Exploring Young South Africans' Use of TikTok to Communicate Mental Health Challenges During the COVID-19 Lockdown Era: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Declaration

DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified psychological distress among adolescents and young adults while repositioning social media as primary spaces for emotional expression, help-seeking, and meaning-making, particularly under conditions of enforced isolation. This study examines how selected young South Africans constructed and expressed mental health narratives on TikTok during the pandemic era, with particular attention to content produced during and after South Africa's risk-adjusted lockdown periods (March 2020–December 2022), and to how audiences engaged with these narratives through platform interaction. It is situated within a South African context shaped by cultural belief, social inequality, stigma, and epistemically diverse understandings of wellbeing spanning both biomedical and indigenous frameworks. As a result, it addresses a gap in scholarship that has focused largely on Western contexts and text-based platforms. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical sociology (1959), Bauman's liquid modernity (2000), Castells' network society theory (2009), and Cognitive Behavioural Theory, this study employed a qualitative netnographic design combining reflexive thematic analysis with relational multimodal analysis. A purposive sample of 20 TikTok videos and 1,000 associated viewer comments posted during the COVID-19 era was analysed. Seven interconnected themes emerged, showing that psychological distress was communicated through multimodal performance rather than direct disclosure, including aestheticised visual form, confessional domestic space, humour as concealment and expression, collective meaning-making, symbolic representation, platform commodification, and the negotiation of competing cultural frameworks of distress. From this analysis, three theoretically grounded propositions of differing empirical status are advanced. The paradoxical diary and its live archive synthesise the study's integrated theoretical framework, naming the structural condition of platform-mediated disclosure. The recognition space extends Castells' network society theory to specify the uneven distribution of visibility and emotional acknowledgement. Epistemic coexistence, substantiated by limited direct evidence but supported by broader comment-thread patterns, is offered as a hypothesis requiring comparative validation across Global South digital contexts.

Keywords: digital mental health, TikTok, multimodal communication, netnography, epistemic coexistence

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
API	Application Programming Interface
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Theory
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSV	Comma-Separated Values
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition
FYP	For You Page
ICD-11	International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision
POPIA	Protection of Personal Information Act
RO	Research Objective
RQ	Research Question
UV	Ultraviolet
WHO	World Health Organisation

Glossary of Key Social Media Terms

Term	Definition
Algorithm	A computational process that determines content visibility and distribution on social media platforms. It is based on signals such as watch time, engagement, and user behaviour.
Caption	The text accompanying a video post, distinct from on-screen text
Creator	An individual who produces and posts content on the platform
Comment thread	The sequential series of user responses to a post, representing interaction and co-construction of meaning between creators and audiences

Duet	A TikTok feature that allows users to respond to another user's video by creating a split-screen or side-by-side interaction
Emoji	A visual symbol used in digital communication to convey emotional tone, affective response, or social meaning.
Engagement	Platform interaction metrics, including likes, comments, shares, and views. Engagement is central to TikTok's recommendation algorithm
Share	An action that redistributes content from user to another, contributing to content amplification and algorithmic visibility.
Filter	A visual effect applied to video content, altering colour, lighting, or appearance
Multimodal	Involving the interaction of multiple communicative modes, including visual, auditory, textual, and gestural elements.
Netnography	A qualitative research method adapted from ethnography, focused on understanding digital cultures and practices within online communities.
Paradoxical Diary	A form of self-documentation in which private emotional experience is publicly shared while remaining selectively framed through platform affordances
Context Collapse	The flattening of distinct social audiences into a single undifferentiated public on social media, creating tension in self-presentation

Emotional Labour	The effort required to manage feelings to conform to social expectations, often redistributed on social media from concealment to performance.
Recognition Space	The zone of potential visibility within which creators seek, and audiences distribute, acknowledgement of shared emotional experience
Epistemic Coexistence	The condition under which multiple, potentially incompatible knowledge systems for understanding distress circulate without institutional resolution.
For You Page (FYP)	The algorithm feed of video content on TikTok, curated for each user based on engagement patterns and behavioural data.
Like	A positive response indicator on TikTok that signals user agreement, validation, or emotional resonance with content.
Live Archive	An accumulating, iterative, audience-responsive record of digital self-documentation, initiated by the creator but shaped by platform affordances and audience interaction.
Share	An action that redistributes content from one user to another, contributing to content amplification and algorithmic visibility.
Hashtag	A user-generated keyword or phrase preceded by the # symbol, used to categorise content and increase discoverability on social media platforms

On-screen text / text overlay	Text superimposed directly onto video footage, distinct from the caption
Stitch	A TikTok feature that allows users to incorporate a segment of another user's video into their own, enabling dialogic content creation
Trending sound	An audio file that has been used across a high volume of videos, often generating shared cultural associations and affective meanings.

Acknowledgement

This work was not built in isolation. Those who helped me build it were rarely aware of the part they were playing—offering a meal, listening to an unfinished thought, sharing a conversation about loss, or simply believing in me. It is only in looking back that I can see how these ordinary acts became part of the architecture of this work.

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I once thought I was completing a master's dissertation. I now understand that I was also carried, taught, witnessed, and nourished while becoming someone new. This work is more than a product of research; it is a record of care that makes intellectual life possible.

May the study honour complexity of being human—especially in a world where so much of the human mind now lives, connects, and seeks meaning online.

Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my mother Grace Mmakgang Tshele, who did not live to see her seed sprout, yet whose teachings, confidence, and love remain the compass by which I navigate life.

To my aunts and uncle: you carried something of my mother's spirit forward for me. In each of you, I encountered an essence of her—kindness, discipline, prayer, joy, and truth. You kept parts of her present in my life in ways you may never have fully known, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

To my brothers and sisters: I hope you understand that when I say I paved a little of the way, I do not mean that I know the road you should take. I mean only that perhaps my journey can make yours a little less unfamiliar. Pick up the baton wherever it falls and run your own race. Our paths may differ, but we remain roots and branches of one great tree. You are allowed to grow beyond what came before you without becoming disconnected from where you began.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Mental health is not a possession but a capacity: the process emotional experience, maintain a sense that the future holds possibility, and sustaining connection with others. This capacity is never an individual achievement. It depends on whether one's community can name what is felt, whether available structures offer language for it, and whether they respond with support or silence. Where these structures fail, distress does not simply accumulate; it becomes invisible, unmoored from the frameworks that might render it intelligible.

This dependence on community and structure becomes critical when both are threatened. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Beyond its direct health consequences, the pandemic produced a secondary crisis of psychological distress at scale. Lockdowns closed the spaces that ordinarily mediate psychological experience: therapy rooms, school counselling, religious gatherings, extended family networks. For young people, these closures were near-total. Formal mental health services, already under-resourced in most contexts, contracted further (Lund et al., 2020). In South Africa specifically, the structural gap between mental health need and available care weakened into a crisis.

South Africa concentrates this global crisis in a particular form. The country operates under an epistemic plurality that is analytically significant. Biomedical psychiatry frames distress as individual pathology rooted in neurochemistry (Roehr, 2013; Horwitz, 2002). Indigenous ontologies, particularly those associated with Nguni and Sotho cosmological traditions, situate it within relational imbalance: a disruption between self, community, and ancestral world (Thornton, 2009; Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010). A young person experiencing auditory disturbance might receive a diagnosis of psychosis in a Cape Town clinic and be recognised by a family in Eastern Cape as a candidate for ukuthwasa, the ancestral calling to become a healer (Thornton, 2009; Seedat, 2018). These interpretations do not arrive in sequence. They coexist in the same household, sometimes in the same conversation, with neither framework holding

institutional authority over the other in everyday life. This interpretative complexity is not merely cultural texture. It exists within a quantifiable crisis.

The epistemic plurality unfolds against a backdrop of severe and quantifiable need. Mental health disorders contribute to South Africa's disease burden. The National Department of Health (2023) acknowledges that mental disorders are a leading cause of disability, while the South African Health review notes that depression and anxiety alone account for an estimated 2.5% of total years lived with disability. Among young people aged 14 to 24, a broader band than this study's own 18–24 sample—prevalence of reported depression and anxiety during the pandemic climbed sharply, with one in four reporting current suicidal thoughts (Shobhana & Raviraj, 2022). Critically, what the numbers obscure is the structural gap. A 92% of the uninsured population requiring mental health care did not receive it (Wolvaardt et al., 2024).

The emergence of TikTok as a mental health communication space during the pandemic era is neither incidental nor exceptional, even though its prominence was amplified by the acute conditions of lockdown. It reflects a structural reality. When formal and informal support systems fail, people use the tools available. But how they use those tools, what those tools make possible, how audiences reshape what is shared, and how the platform's own architecture shapes what can be said remain largely unexplored, particularly in South African contexts, where epistemic plurality complicates the very meaning of mental health.

This study addresses that gap. It examines how selected young South Africans used TikTok to construct and communicate mental health narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic, with specific attention to content produced during and immediately following South Africa's risk-adjusted lockdown periods. The analysis focuses on multimodal communicative forms through which distress was expressed; the cultural negotiations between biomedical and indigenous frameworks of well-being that occurred within platform space; the audience interactions through which individual disclosures were transformed into collective experiences; and the platform affordances that shaped each of these processes.

1.2 Background and Context

1.2.1 The South African Alert Level System

South Africa's pandemic response operated through a risk-adjusted Alert Level system of five levels, moving from most to least restrictive. Alert Level 5, implemented from 27 March 2020, prohibited movement outside the home except for essential services, closed educational institutions, banned public gatherings, and suspended most economic activity. Restrictions eased progressively thereafter. Level 4, introduced on 1 May 2020, permitted limited economic activity while continuing to restrict outdoor exercise; a month later, Level 3 (from 1 June 2020) allowed the reopening of additional economic sectors and broader movement, even as restrictions on gatherings, schools, and high-contact industries remained in place. Levels 2 and 1 relaxed constraints further still, though social distancing and public health protocols persisted throughout (De Villiers, et al., 2020; Moonasar et al., 2021). This graduated easing, however, did little to arrest the psychological toll already accumulating. The combined effects of prolonged isolation, economic precarity, bereavement, and disrupted routine produced a sustained strain that extended well beyond the formal lockdown period, persisting through late 2021 and into 2022.

1.2.2 TikTok as a Platform

Developed by ByteDance and internationally deployed in 2017 following corporate integration with Musical.ly, the platform is predicated upon an algorithmic infrastructure structurally divergent from antecedent social media ecosystems. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, by contrast, distribute content primarily through follower networks and social graph structures. TikTok's For You Page (FYP) algorithm works differently. It orchestrates content distribution on the basis of interactional patterns—specifically viewing duration, completion rate, sharing behaviour, and interactive conduct (Huang et al., 2019). The implications of this structural difference for mental health communication are considerable. For instance, a creator with minimal followers can reach audiences numbering in the thousands provided the video sustains engagement. Distress content is inherently engaging, it triggers attention, emotional response, and prolonged viewing. On TikTok, the algorithm reads these engagement signals as indicators of quality, regardless of what the content actually is. The result is

that psychological pain can circulate at scale without any institutional gatekeeper, no policy framework assessing harm , only the feed accelerating what keeps eyes fixed.

TikTok's growth in South Africa during the lockdown period was rapid and demographically concentrated. The platform's user base skewed heavily toward users aged 18 to 24, the cohort most strongly represented in the platform's creative culture during this period (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Pereira et al., 2021). By 2021, TikTok had surpassed 1 billion monthly active users globally (Iqbal, 2021), with Sub-Saharan Africa among its fastest-growing regional markets. In South Africa, the platform became a primary site of youth social life during the pandemic periods, a compressed digital public sphere in which emotional expression, peer interaction, and identity negotiation converged.

The platform's multimodal affordances, video, text caption, audio overlay, visual effects, and interactive comments together enabled forms of mental health communication unavailable to text-based platform. A creator might communicate distress through the choice of a trending audio track carrying established emotional associations, through body language and facial expression staged within a particular domestic space, and through a caption that simultaneously names and deflects the feeling it accompanies. Such expression constitutes a genuinely multimodal construction, in which meaning emerges from the interaction of sonic, visual, textual, and spatial elements, with the platform's own affordances participating in shaping what can be said and how it can be said.

The COVID-19 pandemic created acute conditions in which TikTok became one of the few available spaces for young people's psychological expression. These conditions, prolonged isolation, economic precarity, disrupted education, and suspended mental health services persisted in modified form through 2022. It shaped the platform's function as a continuing site of psychological expression even as formal restrictions eased. Therapy rooms closed. Schools shut. Police checkpoints at provincial boundaries prevented movement between frameworks as much as between places. Bathrooms and bedrooms became, for many the only available stage. What young people performed there, what they showed, what they hid, how they framed it, and how audiences responded constitutes the empirical terrain of this study.

1.3 Research Problem and Study Rationale

Existing research on social media and mental health has provided important knowledge. Studies have established correlations between social media use and psychological outcomes, documented patterns of disclosure and help-seeking, and identified risks associated with social comparison and validation-seeking (Braghieri, et al., 2022; Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2021; Seabrook, et al., 2016). However, this body of literature carries three significant limitations.

First, it is geographically concentrated in North American and Western European contexts, where biomedical frameworks for understanding distress are institutionally dominant. It does not adequately theorise what happens when mental health communication occurs in contexts where multiple, epistemically incompatible frameworks coexist without one achieving institutional authority. Second, it has focused primarily on text-based platforms, and where it has examined visual platforms, it has frequently treated visual content as supplementary to textual analysis rather than as the primary communicative mode. Third, it has addressed mental health communication predominantly at the level of outcomes, whether social media use increases or decreases wellbeing, instead of examining the communicative practices and cultural negotiations through which mental health meaning is made.

The urgency of this problem is underscored by the concentration of untreated distress among young South Africans. Up to 44% of young people in the country are living with some form of mental disorder (Herman, 2009). With formal therapeutic spaces closed during lockdown, school counselling suspended, and 92% of the uninsured population needing but not receiving mental health care (Wolvaardt et al., 2024), digital platforms became support systems of psychological expression. Scholars have treated these platforms as correlates of wellbeing rather than as communicative environments. This framing represents a significant oversight in both digital health and South African mental health research.

The present study addresses that gap. It examines how selected young South Africans used TikTok to construct and communicate mental health narratives during the COVID-19 era, with data concentrated in the period March 2020 to December 2022 that spans beyond strict lockdown, to easing, and post-lockdown adjustment. The study focuses on four dimensions: the multimodal communicative forms through which

distress was expressed; the cultural negotiations between biomedical and indigenous frameworks of wellbeing that occurred within the platform space; the audience interactions through which individual disclosures were transformed into collective experiences; and the platform affordances that shaped each of these processes.

1.3.1 Study Rationale

The rationale for this study rests on three convergences. First, the COVID-19 lockdown created an unprecedented context for studying digital mental health communication. The closure of alternative spaces concentrated young South Africans' psychological expression into digital platforms, making communicative practices unusually visible and analytically tractable. Second, TikTok's algorithmic architecture and multimodal affordances constitute a communicative environment sufficiently distinct from previously studied platforms to warrant dedicated scholarly attention. The platform does not enable communication; it actively shapes the form distress takes when it is expressed there. Third, the South African context offers a vantage point from which dominant assumptions in digital mental health research can be productively challenged. This context includes a specific configuration of biomedical and indigenous frameworks, history of racialised inequalities in mental health access, and a particular social experience of the pandemic.

1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

Main Research Question: How do selected young South Africans construct and express mental health narratives on TikTok during the COVID-19 era?

Sub-question 1 (RQ1): Which communicative modes are used to express mental health narratives during COVID-19 era?

Sub-question 2 (RQ2): What coping strategies are communicated through these expressions?

Sub-question 3 (RQ3): How do viewers respond to the audio-visual messages shared by content creators?

These questions are structured to move from the communicative (what forms does expression take?) through the psychological (what coping is enacted?) to the relational (how are expressions received and transformed?). Together, they address TikTok

mental health communication as a process rather than a product, one in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of creator choices, platform affordances, and audience response.

1.5 Aim and Objectives

1.5.1 Aim

This study aims to investigate how selected young South Africans construct and express mental health narratives on TikTok during the COVID-19 era, with data spanning South Africa's risk-adjusted lockdown periods and their immediate aftermath. The study situates this inquiry within the South African context, where psychological distress is shaped by cultural beliefs, social inequalities, stigma, and epistemically diverse understandings of wellbeing.

1.5.2 Objectives

Research Objective 1 (RO1): To identify and describe the communicative modes young South Africans used to construct and express psychological distress on TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Research Objective 2 (RO2): To analyse the coping strategies communicated through young South Africans' mental health narratives on TikTok during lockdown.

Research Objective 3 (RO3): To investigate viewer responses to psychological disclosures on TikTok and examine how audience interaction co-constructs meaning around mental health content.

1.6 Significance of the study

The study aims to make three specific contributions to existing scholarship.

The first contribution is conceptual. The study proposes that mental health communication on TikTok is best understood not as individual disclosure but as relational construction. Creators assemble psychological experiences from platform affordances, cultural references, and audience-oriented choices. Audiences do not simply receive them. They rewrite, contest, validate, and extend them through comment interaction. Algorithms do not simply distribute them. They determine what circulates, to whom, and under what conditions of visibility. Theorising this as a relational construction instead of self-disclosure or help-seeking behaviour shifts the

unit of analysis from the individual creator to the communicative system that the creator inhabits. This has implications for how digital mental health is studied and for how interventions are designed.

The second contribution is contextual. The study foregrounds the South African epistemic context as analytically significant. South African creators move between biomedical and indigenous frameworks of distress without institutional pressure to choose between them. TikTok's platform architecture accommodates this multiplicity without resolving it. The same creator can post about anxiety in clinical language and about ancestral calling in the same week, to the same audience, without these being treated as contradictory. This is not a feature of all digital mental health communication. It is specific to contexts where multiple knowledge systems have legitimate, if unequal, social authority. This contextual specificity feeds directly into the study's third contribution: the relational construction identified in the first contribution takes a particular form in the South African context, one that requires distinct conceptual articulation.

Third, the study proposes the concept of epistemic coexistence to describe how multiple frameworks for understanding distress may circulate within digital spaces without institutional pressure to resolve. This concept is offered as a theoretically productive framework, or hypothesis requiring future validation—depends on the analytical outcome. The concept is offered as a challenge to the epistemological assumptions that underpin existing digital mental health literature, which has largely assumed consensus among users about the nature and causes of psychological distress.

1.7 Overview of Chapters

This dissertation comprises five chapters that build a coherent and cumulative argument about TikTok as a multimodal, relational space for mental health communication among young South Africans during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background establishes the research context, situating the study within the South African landscape of mental health communication, the COVID-19 pandemic, and TikTok's emergence as a significant digital public sphere. It introduces the research problem, questions, aims, objectives, and significance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework examines existing scholarship on mental health and social media, digital disclosure, multimodal communication, and platform-mediated coping practices, situating the study within South African digital mental health scholarship and identifying the gap that the study's second and third contributions—the recognition space and epistemic coexistence—address through the findings.

Chapter 3: Research Design, Methodology, and Analytical Process presents the study's methodological architecture, grounded in a constructivist paradigm and interpretivist epistemological orientation, detailing the qualitative netnographic design, the purposive sampling process, and the application of Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis combined with relational multimodal analysis**.** The chapter also addresses ethical considerations and presents the study's trustworthiness measures.

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretation presents the study's seven themes, each representing a distinct pattern in how young South Africans articulated psychological distress on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic era, with data spanning March 2020 to December 2022. Each theme is analysed through the study's integrated theoretical framework. Specific attention is given to three elements: the multimodal communicative practices through which distress was constructed, the audience interactions through which it was collectively negotiated, the platform mechanisms that shaped its visibility.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion synthesises the findings against the study's research questions and existing scholarship, developing the study's three primary contributions, the paradoxical diary, the recognition space, and epistemic coexistence. The chapter also examines their implications for digital health communication theory. The chapter closes with a statement of the study's significance and its limitations**.**

1.8 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions associated with South Africa's Alert Level system transformed the conditions under which young South Africans communicated psychological distress. These transformations originated in lockdown but persisted as platform-native communicative practices even as formal restrictions eased. As physical spaces of support, treatment, and social connection became

inaccessible, digital platforms, TikTok in particular, became consequential sites of emotional expression, peer support, and meaning-making. This chapter has established the research context within which that transformation occurred, identified the gaps in existing scholarship that make its empirical study necessary, and articulated the questions, aims, and contributions that structure the study.

Three dimensions of this context are analytically central and will recur throughout the dissertation. First, the South African epistemic landscape, in which biomedical and indigenous frameworks of distress coexist without institutional resolution, shapes both what young people can say about their psychological experience and what they choose to say on a public platform. Second, TikTok's algorithmic architecture and multimodal affordances are not background conditions for mental health communication. They are active participants in determining what forms distress takes when it is expressed there, whose distress becomes visible, and how audiences engage with what they see. Third, the COVID-19 lockdown was not merely a contextual variable. It was a structural condition that closed alternative spaces for psychological expression and concentrated young people's communicative practices into digital environments. This, in turn, made the dynamics of platform-mediated mental health communication unusually visible. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework through which these dynamics are analysed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a global mental health crisis, fundamentally reshaping how young people connect, communicate, and manage psychological distress. Under conditions of enforced isolation, social media platforms were repurposed: spaces once given narrative sharing. This chapter reviews the literature on youth social media use and mental health expression, attending in particular to how South African youth navigate multiple epistemic worlds, including indigenous spiritual ontologies such as ukuthwasa and to how TikTok's distinct affordances shape these negotiation.

Existing scholarship establishes that social media occupies a complicated position in adolescent mental health as it generate risk and protection in equal measure, This review moves beyond genaralised treatments of "social media use" to focus specifically on audio-visual, algorithmically curated platforms and the mental health discourse they shape. The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2.2 traces the evolving discourse of mental health communication, from stigma toward discourse. Section 2.3 examines indigenous spiritual ontologies and decolonial knowledge, including ukuthwasa, as legitimate frameworks through which distress is understood. Section 2.4 explores the dual role of social media in adolescent wellbeing, addressing pathways to both harm and protection. Section 2.5 considers what distinguishes visual and video-based platforms from their text-centric counterparts. Section 2.6 treats TikTok as a case study, establishing why the platform warrants focused scholarly attention. Section 2.7 reviews South African research on social media and mental health, identifying the specific gap this addresses. Section 2.8 finally, presents the integrated theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

Throughout, the COVID-19 lockdown period in South Africa (March 2020 onward) serves as this review's temporal anchor, with particular attention to the risk-adjusted alert levels that structured its initial phase. During this period, the suspension of in-person support networks, the inaccessibility of face-face help, and the concentration of young South Africans' social lives within digital environments rendered platforms such as TikTok consequential sites of mental health communication in their own right

(Torales et al., 2020). Widespread uncertainty and solitude heightened psychological vulnerability, drawing mental health ever further into public discourse and, correspondingly, into online space.

2.2 The Evolving landscape of Mental Health Communication

2.2.1 From stigma to disclosure

Historically, mental illness carried profound stigma. Psychological distress was frequently read as personal weakness, a construal that produced silence, reluctance to disclose, and avoidance of professional assistance (Gage, 2019; Corrigan, 1998). In South Africa, this stigma was compounded by cultural beliefs attributing emotional distress to supernatural forces such as ancestral anger, witchcraft, or spirit influence, which further obstructed biomedical pathways (Zabow, 2007; Ngobe et al., 2021). Young people were thus caught between conflicting messages: Western clinical models routinely disregarded indigenous understandings of distress, even as traditional prohibitions foreclosed open discussion of psychological suffering. Medical stigma and cultural silencing converged, in effect, to produce a formidable barrier to seeking support from either system.

This barrier has, over time, been eroded by global advocacy and an emergent culture of disclosure. Mental health movements of the late twentieth century reframed psychological distress as a matter of public concern comparable to physical illness (World Health Organization, 2022). While celebrity coming forward, narratives and awareness campaigns drew mental health struggles into everyday conversations, displacing them from private therapy room into public space (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Freed from the traditional gatekeepers who had once controlled what could be said and how, individuals gained the latitude to narrate their own experiences. This shift laid the groundwork for digital spaces in which users could assume authorship of their own mental health narratives.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation considerably. As lockdown foreclosed in-person contact, digital platforms became indispensable channels for mental health communication, and South African youth, confronting economic hardship and restricted mobility, turned to TikTok and comparable applications to voice anxiety, loneliness, and coping strategies. Within these digital environments, expression, connection, and risk came to coexist.

2.3 Indigenous Spiritual Ontologies and Decolonial Knowledge

Understanding mental health expression among South African youth on TikTok requires attention to how young people navigate between Western biomedical frameworks and African spiritual ontologies. Psychological distress, within African contexts does not resolve neatly into the categories dominant psychiatric frameworks provide for it. Where biomedical systems, as codified in the DSM-5 and ICD-11, classify emotional volatility, auditory or visionary phenomena, and unexpected somatic disturbance as psychosis, anxiety, or depressive disorder, many African spiritual traditions read the identical constellation of experience as ancestral communication marking the onset of ukuthwasa (Thornton, 2009; Mlisa, 2009; Edwards, 2011).

