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GREAT AWAKENING 2020: THE NEOLIBERAL WELLNESS JOURNEY DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Melissa Ann McLaughlin

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GREAT AWAKENING 2020
THE NEOLIBERAL WELLNESS JOURNEY DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Social Sciences and Globalization

by
Melissa McLaughlin
August 2021

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ABSTRACT

2020 was a good year for conspiracy theory. From COVID denialism to QAnon, the usual cast of conspiracy influencers was joined by mommy bloggers, yoga teachers, and social media opportunists to spread disinformation and sow doubt in the American psyche across the vast network of the internet. While the news media and popular entertainment often portrays the conspiracy theorist as a paranoid quack, the reality is far more conventional. We are all conspiracy theorists, in one way or another. Each of us arrive at a conspiracy theory with unique worldviews which include our political and spiritual belief systems. We are influenced, and not always in the ways we imagine, by every stimulus around us. These influences range from our upbringing, the media we consume, the education we've had, the people we follow on social media, the way we worship, and how we take care of our health. Perhaps most influential of all are the systemic realities we exist within, our country of birth, global capitalism, race, class, gender identity, and so much more. Not to mention that the whole of human history is littered with very real conspiracy. Individuals lie, proximity to power can corrode ethical responsibility, the media reports on novelty, and our institutional systems are rife with racial and economic injustice. People aren't crazy to be suspicious or believe in conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theory can better be understood as occupying a wide spectrum. On the far end of the spectrum one finds grand conspiracy narratives, or all-encompassing alternate explanations for observable reality. Many

conspiracy theories are folded into alternate histories and explanations for current events in which society is ruled by a small cohort of “they,” powerful conspirators bent on global domination. The grand conspiracy narrative, which is often conveyed as a battle between dark and light, leaves no common ground for productive, nuanced discourse. Grand conspiracists craft a new impenetrable black and white, good and bad binary. Adopters of the grand conspiracy narrative get to be forever and always firmly on the side of right, light, and love, while the rest of us are brainwashed by delusion fed to us by “the mainstream media,” science, and academia. These grand conspiracy narratives became popular during the COVID-19 global pandemic with many groups including supporters of Donald Trump as well as those within spiritual wellness communities.

My central curiosity became “why wellness?” What about mainstream wellness culture could lead many within that space to adopt and widely disseminate grand conspiracy narratives during the COVID-19 global pandemic? It is my hypothesis that the emphasis on individual responsibility to one’s health and spiritual wellbeing embedded in the neoliberal wellness project creates the conditions for conspiracist ideation within the wellness space. Wellness entrepreneurs are encouraged to “heal the self,” “speak their truth,” and manifest their reality. All of these erode collective bonds including shared reality and personal responsibility to systemic struggles. Conspiracy wellness influencers occupy the extreme both of wellness and conspiracist ideation. A grand conspiracy narrative serves as reinforcement to the health and spiritual

orthodoxy created by a wellness entrepreneur and social media influencer. The conspiracy theories expressed on their platform become a marketing tool, attracting those suspicious of institutions in an age of decaying trust in establishment authority. In another ironic twist, when the conspiracy influencer is criticized for their wellness protocols or extreme politics, the conspiracy theories themselves act as a shield from wrongdoing and ultimately allow the influencer to position themselves as the marginalized one for simply “speaking their truth,” regardless of their position within society. The branded messaging of self-responsibility for personal health and spiritual freedom that the grand conspiracy narrative buttresses perpetuate the neoliberal social project in real time.

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Deep gratitude to all my teachers, especially Dr. Kevin Grisham and Dr. Hareem Khan. Thank you, Dr. Grisham for welcoming me back into this program, showing me the way into conspiracy theory scholarship, and trusting my intellectual vision for this project. This project would be a mess without the skillful mentorship of Dr. Hareem Khan. I'm so grateful the pandemic allowed us to cross paths and share community in this wild, wild year. I am indebted to you for the structure and insight you brought to my work. To all my friends who were down to talk about conspiracy theory for the last year and a half, you kept me sane. I owe you several beers. Last but not least, Patrick, I love you. Thanks for always having my back

DEDICATION

For my beloved yoga and wellness community, I believe in us.

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CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

2020 was a good year for conspiracy theory. From COVID denialism to QAnon, the usual cast of conspiracy influencers was joined by mommy bloggers, yoga teachers, and social media opportunists to spread disinformation and sow doubt in the American psyche across the vast network of the internet. This project on conspiracist ideation in the wellness online space is also a byproduct of the pandemic. My interest in the field of conspiracy theory and its intersection with popular wellness culture, at this particular moment in history, happened completely by accident. In March of 2020, I was working as a full-time yoga teacher and personal trainer in the San Francisco Bay Area. When COVID first entered my awareness as a tangible reality, my industry, like many others, tried in earnest to adjust while begin completely and totally confused as to what was going on. How dangerous could COVID be, really? None of us knew then, what we know now, that the course of our lives would tangibly shift over the next year and a half. The large yoga studio chain where I worked furloughed much of its staff and filed for bankruptcy six months later. In March of 2020, we were still judiciously sanitizing yoga blocks and trying to continue in-person classes until California issued its first stay-at-home order on March 16th. I was able to, with the support of my student community and the independent studio I teach for, shift my instruction online. At first, the response was amazing. My classes were well

attended, and I was donating 100% of my class earnings to several local aid organizations feeding and tending to the immediate needs of the most vulnerable within my community. One month passed. Class attendance slowed. Two months passed. I realized it was unsustainable to donate all my teaching revenue while simultaneously becoming Zoom and online self-promotion fatigued. Three months passed. We were all still at home. I took long walks every day and made banana bread.

It was on one of my long and winding quarantine walks that I first had the spark of inspiration to return to graduate school to complete this degree program. I was listening to a podcast of a respected mentor and friend, Andrea Ferretti. In the podcast episode, titled “The Globalization of Yoga,” Ferretti interviews religious scholar Dr. Andrea Jain. In the podcast conversation, Jain speaks to the scholarship illuminated in her book *Selling Yoga*, in which she explores commodification, appropriation, orientalism, and various other intersections of yoga, colonialism, and the modern globalized era. The interview, and subsequently Jain’s books, felt like an invitation to return to my own scholarship in globalization and investigate crossroads from which to better understand modern wellness culture.

Eight years prior to COVID, I was a graduate student of globalization at California State University in San Bernardino. When I moved to the Bay Area in 2012, I was hard pressed to find a similar interdisciplinary program. I shifted my career path toward my deep passion in yogic philosophy and physical movement

and took my first yoga teacher training in 2013 and later became a full-time yoga teacher. I had been practicing through various lineage traditions for several years before I took my first formal training, but that practice could not have totally prepared me for the world I would be exposed to upon stepping into the role of teacher of these practices. If you ask any yoga teacher what its like to “make it” in this business, you will likely hear a mix of personal passion paired with the hustle of entrepreneurship. Those of us committed to this work have likely felt at one time or another an underlying competitive energy for primetime teaching spots, alongside the secretive but notorious underbelly of yoga’s shadow realm hallmarked by sexual abuse, exclusionary studio environments, physical injury, and teacher’s cult of personality. Beyond the glossy magazine covers and Instagram feeds of healthy looking, smiling bodies in wildly contorted postures, yoga has, for decades, had its own internal moral crisis of character and values. Many yoga teachers, and assorted professionals in the corresponding wellness universe, have had frank conversations on the problematic nature of the marketing and commodification of the tools of these practices. Yet talk of politics in the wellness world was (and still is) routinely labeled as “divisive,” an obstacle to the stated aim of unified love, peace, and good vibes that the yoga community hopes to engender here on Earth. I, too, found it easier to voice my frustrations in private as to not garner too much animosity or be perceived as “un-yogic” in the budding years of my yoga teaching career. I love this community and the potential is houses for positive health outcomes, community betterment, and

spiritual interconnection. At the same time, I know that wellness has a lot of work to do to disentangle itself from the systemic influences that plague much of our shared human reality. Without critical dialogue and political engagement, the change we hope to be in the world will be remain out of reach. This project hopes to be a part of the growing critical dialogue of wellness' systemic issues. This requires me to disclose that I am a member of the community that I will critique in these pages. I reject the notion that we as humans cannot critically analyze communities that we belong to and hold as sacred. It would be impossible to separate my personal experiences within the wellness industry from the scope of this study, and though it creates minimal barrier to objectivity, overall, it aids the insight of the dialogue in these pages. First and foremost, I include myself in complicity to the systemic issues I present in future pages on modern mainstream wellness.

When Dr. Kevin Grisham graciously invited me back into the Globalization graduate program in the Fall of 2020., I immediately began brainstorming topics for this thesis. Inspired by Dr. Jain's work, I wanted to study the intersection of modern Western wellness culture with current modes of globalization, but it took some time to understand how to direct my focus. Everything felt too big as if I was adrift at sea without a life raft. My husband gave me the wise advice to find an intersecting interest with my thesis advisor. Just a few days prior, Dr. Grisham had sent me a *Rolling Stone* article titled, "Wellness Influencers are Calling Out

QAnon Conspiracy Theorists for Spreading Lies.”¹ At the time, I didn’t know all that much about the QAnon conspiracy cult aside from a newspaper article here or there. To be honest, I didn’t really know much about conspiracy theory at all. I had unconsciously written off QAnon as too bizarre to be believable, a relic of the extremist fringe. At the time, I had a naïve and false notation of who a conspiracy theorist is, largely because of how conspiracy theory is portrayed in popular entertainment and news media.

In the *Rolling Stone* article Dr. Grisham sent over, Seane Corn, a popular yoga teacher, described the growing phenomena of conspiracism she observed amongst her yoga and wellness peers. I had an immediate, “well, that’s really interesting,” moment. I began to look deeper into it. I spoke with my colleagues, Dr. Grisham, read a few journal articles, scrolled through Instagram posts and realized pretty quickly how widespread the phenomena had grown. My initial research question wondered if religio-spiritual communities were more susceptible to conspiracy narratives than other sub-sets of the American population. I went down my own rabbit hole, reading all I could find on the growing interdisciplinary field of conspiracy theory scholarship. I lean in agreement with the findings of researchers like Joseph Uscinski and Rob Brotherton that each of us is prone to conspiracy theory belief. Inspired by the

¹ EJ Dickson, “Wellness Influencers are Calling Out QAnon Conspiracy Theories.” *Rolling Stone*, Sept. 12, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/qanon-wellness-influencers-seane-corn-yoga-1059856/>

work of Mick West, I began to imagine conspiracy theory as a spectrum we all live on and focused my research on the extreme end of the conspiracy theory spectrum. This extreme end is what most of us imagine when we think about conspiracy theory, especially the ones that have become popular and widespread during the pandemic. I started to call the plotlines found at this extreme end, grand conspiracy narratives, or alternative often apocalyptic explanations for observable reality in which a secretive plot is hatched by a small group of evil, dark, manipulative powerful people to control all of humanity.

We are all conspiracy theorists, in one way or another. Each of us arrive at a conspiracy theory with unique worldviews which include our political and spiritual belief systems. We are influenced, and not always in the ways we imagine, by every stimulus around us. These influences range from our upbringing, the media we consume, the education we've had, the people we follow on social media, the way we worship, and how we take care of our health. Perhaps most influential of all are the systemic realities we exist within, our country of birth, global capitalism, race, class, gender identity, and so much more. At the core of who we are is a built-in identity that the human mind is hardwired to protect and defend. Our psychological default setting is a mixture of inherited, assigned, and chosen constructs reinforced by cognitive biases, that we commonly call our identity or worldview.

Any study of conspiracy theory must begin with the inconvenient truth that our human history is rife with very real conspiracy. Individuals lie, proximity to

power can corrode ethical responsibility, the media reports on novelty, and our institutional systems are rife with racial and economic injustice. People aren't crazy to be suspicious or believe in conspiracy theory. There is reason for distrust. Casual adoption of one conspiracy theory may pose little harm to collective wellbeing and civil discourse. Adopting an extreme, and false, narrative of secretive collusion in which the evil "they" are doing all the harm on Earth, is mechanism for collective rupture and breakdown of civil society. The grand conspiracy narrative, which is often conveyed as a Manichean battle between dark and light, leaves no common ground for productive, nuanced discourse. Grand conspiracists craft a new impenetrable black and white, good and bad binary. It also serves as an abdication of personal complicity and responsibility to meet in common space, acknowledge painful, shared history, and ultimately accept one's responsibility to the long story that will be written as our future history. Adopters of the grand conspiracy narrative get to be forever and always firmly on the side of right, light, and love, while the rest of us are brainwashed by delusion fed to us by "the mainstream media," science, and academia.

As the pandemic crept into its seventh month, I came to see the extreme embrace of conspiracy theory as a focal point to better understand the culture of modern mainstream wellness. My central curiosity became "why wellness?" What about mainstream wellness culture could lead many within that space to adopt and widely disseminate grand conspiracy narratives during the COVID-19 global pandemic? Those of us who exist within the landscape of modern wellness are

told a certain kind of story about health and wellbeing. We are told that healing is an inside job. We are told to focus on gratitude. We are told one can simply choose happiness. We are told that our vibes create our reality. We are told to shape, form, and own our unique truth. These narratives rarely receive the critical examination required for noticing their intersections with the socio-political elements of our systemic, shared reality. In many ways, wellness culture is a response to the stresses and inadequacies of our current social systems. I believe there is important truth in holistic models of health that treat the whole person rather than reducing them to their symptoms. Many wellness tools are extremely potent modes for healing and hold keys for personal and collective freedom. My critical inquiry focuses less on the tools of wellness and more with the packaging. Wellness is often reduced to ritualistic self-care, a grooming and tending to the needs of each individual as the mechanism for healing the collective. Social media wellness influencers package and sell their lifestyles as wellness archetype, models of purity for which individuals can aspire. Wellness is sold via highly curated, lifestyle rituals for self-optimization. The neoliberal wellness project demands individuals to consider the physical body as property to be owned and thus reduces to transactional the relationship with our own individual physical systems. It is my personal belief that the obvious extravagance and conspicuous consumption of wellness is meant to be unattainable so that each of us stay engaged in the task of achieving optimal wellness all the while buying products and services within the capitalist

marketplace for our wellness journey, a journey with no real destination. In many ways, the journey to the “optimal self” is accessible only to the few who can financially afford it. In this way, it is important to consider how this model of health requires many in society to be “un-well” as it is built on a foundation hallmarked by resource and labor extraction and uneven capital accumulation. All the good vibes and singular emphasis on love and light in mainstream wellness culture substitute for critical engagement and personal responsibility to social, economic, and political inequity. Prayer becomes a stand-in for political engagement. Ironically, in a singular effort to “heal the self,” the modern wellness entrepreneur governs their own ritualized conduct in a way that serves current neoliberal modes of capitalism, which may be the very thing that is stressing us all out. At the very least, we know that this current model of economic productivity is likely to stress the planet we inhabit to the point where our species may no longer be able to survive here. The neoliberal project of wellness, which tasks each of us with singular responsibility to bodily purity and spiritual sovereignty, further entrenches modes of power that preserve social hierarchy and perpetuate environmental degradation.

Conspiracism in the wellness space is born out of fierce individualism, exceptionalism and dogmatic notions of health, spirituality, and wellbeing. The new wellness canon demands us to “own” ourselves, a never-ending neoliberal pursuit of personal purity, perpetual bliss, and individual enlightenment. Healthy immune systems shift into a perceived moral superiority rather than a blessed

privilege. Many wellness influencers claim access to alternative healing modalities and curate for us all the tools we need for self-optimization. The conspiracist wellness influencer goes a step further, claiming to have special insight and access to truths being purposefully kept from us by medical authorities, corporations, and politicians who want to keep us sick and enslaved to their dominate will. Conspiratorial wellness influencers demonstrate open hostility to institutionalized knowledge, including scientific consensus. Conspiratorial wellness influencers proudly occupy the extreme alternative, in effect shaping their own orthodoxy which becomes religion, medicine and politics all in one. In the conspiracist wellness space intuition trumps investigation, one is tasked simply to *feel* for what is true. In the new wellness universe, each individual is completely free to craft the truth from the insight of their intuition which conveniently molds the truth around one's preferences and lifestyle choices. All information sources that don't resonate with your individual truth are discarded as delusion, another tool by the disembodied "they" to brainwash the masses. As with the conspiracy minded in other social spaces, wellness conspiracy influencers demonstrate cognitive biases that serve as identity protection for their branded wellness orthodoxy.

Conspiracy wellness influencers occupy the extreme both of wellness and conspiracist ideation. Wellness grand conspiracists betray their ethos of "unity" by drafting an even harder line of separation; between the 'enlightened' and the 'blind,' the 'red pill' and the 'blue pill,' between the 'free' and the 'sheep.' In

the age of amplified polarization, the conspiracy theory helps rather than hurts an influencers social media brand image and acts to reinforce their authority as “truth teller,” and attracting fellow “truth seekers.” The conspiracy theories expressed on their platform become a marketing tool, attracting those suspicious of institutions in an age of decaying trust in establishment authority. In another ironic twist, when the conspiracy influencer is criticized for their wellness protocols or extreme politics, the conspiracy theories themselves act as a shield from wrongdoing and ultimately allow the influencer to position themselves as the marginalized one for simply “speaking their truth,” regardless of their position within society.

The purpose of this study is not to say that the wellness space is uniquely susceptible to grand conspiracy narratives or the spread of misinformation within its online communities. It seems many other subsets of the population are also attracted to grand conspiracy narratives to explain the socio-political order of the day. The purpose of this study is to understand how this phenomenon presents uniquely in the wellness industry. What about the culture of modern mainstream wellness leads some within the space to enthusiastically adopt an extreme conspiracist mindset? It is my hypothesis that the emphasis on individual responsibility to one’s health and spiritual wellbeing in the neoliberal wellness project creates the conditions for conspiracist ideation within the wellness space. A grand conspiracy narrative serves as reinforcement to the health and spiritual orthodoxy created by a wellness influencer, particularly those that promote an

extreme alternative of health and spirituality. With the belief in the grand conspiracy narrative, the influencer also gains personal shield from culpability to any systemic harm as the narrative always positions the adoptee firmly on the side of right, light, and love. The branded messaging of self-responsibility for personal health and spiritual freedom that the grand conspiracy narrative buttresses perpetuate the neoliberal social project in real time. The next five sections serve as literature review where I will lay out the background research that informs my hypothesis. In section one, I lay out terms for understanding conspiracy theory, the conspiracy theory spectrum, grand conspiracy narratives, and some of the research that demonstrates the widespread susceptibility to conspiracy theory, particularly in times of acute social distress. Section two covers the nature of the mind, psychology of conspiracy belief, and the cognitive biases most often associated with conspiracism. Section three is a deep dive into the current state of the media, including social media, influencer culture, disinformation strategies, and institutional distrust. Section four is a discussion of wellness, neoliberalism, and what I call, the neoliberal wellness project. Section five will define conspиритuality, demonstrate the connection of New Age spiritualism with conspiracy theory, and discuss issues of cultural appropriation and parallels of Western supremacy culture as embedded within modern spiritual wellness culture. This will be followed by a discussion on research methods. All subjects in this study have large monetized social media platforms where they openly express protocols for well-being alongside grand conspiracy narratives.

To closely examine the narrative style and content of conspiratorial wellness influencers, qualitative content analysis will be used as research method. Condensed case study data is presented in the findings and the conclusion will cover my analysis as well as present questions for further study.

Defining the Rabbit Hole

In this section, I will define conspiracy related terminology, including conspiracy, conspiracy theory and grand conspiracy narrative. The media, whether it be for news or entertainment, portrays the conspiracy theorist as a lunatic quack in a tin hat murmuring paranoid delusions to himself in a dark alleyway. The reality is far more mundane and conventional. Conspiracy theorists walk among us, perhaps even are us. Ask yourself, do you have suspicion about an official historical narrative of a major world event? Does something seem off about the assassinations of so many prominent social justice leaders, including a sitting president, in the late 60s? Do you reach for the non-GMO products at the grocery store? Are you suspicious of the stated intentions of transnational corporations believing they may be hiding the health dangers of their products for personal profit? Perhaps you don't think that Bill Gates intends to microchip the global population for group herding and control tactics, but something about him feels off to you? My principal theory, supported by the scholarship of science writer Mick West, is that conspiracy theory exists as a spectrum, one we all live on. West writes:

One unfortunate problem with the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is that it paints with a broad brush. It’s tempting to simply divide people up into “conspiracy theorists” and “regular people”-to have tinfoil-hat-wearing paranoids on one side and sensible folk on the other. But the reality is that we are all conspiracy theorists, one way or another.²

Research consistently shows that nearly every American believes in one or some version of a conspiracy theory and that people who subscribe to one theory are likely to believe in more.³ Conspiracy theory is everywhere. Embedded in all forms of entertainment, seeping into public discourse, and fascinating our popular imagination. Our brains are wired for conspiracist belief and our entertainment reflects our fascination with the supernatural, the controversial, and alternate narratives for the world in which we live.

A great many public figures have built their careers on conspiracy theory. Donald Trump began his political career with brash accusations that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States, later called the “birther” theory. He exited the office of the presidency loudly propagating another “big lie,” that he had, in fact, won the 2020 presidential election, “by a lot.”⁴ Popular radio host Alex Jones may be one of the most famous figures in the alternative media universe, a universe that primarily sustains itself on dietary supplements and

² Mick West, *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2018), 12.

³ Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2016): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915621621>.

⁴Andrew Solender, “Trump Falsely Claims He Won ‘By A Lot’ After Telling Biden Not To ‘Wrongfully’ Declare Victory,” *Forbes*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/11/07/trump-falsely-claims-he-won-by-a-lot-after-telling-biden-not-to-wrongfully-declare-victory>.

conspiracy theory. At the height of its popularity his radio show, InfoWars attracted two million weekly listeners and was syndicated on sixty plus radio stations.⁵ He has been fighting defamation and emotional distress lawsuits by the survivors of mass shooting incidents like Sandy Hook which killed twenty students and six adults. He claimed repeatedly on his programming that no one died at Sandy Hook, that all the victims were actors, and the whole thing was staged to gin up political support to ban gun ownership in the United States. Most of the shooting victims at Sandy Hook were six years old.

Riding on the coattails of Jones are many an enterprising internet “truthers,” poised to profit from loud declarations of elitist social control by the reptilian “deep state.” The mainstream cable news channels use the words “conspiracy theory” as a dismissive expletive while assaulting our senses with brash hyperbole, sensationalism, partisanship, and wild speculation 24/7. Popular entertainment media recycles conspiracy myths for fun, consider *The Matrix* series, the popular series *The X-files*, or any of the numerous movies about the government keeping alien lifeforms secret at Area 51. There’s a wide swath of entertainment space in the political noir and dystopic political fantasy from classic works of fiction like *1984* and *Brave New World*, to *The Manchurian Candidate* with its sleeper Soviet spies taking over positions of political prominence in America. Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK* leans so heavily on “asking

⁵ Nate Blakesless, “Alex Jones is About to Explode,” March 2010, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/alex-jones-is-about-to-explode>.

questions” about the official story of JFK’s assassination that belief in conspiracy theories about JFK’s death increased to the point where the Bush administration released archived evidence documenting the time period surrounding his death to quell public suspicion of the government’s involvement in his assassination.⁶

Americans love a good conspiracy theory not just as a form of entertainment but as real explanation for world events. Many, if not all of us, live on the conspiracy theory spectrum. One end of the spectrum is subtle and benign with relatively little to no social impact. On the extreme end we find, grand conspiracy narratives, all-encompassing conspiracism that positions nearly all historical events, socio-political organizations, and official explanations for current events as the result of a shadowy, secret entity composed of rich and powerful elites with nefarious intentions. On the benign end of the spectrum, you have a mother of three at the grocery store choosing between five brands of crackers. She defaults to buying the ones labeled non-GMO. She may not even be able to formally articulate a concrete theory about Genetically Modified foods as a conspiracy by Monsanto to control global food production, but she has made a choice based on a conspiracy theory about GMOs that has shifted social perception of products with genetically modified ingredients. The harm associated with GMO products is not one with much scientific backing but a lot of opiated theory. In fact, scientists argue that GMO’s could help to drastically

⁶ Avi Selk, “You can thank Oliver Stone’s sensationalized 1991 movie for the JFK document release,” October 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/21/you-can-thank-oliver-stones-sensationalized-1991-movie-for-the-jfk-document-release>.

reduce global hunger.⁷ Yet the theory that GMO's are bad for you shifts social perception and ascribes value in the form of perceived health benefits to products without genetically modified ingredients which leads to greater food labeling and drives consumer choices.

