How Real is the Illuminati?

Investigating Open Source Conspiracism in the age of Black Lives Matter and Vigilant Citizen(s)

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Summary of Key Findings

Our inductive approach to co-hashtags on TikTok over the course of 2021 suggests that *hashtag stuffing* is the very means through which everything becomes (literally) connected and conspiracy theories grow. The highly relational 'language' of co-hashtags might therefore be thought of as a kind of *apophenic grammar*, and our analysis suggests that this grammar is responsible for the convergence of conspiracy theory and spirituality content to conjure 'conspirituality' (cf. Ward & Voas 2011; Beres, Remski, & Walker in press). Though this finding foregrounds the agency of TikTok's platform affordances or 'technical inscription' (Akrich 1992), our cross-platform studies of Beyoncé-related conspiracy theories reveal that *performative user behaviour* is also responsible for the growth, spread, weaponization, mutation, and reclamation of conspiracy theories in the age of the social web. On Instagram, the #VigilantCitizen hashtag is used to signal surveillance and reconnaissance efforts that resemble a paranoid perversion of OSINT, while our analysis of Twitter and YouTube suggests that contemporary conspiracism often draws its strength from strange kinds of fandom.

1. Introduction

The principal aim of this project was to understand the key traits of 'open source conspiracism'. Open source conspiracism resembles OSINT through its investigative aesthetic style and emphasis on 'doing your own research', yet it serves to distort truth and meaning through sensationalist acts of (mis)hearing and (mis)reading. Longstanding conspiracy theories resemble records that are remixed and weaponized by various web users, especially in the case of 'the Illuminati' (a secret organization of nefarious global elites that is understood to have its roots in Bavaria during the Enlightenment).

The main case study concerns the popular music icon Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z, a power couple who have been linked with the Illuminati on the Vigilant Citizen conspiracy theory website since 2009. In 2016, the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones cast Beyoncé's Super Bowl half-time performance as an attempt to initiate a race war, while other conservative commentators criticized the appearance of her backup dancers (dressed as Black Panthers on the 50th anniversary of the party). In 2020, the Congressional candidate K.W. Miller claimed on Twitter that Beyoncé is actually an Italian woman called Ann Marie Lastrassi. Miller seems to have 'discovered the truth' about Beyoncé being Italian via a speculative Instagram comment, and his #QAnon dog whistle was a deliberate misappropriation of black vernacular conspiracism with white supremacist overtones.

While this case study foregrounds issues of convergence and misappropriation in terms of racialized conspiracy theories, the project also sought to investigate a more general logic of connection through which conspiracy theories operate (cf. Barkun 2013) – especially in the age of digital platforms such as TikTok. Focusing on a co-hashtag TikTok dataset from 2021, we took an inductive approach to the growth and spread of conspiracy theories on this prominent platform and sought to understand the ways in which conspiratorial clusters interface with other clusters (such as spirituality content and alt-right sentiments).

At stake in this project was the question of how online speculation becomes reframed as 'evidence' through a perversion of OSINT's key principles; the question of how similar conspiracy theories operate across different social media platforms; and the question of what drives the growth and spread of conspiracy theories in the age of the social web.

2. Initial Data Sets

[RQ1]

Reddit: A dataset of 638 comments from r/conspiracy and r/conspiracy_commons mentioning the keyword "vigilant citizen" within the timeframe 12/11/09 to 5/1/23.

Instagram: The initial dataset comprised mentions of the hashtag #VigilantCitizen. The most prevalent co-hashtags were #illuminati, #hollyweird and #secretsociety. Close reading of 85 #illuminati posts was used to retrieve 56 images conforming to the 'one eye covered' trope.

[RQ2]

Reddit: A dataset of 210 posts from r/conspiracy mentioning 'Beyoncé' AND 'Illuminati' from 2012 to date.

4chan: A dataset of 128 posts from /pol/ mentioning 'Beyoncé' AND 'Illuminati' from 2013 to date.

Twitter: A dataset of 101 unique tweets mentioning 'Beyoncé' AND 'Illuminati' within a ten-day time window to date.

