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In FYP We Trust: The Divine Force of Algorithmic Conspirituality

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In this article, we introduce the concept of algorithmic conspirituality to capture occasions when people find personal, often revelatory connections to content algorithmically recommended to them on social media and explain these connections as a kind of algorithmically mediated cosmic intervention. The phenomenon emerges from three particular developments: an epistemological shift that has positioned algorithms as important tools for self-knowledge; the sublime quality that algorithms have acquired, which primes users to imagine them as providential; and the rise of *conspirituality* (a portmanteau of *conspiracy* and *spirituality*). In conceptualizing algorithmic conspirituality, we particularly focus on TikTok, where the platform's For You Page algorithm shapes users' experience to an even greater degree than other platforms. We illustrate the concept through three example TikTok videos and conclude with a discussion and recommendations on future research agendas using algorithmic conspirituality.

Keywords: algorithms, conspirituality, algorithmic conspirituality, big data, platforms, TikTok

Actress and director Natalie Morales faces the camera and shares the story of how she finally achieved her dream of directing a Hollywood movie despite years of rejections, odd jobs, typecasting, and prejudice. The caption on the video (see Figure 1) reads, "If you're seeing this the algorithm wants you to follow your dream" (Morales, 2021). In the comments section, alongside fans gushing appreciation for

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Morales's work, several viewers express how inspired they were by her words and declare their intent to pursue their dreams.

Figure 1. Natalie Morales telling users, "The algorithm wants you to follow your dreams" (Morales, 2021).

Morales's (2021) video falls in the genre of "if you see this" TikTok videos, a popular format that serves as a kind of meta message about the platform's For You Page (FYP) algorithm (Schellewald, 2021).[1] Most content on TikTok reaches users through the FYP (TikTok, 2020), which is the default landing page for the app. Much of the FYP content comes from accounts users do not follow, which means that TikTok relies more than other platforms on algorithmic inference of users' interests than users' declared preferences for who or what they want to see. The FYP algorithm is notorious for its eerie accuracy, perceived as capable of identifying nuances of users' identities that they themselves may not have even been aware of, particularly when it comes to mental health issues, disability status, sexuality, and gender identity ("Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm," 2021; Mercado, 2021). Following from this perception, the (meta-)message communicated in "if you see this" videos is something like "if the FYP algorithm has displayed this video to you, it must be meant to be." Responses to these videos reflect a belief that the timing and content of posts delivered to individual users is more than mere coincidence. "If you see this" videos suggest that content shown to users is the result not just of a finely tuned algorithm designed to predict which videos will seize and sustain their attention, but perhaps divine intervention.

In this article, we make sense of such responses to algorithms, specifically TikTok's FYP algorithm, through what we call *algorithmic conspirituality.* Algorithmic conspirituality captures growing perceptions of algorithms as capable of sophisticated knowledge of human life (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). This perception is particularly evident in the popularity of data-driven approaches to "optimizing" the mind, body, and soul—for example, as seen in the Quantified Self (QS) movement that has become commercialized through fitness trackers, apps that encourage users to drink water, meditation apps that track "progress," and dating apps that purport to help users find the most compatible partner. Such apps help us synthesize patterns from various data points in ways that would be impossible or onerous to do without the assistance of algorithms. In many ways, people trust algorithms to tell them things about themselves that they cannot see.

These investments in algorithmic ways of knowing oneself coincide with the emergence of what Ward and Voas (2011) referred to as *conspirituality*, a portmanteau of *conspiracy* and *spirituality*. Fueled by the participatory nature of the social web, conspirituality was first conceptualized as a belief system that fused together new age beliefs with conspiracy-esque mental models of making sense of the world. A global movement, conspirituality is a politico-spiritual philosophy primarily bound together by the notions that "nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected" (Ward & Voas, 2011, p. 108).

Bringing together faith in algorithms and conspirituality, we conceptualize algorithmic conspirituality as spiritualizing beliefs about algorithms, which emerge from occasions when people find personal, often revelatory connections to content algorithmically recommended to them. Algorithmic conspirituality represents an understanding of such experiences as a kind of algorithmically mediated cosmic intervention. We suggest that examining conspirituality within the context of algorithm-dominated platforms (and vice versa) can further understanding of how people come to know the nature of their own social realities, namely, which people and ideas gain purchase. It further introduces an additional layer of complexity to the dynamics of human–algorithm relations and the formation of beliefs and attitudes about

[1] While Schellewald (2021) documented this genre in her ethnography of TikTok and we have observed it ourselves, its relative prevalence on the platform is unclear.

algorithms. In the following pages, we first describe the theoretical roots of algorithmic conspirituality and then ground our theorizing in a series of TikTok videos that exemplify algorithmic conspirituality in more concrete terms.

"The Algorithm Knows Me Better Than I Know Myself"

Algorithms have come to be seen as powerful tools for making sense of the world, frequently perceived to be superior to human reasoning. The ascendancy of algorithmic ways of knowing is rooted in an increasing investment in quantification over the course of many centuries (Beer, 2016; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021; Porter, 2020) and an accompanying epistemological shift, wherein quantification and statistical analysis have achieved a privileged status (Kitchin, 2014). Further, the rise of big data has ushered in a new era of dataism (Fisher, 2020; van Dijck, 2014), or "a theology of data which sees it as the basic building block for knowledge and sees data—specifically the data produced by individuals while engaging with digital technology—as comprising the 'source code' of humanness" (Fisher, 2020, p. 112). Algorithmic ways of knowing, thus, have gained traction as a result of their capacity to synthesize insights from massive amounts of data (Hong, 2020) and a belief in the impartiality of numbers and technology (Beer, 2016; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021; Hong, 2020; Kitchin, 2014; Porter, 2020). Algorithms' perceived impartiality is cast against human fallibility and bias, such that people often believe algorithms to be fairer than human decision makers because of their (perceived) greater capacity for objectivity (Helberger, Araujo, & de Vreese, 2020).

