Everything is Connected

Examining Co-hashtag Conspiracy Networks on Tiktok

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

This sub-project examines how the popular practice of hashtag stuffing has been used to circulate conspiratorial narratives in Tiktok. Focusing on semantic yoking of Tiktok hashtags, the sub-project analyzes the growth and spread of conspiracy theories, particularly conspiritual (Ward & Voas, 2011) content, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Approaching Barkun's idea of "everything is connected"(2003) as a concrete mechanism (rather than a metaphor), the central research question calls for an inductive approach to study the growth and spread of conspiracy theories through the emergence of nodes that form discrete co-hashtag clusters in the Gephi network.

By tracing the emergence and development of the main hashtag clusters in time, we selected a three-month period, right in the aftermath of the American presidential elections in November 2020, when coherent clusters can be first identified in Gephi.

Main hashtag clusters identified are spirituality, conspiracy, mainstream news, wealth, globalist agenda and alt-right. The conspiracy hashtag cluster is the biggest one, occupying the middle space in the Gephi chart, and connects to the two clusters on both horizontal edges. The spirituality cluster occupies the left-hand space and the mainstream news the right-hand one. Both are situated furthest away from each other. However, both are rightly connected to the conspiracy hashtag nodes. Some connections to the conspiracy cluster go directly to edge clusters of spirituality and mainstream news, while others get connected to edges via the connector clusters wealth and globalist agenda.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

Can the practice of 'hashtag stuffing' on TikTok be re-used as the basis of an inductive approach to study how, in conspiracy theories, everything is (literally) connected?

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

Can we identify specific distinct narratives (e.g. Bill Gates, The Great Reset), or do they all blur together?

If we zoom in on a hashtag, which we could treat as a "public" a "character" or a "story" (e.g. Bill Gates or Illuminati), how does it develop over time? What is the significance of its relative proximity to another such hashtag?

Data Collection

The raw data was collected by Marc Tuters via Zeeuschuimer. He started snowballing through all the posts that appeared by typing in conspiracy terms like "adrenochrome" to obtain more associated hashtags on TikTok.

On this basis, we created custom networks among hashtags on 4CAT at day intervals from 2020 to 2022 and imported them into Gephi to develop visual and dynamic graphs. When looking at the overall data over two years, we found that the sheer size of the data made the whole cluster too noisy and chaotic for longitudinal analysis. Filtering and sorting are therefore essential. Accordingly, by observing the monthly post-distribution histogram generated by 4CAT, we targeted a key three-month period (December 2020 to February 2021), which was the initial point of dramatic change in the overall growth period. It was thus more suitable for our detailed research as it had sufficient data to study but was less noisy than the phases before and after it.

Data Curation

When we looked at the histogram provided by 4CAT, we found that the number of posts has a rapid growth between December 2020 and February 2021. In that case, we chose to zoom in this period of time to see how co-hashtags are linking to build a network. To make the data not so noisy, we used the algorithm of average weighted degree to rank all the nodes and we filtered the hashtags that were under the weighted degree of 100. At the same time, we hoped to be more focusing on the hashtags related with social content rather than medium. Therefore, we removed some intermediary nodes that apparently acted as propagation on Tiktok, such as #4u, #fyp and #duet.

After filtering out these irrelevant hashtags, we presented the network in ForceAtlas 2 layout, where the node size was determined by the ranking of average weighted degree and the different thematic modules were differentiated by colour through running the modularity statistics.

Most importantly, we identified, settled, and highlighted the three most representative anchors: spirituality (left), conspiracy (middle), and news (right), as they belong to the three largest clusters, which connect all clusters and hashtags into a coherent network.

