

“TikTok Is One Long Conversation with the Universe”: How Platform Affordances Shape Emerging Spirituality Across TikTok Manifestation Content

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After a surge in popularity during the pandemic in 2020, the allures of manifestation—the ability to summon one’s desires through positive thinking—have captured the public imagination and found fertile soil and a voracious audience on TikTok. This research uncovers themes across manifestation content on TikTok to reveal how platform affordances are becoming enmeshed with the performance of spiritual beliefs. This analysis finds several key characteristics of manifestation content that represent the intertwining of TikTok’s features with this spiritual practice: ritualized interaction, collapsing temporalities, visibility as spiritual empowerment, and a spiritual algorithmic imaginary. I argue that this entangling of the practice of manifestation with platform logics results in an ambivalent spirituality that appeals simultaneously to the complete transcendence of institutionalized religion while also being inextricably bound up in the commercial logics of the platform.

Keywords: TikTok, algorithms, digital religion, New Age, platform affordances, algorithmic imaginary, discourse analysis

“I am healthy. I am wealthy. I am divine /
Everything comes to me in the perfect time /
I am hot. I am rich. Girl, I’m so fine! /
The universe and me are aligned.”

—Lyrics from “I AM ALIGNED.” Audio used for 114.7k TikTok videos
(amandasikoralmusic, n.d.)

“I really think our generation is here to push this idea into the mainstream—we see it as
part of a new enlightenment.”

—Quote from a teenager on manifestation as reported in the New York Times (*La Ferla*,
2021, para. 12)

Under an evolving set of monikers and techniques, including “affirmations, lucky girl syndrome, subliminals, scripting,” and more, manifestation content has evolved to become a thriving genre of TikTok content. In its most general form, the concept of manifestation asserts that everyone has the power to

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conjure his or her desires or shift reality for his or her own benefit through positive thinking and focused beliefs. For example, practitioners of manifestation may write, chant, or meditate about being wealthy or successful with the expectation that their circumstances will shift accordingly. Though manifestation is experiencing a notable resurgence on social media today, it has been practiced in various forms throughout history. This current Western iteration has traceable roots in the 19th century New Thought movement and the popularization of the "law of attraction" via *The Secret* in the early 2000s (Haller & Fuller, 2012). Today, in response to heightened curiosity generated by social media, manifestation guides can be found everywhere, from *TODAY* to *ELLE*, and coverage of the phenomenon is well-documented across outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Vox* (Fielding, 2023; Jennings, 2023; La Ferla, 2021; O'Malley, 2023).

Although manifestation and its associated principles are diffused across the Internet, it has found a particular stronghold on TikTok, where 6.8 million videos are tagged with #manifestation. Crucially, manifestation content is not relegated to a niche area of TikTok with specific codified or fully agreed-on religious beliefs. Similar to astrology's widespread influence across both psychics' storefronts and horoscopes in fashion magazines, manifestation content exists in both forthrightly spiritual "sides" of TikTok (e.g., #SpiritualTikTok or self-proclaimed "spiritual coaches") and throughout more indirectly connected accounts that focus on topics like lifestyle inspiration, fashion, or even entrepreneurial success. With its focus on personal desires, soundbite-length declarations, "visualization," and positive thinking, manifestation content finds a seamless and happy home on the algorithmically personalized, short video platform of TikTok. However, as this research will suggest, this connection is bidirectional, and manifestation content reveals how the mechanisms of TikTok itself are becoming woven into diffused spiritual norms and deeply held beliefs. As *Vox* reporter Rebecca Jennings (2021) asks, "Is a new kind of religion forming on the Internet?" TikTok and the spiritual trends and proclivities that flourish on the platform offer fertile space for exploring this question. In response to how pervasive manifestation content has become on the platform, this research endeavors to explore how TikTok is shifting and shaping this particular expression of spirituality at scale. How do TikTok's features mold how belief in manifestation is performed and circulated? How are TikTok's affordances shaping and shifting spirituality?

Religious Switching and Consumerist Spirituality

The rising popularity of manifestation—both on TikTok and beyond—must be understood within the context of sizable shifts in religious leanings and self-understandings in the United States. As the Pew Research Center has reported, America is experiencing accelerated "religious switching," with the "religiously unaffiliated" now accounting for 30% of the U.S. population (Nadeem, 2022). Christianity's majority status in the United States is being threatened as more and more people avoid officially identifying with any particular religion. Additionally, Pew has noted that nearly a quarter of Americans identify as "spiritual but not religious," and six in 10 accept various "New Age" beliefs (Alper, Rotolo, Tevington, Nortey, & Kallo, 2023, para. 34; Gecewicz, 2018). The very phrase "spiritual but not religious" captures a distinct ambivalence—there is a pushback against traditional forms of religious organization, but still a yearning for supernatural meaning-making. Across the board, Pew's survey data suggest that many Americans are forgoing established religious systems and seeking alternate forms of spiritual expression. This movement opens up space for the evolution and experimentation of spiritual practices.

