Nesbitt, 2008, p. 50; Carlson, 2019, p. 20). Feminist rhetorical practices of healing occur in TikTok comment sections. Danielle discussed how she feels when she sees someone positively interacting with her content: "It's just very eye-opening because it takes a lot for you to comment on someone's content, right? And then to come to something so intimate and so personal and say, 'Hey, this was my experience or this is how I felt,' and everyone can see it. I think it's amazing,

actually. I love seeing the connections that people are forming." As Kristi McDuffie and Melissa Ames (2021) have argued, sharing or responding to content promotes and circulates emotion as much if not more than the original content (p. 7). As these content creators have pointed out, many users approach and respond to healing-related content from a place of empathy and support. For example, Chloe describes the healing content she posts and responds to as "very authentic and raw." She notes, "Usually [TikTok] is geared toward funny or comical stuff, and whenever I started going through a lot, I decided to share the side of me that a lot of people don't get to see on the internet...Then I got to connect with other people who were experiencing things in their life that are normally not shared online." In her own words, Chloe idealizes the value of healing content and communities. On one level, sharing trauma and healing journeys are not "normally" done online, as there are still significant cultural stigmas related to trauma and mental health (Rajabi, 2021). Therefore, the act of posting healing-related content is a subversion of cultural norms regarding healing and trauma. As expressed by many of the participants, seeing others' healing journeys can be inspiring and comforting to both creators and users. Creators and users often do not feel as isolated or alone and can relate and connect with #HealingJourney posts because they feel a level of validation in their experiences.

These creators also take notice of other content creators and commenters and learn from their content, further enacting feminist practices of knowledge production (hooks, 1994). For example, Danielle describes how viewing comments on her posts expanded her perspective on her trauma and healing. Danielle notes that her healing content is often about her experiences being the eldest daughter and the weight of her responsibilities as the daughter of an immigrant parent: "I kind of felt like I was a co-parent, especially when my dad was in the military. It was literally just me and my mom, and my mom didn't speak English. I would go to school and teach whatever I learned to my Mom and then teach my siblings." Danielle beautifully summarizes how content creation can powerfully expand perspectives:

> When I'm reading my comments, I'm looking at the perspective as like the oldest sibling, immigrant family, small town. Then, I started reading comments from people who are younger siblings in immigrant families. I was like, 'oh man, like I didn't even think about the perspectives of the youngest kid, right?' I've seen some TikToks like, 'let's everyone share what our oldest sibling made us do?' And I was like 'Oh my gosh, do my siblings have trauma from me?' Like, I'm playing everything back in my head. So it's just interesting, to get different perspectives on trauma, because you can see it as I see it, like as the oldest sibling, but then you've got trauma from the youngest sibling, and the mother, and the middle child.

Danielle also articulates how positionalities affect content creation and perception. This also exemplifies how content creation can inherently urge viewers to reflect on their own life experiences.

However, while sharing healing-related content is integral for creating online healing communities, there are certain strategies participants noted they implement to maintain these communities. Content creators posting #HealingJourney often discuss the steps they have taken or are taking for their overall wellness, but also situate many of the triggers, such as breakups, grief, and abuse, that catalyzed their healing journeys. Many participants stated that they carefully consider the details of their stories before posting as a means to circumvent possible triggers for their viewers. Jodie, for example, is mindful of TikTok's community guidelines when posting about her trauma. Other creators, like Nicole, use specific rhetorical writing strategies

like "algospeak," or "abbreviating, misspelling, or substituting specific words" to avoid triggering audiences or TikTok's content moderation system (Steen et al., 2023). For example, she will say or write the letters "SA" as an abbreviation of "sexual abuse." Nicole feels that abbreviations are "less harsh" for audiences. Many scholars have pointed to how TikTok users subvert guidelines by using "algospeak" but Nicole's use redirects "algospeak" as a type of care communication for her audience. It's an intentional choice to express her trauma in her own words, but she carefully considers the reactions and lived experiences of her followers.

Danielle, though, notes the limitations of her authority in how her content is perceived: "My content can be sad, and you can sometimes tell when they [viewers] have not searched for help or done the internal work. I don't know if posting videos helps, but sometimes it does make me sad because what else can I say?" Online healing communities benefit creators and audiences but are also limited, as they are tied to platform rules and politics. These limitations serve as a reminder that not all content creators are licensed health professionals or feel qualified to take on more engagement with audiences outside of posting content. Learning directly from #HealingJourney creators and community members highlights the possibilities of TikTok as a space for users to engage and empathize with others and their trauma through relationships cultivated strictly online. Speaking directly with content creators also demonstrates how sharing traumatic experiences online is a legitimate form of care communication, but also has consequences and limitations for community building, as noted by participants.