An epistemic tension thus opens between Western clinical ontologies and indigenous spiritual knowledge systems grounded in ancestral cosmology. This study does not treat psychiatric and indigenous frameworks as competing explanatory systems to be adjudicated. Instead, it approaches ukuthwasa as a site where understandings of distress, spirituality, and healing are actively negotiated. Decolonial scholarship has long argued that dominant psychological frameworks universalise Euro-Western conceptions of mental illness at the expense of indigenous epistemologies. (Mkhize, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Oppong, 2022). Consistent with this critique, ukuthwasa is positioned here not as a cultural supplement to psychiatric discourse but as a legitimate interpretive framework in its own right for understanding mental distress within African contexts. Such framing is consonant with decolonial calls for pluriversal ways of knowing and for the repositioning of indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary intellectual discourse (Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). It resonates in particular with what Malherbe and Ratele (2022) term a ‘decolonising African psychology,’ one that declines to treat Western diagnostic categories as the universal grammar of distress, centring African ontologies instead as co-constitutive frameworks for understanding wellbeing.

2.3.1 Ukuthwasa as a Culturally Situated Response to Distress

Ukuthwasa refers to the process through which ancestors call an individual to train as a sangoma, or traditional healer (Thornton, 2009; Mlisa, 2009; Gumede, 1990). The calling manifests through a constellation of experiences such as recurring dreams, emotional disorientation, auditory or visionary phenomena, unexplained somatic symptoms, social withdrawal, and episodic trance states (Wreford, 2008; Mlisa &

Mazibuko, 2019). Indigenous spiritual frameworks interpret these experiences as pathology but as evidence of a spiritual translation unfolding under ancestral guidance toward formal initiation.

Scholarly interpretations of ukuthwasa differ across disciplinary traditions. Anthropological scholarship emphasises its cultural coherence and communal significance (Thornton, 2009). African-centred psychological perspectives interpret it as a culturally situated response to distress that cannot be fully reduced to biomedical pathology (Holdstock, 2000; Mkhize, 2004; Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010). Diagnostic tensions emerges, however, when this same constellation enters clinical settings unequipped to reconcile it as such: practitioners unfamiliar with indigenous healing systems have been shown to diagnose the condition in psychiatric terms (Edwards, 2011; Kriel, 2014; Oppong, 2022). Hearing ancestral voices may be clinically interpreted as auditory hallucinations indicative of psychotic disorders, while emotional volatility and social withdrawal align with depressive disorder criteria (Roehr, 2013). Conversely, traditional healing systems contain mechanisms for distinguishing spiritual calling from severe mental illness (Bakow & Low, 2018). The relationship between these interpretive frameworks therefore remains complex and unresolved.

This tension is historically produced. Psychiatry during the colonial and apartheid eras systematically pathologised indigenous spiritual experience, excluding traditional healing from formal healthcare structures altogether (Swartz, 1998; Thornton, 2009). Although the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (Act 22 of 2007) has since extended post-apartheid South Africa legal recognition to traditional healing, biomedical models still dominate institutional mental healthcare in practice. Young people presenting these symptoms associated with ukuthwasa consequently remain more likely to encounter psychiatric interpretation first. They arrive at indigenous spiritual frameworks, if at all, only afterward.

2.3.2 Multiple Epistemic Worlds and Ontological Flexibility among South African Youth

South African youth occupy a subject-position shaped by the intersection of global mental health discourse, formal education, family tradition, spiritual cosmology, and digital culture (Ratele, 2017). These domains do not operate sequentially. They coexist, often without institutional pressure to integrate them. Western biomedical-

psychiatric explanatory paradigms for psychological distress are predominantly privileged within public health messaging and online mental health content. Ancestral, spiritual, and Ubuntu-centric frameworks of wellbeing (Ubuntu denoting the relational ethic of personhood realised through community, often rendered as “I am because we are”) are perpetuated within communal and familial contexts (Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). This dynamic produces what this study terms ontological flexibility, wherein youth move fluidly between biomedical, spiritual, and cultural interpretive systems depending on context.

This ontological flexibility assumed critical salience during the COVID-19 period. Digital platforms became arenas where young people could articulate affective perturbation and existential uncertainty. Concurrent interpretability through both psychiatric discourse and ancestral cosmologies characterised experiences indexed by anxiety, socio-relational isolation, emotional lability or spiritual disturbance. This study does not seek to determine which framework is more legitimate. Instead, it examines how South African youth used TikTok’s multimodal affordances to express and negotiate mental distress across intersecting biomedical, cultural, and spiritual frameworks, including those associated with ukuthwasa.

2.3.3 TikTok as a Site of Epistemic and Expressive Negotiation

TikTok's audio-visual affordances and algorithmic visibility enabled the circulation of diverse and often competing narratives, ranging from psychiatric self-diagnosis and therapeutic discourse to spiritual explanations rooted in African cosmologies (Boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015). Multimodal affordances of the platform render it possible for content creators to articulate affective and numinous experiential dimensions without circumscribing them within a singular hermeneutic framework. Such creators may simultaneously index both psychiatric and spiritual explanatory models of psychological distress though a heterogeneous assemblage of semiotic resources, encompassing textual captions, metadata hashtags, sonic sections, visual iconography, embodied gestures, and dialogic audience engagement. The comment section constitutes an extension of these epistemic negotiations. This is where audience interlocutors reciprocate through psychiatric counsel, spiritual direction, first-hand testimony, or collective affirmation. In this manner, they constitute a collaborative space of intersubjective meaning-production that transverses epistemological boundaries (Barta & Andalibi, 2021).

Concurrently, the condition of digital visibility precipitates novel forms of tension. The platform may increase visibility of indigenous explanatory frameworks for psychological distress and reduce experiences of socio-relational isolation. However, it may also facilitate the commodification, aestheticisation, or reductive simplification of culturally consequential spiritual processes. Users may encounter conflicting interpretations and advice from both biomedical and spiritual perspectives. Approaching TikTok as an open space of negotiation, this study highlights how selected young South Africans use the platform to negotiate culturally situated meanings of suffering, healing, and identity.

2.4 Adolescent Wellbeing and Digital Platforms

Social media's impact on adolescent mental health is neither uniformly harmful nor uniformly beneficial. Psychological outcomes are contingent upon the qualitative modalities through which such engagement is enacted. This section interrogates the psychosocial mechanisms through which digital platforms may function as either risk amplifiers or protective buffers for adolescent wellbeing, drawing upon empirical literature to elucidate the contextual and behavioural conditions under which harmful or beneficial outcomes are more or less likely.

2.4.1 Pathways to harm

Viewing peer-generated content that depict celebratory milestones or idealised lifeworlds frequently prompts comparative self-evaluation. This occurs even when users recognise such representations as curated “highlight reels” rather than everyday reality (Steers et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2014). Adolescence amplifies self-evaluative deficit, ontological inauthenticity, and socio-relational estrangement. During this period, young people negotiate identity and social position while navigating a discordance between their digitally mediated identity performances and their bodily lived experience.

A secondary pathway operates through the displacement of co-present interpersonal interaction. Excessive platform engagement may progressively displace face-to-face relational practices. As young people spend more time scrolling, they have fewer opportunities for physical activities, leisure pursuits, and face-to-face conversation (Coyne et al., 2020). Adolescents who relate mainly through digital channels may

struggle to read body language and mange conflict in person. Offline situations then feel more anxiety-provoking.

Passive consumption and algorithmic amplification constitute a third pathway. Researchers have termed the endless consumption of content without reciprocal interaction “social snacking” (Gardner et al., 2013; Song et al., 2014). Algorithms exacerbate this by pushing emotionally intense posts that keep users watching longer. These sessions often leave people with less satisfaction over time, even though the content feels gripping in the moment (Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2021; Keles et al., 2020).

Information credibility and flattened expertise represent a fourth pathway. Even online communities designed for mental health support carry risks. Advice may come from peers without clinical expertise, individuals misrepresenting qualifications, or well-meaning users whose experiences are not generalisable (Entwistle et al., 2011). Comments sections on social media flatten everything into a single stream, making it difficult to distinguish evidence-based information from personal stories or opinions. This blurring can create unrealistic expectations. Platforms often highlight dramatic recovery stories or long periods of suffering because those draw strong reactions, while gradual progress, the slow, everyday work of getting better, receives least visibility (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012).

Contagion and triggering content constitute a fifth pathway. Exposure to detailed accounts of self-harm or suicidal ideation can trigger contagion, particularly among vulnerable adolescents (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012). The risk does not come from platforms themselves in some fixed way but from how platform features, the nature of content, and the vulnerabilities of young users interact.

Dependency on online validation represent a sixth pathway. Some adolescents develop dependency on online validation, relying on likes and comments to regulate self-esteem. Absence or negativity in these responses can trigger distress (Caplan, 2003). Harassment and invalidating comments represent obvious risks, but subtler harm can occur when well-intentioned responses minimise experiences, such as *“just think positive” or “you’re stronger than this.”* When responses fail to match the depth of the experience, isolation grows instead of easing.

The cycle of avoidance constitute the seventh pathway. Adolescents who spend most of their social energy in digital spaces sometimes struggle to read body language,

handle conflict, or build closeness in person. That difficulty can feed anxiety about face-to-face encounters. Over time, it creates a cycle: avoidance of real-world interaction leads to more time online, which in turn makes offline relationships feel more intimidating (Crabtree et al., 2010; Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014).

2.4.2 Pathways to protection

Despite these risks, extensive evidence highlights the protective functions of social media. Platforms create peer communities that reduce isolation and stigma. They offer emotional validation and practical advice from others who have been through similar experiences (Seabrook et al, 2016). Peer expertise complements professional knowledge by providing lived insights into daily coping strategies.

Online spaces allow controlled disclosure. Users can share selectively, remain anonymous, and engage at their own pace, making support-seeking feel less risky (Togas, et al., 2018). Both active participation and passive engagement can provide therapeutic benefits (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008; Mo & Coulson, 2010).

Importantly, online communities challenge stigma by normalising disclosure. Seeing peers openly discussing depression or anxiety counters perceptions of rarity or shame (Betton et al., 2015). This fosters belonging and reassures adolescents that their struggles are shared (Harvey et al., 2007). In tandem, social media platforms afford developmental space for identity experimentation; adolescent user may provisionally enact diverse self-presentational strategies and reflexively narrate their mental health experiences (Berryman et al., 2018).

2.4.3 The Role of Engagement Mode

Whether social media use is active or passive, social or consumptive, intentional or habitual, shapes psychological experiences and outcomes (Coyne et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). These dimensional are not mutually exclusive; a single session may involve multiple forms of engagement simultaneously.

Active use refers to participatory behaviours such as content generation, discursive commentary, and creative production. Passive use by contrast, involves the reception of content without direct reciprocal interaction, which is exemplified by scrolling and spectatorial viewing. Social use emphasises interpersonal interaction, connection, and community-building. It includes activities such as responding to others, reacting to a

videos through duets (parallel recording), or stitching (integrating parts of others' videos into one's own) (Anderson, 2020). Consumptive use, by contrast refers specifically to the absorption of content without any form of engagement, neither active participation nor social reciprocity.

Intentional use denotes to deliberate, goal-directed engagement, such as seeking mental health information or sharing personal experiences for support. Habitual use, by contrast, involves repetitive and often automatic patterns of engagement undertaken with limited conscious reflection, frequently manifesting through continuous scrolling or routine platform checking.

These dimensions are analytically important because they determine whether TikTok functions as a space of relational construction or as a mechanism of distress reinforcement. Frequency alone cannot predict this outcome. However, the mode of engagement does. Passive engagement is associated with poorer psychosocial outcomes such as self-perceived inadequacy, anxiety, and social isolation. Upward social comparison is the primary mediating mechanism. Active, socially participatory engagement yields different outcomes—affective validation and stronger belonging—despite comparable screen time (Coyne et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). Platforms such as TikTok often blur these distinctions, as users move fluidly between consumption and participation through algorithmically curated content, trends, imitation, and affective identification.

2.5 The Power of Visual and Video-Based Platforms

2.5.1 Platform specific Architecture

TikTok differed from both platforms in one structural feature: video was not merely favoured but was the dominant unit of content and interaction. Twitter/X, during the study period, was organised around short-form text and threaded replies. Facebook occupied a more intermediate position: its News Feed algorithm already prioritised photo and video content over plain text, but engagement remained organised around follower networks, shared links, and mixed-format posts rather than any single dominant mode. Neither Twitter/X nor Facebook, therefore, made video the dominant unit of content and interaction in the way TikTok did.

TikTok differs fundamentally because it is hypervisual and video-centric. Hypervisual refers to a platform architecture in which the dominant unit of content, consumption,

and interaction is short-form video rather than text or static images. The platform privileges full-screen vertical video, audio-visual editing tools, sound-based trends, and performative participation. Almost every major communicative practice on TikTok—such as stitch, trends, duets, stitches, and shared sounds, revolves around audio-visual performance (Zulli & Zulli, 2020; Kaye et al., 2022). Meaning is therefore produced more frequently through visual performance, sound, and movement, editing, and embodied expression than through written text alone.

This architecture is exemplified by TikTok's "For You Page" (FYP), an algorithmically curated vertical feed of full-screen video content. Similar video feeds have since been adopted by other platforms through products such as Instagram Reels, Facebook Reels, and YouTube Shorts. However, TikTok pioneered this design as its core interface, establishing a communication environment built around audio-visual circulation and discovery.

2.5.2 Multimodal Self-disclosure

Since TikTok privileges audio-visual expression, users do not disclose emotional experiences through words alone. Self-disclosure occurs through multimodal combinations of video, sound, music, colour, captions, gestures, and embodied performance. While the motivations underlying self-disclosure remain consistent with earlier theories of communication (Chelune, 1975; Derlega et al., 1993), the forms it takes have evolved. On TikTok, self-disclosure shifts from text-based updates to multimodal narratives incorporating audio, visuals, music, colour, and performance. This multimodal form consequently shapes both what is communicated and how audiences interpret emotional experiences.

Classical frameworks, including Altman's (1975) dialectic of openness and privacy, Goffman's dramaturgy, and Petronio's Communication Privacy Management Theory (2017), remain valuable but require adaptation to account for multimodal communication. The semiotic practice of impression management has transcended linguistic boundaries to encompass extra-linguistic modalities: post-production editing techniques, colour grading, lighting adjustments, compositional framing, and broader aesthetic choices. At the same time, the negotiation of privacy boundaries requires attention to visual and auditory signifiers that can either reveal or conceal personally identifiable information. Platforms such as TikTok are consequently theorised as

curated environments wherein affective narratives are orchestrated through the deliberate assemblage of sonic, imagistic, performative, and textual modalities (O'Hagan, 2021). The act itself thus becomes performative—not because it is inauthentic, but because emotional experiences are necessarily mediated through intentional multimodal selections.

2.5.3 Visual Semiotics and Colour

Among the communicative resources available on TikTok, visual aesthetics play a particularly important role in shaping emotional meaning. Audience decode emotional content through interpretive frameworks that assign evaluative labels: hopeful, authentic, distressing, dramatic, or vulnerable. These frameworks are shaped by visual choices. Colour, lighting, and framing do not merely illustrate emotional claims; they serve as primary cues through which audiences classify what they see.

Research in colour psychology demonstrates that colours can evoke a wide range of emotional responses (Reeves, et al., 1978). Red is predominantly associated with affective intensity and psychological arousal. By contrast, tranquillity is conventionally aligned with blue, although melancholic and depressive states have also been empirically associated with it (Küller et al., 2009; Andrews & Thomson, 2009). These findings highlight the complexity of colour effects and suggest that colour meanings cannot be reduced to universal interpretations (Rider, 2010).

On TikTok, colour acquires additional meanings through platform-specific conventions and user practices. Within mental health-related content, dark chromatic palettes are frequently deployed and tend to be interpreted as signs of vulnerability, gravitas, or experiential authenticity. Conversely, brighter colour palettes are often interpreted as attenuating or diluting the severity of psychological distress. Colour therefore functions simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a reference to shared visual conventions circulating within platform culture. In South African contexts, colour meanings may also be shaped by local cultural associations that differ from those identified in predominantly Western research. Visual elements such as colour meanings may also be shaped by local cultural associations that differ from those identified in predominantly Western research. Visual elements such as colour cannot be treated as neutral aesthetic features; rather they function as culturally situated

communicative resources that shape how emotional experiences are represented, interpreted, and negotiated within TikTok mental health narratives.

2.5.4 Humour and Creative Art as Coping Mechanisms

Humour has long been recognised as a protective mechanism for emotional regulation and stress reduction (Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011; Sliter et al., 2014). On social media, humour often appears as sarcasm, irony, and exaggeration (Al-Qudah & Hait, 2022). TikTok users frequently deploy humour when discussing suicidal thoughts, the high cost of therapy, or the side effects of medication. This kind of humour can build community among those who recognise the reference, push back against stigma, and render heavy experiences more bearable. However, humour also creates uncertainty. Viewers sometimes struggle to determine whether a joke is genuine coping or a way of concealing something more serious. Creators may choose humour deliberately because it allows them to share distress while maintaining a layer of protection. If the response turns negative, they can retreat to *"I was only joking."*

Expressive writing demonstrates therapeutic benefits through externalisation (Pennebaker, 1997), and visual modalities extend this principle. Pennebaker's seminal research demonstrated that writing about emotionally difficult experiences for 15–20 minutes over several sessions produces measurable improvements in both psychological and physical health outcomes, including reduced healthcare utilisation and improved immune function. The mechanism involves translating emotional experiences into language, which facilitates cognitive processing, meaning-making, and emotional disclosure. On TikTok, users post sketches or digital art as metaphors for their internal emotions. These visual pieces can communicate emotional weight in ways that speech alone cannot. Digital platforms make creative art more accessible, offering tools for externalising trauma and for trying out different versions of identity. This complements verbal disclosure and opens new possibilities for processing difficult experiences.

Research on visual externalisation shows promise, but much of it draws on small samples and short-term interventions. To build stronger understanding, future work should employ mixed methods, combine measurable outcomes with close qualitative reading of personal narratives, and place these expressions firmly in their cultural settings.

2.6 TikTok as a Case Study

2.6.1 Demographic and Technological Rationale

The multimodal coping strategies and communicative practices discussed in previous sections find contemporary expression on TikTok. Within social media ecosystems, the platform constitutes a distinctive architectural evolution, characterised by the intersection of audio-visual interface design, algorithmic content curation, participatory cultural norms, and archival affordances.

During the COVID-19 lockdown period, exponential proliferation positioned TikTok as a predominant platform among South African youth aged 16–24 (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Pereira et al., 2021). Given the progressive constriction of co-present interpersonal engagement, youth cohorts increasingly gravitated toward the platform as a multifaceted domain for recreational engagement, social connectivity, creative production, and self-presentation.

2.6.2 Platform Architecture and Mental Health Communication

TikTok is designed for multimodal expression. Unlike text-based platforms, it prioritises short-form, audio-visual content (Zhu et al., 2019; Alhabash & McAlister, 2014). These tools make it easy for young people to create polished content even without formal training; a teenager with a smartphone can produce videos that look professional. This accessibility opens up expression in ways text alone cannot: private struggles become visually compelling and shareable. However, it also means mental health content follows platform conventions. Videos with soft lighting, smooth transitions, and emotive music tend to spread further, quietly pushing creators to style their pain in ways that fit what the platform rewards.

The algorithmic recommendation system is central to this dynamic. It builds the For You Page using signals such as duration, likes, shares, comments, and re-watches. Once the algorithm spots interest in mental health topics, it keeps delivering similar videos. Users do not need to search; content finds them. This creates strong feedback loops: communities form quickly, and validation arrives fast. TikTok's publicly available documentation and independent technical analysis (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) suggest that the platform's engagement-based recommendation architecture prioritises content that sustains user attention. Even though the specific weighing of recommendation signals is proprietary and not directly observable, the correlation

between high-engagement content and prominent platform positioning is consistent with this architecture.

Collaborative features such as stitches and duets transform individual videos into conversations. Platform affordances enable the co-creation of depression-related content through duet functionalities, thereby facilitating the expression of communal solidarity, the articulation of counter-narratives, or the integration of personal experiential narratives (Klug et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, such participatory practices proliferated exponentially, with metadata tags including #pandemic, #lockdown, and #mentalhealth. These hashtags accumulated aggregate viewership exceeding one billion impressions. These digitally mediated interactions cultivate intersubjective solidarity and collective experiential cohesion, operating in contradistinction to the atomisation of individual psychological distress.

The endless scroll offers immediate emotional hits. Adolescents can watch dozens of videos in minutes, each giving a brief moment of resonance. This can feel comforting, but it also risks turning scrolling into a substitute for deeper offline conversations.

2.6.3 Information, Self-diagnosis and Cultural Negotiation

TikTok also functions as an informal source of mental health information. Content is user-generated and rarely checked by professionals, so engaging but inaccurate videos often reach more people than expert material. This contributes to self-diagnosis: relatable symptom descriptions lead young people to adopt psychiatric labels without clinical evaluation. Horwitz's (2002) analysis of the social construction of mental illness argued that diagnostic categories have expanded over time to encompass increasingly normal human experiences. Although Horwitz (2002) did not examine digital contexts, his framework helps explain how TikTok's algorithmic amplification of symptom descriptions may facilitate lay self-diagnosis by making psychiatric labels accessible and seemingly applicable to everyday struggles**.**

2.7 South African Research on Social Media and Mental Health

International scholarship on social media and mental health is well established; a corresponding South African literature, though comparatively recent, has begun to address local realities. Even so, this literature leaves substantial gaps unaddressed, most notably around audio-visual platforms, creative expression, and the particular conditions imposed by the COVID-19 lockdown.

A qualitative inquiry by Kgatla (2025) into online identity formation among South African youth found that adolescents undertake intricate identity performances across digital platforms, deploying curated self-presentation simultaneously as coping mechanism and source of psychological strain. Despite its insights into identity performance, the study addresses self-presentation as a general practice rather than examining how the affordances of a specific platform shape mental health expression under conditions of social disruption. This differs from the present study's qualitative multimodal analysis of TikTok content, which is positioned to address this gap.

Employing a quantitative correlational design, Lukose et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes among young adults in Buffalo City, establishing statistically significant associations between times spent on social media and elevated scores for anxiety and depression. As with much of the South African literature in this area, however, platform use is treated as a uniform, generalised variable, and its statistical relationship to wellbeing indicators measured without attention to how particular affordances shape communicative practice. It is this affordance-level specificity, approached qualitatively rather than correlationally, that the present study takes up.

Malatji (2024) examined South African users' perceptions of Instagram lifestyle content, foregrounding the consumption of curated imagery; exposure to idealised lifestyle posts was found to correlate with heightened social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptomatology among young users. The study's orientation toward passive engagement and perception, however, leaves the active, performative dimension of audio-visual production largely unexamined. Where Malatji's participants are positioned as viewers of others' curated content, the present study reorients attention toward production: how young South Africans themselves generate mental health content, rather than merely respond to it.

Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with Black South African millennials, Morapeli and Ratele (2025) investigated the mental health implications of text-based interaction on Black Twitter (X). Their findings revealed that participants regarded the platform as both a convenient informational resource and a means of escapism, even as the prevalence of trolling and hateful content contributed to anxiety and depression. The textual, discourse-driven register of this engagement stands in marked contrast

to the multimodal, video-based environment that constitutes this study's object of analysis.

Using structural equation modelling study with 1,176 adolescents aged 13–19 in peri-urban KwaZulu-Natal, Rossouw, du Plessis, and Pretorius (2024) modelled the social determinants of adolescent anxiety and depression. The outcomes showed that co-residence with a biological mother, perceived family and peer support, school enrolment, and a positive sense of school belonging each functioned protectively, while exposure to community violence proved detrimental both directly and indirectly, through erosion of school belonging. Population-level risk factor frameworks carry real scholarly merit in their own right. But such macro-level accounts sit at some conceptual distance from the present study, whose analytical focus resides in the granular, situated, and multimodal texture of individual disclosure as opposed to statistically generalisable predictors.

Boateng et al. (2026), finally, set out plans for a systematic review of social media mental health messaging across Sub-Saharan Africa, with the focus on formal health communication rather than youth-generated creative content. Across this body of work, no study attends to TikTok specificity as an audio-visual, performative platform on which mental health experience is communicated through short-form video, sound, humour, trend participation, embodiment, and creative self-presentation under conditions of enforced social isolation. The current study addresses this gap, contributing to an emerging South African scholarship by examining how young South Africans used TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown era to express, negotiate, and cope with mental health challenges audio-visually. In foregrounding lived experience, creative expression, and the communicative affordances of a platform organised around performance, visibility, participation, and effective interaction, it responds to a clear absence in locally grounded, platform-specific, qualitative research on digital mental health practice.