Remarking on these survey data, Burton (2020) suggests that calling the religiously unaffiliated “Nones” does not adequately describe how many Americans approach their spiritual lives. Instead, Burton (2020) suggests that considering them “Remixed” better captures how many of them favor an “intuitional spirituality over institutional religion” (p. 10). Rather than being devoid of interest, they instead “envision themselves as creators of their own bespoke religions, mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions” (Burton, 2020, p. 10). This idea of personalized belief systems echoes further findings from Pew Research, which reveal that of those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” 72% profess that “being connected to my true self is essential to being spiritual” (Alper et al., 2023, p. 86).

Within a shifting American spiritual landscape of religious remixing and hyperpersonalization, consumer culture and spirituality are colliding. Often focusing on conjuring success or material goods through mindset transformation and repeated incantations, manifestation emerges from a long history of capitalism and religious beliefs intertwining in the West. As a spiritual practice, manifestation often encapsulates what Carrette and King (2004) call “individualistic or consumerist spirituality,” a sentiment stemming from “a late twentieth-century development within the broader historical phenomenon of ‘prosperity religions’” (p. 19). Fundamentally, prosperity religions emphasize that money, success, and health are direct gifts from God (or the Universe, etc.) and that individual belief and faithfulness can translate to greater physical blessings. It is important to note that manifestation and its insistence on intertwining spiritual conviction with material success is not singular; rather, it is one of many practices situated in the thriving space of consumer spirituality. Drawing from movements such as New Thought, prosperity gospel, and various New Age beliefs, manifestation exemplifies a general postmodern orientation that contains an “emphasis on eclecticism, individualistic experimentation and a ‘pick and mix’ approach to religious traditions” in the West (Carrette & King, 2004, p. 19).

The Law of Attraction and the Mainstreaming of Manifestation

Within the context of this religious switching and remixing, manifestation—a perfectly malleable belief—has taken root. The iteration of manifestation practices under examination in this research has its roots in the New Thought movement originating in the United States in the 19th century. Serving as an “umbrella term describing a group of metaphysical religions,” New Thought captures the belief in “some unity of God and the individual mind, with the ability to manifest change in the world” (Hutchinson, 2014, p. 28). Proponents of New Thought “were identifiable by a devotion to the possibility of physical healing through spiritual healing” and encouraged “cosmic optimism” (Lofton, 2011, p. 39). This philosophical and spiritual movement embraced the principle of the “law of attraction” and the practice of “affirmation,” believing that “stating an intent that the practitioner believes can become material reality” (Hutchinson, 2014, p. 32). The ideals of New Thought, which promised “peace of mind and personal success,” began to spread and weave through America as they seemed to represent “a democratic religion whose oversimplification and commercial overtones appealed nicely to the nation’s complacent yet optimistic culture” (Haller & Fuller, 2012, p. 279). Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, the sentiments of New Thought became diffused through Christian Science, prosperity theology, and business success literature (Hutchinson, 2014).

In the early 2000s, there was a resurgence of interest in the "law of attraction" because of the massive popularity of the 2006 book and film *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006). Drawing on and repackaging New Thought, Byrne's book became a cultural phenomenon and has sold more than 35 million copies globally (Mullin, 2020). "Through this most powerful law, your thoughts become the things in your life," Byrne (2006) insists, "Your thoughts become things!" (p. 9). Although the New Thought movement of the 19th and 20th centuries largely grated onto Christianity, Byrne's iteration of the belief system was closer affiliated with the New Age movement. The spread of these ideas was accelerated by numerous heartfelt endorsements from Oprah Winfrey, who herself incorporated the "law of attraction" into her brand of spirituality (Lofton, 2011). In addition to Byrne, Winfrey also hosted a consistent flow of manifestation proponents such as Esther Hicks, Eckhart Tolle, and more (Haller & Fuller, 2012). Winfrey's endorsement was pivotal in disseminating manifestation concepts, making them accessible to a broader demographic and solidifying the "law of attraction" as a central component in American self-help culture. This popularity spurred a thriving cottage industry of audiobooks, CDs, seminars, retreats, radio programming, and now apps aimed at equipping audiences with the tools to reshape their thinking to change their realities.

In addition to the general mediated spread of manifestation principles, media also plays a key role in two practices that are clear predecessors to manifestation activity on TikTok: vision boards and chain letters. A key tactic of Byrne's (2006) *The Secret* is "visualization"—the act of picturing your desires through either mental or physical exercises. This focus fueled interest in the associated practice of "vision boards," a practice Byrne is credited with popularizing (Florsheim, 2021). Vision boards are commonly associated with collaging magazine clippings to create an assemblage representing one's goals as a key tool for bringing these desires into reality. Vision boarding continues to enjoy significant popularity in both its physical and digital forms, with the platform Pinterest, in particular, becoming a central digital destination for creating such boards (Hennes, 2024). Additionally, vision boarding continues on TikTok through users both filming their physical boards or creating digital montages of aspirational photos and videos gathered from across the Internet.

