

#Twospirit: Identity construction through stance-taking on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms offer users various meaning-making resources to express their stances towards specific issues, and, as a result, to perform and manage their identities. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, this paper explored how individuals who identify as Two-Spirit, an umbrella term used within Native American communities to refer to non-binary people, discursively construct their identities on the popular video-sharing platform TikTok by enacting varied practices of stance taking. Specifically, this paper provides a detailed analysis of three videos marked by the hashtag #TwoSpirit in which the content creators explain the meaning of the term to their audience. The findings not only illustrate the approaches taken by three content creators to the explanation of the term (i.e., contrastive, pedagogical, and metamorphic), but also shed light on the multimodal nature of stance-taking on TikTok and the centrality of embodied practices in the mediated era. In detail, embodied practices are seen as particularly relevant to disrupting colonial heteropatriarchy.

1. Introduction

In a world where technology is inextricably intertwined with people's everyday experiences, individuals use social media platforms as a new borderless space to connect with other people, share their opinions, and express their identities (Dovchin, 2019; Zappavigna, 2014). Arguably, digital platforms offer individuals an opportunity to construct their identities by using diverse meaning-making resources than in their offline realities. In this regard, online contexts make visible the performative character of identity, which, as it has been argued, is a dynamic process undergoing constant transformations resulting from the continuous interactions between individuals and the environment (e.g., Butler, 2004; Weedon, 1996).

One of the major strategies that individuals adopt to perform their identities is taking stances within interaction. As Jones (2011) maintains, identities emerge "through discourse, as speakers position themselves in line with and against others" (p. 721) by performing dialogic practices of stance taking. These practices can be enacted in face-to-face interaction as well as in technologically-mediated communication, and carried out by multiple modes of communication (e.g., written and spoken text, tone of voice, physical arrangement, etc.). Not surprisingly, in the last decade, an increasing number of studies have investigated identity construction from the sociolinguistic perspective of stance in online discourse (e.g., McCambridge, 2022; Valentinsson, 2018). However, what has to be remarked is that multimodal stance taking practices involved in identity performance have remained underinvestigated.

In order to expand our understanding of identity work in online contexts, the present study adopted a multimodal discourse approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to investigate stance taking on TikTok, a video-sharing platform that is currently receiving much scholarly attention due to its increasing popularity, especially among young users (e.g., Scherr & Wang, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Specifically, this study sought to explore how Native American individuals who identify as Two-Spirit *discursively* construct their identities by enacting practices of stance taking in the videos that they upload to their TikTok accounts. The term 'Two-Spirit', coined by the Cree scholar Myra Laramee is used within Native communities as an umbrella term interconnecting ethnic and cultural identities with gendered, sexual, and spiritual identities (Wilson, 1996). The term was coined during the third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians in 1990, and it had been proposed to replace the expression 'berdache', a term coined by the colonizers in the 18th century to label non-binary Native American individuals (Laing, 2021). Other tribally specific terms exist and some Native people prefer using them over Two-Spirit. Importantly, by signaling the *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989) of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, Two-Spirit identity not only transcends the Eurocentric/Western categorization of gender and sexuality, but also questions single-axis understandings of oppression which fail to recognize the complex experiences of marginalization resulting from the intersection of multiple identities. In turn, as Walters et al. (2006) pointed out, self-identifying as Two-Spirit has political implications in that the term also "emphasizes the importance of

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indigenous worldviews, histories, and experiences in the face of White hegemony in the mainstream LGBT community” (p. 130).

While the stance taking practices enacted by Native American individuals who identify as Two-Spirit might be similar in many ways to those of other TikTok users, how they manage their identities on the platform is particularly interesting because Two-Spirit individuals simultaneously represent two *nonhegemonic* identities: as indigenous and as non-binary persons. When Two-Spirit creators participate in the platform, they are not only able to express their stances and “enter in conversation” with previous and future TikTok content and viewers, but they can also develop *counter-hegemonic* practices of agency through which they claim a right that has been denied to socially marginalized communities as theirs for a long time: the right to make their voices heard.

For the present study, I analyzed thirty audiovisual texts created by Two-Spirit individuals and retrieved from TikTok in February 2022. All the videos in the dataset were marked by the hashtag #TwoSpirit. As Zappavigna (2018) observes, hashtags (#) serve as highly productive resources for stance taking in digital contexts. Specifically, hashtags do not merely function as topic-markers by making discourse searchable, but they are also employed by social media users to co-construct sets of values, (dis)align with others, position themselves, and, as a result, perform their identities in virtual spaces. Focusing on three highly representative videos in which the users define the meaning of the term ‘Two-Spirit’, this paper illustrates the multilayered stance taking practices, among which embodiment, through which the users multimodally convey their Two-Spirit identities. Joining scholars as Darvin (2022), Jones (2022), and Sandel and Wang (2022), the paper also emphasizes the need to take fuller account of the semiotic complexity of digital environments.

2. Literature review

2.1. TikTok, multimodality, and self-expression

Owned by the Chinese company ByteDance and formerly known as Musical.ly, TikTok is a video-sharing platform that is rapidly growing around the world due to the opportunities it offers for creative self-expression (Scherr & Wang, 2021). TikTok users can upload their videos (up to 10 min long) to the platform as well as edit them using varied resources, including filters, Augmented Reality (AR) effects, soundtracks, captions, stickers, emojis, and GIFs. Importantly, users can also mark their content with hashtags to make their videos searchable by other users, engage in remixing content previously shared on the platform, especially by lip-synching songs and sound clips. In addition, users can also duet with other users (Herring & Dainas, 2022; Jones, 2022), or rather posting videos side-by-side with videos from other TikTokers) which not only helps promote interaction, and participatory culture building, but also plays a role in amplifying content visibility. TikTok is mainly used as a means for entertainment and, as some argued, is driven by algorithmic trends prioritizing mimetic logics, or rather content creation and consumption based on imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). However, recent research has shown that the platform is also employed by its users to promote social activism (Hautea et al., 2021). Furthermore, TikTok and other social media platforms have been seen to enable minorities, including non-binary (e.g., Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2021) and indigenous individuals (see Meighan, 2021), to connect, build safe environments, and contribute to media culture production.

