

WORKING TITLES

Journal for Practice-Based Research

Issue No. 03/2025:

SPELL CHECK: SPIRITUALISM, SHAMANISM,
SORCERY & the REINCARNATION of the
Occult in Dark Times

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TechnoSpirituality in a TechnoPolitical World: The Algorithmic Sacred and Its Beneficiaries

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Abstract

Mysticism has been reshaped by the rise of technopaganism, an emerging cultural phenomenon where spiritual practices, occult traditions, and magical thinking are mediated through digital platforms and AI-driven algorithms. From the widespread popularity of #WitchTok to algorithmically curated astrological readings, technology has become both a conduit for mysticism and a force that reshapes its meanings. This paper explores how digital culture transforms mystical practices into commodified, hyper-accessible rituals, creating new hierarchies of knowledge and power.

On one hand, technopaganism democratizes esoteric traditions, allowing marginalized spiritual communities to reclaim lost or suppressed practices. On the other, it creates new dependencies on digital infrastructures, where the sacred is filtered through corporate algorithms that prioritize engagement over authenticity. By examining AI-generated divination tools, algorithmic tarot readings, and digital rituals, this study interrogates who benefits from the fusion of mysticism and technology. Are users empowered, or do platform economies extract value from their belief systems?

This paper argues that digital mysticism blurs the line between spiritual empowerment and algorithmic manipulation. While it enables new forms of connection, it also risks turning mysticism into a data-driven spectacle, reinforcing platform capitalism's influence over belief and identity. Understanding technopaganism as both a site of resistance and co-optation is crucial to unpacking the political and economic forces shaping contemporary spiritual practices.

Introduction

„On the surface, technopagans like Pesce embody quite a contradiction: they are Dionysian nature worshippers who embrace the Apollonian artifice of logical machines.“. Eric Davis, 1995.

Mysticism has not disappeared, it has been digitised, reformatted, and monetised. Today's spiritual practices unfold not in secluded groves or ancient temples, but on TikTok's For You Page, where algorithmic curation intersects with magical intention. This transformation marks the rise of technospirituality: a hybrid domain where esoteric traditions are both empowered and constrained by digital infrastructures.

As hashtags like #WitchTok and #AstroTok reach billions of views, they signal more than just cultural curiosity, they reveal a shifting ontology in which the sacred is mediated through opaque recommender systems, user metrics, and engagement loops. At stake is not only how mysticism is practiced, but also who benefits from its datafied forms.

This paper situates these developments within two overlapping frameworks: technopaganism, which foregrounds the digital mediation of spiritual life; and platform capitalism, which exposes the extractive logics embedded in digital ecosystems. Drawing on discussions with high-follower WitchTok creators, it explores how rituals are reshaped, authority redefined, and belief systematized through the mechanics of virality. By analysing this algorithmic sacred, the paper offers a critical lens on the evolving relationship between mysticism, identity, and technological power.

Context and Conceptual Framework

Mystical practice is seldom static. From oracle bones to radio séances, each communications revolution has carried with it a new wave of esoteric possibility. TikTok, and its sibling platforms that rely on opaque, data-hungry recommender systems, marks the most recent inflection point. Within only a few years, hashtags such as #WitchTok, #AstroTok, and #Manifestation have accumulated tens of billions of views, effectively normalising occult discourse inside a commerce-driven attention economy. As St Lawrence observes, the “algorithm holy” has become an organising metaphor for a generation that experiences divination primarily through the For You Page (FYP) rather than through coven, temple, or parish (St. Lawrence 435).

To theorise this shift, I adopt the twin lenses of technopaganism and platform capitalism. Technopaganism frames spiritual practice as fundamentally mediated by, and often indistinguishable from, digital infrastructure; practitioners bend code, filters, and feedback loops into tools of enchantment. Platform capitalism, meanwhile, highlights how those same infrastructures are owned, optimised, and policed by firms that monetise user desire through surveillance-advertising logics (Mohammed et al.). Together these lenses reveal a dialectic: digital media amplifies esoteric creativity and re-territorialises it inside profit-seeking circuits.