Given the epistemic premium placed on algorithmic reasoning, people often trust algorithms more than humans in various decision-making scenarios. For example, in a series of experiments, Logg, Minson, and Moore (2019) found that participants relied more on algorithmic than human judgments for estimating the weight of an individual based on a photograph, forecasting the popularity of songs in the Billboard top 100 chart, and predicting how someone else would judge a potential romantic partner. Castelo, Bos, and Lehmann (2019) found that participants relied on algorithmic more than human judgments for objective tasks (e.g., diagnosing a disease) than for subjective tasks (e.g., predicting joke enjoyment), but that "reframing subjective tasks as being amenable to quantification and measurement increases trust in algorithms for those tasks" (p. 821). Thurman, Moeller, Helberger, and Trilling (2019) similarly showed greater appreciation for algorithmic selection of news stories than selection by journalists and editors. Although there are certainly important boundary conditions that predict variations in trust in algorithms (Hoff & Bashir, 2015),[2] for many people in many contexts, algorithms are seen as reliable and authoritative.

As society has come to accept algorithms as an antidote to flawed human decision making, people have similarly embraced data-driven ways of knowing into their personal lives. The rise of self-tracking, particularly as on display in the QS movement (Lupton, 2016), demonstrates how many people have turned to data collection and analysis to more deeply know themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. For example, QS urges "self knowledge through numbers" (Heyen, 2016, p. 284), emphasizing a prioritization of quantitative data for truly knowing oneself and the idea that "[u]nless something can be measured, it

[2] Indeed, under some conditions, people exhibit aversion to algorithmic decision-making, preferring human judgment instead (Dietvorst, Simmons, & Massey, 2015; Lee, 2018; Thurman et al., 2019).

cannot be improved"[3] (Hong, 2020, p. 80). Such a perspective fits well with the modern emphasis on self-reinvention and self-actualization that positions the self as an ongoing project (Lupton, 2016). QS and its associated biohacking and transhumanist subcultures are influenced by "deep mediatization," an era in which "the way we shape our lives and society is no longer imaginable outside the realm of digital media and their infrastructures" (Hepp, 2020, p. 932). In this era, data-centric technologies help reveal key details about our "authentic" selves and suggest opportunities for improvement (Fisher, 2020).

Indeed, recent work suggests that under some conditions, people receive algorithmic outputs and decisions as true reflections of their inner traits. As Fisher (2020) noted in relation to music recommender systems like Spotify, algorithms "help us formulate our musical taste, revealing to us what it is actually that we like to listen to" (pp. 115–116). Social media users facilitate this process by engaging in consumptive curation, that is, communicating information to algorithms about the kind of content and accounts they wish to see via "conscious clicking" and selective allocation of attention (Bucher, 2018; Davis, 2017). Thus, when algorithms make mistakes about individuals' interests and traits, people will often internalize the mistakes as a failure to adequately inform an algorithm of who they are, that is, "Maybe I did not do a good enough job behaving like someone who is X or is interested in Y." Moreover, as Burrell and Fourcade (2021) noted,

> Discrepancies—for instance, between biological age and algorithmic age or between gender self-identification and algorithmic gender—may come to be taken not as amusing mistakes by an imperfect technical system but as external, objective, and constantly fluctuating signals informing us of who we really are. (p. 15)

This internalization of algorithmic misjudgments could be a result of the aforementioned trust vested in algorithms. One might think that by nature of their extensive, "omnivorous" access to data about individuals, algorithms can tap into the self's "underlying 'material,' objective and performative facets," "the true core of humanness" (Fisher, 2020, p. 115). In other words, people may believe that algorithms have the capacity to know them in ways they might not even know themselves because of a perception of algorithms as "all-seeing and all powerful" (Liao & Tyson, 2020, p. 6). They may find alignment with a belief in the objectivist standpoint of an algorithm assuming a "god's eye view."

Algorithmic Providence

Beyond the perceived capacity to know us deeply, with increased computing power and the development of more complex techniques, algorithms have attained a sublime quality in the public imagination (Ames, 2018; Singler, 2020), like other technologies historically (Nye, 2007). Just as algorithms spark utopian imaginaries of the ways they might save us from the perils and pitfalls of everyday life, they also invoke dystopian fears about humanity's decline as we cede control to them (Ames, 2018). Such visions of algorithms overstate their capabilities (Thomas, Nafus, & Sherman, 2018). As Thomas and colleagues (2018) argued, collective social investments in what algorithms might make possible leads to their fetishization: "People vest algorithms with promises and possibilities that extend beyond what the math, lines of code, steps or ingested sensors can do" (p. 8). Indeed, attention to the outcomes algorithms

[3] This quote is often traced back to Lord Kelvin (Sir William Thompson; Bollmer, 2016).

produce, rather than their design and functionality, creates a sense of magic or even divinity (Singler, 2020). As Bogost (2015) provocatively suggested, "The next time you hear someone talking about algorithms, replace the term with 'God' and ask yourself if the meaning changes" (para. 1).

This divine perception of algorithms is sometimes accompanied by a sense that algorithms will "proactively" accommodate one's needs. Social media platforms iteratively design algorithms to ensure that users see increasingly relevant and timely content (Bucher, 2018, 2020). Many users are aware of the curatorial role that algorithms play (Dogruel, 2021; Gran, Booth, & Bucher, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). They know that algorithms serve a goal of, as Facebook (2013) has put it, delivering "the right content, to the right people, at the right time" (para. 1). This insight lends itself to a faith in algorithms to deliver what one needs (the "right" content or voices). As Kalpokas (2019) noted, "a consumer progressively expects to obtain the object of their desire or expectation intuitively, often before they themselves consciously know what that object is" (p. 54). For example, those who rely on algorithmic news feeds for keeping up with the news tend to adopt the attitude that news will find them, so they do not need to actively seek it out (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Online daters who trust algorithms to find them a compatible partner tend to have better first dates than those who do not, but not because algorithms are actually better at selecting partners (Sharabi, 2021). Possibly, those who trust matching algorithms believe the algorithms are capable of identifying their destined soulmate, which sets them up for a more positive experience.