2.2. Stance taking and identity construction

Drawing on poststructuralist theory, the present study conceives identity as a fluid, contextual, and discursively constructed site rather than a fixed and static entity (Butler, 2004; Jones, 2015; Weedon, 1996). Identity construction implies multiple strategies among which one is *stance taking*. At its most basic level, stance taking can be seen as a

relational work and an interactional evaluation process (Du Bois, 2007). As discussed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), stance taking refers to the “display of evaluative, affective, and epistemic orientations in discourse” (p. 595), or rather a strategy through which individuals position themselves within interaction.

The stances that individuals take are intrinsically intersubjective and are signaled by the interplay of linguistic and non-linguistic features which enable them to dialogically assign values to objects, categories, and identities, express their attitudes and judgments, and position themselves in relation to others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Johnstone, 2007; Kiesling et al., 2018). Specifically, when speakers (or writers) interact, they can take different types of stances which have been understood by some as either *epistemic* or *attitudinal* (e.g., Hyland, 2005), and are respectively enacted to claim knowledge or authority, and to express alignment or disalignment with their interlocutor(s) with respect to the objects of their evaluations.

In most of prior research, the complexity of stance taking has been investigated in offline communication. Jones (2018), for instance, explored how five members of an LGBTQ group in Northern England constructed their lesbian identity by using multiple linguistic stance-markers, including adverbs, declarative forms, and negations, to disalign with certain lesbian identities which they considered as being inauthentic. Recent research in face-to-face interaction has also highlighted the multimodal nature of stance taking, an aspect that the present study of TikTok videos emphasizes. For example, in a 2017 study, Rekitke (2017) illustrated the role played by co-speech gestures in conveying the speakers’ stance towards taboo topics. Similarly, King (2018) showed how a female student in a sexuality education classroom negotiated her gender identity and sexual agency by adopting verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources indexing the Hip Hop cultural *personas* of swagger and braggadocio. Remarkably, King’s study resonates with what Goodwin and Alim (2010) define as *transmodal stylization*, namely how individuals take stances by manipulating “the voice and the body, transmodally, to create local and broader social meaning” (p. 181), as I will illustrate in a later section.

2.3. Stance taking in digital contexts and minorities’ social media use

In social media, individuals interact with each other and discursively construct their identities (Georgalou, 2017). As Vásquez (2021) pointed out, social media are “stance-rich” (p. 43) online environments where users position themselves within their interactions. In social media, these interactions are usually asynchronous; for example, on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, where users make their comments as replies to other people’s content. Nevertheless, as shown by McCambridge (2022), the different types of stance markers identified by Hyland’s (2005) model for the analysis of offline written texts within academic discourse, namely hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and reader addresses - which form part of the theoretical background of my study -, are adopted in technology-mediated interaction as well. In her study, McCambridge analyzed the stances taken by YouTube users who commented on a speech by Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg in 2019. The study illustrated how users performed a recognizable bullying voice against Greta Thunberg by using numerous stance-markers, including varied semiotic resources, such as exaggerated punctuation, emoticons, and memes. As aforementioned, social media platforms offer individuals varied ways to agentively perform and spread their identities and views at a higher speed and with a wider audience than ever before. Notably, numerous studies have explored the spread of hegemonic discourses, populist ideologies, and various forms of hate speech on digital platforms (e.g., Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016; Kreis, 2017). However, social media have also been proven to enable minorities to connect and make their voice heard, as the present study shows. An example is offered by Cashman (2019), who showed how a chef self-identifying as lesbian and Mexican and the members of an LGBTQ association known as Trans Queer Pueblo made

use of social media to challenge the white hegemonic ideologies negatively impacting the Mexicans/Latinx LGBTQ community in Phoenix.

To further our understanding of how marginalized groups multimodally construct their identities in digital contexts, the present study explored how individuals from a marginalized community, namely Native American individuals who identify as Two-Spirit, presented their non-hegemonic identities on the video-blogging platform TikTok. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question:

What stance markers (i.e., lexico-grammatical, discursive, and multimodal resources) were utilized by Two-Spirit individuals to construct their identities in their #TwoSpirit videos on TikTok?

3. Methods and data collection

3.1. Multimodal discourse analysis

To explore how Two-Spirit individuals construct their identities on TikTok through stance taking, this study draws on multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA), an interdisciplinary approach that is well suited to investigating multimodal texts. As described by [Kress & van Leeuwen \(2006\)](#), *multimodality* refers to how different *modes* of communication (e.g., verbal, visual, aural, etc.) interact to produce socially-recognized meanings. This interplay of modes is particularly evident in social media platforms such as TikTok (e.g., [Schellewald, 2021](#)), where users have access to abundant resources for meaning-making which enable them to creatively construct their personas.

Drawing on [Halliday's \(1985\)](#) systemic-functional grammar, [Kress and van Leeuwen \(2006\)](#) expanded Halliday's metafunctions beyond the linguistic dimension. Specifically, in Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar, Halliday's *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* metafunctions are respectively named *representational meaning* (concerned with how the world is represented in multimodal texts), *interactive meaning* (dealing with how the relationship between the visual, the producer, and the viewer is pictorially encoded), and *compositional meaning* (concerned with multimodal texts' inner coherence). The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen involves: (1) the *processes* (i.e., the represented events); (2) the *participants* (i.e., who/what is involved in the event); (3) the *circumstances* (i.e., the conditions in which the action takes place). In multimodal texts, for instance, the participants could *request* or *demand* something from their viewer(s). Following Kress and Van Leeuwen, in this study, I show how these communicative objectives are achieved through the use of multiple modes, such as the gaze (i.e., suggesting social distance or intimacy), and the size of the frame (i.e., the very-long-shot and the vertical angle suggest social distance and detachment, while very-close-shot and frontal planes convey intimacy and involvement). Additionally, I present how, from a compositional perspective, visual texts achieve their inner coherence through the interplay of three main components, as identified by [Kress and van Leeuwen \(2006\)](#). These are: (1) the *information value*, concerned with how the elements are spatially placed in the text (e.g., the placement of the content creator with respect to their viewers); (2) the *salience* of the elements displayed in the composition (e.g., the size and placement of subtitles); (3) the *framing*, or rather how elements are connected or disconnected the one another.