[RQ3]

The initial dataset comprised all YouTube comments on the following Beyoncé music videos: *Crazy In Love* (2009) (n = 66,166); *Run The World* (2011) (n = 238,865); *Hold Up* (2016) (n = 75,182); *APESHIT* (2018) (n = 176,436). This dataset was subsequently filtered (see methodology section).

[RQ4]

A custom network of co-hashtags on TikTok from 2020 to 2022 obtained using conspiracy theory keyword snowballing.

3. Research Questions

RQ1) How is Vigilant Citizen content used as OSINT 'evidence' by conspiratorial web users on Reddit and Instagram?

RQ2) What recurring tropes have emerged in YouTube comment sections around the term Illuminati in various Beyoncé music videos? What different kinds of user behaviour and 'performance personae' can be heard in these comment sections?

RQ3) What are the recurring tropes, themes, and narratives that contribute to Beyoncé-related conspiracy theories on Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter? How are these ideas expressed differently between the platforms?

RQ4) Can we take an inductive approach to the growth and spread of conspiracy theories through the use of co-hashtags on TikTok? Can we identify distinct narratives (e.g. Bill Gates, The Great Reset), or do they all blur together? How do specific hashtags develop over time? What is the significance of their relative proximity to other hashtags?

4. Methodology

[RQ1]

[Reddit] The CrowdTangle link checker tool (Chrome plugin) was used to see which subreddits refer to vigilantcitizen.com most often (the top two were r/conspiracy and r/conspiracy_commons). 4CAT was then used to search these subreddits for posts mentioning the keyword "vigilant citizen" (n = 638). First, we imported this corpus into Voyant tools to carry out some 'background listening' and generate a collocates graph.

Second, we used the Jason Davies word tree tool in order to generate a word tree visualisation with 'vigilant citizen' as the stem. Third, word frequency analysis was used to see which terms were most used in the corpus. Fourth, we listened closely to selected comments in order to triangulate the impressions obtained from the 'background listening'. [Instagram] Zeeschuimer was used to collect the initial dataset. Following close reading of Instagram posts with both #VigilantCitizen and #Illuminati co-hashtags, 56 images from the dataset conforming to the 'one eye covered' or 'black eye club' trope were downloaded. The pictures were layered on top of one another using low opacity settings in Photoshop in order to generate a visualisation of the material passed on to Vigilant Citizen by his following of volunteer 'OSINT researchers'.

[RQ2]

The four initial YouTube comment datasets were collected using Bernhard Rieder's YouTube Data Tools. The datasets were then filtered in order to make conspiratorial discourse more audible. Five filtering terms were used: 'Illuminati', 'Pale White Horse', 'puppet', 'occult', and 'Satan'. This resulted in the following YouTube comment sub-corpora: *Crazy In Love* (n = 520); *Run The World* (n = 2448); *Hold Up* (n = 1661); *APESHIT* (n = 5190). We then filtered the sub-corpora for time-coded comments or TCCs (cf. Bell 2020) in order to see which moments in each video were most associated with conspiratorial discourse. The video frames for these moments were extracted in order to create visualisations (the larger the video still, the more TCCs it represents). A random sample of 200 comments from each sub-corpora was then extracted in order to perform manual content analysis and develop a typology of user personae. Each comment was evaluated for its rhetoric, tone, and content. The relative prominence of different personae in each of the four sub-corpora was subsequently visualised as a colour-coded bump chart generated using RAWGraphs.

[RQ3]

Using annotation/checkbox options within the 4CAT explorer interface, we carried out close reading (Smith 2016) on all three datasets in order to develop an inductive coding scheme. The relative prominence of each theme in each dataset was subsequently visualised using a colour-coded RAWGraphs bar chart. Additionally, we used 4CAT to extract all co-words associated with 'Beyoncé' AND 'Illuminati' in each dataset (excluding stopwords) and selected the option for trigrams (i.e. three co-words). We then ran the co-word network option in 4CAT and downloaded the resulting .gexf files in order to produce trigram visualisations in Gephi. In each case, we used Gephi's Force Atlas algorithm to

adjust and expand the layout of the trigram visualisations. The visualisations were then exported as .png files.