Not only do people now expect algorithms to help them satisfy their needs, but they also anticipate that they will do so at the right time. As Bucher argued, algorithms have introduced a new regime of temporality that privileges a "kairologic" (from "kairos"), or "the personalized timing of mediation" (Bucher, 2020, p. 1708). Algorithms inherently "make . . . time itself logically controllable and, while operating, produce . . . measurable time effects and rhythms" (Miyazaki, 2012, para. 22). This quality renders them useful for tailoring users' experiences on social media. In this, social media algorithms prioritize not (only) recency, but *timeliness*: "Most platforms explicitly seek to deliver content, not so much as it happens but at the right-time" (Bucher, 2018, p. 170). This shift toward kairlogic timing makes sense, because it accommodates platforms' business models by helping advertisers reach users when they are primed to make a purchase (Bucher, 2020). Thus, an "old" TikTok video from several days ago might show up at the top of a user's FYP upon opening the app, because datafied signals of personal relevance suggest that the person might want to see it right then, more so than other, newer content.

Together, the veneration of algorithms and expectations that algorithms will provide individuals what they need when they need it suggest a kind of "algorithmic providence." In big and small ways, people sometimes experience algorithms as purveyors of serendipitous encounters. As in divine providence, these serendipitous encounters often require active communication. Constructing a more precise algorithmic identity (or refining one's algorithmic identity to be more complex) requires "training" the algorithm to understand who the user is (Siles, Segura-Castillo, Solís, & Sancho, 2020; Simpson, Hamann, & Semaan, 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). This is a process that is manifest to users, and at least some users have a sense of how they can "train" the algorithm (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Thus, as mentioned, they may "click consciously" to communicate a wish or a hope for certain kinds of content (Bucher, 2018, 2020; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). They may believe that if they can send the algorithm clear signals of what they need or want, it will accommodate their prayers.

Shifting Belief Systems and the Rise of Conspirituality

The rise of algorithms follows the convergence of conspiracy theories and the new age movement in what Ward and Voas (2011) termed "conspirituality." Conspirituality represents a contemporary expression of a long-standing cultic milieu, or a "primary orientation is toward personal, 'mystical' experience" (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015, p. 370), which frees belief systems from rigid doctrine and organizational structures, permitting greater flexibility in beliefs and a privileging of alternative, deviant, and/or stigmatized claims to truth (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015). Certainly, the human capacity to imagine and worship godlike entities connects civilizations across time, language, and borders. Yet, conspirituality—and its connection to new age and new religious movements—is specific to postmodernity, influenced by technology.

Conspirituality emerged as part of the evolution of an enduring "culture of conspiracy." The anti-intellectual, antiscience, and antigovernment ideologies that undergird much conspiratorial thinking have been fomenting for decades in the United States and beyond (Aupers, 2012; Knight, 2002). Conspiracy theories should be understood as alternative epistemologies rooted in distrust (Aupers, 2012) and are often supportive of dangerous, hateful ideologies (Rousis, Richard, & Wang, 2020). As Aupers (2012) suggested, conspiracy theories emerge from "epistemological doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge claims, ontological insecurity about rationalized social systems like the state, multinationals and the media; and a relentless 'will to believe' in a disenchanted world" (p. 22). Whether it is a conspiracy about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the events surrounding 9/11, or the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracies tend to have a particular set of characteristic underlying beliefs: that everything is connected; that there is a malicious force and organization other than the government controlling world events (e.g. "New World Order"); and that believers have been "awakened" to the truth and achieved a different level of consciousness (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Ward & Voas, 2011).

Alongside conspiracy theories, the new age movement also contributes to the emergence of conspirituality (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015; Ward & Voas, 2011). The new age movement represents various spiritual beliefs and practices, including meditation, psychic powers, personal growth, angels, energy, and occultism (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015; Ward & Voas, 2011). The movement typically involves belief in omnipresent forces not visible to the naked eye, as well as an emphasis on an individual awakening or consciousness expanding (Ward & Voas, 2011). New age spirituality centers an "inward turn" or "the privatization of religious beliefs" (Dziuban, 2007, p. 485), which focuses on the self. As Dziuban (2007) explained, "There has been a shift from a communal institutional religiosity, marked by its emphasis on obedience to external sources of authority, to a 'late modern' spirituality, which consists in self-authority and cultivating quality in one's own life" (p. 486). New age beliefs also focus heavily on the body as a primary vessel for spiritual experiences (Dziuban, 2007) and have featured prominently on various social media platforms (Chia, Ong, Davies, & Hagood, 2021).

Ward and Voas (2011) introduced the term *conspirituality* to explain the ways that conspiracy theorizing and new age spirituality began to blend. Conspirituality is, thus, a pastiche of beliefs and principles structuring how many people now make sense of reality. Conspirituality entails core beliefs that "nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected" (Ward & Voas, 2011, p. 108). It

also involves both a personal spiritual awakening and a sense of oneness with others (Ward & Voas, 2011). Conspirituality further features a rejection of "establishment" or mainstream ideas and discourses (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015). Conspirituality was originally introduced as a Web movement (Ward & Voas, 2011) and is driven by Internet networks (Chia et al., 2021). Although a useful concept for making sense of how conspiratorial thinking and new age spirituality collide online, the term was only introduced just before the so-called algorithmic turn (Napoli, 2014). We suggest that we are in a new era of conspirituality, one that is defined not just by online communities and collaborative knowledge construction, but also by algorithms.