Chain letters, specifically those that promise good fortune for recipients who pass the content along, are also an important predecessor for the activity on manifestation TikTok. In his extensive project documenting more than 900 chain letters dating back centuries, archivist and folklorist Daniel VanArsdale (2004) identifies "luck chain letters" as a key genre and defines them as "a category of chain letters that appeal primarily to superstition to motivate replication" (para. 102). This genre of letters evolved from printed artifacts in the 20th century that insisted on the recipient distributing copies to the infamous e-mail chains of the later 20th and early 21st centuries that demanded forwarding. Across all cases, luck chain letters insist that being bestowed with luck (or being cursed with various maladies) relies on sharing and replicating the message. This practice continues its digital evolution in the form of TikTok manifestation videos that require viewers to engage to "claim" a blessing.

Online Religion and TikTok

Today, there has been a reinvigorated interest in manifestation across social media and TikTok in particular. Following a surge of interest in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, manifestation has sustained an elevated interest and shows no signs of waning in mainstream appeal

(Google Trends, n.d.). This research's focus on the specificities of manifestation on TikTok puts it in closer conversation with foundational work in the field of "digital religion." The study of digital religion has become a growing area of interest for scholars delving into the interplay between the rapidly evolving digital landscape and religious and spiritual beliefs (see, for example, Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Hoover & Emerich, 2011). Writing at the turn of the 21st century as religious activity online blossomed, Brasher (2004) draws early attention to how the "imaginative energy of this new medium is fueling a new dimension in religious practice and thought" (p. 44). In an argument foundational to the field, Helland (2000) suggests that there is a distinction between "religion-online" and "online-religion." Whereas "religion-online" captures the more official, hierarchical activity of established religious orders, "online-religion" instead suggests a nonhierarchical "dialectic process" outside of institutional bounds that offers a "liminal and unstructured environment for the participants" (Helland, 2000, p. 214) and can also be a "low commitment form of religious participation" (p. 219). This research investigates manifestation content on TikTok as an instance of both Brasher's (2004) notion of "imaginative energy" from a "new medium" and Helland's (2000) online religion.

In an insightful contribution to the field, Tsuria (2021) moves beyond looking only at "how religious institutions and individuals use digital media" and instead "emphasizes the religious feelings digital media seem to invoke" (p. 110). In this work, she shows a powerful blurring of the sacred and profane (borrowing from Durkheim, 1912) and makes a compelling case that Internet-connected technologies "have been especially and recently deemed sacred, magical, divine" (Tsuria, 2021, p. 110). This shift from looking simply at how religious people use technology to analyzing the affective power of technology to coax out spiritual sentiments or beliefs frames my theoretical approach to studying manifestation content on TikTok. Given the relative newness of the app, it is unsurprising that religious and spiritual activity on TikTok is still understudied. Yet, there is mounting interest in this intersection, and user behavior on the platform itself suggests it will be a fruitful research space for digital religion scholars and media scholars alike. Connecting Ammerman's (2021) idea of "lived religion" with TikTok, Hamm and Hoeting (2023) rightfully suggest, "Lived religion seeks to prioritize materiality, the body, ritual, and quotidian practices within the home—the kind of personal experiences that TikTok can capture" (p. 9). TikTok also then becomes a prime space for the blurring of the sacred and the profane.

Recent research is beginning to examine the specific spiritual contours of TikTok and, in the process, has uncovered the platform's distinctive affective influence, particularly about its robust algorithm. When examining witches on TikTok, Miller (2022) concludes how TikTok's algorithms play a crucial role in generating the digital subculture and notes that algorithms "funnel users from adjacent tags (#Spirituality, #Crystals) into deeper engagement with Witchcraft" (p. 118). As Bhandari and Bimo (2022) have noted, "TikTok is an extreme example of the prominence of algorithms in user experience," and this algorithm has an uncanny ability to deliver enticing and resonant content (p. 10). For many, this striking ability feels almost magical. Though not explicitly investigating spiritual communities, Cotter, DeCook, Kanthawala, and Foyle (2022) have uncovered what they call "algorithmic conspirituality," a phenomenon in which even seemingly secular people "perceive algorithms as entangled with a higher power, or even as nearly godlike in their technical functionality" (p. 16). This framing reflects a sense of awe over how strikingly accurate the algorithm seems to be and reveals how many people feel transcendently "seen" by the algorithm. Similarly, when studying therapeutic content on TikTok, Avella (2023) notes how TikTok therapists often

depict the algorithm "as an alchemy of science and spirituality, while tapping into that process by engaging its affective flows" (p. 8).

Within #ChristianTikTok, there is a strong "spiritual algorithmic imaginary" (Reinis & Laughlin, 2025). Building off Bucher's (2017) concept of the "algorithmic imaginary," we identified a distinctly religious framing of the algorithm emerging across some Christians' conceptualization of the TikTok algorithm. The spiritual algorithmic imaginary functions as both "an affective framework and a networked performance" that "enables users to excavate deeper meaning from algorithmic-controlled economies of visibility" (Reinis & Laughlin, 2025, p. 13). This framing leads evangelicals on the platform to portray the decisions made by the algorithm as divinely directed by God for purposes such as evangelizing or reaching specific users with a prophetic word. Despite differences in the faith systems in question, this research will reveal a continuation of this phenomenon within the New Age space of manifestation.