2.7.1 TikTok as a Paradoxical Diary

Research on expressive writing has shown disclosure in private journals supports reflection, emotional processing, and meaning-making (Pennebaker, 1997). The therapeutic value lies in the act of expression itself rather than in audience response. TikTok inverts this arrangement: private reflection becomes public communication,

and therapeutic benefit becomes contingent on reception. This study conceptualises this transformation as the paradoxical diary—a form of self-documentation in which personal experiences are publicly shared while remaining selectively framed through platform affordances. The concept captures the tension between the diary as a private space of self-reflection and the platform as a public space of performance.

2.7.2 TikTok as a Live Archive

The paradoxical diary names the single act of disclosure: private emotional experience publicly shared while remaining selectively framed through platform affordances. The live archive names the temporal dimension of the paradoxical diary: the accumulating, iterative, audience-responsive record that repeated entries produce, in which identity and distress are documented continuously rather than resolved. It is not a separate contribution but the cumulative condition that gives the paradoxical diary its historical specificity. The paradoxical diary is the unit of analysis; the live archive is the cumulative condition. Together they describe a new condition of selfhood under platform mediation—one in which the question of what has been said, to whom, and with what permanence is structurally unanswerable.

Lambert's (2013) concept of the live archive highlights how digital spaces enable continuous, user-generated documentation that resists the closure of traditional archival forms. On TikTok, this means that mental health narratives remain open, iterative, and responsive to audience interaction—unlike the closed case files of clinical records. Through this process, personal experiences become part of an evolving digital record that can be revisited, expanded, and reinterpreted over time.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

This framework integrates four theoretical perspectives, each addressing a distinct dimension of platform-mediated mental health communication. Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology (1959) illuminates the performative labour of self-presentation: how creators assemble distress from visual, sonic, and textual resources for audience-oriented display. Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Beck, 1979, 1985) illuminates the cognitive conditions that make certain performances necessary, particularly the reinforcement dynamics embedded in the platform’s rewards architecture. Bauman’s liquid modernity (2000) illuminates the provisional, opaque conditions under which identity is constructed on the platform. Castells’ network

society theory (1996, 2009) illuminates how distress circulates through networked communities of recognition, and how that circulation's reach masks its uneven distribution that the others cannot reach. Together they reveal TikTok not as a neutral container for mental health content but as an active participant in shaping what becomes visible, what gets validate, and what remains hidden.

2.8.1 Goffman's Self-presentation Theory

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical sociology, grounded in symbolic interactionism, conceives of selfhood not as a fixed essence but as a performance continually reconstituted through social context (Onorato & Turner, 2004). Central to this framework is the deliberate management of disclosure—the calculated revelation or withholding of information to shape how others perceive one (Drory & Zaidman, 2007; Higgins, 1987). This management operates across a spatial distinction that Goffman terms frontstage and backstage. The former is a site of curated performance, in which only what is deemed presentable is disclosed; the latter is a space of retreat, in which the performative demands of self-presentation are suspended. Translated to TikTok, the frontstage becomes an assemblage of technical and aesthetic apparatus—filters, soundtrack, caption, lighting, and edit—through which distress is not only expressed but visually and rhetorically composed for circulation.

Goffman (1972:319) also described "face" as the positive social value a person works to maintain. To protect face, people avoid actions that might cause embarrassment or loss of esteem. Smith and Cooley (2012) connect this to online self-presentation, showing that social and cultural expectations guide users to present images that meet perceived norms. Qutub (2021) demonstrates that TikTok creators adjust performances based on the audience, which can create stress and anxiety. Frontstage tends to dominate public interaction, yet backstage elements can still leak through, adding complexity to identity.

Goffman (1959) compared social life to theatre: social interactions become performances in which people shape their behaviour to match expectations and leave the impression they want. Non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and posture, send messages that words alone cannot carry. However, Goffman's (1959) framework predates digital media. It does not fully account for how platforms like TikTok shape self-presentation or the emotional and cognitive work involved. The

theory assumes ongoing impression management but does not explore the psychological costs or inner processes. Cognitive Behavioural Theory helps address that gap.

2.8.2 Cognitive Behavioural Theory

Within Cognitive Behavioural Theory, emotional distress such as depression and anxiety originates in dysfunctional cognitive schemas as core beliefs and automatic thoughts shaped by adverse experience (Beck, 1985, Beck, 1979). These distortions manifest through patterns such as overgeneralisation and catastrophising. Through them, negative affect and behaviour become mutually reinforcing, entrenching instead of resolving psychological difficulty over time (Beck et al., 1979).

On TikTok, these patterns may be amplified because the algorithm tends to push videos that spark comparison or demand performance, feeding self-criticism and leaving people feeling worn out (Vogel et al., 2014). Govender's (2021) study of South African youth during the COVID-19 pandemic era found that restricted mobility, economic precarity, and disrupted education converged to produce a pervasive sense of futility, compounded by the socially comparative processes precipitated by platform engagement. These conditions corresponded closely to what Abramson et al. (1989) theorise as learned helplessness: an attributional pattern in which outcomes are perceived as uncontrollable, engendering passivity and exacerbating depressive symptomatology.

Although CBT tools such as rethinking negative thoughts or behavioural activation can push back against some platform effects by challenging the biases they create and encouraging more real-life connection, the approach focuses mostly on the individual. It does not always leave sufficient room for cultural or collective influence. In South Africa, communal principles like Ubuntu stress collective support, suggesting adaptations to CBT that address broader inequalities and racial legacies (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013). Eagle and Kaminer (2013) argued that CBT requires cultural adaptation in South African contexts by integrating Ubuntu principles and addressing structural inequalities, rather than treating cognitive distortions as purely individual pathologies. Even so, TikTok's features, especially music and visuals, give users ways to voice and rework distorted thoughts. Basch et al. (2022), in a cross-sectional

content analysis of 100 TikTok videos tagged #mentalhealth (collectively receiving 1.3 billion views), found that 61% of comments offered messages of support or validation.

CBT functions here not as a clinical intervention tool but as an analytical lens for understanding the reinforcement dynamics through which platform architecture shapes thought-behaviour patterns over time. Goffman illuminates the performed surface of distress communication, CBT illuminates the cognitive conditions that make certain performances necessary. TikTok's attention economy amplifies distress-amplifying feedback patterns, validation dependencies, and comparative distortions rather than interrupting them. No sociological framework accounts for this internal cognitive dimension, making CBT a necessary complement to the study's communication-focused theoretical architecture.

2.8.3 Bauman's Liquid Modernity

A trend on TikTok rarely survives the week that made it: a sound, a format, a way of narrating distress rises, saturates the feed, and disappears, replaced by the next. Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity gives this churn a name. Where "solid" modernity organised life around durable institutions such as family, employment, and community that offered predictability and fixed hierarchies, liquid modernity renders those structures contingent, eroding the social codes and long-term bonds they once secured. Individuals caught in this flux are left, largely alone, to the fruitless labour of continually reconstructing an identity that keeps dissolving under them (Bauman, 2000:84).

Bauman likens liquid subjects to nomads: detached from rooted communities, they drift through uncertainties, fostering hyper-individualism laced with loneliness (Bauman, 2005; Palese, 2013). Digitally mediated ties coalesce into "swarm-like" formations--fleeting assemblages around viral trends (Bauman, 2000: 59). This impermanence exacts a psychic toll: relentless adaptation to consumerist aesthetics and global norms precipitates vulnerabilities like anxiety and depression (Cleary, 2020; Lee, 2022). Central to this is identity as a precarious "project": eschewing collectivist selves, liquid agents must ceaselessly sculpt marketable personas, navigating freedom's double bind of autonomy and angst (Bauman, 2000:32).

Applied to TikTok, liquid modernity elucidates users' negotiation of mental distress in a hyper-fluid arena of ever-shifting algorithms and ephemeral selfhood. Identity

performances such as #MyAnxietyStory videos epitomise liquefied presentation, where disclosures blur into commodified trends, amplifying self-diagnosis amid misinformation loops (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Yet Bauman arguably overstates dissolution: TikTok engenders resilient affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), evidenced by sustained mental health advocacy networks that counter swarm transience with digital kinship. Extended digitally, Bauman illuminates how platforms reshape identity, community, and wellbeing in contingent ecologies (Farnsworth et al., 2024).

2.8.4 Castells' Network Society: Space of Flows

Castells' (1996, 2009) network society theory frames the space of flows as interconnected streams of data, individuals, and resources surpassing geographic limits, organised in three strata: electronic signals for infrastructure, nodes and hubs for coordination, and agents wielding influence.

TikTok illustrates this through algorithms enabling instant worldwide exchanges of health narratives, erasing borders as local users interact with global ones. The For You Page serves as a central node, ordering exposure by interactions, frequently elevating dramatic over informed material (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Controlling entities perpetuate disparities, side-lining balanced views in favour of attention-grabbing formats.

The theory has been criticised for putting too much weight on technology and overlooking the physical realities and divides that shape access, especially in places like South Africa where connectivity remains uneven during crises (Gómez Martinez, 2011). Schlebusch and Govender (2021) examined how data costs and infrastructure limitations in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown created a "digital divide" that excluded many young people from participating in online mental health communities, meaning that the "space of flows" was not equally accessible to all. Even with those shortcomings, the theory points to something important: resistance. Creators do not just accept the rules; they push back against them, carving out room for voice and experiences that would otherwise stay quiet or unheard. In lockdown scenarios, this structure shaped distress among youth, blending local cultures with universal flows, though data barriers limited participation.

Castells complements Bauman by situating liquidity in networks, and Goffman by viewing performances as circulated acts.

2.8.5 Synthesis: The integrated Analytical Lens

This framework integrates CBT for cognitive processes, Goffman for performative displays, and Bauman for contextual fluidity, and Castells for networked circulation. It treats TikTok content as zones where these dimensions converge. Expressions manifest distortions (CBT) through curated staging (Goffman), influenced by mutable conditions (Bauman) and propagated through digital channels (Castells).

The four frameworks illuminate distinct dimensions of the same phenomenon. Goffman accounts for the performative labour of self-presentation. Creators assemble distress from visual, sonic, and textual resources for audience-oriented display. CBT accounts for the reinforcement dynamics embedded in the platform's reward architecture. Bauman accounts for the provisional, opaque conditions under which identity is constructed on the platform. Fluidity produced not by institutional absence but by structural inaccessibility. Castells accounts for how distress circulates through networked communities of recognition, and how that circulation's reach masks its uneven distribution. He explains the network's capacity for connection but not the experiential texture of recognition within it. No single framework is sufficient because each illuminates a distinct dimension that the others cannot reach.

2.9 Research gap

Foundational scholarship in multimodal social semiotics established the tools for analysing how multiple communicative modes combine to produce meaning (Kress, 2000; Jewitt, 2009). However, existing scholarship has frequently under-theorised how meaning on contemporary social media platforms is produced through the interaction of these modes and negotiated relationally between creators and audiences. This gap is particularly significant for understanding mental health communication on platforms such as TikTok, where distress is expressed through the interplay of visual imagery, sound, gesture, text, and platform-specific features.

In studies of mental health and social media, analytic attention has focused predominantly on thematic categorisation or descriptive patterns of content (Kgatla, 2025; Lukose et al., 2025; Morapeli & Ratele, 2025). Rossouw et al. (2024) examined adolescent anxiety and depression through standardised psychological measures,

while Boateng et al. (2026) outlined a systematic review protocol focused on mental health messaging framed within clinical paradigms. None of these studies examines how young South Africans draw on indigenous, spiritual, and culturally situated frameworks when expressing distress on multimodal platforms. This gap is particularly significant given that South African youth navigate multiple epistemic worlds in which biomedical, cultural, and spiritual understandings of distress intersect, compete, and coexist (Thornton, 2009; Mlisa, 2009; Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010).

This study identifies a gap at the intersection of platform, methodology, and context. Specifically, limited qualitative research examines mental health expression on TikTok as an inherently multimodal and relational practice, in which meaning emerges through the combined use of audio, visuals, text overlays, and embodied performance shaped by audience interaction in comment threads and platform-specific forms of engagement. Few studies draw on an integrated theoretical framework that accounts for the externalisation of internal cognitive states, the performative management of identity, and the structuring role of digital networks in shaping visibility and response. Finally, there remains a paucity of research that situates these dynamics within the lived realities of South African youth during the COVID-19 lockdown, a period in which TikTok functioned as an important site of mental health communication and peer interaction.

An additional gap concerns the limited attention given to how digital platforms function as sites of negotiation between competing understandings of mental distress. Existing studies often analyse mental health communication through predominantly biomedical frameworks, with little consideration of how users simultaneously draw on indigenous, spiritual, and culturally situated explanations of distress. In the South African context, where psychiatric and ancestral interpretations may coexist, conflict, or overlap, there remains limited research examining how these epistemic tensions are expressed and negotiated through social media platforms such as TikTok.

In response to these gaps, the study asks: How do young South Africans use TikTok's multimodal affordances to perform, negotiate, and cope with mental stress, and how do the platform's relational and networked dynamics shape processes of meaning-making? By addressing these questions, the study contributes an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of digital coping as a culturally situated and

platform-native practice. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship by foregrounding the interplay between visual communications, audience interaction, and competing understandings of mental health within a South African context.

2.10 Conclusion

This literature review examined the evolving landscape of mental health communication, arguing that social media functions as a space of simultaneous risk and protection. Platforms expose users to harmful strategies that can exacerbate depression and anxiety, yet they also offer access to communal support that can challenge mental health stigma.

Within this space, TikTok as a case study requires focused attention. The platform's multimodal features facilitate a raw and intimate form of self-disclosure that is qualitatively different from text-based communication. The semiotics of colour and aesthetic, the use of humour and creative art as coping strategies, and the interplay of sound, gesture, and visual narrative are key to how young people externalise their internal experiences with mental illness. These creative expressions allow users to present their struggles and build community in ways that text-based communication alone cannot capture.

Theoretically, this review establishes a dialogue between the macro-level analyses of Castells' network society and Bauman's liquid modernity, which contextualise the fluid nature of modern identity and community, and the micro-level analyses of Goffman's self-presentation and CBT's cognitive distortions, which illuminate how individuals manage and experience distress. The review further demonstrates that mental health communication on TikTok cannot be understood solely through Western psychological frameworks. South African youth often navigate multiple epistemic worlds in which biomedical, spiritual, and indigenous understandings of distress intersect, compete, and coexist within digital spaces. The following chapter turns to the methodology through which these dynamics will be empirically investigated.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodological framework guiding the study. It explains the research paradigm, research design, sampling procedures, data collection methods, analytical process, reflexivity, and ethical considerations.

The study adopts a qualitative netnographic approach situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. TikTok videos, captions, and viewer comments were analysed as multimodal forms of digital communication through which emotional experiences, coping practices, and identity performances were publicly negotiated.

3.2 Research paradigm: unpacking the philosophical standpoint

Research paradigms comprise the assumptions, norms, and standards that underpin the research approaches. They comprise ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, which together shape the researcher's worldview (Lincoln et al., 2011).

The study adopts a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, appropriate for examining how mental health is performed and co-constructed on TikTok. Constructivism holds that reality is socially produced through interaction rather than objectively given (Gergen, 2012); interpretivism treats knowledge as situated, subjective, and emergent from context (Scotland, 2012). These commitments justify analysing TikTok content not as transparent windows into individual pathology, but as collaboratively produced cultural texts whose meanings shift across viewers, platforms, and moments.

This stance directly shapes analytical practice. It requires attending to how creators, audiences, and algorithmic infrastructures jointly produce mental health narratives, rather than treating videos as stable records of private experience. It also demands reflexive awareness that the researcher's interpretive choices are constitutive of findings.

3.3 Research design

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Design

This study used qualitative netnography to explore the culture and practices of mental health expression on TikTok. Netnography adapts traditional ethnographic methods to

digital platforms. The approach treats TikTok as a site where South African youth construct shared understandings of mental health through multimodal performance and audience co-construction (Kozinets, 2015). Culture here is not a static context but an emergent process. Creators perform distress through platform-specific conventions, audiences validate or contest these performances through comment interaction, and algorithms distribute visibility unevenly across this negotiated field. The study examines how this process produces recognisable, repeated forms of mental health communication that participants can inhabit and mobilise. This design is suitable because TikTok's audio-visual architecture enables examination of how young South Africans curate mental health narratives within a unique digital and socio-cultural environment.

The strength of qualitative research lies in its capability to capture deep, contextualised lived experiences (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014). Unlike quantitative methods, it emphasises meaning-making by examining how individuals and communities create and perform their realities (Cleland, 2017). To capture this complexity the study combined Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis with multimodal and relational sensibility. This integration is necessary because meaning on TikTok emerges through the interplay of visual, audio, text and other platform features.

3.3.2 Analytical Framework

The study is informed by two complementary layers of theory. The substantive frameworks discussed in Chapter 2 (CBT, Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation, Bauman's liquid modernity, and Castells' network society) served as sensitising concepts during analysis. The analytical frameworks presented below provided the methodological tools for examining the multimodal TikTok dataset.

The substantive theories directed attention to key patterns without imposing rigid categories. CBT informed analysis of coping strategies: cognitive reframing through humour, externalisation of thoughts via captions or voice notes, and behavioural expressions of distress. It helped distinguish adaptive coping from maladaptive dataset. Goffman's dramaturgy offered a lens for examining impression management and identity performance, particularly the tension between frontstage composure and backstage vulnerability. Bauman's liquid modernity sensitised the researcher to the transient nature of digital intimacy: fleeting recognition in comments, low-commitment

solidarity through trends and the substitution of temporary platform bonds for stable relationships. Castells' network society highlighted how platform architecture shapes content circulation, including creator's awareness of algorithmic optimisation, trending sounds, and hashtag strategies.

These substantive theories were applied reflexively. Where data complicated theoretical expectations, interpretive emphasis was adjusted accordingly. Analytical frameworks shaped data collection, coding, and interpretation

Multimodality (Kress, 2000; Norris, 2004; Van Leeuwen, 2014) conceptualises meaning as emerging from the interaction of visual, auditory, gestural, textual, and spatial resources. Digital Ethnography or Netnography (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2015) positioned TikTok as a dynamic cultural space, supporting naturalistic sampling and relational analysis of how creators and audiences co-constructed meanings. Platform Studies (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013; Bucher, 2018) focused platform affordances, algorithms, and vernaculars in shaping communication, including TikTok-specific features such as Duet, Stitch, trending sounds, and algorithmic visibility.

3.4 Research Site: TikTok as a Youth-Oriented Digital Environment

3.4.1 Algorithmic Architecture as research Analysis

TikTok was selected for two reasons: demographic concentration and communicative specificity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok grew rapidly among South African youth, becoming a primary site for peer interaction, emotional expression, and identity performance when physical spaces were closed (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Pereira et al., 2021).

While Facebook and Twitter/X subsequently adopted similar video-feed formats, TikTok pioneered the short-form, algorithmically curated sound-on-default architecture that dominated youth digital culture during the study period. Its native affordances (duets, stitches, trending sounds, and in-app editing) structure collaborative, iterative expression distinct from text-centric or network-organised platforms. These features shape how mental health is performed and witnessed. This makes TikTok methodologically relevant as the culturally dominant environment where South African youth negotiated distress during lockdown.

Because the study did not have access to TikTok's proprietary recommendation algorithms, the algorithmic context was established through (a) analysis of TikTok's

publicly available creator guidelines and transparency reports; (b) engagement with platform studies scholarship documenting TikTok's recommendation logic; and (c) observation of content circulation patterns within the dataset, including the relationship between posting time, hashtag use, and comment velocity. These sources provided a theoretically informed but empirically indirect basis for interpreting how platform architecture may have shaped content visibility. Claims about algorithmic effects throughout the study should be understood as interpretive inferences based on observable patterns and platform documentation, not as direct empirical observations of algorithmic process.

3.5 POPULATION AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

3.5.1 Target population, accessible population, and units of analysis

The target population comprised TikTok videos, captions, and associated viewer comments relating to mental health experiences shared within South African communities between March 2020 and December 2022. The population included content addressing experiences such as stress, anxiety, depression, emotional distress, coping, and psychological wellbeing during and following the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The accessible population refers to the portion of the target population that was available and feasible for analysis (Asiamah, et al., 2017: 1607). For this study, it consisted of 20 publicly accessible TikTok videos identified through the sampling criteria and posted between March 2020 and December 2022. The dataset also included the accompanying captions and 50 viewer comments per video, resulting in a final dataset of 20 videos and 1,000 comments.

The unit of analysis were TikTok videos, their captions, and the viewer comments. Video analysis considered multimodal elements such as non-verbal cues, aesthetics, audio, and performed behaviour. The analysis also examined linguistic features, textual phrasing and paralinguistic elements such as emojis.

3.5.2 Analytical Sample

The study examined content produced within South African youth TikTok culture during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Young South Africans were operationalised as TikTok users aged approximately 18–24, the demographic most strongly associated

with the platform during this period (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Pereira et al., 2021). Since TikTok does not verify age data, identification relied on proxy indicators. TikTok's own platform terms set a minimum sign-up of age 13, establishing the outer demographic boundary of who could plausibly be producing content on the platform. This floor is considerably younger than 18-24 cohort the study's proxy indicators point to, and it cannot itself confirm that any individual creator falls within that range. These included self-disclosed age or educational status, participation in youth-coded trends, and South African cultural markers, including language use, local references, and geographic tags. These indicators allowed the researcher to situate content within a youth-dominant cultural and algorithmic environment without claiming demographic verification.

These findings describe content produced within a youth-dominant cultural environment rather than a population whose age could be independently verified. References to "young South Africans" throughout this study are therefore treated as categories not demographic ones. The final sample comprised 20 TikTok videos and 1,000 associated comments. The sample size was determined through assessment of thematic saturation following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) guidance for reflexive analysis, adapted for multimodal data.

Thematic saturation was operationalised through three criteria. First code saturation required that no new initial codes emerged across two consecutive videos. Second, category saturation required that no new candidate categories were identified across the final five videos. Third, thematic sufficiency required that existing themes were sufficiently data-rich to support interpretive claims with multiple instances across the dataset.

These criteria were tracked using a saturation log (see Appendix D) documenting the emergence and stabilisation of codes, categories, and themes across the sequential coding process. Coding across five communicative modes (textual, visual, auditory, expressive orientation, platform grammar) meant that thematic insights stabilised after the fifteenth video. The final five videos (Vid016-Vid020) confirmed existing themes without generating new categories or themes, suggesting that thematic saturation had been achieved. The decision to stop at 20 videos (rather than 15) was made to ensure thematic sufficiency and to provide a robust dataset for the comment analysis.

While Guest et al. (2006) suggest that 12interviews may suffice for saturation in homogeneous populations, this guidance derives from interview-based research and cannot be directly transferred to multimodal digital content. Given the greater complexity of multimodal data, where meaning emerges from the interaction of visual, auditory, textual, and performative elements, saturation in this study was assessed at the level of thematic and categorical stability rather than simple code frequency. This follows established qualitative guidance that saturation reflects conceptual sufficiency instead of exhaustive enumeration.

3.5.3 Sampling process

This study employed purposive sampling to identify TikTok content that could provide rich insights into how mental health experiences were expressed during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. Qualitative researchers use purposive sampling to identify information-rich cases that advance analytical objectives, rather than to represent a population statistically (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The researcher searched TikTok systematically using mental health hashtags (#MentalHealth, #MentalHealthAwareness, #MentalBreakdown, #Stress, #Anxiety, and #Depression) to identify videos addressing mental health experiences during the pandemic era.

The researcher screened videos against predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible content had to address mental health-related experiences, demonstrate a South African context through language, geographic tags, or cultural references, and fall within the selected study period. Videos that were unrelated to mental health, duplicated, inaccessible, or failed to meet the minimum engagement threshold were excluded.

The sampling process resulted in a final dataset of 20 TikTok videos. To facilitate relational analysis of audience responses, 50 comments were systematically selected from each video, producing a secondary dataset of 1,000 comments. Together, the videos, captions, and comments formed the corpus for multimodal and thematic analysis. Table 1 present a summary of the sampling process.

Table 1: Summary of the sampling process

Hashtags	Total Number of Posts on TikTok
#MentalHealthAwareness	6.7 million
#Anxiety	7.3 million
#Depression	4.2 million
#Stress	3.1 million

Post counts reflect TikTok's reported hashtag volumes at the time of data collection and are provided to contextualise the scale of the search pool, not to represent a definitive census of relevant content.

3.6 Data collection

Following ethical approval from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 3384), data were collected from TikTok using a purposive digital search strategy. The study focused on publicly available content related to mental health experiences shared within a South African context.