Algorithmic Conspirituality

Algorithmic conspirituality captures the intermingling of cultural investments in algorithms and the emergence of conspirituality. It represents a vision of algorithmic media not just as a node in the contemporary digital infrastructure, but as a kind of omnipotent force. Such a vision corresponds to the ways people have long ascribed metaphysical value and significance to objects, events, and people, including through traditions like astrology, witchcraft, and parapsychology (Truzzi, 1972; Versluis, 2007). It is also adjacent to technopaganism, the belief that "the computer is the final and most powerful kind of magic" (Stivers, 1999, p. 5), and spiritual transhumanist movements that view technology as a means of transcendence (Singler, 2020). Along with the higher power vested in algorithmic media, we suggest that people have begun to interpret algorithmic outputs (e.g., a curated feed of content) as extensions of themselves, similar to other objects (Belk, 1988; Knorr-Cetina, 1997).

As the following examples will demonstrate, people—specifically, TikTok users—sometimes read algorithmically curated content as akin to a sign from a higher power predestined for them. They find personal, often revelatory, connections to content algorithmically recommended to them and explain these through a combination of mysticism and algorithmic imaginaries. Moreover, these connections inspire people to discount mere coincidence as an explanation for encounters with eerily resonant content.

Likewise, as we will show, content creators on TikTok have begun to draw on this reading of algorithmic media by positioning their posts as directed to individual users personally (e.g., "if you're seeing this, it's meant for you"). In some cases, creators explicitly suggest to viewers that the message contained in their video has appeared to them in their FYP not by mere chance or technical feat, but as the result of algorithmically mediated kismet.

Beliefs about algorithms embedded in algorithmic conspirituality help comprise the broader, intricate tapestry of understandings and meanings that people cultivate about algorithms through affective encounters with them (Bucher, 2018). Even in the absence of complex technical insight about algorithms, people intuitively formulate a sense of what they do, why, and with what effect (DeVito, 2021; Dogruel, 2021). As Siles and colleagues (2020) explained, people "have vivid stories about how they received [algorithmic] recommendations that shaped their social lives and selves" (p. 12), and these stories act as cultural resources that inform their orientation to algorithms and social practices around them.

These stories grow around the mechanisms and affordances of specific algorithmic systems, which necessitates a brief overview of TikTok's FYP algorithm. Like other platform algorithms, the FYP algorithm

probabilistically infers users' interests from various behavioral signals, including the kinds of content and accounts users like, comment on, share, follow, and watch, as well as content signals, including captions, hashtags, and audio tracks used ("Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm," 2021; Smith, 2021). The algorithm also accounts for repeated exposure to the same creators and kinds of content to obviate boredom (Smith, 2021). When users initially join the app, the algorithm serves them popular content and gradually identifies niche interests based on these signals, especially the amount of time they spend on different videos ("Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm," 2021). The centrality of this automated curation process in the app experience—as opposed to a ranked feed of only accounts a user follows—may invite perceptions of it as more intimate.

The TikTok videos we will now describe came to us through our own use of the platform. While conceptualizing this study, we saved and uploaded TikTok videos that we encountered in our own feeds to a shared folder. Each of us then watched the collected videos and through consensus narrowed the larger data set to roughly 10 TikTok videos. From there, and through further discussion, we selected three videos to explore in depth in this article. We do not suggest that the following examples comprehensively capture algorithmic conspirituality, but have selected them to illustrate key features.

The Reminder

In the first example (see Figure 2[4]), a woman speaks to the camera in "selfie view," telling her viewers, "If you're seeing this, it's because you set this reminder in place. You asked me to bring you this reminder when you need it. So, here it is." Overlaid on the video, the creator has included text that specifies she has posted the content without including any hashtags, caption, or music. These details are important because such content features would all act as signals for algorithmic distribution of the video ("Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm," 2021; TikTok, 2020; Wang, 2020). Thus, the creator suggests to her viewers that she has reached them via a kind of algorithmically mediated psychic connection with them, wherein they prompted her to bring to them a reminder in the moment of their viewing. The "reminder" reads like a horoscope:

> Do not live in fear. You're going through a transitional period that is going to lead to a different kind of maturity. You have a lot of talents that are laying dormant at the moment. But this tower moment, this transitional moment that you're going through is going to give you the maturity you need to decode those talents. So, I have given you a reminder. I hope you're paying attention. Do not live in fear.

[4] We have anonymized/blurred identifying information (usernames, profile photos, faces) in the figures to protect the users' privacy.