The importance of incorporating multimodal approaches in the study of identity in digital environments has been underlined by an emerging body of research. For instance, in a study of three apps, namely Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili, [Sandel and Wang \(2022\)](#) explored the multimodal strategies used by Chinese internet celebrities to construct their online *personas* and build intimate connections with their viewers. Similarly, [Darvin \(2022\)](#) draws on MMDA to examine how Hong Kong TikTokers resist the mimetic logic of the platform and perform their identities as Hongkongers by enacting processes of resemiotization of popular sound memes. However, how identity is discursively and multimodally constructed has been scarcely investigated in digital contexts. One exception is [Weninger and Li \(2022\)](#), who analyzed how a Chinese

microcelebrity constructed her *persona* through the use of multiple multimodal devices to create her stances on YouTube (e.g., interjections, face expressions, voice tone, etc.). Recognizing the semiotic potential of digital environments, this paper expands our understanding of the relationship between stance taking and identity performance by taking a multimodal discourse approach in focusing on Two-Spirit content creators to explore how they perform their identities on TikTok.

3.2. Data collection and analytic procedures

Data for this study include thirty audiovisual texts that I retrieved from the TikTok platform after creating a new account under a pseudonym to minimize algorithm bias. The dataset was composed of 15 videos from February 14th, 2022, and 15 videos from February 28th, 2022. The dates and the number of videos were arbitrarily selected with the objective of having diversified content. My sampling strategy involved selecting the 15 most popular videos marked by the hashtag #TwoSpirit, entered in the search engine on TikTok, at the time of each data collection point. Further two criteria guided my sampling: (1) the videos were made by users who identified as Two-Spirit; (2) English was used as medium of communication. With regard to the first criterion, I checked the information provided by the video creators in their profiles and/or content they previously uploaded to TikTok.

The videos were downloaded, stored, and thematically coded, and four main categories of videos were identified through inductive analysis: (1) videos in which the users explained the meaning of the term 'Two-Spirit'; (2) coming out stories; (3) videos in which the users openly mocked and/or parodied heteronormative and gender binary ideologies; (4) videos in which native handmade products were promoted. In my analysis, I focused exclusively on the first and most represented category, in other words, those videos in which the users explained the term Two-Spirit to their audience, in order to explore the similarities and differences among the videos in this category. Next, I selected three videos to analyze more closely (see [Appendix A](#)); these were representative of enacting three different approaches to the explanation of the term that I had found in my dataset: (1) a contrastive approach; (2) a pedagogical and quasi-scholarly approach; (3) a metamorphic (i.e., supported by bodily transformation) approach. These three videos also differ in the stances that the users take towards their viewers.

For each video, I orthographically transcribed the spoken discourse and annotated all other modes. Following this, I highlighted the stance taking strategies linguistically enacted by the video creators through the analysis of specific stance-markers. In a similar vein to [McCambridge \(2022\)](#), who employed [Hyland's \(2005\)](#) model to investigate stance-taking in an online context, I identified the following stance-markers based on Hyland's model:

- self-mentions (use of first-person pronouns and adjectives, i.e., *I, my, we, our*);
- readers/viewers addresses (i.e., directives, uses of *you*, and direct questions);
- markers of epistemic stance (i.e., hedges and boosters);
- markers of affective stance (i.e., attitude markers).

Next, [Hyland's \(2005\)](#) model was extended by non-linguistic resources (see [Appendix B](#)). Specifically, when analyzing the data from a multimodal discourse perspective, I looked for those non-linguistic resources that, combined with the linguistic markers, contributed to expressing the video creators' stances. Importantly, the non-linguistic features are derived from those identified in the videos under scrutiny. Although the present paper promotes a multimodal approach to stance-taking, proposing a generalized multimodal model is beyond the scope of the present paper. A more comprehensive model may include also include filters, visual transitions, soundtracks, sound effects, and stickers.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Acting in compliance with the video creators' privacy choices, all the videos in the dataset were publicly-available and downloadable at the time of the data collection. Recognizing the importance of protecting the video creators' privacy, several ethical steps were taken: the data were anonymized; pseudonyms were assigned to each video creator; the users' faces were blurred; the links to the videos and the captions under the videos have not been provided. Although these data are public and may be retrievable, I ask the readers not to track down the sources as users' privacy expectations may differ from those of the researchers and readers. Importantly, I refer to each video creator by using the pronoun with which they identify depending on the information they provided in their profiles and/or in their videos. In the absence of this information, I took the liberty to use the most inclusive pronoun *they* since I considered it well-suited for addressing the fluidity of Two-Spirit identity.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my privilege in the world as a white woman. Personal experiences have led me to develop a deep respect for indigenous cultures and people. In approaching the analysis, I embraced the role of an active listener and critically questioned my own worldview.

