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ABSTRACT

While conspiracy theories are prominent on social media, they also increase audience engagement. It is thus unclear how many creators “believe” the theories they espouse, especially when they are outrageous or counter to mainstream belief. We investigate how conspiratorial social media creators position themselves in relation to the claims in their videos, the evidence they present, and their audiences. We apply qualitative content analysis to ConspiracyTok videos and comments. Creators position themselves vis-à-vis claims as having personal stakes in their veracity; emphasizing enjoyment; or adjudicating through evidence-backed research. Creators appeal to common experiences, promoting community engagement, construing viewers as extraordinary insiders, and encouraging collective research. These actions allow creators to cultivate generative, welcoming environments where even skeptical commenters often approach conspiratorial TikToks using the same epistemological frameworks as creators, a *generous epistemology*. Most commenters are not skeptical of creators’ claims, instead extending creators’ claims through “yes and” comments and additional research. We provide insight into the popularity of and difficulty in combating conspiracy theories on “fun” youth-oriented platforms like TikTok.

KEYWORDS

TikTok; conspiracy theories; disinformation; commenters; frames; claims

Introduction

Though often construed as fringe beliefs adopted by isolated, niche communities, conspiracy theories are a prominent part of popular culture and political discourse in the United States (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Fenster, 2008; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Conspiracy theories focus on alleged actions of powerful groups and their impacts on complex social phenomena, centering power such that participating in conspiratorial discourse constitutes a political act (Douglas et al., 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Online platforms provide easily accessible, highly connected arenas where conspiracy theories are actively debated, supported, or discredited (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Harambam & Aupers, 2017). Given this, it is vital to investigate how online conspiratorial communities negotiate their position relative to the claims they promulgate. While not every conspiracy is false, how do creators and their viewers grapple with theories that are incorrect, outrageous, or ridiculous?

We turn to TikTok, a short video-sharing platform immensely popular with young people, to investigate these questions.¹ We ask, first: how do

TikTok creators promoting conspiracy content position themselves vis-à-vis the conspiratorial assertions they contend to be true? Secondly, how do social media users navigate conspiracy theories that are widely popular but often outrageous or counter to mainstream belief? Finally, how do people negotiate belief in false claims? Analyzing a corpus of 202 ConspiracyTok videos and 1,312 associated comments, we find that, by positioning themselves in relation to their claims and their audiences, ConspiracyTok creators cultivate largely generative, welcoming commenter environments such that even skeptical commenters often approach conspiratorial TikToks using the same epistemological frameworks as creators, which we call *generous epistemology*. Though conspiratorial TikToks in our corpus still receive some discrediting mockery, a surprising number of skeptical commenters willingly engage with conspiratorial creators and their content on their terms. While the welcoming community fostered by ConspiracyTok creators facilitates discussions of topics stigmatized elsewhere, this can also foster disinformation harmful to marginalized

populations. Ultimately, ConspiracyTok demonstrates how even outrageous, incorrect information is likely to be viewed non-skeptically when presented in an epistemically generous manner, welcoming a variety of modes of knowledge production.

Belief and entertainment in online conspiracy content

While conspiracy theories are typically seen as fringe beliefs pursued by niche, isolated groups, conspiracy theories are now a prominent part of popular culture (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Fenster, 2008; Smallpage et al., 2020). Many people resist the label “conspiracy theorist,” preferring to think of themselves as “critical thinkers” who thoughtfully draw conclusions based on available evidence (Harambam & Aupers, 2017). Rather than echo chambers filled with unquestioning believers, online conspiracy communities are better understood as complex spaces of active debate and dissent (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Harambam & Aupers, 2017).

Conspiracy theories generally hold that a group of powerful people are secretly behind a social phenomenon (Douglas et al., 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). They are often viewed by laypeople, journalists, and academics as a form of *disinformation*, defined by Freelon & Wells as “false information spread for ideology, profit, or harm” (2020). While conspiracy theories often include false claims, they may also include truthful or unverified information; factual events such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiments or MKULTRA were considered conspiracy theories before being exposed. Thus, conspiracy theories often include disinformation, but are not always intrinsically disinformative.

While conspiracy theories vary in topic, they reflect common concerns about losing control to complex social forces and share themes and narratives (Byford, 2011; Melley, 2016). Because they focus on the actions of the powerful, theories frequently accuse governments and politicians of nefarious acts, such as “9/11 truthers” who believe the Bush administration secretly planned the attacks on the Twin Towers, or people who believe that Princess Diana was assassinated by MI6

(Birchall, 2006; Olmsted, 2011). Other theories are incorporated into mainstream political discourse, such as the “birther” theory that former President Obama was not born in the United States or conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic (Pasek et al., 2015; Uscinski et al., 2020). Indeed, conspiracies can be considered central to politics in the United States. Political scientists Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood argue that “conspiracy theories are simply another type of political discourse that provides a frame of interpretation for public events” (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 953). It is well-known that belief in political conspiracy theories decreases voter engagement and trust in government, eroding democracy over time (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). However, even nonpolitical conspiracy theories contribute to a lack of faith in democratic institutions and politics (Invernizzi & Mohamed, 2023).

It is thus vitally important to understand social media’s role in spreading conspiracy theories. While conspiracy theories flourish online, it is difficult to ascertain whether those engaging with conspiracy theories truly believe them. A study of social media users in six countries found that people shared conspiracy content for different reasons; while most spread conspiracy content because they believed it, others did so to provoke reactions from their followers, while others “liked,” shared, or commented on conspiracy content “for fun” (Morosoli et al., 2022). However, this study used two highly partisan conspiracy theories: the Great Replacement Theory, which states that immigrants are plotting against Western countries to displace their white occupants, and a claim that COVID-19 was a bioweapon created by the Chinese government. It also focused on those *encountering* conspiracy content rather than those *creating* it.

