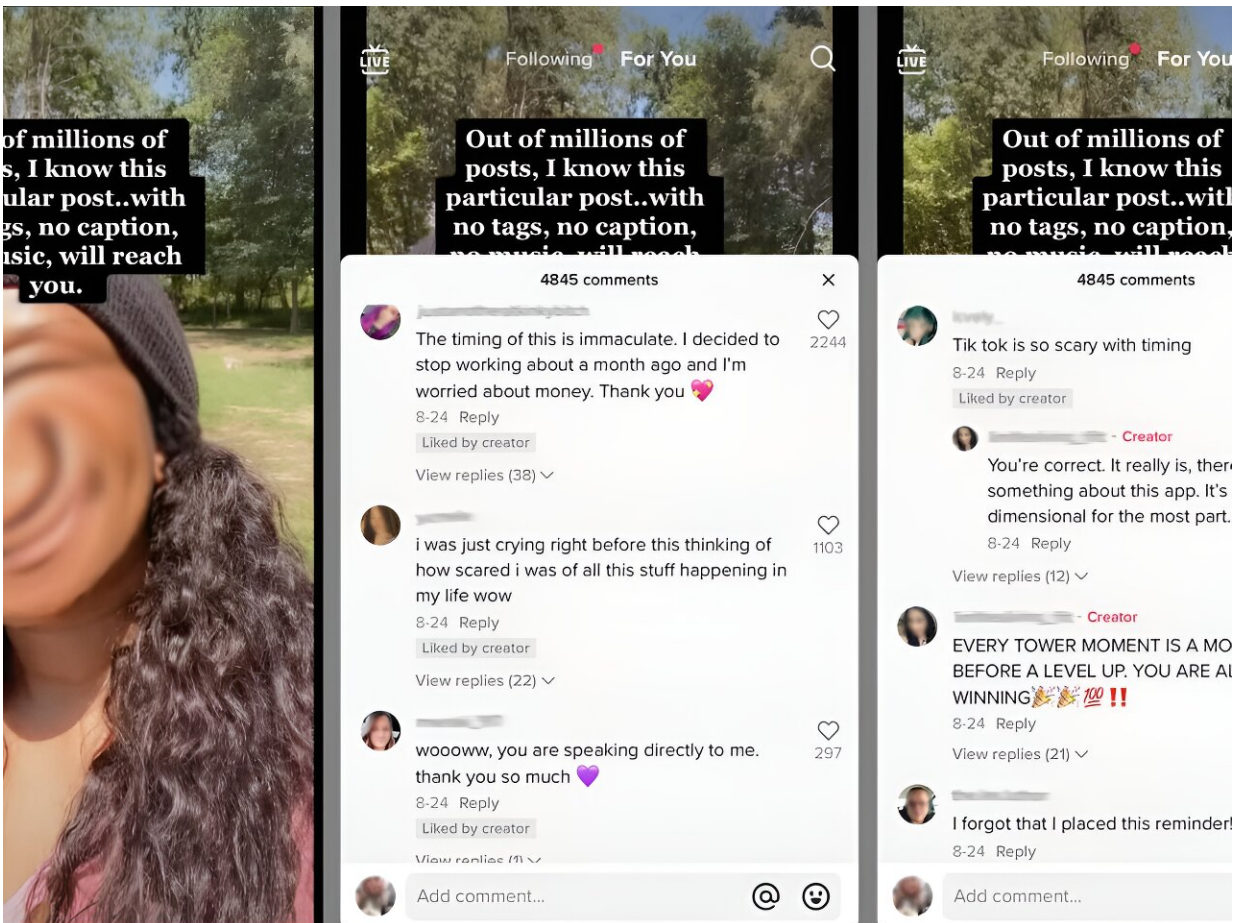


Q&A: Algorithmic conspiratorality—if you're seeing this, is it meant for you?

July 25 2024, by Mary Fetzer



Credit: Pennsylvania State University

Thanks to algorithms, social media platforms can generate content that

feels like it's made just for you. And while you may acknowledge that technology is what delivers the content, you may sometimes feel that a higher power is involved.

Conspirituality is a belief system that blends new age spiritual beliefs and conspiracy theorizing. Algorithmic conspirituality combines [algorithm](#)-driven content with mystical reasoning, drawing on conspiratorial and spiritual ideas common among [young people](#) on TikTok, according to Kelley Cotter, assistant professor, and Ankolika De, a graduate student pursuing a [doctoral degree](#) in informatics—both in the Penn State College of Information Sciences and Technology.

Penn State News spoke with Cotter and De about how and why TikTok users interpret algorithmic recommendations as a kind of divine intervention.

What led you to explore the idea of algorithmic conspirituality?

Cotter: The project began via a group chat conversation among research collaborators trying to make sense of TikTok videos that used the "If you see this, it's meant for you" framing. This led us to write a [paper](#) theorizing the emergence of this unique genre of content. From there, we wanted to know how users interpreted this kind of content, its downstream impacts and the motivations of those who create it.