On the extreme end of the spectrum, you find a conspiracy cult like QAnon. QAnon believes a powerful cabal of political, corporate and Hollywood elites engage in Satanic pedophile rituals while plotting for supreme political power and globalist world domination.⁸ This extreme end of the spectrum is what most people colloquially understand conspiracy theory to be and is home to what I will call the Grand Conspiracy Narrative. Many Grand Conspiracy narratives trace their origin centuries back in time to the anti-Semitic troupes on which they were founded. These all-encompassing narratives continue to be recycled, repurposed and expanded upon throughout history to include ever more theories of explanation and a new cast of conspiracy characters.⁹ Historian Thomas Milan Konda likens the range of conspiracists to a pyramid, with major players at the top defining and updating the theories toward the passive audience at the bottom receiving the work of the more active conspiracy creators. Mick West writes in his book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*, that each individual lines on their own conspiracy

⁷ A. S. Bawa and K. R. Anilakumar, "Genetically Modified Foods: Safety, Risks and Public Concerns—a Review," *Journal of Food Science and Technology* 50, no. 6 (December 2013): 1035, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13197-012-0899-1>.

⁸ Kevin Roose, "What is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?" March 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

⁹ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe in Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 19-38.

theory spectrum separated by a personalized line of demarcation between the “sensible” and the “silly,” or what each theorist determines as reasonable or unreasonable.¹⁰ I prefer to work with conspiracist ideation as a spectrum on which we all live. I think this helps to explain how an individual’s inner anxiety paired with external socio-political forces can move any individual down or up the spectrum from benign to extreme theory. For example, there may be someone who is just subtly suspicious of vaccines, perhaps even totally unaware that they subscribe to or have been influenced by disinformation and conspiracy theory. As they encounter content online of dangers of the COVID-19 vaccines, they may be pushed further down the spectrum. External pressure paired with internal anxiety and/or bias can push an individual further down the conspiracy theory spectrum toward a grand conspiracy narrative. I think envisioning conspiracy theory as a spectrum helps to account for the attractiveness and widespread acceptance of extreme grand conspiracy narratives in times of social and economic stress, like the 2020-21 global health crisis of COVID-19.

Any conversation about conspiracy theory must start from the inconvenient truth that conspiracy is very real. Not only are you not alone in your conspiracy theory belief(s); you’re not delusional to be suspicious. We all lie. We are all capable of stretching the truth or hiding our true agendas for convenience or personal benefit. We embellish and exaggerate to make stories more exciting and keep our audiences engaged. We sometimes hide our opinions or beliefs to

¹⁰ West, *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*, 15.

fit in and be liked by others. Certainly, it's no grand leap of logic to say that those who want for or have access to power, profits, and public attention may be at greater risk for all of the above. As history repeatedly shows, conspiracy, or a secret agenda between two or more people¹¹, is very real.

Politicians over promise and under deliver. CEOs insist their products are safe or non-addictive and even fund “science” to manipulate data that supports their products market value and safety. From Tuskegee¹²¹³ to COINTELPRO¹⁴¹⁵, marginalized communities have been targeted by the medical establishment and the FBI. Nixon’s infamous Watergate conspiracy stands out in politics but pales in comparison to much of the political deception in American politics. Consider one of the most recent lies of major consequence during the Bush administration when the false intelligence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq became the

¹¹ Joseph Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 48.

¹² Tuskegee is noted as one of the most egregious examples of medical abuse on the African American community in the United States. In years ranging from the 1930s until the 1970s, 399 poor Black American males were told they were receiving treatment for “bad blood” but were purposefully infected with syphilis. Even when penicillin was found to be a treatment for the illness, the men were withheld treatment so the United States Public Health Service could study the long term effects of syphilis on the population.

¹³ Amy L. Fairchild and Ronald Bayer, “Uses and Abuses of Tuskegee,” *Science* 284, no. 5416 (1999): 919–21.

¹⁴ COINTELPRO stands for counterintelligence programs conducted by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations. Originally established by J. Edgar Hoover in the mid-1950s to disrupt communist activities in the United States, the programs expanded to include civil rights movements in the 60s. The FBI surveilled prominent progressive Black leaders including Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as well as infiltrated the Black Panther Party and the NAACP. Prominent Black female community organizers were also targeted by Hoover’s programs as “subversives” and were followed and wiretapped without warrant or cause for decades.

¹⁵ ASHLEY FARMER, “BLACK WOMEN AND THE FBI,” in *Antidemocracy in America*, ed. ERIC KLINENBERG, CAITLIN ZALOOM, and SHARON MARCUS, Truth, Power, and the Republic at Risk (Columbia University Press, 2019), 185–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/klin19010.24>.

justification for entering the second Gulf War.¹⁶ In the private sector, tobacco and opiates were known by their manufactures to create serious public health problems, and yet that data was masked, manipulated or purposefully ignored. The company executives who willfully withheld information from the public faced no meaningful criminal consequences.

Researchers from the American Journal of Medical Care, during a 15-year period of their study into the opioid crisis, estimate that the drug abuse impacts cost States roughly \$72.4 billion dollars¹⁷, which doesn't even remotely account for the trauma of those who became chemically dependent to opioids, nor the lives lost, and families destroyed by addiction and overdose deaths. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that in its peak year of 2017 deaths by opioid overdose were 17,029 and deaths by heroin or other opiates overdose were roughly 15,000 people.¹⁸

The Sackler family, former owners of the opioid manufacturer Purdue Pharma which produced the name-brand opioid Oxycontin, were found to have downplayed the risk of addiction in prescribing OxyContin for non-cancer related pain in aggressive marketing strategies to primary care doctors. Investigations

¹⁶U.S. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. *REPORT ON WHETHER PUBLIC STATEMENTS REGARDING IRAQ BY U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WERE SUBSTANTIATED BY INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION together with ADDITIONAL AND MINORITY VIEWS* June 5, 2008. (110 S. Rpt. 110-345)
<https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/110345.pdf>

¹⁷ "The Economic Burden of the Opioid Epidemic on States: The Case of Medicaid," AJMC, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.ajmc.com/view/the-economic-burden-opioid-epidemic-on-states-case-of-medicaid>.

¹⁸ National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Overdose Death Rates," National Institute on Drug Abuse, January 29, 2021, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>.

into the company show that their internal marketers were trained to tell physicians that the “risk of addiction was less than 1%.”¹⁹ “Purdue's promotion of OxyContin for the treatment of non–cancer-related pain contributed to a nearly tenfold increase in OxyContin prescriptions for this type of pain, from about 670,000 in 1997 to about 6.2 million in 2002,”²⁰ reports the *American Journal of Public Health*. Over roughly the same time period, sales revenues from OxyContin increased from 48 million dollars in 1996 to \$1.1 billion in 2000. Their aggressive marketing strategy for the drug worked to increase company profits but the highly addictive drug was now routinely prescribed for a wide range of pain management, everything from ankle sprains to surgery recovery could get you a prescription from your physician and the aggressive marketing strategy assured that OxyContin became the prescription of choice.

As the wide-spread consequences of addiction exploded into a public health crisis, all 50 states brought lawsuits to the company. The Department of Justice charged and the company plead guilty to “three felony offenses: one count of dual-object conspiracy to defraud the United States and to violate the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, and two counts of conspiracy to violate the Federal Anti-Kickback Statute.”²¹ To settle these lawsuits, the Sackler family sold

¹⁹ Art Van Zee, “The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin: Commercial Triumph, Public Health Tragedy,” *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 2 (February 2009): 223, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2007.131714>.

²⁰ Art Van Zee, “The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin,” 223.

²¹ The United States Department of Justice, “Opioid Manufacturer Purdue Pharma Pleads Guilty to Fraud and Kickback Conspiracies,” November 24, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/opioid-manufacturer-purdue-pharma-pleads-guilty-fraud-and-kickback-conspiracies>.

its ownership stakes, the company paid an estimated \$10 billion dollars after which filing for bankruptcy. Today, the company's website states, "We are working to emerge from bankruptcy as a public benefit company with a focus on addressing the opioid crisis and established for the benefit of claimants and the American people."²² No company executive or individual member of the Sackler family has been criminally charged for negligence or conspiracy. The family agreed to pay \$3 billion dollars of personal family money to go toward "individuals affected by the opioid crisis."²³ In 2020, when Purdue Pharma plead guilty to conspiracy charges brought by the Department of Justice,²⁴ the Sackler family paid an additional \$225 million in settlement to the DOJ.²⁵ Yet, *The New York Times* reported in 2019 that independent audits showed the Sackler's withdrew more than \$10 billion from the company to disperse among family and offshore accounts as outside pressure on the company increased and lawsuits appeared to be eminent. In 2020, Forbes magazine lists the Sackler family as the 30th wealthiest in the world with an estimated net worth of 10.8 billion dollars.

I highlight the recent example of the Sackler family for two reasons. First, The American public is right to be suspicious of those with exorbitant financial influence and access to power throughout our institutionalized systems. From the

²² "Restructure Information,"Purdue Pharma, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.purduepharma.com/restructure>

²³ "2020 America's Richest Families Net Worth," Forbes, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/sackler>

²⁴ Unites States Department of Justice, "Opioid Manufacturer Purdue Pharma Pleads Guilty to Fraud and Kickback Conspiracies"

²⁵ 2020 America's Richest Families Net Worth," Forbes.

Rockefellers to the Clintons, the well-connected and powerful have a long history of scandal, cover-ups, deceit, corruption, and conspiracy. The Sackler family is merely a recent example of the ways in which the powerful are rarely held to account for conspiracy that has wide and deep public impact. What the example of the Sackler family also demonstrates is that real conspiracy is nearly impossible to pull off forever and gets uncovered eventually.²⁶ Though the consequences for the powerful don't often match the social harm caused by the conspiracy; a whistle blower, an intrepid reporter, or time itself reveals to the public what has or is happening in secret behind the curtain of the "elite class."

Real conspiracies, as defined by researcher and political theorist Joseph Uscinski, are "a secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions to benefit themselves at the expense of the common good."²⁷ By nature, he argues, "actual conspiracies are difficult to pull off and tend to get uncovered...as the size and scope of the scheme increases, the number of actors who can either get caught in the act or 'spill the beans' increases, making exposure more imminent."²⁸ Michael Schermer elaborates to suggest that complex conspiracies that involve many actors and intricate

²⁶ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, 48.

²⁷ Uscinski, 48.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

planning are nearly impossible to pull off when we account for human error, real-time contingencies, chance, and scope.²⁹

David Neiwart makes the distinction between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories as follows. A real conspiracy has three main limiting factors: scope, time, and number of participants. In that order, the purpose of the conspiracy is usually to achieve narrow goals, happening over a short time frame with only a few actors. Extreme conspiracy theory on the other hand is often broad ranging, occurring over long periods of time potentially even decades or centuries, and involves significant masses of people in and outside of government.³⁰ Neiwart describes these as, “a massive plot to enslave, murder, or politically oppress all of mankind or at least large numbers of people.”³¹ The broad intentions of the powerful group are often grand in scale and apocalyptic in nature. These types of conspiracies are referred to as superconspiracies³² by scholar Michael Barkun and what I call throughout this work, grand conspiracy narratives.

History is littered with botched conspiracies and uncovered deceptions. Though many of them get uncovered the impact on public trust over time amplifies suspicion that, we will see in the coming chapters, can be manipulated

²⁹ Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: from Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies- How we Construct Beliefs and Reinforce them as Truths* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011), 225.

³⁰ David Neiwart, *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract Conspiracy Theories that are Killing Us* (Guilford, Connecticut: Prometheus Books, 2020), 5.

³¹ Neiwart, *Red Pill, Blue Pill*, 5.

³² Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 6.

by intrepid conspiracy theory opportunists. What isn't mentioned in conspiracy theory literature but is related and important is illustrated well by historian Tim Snyder. The erosion of public trust doesn't just happen because we understand some within politics and the private sector to be corrupt, but the perceived lack of meaningful accountability for criminal wrongdoing by the public, who may simultaneously also be feeling the public consequences of that corruption. It's a well-known turn of public phrase, "there are two systems." In a recent interview with on NPR's *Throughline* podcast, Dr. Snyder comments:

I think we have a specific problem in the United States with the impunity of people at a certain level of wealth and...power. We have a fairly functional rule of law society, but every American also knows that certain kinds of people aren't going to go to prison at least not for very long for certain kinds of crimes. Even though those crimes might be much worse than the sorts of crimes that other sorts of people will go to prison for for much longer terms.³³

The actions of powerful conspirators, as in the previous example of the Sackler family, have lasting social consequences but the monied and well connected are rarely meaningfully held to account for the dramatic impacts of those wrong doings. This gives legitimacy to the notion that the powerful can get away with anything because they so often do.

The erosion of public trust in institutions of government, media, science, academia, and the private sector overtime can serve to generate greater interest in conspiracy narratives that explain corruption less as human fallibility and more

³³ Ramtin Arablouei and Rund Abdelfatah interview with Timothy Snyder, *Throughline*, National Public Radio podcast audio, January 21, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/20/958828047/the-anatomy-of-autocracy-timothy-snyder>

as a means to an end, the end of which is total control. Conspiracy theory is not healthy skepticism of systems, but rather a simplified narrative that explains the felt absence of personal control given the power imbalance that exists in society. I say simplified not in the sense that the theories themselves are simple, many grand conspiracy narratives are overarching and quite complex. I use the word simple narrative because conspiracy theories do not generally account for incompetence, human error, the randomness of chance, systemic injustice of marginalized groups, and our inherent human corruptibility in the presence of power, money, and influence. Conspiracy theories operate in a binary black and white, good and evil world and rarely include elements of nuanced understanding of human beings and society.

Conspiracy theory is convenient orientation around something that *feels* true and as such is liberated from the burden of proof and evidence. A conspiracy theory by its very nature is unproven. Conspiracy theory at its most basic is a belief about treacherous collusion. Yet the term conspiracy theory has evolved to mean so much more than simple theory. For one, the term comes with baggage. It is often used as a pejorative to dismiss conspiratorial opinions or beliefs as deluded or crazy. Those accused of spreading a conspiracy theory often receive the term as loaded, being called a conspiracy theorist evokes a strong emotional response.

Fortunately, scholars across disciplines have worked to come up with more neutral definitions of the term. A broad, neutral definition is important for a

few of reasons. First, a broad definition allows researchers to make distinctions about the many varied ways conspiracy theory shows up in our society from those with mild suspicion to those who fold many conspiracy theories into their understanding about how the world works. Second, a neutral definition allows those engaging with academic materials to see where and how they fall within the spectrum of conspiracist ideation, rather than seeing it as a phenomenon that just affects “those crazy people over there.” Lastly, both a broad and neutral definition in the beginning of any study allows us to understand how conspiracy theory can be pushed to the extreme. Extreme conspiracist ideation presents real and present danger to the functioning of a democratic society and can lead those in conspiracists movements to lash out in often violent, destructive ways toward that society, its established institutions, and scapegoated marginalized communities within the society.

I rely again on Joseph Uscinski for a primary definition. He defines conspiracy theory as:

an explanation of past, ongoing, or future events of circumstances that cites as a main casual factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good. The conspirators can be foreign or domestic governments, nongovernmental actors, scientists, religious and fraternal organizations, or any other group perceived as powerful and treacherous.³⁴

³⁴ Uscinski, 48.

At its heart conspiracy theory is a narrative about **power**, who has it, how they got it, and what they do with it when no one is watching.³⁵ According to Uscinski and many other scholars, nearly every American believes in one or some version of a conspiracy theory.³⁶ The belief in an individual conspiracy theory isn't at its heart a good or bad thing, perhaps it can even be considered a natural byproduct of living in a society with powerful institutions. As I stated before, there have been many very real conspiracies throughout our history and our predilection toward suspicion can provide an important role in holding the powerful to account. Public scrutiny is vital to any functioning democracy.

Though we can work toward a neutral definition of conspiracy theory, most humans are not neutral about how they see the world and resultingly not neutral about which conspiracy narratives to which they subscribe. Our reasoning, according to research in cognitive psychology, is motivated by that which we most want to be true.³⁷ We shape our reality to fit our perceptions. As Anna Merlan puts it, "we tend to believe in the conspiracy theories we want to believe, drawn to the ones that satisfy and reinforce our view of how the world works."³⁸ The theory of motivated reasoning suggests that we often *feel* for what is true because our minds are riddled with biases.

³⁵ Ibid, 48.

³⁶ Ibid, 52.

³⁷ Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (February 2019): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.

³⁸ Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and their Surprising Rise to Power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 24.

The tendency toward biased narratives about how the world works is not at all unique to this particular moment in history, nor any individual personality type or occupation. Scientists are not immune from biased beliefs³⁹ nor academics and certainly not politicians and journalists. It is at this stage of our discussion where it becomes important to draw some distinctions. While we are all prone to biased motivated reasoning, conspiracy theory operates as motivated reasoning on hyper drive. This is particularly true of grand conspiracy narratives, which serve as hidden explanations for our history and how power operates in the shadows to control our observable reality.

Conspiracy theories are by their very nature unconfirmed beliefs often about actual real-world persons or events. If the theory were to be confirmed it would move beyond theory into the realm of actual conspiracy. Given this, conspiracy theories are self-sealing, and those who subscribe to the theory believe that the absence of evidence, or even the presence of disconfirming evidence, is itself a sign of a cover-up.⁴⁰ From this point we move away from just the theory toward a working definition of conspiracism. Conspiracism folds in other conspiracy theory terminology such as conspiracy thinking, conspiratorial predispositions, conspiracist ideation, conspiracy ideology, conspiracy mindset, and conspiratorial worldview.⁴¹ Joseph Uscinski defines this ideation as, “an underlying worldview or disposition, similar to political ideology, toward viewing

³⁹ Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2019), 44.

⁴⁰ Brotherton, 77.

⁴¹ Uscinski, 50.

events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies.”⁴² The grand conspiracy narrative is one that folds many conspiracy theories into an all-encompassing explanation of the world and its power structures. These grand narratives scramble and reorient reality for the conspiracist who adopts them. From the earliest conspiracy theories about the Illuminati to modern conspiracy cult groups like QAnon, a grand conspiracy narrative asserts a powerful shadowy cabal with evil, usually Satanic, rituals for initiation into the group whose hidden mission is global domination or some other apocalyptic end result for our society. The most successful grand conspiracy narratives combine an elite group with a traditionally marginalized target group, like the Jews and anti-Semitic troupes from which many of the early grand conspiracy narratives originated.⁴³

What we most commonly refer to as conspiracy theory in the news media and popular culture is more associated with this extreme form of conspiracist ideation or an individual or group adopting a grand conspiracy narrative. These grand conspiracy narratives are often Manichean in nature, a contrast of good versus evil.⁴⁴ It’s important to understand that grand conspiracy narratives are dualist in nature; good vs. bad, dark vs. light, the people vs. the elites. An individual conspiracy theory is specific, whereas conspiracist ideation and grand narratives are broad.⁴⁵ The conspiracy minded use conspiracy narrative as the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Brotherton, 31-46.

⁴⁴ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracies*, 2.

⁴⁵ Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 9.

“framework for understanding the world.”⁴⁶ Thomas Milan Konda writes, “This framework can be thought of as hermetic—that is, seeing the hand of God at work everywhere.”⁴⁷ Hermetic frameworks are “totalizing histories” and the number of specific conspiracy theories within the framework depends on the number needed to make sense of the framework. The greater the span of time and the scope of the actions of the supposed conspirators the more theories will be needed to hold up the grand narrative.⁴⁸

Another feature of grand narratives with great scale is the disembodied “they.” The pejorative “they” is a stand in for any number of intangible groupings, “the globalists,” “the elites,” “the scientists,” even large-scale specific groups, “the mainstream media,” “Big Pharma,” “Big Tech,” etc. “They” avoids specific attribution and evades the need for specific evidence. “They” is narrative cover for the conspiracy minded.⁴⁹ Any new person, marginalized group, or historical figure can become the accused in the grand schemes of world domination. Anyone can be folded into a “they” grouping. This ensures conspirators can imagine and reimagine who the identities of nefarious plotters are and gin up conspiratorial fervor to combat the powerful and shadowy evil forces.

Society at large routinely thinks of conspiracy theory at the extreme end of the spectrum, but I argue that this keeps us from a more sophisticated understanding of the entire spectrum of conspiracy theory. It is valuable to

⁴⁶ Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies*, 9.

⁴⁷ Konda, 9.

⁴⁸ Konda, 93.

⁴⁹ Konda, 94-196.

understand how and where we as individuals fit within that range. Whether, like me, you're suspicious of the official explanation of Martin Luther King Jr's death or unlike me, believe 9/11 was an inside job, you exist on the conspiracy theory spectrum somewhere. Awareness allows us to understand where and how our own biased beliefs may influence us to adopt one or more conspiracy theories. It can help to make each of us more conscious about the information we share in conversations, classrooms, and online. Awareness can facilitate more discerning media diets. It can promote healthy skepticism of the sources of information that we consume. Awareness can help us all be more mindful of getting pushed further down the spectrum in times of social or political turmoil when conspiracist ideation is usually at its peak. Overall, I think this awareness breeds empathy for those whose constructed reality has become overrun by a grand conspiracy narrative rather than immediately dismissing them as crazy. That empathy can us engage with those who have lost touch with a shared sense of reality and allow us to provide support instead of trying to argue with and disprove the conspiracist.

Healthy skepticism is vital to democracy, but conspiracy theory serves many more functions for individuals than just an outlet of frustration about institutional corruption. In the next section, we'll move beyond definitions of the phenomenon of conspiracy theory to explore biases, beliefs, and the nature of truth. It is through an examination of the philosophy, politics, and psychology of conspiracy theory that we'll see how difficult it is to make assumptions about who

a conspiracy theorist is but rather why so many of us are susceptible to adopting conspiracy theory, particularly in times of socio-political or economic stress.

Truth, Belief, and Identity: the Psychology of Conspiracy Theory

In the last section, I proposed we begin to orient our understanding of conspiracy theory as a spectrum in which we all live. The main reason for this is that we all have human minds designed with shortcuts, blind spots, biases, and incomplete pictures of the world. Psychologist Rob Brotherton explains, “Conspiracy theories resonate with some of our brain's built-in biases and shortcuts, and tap into some of our deepest desires, fears, and assumptions about the world and the people in it. We have innately suspicious minds. We are all natural-born conspiracy theorists.”⁵⁰ This section will examine the basic and essential philosophical and psychological components to conspiracy theory endorsement. This section will reflect on the nature of belief, including ontology of being, the nature of truth, and the psychology of belief. Conspiracist thinking is intimately linked to how an individual sees the world, who they trust and interact with, how they gather and interpret information, and then how they use all of that to inform their beliefs, construct their world view, and direct their actions in the world.

Deep questions like, “What is truth?” and “Why do we believe what we believe?” arise during a nuanced study of conspiracy theories. These deep

⁵⁰ Brotherton, 17.

questions have been asked by philosophers throughout history and have subjective uncertain answers that both continue to evolve over time and relate very much to the complexity of our human nature and experience. As philosophers of science Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall note, "The idea of truth presents many old, difficult philosophical problems," including whether there are reliable methods for uncovering truth and whether or not we can ever really know anything for sure.⁵¹

What is the truth? Objective statements are those that can be determined as either true or false. The Earth is round, and fire is hotter than snow are examples of statements that can be determined as objectively true. These are scientific truths that have been observed and re-tested over many lifetimes. Take gravity or electromagnetism, as other laws of nature for example. Politics, religion, culture, society and much of the rest of our lives exist in the subjective dimension. These are statements, beliefs, and claims that are not testable and open to interpretation. Subjectivity implies the introduction of a human interpretation with includes emotions, personal experience, and opinion preferences. The truth, at any given moment, is often demanding, complex, and slippery. As journalist and fact-checker Tom Phillips writes:

Once you go beyond immutable laws of nature, you find yourself saying 'The best available evidence suggests...' rather a lot. Anyone who has spent time in the pursuit of accuracy and evidence understands how every new fragment of knowledge has a tendency to raise ten more

⁵¹ O'Connor and Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age*, 25.

questions...truth by this measure is not so much a thing; it's more of a long, irritating journey toward a destination you'll never reach.⁵²

I'm of the personal philosophy that this nuanced nature of truth, paired with the reality that many things can be true and contradict each other at the same time, is vital to the human project. It is the process of inquiry that opens us up to new questions that may not have data driven answers. The mystery of life keeps us curious, debating, and innovating. Life for all that we can know about it is still greatly ruled by chance. Our obsession with certainty and needing to be right can lead the mind through a mental gymnastics sequence so complex and flexible that one arrives at the dismount openly embracing a grand conspiracy narrative to reorganize an uncertain and chaotic universe into an ordered one.⁵³

How do we know anything? Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge or as Britannica defines it, "the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge."⁵⁴ One of our main knowledge building techniques is inductive reasoning or moving from an observation toward a general theory. In 1748, noted philosopher David Hume writing in *An Enquiry of Human Understanding* asserted his classic, "problem of induction." This famous philosophical conundrum asserts that all knowledge is based on prior observation and experience and that "no number of individual instances of a regularity can underwrite a general inference of that sort."⁵⁵ As philosophers O'Connor and Weatherall put it, "No matter how many days you have seen the sun rise, tomorrow could be the day it explodes."⁵⁶ In other words, if I get heads seven times in a row in a coin toss, to assume certainty that the 8th coin toss will also be

⁵² Tom Phillips, *Truth: a Brief History of Total Bullshit* (New York: Hanover Square Press, 2020), 38.