Methods

Although manifestation is pervasive on other major social media platforms such as Twitter/X, YouTube, and Instagram, this research focuses on TikTok as a case study both for manageability of scope and because of frequent references in popular media to manifestation practices as a "TikTok trend." This study followed the practice of "enrolling the algorithm" in research (Christin, 2020) by creating a new TikTok account and "training" the algorithm to surface content related to manifestation. Training consisted of initially searching for key terms and hashtags on the platform and engaging with the relevant surfaced content (liking, following, and bookmarking) to register interest to the platform. Preliminary search terms included manifestation, #manifestationtips, #luckygirlsyndrome, and #lawofattraction. After priming the algorithm, my TikTok For You Page (FYP) was hastily transformed into a deluge of manifestation content. To immerse myself in the experiential flow of content on the platform, I consumed most content via my FYP and continued liking relevant content and following manifestation-oriented accounts. I also explored content interconnected to the most relevant videos on my feed by clicking on related hashtags, investigating tagged accounts, and investigating attached audios. Throughout this process, I viewed more than 3,000 videos and followed more than 200 accounts primarily dedicated to manifestation content.

To analyze the data set, I employed an approach based on critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2018) and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). CTDA requires close attention to "a triad of *artifact*, *practice*, and *belief*" (Brock, 2018, p. 5; emphasis in original), making it an ideal multimodal approach to capture the complexities of spiritual performance as mediated and shaped by social media platforms. This approach enabled me to conduct a simultaneous interface analysis of TikTok's unique affordances and a critical discourse analysis of the content circulating within it. Additionally, this critical framework opens space to assess how TikTok's commercially oriented architecture exerts power and influence over the construction of beliefs at scale. Throughout viewing 3,000+ videos related to manifestation, I used a constant comparative method to develop a sense of emerging themes across the content. Once my analysis reached a level of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2018), I used a data scraper to create a more detailed archive of 150 representative videos for deeper analysis. For these videos, I took even more extensive notes and tagged them with respective themes that had surfaced during the research. The archive contains the following information for each video: engagement stats (views,

likes, comments, shares), display name, username, linked audio, full caption, post date, and screenshots of the opening frame. Of the 150 videos in the annotated sample, views ranged from 1,500 to 3 million, and posts dated from April 2021 to October 2023. Although all quotes come from public accounts, because of ethical considerations no usernames or screenshots will be published in the following analysis as “people may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy” (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess, & Association of Internet Researchers, 2020, p. 7). To preserve a level of anonymity, videos and comments will be cited as “personal communication.” However, quotes will still be verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of discourse.

Across the entirety of my 3,000+ video viewing practice, most videos featured a single person speaking or looking directly into the camera (either educating on or performing manifestation). Another prominent format included video/photo montages that functioned as aspirational vision boards (idyllic natural scenes or reposts of luxury lifestyle scenes). These montage vision boards often included overlaid text on manifestation or were attached to a specific manifestation audio. Most creators of manifestation content on TikTok are femme-presenting. And, although English-language manifestation content was predominantly White, there was still notable racial diversity among participants, including highly followed and influential manifestation accounts. When viewing videos through the lens of my research question, the following themes emerged: (1) ritualized interaction, (2) collapsing temporalities, (3) visibility as spiritual empowerment, and (4) a spiritual algorithmic imaginary. Each of these factors of manifestation content was also rooted in a key affordance of TikTok: (1) engagement mechanisms, (2) fast-paced feed, (3) economy of visibility, and (4) personalization algorithm.

Results

Ritualized Interaction

Across manifestation content on TikTok, specific rituals have grown and crystalized around the affordances of TikTok’s content engagement mechanisms. This often takes the form of what I will call “pressured engagement,” which occurs when a creator adds consequences, moral obligation, or urgency to their calls for likes, comments, or shares. Typically, pressured engagement attempts to obscure any selfish, personal gain and instead redirects attention to another goal (e.g., spreading an important message, helping someone in need, or sharing for “good fortune”). Earlier iterations of this practice are evident in the previously mentioned phenomena of chain e-mails that demand sharing for good luck. Pressured engagement is the natural outcome of being in an “economy of visibility” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21), and on TikTok, gaining or maintaining visibility is dependent on engagement. Therefore, creators attempting to build a compassionate reputation, particularly, search for ways to boost visibility without seeming selfish. Thus, they deploy “pressured engagement” tactics to boost their profiles and content without being accused of shallow motives or inauthenticity.

