

Disguised as Entertainment: How TikTok's Algorithm Amplifies Dominant Ideologies Through
Viral Trends

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04:567:333: Media & Popular Culture

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May 10, 2026

Introduction

With close to 2 billion active users worldwide, TikTok has positioned itself as one of the most influential social media platforms of the digital age (Slotta, 2026). Revolutionizing short-form content through its algorithmic interface, TikTok has “reshaped the social media landscape,” altering how users consume content (Setyon, 2025). By encouraging engagement through rapid, continuous scrolling, TikTok’s algorithm delivers immediate entertainment to users on the platform’s ‘For You’ page (Alshamiri, 2024; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Organized around trends, TikTok incentivizes participatory creative expression through mimetic engagement (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), acting as a site of cultural production (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023).

TikTok’s algorithm prioritizes videos that generate high engagement but remain similar to existing trends (Cotter, 2019), reinforcing dominant discourses while limiting users’ exposure to alternative perspectives. With its recommendation systems prioritizing familiar themes, aesthetics, sounds, and challenges, TikTok structurally encourages imitation and repetition rather than uniqueness (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023). As aesthetics are closely connected to a user’s visibility on the platform (Issar, 2024), algorithms are amplifying and reinforcing recurring cultural patterns, shaping what becomes widely disseminated to audiences. This alters user perceptions and beliefs, as TikTok helps shape “personalized narratives about individuals and the world” (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023).

By analyzing three widely circulated trends on TikTok – Girl Math, Tradwife, and Hustle Culture – I will explore how the algorithm prioritizes engaging and familiar content that contributes to the reinforcement of dominant ideologies. I will combine Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, Herbert Marcuse’s technological rationality and Stuart Hall’s

argument that audiences are not passive recipients of media messages to support my analysis. In this paper, I argue that TikTok functions as a site of cultural production where short-form content embeds and amplifies hegemonic ideologies through entertaining trends, even as users simultaneously reinforce, reinterpret, or resist these meanings.

Theoretical Lens

Expanding on Marxist theory, Antonio Gramsci argues that in capitalist societies, the ruling class maintains power through both domination and the production of consent among subordinate groups, in a process he calls cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985, p. 568). Gramsci emphasizes how this consent is actively manufactured, leading “the great masses” to internalize and accept beliefs – or ideologies – that reflect elitist perspectives (Lears, 1985, p. 568). With ideology continuously “produced and reproduced,” ruling classes can manipulate culture to align with their worldview until it becomes accepted as a common sense norm (Lears, 1985, p. 568). By analyzing how TikTok algorithms amplify certain trends, this framework helps explain how dominant ideologies are reproduced through algorithmically visible content on users’ For You Page.

Social media platforms, such as TikTok, are not neutral tools, as they often function as inherently political technologies (Winner, 1980), where they profit and favor a dominant group. In this case, TikTok’s algorithm helps shape social discourse, determining which videos become visible to the masses. Because recommendation algorithms prioritize content that keeps users engaged and immersed in their screens, the design of these algorithms is not only political but amplifies content that aligns with dominant social norms and reinforces already popular cultural discourses.

While algorithms determine which trends gain visibility, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model help explain how these trends communicate ideological meaning through their humor, aesthetics, and visual presentation. Hall emphasizes how these "codes," including social norms, visual signs, or shared cultural meanings, are used to communicate ideology through "particular discourses," allowing these beliefs and values to appear normal and natural within media contexts (Hall, 1980, p. 123). For example, travel TikToks may feature drone shots, upbeat music, luxury hotels, and curated color palettes to communicate ideas about freedom and success, framing wealth and consumerism as desirable, achievable lifestyles.

As algorithms help shape and circulate the visibility of these encoded meanings, users aren't just passively absorbing information, they are actively shaping or resisting cultural meanings. Unlike earlier mass media theorists, like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer from the Frankfurt School, Stuart Hall argued that media recipients have agency, as he notes, "unless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (Hall, 1980, p. 125). While the platform still structurally shapes meaning through "some...limits and parameters," TikTok does not function as a deterministic technology, as it is the users who interpret meaning. However, because TikTok is algorithmically trained for personalization, utilizing user data, including "clicks, reviews, likes, shares, and comments" – even forms of resistance, like writing a negative comment, continue to drive algorithmic amplification (Shin & Jitkajornwanich, 2024, p. 1024).