Conceptually, I argue that TikTok's recommender algorithm performs three overlapping functions in contemporary mysticism. First, it curates belief by delivering personalised streams of symbolic content that feel serendipitous, even fated. Second, it formats ritual by rewarding short, visually kinetic, sound-tracked performances that can be consumed in under sixty seconds. Third, it stratifies authority by tethering visibility, and thus spiritual credibility, to metrics of virality. A creator whose protection-jar spell garners 3 million views accrues an aura of expertise irrespective of lineage, initiatory status, or community accountability.

This entanglement can be termed as “algorithmic sacred”. It is a zone where software logics substitute, or at least supplement, traditional sources of transcendence, endowing systems of ranking, recommendation, and predictive modelling with an almost theological gravitas (Cotter et al. 5). What distinguishes the 2020s from earlier techno-occult moments is not simply the existence of cyber-mystics, but the unprecedented scale, speed, and extractive intensity with which commercial recommender systems now govern the circulation of the sacred.

Discussions with WitchTok Creators: Methods & the Algorithmic Shaping of Practice

Methodology

To explore how TikTok's algorithm choreographs technospirituality, I designed a five-month observational study (Oct 2024–Feb 2025) using two blank accounts: one attuned to witchcraft, the other neutral. Each scrolled 60 minutes of #WitchTok daily, generating over 48,000 impressions and 1,274 unique videos. Interface walk-throughs and affordance audits revealed how platform design nudges ritual aesthetics. Findings were enriched through informal discussions with several content creators, who reflected on how algorithmic feedback loops shape their magical practice, visibility, and sense of spiritual authority.

Algorithmic Discipline in Everyday Content Production

Across discussions, creators repeatedly described the TikTok algorithm, not deity, tradition, or even audience, as the primary force shaping their craft. “If the FYP is happy, the spell works,” joked Aria, a 27-year-old chaos witch. While the quip was half ironic, it encapsulates a pervasive orientation: creators continually interpret engagement analytics (view-through rate, watch-time, share ratios) as divinatory signals indicating whether their ritual content resonates.

Three recurrent practices emerged. These are 1) structural compression, 2) trend piggy-backing, 3) A/B ritual testing. Regarding structural compression, content creators truncate complex ceremonies into 30-90 second montages, intercut with text overlays that function as mnemonic sigils. Juniper, a British Wiccan, likened editing to “condensing a full-moon rite into a Reels recipe.” The need for compression derives directly from the platform’s algorithmic preference for short-form, loop-friendly clips. Trend piggy-backing is another practice. Creators graft spells onto viral sounds or memes to ride existing momentum. Lux, an Afro-Latinx bruja, insisted that “participating in trends isn’t selling out; it’s hiding the medicine in the candy.” Yet she also acknowledged that refusing to trend often consigns videos to algorithmic obscurity. The final one is A/B ritual testing. Echoing growth-hack jargon, content creators spoke of experimenting with thumbnail colours, caption phrasing, and even candle-flame hues to see what “the algo” favours. Incremental adjustments then feed back into their esoteric repertoire, subtly but cumulatively standardising aesthetics across WitchTok. The resulting convergence is evident in the near-ubiquitous lavender-and-sage colour palette flagged by recent content analyses (Miller 118).

Platform Economies and Sacred Labour

While many creators frame their work as devotional, eleven of twelve also monetise through affiliate links, livestream gifts, or Patreon-hosted extended readings. The boundary between ministry and micro-entrepreneurship blurs: spiritual instruction becomes gig labour. TikTok’s Creator Fund 2.0 (rolled out globally in June 2024) intensifies this blurring by directly tying payouts to watch-time. “Every minute of mystical insight competes with dance challenges for rent money,” remarked Orchid, a 31-year-old tarot reader.

Crucially, however, the lion’s share of economic value still flows upward to the platform owner. TikTok captures advertising revenue, behavioural data, and brand partnerships, converting spiritual expression into a renewable resource for targeted marketing. Billions of #WitchTok views makes clear, occult niches have become lucrative verticals within broader influencer economies (Greschat; Tripadvisor).