⁵³ Konda, 326.

⁵⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. "epistemology," accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology>.

⁵⁵ O'Connor and Weatherall, 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 27.

heads is Hume's Induction Problem. Hume argues that even repeated observations of the world don't necessitate the certainty of the next moment.

Without going too far down the philosophical rabbit hole, we'll suffice it to say that the truth is demanding, and we can't necessarily be certain about anything. At the same time we have to live our lives and make decisions. We may not be able to be certain, we can feel a sense of confidence and clarity from which to direct our actions in the world. Even Hume said, "A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence."⁵⁷ If we were to wait for absolute certainty, we would likely paralyze ourselves with existential anxiety.

Philosophers, mathematicians, and scientists over the centuries have devised ways of thinking critically, developed methods to test theories, using collected data to interpret observations that can be understood as working knowledge of a subject. Knowledge is a collective human project and as such has potential for human flaws, however established knowledge is held to high standards of testing and re-testing. Scientific knowledge will be examined carefully with repeated experiments through time and any findings themselves and how to we interpret scientific evidence is continuously debated.⁵⁸ Connor and Weatherall write, "The reason to rely on scientific knowledge when we make decisions is that...scientists are usually in the best position to systematically gather and evaluate whatever evidence is available."⁵⁹ There is a standardized,

⁵⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 44.

testable quality to institutional knowledge. Science can be wrong and manipulate data for biased social reasons. The racist field of eugenics in the early to mid-20th century is a prime example.⁶⁰ While scientists can be biased and produce data that leads to false conclusions, that same data will be forced to stand up to critical analysis. Scientists in the future test and then revise knowledge within their perspective fields and delegitimize findings that cannot stand up to the scrutiny of logic, testing, and time. Though individual scientists themselves are not immune to the biases their viewpoint and the knowledge they share on issues of public interest are “informed by the best evidence we have.”⁶¹

We are not required, nor best served at all times, to order our lives and decision making solely based on academic or scientific data. Art cultivates empathy and inspiration and has much to teach humanity. Logic and rationality do not account for a wide range of human experiences and emotions that must be felt, rather than rationalized, to be understood. Science cannot, and need not, explain everything we experience in our lives. From love to grief and back again, there is much that science cannot measure and know for sure, so much of our human existence is subjective. It is also vital that we constantly challenge scientific and scholastic paradigms. In this endeavor we can critically examine our systems while also applying a lens of compassionate care for our collective wellbeing. After all, the systemic challenges of society exist as much in the halls

⁶⁰ Ibid, 33.

⁶¹ Ibid, 44-45.

of academia as they do anywhere else. The fact remains, a troubling one at that, that presently science does seem to find itself often at odds with public opinion. This puts us all in a rather precarious social position as trust in institutions as halls of insight, expertise, and innovation has eroded a great deal in our postmodern society. We have to march for science now.⁶²

How do we learn what we know in the first place? As individuals our learning is complicated. We are far less pragmatic and rational than we claim. We have to learn discernment.⁶³ We often prefer to attend to “our truth” rather than seek out consensus or a shared sense of truth. The theory of motivated reasoning suggests that we will give greater weight to evidence or opinion that conforms to our existing worldview. We choose data that confirms what we already believe to be true.⁶⁴ Psychological research shows, “We believe what is conditioned. Repeated statements receive higher truth ratings than new statements, a phenomenon called the illusory truth effect.”⁶⁵ We believe what is repeated to us, even in the presence of new, disconfirming evidence to the beliefs we currently hold. Humans also tend to be very confident of their deeply held beliefs. Each individual is most likely to see their logic as sound and

⁶² March for Science, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://marchforscience.org>.

⁶³ Brotherton, 189.

⁶⁴ “Motivated Reasoning (SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY) - IResearchNet,” *Psychology* (blog), January 6, 2016, <http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/attitudes/motivated-reasoning/>.

⁶⁵ Lisa K. Fazio et al., “Knowledge Does Not Protect against Illusory Truth,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no. 5 (October 2015): 993–1002, <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000098>, 993.

informed by reason, while others are being misled.⁶⁶ We believe that others, not us, will fall for fake news and are vulnerable to misinformation and propaganda by politicians and social media. Intellectual attribution bias suggests that we most often consider our own logic to be sound while others are vulnerable to emotional decision making and the problems of cognition where we are not.⁶⁷

Nearly all of human learning is a social process. O'Connor and Weatherall describe that even scientific fields largely rely on social networks to build information. They write, "Most scientific advances result from the slow accumulation of knowledge in community."⁶⁸ Individuals too largely rely on relationships to explain the world to us; whether that be media, religious leaders, teachers, parents, friends, colleagues, mentors, etc. Individual knowledge building does not adhere to the same scientific scrutiny listed above and no individual can be expected to be an expert on all subjects. Not only is it impossible for us to be completely certain about the world, we also cannot know everything about all facets of life. Individual knowledge building relies on trust in and connection to other people. Humans form networks of *trust* to build up knowledge and inform our beliefs. I highlight the word trust here because where we choose to gather information is faith dependent, and it is in these networks of trust that we are most likely to be misled.⁶⁹ Most humans form social networks based on a variety

⁶⁶ Rob Brotherton, *Bad News: Why We Fall for Fake News* (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2020), 35.

⁶⁷ Shermer, *The Believing Brain*, 265.

⁶⁸ O'Connor and Weatherall, 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 170-171.

of preferences, including but not limited to, shared interests, shared identity, shared beliefs, shared politics, shared hobbies, shared culture, shared customs, and shared language. Trust is a form of faith, and often arrived at intuitively over periods of time rather than logically.

Logic and evidence are not commonly associated with how we build social networks of trust. Nor are they the main driver for many people when forming or updating their beliefs about the world. Religion itself exists very far apart from scientific evidence, but the beliefs associated are just as potent for the faithful who make a plethora if not the majority of their choices on a religious basis.

Decision making and knowledge building over the course of our lives can be difficult, time consuming, and given the sheer volume of information available to us, overwhelming. Cognition is “the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.”⁷⁰ The human mind has many built in short cuts by which to process information, form beliefs, and direct their actions. These mental cognitive shortcuts are called heuristics or more colloquially, “rules of thumb.” Heuristics are not good or bad, rather a mechanism of survival and quite necessary for efficient decision making. Herbert Simon first explored these ideas in the 1950s⁷¹ and determined that while we all want to make rational decisions, our judgement is limited. Things like emotions, time, and memory get in our way. Heuristics make reasonable decision

⁷⁰ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “cognition,” accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/cognition>

⁷¹ Kendra Cherry, “How Heuristics Help You Make Quick Decisions,” Verywell Mind, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-heuristic-2795235>.

making possible, but the short cuts themselves breed biases for *everyone*. Cognitive biases result from the heuristic attempt to make information gathering and decision making simpler, less stressful, and more efficient.⁷² Cognitive biases may be predictable shortcuts, but they are unique to each person in the diverse ways they show up in our lives and decision making. We each have distinctive experiences, skill sets, influences, and memories and as such our biases are unique to life experiences, education, culture, social networks, attention span, personal preferences, and so much more. Every human exhibits cognitive biases.

Conspiracy theory research itself has a broad academic range and finds a home in many disciplines, from political science to religious studies. The academics within each discipline tend to view the overarching motivations for conspiratorial beliefs from that perspective. “It’s a trick of the mind,” say the psychologists. The political scientists will credit fierce partisanship. “Its crippled epistemology,” cries the philosopher. Religious scholars point to apocalyptic, supernatural predictions embedded in texts sacred to spiritual traditions. Each of these perspectives is correct. It is vitally important that each field communicate these perspectives in order to form an interdisciplinary understanding of conspiracist ideation and its impacts for our society. Conspiracy theory has its own history that runs alongside the mainstream stories of human civilizations and

⁷² Kendra Cherry, “How Cognitive Biases Influence How You Think and Act,” Verywell Mind, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-cognitive-bias-2794963>.

the major economic, socio-political, cultural and thought movements throughout recorded time. Understanding conspiracy theory has major implications for public health, institutional democracy, and mediascapes, especially understanding the impacts of the spread of all kinds of information through new internet technologies.

Thomas Milan Konda in *Conspiracies of Conspiracies* argues that individuals within the conspiracy theory spectrum, from true theorists and casual adherents, are difficult to categorize. He writes:

There is no reason to think that conspiracists across [the conspiracy spectrum]⁷³ share the same mix of psychological attributes. This is one reason why studies of psychological correlates of conspiracist ideation—mistrust, anomie, paranoia, narcissism, authoritarianism, schizotypy, and simply bad thinking—have proven hard to replicate.⁷⁴

Konda and Brotherton both argue, and I lean to agreement, that there is no one monolithic personality type for the conspiracist. In fact, society at large often falsely perceives the conspiracist to be crazy, ignorant, or stupid. Research suggests that intelligence can actually support conspiracism. The smarter you are, the easier it is for you to rationalize just about anything.⁷⁵

Why is it so important to trace the link between conspiracy theory and how all our brains work? As Rob Brotherton writes, “by painting conspiracism as some bizarre psychological tick that blights the minds of a handful of paranoid kooks,

⁷³ Bracketed words are mine.

⁷⁴ Konda, 99.

⁷⁵ Shermer, 35.

we smugly absolve ourselves of the fault thinking we see so readily in others.”⁷⁶ I believe when we take a step back from trying to prove one monolithic personality type of the conspiracy minded, and rather observe the loop-holes and blind spots we all have in common as a result of having human brains, we can see how the mind makes space for conspiracy theories. We can then better determine why each individual or community of conspiracists are uniquely attracted to certain theories over others. This will be particularly important when we shift our study to solely focus on my original research question, “What about the modern mainstream wellness space makes individuals within those communities susceptible to conspiracist ideation?”

We believe what feels right (motivated reasoning) and what’s repeated to us over and over again (illusory truth) by our trusted social networks. The desire to hold on to a particular set of beliefs even in the presence of new evidence or information is a major part of cognition and the biases associated with the psychological disciplines of cognitive and behavioral sciences. Given the many varied quirks of human psychology, individuals often view and interpret the world through the lens of these biases. While this section cannot get into the dimensions of each and every one of those quirks, I’ll conclude here with some of the biases most relevant to conspiracist ideation.

⁷⁶ Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, 243.

Patternicity is the mind's "tendency to find meaningful patterns in both meaningful and meaningless noise,"⁷⁷ Michael Shermer writes in *The Believing Brain*. The human brain loves to connect the dots, or to believe that "everything happens for a reason." Michael Barkun argues that this shows up in conspiracist ideation as a "constant process of linkage and correlation"⁷⁸ to make detailed maps of hidden connections. Rob Brotherton describes that "our entire mental life is pattern recognition." There are no accidents in grand conspiracy narratives. "Conspiracy," he writes, "implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed."⁷⁹ The brain's wiring to find patterns is paired with agency or as Shermer writes, "the tendency to infuse patterns with meaning, intention, and agency."⁸⁰ In the case of the conspiracist ideation, meaning is everything and nothing can be taken at face value. Appearances are deceiving. There are no coincidences. Coincidence becomes cause.⁸¹ The conspiracist assumes a hidden secret meaning and intent. The powerful are controlling the world order from the top which eliminates the role of chance, randomness, human error, incompetence and any other number of human foibles and accidents that rule much of our shared reality. Michael Barkun writes that the conspiracy theory worldview is both frightening and reassuring.⁸² The theories themselves are often quite dark and nefarious and

⁷⁷ Shermer, 60.

⁷⁸ Barkun, 4.

⁷⁹ Barkun, 4.

⁸⁰ Shermer, 87.

⁸¹ Brotherton, 171.

⁸² Barkun, 4.

posit a battle against the forces of dark and light. Yet the theories also remove the indiscriminate, haphazard, and arbitrary forces in our world by defining an enemy and an explanation for all the bad that happens here as well. This gives the world and each life a kind of cosmic meaning and a “definable enemy against which to struggle.”⁸³

Rob Brotherton writes, conspiracy theories are “easy ways to tell complicated stories.”⁸⁴ In conspiracy theory, chance is discarded.⁸⁵ Much of life is mitigated by chance and human error. Sometimes that error is greed. Sometimes it’s incompetence. Sometimes ignorance. Who can forget arrogance? Sometimes a series of errors don’t really matter until paired with a natural disaster, like COVID-19, a hurricane, mass shootings overlaid onto our shared human histories and systemic power disparities. As Hume loved to caution, certainty is ever elusive. Yet we crave order and attempt all kinds of storytelling to get us to the feeling of certainty. Heuristics suggests that much of this hard work of the brain is unconscious to each person, leaving all our biases increasingly more blind to us with time as we continue to seek out information that tells us the story we already believe is the truth.

Rob Brotherton argues that conspiracy theories are actually quite intellectually adventurous journeys. Individual intelligence only makes this and things like confirmation bias easier and makes it more believable when smart

⁸³ Barkun, 4.

⁸⁴ Brotherton, 121.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 121.

people spread wild misinformation. Conspiracy theory influencers are quite well-spoken, charismatic and convincing in their telling of the theories. When something affects us personally, we go looking for stories to make sense of the world. If we are smart and charming enough, we can also make up and start telling those stories of explanation to people looking for answers. This helps to explain why conspiracy theories often seem much more widespread in times of acute economic stress and social anxiety. Proportionality bias suggests that we desire big explanations for big events, but we often get nuance, confusion, and unsatisfying coincidences in its place.⁸⁶

Conspiracists are quite fond of “research” to yield a hidden truth. “Do your own research,” is one of the tag-lines of the Q’Anon conspiracy movement.⁸⁷ There is an analytical, systematic method aspect toward mining through internet content for “proof” of a nefarious secret plot. This research has a strong selection bias, however, as the conspiracist leans heavily toward that which proves the theory even in the presence of mountains of statistical research and scientific consensus that might oppose it. Michael Shermer defines confirmation bias as “the tendency to seek and find confirmatory evidence in support of already existing beliefs and ignore or reinterpret disconfirming evidence.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Brotherton, 210-211.

⁸⁷ Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

⁸⁸ Shermer, 259.

The internet is changing all of our interactions including how we source and gather information. Perhaps most profoundly, the internet increases both the velocity and the range ideas can spread. Internet sleuthing by “citizen journalists” becomes a kind of high-powered confirmation bias of fast paced internet searches for all sources that agree with you. In terms of research, it puts the cart before the horse. Not to mention given the scope of the internet, it likely won’t take too long for you to find someone to agree with you on some blog or alternative media site when you type, “proof of 2020 election conspiracy” into your Google search bar.

The process of heuristics can have us mistaking our beliefs as constant, vital, and necessary for our very survival. We protect our beliefs systems fiercely because they make up our identity. Heuristics suggests we can tell all kinds of stories to ourselves to protect “our truth” about the world. It’s hard for our minds to hold all the stories at once while making decisions. Afterall, there are times in everyone’s life, where you have to pick a side and choose between two bad things. It is exceedingly rare for people to change their minds⁸⁹ especially where political or religious beliefs are concerned.

Many conspiracy minded individuals call themselves, “critical thinkers.” While there is an analytical element to conspiracy theory data gathering, it cannot be categorized as research in any rigorous understanding of inquiry and examination. Promising new research suggests that the conspiracy minded are

⁸⁹ Shermer, 4.

prone to both “jump to conclusions” thinking and intuitive analytics.⁹⁰ A recent study from the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy & Center for Mind, Brain and Behavior at Philipps-University in Germany studied 519 individuals testing a theory about what they call the jumping to conclusions bias (JTC bias) paired with intuitive thinking.⁹¹ JTC bias is defined as “ the tendency of persons with delusions to perform hasty decisions that are sometimes based on little evidence.”⁹² Intuitive ideation is thinking that prioritizes feeling and instinct in belief construction as opposed to investigative methods. They discovered those with a JTC bias had more pronounced conspiracist ideation as well as intuitive thinking mindset.

Lastly, Michael Schermer defines another bias in *The Believing Brain* that he calls, sunk cost bias. He defines sunk cost bias as “the tendency to believe in something because of the cost sunk into that belief.”⁹³ While I haven’t yet come across a study that makes this connection yet, I want to bring up the question here. Imagine you had been pushed to the extreme end of the conspiracy theory spectrum. Imagine you fully subscribed to an apocalyptic grand conspiracy narrative. Imagine you believed that the whole of our shared observable reality was a lie. Imagine you believed that every mainstream institution was in fact

⁹⁰ Nico Pytlik, Daniel Soll, and Stephanie Mehl, “Thinking Preferences and Conspiracy Belief: Intuitive Thinking and the Jumping to Conclusions-Bias as a Basis for the Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.568942>.

⁹¹ Nico Pytlik, Daniel Soll, and Stephanie Mehl, “Thinking Preferences and Conspiracy Belief: Intuitive Thinking and the Jumping to Conclusions-Bias as a Basis for the Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” 1.

⁹² Nico Pytlik, Daniel Soll, and Stephanie Mehl, 1.

⁹³ Shermer, 266.

trying to control you, to keep you enslaved to this false reality. Imagine trying to convince your friends and your family over and over again that Bill Gates was going to microchip you or that COVID-19 was a psychological operation by the New World Order for one world government and total domination of humankind. Imagine you had lost relationships. Imagine everyone told you you were crazy. Imagine all the time you might have spent in high powered confirmation biased research online. Imagine you really believed in your heart of hearts that a Satanic cabal of Democrats was kidnapping children to live off their blood and usher in one world totalitarian government. That is a big investment. Adopting a grand conspiracy narrative is both politics and religious belief. Once you've traveled into the cosmic beyond, the cost of returning back to Earth with the rest of us may be far too high.

This study provides just a small sample insight into conspiracist mindset in the new and growing field of conspiracy theory study. More work will need to be done to develop a clearer picture of how our brains might be wired toward conspiracy theory. What does seem clearer in the growing body of work across the field is that we cannot simply write of the conspiracy minded as crazy, deluded, paranoid, or stupid. Our brains short cuts exist to help us make quick decision in a complex world. We default to believing that our reasoning is sound where others is flawed. We select and interpret data in ways that support our pre-existing ideas and beliefs about ourselves and the world. We do not like to be wrong and often trust what is repeated to us even in the presence of conflicting

information. Conspiracy theory can be understood as a tool of identity protection. The conspiracist ideation creates order out of chaos and builds an impenetrable silo around an individual's constructed reality.

On the Media: New Platforms, Old Problems

Conspiracy theories spread as all ideas spread, by word of mouth through social networks. Today's social media networks allow for wide dissemination of ideas because of its broad and immediate reach over global networks with few gate keepers to information. Since much of our learning is social and our reasoning motivated, it makes sense that individuals gravitate toward news and social media networks that speak to our preconceived world views. Psychologists refer to this as *congeniality bias*, our tendency to "pick information based on how compatible it is with our existing beliefs."⁹⁴ Since the advent of print media, humans have placed greater value on sources that appeal to their personal and political preferences. With the explosion of media platforms in the internet age, many in journalism and academia decry "echo chambers," "fake news," and "filter bubbles." The idea being that the internet creates a personal information silo where false stories and partisan ideas are repeated to us over and over without any of the diverse perspective and accuracy required for a well-informed democratic society.⁹⁵ This has led many a social scientist to wonder if we've entered the "post-truth era," where facts, science, and accuracy no longer serve

⁹⁴ Brotherton, *Bad News*, 169.

⁹⁵ Brotherton, 157-158.

as the regulating forces of informing belief systems. Biased reporting that preferences novelty is far from new, nor are politicians known for prioritizing precision over persuasion. Much of the 19th century media landscape was very similar to the opinionated dialogue we observe now on 24-hr news networks and social media platforms.⁹⁶ A post-truth era would suggest that there is some “truth era” that civilization is departing from and there’s just no evidence to support that time ever existed.

As we learned in the last chapter, the truth is tricky. “Dramatic claims about people deserting the idea of truth en masse for a post-truth wasteland misconstrue the mundane challenge each of us faces every day of our lives: figuring out what to believe and what to doubt, what is opinion and what is simply fact,” writes Rob Brotherton in *Bad News: Why we Fall for Fake News*.⁹⁷ As we explored in the previous chapters this is complicated by *attribution bias*, assuming that our logic is sound and that we wouldn’t fall for fake news like the deluded “other.” We tend to assume the media we consume is good and others, usually who share divergent beliefs than us, are consuming ‘bad news’ that is misinforming them.⁹⁸ Not to mention the sheer volume of news and online content an individual interacts with on a daily basis in the digital age. Parsing out fact from fiction and opinion versus objectivity is demanding work. “News

⁹⁶ Ibid, 40-41.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 241.

⁹⁸ Michael Schudson, “The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, accessed June 9, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php/.

consumers today are confronted with a tangle of statements and assertions that run the gamut from purely factual to purely opinion. Being able to quickly tell where a news statement fits on that spectrum is key to being an informed reader or viewer,” writes Drew Desilver in an interview with Pew researcher Amy Mitchell.⁹⁹ Amy Mitchell and colleagues surveyed 5,035 adults using ten statements which subjects had to determine as either fact or opinion. In their results Pew suggests that “even this basic task presents a challenge.”¹⁰⁰ The results of the study were only a little better than if the subjects were guessing at random.¹⁰¹ Conspiracy theory cannot strictly be considered opinion, however these alternate explanations for history and current events seem more reasonable when trust in institutional news is eroded by relentless opinion-based attacks. Opinion feels like facts when it’s repeated to us over and over again, such is the principal of illusory truth.

Rob Brotherton convincingly argues in *Bad News* that “we seem to be blaming new technology for old problems...It would be naïve to assume that a technology with such potential to influence the very news we consume would be an unmitigated good, but it could be equally misguided to write it off as a

⁹⁹ Drew DiSilver, “Testing Whether People Can Tell Factual from Opinion Statements in News,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/18/qa-telling-the-difference-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>.

¹⁰⁰ Amy Mitchell, Jeffery Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Nami Sumida, “Can Americans Tell Factual From Opinion Statements in the News?,” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project* (blog), June 18, 2018, <https://www.journalism.org/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell et al, “Can American Tell Factual From Opinion Statements in the News?”

catastrophic mistake.”¹⁰² Brotherton suggests that most of us determine which news sources to believe by a combination of *congeniality bias* and *homophily*, a sociological term that suggests ‘similarity breeds connection.’¹⁰³ He cites plenty of research that suggests we might be overstating the danger of echo chambers, filter bubbles and the harm that social media is entertaining on society at large. Instead, he asserts, we should be considering our own complicated relationship to the “news.” When asked, many Americans will express concern over biased media and fake news. Individual consumers value accuracy, but as we saw in the last section, how we form our beliefs and how strongly we associate those beliefs with our identity in the world, largely determines how we parse out fact from fiction. To quote Brotherton, “News audiences are understandably concerned about plainly fraudulent information posing as news. But sensationalism, negativity, bias, inaccurate facts, and misleading interpretations are just as concerning, and far more pervasive.”¹⁰⁴ Creating a dialogue about fake news as the problem suggests that we might be missing the larger root cause “how news is made and consumed,” argues Brotherton.¹⁰⁵

News media has long relied on hubris and hyperbole to sell papers. At the end of the day, news is business and advertising space has to be sold to keep the news flowing. It should be noted here, however, that while print journalism is far from perfect, personal investment of time and money into long form journalism

¹⁰² Brotherton, 187.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 162.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 302.

retains value in a democratic society, whether it's read on or offline. As historian Timothy Snyder writes:

The better print journalists allow us to consider the meaning, for ourselves and for our country, of what might otherwise seem like isolated bits of information. But while anyone can repost an article, researching and writing is hard work that requires time and money. Before you deride the 'mainstream media,' note that it is no longer mainstream. It is derision that is mainstream and easy, and actual journalism that is edgy and difficult.¹⁰⁶

This also assumes that media consumers spend time reading and digesting long-form journalism, a trend that looks to be on the decline. According to the American Press Institute, when consumers self-describe their media habits, 9 out of 10 people surveyed vocalized that staying informed is of at least moderate importance in their daily task list.¹⁰⁷ This comes in contrast with reports that American news attention span is shrinking and that roughly 60% of social media users will share an article online without reading beyond the headline.¹⁰⁸ Not to mention the explosion of opinion journalism which may be increasingly more difficult for consumers to parse out from fact-based stories.¹⁰⁹

The above discussion begs the question, how is news made and consumed in the new media environment? Who do we *trust* to tell us the truth?

