

The Law of Attraction:
Theorizing TikTok's #manifestation Trend as Mediated Spirituality

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Abstract

This thesis develops a theoretical framework for exploring the dissemination of #manifestation on TikTok, which saw widespread appeal during the pandemic. It begins by historicizing manifestation within the history of American metaphysical thought to demonstrate that it is not an emergent belief, while also contributing to a better understanding of why spiritual ideas continue to find cultural purchase throughout time and space. To explore how these ideas are circulated in a culture, this thesis juxtaposes the print media culture that underpins the development of spirituality in the nineteenth-century with TikTok, and how the app shapes spiritual discourses and interactivity through its affordances and editing tools. By analyzing TikTok videos as artifacts of belief, it also theorizes how digital mediation affects modes of ritual, norms of identity, the interplay of humor and sincerity, and how TikTok users enchant the algorithm.

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Introduction

At the height of the pandemic, while millions of Americans were quarantining, still wiping down their groceries with disinfectant, the soft glow of the iPhone screen became a portal for countless digital subcultures. These online communities have existed for as long as there has been an internet, but the collective isolation of the pandemic reinscribed them with a new urgency: we're all alone, together. The short-form video platform TikTok represents one of the most popular apps for Gen-Z users. While many online trends came and went before quarantine protocols were lifted, one of the most popular trends didn't originate on TikTok in 2020, but rather in New England during the nineteenth-century—manifestation.

Before exploring the resurgence of manifestation on TikTok, it is important to gain clarity on the term “manifestation” itself. Manifestation, and the cluster of associated practices that historically precede it, privilege the power of the mind over matter. Positive thoughts attract positive material outcomes, and the same is true of negative thinking. Energy is frequently posited as the mediating factor between a person's mental state and circumstances of life. The beliefs that underpin a manifestation practice can be highly spiritualized and metaphysical, or quite material (by emphasizing the cognitive benefits of positive thinking, for example). Some manifestation practices are rigid in their structure, observing ritualistic and codified rules; others are dynamic, fluid, and ad hoc. Some argue that there is no right way to manifest, meanwhile, a chorus of manifestation coaches promise more efficacious results. These tensions demonstrate that manifestation is not monolithic. Being mindful of these differences will be crucial for understanding the disparate invocations of manifestation. Given these differences, it should also not be surprising to learn that the practice takes many different forms. Some are contemplative. They could consist of intention-setting exercises. There are visualization techniques. There are

also writing practices, such as the popular 3-6-9 method, where a manifester writes down the object of manifestation three times in the morning, six times at midday, and nine times at night (the manifested object could be anything: health, success, money, romantic partners—the list is as expansive as human desire). The belief that the mind can influence material reality through the power of thought is the link that binds these practices together.

To better understand why manifestation became so popular during the pandemic and remains popular today, it would be helpful to first appreciate that it is not a novel practice. Manifestation is a contemporary rebranding of the law of attraction—an older but analogous belief.¹ Furthermore, each of the different forms of manifestation mentioned above has a common origin in nineteenth-century New Thought spirituality. “New Thought” was agreed upon as a catch-all term for the myriad sects of spiritual faith that emerged in the nineteenth-century; this loose identity has allowed New Thought ideas to adapt to the changing currents of American culture up to the present day.² New Thought has historically been a spiritual resource for those thinking about the relationship between identity and desire. The historian Beryl Satter notes that, from its advent, New Thought represented “the beginnings of a reconceptualization of the nature of the mind and its relation to matter, heredity, “influence,” selfhood, and desire.”³ This web of relations persists in the discourses found within the manifestation subculture on TikTok. New Thought ideas, even if they are no longer referred to as such, are still used today by people not only explicitly seeking a spiritual practice but also as way of relating to their desires.

¹ On TikTok, manifestation and the law of attraction are sometimes used interchangeably, other times they are invoked as separate but analogous concepts.

² Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3-6.

³ Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 9.

Such an emphasis on desire (as Satter argues, New Thought is a “gendered discourse of desire”) is important for qualifying any critiques of manifestation as self-indulgent, as it grows out of a moment in history of economic transition and a cultural struggle over the fundamental nature of gender.⁴ Regarding the former, Satter argues New Thought helped Americans at the turn of the nineteenth-century reconceptualize their desire throughout the transition from producer capitalism to consumer capitalism.⁵ In the present consumer capitalist context, many manifestation practitioners on TikTok experience the same transition but in reverse: they may be attempting to create a business and develop a brand, sell eBooks or other products, and many users try to manifest financial success. Manifestation retains the utility of New Thought as a resource for understanding one’s desires while navigating economic uncertainty.

Concerning the historical cultural struggle over gender, Satter observes that when “female New Thought authors spoke of desire, they referred to material and sexual desires, but more broadly to their fundamental cravings for the right to think, feel, and act for themselves.”⁶ Manifestation is not only about desire but also about agency. In the contemporary manifestation culture, there are more than echoes of New Thought as a movement for disrupting the nineteenth-century notion of femininity as desireless. Such historical parallels demonstrate the malleability of New Thought beliefs as they are adapted across temporal and cultural contexts. The malleability of New Thought is only half the story, however. What is left to explore is the contemporary practice of these spiritual ideas: Why have they been such a persistent force in American culture, as made evident by its appearance as a trend on TikTok in the 2020s? By

⁴ Satter, 15.

⁵ Satter, 8.

⁶ Satter, 15.

exploring the dissemination of #manifestation on TikTok, this thesis contributes to a better understanding of why the law of attraction and related beliefs find cultural purchase in different eras across time and space. This consideration cannot be divorced from the communication technologies through which contemporary discourses take place, such as social media platforms in the context discussed here. To explore this, I will scrutinize how TikTok shapes spiritual discourses and modes of interactivity through its app-specific affordances. In doing so, I aim to theorize the function of digital manifestation practices. How does TikTok work as a platform where beliefs are communicated? As an arena for spiritual development? As ritual?

Methodology

To determine how to study a spiritual subculture, like the one associated with #manifestation, it seems like one must first determine what spirituality *is*. As the sociologists Courtney Bender and Omar McRoberts have noted, the difficulty in defining spirituality is “not so much because it lacks definition (or a relational counterpart, like “religion,” to make it meaningful), but because spirituality suffers from an excess of definitions.”⁷ Even though spirituality eludes any single definition, it is not an inscrutable object of study. Rather than ask what spirituality is, it is more productive to ask what spirituality *does*. As Bender and McRoberts suggest, attending to discourses can provide access to spirituality: the media channels, for example, where spiritual practices like manifestation circulate and are disseminated.⁸

My approach began with creating a dedicated TikTok account to avoid any algorithmic biases that would be found in a personal account as I pursued immersion into the manifestation

⁷ Courtney Bender and Omar McRoberts, “Mapping a Field: How and Why to Study Spirituality,” *Working Group on Spirituality, Political Engagement, and Public Life*, (2012): 2.

⁸ Bender and McRoberts, “Mapping a Field,” 7.

subculture. I use the language of “subcultures” rather loosely to refer to a shared vocabulary, genre of video, related conceptual orientations or beliefs, and, occasionally, a shared aesthetic, across a wide userbase. From January to April 2024, I used the app for approximately thirty minutes to one hour every other day. This immersion technique follows media studies scholar Crystal Abidin’s methodology for studying TikTok subcultures, which consists of “selectively following/unfollowing and liking/unliking posts in order to experiment with the algorithmic triggers, explore various subcultures and genres on the app, and map out trending and viral activity through fieldnotes (e.g. written notes, screengrabs, downloads, etc.).”⁹ Over this period, I used the hashtags #manifestation and #lawofattraction to search and watch videos situated within this subculture. Many users employ the hashtags #manifestation and #lawofattraction in their videos which allows others to easily find their content. These specific searches reflect an attempt to train the TikTok algorithm to deliver content to my account based on the engagement with videos about spirituality.

Encountering hundreds of videos while pursuing this immersion has allowed me to explore how TikTok’s affordances intersect with spiritual praxis. Affordances can be understood as the aspects of apps that “do not dictate participants’ behavior, but... configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement,” as the internet researcher danah boyd describes them.¹⁰ The user interface of the app, the layout of its menus and buttons, the way that content is displayed, and the tools for content creation—each of these can all be thought of

⁹ Crystal Abidin, “Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours,” *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (November 2020): 78. <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140>.

¹⁰ danah boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications,” in *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York: Routledge, 2011): 39.

as the affordances of an app as they encourage particular modes of engagement for users. Engagement will differ, however, from user to user as these affordances are negotiated and contested. The affordances of TikTok represent an important starting point for theorizing the app's potential as a spiritualized medium, which will be discussed further in the section on TikTok's For You page.

Given the diversity of beliefs and dispositions I have encountered within this subculture, I have limited my claims here to a theoretical analysis of TikTok and the practice of manifestation—rather than focusing my observations on those doing the manifesting. But these boundaries are not distinct, as the manifestation practice cannot be entirely separated from the manifester; therefore, an important ethical quandary to consider is how TikTok blurs the distinction between public and private. For many videos, the intended audience may be hard to decipher and should be understood as quasi-public. Users may also have never anticipated their videos being decontextualized from the original platform and analyzed in an academic setting. In their report on ethical research, the Association of Internet Researchers urges scholars to consider how “the substance of [user] communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is—or ought to be—used by other parties.”¹¹ Given this ethical consideration, I have chosen to anonymize quotations from individual users with personal accounts detailing their experiences with manifestation. This technique emphasizes individual privacy. Public-facing accounts, however, will be cited and occasionally featured in screenshots. Public-facing refers to users creating explicit content for

¹¹ Anette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, “Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0),” *AoIR* (2012): 6. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.

consumption or developing a manifestation brand (as indicated by linking online shops in their bio, or those writing books on manifestation techniques, for example). Citing public-facing accounts is important for giving credit to the creators of the referenced content as the rightful owners of the images. Other accounts are already anonymized as they do not feature any personal details, and those accounts will also be included in screenshots.

