

Exploring Digital Inclusion: Addressing Homelessness Through Equitable Design on TikTok

Malavika Mahesh, University of Ottawa, [mmahe042@uottawa.ca](mailto:mmah042@uottawa.ca)

Exploring Digital Inclusion: Addressing Homelessness Through Equitable Design on TikTok

Abstract

This study examines the digital experiences of individuals experiencing homelessness on TikTok, focusing on their usage patterns, challenges, and opportunities for social connection. Through a review of literature and analysis of TikTok content, the study examines how individuals experiencing homelessness use social media, the challenges they encounter, and the potential benefits and risks associated with online engagement. Despite challenges such as network access, device quality, and privacy concerns, homeless individuals navigate digital spaces to share personal stories, seek support, and participate in online communities. The study identifies themes related to digital divide perceptions, survival infrastructuring, social capital building, and health information seeking behaviours among homeless populations on TikTok. Based on these insights, the study proposes platform-level and user-level recommendations to improve the digital experiences of homeless individuals on TikTok, focusing on bandwidth-sensitive design, enhanced privacy controls, and security toolkits. These recommendations aim to promote digital inclusion and support for vulnerable populations in the digital age, contributing to ongoing discussions about equity and social support online.

Keywords: Homelessness; Unhoused; TikTok; Social Media; Vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the surge in homelessness has received increased attention across the globe, due to many factors like rising housing costs, inflation, unstable rental markets and the COVID19 pandemic. The National Shelter Study by the Government of Canada (Infrastructure Canada, 2024) reported that there were 105,655 individuals experiencing homelessness in 2022—an increase of 23.4% from 2021. However, understanding the complexities of homelessness goes beyond mere statistics; it delves into the lived experiences of individuals facing multifaceted challenges in securing stable housing and navigating societal structures.

In order to address the lived experience and the challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness, it is important to understand who exactly they are. Research on homelessness has evolved from the early studies of poverty and homelessness around the era of the Great Depression to more modern understandings of the different dimensions and definitions of the same (Lee et al., 2010). Today's understanding of homelessness looks at the concept around the dimensions of shelter, temporality, and security— a perspective that has deepened since the

rising cost of housing in several countries has brought homelessness into greater visibility (Statistics Canada, 2023). The concept of *shelter* discusses physical concepts of homelessness, such as rooflessness (individuals who “sleep rough” in public spaces such as sidewalks and under bridges, whose homelessness is the most visible), as compared to *temporality*, which looks at how long and how often individuals experience homelessness (homelessness as chronic, episodic, or transitional). *Security* addresses whether individuals are stably housed in their dwelling (for e.g., individuals living on a friend’s couch may not be roofless but are precariously housed during their stay) and it explores the difficulties in experiencing housing insecurity (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020).

These definitions are especially vital to understand homelessness since more often than not, they determine the type of policy that is written to address them. A 2023 study (Sullivan, 2023) in the United States found that definitions of homelessness across different policy instruments affected the level of resources and support offered to individuals experiencing homelessness. Narrow definitions of homelessness that address only the “shelter” aspect may not consider those who face housing insecurity to fall under its radar, and as a result, may redirect support towards managing only those who are roofless. This is also seen in the modern discussion of homelessness, where different definitions of the concept result in a patchwork of research, ultimately influencing the policy surrounding it. The ETHOS framework in Europe (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020) was one of the earliest to address these discrepancies and provide a comprehensive structure for policymakers, which has since influenced other governments as well. The Canadian National Housing Strategy’s Reaching Home program, for example, defines homelessness as “the situation of an individual or family who does not have a permanent address or residence; the living situation of an individual or family who does not have stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it” (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020). As such, these expanded definitions help policymakers understand homelessness better— but it’s important to note that despite these attempts to identify those individuals, challenges regarding data collection still persist. To date, Statistics Canada does not provide monthly or annual data on the total number of people who experience homelessness (across all types) in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Moreover, understanding the nuanced dimensions of homelessness not only informs policy frameworks but also underscores the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals within this population as well. One emerging avenue for understanding these lived experiences is through social media, which have been noted to be particularly helpful in retrieving data that is “true” to lived experiences as compared to self-reported data (Deng et al., 2022). With a 2022 report by Mai & Gruzd (2022) finding that “an overwhelming majority” (94%) of Canadian adults used an account on at least one platform, social media is often a rich source of information on the online habits of a demographic. In particular, the use of social media platforms tends to skew towards a younger userbase, with the report confirming that young people aged 18-24 were the largest adopters of social media (except for Facebook and LinkedIn), while older people aged 55+ were the least likely to use social media.

While previous research has examined how marginalized communities use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, TikTok presents a unique case due to its algorithm-driven content distribution, highly visual nature, and participatory culture. Unlike text-heavy platforms, TikTok's short-form video format enables individuals to share personal narratives in compelling ways. Its algorithm-driven distribution enables content from marginalized users to achieve visibility far beyond their networks; its video-based format allows creators to share personal narratives even with limited literacy; and its participatory culture supports resource-sharing and solidarity. For unhoused individuals, these affordances may create new opportunities to document lived experiences, seek aid, and contest stigma. At the same time, the same mechanisms also pose heightened risks of exposure and coercion. This duality is especially pressing in Canada, where the Privacy Commissioner's 2025 report noted that despite TikTok being most used social media app by children and teens, it fails to adequately explain its data practices for these vulnerable groups (Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2025). For unhoused individuals, who already face heightened risks of surveillance and coercion, such opacity compounds existing vulnerabilities.