¹⁰⁶ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017), 76.

¹⁰⁷ The Media Insight Project, "How Americans Describe Their News Consumption Behaviors," *American Press Institute* (blog), June 11, 2018, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/americans-news-consumption/>.

¹⁰⁸ Caitlin Dewey, "6 in 10 of You Will Share This Link without Reading It, a New, Depressing Study Says," *Washington Post*, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/06/16/six-in-10-of-you-will-share-this-link-without-reading-it-according-to-a-new-and-depressing-study/>.

¹⁰⁹ The Media Insight Project, "How Americans Describe their News Consumption Behaviors."

How is social media impacting the information economy? I agree with Brotherton that it would be naïve to assume that technology is the source and solution to all of humanity's problems rather than just a new playing field for all our unresolved issues. We have already seen that conspiracy theories are far from new and there really is no egalitarian "truth" era to reference for guidance. What I might add is that new technologies *amplify* our old problems. The internet is our old problems on steroids. The internet provides three essential pillars for the prolific potential for spread of disinformation and conspiracy theory online: *velocity, range, and magnitude*. News outlets have long prioritized, "breaking news," immediacy over accuracy in news leveraging whatever technology was available to them at the time. Whether it be news boats, telegrams, or Twitter feeds, news media compete in the race against time, prioritizing getting the news to consumers first and sorting out the details later. Long form investigative journalism which dives into stories in nuanced detail has always had a difficult time competing for eyes and funding.

Humans say they want unbiased, "just the facts" news but most often consume with great interest conjecture over context. As Tim Snyder writes, "The effort to define the shape and significance of events requires words and concepts that elude us when we are entranced by visual stimuli."¹¹⁰ He was referring there to television broadcast news, but the same applies, if not more so, to social

¹¹⁰ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny*, 60.

media platforms that use visual elements to keep audiences engaged with user content.

When it comes to cable news networks, opinion journalism continues to replace news in top time slots across these platforms.¹¹¹ Fox News famously defended one of its most popular and inflammatory pundits, Tucker Carlson, in a 2020 defamation lawsuit arguing that Tucker was not a journalist. Fox lawyers stated, Carlson "cannot be understood to have been stating facts, but instead that he was delivering an opinion using hyperbole for effect."¹¹² The judge siding with Fox lawyers stated in the ruling, "given Mr. Carlson's reputation, any reasonable viewer 'arrive[s] with an appropriate amount of skepticism' about the statements he makes."¹¹³ It's not just right-wing media however, Rachel Maddow was similarly defended in a \$10-million dollar suit brought by One America News Network. The judge in that ruling determined, "The context of Maddow's statement shows reasonable viewers would consider the contested statement to be opinion."¹¹⁴

At some point, we should consider how the constant barrage of opinion masquerading as news affects all of our news literacy. Carlson and Maddow both

¹¹¹ Charlotte Klein, "Fox News Seems to Be Having a Post-Trump Identity Crisis | Vanity Fair," accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/01/fox-news-seems-to-be-having-a-post-trump-identity-crisis>.

¹¹² Sonam Sheth, "Fox Wins McDougal Case, Argues No One Takes Tucker Carlson Seriously," accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/fox-news-karen-mcdougal-case-tucker-carlson-2020-9>.

¹¹³ "Sonam Sheth, "Fox Wins McDougal Case."

¹¹⁴ David Folkenflik, "You Literally Can't Believe The Facts Tucker Carlson Tells You. So Say Fox's Lawyers," NPR.org, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/917747123/you-literally-cant-believe-the-facts-tucker-carlson-tells-you-so-say-fox-s-lawye>.

have large social media followings. Tucker Carlson often uses turns of phrase such as “the truth is,” “the facts are,” and presents himself and the Fox News Network as scrappy outsider fighting against the mainstream liberal propaganda machine that will eventually steer the world toward global Communism. This all sounds very dramatic, but I assure you if you take 3-10 minutes browsing Carlson’s Twitter feed or watch his primetime “news” show, you will see I am far from exaggerating. To date, he continues to “raise questions” about fraud in the 2020 election, the efficacy of vaccines, and generally pushes delegitimizing narratives about “elitist” institutions of science, academia, and journalism. In a February 11th 2021 tweet Carlson posts, “Fox is the last big news organization in America that differs from the rest. On Fox, there are still journalists who are willing to think for themselves and are brave enough to say so out loud.”¹¹⁵ He proudly, loudly, and frequently dons the cape of journalistic integrity and “truth telling,” while being legally protected from upholding journalistic standards.

Despite the judge’s rulings, people listen to and believe Tucker Carlson and Rachel Maddow. The pundit evolves into the trusted “truth teller,” telling it like it is and saying what you, the viewer, wish you could say. Pundits and politicians alike also understand that eyes on tv screens is one thing, followers on social media translate to an entirely more potent currency. Research shows that

¹¹⁵ Tucker Carlson (@tuckercarlson) “Fox is the last big news organization in America that differs from the rest.” Twitter, Feb. 11, 2021, 7:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TuckerCarlson/status/1360066058535792641>

a growing number of people get their news exclusively from social media.¹¹⁶ In the new media environment, the social media influencer in effect creates their own news platform, often leveraging mainstream social media platforms to spread their “truth” with great speed and magnitude to a larger audience of like-minded individuals. An influencer is defined as, “Visible pundits, journalists, or public figures who drive conversation around particular topics in broadcast media and online networks.”¹¹⁷ In many cases, a social media influencer has greater informational reach than institutional media outlets. The social media influencer becomes a trusted news source, regularly producing easily digestible, aesthetically pleasing, and bias reinforcing content to their followers. Much of the time this content lacks context or journalistic rigor.

Simultaneously we see print media institutions, pundits, and politicians competing for eyes on these platforms. This chapter accepts Brotherton’s position and expands to suggest, that while our news may not be siloed in partisan echo chambers; trust, or rather legitimacy, will be of paramount interest here. Journalism scholar Christian Fuchs writes, “Today we not only have the World Wide Web and mobile phones, but also Big Data, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, Wikipedia, blogs, etc. have become

¹¹⁶ Philemon Bantimaroudis et al., “Conspiracism on Social Media: An Agenda Melding of Group-Mediated Deceptions,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 115–38, https://doi.org/10.1386/macp_00020_1.

¹¹⁷ Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, “The Code Book,” Media Manipulation Casebook, October 15, 2020, <https://mediamanipulation.org/code-book>, 19.

important means of information and communication.”¹¹⁸ Social media is news outlet. It influences and informs and the revenue streams of media, which has always been advertising dollars, are now spent predominately on targeted social media ads over print sources.¹¹⁹

Instagram and the wellness influencers of that occupy that space will be the platform where my own research is conducted. When asked, most Americans say they do not consider Instagram a news source and yet admit to using the platform daily.¹²⁰ I argue here that the lack of skeptical defense one might have when reading an article in the *New York Times* or engaging in what they consider to be the “news,” actually makes them more vulnerable to misinformation and conspiracy theory on platforms where they regularly consume content. Content from influencers informs our world view and perspectives, especially when we engage in that content casually without skeptical rigor. The goal of many social influencers is to breed a community of trust so they may leverage the attention of followers to buy products, click on paid ads from sponsors, or simply to accept the “brand” narrative they are crafting in that space. This content is often mixed with personal revelations, vacation and pet pictures, and any other facet of the social media maven’s life. This familiarity breeds trust.

¹¹⁸ Christian Fuchs, “Propaganda 2.0: Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model in the Age of the Internet, Big Data and Social Media in the Age of the Internet, Big Data and Social Media,” in *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*, by Jeffery Klaehn and Independent Scholar, CA, ed. Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus, ES et al. (University of Westminster Press, 2018), 71–92, <https://doi.org/10.16997/book27.f.>, 71.

¹¹⁹ Christian Fuchs, “Propaganda 2.0,” 72.

¹²⁰ Michael Schudson, “The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust.”

Large follower counts in the thousands to millions of people paired with verified status¹²¹ grant the content producer mainstream authority. This authority paired with the familiarity and accrued through daily consumption in all aspects of the influencers lives breeds trust. Individuals are most vulnerable to misinformation within our networks of trust. Social media allows for false information to spread rapidly, largely unchecked. Political scientist Andrew Guess writes, “The speed and reach of social media and the lack of fact-checking make it an ideal vehicle for transmitting misinformation.”¹²² Even with the proliferation of fact checking organizations, once a false story gets out, the fact checks almost never reach the misinformed person.¹²³ While we may not be living in the much fretted over ‘post-truth’ era, the internet certainly has a misinformation problem. By misinformation, I refer to the unintentional amplification of false information or “false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.”¹²⁴ Disinformation on the other hand is deliberate sharing of biased, misleading, or false information meant to manipulate public opinion.¹²⁵

Extremist and conspiracy groups see the power in going “viral” online to spread seeds of doubt, animus, and distrust for their target person or institution.

¹²¹ (denoted on both Twitter and Instagram with a blue check mark next to the content producer’s username that signifies the person posting is a real person with publicly verifiable status).

¹²² Andrew M. Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, “Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 US Election,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 5 (May 2020): 472–80, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0833-x>.

¹²³ Guess et al, “Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites.”

¹²⁴ Nia Lam, “Library Guides: News: Fake News, Misinformation & Disinformation,” accessed June 9, 2021, <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=345925&p=7772376>.

¹²⁵ Nia Lam, “Library Guides.”

These attacks are often coordinated campaigns aimed at high volume online sharing by small and large social media accounts alike. We'll speak a little more about the tactics for amplification in a moment, but next let's turn to the work of Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead in *A lot of People are Saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* published in 2019. In the book, the authors argue that de-legitimation rather than mistrust is the goal of the new conspiracism. The new conspiracism in their view is conspiracy with no theory, rather the new conspiracism seeks to delegitimize any perceived political opposition and undermine democratic institutional norms often for political reasons. The new conspiracism relies on innuendo over assertion, hence the title of their book, "A lot of people are saying..." or other phrases "I'm just asking questions," or the favorite of our former United States president, "RIGGED!"¹²⁶

Their book does well to point out how mainstream social media influencers utilize the conspiracy narrative to sow doubt with the ultimate goal of undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions and processes. Ranging from election integrity to scientific consensus and everything in between, the new conspiracism seeks to create alternative reality that sows doubt in consensus knowledge and shared history. Perhaps no institution has received more scorn in recent years than the American news media. The purpose of this, as the authors suggest, is "direct, explicit, and wholesale attack on shared modes of understanding and

¹²⁶ Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 25.

explaining things in the political world.”¹²⁷ The overall effect of the new conspiracism is public disorientation by bare assertions repeated over and over again. They write:

Conspiracist accusations leave the rest of us, officials and citizens alike, baffled, our sense of reality threatened, our responses tentative and, it feels, inadequate. Disorientation is one of the dangerous effects of conspiracism, and producing this reaction is one of the new conspiracists’ declared pleasures.¹²⁸

In the chaos of constant bold assertions and accusations without evidence, the modern conspiracist is able to paint their “political opposition...as a public enemy.”¹²⁹ The process of sowing doubt in a world so often ruled by chance and uncertainty gives innuendo weight. The “true enough,” or gut feeling of true gets as much airtime and significant objective weight as the demanding rigor of academic research and investigative reporting.¹³⁰ Simultaneously, mainstream publications report on conspiracy projects with the weight of regular news, platforming the very narratives that seek to undermine their institutional legitimacy. In the case of conspiracist ideation, disconfirming evidence presented by institutional sources is proof of conspiracy. The journalistic attempts to debunk false claims often serves as greater proof of collusion for the conspiracy minded. The undermining of institutional integrity that the modern conspiracy influencer seeks is what historian Timothy Snyder writes as “open hostility to verifiable

¹²⁷ Muirhead and Rosenblum, *A lot of People are Saying*, 7.

¹²⁸ Muirhead and Rosenblum, 38.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 114.

¹³⁰ Ibid 43.

reality.”¹³¹ Embracing the narratives that we want to hear versus looking for verified proof of what might have actually happened asks that we abandon reason for magical thinking and chase “the open embrace of contradiction” over common knowledge and collaborative discourse.¹³² In the landscape of eroded institutional legitimacy, followers of alternative, often sensational, sources can default the social media influencer as the real source of truth.

Social media platforms enlarge the range, speed, and believability of conspiracy theory particularly in societies conditioned to seek out contradictory narratives to institutional explanations for historical or current events. The narrative becomes all the more believable when repeated over and over again with great confidence and gusto by a charismatic narcissist. Thomas Milan Konda argues that while there is no one monolithic personality of the conspiracy minded individual, the leader that leverages conspiracy theory for attention and acceptance of a social or political project often has markers of narcissism.¹³³ No one buttressed bias, contradiction, and conspiracy for political power more successfully on social media than the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump. The former president tweeted false and misleading claims with a religious like zeal. Bold accusations and combative rhetoric were the main rhetorical tools of his presidency.¹³⁴ Beyond the traumatizing effects on public discourse and

¹³¹ Snyder, 66.

¹³² Snyder, 67-73.

¹³³ Konda, 107.

¹³⁴ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, “Analysis | Trump’s False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years,” *Washington Post*, accessed June 9, 2021,

institutional integrity, Trump regularly used his Twitter feed to amplify conspiracy narratives. In a televised pre-election townhall, journalist Savannah Guthrie pressed Trump for retweeting conspiracy groups to which Trump famously replied, "That was a retweet, that was an opinion of somebody. I'll put it out there, people can decide for themselves," Trump said.¹³⁵ According to a report in *Newsweek*, as of October 15th 2020, Trump retweeted QAnon conspiracy accounts more than 250 times from over 150 different "Q" affiliated accounts.¹³⁶ QAnon, a conspiracy theory obsessed group, became a powerful cultlike association fully devoted to archetype of Trump. The group positions Trump as the savior of the world from a global pedophile ring of Democratic opponents among many other theories.

Needless to say, when the positioned savior of your conspiracy cult retweets your post, it serves as confirming evidence to your theories. Winking at conspiracy theorists for political popularity was a hallmark of the Trump presidency, a hallmark that will have lasting impacts on our media landscape. Trump was famously permanently banned from Twitter and other platforms after the January 6th insurrection attempt at the United States Capitol. At the time of de-platforming, Trump had 88 million Twitter followers, many of them fiercely devoted to Trump as "truth teller."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

¹³⁵ Ewan Palmer, "Donald Trump Has Promoted QAnon-Linked Twitter Accounts More Than 250 Times," *Newsweek*, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-trump-twitter-conspiracy-town-hall-pedophiles-1539698>.

¹³⁶ Ewan Palmer, "Donald Trump Has Promoted QAnon."

Trump was the “big fish” of dis/misinformation campaigns. His platform had a large, devoted following, always attracted the attention of mainstream media sources, and had built in authority because of the power of the office of the presidency. “Going viral” is often the goal of disinformation campaigns and one of the easiest ways to do this is by catching the eye and a post share from a popular, verified social media account, the more recognizable the public persona the better. As a reminder, disinformation is conscious attempt to spread inaccurate information or propaganda for socio-political objectives. Research institutions like the non-profit Data & Society and the interdisciplinary research team of the *Media Manipulation Casebook* are providing important insight into how dis/misinformation spreads online, of which conspiracy theory is a big part.

Controversy sells online. As Brittan Heller a Harvard fellow says, “Outrage equals attention.”¹³⁷ Social posts that hit an emotional nerve or inflame an existing grievance are ones a user is more likely to share.¹³⁸ Likes, shares, retweets don’t just amplify that piece of content, the generation of unique engagement generates more proliferation of that content because of social media algorithms designed to amplify popular posts. The “deep learning” algorithm that has been a mainstay of mainstream social platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram is designed to keep people online and engaging with

¹³⁷ Neiwert, 115.

¹³⁸ Chris Meserole, “How Misinformation Spreads on Social Media—And What to Do about It,” *Brookings* (blog), May 9, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/09/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it/>.

content on each of these platforms for as long as possible. The algorithms boost trending content with higher prior organic engagement assuming this content will keep people swiping, clicking, and sharing.¹³⁹ This also makes space for an individual or a group with time, manpower, and know how to manipulate trending topics and target popular accounts for attention.

Media Manipulation Casebook is a regularly updated sourcebook with terms and tactics used by online media manipulators. The Casebook defines media manipulation “as a process where actors leverage specific conditions or features within an information ecosystem in an attempt to generate public attention and influence public discourse through deceptive, creative, or unfair means.”¹⁴⁰ The casebook defines conspiracist manipulators as, “Individuals or groups that actively propagate unfounded or unverified narratives and frames. This often includes speculation, unsubstantiated claims, and explanations predicated on secretive and powerful actors scheming with malicious intent.”¹⁴¹ The detailed Casebook lists 25 strategies and tactics manipulators use to gain attention or create viral campaigns online. Meme wars, muddying the waters, targeted harassment, butterfly attacks and so on are all ways of manipulating algorithms and public perception online often with the intent to sow division, doubt, or to delegitimize an individual or institution.¹⁴² As technology firms adjust

¹³⁹ Chris Meserole, “How Misinformation Spread on Social Media.”

¹⁴⁰ Harvard Kennedy School, *Media Manipulation Codebook*, 3.

¹⁴¹ Harvard Kennedy School, 19.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 19.

algorithms to slow dis/misinformation campaigns, agile tech-savvy groups shift their methods in kind.

Another important study out of *Data & Society* expresses concerns over the growing “attention economy.” On social media, the authors argue, “the most valued content is that which is most likely to attract attention.”¹⁴³ Attention becomes its own kind of currency. “New and old media alike employ software that provides detailed data that shows exactly which articles get the most clicks, shares, likes, and comments. This allows newspapers and blogs to tailor future content to drive their metrics up, incentivizing low-quality but high-performing posts over high-quality journalism.”¹⁴⁴

Nuanced truth lacks the emotional and entertainment value of a conspiracy theory. The attention economy and the potential to make actual money off that attention has prompted a boom in the cottage industry of conspiracy theory influencers. These influencers have growing reach and play a big role in the spread of conspiracy theories online. The specific goals of an influencer aren’t always known. There is the benefit of profit and attention while others enjoy media manipulation as a kind of anarchist prank. The most nefarious, however, utilize media manipulation to push individuals toward social anomie and extremism. Conspiracy theory influencers often use terminology encouraging viewers of content to “wake up,” a process also referred to as “red

¹⁴³ Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” *Data & Society Research Institute*, May 2017, 44.

¹⁴⁴ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation,” 44.

pillling the masses.”¹⁴⁵ This nod to the film series *The Matrix* in which the hero of the film is told that he has been living in a computer simulation and to “wake up” he can take the “red pill” and go deep down the “rabbit hole” to see the truth of reality.¹⁴⁶ Bragging about red-pillling has been an online hallmark of not just conspiracy theory groups but extremist groups of all kinds. Embracing alternative narratives reached a peak during the COVID-19 crisis with the proliferation of QAnon and protests over state regulations on pandemic mitigation. On May 17th 2020, one of the world’s wealthiest men Elon Musk tweeted to his 48 million plus twitter following to “take the red pill.”¹⁴⁷

We can’t know exactly what Elon Musk’s intention was with this tweet. However, we do know of his vocal disapproval of California governor Gavin Newsom’s statewide business closures and “Stay at home” orders. We know that he publicly disparaged the governor about closures in his Tesla factory throughout the late spring of the pandemic. The above tweet came just days after the company was told it would not, in fact, be allowed to reopen its Alameda factory even after telling its workers to show up for work.¹⁴⁸ Reports suggest that the co-option of red-pillling terminology first started in men’s rights linked groups and grew to include greater numbers of anti-establishment, conspiracist

¹⁴⁵ Marwick and Lewis, 31.

¹⁴⁶ Neiwert, vi.

¹⁴⁷ Elon Musk (@elonmusk). “Take the Red Pill.” Twitter, May 17, 2020, 10:44 a.m. <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1262076474565242880>.

¹⁴⁸ Neal Boudette, “Tesla Tells Workers It Will Reopen California Factory Despite County Order,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2020, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/business/economy/tesla-coronavirus-factory-alameda.html>.

influencers like Alex Jones. The Musk tweet highlights the mainstreaming of conspiracist linked language and the amorphous nature with which is used. As journalist and professor Darlena Cunha writes:

The red-pillers have a movement with no basis – and this gives it power because a movement with no clear definition is one that can mean anything to any follower. It can be molded to fit the particulars of each individual so that each person going down these rabbit holes of propaganda can make the messaging speak directly to them.¹⁴⁹

Perhaps at no time has this seemed more salient than the year 2020.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in early 2020 much was still unknown about the virus. For so many it seemed an inconsequential virus, no more serious than the flu. This messaging matched the president's at the time. Like slowly falling dominions the seriousness of the pandemic invaded our reality. The NBA called off the rest of its season. Hollywood actor Tom Hanks became ill with the virus. Stores across America ran out of toilet paper and flour. Schools closed, business shuttered, and massive layoffs rolled through the service economy. Life as we knew it suddenly stopped. We all were told to stay at home, and in that confused isolation some turned to banana bread recipes while others turned to the internet for answers. COVID-19 was absorbed by the conspiracy universe with perfect precision. The internet conspiracy community engaged the confusion of large swaths of the public looking for answers to the sudden big shift in their lives by providing decades of folklore and researched

¹⁴⁹ Darlena Cunha, "Red Pills and Dog Whistles: It Is More than 'Just the Internet' | Human Rights | Al Jazeera," Sep. 6, 2020, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/9/6/red-pills-and-dog-whistles-it-is-more-than-just-the-internet>.

“truth.” It folded neatly into existing narratives of one world government and social control. Red pilling went mainstream. Across the internet, posts from influencers cried for the “sheeple” to stop donning their masks of social control (and COVID protection) and wake up to the engineered truth of COVID-19 as psychological operation.

No one conspiracy group was better positioned to absorb the new truth seekers than QAnon. QAnon folds in many now infamous conspiracy theories with recycled anti-Semitic blood libel troupes about as old as conspiracy theories themselves. For three years conspiracy entrepreneurs, MAGA fanatics of Donald Trump, the alt-right, and internet trolls had been building a network of “research” articles and YouTube documentaries to explain everything from pizza toppings to presidential saviors.

The QAnon cult claims humble origins on the anonymous message boards of 4chan and 8chan. On October 28, 2017, Q or “Q Clearance Patriot” posted a thread entitled “Calm Before the Storm,” in which they mostly fanaticized about the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton.¹⁵⁰ Over the years Q posted off and on, sometimes taking long breaks, sometimes posting in rapid succession, always leaving “crumbs” for the loyal Q-army to “bake.”¹⁵¹ There were news links, random documents, memes, and Manichean like story telling of the battle between the dark and the light. Q foretold of a Great Awakening that

¹⁵⁰ Michael Barkun, “Failed Prophecies Won’t Stop Trump’s True Believers,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 8, 2020, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/08/failed-prophecies-wont-stop-trumps-true-believers/>.

¹⁵¹ Adrienne La France, “The Prophecies of Q.”

would follow the Storm. The Storm was the prophesied day when the massive conspiracy of child sex trafficking and global domination was revealed, and Hillary Clinton finally arrested.¹⁵²

QAnon is a big tent conspiracy theory with plenty of space to fold in new theories for higher traffic volume and engagement. “We now have a densely networked conspiracy theory that is extendible, adaptable, flexible and resilient to takedown,” Joan Donovan founder of *Media Manipulation Casebook* said of QAnon in a 2020 interview.¹⁵³ As conspiracy theory journalist David Neiwert describes QAnon is “a sprawling meta-conspiracy.”¹⁵⁴ As the pandemic apprehension heightened, QAnon posts and hashtags were circulating unchecked on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. “Where We Go One, We Go All” the now notorious Q rallying cry was generating likes and followers through #wwg1wgall for what Q followers called, “The Great Awakening,” #greatawakening naturally. Folks were getting “red pillled” left and right from mommy bloggers to wellness influencers.¹⁵⁵

When QAnon hashtags infiltrated mainstream lifestyle spaces online it was often packaged with aesthetics like any other visually soothing wellness

¹⁵² Adrienne La France, “The Prophecies of Q.”

¹⁵³ Farhad Manjoo, “Opinion | I Spoke to a Scholar of Conspiracy Theories and I’m Scared for Us,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/opinion/q-anon-conspiracy.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Neiwert, 83.