Online communities may interact with conspiracy theories, especially those about celebrities or “conspiratorial” beliefs, for their entertainment value, further complicating assessment of “true” belief (Birchall, 2006; Ong, 2021). When theories are viewed as entertainment, “true” belief is put aside and conspiracies become “fun” narratives that both creators and viewers enjoy (Fenster, 2008). Because social media platforms rely on posts that grab users’ attention, scandalous or entertaining conspiracy theories can be easy

avenues for creators to gain views and likes (Valaskivi, 2022). Still, creators who pump out low-quality content designed purely for metrics risk losing status and reputation in online attention economies (Mears, 2023).

Scholars have identified popular video-sharing platform TikTok as a key hub for the spread of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, QAnon, and American politics, among others (Forberg, 2022; Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023; Kim et al., 2023). Our corpus contains conspiratorial content about partisan and nonpartisan topics. Given its reputation as a “fun” platform, TikTok’s affordances may foster positive and supportive communications between conspiracy content creators and commenters (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Given the proliferation of conspiracy content on the platform and the economic advantages it provides to creators, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether TikTok creators believe the theories they espouse.² Instead, we look at how creators *frame* their relationships to the claims they make – what they assert is true (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). This approach provides insight into how ConspiracyTok creators communicate their investment in certain theories and the purpose of the videos they create, whether spreading the word about an important truth or offering an entertaining diversion. We ask:

RQ1: How do conspiracy TikTok creators frame their relationships to the claims they make?

Comments as negotiation

The prevalence of online mis- and disinformation has led to significant research investigating whether it can be corrected by users themselves (Yu et al., 2023). Although user correction can be effective (Bode et al., 2023; Walter et al., 2021), studies are inconclusive on its frequency, with some research stating that people rarely bother to investigate or report “fake news” (Tandoc et al., 2020; Wu, 2023) and others finding frequent push-back against online disinformation (Bode & Vraga, 2021). However, this requires users to *recognize* information as incorrect, which may not be the case in conspiratorial communities. One study of

COVID-19 conspiracy theories on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, for example, found that supportive comments were three times as common as critical ones (Fuchs, 2021).

Little work has investigated comments on TikTok, so we turned to scholarship on YouTube to illuminate creator-commentor interactions. Both YouTube and TikTok involve individual creators posting videos that receive largely individual responses. While commentor interaction can occur, most comments respond directly to the original content. Several factors – whether content is considered entertaining, whether commenters seek information, or whether commenters feel compelled to provide additional information – influence viewers’ decisions to comment on YouTube videos (Khan, 2017). Additionally, YouTube creators’ tones impact whether they receive more positive or negative comments, as videos where creators employ hostile or confrontational tones tend to receive hostile or confrontational comments in turn (Edgerly et al., 2013).

Regardless of why viewers comment on videos, creators have incentive to respond, as creator participation keeps viewers interested and increases overall engagement (Byun et al., 2023). On TikTok, views, comments, and shares are highly valued, as they lead to creators being featured on the For You Page (Abidin, 2020). As a result, TikTok creators often actively encourage viewers to comment, both as a plea for endorsement and a request for affirmation (Abidin, 2020, p. 90).

Comment sections can serve as locations for argument and dissent (Klein et al., 2018; Wood & Douglas, 2015). Online conspiracy communities are sites of active debate, and examining how viewers respond to conspiracy content is just as important as how it is presented. Given that conspiracy theories are predominantly false, comment sections reveal how participants negotiate shared belief systems and ideological values that underlie conspiracy theories (Inwood & Zappavigna, 2023). Thus, comment sections function as sites of knowledge production, generating new information in conversation with the content users respond to (Dubovi & Tabak, 2020).

Commenting, then, is an important aspect of TikTok’s functionality. Therefore, in addition to examining how ConspiracyTok creators position

themselves in relation to the theories they discuss, we also consider how they define their relationship to their viewers and how viewers respond. If the viewer-creator relationship is important for success on the platform, then how the creator defines that relationship and the responses that conspiracy content inspires helps us better understand how viewers approach potentially incorrect, even outrageous theories encountered online. Thus, we ask:

RQ2: How do conspiracy TikTok creators frame the viewers' relationships to those claims?

RQ3: How do commenters negotiate the claims and evidence presented by conspiracy TikTok creators?

Method

We collected TikTok data during May-September 2022. As a "side" of TikTok, ConspiracyTok represents a genre with similar aesthetics, techniques, and references, influenced by platform trends, shared sounds, stitches, and other similarities (Schellewald, 2021). We triangulated sampling techniques to create a corpus of videos that were diverse, highly viewed, and represented ConspiracyTok as a genre.

First, we found conspiratorial videos by searching hashtags associated with conspiracies (#conspiracytok, #conspiracy, #rabbithole, #flatearth), communities like QAnon (#greatawakening) and anti-vaxxers (#nojabforme) and collecting the highest-viewed videos from the results page. We identified TikTokers who frequently posted conspiratorial videos and collected their most popular videos. We searched for TikTok sounds commonly used on ConspiracyTok and collected the most popular videos that dealt with conspiratorial topics. Finally, we collected the most popular videos from two "stitches" (one user's video combined with another, often in question/answer format) dealing with conspiracy theories. We collected about 250 videos and eliminated the ones thematically beyond the scope of this study, with a resulting corpus of 202 videos from 153 creators. We watched each video and recorded the creator, date posted, number of comments, likes, and views, caption text, background sound, and URLs for

Table 1. Engagement metrics across non-deplatformed TikToks ($N = 156$).

| Descriptive Statistic | # Views | # Likes | # Comments |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Mean (rounded to 1) | 3,671,918 | 433,831 | 6,852 |
| Standard Deviation (rounded to 1) | 8,417,281 | 1,050,335 | 17,518 |

videos and creators. The mean view count of videos in our corpus is 3.6 million views, 433,000 likes, and 6,852 comments, representing videos that are highly viewed by TikTok's standards (Table 1).