[RQ4]

The TikTok data was initially collected by Marc Tuters using Zeeschuimer and then imported into 4CAT. Snowballing was used during the collection process: known conspiratorial terms such as 'adrenochrome' were used as starting points in order to obtain other associated hashtags and thus a co-hashtag network. The data was initially split up by year and by quarter, with draft network graphs created for each quarter. Then, day intervals were employed for the entire date range 2020–2022 and this dataset was imported into Gephi to develop a visual and dynamic graph. However, the sheer volume of data resulted in too much noise, so having looked at a monthly post distribution histogram in 4CAT we decided to target a key three-month growth period (December 2020 to February 2021). To improve the visibility of this less noisy network, we ranked all nodes by average weighted degree: hashtags with a weighted degree under 100 were filtered out. We also filtered out strategic hashtags that were clearly attempts to get increased exposure on TikTok (such as #4u, #fyp, and #xyabca). Finally, 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 using 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. Screen capture software (QuickTime) was subsequently used to generate a video of network change over time. Still images of the network were also exported in order to show the different clusters more clearly.

5. Findings

[RQ1]

The Reddit analysis revealed that the Vigilant Citizen website is primarily referenced as a good source of information, while the most referenced conspiracy theory components were mind control and MK Ultra. Sometimes users referred to Vigilant Citizen generally, but at other times they mentioned specific articles. The more surprising finding concerns the Instagram analysis: rather than recommendation references, we found that users were *performing open source investigations on behalf of Vigilant Citizen* by bringing occult symbolism to his attention through the use of the #VigilantCitizen hashtag. This legion of

voluntary 'OSINT' practitioners can be understood to be doing surveillance or reconnaissance work on behalf of the conspiracy theorist.

[RQ2]

Ten 'performance personae' were identified during the coding procedure: *The theorist* (users theorising about the artist's involvement at length); *The Accuser* (users loudly accusing the artist of Illuminati affiliation without providing 'evidence' or a specific theory/explanation); *The Satirist* (users that satirically engaged with the artist's supposed Illuminati involvement); *The Conspiracy Denouncer* (users criticising conspiratorial sentiments); *The Lyric Quoter* (users referring to the lyric 'Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess from the 2016 single *Formation*); *Christians* (comments with strong religious imagery or references to the Bible); *The Solicitor* (users trying to obtain exposure or financial gain); *The Spammer* (spam comments); *The Confused* (users that are unsure of the veracity of conspiratorial claims); *Miscellaneous* (comments that do not fit into the other nine categories).

The *Run the World* sub-corpus was the main site for conspiratorial discourse, and analysis of time-coded comments (TCCs) revealed that the religious and occult imagery in the music video was much commented on. We found that *The Accuser* was the most prominent performance persona across all four videos. *Run the World* and *Hold Up* were the most prominent 'breeding grounds' for *The Theorist*. However, in terms of change over time, it is significant that the theorist persona fell from second place to fourth place between 2016 and 2018. Additionally, we found that there was more accusation in comments on videos featuring Beyoncé only compared to those featuring Beyoncé and Jay-Z as a duo.

[RQ3]

Nine prominent themes were identified through the content analysis: *Christianity* (especially the idea that the Church is a front for Illuminati operations); *Symbolism* (especially in terms of references to 'all-seeing-eye' imagery and numerology); *Satanism / The Occult* (especially accusations that allege celebrity involvement in Satanic or occult practices); *US Politics* (especially the idea that politics and the culture wars are just a charade overseen by the Illuminati); *Celebrities, pop culture, and the entertainment industry* (especially the idea that the entertainment industry is an Illuminati control mechanism and that celebrities are either puppets or clones programmed by the Illuminati elite); *Hierarchy within the Illuminati* (especially the idea that the real Illuminati leaders remain hidden from public view); *Gender and sexuality* (especially 'transvestigations' theories and fake pregnancy accusations); *Racism* (racist sentiments directed towards celebrities of

colour and comments with white supremacist overtones); *Antisemitism* (either accusations of Illuminati/Nazi collusion with reference to the antisemitic pronouncements of Kanye West or, in contrast, overtly antisemitic user sentiments).