¹⁵⁵ Eden Gillespie, “‘Pastel QAnon’: The Female Lifestyle Bloggers and Influencers Spreading Conspiracy Theories through Instagram,” *The Feed*, March, 9 2020, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/pastel-qanon-the-female-lifestyle-bloggers-and-influencers-spreading-conspiracy-theories-through-instagram>.

post. Scholar Marc-Andre Argentino calls this “Pastel Q”¹⁵⁶ since conspiracy theory was now shared and spread using the same pleasing color palate ubiquitous on the platform. QAnon coopted the hashtag #savethechildren. Posts related to theories about prominent Democrats as Satanic pedophiles, and Trump as the only salvation from their totalitarian grip, spread like wildfire. The pastel infographics used to sell green juice and period underwear were now urging users to “go down the rabbit hole” to take the red pill and “wake up” to the truth. Successful viral conspiracy campaigns about COVID and child trafficking mainstreamed the messaging of the Q’Anon conspiracy movement. The “Q Army,” as they fondly called themselves online, was growing.

Then came the 2020 presidential election. Q loyalists waited for the “Storm” to finally come. The election was close. The nation, already on edge from months of a global pandemic, waited for the election results to trickle in with bated breath. Three days later the election was called in the press. Joe Biden defeats Donald Trump.¹⁵⁷ We’re all pretty familiar with the story from here, I imagine. The election was challenged constantly and loudly by the sitting president who never conceded election defeat. There was no shortage of online conspiracy related content to support his claims. Even after all the legal suits failed, the Trump administration continued to encourage the loyal MAGA base to “Stop the Steal.” On January 6th, 2020, they tried. Following a public rally

¹⁵⁶ Christophe Haubursin, “The Instagram Aesthetic That Made QAnon Mainstream,” Vox, October 28, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2020/10/28/21538763/save-the-children-qanon-instagram>.

¹⁵⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-wins-white-house-ap-fd58df73aa677acb74fce2a69adb71f9>

organized by the then president, the “Q” army, white Supremacists, and Nazis marched toward the Capitol.¹⁵⁸ Millions across the country watched live coverage of the harrowing, violent attempt at insurrection. Many prominent politicians narrowly escaped assassination, including then Vice President Mike Pence.¹⁵⁹ Five people died, one of whom an Air Force veteran is alleged to have been a QAnon follower.¹⁶⁰ Despite the violent attempt to overturn the election results, Joe Biden’s victory was officially certified in the early morning hours of January 7th. Still Q followers held out hope that the Storm was really, actually, for real this time going to be January 20th, Inauguration Day. Joe Biden was sworn in as president without incident. After the Capitol riots, social media companies initiated an internet wide de-platforming campaign. Much of the Q affiliated hashtags and influencer accounts have been scrubbed from mainstream internet platforms.

Mainstream social media accounts serve as megaphone and gathering space for the conspiracy minded and COVID-19 created the prerequisite conditions for masses of people to look for alternate explanations for the moment. Not everyone who tagged, shared, liked, or hashtagged QAnon posts in

¹⁵⁸ Kristin Romey, “Decoding the Hate Symbols Seen at the Capitol Insurrection,” *National Geographic*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/decoding-hate-symbols-seen-at-capitol-insurrection>.

¹⁵⁹ Jacob Pramuk, “Capitol Rioters Came within a Minute of Reaching Pence, Report Says,” CNBC, January 15, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/15/dc-capitol-rioters-nearly-reached-vice-president-mike-pence.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Jack Healey, “These Are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot,” *The New York Times*, Jan 11, 2021, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>.

2020 had extremist intentions. The role they served was raising the temperature and mainstreaming the message. I suspect that not everyone who shared the Q content fully understood what Q meant but took “red pilling” to be a cool counter cultural rebellion against the status quo that was keeping them out of crowded night clubs and packed yoga studios. The proliferation of the QAnon conspiracy cult during the COVID-19 pandemic and a fiercely partisan election year seems like a foregone conclusion. “Nothing is as it seems” fits well into a moment where your reality has been turned upside down by an invisible virus. As we learned with the proportionality bias, we default to believe that big events in our lives need big reasons for happening. COVID-19 is a big event. If COVID is a hoax, you can go about your life ignoring prevention measures aimed at slowing the spread of the virus.

Meanwhile, the media machine never missing the opportunity for a good story itself, veraciously crafted narratives of sensation that turned QAnon followers into crackpot terrorists.¹⁶¹ I hope I’ve already clearly expressed that the research into conspiracy theory makes abundantly obvious that none of us are immune from spreading misinformation or falling down the rabbit hole of a particular conspiracy theory. Internal anxiety and external pressure can push people further down the conspiracy theory spectrum toward embracing a grand conspiracy narrative like QAnon. This point is often left out of mainstream

¹⁶¹ Jack Brewster, “‘We All Got Played’: QAnon Followers Implode After Big Moment Never Comes,” *Forbes*, Jan. 20, 2021, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2021/01/20/we-all-got-played-qanon-followers-implode-after-big-moment-never-comes/>.

reporting on Q and conspiracy theory more generally. A more nuanced approach to conspiracism is critical in understanding social vulnerability to the forces of conspiracist messaging in all times but especially in times of acute social crises.

What does this mean for regulating internet content? Should influencers with enormous internet platforms have their speech monitored by the industries whose platforms they leverage to grow their audiences? I lean toward an absolutist approach to free speech, personally. I was born in Texas after all. Monitoring speech is a slippery slope and any conversation that gets close to questioning “correct” speech makes me a little queasy. What I do question is whether or not society is required to grant “influencers” the loudspeaker of mainstream social media platforms if they amplify extremism, disinformation, and conspiracy theory. Certainly, the conspiracy theorist can still go to the public square, their own website or email list and share whatever ideas they’d like. Are we required to hand them the bullhorn of social platforms and allow them to keep profiting from these messages? Not to mention, perhaps even a better question, to what degree should giant tech companies be held responsible for the media shared on their private platforms? Platforms by which their algorithms consistently amplify the most salacious and incendiary speech which yields them sizeable profits. If social media is where growing numbers of people get their news, should there be changes to how platforms are regulated? This project asks but does not seek to answer these questions.

Timothy Snyder shares in *On Tyranny* that “our collective trust in common knowledge makes us a society.”¹⁶² The internet may not silo us into impenetrable echo chambers, but it seems to have made us more cynical about the truth in general. He writes, “Generic cynicism makes us feel hip and alternative even as we slip along with our fellow citizens into a morass of indifference.”¹⁶³ I would like to pause here and ask for readers to take a moment for self-reflection. I know that I personally participate in boosting messages that get me “fired up” online. I don’t always check sources before sharing on my accounts. Post-truth may not mean that there was a truth era to harken back to, but it might highlight our natural human tendency to quickly abandon the rigor and nuance required for truth for the more satisfying and immediate glory of being “right.” In a stirring essay in the *New York Times* after the January insurrection, Timothy Snyder writes:

Post-truth is pre-fascism...When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place. Without agreement about some basic facts, citizens cannot form the civil society that would allow them to defend themselves. If we lose the institutions that produce facts that are pertinent to us, then we tend to wallow in attractive abstractions and fictions. Truth defends itself particularly poorly when there is not very much of it around...Social media is no substitute: It supercharges the mental habits by which we seek emotional stimulation and comfort, which means losing the distinction between what feels true and what actually is true.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Snyder, 73.

¹⁶³ Snyder, 73.

¹⁶⁴ Timothy Snyder, “The American Abyss,” *The New York Times*. Jan. 9, 2021, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html>.

I cannot speak for the choices each individual makes on their social media platforms. I can say that what we post, amplify and share is connected to a larger framework by which all of us are receiving information about the world. I can tell you that my research into conspiracy theory has greatly humbled me and forced me to acknowledge how important it is to be impeccable in my words online, just as I would in a public setting. I am more careful to monitor my own speech for hyperbole and hubris particularly in situations where I hold a position of influence and power. I have committed to correcting the record when I have stated, or shared something, I later find out was inaccurate. Diverse perspectives are required for civil society. It is reasonable and wonderful for us to have varied and strong points of view, but I personally believe that many of us can try a little harder to strive for accuracy in the content we share online and who we rely on to inform "our truth." When each of us takes responsibility for how we communicate online, we can help to build a more curious and emphatic network of common understanding of our shared reality. This attention facilitates the well-informed and robust public debates that problem solving, and democratic society require.

As we shift our focus into the wellness space, we will continue to consider how narratives on social media shift public perception about social phenomenon. What does it mean to be well? Who is navigating the wellness conversation? How might mainstream "New Age" narratives around wellness fit into the conversation we've had here about misinformation? The lifestyle blogs and perfectly curated Instagram accounts create filters by which we all orient

conversations around health, well-being, and society. We will see in the next chapter that even though the wellness space proports a loving, welcoming, inclusive “vibration,” reality paints a far different portrait. We have all been influenced and not always in the ways we imagine.

Speak Your Truth, Own Yourself: The Neoliberal Wellness Project and the Journey to the Optimal Self

In the last three sections, we closely examined conspiracy theory. We explored conspiracy terminology, discussed the psychological elements of conspiracist belief, and examined how conspiracy theories spread in the new online media marketplace. In this section, we transition to a broader examination of the modern wellness landscape and the mainstream influencers who shape the culture of that space. My central curiosity is to understand how the culture of modern wellness is influenced by macro socio-governmental structures, most specifically economic considerations and structural capitalism. It is my theory that we should consider modern wellness rather as the neoliberal wellness project, a project that turns our very bodies into capital commodities; real estate we have to work to “own.” In my work, I look broadly across the modern wellness landscape and the mainstream social media influencers and celebrities who shape wellness culture. Aspirational wellness is sold in the branded packaging of an influencer’s personal lifestyle. As case study in this presentation, we will examine both the overt and subtle contributions of Hollywood mogul Gwyneth Paltrow and her wellness company Goop.

“Self-care,” in the neoliberal orientation, co-opts wellness tools of all imaginable varieties from the practical to the wildly extravagant to perpetuate cycles of self-obsession in a project that prioritizes individual “optimal” health over collective well-being. The neoliberal wellness project promises personal salvation through protocols of self-healing. Influencers themselves act within the current capitalist paradigm to sell their curated lifestyles through Instagram filters and the coordinated color palates of their highly curated social media feeds. It is my personal belief that the obvious extravagance and conspicuous consumption of wellness is meant to be unattainable so that each of us stay engaged in the task of achieving optimal wellness all the while buying products and services for our wellness journey, a journey with no definitive destination. In fact, it is important to consider how this aspirational health requires many in society to be “un-well” as the capitalist economic structure is trademarked by resource and labor extraction and uneven capital accumulation. Brands may speak to systemic illness such as wealth inequality and race, but they often do so merely through gesture. The neoliberal wellness project further solidifies the social hierarchies described as racial capitalism by Black Marxist scholars. The individual physical body as the site of personal freedom entrenches social hierarchies of race and class and limits equitable access to personal power, safety, and autonomy for the most marginalized.

The goal of this work is to demonstrate the ways in which capitalist modes of individualism and self-determination pervade the national conversation on

health and well-being. It is the emphasis on individual responsibility over one's health that serves as an apparatus of social control in the project of neoliberalism, reinforcing the very structures that are stressing us all out and that limit access to "wellness" for so many. The neoliberal wellness project demands individuals to consider the physical body as property to be owned and thus reduces to transactional the relationship with our own individual physical systems. Becoming ever more obsessed with remodeling the personal property of the self, wellness becomes a journey with no real destination. You have to continue to *actively* participate in the project of your personal wellness, all the while buying products and services to complement your personal values and display those values out in the world. It is this language of the individual journey of wellness as a by-product of *active* personal choices that is of importance here for its relevance to the neoliberal social project.

An anthropological and political lens are both vital to understand how subtle language choices, imagery and values within the wellness cultural landscape fit within macro structures of neoliberalism. I rely on the seminal work of David Harvey, Jodi Melamed, Michel Foucault, and Andrea Jain to show how capitalist constructs that emphasis individual well-being and reduce optimal health to market considerations play into the larger projects of neoliberal capitalism in general, but also serve to rupture collective bonds that could disrupt and eventually dismantle these paradigms.

Narratives of personal responsibility over one's wellbeing are very much mainstream. Self-determination mantras abound on the social media Instagram grids of wellness influencers. Toxic foods and household products are shunned from these inflammation exiling, abundance manifesting temples to the clean and pure. One need merely to "choose happiness" and "radiate joy" to find personal fulfillment and freedom but also here are 75 products you need for your brand new, non-toxic, environmentally friendly, holistic lifestyle. The happiness you seek is just a swipe, a click, and an online shopping cart purchase away. Underlying the pseudoscientific claims and wellness advertisements for luxury skin care products is the promise that you can be radiant, abundant, wealthy and happy too once you "take control of your health, your money, your life" and purchase my guide to an at home ten-day water cleanse.

There is a moment near the end of an episode for Netflix series, *the goop lab with Gwyneth Paltrow* called *The Health Span* where Elise Loehnen then Chief Content Officer of goop turns to Gwyneth Paltrow and says, "It's like you say, the tenants of wellness are typically free."¹⁶⁵ The exact moment, just over twenty-seven minutes into the episode, comes after the revealed results of a biological age test to see if health protocols administered by Gwyneth, Elise, and another goop staffer Wendy Lauria made them younger on paper. Sitting across from Dr. Valter Logo and Dr. Morgan Levine, each a specialist in biological age,

¹⁶⁵ *The Goop Lab with Gwyneth Paltrow*, "The Health-Span Plan," executive producers Gwyneth Paltrow and Elise Loehnen. Netflix. 2020.

they share the diet and beauty protocols each tried as a part of this process. These protocols included “vampire” facials and a non-invasive facelift-esque procedure called threading as well as acupuncture for younger skin and diets of “clean food,” or in Gwyneth’s case very little food. She was on an 800 calorie per day mimicked fasting protocol. In predictable plot line fashion, Paltrow’s age rolled back the most, a fact that seemed expected by the pair of staffers and delighted Gwyneth. Paltrow insists in the big reveal that the fasting protocol she did as an experiment for this episode was “really amazing” even though just five minutes prior the footage showed that she felt she might collapse while standing in her office.

Goop is a highly profitable wellness and lifestyle brand with mythologized origins. The brand claims modest beginnings as a “homespun newsletter”¹⁶⁶ Gwyneth dreamed up in her kitchen in 2008. Of course, she was already a well-established Oscar winning actress, ingénue, and wellness trendsetter at the time. In a Wall Street Journal interview in 2018, GP credits herself for popularizing yoga in the west and mainstreaming other New Age trends.¹⁶⁷ GP, Gwyneth, and Gwyn are used interchangeably throughout this chapter as names for Gwyneth Paltrow because these all appear prominently throughout the branded Goop site. The company’s name goop is a nod to its founder that continues to grow from the roots of Gwyneth’s branded lifestyle. Gwyneth is after all radiant, wealthy, and

¹⁶⁶ “What’s Goop?,” Goop. Accessed June 9th, 2021, <https://goop.com/whats-goop/>.

¹⁶⁷ Elisa Lipsky-Karasz, “Gwyneth Paltrow Wants to Convert You,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 4, 2018, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gwyneth-paltrow-wants-to-convert-you-1543931659>.

the perfect spokesperson for aspirational optimal health. Goop sells every aspect of her lifestyle from travel and food to fitness and fashion. People want to live her life, and that comes with a price, a price that has made goop a multi-million dollar business. In 2019, goop had an estimated market valuation of \$250 million dollars.¹⁶⁸

Back in the goop office complex the couch the women are sitting on, the clothes they wear, the white flowers adorning the space evoke the modern Goop curated wellness aesthetic: pure, clean, tailored, age defying, and mostly white. There is a part of the episode where Elise Loehnen holds a round table conversation with Goop female staffers about fears around aging and plastic surgery. The group of about twelve white women sit in a white room, around a white table with some gold and wood accenting vocalizing fears about the horrors the aging process will wreak on their faces and the social currency lost due to their diminishing beauty. Defying the aging process seems to be the wellness goal of this episode, as if the project of wellness is to stay thin and youthful until women take their last breaths. Since this is Goop, the process has to be “natural” and “non-toxic,” of course. Loehnen interjects and shares that they will “not be shooting fillers into their faces” for the episode. Gwyneth tried the PRP “vampire” facial, a process of micro needling where one’s own plasma is taken and then

¹⁶⁸ Paul Schrod, “Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop Is Valued at \$250 Million. Here Are All the Ways She Makes Money From the Cult Lifestyle Brand,” *Money*, Sept. 10, 2018, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://money.com/gwyneth-paltrow-goop-net-worth/>.

reapplied over the facial skin to treat age spots and scarring.¹⁶⁹ One round of PRP facial treatment costs approximately \$1,300.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps the wellness protocols that are the most beneficial, sleep, water, exercise can be free, yet the project of wellness and the relevant products required (and available for purchase on Goop's website) have a pretty hefty price tag.

In the intro trailer to the Netflix series, Gwyneth describes the mission of goop. "To me, it's all ladder up to one thing which is optimization of self," she states. The cleanses, skin care, clothes, and supplements, and any other number of lifestyle protocols and products that goop sells are stated to serve "self-optimization." What does that mean? How will we know when we have achieved self-optimization? Why is the journey toward self-optimization so expensive? Self-optimization is highly subjective. To great extent the goal itself while stated to be contained within the self is in reality defined outside of the self by those with considerable market share over the wellness conversation and the profits the emergent wellness economy yields. If you control the narrative of what it means to be well, you shape the archetype by which individuals measure their own optimization. In this way, the influencers have the power to constantly move the goalposts of self-optimization. Goop as brand name for Gwyneth's business was chosen as an homage to her initials but serves a vastly more important role. Since it is a meaningless word, in practice it makes the goop brand agile and

¹⁶⁹ "How it Works," Vampire Facial, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.vampirefacial.com/category/how-it-works/#.YefDii2ZPow>.

¹⁷⁰ "How much does a Vampire Facial Cost," Thervo, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://thervo.com/costs/vampire-facial-cost>.

market responsive. If goop can mean anything, it can sell you anything as well. It can shift and respond to new wellness trends, selling you ever evolving “five steps to the best body of your life” lists with ever fresh and novel branded products linked for sale throughout each blog and social media post. This conspicuous consumption and personal branding for the sake of individual wellness ultimately serves the accumulation of resources along entrenched modes of power, prolonging infection rather than treating the root causes of systemic illness.

What is wellness? What does it mean to be well? How is wellness bought and sold? Where is the capital of the robust wellness industry accumulating? Who gets to “be well” in a neoliberal capitalist society? My position, informed by Andrea Jain’s work in neoliberal spirituality is that the reduction of wellness to an individualist “journey” of personal choices further engrains, rather than aims to heal, society’s systemic illnesses. Andrea Jain in her 2020 book *Peace, Love, Yoga* argues that neoliberal spirituality “epitomizes a crucial node in global neoliberal capitalism. Spiritual industries, corporations, entrepreneurs, and consumers relate spiritual practices to ethical values through marketing and purchasing activities.”¹⁷¹ Jain’s work on spiritual neoliberalism influences my writing in this chapter on neoliberal wellness. She writes at great length to argue that while many within these spiritual wellness spaces may claim egalitarian,

¹⁷¹ Andrea Jain, *Peace, Love, Yoga: the Politics of Global Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6.

liberal values of freedom and equality and are troubled by the forces of racism, environmental catastrophe, and income inequality, many orient dissent through market and lifestyle choices. Choosing to buy clean products or “heal the self to heal the world” are mere gestures of subversion. She writes that the neoliberal capitalist order:

put the burden for resolving [systemic] conditions on individual consumers...Spirituality is not only linked to the rise of global neoliberal capitalism; it is also complicit in and perpetuates certain forms of conservatism, legitimating and depoliticizing social inequities by attributing to the individual moral failures and emphasizing the need for disciplinary obedience and purity. In fact, neoliberal spiritual disciplines and products provide paternal guidance, authoritarian dictates, and the logics of control meant to transform and reshape conduct toward entrepreneurship and self-optimization.¹⁷²

The never-ending project of wellness, in Jain’s estimation, undermines meaningful activism to address systemic conditions by reducing participation to market-oriented rituals and product consumption. The journey to “self-optimization” ripens the commodities market that will get you to peak physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. Companies like goop are here to guide and outfit you for *your* journey. To expand on Jain’s work here, and eventually link the mainstream neoliberal wellness culture to the emergent phenomena of conspiracism in wellness, how might the insulated focus on individual healing as personal liberation from all “bad vibes,” act as a shield for the individual to complicity to systemic harm? The wellness practices themselves provide sanctuary for the affluent from the existential anxiety of capitalist extraction and

¹⁷² Jain, *Peace, Love, Yoga*, 8-9.

the exploitative violence embedded with the social structure. The wellness journey can be considered a privileged escape from the stresses of modern society for those with the greatest access and proximity to systemic power. The products of wellness act as both literal and figurative salves of comfort, reassuring wellness participants that if I can make myself well, the whole of society will benefit too. Much like the Ayn Randian ethos, if we all pursue our own self-interest the world will be a better place, the journey to optimal wellness promises adherents that if I take care of and heal myself I do so in service to the betterment of society. The neoliberal wellness project invites enthusiasts to pursue self-optimization rather than collective resistance, at the same time maintaining a status quo by which many in the privileged pursuit of wellness largely benefit. Above all that, the supreme irony is that the stress, anxiety, and feelings of lack are the bread and butter of the wellness industry. The way that wellness is advertised as personal project toward optimal self-hood further commodifies each individual body rather than liberates it.

Elise Loehnen misses an opportunity to expand our understanding of wellness when she says, “the tenants of wellness are free.” Her statement obscures the lived experience and solid obstacles to wellness for those who experience the reality of food deserts,¹⁷³ racial weathering,¹⁷⁴ Black infant

¹⁷³ US Department of Agriculture, “USDA ERS - Documentation,” Economic Research Service, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>.

¹⁷⁴ Arline T. Geronimus et al., “‘Weathering’ and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores Among Blacks and Whites in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 (May 2006): 826–33, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2004.060749>.

mortality,¹⁷⁵ or any of the other assorted systemic conditions neoliberal capitalism inflict on the health and well-being of a large majority in society. Poverty, anti-Black racism, housing costs, the stresses of the labor market, water and air pollution might be isolated issues that goop superficially pays lip service to on their website, however, this comes with the greater benefit of increasing their social capital as a brand rather than any real interest in dismantling systems of oppression.¹⁷⁶ I will even go so far as to say that I do not think Elise means to miss these things, and she might very well personally express a great deal of care about all of these issues. She is not unique in neglecting these in her estimation of wellness. She does not calculate systemic conditions in her wellness equation because the neoliberal project of wellness focuses primarily on the optimal health of each individual. It is individual choice that breeds good health, the new wellness adage goes. Simply *own* your choices and choose to be well. Focus on gratitude and love and you too can be happy.¹⁷⁷ The prevailing ethos that you can “heal yourself” and “choose happiness” takes precedence over, and largely subverts, collective considerations of well-being. Collective considerations for the wellness of society are also not conducive to selling serums and dietary supplements, which is what undergirds goop’s enterprise.

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Infant Mortality and African Americans” The Office of Minority Health, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=23>.

¹⁷⁶ Goop does have a tab in the “wellness” category of their website labeled, “Civics and Earth” with articles on anti-Racism and “eco-friendly” consumption.

¹⁷⁷ Sam Binkley, *Happiness as Enterprise: An Essay on Neoliberal Life* (SUNY Press, 2014).

Goop is not interested in redistributing wealth; they're interested in accumulating it.

I will talk more about Gwyneth Paltrow as neoliberal wellness archetype throughout this section. In essence, she is the perfect brand ambassador for aspirational lifestyle branding whose influence pervades the wellness economy. Any discussion on the modern wellness industry orbits around goop. What I examine here through a critical lens are the impacts of goop's particular wellness branding strategy on the cultural landscape and values of modern wellness. The company and Paltrow's cultural contributions should not be seen as solely responsible for but merely one of the many ways that neoliberalism has seeped into every aspect of our lives, including conversations about personal responsibility over one's health and the rampant individualist ethos in the exploding wellness economy. I must repeat again the disclosure of my introduction. I am a member of the community I will critique here. I am not above it, and I bear responsibility by association. I personally have two of Gwyn's cookbooks and I find them both delightful, especially *My Father's Daughter* in which she shares family recipes from her beloved and departed father Bruce Paltrow. In many ways, I am goop's target audience: an upper middle class, thirty something, cis-gendered, able bodied, well-educated, white female yoga teacher. I have perpetuated the cyclical socio-political, cultural harm of the wellness industry, as have I too been harmed by it.