With over 14 million users on TikTok and a steadily growing daily user base (Statista, 2022), it becomes pertinent to understand the nature of interaction and user behaviour on the platform— especially when members of vulnerable groups have a different experience on the same. By situating homelessness within the broader literature on digital inequality and community informatics, this study asks how design and policy might better support unhoused individuals engaging with TikTok. Specifically, given the prevalence of smartphone access and social media use as well as the heterogeneous, complex nature of homelessness, this study looks at the existing literature in the domain to answer the following questions:

1. How do individuals experiencing homelessness use social media platforms like TikTok?
2. What are the primary challenges they face in doing so?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to shed light on the ways in which individuals experiencing homelessness navigate digital spaces, particularly social media platforms like TikTok. Understanding their usage patterns and challenges can inform interventions and policies aimed at promoting digital inclusion and addressing the unique needs of this population in the digital age. This research contributes to a broader conversation about equity and access to technology, in order to emphasise the importance of considering diverse perspectives and experiences in shaping a more inclusive and equitable digital society.

METHODOLOGY

This review focused on 50 papers from 2016 (when TikTok was launched) to the current day, with a focus on exploring homelessness and usage of TikTok. However, it is important to highlight that scholarly research on the intersection of TikTok and homelessness has been primarily limited, with older studies focusing more on Facebook due to its popularity at the time. As a result, this

review analyses the information regarding the online experience of unhoused individuals across different platforms and augments the gap in scholarly literature with an analysis of the most popular/most viewed user generated content on this topic in order to develop a theoretical foundation to guide design decisions on the platform.

Papers regarding TikTok's impact on related topics such as youth homelessness, substance abuse recovery and health information were also included. Of these, 8 studies were related to the access to healthcare available to those experiencing homelessness, 11 focused on online behaviour, 9 examined the network and social media usage, and 10 explored the impact on vulnerable and marginalised groups. The primary themes identified by the studies included access to digital resources, online behaviour, vulnerability, and potential for interventions. These findings are synthesized to form the foundation of a discussion of how unhoused individuals navigate online social spaces, and how it might be shaped on TikTok.

Apart from the review of literature, a content analysis of videos, accounts, and hashtags on TikTok was also conducted in order to highlight the stories and experiences of those experiencing homelessness. The content analysis was exploratory and inductive. Public TikTok videos were identified through browser searches of hashtags (#homeless, #unhoused, #shelter). Videos and profiles were reviewed for recurring patterns, which were coded manually into broad thematic categories (e.g., survival infrastructuring, stigma navigation, resource-sharing). Themes were refined iteratively to align with concepts in the literature.

FINDINGS

Access to resources

One of the primary aspects discussed in the review was the access to resources available online. Several studies note that access to resources has been sharply affected by the growing prevalence of smartphones (Harpin et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2020; Williams et al., 2023). Initial studies introduced the concept of the "digital divide," which expressed that individuals from marginalised and economically disadvantaged communities experienced a gap in the availability of digital resources and benefits which accrued over the years as technologies advanced. More modern studies introduce concepts such as "access instability," where individuals face difficulties in gaining digital literacy, capitalising on digital resources, and affording data plans on a regular basis (Galperin et al., 2021). The study by Galperin et al., (2021) found that 60% of their study's respondents reported that "their days start with a dead or dying battery" and that access to charging points is of vital importance throughout the day, especially since employment opportunities are fluid and require them to be "on call" more frequently.

However, it is important to note that despite such disparity in access and technical literacy, most studies conducted across a ten-year period agree that mobile phone usage and ownership are on par with housed individuals. While the rates of usage vary across studies (a

study by Humphry (2021) notes that “67% of the participants used social network sites and 83% reported using their mobile to take photos”), all concur that the levels of usage between the two groups— housed and unhoused— remain the same. VonHoltz et al., (2018) also found that the prevalence of smartphone use had a heavy impact on internet and social media usage, and that the usage was in a “goal-directed fashion” in times of housing insecurity.

Online behaviour

As a result, a key theme of the review was noting the effect of smartphone usage on the lives of those experiencing homelessness. Several studies note that social media is a strong resource that is used by different age groups for different purposes, such as maintaining and extending their social networks, negotiating their identities, building social capital, and finding a sense of community and emotional support. These behaviours differed slightly on the basis of age group, with several studies noting that more young individuals experiencing homelessness are open to sharing personal details and sharing the struggles associated with being homeless (Marler, 2021).

Some studies also find that older adults are less likely to post personal information or share experiences regarding homelessness (Marler et al., 2024), which might indicate a disinclination to seek support through more personal and direct social media apps like TikTok. Older adults also report feeling shame as a significant barrier in expressing details regarding their experience with homelessness. Their social media use, as a result, often can be a way to reaffirm a link to their past self (prior to experiencing the struggle with housing) and social capital with other housed individuals (Dvořák, 2024). Users also tended to express more negative emotions, personal struggles, and practical challenges. Staying connected, as well as finding emotional support and practical resources were the key priorities of those experiencing homelessness (Hu et al., 2019).