This consideration leads to another methodological difficulty to confront: the ephemerality of studying any content on the internet. TikTok videos are transient, which can prove elusive for analysis. Since users generate their own content, these archives are unstable and liable to be deleted at any time. Throughout this study, many videos and accounts I have encountered have been deleted, so I have put together a synthesis of fieldnotes throughout my immersion to facilitate continuity while researching. These fieldnotes inform my theoretical approach, which investigates both the content of TikTok videos, and their embeddedness in a historical, cultural, and technological context—beginning with the pandemic.

Manifestation and the Pandemic

In a situation where people were separated from their communities and loved ones, digital platforms such as TikTok were a support mechanism, a source of community, comedic relief, and an escape from boredom. TikTok itself was uniquely poised to influence digital culture going into quarantine and throughout the lockdown. The platform's period of growth during Q1 of 2020 represents the most downloads of any app before it, ever, on both Google Play and the App Store.¹² TikTok saw a 62% increase in downloads in Q1 of 2020, and 51% in Q2 of

¹² Craig Chapple, "TikTok Crosses 2 Billion Downloads After Best Quarter For Any App Ever," *Sensor Tower*, April 2020, <https://sensortower.com/blog/tiktok-downloads-2-billion>.

2020, compared to Q4 of 2019, i.e., when lockdowns and quarantine protocols were first being enforced worldwide.¹³

Google analytics show how interest in manifestation was a response to the pandemic. Google searches for manifestation peaked in interest during July 2020, which was about a month or two into quarantine protocols in the United States, depending on the state:

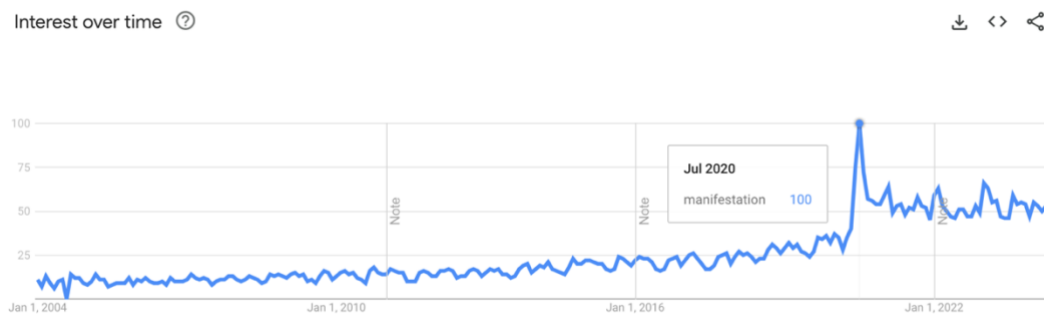


Figure 1: Interest in the term “manifestation,” from 2004 to the present (source: Google trends).

Recalling the unpredictability of those early stages of the pandemic, with its persistent threat of mutating variants, along with the social isolation of quarantining, financial stress, job insecurity, fear of infection, fear of death, fear of grieving for loved ones, or actually grieving loved ones—all of these facets combined to heighten anxiety across the planet. The World Health Organization reported that the pandemic led to a “25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.”¹⁴ It should not be surprising that a practice that seeks to assert control over one’s life, like manifestation, would enjoy widespread appeal during a period when many people experienced a loss of agency.

¹³ Statista, “Digital & Trends: TikTok,” *Statista*, accessed March 14, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/study/70013/tiktok/>.

¹⁴ World Health Organization, “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” *WHO*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>.

One genealogy of #manifestation traced back over a century even finds its point of origin in confronting disease. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby—a nineteenth-century figure foundational for the New Thought movement—had a lifelong preoccupation with the idea that the mind could affect the body, perhaps stemming from his affliction with tuberculosis. This personal disposition led to Quimby’s interest in mental healing.¹⁵ Such an example demonstrates that, although the contemporary invocations of manifestation do differ from the the doctrine of mind over matter found in the New Thought movement, #manifestation shares this cultural DNA as a reaction to disease.

Quimby was also opposed to traditional Christianity, although he was inspired by biblical themes such as the Christ serving as a healer.¹⁶ The figure of Quimby is instructive as he demonstrates how spiritual ideas can accrue cultural value within a secular context in ways that religious ideas often do not.¹⁷ This cultural value can be observed in assertions about the cultural vogue, as the journalist Rebecca Jennings reported for *Vox*: “[manifestation is] what one might consider praying, if praying were a cool thing to do on social media.”¹⁸ The screenshot below, from a TikTok video posted on August 5th, 2021, illustrates Jennings’ point. Even though vaccines were made available by August of 2021, lifting quarantine protocols and the threat of mutating variants meant that the danger of infection was still a persistent possibility in public life. While manifestation is frequently practiced as a way of realizing one’s own desires, the user in figure 2 communicates a selfless desire that resembles a prayer:

¹⁵ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 285.

¹⁶ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 288.

¹⁷ Bender and McRoberts, “Mapping a Field,” 7.

¹⁸ Rebecca Jennings, “Shut up, I’m manifesting!,” *Vox*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21524975/manifesting-does-it-really-work-meme>.

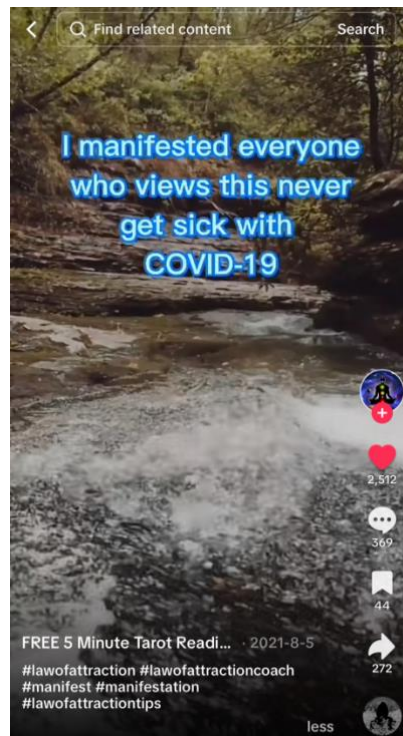


Figure 2: from (@lawofattraction0101).

It is not random, but rather the result of spirituality's historical permutations in the United States, that a spiritual-coded practice like manifestation would become a trend within a secular setting like TikTok during the pandemic, and not a similar contemplative practice that is coded as religious, such as prayer.¹⁹

The figure of Quimby disrupts any assumptions that manifestation is an emergent phenomenon; instead, it is an American cultural inheritance. While I have focused on Quimby here because of his historical importance within New Thought, the origins of the law of attraction can also be attributed to other writers of the nineteenth-century such as Prentice Mulford, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Mary Baker Eddy, each of whom articulated the principle of mind over matter or adjacent ideas in one form or another. From this historicization emerges

¹⁹ Although prayer can be found on TikTok, of course, alongside just about anything a user is seeking. Here, the differentiating factor is manifestation being perceived as a trend by the public.

questions regarding the continuity and discontinuity of this idea. The TikTok resurgence of manifestation and the historical concept of mind over matter share a vocabulary of terms and occasionally praxis (primarily through techniques such as intention setting and visualization exercises). Consider this excerpt from Prentice Mulford's 1887 essay "The Law of Success:"

The mind is a magnet. It has the power, first of attracting thought, and next of sending that thought out again... What kind of thought you most charge that magnet (your mind) with, or set it open to receive, it will attract most of that kind to you.²⁰

Although most TikTok videos I have encountered do not explicitly cite Mulford, Quimby, or the other nineteenth-century writers who historically shaped the metaphysical concept of mind over matter, this quote demonstrates a continuity of beliefs that can be observed in contemporary TikTok discourses. One user summarized it as "what you put out is what you get back... if you're low: coming from lack; if you're high, abundant, vibrating, you're gonna attract likewise in your life." The idea that thoughts are tangible, as Mulford articulated, and attractive in the sense that they are magnetized, persists today across a vast number of TikTok videos with the hashtags #manifestation and #lawofattraction. In addition, the idea that one must make oneself open to receive their desires also appears in many TikTok videos where users discuss techniques for becoming more receptive i.e., more attractive.

While it is important to acknowledge that #manifestation draws on deep cultural currents in the history of American metaphysical thought, TikTok also represents a major technological departure from the circulation of these ideas in the nineteenth-century. If many of these core ideas about the relationship of the mind to the material world remain consistent across time, the

²⁰ Prentice Mulford. "The Law of Success," in *Your Forces, and How to Use Them*, (New York: F. J. Needham, 1903), 4.

question that emerges regards how the medium shapes the encounter with this information. In the following sections, I will explore how accessing spiritual discourses on TikTok, i.e., the experience of scrolling, differs from the circulation of print media. TikTok represents a difference not in degrees, but in kind; the platform is not a library, as algorithmic recommendation systems lead to a different experience for each user. These distinct media represent different dynamics of authority, as well. The distinction between the authorial voice of the book versus the intimacy and presence of practitioners on TikTok also brings into relief social media's capacity to further the historic trajectory of spirituality as a non-elite tradition.