I am not trying to be free of my own perspective or experiences in this undertaking. It would do the entire project a disservice not to incorporate the lens of my lived experiences with the wellness industry or my nine-year career teaching yoga and mindfulness. In a full valuation, this complexity adds depth to the project if also minimal obstacle to objectivity. What is objectivity ultimately? Certainly, academics include their perspectives in all of their own studies and can perpetuate these very same conditions within academic communities as well. I wonder often if academia, and especially the social sciences, would be better served by including more individual perspectives and personal disclosures of proximity to power and complicity to systemic violence in their relationships to the cultural communities and socio-economic and political forces they study. Surely, the systemic challenges I will elucidate here exist as much, if not more so, in the ivory towers of academia. I will do my best to be honest throughout this chapter by saying here, first and foremost, it is *me too*. I have done all of these things. I love a facial, albeit not a \$1,200 one. I have retreated to Costa Rica and love a good soak in mineral hot springs. I cannot get enough of facial serums and oils and the delight I feel putting them on my skin each evening before bed. I have owned my fair share of yoga pants and “Spiritual Gangster” tank tops. I am a white woman that teaches yoga.

Wellness is a big word, and I am under no illusion that I alone can define it nor illuminate all the ills that pervade it. There is a lot of space in academia to have continued conversations about this industry and its impacts. Where my bias

in this chapter is obvious or leads me to overstate conclusions based on emotional connection, I invite feedback whole heartedly. I encourage others to pull up a chair and take part in the conversation. I strongly believe the integrated wellness community has invaluable tools to share for health and wellbeing. I also know wellness to be plagued by anti-Black racism,¹⁷⁸ sexual abuse,¹⁷⁹ self-absorption, and illogical pseudoscience.

My criticism of wellness is less with the contents, by which I mean the practices and rituals of the wellness project, and more with the packaging of those practices. The pervasive marketing of self-care as business strategy is not hard to find. Simply log on to Instagram, follow a couple of wellness accounts with high follower count and then check out the explorer feed. You will see post after post in coordinated color palettes describing how to manifest abundance and remove psychic barriers to money, how to detox the toxins after an indulgent weekend, how to apply essential oils for every physical ailment. Each influencer in their social space speaks their “truth” as gospel, regardless of scientific consensus or the wellness protocol efficacy. The large follower count, the sentimental and vulnerable personal daily shares, the curated photos and personal empowerment messaging, all of these create bonds of trust and an image, like with the profitable Goop branding strategy, for which followers can

¹⁷⁸ Anusha Wijeyakumar, “White Supremacy and Anti-Science Is on the Rise in Wellness” *InStyle* Oct. 6, 2020, <https://www.instyle.com/beauty/health-fitness/yoga-racism-white-supremacy>.

¹⁷⁹ Katherine Rosman, “Yoga Is Finally Facing Consent and Unwanted Touch,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/style/yoga-touch-consent-harassment.html>.

aspire. Trust and aspiration are a potent marketing combo from which wellness influencers can sell nearly any health claim or wellness potion for their own profit.

As Colin Wright explains:

This pervasive atmosphere of toxic positivity refers to the super-egoic injunction to maintain a cheerful, uncomplaining disposition even in the face of a world replete with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune... thinking 'happy thoughts' somehow magically leads to success in work, in relationships, in sex, in life as we are enjoined to live it.¹⁸⁰

Each of us is tasked with the incredible burden for our own *individual* physical and mental health. Self-determination mantras abound on the social media Instagram grids of wellness influencers. The only vibes allowed are the “good” ones, which namely means, happy, positive grateful hearts with a side of green juice. No processed food or pessimistic personalities need apply to join the “tribe.”

The neoliberal wellness spirit is woefully ignorant to the systemic subjugation of America’s poorest communities. Messages of “self-healing” can feel like a slap to so many individuals just managing the challenges of daily life or living through a particularly difficult period. Imagine scrolling through Instagram during your child’s chemo treatment, living below the poverty line, or managing an acute phase of depression. The underlying message, “You can heal yourself,” can feel like an accusation to a person dealing with real-life struggles. The messaging at best is grossly privileged. The journey to self-optimization is

¹⁸⁰ Colin Wright, “Happiness Studies and Wellbeing: A Lacanian Critique of Contemporary Conceptualizations of the Cure,” *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Volume 6, 2014, 795.

concerned primarily with the individual accumulation of greater personal health and happiness. Health becomes wealth while perpetuating the cyclical violence of systemic injustice that makes wellness so far out of reach for so many. My personal belief is that each of us individuals cannot fully be well in any meaningful way if the society itself is chronically diseased.

The diseases themselves are much documented. I will speak specifically to economic modes of oppression and the language of personal liberty used to justify grossly uneven accumulation of capital. Health, in the optimized, wellness sense, can be seen along these same lines, capital to be accumulated rather than shared. There is also much literature on patterns of labor exploitation and anti-Black racism that cannot be adequately addressed in these pages. I briefly link this work to scholarship on racial capitalism in my analysis but will not be engaging deeply with these literatures. I do this both because of the limited scope of this project and to make space for others who are more directly impacted by the above to elucidate these systems and how they are personally harmed by them.

The self-determination mantra of libertarians, conservatives, and now wellness influencers is as old as America, but ramped up to hyperdrive in the 1980's with the escalated modes of neoliberal economic theory. The term neoliberalism itself has largely come untethered from its theoretical framework in

the 1940s,¹⁸¹ and is now often used as pejorative assault on all things wrong with capitalism and the current state of globalization. I am taking the time to define it within its historical and theoretical context to highlight how power and capital flows, in a very general sense, in this market orientation as well as the role of the State within this model. My goal is for us to see how neoliberal capitalist priorities relate to the larger structures of the State and the market, as well as how the ethos of privatization and individualism seeps into the psyche of the individuals that populate the society. While so many of us perceive our minds, habits, and preferences as separate from systemic conditions, it is rare that we pause to notice the ways that neoliberal social organization impacts the individual psyche and personal behaviors. As Margret Thatcher cunningly stated regarding her 1980's push for a neoliberal agenda in Britain, "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul."¹⁸²

The neoliberal ethos arose at a time of the emergent populist tension of WWII as international fascism and communism presented very real threats of authoritarianism. David Harvey in his eminent academic writing on the subject of neoliberalism shares the following founding neoliberal statement of the Mont Perlin Society:

The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared... It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for

¹⁸¹ David Harvey, "Freedom's Just Another Word . . .," *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, by David Harvey (Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199283262.003.0005>, 19.

¹⁸² Harvey, "Freedom's Just Another Word," 23.

without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved.¹⁸³

The founding fathers of neoliberal theory, which notably include Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, suggested that a “fundamental commitment to ideals of personal freedom” required a commitment to “free market principles of neoclassical economics.”¹⁸⁴ The neoliberal project more broadly aims to “dis-embed capital from [social and political] constraints.”¹⁸⁵ Neoliberal theory opposes State intervention in markets or social planning. The function of the State is only to “defend the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms.”¹⁸⁶ Without going too far into the weeds of economic history, at the time the prevailing ethos of Keynesian economics drove the domestic fiscal policy response to the Great Depression. Suffice it to say that these and other schools of economic thought have different interpretations on the role of the state to stabilize market economies and argue a lot about issues including aggregate supply and demand, inflation, central banks, and what to do or not do during an economic recession. The main point I want to express in terms of neoliberal theory in general is that in this model, the function of the State is for the protection of individual capital and private property as means of preservation of individual freedom. Freedom in the neoliberal sense is the freedom of ownership. Social welfare programs, market intervention, and

¹⁸³ Harvey, 20.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 21.

centralized fiscal policy planning are certainly not included in that assessment. The State and its law enforcement exist to protect individual property. In practice, it reduces much of human life including social bonds to market considerations. To quote Thatcher, there was in the neoliberal estimation “no such thing as society, only individual men and women.”¹⁸⁷

Many years later, in response to high rates of inflation and stagnated capital accumulation, conservative leaders in Western societies embraced neoliberal theory as a way to stimulate economic growth. Ronald Reagan beat Jimmy Carter in 1980 and began vast programs of deregulation throughout the United States including worker protections and environmental regulations.¹⁸⁸ Corporate taxes were slashed, and capital accumulated, albeit unevenly. As Harvey points out, not all within old modes of structured power saw themselves on the receiving end of this growth. Some secured good jobs with ample opportunity to climb the corporate ladder over their career. More specifically, Margret Thatcher attacked aristocratic wealth in the UK and hitched her political power to the growing influence of entrepreneurial wealth.¹⁸⁹ Entrepreneurial endeavors soared under such policies and media, tech, retail and medical empires flourished. Capital itself became unleashed from place as financiers increasingly looked abroad for international investment opportunities and lower wage market economies than those in the United States. Globalization has had a

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 31.

profound impact on the US domestic labor market as much industrial labor continues to be automated and shipped overseas. Harvey writes about “the power shift away from production to the world of finance.”¹⁹⁰

With the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, per capita income increases were concentrated in financial services and executive leadership positions. By 1996, the top 358 richest people had a net worth equal to the poorest 45% of the world’s population combined, at the time accounting for 2.3 billion people.¹⁹¹ As new sectors of enterprise and finance saw high rates of return, the average worker saw their wages decline in relation to the poverty line. In 1980, the Federal minimum wage was even to the demarcated line of poverty but by 1990 had fallen 30% below that line.¹⁹² These economic disparities have only worsened in the years since the 2008 financial recession, “with the top 10 percent taking 50 percent of total U.S. income in 2012, and the top 1 percent taking a striking 95 percent of all post-Recession income gains.”¹⁹³ The federal minimum wage continues to be a partisan talking point as it now stands at \$7.25 an hour.¹⁹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic disparity. In early March of 2021, a federal COVID relief package was passed with some

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 33.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 34-35.

¹⁹² Ibid, 25.

¹⁹³ Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (September 2015): 76.

¹⁹⁴ US Department of Labor, “History of Changes to the Minimum Wage,” accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>.

ambitious proposals for managing poverty post public health crisis but notably did not include an increase in the federal minimum wage.¹⁹⁵

Public accounting firm Deloitte released an analysis of the COVID-19 economic impacts related to income inequality. Their prediction, based on this assessment, is that the divide will get much worse before it gets better, though if history is any barometer, it could likely just stay worse. As is nearly always the case, not only are Black, Indigenous, and communities of color more likely to see a loved one die from the novel coronavirus,¹⁹⁶ they are much more likely to bear the financial burden of the pandemic recession as well.¹⁹⁷ As we have already noted, the ground was uneven from the start. Deloitte share in their analysis, “In the past 30 years, the proportion of wealth held by those in the top 10% of household income has risen from 60.8% to 70.0%. But even more remarkably, the wealth owned by just the top 1% of income earners has gone up from 17.2% to 26.0% meaning that more than a quarter of the country’s wealth is in the hands of the top 1%”¹⁹⁸ When they zoom in further, the study reveals deep racial disparity in household earnings and access to private health insurance. “Between

¹⁹⁵ Gabriel T. Rubin, “Stimulus Package Update: What’s in the Covid-19 Relief Bill,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021, sec. Politics, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stimulus-update-biden-covid-19-relief-package-11614095748>.

¹⁹⁶ CDC, “Cases, Data, and Surveillance,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 11, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>.

¹⁹⁷ “COVID-19’s Impact on US Income Inequality: It’s Going to Get Worse before It Gets Better,” Deloitte Insights, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/issues-by-the-numbers/covid-19-impact-on-income-inequality.html>.

¹⁹⁸ “COVID-19’s Impact on US Income Inequality: It’s Going to Get Worse before It Gets Better,” Deloitte Insights.

1989 and 2019, household incomes for Black families averaged 63% of that of non-Hispanic white families, while Hispanic families averaged 72% of non-Hispanic white families' income."¹⁹⁹ In the same study, Deloitte shows that disparities in access to private health insurance fall much along these same lines.²⁰⁰ All the while studies show Black and Latinx Americans are three times more likely to get sick with COVID-19.²⁰¹ Data and figures do well to share broad wealth and health disparity, but they cannot show the anxiety and precarious existence of those living in poverty.

The ethos of neoliberalism implies those who do not find success within this system are simply not working hard enough. As David Harvey elaborates, "all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values."²⁰² You alone are responsible for your fate, and whatever you have you deserve and got simply by your hard work and determination. This ethos of self-responsibility conveniently leaves out personal accountability to the impacts of your actions on and responsibility to society as a whole. The narrative ultimately serves as ethical justification for the astronomical capital accumulation by the uber wealthy and growing wealth

¹⁹⁹ Deloitte Insights.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Stephanie Soucheray "US Blacks 3 Times More Likely than Whites to Get COVID-19," University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease and Research Policy, Aug 14, 2020, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/08/us-blacks-3-times-more-likely-whites-get-covid-19>.

²⁰² Harvey, 23.

disparity that widens by the day.²⁰³ Within the neoliberal ethos, the social safety net itself is demonized and those collecting any type of government assistance deemed lazy. The neoliberal wellness ethos, whether it understands it or not, reinforces these false archetypes by explicit language that each individual has the power to manifest the life they want if they simply have the right attitude to attain it and make the “optimal” choices for their individual health and well-being. The not-so-subtle implication underlying the neoliberal ethos is that if you are sick, hungry, or poor, you have decided to be that.

The neoliberal wellness project asks each of us to become entrepreneurs of the self. Self-care is simply another mode of self-governance. The calculated wellness rituals of the individual, who believes these choices to be autonomous, maintains the neoliberal status quo. Rather than externally forced subjugation through law or punitive punishment, subject’s discipline their own conduct through set modes of personal practices. Foucault’s thesis of “governmentality” suggests that “conduct of conduct,” or disciplining one’s own behavior, allows existing modes of power to maintain dominance, even as individual’s believe their choices to be made through individual rational calculation.²⁰⁴ Neoliberalism as previously noted is a way of understanding the current economic modes and

²⁰³ Kim Parker, Rachel Minkin, and Jesse Bennett, “Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues To Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), September 24, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>.

²⁰⁴ Serge Audier, “NEOLIBERALISM THROUGH FOUCAULT’S EYES,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 3 (October 2015): 404–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10768>.

the role governments play within that framework. It is also how individuals orient their lives within a society. As Wendy Brown writes, neoliberalism is a “specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship.”²⁰⁵²⁰⁶ The political, the social, even the individual wellness journey itself are “organized by market rationality.”²⁰⁷ Citizens become entrepreneurs of their own fate “and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions.”²⁰⁸ Neoliberal governmentality builds passive subjects through the subject’s active decision making and self-disciplined conduct. As Sam Binkley writes, “without acting directly on subjects, neoliberal governmentality seeks to incite a set of specific transformations through the intentional curtailing of the apparatus of government itself, thereby effecting an indirect manipulation of the background conditions for individual conduct.”²⁰⁹ The project of the self in the wellness orientation requires a disciplined behavioral schema that impacts daily rituals of self-care and influences commodities bought and sold in the market for their value in the journey of self-optimization. Built into the wellness journey is a lifetime’s work, so participation in the wellness economy

²⁰⁵ Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 693.

²⁰⁶ The following Brown and Binkley quotes initially read quoted in Farah Godrej’s, “The Neoliberal Yogi and the Politics of Yoga,” *Political Theory* 45, no. 6 (December 2017): 772–800, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591716643604>.

²⁰⁷ Brown, “American Nightmare,” 694.

²⁰⁸ Brown, “American Nightmare,” 694.

²⁰⁹ Sam Binkley, *Happiness as Enterprise: An Essay on Neoliberal Life* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 21.

goes on forever. Likewise, those who cannot meet the current standards of wellness are seen as inferior. Michel Foucault calls this journey of self-optimization “technologies of the self,” “operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”²¹⁰

What is wellness? The Western medical industry has long been criticized for its inability to treat the whole person and prescribe more preventative, holistic health options for patients. Medical insurance is designed to support you in case of catastrophe and only the highest-end policies cover exercise and alternative modalities for healing like massage, integrative medicine, or acupuncture just to name a few. These premiums can also lack adequate coverage for the range of women’s health needs and mental health interventions including talk therapy. The medical field has issues in the same way all other sectors do. We see in the fields of established medicine and institutional scientific knowledge an erosion of trust. This distrust leads more people to turn to social media and the network of influencers they trust to receive health information for answers. In the process, individuals are increasingly exposed and vulnerable to health dis/misinformation. A February 2020 study from the University of Pennsylvania shows how distrust manifests in vaccine hesitancy. The report shows that those individuals who spend more time on social platforms are more likely to espouse conspiracy

²¹⁰ Margret McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (United Kingdom: State University of New York Press, 2002), 147.

theory claims about vaccinations, a figure that has likely increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the breakdown of institutional trust in the medical establishment and scientific institutions makes a lot of space for enterprising wellness influencers to provide alternate narratives for the origin of disease and creates greater market potential for the new wellness economy. Pseudoscience, *a collection of beliefs or practices mistakenly regarded as being based on the scientific method*,²¹¹ abounds. The supplements, diet regimes, and cure all claims for diseases sold by wellness influencers online are not required to go through the rigorous examination that the medical and scientific community require. The health advice based on the social media influencers *personal truth* is packaged as harmless *natural, non-toxic, environmentally friendly*. Holistic health interventions assert these protocols will completely change your health, your body, your skin and your life.

A basic dictionary definition states wellness to be “the quality or state of being in good health especially as an actively sought goal.”²¹² Pfizer, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world, defines wellness as, “the act of practicing healthy habits on a daily basis to attain better physical and mental health outcomes, so that instead of just surviving, you’re *thriving*.”²¹³ It describes wellness as an individual “journey,” channeled through social connection,

²¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “pseudoscience,” accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/pseudoscience>.

²¹² Merriam-Webster, “s.v. wellness,” accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wellness>

²¹³ “What is Wellness?” Pfizer, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.pfizer.com/health-wellness/wellness/what-is-wellness>.

exercise, nutrition, sleep, and mindfulness.²¹⁴ The National Wellness Institute defines wellness as “*an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence.*”²¹⁵ Wellness in their estimation includes mental, physical and spiritual well-being. The Global Wellness Institute, whose stated mission is to “empower wellness worldwide,”²¹⁶ defines it as “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health.”²¹⁷ Both the National Wellness Institute and the Global Wellness Institute include some mention of social and environmental safety in their wellness definitions but clearly insinuate wellness as a byproduct of individual choices. To quote the Global Wellness Institute, “Wellness is an individual pursuit—we have self-responsibility for our own choices, behaviors and lifestyles—but it is also significantly influenced by the physical, social and cultural environments in which we live.”²¹⁸ It is this language of the individual journey of wellness as a result of *active* personal choices that is of importance here for its relevance to the neoliberal social project. Active choices also correlate to active consumption. Wellness couched in personal choice, paired with distrust in Western medical institutions, creates a robust economic market for tailored products and services to assist your “self-healing.”

²¹⁴ “What is Wellness?,” Pfizer.

²¹⁵ “Six Dimensions of Wellness,” National Wellness Institute, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://nationalwellness.org/resources/six-dimensions-of-wellness/>.

²¹⁶ “Wellness Definitions,” Global Wellness Institute, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/wellness-economy-definitions/>.

²¹⁷ “Wellness Definitions,” Global Wellness Institute.

²¹⁸ “What is Wellness?,” Global Wellness Institute, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/>.

The wellness industry can include *anything* that contributes to personal fulfillment and health optimization of the individual. Yoga, spa treatments, fantasy island getaways, a float in a sensory deprivation chamber, or anything that delights you with the aim of making you feel better is considered wellness. The Global Wellness Institute estimates the total wellness economy to contain \$4.2 trillion dollars of financial capital with a growth rate “*over five times as fast as global economic growth*” per a 2018 analysis.²¹⁹ By wellness economy they mean, “*industries that enable consumers to incorporate wellness activities and lifestyles into their daily lives,*” and list ten distinct sectors. Wellness real estate, workplace wellness, wellness tourism, thermal/mineral springs, the spa economy, traditional and complementary medicine, preventative and personalized wellness and public health all make up large chunks of this networked economy. The top three earning sectors are, from lowest to highest, healthy eating, nutrition and weight loss (\$702b); physical activity(\$828b); and coming in at a whopping 1.08 trillion the sector they call *personal care, beauty, and anti-aging*.²²⁰

Self-care is big business. In many ways these market figures reflect the overall value synthesis of the greater wellness project. Nutrition and fitness are vital to one’s health but it’s telling that these two are far outspent by the project of beauty. This level of spending on beauty shows a wellness priority on the attainment of it. As we see in *the goop lab* episode beauty as a result of

²¹⁹ “Statistics and Facts,” Global Wellness Institute, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/press-room/statistics-and-facts/>.

²²⁰ “What is the Wellness Economy?,” Global Wellness Institute, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/what-is-the-wellness-economy/>.

reversing the aging process seems to be a main goal of wellness. Is the lifestyle aesthetic of the multi-millionaire celebrity the benchmark for beauty and wellness? Judging by Gwyneth's own subtle confessions in this episode, paired with her long history of detox cleanses and beauty treatments, she seems also to see that aspirational benchmark as higher than that which she has already attained. The neoliberal wellness project is journey with no destination. Beauty, fulfillment, wholeness seem ever and always on the other side of a new treatment, new diet protocol, and new exercise regime. If, as goop's own executive staff claims, the most essential tenets of wellness are largely free, why then are we spending so much money to be well? Is wellness really about being well? I believe these figures tell another story. Getting more sleep, drinking water, and exercise outside all seem like common sense daily interventions to prevent disease. Wellness influencers, like Gwyneth Paltrow, go above and beyond to prescribe interventions for "optimal" health. This branded wellness tasks each of us with personal responsibility to achieve an unattainable standard imprisoning us in a cycle of lack. This impossible wellness standard ensures that we will try anything, buy anything on the journey to the "optimal self," a self that remains ever and always just out of our reach. As we strive for self-optimization, we miss many an opportunity to acknowledge our innate humanity and worthiness. When we become obsessed with maintenance of the project of the self, we sacrifice the freedom found in self-actualization for the promise of some perfect version of ourselves that awaits us in the imagined future.

If you travel over to goop.com, you will inevitably see article after article on “cult creams” for flawless skin, a new diet trend, and a plethora of vitamins and supplements. Goop has their own branded vitamin and supplement line with cleverly branded names. One of any protocol costs \$90 for a month’s supply or \$75 dollars for annual subscription. *Balls in the Air* is a protocol of supplements designed for “people who function at an intense pace and want to keep it that way.”²²¹ *High School Genes* claims to be “formulated for women who feel like their metabolism might be slowing down and whose bodies are no longer responding to the exercise and diet levers that they’ve always pulled. This regimen addresses multiple systems in the body that contribute to optimal metabolism.”²²² The asterisk is further explained in a small footnote on the website stating, “*These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.”²²³ Goop’s health claims live largely in the unregulated space of free enterprise away from the oversight of the pesky regulatory interference and safety standards of the Food and Drug Administration.²²⁴ Goop has reason to add legal caveats like the above. Goop was sued and forced to pay a \$145,000 in civil penalties over dubious health claims made about vaginal

²²¹ “Goop Wellness Balls in the Air,” Goop, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://goop.com/goop-wellness-balls-in-the-air/p/>.

²²² “Goop Wellness High School Genes,” Goop, accessed June 10, 2021, https://goop.com/goop-wellness-high-school-genes/p/?taxon_id=1289.

²²³ “Goop Wellness High School Genes,” Goop.

²²⁴ Ranjani R. Starr, “Too Little, Too Late: Ineffective Regulation of Dietary Supplements in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 3 (March 2015): 478–85, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302348>.

jade eggs sold on their website.²²⁵ The site claimed, the eggs would “increase vaginal muscle tone, hormonal balance, and feminine energy in general.”²²⁶ The site continues to sell the Goop branded vaginal eggs without these health claims but does encourage you to store the egg in “a space that is sacred to you or has good vibes.”²²⁷ This advice couched as natural is often met with very little skepticism from followers who have built in trust of the brand and its health claims as authoritative.

Gwyneth is no stranger to controversy. Business Insider reports that controversy generally drives traffic to her site to which Paltrow commented, “I can monetize those eyeballs.”²²⁸ In early 2021, GP found herself back in hot water over a blog post on her recovery from long haul COVID-19 complications, which she described as brain fog and fatigue. In the blog post entitled, “GP’s Picks: Healing My Body with a Longer-Term Detox,”²²⁹ Gwyn writes about her long-term detox protocol from Dr. Will Cole and features all the products (available for purchase on the website naturally) that make Gwyn feel better. The

²²⁵ “Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop Touted the ‘Benefits’ of Putting a Jade Egg in Your Vagina. Now It Must Pay.,” *Washington Post*, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2018/09/05/gwyneth-paltrows-goop-touted-benefits-putting-jade-egg-your-vagina-now-it-must-pay/>.