Herbert Marcuse's concept of technological rationality supports this reasoning, as he viewed technology not as a neutral tool, but as a means of domination. Marcuse argues that "Technological rationality has become political rationality" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 47), suggesting that algorithmic systems are shaping what humans deem necessary and normal rather than the

other way around. TikTok algorithmically decides what videos are important based on engagement data; this all influences what users think about, what trends they follow, or alter how they interpret content. Rather than users questioning the videos on their For You Page, users are adapting their own behaviors to the needs of the machine in hopes of becoming successful.

Analysis

Living in a digital era, society increasingly relies on technological platforms, like TikTok, which structure social discourse, as it combines cultural, political, and economic systems that shape how popular meanings are produced, internalized, and further circulated (Marcuse, 1964, p. 47). Through this process, TikTok not only continuously circulates content that gains virality, but the videos that become culturally relevant also influence everyday speech, as users may adopt new phrases into their offline communication. One example of this phenomenon is the viral trend known as “Girl Math.” Girl Math references flawed financial logic that women use to humorously justify their spending habits (Kawata, 2023). The justifications often entail turning monetary expenses into a net positive experience, as women across the platform share how purchases under five dollars are automatically “free,” buying on sale quantifies a saving, or free shipping warrants more spending to avoid a shipping charge. These financial irresponsibilities are reframed as “logic,” allowing the ideology embedded within these videos to appear harmless, as it is disguised by humor.

In one TikTok video, creator @sydwingold sits with her father explaining girl math to him, sharing her financial justifications for various scenarios. During one part, she mentions, “If I buy something at a store and I return it...when I return [the purchase] I’m actually making money.” The video cuts to a close-up view of her father’s face who immediately starts laughing with a grin across his face, as he shakes his head in utter disbelief over the absurdity of her

reasoning. The humor of the video is reinforced through several visual and auditory cues. As Hall (1980) argues, “codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses” (p. 123). The video repeatedly cuts to the father’s reaction, helping to guide audience interpretation of the daughter’s reasoning as non-sensical yet entertaining. Additionally, the creator altered her and her dad’s voices to sound high-pitched, which not only enhances the video’s comedic tone but frames the video’s “logic” as unserious rather than financially concerning. Through these codes, the ideological assumptions are softened as users focus more on the humor and relatability of the video, which position irresponsible spending as socially acceptable and entertaining.

The juxtaposition between both the father and the daughter’s clothing also communicates meaning. While the daughter appears to wear casual, girly attire, as she’s dressed in a brown fluffy coat, the dad is dressed in business-professional clothing with a button-down and black zip-up jacket. The father’s attire positions him as more official or reliable, signifying a sense of financial discipline. This dynamic is commonly featured as part of the trend, where women explain their reasoning to male figures whose reactions frame the logic as irrational. Although appearing as humorous, these interactions subtly reinforce stereotypical gender norms, especially in regards to financial management.

By disguising these stereotypes through humor and entertainment, the audience may not even realize the ideological assumptions at play, illustrating Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, where dominant ideologies become “internally persuasive rather than merely authoritative” (Lears, 1985, p. 591). Rather than explicitly instructing the audience on what to believe, the persuasive elements are not only the embedded codes, but the trend normalizes these

implicit ideologies through repetition and participation. The video innocuously hides its stereotypical nature, allowing gendered assumptions to circulate as a commonsense narrative.

TikTok's algorithmic structure also amplifies these dominant gender ideologies by rewarding highly engaging and easily replicable content with greater visibility across users' For You Pages. As the trend becomes more widely amplified, creators often follow similar structures by using humor or having the presence of a male figure to align with other successful videos. Since "limitation and replication have become the central creative logic of the platform," not only were these videos becoming more popular through increased circulation, but the ideological harm and sexist nature were often minimized as the content was framed as harmless entertainment.