What does algorithmic conspirituality look like?

De: TikTok's For You Page (FYP) and the algorithm that defines it have been discussed as being uncannily and inexplicably on target. The accuracy of the algorithm's recommendations produces a "right time, right place" feeling, inspiring a format that tailors content to individuals

in an extraordinary manner.

This precision can create a sense of serendipity, making content feel uniquely relevant and leading users to perceive the algorithms driving TikTok as connected to a higher power, even as users maintain a rational understanding of algorithms.

Videos on TikTok with captions like "this message is meant for you" or "the algorithm is asking you to watch this" urge viewers to think of the algorithm as divine. These phrases and similar ones create a format we identified as manifesting algorithmic conspiratoriality.

There is also an explicit mention that the videos lack common attributes typically used by the algorithm as data for recommendations. "This video has no hashtags, so if you're seeing this...", for example, strengthens the idea that something divine is independently driving the algorithm.

Cotter: We thought that algorithmic conspiratoriality occurs when social media users interpret algorithmic recommendations as cosmically significant, prompting revelatory self-insight. It also refers to a kind of hook that content creators sometimes use that explicitly invites this kind of interpretation.

In [another paper](#)—on which we collaborated with Shaheen Kanthawala, assistant professor, and Amy Ritchart, doctoral student, both from the University of Alabama—we also argued that algorithmic conspiratoriality makes social media content more persuasive by creating the impression that not only are users not alone in certain thoughts or behaviors but also that these thoughts and behaviors are encouraged.

What makes a user decide that it's spirituality—not just technology—that delivers personalized content?

Cotter: In a nutshell, it's a leap of faith. Participants in our research have demonstrated consistent awareness of the underlying technology affording the serendipitous experiences with TikTok's FYP algorithm. However, when leaning toward a divine interpretation, they've tended to describe experiences in which they received an extraordinarily well-tailored recommendation, were in a heightened state of emotion and/or drew on pre-existing [spiritual beliefs](#).

Are the algorithms that drive FYP unique to TikTok?

De: All [social media platforms](#) driven by recommendation algorithms do not disclose how these algorithms really work. This confidentiality is fundamental to their [business models](#)—it's their secret sauce for pursuing monetization through targeted advertisements, engagement and user retention. And while this is understandable, it pushes platform users to theorize and speculate about their experiences with the algorithm.

Cotter: In many ways, TikTok's FYP algorithm is not unique from other social media algorithms. However, the greater reliance on algorithm-driven personalization—as opposed to user-driven personalization, such as by following accounts—has made the FYP algorithm more central to the TikTok experience. Plus, the frictionless user experience of swiping through and engaging with videos helps streamline the process of inferring user interests.

Can users intentionally personalize and control their FYP?

De: For TikTok in particular, the algorithm's high level of accuracy, combined with its unknowability and unpredictability, makes this process very difficult. But while users cannot guarantee that specific actions will personalize their FYP, there are folk theories and

speculations about what practices help influence the FYP—such as liking, sharing or commenting on content similar to what they would like to receive as recommendations—that users use to rationalize their experiences with algorithms.

Algorithmic conspiratorality is the users' attempt to make sense of the algorithm's ability to recognize their existential needs. So, do users understand that there is science behind it but believe that the technology is enhanced by something more otherworldly?

Cotter: Everyone we have interviewed has understood, to some degree, that the FYP algorithm is a computational process, a technology, designed to personalize content curation for them. In general, most average users do not have complex technical insight about the science behind algorithms but have a basic grasp on functionality from using algorithm-driven social media sites and making inferences from their observations, as well as from what they gather from content creators and the media.

And yet, in our study, we saw that some people still found themselves reading more into their encounters with the TikTok FYP algorithm. Some people seemed to see the algorithm as a conduit for a higher power; other people did not clearly disentangle the algorithm from a higher power to identify the source of a perceived divine intervention.

Tell us about the concept of reflexive ambivalence that you've discussed in your work.

Cotter: Reflexive ambivalence refers to when users simultaneously

understand social media algorithms as human-made technologies, while interpreting them as a divine force. I see this as similar to how people casually engage with astrology, horoscopes or even the chain mail that preceded the internet. Most people would tell you they don't actually believe in this stuff but often find themselves struggling to shake the feeling that maybe it's true.

Ultimately, have you found that users want to believe in algorithmic conspirituality?

Cotter: Interestingly, in general, the people we interviewed did not want to believe in algorithmic conspirituality. As one user put it, they thought the idea was "goofy" and something they "shouldn't" believe in. However, some participants described moments when reading a particularly well-timed and well-tailored algorithmic recommendation as a divine intervention instilled hope or affirmed their feelings or beliefs when they needed it. In such moments, it seemed like they did want to believe.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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