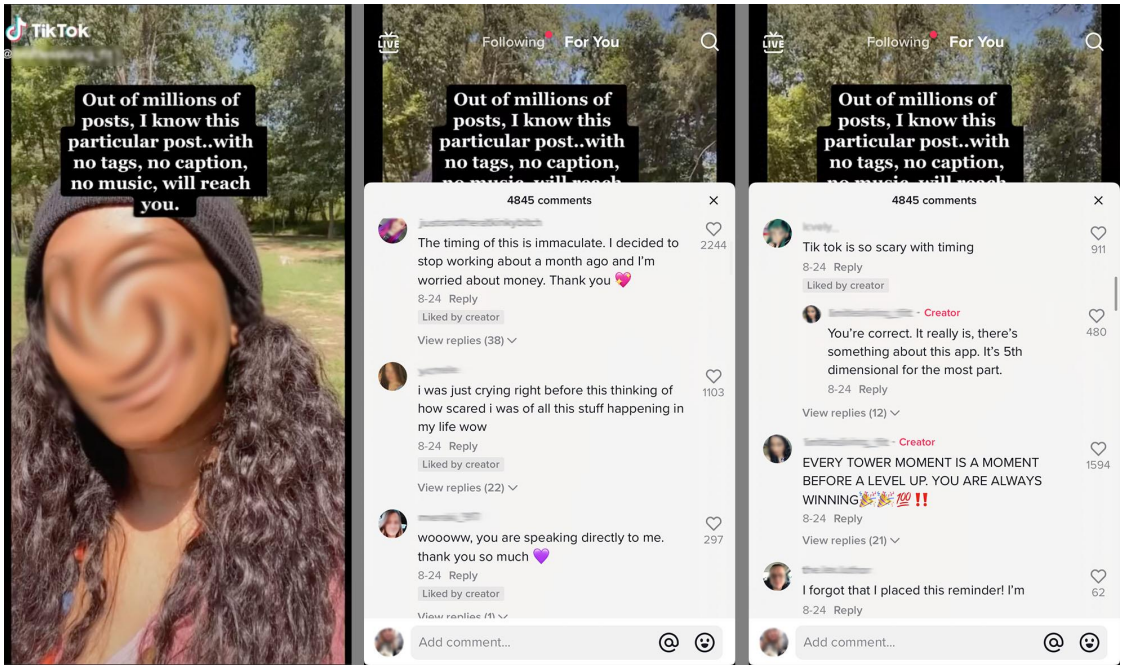

Figure 2. "The Reminder" TikTok video and accompanying comments.

As evident in comments on the video, the "reminder" not only resonated with many users, but seemed to reach them at the (perceived) exact right moment. For example, the top comment declares, "The timing of this is immaculate. I decided to stop working about a month ago and I'm worried about money. Thank you [sparkle heart emoji]." Another user remarked, "Tik tok is so scary with timing," to which the creator replied, "You're correct. It really is, there's something about this app. It's 5th dimensional for the most part."

The components of algorithmic conspirituality take shape in this example through the interface between the creator and her audience, as well as the underlying beliefs and assumptions that both hold in relation to this interface. The creator's understanding of some of the basic principles of how TikTok's FYP algorithm works indicates an understanding of the mechanics of how content reaches users (i.e., via algorithmic curation). Yet, she also reads a bit of alchemy into algorithmic curation on the app by describing it as "fifth dimensional." Although it is not entirely clear what the creator means by this, the phrase conjures notions of spiritual planes and metaphysics. Indeed, the creator explicitly states that she has published the content with the expectation that it would reach those to whom it would be meaningful and that she believes this is the case despite the "millions of [other] posts" (see overlaid text in Figure 2) that could be served to users instead. Users who saw the content in their FYP responded in kind, indicating that they too believed that the content addressed them directly and, further, reached them at the exact right moment. Seemingly as a result of these beliefs, the commenting users appear awestruck and grateful. The content seems to have provoked thoughts of self-improvement. The commenters appear to have a sense that the FYP algorithm has serendipitously delivered them a message that has provided what they needed in that moment—a sense of validation, reassurance, and drive.

Help With Dating and "Knowing" Potential Partners

Our second example (Figure 3) focuses on making a connection with potential romantic partners early in the dating stage. Specifically, this video provides a "life hack" to gather deep insight into a potential partner's inner world to determine if they might be a good match based on their identity, beliefs, and values. This TikTok presents a "stitched" (i.e., a video response to another video) and "dueted" (i.e., a dual view with the person speaking while reacting to what they are saying) video. In this video, the creator on the right of the screen suggests that asking to see a new date's FYP would tell an individual what she needed to know about the person to determine compatibility.

The creator on the right claims that it takes almost no conscious effort to "decolonize" one's feed, and that the very fact that his video has displayed in viewers' algorithmically curated FYP indicates that the content usually curated for them is from Black, queer, and mental health positive creators. "Your FYP quickly becomes a mirror into what you wish the world was more like," he claims, explaining that if an individual goes on a date with someone whose FYP contains incompatible ideologies or views, their FYP should be interpreted as reflective of their worldview. The creator who has *duetted* this video (on the left half of the screen) is seen excitedly agreeing with this perspective on the FYP's ability to mirror worldviews. The creator seems to express gratification at the idea that they have been (algorithmically) identified as someone aligned with "black, queer, and mental health positive creators," by nature of being served the original creator's video in their FYP.