However, some studies also looked at social media and homelessness through the lens of housed users, analysing their responses and attitudes towards unhoused users across social media platforms. A study by Frechette et al., (2023) found that the modality of media consumed has a direct influence on “verisimilitude” or the degree to which audiences perceive a story as real. Participants who experienced highly immersive media as compared to text based or static images reported positive changes in their attitudes towards helping those experiencing homelessness, which confirmed that delivery modality has a critical effect on users. Another study on prosocial behaviour on Facebook (Ziegele et al., 2018) found that hostile and hateful speech towards individuals experiencing homelessness triggered users on the platform into donating money to support the individuals as a counter to the hateful comments online. This suggests that prosocial behaviour is governed by the prevailing attitudes towards homelessness and the story behind the unhoused individual’s crisis. A study on the subreddit r/homeless (Bhandari & Sun, 2023) also found that individuals experiencing homelessness were more likely to air frustrations regarding personal negative experiences with homeless shelters, the state of the current labour market, etc., whereas housed users were more likely to discuss more broad themes such as poverty and housing crises with reference to homelessness.

Vulnerability

However, social media usage by unhoused individuals was also marked by fears of stigmatisation and doxxing, with several studies noting that vulnerable groups such as LGBTQ+ youth, marginalised communities and women escaping intimate partner violence are heavily affected by the same. One study found that in order to maintain social connections from their past, individuals would often present themselves in a more favourable light to avoid the stigma associated with homelessness (Dvořák, 2024). This focus on identity validation is particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ individuals, who are affected by being able to see expressions of identity affirmation through successful coming out stories, validation from peers etc. which forms a core aspect of their experiences on the platform (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). However, critics also argue that “when people do not see their identities represented, their identity routines are made unstable, which can, in turn lead to insecurity and anxiety about their self-identity” (O’Grady et al., 2020). In addition to the same, the type of resources available online to support the needs of vulnerable groups often do not cater to certain groups, with one study (Johns et al., 2022) finding that resources are mainly targeted toward younger children and parents.

Moreover, vulnerable children (such as adolescents in state care) who are at high risk of homelessness often turn to social media platforms like Facebook. A study by Hammond et al., (2018) finds that this can be a valuable resource for adolescents in state care to maintain and extend their social networks, negotiate their online and offline identities, and access psychosocial support before, during and after their transitions— however, stigmatisation and privacy remain major concerns.

Women in particular also face certain key challenges identified within the research. Women’s homelessness is often termed as “hidden,” since they often turn to informal support systems such as friends and family to avoid street homelessness (Schwan et al., 2020). However, their challenges continue to rise through the past few years in formal public systems such as shelters— a report by Statistics Canada found that 86% of women in the shelters were escaping abuse, usually from intimate partners, with a large majority of shelters reporting that “a lack of affordable and appropriate long-term housing was one of the top issues facing their residents” (Statistics Canada, 2022). Research on women facing homelessness and social media use also identify “digital coercion” by their abusers as a method by which they manipulate various technological channels, such as social media and email, to manage and control survivors’ access points, even post-separation (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Abusers also restrict survivors’ access to technology, severing their connections to resources, friends, and family, resulting in isolation and control over their digital participation.

Healthcare

Another key theme of the review was noting the effect of health and healthcare interventions available to those experiencing homelessness. These studies focused both on mental health as well as physical health, with a focus on substance abuse, HIV prevention, and mental health services. Most studies agree that social media offers a powerful medium for social workers and healthcare practitioners to intervene and provide relevant, timely and medically verified information on TikTok— as well as the potential for understanding the various needs and preferences of vulnerable users online (Basch et al., 2022). The study by Basch et al., (2022) analysed the hashtag #mentalhealth on TikTok and found that various aspects of mental health experiences and challenges are shared among the users, such as depression, suicide, self-harm, coping strategies, and social support.

Another study found that the design and the user experience of short video apps like TikTok can significantly predict users' intention to adopt and continue using them as a health information source (Song et al., 2021). This is further confirmed by a study on digital knowledge mobilisation and community-engaged knowledge (MacKinnon et al., 2021) which highlighted the unique role of TikTok's video tools and impactful algorithm to share and disseminate information within marginalised groups. Additionally, while underserved communities generally face greater barriers in accessing healthcare services (especially in the field of mental health), they report positive feelings towards interactions which inculcate a feeling of trust and personal connections with therapists (Adkins et al., 2017). This suggests that tech interventions which reduce the level of mistrust with the system allow those experiencing homelessness to feel a sense of agency or control in seeking treatment.

Illustrative examples from TikTok

There are multiple voices that narrate the lived experience of homelessness on TikTok. Accounts like Invisible People TV (n.d.), Poverty on the Streets (n.d.), Tales from the Streets (n.d.) on TikTok interview individuals on the street and share their stories (Figure 1). These are highly popular, with millions of views and likes on videos across each account— signalling an interest in knowing the stories behind the people who are visibly homeless and who users might be more familiar with in their day to day lives, similar to what was noted by Frechette et al., (2023).

More personal accounts highlight the power of sharing one's struggles. As someone struggling with housing insecurity, Jeff (name changed to protect identity) posted a TikTok giving his audience a tour of his living conditions, highlighting how stressful his life is as someone who cannot afford to live anywhere else (see Figure 2). This soon went viral, and though the comments in his videos were sometimes negative and dismissive, being able to share and provide a visual medium to showcase his struggle led to an outpouring of support.

Figure 1

Popular accounts on TikTok covering homelessness.

