TikTok as a Stage: Performing Rural #farmqueer Utopias on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine how an under-studied group in HCI, rural queer farmers, use the social media platform TikTok to perform rural queer utopias. Queer utopia, coined by queer theorist Jose Muñoz, is a way of using queer aesthetics and performance to expose heterosexual norms and imagine worlds of hopeful queer alternatives. Through close reading and interpretation of TikTok, we examine content made by rural queer farmers on TikTok and ask how it enacts queer utopias. We show these farmers perform queer identity in rural farming spaces which subverts stereotypes of both who is queer and who can farm, and their videos also enact queer political utopias by connecting farming to social justice and radical sustainability. We explore how TikTok offers a sociotechnical stage where queer rural farmers can perform queer utopias in ways that celebrate creative and generative uses of platforms by queer folks.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Human Computer Interaction (HCI)**; • **HCI theory, concepts and models**;

KEYWORDS

Queer Utopia, TikTok, Queer Farmers, Rural HCI, Rural Queerness

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1 INTRODUCTION

In all honesty, this paper was inspired by a hinge date. The first author (A1) went on a date with a queer-identifying woman they met online, and partway through the conversation – which also included talking about learning to fly fish together and radical Mennonite friend groups – the woman A1 was on a date with started talking about the TikTok videos that they made about their agroforestry work and running a tractor to clear land on their farm in rural Pennsylvania. Now, A1's ears perked up, as they have a history of doing small farm research. They thought, if this woman is queer, and posting videos on TikTok of her farm, surely others were too. Interestingly, this woman also had a very progressive view of what she called a farm – she did own a plot of land, but it was mostly wild, and untamed, and she only planted food on a very small portion of the farm (A1 has since visited the farm, it is quite a magical place). However, she still called it a farm, and espoused unique relations to the land, she knew the name of every plant and had a long-term vision of this farm being an ecofeminist art retreat. This vision of farming had an edge of utopia, this farm was enmeshed in a politics of land relations and ecofeminism, grounded in queer identity. What other ideals of farming and queerness might exist? Were they being shared on TikTok? We went to take a look and report on the findings in the following. Because the woman on the date doesn't openly identify as a queer farmer on TikTok, we didn't include them in our data, but this is where the idea for this paper came from.

By studying rural queer farmers and how they use and experience TikTok to share queer experiences of farming, this research adds to calls in the HCI community to represent and understand computing in rural communities, especially as they extend to rural LGBTQ+ communities [28, 30, 51]. Rural queerness is studied, yes, but it, by nature, is less normative than queer identities that are often seen as metro-normative [34]. However, rural queerness is a burgeoning field of study in the social sciences and humanities [26, 34, 39, 53, 63] as well as HCI [28, 30, 51] where authors suggest rural queerness critiques normative queer identity [26] and builds rural queer temporalities [63], and can have roots in specific place-cultures like Appalachia [16], where researchers observe how rural Appalachian pagans conduct queer future worlding practices [58]. In addition, recent sociological research focused on rural communities explores the ways that queer farmers navigate visibility and community building in traditionally straight spaces of agriculture which are operated using nuclear families [36, 44]. Rural studies of queer folks and queer farming explore how queer folks build their own takes on farming, navigate straight spaces, and enact politics and worlding through agriculture.

However, TikTok is a way to see a broad spectrum and aggregation of rural queer farming practices. Through interpreting and analyzing content produced by queer farmers on TikTok using hashtags as guideposts to identify rural queer farmers, we ask how queer farmers use TikTok to perform *queer utopias of farming*. Much like the queer farmer A1 went on a date with, through looking at an array of TikTok videos, we observe how TikTok is a place where rural queer identity can be discovered, shared, and publicized across distances (a problem with rurality and queerness, is it can be isolating!). Queerness as a positionality is inherently countering a

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kind of normativity orientation to sexuality or gender – and these politics often become part of how one enacts practices, such as farming. This enacting, is a kind of utopia in action, as theorized by Jose Esteban Muñoz [54]. The critical aspects of queer utopia that we draw upon are the way that is *performed* by everyday queer folks, like those farmers on TikTok (and borrowing from drag, and other queer performance, the performative aspect often subverts expectations of gender and sexuality), queer utopia it sees queer identity as an open-ended horizon of possibility (we see rurality and farming as extending normative queer identities), and queer utopia responds to histories of oppression to imagine alternative futures (queer farmers on TikTok often combine their farming with other social justice issues).

We contribute reflections on how farmers engage with the TikTok platform and its various affordances toward distributed, technologically mediated modes of performing queer utopias in rural spaces. We draw attention to the politics these content creators are envisioning and how they perform rurality and farming in ways that honor many forms of difference, but which advocate collective visions of care, healing, and radical sustainability. Ultimately, we bring additional representation to rural queer farmers, responding to recent calls in HCI, and offer queer utopias in rural places as a way to examine the norms related to sexual and gender identity and imagine otherwise.

2 BACKGROUND

We examine rurality and sustainable farming within HCI research through the theoretical lens of queerness, motivated primarily by the calls to further understanding of rural LGBTQ+ communities and their engagement with various technologies in the recent TOCHI special issue on rural HCI and rural LGBTQ+ communities [51].

The present work is informed by queer HCI research, which includes research that engages with queerness both as an identity and as an action. While the active use of queering can be deployed broadly, it has its roots in the 'orientation' of queerness, which stems from queer theory of alternatives to heteronormative gender and sexual orientations [47]. Jack Halberstam, a queer theorist from the humanities, offers a useful definition of queerness which integrates both senses of the word as an identity and an action, "refers to the non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" [27]. We see this as a guiding definition for our work, which explores how queerness as an orientation to gender and sexuality results in actions that actively challenge and subvert normative orientations. In the following, we explore queer, rural, and farming research in HCI, and then expand on current sociological framings of rural queerness and farming, followed by how we see queer utopia as a productive lens for how we see queer farmers using TikTok.