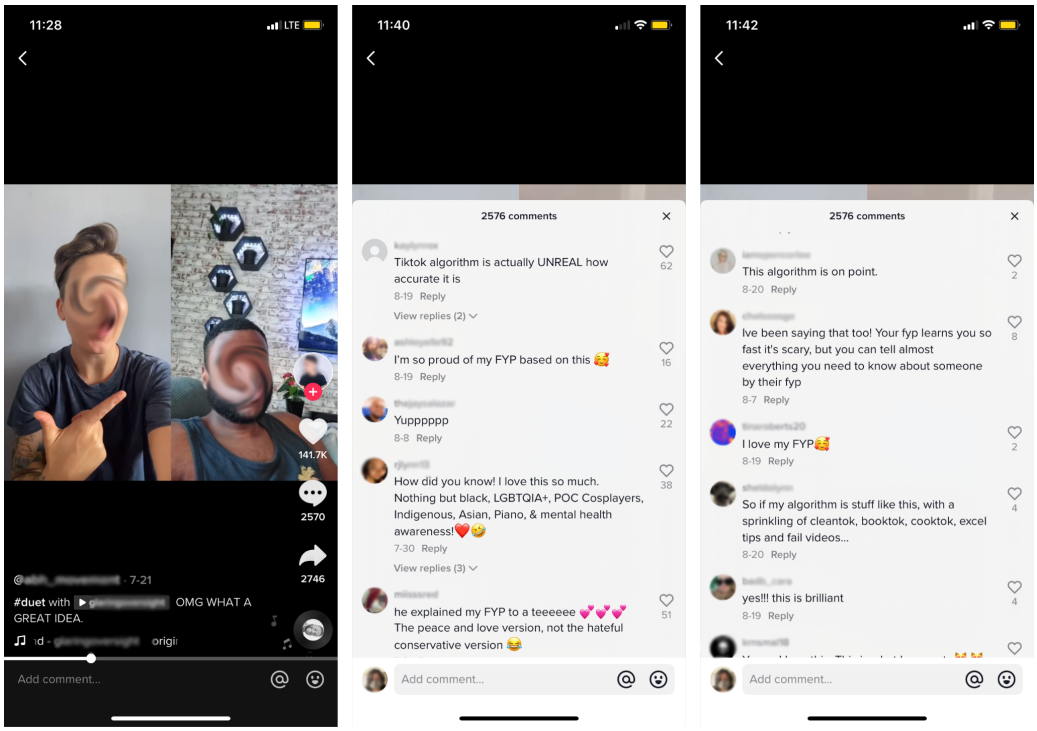

Figure 3. "Help With Dating" TikTok video and accompanying comments.

This TikTok points to beliefs about how the FYP algorithm does more than simply provide content that people are interested in; it helps one construct and perform the self, provides feedback on this process, and, thus, supports the satisfaction of basic needs. Comments on the video (see Figure 3) demonstrate how much such content resonates with viewers who see the video in their FYP. "Tiktok algorithm is actually UNREAL how accurate it is," states one commenter, while another claims, "I've been saying that too! Your [FYP] learns you so fast it's scary, but you can tell almost everything you need to know about someone by their [FYP]." This video and its comments help establish how people sometimes read the FYP algorithm as a source of self-knowledge and a tool for pursuing quality of life. Like tea leaves, tarot cards, or horoscopes, algorithmic curation acts as a means of revealing individual essence and an apparatus of spiritual guidance.

"Not Even Gonna Hashtag This Shit"

In our third example, shown in Figure 4, we see another video in "selfie mode" with a woman stating immediately at the start of the video, "Baby, I'm not even gonna hashtag this shit. If you see it, you see it, then it was meant for you." The creator is sitting in a room with music playing in the background and proceeds to encourage viewers to avoid negative people in their lives who are only interested in bringing them down. With no hashtags, this video mimics the first example (see Figure 2), positioning the message as "meant for" whomever it reached, under the presumption that the absence of hashtags and other identifying features renders it less legible (via certain data inputs, at least) to the FYP algorithm for curation. Although this message is delivered as more of a polemic, condemning "miserable people," it is met with comments from users who say things like, "I needed to hear this," or that the message came "at the right time." Other comments laud the creator for sharing her wisdom and for reminding them to set boundaries in their relationships and control who they let in and out of their life.

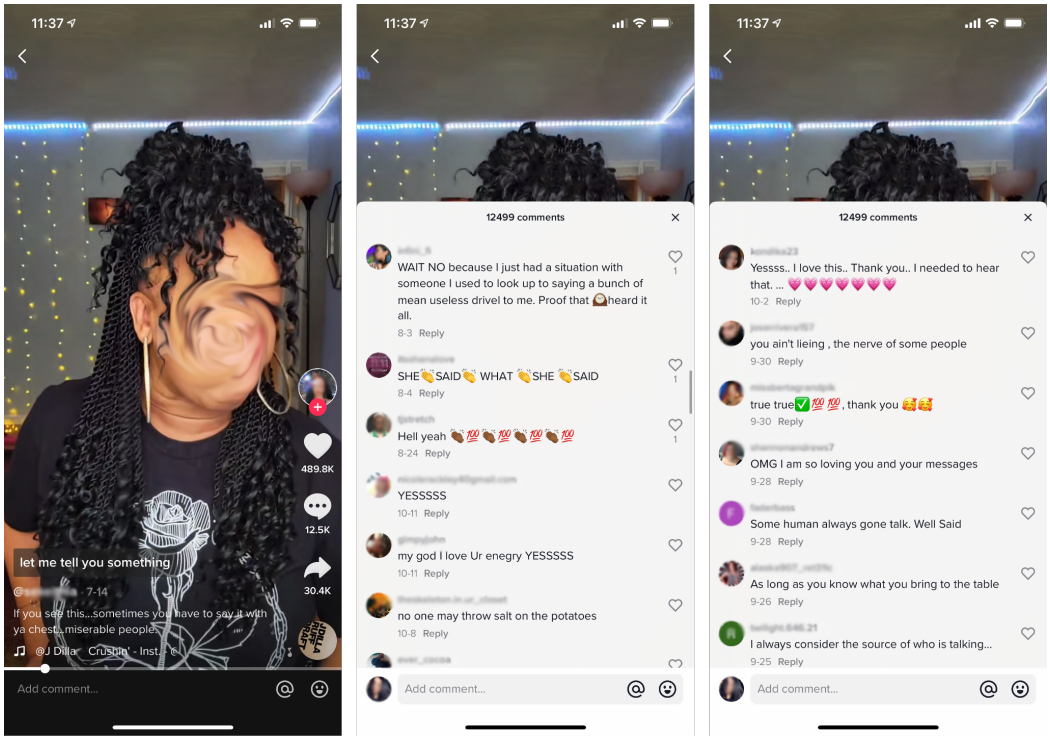

Figure 4. "Not Even Gonna Hashtag This Shit" TikTok video and accompanying comments.