TikTok: History, Design, and Affordances

To understand the position TikTok occupies in the social media landscape, this section will begin by briefly summarizing its history. TikTok has built a reputation on being a short-form video sharing app, but its predecessor was another social media platform called Musical.ly, created by the developers Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang in 2014. Musical.ly was acquired by ByteDance (the Beijing-based internet technology company that owns TikTok) and integrated into TikTok in 2018.²¹ Before this integration, Musical.ly enjoyed growth as an app where users would create their own lip-sync music videos with a variety of editing options including video speed and the use of filters. As the progenitor to TikTok's current way of accessing content, Musical.ly allowed users (called "musers" at the time) to search by songs and sounds (videos that share the same audio) to discover the latest trends.

²¹ Kishalaya Kundu, "Musical.ly App To Be Shut Down, Users Will Be Migrated to TikTok," *Beebom*, August 2, 2018, <https://beebom.com/musical-ly-app-to-be-shut-down-users-will-be-migrated-to-tiktok/>.

Musical.ly, however, did not begin as the dancing and lip-syncing cultural phenomenon inherited by TikTok. Zhu’s original vision was an education app called Cicada, which would host short-form education videos where experts would explain a subject in digestible portions.²² Cicada was a market failure partly because the task of creating educational content was not particularly well-suited to short-form videos. Zhu and Yang retained the short-form emphasis while transitioning to a platform designed for creating DIY music videos, which capitalized on the entertainment value of lip-syncing. These design changes over the past decade have retained a throughline of short-form content while changing emphases. Their culmination in TikTok has been a realization of a wide and eclectic variety of content that exceeds the original focus of its musical beginnings—as wide and eclectic as its base of over one billion active global users.²³ Yet the functionality for remixing songs and dances remains in both duets and stitches.

On TikTok, users can interact with the video content from other users through the duet and stitch features. Duets are videos where users produce side-by-side videos alongside another video. The result is a new split-screen video allowing the user to respond to another video with their own juxtaposition. The stitch feature allows users to combine sections of another video in their own video. Both of these tools are already integrated into the app and give users the capability to cite other videos and produce a complex network of intertextuality with relative ease. It might be worthwhile to theorize discourse on TikTok as intertextual and discursive even if it is not intrinsically social. In other words, the user’s content itself becomes discursive, rather

²² Biz Carson, “How a failed education startup turned into Musical.ly, the most popular app you’ve probably never heard of,” *Business Insider*, May 28, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190111121542/https://www.businessinsider.my/what-is-musically-2016-5/>.

²³ Statista, “Number of TikTok users worldwide from 2018 to 2027 (in millions),” *Statista*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1142687/tiktok-users-worldwide>.

than the user participating in those discourses for the sake of socialization. The emphasis is on creating content and engaging with content, as opposed to explicitly engaging with other users.

These editing tools also allow users to easily create how-to instructional videos for manifesting. Many users create videos where the camera faces a blank piece of paper, and the video creator demonstrates how to manifest something by creating a personalized chart with lines and occasionally numeric designations. Then, the user writes down the desired object of manifestation, like money, and they also write down the feelings associated with the object (e.g., how they feel now, or how they would feel if they had those things). These examples demonstrate that the pedagogic ethos of Cicada has returned to TikTok despite its short-form video format. Although differing from Zhu's original vision, knowledge (including dubious knowledge) is professed on any number of subjects all over TikTok, including the metaphysical knowledge I have been discussing here. The original idea of video lessons from a single author may take too long to create because it is difficult to distill knowledge from an expert source quickly enough to be suitable for the app's lifespan, while nonspecialized knowledge can proliferate. Searching #manifestation TikTok yields endless varieties of instructional videos, like the writing method described above. There are numerous different kinds of methods that are loosely connected through sharing a vocabulary of distinct terms. The amount of context required to understand what the terms mean, and how to manifest, differs from the amount of context required to explicate an expert argument. Sharing instructional knowledge and techniques for manifesting does not require context, as the context comes into focus over time as more and more videos are encountered by the user introducing different iterations on manifesting, what it means to manifest, how to manifest, what kind of people manifest, and so on *ad infinitum* (or at least as long as a user can possibly scroll).

The key distinction is thus between specialized and nonspecialized knowledge. Information across a spectrum of disparate users can aggregate into a pedagogic ecosystem of nonspecialized knowledge. The kind of knowledge sharing among non-specialist users has been able to sustain itself across a variety of subcultures. This principle is a contemporary echo of the non-specialist ethos pervading the print media culture where spirituality blossomed in the nineteenth-century, which will be discussed in the next section.

Digital Combinativeness and Spiritual Media

The different ways that TikTok blurs the lines separating citation and conversation, text and context, or consumer and producer of content create an environment ripe for spiritual combinativeness. The historian of American religions Catherine Albanese describes combinativeness as the free exchange and interplay of ideas, from many different characters, that has historically allowed spirituality to develop.²⁴ Spirituality, and the metaphysical religiosity that constitutes it, has been the product of many different streams of thought. The term combinative is meant to evoke the confluence of ideas and traditions that cohere in American spirituality (and everything elicited by that term), including the canons of thought where the #manifestation trend has its roots. This history of this combativeness—which can make a single definition of spirituality elusive—also attests to how it has remained generative. The incorporating nature of spirituality, and the fluidity of its ideological boundaries and overlapping beliefs with other spiritual sects, is the essence of the combinativeness that renders spirituality distinct from other forms of religion. Combinativeness is not only a property of spirituality,

²⁴ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 21.

however. All culture must be combinative to varying degrees. The deeper point is that combinativeness is a precondition for the loosely defined tradition of spirituality to emerge.

Another condition for spirituality is the specific technologies that make combinativeness possible. Metaphysical beliefs are not being exchanged in disembodied contexts, as these ideas require a medium to travel from mind to mind. Albanese cites the printing press as one particular technology that enabled a proliferation of spiritual ideas: “technology drove a revolution in the print media, as (mass production) stereotype printing brought information to people far more quickly and cheaply than ever before.”²⁵ The increased accessibility of printing, both for the producer and consumer of print media, meant that the nexus of public discourse was shifting from elites to “nonspecialists” who “increasingly felt capable of acquiring the knowledge that could make them persuasive conversation partners in public religious discourse.”²⁶ Albanese argues that this shift in how information was disseminated also “transmitted power—both social and spiritual—to ordinary people.”²⁷ As Albanese points out, the increased access to printing was not only a reclamation of social power but also spiritual influence. That this spiritual and media revolution was increasingly the domain of ordinary people only furthered its combinative potential.

Today, digital communication furthers the historic trend of spiritual discourses becoming the domain of ordinary people. The internet is a well-suited environment for the circulation of spiritual ideas, but to understand how the internet functions both as a site for spirituality and a spiritualized medium for users requires going beyond the initial observation that the internet can

²⁵ Albanese, 11.

²⁶ Albanese, 11.

²⁷ Albanese, 11.

be adapted for a variety of cultural functions. Both the internet as a communication technology, and spirituality as a web of metaphysical beliefs, have the potential to foster highly combinative cultural environments. The internet untethers the communication of spiritual ideas from the material limitations of printing technologies, while the increasing accessed to the internet furthers the historic trajectory of spirituality as a combinative and increasingly non-elite tradition. By 2006—the same year that Facebook was opened to the general public—the scholar Kerstin Radde-Antweiler described the internet as a site for what she called “patchwork religion,” which refers to a webpage’s capacity to allow “different combinations of religious traditions” to appear where users “can select separate pieces, combine them, and form their own personal religious beliefs.”²⁸ Similarly, in their discussion of the internet, media scholars Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner describe the ability of mimetic media “to manipulate and continually remix an ever-expanding reservoir of source material, often without attributing what was found where, or made where, by whom.”²⁹ These descriptions demonstrate how digital technology allows for decontextualizing and recontextualizing information in various modalities such as videos or images across a wide array of platforms, or other corners of the internet such as personal blogs. This process leads to a heightened tendency towards intertextuality and authorial multiplicity, as content is reposted, transformed through edits, and new meanings are acquired. These internet logics suggest that digital technologies have increased the potential for new forms of combinativeness. In the context of this study, it may be helpful to conceptualize this phenomenon specifically as digital combinativeness. If combinativeness generally refers to the

²⁸ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Rituals-Online: Transferring and Designing Rituals,” *Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet*, 2 no. 1, (2006): 57. <https://doi.org/10.11588/rel.2006.1.376>.