2.1 HCI research on Queerness, Rurality, and Farming

2.1.1 HCI Research on Queerness. Queerness has been framed in HCI as a design orientation and practice, a user group, and more recently, queer folks have been studied for how they use online spaces to generatively explore and build identity. Early work on queerness in HCI explored how queering could be *design orientation*, Anne Light (2011) argued 'queering' in the design of technology 1) challenges readings of identity which assume there are essential aspects of gender and 2) enables playful/oblique/performative open-ended and subversive use of technologies [47]. Following this example, researchers have studied queer-centered user experience design [7], how audio-based smart home technologies perceive and engage with queerness through autoethnographic explorations of queer breakups and how sound and audio can be remixed toward queer alternatives [42], and offered reflections of how computing research might be designed differently to support non-binary identifying folks [64].

As a user group, researchers ask how queer people navigate their identity online, including how gay men craft profiles on online dating apps like Grindr [9]; transgender identity disclosure on dating apps [22]; online harassment, and safe spaces for LBGTQ+ people online [10], how transgender and non-binary people navigate safety online [61], and navigating queer visibility in online spaces [23]. Others study ways designers should consider queer use to enable more performative gender expressions and queer identity in social media ecosystems and streaming services [13, 17, 24]. Others explore bias and discrimination queer people face on dating platforms [38] and in natural language processing [67]. These researchers argue for safer and queer-focused ways of managing identity online as well as critique the heteronormativity of automation and its negative impacts on transgender and queer individuals. There is also a small but powerful body of research on the experience of using technology as a queer person in rural spaces that draws attention to the mismatch between rural queer populations and the urban queer stereotypes that technologies are often designed for [29–31]. To date, there have also been meaningful explorations of how queer folk receive content on their for-you page where 'for you' content can both affirm and transgress queer identity [62].

A third, emerging space for computing research on queerness asks how online spaces provide places for queer community and identity building. For example, Tumblr is a queer space that enables users to collaboratively craft identities and play with sexual orientation due to open-ended user interfaces [14, 56]. Another example looks at how Queer folks use fanfiction communities online to simultaneously build community, test, and refine their queer identities, and heal from trauma [20], and how LGBTQ folks use online spaces to navigate conception, pregnancy, and pregnancy loss [1] We contribute to this line of queer social computing research agendas by looking at the generative queer identity construction of rural, queer farmers on TikTok. We find that using an interpretivist approach to analyze TikTok videos, we see 'queer utopias' which offer rural formations of queer identities and challenge the identity and practices of the 'straight' farmer.

2.1.2 Rural and Farming Research in HCI. Centering rurality foregrounds those often overlooked by the focus on urban tech centers when considering the design of technologies [28]. In recent calls and special issues of *TOCHI*, it has been noted that users are geographically and culturally situated and that there is a lack of attention given to rural communities in computing research, as computing innovation and infrastructures are often deployed around urban hubs [28, 51]. Within rural studies, there is even less focus on queer

identity, which as we will discuss in 2.2, is often also associated with urban settings. Therefore, addressing rurality when considering the lived experiences of queer people allows for a broader understanding of queerness [26, 36, 37, 70]. Rural is a broad category, and HCI research on rurality often addresses non-US subjects, however, in our research, we look at rural settings in the United States.

Small and alternative farming is a rich sight for critical computing research – small farmers are frequently presented as communities where technology is towards creative, sustainable, alternatives to large-scale food production and alternative values in sustainability. For example, people study how farming communities operate like 'tiny publics' [66], the alternative farming values of permaculture communities [50] IT for food democracy and food access infrastructures [59, 60], and seed libraries [32]. More recent research asks how data and farming are connected [65], how technologies continue patterns of racial legibility and dispossession [8, 48], agriculture's ties to climate change and possible alternative data orientations [8] and posthuman ways of viewing small-scale agriculture [49]. In sum, these projects explore how technologies can support the politics of small farmers as sustainable stewards of the environment as well as advocates for food access and justice. However, we offer a novel strategy for studying alternative farming groups and their politics through the use of TikTok to craft and publicize queer farming practices and ideas.

2.2 Queer Farming and Queer Rurality in Social Science and Theory

Ongoing and emerging research agendas in social science and queer theory point to both the heteronormativity of farming and the ways that the LGBTQ+ community navigates that space, as well as the ways that queer folks are often stereotyped as metro-normative (or in urban settings). We find that queer farmers on TikTok produce content that subverts and re-imagines both of these spaces and identifies away from stereotypical or normative orientations.

Informed by theory on rural queerness (e.g., [34]), we ask what happens when queer identity is enacted in rural and agricultural spaces. There is an emerging area of research on LGBTQ+ farming in rural sociological research that explores the sustainable farming practices and ideologies of queer farmers [44, 45]. In this work, Isaac et al. offer an in-depth analysis of how farming is deeply entangled with heteronormativity and the nuclear family, but that seeing sexuality as a critical factor in farming, while actively examining queer and feminist orientations to agriculture, can offer new political and sustainable frameworks to examine agricultural production [45]. Other research examines the ways queer farmers navigate the 'straight' spaces of agriculture which often relies on family-farm model and sees homosexuality as something only discussed in the 'private' sphere. This research examines queer farming practices and how they navigate disclosing their identity amongst their professional sphere of other farmers and clients and reimagine farming practices that rely on nuclear family structures (often along sustainable lines) [36, 37]. This research is opening preliminary evaluation of the important political, critical, and social changes that queer farming brings to agriculture as well as the challenges queer folks face while farming.

Additional qualitative sociological research explores the importance of focusing on queer identities in rural spaces as they are often overlooked in favor of archetypes of the urban queer. Several essay collections and books have been published in recent years that explore queer life in rural settings and how queerness in rural settings intersects with the design of technologies [26, 34]. Studying rural queerness expands understanding of where queerness can happen, how queerness is enacted, what is considered queer aesthetics, and queer epistemologies. We see this exploration adding to conversations in HCI and design by noticing the ways TikTok was used to foster rural queer farmer idealism, identity formation, and utopic orientations of these queer farmers.