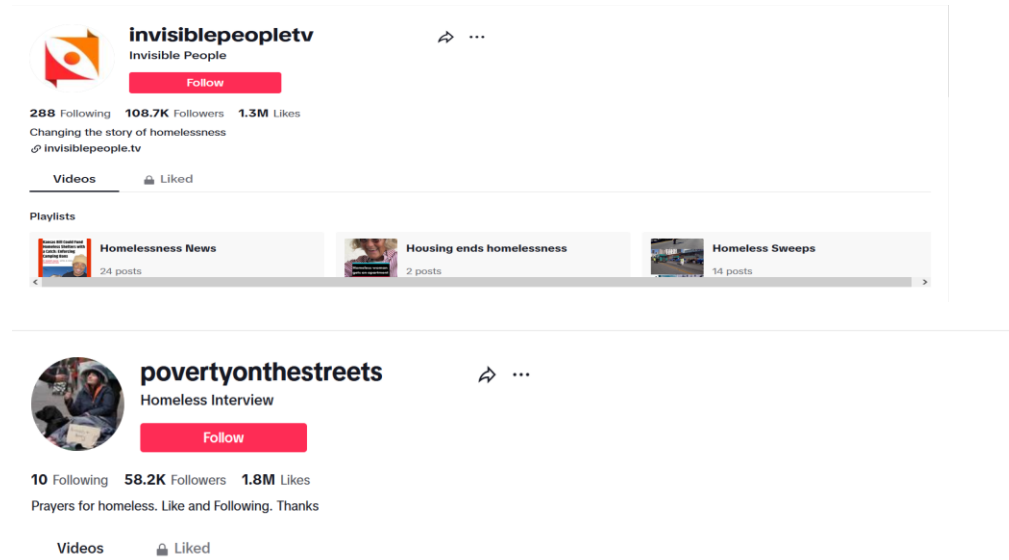
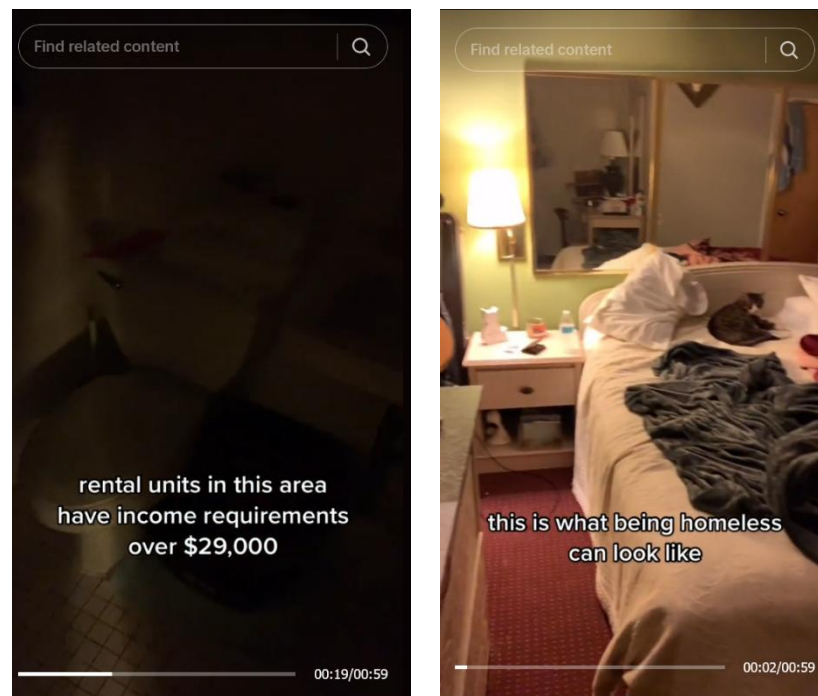


Figure 2

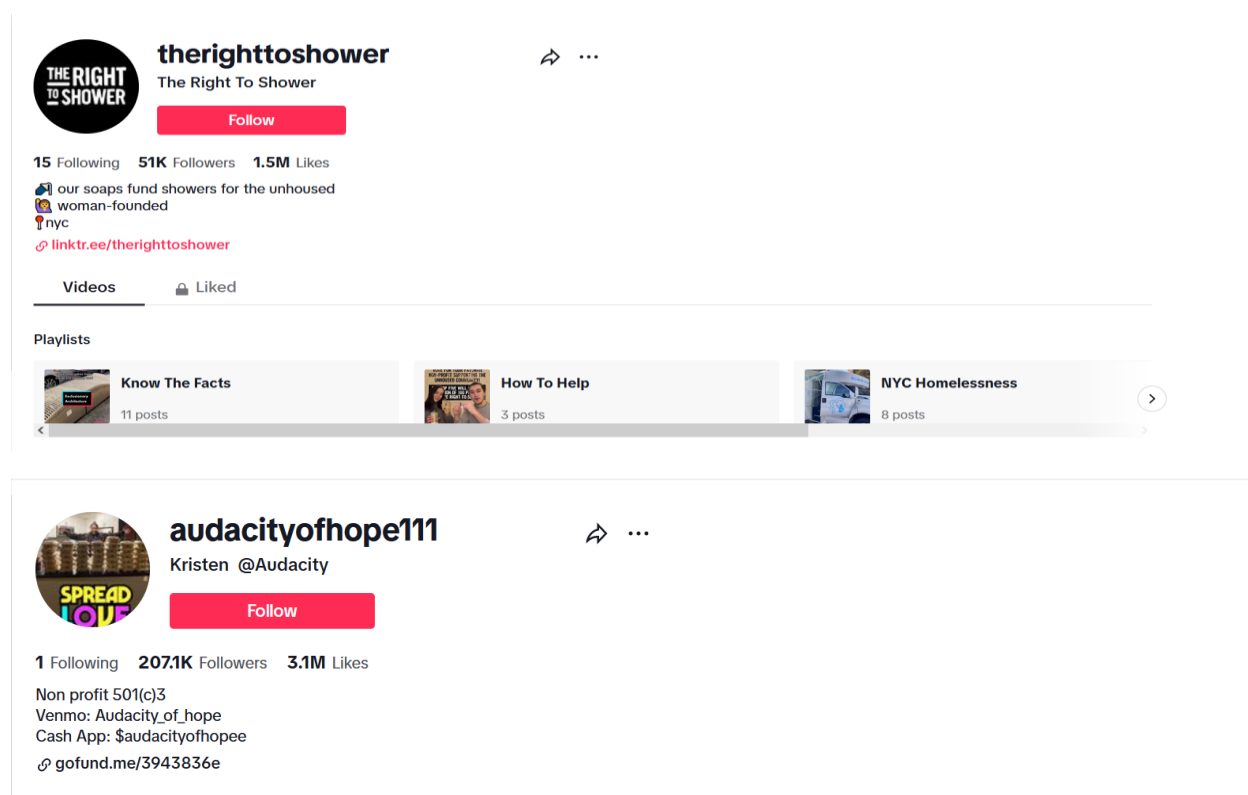
Jeff's TikTok profile documenting his homelessness experience.