4. Analysis

4.1. This identity. A contrastive approach to non-binary identity from an indigenous perspective

In the first video that I analyzed, the *represented participant* - whom I will call 'T1' from now on - engages in the *process* of performing a spoken word poem about Two-Spirit identity, a genre that, interestingly, has both didactic and aesthetic ends in this case. T1 is the author of the poem, as they state in the video's caption, and they shot the video vertically by using the selfie mode of their phone's camera (see Fig. 1). Their gaze is directed toward the camera and their figure is viewed from the waist up (i.e., medium shot). The video was recorded in an interior space, a room in their home, perhaps in their bedroom, as indicated by objects such as a white door and a guitar (Fig. 1). Above T1's head, the text of the poem is displayed so that the viewers can read it while T1 is performing (Fig. 1). Notably, to catch the viewers' attention, the text appears in a white box (framing) emphasizing its *saliency*.

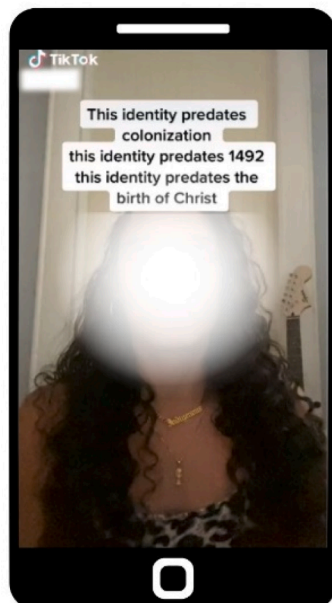
As in physical contexts, there are implied viewers also in

asynchronous mediated online communication. However, the difference between F2F and digital interaction is that who the interlocutors are (or will be) is not known to the content creator. Nevertheless, users might have a clear image of their "ideal" recipients when sharing videos on their social media accounts. Interestingly, this video was published in June 2021, on the occasion of Pride Month. I presume that the date of publication is not accidental since the user marked the video by using multiple hashtags, among which #PrideMonth stands out, and wishes their viewers a happy pride in the video's caption. What I argue here is that, in this video, T1 aimed to appeal to a specific audience and sought to spread a counter-narrative of non-binary identity from a Native American perspective in a historical moment when the platform was flooded by posts dealing with other Pride Month-related content. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, throughout the video, T1 takes the stance that the LGBTQ movement did not start with the Stonewall riots (see Table 2), namely, a series of demonstrations that took place in New York City in 1969 and are regarded as the birth of the modern LGBTQ movement in Western history. I would like to emphasize that 'LGBTQ' is the acronym used by T1 throughout the video. I acknowledge the existence of further and more inclusive acronyms, but it is my intention not to alter T1's words.

In the first part of the video, T1 refers to Two-Spirit identity by using the demonstrative adjective *this*, which is employed to modify the noun 'identity' several times (see Table 1). In detail, the repeated phrase 'This identity' used as a booster opens a series of statements fostering an *epistemic stance of knowledge* on Two-Spirit identity and introducing the history of the term from a contrastive point of view, an approach that

Table 1
Boosters and attitude markers.

T1	— Time	
	00:00-00:04	<i>This identity predates colonization.</i>
T1	— Time	
	00:04-00:08	<i>This identity predates 1492.</i>
T1	— Time	
	00:09-00:14	<i>This identity predates the birth of Christ. It has and will always exist.</i>
T1	— Time	
	00:14-00:15	<i>This identity is <u>ancient</u>.</i>
T1	— Time	
	00:14-00:15	<i>Trans, non-binary, Two-Spirit: these are <u>new</u> words of a western language associated with identities that predate <u>that</u> language. It is an <u>ancient</u> identity.</i>



- Setting: interior space
- Speaker in the center
- Subtitles in a white box at the top of the screen
- Medium-shot, eye-level, frontal
- Gaze directed at the viewer
- Non-transactional reactional process:
T1 is performing a poem

Fig. 1. *This identity*: Composition.

Table 2
Stance against Western LGBTQ discourse.

T1	— Time 00:28–00:34	The LGBTQ movement didn't start in the 60 s. It started in <i>ancient</i> times.
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has been taken by some other Two-Spirit TikTokers in my dataset. Specifically, T1 draws an imaginary line between pre- and post-colonization (e.g., “*This identity predates 1492*”), and regards and posits Two-Spirit identity as chronologically antecedent to the conquest of America (see Table 1). This chasm is also signaled by the use of the symbolically opposite demonstrative *that*, which modifies the noun ‘language’, referred to the English language, and by the use of two dichotomic adjectives employed as attitude markers, *ancient* and *new*, repeated throughout the performed poem (Table 1). In fact, T1 states that the terms ‘trans’, ‘non-binary’, and even the term ‘Two-Spirit’ are but “*new words of a western language associated with identities that predate that language*” (see Table 1). Interestingly, the word ‘English’ is not even mentioned by T1, and this omission, along with the use of *that* to refer to it, suggests T1’s distancing from colonial history.

The stance that T1 verbally takes in the first part of the video is reinforced by varied multimodal stance-markers. From a compositional perspective, T1 fosters a sense of closeness and intimacy with their viewers which is conveyed through the interplay of multiple modes, including: a normal rate of speech, their placement in front of the camera, and the direct eye contact with an unwavering expression established by T1 with their potential viewers (Fig. 1). Concerning the interactive meaning, T1 looks at the viewers, who are not depicted in the video. This image act involves a *demand*, or rather T1 demands their ideal viewers to “enter into some kind of imaginary relation” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 118) with them and carefully listen to what they have to say.

Next, T1 begins challenging the idea that the LGBTQ movement is the product of the Sexual Revolution that started in the 1960s in the United States (see Table 2) — again, in this segment, they are referring to the Stonewall riots. Because Pride Month is dedicated to honoring the Stonewall riots, in making this statement and sharing the video on TikTok on the occasion of Pride Month, the content creator takes a clear stance against Western LGBTQ discourse and openly questions one of its most important symbols. In detail, they take an *attitudinal stance* of *indignation* and *discontent* which is multimodally conveyed by *what* they say and *how* they say it. Their stance is amplified by embodied practices such as their accelerated and raised-pitch speech, their defiant facial expressions (i.e., eyebrows pulled down), and their posture (i.e., they stand proudly in front of the camera).