2.3 Utopia in HCI and Queer Utopia

2.3.1 Utopia in HCI. Utopia, as a broad concept, is a literary convention used to imagine idealistic futures or societies. Within the cannon of HCI, it offers a method for design speculation (alongside dystopia) in critical and speculative design [2, 19, 69]. While utopia is a literary tradition that can and has been critiqued as overly idealistic, it can be productive as a thought exercise or modified by feminist and queer theory. Utopia has been critically employed in computing research by feminist HCI scholar Bardzell who introduces *feminist* utopia. In contrast to a 'traditional utopia' which tends to focus on a totalizing, universal, product or outcome, Bardzell argues that feminist utopias are process-oriented, democratic, emergent, situated in a critique of the mundane, embracing multiple worldviews, and a place where the marginalized are given a voice [4, 5]. The present work expends critical utopian thinking in HCI and design research by introducing queer utopias.

2.3.2 Queer Utopia. We draw on the concept of queer utopia as it was developed by queer theorist José Muñoz in his seminal text *Cruising Utopia* [54]. Muñoz maps out the mechanics of queerness and queering as a utopian practice that de-normalizes 'straight' time and orientations by performative counter-narratives and future imaginaries which disrupt heteronormativity and celebrate LGBTQ+ pride, identity, and justice. Following Muñoz, we see queer utopia operating along three key lines:

- Queer Time: Queer utopia responds to histories of oppression and imagines futures in the present:

Muñoz uses the language "then and there" of queer utopia to reflect how queer utopia is rooted in a historical instance of oppression (*then*), yet it reaches toward queer futures (*there*). Queer utopias, enacted in various ways (through art, through poetry, through performance) subvert the "self-naturalizing temporality" of "straight time" [55:25] by offering an "anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present." [54].

- Queer utopia sees queerness as an open-ended horizon of belonging and becoming:

Second, according to Muñoz, queerness is an open-ended collective vision of becoming – "we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" [54]. In addition, Munoz encourages a "we" of futurity, a "we that is 'not yet conscious' – which the various identity markers like " 'race, sex, age, or sexual preferences' – are not things in and of

themselves that format this 'we'," instead it is a collective, "in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" [55:20]. While queerness might ground this theory of utopia, a collective vision can and should include multiple forms of difference and identity.

- Queer utopia is rooted in performance:

The methods of queer utopia are often rooted in aesthetics and performance, following theories of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler who argues that gender is not biological but learned and performed. The performances of queer utopia are also concerned with subverting sex/gender norms [12]. Muñoz shows how queer utopias are publicly performed by "ensemble[s] of social actors" – the likes of which we see continued in TikTok content. These performances are often about the mundane, process-oriented, and amateurish, which reflects a queer politics of situated, critical, urbaneness, and of process-based, "performative doing, a perpetual becoming" [54]. The everyday performances of queer utopia bring queer alternatives into everyday visions of life and living, and bridge theory and creativity through personal and pluralistic queer expression.

Queer utopia, or horizons, are played out and performed on various "stages" where queer identity and utopia are performed in ways that represent a "convergence between artistic production and critical praxis" [54]. We see TikTok as a digital stage, one that has an open-ended potential for performance where queer farmers can create and engage with content that represents a subversion of norms of rurality and queerness simultaneously while imagining ways that farming can be a stage for rural queer identity formation, queer politics and critiques, and queer ways of inhabiting farming practices.

3 METHODS

This research unpacks the values, goals, and practices of queer farmers in rural places on TikTok through the lens of queer utopia. We do this through carefully watching, taking notes, and thematically analyzing 146 TikTok videos from self-described queer, rural farmers. In doing so, it asks both how rurality, farming, and queerness intersect, but also how rural queer farmers use TikTok to communicate their queer identity and build queer community and queer utopias.

To do this, we curated a cannon of TikTok videos and then used humanistic interpretive methods to analyze their content and develop thematic analysis [3]. Using a hermeneutic interpretivist method from the humanities allowed us to closely examine the diction of the video content while leveraging theoretical frames to reflect on findings [3]. Such an approach has been done by Lazar et al [43] where the authors analyzed the lived experiences of women experiencing menopause by combining grounded theory analysis and interpretive and critical readings of a corpus of text pulled from Reddit subforums on menopause. In our work, as in the work of Lazar et al., we found that using a theoretical lens in conjunction with interpreting the videos, allowed us to examine and thematize the contents of these videos in a critical, theory-driven way. Analyzing videos informed by queer utopia helped us identify the phenomenon of how TikTok videos are being used to build rural farm queer identities and politics within the larger context of queer and rural culture and intersections.

Our final corpus for the present study includes 146 TikTok videos created by 14 content creators. These 14 creators represented all of the content creators we could find on TikTok who self-identified as queer farmers whose video content includes a considerable number of videos devoted to intersections of farming and queer identity. The project focuses specifically on TikTok creators who were queer, rural, and invested in some kind of agricultural, larger-scale gardening practice. This was achieved by searching for two hashtags: #farmqueer and #queerfarmer. We prioritized videos from creators who had a regular schedule of including video content about farming or their garden which intersected with queerness, and which appeared to be in a rural setting. We found hints about these content creators' rural location by the settings of their videos, which often showed large gardens surrounded by woods, via videos that had origin stories of how they began their operations in rural places, and due to videos where the creators explicitly stated their locations. We identified an account through an initial hashtag search, and we examined other topically-relevant videos made by the creators, even if those videos did not include one of our initial two hashtags. We understand there might be many more folks on TikTok who identify as queer farmers who are less open about their practices, or who don't post about that type of content specifically. On average, we analyzed 10 videos per account, for a total of 146 videos from 14 content creators. Selecting videos by hashtag on TikTok is a method demonstrated elsewhere, including a study on discussions of climate change [6], COVID-19 [46], and grief [21], among dozens of others.