While academics have debated the definition of "conspiracy theory" at length (e.g., Baden & Sharon, 2021), all videos in our sample were described by the creators as "conspiracies" or "conspiracy theories." We chose to use this emic definition of conspiracy rather than map etic standards for conspiracies onto vernacular conspiracy culture.

Qualitative analysis

We applied qualitative content analysis to our video corpus. First, four team members pilot coded 20 randomly selected videos, using a draft codebook and codesheet written by the third and fourth authors. We refined the codebook and sheet based on subsequent discussion. We then did a "mini pilot" of three videos to ensure the refined codebook and codesheet worked well for the project. For each codebook item, we recorded *descriptive* (denotative) information supplemented with *analytical* (connotative) memos.

Claims

We defined a claim as "an assertion that something is true" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). We cataloged each video's central claims, excluding widely agreed-upon facts ("Trump was elected president in 2016"). Claims range widely and include the US government using the High-frequency Active Aural Research Program (HAARP) to cause a cold front in Texas; a "great reset" taking place approximately 300,000 years ago exterminating giants and dragons; and the military enforcing mandatory vaccination as a ploy to remove anyone critical of Joe Biden from its ranks.

Evidence

We defined evidence as "the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or

proposition is true or valid” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023) and listed evidence presented in each video to support claims. These included fictional media, Wikipedia screenshots, search results, historical images, stock images, news articles, video clips, dictionary definitions, book covers, and personal experiences.

Frames

We used Kuypers’ definition of *frames*: how communicators “act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner” (Kuypers, 2009, p. 22). We were interested in how creators framed theories, evidence, and/or themselves, using frames to indicate how seriously the creators took theories, how widespread they believe theories are, and what point of view they think is correct relative to the theory. Frames were often indicated with hedging language like “some people say,” calls to “do your own research,” the sounds used, camera angles, and the facial expressions and actions of the creator. For example, some creators shook their head or pointed at particularly persuasive pieces of evidence.

Our codebooks and codesheets are available as supplemental material at <https://osf.io/6shqe/>.

Comments

We used Deen Freelon’s PykTok Python module to download the top 20 comments from each video ($n = 4,000$) (Freelon, 2022/2022). The first two

authors coded comments into three categories – *Skeptical*, *Non-skeptical*, or *Other* – to determine how commenters evaluated the evidence presented in the video. Through pilot coding, we refined the codebook to include subcodes. Table 2 provides an explanation of comment codes and results.

Results

Creators’ positions vis-à-vis claims

ConspiracyTok creators made a variety of claims about powerful institutions like science, popular culture, and religion; secret phenomena like the Illuminati and hidden knowledge; and fringe topics such as aliens, flat earth, and vaccinations.³ Creators positioned themselves differently in relation to these claims. Some emphasized their “true” belief in presented claims; others construed themselves as entertainers engaging with presented claims for enjoyment; and still others emphasized their skepticism and pseudo-scholarly rigor, evaluating claims based on evidence and counterevidence.

True Believers. Several creators framed conspiracy theories as personal beliefs and themselves as “true believers.” These videos usually lacked visual evidence, with creators talking directly to viewers, often displaying intimacy and vulnerability. In some cases, creators affirm their conspiratorial beliefs through claims of first-hand experience. One bank teller told a story of an older woman depositing large checks at his branch, which

Table 2. Comment codes and results.

| Code | Description | Count (%) |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| <i>Skeptical</i> | Expresses disbelief, contradicts a claim made in the video, insults the creator. | 105 (~8%) |
| Skeptical > Counter-Evidence | Presents evidence contradicting or disagreeing with the video. | 75 (~6%) |
| Skeptical > Mockery | Making fun of the creator, the theory, or believers, insults, and ad hominem attacks. | 35 (~3%) |
| Skeptical > Eyewitness | Presents personal experience that contradicts or disagrees with the video. | 4 (~0.3%) |
| TOTAL Skeptical | | 219 (~16%) |
| <i>Not Skeptical</i> | Expresses support, surprise, adds information to the theory, asks for more videos. | 505 (~38%) |
| Not Skeptical > Addition | “Yes and,” agrees with the conspiracy and directly adds more to the theory presented in the video. | 147 (~11%) |
| Not Skeptical > Eyewitness | Agrees with the conspiracy and says their own personal experience confirms it. | 43 (~3%) |
| Not Skeptical > Fiction | Incorporating fictional media into conspiracy lore and/or to “prove” video claims. | 42 (~3%) |
| Not Skeptical > Research | Calls for further research, recommendations for things to read/view/Google. | 21 (~2%) |
| TOTAL Not Skeptical | | 758 (~58%) |
| <i>Other</i> | Incomprehensible comments, or comments that don’t belong in another subcategory. | 54 (~4%) |
| Other > Creator Comments | The video creator replies to video comments. | 102 (~8%) |
| Other > Ambivalent | Speculation; aren’t clearly skeptical or non-skeptical. | 84 (~6%) |
| Other > Joke | Jokes that don’t fit elsewhere. | 56 (~4%) |
| Other > Meta-commentary | Commentary on TikTok, the creator, the algorithm, or the video’s jokes/aesthetics. | 23 (~2%) |
| Other > Unrelated | Unrelated comment that has nothing to do with the video, such as prayers and advertisements. | 16 (~1%) |
| TOTAL Other | | 335 (~26%) |
| OVERALL TOTAL | | 1,312 |