In the second half of the video, the user engages in constructing a counter-narrative to Western LGBTQ discourse. Specifically, they mention two Andean pre-colonial gendered and sexual identities (see Table 3): *Chuqui chincay* and the *Quariwarmi* people. *Chuqui Chincay* was considered the mountain deity of the jaguars and the patron of dual-gendered people, also known as ‘quariwarmi’ (meaning ‘man-woman’), cross-dressed shamans embodying “a third creative force between the masculine and the feminine in Andean philosophy” (Picq & Tikuna, 2019, p. 62). When performing this part of the poem, the user’s body language plays a crucial role in delivering their message and reinforcing their stance. In detail, T1’s gaze (i.e., eyes to the sky) and their gestures (i.e., open palms, hands clasped in prayer) serve as *symbolic suggestive processes* indexing *sacredness* and *respect* (see Figs. 2 and 3). Hence, T1’s words and embodied practices sound even more like a claim: they underline T1’s desire to unravel a silenced history and question

Table 3
A counter-narrative for queer identity.

T1	— Time 00:34–00:46	I’m talking ancient like Chuqui Chincay, Quariwarmi, Jaguar, androgynous deity channeling masculine-feminine energy, channeling medicine.
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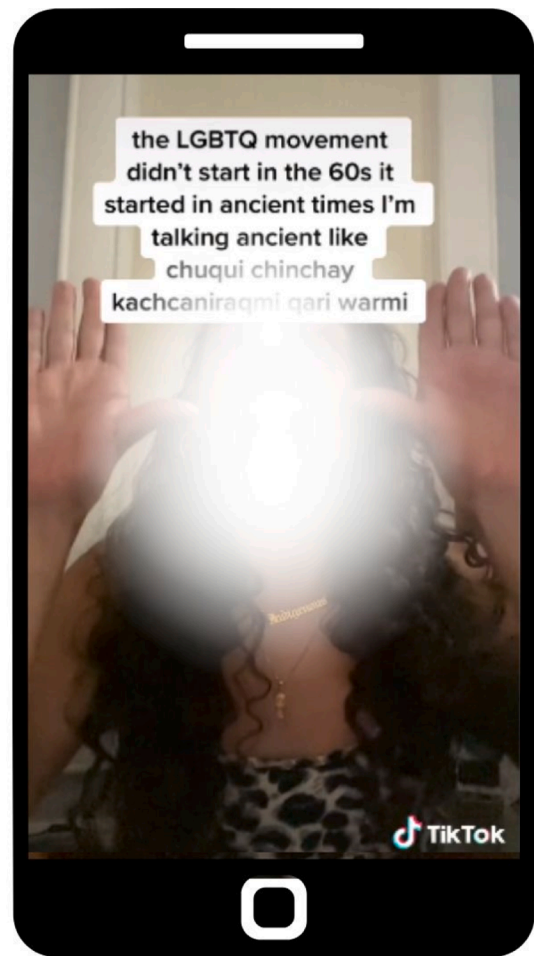


Fig. 2. Embodied practices indexing respect and sacredness.

mainstream, hegemonic versions of history. This position is emphasized by the imperative “*Let this poem teach you*” (01:04–01:06) in the closing lines of the performance.

In the closing part of the video, T1 emphasizes their identity as a Two-Spirit by simultaneously taking two different stances: an *epistemic stance* towards Two-Spirit identity and an *affective stance* against Western LGBTQ discourse. The *epistemic stances* of *authority* and *membership* that T1 takes are signaled by three self-mentions: the subject pronouns *I* and *we*, and the possessive pronoun *our* modifying the word ‘identities’ (see Table 4). Interestingly, T1 defines their identity in contrast to a Western erroneous conception of Two-Spirit identity as a third gender by using various negations (Table 4). In detail, the series of contrasts presented by T1 suggests the impossibility of capturing Two-Spirit identity in Western categories of sexuality and gender. Once again, the video simultaneously works on two scales. Specifically, in taking clear a stance against Western LGBTQ discourse on TikTok, the video creator constructs their own narrative about Two-Spirit identity from a contrastive perspective.

4.2. A gentle reminder. A quasi-scholarly definition

In the video that I titled ‘A gentle reminder’, the represented participant, who I will refer to as T2, is also located in a private space, presumably at home. As for the previous video, they are placed at the same level as their viewers (i.e., frontal shot) and their gaze is directed at them, a choice that conveys a sense of closeness and intimacy (see Fig. 4). The video was also subtitled and the text, in typewriter-style print, appears above T2’s head (Fig. 4). With regard to *framing*, the font choice, its color (i.e., white), and the absence of boxes framing the



Fig. 3. Embodied practices indexing respect and sacredness.

Table 4
Self-mentions and negations.

T1	— Time	I am <u>not</u> a third gender. I am the fourth, fifth, sixth entity, so I will <u>not</u> conform to Western identities
T1	— Time	We are the descendants of indigenous peoples. We are more than just Machu Picchu. Our identities <u>cannot</u> be summed up by LGBTQ.

text suggest that the subtitles were added to help the viewers read and follow the creator’s speech but, differently from the previous video, they appear more integrated with the composition.

Just like the first video discussed, ‘A gentle reminder’ was published on the occasion of Pride Month. Presumably, the video was meant to enter into conversation with other Pride Month-related content posted on TikTok, as signaled by the popular hashtag #ForYourPride appearing in the video’s caption. According to what the caption reads, the video had a pedagogical purpose: T2 seeks to explain the meaning of the term ‘Two-Spirit’ to their viewers. Similarly to the previous video, T2 emphasizes the infeasibility of approaching and understanding Two-Spirit identity through non-native American categories. In fact, the user starts their speech by stating “A gentle reminder that being Two-Spirit is not synonymous with being queer and/or trans.” Arguably, the phrase ‘a gentle reminder’ is used to convey an ironic tone since it indexes the language used in formal reminder emails but T2’s viewers might have no background knowledge of the term to be recalled.