Having identified a core group of strong users who seemed to identify and post content as queer farmers on TikTok, we went through these creators' videos, taking notes, which we then turned into memos. These memos noted how creators used memes, music, how they dressed, the content of their videos, the subjects (like animals and plants), and the things they addressed alongside or within the context of queer farming (e.g. Indigenous Knowledge systems or Recovery). From these notes and memos, which we used to familiarize ourselves with the cannon and take note of things we found interesting or notable, we developed themes that we report on in the findings.

Our engagement with the theory of queer utopia and other social science research about queer and intersectional farming practices informs our hermeneutic interpretivist analysis. We became sensitized and drawn to certain video examples and thematic unities within our corpus of videos that began to illustrate the complex webs of meaning-making, daily practice, and identity performance that queer farmers on TikTok produced via their content individually and as a community, asking how it reflected a network of queer utopic thinking. Our use of a hermeneutic interpretivist approach to unpack the meanings of the videos in our corpus also required us to attend to how queer farmer creators combined cinematography, scene cuts, captions, on-screen text, music, facial expressions, and viral memes as part of their practice and performance of rural queer farming identity.

3.1 Positionality

In addition, our positionality informed this research. Our disciplinary training and queer orientations came into play as all of the authors have humanities training in interpretivist methods. A1 is interested in queer theory and ecology, A2 holds a doctorate degree in women's and gender studies, and A3 is a foundational feminist HCI scholar. A1 and A2 also identify as queer, helped them pick up nuances in media selection, language choices, and nuances and undertones of the queer videos. However, the first author, who led the data analysis, identifies as white and may have missed nuances, inside jokes, and references from content by BIPOC farmers or other intersectional identities like those farmers who identified as having neurodivergent qualities.

4 HOW QUEER FARMERS BUILD RURAL QUEER UTOPIAS USING TIKTOK

In this project, we explore how queer farmers use TikTok to build identity and community and to express utopian visions of rural, queer life. In the following, we explore four different levels where queer farmers are generating concrete utopias on TikTok: 1) specific constructions of hashtags, 2) videos that perform queer farmer identities, 3) content that specifically calls for expanding queer farm community, and 4) utopias of non-normative farming practices that embrace multiple ways of connecting farming to extended social justice, neurodivergence, mental health, and multi-species world views.

4.1 #Farmqueer → Labels of Rural Queer Farmers on TikTok

4.1.1 Use of Hashtags by Queer Farmers. Hashtags are ways to track content and build meaning across creators on social media platforms, and they have been studied as both activism tools (as in the case of #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo movements) as well as markers of identity in various communities [15, 33, 41, 71]. In the current project, our method relied on finding profiles using hashtags, but through our initial searches, we found that not only are there an array of rural-farm-queer hashtag concatenations, but there also seems to be meaning built through the combination of hashtags. It's evident that hashtags are both a way to connect queer rural farmers under certain tags, like '#farmqueer' but also surround those identities in intersectional, political, and even comical, collections of adjoining hashtags. The use of hashtags for identity formation, community formation, and expression of intersectional agendas and alternative politics begins to build the scaffolding of queer farming utopias that we see unfolding in rich detail in the content created by these queer farmers.

Two hashtags that guided our research were #farmqueer and #queerfarmer. While #queerfarmer seems to suggest a farmer who is also queer, #farmqueer feels like a unique concatenation and entire identity category. In one video a content creator recounts how originally, just embracing queer as an identity was a huge "game changer" for them but discovering the #farmqueer identity became an even more accurate descriptor of their identity, stating, "this farm is part of my identity, officially." Other hashtags used in less frequent but heavy rotation were #ruralqueer #queerfarmer #queercowboy #cowthey (the 'they' is in reference to gender non-binary gender identity) #queerswhofarm #lesbianfarmer #queerhomesteader and #farmdaddy. It is clear from these hashtags that, while referring to rural practices like homesteading, farming, and being a cowboy, these content creators have either queered the terms (#cowthey instead of #cowboy, referencing non-binary gender orientation) or claimed them as a part of queer culture and identity through concatenation with the word queer. There were also times when these content creators simply used hashtags that spoke to queer identities like #queer, #lgbtqia, #lesbiantiktok, #lesbian, #queertiktok, #ftm (female to male trans person), #transgender, #transman, #polyamtiktok (polyamorous) and #twospirit. These instances of queer identities used as hashtags connect farm queer content to the larger queer community and are often included in longer strings of hashtags that build intersectional agendas.

The way that queer farmers also seemed to build meaning in intersectional and political ways suggests queer farming practice and identity intersect with multiple identity markers, as well as alternative political beliefs. These hashtags help express queer utopian ideals about how farming practice, queer farm identities, and related social justice agendas are intertwined. Below, we show several examples of how hashtags are strung together to form political, sustainable, and intersectional meanings.

In the example for sustainable hashtags, in a video where a content creator uses poetry to reflect on foraging for dandelions, advocating for alternative food production methods, they accompany their video with the hashtags, "#queerfarmer#gardentok#cottagecore#notill#garden," signaling they use no-till farming methods, which are arguably better for soil health and carbon capture [68]. Other hashtags included groupings that signaled alternative farming practices expressed sustainable farming practices like #altfarmer, #landcare, and #raisedbedfarming, #homesteading #wildfood – which indicate low-tech, sustainable, and care-filled methodologies of farming. Some alternative farming hashtags also signaled alternative politics like #cornbreadcommunism and #growfoodnotlawns which are related food movements where socialist and mutual aid food intersect with land use and sustainability [35, 57]. This shows an emerging queer utopian agenda that translates queer eco-feminist politics which argue that race, class, and sexuality intersect in cultural constructions of 'nature' [25] into farming practice into agendas that see connections between social justice, food access, and justice, and the sustainable treatment of land.