²⁹ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2017): 49.

tendency to *combine* different ideas and practices from various metaphysical, spiritual, folk, and religious traditions into a personalized cosmological framework, then *digital combinativeness* foregrounds how digital technologies influence the circulation of those ideas through algorithmic weighting and platform-specific affordances. The fluid boundaries between the #manifestation subculture and other spiritual subcultures on TikTok, and their overlapping beliefs and practices, also exemplifies digital combinativeness. Participating in many different internet subcultures allows the integration of these different ideas. These screenshots represent two examples of digital combinativeness from different accounts:

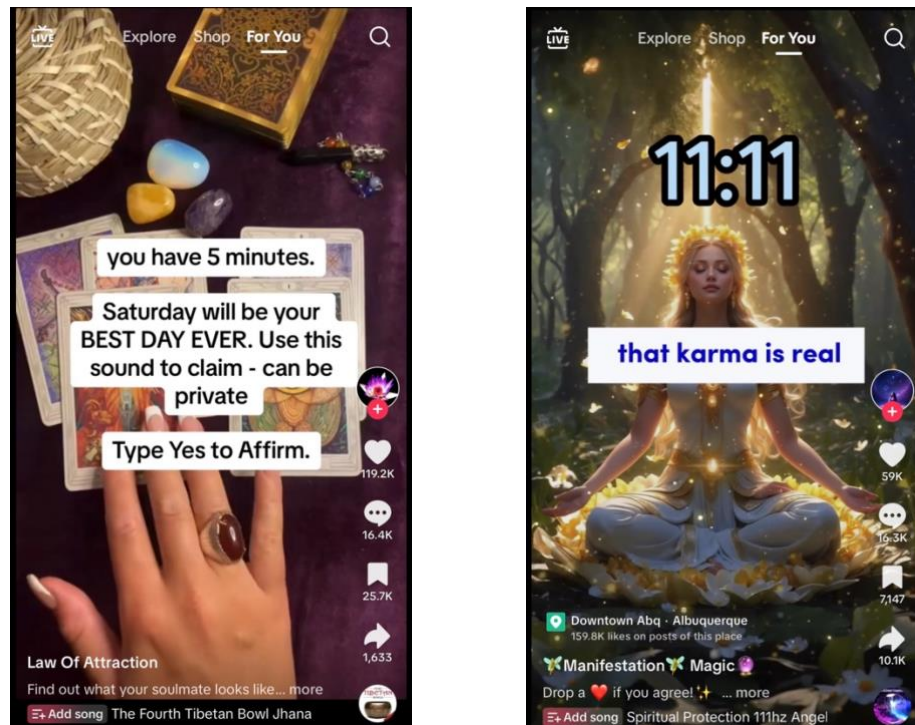


Figure 3: (Left to Right) **3.1** from (@manifestation1006); **3.2** from (@manifestation_magic1111).

Figure 3.1 shows the presence of tarot and crystals cohered in a spiritual aesthetic that serves as a background for the text, which describes the practice of affirmation in a quest to discover what “your soulmate looks like” through employing law of attraction techniques. The video also prompts the user to “Type Yes to Affirm,” which encourages interaction with the video, an interaction that acquires symbolic meaning. Figure 3.2, a video titled “Manifestation Magic,”

invokes the Buddhist doctrine of karma and demonstrates how manifesters on TikTok may also practice various kinds of numerology and perceive the appearance of numbers in one's life as symbolic of good fortune or alignment with the universe (frequently these are called angel numbers; 111, 444, 777 are popular examples). It is not uncommon to find comments on manifestation videos drawing attention to encountering the video at a time of day that corresponds to these angel numbers, like at 11:11 or 4:44 am/pm. The repetition of symbolic numbers can also be incorporated into a manifestation practice (e.g., by writing down the object of manifestation 7 times, for 7 days). The use of crystals is another spiritual practice that can combine with manifestation and is found on the side of TikTok known as CrystalTok. Crystals have been a mainstay of spiritual subculture at least since the New Age "light" groups of the 1960s, serving various functions like focusing one's energy and intentionality.³⁰ How the term "energy" is deployed among those practicing manifestation and on CrystalTok indicates an encounter with metaphysical religion. The ubiquity of energy on TikTok is not a coincidence, although it does attest to the term's malleability. Energy has enjoyed such a storied role in American metaphysics because it reflects the privileging of the mind's capacity to intuit the innate workings of the universe.³¹ Energy mediates the mind and the material universe. For some, this energy may just be metaphorical, for others, it is perceived as literal. In either case, energy appears to serve this symbolic, mediating function. It is important to note here that the cultural currents that digital combinativeness draws upon predate TikTok, or even the internet—many of the ideas that TikTok users recontextualize in their own content, such as karma, may even be ancient. The way that these ideas are communicated, combined, and presented on

³⁰ Albanese, 499.

³¹ Albanese, 6.

TikTok, however, represents the emergent dynamic of digital combinativeness. Whether one is incense-burning, crystal-washing, journal-writing, or intention-setting, all these and more can be encountered and juxtaposed in seconds on TikTok with the swipe of a finger; the user determines what ideas and practices should be incorporated in their own “patchwork” belief system—if any.

As the screenshots displayed above also demonstrate, TikTok, as a video platform, is especially conducive to engaging the aesthetic element of spirituality. Spiritual aesthetics, just as much as spiritual ideas themselves, are shaped by the dynamics of digital combinativeness. Many different aesthetics showcase various visual representations of spirituality. Crystals, like those in figure 3.1, are both a conduit of energy and a prop on set when filming, and the latter property need not diminish the former. On TikTok, the cultivation of a spiritual aesthetic can give an occasion to the video that differentiates it from other content, just as ceremonial objects do in traditional rituals. Aesthetics remain an important affective dimension for users.

Many of these images used in crafting an aesthetic are increasingly AI-generated, which warrants a brief analysis here. TikTok is becoming saturated with AI content and the videos yielded by searching #manifestation are not an exception. The AI-generated TikTok voiceover is an infamous component of the app, which is featured in figure 3.1. Meanwhile, the art in figure 3.2 shares a resemblance (at the time of this writing) with many of the AI-generated images produced by Stable Diffusion, DALL-E, Midjourney, and other text-to-image models. These tools give users the ability to craft new aesthetic imaginaries, an ethos that appears well-suited for the egalitarian trend in the history of spirituality. Yet spiritual combinativeness has traditionally referred to weaving various cultural threads into a novel tapestry. There is much debate, both on an engineering and a philosophical level, if the content generated by AI meets the criteria for novelty. Concerns regarding the homogenization of artistic expression have also

produced outrage across many creative subcultures on the internet. The cultural reception of AI will be an area of continued interest. The ability for spiritual users to render their vision into an image with increasing specificity may position the aesthetic dimension as an increasingly prevalent feature of digital combinativeness. The rich variety of symbols found throughout the history of spirituality represents a cultural space of imagining, and reimagining, what spirituality looks like by people using these text-to-image models. For example, figure 3.2 shows a forested setting and a beam of light entering the head of a blonde, angelic figure, figuring nature as a restorative space that offers connection with the divine. Such ideas are not emergent, but the increased capacity to render them into new visual imaginaries and share them on a platform like TikTok will be of increasing interest for studying digital combinativeness in the future.

The internet's capacity to be a highly combinative nexus of beliefs and ideas long predates TikTok, however, so the question remains: Why was TikTok the primary platform associated with the #manifestation trend, and not other video sharing platforms like YouTube or Instagram? To be sure, plenty of manifesting occurred before the TikTok trend. But many major journalistic publications located #manifestation as a cultural event happening on TikTok. *GQ* published an article in June 2021 titled "TikTok's 'Manifesting' craze, explained,"³² and *Vox*'s article "Shut up, I'm manifesting!"³³ cites a variety of TikTok videos as contemporary instances of recycling New Age beliefs. Meanwhile, journalist Terry Nguyen reported during the pandemic "a cultural quarantine hivemind developing on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Stories, and

³² Stuart McGurk, "TikTok's 'Manifesting' craze, explained," *GQ*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/manifesting-tik-tok>.

³³ Jennings, "Shut up, I'm manifesting!," *Vox*.

Zoom, allowing micro-trends to bloom and fade even faster than before.”³⁴ However, while many pandemic trends have come and gone on TikTok, #manifestation remains popular at the time of this writing in 2024 (which should not be surprising, given the law of attraction’s history and tendency to appear and reappear in American culture). In other words, while #manifestation was identified as an internet trend around 2020, manifestation is also a spiritual idea with its own history (thereby exceeding the label of trend). Since user interaction with content varies in degrees of intensity, intentionality, and cultivation, it would be unproductive to propose a binary delineation between users who engage manifestation as a trend versus those who do not. Instead, it may be helpful to theorize a spectrum of engagement. Some may go to the internet seeking spiritual knowledge, while others just end up getting pulled into some algorithmic rabbit hole that they never expected. Meanwhile, many TikTok users draw from a litany of different sources within historical metaphysical or spiritual literature, and other corners of the internet, on their quest to develop a personalized belief system and ritual praxis that is then shared and circulated in the media ecosystem for others to draw on. And the cycle continues. So, what makes TikTok well-suited for the continued proliferation of spiritual ideas? To theorize TikTok’s relationship to combinativeness, I will examine the appeal of TikTok’s primary mode of interaction, the “For You” page, and other platform-specific affordances that make it well-suited for manifestation enter the cultural zeitgeist once again.

³⁴ Terry Nguyen, “Dalgona coffee, PowerPoint parties, and bread baking: The micro-trends of quarantine,” *Vox*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/4/7/21207127/things-to-do-during-quarantine-dalgona-coffee-bread-baking-trends>.

TikTok's "For You" page and the Algorithm

When a user opens TikTok on their phone, they are greeted by the "For You" page (henceforth "FYP"). As the default mode of engagement on TikTok, understanding the FYP demonstrates how TikTok differs from other social media platforms. The FYP consists of algorithmically determined videos that occupy the entire phone screen and begin to play automatically (except for some overlaid user-interfacing elements, e.g., the heart, comment, and share buttons). Media scholar Andrea Ruehlicke describes the FYP as "an endless stream of content they are assumed to enjoy."³⁵ The primary interaction with the FYP consists of swiping to move on to the next video. The user cannot guess the content of the next video with exactitude. Ruehlicke argues that this model differs from other platforms that suggest a grid of content where the user must then determine whether they will engage with the suggestions; in contrast, "TikTok bypasses this step. While the user can reject a suggestion by immediately swiping to the next video, acceptance is assumed."³⁶ Even though TikTok has a search function using hashtags and sounds (videos that share the same audio), the FYP is designed to tailor the content it shows to the user over time as it collects data about the user's interests and the content they have engaged with in the past. This algorithmic determinacy means that the user can sometimes find themselves adrift in subcultures with which they do not actually identify, but it also means that TikTok should get better at predicting the most relevant content for the user without them having to do more than watch (or swipe away from) the videos they are shown.