The initial research design targeted South Africa's strict COVID-19 pandemic era, March 2020 to June 2021, when movement restrictions generated acute conditions for distress. These conditions increased the volume of digital communication about that distress. This narrow window proved too restrictive in practice. Since relatively few videos from this strict lockdown period met the inclusion criteria, the timeframe was extended to December 2022. Two considerations justified this decision. The first was practical: the extended timeframe was necessary to reach thematic saturation, since the strict pandemic era on its own did not yield a dataset sufficient for rigorous analysis. The second was theoretical, and arguably more significant. The psychological and communicative aftermaths of the pandemic did not end when the restrictions were lifted. Extending the timeframe made it possible to trace how practices that began as urgent responses to crisis settled into something more durable, recognisable, repeated forms of mental health communication that outlasted the conditions that first produced them.

To address the temporal heterogeneity introduced by the extended collection period, temporal markers were recorded for each video during initial familiarisation (see

Appendix D). Where content from 2021 or 2022 showed characteristics consistent with post-lockdown platform normalisation, rather than acute lockdown response, this was noted in the coding memo and carried through to the thematic synthesis. The study makes no claim to have fully resolved the interpretive challenge this heterogeneity introduces; it does not claim to have tracked it systematically.

The researcher collected data using Apify, a cloud-based web-scraping platform that enabled systematic retrieval of public available TikTok content and metadata. The sampling process began with a systematic search of TikTok content using mental health hashtags (#Mental*Health, #MentalHealthAwareness,* #MentalBreakdown, #Stress, #Anxiety, and #Depression). These hashtags functioned as entry points to identify videos addressing mental health experiences during the pandemic era. The researcher then screened retrieved videos against inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2).

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The table provides a detailed breakdown of the inclusion and exclusion criteria

INCLUSION CRITERIA	
Content Relevance	Videos related to mental health experiences
Language	Videos in English
Date Range	Videos posted between March 2020 and December 2022
Engagement Metrics	Posts must have a minimum threshold of 100 views, 50 likes, and 50 comments
Hashtags	Videos under relevant hashtags #MentalHealth, MentalHealthAwareness, #Mental Breakdown, #Stress, #Anxiety, #Depression
Engagement threshold	Minimum 100 views, 50 likes, and 50 comments
Geographic context	Videos demonstrating South African context through language, cultural reference, or geographic tag
EXCLUSION	
Irrelevant Content	Content unrelated to mental health

Duplicate Posts	Videos posted multiple times
Low Engagement	Videos with fewer than 50 comments
Inaccessible accounts	Videos on restricted or inaccessible accounts
Harmful content	Videos showing or promoting hate speech, bullying, or self-harm
Non-relevant humour	Humour without mental health relevance
Insufficient engagement	Videos failing to meet minimum engagement threshold (100 views, 50 likes, 50 comments)

The sampling process is summarised in Figure 1. The researcher searched TikTok using the hashtags listed above and retrieved candidate videos through Apify. Each search returned up to 100 videos, generating an initial pool of 400. The researcher then applied inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2) through a four-stage screening process: duplicate removal, initial screening against relevance criteria, retrieval verification, and detailed eligibility assessment. This process yielded 20 videos for analysis.

Figure 1: Sampling and Screening Process for TikTok Video Selection (Page, et al., 2021)

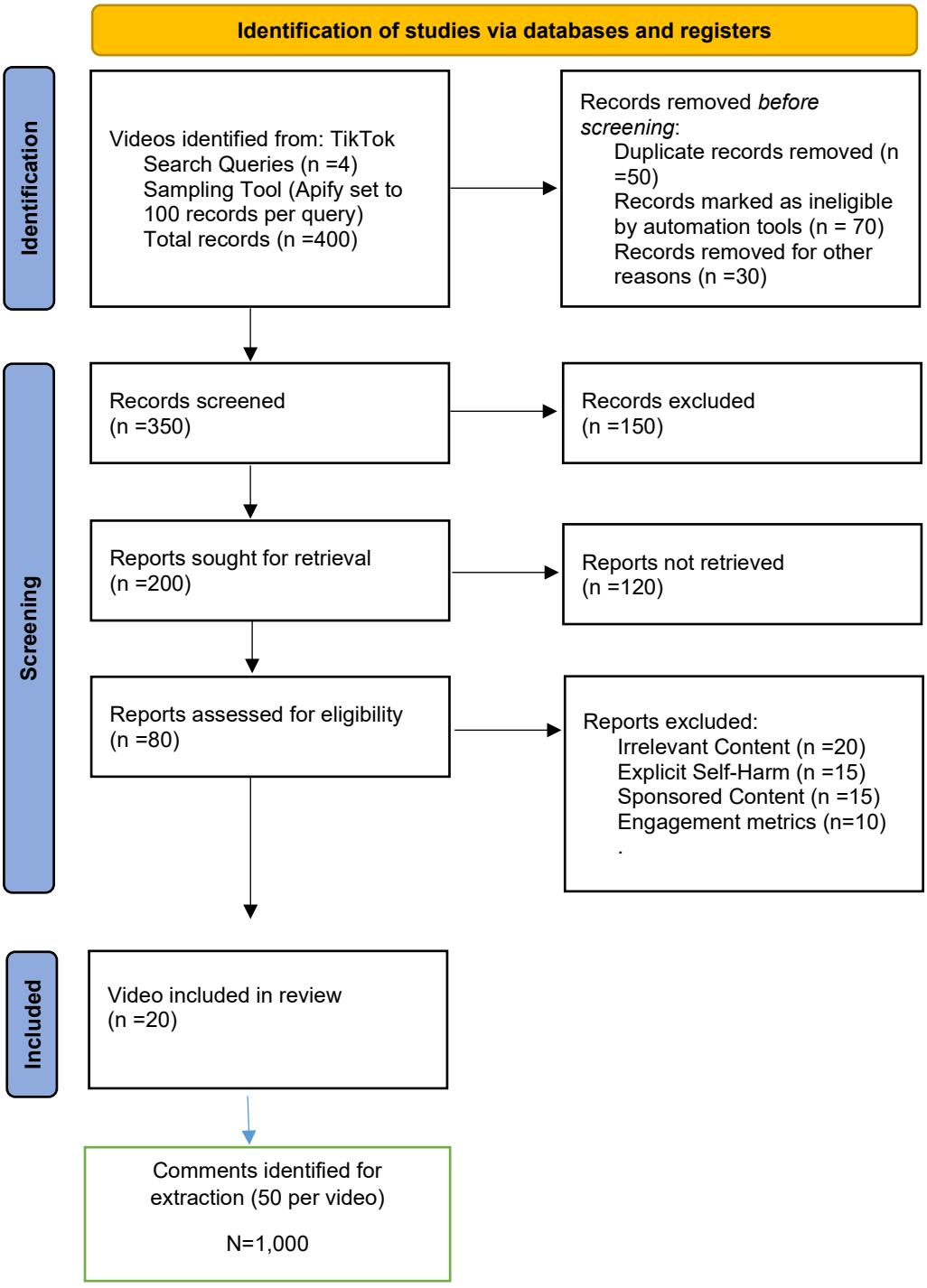


Figure 1 documents the quantitative flow at each stage; the following paragraphs explain the qualitative judgments involved.

The 20 videos were selected from the 80 available videos through purposive judgment sampling guided by the criterion of maximum variation. The researcher aimed to include videos representing diverse communicative modes (humour, aesthetic, confessional, artistic, etc.), diverse settings (bedroom, bathroom, outdoor, clinical), and diverse temporal periods (early lockdown, late lockdown, post-lockdown). This purposive selection ensured that the sample captured the breadth of mental health communication practices rather than concentrating on a single type of content.

Apify facilitated the initial identification and retrieval of relevant content. However, because automated extraction could not adequately capture multimodal features, a second stage of manual review was undertaken. Selected videos were downloaded and viewed repeatedly to examine visual, textual, auditory, and performative elements. To support relational analysis of audience engagement, 50 comments were manually extracted from each selected video's comment section.

The final dataset comprised 20 TikTok videos and 1,000 associated comments. Video metadata, including captions, views, likes, shares, and comments, were organised in a spreadsheet, saved as a CSV file, and imported into NVivo 15 for coding and analysis. Original captions and comments were retained in their verbatim form to preserve contextual meaning during interpretation. A summary of sampled videos and metadata is provided in Appendix E.

3.7 ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

3.7.1 Familiarisation with the data

Each video was reviewed multiple times using a systematic approach. The first viewing was with sounds to capture the full multimodal experience, second viewing without sound to isolate visuals. The third viewing focused on captions and text overlays, while the fourth focused on audience comments and interaction. NVivo annotation and memo tools captured initial observations, reflections, and provisional connections such as recurring aesthetic choices, emotional registers, and platform-specific features (See Appendix C).

3.7.2 Initial Codes

Coding proceeded chronologically (Vid001 through Vid020) using NVivo 15. Although analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, attention was also given to the relationships between communicative modes within

and across videos. Drawing on relational content analysis (Jewitt, 2009; Zhao, et al., 2014), coding examined how captions, visuals, audio, gestures, and platform features interacted to produce meaning. Particular attention was paid to:

- Intratextual relations, referring to interactions between communicative modes within individual videos (e.g., alignment or contradiction between captions, visuals, and audio).
- Intertextual relations, referring to connections across videos and between videos and audience comments, including recurring themes, shared discourses, and collective meaning-making.

Table 3: Examples of Initial Codes Generated During Analysis

Coding Area	Elements Coded	Example Codes
Textual	Captions, overlays, hashtags	Textual disclosure, caption framing, hashtag strategy
Visual	Lighting, filters, body language, scene composition	Colour symbolism, embodied distress signals, bedroom isolation
Auditory	Music, tone, sound effects, silence	Audio-visual alignment, modal contradiction, silence as communication
Expressive Orientation	Tone, register, performative stance	Strategic humour, performative concealment, confessional directness
Platform Grammar	Format, edits, duets, stitches, trends	Duet interaction, stitch continuation, trending audio use

Each code was defined with inclusion criteria, exemplar extracts, and boundary notes. Coding was primarily inductive, while remaining sensitised by the study's theoretical framework. Appendix A presents the full codebook, including selected codes with definitions, examples, and reflexive notes.

Two coding practices ensured analytical rigour. First, negative cases with videos or segments that resisted emerging patterns were flagged during coding and revisited

during theme development to prevent premature closure. Second, modal contradictions were coded explicitly where communicative modes worked at cross-purpose (e.g., upbeat music paired with distressing visuals), as these disjunctions often carried significant interpretive weight.

3.7.3 Comment Coding Framework

To complement the multimodal analysis of videos, the 1000 sampled comments were subjected to a secondary interpretive coding process. The purpose was not to generate standalone themes but to identify the dominant ways audiences responded to mental health disclosures on TikTok. During initial coding, comments were grouped according to their communicative function within interaction. Five recurrent categories emerged: validation and recognition; support and engagement; critique and disagreement; information sharing; social regulation and policing.

Comments were extracted using a systematic procedure designed to capture both volume and variation. For each video, the 50 comments were drawn from the top-ranked comments as displayed in TikTok's default sort order at the time of data collection. This selection logic was intentional. Highly engaged comments are most likely to have been read by the creator and by other viewers. They are therefore analytically significant for understanding the relational dynamics of the platform rather than documenting individual responses.

Comments were extracted verbatim and where necessary, paraphrased to preserve original meaning while aligning academic tone. Both forms were coded in NVivo 15 alongside associated video data, ensuring that relational context, including video source, creator username, and emotional register was preserved throughout analysis.

Comments coding was not conducted independently of video analysis. The purpose of comment analysis was explicitly relational: to examine how audience responded to, contested, extended, and co-constructed the mental health narratives that creators had initiated through multimodal performance. Consequently, the five comment categories did not generate standalone themes; instead, they functioned as secondary interpretive evidence within the theme structure produced by the video analysis. Where comment patterns provided strong corroboration of a theme, they are presented as interpretive counterweights. This integration of comment evidence into thematic interpretation reflects the study's netnographic commitment to examining

TikTok as a relational space in which meaning is co-constructed between creators and audiences, rather than produced unilaterally by content creators.

3.7.4 Theme Development

Theme development moved from descriptive coding to interpretive synthesis through three stages.

Stage one: initial sorting. The researcher grouped codes by conceptual similarity. Physical card sorting and NVivo hierarchy charts identified twelve candidate themes: humour as emotional management, aesthetic translation of distress; intimate spaces as confessional sites; performative concealment; emotional labour in composure; seeking recognition and belonging; platform mediated expression; quiet endurance; visual narrative construction; commodification of vulnerability; temporal marking of pandemic experience; and collective diagnostic ritual.

Stage two: review and refinement. Each candidate theme was assessed against three criteria: (a) internal coherence to check whether codes shared an organising concept; (b) distinctiveness, whether the themes could be clearly differentiated from others; and (c) empirical sufficiency to check whether the theme was supported across multiple data sources. Overlapping or thin clusters were merged or discarded. Platform-specific codes (duets, stitches, trending audio) were redistributed across other themes rather than constituting a separate mode.

This review produced seven final themes:

1. Searching for connection in a crowd-desire for recognition and validation through platform mediated disclosure
2. Aestheticising pain-translation of distress into stylised visual and sonic performance
3. Bathroom, beds, and shadows as the new confessional space-domestic settings as charged sites of vulnerability
4. The mask of humour-comedy as protective strategy and communicative mode
5. Commodifying mental health-vulnerability operating within platform attention economies
6. Smiling through silence-restraint, endurance, and non-verbal expression
7. A picture in a thousand strokes-symbolic and artistic expression beyond verbal articulation

Stage three: validation. A spreadsheet tracked theme distribution across the dataset. The seven themes recurred across the dataset, although with varying levels of prominence.

Negative case analysis. Three videos initially resisted thematic categorisation:

- Vi005 (spiritual ancestors/psychiatric ward): this videos blended humour, spirituality, and clinical narrative in ways that did not fit neatly into any single theme. It was ultimately distributed across Theme 1(connection), 4 (humour), and 5 (commodification), with a memo noting its resistance to singular categorisation.
- Vid017 (homeopathic remedy): This video's ambiguous position between personal testimony and product promotion resisted clear classification. It was placed in The 5 (Commodifying Mental Health) but flagged as a boundary case where the line between support and commerce was particularly blurred.
- Vid020 (laughing during breakdown): This video's description of dissociative laughter as a breakdown symptom did not fit the "mask of humour" theme (which concerns deliberate humour as coping) but rather represented involuntary emotional dysregulation. It was places in Theme 6 (Smiling through Silence) with a memo distinguishing performative from involuntary emotional display.

These negative cases were not discarded. They were used to refine boundaries and to ensure that the final thematic structure could accommodate not suppress data that resisted easy categorisation.

Appendix F, Figure 2 provides a visual representation of how these phases, dimensions, and relational stances operate together as an integrated analytical framework. It sets out the full operationalisation of reflexive thematic analysis through multimodal relational sensibility).

Appendix B presents the theme reconciliation table, reconciling communicative modes with final themes, illustrating how multimodal elements converged in interpretive synthesis.

3.7.5 Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Reflexivity was maintained through systematic memoing in NVivo 15. Memos documented coding decisions, theme boundary uncertainties, and interpretive dilemmas. One persistent bias required explicit management: an inclination to privilege textual elements over visual and sonic modes. Early memos flagged this tendency, prompting deliberate attention to videos where meaning emerged through silence, gesture, or editing rather than linguistic content. Vid010 and Vid002 exemplified such videos.

Given the solo-researcher design, peer debriefing was conducted retroactively to verify coding consistency and challenge interpretive assumptions. A colleague with expertise in digital media was provided with (a) the complete codebook (Appendix A); (b) five randomly selected un-coded videos; (c) the coding manual with inclusive/exclusive criteria. The peer independently coded these five videos using NVivo 15, after which a debriefing session was held to compare coding decisions.

Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, with no discrepancies requiring codebook revision. This process confirmed that the coding scheme was sufficiently explicit to support consistent application by an independent coder. The peer debriefing protocol and results are documented in Appendix G.

Trustworthiness was supported through the following measures:

- Prolonged engagement (10 weeks across familiarisation, coding, and theme development).
- Thick description
- Audit trail documentation.
- Negative case analysis.
- Peer debriefing

The researcher acknowledges that interpretive analysis is inherently subjective; these procedures render subjectivity visible and traceable rather than claiming to eliminate it.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

The study received institutional ethics approval (Ref: 3384) and adhered to TikTok's terms of service. Data were publicly posted content; no private accounts were accessed and no direct interaction with users occurred.

The sensitivity of mental health disclosure required harm-minimisation protocols. Usernames and profile images were removed or anonymised. Verbatim quotations were lightly paraphrased where re-identification risk outweighed analytical precision. Data were stored on an encrypted, password-protected drive with access limited to the researcher. These measures align with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) and standard practice in digital ethnography (Markham et al., 2016).

To protect participant anonymity and comply with copyright guidelines, no video content, visual frames, audio, or screenshots is reproduced in this dissertation. Video captions and on-screen text were paraphrased in the analysis to prevent re-identification and respect creator ownership. Appendix E provides a metadata table comprising date posted, engagement metrics, and summary descriptions for each video in the corpus. These summaries contextualise the content and communicative purpose of each video without reproducing visual material. This decision reflects both ethical obligations to platform users whose content was collected from publicly accessible posts but who did not consent to academic reproduction of their creative work and a conservative interpretation of fair use provisions. TikTok's Terms of Service grant the platform a broad licence over user-generated content. However, they do not extend to third-party scholarly use.

It was impossible to obtain informed consent for publicly available platform data. Although users posted content voluntarily, they did not anticipated academic analysis. The study, therefore acknowledges this tension as an irresolvable limitation of research using publicly available digital content.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the research design, methodology, and analytical procedure guiding this study. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, qualitative netnographic design, purposive sampling strategy, and multimodal data collection procedures were explained. The analytical procedure comprising familiarisation, coding theme development, and reflexive validation produced seven themes that capture how young

South Africans expressed and coped with mental health challenges on TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown. These themes are not presented as findings in themselves; they constitute the analytical framework through which the dataset is interpreted in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

The analytical procedure described in Chapter 3 (section 3.7) produced seven themes capturing how young South Africans expressed and coped with mental health challenges on TikTok during COVID-19 lockdown. This chapter presents each theme as an interpretive argument, using multimodal evidence from the dataset to build analytical claims.

This chapter addresses the study's three research questions: (1) which communicative modes are used to express mental health narratives during lockdown? (2) What coping strategies are communicated through these expressions? (3) How do viewers respond to the audio-visual messages shared by content creators?

The evidence below consists of reconstructed video descriptions rather than embedded media. Each extract includes temporal context (posting date, lockdown phase), visual description (setting, body, gesture, lighting, editing), sonic context (music, sound, silence), textual elements (caption, overlay, hashtag), and selected comments indicating audience response. These reconstructions aim to preserve multimodal complexity while enabling linear argument.

4.2 Overview of themes

The analysis generated seven themes that capture distinct patterns in how young South Africans articulated psychological distress on TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown. These themes are not mutually exclusive categories; they overlap, intersect, and sometimes coexist within single videos. Theme 1, Searching for connection in a crowd, speaks to the paradox of posting isolation in a space designed for visibility. Theme 2, Aestheticising Pain, shows how distress was translated into visual form through colour, lighting, and composition. Theme 3, Bathrooms, Beds, and Shadows as Confessional Spaces, reveals how domestic spaces were converted into stages for public disclosure. Theme 4, The Mask of Humour, captures the dual function of comedy as both disclosure and deflection. Theme 5, Commodifying Mental Health, documents how distress acquired economic value through platform monetisation. Theme 6, Smiling through Silence, shows how performance preserved the mask rather

than the face. Theme 7, A Picture in a Thousand Strokes, demonstrates how visual symbolism operated where words failed. Collectively, these themes do not describe a single coherent practice. They describe a fractured terrain in which young people negotiated psychological distress through multimodal, platform-mediated communication.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Searching for connection in a crowd

The search for connection operates through cognitive patterns that CBT would recognise as characteristics of distress-maintaining cycles. Vid010's caption *("You don't know pain until you're staring at yourself in the mirror with tears in your eyes, begging yourself to just hold on and be strong") (see Appendix E)* exemplifies all-or-nothing thinking (pain as absolute threshold) and emotional reasoning (presence of tears as confirmation of unbearable suffering). The creator does not describe a specific event but generalises from a moment of distress to a totalising self-definition. This cognitive pattern is amplified by the platform's architecture of visibility. The video receives 137,900 views and 1,414 comments—validation that reinforces the pattern's recurrence.

Drawing on Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity, the study argues that these connections are not stable social bonds. They are momentarily recognitions, mediated by algorithm rather than sustained obligation. Castells' (1996) network society helps explain the structural condition: in a space of flows, connection is always possible but never guaranteed, making recognition a scarce resource that heightens the stake of visibility.

Creators share disclosures as invitations to be seen and understood. Viewers are drawn to content that mirrors their own struggles, and engagement often manifests as affective alignment. A comment such as *"You saved my life"* indicates that viewers experience these videos as emotionally significant sources of comfort and validation. Such statements should not be read literally. Yet they indicate that creators can provide connection and hope for distressed individuals. The comment also illustrates how emotional support on TikTok is often mediated through brief encounters between strangers. Rather than emerging from established relationships, recognition is generated through shared experiences made visible on the platform.

Comments such as "*I thought I was the only one*" *(@User8303735282)* reveal how TikTok reduces feelings of isolation by connecting users with experiences similar to their own. Recognition emerges when viewers realise that their struggles are shared by others, creating a temporary sense of belonging.

These connections are fragile and uneven. Although creators present comparable levels of vulnerability, some videos attract substantial validation while others with similar pain receive minimal response. This unevenness sharpens the stakes Bauman's (2000) framework identifies: recognition is not only fleeting but scarce, distributed unequally even among creators presenting comparable vulnerability.

Voice journaling occupies a space between private reflection and public narration. By recording and sharing spoken reflections, creators externalise emotions that may otherwise remain unspoken. Unlike traditional journaling, TikTok allows these reflections to be witnessed by others, creating opportunities for validation and support. Several comments show viewers interpreting these recordings as self-reflection, suggesting that audiences perceive voice journaling as both private processing and social communication.

The auditory mode is essential here. Voice journaling introduces a theatrical dimension often overlooked in discussions of digital self-disclosure. The creator is simultaneously speaker, audience, and performer. Unlike private diary writing, the act of recording and uploading one's voice transforms reflection into public enactment. The creator speaks to themselves while anticipating an unknown audience. This dual orientation produces a productive tension: authenticity becomes dependent upon mediation. The emotional power of the disclosure derives not from its privacy but from its visibility. Sonic qualities of the voice further to meaning. Hesitations, trembling, pauses, changes in volume, and audible breaths function as affective signs that communicate distress independently of lexical content. From a multimodal perspective, emotional meaning resides not only in what is said but in how the voice sounds.

The search for connection is also witnessed in recovery stories. Creators share personal experiences as proof that certain paths work. In Vid014 (*June 2020, Alert Level 3/transition period; see Chapter 1 for an explanation of South African COVID-19 alert levels*) shows the creator presenting a static image of a healthy meal against a

kitchen background. No sonic element; no embodied performance. The caption reads: *"I rejected antidepressant prescription…told my doctor I'll find my way back to self without meds. Years later I'm living my best life."* This text follows a platform script of transformation: suffering to wellness, passivity to agency delivered through the visual register of lifestyle aspiration (healthy food, bright kitchen). The absence of sonic or performative elements is itself significant. The argument is made through multimodal intensity that characterises other videos in the dataset.

But within the South African context, this script carries specific political weight. Mental health pharmaceutical access is unevenly distributed along racial and economic lines; public sector psychiatric care is under-resourced, and private treatment remains unaffordable for most. Rejecting medication is thus not a universal narrative of empowerment but a situated act whose meaning depends on whether medication was ever accessible in the first place.

Viewer comments range from agreement *("You inspired me to stop my meds"*) to warning *("Please don't discourage people from treatment"*). These responses demonstrate that recovery narratives are interpreted in different ways by audiences. While some viewers treat personal testimony as guidance for their own mental health journey, others challenge its implications. Personal stories become sites of negotiation where viewers debate treatment, recovery, and responsibility.

The negotiation between biomedical and indigenous explanatory frameworks that surfaces in Vid014 is not limited to a recovery narrative alone. A post circulating under #MentalHealth—hereafter referred to as the multi-epistemic disclosure—makes epistemic tension visible in a single, unresolved caption. The creator describes experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations beginning in 2020, noting that traditional healers interpreted these symptoms as ukuthwasa, a spiritual calling, while medical professionals assigned formal diagnoses of schizophrenia and major depressive disorders. The post does not arbitrate between these interpretations. Both are presented as having been operative, each carrying its own institutional authority, its own vocabulary of suffering, and its own prescription for response. For months the creator followed psychiatric medication protocols. At the time of posting, the creator marked one year medication-free. Symptoms were described as resolved.