convinced him of the veracity of the Wayfair child trafficking conspiracy. Another creator asserted she and her audience have all been victims of “human trafficking” due to a series of “visions” she recently experienced. Another, filming in a dark car and seeming quite agitated, claimed to have just seen a cryptid on the side of the road. “True believers” occasionally draw boundaries between themselves and more stereotypical conspiracy theorists. One creator, arguing that pharmaceutical companies are suppressing cures for every major disease to make money, states, “I’m not even a conspiracy theory type person, I just honestly believe this.” Other creators admit they cannot prove the theories in their videos, and instead just have a hunch, as one creator claiming popular TikTok influencer Charli DeAmelio has fake followers professes, “I have no actual basis for this theory, I just think that it’s so weird that like she has 100 million followers.”

Though some creators genuinely appear to believe in the conspiracy theories they espouse, others employ “true believer” frames more ambiguously. For example, one creator simultaneously signals their belief that Megalodons exist – writing “Y’all believe me NOW?!” and “I told you!” in the caption and video, respectively – and the enjoyment they gain from presenting evidence to the audience, voraciously eating popcorn over background footage of a shark (purportedly in danger from a Megalodon). A popular stitch in our corpus asked other creators, “What’s a conspiracy theory you 1000% believe in?” The originator seemingly believed their claim that George Washington’s false teeth were, in part, pulled from the mouths of enslaved Africans, but others using the stitch were less clear-cut. One signaled their joy in investigating whether OJ Simpson is Khloe Kardashian’s real father by using humor, a singsong tone of voice, and even the *Law and Order* theme song to convey a sense of fun. Genuine “true believers” constitute only a portion of the creators in our corpus, as “true believer” frames can coexist with presenting evidence for the audience’s evaluation and/or signaling enjoyment in engaging with conspiratorial claims.

Entertainers. Creators occasionally position themselves as entertainers engaging with presented claims for fun. These creators often discuss popular

culture, celebrities, works of fiction, or other easily-accessible topics; their attachment to conspiracy theories comes less from a personal stake in those claims than their inherent entertainment value.

Entertainers sometimes distance themselves from their claims by using lighthearted hedging language. One creator investigating a theory claiming mountains are actually the remains of ancient, giant trees states that they are “not a Flat Earther,” but they still “f*** with this conspiracy” because they “think it’s cool.” Though they “don’t know if [they] believe” the claims they present, they nevertheless “enjoyed the rabbit hole” of learning about them in detail. The same creator addresses the viewer playfully, “What if I told you that this were true. . . according to this conspiracy theory?” while a slyly smiling emoji briefly appears on the screen. The creator is unwilling to fully endorse the theory but is happy to present it to their audience for fun.

In another example of lighthearted hedging employed for entertainment, a different creator presenting the claim that “sky ice” is hidden from the general public provides a “disclaimer:” “I’m not saying what they posted is facts, but it’s just very interesting, so let’s check it out.” In doing so, the creator centers the conspiracy theory’s inherent entertainment value over their own personal stake in the claim. Another discusses the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight 370 and employs hedging in a cliffhanger toward the end of the TikTok. They first state “some people think aliens were behind this, or it was a black hole,” placing belief in the hands of someone other than themselves. The creator follows this with, “but I think it was a cover up,” coupled with superimposed text prompting viewers to “Like for part 2” and an emoji with a hand covering its mouth. Here, hedging becomes a part of the process of building suspense – a tool not only useful for disclaiming responsibility, but for positioning oneself within a broader realm of conspiracies in an entertaining way.

Though some ConspiracyTok creators engage in more lighthearted, entertainment-oriented hedging, others use more serious hedging alongside more or less rigorous adjudication of presented evidence.

Skeptical Scholars. Some ConspiracyTok creators actively work to distance themselves from

uncritical, absolute belief in presented claims by employing hedging language. More formal hedging can be seen in the form of “official” disclaimers, as in a video claiming Martin Luther King Jr. was part of an elaborate hoax. Before the video makes any attempt to prove this claim, a block of superimposed text informs the viewer “The following content is presented as an existing theory for informational purposes without commentary or personal opinion for consideration by interested parties only.” This quasi-legal disclaimer frames the creator as less supportive of the claims they present and absolves themselves of responsibility related to posting the theory – including having their video removed by TikTok for spreading incorrect information. A slightly more subtle – and, in our corpus, more common – form of hedging involves quick verbal asides inserted throughout a TikTok’s runtime. Such distancing can be as brief as a single word, as when creators preface their video’s main conspiracy with an all-important “if,” “might,” “could,” “apparently,” or “allegedly.” Though more covert, this form of hedging also serves to distance creators from presented claims.

Importantly, this approach also involves convincing viewers they have the power to determine the truth of presented claims. Creators use a “just asking questions” approach to distance their own personal stake in the claims in the video. These creators do not allege that they, individually, know the truth, or at least do not state which of one multiple possible “answers” to the conspiracy theory is unquestionably correct. For example, one creator prefaces the claim that several celebrities died at the age of 21 because they sold their soul to the devil with, “I’m not saying I believe in any of this. It’s all just information, and you guys can make your own minds up.” In doing so, the creator transfers determination of the claim’s veracity from themselves to their audience. Another tells viewers, “I don’t claim to know what this means, I’m just here to let you know. . .just take that information, and do with it what you will.” Creators often accompany such statements with implicit or explicit requests for comments from viewers, such as, “So what do you think?” In this way, these videos actively foster debate and conversation – often in

the service of improving videos’ engagement metrics.