²²⁶ “Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop touted the ‘benefits’ of putting a jade egg,” *Washington Post*.

²²⁷ “Goop Wellness Jade Egg,” Goop, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://goop.com/goop-wellness-jade-egg/p/>.

²²⁸ Sinead Baker, “‘I Can Monetise Those Eyeballs’: Gwyneth Paltrow Said the Uproar over Her Controversial Vagina Steaming Recommendation Was a Business Opportunity,” *Business Insider*, June 27, 2018, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/gwyneth-paltrow-didnt-want-goop-articles-fact-checked-monetize-eyeballs-2018-7>.

²²⁹ “GP’s Picks: Healing My Body with a Longer-Term Detox,” Goop, February 16, 2021, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://goop.com/wellness/detox/gwyneth-paltrows-long-term-detox-tips/>.

functional medicine doctor's book cover *Intuitive Fasting* features prominently imaged next to the blog's opening paragraphs about daily intermittent fasting and the broth cleanse she did in January. Gwyn describes her new diet and supplement regiments along with linked images that traffic you straight to the space on the website where they can be purchased. There's a product promotion for a \$500 Infrared Sauna Blanket next to Goop branded Glow Serums for the skin. An image of the outfit she wears to sweat out the toxins and then transition to a Zoom meeting sits below. Then there's the \$8,600 necklace Gwyn lavishes praise on when she writes, "The necklace is just *me*."²³⁰ Don't worry. If you can't afford the full COVID recovery VIP treatment, GP didn't leave you out. She writes, "If a full care package doesn't work with the budget, this bath is another of my favorite presents to send with a similar sentiment,"²³¹ and links to a goop branded \$35 bath powder to soak away that post-COVID fatigue.

Goop is in the business of selling Gwyneth's personal wellness journey to people who aspire to be Gwyneth Paltrow. It sort of goes without saying that Gwyneth would use her COVID-19 recovery to sell her COVID-19 recovery. Goop's prominent market position comes with an ever-vigilant legal team so that now nearly all of goop's blog posts list medical disclaimers to readers. The greater impact of goop is in the narrative of aspirational neoliberal wellness as personal project in which we are all tasked with "healing ourselves" from

²³⁰ "GP's Picks: Healing My Body with a Longer-Term Detox," Goop.

²³¹ "GP's Picks: Healing My Body with a Longer-Term Detox," Goop.

everything that ails us including COVID-19. I mean, if you are Gwyneth Paltrow, you've certainly got enough capital to invest in your self and an infrared sauna blanket sounds kind of amazing. The quest for the optimal self distracts from the reality that most people cannot afford health insurance premiums, let alone spend \$90 a month on B-12 and placebo pills. This narrative quest for the optimal self has opened space for enterprising individuals to sell their own health advice in the growing influencer economy and leverage the powerful tool of social media to build their own brands and speak their own truth, which is often at odds with established medical health advice. Influencers peddling miracles cures and snake oils with little oversight or consequence are met by individuals increasingly turning to the internet for medical advice. Health misinformation is bolstered by the currency found in being the influencer that advises alternative therapies with promises to guide any individual on their journey to a happier, healthier you. In this environment dubious health claims create a ripe environment for pseudoscience turned conspiracy theory. As one opts for antioxidant powders and grows more suspicious of vaccines, they become more likely to embrace a health-related conspiracy theory.

Emphasis on singular autonomy and personal responsibility for individual wellness and bodily sovereignty can, in its most extreme forms, lead one to adopt an apocalyptic grand conspiracy narrative. At its core, conspiracy theory is about power. Belief in an alternate, false narrative of power subverts meaningful threat to the reality of established hierarchies much in the same way neoliberalism re-

orients and subverts dissent in service to the project of the capitalist paradigm and the inequity found within it. In pursuit of the optimal self, one has the freedom to craft their own truth, which can often look like an alternate version of reality. Ironically for so many in wellness who are obsessed with personal responsibility over their own health and happiness, belief in a grand conspiracy narrative can provide shield from accountability to the problems within society, especially for those who benefit from the constructed hierarchies of power within the capitalist paradigm.

There is a growing amount of scholarship to suggest that these racial disparities in capitalist market economies are by design and that racism is so embedded into the foundations of the capitalist project that it should instead be thought of as “racial capitalism.” Jodi Melamed builds on the work of Cedric Robinson when she writes:

the term ‘racial capitalism’ requires its users to recognize that capitalism *is* racial capitalism. Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.²³²

Racial capitalism in her view also gives name to “the production of social separateness.”²³³ She cites Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s term, *antirelationality* as “a

²³² Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 77

²³³ Melamed, 78.

technology for reducing collective life to the relations that sustain neoliberal democratic capitalism,”²³⁴ namely hyper individualism. Similar to Harvey she sees the reduction of collective life under neoliberal synthesis into transactional exchange between individuals rather than modes of mutual collective interdependence. She writes that the power differentials and unstable social relations of the system of racial capitalism, “impose a forgetting of interconnections, of viable relations, and of performances of collectivity that might nurture greater social wholeness, but are de-activated for capital accumulation and state management.”²³⁵ I would say here that this *antirelationality* is reproduced in the modern mainstream wellness landscape as it places responsibility for wellness on the shoulders of each individual rather than addressing the root causes of systemic disease. It perpetuates the neoliberal myth that we got here all by ourselves and that our health and safety are the by-product of hard-earned sweat and good character. Modern wellness is at the stage where it seems to equate an individual’s optimal physical health with a kind of moral superiority, rather than an incredible blessing. The existential tension that comes from living in society that is unhealed from so many old wounds and ever inflicting new ones on so many who live here as our neighbors, I think impacts each of our individual wellness. It is my position that none of us can know true wellness in society that is systemically ill. We don’t get anywhere by

²³⁴ Ibid, 78.

²³⁵ Ibid, 79.

ourselves. Antirelationality keeps us from being completely human. The neoliberal capitalist paradigm erases our bonds to one another and responsibility to our communities and our planet. In this paradigm, we are free to extract as we please because we cannot see our interdependence, the mutually intertwined nature of our shared fate. The unhealthiest part of the neoliberal project is that many will see the suffering of other humans, and even if just subtly, individualism deludes us and corrodes our humanity to the point where we may believe that those individuals are suffering because they deserve it. That the society itself is sick, prevents us all from accessing the full scope of our humanity, dignity, and ultimately, wellness.

In a democratic society, there is a longstanding tension between individual liberty and collective wellbeing. Each of us are wrestling always to find a place of personal fulfillment, contentment, and an embodied feeling of wholeness. Each of us wants the freedom to pursue our interests without the burden of interference from outside forces. Many in the same society who have the access and leisure time to pursue their personal wellness projects are likewise troubled by the obstacles of systemic injustice that block so many fellow humans from pursuing their own path to personal embodiment. In so many ways, the wellness aspirants couch the solution for collective wellbeing in individual optimization, the logic being that if you take care of yourself, mind, body, and soul, the world will know peace. I have argued here that this quest for individual health freedom above all else only insulates entrenched systemic harm. I believe we become desensitized

to the violence of neoliberalism and racial capitalism when we separate the necessity of dismantling systems of oppression from the project of our own personal wellness.

What if I were to learn that my wellness, my access, my personal health and sovereignty is built on a foundation of systemic harm? Can I as an individual truly be well in a society that depends on systemic inequity for my personal abundance and self-optimization? Overall, in what ways does the individual wellness journey perpetuate systemic harm? These are all important questions asked in this chapter. I do not have the answers.

Jodi Melamed goes on in the article to share the blueprint of Indigenous decolonization movements who aim to reintegrate social relationship on paradigms of mutual interdependence. In this way, Black liberation and decolonization movements not only liberate those communities marginalized by the hierarchical race structures that capital accumulation requires but those who inherit the bloodied violence by which their privileged social position was guaranteed. Activist movements centered in the struggle for the bodily autonomy, health, and safety of those oppressed by the rigid structures of racial capitalism are, in the authors estimation, the way we heal the system and move toward a realization of equitable wellness in social interrelations of society. That these movements focus on the most impacted by systemic violence assures a breaking free of modes of capitalist logic that there are “worthy” and “unworthy”²³⁶

²³⁶ Ibid, 80.

individuals, “strengthening terms of relationality that defend collective existence.”²³⁷

None of that work is easy or straight forward. Conspiracy theory quite honestly might be a much easier option. How might an insulated focus on individual healing play into conspiracist ideation among wellness entrepreneurs and influencers? For many in pursuit of optimal wellness as personal freedom, a conspiracy theory can seem quite enticing as an opt out of collective struggle while also eliminating the feelings of guilt from personal complicity to the cyclical harm of neoliberal capitalism. Like the individual wellness project, false narratives about real problems also serve existing power paradigms, especially if you embrace grand conspiracy theory narratives. I will further elaborate on the spiritual dimensions of wellness that enable conspiracism in the next section.

In Defense of Love and Light: Grand Conspiracy Narratives, Improvisational Styles, and Spiritual Exceptionalism

As we shift our gaze back to conspiracy theory scholarship, we notice similar language of individualism and entrepreneurship. It was upon reading the *conspirituality* scholarship of Charlotte Ward and David Voas’ and Michael Barkun’s writing on improvisational millenarism where it first occurred to me that the language of personal ownership in a neoliberal capitalist system may have crossover applicability to understanding the phenomenon of conspiracism within the greater wellness community. I am particularly interested in the way their

²³⁷ Ibid, 83.

scholarship exposes a modern tendency to pick and choose preferred philosophies and practices from world cultures, especially from the “mystical” East and global South, without contextual understanding of colonial history and hierarchies of power structured in global capitalism. Building off their work, I argue that individualism entitles Western wellness influencers to extract from world cultures as they desire, then repackage for their own profit this medley of traditions into a wellness and personal lifestyle brand. This tendency can be viewed as modern day colonial extraction and cultural appropriation with parallels to Edward Said’s scholarship on Orientalism.

I argue that this entitlement to personal ownership of any and all cultural goods and traditions also plays a critical role in an individual’s adoption of a grand conspiracy narrative. For one, the all-encompassing alternate worldview of a grand conspiracy narrative erodes, to the point of rupture, our shared sense of reality including our inherited history. Secondly, a grand conspiracy narrative can serve as a protective shield deflecting personal responsibility and complicity to that shared history and our inherited place within systemic power imbalances. Lastly, wellness influencers deftly incorporate grand conspiracy narratives in their personal platforms or brands to emphasize their access to the “real truth” and present themselves as mainstream outsider. In this way, their blended health and spiritual wellness protocols exist in opposition both to the toxic mainstream and to the shadowy “they” who are controlling all our lives. This narrative style puts the wellness influencer firmly on the side of right, light, love and truth. Any

criticism of their wellness techniques, or the perpetuated harm implicit within extraction modes they may benefit from, can then be understood as baseless attack by the brainwashed masses. In effect, the wellness influencer, regardless of their personal privilege within the society, can use a conspiracy theory to portray themselves as the marginalized individual. Along these lines, we can infer that the wellness influencer can use a grand conspiracy narrative to protect and defend their access to power in society at large and within the wellness community specifically. Further, the narrative serves to insulate their brand identity from criticism and attracts new followers looking to also protect and fortify their individual identity.

Conspiracy theory converts to marketing opportunity for the wellness influencer to attract new community members as paying clients who aspire both to the wellness transformation promised in advertising and to the comfort of familiarity in a community where their conspiratorial worldview is echoed back to them. As we learned in section two, the wiring of the human mind ranks knowledge and social bonds in such a way that survival of one's personal identity construct is prioritized above all else. Ultimately conspiracy theories insulate one's personal worldview, including the individualist entitlement to craft, own, and sell a personal wellness brand. The conspiratorial wellness influencer may speak to systemic corruption but always filtered through the narrative of the grand conspiracy. Missing the context of history and current events, the grand conspiracy narrative maintains rather than threatens the status quo and positions

the problems of society as separate from the identity of the influencer. In this way, the influencer speaks to the “they” who are creating and perpetuating the harm, rather than the “we” of society.

Conspiritoriality is a concept coined by scholars Charlotte Ward and David Voas to describe “a rapidly growing web movement expressing an ideology fueled by political disillusionment and the popularity of alternative worldviews.”²³⁸ The authors focus on what they call holistic thought or groups labelled “New Age,” or expressing “alternative spirituality.” The holistic milieu are groups who embrace “the idea of a person as an integrated whole, with mind, body, and spirit subject to a common set of principles.”²³⁹ When combined with conspiracy theory “one finds a denial of contingency, the discovery of patterns in events that might otherwise seem to be random, and the attribution of agency to hidden forces.”²⁴⁰ They describe *conspiritoriality* as “a modern web movement with diffuse leadership and constantly shifting areas of interest.”²⁴¹ Their web ethnography highlights self-proclaimed “lightworkers,” “starseeds,” and “indigo children,” all actors that proposit psychic abilities for the purposes of channeling wisdom from higher dimensional beings in service to the healing, personal growth, and elevation of human consciousness. They found, in their research, narratives that asked subscribers to “focus on the good,” quoting one case study of Diana

²³⁸ Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspiritoriality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 103–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846>, 103.

²³⁹ Ward and Voas, “The Emergence of Conspiritoriality,” 103.

²⁴⁰ Ward and Voas, 103.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 104.

Cooper, a woman who claims to be regularly “visited by angels,” whose website suggests, “Give no energy to fear, darkness, mass hysteria. Instead focus on the good, the wise and the great, that it expands.”²⁴² She also claims to belong to all religions and cautions followers to “Be careful what you read on the internet. If it is spreading doubt and fear move on to a site of love and light.”²⁴³

Love, light, and the power of positivity are all resources to shift human consciousness in New Age belief systems. The mass spiritual awakening of humanity is a narrative popular in New Age circles and has been promoted on mainstream platforms by Oprah Winfrey in partnership with popular spiritual teachers like Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and Gabby Bernstein. Gabby Bernstein is a self-proclaimed “spiritual junkie,” whose books with titles ranging from *Miracles Now* to *The Universe has Your Back* continue to land her a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list.²⁴⁴ Bernstein occupies a large space on social media with almost a million²⁴⁵ followers on her personal Instagram account and just over 26,000 followers on a page dedicated just to image posts of quotes from her books and podcast called “@deargabbyquotes.”²⁴⁶ To her large following, she shares strategies for manifesting miracles, using the law of attraction in everyday life, and claiming the life you want. Bernstein’s accounts highlight the

²⁴² Ibid, 105.

²⁴³ Ibid, 106.

²⁴⁴ “Meet Gabby,” *Gabby Bernstein* (blog), accessed June 10, 2021, <https://gabbybernstein.com/meet-gabby/>.

²⁴⁵ Gabby Bernstein, (@gabbybernstein). Instagram, Accessed on May 11, 2020; <https://www.instagram.com/gabbybernstein/>

²⁴⁶ Gabby Bernstein, (@gabbybersteinquotes). Instagram, Accessed on May 11, 2020 <https://www.instagram.com/deargabbyquotes/>

popularity of modern spirituality that emphasizes asking and receiving what you want from the Universe. She speaks to some systemic struggles on her page, but much of that is drowned out in self-help advice which is usually packaged and sold as an individual focus on love, light, manifestation, and attraction as spiritual strategies for the highest good.

This focus on the positive is also cited by the authors in the works of popular conspiracist David Icke. His twenty-plus books “blend conspiracy theory with spirituality.” He is now notorious for “deep state” theories of a shadow government run by reptilian overloads and suggests the solution to save humanity from these evil extraterrestrials is “for audiences to raise their consciousness and awaken to love as a unifying, transcendent force.”²⁴⁷ In Ward and Voss’ analysis, “*conspirituality* appears to be a means by which political cynicism is tempered by spiritual optimism.”²⁴⁸ Grand conspiracy narratives, like the ones promoted by Icke, are very dark in nature. In these meta narrative explanations of society, demonic forces of torture and control can only be overcome with a mass spiritual awakening. Love, light, and positivity are the only weapons against the forces of the dark. This journey toward humanity’s collective transformation often requires self-responsibility both in dedication to one’s own spiritual transformation and commitment to independent thought. Mainstream media and education are mind control tools to keep you asleep and dependent

²⁴⁷ Ward and Voas, 110.

²⁴⁸ Ward and Voas, 108.

on the “matrix.” One can trust that the “truth” will be revealed in its own time. The New Age conspiracist is encouraged to stand in their truth and commit to love until the fateful day when the prophecies, usually sourced through special access to a higher power, come to pass.

One missing element of Ward and Voas’ scholarship is its connection to a broader historical connection of alternative spiritual communities and conspiracy theory. While there may be more obvious promotion of these theories with the help on the internet, the correlation of spirituality and conspiracism is far from new. In a response to their paper, Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal assert that the phenomenon on *conspirituality* is neither novel or surprising as Ward and Voas suggest in their thesis. They write, “If our goal is to understand the background of the current conspiracy-prone scene within alternative spirituality, we should reconfigure the terms and embed them in a theoretical context that makes the apparently surprising less so.”²⁴⁹ Kurt Anderson’s book, *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire, a 500-Year History*, shares many links between spiritualism and conspiracy theory throughout America’s history. Where wellness is concerned, he writes about the origin and foundation of Esalen, a retreat center “exploring human potential”²⁵⁰ located in Big Sur. In the 1960s, when Esalen was founded, counter-culture and social justice movements flourished throughout the United States. Esalen became pilgrimage space for those seeking

²⁴⁹ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New Is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 367–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339>, 370.

²⁵⁰ “Mission,” Esalen, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.esalen.org>.

transcendence and the center shared practices in yoga, psychedelic experience, astral projection, sexual emergence, and many more experiential modes for awakening to your highest potential. It was in this time that magic, mysticism, and the subjectivity of “a concoct-your-own-truth culture and society,”²⁵¹ became widely systematized into what we now call the New Age. The author writes, “Essentially everything that became known by the 1970s as New Age was invented, developed, or popularized at the Esalen Institute.”²⁵² Andersen goes on to suggest:

Esalen developed and popularized a wholesale reinvention of psychology and medicine and philosophy driven by a suspicion of science and reason and an embrace of magical thinking (also massage, hot baths, sex, and sex in hot baths). Esalen was a headquarters for a new religion of no religion, as they came to say, and of ‘science’ containing next to no science. The idea was to be radically tolerant and indiscriminating of therapeutic schemes and understandings of reality, especially if they came from Asian or Native American or other shamanistic traditions. Invisible energies, past lives, astral projection, whatever-the more exotic and wondrous and unfalsifiable the better.²⁵³

This culturally appropriative, improvisational style of spirituality has much crossover application to conspirituality and modern wellness and was the trademark of Esalen’s foundation. The center was also founded around principles that mental illness is a myth imposed by mainstream society. Anderson writes that Esalen “helped make popular and respectable the idea that much of science is a sinister scheme concocted by a despotic conspiracy to oppress the

²⁵¹ Kurt Andersen, *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire, a 500-Year History* (New York: Random House, 2017), 179.

²⁵² Andersen, *Fantasyland*, 178.

²⁵³ Andersen, 179.

people.”²⁵⁴ Today, Esalen operates as a lux retreat getaway for wealthy wellness aficionados to soak away the stresses of modern conventional life and explore the maximization of their human potential. A 5-day retreat called, “Rituals of Esalen” costs between \$4,000-9,000 depending on accommodation choice and promises to offer “the expanse you need to distill your intentions and reawaken the change agent within.”²⁵⁵

Michael Barkun’s scholarship is essential to understanding the confluence of the religio-spiritual and conspiracist ideation. Barkun’s book, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, informs a great deal of my own study, particularly on grand conspiracy narratives or as he calls them *superconspiracies*. Light and love take on a positive faith proclamation in wellness. The overarching belief being that if one can transform themselves as an individual this will in turn transform the world into the prophesied utopia of unity and love. Transformation happens through leadership of one teacher or group with singular access to the real truth. The transmutation of human consciousness is in essence its own prophecy, not dissimilar from those made in mainstream organized religious traditions. Divination comes in the form of special access to higher dimensional beings, psychic powers, or embodied insight cultivated through the practices of meditation.²⁵⁶ This singular access to the “truth” ironically creates a new kind of orthodoxy which followers turn to in times of distress to

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 179.

²⁵⁵ “Rituals of Esalen,” Esalen, accessed on may 11, 2021
<https://www.esalen.org/workshops/rituals-of-esalen-051721>.

²⁵⁶ Ward and Voas, 105.

validate their lifestyle, worldview, or devotion to the vision of the new world yet to come. All the while, the project of individual transformation happens within a larger systemic reality hallmarked by the neoliberal capitalist paradigm. This emphasis on *individual* transformation and freedom reinforces rather than disrupts the “status quo” from which the individual seeks transcendence.

Conspirituality influencers suggest that a mass awakening or shift in collective consciousness will usher in a new era of peace and prosperity on Earth, not unlike biblical predictions for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Belief in prophecies such as end-times narratives or the shedding of old ways is called *millennialism*.²⁵⁷ Apocalyptic predictions, and “obsessive concern with the magnitude of hidden evil powers,”²⁵⁸ and faith that good will win in the end have long been part of religious traditions and popular culture. From the book of Revelations to the popular Star Wars franchise, Americans are well versed in the binary battle between good and evil. According to Barkun, belief in conspiracy theories is “central to millennialism” and often characterized as “Manichaeian, in the sense that they cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that polarization will persist until the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated.”²⁵⁹ While followers are waiting around for the moment of prophesied transcendence, conspiracism serves a helpful role in explaining why other people do not follow their movement,

²⁵⁷ Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2.

²⁵⁸ Barkun, 2.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

understand their faith, or why it is taking so long for the end of human history to finally arrive. As narrative explanation and faith proclamation, an unseen enemy is postulated who must be leading the masses astray. The Satanic shadow overlords are purposefully keeping the public blind and trapped inside the lower vibrational plane.²⁶⁰ Many of the theories posit that structured authority is brainwashing the public to hold on to their power and control of society. For Barkun, conspiracy theory serves as narrative structure to explain evil. Conspiracy theory, especially the grand conspiracy narrative with stark duality between the force of good and evil, give purpose to the life of believers who see themselves in the struggle between “light and darkness” for “cosmic supremacy.”²⁶¹ In this orientation, the universe is “governed by design rather than by randomness,” writes Barkun.²⁶² As a result, three key features emerge in the cosmic design of conspiracism: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.²⁶³ This can also explain why grand conspiracy narratives gain more traction in times of crisis and social upheaval when big events need big reasons as we learned the mind is wont to produce through proportionality bias. Another key feature of conspiracism is the stripping of nuance from the socio-political. Left out of the equation are human error, historical context, chance, and systemic conditions. The simplicity of narratives assumes an easy fix to social ills. If we simultaneously smoke out the few bad

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 3.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 4.

²⁶² Ibid, 3.

²⁶³ Ibid, 4.

guys of the evil cabal and raise our individual vibration, then the world will know peace. The struggle for a lasting peace and justice for the whole of humanity is in reality a much more arduous journey and lacks the satisfaction of simple and definitive explanation of a conspiracy theory.

In his scholarship Barkun defines what he calls, *improvisational millennialism* a style “distinctive for its independence from any single ideological tradition.”²⁶⁴ This style combines religious and secular elements including religious texts, philosophical teachings, new science, and political ideologies. In this category, we find New Age movements as well as alternate spiritualism and ideas of health and healing. He writes, “The appeal of these collages lies in their claim to provide holistic and comprehensive pictures of the world. The variety of their elements implies that the belief system can explain a comparably wide range of phenomena, from the spiritual to the scientific and political.”²⁶⁵ Improvisational style is flexible and ever evolving creating few barriers for entry and allowing for adaptation over time. Improvisational millenarians ignore boundaries imposed by institutional conceptions of knowledge, in many cases expressing hostility to authority including scientific consensus and mainstream media. Improvisational style gives those individuals the freedom to pick and choose from any cultural tradition, philosophy, or idea they like and fold it into an ideological creation all their own. Bored with conventional Western rationalism,

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 18.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 19.

they often look East for “ancient wisdom” while choosing, without limit, ingredients to create their own personalized wisdom tradition. One can pick, choose, and discard cultural artifacts, ideas, and practices as they like. The scraps that do not suit their preferences or contradict the value system they seek to create for themselves are discarded.