The most common ritual based around pressured engagement is the suggestion that interacting with content is necessary to “claim” the blessing. Representing countless similar videos, one video overlays the following text over a clear, blue ocean scene: “Listened to this sound and 3 days later I was offered a dream job. Interact 3x to claim” (personal communication, August 21, 2023). The comment section is

brimming with 1,715 comments, which are an enthusiastic chorus full of variations such as "CLAIM CLAIM CLAIM" or "claim for my exams" (personal communication, August 21, 2023). Searching "interact 3x to claim" on TikTok results in thousands of videos, and the incantation has even become a hashtag (#interact3xtoclaim) that boasts 138.8 million views.

As with many trends on TikTok, pressured engagement in the manifestation community often revolves around using specific audios. As Crystal Abidin (2019) argues, these "audio memes" are "the driving template for content production on TikTok" (p. 80). Leveraging the "templatability" of TikTok audios (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020), manifesters create a call to action to repost or re-create with specific audios to accomplish what your heart desires. Most manifestation audios fit into three primary types: (1) spoken or chanted manifestations, (2) sounds at a sustained frequency believed to be healing or beneficial, and (3) fully produced songs with lyrics focused on claiming power or positivity. The overwhelming popularity of this genre on the platform is evidenced by multiple recording artists specifically promoting their music by branding it "manifestation music." According to the artists themselves, they designed their music to summon anyone's innermost desires. The most common themes of manifestation music are beauty, love, and wealth. Although these songs sound similar to current "girl power" pop, hip-hop, and dance music, they are intentionally marketed as manifestation music.

According to one creator with 1.1 million followers (which she says she also manifested with her own songs),

Here is the scientific explanation of why people are actually getting results from my manifestation music . . . the lyrics, the melodies, the production, they are all created to make you feel a certain way, cause how you feel is what you attract. (Personal communication, September 18, 2023)

Throughout her profile, she encourages followers to use her music in their own TikTok videos to obtain their desires, "post this manifestation sound & trust" (personal communication, July 2, 2023). As a result, hundreds of thousands of videos have been made using her original songs. Videos reposted using her audio include the following statements: "Ppl are saying this song manifested them highest grades. So I'm not skipping" (personal communication, September 13, 2023), and "idk what magic this girl puts in her music, but it works" (personal communication, June 28, 2023) and "Do NOT skip if you are trying to manifest love . . . my ex came back to me after I used this sound" (personal communication, January 21, 2023).

Analyzing a large body of scholarly work on ritual practice Helland & Kienzl (2021) identify the basic building blocks of rituals: the script (rules), performance (carrying out the script), the medium (mechanism for communicating or receiving performance), and embodied representation of belief. In the case of TikTok manifestation audios, the script is the original post's command to engage with the content in a particular way; the performance is the memetic execution of commanded interactions, the medium is the TikTok interface, and the proliferation of TikTok content (in the form of both comments and videos intending to "claim" a blessing) becomes the embodied representation of belief in the power of manifestation. Leveraging the supposed inherent power of the manifestation music hinges on rebroadcasting it via TikTok, which infused spiritual ritual significance into the memetic process. This elevates the act of posting on the

platform from mere trend-following or meme-making and treats the mechanism instead as a spiritual channel for “claiming” supernatural power to fulfill one’s desires. Posting on the platform thus becomes a way of communicating something you want into the Universe, and digital memetic rituals become framed as actions that shift and redesign physical reality. The TikTok interface itself transforms into a portal to the spiritual realm, and thus, engagement features are reconfigured as ritualistic keys to a better life.

Collapsing Temporalities

In addition to engagement features, the fast-paced sensory experience of TikTok’s primary feed shapes manifestation practice, as evidenced by the sustained emphasis on the present moment. With its constantly recirculating, resurfacing, and remixed microtrends, TikTok embodies Gumbrecht’s (2014) concept of a “broad present” in which the past and future flood the present and lead to an “ever-broadening present of simultaneity” (p. xiii). Indeed, the platform generates “an intensification of our experience of the present, through the simultaneity afforded by the multiplicity of feeds” (Hoskins, 2009b, p. 39). Those deeply immersed in discussing manifestation have quite complex conversations around the concept of time and are keenly aware that it is a social construction. This belief is repeated frequently through the use of phrases such as “time is an illusion” (personal communication, September 6, 2023), “the present moment is the only thing that exists” (personal communication, January 17, 2022), or “time is self-created” (personal communication, August 25, 2023).