Theory-viewer frames

In addition to framing themselves in relation to conspiracy theories, ConspiracyTok creators also establish frameworks for how *viewers* should think about them. We identified three primary frameworks that ConspiracyTok creators used to encourage viewers to think about and act on their theories. First, creators appeal to *commonalities* to imply theories should be obvious to anyone sharing that common knowledge or experience. Second, creators frame conspiracy content as an appeal to *hidden knowledge*, revealing secret information intended to “wake up” unsuspecting viewers, implying that they are insiders providing information unavailable elsewhere. Third, creators direct viewers to *do their own research* and make up their own minds about theories, encouraging viewers to draw their own conclusions while simultaneously implying their evidence and arguments are replicable. These three frameworks construct very different relationships between theory and viewer, but all work to increase the credibility of ConspiracyTok creators and encourage audience engagement and discussion that is neither skeptical nor hostile.

Appeals to commonalities

Videos relying on appeals to commonalities frequently take informal, conversational approaches. Within this framework, creators approach their audience as a friendly group of people who already agree with everything that the creator is saying. This assumed agreement takes three primary forms: common experience, common knowledge, and common sense.

First, creators presume that they and the audience share a *common experience* that validates the theory presented in the TikTok. For example, one creator makes the argument that the US government intentionally destroyed the Black family by telling viewers, “many of us had grandparents who worked in factories their whole lives and lived better lives than we’re living now.” Another creator promoting the Flat Earth conspiracy theory starts his video by asking “Does anybody else remember being told as a kid the reason why we couldn’t see

the moon and the sun in the sky at the same time during the day was because the moon was on the other side of the earth?” In these examples, the creators set up a presumed common experience that serves as evidence for why the rest of their theory makes sense. If viewers can relate to these statements – or even if they think other viewers relate if they can’t – the rest of the creators’ argument may make more sense.

Like appeals to common experience, some creators use an appeal to *common knowledge* to lend credibility to the theory they are presenting. Given the esoteric subject matter of many ConspiracyTok videos, this framework has less to do with whether the audience is actually familiar with the knowledge presented by the creator than with how they present it. With phrasing like “We’ve all heard of the Antarctica treaty by now,” “As we all know, they like to put messages in movies and tv shows,” and “So, y’all heard of the 33rd degree parallel, right?” these creators treat the viewers as insiders in a conversation where a set of facts has already been established. No evidence supporting these claims or explaining where this information comes from is necessary as “we” all already know it. In this way, the viewers are interpellated into the preexisting world of the theory and made to feel like an insider.

Finally, many creators use appeals to *common sense* to emphasize the presumed apparentness of their theory. This most frequently takes the form of asides where the creator asks viewers questions like “It’s weird, right?” or “Makes sense, right?” Sometimes, however, the specific piece of common sense is stated explicitly. For example, creators use sarcasm to communicate to viewers the absurdity of arguments that run counter to their theory. One creator whose TikTok revolves around the existence of advanced ancient civilizations asks about the Great Sphinx of Giza, “You’re telling me people were so primitive they took a hammer and chisel and made this?” Another video arguing that Hitler was killed by time travelers states, “A bullet in his own head? In a bunker?! Come on.” By framing their theories in this way, creators tell viewers that these theories are obvious, and that the viewers – addressed as knowledgeable and logical insiders and friends – already know this information to be true.

By taking this approach, creators weave narratives in which viewers serve important roles as knowledgeable participants. Those watching ConspiracyToks can turn to their own common sense, knowledge, and experiences to recognize the truth of what is presented. The creator and audience are framed as friends who already know this information and are simply talking it out together.

Appeals to hidden knowledge

In contrast to assuming that viewers are already insiders, frameworks that *emphasize appeals to hidden knowledge* frame insider status as a gift bestowed on the viewer by a creator who already has it. Fundamentally, the creator offers their viewers some insight or information that cannot be obtained elsewhere, as such theories cannot be learned by doing one’s own research or through lived experience. As a result, many of these videos cover spiritual or paranormal topics, with creators delivering information they received via visions or enlightenment. Whether this information is good or bad for the viewer can vary greatly, as videos that take this approach range from dire warnings to the promise of a special status.

Videos that serve as warnings often carry with them a sense of urgency or a call to action missing from the other frameworks. This sense of urgency is often rooted in the belief that our understanding of reality is wrong, and only the reveal of some piece of hidden knowledge will “wake up” to the truth. For example, one creator tells viewers that she had a “vision” telling her that we are all victims of human trafficking but do not remember because of “mind control experiments.” We shouldn’t get “the jab,” she warns, because it will prevent the memories from coming back. According to her narrative, vital information about our pasts is intentionally being withheld from us by an evil government, but thanks to her vision and willingness to share it, we can regain that knowledge. There is no way to verify her claim except to follow her instructions: refuse to get vaccinated and wait to see if the memories come back. In this way, the promised “truth” about reality is entirely contained within the perceived specialness of this single creator with inside knowledge.

The inverse of the dire warning is the conspiracy video that promises to reveal to viewers how *they* are special, whether by having special powers or destinies that make them unique. Often, this includes the creator and all their presumed viewers. For example, one creator explains that some people are “chosen ones” who chose to come down to earth to break generational curses and trauma, and thus have powerful spirit guides protecting them. Even though this only applies to certain people, he tells viewers, “I guarantee that most of you guys watching this right now literally volunteered to come down here and break all the generational curses and heal all the ancestral trauma, making you the black sheep.” Not everyone can be one of these chosen ones, but all the audience members watching his video are chosen ones. Creators also claim to help viewers access special abilities, such as how to jump across timelines, harness the power of the gods, or tap into the guardian angels watching over them. Others teach viewers how to avoid demons, recognize omens, and avoid cryptids. In this way, these creators offer viewers information that they may not be able to receive anywhere else, which offers a sense of uniqueness or power to viewers who accept it.