The cross-platform analysis revealed that there is a significant difference between Twitter and the other two platforms in terms of the *gender and sexuality*, *antisemitism,* and *racism* categories. The greatest level of scepticism and disagreement could be found on 4chan, Reddit contained the most prominent level of conspiratorial speculation, while the Twitter analysis revealed a far lower level of hate speech and much more engagement from users that resembled Beyoncé fans. The most surprising finding concerned *the celebration of Beyoncé as an 'Illuminati Queen' on Twitter*, a gesture that is indicative of broader patterns of reclamation and celebration performed by the 'Bey Hive' (loyal Beyoncé fans and their allies).

[RQ4]

Six colour-coded hashtag clusters were identified through the analysis: *mainstream news* (blue), *conspiracy* (green), *spirituality* (orange), *wealth and the elite* (yellow), *the globalist agenda* (red), and *the alt-right* (violet). During the key three-month growth period (December 2020 to February 2021), a significant shift in the spirituality cluster occurred, with an increase in connections to the conspiracy cluster. Orange spirituality nodes with a high weighted degree such as #starseed also moved further towards the green conspiracy cluster. Terms previously belonging to the spirituality group slowly became the preferred choice of conspiracy theorists, with #reptiles being a key point of connection. During the targeted three-month period, we also found that spiritualist language started to creep into COVID-19 scepticism.

6. Discussion

[RQ1]

The Reddit analysis foregrounds not only a logic of recommendation but also a process of *legitimacy exchange* (cf. Turner 2006: 84) whereby the Vigilant Citizen website is invoked for the sake of accruing more authority within the two conspiratorial subreddits. The practice of linking to the Vigilant Citizen website could also be understood in more Tardean terms as a kind of *prestige imitation* (cf. Spencer 2023) given the conspiracy theorist's longevity and reputation within a wider conspiratorial landscape. The Instagram analysis reveals a kind of *collaborative conspiracism* that is reminiscent of the *research cypher* encountered during earlier analysis of Vigilant Citizen user comments. There is also a significant irony to consider. The quasi-OSINT investigators that work on Vigilant

Citizen's behalf actually consolidate the very state of surveillance that is wont to fuel conspiratorial attitudes. To put it another way, this user behaviour is in fact somewhat reminiscent of the 'research and analysis' activities run by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in the USA during the 1940s (cf. Shapiro 2023). Notwithstanding the overtones of surveillance and reconnaissance, there are other kinds of hashtag practices in Vigilant Citizen-related Instagram posts that need to be considered in further research. In particular, it will be important to consider the way that users take inspiration from Vigilant Citizen while at the same time vocalising new conspiratorial connections. A key example of this is an Instagram post that draws inspiration from the Vigilant Citizen motto ('Symbols rule the world, not words or laws') and then (over)analyses the Bluetooth symbol before ending with hashtag stuffing that promotes 5G conspiracy theories.

[RQ2]

The prominence of the *Accuser* performance persona across all four videos suggests that the so-called 'New Conspiracism' (Rosenblum & Muirhead 2019) has been a prominent part of popular music reception for some time. Although long and elaborate theories about Beyoncé's Illuminati involvement do occasionally appear in YouTube comments (the longest being 1761 words), short and emotive one-liners are more commonplace. The subtle differences between the Beyonce-only sub-corpora and the Beyonce and Jay-Z sub-corpora warrants further reflection. Notwithstanding the significant amount of speculation relating to Jay-Z within the sphere of hip-hop counterknowledge during the 2000s (Gosa 2011), is it the case that Beyoncé is now the more targeted figure due to the rise of far-right conspiracism (and its inherent misogynoir)?