Compounding this sensibility, there are no visible time stamps when watching videos on the TikTok FYP. Time stamps are visible only when using the search functionality or looking directly through someone’s profile. Relevance is determined algorithmically with recency being only one factor the recommendation algorithm considers. As *The Washington Post* reports, “TikTok’s central ‘For You’ feed serves up videos without context or dates, making everything feel relevant and new” (Harwell, 2022, para. 30). The potent ability of TikTok to redefine the temporal cycles of trends has been well-captured by its impact on the music industry, as it has the uncanny ability to resurrect decades-old songs (Ahlgrim & Tyson, 2023). In his discussion of “automated, electronic systems of memory,” Gumbrecht (2014) noted that “it is increasingly difficult for us to exclude any kind of fashion or music that originates in recent decades from the time now,” and he blames this on “automated, electronic systems of memory” (p. xiii). Being even more formidable than the “electronic systems of memory” that were available a decade ago when Gumbrecht wrote, TikTok has only accelerated this phenomenon. In the words of one video creator, “on TikTok, it’s like everything is happening everywhere all at once . . . and that’s what the universe is like too” (personal communication, August 29, 2023). The ever-broadening present that TikTok manifestors endorse is felt experientially when scrolling through the app. Minutes become hours when scrolling through endless short-form videos perfectly algorithmically tailored for the viewer. Time and space are flattened as dozens of people, places, and times can enter your screen in just a short 15-minute session flicking through videos. Within manifestation TikTok, this warping of time is taken in stride as part of their pushback against linear time.

For some of the most fervent manifestors on TikTok, being present is not just about the platitude to “live in the present”; it is about affirming that the “ever-broadening present of simultaneity” is actually all that exists. In their conceptualization, time is an illusion, and the past and the future are distractions. The intentional turn to emphasizing the present is evident in many manifestors’ attempts to move their

followers away from the "law of attraction" and toward the "law of assumption." As discussed, the mainstream popularity of manifestation predates TikTok and is often associated with *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006), which is built around the idea of the "law of attraction." However, many on TikTok see this approach as fatally flawed because of its temporal framework. In short, where the law of attraction instructs people to envision the future they want and incant with phrases like "I desire," the law of assumption requires assumptive statements in the present tense. As one manifestor explains, "by saying 'I want' or 'I need,' you are admitting a feeling of lack . . . these are some phrases you can use instead: 'I am attracting' 'I have' 'I am receiving now'" (personal communication, November 2, 2021). For manifestors, complete and utter confidence that the Universe will deliver your desires is necessary for success. In fact, one must be so confident that even admitting something is a future desire is not enough. The future must be collapsed into the present and treated as a current reality.

In one popular video, the creator claims, "law of assumption is a way to create anything you desire by assuming the feeling of your wish having *already* been fulfilled" (personal communication, August 13, 2022). This same video's caption reads, "Can you tell I'm bitter from the lies and false truths from the law of attraction?!" Another manifestor describes the law of assumption as an effort to "reprogram your subconscious so that you believe what you want is *already* yours" (personal communication, January 16, 2023). The need to de- and reprogram one's mind is a common refrain. Manifestation is both a spiritual and a psychological endeavor that involves seeing through contemporary society's "false truths" and transcending them on all levels of consciousness. In these cases, it means pushing past conventional temporal constructions.

On several occasions, manifestors spoke to the idea of creating "future memories." For example, "i envision my success as future memories because time is a construct and everything i've ever wanted is in reach and happening everywhere all at once" (personal communication, September 9, 2023). Contemplating successes as "future memories" is presented as a productive way to manifest. Pushing back against linear perspectives on time, manifestors advocate for a new chronotope. Where Gumbrecht (2014) sees a temporal crisis, these manifestors see a liberatory paradigm shift that allows them to change their realities.

Visibility as Spiritual Empowerment

The prevalence of engagement features and the experience of the FYP highlight how TikTok functions as an "economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21), and this environment facilitates the connection of spiritual empowerment with visibility. Within a landscape in which social and financial capital are tied to views, visibility itself becomes part of the vision of prosperity and success espoused by manifestation. TikTok replicates technocultural conditions across social media platforms that have led to a rise in particular strains of "popular feminism." Banet-Weiser (2018) defines popular feminism as a system that "tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just *be* empowered" (p. 21). Similarly, the femme-dominated world of manifestation TikTok frames this broad, loosely defined feeling of empowerment as the goal of their spiritual endeavors. The result of this is a fraught, ambivalent version of empowerment that seems to have ingested and incorporated TikTok's platform priorities. As one TikToker puts it in her self-introduction, "I'm an alignment coach, and I teach

women to step into their 'it girl' energy so they can manifest the life of their dreams" (personal communication, April 5, 2023).

Even while critiquing the limits of empowerment sought via TikTok, the profound affective experiences of those finding spiritual community on TikTok cannot and should not be dismissed. Many of the creators speak of healing from trauma, breaking free from oppressive patriarchal religious structures, finding their voices, and even gaining financial independence. They passionately discuss the struggles and strengths of being a woman and feel as though they can claim their inherent power and move past the naysayers. On the other hand, the most visible and highly viewed depictions of achieving empowerment often become indistinguishable from acquiring material, commercial goods, or even embodying patriarchal beauty standards. In this space, a spiritualized version of "popular feminism" emerges—aiding its ideals in transcending to a level of spiritual significance.