Feminist Disengagement

Even though participants identified #HealingJourney content as a critical avenue in their healing processes and online communities, they also noted the necessity of logging offline to remove toxic online pressures. Participants discussed how their online interactions also require careful negotiation of their mental and physical health, time, and energy, resulting in many having to step away from the platform. For many, part of their healing process is engaging in what Sara Ahmed (2017) has defined as "feminist refusal," which is often brought on by feminist "snaps," or a realization/breakaway from society's expectations and norms (p. 187). As noted by participants below, sometimes it is needed to break away from followers, and these "snaps" are important moves in their healing and daily living. For example, for Mary, feminist disengagement means "reaching out to core relationships" offline and getting their opinion on the comment or issue. She notes, "I would never want to step on anybody in a way that they're like, whoa, that was too much. So I definitely always consult, and then I come back to the point of like, I'm a good person." Throughout our conversation, Danielle emphasized repeatedly that she posts "what makes her happy," and this means she creates videos about wide-ranging topics from healing to her daily activities. She mentioned a certain pressure from her followers to post certain types of content, like healing-related posts, and how she experiences some pushback when she does not. In response to this pushback, Danielle added that she now refuses to allow herself to be defined or boxed in by comments or content: "For me, I do things that make me happy. I'm not here to make everyone happy because you can't make everyone happy. I want to control my platform because I want to be able to unplug." Similarly, Jodie talked through having to take a four-month break from the platform: "I just came back to TikTok like a couple of weeks ago, because I didn't want to share any more about my life. It was

like people were finding my other social videos, they were in my DMs, and it got to be just really hard to kind of take it all." Mary, Danielle, and Jodi experienced what Ahmed (2017) refered to as a "snap" brought on by frequent negative reception or responses to their content. While "snapping" and disengaging are often perceived as negative, Ahmed (2017) has reminded us that "snapping might matter because a bond can be what gets in the way of living a life" (p. 193). TikTok is a new space for potential "snaps," as exemplified by these creators. These "snaps" are critical feminist and rhetorical actions that help creators continue living their lives offline. Ultimately, creators curate different feminist tactics for working through online hate, often turning to communities offline, "snapping," or enacting muting or blocking practices that help reduce negative experiences and maintain their healing journeys.

In addition to positivity, it was clear through these conversations, that Black content creators experience an increased level of hate and online racism, often forcing them to negotiate their identities in a way that differs from the other participants. For example, Mary defines her relationship with posting as "walking a tightrope." She discussed how, as she has increased in followers, she also experienced more negativity and racism online:

> Now that I have a bigger follower rate, about 100,000 followers, you meet a lot of people who don't see your perspective on things that you're talking about. Therefore, the interaction is a little bit more sour because I feel like people have disconnected with the fact that they're talking to a real person because there's a layer of the screen between us. If I say something, they're like, you're ugly, you know, like weird and racist stuff.

Black women and women of color are more likely to experience hate and negativity online and that directly impacts mental, physical, and healing wellness (Maragh-Lloyd, 2024). Mary detailed the mental trauma that online hate can cause:

> So half of me is like I don't care. But then the other half of me does care because I still consider myself newly healed, whatever that means, right? So, a lot of me still will get negativity and kind of take it personally and then it makes me reevaluate who I am as a person and reevaluate what I post and reevaluate what I said. It's difficult because again, I'm in this new arena of self-assuredness. So it's a tightrope walk right now that I hope to be more comfortable with. But as I grow, I'm not sure if it'll get worse.

Creators from different positionalities do experience pushback and online hate differently across the platform. For instance, Chloe stated that she had not experienced explicit hate like name-calling or critiques about her personal appearance, but noted, "There's always going to be someone who has a different opinion than what you're putting out." Rhetorical technofeminist scholars Kaitlin Clinnin and Katie Manthey (2019) have argued that users "experience technology differently because of their embodied identities" (p. 35). They call for rhetorical scholars to "consider how different bodies are able to produce different messages as well as how messages are received by differently embodied individuals" (p. 35). While all of the creators identified examples of negative pushback online, there are discrepancies in the intensity of online hate that each experiences, which directly impacts their disengagement strategies.

These conversations also give valuable insights into the emotional and physical labor of content creation

and the expectations audiences have for creators. For example, Danielle discussed the difficulties of continually posting healing-related content:

> When I hit a million views on my healing videos, I think 'like, do people want more of this?' At the same time, I don't know if I can mentally and emotionally keep it up. Sometimes it doesn't feel good to continue posting about my trauma because I kind of just want to move on. I've learned what I need to learn and then like, let us move on. Sometimes I want to say to people 'this [trauma] doesn't make us, this doesn't keep us and I don't want to still stay there.