Appeals to research

In contrast to frameworks appealing to commonalities or hidden knowledge, a final major framework involved ConspiracyTok creators making *appeals to research*. Rather than demonstrating the veracity of a theory by creating a sense of shared knowledge and agreement between the creator and viewer, creators assume that the viewer will be skeptical. To address this, creators encourage viewers to go and do their own research to confirm that a given theory is true. In doing so, creators interpellate viewers into the interpretive community, encouraging them and instructing them on how to contribute to conspiracy communities.

At times, these appeals to research manifest as a defense mechanism presuming distrust from viewers; as one creator stridently states, “I’m not making this up – read the Bible!” Other creators use calls to research as a challenge, daring viewers to find evidence that proves them wrong. For example, a creator whose video claims that Adele

and Sam Smith are the same person incites viewers to find a photograph of the two singers together. “Seriously, try to Google it,” they tell viewers, “You won’t find it.” With statements like these, creators communicate to viewers that they aren’t afraid of external research but expect it to confirm their claims.

Others, however, use research as a badge of honor to communicate that they have done the legwork necessary to be considered knowledgeable and viewers should follow their lead. Some refer to their research experience with statements like, “After I started researching the occult...” and “of course, I had to go find it for myself.” Others stress the importance of research, assuming the role of an instructor assigning homework to a class of pupils. “As you have learned – if you haven’t done the research, go ahead,” one creator states. Creators provide extratextual sources that interested viewers can investigate, encouraging viewers to read a cache of CIA documents or their TV’s user manual. Completing these assignments, they imply, will provide viewers with knowledge that will help them fully understand the theory being presented. As one creator put it in a pinned comment on his video, “Remember to do your own research. I’m only here to plant seeds for you to grow.” Without this educational labor, viewers are presumably not equipped to engage with – or discredit – the theory at hand.

Crucially, in directing viewers to do their own research, creators frequently lay out a specific investigative route for viewers to follow. In doing so, they make it inevitable that anyone who follows that path will encounter evidence that only strengthens the persuasiveness of a given claim. For example, one creator tells viewers to “Just Google ‘FBI Illuminati’ and click this link.” Others use keyword seeding (Tripodi, 2022), providing viewers with specific search terms only used by other, already-convinced conspiracy believers. For example, one creator tells viewers, “If you don’t believe me, type in ‘biblical cosmology’” and another tells viewers to “please look up ‘radiological dispersal device.’” Creators also cite specific books, videos, and documentaries where they got their information, lending credibility to their claims and pointing viewers to alternate sources that reaffirm their theories.

This framework holds that viewers are and should be active participants in the conversations surrounding conspiracy theories. Audience members should not just take creators at their word but leave with the desire and ability to confirm the theory for themselves. While *appeals to commonalities* frame a conspiracy theory as so obvious that its veracity should be self-evident, this framework uses debate to add veracity to a given claim. If all these people are doing their own research and coming up with similar – or at least equally conspiratorial – answers, there must be something to these theories in the first place.

Ultimately, all three frameworks create a sense of connection between viewers and the conspiracy theory being presented. In different ways, they work to convince viewers of the veracity of a given theory. While videos that *appeal to commonalities* use common sense to make their conclusions appear self-evident, videos that *appeal to hidden knowledge* use a sense of urgency and the promise of being unique and special to invest viewers in a particular conspiracy theory. Those that use *appeals to research* encourage viewers to become active participants and contributors to conspiratorial knowledge. Even as creators establish a varying sense of distance from the theories they promote, they still work to make that theory as appealing to viewers as possible.

Commenter negotiation

Finally, we turn to viewer comments on the videos in our corpus to understand how claims presented by ConspiracyTok creators are negotiated by TikTok commenters. Table 2 illustrates rates of skepticism across comments in the corpus. Of the 1,312 comments we coded, most (758, approximately 58%) were not skeptical of ConspiracyTok creators or their presented claims. Far fewer comments (219, approximately 16%) exhibited skepticism toward either creators or toward presented claims. In fact, more comments fell into the “Other” category (335, approximately 26%) than comments exhibiting any form of skepticism. This is notable given ConspiracyTok’s frequent engagement with hotly-debated themes. We interrogate the substance of these comments and the

implications of a general lack of commenter skepticism.

Though comments were largely non-skeptical, many theories were met with some degree of skepticism; 35 comments (approximately 3% of these examined) openly mocked and insulted creators and the claims they presented. For example, on a video discussing submerged ruins of an ancient civilization, the top comment read “And this, people, is why archeology requires degrees.” Other commenters employed sarcastic condescension, as in the comments “Poor thing! She slipped and busted her head! Bless her heart,” “r u drunk?” and “I would’ve believed this. . .but I’m 18 now so.” Here, commenters express disagreement with creators and their presented claims by portraying them as pitifully immature or impaired. Other commenters construe creators as hopelessly gullible, as in the comment “Y’all literally believe anything you see or hear online.”

Despite this occasional mockery, most comments not only lacked skepticism but supported creators and their presented claims in some manner. This could take the form of expressing shared belief in a theory or requesting more content. For example, commenters ecstatically proclaim “Thank god, someone is on the same page!” and “I LITERALLY BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU POST.” Others respond to videos by clamoring for more, with comments such as “can you make a video on mandela affects?” and “You should do one on avril lavigne!” Still others convey their solidarity with creators by expressing concern that creators will receive backlash for revealing the truth. “Be carefull [sic] my brother we don’t wanna lose you!” states one commentor. “You’ve been exposing the industry a lot lately. Don’t go disappearing on us bruh,” warns another. Here, commenters express support for ConspiracyTok creators, fostering an environment of shared community and care despite contentious subject matter, as well as reaffirming the significance (and perhaps dangerousness) of the conspiracy theories themselves.