The caption does not reject biomedicine, as Vid014 does. It does not straightforwardly validate indigenous frameworks. It occupies a third position: two systems applied to the same body, neither absorbing the other, with a resolution belonging to neither entirely. The audio attached to the post is a Xhosa praise track, and the scriptural citation introduces a third interpretive register: charismatic Christian faith. In many South African communities Christian faith functions as a distinct healing framework rather than supplement to either biomedical or indigenous systems. The creator's narrative traverses three epistemic traditions without settling into any of them.

This is significant for how TikTok functions as a site of mental health communication in the South African context. The platform does not require users to declare allegiance to a single explanatory system. Its caption format accommodates contradiction; its audience expects narratives rather than clinical precision; and its recognition economy rewards vulnerability rather than coherence. A post would be untranslatable in a clinical consultation, where competing frameworks must be adjudicated rather than allowed to coexist. On TikTok, it becomes fully legible because platform norms permit epistemic multiplicity to circulate without resolution. The 4,538 like this post accumulated suggest that the recognition it solicited landed, that audiences encountered the simultaneously held frameworks and found in them something familiar. The connection here was generated through unresolved tension.

Vid005 demonstrates epistemic coexistence not as individual navigation of competing claims but as institutional collision processed through humour. The creator, wearing hospital pyjamas in a psychiatric ward setting, uses on-screen text to narrate a personal story about spiritual awakening leading to psychiatric admission. The video employs humour and irony to process a stigmatised experience. The caption performs a collision: *"When your spiritual ancestors got you admitted into Psych ward."* The spiritual framework (ancestors as agents) and the biomedical framework (psychiatric ward as institution) are not presented as alternatives to be chosen between but as sequential events in a single narrative. The creator does not resolve whether the ancestors caused the admission or whether the admission was necessary despite the ancestors; both propositions circulate simultaneously.

The comment thread reveals how audiences navigate this collision. One commenter wrote: *"no because my spiritual awakening was intense never thought I'd come back*

from all that" (@User258974680759, 2021-02-04), affirming the spiritual framework without rejecting the psychiatric outcome. Another wrote: *"my mum dragged me out of psych ward after uvuka umoya and I was rushed to hospital" (@User43098605423, 2021-02-19),* documenting a family intervention that moved the creator between biomedical and indigenous spaces without resolution. A third commented: *"highly likely to be admitted. Because the current known world is invested towards instead of embracing abaphansi" (@User7206387328367, 2021-02-23),* explicitly naming the structural conflict between biomedical institutional investment and indigenous spiritual recognition (abaphansi referring to ancestral spirits). These comments do not adjudicate between frameworks; they document the lived experience of moving between them.

Where multi-epistemic disclosure presented epistemic coexistence as narrative capacity, Vid005 presents it as institutional reality. The psychiatric ward and the ancestral calling are not abstract concepts but physical spaces the creator's body occupies. The humour does not resolve this tension; it makes the collision shareable. Vid005's engagement (2,420 views and 129 comments) is modest compared to the multi-epistemic disclosure (4,538 like). This suggest that institutional collision is less legible within platform recognition economies than individual narrative navigation. The recognition space distributes visibility unevenly not only by emotional intensity but by epistemic legibility.

When vulnerability reaches severe levels, connection feels urgent. Vid006 documents preparation for psychiatric admission. *The creator says, "I cannot survive the outside world alone," and "it's not as psych ward, it's a hospital for sadness" (@User3018632282, 2022-04-09)*. By sharing their admission journey publicly, the creator seeks support from audiences beyond the clinical setting. The video demonstrates that mental health communication on TikTok is not limited to discussing symptoms but also includes documenting help-seeking behaviour. Audience responses suggest that public disclosure can reduce stigma and create opportunities for encouragement during periods of crisis.

The phrase *"hospital for sadness"* is not merely stigma-reduction; it is a translation strategy that renders psychiatric care into the affective vernacular of platform discourse, where "sadness" is more legible than "mental illness" and more amenable

to the platform's preference for consumable emotional content. Within the South African context, where mental health stigma remains significant and access to services is uneven, publicly narrating psychiatric admission performs a cultural function that extends beyond individual disclosure. To seek institutional psychiatric care in this context is already a socially weighted act, one that carries associations with chronic illness, loss of control, and for many communities, a departure from indigenous frameworks of healing. To narrate that act publicly, on a platform where strangers bear witness, is to reframe it as a decision that can be spoken about. The creator does not simply report going to the hospital. She translates an act that the broader culture has coded as shameful into one that the platform codes as shareable. That translation is the cultural work, and it is only possible because the platform offers an audience that the clinical setting does not. The creator normalises help-seeking behaviour while challenging dominant assumptions surrounding institutional care. But this normalisation is platform-conditioned: the creator must translate institutional care into platform-compatible language ("sadness" not "psychosis") to make it shareable.

The search for connection emerges as a defining feature of mental health communication on TikTok. Across testimony, recovery stories, voice journals, and crisis narratives, creators seek recognition from audiences who may share similar experiences (Tucker & Lavis, 2019). These interactions can reduce feelings of isolation and create moments of validation, but they remain dependent on platform visibility and audience engagement. Connection is therefore possible but never guaranteed. Mental health disclosure on TikTok operates within a space where support is accessible yet fragile, offering temporary forms of recognition that may not develop into lasting relationships. Rather than replacing offline support systems, TikTok creates a form of networked recognition in which strangers become temporary witnesses to one another’s struggles. These moments of connection may be brief and unstable, yet they provide forms of visibility, validation, and belonging that many creators seek when sharing personal experiences. It is also a search for recognition within a crowded and algorithmically mediated social world.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Aestheticising pain

Drawing on Goffman (1959) and the multimodal framework, the researcher examines how distress is translated into visual and sonic performance, and how this translation raises questions about authenticity, platform design, and the conditions of shareability.

On TikTok, suffering is almost never shown unfiltered. Creators use filters, lighting, music, captions, gestures, and editing to frame, place, and make it readable for others. These choices let creators decides what shows, how fast emotions unfold, and how viewers receive it. The process raises questions about authenticity and whether pain becomes a product. At the same time, it acts as a bridge, making overwhelming feelings shareable through shared sensory and emotional cues.

In Vid004, the creator sits against a wall with knees pulled to his chest, wearing a black oversized hoodie. His posture pulls inward, making his body small and contained. He looks straight at the camera with tired eyes, then quickly pulls the hood over his face. The hood creates deep shadow, intensified by a blue filter that drains warm tones and shifts colour palette. Tears fall quietly. His expression stays flat. No words, no music, just faint noise that makes the silence feel present.

White text overlays the blue scene: *"My toxic trait is no matter how depressed I am, I will mask it so that I do not burden those around me" (@User925383048, 2022-03-10)*. The phrase *"I will"* indicates an ongoing commitment, not a past or future state. *"Mask"* captures the push and pull: it hides pain while still enacting it for an audience. By labelling this habit a *"toxic trait,"* the creator borrows the casual, self-deprecating vocabulary of relationship talk—language typically used to name flaws in dating context—and applies it to a serious coping mechanism. This framing signals self-awareness: she recognises that concealing her pain to avoid burdening others is itself a harmful pattern, even as she continues it. The caption does exactly what it describes. The creator says he conceals depression, yet he announces that concealment to potentially thousands.

The theatricality of the scene extends beyond the caption. The camera angle, posture, clothing, and timing of the emotional disclosure all contribute to the construction of vulnerability. The creator sits against a wall with knees pulled inward, visually communicating withdrawal. The oversized hoodie functions as a protective shell: it conceals the body while drawing attention to the fragility beneath. Tears appear at the precise moment when viewers are already primed to interpret the scene as melancholic. From a dramaturgical perspective, this is not simply emotional expression but carefully staged vulnerability. Yet performance should not be confused with deception. On TikTok, authenticity is frequently achieved through performance:

users must render emotional experiences visible through recognisable visual conventions if they are to be understood by others. The creator enacts sadness not because the sadness is inauthentic, but because visibility requires performance.

The blue filter does more than enhance the video's visual appeal. It functions as a symbolic cue that positions the creator's emotional state within a recognisable visual language of sadness and isolation. Before viewers read the caption, they encounter a body dressed in black seated against the wall with knees drawn inward and framed within a cold blue colour palette. Together, these elements communicate withdrawal, containment, and emotional heaviness. The creator's posture reduces his physical presence, while the oversized hoodie conceals parts of his body, reinforcing themes of hiding and protection. The blue filter amplifies these meanings by removing warmth from the image and creating an atmosphere associated with loneliness and depression. Instead of communicating distress through speech, the creator constructs a visual performance of suffering in which colour, clothing, posture, and camera framing work together to make emotional pain legible to viewers.

This theatricality is central to TikTok's platform culture. The creator does not simply confess depression; he stages it through a carefully assembled visual scene. His tears appear within a composition that has already prepared viewers to interpret the moment as emotionally significant. The performance operates on two levels simultaneously. It expresses distress while also translating that distress into a visually recognisable form. This form attracts attention, generates recognition, and invites engagement from audiences fluent in TikTok's emotional vernacular.

Viewer responses suggest that these aesthetic choices shape how distress is interpreted. One viewer noted that "*the blue filter drew attention to the video before the caption was read" (@User7863037263, 2022-02-15)* while another questioned "*why depression often appears visually appealing on social media" (@User43520972813 2022-02-26)*. These responses highlight a tension within TikTok mental health content. Aesthetic presentation can make emotional experiences easier to recognise and share, but it may also raise concerns that suffering is being stylised or beautified. Viewers therefore engage not only with the creator's emotions but also with the way those emotions are presented.

Vid008 layers visual, sound, and words more deeply. The creator sits in a backroom with dim lighting. A single amber desk lamp brightens only one side of the face and leaves the other side in shadow. A vintage filter adds slight desaturation and film grain, which gives the scene a memory-like feel. She hunches forward, elbows on knees, scratches her hair with tense muscles, then covers her face, breathes in deeply, and drags her hands down her cheeks while tilting her head back in a long exhale. The whole sequence conveys fatigue.

A slow, melancholic piano plays throughout. The song already carries weight from other mental health videos by different users. It slows the pace and adds emotional depth. The creator speaks quietly: *"Some days I just…disappear. Not physically but…I'm not really here. Going through motions. Pretending I'm okay. Nobody notices."*

The lighting visually reinforces the creator's description of feeling emotionally disconnected. One side of the face remains visible while the other is obscured by shadow, reflecting the tension between what is shown and what remains hidden. The slow piano and deliberate pauses in speech further reinforce this sense of emotional absence. Together, these elements work with the spoken words to communicate a feeling of withdrawal that would be less powerful if any single element were removed.

The comments indicate that viewers respond to the combination of visual, verbal, and auditory elements rather than to any single feature in isolation. Some viewers described feeling emotionally affected by the video's atmosphere, while others questioned whether the careful use of lighting and filters made the disclosure appear performative. These responses reveal ongoing negotiations around authenticity on TikTok. For some users, aesthetic effort strengthens emotional communication. For others, it raises suspicion about whether the distress being presented is genuine.

Vid018 takes a different approach to aestheticising pain. Instead of relying on soft lighting or stylised filters, the creator records himself in a bathroom mirror under harsh fluorescent light. The visual style appears raw and unpolished. However, this does not mean that aesthetic choices disappear. The mirror reflection, repetitive whispering, and stark lighting all contribute to the video's emotional impact. The creator

communicates distress through a style that emphasises immediacy and vulnerability rather than visual refinement.

Viewer responses suggest that many interpreted the lack of filters as a sign of authenticity. Several comments described the video as more real than highly edited health content. This highlights how authenticity is often judged through visual conventions. On a platform where filters and editing are common, the absence of aesthetic enhancement can itself become a powerful communicative strategy.

The melancholic piano that appears across several videos functions as a shared resource within TikTok culture. Repeated use of the same sounds allows creators to draw on emotional associations that audiences already recognise. Rather than building meaning from scratch, creators can use familiar audio to situate their experiences within broader conversations about mental health. In this way, personal stories are communicated through platform resources that are collectively understood.

Across the dataset, mental health communication on TikTok emerges as a form of aesthetic labour. Creators use filters, lighting, music, captions, gestures, and editing techniques to transform emotional experiences into forms that can be recognised by others. These aesthetic choices do not necessarily make distress less genuine. They provide a language for communicating difficult emotions within a highly visual platform environment.

Audience responses show how these aesthetic strategies influence how authenticity is interpreted. Some viewers view stylisation as a meaningful way of expressing emotional complexity, while others see it as evidence of performance. This tension reflects the broader conditions of TikTok communication, where visibility often depends on presentation.

The aesthetisation of pain exposes a core paradox within TikTok mental health communication. Visibility often depends on presentation. Distress must be transformed into images, sounds, and performances that audiences can quickly recognise within a fast-moving platform environment. These aesthetic choices do not necessarily make suffering less genuine; rather, they provide a means through which emotional experiences become communicable. Yet the same process that enables

recognition also risks turning pain into spectacle. Mental health narratives on TikTok therefore exist in a space where authenticity and performance are not opposites but intertwined conditions of visibility.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Bathrooms, beds, and shadows: The new confessional space

When physical spaces of support closed during lockdown, domestic interiors like bathrooms, bedrooms, corridors, became the primary available stage for psychological expression. This theme examines how young South Africans converted these spaces into confessionals through platform-mediated narration, and how the material conditions of domestic life shaped what could be expressed and what had to be concealed. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour and Marwick and Boyd's (2011) context collapse provide the analytical frame: the emotional labour performed for family is redistributed to platform performance, but that redistribution introduces new vulnerabilities through collapsed social boundaries.

Vid015 captures a 3:00 AM breakdown behind a locked bathroom door. The creator curls in foetal position on the floor, dressed in black. Black is the colour associated with mourning and withdrawal. Her sobs are masked by running water from a tap or shower. The water prevents her noise from disturbing family members nearby. The cold tiles and confined space become a private mini theatre with two audiences: the family members who are excluded from knowing and the online strangers who are invited to witness her breakdown.

This spatial arrangement is a narrative architecture. The locked door performs a double function: it creates the conditions for disclosure while simultaneously producing the performance of concealment. The bathroom is not neutral space that the creator happens to occupy; it is a platform-enabled confessional that requires specific material conditions—running water, a lock, sufficient acoustic separation from sleeping family members. In overcrowded homes where shared facilities restrict privacy, the locked bathroom door becomes a rare boundary for individual distress. This speaks directly to RQ2: coping is not a psychological process alone but a spatial-material practice: the creator must first secure physical privacy before emotional disclosure becomes possible.

Comments show that this containment is structurally patterned. *“I had to hold it in when my sister called out to me. Pretending to be okay is the worst,” (@user6739276410, 2020-04-28)* reveals the temporal suspension of distress: emotional release is interrupted, deferred, and performed in fragments. *“I never forget to lock the door and pretend to wash something” (@user2658394018, 2020-04-27)* shows that bathroom occupation must be justified as routine hygiene; the emotional performance is camouflaged within domestic labour. These comments do not simply share experiences; they map the choreography of concealed distress, revealing how young people in overcrowded homes develop micro-practices of emotional concealment that are simultaneously spatial, temporal, and performative. This addresses research question 3 by showing that audience interactions on TikTok are infrastructural knowledge-sharing: commenters teach each other how to manage the spatial material conditions of platform disclosure.

Vid002 shifts to the bedroom. The scene is framed by grey curtains, an unmade bed, and scattered clothes. The creator lies flat, face buried in a pillow, muffling screams to avoid waking a sibling. The pillow serves as both silencer and confidant. It absorbs sound that shared living space cannot accommodate. The pillow functions here as a semiotic substitution. In psychoanalytic discourse, an object like this might represent the maternal breast or transitional object. Here, it becomes a prosthetic witness—standing in for the human recognition the creator cannot access. The pillow absorbs what the family cannot hear.

Comments deepen this spatial-semiotic analysis: “*Crying in silence trying so hard not to make a sound,” (@User9833862058, 2021-10-22)* reveals the sonic labour of concealment. Distress must not only be hidden but also silenced, its acoustic signature erased. *“The pillow knows my screams more than my family” (@user8593242351, 2021-10-18) pe*rforms a reversal of intimate knowledge: the inanimate object becomes the repository of truth while the family remains ignorant. *“I fear lights being switched on because I’ll be exposed” (@user6743590183, 2021-10-23)* shows that illumination is threat: visibility in the domestic space means surveillance, not recognition. Darkness protects; light threatens visibility and interruption. For RQ1, this indicates that the narrative of distress is not verbal but spatial sonic. It is told through the management of light, sound, and bodily position within the domestic environment.

These practices reflect Hochschild's emotional labour (1983): the effort to regulate feelings to meet social expectations. On TikTok, however, this labour is redistributed rather than relieved. Offline, creators suppress distress to preserve familial harmony; online, they externalise it through platform disclosure. The emotional labour does not disappear. It is translated from concealment to performance. This redistribution carries its own risks. Marwick and Boyd (2011) terms this context collapse: the flattening of distinct social context—family, colleagues, and strangers—into a single, the undifferentiated audience on social media platform. Unlike face-to-face interaction, where self-presentation can be tailored to specific groups, networked publics collapse these boundaries and force users to navigate competing expectations simultaneously. On TikTok, a disclosure directed at strangers may reach family members through For You Page algorithm. The concealment that emotional labour maintains becomes structurally precarious online.

As noted in Theme 1, Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity illuminates the instability of these divided selves: family receives the composed frontstage; TikTok receives backstage reality. But this division is not a stable dramaturgical arrangement. The platform's architecture introduces context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The For You Page mixes audiences, meaning a video intended for strangers can reach family without warning. The locked door and running water create temporary privacy, but the digital archive is permanently porous. This is a further indication, relevant to RQ3, that audience interactions on TikTok are not controlled by creators but structured by platform distribution: the algorithm, not the creator, decides who sees what.

Castells' space of flows (1996), introduced in Theme 1, helps explain the paradox: physical confinement (locked doors, shared rooms) drives participation in global networked intimacy. TikTok offers digital mobility where offline privacy is denied. Yet this flow is not liberating; it compensates for constraint while introducing new vulnerabilities. The bathroom breakdown that was once ephemeral-water running, sobs muffled, door locked—becomes a permanent digital record that can be discovered, shared, and algorithmically amplified. The confessional space is not a safe container; it is a leaky vessel where the very act of seeking recognition produces new forms of exposure. This extends the answer to RQ2: platform-mediated coping is not a simple release valve but a risk-laden translation: offline concealment becomes online visibility, and that visibility carries archival permanence that offline distress did not.

Within some South African families, emotional disclosure may be constrained by cultural expectations surrounding resilience, respect for elders, and collective harmony (Ungar, 2013). Under these conditions, TikTok offers an alternative space for expressing forms of vulnerability that may be difficult to articulate within family settings. Age-based dismissal invalidates testimony: mental health struggles are framed as youthful melodrama, as one commenter notes when describing parental response *("I tried to tell my parents once and they said I'm being dramatic. Never again," @User4782530075, 2022-03-23)*. Existing South African scholarship documents additional layers of stigma, including racial framing of psychological distress as culturally foreign (Zabow, 2007; Ngobe et al., 2021). Hierarchical dynamics where parents choose to diagnose instead of listening render vulnerability unsafe. Audience interactions function as a form of infrastructural knowledge-sharing through which users exchange practical strategies for managing concealed distress.

These architectures of containment ultimately fail to achieve their intended purpose. Water masks bathroom breakdowns; pillows absorb bedroom screams; both leak into public spectacle when posted. The locked door protects from the family but frames a stage for digital audiences. This clash reveals fractured emotional geographies: stability performed offline, distress broadcast online. But this fracture is not a failure of the creator's strategy, it is a structural condition of platform life. The very features that enable disclosure also produce exposure. Creators find agency inside these limits. They build recognition where family support and formal systems fall short. But this agency is constrained agency, operating within platform architectures that they did not design and cannot control.

4.2.4 Theme 4: The mask of humour

A stiletto heel breaking on a dusty hillside road is an unlikely entry point into mental health communication. Yet Vid003 opens with exactly that. The camera captures a continuous unbroken shot: the creator mid-stride, the heel catching an uneven surface, the body lurching forward, and the moment recovery. She laughs, gestures at the broken shoe, and continues talking to a passer-by. The video is humorous, but the humour does not erase distress; it reframes it.

What breaks is not only the heel. The body's composure ruptures with it, and the rupture is the revelation. There is no verbal confession of emotional exhaustion, no

caption naming a feeling. The creator's body enacts what direct speech withholds: instability beneath a composed surface. This is the communicative logic that runs through Theme 4. On TikTok, humour does not dissolve distress; it provides a vehicle through which distress can be named, circulated, and received without the social risk that direct disclosure carries.

The effort to maintain normality after the heel break is not incidental to the video's meaning: it is the central argument. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour names this dynamic: the work of regulating internal states to meet the expectations of social situations. What distinguishes TikTok's version of this labour is that it is made visible and turned into content. The creator does not conceal the work of maintaining composure. She converts it into a shareable form and releases it into a platform space where audiences read it on their own terms.

The soundtrack does significant interpretive work here. The lyric *"And I'm broken,"* plays against footage of a broken stiletto on a broken road, a layering that shifts the video out of slapstick and into something more emotionally weighted. The audio is not incidental. By the time this video was posted, the track had accumulated circulating emotional associations through repetition. Viewers arriving at Vid003 carried those associations with them, which meant the broken heel could function as a symbol rather than a punchline.

The road itself contributes to this symbolic register. The stiletto, engineered for smooth and controlled environments, meets terrain it was never designed for. Within the South African context, where infrastructural inequality is a material fact of daily life for many young people, the mismatch between the shoe and the road is not only comic. It is legible as a commentary on aspiration navigating difficult conditions: presenting well in environments that do not support the presentation. Humour, in this reading, redirects attention from the difficulty of that navigation toward its absurdity, which is exactly what makes the experience bearable enough to narrate.

Audience responses confirm that viewers were reading beneath the surface. One commenter writes, *"I laugh at everything because it hurts when I'm quiet" (@User5372968039, 2022-07-18).* A comment does not describe amusement; it explains the function of humour as a strategy for managing what silence would make unbearable. Another viewer wrote, *"The way I laughed then immediately cried*

because I get it" *(@User3769449814, 2022-07-17).* The sequence—laugh, then cry—maps the experience of recognition: the joke lands, and then what the joke was carrying lands after it. For these viewers, the broken heel became a symbolic container for emotional imbalance, one they could fill with their own experiences of stress, anxiety, and concealed exhaustion.

Vid016 pursues the same logic through a different visual register. A creator wears a clown mask and pairs it with the caption: *"When you're having a mental breakdown and you start laughing" (@User2628196353, 2021-10-22).* The clown is a culturally dense figure. It performs joy as its public function while encoding concealed distress as its defining condition. The smiling mask over the tearful face is not a new image, but on TikTok it takes on additional specificity.

Goffman's (1959) framework, introduced in Theme 2, is relevant here, though what the video does is subtler than straightforward self-presentation. The creator does not simply perform happiness while hiding distress. The mask makes the performance visible as performance. The contradiction between outward humour and inner state is the explicit content of the video, not a subtext the viewer must excavate. This is what distinguishes Theme 4 from Theme 6, which examines composure sustained through the absence of disclosure. In Theme 4, humour is the disclosure, but it reveals at a remove, through symbol and comedy rather than through direct declaration. A further caption across the dataset makes this explicit*: "When your mind gets to a point where everything is funny," (@User2780364720, 2020-12-18).* Laughter here is not a sign of ease. It is a sign of overload, the point at which distress has exceeded the capacity for measured expression and spills out as absurdity.

The comment on Vid016 extends this interpretive frame. *"Me gas-lighting myself into feeling better" (@User7832072273, 2020-12-20)* names the cognitive manoeuvre with wry precision. It uses irony and self-directed humour to manufacture temporary emotional relief. Another comments reads, *"When your mind gets to a point where everything is funny,"* signalling that the phrase had already circulated widely enough to function as shared shorthand. These responses show audiences doing more than reacting; they are participating in a collective vocabulary for describing emotional states that feel too complex, too ambivalent, or too socially precarious to name in earnest.

This is the specific contribution of humour as a communicative mode in this context. It creates distance between the speaker and the emotion being communicated, and that distance is what makes disclosure possible. The clown mask does not prevent the audience from knowing that the creator is distressed. It regulates how that distress can be received as something ironic, shareable, and held at enough remove to avoid the vulnerability of sincerity. As Crawford and Caltabiano (2011), Sliter et al. (2014), and Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2015) have established, humour functions as a buffer against stress in offline relationships. What the TikTok data reveal is that in platform environments, humour extends further. It becomes a communicative strategy that is coping, disclosure, and social signal at once. The difference is not in the function of humour but in its reach: a joke shared with a friend stays private; a joke posted on TikTok enters a networked public and can find an audience of thousands navigating the same emotional territory.