³⁵ Andrea Ruehlicke, "All the Content, Just For You: TikTok and Personalization," *Flow*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/10/content-just-for-you/>.

³⁶ Ruehlicke, "All the Content, Just For You," *Flow*.

The emphasis on personalization has led media scholars Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo to argue that “the prominence of the For You algorithm leads to the prevalence of individualized identificatory self-making processes over processes that are more overtly social and network dependent.”³⁷ TikTok, and the FYP specifically, leads to a more personalized experience which in turn makes the platform a resource for the individual project of identity formation. This dynamic, however, also leads Bhandari and Bimo to observe that the “experience of using TikTok is one of repeatedly engaging with one’s own self: intra rather than interpersonal connection,” and that the app favors content creation (and consumption) over more social functionalities.³⁸ Unlike Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter), interactivity and sociality are exceptions on TikTok and not the rule. In addition, the content on TikTok is less like a library, and more like an autobiography of the user. I would argue this represents one of the primary reasons why spiritual and even occult (i.e., WitchTok) subcultures thrived and continue to thrive on TikTok. For users trying to develop a ritualized practice or even self-reflexively construct any particular identity, the algorithm can anticipate those desires while displaying content that resonates with the user on a deeper level. Bhandari and Bimo even note how many TikTok users describe a moment when the TikTok algorithm understood them (it “got me,” as one user described it), and suddenly all the content they were receiving clicked.³⁹ This description

³⁷ Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, “Why’s Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media,” *Social Media and Society*, 8, no. 1 (January 2022): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241>.

³⁸ Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, “TikTok and the “Algorithmized Self”: A New Model of Online Interaction,” *The 21st Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers*, 2020, 3, <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11172>.

³⁹ Bhandari and Bimo, “Why’s Everyone on TikTok Now,” 5.

gestures to a powerful affective moment for any user, which can collapse the boundaries between a user's interiority and the almost uncanny omniscience of the algorithm.

The algorithm would not be able to achieve this level of accuracy without the data-collecting practices that inform it, and other platforms, about the user. A problem that arises when examining a platform like TikTok is how the project of identity formation can intersect intimately with algorithmically driven private interests. The sociologist Rogers Brubaker has drawn attention to the ostensible neutrality of social media platforms, arguing that the term "platform" itself suggests a relationship of equality, when, in reality, platforms exist in an asymmetrical relationship with their users due to data-collecting practices.⁴⁰ As mentioned above, this data collection informs the algorithm about the user to then offer them the most relevant content that will maximize their engagement on the app. The user's interests are therefore being predicted for them, rather than the user determining their patterns of content consumption. Brubaker even theorizes that an algorithm's capacity to anticipate user desire may indicate that a "post-neoliberal self" is on the horizon; where the neoliberal self is governed and defined by their choices, the post-neoliberal self is "steered by algorithmic systems."⁴¹ Circling back to spiritual life, this platform asymmetry also brings to the fore questions of agency and intentionality regarding how a user constructs their spiritual identity. TikTok encourages "heavy interaction with a personalized algorithm," Bhandari and Bimo argue, "which repeatedly confronts users with various aspects of their own personas."⁴² Where is the line drawn between

⁴⁰ Rodgers Brubaker, *Hyperconnectivity and its Discontents*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023): 101.

⁴¹ Brubaker, *Hyperconnectivity and its Discontents*, 46.

⁴² Bhandari and Bimo, "TikTok and the "Algorithmized Self," 3.

constructing a spiritual persona and having a spiritual persona constructed for you? TikTok reveals these boundaries as increasingly porous.

The danger in the dissolution of such boundaries is not merely that inner lives are increasingly subject to private interests, as in advertising. Instead, the emergence of affective capitalism seems to represent a paradigmatic shift in the power asymmetry mentioned earlier. As Brubaker puts it in his book, *Hyperconnectivity and its Discontents*:

So tech firms' efforts to reach inside the self are certainly not new. But their power to do so – grounded in the extraordinarily rich data they have extracted and in the unparalleled immediacy and intimacy of our relationships with our devices – is unprecedented in scale, scope, and intensity... Earlier efforts to reach inside the self... were feeble by comparison.⁴³

Now, more than ever, the spiritual self, or any other constructed identity as presented through digital platforms, becomes a commodity object. The majority of TikTok users will have varying degrees of awareness regarding how the platform uses their data to maximize engagement on the app. This tension between user intentionality and private interests brings into relief the shift from users discerning their patterns of content consumption and mode of engagement to those decisions being increasingly relegated to the algorithm. While it is important to note the ways that platforms curtail user intentionality, I do not want to detract from user agency entirely and argue that they have no freedom at all when using these apps. Even though “affective capitalism purloins our desires, emotions, and forms of expressivity and turns them into commodities and assets,” as the scholar Alison Hearn condemns, people will continue to do what people have always done: construct their identities in relation to their environments, digital or otherwise.⁴⁴ In

⁴³ Brubaker, *Hyperconnectivity and its Discontents*, 47.

⁴⁴ Alison Hearn, “Verified: Self-presentation, identity management, and selfhood in the age of big data,” *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 15, no. 2 (April 2017): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1269909>.

this sense, TikTok represents an important site of spiritual engagement, even if that engagement is not on neutral grounds. The next section theorizes TikTok as a space for spiritual self-making.

TikTok and Identity Play

I have argued that TikTok’s algorithm and the For You page represent an important shift in how users develop a sense of belonging online within a particular subculture. Yet the performance of identity through media long predates the digital. The curational aspect of self-representation through posting on TikTok can be situated within a past legacy of mediated self-making. In her chapter on identity work and media, scholar of communication Lee Humphreys argues that amateur photography, scrapbooking, and snapshot culture demonstrate how expressing identity has historically been achieved through various media.⁴⁵ In this sense, social media is a continuation of the “collection, curation, and consumption processes” that are conducive to self-representation.⁴⁶

Humphrey’s concept of media accounting sheds light on the dynamics of consumption and self-curation that occur on TikTok. “Media accounting is both the captured and collected identity traces that affirm particular identities,” as Humphreys describes, and “the consumption of media accounting by the self and others reaffirms such identity work.”⁴⁷ The act of posting a video becomes one’s own self-representation. These mediated representations of identity create a past signifier of selfhood that can be consumed by oneself, or others, at a later time. “Who was I then?” occasions the question “Who am I now?” Regarding the cultivation of a spiritual identity,

⁴⁵ Lee Humphreys, *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018): 51-72.

<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262037853.001.0001>.

⁴⁶ Humphreys, *The Qualified Self*, 70.

⁴⁷ Humphreys, 60.

these temporal markers can signal growth and change. In addition, by steeping oneself in TikTok's #manifestation subculture and consuming numerous videos that signal spirituality, a sense of oneself as a spiritual person can become refracted through other representations of spirituality (if there is a resonance with the content). The process of consumption *is* self-making. These dimensions of representation also emphasize the self as a social relation and self-making as a mediated process.

Conceptualizations of selfhood are intangible, but mediated representations of identity are left behind as artifacts. From this characterization, the elusiveness of the "self" can be fully appreciated. I note this because, as mentioned in the methodology section, numerous accounts and posts I encountered during this study were later deleted. When a user's library of videos, or entire account, no longer resonates with their current self-understanding, purging that account and creating another one provides an opportunity for a renewed self-understanding. Humphreys draws attention to how social media platforms insist on the presentation of a singular identity, when, in reality, people present multiple identities in different social contexts; as a result, some users create multiple accounts to manage these different sides of the self.⁴⁸ The "Finsta" culture on Instagram also demonstrates this multiplicity of selves, and the term Finsta (combining "fake" and "Instagram") generally refers to a more private account for a closer circle of friends whereas a primary Instagram account tends to be more public-facing. What does it mean for private, more intimate accounts to be (even playfully) dubbed as fake, while public, curated accounts are considered the default representations of oneself? This dichotomy is in tension with the common critique that curating a self-image on social media is performative, and this performativity is

⁴⁸ Humphreys, 69.

construed as just playing a role, i.e., “not the real you.” But such a critique relies on the premise that one version of the self is more “real” than another; meanwhile, authenticity itself is a socially constructed category. Curating representations of the self can also be aspirational, as Humphreys also points out.⁴⁹ People curate not only to reflect who they are, but who they want to be. This curation does not mean that these representations are necessarily inauthentic, just that they signal a measure of devotion to an idea of becoming a certain kind of self.

TikTok, however, is distinct from Instagram or other social media platforms predicated on networks of people. As mentioned earlier, TikTok’s For You page automatically populates a user’s feed with seemingly random content that is supposed to increasingly resonate with their interests over time, so a user does not have to first determine who they are going to follow to gain access to content. As scholars Kristen Barata and Nazanin Andalibi discuss in their research on TikTok and authenticity, this dynamic of being exposed to seemingly random content from users, as opposed to intentionally cultivating a formal network of friends or followers, may “be freeing and resultant in disinhibited self-presentation in a way that feels authentic, while some users may find authenticity as valued on TikTok to be simply another lens through which to filter self-presentation, as evident in posting.”⁵⁰ Barta and Andalibi’s research suggests TikTok is more conducive to experimentation, which offers some hints into the representation of a spiritual self on TikTok. It offers a space where users can explore the ideal of the authentic self and develop a spiritual practice through testing different techniques, aesthetics, and even beliefs without the inhibitions that could accompany committing to that particular model of selfhood within a

⁴⁹ Humphreys, 70.

⁵⁰ Kristen Barta and Nazanin Andalibi, “Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the “Fun” Platform,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5, no. 1, (October 2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479574>.

network of peers who may constrain them through pre-existing norms of identity found between friends, family, co-workers, classmates, potential or actual romantic partners, and so on.