Notably, many supportive commenters embrace the frameworks established by creators, echoing creators’ appeals to common knowledge and common sense and embracing creators’ framing of their community as distinctly special. For example,

one commentor emphasizes that a theory about alien life is common sense, stating “Not believing in aliens is like going in the ocean and taking a spoon of water out and saying there’s no sharks in the sea because none on the spoon.” Thus, it should be evident to others that more research is necessary to debunk this claim rather than dismiss it out of hand. Another commentor concludes, “It all makes sense now,” responding directly to the creator’s claim that the US government’s intentional destruction of the Black family is apparent based on common knowledge shared by the Black community. Other commentors gesture to the idea that creators and viewers are part of a special group of people who know things others do not, sometimes adding to creators’ own expertise by similarly embracing the idea they are special. One commentor, responding to a video about spirit guides, asks, “This is why I’ve felt protected my whole life?” Others build on the idea that they are part of a special community by adding their own personal wisdom or knowledge. With comments like, “Girl I literally had a vision about this this morning” and “does anybody have memories of being in circle of black robed people? I’ve had this memory for 30 yrs and can see that I was a baby,” commentors build on the sense of exclusive knowledge set up by many ConspiracyTok creators.

Commentors also embrace this sense of community more generally. “Only the woke see the everyday signs,” laments one commentor. Another states, “they put it right in front of our faces to mock us because they know we will never be able to outnumber the sheep in this world unfortunately.” In this way, commentors reinforce the frameworks that ConspiracyTok creators establish to create a sense of intimacy and community between creators and users. In echoing the idea that these theories are “common sense” or accepting a one’s inclusion in an exclusive community of people whose specialness derives from being “in the know,” commentors become an active, largely uncritical, part of the larger conspiracy community.

Embracing creators’ frameworks is most apparent in the ways commentors embrace and further the emphasis on research as a key facet of ConspiracyTok. In response to creators’ calls for viewers to do their own research, commentors

state, “Bro is giving out homework” and “*sighs* fjjf *opens youtube*.” One commentor provided research tips, telling other users that “Google is wiped clean of anything conspiracy theory related. [...] I use the app Duck Duck Go.” Others call for additional research that goes beyond the video’s conspiracy narrative. For example, one commentor states, “Don’t forget the Orsini family that started it. Its not just rothchild, orsini . . . there is 13 bloodlines. Happy researching!” Commentors frequently respond to creators’ calls for research by expressing the need to do a “deep dive” into a theory now that they are aware of it. Repeatedly, non-skeptical commentors acknowledge the research process as an integral part of participating in online conspiracy communities. Doing this research is a mark of being a good community member.

Though mocking comments did pop up across our corpus, they are a minority. Instead, skepticism was more commonly expressed using the same frameworks established by creators, with commentors attempting to reason with conspiracy believers using their own logics. By countering “common sense” with “common sense,” eyewitness testimony with contradictory eyewitness testimony, and research with different research, these comments attempt to discredit conspiracy theories within their own logical frameworks. Appealing to the so-called common-sense assertion that ancient peoples could not have possibly built the pyramids, one commentor points out, “We can build 50+ skyscrapers in like a year with 150–200 people Imagine what we could do in 100 years with 10,000 people.” Another offers a contradictory eyewitness experience of 9/11, sharing “my uncle was actually almost the first fire fighter there and he told me he walked over part of the wing.” Numerous other commentors provide additional information and encourage other users to research supplementary topics. One commentor tells other viewers that a purported sea monster is “. . . a bigfin squid. Fun fact: the little amount of sightings we’ve had of them are only juveniles. We’ve never seen an adult,” playing into the conspiracy’s entertainment potential. Another commentor posts that contradictory evidence exists if viewers are willing to “search it up.” Skeptical commentors thus attempt to dissuade belief in these theories by offering counter-evidence. In doing so, they reinforce the

frameworks that the creators establish, meeting the conspiracy theorists on their own terms and reiterating the importance of research practices already embraced by the conspiracy community.

Finally, several comments openly embrace the entertainment aspect of conspiracy culture. Just as many creators distanced themselves from their content by emphasizing their fun or entertaining aspects, so do some commenters. For example, comments include, “These theories are so extreme though but so interesting to discuss fjfj ” and “It’s a fun theory to think about if nothing else haha.” These commenters openly embrace creators’ emphasis on the entertainment aspects of conspiracy theories rather than adjudicating the veracity of presented claims.

Overall, the comments we analyzed largely embraced the same frameworks the creators established in conspiratorial TikToks. Even when users were skeptical or critical, they frequently appealed to the logics established by creators to define the rules of the debate. In this way, even when creators distanced themselves from the conspiracy theories they espoused, they set up a framework for engagement that encouraged viewers to take a non-skeptical approach to conspiracy theories. Users generally accepted creators’ frameworks, even when trying to challenge presented claims.

Discussion and conclusion

We investigated how online conspiratorial communities negotiate their position relative to presented claims, supporting evidence, and viewers, applying qualitative content analysis to a corpus of 202 ConspiracyTok videos from 153 unique creators and 1,312 associated comments. We find creators variably position themselves as “true believers” with personal stakes in the veracity of their claims; as “entertainers” emphasizing the enjoyment factors of claims espoused; and as “skeptical scholars” adjudicating claims based on research and evidence. Creators appealed to commonalities shared with audience members, construing their viewers as special insiders worthy of hidden knowledge and encouraging them to participate collectively in the research process. Responding to these frames, commenters were more often not skeptical of creators’ claims than

skeptical, with skeptical and non-skeptical commenters alike frequently engaging with claims based on creators’ epistemological frameworks.