The lockdown context sharpened the significance of these practices. Isolation, disrupted routines, and restricted access to institutional mental health support left many young South Africans without the interpersonal channels through which emotional difficulty is ordinarily managed. Humour on TikTok filled part of that gap, not by resolving the difficulty, but by providing a form in which it could be articulated and recognised. For a feeling that is difficult to name seriously, the joke becomes the most honest available language.

Humour's limits are inseparable from its affordances. Its lightness, irony, consumability make emotional revelation accessible, yet these same qualities risk reducing complex psychological experience to entertainment. A breakdown narrated as comedy is a breakdown that can be liked, shared, and algorithmically amplified. What begins as a strategy for making distress bearable can become content, and the logic of content is engagement rather than care. Humour therefore occupies the same liminal space that characterises mental health communication on TikTok more broadly: between disclosure and concealment, between vulnerability and performance, between authenticity and the conditions that make authenticity visible on the platform. For young South Africans during lockdown, it was one of the few languages available for making suffering communicable—not despite its ambivalence, but through it.

4.2.5 Theme 5: Commodifying Mental Health

This analysis turns to how mental health disclosure becomes entangled with commercial practices on TikTok, where personal testimony, self-help advice, and product promotion frequently overlap. Rather than treating commercialisation as separate from support, the analysis examines how creators convert emotional experiences into forms of visibility, credibility, and value.

Vid017 (March 2022, post-lockdown) shows the creator standing in a bright, tidy kitchen with white walls and granite countertops. The setting suggests middle-class stability and private space. She holds a box of antidepressants, brand name visible. Her tone is calm and friendly (voiceover, no direct camera address). The video employs close-up product shot and explanatory text overlay. No musical soundtrack; the sonic register is informational rather than affective. The visual and sonic minimalism, absence of aesthetic labour, absence of emotional performance mark this video as operating in a different genre from the confessional or aestheticised disclosures elsewhere in the dataset. The creator's credibility rests not on performed vulnerability but on lifestyle aspiration and consumer authority.

The video ends with product information such as the name, where to purchase it locally, and a nudge to "look into it." What started as personal testimony becomes a consumer tip. The creator positions herself as a trusted peer who tried it first. She builds credibility through authenticity. The endorsement simplifies a clinical intervention that ordinarily involves professional assessment and ongoing medical oversight. Unlike clinical consultations, peer recommendations are based primarily on personal experience rather than individual medical circumstances. Consequently, the video may encourage some viewers to perceive treatment through the lens of personal testimony and consumer choice, not clinical decision-making. The presentation therefore illustrates how mental health interventions can be repositioned within the communicative logic of social media, where personal experience often functions as a source of credibility.

The shift from personal testimony to product recommendation blurs the distinction between sharing experience and marketing advice. The creator's credibility rests on lived experiences rather than professional expertise, making authenticity a persuasive resource. Where peer-generated mental health content is uneven, it may become

particularly visible and influential. The dataset shows product placement and promotional discourse but cannot demonstrate whether economic exchange occurred. The significance lies in the communicative framing of mental health through consumer discourse, regardless of whether transactions took place.

The popularity of such content highlights the ways in which individuals seek information, reassurance, and support through digital networks. Instead of replacing formal care, these exchanges illustrate how social media can function as an additional source of guidance and emotional validation within contexts characterised by structural constraints. That does not remove the dangers. It shows the context in which they happen.

The viewer comments on Vid017 show audiences as active interpreters of commercial intent and not passive consumers. *"I am on a journey struggling with self-doubt about my decision to self-medicate. How do you get this?" (@User3879274983, 2021-08-10)* does not simply seek product information; it performs the therapeutic relationship with a peer rather than a professional. The commenter treats the creator as a proxy clinician, someone who has *"tried it first"* and can offer guidance. "*What worked for you might not work for others, be careful*" *(@User2671064837, 2021-08-02)* performs unpaid harm reduction, labour that should be undertaken by regulators or platform safety teams but is instead delegated to viewers. "*Another promoter…scammer on the loose*" *(@User9357587253, 2021-08-20)* reveals that viewers have developed sophisticated frameworks for detecting commercial intent, but these frameworks are unreliable. The commenter cannot know whether the creator has hidden commercial ties, and the platform provides no transparency. The comments reveal that viewers perform evaluative work that extends beyond ordinary engagement. They assess credibility, warn others of potential risks, and challenge commercial claims in ways that resemble informal quality control.

Vid018 extends commodification further into lifestyle merchandise. In a softly lit bedroom, the creator shows mental health-themed items such as a hoodie reading *“You are not alone.”* The hoodie gives a sense of belonging and it materialises platform solidarity. The hoodie transforms emotional struggle into a visible identity marker. Rather than disclosing distress through conversation, the wearer communicates it through consumption. Support becomes materialised in an object that can be

displayed, concealed, purchased, and circulated. Mental health awareness is therefore translated into a consumer practice in which belonging is expressed through ownership.

The creator's claim that the hoodie *"starts conversations"* and "lets people know you're safe to talk to" reframes consumption as a form of advocacy. Purchasing the product becomes a visible demonstration of support, while wearing it signals openness to discussions about mental health. In this way, emotional distress is transformed into a wearable sign that can be strategically deployed in offline social spaces. The critical comments reveal that some viewers recognise the commercial dimensions of mental health content and question whether support and profit can comfortably coexist. These practices reflect broader dynamics of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2023), where personal experiences become resources for engagement, visibility, and commercial exchange.

The bright kitchen and carefully curated bedroom suggest a degree of privacy, personal space, and material comfort that differs from the constrained domestic environments discussed in Theme 3. Whereas earlier creators sought temporary privacy to conceal distress, the creators in this theme possess the material conditions necessary to package, display, and monetise it. What this comparison indicates is that opportunities to package and monetise mental health content are shaped not only by platform affordances but also by differences in available space, material resources, and social positioning.

Commodified mental health content reveals an ambivalence that runs through TikTok's culture of disclosure. The same practices that provide visibility, validation, and peer support also transform emotional experiences into economic opportunities. Creators draw credibility from personal suffering, while audiences are required to evaluate claims that increasingly resemble health advice. In a context where access to mental health services remains uneven, these practices often emerge as practical responses to unmet needs rather than deliberate attempts at exploitation. Yet the platform's commercial architecture ensures that support and profit remain difficult to separate. Mental health becomes simultaneously a personal experience, a social performance, and a marketable resource.

4.2.6 Theme 6: Smiling through silence

At the centre of this theme is a paradox in young people's mental health communication: emotional struggles are frequently concealed from family and close friends while being revealed to strangers on TikTok. The theme examines how vulnerability is strategically distributed across different audiences, revealing that disclosure is not simply a matter of willingness to speak but where recognition is expected to occur. TikTok emerges as a space where creators can communicate experiences that remain unspeakable within their immediate social environments. In doing so, the platform reshapes conventional assumptions about intimacy, trust, and emotional support.

Vid019 centres on a creator sitting alone in a dimly lit bedroom. A forced smile remains fixed on her face as tears gradually emerge. The visual contradiction between smiling and crying becomes the video's primary communicative device. Instead of verbally describing emotional distress, the creator performs the tension between outward composure and internal suffering. The smile signals compliance with social expectations, while the tears expose the emotional cost of maintaining that performance.

The accompanying text, *"My heart breaks for my parents who will never experience the real me" (@User2753910357, 2022-03-15)*, reveals that the video is not simply about sadness but about selective disclosure. The issue is not an inability to communicate distress; the creator communicates it effectively to thousands of viewers. The video highlights a redistribution of vulnerability in which strangers become trusted witnesses while family members remain excluded. Emotional authenticity is therefore directed towards audiences perceived as safer, more validating, and less judgemental than those available offline.

The video's significance lies in its reconfiguration of intimacy. Physical proximity no longer guarantees emotional closeness. Parents may share the same households while remaining distant from experiences that are openly disclosed online. TikTok therefore functions as an alternative space of recognition where vulnerability can be expressed without the risk associated with family disclosure.

The comments reveal how many others live this way. "*I am the clown of the family, what they don't know is every laughter is a loud cry" (@User9271844892, 2022-03-*

18). The commenter assumes the role of making others laugh while they hide that they are crying inside. *"I sleep a lot just as just in case my mood gets the best of me" (@User4738294324, 2022-03-21).* Sleep is used as a strategic withdrawal—a way of staying out of sight. Comments such as *"I don't like being asked if I'm okay" are* common *(@User83295043, 2022-03-23).* Here family concern is portrayed as intrusive surveillance. *"Not my cousin showing my mom the video, her constant stare screams I know*." (@User7298539102, 2022, 03-15), shows that digital sharing can reach family unexpectedly. "*In my culture we don't talk about feelings with parents. Respect means keeping your problems to yourself" (@User3791733601, 2022-03-19)* ties silence to cultural ideas of respect across generations. "*Y'all get me more than my own family ever will" (@User2681630830, 2022-04-02).* This comment reverses intimacy hierarchies where strangers become the safer place for truth. "*I tried to tell my parents once and they said I'm being dramatic. Never again" (@User4782530003, 2022-03-23)* explains avoidance as a learned behaviour from dismissal.

Taken together, the comments suggest that silence is not merely an individual coping strategy but a socially shared practice. Many participants describe concealing distress to protect family relationships, avoid dismissal, or maintain expectations of strength. TikTok provides a space where these experiences become collectively recognisable. Rather than receiving solutions, creators and viewers exchange validation, producing a form of peer witnessing that challenges traditional assumptions about where emotional support should originate.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) as already discussed, helps explain this performance, but it requires an extension for digital contexts. Family members see the frontstage of wellness while TikTok audiences see the backstage reality. The platform becomes a digital confessional space. It is a liminal zone where anonymity allows vulnerability that offline relationships disallow. Marwick and Boyd's context collapse (2011) is relevant here. The For You Page collapses social boundaries that would normally separate family, peers, employers, and strangers. As a result, creators attempt to manage multiple audiences simultaneously, even while using the platform as a space for emotional disclosure.

From a clinical perspective, the forced smile points to emotional suppression (Gross, 2002). When maintained over extended periods, expressive suppression has been

associated with elevated psychological distress and reduced emotional well-being (Gross & John, 2003). Digital disclosure may therefore function as a compensatory outlet through which difficult emotions are acknowledged and validated. However, while online recognition may provide temporary relief, it does not necessarily resolve the underlying interpersonal tensions that make disclosure difficult within offline relationships.

Read together, the patterns point to disclosure on TikTok as more than a matter of convenience. They reflect changing conditions under which emotional support is sought and received. While family and friendship networks traditionally function as primary sources of emotional care, they may also carry expectations of strength, respectability, emotional restraint, and, within some South African cultural contexts, deference to elders and the privatisation of personal struggles. Under these conditions, revealing psychological distress to those who are personally known can involve risks of judgement, misunderstanding, stigma, or unwanted intervention. By contrast, TikTok provides access to audiences who are emotionally available but socially distant. Strangers have little influence over an individual's offline identity, educational prospects, family relationships, or social reputation. This distance reduces the perceived costs of disclosure while increasing opportunities for validation. As a result, vulnerability becomes redistributed rather than suppressed. Emotional experiences that remain hidden within close relationships are often expressed more openly within networked publics where recognition can be sought without the obligations and consequences associated with face-to-face interaction.

These findings suggest that emotional support on TikTok is not simply a substitute for offline relationships but represents a distinct form of networked intimacy. The platform enables users to seek recognition from audiences who share similar experiences yet remain socially removed from their everyday lives. This arrangement allows vulnerability to circulate in ways that would be difficult within conventional social settings. However, the support generated through these interactions remains fragile because it depends on visibility, engagement, and algorithmic circulation. Recognition can be immediate and affirming, but it is rarely guaranteed or sustained. Mental health disclosure on TikTok reflects a broader tension between connection and precarity in digital life. Users gain access to new forms of emotional community while remaining dependent on platform structures that shape who is seen, heard, and acknowledged.

4.2.7 Theme 7: A picture in a thousand strokes: Semiotic Representation of Mental health

Here the focus shifts to how visual art functions as an alternative language for communicating mental health experiences on TikTok. Instead of relying on direct verbal disclosure, creators use colour, symbolism, composition, and metaphor to express emotions that may be difficult to circulate through words alone. These artworks do not merely illustrate distress; they translate subjective psychological experiences into visual forms that can be recognised and interpreted by others. Through drawing, painting, and symbolic imagery, mental health becomes a shared visual language that operates alongside, and sometimes beyond, conventional forms of communication.

Vid012 holds a single shot for thirty seconds. A finished drawing is pinned to a bedroom wall. At the centre is a rough figure. The face is a black oval outline filled with empty white space: no eyes, nose, or mouth. That blankness shows what it feels like to lose sight of oneself. It invites viewers to put their own face into the void. This visual strategy appears in Vid001 and Vid019 as well, suggesting that artistic representation serves as a recurring communicative mode when direct verbal disclosure proves inadequate. Barbed wire wraps tightly around the neck. Each barb is drawn with care, sharp and clear. The wire symbolises external pressures such as stigma and social expectations, as well as internal struggles including self-criticism. The wire is precise and controlled. The body is loose and free in its lines. That contrast keeps the eyes on the chokehold. It targets breath, voice, and life.

The artwork transforms emotional suffering into symbolic language. The absence of facial features removes individual identity and allows viewers to project their own experiences onto the figure. Instead of representing a single creator's distress, the image becomes a collective representation of emotional struggle. Similarly, the barbed wire around the neck visualises feelings of entrapment that resist verbal communication.

The smiling mask introduces a second layer of meaning. It symbolises the expectation to appear emotionally well despite internal distress, echoing broader themes of concealment that emerge throughout this study. The contrast between fixed smile and the surrounding signs of suffering suggests that emotional performance has become

disconnected from emotional reality. Through these visual metaphors, the creator communicates experiences that exceed the limits of ordinary language.

A comedy mask floats above the chest in lighter grey, its smile is wide and fixed: fake joy. Below and around the edges, a jagged red scream breaks through. The lines look torn, like something ripped open. Red is the only strong colour in a mostly grey piece. It draws the eye straight to the failure of the mask. The scream appears to break through the smiling mask, suggesting tension between emotional concealment and disclosure. It signals another layer of silence from stigma, self-censorship, or feeling cut off from the body. Floating tears and broken bits of text *"HELP"* and *"ALONE"* drift around the edges. They are disconnected, like pieces of feeling that never land.

The dark bedroom wall functions more than a backdrop. It is where the video was filmed. It also stands for depression as a room without light or exit. The camera stays completely still. No movement, no TikTok flash. That stillness goes against the platform's usual rush. It asks for slow, careful looking. Hashtags including #mentalhealth, #sad, and #broken, give the video a way to be found. The soundtrack adds lyrics, *"I wish it was simple, I would give up easily."* The words introduce irony. The lyrics evoke tension between hopelessness and perseverance. The line sits between giving up and holding on.

Comments show the communicative power of artwork. Several viewers described strong emotional response, with one noting that the image was *"beautifully therapeutic just by watching" (@User4573895331, 2021-10-05),* while another wrote, *"Why did this make me cry?" (@User8308302952, 2021-10-27).* Others recognised themselves in the symbolism, particularly the barbed wire, which one commenter described as *EXACTLY how my anxiety feels, tight, cutting, and inescapable' (@User3673520742, 2021-04-11).* Some viewers were inspired to create their own versions of the artwork, while others raised concerns about potentially triggering imagery. One viewer explained, *"I used this video to explain what I couldn't articulate to my therapist" (@User6206375180, 2022-02-19).*

These responses suggest that the artwork functions as more than self-expression. Rather than merely depicting distress, it provides viewers with a symbolic vocabulary through which emotional experiences can be recognised, interpreted, and communicated. The comment about using the image in therapy is particularly

significant because it demonstrates how visual representation can act as a communicative bridge when conventional language feels inadequate. In this sense, visual content does not replace conversation but facilitates it by providing symbolic resources through which distress can be understood and expressed.

Vid001 extends the theme through technical innovation. Under normal light, the canvas shows abstract blue and purple swirls. It looks decorative and calm. Then the creator turns on the UV light. Hidden words appear. *"Abuse"* is written in hard capitals at the top. *"Fear"* curls through the shapes. *"Trauma"* in the centre. *"Alone"* painted in UV reactive pigment, appears low down. A ghostly wolf figure rises from the forms. It was always there but invisible without the right light. The creator moves the UV slowly. Some letters show while others stay dark. This controls what is revealed and when. The double layer mirrors post-traumatic experience. The surface is the self that functions day to day. The UV layer uncovers buried trauma that needs a specific trigger to appear.

The technique makes the psychology of trauma visible. Traumatic memories are often fragmented and non-verbal. They resist being translated into words (van der Kolk, 2014). The UV light functions as the trigger. Unlike sudden flashbacks, the creator decides the moment and the pace. Art gives distance and control. The lyrics say, *"Don't look into my eyes, this is where my demons lie."* They warn and invite at the same time. The lyrics simultaneously invite and caution engagement with painful experiences. Comments pick up the weight, *"The UV technique is genius. It shows how trauma hides in plain sight" (@User6253701638, 2021-09-10)*; *"When the wolf appeared I literally gasped. That's my nightmare right there" (@User37260917395, 2021-09-25).* Someone asks, *"I want to try this with my own trauma words. Where do you get the UV paint?" (@User6430725392, 2021-09-30).* Others question the risk. *"This feels like naked trauma. You're exposing your deepest wounds for strangers' entertainment" (@User5362973502, 2021-09-26).*

In South Africa, these visual expressions carry additional meaning. Resistance art has a long history here. Personal pain links to collective trauma shown through images. Class differences still shape who can make this kind of work. UV paint, quality lighting, and editing tools require resources not everyone has. In crowded homes or informal

settings, creators may work with a phone in low light. Sophisticated artistic work often gains more reach and cultural weight than simpler and less polished sharing.

This body of evidence challenges the assumptions that mental health communication must be verbal, clinical, or explicitly confessional. Through colour, symbolism, metaphor, and artistic experimentation, creators construct alternative ways of expressing emotional experiences that resist straightforward description. These visual narratives allow distress to be communicated, recognised, and shared without requiring direct disclosure. At the same time, they remain subject to the same platform dynamics that shape other forms of mental health content, including algorithmic visibility, audience interpretation, and ethical concerns surrounding exposure. TikTok therefore expands the communicative repertoire through which mental health is negotiated, demonstrating that suffering is not only spoken about but also illustrated, performed, and visually interpreted.

Experiences of distress were disclosed through humour, visual symbolism, personal storytelling, audience interaction, and coping narratives. Across the themes, emotional expression was simultaneously public and controlled, allowing creators to make experiences visible while retaining influence over how they were interpreted.

4.3 Synthesising the Themes

Across the seven themes, creators communicated emotional distress through multimodal resources: sonic, spatial, humorous, aesthetic, and symbolic. These resources made distress visible in forms that audiences could recognise and co-construct. The coping strategies that these expressions performed, addressing Research Question 2, appear across all themes but achieve greatest analytical clarity in Themes 4 (The Mask of Humour), 5 (Commodifying Mental Health), and 6 (Smiling Through Silence).

Viewer responses, addressing Research Question 3, are documented most directly in Theme 1 but permeate all themes. The comment-thread analyses show audiences validating, contesting, extending, and co-constructing meaning around mental health content. Audience comments clustered into five functional patterns—validation and recognition, support and engagement, critique and disagreement, information sharing, and social regulation that cut across the seven creator-centric themes. Rather than

generating parallel themes, these patterns functioned as interpretive lenses through which the thematic analysis was triangulated.

The “recognition space”—the zone in which emotional acknowledgement is sought and unevenly distributed—operates as a structural condition across all seven themes, whether through the 4,538 likes on the multi-epistemic disclosure or the 129 comments on Vid005. The themes should not be understood as separate phenomena. They operated as interconnected practices through which young South Africans communicated psychological distress during COVID-19 lockdown.

The temporal distribution of themes reveals how communicative practices evolved as the pandemic’s material conditions shifted. Themes 1 (Searching for Connection), 3 (Bathrooms, Beds, and Shadows), and 4 (The Mask of Humour) appear across the full dataset, from Vid002 (December 2020) to Vid020 (December 2022), suggesting that the core communicative repertoire—seeking recognition, converting domestic spaces into confessionals, using humour as protective strategy—emerged during strict lockdown and persisted as a durable vocabulary even when acute restrictions lifted. This persistence suggests that the lockdown did not merely trigger temporary adaptations but accelerated the development of platform-native mental health communication practices that outlasted the specific conditions that produced them.

Themes 5 (Commodifying Mental Health) and 7 (A Picture in a Thousand Strokes) show stronger concentration in the 2021–2022 portion of the dataset. Vid012 (April 2021), Vid017 (March 2022), and Vid018 (August 2022) represent the commodification and artistic expression patterns. This concentration is consistent with TikTok’s growing creator monetisation culture and aesthetic sophistication over this period, as the platform matured from an emergent communication channel to established cultural infrastructure. The temporal pattern thus reveals not a single lockdown response but a phased development: initial improvisation under acute constraint (2020), followed by genre consolidation and commercialisation as platform use normalised (2021–2022). This temporal heterogeneity is addressed through sensitivity to contextual differences in interpretation. However, the study acknowledges that it cannot definitively distinguish between lockdown-specific and pandemic-era communication patterns.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented and interpreted the findings of the multimodal thematic analysis of TikTok videos, captions, and viewer comments. Through seven interconnected themes, the analysis demonstrated how young South Africans used TikTok to communicate, negotiate, and make sense of mental health experiences during and after the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Across the chapter, mental health expression on TikTok emerges as something that extends well beyond direct verbal disclosure. Creators employed humour, visual symbolism, artistic expression, domestic spaces, platform affordances, and audience interaction to communicate experiences of distress, vulnerability, coping, and belonging. At the same time, audience comments functioned as spaces of validation, recognition, support, and, at times, contestation.

Taken together, the themes reveal that mental health communication on TikTok was shaped by the interaction of self-disclosure, audience participation, platform affordances, and culturally situated understandings of wellbeing. These findings provide the basis for the discussion presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The seven themes that emerged from the analysis do not simply describe communicative practices. They reveal how TikTok's architecture, the COVID-19 lockdown's structural conditions, and South Africa's epistemic landscape combined to produce a specific and analytically distinctive form of mental health communication. This chapter develops that argument across three research questions and consolidates it in three conceptual contributions that extend existing frameworks in digital health communication, platform studies, and South African mental health research.

The discussion is organised around the study's four theoretical frameworks, each illuminating specific dimensions of the findings. Section 5.2 addresses research question 1(communicative modes) through Goffman's framework, examining how the distress is performed through multimodal self-presentation. Section 5.3 addresses Research Question 2 (coping strategies) through Cognitive Behavioural Theory and Bauman's liquid modernity, examining how platform architecture reinforces certain coping patterns while identity remains fluid and provisional. Section 5.4 addresses Research Question 3 (viewer responses) through Castells' network society theory, examining how audience engagement produces episodic recognition within digital flows. Section 5.5 draws these three contributions together around a single worked example from the dataset, showing how they operate jointly rather than independently. Section 5.6 acknowledges the study's limitations. Section 5.7 offers recommendations for future research, mental health practice, platform developers, education, and policy. Section 5.8 concludes with the study's significance.

5.2 Research Question 1: Communicative Modes

Goffman (1959) understood self-presentation as performative work oriented toward a specific audience whose presence could be managed. The findings extend and complicate this framework in the context of TikTok's algorithmic architecture.

5.2.1 Multimodal Performance of Distress

Across the dataset, young South Africans did not simply report psychological distress. They performed it. Theme 2, Aestheticising Pain, reveals distress translated into visual form through filters, curated lighting, and carefully selected soundtracks. This aesthetic labour is not decoration. It is translation: private feeling converted into a public form that the platform can circulate. Theme 3, Bathrooms, Beds, and Shadows as Confessional Spaces, demonstrates that domestic spaces associated with privacy were converted into stages for public disclosure. The bathroom mirror and the bed function as settings through which personal experiences are communicated to an audience. Theme 4, The Mask of Humour, demonstrates that comedy operated simultaneously as disclosure and concealment. The joke named the feeling and deflected it in the same gesture. Theme 7, shows visual symbolism doing communicative work where direct speech failed.

These findings directly address research question 1: Which communicative modes are used to express mental health narratives during lockdown? The answer is not a single mode but a multimodal assemblages. Visual aesthetics (colour, lighting, filters), spatial settings (domestic confessional spaces), sonic elements (music, silence, voice), embodied performance (gestures, facial expression, posture) textual framing (captions, hashtags, irony), and platform-specific formats (duets, stitches, trending audio). No single mode is sufficient; meaning emerges from their interaction.

