#RushTok: An Evaluation of Event-Based Communities on TikTok

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1 Research Summary

Short-form video platforms, like TikTok, are increasingly gaining popularity as communication hubs; people progressively turn to them as a source of information, community, and connection. In previous years, it has become clear that the sway of online TikTok communities can have a huge impact on real-world events, such as when the K-pop community of TikTok nearly sold out a Trump rally or BookTok's recent role in the sale of two million copies of a 2012 book with an initial print-run of 20,000 [1, 7].

In the realm of social media, TikTok's unique ecosystem intertwines algorithmic processes with user-generated content, fostering distinct, algorithmically driven communities. Due to TikTok's focus on the algorithm-based *for you* page over the traditional network-based feed, content is able to go viral in ways that we have not seen on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. New types of algorithmically-driven communities and interactions form through the algorithmic focus of TikTok. Users find themselves members of a community through algorithmic influence instead of traditional opt-in methods, such as choosing to join a Facebook group or subreddit. Within this landscape, they navigate where algorithmic identity merges with the platform's culture, shaping their experiences and expressions within imposed boundaries [2].

Users rely on *folk theories* to make sense of social platforms, developing intuitive frameworks to understand algorithmic curation [5, 6]. On TikTok, self-expression becomes a negotiation with algorithms, challenging users to assert their identities amidst a sea of viral content [3]. While the platform's design may encourage replication, users resist this reductionism through intentional profile curation and the appropriation of memes for personal expression [4].

The interplay between algorithmic identity and TikTok's culture shapes the expression of identity within the platform, as users actively engage with the algorithmic culture while asserting their individuality [8]. This dynamic landscape reveals the evolving nature of digital interactions and self-presentation, highlighting users' agency in negotiating their identities and shaping digital sociality [4].

In essence, TikTok has emerged as a dynamic space where users negotiate, assert, and resist, reshaping the boundaries of identity and creativity in the digital age [10]. Through the lens of algorithmic identity and cultural dynamics, we aim to uncover the intricate interplay between algorithmic processes, user identities, and the construction of digital communities, ultimately reshaping our understanding of online communities.

Although there are many examples of algorithmically-driven communities on TikTok, such as BookTok, my current work focuses on a particular subset of these communities that I define to be event-based communities. These communities are driven together around real-world (and often recurring) events through shared qualities of algorithmized identities. Creators involved with an event can spring to instant virality and suddenly have a committed audience viewing their

videos. In contrast, creators on network-focused social platforms have typically spent significant time developing their specific brand and growing a dedicated audience. In essence, creators involved with event-based communities are becoming *instant influencers*, complete with the monetary benefits often associated with influencers.

A prime example of an event-based community is the group surrounding the annual University of Alabama Sorority Recruitment (i.e., the rush process), known as Bama Rush or RushTok. Thousands of TikTok users have found themselves captivated by rush-based content for the past few years. Discussions pop up in the comment sections, and some community members create videos analyzing the event itself. Many of the women creating content while rushing have gained substantial followings and are now influencers in their own right.

Given TikTok's expanding role as a source of information and news [9], understanding how users interact with event-based communities is increasingly critical, especially in the context of emerging and new social movements or events. This is particularly notable in the context of upcoming U.S. elections, where engagement could shape future events, policy decisions, and political discourse. While RushTok is a far cry from the upcoming U.S. Presidential election, it provides an established event-based community to learn from. The insights I gain from studying this community will be critical in identifying and evaluating future event-based communities.

My research seeks to ask the questions central to the evolving dynamics of information sharing in the digital age. My ultimate goal is to develop a holistic understanding of user behavior, trends, motivations, and community dynamics within these algorithmically-driven digital communities.

I am currently in the process of a qualitative review of RushTok's content. I first collected a comprehensive dataset through web scraping of publicly available TikTok videos, specifically those tagged with relevant community-specific hashtags such as #BamaRush and #RushTok. TikToks from popular RushTok creators were also added when community-specific hashtags were not used. Videos using these hashtags but unrelated to the specific event of the University of Alabama's rush week were excluded. I am currently in the process of a qualitative thematic analysis, where I am conducting iterative rounds of coding to discern recurring themes and motifs within the content. Once completed, I will analyze the data using a grounded theory approach. This thematic analysis process captures the content's textual and visual elements and underlying context, allowing for an in-depth understanding of its nature and relevance within the community.

The next stage of my project is to evaluate the users involved with the community. First, I will explore the content creators' and influencers' roles in event-based communities through semi-structured interviews. This study will examine their motivations for participating in these digital communities, explore how their involvement influences their lives, shed light on the consequences they face when the community event reaches its conclusion, and assess their level of awareness regarding their affiliation with the community. Publicly available contact information will be leveraged to initiate the engagement. Subsequently, a snowball sampling methodology will be employed to reach additional content creators, thus expanding the breadth and diversity of the participant pool.

The second part of the study will focus on casual participants in the community, such as viewers and commenters. My primary objective is to comprehend how individuals become community members and gauge the extent of involvement required for casual participants to perceive themselves as active community members. To do this, I will use a structured survey to gather data on motivations and engagement patterns from a broad range of participants. Targeted recruitment strategies, like advertisements in relevant spaces, will aim to engage those who might otherwise stay uninvolved. The

survey questions will explore participants' RushTok experiences, engagement patterns, motivations, perceptions of the community, and reflections on their online participation.

My exploration of algorithmically-driven communities on TikTok, particularly within the context of event-based communities like RushTok, will shed light on the evolving landscape of digital sociality. The interplay between algorithmic identity and cultural dynamics will not only shape our understanding of how users express themselves but also how communities form and evolve within these platforms. This research will contribute to a nuanced view of user behavior and the role of platforms like TikTok in shaping online discourse and real-world engagement.

2 Statement of Interest

I would love to participate in the upcoming #AoIR2024 Doctoral Colloquium. This event provides a vital platform for PhD students in internet research to engage with senior scholars, enabling us to delve into the nuances of our work. With the current surge of interest in algorithmic identity and cultural dynamics on platforms like TikTok, this colloquium offers a timely opportunity to explore my work in the context of innovative internet research. Through this forum, I aim to gain insights into methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and practical challenges in studying the evolving landscape of digital sociality. Additionally, I am excited about the opportunity to connect with other PhD students currently working on similar topics, fostering valuable discussions and potential collaborations that can further enrich our research endeavors. Connecting with established scholars and fellow emerging researchers will undoubtedly enhance my understanding and contribute to the advancement of my research on TikTok's influence on online discourse and real-world engagement.

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