Next, T2 advances a quasi-scholarly definition of the term by describing its history and complexity. I noticed similar pedagogical approaches to the explanation of the term in a number of other videos

belonging to this category in the dataset. To convey an *epistemic stance of knowledge*, T2 avoids using first-person pronouns (see Table 5). In detail, the user sets an impersonal tone throughout the video which is achieved through the use of the third-person pronoun *it* and several instances of passive voice (e.g., “was translated”, “is meant to be”, “became popularized”). Additionally, the calm tone of the user’s voice serves to convey the didactic scope of the video.

Apparently, T2’s main goal in making this video is to address the complexity of the term and avoid binary or simplified explanations — hence the descriptors ‘complex’, ‘complicated’, and ‘unique’, that they use to explain the term to an audience of potential cultural outsiders (see Tables 5 and 6). To achieve this goal, T2 also uses the modal *may*, conveying an *epistemic stance of possibility and uncertainty* (“[...] ontology that may or may not be similar to understandings of gender and sexuality”), and physically places n air quotes the phrase ‘gender and sexual identity’ with a gesture of their hands (see Fig. 5). In addition to that, T2 ascribes the attribute of beauty to complexity (“It’s complicated, and that’s what makes it beautiful”) signaling a *positive affective stance* towards Two-Spirit identity (see Table 6). In doing so, they construct their identity by disaligning with the colonial hegemonic practice of labeling the world while simultaneously constructing their Two-Spirit identity as fluid, complex, and non-labelable.

4.3. So get this. crossing genders

In ‘So get this’ video, the *represented participant*, T3, who identifies as male, aims to explain the term ‘Two-Spirit’ to his audience. The video is filmed in a close shot, a choice that conveys physical closeness between the user and his audience (see Fig. 6). In terms of the *processes* depicted in the video, T3 recorded several video frames in which he speaks to his viewers while performing two daily routine activities, namely shaving his beard and putting on make-up, respectively indexing *masculinity* and *femininity*. Similarly, in other videos in the dataset, the users symbolically performed transformations from an embodied gender to another while offering their viewers a definition of the term.

In the first part of the video, T3 is looking at himself while shaving in front of a mirror that viewers cannot see (Fig. 6). Hence, he is depicted from a slightly oblique angle that conveys a sense of authority by producing an apparent detachment from the viewers. The latter is also achieved through the opening utterance, namely the directive “So get this!” (see Table 7). Additionally, this directive helps T3 establish direct contact with the viewers who are almost “forced” to listen to what he is saying.

Differently from the previously analyzed audiovisual texts, T3 provides a rationale for recording his video: he states that many people asked him what ‘Two-Spirit’ means and this led him to create this content. In order to take an *affective stance of annoyance* towards those who, apparently, keep asking him the aforementioned question - presumably, his ideal recipients -, T3 uses multiple linguistic stance-markers, including the repetition of the frequency marker *always*, marking irritation, the informal adverbials *just* and *actually*, and the direct question ‘right?’ (see Table 7). In doing so, T3 distances himself from those potentially uninformed viewers who may identify with the individuals asking him the aforementioned question. The stance taken by T3 in this first part of the video is multimodally conveyed through the slightly oblique camera angle, indexing social distance, and two embodied practices, namely the gaze directed to an imaginary mirror, and the mocking tone of the voice when uttering “What does it mean?” (Table 7) as if the utterance was said by those who ask him the question.

In the next part of the video, T3 takes an *epistemic stance of authority* and delves into explaining the term by adopting several impersonalization strategies which are used to signal his taking a historical perspective on Two-Spirit identity from a pre-colonial perspective (see Table 8). In fact, he refers to Two-Spirit individuals using the demonstrative adjective *these* (“these people”), the third-person pronoun *they*,

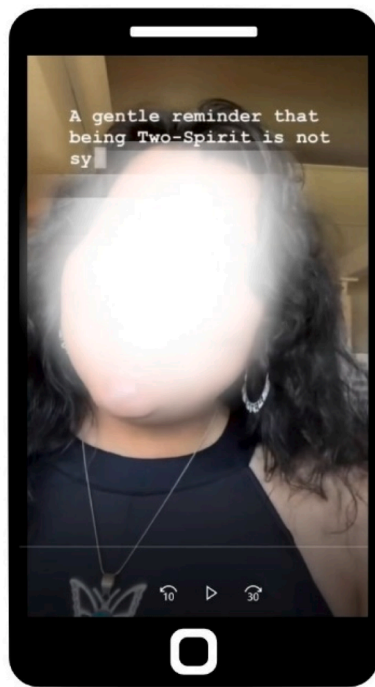


Fig. 4. A gentle reminder: Composition.

- Setting: interior space
- Speaker in the center
- Subtitles at the top of the screen

- Medium-shot, eye-level, frontal
- Gaze directed at the viewer

- Non-transactional reactional process:
T2 is talking to the camera

Table 5
Epistemic stance on the term ‘Two-Spirit’ & impersonal tone.

T2	— Time 00:06–00:13	The phrase has a <u>unique</u> history, considering it was translated from an Anishinaabe word and became popularized in the 1990s.
T2	— Time 00:13–00:24	Two-Spirit is meant to be an all-inclusive term unifying and describing various gender and sexual identities is <u>unique</u> to indigenous communities.
T2	— Time 00:24–00:33	Each indigenous community has a <u>unique</u> and <u>complex</u> understanding of ontology that <i>may</i> or <i>may not</i> be similar to understandings of gender and sexuality.

Table 6
Addressing complexity: Attitude markers.