This exploration can also be understood as a form of play, which is an important aspect for forming one's identity. TikTok, in particular, may be perceived as more conducive to playfulness through the aforementioned disinhibition of socialized expectations. As opposed to Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), where users can post images, text, video, or some combination of the three, the only modality on TikTok is video, which is no less performative than a curated selfie, post, or Tweet, but may be considered more authentic because videos have the potential to be more intimate and therefore have a higher ceiling for emotionality.⁵¹ Barta and Andalibi describe this as a "just be you" disposition that users generally assume on TikTok.⁵² Such a disposition allows for the playful exploration of the implied question "Who are you?" through consuming and posting videos that offer various answers to such an unstated but felt question.

Another way people engage in identity play is through humor. On the internet, memes encode humor (and a range of ideological positions). But memes are also units of communication that are contact points for users across a user base, giving an affective dimension to digital spaces. This principle extends to TikTok. Users of the app, including those engaging with spirituality, exhibit a spectrum of humor. On one end of the spectrum, there is the absence of humor found in sincerity, which represents an earnest engagement with spiritual ideas. Sincere engagement consists of performing the manifestation with the belief that it will, through metaphysical design or otherwise, result in the intended consequence. Ironic engagement refers

⁵¹ Barta and Andalibi, "Constructing Authenticity on TikTok," 14.

⁵² Barta and Andalibi, 21.

to manifesting for humor (usually as a meme), and generally operating under the belief that manifestation does not work. This irony is found among people on the internet playfully mocking #manifestation as a joke. Post-irony is the collapse of ironic and sincere intentions into a state of ambiguity. More specifically, post-irony reclaims sincerity through ironic posturing. To understand the communicative function of post-irony, consider the “delulu is the solulu” TikTok trend. These screenshots show three images from a TikTok video referencing the “delulu is the solulu” meme, which is slang for delusion is the solution:

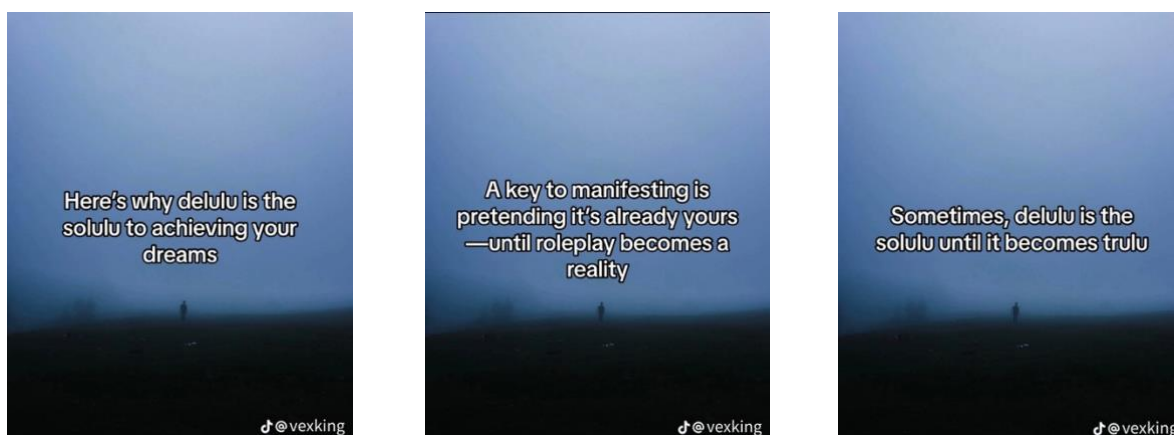


Figure 4: (Left to Right) 4.1-4.3 from (@vexking).

“Delulu is the solulu” has been identified as “a grandchild of the manifestation movement,” and the shared genealogy consists in the emphasis on positivity and optimism—even when one’s hopes and dreams verge on naiveté, or delulu.⁵³ The playful embrace of delulu foregrounds the role of self-deprecating humor in adopting an optimistic disposition as if to say that achieving your dreams is a delusional ambition. Yet the second slide reveals a kernel of sincerity within the joke. Manifesting consists of *pretending*, a term usually reserved for make-believe games, but that pretending gives way to reality, meaning it is not actually pretending, ergo, the last slide:

⁵³ Mark Travers, “Is ‘Delulu’ Really The ‘Solulu?’ A Psychologist Explores The New TikTok Trend,” *Forbes*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/traversmark/2023/09/21/is-delulu-really-the-solulu-a-psychologist-explores-the-new-tiktok-trend/?sh=6c58bebe7196>.

delusion is the solution until it becomes true. Earnestness and humor are blurred in such examples. What is the function of irony if the intended result is sincerity? Humor allows distance from certain ideological positions while also participating in them. Manifestation contains an ontological assertion that the mind can, and does, influence reality. Yet each manifestation risks the Universe's indifference. Some manifestations may not come true or have not come true yet. The possibility of an indifferent cosmos can stir ambivalent feelings about the nature of reality and require humor to distance oneself from such beliefs while still maintaining them. In addition, internal tensions consisting of a desire to manifest and doubts about its efficacy may result in humorous engagement, allowing the subject to hold their curiosity and suspicion in tension. Popular engagement with astrology exhibits a similar spectrum of engagement, ranging from sincerity to playful curiosity that concedes the fallibility of planetary alignment dictating personality while at the same time wondering if they are compatible with an Aries, or if the reason they are so organized can be attributed to being a Virgo. To summarize, in post-ironic manifestation one performs the ritual of manifestation, and does so under the guise of humor, which—as mentioned above—serves as a distancing mechanism from the act of manifesting, but still reflects an openness to the idea of manifestation. While humor remains an important component for understanding many aspects of internet culture, including the many valences of #manifestation on TikTok, it is also crucial to theorize digital engagement as a spiritual practice—whether or not sincerity is blurred by humor. The following section will theorize #manifestation TikTok videos through the lens of ritual.

TikTok and Ritual

As discussed earlier, TikTok is a platform designed for variations on a theme. Manifestation videos are no exception. This makes manifestation videos meme-like in their

reproduction. In other words, they follow mimetic logics which “depend on the interplay between fixity and novelty,”⁵⁴ and follow a relatively fixed structure but introduce novel tweaks like different language or techniques. This dynamic makes TikTok videos “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts,” as Milner and Phillips describe memes, which are “collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online.”⁵⁵ But as memes, these videos are not only consumed like the images and videos that populate a news feed. The aforementioned instructional format inspires action outside of consumption, as in the case of recipe videos or other videos in the how-to genre. Yet the metaphysical knowledge explicated in manifestation videos means that they also exceed the genre of how-to videos because they implicate a person’s beliefs about the nature of reality: the realm of ritual. The formalized communication of beliefs differentiates rituals from other similar practices. While rituals often depend on enacting scripted performances, the medium of TikTok also multiplies the occasions for novel language, thus rendering manifestation a kind of mimetic ritual.

In recognition that the diversity of ritual behavior escapes the universalization of any single definition, this section develops a description of ritual appropriately suited for the medium of study (TikTok) and the praxis at hand (manifestation). Despite the dynamic nature of ritual behavior, scholars Christopher Helland and Lisa Kienzl helpfully articulate the “basic building blocks” that are common among most rituals: a script (consisting of “words, actions, gestures and symbols”), followed by the performance of the script, the medium used for communicating the performance and, lastly, the “representations of belief... whatever the participants view as

⁵⁴ Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 32.

⁵⁵ Phillips and Milner, 30.

sacred.”⁵⁶ As a further clarification, the scholar Simone Heidbrink differentiates between “online rituals” and “rituals online.”⁵⁷ The difference primarily consists in where the ritual is performed. *Rituals online* describe “ritual prescripts,” and “ritual descriptions” that are found online, but performed offline.⁵⁸ In contrast, *online rituals* are performed in a digital environment. With this distinction in mind, the manifestation methods that circulate on TikTok fall into both categories.

The *rituals online* on TikTok consist of the #manifestation videos that resemble the how-to genre, like a recipe video: the user gets the information online for an action that is then performed offline. Rituals online usually give the user a script or technique to perform offline:

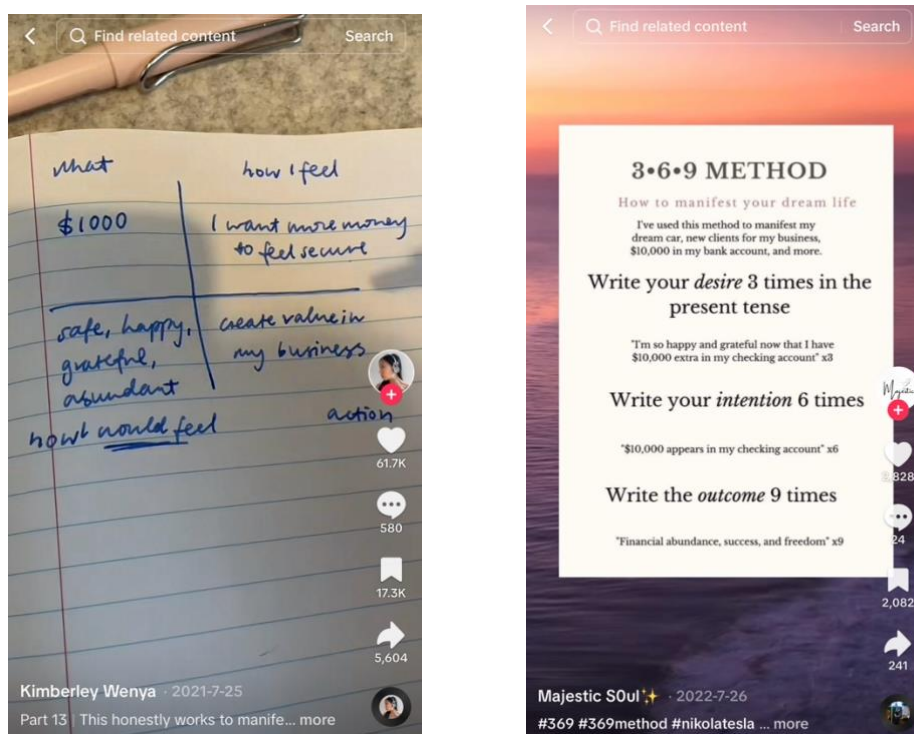


Figure 5, rituals online: (Left to Right) 5.1 from (@kimberleywenya); 5.2 from (@majestic.s0ul).