Hashtags also hint at intersectional identities and alternative politics Content creator 12 (from here on we refer to content creators as C1-14) identified as Indigenous and Black, and built intersectional queer farming hashtag combinations: "#queerfarmer#bipocfarmers#Black#hispanic#indigenous" while C7, a Black and women-run queer farm also built intersectional hashtag collections: "#blackfarmers#queerfarmers#greenhouse#farmtok#womenfarmer." Others signaled neurodivergence and open discussion of mental health issues. Hashtags such as, "#adhdgardening#adhdadult" and "#HealingJourney#mentalwellnesstiktok#AlcoholFreeLiving#lgbtqia" represent openness and acceptance of non-neurotypical orientations and slower-paced lifestyles that support healing, mental health, and recovery. Anti-capitalist sentiments are reflected quite openly through hashtags like#anticapitalism, and again,

#cornbreadcommunism and #foodnotlawns (which is closely tied to the anarchist/socialist project of food not bombs [35, 57]. We see hashtags as one way that queer farmers signaled their own identities, as well as building navigational anchors that signal they want to be seen as intersectional, and seen *by* intersectional communities of folks interested in intersections of farming, race, sustainability, and mental health.

4.2 Rural Farm Queer Identity Creation and Expression in TikTok Content

In this section, we unpack how queer farmers on TikTok perform queer identity in rural, farming contexts through their performative content creation on TikTok, asking what emergent identities, critiques of the present, and hopes for rural queers in food production they are enacting, bringing into the present, and what utopias these performances might reflect.

Some of the queer farm content we analyzed uses the queer orientation of the creator as a major part of the content's branding. C13 identifies as a midwestern butch lesbian and opens almost every video with the catchphrase, "happy lesbian good morning!" In many of her videos, she wears shirts that advocate for lesbians in rural professions. In one video her shirt says, "sapphic cowboy" (Sappho is a Greek woman poet associated with lesbianism) and another shirt says, "America needs lesbian farmers." Her shirts, along with her content add multiple layers of queer identity – it is one thing to write "sapphic cowboy" in a caption, but another entirely to wear it on your body. In another case, C4, an openly gay farmer responds to a snide comment about gay farming and rainbow-colored tractors by making a video where he paints his tractor in rainbow colors while wearing a rainbow flag as a cape, bringing queer culture and symbols directly onto farming equipment. Others take time to document queer transitions, C9 devotes a video to documenting how their voice changes over time on testosterone such that content about transitioning is nestled amongst other farming videos, situating the process of transitioning within the larger lifestyle of farming.

Another layer of identity performance we noticed through our analysis shows that content creators incorporated elements of gender-bending within rural farming contexts. Performativity and gender-bending is a longstanding tradition within queer culture, prominently theorized by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble [12]. These farmers play with stereotypes of rurality and farming, both of which are tied to normative masculinity. In one example, C2, a gender non-binary (she/they) content creator gets acrylic nails (a traditionally femme-presenting body modification) for the first time and creates a video to discuss them captioned, "baby's first nails." Throughout the video, while gesticulating with their new, brightly colored, and semi-long nails, they openly contemplate all the things they will still do with their nails like farm labor, barn mucking, flipping logs and identifying amphibians, and "still build[ing] a fire better than your dad probably." By arguing that they will keep doing this list of non-femme activities with femme-presenting nails, they conversationally reflect on where femme-presentations are normative and how farming activities with acrylic nails is a way of bending these expectations. However, even the nails themselves read as a parody – they are gaudy colors and read as campy femme (camp is deliberate exaggeration and theatricality, often for humorous effect often used in drag and other queer performances) which adds to the performance of femininity by not taking themselves too seriously and drawing more attention to the object under discussion. The only thing they say they won't be able to do with their new nails is "buttoning my own shirt" – a comedic punchline that points out how long nails reduce dexterity.

There are two more examples of how TikTok content creators use clothing to perform and critique gendered contexts of farming and rural identities. In one video, C6, who identifies as non-binary, regularly farms in skirts while wearing a big floppy-brimmed straw sunhat adorned with a big woven-straw flower. Their content, which often just shows a day's labor on their farm while they wear their skirt and floppy hat, uses the framing of the camera and the composition of the video to place queerness and gender fluidity and farming activities into contextual, situated proximity. In another example, C12, who identifies as two-spirit, makes a meme video in response to a recent trend where female-identifying people construct videos that celebrate womanhood using a song titled 'I am Woman' by Emmy Meli. In this video, this song has been altered lyrically to say, 'I'm a person' and the creator ties a scarf around and under the collar of a collared shirt and puts on a cowboy hat while dancing to the song. The video is captioned, "CowThey, CowQueer, CowBoi, I accept any but cowgirl #cowthey #cowboy #queernative #queertiktok #queerfarmer where all my native CowQueers at?" In this video, they actively appropriate gender-specific language and lyrics toward rural queer/rural farming identities that refuse a gender binary.

While not all content creators we studied mention gender or its performance, each content creator discusses queerness on their account, showing how '#farmqueer' is part of the long, slow, messy process of identity construction in queer life. This illustrates the queer utopic potential of identity – never quite 'here' – always on the horizon. C1 in particular discusses identity as a journey and the possibility of not yet having the right words to capture one's identity, nor owing anyone those words. In their video (which is also a queer pride post during queer pride month) C1 reflects on how the term farm queer changed their queer orientation and identity. They narrate a reflexive analysis of the difficulty and process of finding/constructing a queer identity, and how they are now bringing farming practice into their queer identity. They reflect,

> "I went through several different labels before I knew that you could identify as queer. That was a game changer for me, like, mind blown, I am queer, I've got this figured out. I think it's time to change it up again though. So in honor of pride month, I'm announcing, I officially identify as a farm queer . . . this farm is part of my identity officially"

This bold statement does a few things. First, it places 'farmqueer' under the umbrella of queer identities. Second, it explains queer identity as ongoing and open-ended. The author defines and places the term 'farmqueer' into practice – as they say "farmqueer" they pan over to their garden, moving this extension of themselves and their identity into the frame. Additionally, the narration functions as a continual trying on of identity, one which is not static, but is a process of becoming. This is a perfect example of Muñoz's

description of queer utopia, where queer identity and queer utopia are a horizon of possibility – not a fixed and totalizing vision, but open and generative.