Although some popular manifestation audios conjure through general phrases such as "I don't chase, I attract, what is meant for me will simply find me" (personal communication, May 5, 2022), many manifestation practices on the platform are attached to specific goals such as money, fame, confidence, love, and beauty. Additionally, many affirmations are accompanied by "vision boards" that are collages of photos or videos that resemble the highlight reels of lifestyle or travel influencers (luxury goods, thin bodies, fancy cars, beautiful meals, pristine destinations). These vision boards typically use the photo carousel feature or video montage templates available on TikTok's partner editing app, CapCut. Through these vision boards, viewers ask for divine provision for what they want by meditating not on depictions of religious figures or icons but instead on assortments of well-performing social media imagery.

Blurring the boundaries between the commercial and the spiritual, TikTok has become a thriving marketplace for "female spiritual entrepreneurship," which Ganga Kieffer (2020) defines as the effort to "promote women's entrepreneurial empowerment by framing capitalism and the pursuit of financial success as about 'more than money'" (p. 81). Across manifestation TikTok, an entire cottage industry of such female spiritual entrepreneurship has emerged. In addition to traditional sponsorship and brand deals, manifestation influencers attempt to make money through various means: coaching sessions, branded manifestation journals, 1–1 classes, digital courses, and psychic readings. TikTok's recent launch of TikTok Shop has further incentivized the creation and promotion of these products as a way for creators to earn commission. Even becoming an influential creator on the platform itself becomes positioned as a spiritual goal or calling:

- "Manifest out of your 9 to 5 job and become a full-time content creator . . . depression is a gift from the universe . . . a sign that you are going against your fullest potential" (personal communication, February 6, 2023).
- "Let's talk about content creation as a generator or manifesting generator . . . I have so much more to say about this so I actually created a class on sacral beings in business" (personal communication, July 15, 2023).
- "Let me manifest your content going Viral for you" (personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Thus, TikTok becomes both the mediator of spiritual exercises and the higher-order goal of said spiritual exercises.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) writes, "adopting the logics and moralities of an economy of visibility means that despite the fact that popular feminism claims to be about empowerment, this kind of empowerment is often achieved through a focus on the visible body" (p. 25). This mindset permeates manifestation TikTok, which is filled with manifestation instructions on changing one's physical appearance. Additionally, it is often paired with a narrative of self-empowerment. In videos instructing how to manifest "beauty," the creators themselves are often wearing appearance-modifying beauty filters provided by TikTok. "You have to start speaking life into yourself and watch the way your appearance changes," states one creator endorsing the need to do "glamor magic" by saying beauty affirmations to yourself in the mirror (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Distinctively, she is wearing a filter titled "Foxy Cute." I tried on the filter myself, and it modified me in the following ways: lightened my eyes, minimized my nose, enhanced my lips, added makeup, raised my cheekbones, and slimmed my face. Another creator providing affirmations for beauty stares pointedly into the camera with a large microphone and says, "I always look good without even trying. I look and feel powerful without even trying . . . People cannot help but fall in love with me" (personal communication, September 5, 2023). She is wearing the "Pretty Babe x Lashes" filter, which mimics the modifications of "Foxy Cute" but more subtly. Through these practices, TikTok beauty filters seem to become a part of the promised confidence boost and appearance enhancement, centralizing the visible body and acknowledging patriarchal beauty standards as an inevitable force to which one needs to succumb for empowerment. Via the use of beauty filters, the "ideal" feminine face mimetically circulates, making the particular idealized look instantaneously digitally accessible to anyone, while at the same time, reinforcing its unreachable perfection in the physical realm. In this digitized striving and physical disconnect, manifestation becomes a hope to spiritually bridge the impossible divide between the aspirational and the actual. Visibility—both the quality and quantity of it—thus becomes an aspiration equated to spiritual success within manifestation TikTok.

Spiritual Algorithmic Imaginary

TikTok's technological features have also begun to inform mental models for spiritual beliefs, with the algorithm providing the scaffolding for a particular "technological unconscious" (Hoskins, 2009a; Thrift, 2004). Building on Beer (2009), Hoskins (2009b), and Thrift (2004), van Dijck (2011) suggests "the 'power of the algorithm' could be considered the core of the technological unconscious" (p. 403). Specifically, manifestation content exhibits a "spiritual algorithmic imaginary," a phenomenon originally identified among Christians on TikTok (Reinis & Laughlin, 2025). The spiritual algorithmic imaginary offers users a framework in which "Deciphering algorithmic decisions—particularly about what is made visible (or invisible) and to whom—thus becomes framed as a form of divination" (Reinis & Laughlin, 2025, p. 13). This understanding entangles algorithmic targeting with notions of spiritual communication and transcendental meaning. Manifestation content is saturated with more evidence of this phenomenon. It is a ubiquitous refrain for videos to begin with, "you're seeing this for a reason" (personal communication, August 7, 2021), "if this landed on your FYP, the universe wants to deliver you a message" (personal communication, March 5, 2022), or "if you see this video, it means we are on the same frequency" (personal communication, March 3, 2022).