Similarly, accounts by organisations like The Right to Shower (n.d.) produce TikTok videos targeted both at housed individuals as well as those experiencing homelessness, explaining that greater visibility and understanding of homelessness can make a difference in the type of resources and support they receive (Figure 3). Some of the resources targeted at homeless individuals across other accounts also provide them with updates on a place to find temporary accommodation, information on public policy tools that can help them and other ways to find support in their everyday lives.

Figure 3

Accounts of organisations and non-profits dedicated to helping unhoused individuals.



DISCUSSION

As seen in the previous section, going online and navigating the complex digital world as an individual experiencing homelessness is fraught with different challenges. Based on the current literature, it is evident that challenges regarding network access, differences in behaviour online as well as vulnerability across marginalised groups characterise the digital experience of an unhoused individual going online.

Primarily, much like their housed counterparts, individuals experiencing homelessness use smartphones to go online. However, this is disproportionate in terms of access to reliable wireless networks (Humphry, 2021), quality handsets (Buente et al., 2020) and sim cards. Women in particular usually use second hand, inferior quality handsets (often set up by their partners (Sleeper et al., 2019)) and also resort to frequent selling of such phones to meet their survival/addiction needs (Williams et al., 2023).

These behaviours are also what's termed as "survival infrastructuring," by Humphry (2021). Survival infrastructuring refers to the set of behaviours or practices followed by those experiencing homelessness which enable them to use critical services online. Even studies which report that the concept of a digital divide is not as relevant anymore to certain geographies (Rhoades et al., 2017) accept that there is a notable turnover in phone ownership and numbers, as well as gaps in consistent internet usage. As a result, there is a need for better resources that accommodate these frequent changes in phone ownership and inconsistent network connectivity— both at the platform level and the policy level.

However, once regular smartphone and internet access is established, social media emerges as a powerful tool for individuals experiencing homelessness. Many social media platforms act as a virtual community through which users can receive advice, support and encouragement which bolsters trust within the platform (Brown & Dustman, 2019; Buente et al., 2020; Calvo & Carbonell, 2018). These platforms offer individuals the chance to maintain old ties and increase the level of digital social capital that they can accrue, despite the harsh realities of their everyday lives. A study by Marler (2021) also found that social capital determines the type of outreach efforts and survival support individuals receive on digital platforms— with marginalised groups expressing fear of harm and a lack of confidence in digital skills, especially among older adults. However, for those with skills and low in-person resources, the accumulation of online ties for potential gain in the future was an important activity on social media.

In particular, younger individuals benefit the most from their social media use. As native technology users, young individuals form the bulk of the users of different social media platforms, including TikTok (Mai & Gruz, 2022). Young users share more personal details, document experiences and seek help online. One study found that young users who self-identify as "homeless" were more likely to have experienced adverse home conditions, street homelessness, and other difficult life experiences, which in turn influenced the experience of approaching social service networks (O'Grady et al., 2020). This is particularly helpful when individuals face issues such as substance abuse disorder (SUD), as videos on platforms like TikTok are heavily viewed and liked, and often depict recovery journeys, milestones, successes, and challenges. This allows individuals to build a social identity as a person in recovery, as well as enable social support to handle the same (Deng et al., 2022). These types of "normalising narratives" help break stigmas and provide agency for individuals to make their voices heard.

Moreover, the design and the user experience of short video apps like TikTok can significantly predict users' intention to adopt and continue using them as a health information source (Song et al., 2021). As a result, established public health authorities can capitalise on the

reach and sustained use of the platform to deliver timely updates, announcements, and interventions.