4.3 Building #farmqueer Communities on TikTok

In addition to the hashtags that help mark content and connect ideas and identities across content producers, we find the video content itself is often tied to supporting, building, and showcasing queer community and relationships. Muñoz observes that a marker of queer utopia is multiplicity and generativity: "the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" [63:20]. While other aspects of our findings show the multiplicity of queer identity and intersectional politics and identities, in this section we show some ways that queer communities use TikTok to perform and invite cohesion, comfort, and queer relationships across pluralities and difference.

In multiple videos, content creators support queer identity in rural spaces, welcome new members into the community, and advocate for messy, open-ended, ongoing queer identity formation across the community. In a video that deep-dives into a reflection on coming to identify as a 'farmqueer' (this is a continuation of a video mentioned above), C1 talks to the audience about the difficulty and lack of language to describe queer identity. They provide a forceful rebuke of fixed or finalized identity, stating:

> "and for those of you who are like me, and struggled for a long time trying to find just the right labels and identifiers, f*** all that, . . . you don't owe anyone a textbook definition of who you are, and it's ok if you don't know who the f*** you are, it's ok, happy pride."

This anecdote supports others who might be struggling with finding their own language for their identity. It normalizes a continual 'trying on' of different labels, giving permission to discard ones that no longer fit or feel right, permitting change. In the same video, C1 invites other farm queers to join them and be their friend, stating "So if you identify as a farm queer, let's be friends!" But with the caveat, again, that a solidified label is not necessary to be part of queerness. This example shows both an invitation to find and build community across '#farmqueer' as well as offering support for queer people going through the process of identifying as queer. This example seems to perfectly illustrate Muñoz's characterization of the queer identity as never fully formed or solidified and always existing on a horizon of potentiality.

However, C2 illuminates tensions in finding community on TikTok. Their video tracks their awareness of other queer farmers via TikTok. Text is written over the video as she/they pantomime a response. The text goes, "Me: Has long ago given up hope of finding fellow farm queers; gets TikTok. Discovers many hot fellow farm queers; I SHALL DATE THEM ALL!; Realizes everyone here is ten years younger, gives up once again." In this short video, she/they expresses the difficulty of connecting with younger people on TikTok and the age gaps in those who find themselves queer and farming. Several other videos showed emotional support or encouragement to queer farmers. In one video, C4, a farmer who identifies as gay, takes time to address the stigma around being a gay farmer in response to a comment from a teenage aspiring farmer. This teenager is afraid that if he comes out he won't be able to be a farmer anymore because he has overheard members of his hometown saying, "They don't want those type of people farming." The C4 replies, "Here's my answer for those 'theys' out there . . . farming is an occupation, it has nothing to do with whether you are gay, straight, or bi . . . if you want to be a farmer you BE a farmer!" In this example, we see that this queer farmer generates content that bolsters and supports other queer farmers.

4.4 Performing Rural Queer Farming Toward Critical Sustainable Farming Practices

Interestingly, where queer identity and community intersects with farming, at least in this sector of videos we analyzed, non-normative farming practices and intimate care-filled relations to plants and animals are demonstrated with high frequency. These often coincide with critical political orientations and open-minded acceptance and discussion of mental health challenges, neurodivergence, and imperfection within farming practices. The content these farmers generate queers the practices of farming, performing farming in ways that imagine formulations/politics of sustainability that address human, ecological, and political factors together.

4.4.1 Performing Alternative Politics Through Farming. We have seen a steady stream of intersectional and political agendas in these queer farm content creators on TikTok – some of which directly reflect a) video content about decisions to start farming and b) the methods and definitions of farming that they use (which are not always what one would think of when it comes to food production or farm animal relationships).

We were interested in some of the rationales the queer farmers gave for starting their farms. Several queer content creators explain how their farm practices actively critique capitalism or perform alternative visions of economics where food is plentiful, and justly distributed. In one case, C6 reflects on how they began farming, in part, because they had been living in New York, attempting to work as an artist, but felt "generally overwhelmed by capitalism" so decided to start a small farm with their partner. C14 created one video that discusses the intersection between COVID-19 and their decision to start a queer farm. They overlay the following text over a video of them sitting on a porch looking into the camera: "Major Global Pandemic" then "Keep working in fitness" appears lower on the screen, which they 'flick' away, then "run away and start a queer farm commune" appears which they punch, which cuts to the song Mirirlou by Dick Dale and His Del-Tones (a famous surf song) while a rapid progression of still photos of C14 and other farmers are shown. The general notion that farming might be a way to get a break from capitalism, attempt alternative economics, or transition away from a prior life permeate content created by these queer farmers of TikTok via food.

