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THE VIBES ARE OFF: TRACING VIRAL TARGETED THEORIES ACROSS TIKTOK

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Introduction

The social media and short video streaming app TikTok has grown exponentially in the past four years: from 55 million global users in 2018, to 689 million in 2020, to one billion in 2021—a 45% increase from 2020 to 2021 (Wang 2021). The app’s growth, and its marked influence on other apps (Aten 2020) show that studying the socio-techno-cultural dynamics of TikTok are essential for understanding the wider forces at work in our contemporary digital landscape.

TikTok’s uniqueness and appeal derives from its mimetic affordances: the material and sociocultural determinants of how users can engage with the platform, including specific tools and algorithms (Bucher and Helmond 2018) are built on logics of imitation and replication (Zulli and Zulli 2020). Content is often created by using a sound from another creator’s video, “stitching” with a video in order to respond to it, or using the green screen effect, in which a creator can place someone else’s video in the background of their own. TikTok’s main content feed, the “For You Page” (FYP) is precisely algorithmically personalized for each user. The FYP algorithm is notoriously good at cultivating virality (Le Compte and Klug 2021) in particular a sped-up kind of *hyper-virality* that spikes over a matter of days, sometimes hours.

Case Study: Stella Weber

One such hyper-viral incident took place in late 2021: a recently out transgender woman and TikTok creator, Stella Weber,¹ went viral on the platform. Some of her videos, consisting of her dancing in her home in a variety of outfits, garnered views in the millions. These numbers were a result of other creators making videos about her, accusing her of being a serial killer or kidnapper. One creator specializing in “creepy”

¹ Stella Weber is a pseudonym. Although the incident and her TikTok profile are public, the creator’s privacy remains important.

content used the green screen effect to zoom in on a computer monitor in the background of one of Stella's videos, positing that the blurry images on the screen looked like security footage of two women being confined. Comments upon comments on this and similar videos suggested that Stella's content had "Buffalo Bill vibes," referencing the serial killer from *The Silence of the Lambs* whose character design is notoriously transphobic (Romano 2021). Beyond the "creepy vibes" of Stella's videos (likely a classist reaction to her living situation) the main evidence given for her supposedly being a kidnapper are these blurry computer monitor images. It is often easy to fill in the blanks when something comes from a source the reader or viewer finds untrustworthy: some JFK assassination researchers speculate that the redactions on declassified documents contain the keys to the entire case (Eadon 2019). In this circumstance, we see people filling in the blanks in a different way: shaped by their own unquestioned normative perceptions of the monstrosity and concomitant untrustworthiness of transness and poverty.

In a matter of days, a variety of discourses emerged from this initial viral theorization, from people showing up unannounced at Stella's home to interview her on camera, to creators who had accused her of being a serial killer apologizing to her publicly, to videos by queer creators pointing out the transphobia inherent in comments referencing Buffalo Bill. One such creator asked: "If you were one of the countless people that was saying this account was giving you Buffalo Bill vibes, I really want you to think about why." Videos like this one are critical of the original, normative narrative framing of Stella's content, illustrating the depth and variety of discourses that can circulate around such viral incidents.

Targeted Theories

Through a discourse analysis of this and two other case studies (outlined below), this exploratory research project outlines and defines a new kind of phenomenon taking place on TikTok: that of the viral *targeted theory*: an amateur investigation of an individual creator based on an—often mundane—activity recorded in a TikTok video. Targeted theories are related to online harassment; in many cases they constitute a type of harassment. They are also related to conspiracy theories, but are distinct from them in that targeted theories accuse an *individual*, rather than a *group*, of duplicity.

Research questions for this project include: What are targeted theories, and are they unique to TikTok? How do TikTok's platform affordances create an environment that is (or is not) especially hospitable for targeted theorizing and concomitant discourses? How are the identities of targeted creators who are marginalized exploited and even weaponized as part of targeted theorizing? In what ways do creators who engage in normative discourses (reinforcing the targeted theory), those who engage in critical discourses (challenging the targeted theory), and the creators who are themselves targeted, interact, converse, and influence one another?

This project traces the rise and fall of three case studies of targeted theories on TikTok, and the normative and critical discourses that emerge around them. In addition to Stella, other TikTok creators who have been subject to targeted theorization include The

Daydream Collective,² a person with dissociative identity disorder who was bullied off the platform after being accused of faking their mental illness (Colombo 2022); and Couch Guy, whose “weird vibes” in a video of his long-distance girlfriend surprising him with a visit resulted in speculation that he was cheating.

Almost overnight, these creators became the subject of ridicule and loathing from astounding numbers of TikTok users. Creators who are targeted often become memeified, going so viral that references to them are instantly recognizable. The amateur investigative digilantism (Nhan, Huey, and Broll 2017) of creators who posit targeted theories is based in moral panic: they rally against perceived trafficking or murder (in Stella’s case), lying, lack of authenticity, or attention seeking (The Daydream Collective), and cheating or deception in a monogamous relationship (Couch Guy). Online harassment and logics of morality go hand-in-hand (Marwick 2021).

Further Questions

Some big-picture questions to be answered in future research follow. What are the consequences of targeted theories, for the creators who are targeted, in particular those with marginalized identities? How does targeted theorizing reveal the shapes of existing power structures? That is, how might such crises of virality on TikTok exemplify and reveal the wider system of algorithmic harms (Noble 2018) faced by marginalized people online?

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² The Fantasy Collective is also a pseudonym. Couch Guy was not given a pseudonym due to the fact that his name is not used in public discussions of the incident.

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