The Analysis of Visualisation

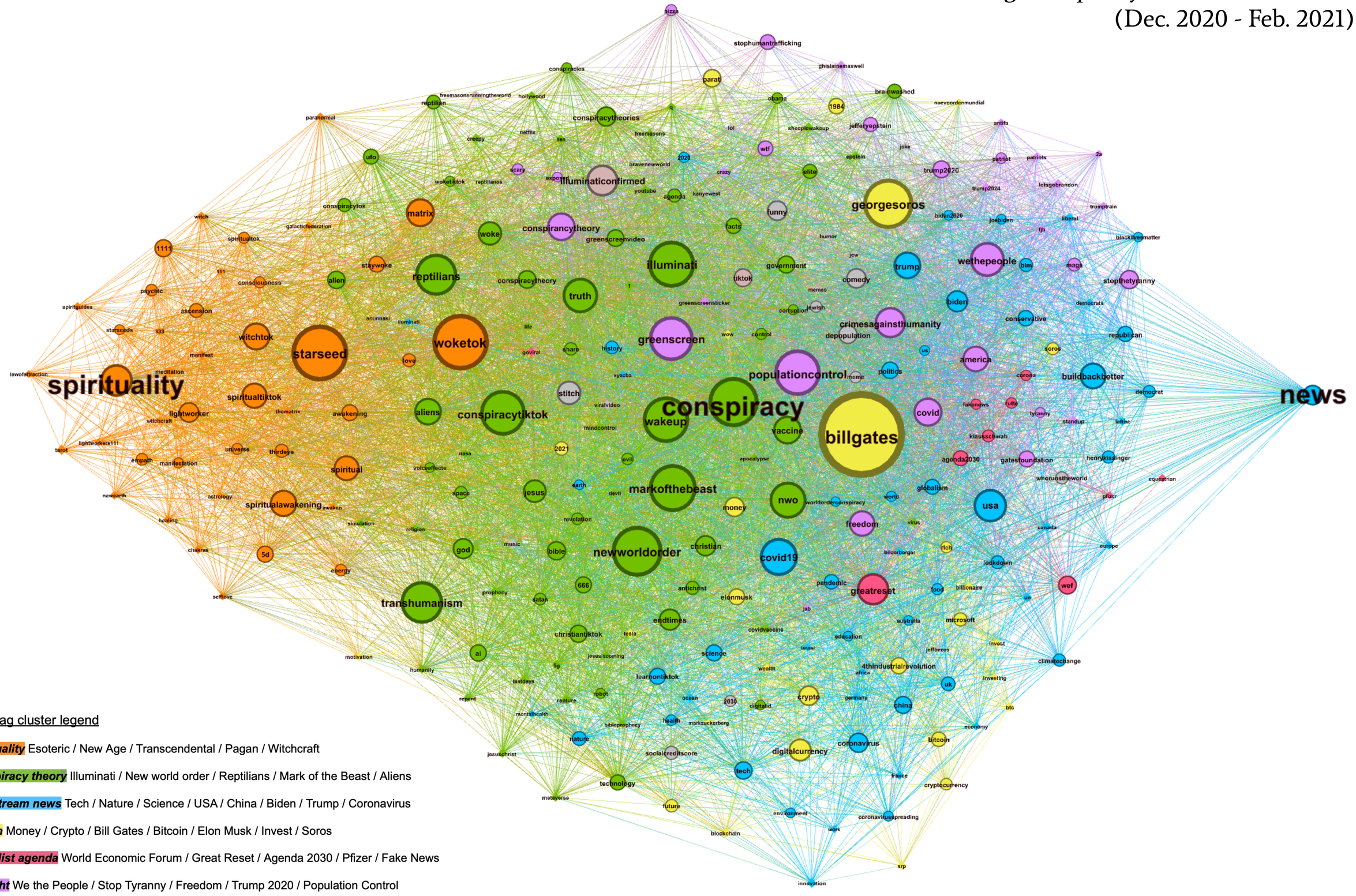
The Gephi network (below) illustrates how Tiktok hashtags co-occurring with conspiratorial content from clusters and link to each other in the aftermath of the US 2020 presidential elections. The two poles in the horizontal edges of the network represent how the esoteric (spirituality, left side, orange) and mundane (news, right side, blue) hashtags co-occur rarely, and are only infrequently directly connected.

The main connection between the poles is the green conspiracy cluster in the middle of the graph. These hashtags co-occur with keywords originating in both mainstream news coverage and articulation of esoteric beliefs, suggesting that during the period, conspiracy theory was commonly presented in Tiktok as conspirtual (Ward & Voas, 2011) commentary of the (North American) political news cycle.

The remaining three categories of nodes do not cluster particularly well, but rather appear to act as a catalyst or a glue, linking the main clusters to each other. They are used by the conspiracy narrators in Tiktok, making use of alt-right slogans (purple) for the purpose of presenting rich people and businesses (yellow) and the global elite projects (red) as the scapegoats of an esoteric conspiracy, whose aims align spiritual, particularly Christian eschatology.

Visualisation and Analysis

Co-hashtag Conspiracy Network on Tiktok (Dec. 2020 - Feb. 2021)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billgates
populationcontrol
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transhumanism
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bitcoin
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climatechange
wef
microsoft
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crimesagainsthumanity
depopulation
covid
vaccine
wakeup
stophumantrafficking
brainwashed
conspiracies
conspiracytheories
freemasons
reptilian
paranormal
creepy
scary
crazy
funny
humor
memes
comedy
government
tiktok
democrats
republican
conservative
america
buildbackbetter
stopthetyranny
blacklivesmatter
trump2020
biden2020
joebiden
lockdown
globalism
agenda2030
gatesfoundation
henrykissinger
klausschwab
whorunstheworld
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pfizer
canada
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rich
bilderberger
pandemic
elonmusk
antichrist
revelation
prophecy
satan
music
religion
simulation
chakras
healing
energy
selflove
motivation
humanity
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tarot
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endtimes
christian
newworldorder
transhumanism
markofthebeast
nwo
freedom
greatreset
covid19
usa
billgates
populationcontrol
conspiracy
wakeup
vaccine
covid
crimesagainsthumanity
depopulation
4thindustrialrevolution
microsoft
wethepeople
trump
biden
stopthetyranny
buildbackbetter
democrat
republican
conservative
america
soros
politics
corona
fakenews
futte
tyranny
standup
lefist
henrykissinger
whorunstheworld
equestrian
pfizer
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globalism
agenda2030
gatesfoundation