Findings: Negotiating Power in the Algorithmic Sacred

Synthesising content creator ideas with extant scholarship, I identify four core findings that illuminate how technopaganism operates as both a site of empowerment and an instrument of extraction.

Curated Serendipity and the Erosion of Initiatory Lineage

TikTok's recommender system engenders what content creators call "guided discovery": the sensation that precisely the right sigil tutorial or planetary candle spell "finds" users at a moment of need. While this serendipity can feel transcendent, it also bypasses traditional gate-keeping structures, elders, covens, apprenticeship, that historically scaffolded esoteric learning. Creators themselves become ephemeral conduits rather than custodians of lineage. This flattening of authority widens access yet attenuates mechanisms of doctrinal accountability, amplifying the spread of syncretic or historically dubious practices (such as "manifest with moon water in a microwave") that would struggle to persist offline.

Aesthetic Convergence and the Homogenisation of Ritual Form

Algorithmic optimisation drives a distinctive visual-aural grammar: pastel filters, crystal-rimmed cauldrons, lofi-hip-hop loops, and on-screen captions in the Papyrus or Cardo typeface. Such convergence fosters communal belonging, but it also standardises magic into easily clickable tropes that prioritise spectacle over depth. Content creators reported feeling pressure to "pretty up" grimoires or omit culturally specific rites that might be less algorithmically palatable. The risk is a feedback spiral where the platform rewards the most polished, consumable iterations of witchcraft, gradually marginalising messier, ethnically rooted, or politically radical expressions.

Datafication of the Sacred and New Hierarchies of Visibility

Digital metrics become proxies for spiritual efficacy. Spells or readings that "flop" (sub-1 % engagement) are interpreted as energetically weak; those that "pop" (10 % +) reinforce the creator's perceived mastery. Yet visibility hinges less on metaphysical potency than on compliance with algorithmic preferences, such as optimal lighting, 8-second hook, keyword-dense captions. Consequently, a new hierarchy emerges in which data literacy, knowing how to exploit analytics dashboards, SEO-style tagging, and cross-platform syndication, supplants esoteric lineage as the benchmark of authority.

Partial Empowerment Amid Structural Extraction

All content creators narrated tangible benefits: expanded peer networks, crowdsourced knowledge exchange, supplemental income, and a sense of reclaiming magic from patriarchal religions. Nevertheless, the structural asymmetry remains stark. TikTok can demonetise, shadow-ban, or de-platform at will, rendering creators' livelihoods precarious. Moreover, user engagement generates datasets that fuel TikTok's ad-targeting engine, meaning that the affective labour of crafting sigils inadvertently trains machine-learning models optimised for brand conversions. As one content creator lamented, "The algorithm is the real energy vampire."

Conclusion: Toward a Critical Techno-Mystical Literacy

This perspective has traced how digital infrastructures reconfigure the sacred into what might be called algorithmic spirituality: a paradigm wherein the discovery, performance, and validation of mystical practice are inseparable from platform logics. The WitchTok case illustrates a broader tension that will likely intensify as generative-AI divination apps, immersive XR temples, and blockchain-verified spell markets enter the field.

For scholars, the task is twofold: (1) to map the emergent grammars through which platforms choreograph spiritual affect, and (2) to interrogate the political-economic architectures that capture value from those affects. For practitioners, a parallel project of critical techno-mystical literacy is imperative, one that equips users to navigate algorithmic enchantment without surrendering autonomy or tradition.

Regulators and platform designers, finally, must reckon with spiritual content as more than a quirky subgenre of influencer culture. When engagement optimisation collides with belief formation, downstream harms extend beyond misinformation to encompass identity foreclosure, cultural appropriation, and the commodification of collective imaginaries. Mitigating these harms will require transparency measures (such as auditable recommendation protocols) and participatory governance that includes esoteric communities themselves.

The algorithmic sacred is here to stay. Whether it evolves into a liberatory commons or a data-mined pantheon depends on power relations still in flux, relations that every looped candle flame, every swipe-induced tarot spread, silently renegotiates.

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The author wishes to thank **Busra Begcecanli** for the open (non-blind) peer review.