Megan Schoettler (2023) has reminded us, "While there can be pressures for feminists…to always be 'on,' feminist theory has reminded us that sometimes we need to step away" (p. 12). Ahmed also notec the importance of having "permission notes to step back when it is too much," arguing, "The mere fact of having them there, as way to give yourself permission to exit a situation, can make the situation more bearable. You can leave; you can grieve" (2020, p. 244). Creators within this study demonstrate how important stepping away can be for maintaining their mental health and healing.

As Danielle and Mary remarked, being a content creator also comes with additional responsibilities and management that require extensive amounts of time and energy. One of these responsibilities is refereeing negative comments from other users. In our conversation, Danielle told an anecdote about seeing two users "fight" in the comments. She described feeling an added pressure to "say something," but questioned if that was her responsibility as the original creator. She mentioned she is still unsure about the rules of engagement with comments, but focuses more now on prioritizing her peace, even if this means turning off her notifications or comments. Danielle implements feminist disengagement strategies by muting comments as a means to create healthier digital environments that better support her healing journey. Similarly, Mary grapples with the notions of being chronically online and available, but also balancing her offline life. She told a story about traveling for her birthday and unplugging from TikTok to celebrate, but felt like there was a "job or school project" that she was not doing or forgetting to do. She stated people often tag her in their posts wanting her input and opinion, so she feels she has to constantly be available:

> I am chronically online to get information, so that I can talk and post and there's always somebody who's posted before me. I'm like, I have no idea how they do it because it's like, bro, I had to go to bed. So, how did you pump out three videos, and two responses while I was sleeping and I'm back online at 6:00 a.m? Like as soon as I open my eyes, which is not healthy at all. I definitely need to learn how to manage that because that's not sustainable. I can't be online all the time. I have a full-time job. I have two children. I have a part-time job. So like, it's just not, it's not feasible.

Mary noted she now focuses on managing her time by logging off and taking intentional social media breaks. Mary's perspective is critical for understanding how different positionalities affect content creation and reception. Chloe pointed out that her pressure comes more from developing content that audiences feel relatable to, rather than finding the time to be online. As these creators have made clear, content creation is often more than a hobby, but a responsibility that comes with various roles, often including creator, moderator, and entrepreneur. However, incorporating feminist disengagement practices is a method for creating agency in creators' online personas. Understanding these struggles and strategies generates "feminist hope" for creating

safer and healthier online environments where creators can freely express themselves (Ahmed, 2017, p. 210).

#HealingJourney Content Impact as an Embodied Healing Practice

As TikTok, its algorithm, and multimodal composition become more embedded in our communicative practices and online engagement, it is vital to learn more from the very people who drive the platform: content creators. Understanding their daily experiences better informs our interpretations of online rhetoric, writing, and communication, especially as it pertains to healing and trauma. I interviewed five content creators to better learn from their everyday experiences and platform interactions. I view the content creators in this study as knowledge producers, centering their experiences as expertise. I take up Constance Haywood's (2022) theorization that a feminist research ethic brings in "voices and thoughts of community members across non-academic and academic spaces" (p. 34). Therefore, the data herein illustrate a continued need for research that prioritizes the voices, reflexivity, labor, and actual experiences of people who directly engage with digital communities and algorithmic systems. Prioritizing such voices is especially important when algorithms have a distinct history of oppressing and suppressing certain marginalized groups and identities (Benjamin, 2019).

My conversations with participants helped to identify recurring feminist rhetorical healing strategies, including reflection, community care, and disengagement practices. Content creators often began posting healing-related content as a means to reflect and document their healing processes. The affordances of TikTok provided these content creators, across varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages, the opportunity to rhetorically engage with their healing journeys on their own terms. They chose to share their traumas, stories, and identities as a cathartic outlet, often dialoging in their comment sections with other users. Healing content proved to be both beneficial and informative for participants, expanding many participants' perspectives on trauma and healing. Through the use of #HealingJourney, creators connected with other users on healing journeys, forming communities through affective messaging. Even though creators are not physically meeting and interacting with other users offline, they create a community online based on embodied empathy and vulnerability. Utilizing TikTok and leveraging the nuances of their trauma, these women have cultivated powerful healing spaces.