T2	— Time 00:41–00:53	There are two-spirit folks who do identify as queer and/or trans, and there are many who do not. In any case, it’s complicated, and that’s what makes it beautiful.
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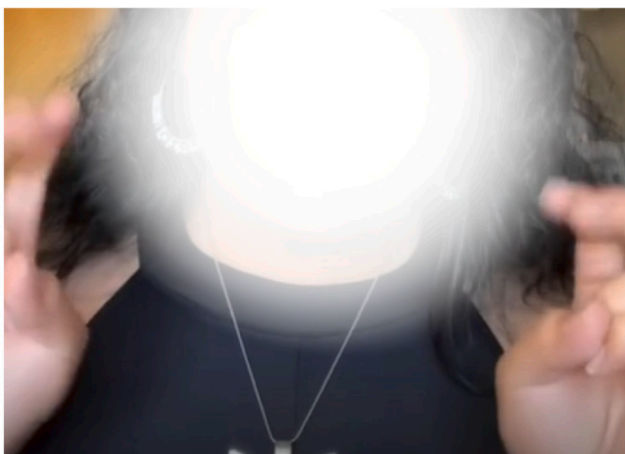


Fig. 5. Detail: air quotes.

and the passive voice (e.g., “these people were actually believed to [...]”). Interestingly, the apparently impersonal and detached tone of this part of his speech, realized via a series of agentless passive constructions, is counterbalanced by the use of multiple boosters that he employs to emphasize the importance of the historical role played by Two-Spirit individuals in their communities (Table 8). Specifically, T3 uses the boosting markers *very* to modify ‘spiritually powerful’ and *really* to modify the adjective ‘important’, and the anaphoric *and* at the beginning of every uttered statement (Table 8). In doing so, T3 attempts to renegotiate the notion of power and constructs an agentive Two-Spirit identity. In fact, he describes Two-Spirit people in terms of sexual identity only at the very end of his explanation of the term (Table 8).

Following the first explanation of the term, T3 takes a different approach. Specifically, in the last part of the video, T3 constructs his identity as a Two-Spirit individual who identifies as male but openly embraces and performs his feminine side by enacting a *symbolic suggestive process*. In detail, he places himself in front of the camera and applies face powder, eyeshadow, and lipstick while talking (Fig. 7). By putting on make-up, T3 uses his body as a resource for *transmodal* stance taking in that he uses his body to construct his identity (Jones, 2022). Specifically, his body becomes the *carrier* of his femininity, which is indexed by the application of make-up. This image act also aligns with the caption to his video, in which he claims “at home” in his “two-spirit body.”.

As the form of his embodiment changes appearance, T3 verbally shifts from an impersonal to a personal tone which signals the performance of a new identity. In detail, T3 reformulates the answer to the question “What does this mean?” from a first-person perspective by using self-mentions numerous times (see Table 9). Through the closing utterance (“I am a spiritual being that existed completely outside of the colonial structure of what gender is”), T3 finally provides a personal explanation for the term. This is preceded by a series of utterances (e.g., “I’m kinda of saying”) emphasizing the difficulty of capturing the complexity of Two-Spirit identity which does not fit into the rigid Western categories of masculine or feminine. Hence, T3 takes a *stance of knowledge* and *authority* which serves him to construct his identity in terms of fluidity and boundary-crossing. This stance is reinforced by two embodied actions: he looks more often at the viewers and sticks his tongue out as a gesture



- Setting: interior space
- Speaker in the center
- Close-up, slightly oblique angle (indexing detachment, authority)
- Gaze directed at an external phenomenon (i.e., the mirror)
- Non-transactional reactional process: T3 (the speaker) is shaving and talking to the camera.

Fig. 6. *So get this*: Composition.

Table 7
Affective stance markers.

T3	— Time	So get this! I am Two-Spirit, right? And I got a lot of people asking me “What does that mean?”
	00:00–00:05	
T3	— Time	And I <i>always just</i> tell them it’s a contemporary term used to describe indigenous people that existed time immemorial.
	00:05–00:11	

Table 8
Epistemic stance on the term: *impersonal forms & boosters*.

T3	— Time	<u>And</u> these people <i>were actually believed</i> to have the spirit of both man and woman inside of them.
	00:11–00:15	
T3	— Time	<u>And</u> because of that, they <i>were regaled</i> and held as being <i>very</i> spiritually powerful.
	00:15–00:20	
T3	— Time	<u>And</u> because of those spirits, they <i>were believed</i> to be able to walk between both worlds.
	00:20–00:24	
T3	— Time	<u>And</u> it’s because of the spiritual power that they held <i>actually really</i> important roles in the community, like were party leaders, medicine men, shamans and... chiefs.
	00:24–00:33	
T3	— Time	<u>And</u> it wasn’t uncommon for two-spirit people to take same-sex partners.
	00:33–00:37	

of contempt.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In an interview, a Native American individual who identifies as Two-Spirit stated: “I sort of like to describe the use of two-spirit as a hashtag to organize conversation, to have an understanding” (Laing, 2021, p. 85). The present study explored content marked by this hashtag, especially when used as a topic-maker on a digital platform like TikTok. Specifically, I attempted to illustrate how three Native American individuals who identify with the term Two-Spirit engaged in explaining the meaning of the term to their viewers in their #TwoSpirit videos on TikTok. The findings of my analysis illustrated how the video creators constructed their identities as Two-Spirit individuals by taking three different approaches to the explanation of the term (i.e., contrastive, pedagogical, and metamorphic) and took multiple stances, including stances against gender-binary and heteronormative ideologies,