This example and the first example (see Figure 2) similarly highlight the FYP algorithm's role as a conduit for a tailored message encouraging viewers to live the best version of their life (e.g., self-optimization). Echoing the message articulated in the video, the caption (see Figure 4) reads, "If you see this . . . sometimes you have to say it with ya chest...miserable people." Recognizing the "power" of the FYP algorithm to deliver perfectly timed and personally meaningful advice for self-betterment, a comment on the video states, "WAIT NO because I just had a situation with someone I used to look up to saying a bunch of mean useless drivel to me. Proof that [clock emoji (TikTok)] heard it all" (see Figure 4).[5] In this comment, the user implies, in conspiratorial terms, that the app had listened to and extracted data from their conversation, which allowed the FYP algorithm to subsequently push the video to them. The video then serves as "proof" and a form of validation for the user's beliefs about the app and the FYP algorithm. Yet, rather than being alarmed, the commenter seems to embrace this outcome, seemingly believing that the algorithm—and TikTok—will deliver what she needs at that moment, further pointing to a sense of faith and trust in the FYP algorithm to give her answers to issues or questions she faces in her life. Similar to the first example, the users who commented on this video treat its presence in their FYP not as happenstance, but as a fated wake-up call and intervention to make necessary changes in their lives.

[5] The clock emoji is used to refer to TikTok (as a riff on the sound a clock makes, users often call it "the clock app").

Discussion

In this article, we introduced the concept of *algorithmic conspirituality*, examining how the rationalization of algorithms in everyday life intersects with contemporary expressions of the cultic milieu, namely, the merging of conspiracy theories and the new age movement in conspirituality. For this, we focused on TikTok, where the FYP algorithm shapes users' experience to an even greater degree than other platforms. Algorithmic conspirituality grows in part from collective investment in algorithmic ways of knowing, wherein algorithms have become an important source of self-knowledge as their judgments are seen as objective and trustworthy. Just as conspiracy theories are premised on the belief that everything is connected, so too is algorithmic conspirituality premised on algorithms' capacity to find unlikely connections across massive data sets about individuals. This capacity often results in eerily relevant content recommendations that seem to be designed specifically for individuals seeing them. On TikTok, creators attuned this phenomenon post content meant to be read as a "sign" to prompt viewers to engage in acts of self-improvement or self-transformation. When algorithmically curated content resonates deeply with viewers and reaches them at the right moment, the experience may be read as divine, giving the impression of a powerfully all-seeing algorithm. In sketching the basic shape of algorithmic conspirituality, we have provided a foundation for future work to elaborate on the constitutive beliefs, as well as shed light on *who* adopts such beliefs and what *impact* they have. Next, we outline some ways the phenomenon of algorithmic conspirituality intersects with existing areas of interest and inquiry related to algorithmic mediation of social life.

Although algorithmic conspirituality seems to inscribe spiritual beliefs, the degree to which people sincerely believe algorithms have *godlike* powers likely varies on a spectrum. Some may believe algorithms to be capable of mystical power, mirroring mainstream beliefs in psychics and astrology, and that spiritual energy can be found in physical objects (Gecewicz, 2018). Just as younger generations "see no contradiction between using astrology and believing in science" (Smallwood, 2019, para. 1), so too may they see no contradiction between using algorithmic conspirituality and believing in data science. Indeed, gaps in interpretability and understanding of algorithmic outcomes can result in interpretations of algorithms as both enchanted and deterministic (Campolo & Crawford, 2020). Alternately, for some, algorithmic conspirituality may even be "secular," closer to an overestimation of algorithmic capacities due to experiences in which algorithms seem to be "all seeing." These people may understand algorithmic conspirituality as some rationalize what psychics or tarot readers do: Algorithms may be seen as capable of producing useful, tailored advice due not to mysticism, but to their skill in soliciting and inferring details about people from available data. Importantly, creators may capitalize on algorithmic conspirituality as a marketing device, without reading the algorithm as divine (see Figure 5). What the belief system of algorithmic conspirituality looks like at either end of a secular–sacred spectrum remains an open question.

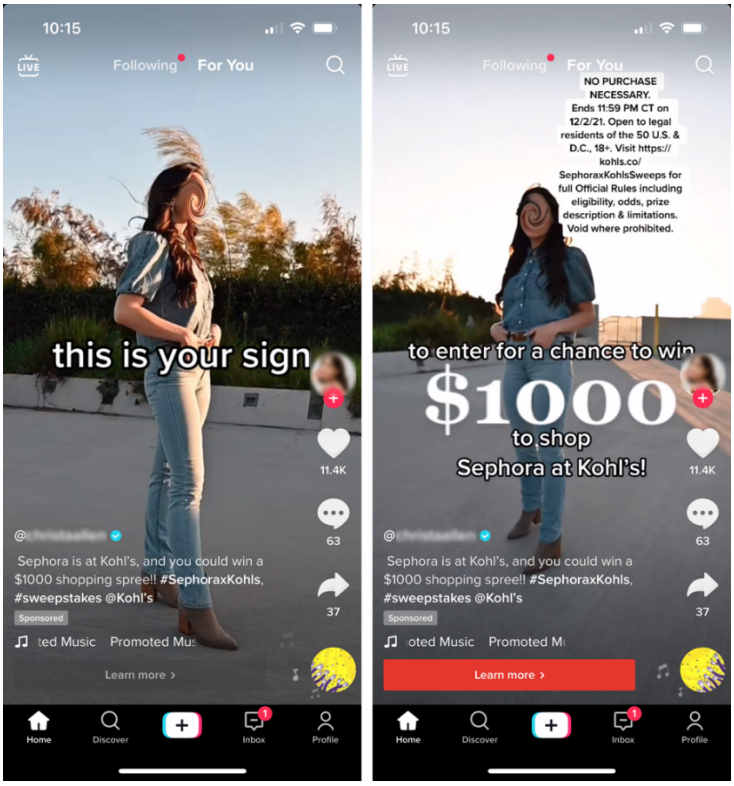

Figure 5. Sponsored post for Sephora/Kohl's sweepstakes.