5.2.2 The Algorithmically Mediated Audience

What Goffman's framework does not account for is the nature of the audience on TikTok. In the dataset, creators staged vulnerability not for a known other but an algorithmically mediated aggregate, an imagined viewer whose preferences have been inferred from patterns of engagement across the platform. The performance was real; the audience was partly fictional. This changes what impression management means in practice. The aesthetic labour, the appropriate light, sound, and calibration of exposure was not deception. It was the condition that made vulnerability visible on a platform where visibility itself functions as currency.

Goffman (1959) distinguishes between frontstage performance and backstage authenticity. The data reveal a more complex dynamic. TikTok did not simply host frontstage. It became a space where the backstage was deliberately staged, not

inadvertently exposed. A creator who captioned a video *"I feel sorry for my parents who will never experience the real me"* was not slipping out of character. She was performing the backstage for an audience that would never see her frontstage. Digital distance did not create absence. It created the condition under which disclosure became possible because it was directed at strangers rather than at those whose relationships carried consequences.

5.2.3 The Paradoxical Diary and the Live Archive

The paradoxical diary and live archive, introduced as conceptual contribution in Section 2.7.1, find their fullest empirical demonstration in the patterns documented across Themes 1, 3, and 6. The findings add one analytical dimension that the conceptual framework anticipated but could not establish without evidence: the relationship between archival permanence and the conditions of self-knowledge under platform mediation.

What makes the paradoxical diary structurally distinct from earlier forms of personal documentation is its archival dimension. A journal entry remains private and static. A paradoxical diary entry enters a live archive, an accumulating, iterative, audience responsive record in which identity and distress are documented continuously rather than resolved. On TikTok, this archive remains open: each new post extends the record, audience engagement reshapes it, and algorithmic logic determined which entries surface and which recede. Unlike the closed case file of clinical record, or the privately held journal of conventional diary-keeping, the live archive is co-constituted by the platform, the creator, and the audience simultaneously. The creator initiates it; they do not control it.

This distinction matters analytically. The paradoxical diary names what the creators do in a single act of disclosure. The live archive names what that act produces over time, a self that is publicly constructed, incrementally revised, and never fully retrievable. As a collective, they describe not just a communicative form but a new condition of selfhood under platform mediation: one in which the question of what has been said, to whom, and with what permanence is structurally unanswerable.

The paradoxical diary and its live archive extend Goffman's dramaturgical framework by naming what it leaves untheorised. The condition of permanent, involuntary archival exposure that TikTok's architecture imposes on every act of self-documentation. It

reframes digital mental health disclosure not as a choice individuals make about vulnerability, but as a structurally produced condition in which vulnerability and exposure are built into the communicative form itself.

5.3 Research Question 2: Coping Strategies

Bauman (2000) argued that liquid modernity frees identity from fixed institutions. The findings point to something more specific. Identity on TikTok became fluid not because nothing held it, but because the containers that did hold it were provisional and opaque to the creators who depended on them.

5.3.1 Commodification and Fluid Self

Theme 5, Commodifying Mental Health, provides the clearest evidence of this dynamic. One creator sold a hoodie bearing the slogan “depression is not a prison cell” for 400 rand, having built a following by posting about his own breakdowns. His distress acquired a logo. Viewers bought the hoodie because his content made them feel seen. The dataset cannot establish where care ended and commerce began. The creator’s own orientation toward this boundary was not accessible through the available data. What the findings do establish is structural. The platform architecture made this conversion from emotional experience to sellable product not only possible but legible and, within TikTok’s visibility economy, logical.

Bauman’s (2000) framework explains why identity becomes provisional under conditions. The findings specify what that provisionality looks like when the self becomes a product line and the community becomes a customer base.

5.3.2 The Recognition Space

The concept of recognition space names the social condition on which the value of disclosure on TikTok depended. It refers to the zone of potential visibility within which creators sought, and audiences distributed, acknowledgement of shared emotional experience. The findings demonstrate that recognition in this space was distributed unpredictably and unevenly.

In Them 1, comments such as *“You saved my life” and “I thought I was the only one”* indicate moments of genuine recognition. But the same theme reveals that “some videos attract huge waves of validation while others with similar pain receive little

response.” In Theme 5, recognition becomes economically valuable. Visibility translates into credibility, which translates into marketability.

The recognition space does not function as a levelling alternative to offline support systems. It reproduces and in some cases amplifies existing inequalities through a different mechanism. Visibility favoured certain aesthetic registers, posting times, content formats, and prior engagement histories. Creators without the material resources, technical literacy, or cultural capital to optimise these conditions faced structural disadvantage in accessing recognition that the platform appeared to offer democratically. In the South African context, where inequality in digital access, device quality, data affordability, and platform fluency maps onto existing socioeconomic and racial stratification, this is not a minor qualification.

The dataset reveals this uneven distribution at multiple points. Vid014 (rejection of antidepressants) generated 3,593 views and 135 comments, with comments ranging from agreement to warning; Vid019 (smiling through silence) generated 2.1 million views and 4.2K comments; Vid006 (psychiatric admission preparation) generated 123.4K views and 2,305 comments. Meanwhile Vid005 (spiritual ancestors/psychiatric ward), which blended humour, spirituality, and clinical narrative in ways that resisted easy categorisation, generated only 2,420 views and 129 comments. Vid017 (homeopathic remedy), ambiguous between testimony and product promotion generated 471 views and 52 comments.

These disparities cannot be attributed to differences in emotional intensity or vulnerability, Vid005 and Vid017 presented comparable distress to higher-engagement videos. The determining variable was not the depth of suffering but the conditions of shareability. Four factors mattered most: whether the content fit recognisable platform genres, such as transforming narrative, confessional directness, and relatable meme format; whether it employed trending sounds or hashtags; whether it was posted at algorithmically favourable times; and whether the creator had accumulated sufficient prior engagement to trigger recommendation. The recognition space thus operates as a secondary market in which emotional need is not the currency that purchases visibility; performative legibility is.

This extends Castells’ (2006) network society framework in a specific direction. Where Castells theorised the network’s structural capacity to connect, the recognition space

theorises the experiential reality of that connection. Its uneven distribution, dependence on visibility logics, and its emergence as a scarce resource. Castells provides the infrastructure; the recognition space provides the experience of navigating that infrastructure.

5.3.3 Platform Reinforcement of Distress Patterns

Theme 4 and 6, show that creators repeatedly performed distress through comedic formats, visual symbolism, and curated soundtracks. The dataset reveals a pattern in which creators who posted consistently about hopelessness or anxiety received sustained engagement, which in turn provided a structural incentive to continue producing similar content.

The platform did not create the cognitive pattern. The data demonstrate that it created conditions under which particular patterns were reinforced over others. The mechanism is structural: distress expressed → algorithm surface similar content → engagement received → distress performed again.

The dataset does not establish whether this reinforcement produces clinical harm. Psychological outcomes were not measured, and the data provide no access to creators' offline states. What the findings do show is that the platform's visibility metrics (views, comments, shares, likes) correlate with emotional intensity in the content that received highest engagement. A creator who received substantially more engagement for content about panic than for content about recovery encountered an environment in which the relative visibility of these two types of content was not equivalent.

This is not a claim about individual pathology. It is an observation about environmental shaping that the data make visible.

5.3.4 CBT and Platform Architecture: Pulling on Opposite Direction

CBT's therapeutic logic recommends interrupting distress-amplifying feedback patterns: identifying the thought, challenging the pattern, and substituting alternative behaviour. The platform's architecture produced the opposite effect. It concentrates attention on content that is already circulating and rewards what sustains engagement. CBT and TikTok pull in opposite directions.

This tension is not a flaw in either framework. It described what the data reveal about what happens when therapeutic logic meets an attention economy. This addresses research question 2: What coping strategies are communicated through these expressions? The findings reveal coping strategies that are simultaneously adaptive (humour as emotional regulation, creative expression as externalisation, peer recognition as validation) and potentially maladaptive (performative concealment, platform-dependent validation, reinforcement of distress-focused identity).

5.3.5 Cultural Meaning-Making and Epistemic Plurality

The available evidence suggests that some creators navigated competing knowledge systems without being compelled to choose between them. This pattern was directly observable in two videos; broader evidence from comment-thread negotiations in which viewers articulated incompatible frameworks without demanding resolution. Whether this pattern characterises South African youth TikTok culture generally, or reflects the specific conditions platform architecture that enable epistemic plurality without institutional pressure for coherence, cannot be determined from this dataset.

The evidentiary basis operated at two levels. At the level of individual video content, direct evidence is limited: only two creators explicitly performed the navigation of indigenous and biomedical frameworks within a single piece of content, most directly the multi-epistemic disclosure (discussed in Section 4.2.1). The comment threads, however, provide a substantively different and broader evidentiary base. Across multiple videos, comment sections became sites of unprompted epistemic debate. Viewers arriving with incompatible frameworks for understanding the same symptoms, articulating them openly, and leaving the tension unresolved.

References to prayer, ancestral protection, and clinical terminology, suggesting that these frameworks circulate within the same threads, sometimes in direct response to one another. Crucially, creators rarely intervened in these exchanges. The conversation move between viewers, using the creator's post as a shared reference point rather than as an address to the creator directly. Epistemic coexistence, on this evidence, is not only a property of individual creators navigating multiple frameworks. It is a structural feature of how South African audiences collectively engage with mental health content on the platform.

What TikTok provided was a space in which this plurality could circulate publicly, at scale, and without institutional pressure to resolve. Unlike a clinical consultation or a community healing process, the platform imposes no requirement for epistemic commitment. Its caption format has contradiction without flagging it as inconsistency. Its comment architecture permits responses across incommensurable frameworks simultaneously. Its algorithmic logic is indifferent to epistemological coherence. The platform did not produce epistemic coexistence. It removed the structural conditions that elsewhere compel its suppression.

It is methodologically honest to note what this dataset cannot determine: whether the observed plurality reflects South Africa's specific history of unresolved colonial knowledge hierarchies, TikTok's platform affordances that may enable epistemic flexibility globally, or a combination of both. Epistemic coexistence is therefore offered as a theoretically productive finding grounded in this dataset, and as a hypothesis requiring comparative validation to establish whether it is specific to South Africa's post-colonial knowledge politics or characteristic of Global South digital health communication more broadly. The claim is substantiated here. Its generalisability remains open.

5.4 Research Question 3: Viewer responses

Castells' (2009) concept of network society provides a framework for examining how emotional experiences circulated across geographically dispersed communities during the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings demonstrate that networked communication enabled emotional support to travel through digital connections when face-to-face interaction was restricted by state-imposed movement.

5.4.1 Episodic Recognition, Not Sustained Community

The data revealed that these connections were concentrated around specific moments of engagement instead of sustained exchanges. In Theme 1, creators posted videos expressing isolation and emotional distress, while audience responses took the form of validation, empathy, and brief expressions of shared experience. A comment reading "Sending virtual hugs across the tollgates" received replies from multiple users from different provinces, demonstrating networked connection across geographic distance.

The data do not do show whether these interactions continued beyond the observable comment thread, whether participants returned to these conversations, or whether any exchanges developed into sustained relationships. These study did not employ longitudinal observation, and no claims are made about the durability of these connections beyond what was visible in the data.

What the data do establish is that engagement was concentrated around particular posts and specific moments of interaction. This pattern is consistent with existing scholarship on TikTok's algorithmic architecture, which prioritises the circulation of content through continuous streams of new material rather than the continuation of existing exchanges (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). The study did not examine algorithmic processes directly, but the temporal distribution of comment engagement across the dataset is consistent with a design that favours ongoing content circulation over extended discussion.

5.4.2 The Value of Being Witnessed

The findings extend Castells' (2009) framework by demonstrating that the significance of networked communication in this context did not reside in the formation of durable communities. It resided in the capacity of networks to generate moments of recognition between individuals experiencing similar forms of distress. The network made connection possible; the platform's temporal architecture shaped how that connection was experienced. These two observations are not contradictory. They are mutually constitutive; the same system that enabled recognition also constrained its duration.

5.5 Integrative Discussion: Synthesis of Contribution

The three contributions developed above name different dimensions of the same communicative act rather than three separate phenomena. They relate sequentially: an act of disclosure (the paradoxical diary) produces an accumulating record (the live archive), which then circulates within a structural field of visibility (recognition space). This circulation takes place on cultural ground where multiple knowledge systems coexist without institutional resolution (epistemic coexistence).

The post discussed in Section 4.2.1, in which a creator described navigating ukuthwasa, a schizophrenia diagnosis, psychiatric medication, and charismatic Christian faith without resolving them, provides the clearest demonstration of how the three contributions operate together rather than independently. The act of posting is a

paradoxical diary entry. It is a private epistemic uncertainty made publicly visible through TikTok's caption architecture, which accommodates contradiction without flagging it as inconsistency. The 4,538 likes the post accumulated represent a moment within the recognition space. It is acknowledgement distributed unevenly according to the platform's visibility logic, yet in this case landing in favour of content that resisted categorical clarity. The comment thread, in which biomedical references, ancestral interpretations, and scriptural citations circulated in direct response to one another without resolution, is the most direct evidence of epistemic coexistence as a structural condition rather than an individual capacity.

5.6 Limitations

The limitations addressed in this section focus on interpretation and generalisation. Methodological choices around demographic identification and algorithmic access, were explained in Chapter 3; this section restates their consequences for what can and cannot be concluded from the findings.

5.6.1 Temporal Limitations

This study examined content produced during a specific historical period: the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate aftermath. The videos analysed were produced by young people who experienced confinement, economic precarity, bereavement, and disrupted social structure. Their TikTok use was shaped by these conditions, with content from 2021–2022 reflecting the persistence of platform-native mental health communication practices that originated in lockdown but continued as established cultural forms. The study cannot definitively distinguish between lockdown-specific and pandemic-era communication patterns; this limitation is acknowledged as a boundary to interpretation. What they expressed, how they expressed it, and who watched may differ substantially now that the pandemic period has receded. The study makes no claim to timelessness; it describes a specific historical moment. The study cannot determine whether observed patterns of distress expression are caudally linked to psychological outcomes, as offline states were not measured.

The inclusion of content of late 2021 and 2020, while necessary for achieving thematic saturation, introduces temporal heterogeneity that the study cannot fully address. Content from this period was produced under different social, economic, and

epidemiological conditions that strict lockdown content, and the study cannot definitely distinguish between lockdown-specific and pandemic-era communication patterns.

5.6.2 Data Access Limitations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available TikTok videos, captions, and comments. While these materials provided substantive insight into observable communicative practices, they offered access only to what creators chose to make visible on the platform. The analysis could not capture creators' intentions, private experiences, offline circumstances, or subsequent outcomes. It was not possible to determine whether particular coping practices contributed to improved wellbeing, facilitated access to professional support, or produced longer-term psychological consequences.

The researcher can observe only what leaves a trace. The lurkers who watched, felt something, and scrolled on are invisible to this method. They may constitute the majority, or the segment most affected by the content. This is not a limitation of the study's method alone. It is a structural feature of platform research.

5.6.3 Demographic Identification Limitations

The study operationalised 'young South Africans' as TikTok users aged approximately 18-24 (Section 3.4), identified through contextual indicators including self-disclosed age or educational status, participation in youth-coded trends, language use, and geographic markers, rather than through verified demographic data. TikTok does not provide researchers with age-verified data, and the platform's own minimum sign-up age of 13 sets only the outer boundary of who could be present, not confirmation of who is. Age, nationality, and related demographic characteristic could not therefore be independently confirmed for any individual creator or commenter. Although multiple indicators were used to strengthen sampling decisions, it remains possible that some creators and commenters fell outside the intended 18-24 range. Furthermore, the study did not systematically examine how race, class, gender, or geographic location might shape mental health expression patterns. In a country where mental health access and stigma are racialised and classed, the absence of demographic analysis is a significant gap. The category "South African youth" may obscure more than it reveals.

5.6.4 Algorithmic Limitations

A significant limitation concerns study engagement with TikTok's algorithmic architecture. Claims about algorithmic amplification, visibility distribution, and content circulation are interpretive inferences based on observable patterns and platform documentation, not direct empirical observation of algorithmic processes. The study cannot establish causal relationship between specific algorithmic signals and content visibility. Future research employing API access, computational methods, or platform-provided data would strengthen this dimension.

5.6.5 Epistemic Coexistence Limitations

The claim regarding epistemic coexistence is based on limited direct evidence (two videos explicitly demonstrating simultaneous framework navigation) and cannot be generalised to all South African youth TikTok use. Furthermore, the study cannot distinguish between platform-induced and culturally specific epistemic plurality. Cross-national comparative research is required to validate this framework.

The expanded evidence base, which includes Vid005's documentation of institutional collision between spiritual awakening and psychiatric admission, and specific comment-thread quotations demonstrating collective epistemic negotiation—strengthens the claim within the bounded dataset. However, this evidence also reveals uneven recognition distribution.

5.6.6 Interpretive Limitations

The study is constrained by the interpretive nature of qualitative research. The themes and interpretations presented here reflect the interaction between the dataset, the analytical framework, and the researcher's interpretive engagement with the material. Reflexive memo-writing, audit trails, and systematic coding procedures were employed to support trustworthiness. Alternative interpretations remain possible.

Researcher positionality constitutes an additional limitation. As a South African researcher who uses TikTok, the researcher was positioned to recognise references that a researcher outside this context might miss: slang, cultural allusions, and the specific texture of South African humour during lockdown. This same positionality meant the researcher sometimes saw what she expected to see. Reflexive memos were used throughout to track and account for such moments.

The study was further bounded by its theoretical framework. The integration of Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, Bauman's liquid modernity, Castells' network society theory, and Cognitive Behavioural Theory provided a productive multi-level lens for examining digital mental health communication. But none of these frameworks was developed to explain the South African specificities this study engages epistemic pluralism spanning ukuthwasa, biomedicine, and charismatic Christianity, or the racialised economies of pharmaceutical access. This gap was addressed through supplementary engagement with South African mental health scholarship. However, a more fully decolonial theoretical architecture—built from African epistemologies rather than supplementing Western frameworks with them—remains a task for future researchers.

5.6.7 Ethical Limitations

Ethical tensions remain inherent in research involving publicly available yet emotionally sensitive content. Although the analysed material was publicly accessible and the study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, the use of content relating to psychological distress raises questions concerning representation, dignity, and participant vulnerability. User identities were anonymised throughout, and the analysis focused on broader communicative patterns rather than individual cases. Nevertheless, tensions persist between the public availability of online content and the ethical responsibility to minimise harm when researching experiences of emotional suffering.

This tension between voluntary public posting and unanticipated academic use, discussed in Section 3.8, remains unresolved here as elsewhere in digital research using publicly available content.

Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the value of the study. They define the boundaries within which the findings should be understood, and they identify productive directions for future research.

5.7 Recommendations

5.7.1 Recommendations for Future Research

The study's dataset has a structural limitation. It sees only what creators made public and what commenters chose to say. The lurkers who watched at 2 a.m. video, felt

something, and scrolled on without leaving a trace are invisible to netnographic methods. Mixed-methods designs that combine content analysis with participant interviews could recover what this study cannot: creator intention, audience interpretation, and the relationship between what is expressed on TikTok and what is experienced offline.

The COVID-19 lockdown was a compressed historical event with a set of conditions that will not repeat in this form. Longitudinal research designs would enable scholars to track whether TikTok functions differently as an emotional space during periods of acute crisis versus ambient hardship, and whether the coping practices documented here persist, transform, or dissolve when the specific pressures that produced them are no longer present. The recommendation is grounded in the observation that themes evolved over the study period (Section 4.3), with commodification and artistic expression appearing more prominently in 2021–2022, suggesting that platform practices may continue to shift as condition changes.

Epistemic coexistence is the study's third primary contribution that demands sustained comparative attention. Cross-national comparative research examining similar dynamics in Nigeria, Kenya, India, or Brazil would determine whether the epistemic coexistence is a feature of South African exceptionalism or a condition of Global South digital life.

Decolonial, feminist, and intersectional theoretical traditions would illuminate dimensions of the dataset that these frameworks cannot reach: the gendered labour of emotional disclosure, the racialised distribution of whose distress achieves platform visibility, and the power relations embedded in whose knowledge system gets validated when a comment thread contains both a clinical referral and an ancestral reading.

A further and more foundational task concerns the theoretical architecture of future research itself. This study integrated Western sociological and psychological theory with South African mental health scholarship as a supplementary corrective—an approach that carried indigenous knowledge systems into an analytical frame not originally built to hold them. Future researchers are encouraged to reverse this relationship: to develop and apply theoretical frameworks grounded primarily in African epistemologies—including, but not limited to, the ontological flexibility that ukuthwasa

exemplifies—as the starting point for analysis, with Western frameworks positioned as supplementary rather than foundational. This study found that TikTok creators already practice this ontological flexibility in their everyday disclosure; future research should match that flexibility in its analytical design. Such an approach would not only produce a more fully decolonial account of digital mental health communication but would advance African knowledge systems on their own terms, contributing to a body of theory that speaks from African contexts rather than simply being applied to them.

5.7.2 Recommendations for Mental health Practice

The finding demonstrate that young people are doing significant psychological work on TikTok. The work that is relational, multimodal, and shaped by platform architecture in ways that therapeutic models have not yet accounted for. A clinician who asks a young client “how are you coping?” without asking what they are posting, watching, and performing on TikTok is missing the primary site of that client’s emotional negotiation. This recommendation is grounded in the observation that creators perform distress through multimodal disclosure (Theme 2) and direct vulnerability toward strangers rather than intimates (Theme 6), suggesting that TikTok functions as a primary space of emotional expression for many young people.

Creators who post about psychological distress on TikTok are not necessarily seeking clinical intervention. They are seeking recognition, the moment of being witnessed by a stranger who says “me too” across provincial or national distance. That form of support is real and should not be dismissed as a substitute for professional care. It should be understood as a distinct communicative practice that coexists with, rather than competes against, formal therapeutic relationships.

TikTok’s reward architecture and CBT’s therapeutic logic pull in opposite directions. The platform concentrates visibility on content that sustains engagement, and emotional intensity sustains engagement. A creator who receives substantially more engagement for a post about hopelessness than for a post about recovery is operating in an environment that structurally disadvantages the cognitive patterns CBT seeks to reinforce. Clinicians working with young people who use TikTok to process distress should address this tension explicitly, rather than treating digital engagement as orthogonal to the therapeutic relationship.

5.7.3 Recommendations for Platform Developers and Moderators

TikTok's architecture is not neutral with respect to mental health. The For You Page algorithm distributes content based on engagement and it distributes mental health content in the same way it distributes everything else: by rewarding what holds attention longest. Emotional intensity holds attention. This means the platform structurally amplifies the most extreme expressions of distress and suppresses recovery narratives.

Specific design interventions:

1. Recommendation systems require examination of how they weight mental health content over time. This is specific to whether users who engage repeatedly with high-distress content are fed progressively more extreme material or whether the system introduced variation that models a broader range of emotional experience. This recommendation is grounded in the findings that the platform structurally amplifies extreme expressions of distress while suppressing recovery narratives (Section 5.3.3), a pattern consistent with engagement-based distribution.
2. Signposting to professional support resources must be visible at the moment of engagement with distress content, not buried in platform settings. The creator who posts a 2 a.m. video about wanting to disappear and receives three comments and no shares deserves a pathway to support that does not require her to leave the platform and navigate a separate system.

Greater transparency regarding content moderation decisions, mental health-related interventions, and the criteria by which distress content is amplified or suppressed is not merely a desirable platform feature. In the context of a platform that functions as a primary mental health communication environment for millions of young users, it is a governance obligation.

5.7.4 Recommendations for Education and Public Awareness

This study's findings suggest that digital literacy education would benefit from extending further than it typically has to date. Existing approaches tend to focus on content; how to evaluate information online, how to recognise misinformation, how to protect personal data—but far less consistently on architecture: how recommendation systems work, why certain content circulates and other content does not, and how the

same platform feature that connects a young person to a community of shared experience can simultaneously deepen the cognitive patterns that sustain distress. This recommendation is grounded in the observation that platform architecture shapes what forms of distress become visible and how they are interpreted (Section 5.2.2), suggesting that understanding platform mechanics is basic competency for psychological self-protection.

Young South Africans encounter clinical language and indigenous interpretive frameworks in the same digital space without any guidance to how these frameworks relate. Educational programmes that support young people in developing critical awareness of these competing frameworks, and in navigating between them without being required to choose definitely, would address a gap that neither formal mental health services nor current digital literacy curricula fill.

5.7.5 Recommendations for Policy and Public Health

South Africa's National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan (2023-2030) acknowledges community-based support but does not yet address digital platforms as a significant component of the mental health landscape for young people. TikTok is not a peripheral supplement. For many, it is a primary space of emotional expression, peer support, and meaning-making.