However, race and positionality have a direct effect on the ways content creators disclose their healing journeys and navigate the platform. Engaging with Black feminist theories and methodologies pushes feminist rhetoricians to be mindful of the racialized experiences of our participants. As noted by Mary, she experiences various instances of racism that directly impact the online expression of her healing processes. Therefore, Mary's actions of logging off TikTok and reconnecting with support systems can be seen as a disengagement strategy and also an important self-protection measures. Disengagement, in this way, aligns with what Raven Simone Maragh-Lloyd (2024) has noted as a form of self-care Black women enact while online, positing, "filtering who is allowed in" is a form of care, protection, and resistance (p. 85). It is important for readers to understand that racism impacts the daily experiences of content creators of color and that the ways content creators utilize platforms are not universal. As I have demonstrated, incorporating intersectional methodologies better accounts for how positionality influences the rhetorical choices of content creators.

Similarly, social media users and content creators can learn from Mary about various ways to self-protect online and reconnect following racist encounters.

In addition to posting content, within these digital communities, content creators often feel like they have additional responsibilities, including recognizing those who view their content and profiles and moderating their comment sections. There is a level of accessibility that content creators give to their audiences that is hard to define and maintain boundaries. Participants noted that they feel certain expectations from their followers to continually produce content related to their trauma. Many participants noted they often feel "stuck" in their healing journeys because their audiences expect them to continually post and relive their trauma online. Additionally, the participants in this study are not trained healing or trauma professionals. These creators share healing practices they personally have implemented and often feel the need to give advice in their comment sections. However, there are risks to posting content related to healing by folks who are not licensed professionals. On one hand, this content provides some avenue of support for folks who may not have access to health, healing, and wellness professionals, but this content is also not fact-checked or tailored to each viewer, which exemplifies how social media cannot be the only source of healing and community for people.

Furthermore, Steele (2021) has identified the complications of taking complex ideas, like healing in this instance, and creating short-form content packaged for particular audiences and algorithms: "It is incredibly challenging to package nuanced and contextually rich content into a short video and produce immediate high arousal" (p. 135). Mary spoke to this issue, highlighting the issues with posting healing-related content on a platform like TikTok that is constantly changing: "Even from Covid, the app is completely different. People used to point at things and do challenges, and now it's more like talking. It used to be skits, but it's less of that, so I don't know the future of healing on TikTok, and I don't know the future of TikTok." Alternatively, as Danielle discussed, viewing content is a way to learn from others and different perspectives and positionalities. As creators build strategies of engagement and disengagement, they enact feminist rhetorical strategies that are critical to their healing journeys. While healing via content creation and engagement is not completely sustainable, as the participants pointed out, #HealingJourney content provides an entry point to critical and self-reflective work that many creators and users long to do.

Implications for Future Research

In this article, I have documented healing as a rhetorical practice online and the tactics creators implement to share and enact their healing journeys. Future research on the strategies of feminist rhetorical healing could question how platform monetization affects rhetorical healing. As TikTok offers opportunities for monetization through ads, sponsorships, and the Creator Fund, some users may feel pushed to have public accounts. In *Digital Black Feminism*, Steele (2021) warned about the selling and packaging of Black feminism online, and her viewpoints can also apply to healing-related content: "The commodification process provides superficial access to complex theories culminating in a more watered-down product palatable to a broader audience" (p. 134). As many creators leverage their popularity to tell their stories, offer advice, and promote services or products, they also create a lens to view healing as a product. Interviews with content creators

who are a part of the Creator Fund and those who are not would be beneficial in identifying rhetorical moves for monetization. Of my study participants, only Chloe was a member of the Creator Fund. Jodie, though, noted, "I haven't accepted a brand deal from anyone. I've been offered hundreds, but I haven't found a brand that I'm willing to put my channel on the line for." Future rhetorical research can also account for creators' agentic choice to participate in the Creator Fund. Throughout this article, I have argued that content creation introduces practices of healing through digital media labor and critical media consumption. Future research should also document the complexities of healing discourse when paired with practices for monetization, popularity, and visibility.

As Zeynep Tufekci (2014) has argued, sampling data from social media to note human activity often has limitations and challenges. A limitation of this study is the focus on only one hashtag relating to healing; therefore, the study presents a partial view of healing discussions on TikTok. I present the perspectives of five content creators, which also limits the number of voices speaking about healing journeys. Additional research can also focus on TikTok as a potential source of wellness and care, as many users are already posting techniques to promote healing. Seeking care from professionals is not always accessible, affordable, or an option for all people. TikTok could potentially be a space where users can build communities of information and practice sharing to help users on their healing journeys. Further research should focus on the impacts of knowledge and practice sharing on TikTok to help users who may not be able to access care from wellness professionals.

Biography

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