However, a pervasive “us vs them” narrative exists online which results in those experiencing homelessness being “othered” by their housed counterparts. Comments about community issues often turned into blame of those experiencing homelessness even if there was no reason to suggest the same (Robillard & Howells, 2023). Content analysis of popular social media platforms also reveals that topics such as personal negative experiences with homeless shelters, and the state of the current labour market, etc. in particular highlight the pervasiveness of the dehumanisation and stigma faced by those experiencing homelessness (Bhandari & Sun, 2023; Robillard & Howells, 2023). There is also a noticeable gap in the availability of resources for LGBTQ+ groups due to stigma associated with HIV, sex work, and drugs as well. In contrast, however, social media emerged as a significant space for LGBTQ+ young people and young key populations in the AIDS response (sex workers, drug injecting youth, homeless youth, and young men who have sex with men) to express themselves, connect with others, and find support despite risks of hate speech, cyberbullying and doxxing (Johns et al., 2022).

Apart from the above, concerns regarding surveillance and privacy, especially for women escaping intimate partner violence form a major portion of research on how social media use has disproportionate effects across gender. Survivors often face complex challenges in navigating social media, in light of the coercive tactics employed by abusers that extend beyond the confines of the home and into the digital realm— where they can be tracked, stalked, and harassed indefinitely (Douglas et al., 2019). According to a study on such digital coercive control, “abusers have also been known to circumvent Facebook’s real name policy by impersonating friends of the person they want to harass.” Platform based rules, they note, are inconsistently implemented— and creating safer online spaces, developing tools for detecting and reporting abuse, and designing interfaces that empower victims and discourage abusive behaviours are key priorities for the same (Dragiewicz et al., 2018).

Recommendations

As a part of developing a set of design practices and solutions to garner equitable experiences for individuals experiencing homelessness on TikTok, a set of platform level and user level solutions are discussed based on the insights provided by the literature.

Platform level solutions

1. Bandwidth-sensitive design and authentication methods to help address survival infrastructuring attempts.

As Rhoades et al. (2017) note in their study, even in areas where smartphone usage is high there exists inconsistency in internet usage which can often restrict unhoused users from accessing

their data. Since their network usage is characterised by unsteady connectivity, most individuals rely on cheap, replaceable handsets and inexpensive data plans (Sleeper et al., 2019). To address this, TikTok and TikTok Lite can be stress tested for skeleton controls and functioning across different use cases for authentication. It might be prudent to stress test authentication methods in particular for use cases like losing your number, changing devices after a security threat, logging in from multiple public networks, etc. which are behaviours identified by Humphry (2021) as “survival infrastructuring”.

2. Addressing shadow banning and dissemination of disinformation to increase transparency and boost community building.

Shadow banning of accounts, especially from creators belonging to marginalised groups has been flagged in scholarly data as a roadblock in equity creation and knowledge mobilisation (MacKinnon et al., 2021). Some of the user accounts found on TikTok as a part of this study also addressed the fact that since the algorithm works to show users more personalised content, it is difficult to make their voices and stories heard within the larger social narrative.

As noted in the literature, many unhoused users turn to platforms like TikTok to seek support, maintain old social ties, and find resources through their network (Brown & Dustman, 2019; Buente et al., 2020; Calvo & Carbonell, 2018). Given the evidence that TikTok is both a site of community and a site of exclusion, it becomes critical to examine how algorithmic design decisions shape the visibility of unhoused creators. Addressing these inequities requires greater transparency in how recommendation systems treat content from marginalized creators, as well as participatory consultation with affected groups.

User level solutions

1. Enhanced privacy controls, especially for victims of intimate partner violence.

Abusers are often the ones setting up the phones of survivors and managing their digital profiles— and as a result they exercise great control over not just their partners, but often their shared network of friends and family. Sometimes DMs from them might not violate community guidelines but users would need to report multiple accounts they might make in order to establish contact. As mentioned earlier, a study on Facebook (Dragiewicz et al., 2018) found that abusers would change their usernames to that of a trusted friend in order to reach out to the women. As a result, it is important to consider IP or device blocks for specific reports of harassment.

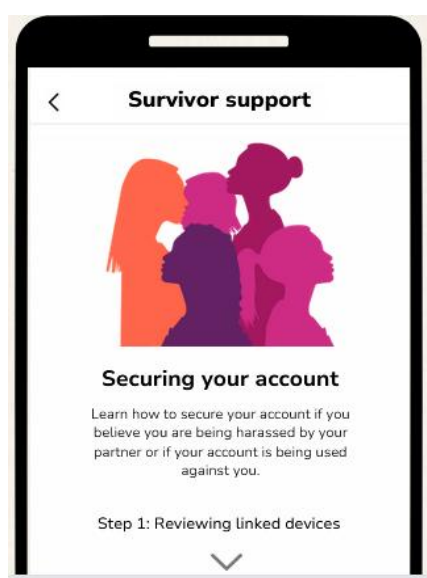
An example of the harassment report might include the following steps: “Block/Report user” → “Which one of these reasons is applicable?” → “This user is a spouse or partner who has engaged in abusive behaviour.”

2. Security toolkit for survivors and those seeking mental health support.

A specialised security toolkit such as the one that exists for sexual assault survivors would also be helpful in providing them with the information and resources which they need to take back control of their digital selves. Publishing a guide within the help section (see Figure 4) on different security measures, privacy controls, and helplines available would allow users to navigate their settings carefully in order to have a safer experience on the platform.

Figure 3

A sample wireframe of the survivor support toolkit.