A digital mental health policy built exclusively on biomedical frameworks will not serve young South Africans who are navigating distress across biomedical and indigenous interpretive systems simultaneously. Culturally responsive digital mental health policy requires partnership with traditional health practitioners, community-based organisations, and the communities themselves. This recommendation is grounded in the findings that epistemic coexistence operates as a structural feature of how South African audiences engage with mental health content (Section 5.3.3), suggesting that policy must account for multiple knowledge systems rather than privileging a single framework.

A young person who posts about wanting to disappear on TikTok at 2 a.m. is not in a clinical consultation. She is in a public digital space with millions of viewers and no mental health professional in the room. The gap between that moment and a therapeutic intervention is the gap that policy must address through investment in digital crisis support services, through partnership between platforms and formal

mental health systems, and through public health campaigns that meet young people in the spaces where they already are.

5.8 Conclusion

These recommendations share a single underlying argument: the institutions responsible for young people's mental health, clinical, educational, governmental, technological are operating on a model of psychological distress that does not yet account for the platforms where distress is primarily expressed, negotiated, and managed. TikTok is not the problem. It is the evidence. It makes visible what was always true: that psychological distress is social and relational before it is individual and clinical, that the frameworks available to young people for understanding their own minds are multiple and unresolved, and that the environments which shape emotional experience are not waiting for institutional recognition to exercise their influence.

This study examined how selected young South Africans constructed, expressed, and negotiated mental health experiences on TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown. Using a netnographic approach and multimodal thematic analysis, the study documented how psychological distress was communicated through videos, captions, sounds, visual symbolism, and audience interactions. The study argues that TikTok mental health communication is best understood as a multimodal, relational, and culturally situated practice. The findings demonstrate that distress is not simply disclosed but performed, not simply received but co-constructed, and not simply individual but shaped by platform architecture, cultural frameworks, and networked recognition. This reframes digital mental health as a social process rather than a clinical variable.

Across the seven themes, mental health expression functioned as both a personal and collective practice. Young people did not merely describe their emotional experiences. They translated those experiences into multimodal performances that could be recognised, interpreted, and responded to by others. Vulnerability was communicated through aesthetic and symbolic form. Humour functioned simultaneously as emotional regulation and concealment. Audience interactions transformed individual disclosures into shared moments of recognition and validation.

The study makes three conceptual contributions. The paradoxical diary captures the structural condition in which private emotional experience becomes publicly

documented through platform affordances that the creator does not control. The recognition space names the zone of potential visibility within which emotional acknowledgement is sought and distributed unevenly. Epistemic coexistence (offered as a hypothesis) described the condition under which multiple knowledge systems for understanding distress circulate without institutional resolution.

The integrated theoretical framework demonstrated that mental health communication on TikTok cannot be adequately explained through psychological explanations alone. Instead it emerges through the interaction of individual experience, cultural meaning, social relationship, and technological systems. Goffman's dramaturgical sociology illuminated the performative dimensions of online self-disclosure. Bauman's liquid modernity explained the fluid and provisional nature of digital identity under conditions of platform opacity. Castells' network society theory highlighted the role of networked communication in generating episodic communities of recognition. Cognitive Behavioural Theory offered a framework for understanding the reinforcement dynamics embedded in the platform's reward architecture.

These claims are offered as theoretically grounded propositions arising from the study's engagement with its specific dataset and context, rather than as generalisations from a representative sample. Their values lies in the conceptual work they perform and the research directions they open, not in claims of empirical coverage beyond the bounded South African case.

This study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that mental health communication on TikTok is best understood not as individual self-disclosure but as a multimodal, relational, and platform-mediated process shaped by the interaction of cultural meanings, audience participation, and algorithmic visibility. The study further extends existing literature by showing how these processes unfolds within the South African context, where biomedical, cultural, spiritual, and community-based understandings of well-being coexist and intersect.

Ultimately, this study argues that TikTok should not be viewed simply as a technological platform through which mental health content is shared. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic social environment that influences how distress is expressed, recognised, interpreted, and managed. Understanding mental health communication in contemporary society therefore requires attention not only to individual

psychological experiences but to the digital infrastructures, cultural contexts, and networked relationships through which those experiences acquire meaning. As young people's lives become increasingly intertwined with digital media, understanding how they engage with these spaces and the opportunities and constraints they create becomes essential for researchers, educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers concerned with youth well-being.

Read together, the study's three contributions describe a single unresolved condition rather than three separate phenomena. The paradoxical diary explains how disclosure becomes permanent and public; the recognition space explains why that disclosure must compete for uneven visibility; and epistemic coexistence explains the plural frameworks through which the resulting distress is made sense of. What connects them is a tension the findings repeatedly surface: TikTok's architecture is built to hold attention, not to serve the young people who use it, yet within that same architecture, young South Africans located a live archive of what mattered to them—appropriating extractive infrastructure toward ends it was never designed to serve.

That appropriation, however, is never fully free of the terms it appropriates. To be found within the archive, meaning must first be rendered legible to the recognition space, translated into the countable form of likes, views, and comments that the platform recognises as value. Validating one's own existence, in this sense, becomes conditional on submitting that existence to the platform's own accounting of what counts as worth noticing. This is the condition future research must reckon with: not whether young people find meaning on platforms built to extract their attention, but what it costs them to make that meaning legible at all.

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APPENDIX A: Full Codebook (Selected Extracts)

Video ID	Code Name	Definition	Example	Reflexive Note
Vid001	Textual disclosure	Explicitly naming of emotional states in captions	“hiding pain is another pain	Direct statement making invisible struggles visible through text
Multiple video	Colour symbolism	Strategic use of colour palettes to convey emotional tone	Dark blues and purples creating sombre atmosphere	Colour choices appear deliberated, not aesthetic accident
Multiple video	Embodied distress signals	Physical gestures representing overwhelm	Foetal position curl, face covering	Repeated across creators suggesting shared gestural vocabulary
Multiple videos	Audio-visual alignment	Sonic elements reinforcing visual and textual messages	Slow music matching slow movements	Modal harmony where elements point same direction
Multiple videos	Modal contradiction	Deliberate tension between communicative modes	Upbeat music paired with distressing content	Dissonance feels intentional, creates unsettling effect
Multiple videos	Micro-affective display	Brief facial expressions revealing emotion	Quick grimaces or eye movements	Emotional leakage where control breaks

Video ID	Code Name	Definition	Example	Reflexive Note
Multiple videos	Duet interaction	Split-screen format creating dialogue between creators	Response to another mental health video	Platform enables stranger connection through shared experience
Multiple videos	Editing rhythm	Pace and style of cuts communicating emotional states	Abrupt cuts versus smooth transitions	Editing mirrors mental state through form
Vid017	Performative concealment	Making joke to keep attention away from you	Not me having a full mental breakdown	Coloured lights in the bedroom
Vid013	Strategic humour	Use of humour, irony or playful language to communicate distress	Depressties	Humour as access point making pain shareable
Multiple videos	Bedroom isolation	Filming in private space signalling withdrawal	Footage in bedroom settings	Private space made public for disclosure
Multiple videos	Direct camera address	Speaking or staring directly at the viewer	Sustained eye contact or camera gaze	Creates intimacy through direct engagement
Multiple videos	Silence communication	Deliberate absence of sound carrying meaning	No audio track use	Silence generates meaning

Video ID	Code Name	Definition	Example	Reflexive Note
Multiple videos	Blank affect	Neutral facial expression despite emotional content	Expressionless face with intense caption	Numbness as emotional state
Vid002	Transition timing	Synchronising mode shifts for emphasis	Smile drops when music shifts	Precision suggests deliberate choreography
Multiple videos	Filter effects	Visual effects modifying appearance	Filters altering visual presentation	Effects externalise internal states visually
Vid014	Text-image irony	Caption contradicting visual content	Statement versus shown reality	Irony reveals truth through contradiction
Multiple videos	Collective recognition	Comments expressing shared experience	Repeated phrases across comments	Audience meaning through recognition
Multiple videos	Temporal markers	Reference to pandemic time	Day 47 of quarantine references	Time anchors experience to specific period

APPENDIX B: Theme Reconciliation Table

Communicative modes	Interpretive focus	Examples from Data	Final themes
Visual aesthetics	Colour grading, filters, lighting choices, slow-motion effects	Colour symbolism, filter effects, monochrome aesthetics, editing rhythm	Aestheticising Pain
Spatial setting	Bedroom filming, bathroom mirrors, domestic confinement, unmade beds	Bedroom isolation, bathroom settings, domestic confinement	Bathrooms, beds, and shadows: New confessional space
Textual expression	Captions, text overlays, ironic statements, vulnerability disclosure	Textual disclosure, text-image irony, caption framing	Multiple themes
Audio elements	Melancholic music, trending sounds, silence, voiceover	Soundtrack selection, silence as communication, audio visual alignment	Multiple themes
Humour deployment	Meme, jokes, self-deprecation, dark comedy	Strategic humour, dark motifs, ironic self-presentation.	The Mask of Humour

Communicative modes	Interpretive focus	Examples from Data	Final themes
Platform engagement	Duets, stitches, hashtags, trending participation	Duet interaction, hashtag strategy, trend participation	Commodifying mental health:
Bodily performance	Gesture, facial expressions, stillness, micro-expressions	Embodied distress signals, micro-affective displays, blank affect	Multiple themes
Audience interaction	Comments, shared experiences, solidarity, criticism	Collective recognition, solidarity expressions, stigmatisation	Searching for connection in a crowd
Artistic creation	Drawings, sketches, symbolic imagery, visual metaphors.	Artistic representation, symbolic imagery, visual abstraction	A picture in a thousand strokes:

APPENDIX C: Tshele Selected Reflexive Memos

Memo 1: Modality Bias in Coding

This memo records the moment at which the study's commitment to multimodal analysis was tested against the researcher's own habituated reading practices. The impulse to treat captions and spoken text as primary data reflects a broader, largely unexamined convention in qualitative content analysis, wherein language is implicitly privileged as the most "analysable" mode. Recognising this bias prompted a deliberate methodological correction: the adoption of relational multimodal analysis as a co-equal analytical layer alongside reflexive thematic coding, ensuring sonic, visual, and spatial elements were coded with the same rigour applied to verbal content. Theoretically, this reflexive moments anticipates Theme 6 (Smiling through Silence), where silence and stillness are read not as an absence of communication but as a deliberate performative strategy, consistent with Goffman's (1959) distinction between frontstage composure and backstage affect.

Memo 2: Audience Interpretation Tension

This memo captures the central epistemological tension the study's dual coding structure was built to manage: the gap between the researcher's own affective response to distress content and the audience's demonstrated interpretation of it. Methodologically, this tension directly motivated the development of the five-category comment coding schema (validation and recognition, support and engagement, critique and disagreement, information sharing and social regulation), introduced so that audience readings could be systematically weighed alongside, rather than subordinated to, the researcher's own thematic judgements. Theoretically, the tension this memo records is the empirical seed of the recognition space concept: what registers to the researcher as clinically concerning may register to a peer audience as cathartic or relatable, because recognition within the platform's attention economy operates according to a logic of visibility distinct from clinical judgement.

Memo 3: Motive Ambiguity

This memo records the point at which the study's analytical boundary around creator intent was established. Instead of treating the ambiguity between support-seeking as a problem to be solved, the memo reframes it as a methodological boundary. The study's analytical claims can describe what performance does and how it is received, but cannot adjudicate why a creator produced it. This decision is consistent with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, which similarly brackets the sincerity or cynicism of a performance as ultimately unknowable and focuses instead on its social function and reception. The same ambiguity underlies Theme 5 (Commodifying Mental Health), where disclosure and self-promotion are shown to co-exist within the same video rather than as mutual exclusive categories.

Memo 4: Artistic Turn

This memo registers an emergent temporal pattern within the corpus and methodological caution it demanded. Noticing that videos employing overtly artistic or symbolic modes of expression clustered later in the sampling window raised the possibility of a developmental narrative, that creators turned to art as verbal disclosure became exhausting. Methodologically, this observation had to be held carefully because no single creator is tracked across multiple posts, any apparent "turn" reflects a pattern across different creators videos arranged by posting date, not verified trajectory within an individual creator's practice.

APPENDIX D.1: Saturation Log

Session	Date	Video Coded	New initial Codes	New Categories	New Themes	Cumulative Codes	Theme Stability	Saturation Assessment
Vid001	Week 1	Vid001-Vid003	35	8	2	35	Theme 1 and 2 first identified	Initial coding frame established. High code density expected
Vid002	Week 1	Vid004-Vid006	28	5	1	63	Theme 3 First identified	Thematic emergence continues; category expanding
Vid003	Week 2	Vid007-Vid009	22	3	1	85	Theme 5 first identified; no prior session	Category emergence slowing; thematic range stabilising
Vid004	Week 2	Vid010-Vid012	15	2	0	100	No new themes; 2 session thematic stability	Category emergence slowing; thematic sufficient pending
Vid005	Week 3	Vid013-Vid015	8	1	0	108	Theme 7 first identified after 2 session stability	Category saturation slowing; thematic sufficiency pending

Session	Date	Video Coded	New initial Codes	New Categories	New Themes	Cumulative Codes	Theme Stability	Saturation Assessment
Vid006	Week 3	Vid016-Vid017	3	0	0	111	No new themes; 2 session stability	No new categories or themes. Code saturation achieved
Vid007	Week 4	Vid018-Vid020	2	0	0	113	No new themes; 3 session stability confirmed	Confirmed: no new codes, categories, or themes across final five videos. Saturation achieved

APPENDIX D.2: Criteria Assessment

Criterion	Definition	Evidence	Met?
Codes saturation	No new codes across 2+ consecutive videos	No new codes in Vid016-Vid020	Yes
Category saturation	No new candidate categories across final 5 videos	No new categories in Vid013-Vid020	Yes
Thematic sufficiency	Existing themes data-rich across multiple videos	All seven themes supported by 3+ videos each	Yes

APPENDIX D.3: Researcher Memo: Saturation Decision

Saturation was assessed as achieved after coding Vid020. The final five videos confirmed existing themes without generating new thematic insights. While additional videos might have yielded new initial codes at the margins, the seven themes identified capture the full range of communicative practices observed in the dataset. The decision to stop at 20 videos (rather than 15, where theme emergence stabilized) was made to ensure thematic sufficiency for the comment analysis and to provide a robust dataset for the multimodal analysis.

APPENDIX E: Metadata Table

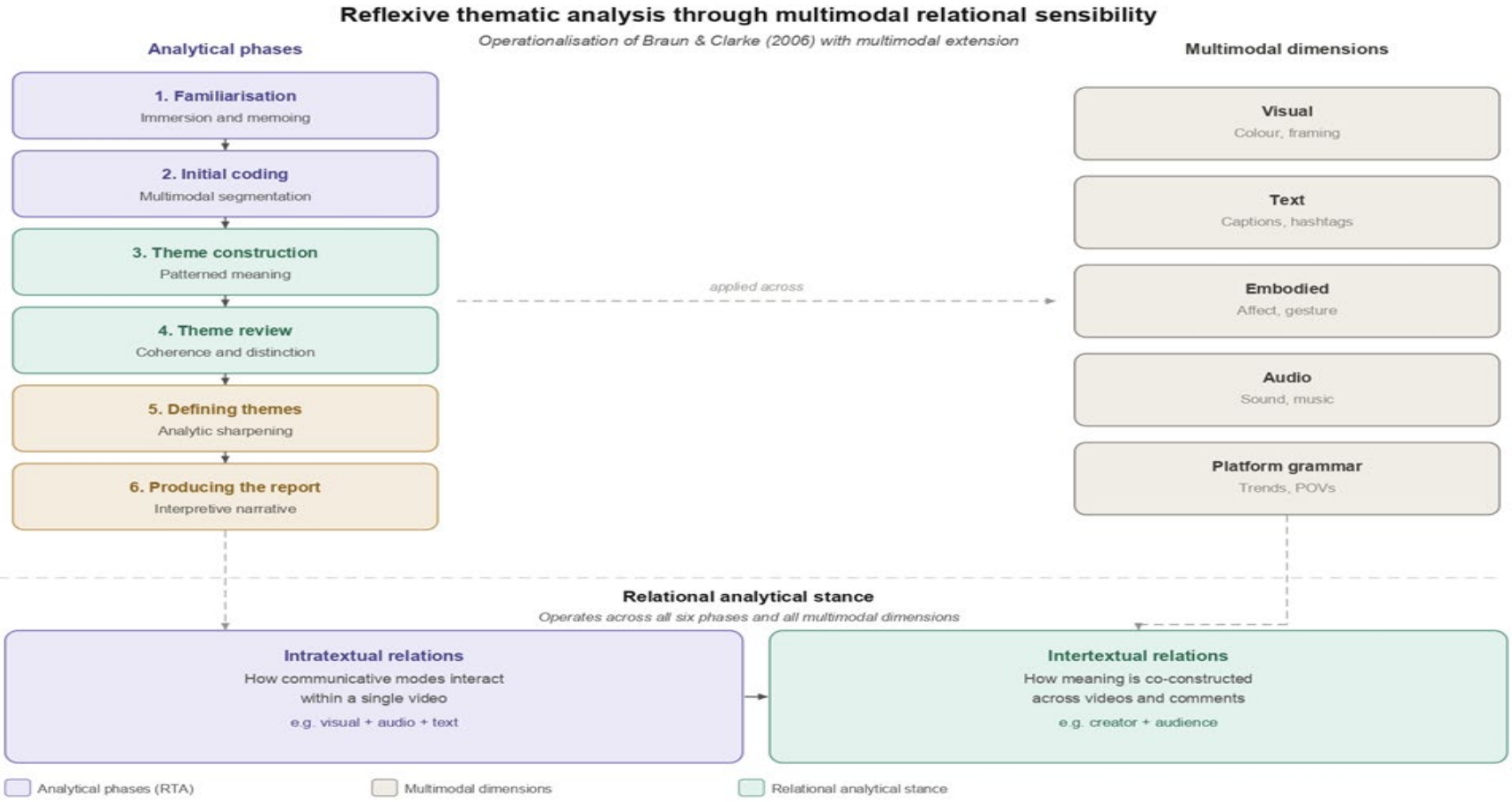
TikTok video	Date Posted	views	Comments	Summary
Vid001	2020-12-11	134,7K	214	The video presents a montage of artistic depictions of depression, using. The green screen effect to display artworks against a ceiling fan backdrop.
Vid002	2020-12-28	10,5K	113	The creator demonstrates screaming into a pillow as an anger release technique, speaking directly to camera from a bedroom setting.
Vid003	2022-07-17	234,7K	1.9K	The video uses a comedic meme format to represent mental health instability, juxtaposing the text prompt with footage of a person stumbling and falling.
Vid004	2021-08-19	92,2 K	517	The video displays text-only content on a black background, describing the experience of emotional overwhelm through crying and screaming into a pillow.
Vid005	2022-03-03	2,420	129	The creator, wearing hospital pyjamas in a psychiatric ward setting, uses on-screen text to narrate a personal story about spiritual awakening leading to psychiatric admission. The video employs humour and irony to process a stigmatised experience, framing psychiatric hospitalisation through a spiritual-ancestral lens
TikTok video	**Date Posted**	**views**	**Comments**	**Summary**

TikTok video	Date Posted	views	Comments	Summary
Vid006	2022-04-08	123,4K	2,305	The creator documents packing for mental health hospital admission in a "pack with me" vlog format, speaking to camera while showing personal items.
Vid007	2020-10-05	102,9K	366	The video overlays a lengthy textual monologue about teenage mental health struggles onto night-time footage of young people. The text critiques generational labelling while articulating experiences of depression, eating disorders, and panic attacks, using a nostalgic aesthetic filter to create emotional atmosphere.
Vid008	2021-03-26	3,284	207	The video presents a text confession about experiencing a mental breakdown while attempting to remain quiet and conceal distress from others. The purple neon-lit background creates an intimate, late-night atmosphere that mirrors the described isolation.
Vid009	2021-08-14	893	135	The creator shares a personal reflection about masking depression to avoid burdening others, using the "toxic trait" meme format. The outdoor setting and casual posture contrast with the disclosed emotional labour of concealment.
TikTok video	**Date Posted**	**views**	**Comments**	**Summary**

TikTok video	Date Posted	views	Comments	Summary
Vid010	2020-10-03	137,9K	1413	The video combines a text quote about emotional pain with a dark, atmospheric visual of a person in dim lighting. The text defines pain as self-confrontation in moments of vulnerability, while hashtags strategically target discovery through sadness-related and viral content categories.
Vid011	2021-09-09	282,6K	2.847	The creator speaks directly to camera about experiencing repeated mental breakdowns and night-time crying episodes, expressing exhaustion and fear of relapse. The dark, close-up framing emphasizes intimacy and vulnerability.
Vid012	2021-04-09	18,6K	474	The creator presents a painting as a visual representation of their experience of mental illness, using the body as canvas.
Vid013	2022-03-24	21K	172	The creator sits huddled in a corner, using the green screen effect to display a lengthy text narrative about depression, self-harm, and emotional numbness. The physical posture of withdrawal mirrors the textual content
TikTok video	**Date Posted**	**views**	**Comments**	**Summary**
Vid014	2020-06-17	3,593	135	The creator shares a narrative of rejecting antidepressant medication in 2018 and achieving

TikTok video	Date Posted	views	Comments	Summary
				wellness through natural means, illustrated with a healthy meal. The video presents an alternative recovery narrative that frames medication refusal as self-determination.
Vid015	2021-06-13	56,4K	276	The video depicts a person at 3:00am having a mental breakdown, using a relatable meme format with on-screen text. The dark, blurry visual quality conveys disorientation and sleep deprivation.
Vid016	2020-12-18	3,735	53	The creator performs a choreographed dance while on-screen text ironically frames the activity as a "mental breakdown at home." The Rolling Stones hoodie and playful emoji use create a juxtaposition between performative cheerfulness and disclosed distress. The video exemplifies the "masking" of mental health struggles through performative competence.
TikTok video	**Date Posted**	**views**	**Comments**	**Summary**
Vid017	2022-03-10	471	52	The creator displays a homeopathic "Rescue" remedy for stressful situations and panic attacks, holding the product close to camera. The video documents self-

TikTok video	Date Posted	views	Comments	Summary
				managed mental health care through over-the-counter alternatives to prescription medication. The close-up product shot and explanatory text position the content within wellness consumer discourse.
Vid018	2022-08-19	38.6K	317	The video presents a black-and-white image of a person sitting with knees drawn up, overlaid with text expressing feelings of brokenness and helplessness. The monochrome aesthetic and confined bodily posture convey depression and withdrawal.
Vid019	2022-06-09	2.1M	4.2K	The video uses a dark, atmospheric visual with overlaid text describing the experience of hiding tears and emotional pain from others.
TikTok video	**Date Posted**	**views**	**Comments**	**Summary**
Vid020	2022-12-31	175.5K	539	The creator depicts the phenomenon of laughing during a mental breakdown, using on-screen text to name this paradoxical emotional response. The video captures a moment of dissociation where distress manifests as inappropriate laughter. The content speaks to the complexity and non-linearity of emotional expression during crises.



APPENDIX F: Figure 2: Operationalisation of reflexive thematic analysis through Multimodal Relational Sensibility

APPENDIX G.1 Peer Debriefing Protocol

Peer credentials: [Anonymous] A postgraduate colleague in digital media studies with training in qualitative methods but no prior involvement in this study.

Materials provided

1. Complete codebook (Appendix A) with definitions, inclusion criteria, exemplar extracts, and boundary notes for all 20+ codes
2. Five randomly selected un-coded videos from the dataset: Vidoo3, Vid008, Vid012, Vid016, Vid019
3. Coding manual with step-by-step instructions for NVivo 15 coding
4. Independent NVivo 15 project file for peer coding

Instructions to peer: “Please code these five videos using the provided codebook. Apply codes to any segment (video, caption, comment) that meets the inclusion criteria. If you encounter material that does not fit any code, please flag it and note why. If you believe a code definition is unclear, please note this. You have two weeks to complete this task.

APPENDIX G2: Peer Coding Results

Video	Researcher Codes	Peer Codes	Matched Codes	Unmatched Codes	Agreement Rate
Vid003	12	10 codes	10	2 (researcher only)	83.3%
Vid008	15	14 codes	14	1 (researcher only)	93.3%
Vid012	8	7 codes	7	1 (researcher only)	87.5%
Vid016	10	8 codes	8	2 (researcher only)	80.0%
Vid019	14	14 codes	14	0	100%

APPENDIX G.3 Peer Debriefing Memo

The peer debriefing process confirmed that the coding scheme supported consistent application by an independent coder. The two areas of initial disagreement "modal contradiction" and "platform grammar" reflected genuine ambiguity in code definitions rather than peer error. Refining these definitions improved the codebook's clarity without changing the thematic structure. The mean inter-coder agreement rate of 88.8% (range 80.0%-100%) supports coding reliability. Documented discrepancies demonstrate that the researcher did not impose preconceived categories on the data. The single case of perfect agreement (Vid019) required boundary clarification, indicating that even high concordance may mask definitional refinement needs.