While Girl Math frames irresponsible spending through humor, the Tradwife trend frames domesticity as a luxury and a desire through aesthetics. The Tradwife, short for 'traditional wife,' is a trend that promotes a lifestyle built around patriarchal gender norms, where women return to subservient roles in the home. Influencer Nara Smith has become the face of the trend, generating over 12 million TikTok followers. Characterized by her eccentric, high-fashion outfits, Nara's content focuses on cooking meals from scratch while using a calm ASMR-style voiceover. Her, and other Tradwife influencers, tend to gain more traction as 'comfort content' – characterized by its slow pace and calming effects – hold user attention for longer, which the algorithm rewards with more visibility. As a participant with online critical awareness observed in Issar's study (2024), "The TikTok algorithm's aesthetic assessments directly impact a user's visibility on the platform" (p. 5391). While this does not indicate that the algorithm chooses visually attractive content, it suggests that creators who conform to aesthetically pleasing formats are more likely to gain visibility, as users may find that content more appealing. As a result,

many Tradwife influencers strategically design their content around soft lighting, ASMR audios, luxury kitchens, and femininity aesthetics.

While Smith's videos heavily rely on depictions of luxury, it is her "from-scratch" obsession that keeps users engaged, as many are intrigued, yet critical over the absurdity of her cooking. In one TikTok, Smith makes a homemade ice cream sundae entirely from scratch – even including the sprinkles – simply because her husband told her he wanted something sweet. This video frames domesticity as desirable, as it's aestheticized through wealth, beauty, and femininity. Smith appears in a highly eccentric white outfit designed with ruffles, while wearing gold jewelry, and a full-face of makeup, which visually transforms household labor into something of luxury and desire. Not only do these depictions code patriarchal roles as ultra-feminine, but as Lin, Swart, and Zeng (2023) argue, "TikTok users are networked and mobilized through affects: pleasure, desire, and pain" (p. 1563). With soft, soothing music playing behind her ASMR-styled voiceover to her pristine, expensive kitchenware, Smith's visual and audio presentation help her emotionally-appeal to audiences by shaping their thinking to associate domesticity with comfort and satisfaction. The calmness of the video also masks the sheer amount of time she spent baking. Through Gramsci's lens of hegemony, these aesthetic decisions help manufacture consent for domesticity by turning patriarchal gender roles into something desirable and aspirational rather than socially limiting or sexually oppressive.

As domestic labor is viewed as entertainment, Tradwife videos often center around male approval and fulfilling others' needs through servitude. Not only do most of Smith's videos revolve around her husband's desires, as analyzed through her use of the pronoun "him," but after putting all this effort into making a sundae, she does not get to take a bite. Her husband stands, nodding with approval as he finishes her sundae – it's assumed that Smith never tried it as

she only dictates her husband's satisfaction. While Smith appears to live a luxurious life, showing how she gets "compensated" for her work, the video disguises her servitude through aesthetics, as Hall mentions, "we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them" (Hall, 1980, p. 124). According to this trend, the preferred reading indicates that patriarchal power structures are normal by presenting men as authority figures while women remain positioned in subservient, domestic roles.

TikTok's algorithm further amplifies these ideologies by rewarding content that retains users' attention and conforms to pleasurable aesthetics. By viewing through Marcuse's lens of technological rationality, Smith and other Tradwife influencers strategically alter their editing styles to prioritize the algorithm's metrics of engagement. While her videos document "slow living," she edits her content to include rapid cuts and continuously changing camera angles to ensure users remain engaged, allowing the algorithm to circulate her videos to more users.

As the Girl Math and Tradwife trends complicate beliefs about gender norms, Hustle Culture glorifies extreme productivity enhanced by capitalist ideology. The '#5to9beforemy9to5' trend shows users documenting their morning routines before their traditional workday begins. Users can be seen working out, meal prepping, journaling, and even starting work before they get to the office, emphasizing the need to use every hour of the day to their advantage. While these videos often frame maximum productivity as part of a wellness or self-care routine, its underlying messages emerge directly from hustle culture. These videos normalize capitalist productivity as common sense, implicitly positioning rest and leisure as unnecessary, hinting that individuals who don't participate lack ambition or are not motivated enough to become successful.

In a TikTok posted by @itsaverylauren, users watch as she shared her structured morning routine, starting promptly at 5:15 a.m. The video moves at an extremely quick pace, arranged by short one-second clips, as timestamps continuously appear across the center of the screen highlighting how she uses every minute to her advantage. While her routine focuses on self-care and wellness, as she's seen working out or doing skin-care, every moment is framed through heightened urgency and efficiency. Lauren can't even relax while enjoying her breakfast, as she starts working while eating. As Lin, Swart, and Zeng (2023) note, "The shortness of short videos, the pace of swiping...bespeak the unique experience of time on TikTok in its...algorithmic curation of visual content" (p. 1561). Not only does TikTok's interface implicitly encourage urgency among users, as it's structured by rapid swiping or short-video content, but hustle culture turns self-care into a productive 5-9 routine, where rest becomes normalized as a form of work within capitalist systems.