Similarly, providing support for users seeking mental health resources and boosting visibility of public health channels can create more equitable access to healthcare through the platform. As noted by Johns et al. (2022) in studying the role of social media in addressing the AIDS response, dissemination of knowledge through these platforms provided a space to connect and learn, despite risks of cyberbullying and doxxing. In the same way, security toolkits that help users recognise potential harms, learn how to use privacy features, and connect with verified public health resources can extend the protective function of the platform beyond individual safety and toward collective wellbeing. By embedding these toolkits directly within platform infrastructure, platforms can reduce barriers to access, normalize safer digital practices, and empower vulnerable users to participate without being forced to choose between visibility and security.

These recommendations allow for a targeted approach to address the unique challenges faced by homeless individuals on TikTok. By proactively addressing these concerns, TikTok can play a role in promoting digital equity and supporting the well-being of all its users, including those experiencing homelessness or other forms of vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the significant role of social media platforms like TikTok in the lives of those experiencing homelessness. Despite challenges such as network access, device quality, and privacy concerns, social media serves as a vital resource for maintaining social connections, seeking support, and navigating the complexities of everyday life. From sharing personal stories to accessing health information and advocacy efforts, social media platforms offer a platform for self-expression, community building, and resource mobilisation.

The recommendations provided, both at the platform and user levels, offer actionable steps to enhance the digital experiences of homeless individuals on TikTok. These include bandwidth-sensitive design, authentication methods, enhanced privacy controls, and security toolkits tailored to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of this population. Implementing these recommendations can contribute to fostering digital equity, promoting inclusivity, and empowering individuals to navigate digital spaces safely and effectively.

As we move forward, it is crucial for stakeholders, including social media platforms, policymakers, and advocacy groups, to collaborate in creating supportive digital environments that prioritise the well-being and dignity of all users. By addressing the challenges identified in this study and leveraging the potential of social media for positive impact, we can work towards a more equitable and compassionate digital society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Prof. Channarong Intahchomphoo of the University of Ottawa for his thoughtful guidance and constructive feedback, which significantly strengthened the analysis and overall clarity of this paper.

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Adkins, E. C., Zalta, A. K., Boley, R. A., Glover, A., Karnik, N. S., & Schueller, S. M. (2017). Exploring the potential of technology-based mental health services for homeless youth: A qualitative study. *Psychological Services*, 14(2), 238–245.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000120>

- Audacity of Hope. [@audacityofhope111]. (n.d.). [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://www.tiktok.com/@audacityofhope111>
- Basch, C. H., Donelle, L., Fera, J., & Jaime, C. (2022). Deconstructing TikTok Videos on Mental Health: Cross-sectional, Descriptive Content Analysis. *JMIR Formative Research*, 6(5), e38340. <https://doi.org/10.2196/38340>
- Bhandari, A., & Sun, B. (2023). An online home for the homeless: A content analysis of the subreddit r/homeless. *New Media & Society*, 25(9), 2419–2436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211048615>
- Brown, M. E., & Dustman, P. A. (2019). Identifying a project's greatest 'hits': Meaningful use of Facebook in an underserved community's development and mobilisation effort. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33(2), 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2019.1597694>
- Buente, W., Neo, R., Quiroga, L. M., & Greene, J. (2020). Examining Factors Associated With Facebook Use Among Sheltered Homeless in Hawai'i. *International Journal of Communication*, 14(0), Article 0.
- Calvo, F., & Carbonell, X. (2018). Using Facebook for Improving the Psychological Well-Being of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness: Experimental and Longitudinal Study. *JMIR Mental Health*, 5(4), e9814. <https://doi.org/10.2196/mental.9814>
- Deng, T., Barman-Adhikari, A., Lee, Y. J., Dewri, R., & Bender, K. (2022). Substance use and sentiment and topical tendencies: A study using social media conversations of youth experiencing homelessness. *Information Technology & People*, 36(6), 2515–2542. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-12-2020-0860>
- Douglas, H., Harris, B. A., & Dragiewicz, M. (2019). Technology-facilitated Domestic and Family Violence: Women's Experiences. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(3), 551–570. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy068>
- Dragiewicz, M., Burgess, J., Matamoros-Fernández, A., Salter, M., Suzor, N. P., Woodlock, D., & Harris, B. (2018). Technology facilitated coercive control: Domestic violence and the competing roles of digital media platforms. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 609–625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447341>
- Dvořák, V. (2024). Escaping the rough life of the street: Roofless people and mobile social media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 20501579241232035. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579241232035>
- Echenberg, H., & Munn-Rivard, L. (2020). *Defining and Enumerating Homelessness in Canada*. https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202041E
- Frechette, C., Diasio, S., Luckett, M., Trocchia, P. J., & Natali, S. (2023). Immersive Technology as