Beyond fleshing out divergence in underlying beliefs driving algorithmic conspirituality, it is likely that algorithmic conspirituality does not impact everyone in the same way. Existing research suggests that algorithms can recognize some people and identities better than others (Andalibi & Garcia, 2021; Jacobsen, 2021; Karizat, Delmonaco, Eslami, & Andalibi, 2021). While some users may celebrate how perfectly the FYP algorithm reflects who they are, other users may lament the ways their FYP may *not* be representative of their identities (e.g., see Karizat et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021; Simpson et al., 2022). Because algorithmic conspirituality entails a perception of being known deeply by an algorithm, perhaps those who do not see themselves fully reflected in their algorithmically curated feeds are more impervious to algorithmic conspirituality and/or its effects. For these people, observing discussions about algorithmic conspirituality could underscore the imperfect nature of algorithmic curation, resulting in a more critical orientation toward algorithms. In sum, a person's specific social location and background likely affect their level of belief in algorithmic conspirituality, just as these factors affect how people understand the ways that algorithms function in their daily lives. In turn, local conceptions of algorithms are a critical facet in understanding agency in relation to these algorithmic recommendation systems (Siles et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2022). Relatedly, because conspirituality itself grows from the resurgence of new age religions in the digital age, we may also assume that current or prior religious affiliation will have an impact on algorithmic conspirituality beliefs.

What people know about algorithms likely also shapes the experience and impact of algorithmic conspirituality, as algorithmic awareness and knowledge shape user beliefs about, behaviors around, and attitudes toward algorithms (e.g., Bucher, 2018; DeVito, 2021). Because algorithmic knowledge is not evenly distributed across populations (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Gran et al., 2020), belief in algorithmic conspirituality might vary. Likewise, algorithmic knowledge exists at multiple levels and encompasses insights beyond technical functionality—for example, understanding the negative consequences of algorithms (Festic, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021), or knowing how to achieve greater visibility online (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Evans, 2021). How heterogeneity in algorithmic knowledge influences the development of algorithmic conspirituality beliefs and vice versa is an open question: Which kinds and levels of understanding strengthen or weaken algorithmic conspirituality beliefs? Moreover, what levels and kinds of algorithmic knowledge correspond with "secular" versus "sacred" algorithmic conspirituality beliefs?

In addition to elaborating on the nature of algorithmic conspirituality, and whom it impacts and how, future work is needed to investigate its impacts. A central concern among those who study the interrelationship between humans and algorithms is the degree to which algorithms shape beliefs, behaviors, relationships, ideologies, and opportunities (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2018; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021; Just & Latzer, 2017). On social media, previous work has particularly highlighted concerns about the potential for algorithms to expose users to harmful content—for example, pro-eating-disorder (Herrick, Hallward, & Duncan, 2020), self-harm (Arendt, Scherr, & Romer, 2019), extremist (Massanari, 2017; Murthy, 2021), and misinformation (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) content. As discussed, under certain circumstances, people rely more on algorithmic than human judgment. If algorithmic conspirituality deepens appreciation for algorithms because of their perceived capacity to know users intimately, it could contribute to the persuasiveness of algorithmically curated commercial, political, and health-related messages. Indeed, users tend to extend trust in algorithms to the content they recommend, particularly because they often perceive algorithms as inherently objective. For example, users tend to trust Google search results because of trust in the search engine and believe health apps to be credible because of trust in Apple and its App Store (Eysenbach, 2002; Kanthawala, Joo, Kononova, Peng, & Cotton, 2019).

Algorithmic conspirituality likely also facilitates the formation of parasocial relationships with platform content creators by nature of the way it involves creators addressing viewers directly (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial relationships, in turn, increase attentiveness to content (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and perceived credibility of the creator (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020). As creators work with the FYP algorithm to deliver personally relevant and resonant content (e.g., "this was meant for you"-style videos), those viewing the content may believe they have an even stronger connection with a creator than they would otherwise. Such a connection may only add to the trust users have in the algorithm and the content it provides to them. This is particularly concerning when cast against the backdrop of aforementioned concerns about exposure to harmful content. We wonder whether/how different actors are exploiting algorithmic conspirituality to sell bogus cures, products, and ideas, and if/how successful they are in this.

More broadly, it is unclear whether algorithmic conspirituality engenders more or less permissive attitudes about the degree to which algorithms should be relied on in various decision-making processes. That is, if people perceive algorithms as entangled with a higher power, or even as nearly godlike in their

technical functionality, does this render people more or less amenable to algorithms' mediation of decision making across social, cultural, and political life? If, as demonstrated in the examples we presented, users embrace how they were being seen (and ultimately surveilled) by the FYP algorithm, might this encourage more uncritical acceptance of datafication and algorithmic processes entailed by surveillance capitalism?

Moreover, as brands and influencers embrace algorithmic conspirituality via "this is a sign"-style videos (see Figure 5), this trend may further validate the logics of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018) because of the implied power vested in algorithms. From this starting point, we might then ask: Does algorithmic conspirituality engender more or less permissive attitudes about the degree to which algorithms should be governed? If people ascribe omnipotent qualities to algorithms—as the creator from the first example put it, "fifth dimensional" qualities—do they believe that algorithms should be subjected to more or less governmental regulation? What degree of control over algorithms do they wish for or believe that humans can achieve?

In sum, algorithmic conspirituality provides a new lens through which to view beliefs and attitudes about algorithms and their impacts, with many open questions to explore in future studies. The questions raised in the preceding paragraph are merely a starting point to examine this phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives. We hope that other researchers find this framework useful in relation to research and conversations about the nature of algorithms, particularly through a critical and cultural lens.

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