4.4.2 Queering food production; There are a variety of farm practices from the content creators we studied, from small farming, large gardens, large-scale production farming, and even large plots of land that people referred to as farms but might mostly be undeveloped land. While many of these ways of farming are non-normative compared to large-scale industrial agriculture, some farmers we

studied made videos about alternatives to production-based farming for food production, such as foraging and groundscaping[1]. In one video C12 dotes over the smell, color, and structure of a lilac they foraged to make syrup, showing a true appreciation for seasonal, found food. One particularly lovely video combines a poem being read aloud with someone picking and cooking dandelions. The poem reflects on how dandelions, despite being a weed, are often unwanted and overlooked as a source of food. But they can be used and cherished:

> "the joy of eating leaves, of plucking bitter leaves and golden flowers starting to wilt into cotton after a long season of pollination . . . of wanting the unwanted, of knowing you are taking what the earth gives so much of . . . as a human it can be hard to feel that you are, and are taking just enough . . . for once, everyone gets to live"

While we cannot perfectly interpret this poem, it does begin to reframe and challenge how food is seen – perhaps food is more plentiful if one learns to see it in new places. By looking at different places, might there be plenitude? And if there is ecological plenitude, already mundanely available as weeds, for instance, might there be food systems that don't require that some have nothing while others have too much? A system where one is, "taking just enough . . . for once, everyone gets to live." In another example of this way of thinking, C5, a blatantly anti-capitalist farmer (it is listed in their bio), discusses foraging and groundscaping as alternative ways of cultivating and procuring food. In one video, they find frozen nettles and reflect on how, "you can eat it, free food, it just comes out of the ground and a lot of people think of it as a weed". In another video, they discuss groundscaping practices of clearing brush to let native plants flourish. In their videos, they suggest food doesn't need to be 'produced' it can be cultivated, foraged, and found. These farming methods align with contemporary queer ecofeminist thinking that challenges the need for land and ecologies to be 'productive' or 'reproductive' [11]. While land is always productive, the queer farmers of TikTok want to show the land and plants are productive without being oriented or organized into garden rows or clearly bounded fields – perhaps foraging and groundscaping queer traditional farming and the rows and tills that 'straighten' food production.

4.4.3 Performing softness and vulnerability: Mental health and mutual care, rest, and imperfection. Many of the queer farmers openly discuss their own mental health over time, as well as openly discussing exhaustion and farm failures. We see this as performing a kind of softness with oneself, a careful relation to oneself that accepts limits and practices sharing vulnerabilities. C9 creates one 'gratitude post' to remind themselves of what brings them joy (including feeding goats) and admits they have been "under the mental weather lately." One of C1's videos shows them picking and eating blueberries with a caption reading: "I'm exhausted." They've done everything they could think to do to preserve their crop of blueberries and the berries keep coming. And for that reason, they are just eating them straight off the bushes . . . "I'll just be in my bra eating blueberries," they say. C6 made one video that openly discussed the difficulty of farming in the beginning and their many failures. These farmers share their mental health issues, exhaustion, and failures, which, collectively, argues that farming might be a space where people might come to recover, a place where personal limits and failures are permissible, even endearing.

In this section, we saw how non-normative farming practices are important to these creators. The types of care discussed above acknowledge limits, both ecological and in terms of mental health, illustrating a need for recovery, recuperation, gentleness, and the possibility of failure. Without meaning to, perhaps, this is a great critique of many intersecting contemporary societal issues like climate change, the mental health impacts of COVID-19, food justice, and the mental health crisis plaguing farmers right now [40, 52]. While perhaps not feasible as a food system that supports an entire society, these queer farmers of TikTok are performing utopias through how they see farming as a salve or possibility, a potentiality toward a different way of building relations.

5 CELEBRATING THE #FARMQUEER UTOPIAS CONSTRUCTED USING TIKTOK

This research responds to recent calls in HCI to look more closely at rural communities [28, 51], especially in the case of rural queer communities [30, 31], and following an ongoing research agenda in HCI that examines how the LGBTQAI+ community uses and is impacted by social computing systems. We contribute an analysis of a selective cannon of queer farmers' TikTok content, asking how these creators' content is used to perform identity, build community, and imagine sustainable and non-normative farming practices at the intersections of queer identity and rural farming spaces. This research shows how social computing platforms like TikTok serve as a stage where rural queer farm identity is performed and developed collectively, in generative and utopian ways. Through the analysis of these queer farm creators' videos, while engaging with queer theory, we began to see glimmers of how their content, and the ideals it espoused aligned with rural queer utopias. In the following we 1) reflect on the possibility of more widely distributed utopias that can be discovered across geographic distance 2) highlight the politics of utopia as content creators on TikTok enact specific queer ideas about agriculture and treatment of people that highlight care, resilience, and alternative practices, grounded in queer experience and finally, 3) we reflect on how queer utopia extends the potential and emphasis of LGBTQAI+ research in HCI celebrating the active, performative visions of queer identity creation and generativity within a socially generated online queer community.

5.1 Distributed Hashtag Queer Utopias

As mentioned in the related works, there is a rich agenda of queer social computing research in HCI but calls to explore rurality and its intersections with queer communities in digital spaces are nascent. However, as Hardy and Lindtner note, rural queer folk are often not the target user of apps, like dating apps, especially due to the low population density of queer folk in rural spaces [30]. In the

[1]Please note that this is not universal, some farmers seem to have less critical orientations to their farming practices. For example, C4 is content to run what appears to be a large-scale farm, but his content making practice shows the non-normative aspects of him being a farmer through how he fields and responds to anti-gay or homophobic responses to his farming.

case of TikTok, we saw rural queers connecting and openly building community through hashtags and invitations in their videos. TikTok enables these farmers to open a window into their world and perform their rural queer identities on a stage that reaches like-minded queer folks.

Queer farmers used the affordances of TikTok to build utopias related to a specific location – rural farming – in a distributed and inclusive way. One of the affordances they used were hashtags to network and share content within their own identity groups (#farmqueer and #queerfarmer) as well as combining queer farming with alternative political orientations, sustainability agendas, neurodiverse orientations, and intersectional identities. We also saw content creators express how TikTok was the first place they had really found or connected with other rural queer folks, or in the case of content creators inviting those who are exploring their queer identity to join them as a 'farm queer'.