- a Social Marketing Tool: Exploring the Impact of 360-Video & Virtual Reality on Intent to Help and Attitudes Toward the Homeless. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 29(1), 45–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15245004221150796>
- Galperin, H., Bar, F., & Nguyen, H. (2021). The power divide: Mobile communication in Los Angeles' Skid Row. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(1), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920932608>
- Hammond, S. P., Cooper, N., & Jordan, P. (2018). Social Media, Social Capital and Adolescents Living in State Care: A Multi-Perspective and Multi-Method Qualitative Study. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48(7), 2058–2076. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx144>
- Harpin, S., Davis, J., Low, H., & Gilroy, C. (2016). Mobile Phone and Social Media Use of Homeless Youth in Denver, Colorado. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 33(2), 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370016.2016.1159440>
- Hu, A., Chancellor, S., & De Choudhury, M. (2019). Characterizing Homelessness Discourse on Social Media. *Extended Abstracts of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290607.3313057>
- Humphry, J. (2021). Looking for Wi-Fi: Youth homelessness and mobile connectivity in the city. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(7), 1009–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1670227>
- Infrastructure Canada. (2024). *Homelessness data snapshot: The National Shelter Study 2022 update* (Report No. T94-60-2024). Government of Canada. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2024/inf/T94-60-2024-eng.pdf
- Invisible People TV. [@invisiblepeopletv]. (n.d). [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://www.tiktok.com/@invisiblepeopletv>
- Johns, A., Byron, P., Cheong, N., Yulius, H., & Affifi, N. (2022). *Mapping and Review of Resources for, and Needs of Vulnerable and Marginalised Young People in the Asia Pacific Region on Digital Literacy, Safety and Participation* [Report]. United Nations Development Programme Bangkok Regional Hub and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/159794>
- Lee, B. A., Tyler, K. A., & Wright, J. D. (2010). The New Homelessness Revisited. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(Volume 36, 2010), 501–521. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115940>
- MacKinnon, K. R., Kia, H., & Lacombe-Duncan, A. (2021). Examining TikTok's Potential for Community-Engaged Digital Knowledge Mobilization With Equity-Seeking Groups. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(12), e30315. <https://doi.org/10.2196/30315>
- Mai, P., & Gruz, A. (2022). *The State of Social Media in Canada 2022*. 1031613 Bytes.

<https://doi.org/10.6084/M9.FIGSHARE.21002848>

- Marler, W. (2021). "You Can Connect with Like, the World!": Social Platforms, Survival Support, and Digital Inequalities for People Experiencing Homelessness. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, zmab020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmab020>
- Marler, W., Hsu, H.-T., Petry, L., & Rice, E. (2024). Digital communication and social support for disadvantaged youth: A social network survey of youth experiencing homelessness. *New Media & Society*, 14614448241227851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241227851>
- Nguyen, H. (2020). *ICTs Use for Mitigating Social Exclusion in the Lives of Homeless Women* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 3747797). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3747797>
- O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Gaetz, S. (2020). Youth homelessness and self identity: A view from Canada. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(4), 499–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1621997>
- Poverty on the Streets. [@povertyonthestreets]. (n.d). [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://www.tiktok.com/@povertyonthestreets>
- Privacy Commissioner of Canada. (2025). *Statement by the Privacy Commissioner of Canada regarding a joint investigation of TikTok*. https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/opc-news/speeches-and-statements/2025/s-d_250923/
- Rhoades, H., Wenzel, S. L., Rice, E., Winetrobe, H., & Henwood, B. (2017). No digital divide? Technology use among homeless adults. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 26(1), 73–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2017.1305140>
- Robillard, A., & Howells, S. (2023). "100% They Are Destroying Our Beautiful Town": Toxic Conversations About Homelessness on Public Facebook Community Groups. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 29(3), 379–395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-023-09553-x>
- Schwan, K., Versteegh, A., Perri, M., Caplan, R., Baig, K., Dej, E., Jenkinson, J., Brais, H., Eibof, F., & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, T. (2020). *The state of women's housing need and homelessness in Canada*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
- Simpson, E., & Semaan, B. (2021). For You, or For "You"? : Everyday LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3432951>
- Sleeper, M., Matthews, T., O'Leary, K., Turner, A., Woelfer, J. P., Shelton, M., Oplinger, A., Schou, A., & Consolvo, S. (2019). Tough Times at Transitional Homeless Shelters: Considering the Impact of Financial Insecurity on Digital Security and Privacy. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300319>

- Song, S., Zhao, Y. C., Yao, X., Ba, Z., & Zhu, Q. (2021). Short video apps as a health information source: An investigation of affordances, user experience and users' intention to continue the use of TikTok. *Internet Research*, 31(6), 2120–2142.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-10-2020-0593>
- Statista. (2022, July). *TikTok users in Canada 2027*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1142634/tiktok-users-in-canada>
- Statistics Canada. (2022). *Canadian residential facilities for victims of abuse, 2020/2021*.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00006-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2023). *A review of Canadian homelessness data, 2023*. Statistics Canada.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2023004-eng.htm>
- Sullivan, A. A. (2023). What Does it Mean to be Homeless? How Definitions Affect Homelessness Policy. *Urban Affairs Review*, 59(3), 728–758.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874221095185>
- Tales from the Streets. [@talesfromthestreets]. (n.d). [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://www.tiktok.com/@talesfromthestreets>
- The Right to Shower. [@therighttoshower]. (n.d). [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://www.tiktok.com/@therighttoshower>
- VonHoltz, L. A. H., Frasso, R., Golinkoff, J. M., Lozano, A. J., Hanlon, A., & Dowshen, N. (2018). Internet and Social Media Access Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Mixed-Methods Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 20(5), e184.
<https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.9306>
- Williams, H., Faith, B., & Waldman, L. (2023). Technologies of inclusion and marginalization: Mobile phones and multiple exclusion homeless women. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 20501579231211498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579231211498>
- Ziegele, M., Koehler, C., & Weber, M. (2018). Socially Destructive? Effects of Negative and Hateful User Comments on Readers' Donation Behavior toward Refugees and Homeless Persons. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 62(4), 636–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2018.1532430>