We argue that this environment creates *epistemic generosity* in which commenters and creators alike feel comfortable creating and sharing their own theories and evidence. A *generous epistemology* is a mode of truth that says “yes, and” rather than “no,” acknowledging multiple truth claims as valid even when they contradict or seem preposterous. Rather than rejecting outrageous or incorrect information, a *generous epistemic environment* encourages asking questions, doing research, and sharing experiences, presuming a communal approach to knowledge creation that still allows each person to believe what they think is best. The commonality comes from subscribing to this mode of inquiry rather than believing individual truths themselves. Thus, people who are “into conspiracy theories” can believe wildly different things while sharing a commitment to “going down the rabbit hole” and “doing their own research” and an antipathy to institutionalized knowledge production. This also explains why many ConspiracyTok creators produce videos on many diverse topics – they are interested not necessarily in individual conspiracies but the nature of conspiracies themselves.

We note two main limitations of our study. First, our corpus was constructed and analyzed by a team of US residents. Our content was exclusively in English and primarily made by Americans. Our positionality provides us with valuable insight into this sociopolitical context but limits the scope of our analysis. Future work can build on our findings to understand how patterns may resonate with or differ across global contexts. Second, the corpus was limited by the loss of access to deplatformed videos during analysis and Pyktok’s ability to only capture 20 comments from each video. Future projects that incorporate larger samples or quantitative analysis can triangulate or challenge our findings from a smaller-n sample analyzed in detail.

However, this study has important ramifications beyond ConspiracyTok. Future research might investigate whether “sides” of TikTok that similarly rely on evidence and interpretation, such as fandom or true crime, share such

a “generous epistemology” (for example, Yvonne Eadon’s work on Taylor Swift conspiracies on TikTok (Eadon, 2024).) Creators who specialize in content that is not strictly conspiratorial, but similarly lacks a firm basis in fact, such as New Age spirituality, religion, or cryptozoology, may also follow similar patterns to those we document. Finally, there are rich opportunities to analyze why conspiracy believers interact differently on different platforms; Lars de Wildt and Stef Aupers, for example, find that conspiracy Redditors “relate to each other primarily through conflict” (2023, 1).

The conspiracy community on TikTok is a largely welcoming environment that allows conspiracy theories to be treated as harmless entertainment even as those theories are largely upheld in and by community discourse. On one hand, the generative discourse on ConspiracyTok provides a supportive community for creators and audience members to discuss in-depth subject matter that may be considered contentious and stigmatized in other arenas. On the other, that same supportive community becomes a breeding ground for spreading disinformation harmful to marginalized groups. Antivaxx, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQ+ content circulate within the same community discussing more benign topics – sometimes, benign and hateful themes coalesce in the same TikTok. When disinformation is viewed as entertainment, the question of whether the propagator actually believes it is less important than the fact that they are spreading it to new audiences. Legitimizing conspiracy theories as “fun” still undermines institutional authority and opens the door to vernacular forms of knowledge production that allow false information to flourish. Whether providing a hospitable environment to develop ideas stigmatized elsewhere, or serving as an arena where prejudice and hate commingle with less obviously harmful discussion topics, ConspiracyTok creators and the frames they rely on shape political discourse in meaningful ways.

Notes

1. According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of US adults under 30 use TikTok and 63% of teenagers use TikTok, more than half of teens (58%) use it daily, and

17% say they use it “almost constantly” (Vogels & Gelles-Watnick, 2023).

2. We reached out to every creator in our sample but did not receive any responses; this is a known issue when researching conspiratorial communities (Franks et al., 2017).
3. For frequencies with which the top 14 video topics occurred, see Table 1 in the appendix. Video hashtags similarly varied – some referred to videos’ themes (#fla-tearth, #bible), others to the ConspiracyTok community (#waketok, #spiritualtiktok, #conspiracytok), and others to potential virality (#viral, #fyp, #foryou). Table 2 (Appendix) shows the top 20 hashtags in our corpus.

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Appendix

Table 1. Video Topics

| Topic* | # Videos (%) |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Science | 48 (~24%) |
| Popular Culture | 47 (~23%) |
| Religious | 29 (~14%) |
| Politics | 32 (~16%) |
| History | 21 (~10%) |
| Secret Societies | 21 (~10%) |
| Hidden Knowledge | 19 (~9%) |
| Spirituality | 18 (~9%) |
| Aliens | 17 (~8%) |
| Conservative | 17 (~8%) |
| Supernatural | 15 (~7%) |
| Flat Earth | 15 (~7%) |
| Anti-Vaxx | 12 (~6%) |
| Human Trafficking | 10 (~5%) |

*Note: Videos can be tagged with multiple topic categories.

Table 2. Top 20 Hashtags

| Unique Hashtags | Occurrences |
|---------------------|-------------|
| #fyp | 73 |
| #conspiracy | 66 |
| #conspiracytiktok | 40 |
| #foryou | 24 |
| #viral | 22 |
| #greenscreen | 19 |
| #conspiracytheory | 16 |
| #flatearth | 15 |
| #woketok | 15 |
| #foryoupage | 14 |
| #stitch | 14 |
| #conspiracytheories | 13 |
| #greenscreenvideo | 12 |
| #spiritualtiktok | 12 |
| #truth | 11 |
| #wakeup | 10 |
| #conspiracytok | 9 |
| #bible | 8 |
| #spirituality | 8 |
| #trending | 8 |