⁵⁶ Christopher Helland and Lisa Kienzl, “Ritual,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, (New York: Routledge, 2022): 42, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295683-4>.

⁵⁷ Simone Heidbrink, “Exploring the Religious Frameworks of the Digital Realm: Offline—Online—Offline Transfers of Ritual Performance,” *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, 1, no. 2 (2007): 178.

⁵⁸ Heidbrink, “Exploring the Religious Frameworks of the Digital Realm,” 178.

TikTok is well-suited for the kind of practical ritualization found in rituals online because the short-form how-to videos are often programmatic and instructional. Throughout the course of this research, my For You page was frequently populated by videos of this genre, which describe different techniques to manifest, usually through instructions (the ritual script) that are voiced over the video. Occasionally, rituals online include a demonstration or text boxes disclosing additional information as seen in figure 5.2 above.

In contrast, *online rituals* represent the other mode of engaging #manifestation and other related spiritual practices on TikTok. Online rituals are distinguished through the performance of the ritual *within* an online environment like TikTok:

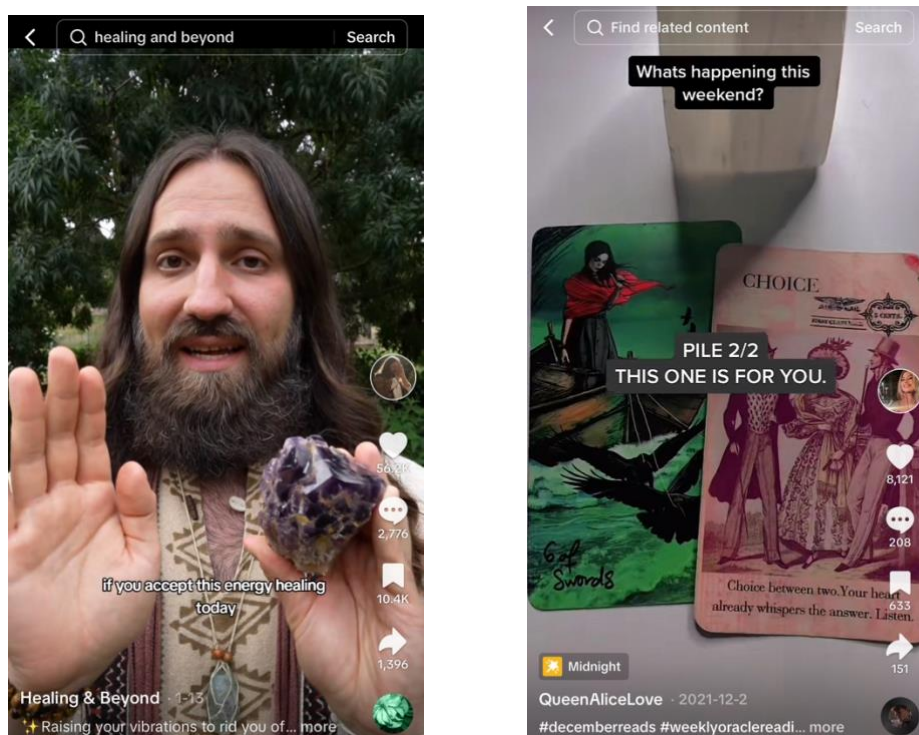


Figure 6, online rituals: (Left to Right) **6.1** from (@healingandbeyond, 1.4 million followers); **6.2** from (@loveexistsvision, 384.7 thousand followers).

Online rituals reveal how TikTok functions not only as a site for ritual—the location where the ritual is encountered or performed—but it also as the medium of ritual itself, with the app becoming integrated into the spiritual lifestyle of the user as a part of their overall metaphysical

practice. Given this collapsing of distinctions, I theorize #manifestation videos on TikTok as ritual media. Consider figure 6.1, which begins with @healingandbeyond asking the user “If you accept this energy healing today, then all you need to do is simply nod or say I accept,” thereby inviting them to participate in the healing. The video continues in the style of ASMR, with @healingandbeyond using a crystal to perform the healing.⁵⁹ Being the recipient of the healing positions the user into the role of ritual participant. Many of these videos include comments thanking @healingandbeyond, or simply commenting “I accept” as public affirmation of their participation. In this sense, commenting is not only a response to the video creator but also becomes an articulation of spiritual identity within a communal space. Such an experience represents ritual engagement and the creation of social micro-worlds predicated on a shared spiritual experience.

Similarly, figure 6.2 exemplifies an analogous dynamic of positioning the user in the role of ritual participant, except the user is participating in a tarot reading. The video prompts the user through the text “THIS ONE IS FOR YOU” and proceeds to lay out tarot cards while foretelling the future of the user’s romantic engagements. Notably, figure 6.2 is “PILE 2/2” from @loveexistsvisions. In traditional tarot, the participant for whom the reading is being performed would be prompted by the tarot reader to select a pile. Within the selected pile are the cards which are then interpreted by the reader. Since @loveexistsvisions posts numerous piles on TikTok to interact with, the user has the agency either to select a pile from their page or, if either pile 1/2 or pile 2/2 appears on the user’s “For You” page, the algorithm has selected the pile for

⁵⁹ ASMR, an acronym for autonomous sensory meridian response, refers to the genre of video meant to stimulate relaxation, or most commonly the feeling of “tingles,” through specific audio and video cues.

them which the user then interprets. In both figure 6.1 and 6.2, online rituals demonstrate the digital mediation of ritual behavior with varying degrees of interactivity shaped through the affordances of a platform like TikTok.

Although they are highly symbolic, rituals are also generally practical affairs. This description may seem counterintuitive at first, but the historian Catherine Albanese describes metaphysical religion as being explicitly ritualistic. Albanese argues that the ritualist employs ritual instrumentally and wields their imagination like a tool for manipulating the symbolic realm towards certain material ends, like realizing a desire or bringing about “miraculous change.”⁶⁰ So, despite a vernacular that may seem markedly ephemeral with its discussion of “energy,” “the universe,” “vibrations,” “consciousness,” and “intentionality,” manifestation—as a ritual practice—seeks to realize *material* outcomes. Writing down the manifested object, using crystals to set an intention, or praying to the universe for a certain outcome are all symbolic practices oriented towards a tangible goal like acquiring more money, a new car, a better job, a loving partner, and other things that will improve one’s quality of life. The symbolic thus functions as a property of what Albanese calls “material” or “mental” magic:

In material magic, symbolic behavior involves the use of artifacts and stylized accoutrements, in ritual, or ceremonial, magic. Here imagination and will join forces with the body and the material “field” in which it dwells. In mental magic, the field is internalized, and the central ritual becomes some form of meditation or guided visualization—so that the mental powers of imagination and will can affect and change the material order.⁶¹

Both material and mental magic are found within spiritual subcultures on TikTok and among manifesters. The use of artifacts, like the crystal seen in figure 6.1, is common, as well as the use

⁶⁰ Albanese, 8.

⁶¹ Albanese, 8.

of a writing utensil and paper to chart out a symbol of the desired object featured in figure 5.1 (insofar as language itself is a system of symbols). While Albanese demonstrates that the type of rituals performed on TikTok are not emergent, the increasing prevalence of the digital realm within daily life occasions a reevaluation of the traditional Western dichotomy separating the physical and spiritual realms—or the perceived boundaries between body and soul. Now, even though digital content can feel ephemeral compared its physical counterparts, the digital mediates between the material and spiritual. Yet the boundaries that divide the digital from the physical were never firm. While the aforementioned distinction between “rituals online” and “online rituals” is true of the ritual itself, the performance is always, already embodied—the user in the video explaining how to manifest on TikTok has a body, and the digital world and physical world sustain and contextualize each other. There is no digital without the physical computing hardware that makes it possible. The interplay between digital, physical, and spiritual therefore coheres on TikTok.