Within manifestation videos, the intertwining of TikTok's affordances with spiritual beliefs is highly evident in the projection of algorithmic processes onto how divine power flows. As one manifestor suggests incredibly directly, "Has anyone noticed the Universe functions exactly like a TikTok for you page? Like the algorithm specifically?" (personal communication, September 5, 2023). This sentiment that the operating, supernatural functions of the world we live in are akin to algorithmic recommendations was evident in multiple videos:

- "The universe has an algorithm just like TikTok. It serves you what you engage with, not what you are interested in . . . The universe gives you what you are, not what you want" (personal communication, March 5, 2023).
- "Manifesting your reality is like a TikTok FYP OR AM I CRAZY" (personal communication, August 16, 2023).
- "I want you to think of the law of attraction like an algorithm. Like a TikTok algorithm, like an Instagram algorithm. It works the same way" (personal communication, June 6, 2023).

Immersion in the affective flow of the TikTok feed begins to create a conceptual framework for the perceived affective flow of the rest of the universe. In this mindset, TikTok is not simply a service designed to sustain viewers' time on the platform to grow ad revenue. Rather, it is a divine force helping people find enlightenment.

TikTok's impressively precise personalization algorithm is also used to suggest it may have the ability to peer into our souls in a sense. "TikTok is like one long conversation with the universe . . . It's a powerful divination tool," an excited TikToker breathlessly explains, "I mean honestly, sometimes it might know you better than you know yourself" (personal communication, September 23, 2022). This framing is also not exclusive to those who create their own videos and may have a vested interest in their videos seeming divinely appointed. Comment sections often include enthusiastic affirmation of shared beliefs. For example, in the comment section of the video quoted above, replies included the following: "I wholeheartedly believe my spirit guides communicate with me by showing me certain tiktok videos"; "I found myself teaching my teens, that the Universe works just like the TikTok algorithm, & they got it!"; and "TikTok single-handedly gave me this BIGGEST wake-up of my life . . . Yes! Universe talking to us" (personal communication, September 23, 2022). Presented as a "divination tool" by the shared spiritual algorithmic imaginary, TikTok becomes an indispensable platform thoroughly enmeshed in pursuit of spiritual meaning.

Discussion and Conclusion

By deeply investigating manifestation content on TikTok, this research demonstrates how TikTok's features, from engagement mechanisms to the personalization algorithm, are all becoming enmeshed with expressions of belief. TikTok's platform logics are establishing new rituals, renegotiating perceptions of time, promoting ambivalent notions of spiritual empowerment for women, and fortifying a spiritual algorithmic imaginary. Through surfacing how platform affordances are shaping systems of meaning, studying spiritual expression on social media platforms can be an incredibly revealing pursuit across multiple dimensions. At its broadest point, this line of inquiry contributes to an understanding of how users seek metaphysical understanding in, through, and alongside algorithmic social media. In all, this research suggests that TikTok

is not simply a passive receptacle for preexisting beliefs but rather an active player and cocreator of today's spiritual landscape. Additionally, allowing platform logics to carry spiritual and metaphysical importance may very well enhance the influence of social media by further entrenching its significance and sway.

Although this research is focused on manifestation content on TikTok in particular, it has surfaced findings that ring true with prior research on both evangelicals and more secular areas of the platform. On TikTok, there is a development of remarkable parallels between the spiritual algorithmic imaginary of both New Age-informed manifesters and #ChristianTikTok (Reinis & Laughlin, 2025), as well as the spread of a similar "algorithmic conspirituality" across the platform as a whole (Cotter, DeCook, Kanthawala, & Foyle, 2022). Cotter and colleagues' (2022) concept of "algorithmic conspirituality" captures the general phenomenon of describing the TikTok algorithm "as divine, giving the impression of a powerfully all-seeing algorithm" (p. 14). Notably, their research was not focused on explicitly religious or spiritual communities, yet they still identified the emergence of viewpoints that saw the algorithm as a "divine force" (Cotter et al., 2022). Across an array of distinct subcultures, we are beginning to witness a widespread pattern of entangling spiritual discourses with algorithmic recommendation systems and platform logics. This spiritualized framing of the algorithm by users naturalizes—and even supernaturalizes—the commercial compulsions of the platform as something parallel to reigning divine logic.

Writing about the emergence of popular religion on the Web, Helland (2004) suggests that "the Internet accommodates individuals and groups who wish to 'be' religious outside the control of an organized religious institution" (p. 23). Indeed, much manifestation content across TikTok claims to be free of old-school hierarchical authority and institutional rules. Yet, it is clear there is a shifting—not absent—institutional influence. This research reveals a coevolution of spirituality and platforms as TikTok's affordances become incorporated into intimately held beliefs. Although traditional religious authority may be decentered in this type of spiritual discourse, it is thoroughly entangled with commercial logics and platform priorities. In light of this emerging research, further pressing questions emerge. How does the constant mediation of personalization algorithms shift spiritual understandings? What does it mean that the ebbs and flows of algorithmic platforms can coax out new iterations of spiritual beliefs? And ultimately, what is at stake when a commercial platform such as TikTok can influence normative beliefs and worldviews at such a scale?

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