TRANSADVOCATE

Lord of the Likes: How TikTok Turned Trans Rights Into a Team Sport

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Published November 19, 2026
https://www.transadvocate.com/lord-of-the-likes-how-tiktok-turned-trans-rights-into-a-team-sport_n_124656.htm

Abstract

I'm sitting in a kindergarten chair. You know the kind: molded plastic, primary colors, built for someone a third my size. My knees are up near my chin and my back already hurts. All around me, the kids are yelling. "Nuh-uh!""Yuh-huh!""You're not even playing right!""I'm telling!" Nobody's listening. Nobody's really being cruel, either. They're loud, [...]

Article



Figure 1. An exhausted woman squeezed onto a tiny chair in a kindergarten classroom labeled TikTok, surrounded by shouting kids, phones and a laughing-emoji sign

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yelling.

“Nuh-uh!”“Yuh-huh!”“You’re not even playing right!”“I’m telling!”

Nobody’s listening. Nobody’s really being cruel, either. They’re loud, they’re certain, and they’re having the time of their lives. Every so often someone holds up a laughing emoji like it’s the winning card.

And I’m on my tiny chair, thinking: what the fuck am I doing here?

That was TikTok this afternoon.

The video was a text post from a couple of lesbians, calling out TERFs for teaming up with the worst men to go after trans women. Fair enough. Underneath it, the classroom.

An account with a cartoon Squirtle for a face (private, zero followers, zero likes) told a young trans woman she was one of the “wired [sic] ass men taking cosplaying to the next level.” She fired back at the Squirtle. The creator fired back. I fired back. Somebody dropped a heart. Thirty-five more replies sat behind a button.

The woman arguing with the Squirtle is 21. Her page is fan theories and drawings. The Squirtle has no page at all.

And there I was, twenty-four years into this, typing “race and ethnicity are social constructs” at a cartoon turtle.

This was my life, not my feed

For the kids in that classroom, this is a TikTok thread. For me, it’s been my life.

Toward the end of the Bush years, a hospital in Madison, Wisconsin offered me a job. Then HR saw my paperwork. My documents didn’t agree with each other about who I was, and suddenly HR wasn’t sure they could hire me.

I’d been working for Obama’s campaign, and I knew my rights. They got the hint.

That wasn’t content. That was my paycheck.

I grew up in a family where you couldn’t talk about being trans. Even thinking about it was a minefield. In 2002 I started TransAdvocate because I didn’t want anyone else to go through what I did. Back then, the problem was that trans people had no voice anywhere, so just getting voices out there was the fight.

Then I knocked doors for Obama, and talking to people face to face made me rethink my work. TransAdvocate had its place. But online, you’re in a white room, talking to a screen instead of a person, and people react that way. There’s no change of heart, because there’s no connection. When you know a trans person, when you connect with one, when you love one, it stops being theoretical.

Same slogans, different app

Now everyone has a voice. What I wanted in 2002 happened. And it got churned.

Look at that thread again. The Squirtle has a script: adult human female. The young woman has a script: there is no trans ideology, trans women are women. The creator has one too, with “feminism” in scare quotes, as if TERFs snuck in from outside instead of growing out of the movement itself. I wrote a whole post on why that’s a comforting mistake. Everybody’s wearing a jersey. Nobody’s doing any analysis.

There’s no malice on my side of the room. That 21-year-old gets to put “trans woman, lesbian” in her bio and post fan theories under it. At her age, I still couldn’t even say it to myself. Obama-era policy, along with a patchwork of state and city protections, made room for trans kids, and she grew up in that room. I’m glad. That’s what the work was for.

I’m not the old woman yelling at clouds. I’ve just seen this episode before, back in the Tumblr era. Same language, same sorting, same certainty, only now it’s amplified. If nothing changes, in ten years it’ll be another app, with a new class of kids who think they’re the first to have this fight.

The sickness

So what’s the sickness? It isn’t the kids. It isn’t algorithms, either. It’s corporate algorithms. I built a personal one to find music I like, and it works for me, because I decide what it’s for. Algorithms can build community too. That same feed is how a 21-year-old trans woman finds out she isn’t alone.

The difference is who the algorithm serves. Mine serves me. TikTok’s serves TikTok. TikTok sells attention, and nothing holds attention like a fight. Community brings you in, conflict keeps you there, and both make money.

That’s the churn. It takes something serious (people’s jobs, their papers, their families, their lives) and grinds it into content. Then it does it again, and again. It burns people out and replaces them with fresh ones who don’t know they’re on a treadmill. The churn isn’t a bug. It’s the business model.

And here’s where the malice comes in. Some people examine what they believe. Some people just react. Questioning them feels like an attack, so they lash out. That’s the Squirtle. “Wired ass men” isn’t an argument, it’s a flinch with contempt behind it. The churn doesn’t just put up with reactive people, it makes more of them, because a flinch gets a reply and a reply is engagement. Nobody farms likes with “good point, let me think about that.”

What it kills is serious dialogue, the kind that comes from analysis. Dialectical materialism asks you to look past the argument to the conditions underneath. Who owns the machine? What does it extract? Who profits when two strangers scream about biology under a TikTok? Ask those questions and you can build something. Skip them, and all you can do is churn.

Build, don’t churn

So no, I’m not running away from TikTok. That’s where people are, and I still learn things there, even from the kids yelling. But I want to help build something better.

For me, that’s the fediverse: PeerTube, Micro.blog, Loops. These platforms have no ad model and no corporate algorithm. Some I pay for, some are run by communities, and some, like Loops, I’m working toward running myself. Nobody’s selling my attention. It’s the same move I made in 2002. If the

platforms don’t serve us, we build our own.

So I’m getting up off the tiny chair. My knees will thank me. The kids can keep their classroom. They earned it, and I’m glad it’s there. But some of us need a room built for grown-ups, where people actually talk to each other.

Let TikTok churn. I’m going to build.

Originally posted on MartiAbernathey.com.

Suggested citation

Marti Abernathey. "Lord of the Likes: How TikTok Turned Trans Rights Into a Team Sport." TransAdvocate, November 19, 2026.
https://www.transadvocate.com/lord-of-the-likes-how-tiktok-turned-trans-rights-into-a-team-sport_n_124656.htm