Several of the content creators signaled to this distributed, but close-knit, and emergent community they were crafting and finding through TikTok. C1 illustrates the open-ended horizon of queer identity – never quite here or finalized – when they discuss the transformation of their queer identity over time, stating farm queer is the most accurate queer identity yet. In this video, there is a sense that queer identity is open, fluid, and will continue to develop over time. In addition, C2 also signals the sparsity of their local community, but the abundance of queer farmers they found through TikTok, and their excitement of finding them as they say, "I shall date them all!" Queer identity is growing, open-ended, and in her example, can be constructed via a queer person's connection to their rural farm. While the videos we studied are often playful, they are writing an emerging identity politics and performing it on a globally accessible stage enabled by global platforms like TikTok. This digital utopian *stage,* unlike the physical stages Muñoz was inspired by (of drag shows, for example), offers windows into the *rural worlds* of these farmers. Perhaps there is an interesting tension or paradox here between how connected to rurality and settings in queer farm TikTok, and how they are building community through their global, digital, distribution. However, this does not hinder the effect of the queering of farming and the rural that these TikToks accomplish as they actively dismantle the heteronormative orientations of farming and metronormative orientations of queerness through their videos.

5.2 Utopian Politics of #farmqueer Tiktok

In these TikTok videos, looking at them as a group, one can see an image emerge, an ideal alternative way of living, driven by queerness but including many other forms of difference, that reframes and reimagines how one might be in the world through active performance and doing and sharing via TikTok. Viewed through the lens of queer utopia, the politics and practices of queer farmers shown on TikTok enact "kernels of queer possibility" in the present that imagine a different more sustainable future for people and non-people alike [54]. We observed saw that the politics of queer peoples, which often addressed intersectionality, justice, land stewardship, and mental health, permeate and are entangled with farming practices.

One aspect of this was an exploration of farming practices as ways to heal, ways to mend, and ways to be in alternative relationships with the earth, animals, and other people. Queer farmers of TikTok imbue their content with a critical new perspective on sustainability which echoes and extends agendas in Sustainable HCI (SHCI) to allow for the expansion of human-centered design to include more than human others [8, 49], intersectional agendas, and the possibility of farming to engage with food justice and mental health, and reciprocal human/animal caretaking. In a way, queer rural farmers add to HCI research that explores political and ideological tensions that small farmers hold in relation to governmental, big ag, and tech conceptualizations of farming [8, 55, 66].

We also observed the content creators craft complex intersections between farming methods, queer identity, and politics by using TikTok's video editing tools to layer meaning into videos and build multiple, intertextual signals. In C9's poem about dandelion foraging, a voiceover of someone reading a poem was placed over a video of the farmers preparing and eating dandelions, showing the possibility of weeds as food, while reflecting on an alternative set of food relations where "for once, everyone gets to live." TikTok content enables queer farmers to both show and tell, and actively enact their utopias. Others suggest we must support intersectional farmers with queer and BIPOC identities. And some farmers show affinities to socialist food movements like Food Not Bombs through hashtags like #foodnotlawns or connect to intersectional agendas by placing hashtags into collections of related agendas. Other videos show mutual care between animals and humans, which include follower comments (showing online social community building) and related hashtags like #MentalHealth and #Sobriety, which reframes animals away from being a commodity toward frameworks of sustainability that center mutual inter-species wellness and care.

Adding to existing SHCI research that has called for sustainability to be tied to social justice [18] these queer farmers use TikTok videos to highlight how social issues and ecological sustainability are intertwined. This is an argument present in early queer ecofeminist writings like those of Greta Gaard [25], who, building on socialist feminist critiques of race, class, and gender, discusses how heteronormative sexuality as 'natural' is the root of many hierarchies of race, class, and gender. The content the queer farmers on TikTok produce about sustainability argues for a queer farmer politics of equitable, universal food access, intersectional and justice-oriented food growing communities, and ways of viewing plants, animals, and humans alike as valuable outside productivity. They can craft and publicize these political queer utopias of sustainable farming using the content creation tools, global reach, and communities that TikTok supports.

5.3 Interpreting Queer Utopia and Seeing Queer Generativity in Social Computing

Our method uses interpretation to observe how queer farmers construct queer utopian performances through text, image, allusion, incorporation of memes, etc. This angle is a lesser-explored way of understanding use in social computing and HCI, but it does indeed help us see the hopes, ideas, narratives, jokes, relationships, and critiques offered up by queer farmers on TikTok through the complex multi-media medium of TikTok. Seeing these videos through

the lens of queer utopia sharpened our sense of what these content creators are *doing* through their content. It is not just a queer person on TikTok claiming that foraging is a way to produce food, or a two-spirit BIPOC farmer getting dressed as a 'cow-they' – these are farmers weaving together queerness and rurality, queerness, and farming, upsetting expectations of who farms, how farming and food production is framed, and offering alternative politics that include care for non-humans, mental health awareness, alternative relationship models. In other words, queer theoretical framings and interpretive methods enabled us to explore different avenues through which rural farm queers are creating visions of queer futurity. Queer utopia reframes queer use toward a means of enacting and performing critique of heteronormativity on the digital stage of TikTok. It is active, not passive, and it imagines creative new horizons of possibility and uses social computing platforms like TikTok to build those visions collectively.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, throughout this paper, inspired by A1's own life as a queer person living in a rural setting, we examined queer rural farm TikTok content through the lens of queer utopias. We argue that queer utopia, moving along the axis of aesthetics and performance, critiques of the past that imagine brighter queer futures, and open-ended identity formation, helps identify, through the aesthetic making practices of queer users using TikTok, the social-sexual norms that pervade queer stereotypes (metronormative) and straight rural spaces like farming (tied to a nuclear family, etc.). We show how queer farmers use the affordances of TikTok, alongside cultural references and their personal stories, to bring to light possibilities of queer folks' orientations to farming practices that are healing, restorative, queer, and hopeful. In this way, we add to research on queer use and queer rural communities in HCI that see queer people as generative, creative, hopeful, and part of seeing *otherwise* for more sustainable and just futures.

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