[RQ3]

The most significant finding concerns fan behaviour on Twitter whereby Beyoncé becomes celebrated as the 'Illuminati Queen'. This can be understood as an act of *reclamation on the part of Beyoncé fans within the wider context of Black Twitter* (e.g. Redmond 2017). The finding also affords renewed reflection on Turner's (1993) notion of 'Topsy/Eva Cycles', the idea that there has been a separate circulation of similar rumours in white and black communities throughout the history of the United States. Rather than thinking in terms of separate echo chambers, it becomes possible to hear perverse kinds of *echo effects* and a greater degree of conspiratorial exchange or mutation. Future work could examine these *echo effects* in greater detail through a chronological account of the 'Anne Marie Lastrassi' conspiracy theory (the claim that Beyoncé is actually an Italian woman). Though voiced on Twitter as a #QAnon dog whistle with white supremacist overtones, the name Anne Marie Lastrassi was subsequently alluded to in various memes on Twitter and even became a term of endearment among Beyoncé fans.

[RQ4]

The analysis of hashtag stuffing on TikTok raises a number of important questions. To what extent is conspiratorial hashtag stuffing a kind of cybernetic language whereby users are speaking in a quasi-algorithmic manner? How consciously is this language deployed – and what other kinds of choreography are in play (whether in terms of algorithmic mechanisms, agential agendas on the part of users, or platform agendas on the part of TikTok)? How are we to approach the 'grammar' of co-hashtags in future research while negotiating the considerable problem presented by 'Poe's Law' (the opacity of intent and valence in many online contexts)? The hashtag stuffing encountered during this research may well encourage a (re)consideration of Barthes's distinction between phenotext and genotext as well as Baudrillard's notion of the floating signifier.

7. Conclusion

From the RQ4 sub-project, we can infer that TikTok's spirituality community has become an important point of departure for conspiratorial content. Similarly, our analyses of Vigilant Citizen remediation (RQ1) and Beyoncé-related conspiracy theories (RQ2 & RQ3) suggest that popular culture and fandom overlap with conspiracism in uncanny ways. When thinking about convergence, it is important to consider whether we are dealing with a convergence of belief, a convergence of sociality, or a convergence of content. Holistically, this project offers several valuable perspectives on convergences of content and on relations between different kinds of users, and the suggestive findings encourage further research that pursues a greater degree of nuance.

Writing about hip-hop conspiracism, Gosa (2011: 195) notes that there have been "interesting alliance(s)" in the past between black rappers such as KRS-One and right-wing conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones. But in an era in which QAnon followers misappropriate black vernacular conspiracism, as was the case with K.W. Miller's 'Ann Marie Lastrassi' tweet in 2020, it is more important than ever to consider power dynamics and (dis)equilibrium when studying conspiratorial convergences of different kinds. One way forward would be to continue the study of linking practices as in the RQ1 sub-project, possibly with greater reference to Tardean perspectives on imitation. This may enable the development of a typology that provides a more detailed picture of specific kinds of relationality (be it in terms of content, sociality, or belief).

In terms of technical and methodological limitations, it should be noted that the RQ4 sub-project relied on Gephi's data-driven modularity algorithm rather than semantic analysis, which may have led to the ambiguous or incorrect categorisation of some hashtags. Yet

the inductive approach used in this study is novel and promising in terms of future methodological strategies, which could well use manual semantic filtering on top of Gephi's modularity algorithm to ensure the correctness of hashtag classification.

Finally, notwithstanding the aforementioned issue of what exactly is converging or overlapping, we might well conclude that the most significant difference the internet has made to conspiracy theories is to catalyse moments of context collapse (cf. Gaunt 2015) and to choreograph recursive speculation sampling that produces multidirectional echo effects. As Jackson Jr (2015: 165) reflects, the internet possesses a weird ability "to make the erstwhile 'fringe' look glossier and more mainstream than it actually is", and this project suggests that contemporary conspiracism draws its strength through a selectively permeable membrane that interfaces with both mainstream and esoteric online spheres.

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