Beyond maximizing every minute, hustle culture frames productivity as an individual pursuit that often requires self-sacrifice or isolation. Throughout Lauren's routine, she is almost always alone. While at the gym, all the machines are empty; while eating breakfast, she sits alone; even at work, the camera is positioned so viewers can only see her desk. These visual patterns hint towards a dominant discourse that equates success and productivity with solitary effort to avoid distractions and disturbances at all costs. These codes help reinforce dominant ideologies, as TikTok acts like "an enormous database and generates personalized narratives about individuals and the world" (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023, p. 1550). In this case, hustle culture constructs narratives that link self-worth with productivity and discipline.

Although dominant discourses that reflect capitalist or ruling perspectives are embedded in trends and amplified through TikTok's algorithm, users still have agency in how they interpret

or internalize these ideologies. As Hall (1980) emphasized in his encoding/decoding model, audiences are not passive recipients of media messages, but rather active interpreters who may accept, negotiate, or resist meanings. This resistance is visible within hustle culture content, as some users explicitly criticize capitalist systems or equate self-worth with productivity. For instance, one of Lauren's commenters wrote, "07:30 team meeting is crazy," criticizing how toxic and unhealthy corporate work culture can be. Although the platform allows for the sharing of different opinions by providing users with the agency to actively shape their perceptions collectively, resistance still powers the algorithm, driving more engagement to certain videos. As Gerbaudo (2024) mentions, "The 'signals'...are not just explicit ones (e.g., liking a post) but increasingly implicit ones (e.g., the time spent watching a video)" (p. 1023). This means TikTok is structurally designed to amplify content regardless of whether engagement is supportive or critical, as the algorithm is unable to distinguish the difference. It only interprets implicit engagement, like prolonged watch time, rather than understanding if a user's prolonged watch time was only because they wrote a negative comment. Viewed through Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, dominant ideologies become difficult to dismantle because by resisting them through verbal or written communication, only contributes to their increased circulation within the platform's algorithmic system. Therefore, oppositional voices only fuel TikTok's algorithmic amplification.

Conclusion

Driven by an algorithmic interface that prioritizes engagement, TikTok shapes how culture is produced and meaning is interpreted, as the platform amplifies and circulates videos that reinforce dominant ideologies through the guise of entertaining trends. Programmed on capitalist values that prioritize monetary growth, TikTok's algorithm maximizes engagement by

amplifying emotionally driven or popular content on users' For You Page. While trends appeal to users' entertainment needs, they innocuously embed dominant ideologies that help maintain the ruling classes' perspectives. Trends such as Girl Math reinforce dominant discourse around sexist gender stereotypes while reinforcing gender roles disguised by humor. Influencers like Nara Smith promote and encourage patriarchal roles and servitude through Tradwife content aestheticized by luxury, beauty, and comfort. And, hustle culture shapes users' internal narratives about self-worth and success through continuous productivity and self-optimization.

Although the algorithm is unable to distinguish between user complacency or resistance, implicit metrics may promote the circulation and amplification of dominant discourses, as they often elicit emotional reactions that drive engagement. The flaws in how the algorithm is structured have detrimental impacts, as resistance only feeds the algorithm's circulation. This leads to a self-perpetuating loop where the algorithm rewards content that reflects dominant ideologies with more visibility, which normalizes those ideologies making them appear as common sense rather than mechanisms of control. Not only does this become problematic as over a billion individuals utilize the app, but TikTok can be strategically weaponized by dominant classes wanting to maintain power, as videos and trends can reshape people's internal perceptions, altering how they think about gender, work, and success. Considering the algorithm works in largely invisible ways, some users are more vulnerable to passively internalizing these ideologies, especially considering younger audiences use the app. As algorithmic systems become increasingly embedded in platforms utilized in daily life, developing critical awareness of how platforms shape cultural meaning while understanding how these structures amplify certain discourses over others is crucial. Ultimately, the most powerful form of resistance begins with user awareness. While dismantling structures that maintain hegemonic ideologies remains a

significant challenge, having the tools to recognize what appears as harmless entertainment is a cultural necessity.

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