Enchantment of the Algorithm

So how does the domain of the spiritual transform the perception of the physical and digital realms? The mystery that envelops emergent technologies can render them an object of speculation—spiritual or otherwise—in the cultural imaginary. In effect, people encountering these technologies have, and continue to, project their own cultural biases onto them, negotiate their meaning(s), or otherwise determine various ways to accommodate them within their own cosmologies. As explored in the previous sections, spiritual needs are increasingly being met through the internet, which positions the internet primarily as a communication technology where people can encounter information and ideas about spirituality. What is left to analyze now is how the internet can become an object of spiritual interest—not just communicating spiritual

ideas—but instead becoming spiritualized itself. As mentioned earlier, the exact nature of how algorithms recommend content is unknown to many users (the intricacies of the algorithm are unknown to most non-experts or people outside the industry, as well). This obfuscatory nature of the algorithm has led to users developing their own theories about why it serves them certain content that seems to align with their needs and desires. This spiritualizing can be observed in what have been called folk theories of the algorithm. Sophie Bishop, a scholar of digital humanities, has described a similar concept dubbed “algorithmic lore,” which refers to “how the subjective decision-making practices of human intermediaries continues to play a significant role in even ostensibly algorithmic symbolic production.”⁶²

In the context of this study, the user tendency to invest specifically spiritual or metaphysical meaning into the otherwise commercial logics of platforms such as TikTok can be understood as an *enchantment* of the algorithm. An example of this enchantment is a perceived cosmological hierarchy that subordinates the physical and digital under the influence of spiritual machinations. Anytime someone feels that “this video came to me for a reason,” they are enchanting the algorithm. Why would a user feel this way? While scrolling through the hundreds of images and videos on social media every day, some might strike a chord. If they resonate too deeply—seem too accurate or speak to a user too intimately—it can feel uncanny. Occasionally, such encounters with content might even seem fated: like the video was meant to be seen at that specific time for a particular reason. Such is an increasingly common affective experience of an algorithmically driven internet: platforms know their users better than ever and feed them videos that stir unconscious desires.

⁶² Sophie Bishop, “Algorithmic Experts: Selling Algorithmic Lore on YouTube,” *Social Media + Society*, 6 no. 1, (January 2020): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119897323>.

Thus, the decisions made by algorithms can acquire a fated status. The term “fated,” as used here, is meant to articulate a certain worldview that events are interconnected in ways that transcend the domains of the material or technological. Users practicing manifestation on TikTok frequently enchant the algorithm. Some videos begin by declaring “if this video shows up in your feed, you already manifested it,” which essentially communicates to the user that the digital realm, TikTok, is aligned with a higher spiritual order.

Scholar of digital religions Beth Singler has noted a similar trend in her research about Twitter users and how the phrase “blessed by the algorithm” is deployed to varying effects on that platform, with many people earnestly or ironically attributing agency to the seemingly inscrutable determinations made by the algorithm. Singler also argues that this cultural engagement with the algorithm signals “the plasticity of such products of technology and their ability to become such apocalyptic and superagential placeholder objects, as well as continuities of theistic thought, imaginings, tropes, and language in new digital spaces.”⁶³ While all of the Twitter users in Singler’s study explicitly reference the algorithm, I have observed that users enchanting the algorithm on TikTok do not always reference the algorithm. Instead, TikTok users may further enchant the platform by attributing the encounter with a particular video to the Universe, or fate, as in the sense that “this way meant to happen.” This attribution fits Singler’s argument that technology can assume a superagential placeholder role in popular imaginaries. Users don’t even have to attribute causal agency to the algorithm itself for the algorithm to have

⁶³ Beth Singler, “‘Blessed by the Algorithm’: Theistic Conceptions of Artificial Intelligence In Online Discourse,” *AI & Society*, 35, no. 4, (April 2020): 947, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-00968-2>.

an enchanting effect. When users circumnavigate the discussion of algorithms entirely, TikTok can assume an even more magical quality as the digital envoy of fated knowledge.

The enchantment of the algorithm shows how new developments in technology are negotiated and received by a culture, and how many people attribute spiritual or metaphysical meaning to emergent technologies. This is nothing new. Communication technologies have been a site of spiritual speculation for centuries. Scholar of communication and media John Durham Peters describes how the history of nineteenth-century spiritualism is intertwined with the development of technology, like the history of the telegraph. The spiritualist religiosity of this era even modeled itself after the telegraph by receiving messages from the ether, in the way that electricity allowed the telegraph to travel across great distances. The effect was, evidently, enchanting. Spiritualists looked to the new technology to lend credence to the spiritual hope of communicating with the dead: previously unsurmountable boundaries are being crossed over there, so why not over here too? As Peters describes it, “the spiritualist haunting of the new medium decisively shaped the popular reception of the new technology.”⁶⁴ People who encounter and use new technologies are still erecting cosmological scaffolding around their precise operations to give it meaning within their worldview, even if that scaffolding has changed throughout the centuries. In paraphrasing Kafka, Peters writes: “Those who build new media to eliminate the spectral element between people only create more ample breeding grounds for the ghosts.”⁶⁵ While he does not attend to the internet or social media, it seems that Peters’ principle

⁶⁴John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 94.

⁶⁵ Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 30.

remains true of TikTok. Spiritual imaginaries continue to be informed by technologies both digital and analog.

Conclusion: The Allure of the Symbolic

Despite being a decentralized tradition, spirituality is an increasingly prevalent force in the lives of many Americans. A 2018 Pew Research study found that “roughly six-in-ten American adults accept at least one of these New Age beliefs,” referring to either a belief in astrology, reincarnation, psychics, or that physical things can contain spiritual energy.⁶⁶ More recently, a 2023 study from Pew found that seven-in-ten American adults consider themselves spiritual, but that demographic overlaps with those who are also religious; meanwhile, 22% of Americans fall into the category of spiritual but not religious (SBNR).⁶⁷ Given the shifting topography of the American religious, or in this case, spiritual landscape, studying popular apps like TikTok is a profitable foray into understanding this growing demographic. The widespread use of TikTok positions it as a platform uniquely suited for understanding one site of meaning-making discourses particularly among Gen-Z users, with nearly half of all TikTok users falling into the Gen-Z demographic.⁶⁸ There is a rich opportunity for ethnographic work to explore the role of TikTok in the lives of spiritual users. How do they perceive the app? How do they integrate it into their spiritual lives? Future research could also adapt the theoretical framework developed here to further explore the intersection of spirituality, algorithmic determinacy, and

⁶⁶ Claire Gecewicz, “‘New Age’ beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>.

⁶⁷ Becka A. Alper, Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, and Asta Kallio, “Spirituality Among Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spiritual-practices/>.

⁶⁸ Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): 27.

practices of identity formation on other platforms. What kind of culture are algorithms on the internet contributing to, if not producing? Another avenue could be a venture into the dark side of TikTok, including the overlap between spirituality and beliefs in conspiracies—or what has been called conspirituality. How do platforms shape the ways in which spirituality bleeds into other systems of belief?

The users I have encountered on TikTok are not radical in their modern disposition insofar as they are seeking a meaningful life. Spirituality is a searching. That search takes people in many different directions, including on TikTok, which fills the role of spiritualized media and a platform for mediated spirituality. Spiritualized media can be thought of as media interpreted as possessing spiritual import, while mediated spirituality refers to how the metaphysical beliefs that constitute spirituality become communicated through a medium. Like any belief system, spirituality requires both a mind and a medium to persist through time. This thesis represents a contribution to theoretical literature towards understanding the latter, and to understand the digital artifacts that constitute the overlapping spiritual subcultures on TikTok. Social media platforms *do* generate endemic spiritual practices that are shaped by the ambivalences of commercial logics, as explored here. In this sense, there are numerous ways that the medium becomes the message. By way of contrast: the reign of smartphones was preceded by the era of dial-up internet, where going online involved sluggishly-loading webpages, accessed through a mouse, keyboard, and a cube-like CRT monitor housed in yellowing plastic. Interfacing with these peripherals led to a much more cumbersome internet experience than scrolling on TikTok, characterized by the effortless glide of a finger across a glossy screen. The overall design of the smartphone, meanwhile, has increased intimacy with content: the lack of peripherals brings content physically closer to you, while larger, more pixel-dense OLED screens have made the

experience more vivid. Accessing the internet thus shifts from a spatially bound activity to an omnipresent fact of life. Such proximity to content certainly contributes to how users experience the online rituals mentioned earlier. The occasion for such rituals is untethered from context and unbound by tradition. This shift seems to herald the apotheosis of spirituality as an egalitarian tradition. There does seem to be a tradeoff, however. Pew also found that the “spiritual but not religious” also appear to be somewhat self-isolated. Unsurprisingly, only 11% of these Americans belong to a religious community. But only 13% belong to a “spiritual community,” and 15% belong to a “nonreligious volunteer community,” which further emphasizes the importance of communication technologies, and the internet broadly, in fostering connection among spiritual believers.⁶⁹ Yet, as I explored in the section “TikTok’s “For You” page and the Algorithm,” the platform encourages interaction with the content of other users as opposed to social interaction with those users themselves. Such ambivalences are constitutive of contemporary social media platforms.

The actual experience of scrolling on the For You page brings to mind the outmoded phrase “surfing the web,” although using TikTok is more like channel surfing on television than web surfing—except the channels can go on indefinitely and the longest channel you might settle on is only three minutes. This scrolling soon acquires a rhythm that verges on temporal fragmentation. The experience of scrolling through the #manifestation and #lawofattraction videos that populated my For You page is like being ushered through an endless gallery of hopes, desires, and dreams, rendered in digital bits. And this dimension of experience certainly

⁶⁹ Becka A. Alper, Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, and Asta Kallo, “Spirituality Among Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spiritual-practices/>.

represents a change in how spiritual culture, or any subculture, is accessed and disseminated—both technologically and affectively. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that people have always used systems of symbols, derived from social conventions, to interpret the world. This interpretive register represents the convergence of the symbolic and imaginative realms found in spirituality, whether mediated digitally or through more traditional means, like the medium of speech. The meaning of these symbols is contingent on interpretation, which makes it a question that evolves alongside culture and technology. The conditions for interpretation also change with context. The #manifestion trend enjoyed a cultural resurgence in a very specific context: the isolation of the pandemic and TikTok’s ascendance into the mainstream. But other spiritual movements and new media will follow this moment in the history of metaphysical religion. Since communications technologies continue to influence how we think of ourselves and the world, scholars should continue to scrutinize how people’s beliefs about the ultimate nature of things, and their orientation to those beliefs, are shaped by digital media.

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