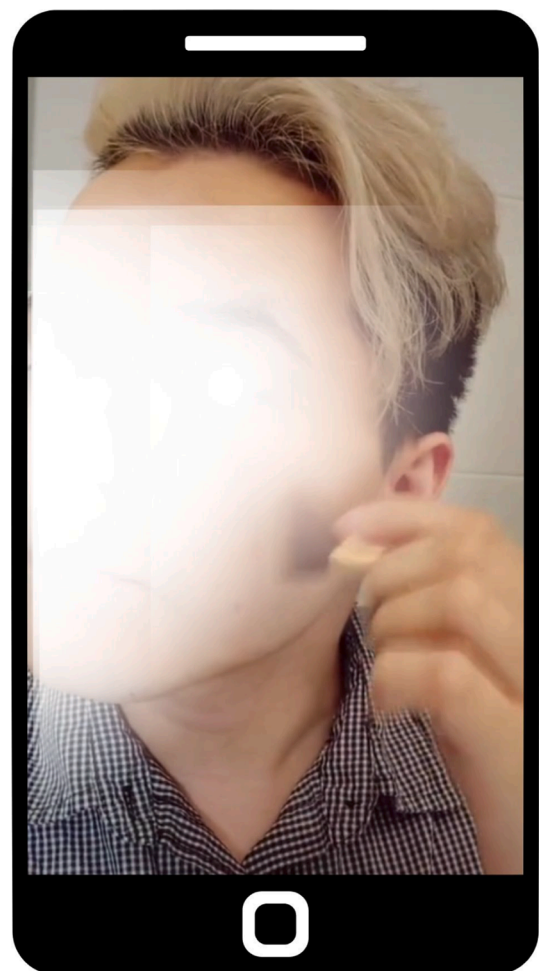


Fig. 7. Embodied practice indexing femininity.

Table 9
Epistemic stance on the term: *self-mentions*.

T3	— Time 00:41–00:44	And so basically, what I'm trying to say is ...
T3	— Time 00:44–00:46	That when I say that I am two-spirit...
T3	— Time 00:46–00:48	What I'm actually kinda of saying is...

Western/-ized LGBTQ discourse, and the hegemonic practice of labeling, as well as in favor of an empowered view on Two-Spirit identity.

As this paper illustrates, TikTok creates a democratizing space for self-production and -representation, and offers Two-Spirit individuals the opportunity to construct their identities by speaking for themselves and about themselves through the appropriation of audio-visual technology. Specifically, by using TikTok, its accessibility, interactivity, and global reach to their advantage, Two-Spirit content creators are not only able to deploy their stances through the interplay of various meaning-making resources, but also to produce media culture, participate in the public sphere in the mediated era, and challenge the lack of visibility of non-dominant discourses in hegemonic cultural spaces. From the intimacy of their homes, Two-Spirit content creators in this study explain instead of being explained and defined by others. In doing so, they proudly place themselves in front of the camera, and start talking and educating their audience.

Importantly, among the varied stance taking practices employed by the users, the present paper highlights the centrality of the body in conveying their stances. From their placement in the composition to transforming their physical appearance, the use that the content creators make of their bodies has important political connotations. As [Driskill \(2016\)](#) writes, indigenous bodies have been historically constructed as either feminine and “willing to colonial control” or masculine and “in need of colonial conquest” (p. 67). Hence, the use of embodied practices and the stances taken by the video creators in this study against colonial labeling are particularly noteworthy if we are to take them as ways to respectively put indigenous bodies at the forefront of the scene, and disrupt colonial heteropatriarchal power over them.

As suggested by [Du Bois \(2007\)](#), the enactment of stance in spoken interaction does not happen in a vacuum as stances are dialogically constructed. As this study illustrates, this is true also for technology-mediated communication. In fact, the strategies adopted by the video creators in my analysis allow them to ‘enter in conversation’ and

Appendix A

Data for micro-analysis.

#	Title	User's provenance/tribe	Date of publication	Videolength
1	‘This identity’	Unknown	26 June 2021	1 min 16 sec
2	‘A gentle reminder’	Unknown	7 June 2021	57 sec
3	‘So get this’	Nakota Sioux	26 April 2020	1 min 30sec

disalign with discourses previously circulated in and out of the platform, namely hegemonic heteronormative and gender-binary discourses as well as non-binary discourses within Western activism. Specifically, in taking stances on TikTok, the video creators were able to craft their identities and counter-hegemonic narratives, and reach a potentially global audience. For this reason, while the present study offers a detailed analysis of the videos from the content creators’ perspectives, users’ reactions to this content should be taken up in future research in order to explore (a) how this content is received by both in- and out-group members of the Two-Spirit community on TikTok, (b) how users interact with this content (e.g., comments posted by the viewers, video replies, soundtrack re-use, duet videos on TikTok), and (c) whether or not this content reaches and builds bridges with other indigenous non-binary identities around the world. Importantly, the dataset only contained videos marked by the hashtag #TwoSpirit. To further our understanding of how communities are built on TikTok, I also suggest that investigating content marked by other related hashtags used within the Two-Spirit community (e.g., #NativeTikTok) might disclose further noteworthy practices enacted by the Two-Spirit individuals on TikTok connecting them with other native TikTokers.

This study highlights the semiotic complexity of digital environments and contributes to research on identity construction on social media platforms. By promoting a multimodal approach and focusing on content created by members of a marginalized community, the present paper emphasizes how identity work is discursively and multimodally accomplished through stance taking in technology-mediated communication.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix B

Stance-markers (adapted from Hyland, 2005)*.

Stance markers	
Hedges (Epistemic markers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● modal verbs ● epistemic lexical verbs ● adjectives, adverbs, and nouns ● body posture ● gesture ● tone of voice
Boosters (Epistemic markers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● modal verbs ● epistemic lexical verbs ● adverbs and adjectives ● attributors ● camera angle ● gesture ● tone of voice
Attitude markers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● attitudinal adjectives ● attitudinal adverbs ● deontic verbs ● cognitive verbs ● camera angle ● gaze ● gesture ● tone of voice ● speech speed
Self-mentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● first-person pronouns and adjectives ● gestures directed to self
Viewer addresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● directives ● direct questions ● uses of you ● gestures directed to the interlocutors

* Non-linguistic stance-markers are in red.

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