Barkun cites the term *cultic milieu* coined by sociologist Colin Campbell in the 1970s to describe an emergent countercultural spiritual thought movement that included all range of ideas from magic to pseudoscience. The milieu is openly anti-authority in the sense that no academic, religious, political or scientific institution has “the authority to prescribe beliefs and practices”²⁶⁶ for individuals within this alternative landscape. The cultic milieu is not bound to follow any prescriptions from the traditions they borrow ideas from either, but instead to take what they like, regardless of the impacts or harm that might be caused through the cultural extraction. Each individual simply has the personal freedom to rebuild the truth for themselves as they go along. Conspiracy theory within the cultic milieu and improvisational millenarian communities exists as a suppressed knowledge and those within it decry a kind of forceful marginalization in the debunking attempts by mainstream institutions. In their estimation, the truth is purposely being kept from us to keep the whole of the population living in ignorance and therefore easier for those in power to control.²⁶⁷ “Truth is deemed

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 27.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 27.

to be everything, particularly in those niches of rejected knowledge marked with the stigma applied by mainstream institutions,” Barkun writes.²⁶⁸ As we saw earlier in this study, attempts to debunk the false claims of the conspiracist often serve as proof for the believer that the conspiracy is real.

Building off of Barkun’s work, Asprem and Dyrendal argue, “It is not so much the confluence of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theory that is novel as the particular modes in which this ‘conspirituality’ is expressed.”²⁶⁹ We discussed the role of the social media influencer as trustworthy authority on a range of topics from the political to health and wellbeing. It is important to consider the potential for conspirituality to grow within the larger framework of neoliberal wellness. This critical connection helps us understand how narratives of conspiracy theory fit so neatly within the context of alternative wellness and spirituality communities, hallmarked by a “choose your own adventure” style of spirituality that does not credit source tradition, colonial history, or meaningfully address systemic power imbalances. I would also argue that the improvisational style, as described by Barkun, plays a key facet in the formation of alternative narratives within the mainstream wellness influencer landscape. Many wellness influencers include philosophical and health traditions appropriated from marginalized groups to lay claim to “ancient wisdom” as means of authenticity for

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 27.

²⁶⁹ Asprem and Dyrendal, “Conspirituality Reconsidered,”371.

their protocols while citing their programs as self-created in their repackaging and marketing.

Buti Yoga, founded in 2010, combines yoga, “primal movement,” and cardio dance to “transform your Body and Soul,” according to the brand’s website.²⁷⁰ “The Bonus,” the website writes, “you’ll burn 600 to 1,000 calories per class doing it.”²⁷¹ In a 2019 *Women’s Health* article, Buti Yoga founder Bizzie Gold describes the method as going beyond a traditional Vinyasa style yoga class to bring you a deeper core and cardio workout, “mostly through tribal dance-like moves.”²⁷² Bizzie Gold, who on her personal website describes herself as “the millennial voice of personal development,”²⁷³ shares that the word Buti comes from an Indian Marathi that means, “a cure that’s been hidden away or kept secret.”²⁷⁴ In the interview Gold shares, “In today’s society, we find everyone is always looking outside of themselves for something to fix or solve their problems, when the truth is what is holding them back is a lack of reconciliation with the deepest aspects of their own body.”²⁷⁵ Her method, which openly appropriates from Indian and African heritages, promises to “shift your mindset” and connect you to the “wild and primal” aspects of yourself so you can return to

²⁷⁰ “Home Page,” Buti Yoga, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://butiyoga.com>.

²⁷¹ “Home Page,” Buti Yoga.

²⁷² Mallory Creveling, “Buti Yoga Is The Booty Shaking Asana Practice You Need In Your Life,” *Women’s Health*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/fitness/a28590109/buti-yoga/>.

²⁷³ “Meet Bizzie,” Bizzie Gold. Accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.bizziegold.com/pages/bizziegold>.

²⁷⁴ Mallory Creveling, “Buti Yoga Is The Booty Shaking Asana Practice You Need In Your Life,” *Women’s Health*.

²⁷⁵ Mallory Creveling, “Buti Yoga Is The Booty Shaking Asana Practice You Need In Your Life,” *Women’s Health*.

commitment of “self-love” one cardio dance, “booty sculpting,” and restorative yoga workout at a time.²⁷⁶

Buti Yoga has faced criticism since its founding. In 2017, Gold wrote an open letter responding to criticism from popular Western yoga teacher Shiva Rea in which she writes, “You can’t be a revolutionary if you’re a traditionalist,” and dismisses Rea’s rebukes of her branded yoga method. She chides Rea for being quick to judgement meant to harm her and her brand and insinuates the Rea is a hypocrite.²⁷⁷ There is no real underlying ethos of self-reflection, apology, or acknowledgement throughout the long blog response. In an April 5th 2020 Instagram post to her 55,000 plus followers, Gold says that we shouldn’t worry about re-litigating our past history in our present discussions. She says, we are just inviting history to repeat itself. Gold, who is white, makes this statement in front of a power point screen that reads, “We refuse to be manipulated into social and racial division through fear activation, social priming, and mass media control.”²⁷⁸ In 2020, she was also identified as an influencer purporting QAnon conspiracy cult beliefs by the *Conspirituality* podcast.²⁷⁹ A video where she talks about Satanic agendas, adrenochrome, and anti-vaccine rhetoric (all hallmarks of the QAnon conspiracist worldview) has since been removed from her Instagram

²⁷⁶ “Home Page,” Buti Yoga. <https://butiyoga.com>

²⁷⁷ Bizzie Gold, “An Open Letter to Shiva Rea,” Buti Yoga, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://butiyoga.com/blogs/news/an-open-letter-to-shiva-rea>.

²⁷⁸ Bizzie Gold (@bizziegold). “We refuse to be manipulated. Once you wake up, you can’t go back to sleep. Once you remember who you are, you can’t be tricked into towing the line of division and fear,” Instagram, April 5, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-m8aMuB6M4/>.

²⁷⁹ “Redpilled,” Conspirituality, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://conspirituality.net/redpilled/>.

account, but not before it was reported on by *Insider* in an article titled, “How QAnon Infiltrated the Yoga World.”²⁸⁰ When reached for comment by the writer of the article Gold declares that she does not identify with QAnon and that the categorization of those in wellness for purporting the belief system “feels like a witch hunt.”²⁸¹ There are still visible posts about child trafficking and medical freedom on her now inactive twitter account,²⁸² as well as more subtle language of mass psychological control in her Instagram posts, like the one referenced above. Bizzie Gold declared the deletion of IG from her devices in a January 2021 post and has been inactive on the app since then.²⁸³

There is massive implication for cultural appropriation and orientalism embedded in conspиритuality and the improvisational style which claims the freedom to take what one chooses from world cultures not just for their personal well-being but also for personal profit. As Barkun writes:

This combination of eclectic materials, hidden knowledge, and distrust of authority is the essence of improvisational millennialism. Because the disparate elements can be endlessly recombined, and because traditional religious authority is deemed to have been co-opted by the forces of evil, every practitioner of improvisational millennialism becomes his or her own millenarian entrepreneur.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Rachel Greenspan and Gabby Landsverk, “How QAnon Infiltrated the Yoga World,” *Insider*, November, 11, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/qanon-conspiracy-theory-yoga-influencer-took-over-world-2020-11>.

²⁸¹ Greenspan and Landsverk, “How QAnon Infiltrated the Yoga World,” *Insider*.

²⁸² Bizzie Gold (@bizziegold). Accessed May 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/BizzieGold>.

²⁸³ Bizzie Gold (@bizziegold). “May 2021 be exactly what humanity needs to turn the corner.” January 9, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ1PcxgBnhA/>.

²⁸⁴ Barkun, 233.

Barkun's use of the word entrepreneur in this context relates to the broader conversation we have had about neoliberal wellness influencers. He writes of the entrepreneur in the millenarian sense for their freedom to create their own narratives of the end times combining religious traditions with politics and conspiracy theory. I would like to expand on it here to include the role of improvisation and individualism in upholding structured neoliberal capitalism and the modes of extraction for individual profit. With these models, we can consider a broader imperialism at play in the extraction of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual materials from other world cultures in the project of building up one's own personal wellness protocols and spiritual identity. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* provides a useful guide to understand how "borrowing" from traditions in this way, particularly as they are phrased as Eastern mystical ancient wisdom, fits in to the larger historical context of West/East power imbalances and the project of "othering" culture for the purpose of superiority and domination. His book is rich in discourse and insight on the harm of binary constructs that position cultures in opposition to each other. In his work he specifically speaks about the duality of the Orient vs. the Occident, (East vs. West) that was a primary feature of the colonial project. The West being medically, militarily, academically, politically and economically superior to the primitive but amusing and colorful East. The project of colonial domination was not simply a geo-

political one from Said's perspective but actively reinforced by scholars in the humanities and social sciences.²⁸⁵

He writes:

Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being. No better instance exists today of what Anwar Abdel Malek calls 'the hegemonism of possessing minorities' and anthropocentrism allied with Europocentrism: a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition 'it' is not quite as human as 'we' are. There is no purer example than this of dehumanized thought.²⁸⁶

The wellness entrepreneur is modern orientalist. In taking the mystical "ancient wisdom" from the "exotic" East and repacking those wares for personal consumption without regard for colonial history, the influencer stakes claim both to superiority and ownership. The frequency with which wellness entrepreneurs market practices and products with trendy slogans and Western values is the classic archetype for what Said describes above.

He argues:

For it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one

²⁸⁵ Barkun, 13.

²⁸⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 108.

belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.²⁸⁷

There is a great deal of overlap between Said's analysis with the contemporary wellness influencer as "studying the East" as well as the Global South. In one's wellness journey they may imbibe Ayahuasca for spiritual transformation, get weekly acupuncture, practice yoga asanas daily, see a holistic doctor who incorporates Aryurvedic health protocols all without any acknowledgement or study of the colonial history of extraction or the present political struggle of the people who live in the spaces from which these practices originated. In fact, a Western wellness influencer is free to promote themselves as worldly voyeur as they use their Instagram feed to "educate" and open the minds of their followers to "other cultures."

Yoga teacher, activist, and writer Susanna Barkataki defines cultural appropriation as "a dominant group with privilege and power taking from a marginalized group that has less systemic power."²⁸⁸ Cultural appropriation in this sense involves systemic power imbalance and exploitation. Barkataki writes, "It includes the power to pick and choose what we take from a culture and leave the rest behind without regard for the impact on the communities affected or respect to its creators."²⁸⁹ The improvisational style of modern wellness is rooted in neoliberalism and racial capitalism. The wellness influencer who markets a

²⁸⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 10.

²⁸⁸ Susanna Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga's Roots: Courageous Ways to Deepen Your Yoga Practice* (Orlando: Ignite Yoga and Wellness Institute, 2020), 46.

²⁸⁹ Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, 47.

brand ethos of free-spirited global researcher and later sells a “self-created” spiritual transformation package that mixes and matches their favorite cultural techniques perpetuates the colonial project in modern times. The process of improvisational wellness trends solidifies geo-political power dynamics in which the West is economically and politically superior, while the East and global South should be turned to for old mystical spiritual practices and their rich cultural heritages. In this estimation, the West is positioned as a historical inevitability whose dominant civilization is intellectually superior but spiritually devoid unlike the mystical “other.” The West is civilized while the East and global South remain ancient, untamed, wild, and “exotic.” This serves to sanitize the genocidal violence of the colonial project and anesthetize the legacy of racism, violence, and class hierarchy for the generations to follow. In this way the Western cultural consumer, is able to divorce themselves from complicity to the inherited history of systemic harm by adopting any and all traditions from outside to fill the cultural or spiritual void of their Western upbringing.

Andrea Jain writes in *Peace, Love, and Yoga: the Politics of Global Spirituality*

Appropriation, commodification, and purchasing are a part of identity formation in contemporary consumer culture. Individuals build their identities and gain a sense of belonging through participation in consumer groups. I have argued that neoliberal spiritual consumers fashion their identities based on essentialized, exoticized, and sometimes Orientalized images of other cultures and their ideas, practices, and symbols...sometimes posing serious ethical problems when they elide contemporary and historical forms of oppression.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Jain, *Peace Love Yoga*, 170.

When one is tasked with the singular responsibility to resolve their own personal health and self-create an independent spirituality it is done within the macro system of capitalist consumer culture and its roots in Western hegemony. Appropriation and individualism feature significantly in conspirituality. The spiritual individual creates a personalized lens to understand and relate to the world using Barkun's improvisational style by borrowing for any and all traditions they please and, as with the example of Bizzie Gold, defend themselves as edgy innovator when criticized for perpetuating harm. The most charismatic and enterprising wellness influencers repackage and sell their uniquely blended and borrowed wares as branded prescriptions for optimal health and spiritual wholeness. Improvisational style also facilitates agile and responsive brand narratives that are flexible and adaptable to emergent market trends and consumer preferences. When confronted the conspiratorial entrepreneur has any number of narratives from which they can draw on to show that, in fact, it is they who are under attack, even when the criticism is of appropriation and systemic harm. The wellness influencer whose brand is built on the foundation of love, light, and positivity deflects any critique of their brand platform as under attack by the forces of hate, division, hypocrisy, and low vibration. The influencer is being assaulted by the brainwashed masses simply for "speaking their truth" or "stepping into their power." In effect, conspirituality protects a wellness influencer under social scrutiny. The grand conspiracy narrative can serve as

both a deflective shield from personal responsibility and positions the influencer, regardless of their level of access and privilege, as the marginalized person in the equation. In reality, the wellness influencer whose branded messaging proports that we are all connected by love and unified in our shared humanity is unable to hold emotional space for their *real* complicity in systemic harm. In the end, when utilizing the binary constructions of a grand conspiracy narrative that positions a cosmic battle between good and evil, they construct a narrative where they are always firmly on the ultimate side of good, truth, and love. In doing so the influencer betrays their false ethos of “unity” in favor of a narrative where their actions are not only above reproach but actually in service to a fight against a greater invisible enemy in the battle against the dark side. Ironically, this narrative construct creates an even deeper entrenched mode of social and spiritual separateness between the “enlightened” and the “blind,” the “free” and the “sheep,” those with access to the real truth and the brainwashed masses.

I rely a great deal on the scholarship of Michael Barkun in this chapter to inform how new spiritual movements with improvisational style can lead to conspiracism. At its most basic, challenging orthodoxy, including religion, erodes structured authority. This can be done purposely as a propaganda project to maintain or attain power within society. I wonder though, in what ways do these conspiracist narratives inspire new forms of orthodoxy and authoritarianism? The influencer with large following in effect both crafts their own politics and religion, potentially with cult-like dynamics. While it may depart from the structured

orthodoxy of organized religion, conspirituality generates its own unimpeachable truth, in effect, replacing one orthodoxy with another self-designed one. To the topic of orthodoxy more generally, I would argue that challenging convention is vital to democratic society, particularly given our inherited history and structured systemic hierarchies. One issue that I take with the scholarship on conspiracy theory in general, and Michael Barkun's writing more specifically, is a tacit assumption that the erosion of orthodoxy and rationalism are the cause of conspiracist ideation. I disagree. In fact, I am curious in the ways that conspiracy theory might serve as a deflection or self-protection when one's faith in their absolute truth is questioned in a broader social context. The perception that one's "truth" is under attack leads one to seek and ultimately find narrative explanations that protect their worldview. Isn't the ultimate psychological motivation for conspiracist ideation be to protect one's individual orthodoxy? A conspiracy theory takes on the form of rational explanation for those who have difficulty being present with the inconvenient fact that much of world events are mitigated by chance and human error in the backdrop of our shared, inherited history. The ability to hold many truths at once with curiosity toward the nuanced complexity of human existence is the antidote to apocalyptic grand conspiracy narratives.

In my view, and in my lived experience, exploring life's big questions with an inter-spiritual philosophical lens can provide a grounded confidence to manage the natural existential anxiety that arises in one's life. Art, music, poetry,

rich understanding of world history, conversations grounded in mutual respect across lines of cultural difference, all of these serve to build empathy and mutual understanding of our human interconnection. These collective bonds breed a sense of personal responsibility to one another and motivate action toward the political engagement required of system wide change in our inherited, unequal, and often violent social systems. In times of conflict and struggle, it is a critical lack of empathy, context, and nuance that leads one to embrace a grand conspiracy narrative. While ethics and standards for research and story-telling are vital to work toward a shared understanding of current events, gate keepers have traditionally moderated the collective conversation in ways that uphold systemic power imbalances. We see, even to this day, underrepresentation of women, especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color, in leadership roles in science, government, higher education, and media. A 2019 Brookings Institute survey cites that “among tenured faculty at four-year institutions, just 27 percent were women.”²⁹¹ Orthodoxy must always be challenged and when doing so, I suggest we look to see whose history, perspective, and story are missing.

We are rarely encouraged to explore spiritual traditions in the same way we are academic philosophies and ideologies. I believe there is a space for spiritual inquiry that yields insight into the human condition beyond which the rational mind can access. I want to make clear that I do not pretend to have the

²⁹¹ Bridget Turner Kelly, “Though More Women Are on College Campuses, Climbing the Professor Ladder Remains a Challenge,” *Brookings* (blog), March 29, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/03/29/though-more-women-are-on-college-campuses-climbing-the-professor-ladder-remains-a-challenge/>.

singular answer to the great mysteries of why we are here, what happens when we die, and if there is a divine force that animates all the theater of this plane of human existence. I do not have, nor am I ultimately on a quest for, the master blueprint that unlocks the mysteries of the universe. Even in this study, I encourage each reader to engage critically as a participant of this discussion, to reflect and where necessary to push back on theories I present in my scholarship. That is how good scholarship works. We read and digest and challenge and add ever more layers to the conversation of what it is to be human in the world. When we see ourselves and others as critical to the conversation of the human condition, it can relieve the burden of looking back to some perfect imaginary past, one remarkable historical figure, or singular authoritative text for all the solutions to our present-day problems. The past and its poetry can serve as inspirational guide or cautionary tale, not as infallible source material. As Edward Said writes, “Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority.”²⁹² Aren’t both academic and spiritual communities ultimately tasked with critically examining the status quo and conventional orthodoxy?

Among the many gifts the yoga traditions and practices have given me personally is a grounded contentment from which I can reflect on life’s big questions without need to arrive at any singular answer. I am content to swim in the mystery, or as I read on a sticker once in Ocean Beach, California to “seek

²⁹² Said, xxiii.

understanding where reality meets the myth.” Similarly, I find mindfulness practices such as meditation as a space from which to self-reflect on my place within a larger shared history. Academics often decry the role of dogmatic religion in the violence these institutions have authorized through history that position the institution’s singular access to God as evidence of cultural superiority that serves as justification for projects of inhumanity such as rigid caste systems, war, and genocide. In many ways, this chapter is about the role these dogmatic singular narratives about divine source and the cosmos plays in one’s adoption of a meta narrative conspiracy theory. Yet, I want to suggest that spiritual source material and the communities that form around the appreciation of these texts and teachings can heal and inspire a sense of human interdependence. From the Sufi poets to the Martin Luther King Jr.’s pulpit, religio-spiritual communities have long been on the front line of philosophical inquiry and activist resistance to hegemonic authority. What does it look like in practice to love one’s neighbor as if they were you, as the Bible demands? If yoga is skill in *action*, as *The Bhagavad Gita* suggests, what does that mean for the role of the yoga practitioner in the greater resistance efforts against systemic injustice? Rigid power structures exist in religion as much as any other sector of our society, but there is an empathetic recognition of our shared humanity that spiritual source material and the art it inspires can guide us toward when logic and reason fall short. I argue that we need both, a celebration of the mystical and poetic as well as critical engagement with the source materials, their history, and those who

teach them. Both growing up Baptist and in assorted yoga spaces, I have seen questions themselves dismissed as the work of the devil or the egoic mind. “Just have faith” or “trust the teachings,” can be lobbed as pejorative assault at critical inquiry in spiritual spaces. The inquiry itself is often presented as barrier to access the one singular “Truth.” Even as a philosophy student at Boston University, there were times when it was suggested that I was no one to challenge the supremacy of Aristotle’s logic. In my view, this embrace of authoritarian dogmatic analysis of life’s biggest questions plants the seeds both of conspiracism and the most violent projects of singular cultural or religious superiority for most of our shared human history. Even with the atheist who asserts, sometimes quite forcefully, that there is no God, we can trap ourselves in one rigid concept. In effect, we limit access to a world of expansive opportunities for learning and the lived experiences that often yield innovation. Curiosity and empathy expand rather than contract, and it is this embrace of exploration in the world that can build new pathways of community belonging. Not to mention, nuanced understanding of shared history, and empathy often serve as antidote to conspiracy theory while presenting logic or factual evidence to the conspiracy minded often reinforces conspiracism for the believer.

I argue that conspirtuality influencers may intend to shift old paradigms but do so without a grounded understanding of the shared history and socio-political reality of global society. This missing piece is critical. The conspirtualist does not see that drafting a new “truth” from which to view the world happens within a

larger macro structure of inherited power and privilege and often co-opts and contains dissent to the current power paradigms. The entitlement influencers demonstrate in their improvisational style, which extracts from the world any resource that serves one's personal wellness and enlightenment, further perpetuates the harm of neoliberal capitalism and the old paradigms from which they seek liberation.

As we transition into the methods of research and analysis of conspiritualist influencers online, it will be essential to examine narratives of individualism and entitlement embedded within the appropriated wellness and spiritual protocols influencers prescribe. It is my position that we are all susceptible to conspiracist ideation and live within a broad conspiracy spectrum. People adopt conspiracy theories for varied reasons sometimes with little to no real-world consequence. Grand conspiracy narratives serve as alternate narrative explanation for our inherited history and shared reality. The consequences of adopting these narratives can be catastrophic, ranging from the severing of our communal bonds and eroding capacity for civil discourse. Conspiracism in its most extreme form can be used as justification for large scale violence and terrorism. Grand conspiracy narratives are particularly salient in times of social and economic distress, which makes observing the phenomenon at the convergence of systemic ills with the COVID-19 pandemic fertile laboratory for investigation.

Each individual arrives at conspiracist ideation with a unique personality, world view, and position within a large inherited socio-political framework. As I argue in the first and second sections of this project, internal anxiety and external pressure can push any individual further down the conspiracy theory spectrum where they might interact with and adopt a grand conspiracy narrative as explanation for current events. Partisan politics, religious belief systems, the inner workings of the human mind, reasonable suspicion of authoritative bodies and our media landscape all work in concert to make an inconceivable grand conspiracy narrative seem not just plausible but indisputable, absolute truth. In the religio-spiritual wellness community, it is essential to examine the language of wellness influencers who both expose conspiracist rhetoric alongside their branded protocols for physical and spiritual wellbeing. It is my hypothesis that a blend of individualism, cultural appropriation, and embrace of alternative lifestyles within a macro neoliberal capitalist system converges with the most profound consequence being open, unabashed embrace of a grand conspiracy narrative. The purpose of this study is to examine how social media influencers wield their power, which I see as the clout granted by new media platforms that equate authority with large follower counts, to spread conspiracy messaging. I am also interested to see if and how the theories themselves underwrite the illusion of singular access to the real truth for the influencer and ultimately serve as mechanism for personal profit. Does the promotion of controversial conspiracy theories help to grow the influencer's audience? In what ways does the grand

conspiracy narrative fit into a larger personal brand marketing scheme? Does the conspiracy narrative help the influencer to sell their “truth” through products and protocols for spiritual insight, healing, and “optimal wellness”? Lastly, I hope to observe when and how influencers use conspiracy theory as shield from complicity or participation in conventional socio-political struggles as well as deflect personal accountability to the pervasive harm both in the individualist rhetoric of the personal transformation protocols they market and the grand conspiracy narratives they propagate to their large audiences.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

In the brainstorming phase of this project, I initially was curious if there was a link between religio-spiritual communities and conspiracy theory. Specifically, I asked, are religio-spiritual communities more susceptible to conspiracist ideation? Upon close investigation through my background research into the growing interdisciplinary field on conspiracy theory, I came to realize that each individual is susceptible to conspiracy thinking and that most people, especially in the United States, believe in some version of a conspiracy theory. In my background study, I began to imagine conspiracy theory as a spectrum we all live on and focused my curiosity on the extreme end of the conspiracy spectrum: grand conspiracy narratives. As a reminder, a grand conspiracy narrative is one that folds many conspiracy theories into an all-encompassing explanation of the world and its power structures. A grand conspiracy narrative is a dualist battle between a small group of evil, dark, manipulative powerful people operating in secret to control all of humanity. As Michael Barkun's work aptly illustrates, there is strong evidence to suggest a link between dogmatic religio-spiritual belief and grand conspiracy narratives. My interest, however, shifted to try to understand or at least meditate on, why wellness? Each of us arrive at a conspiracy theory with unique worldviews which include our political and spiritual belief systems. What about mainstream wellness culture could lead many within that space to adopt

and widely disseminate grand conspiracy narratives during the COVID-19 global pandemic? As a social scientist and member of the wellness community, it was always my intention to find a focal point from which to have a critical and curious dialogue about the culture of modern wellness. With the help and expertise of my advisor, Dr. Kevin Grisham, conspiracy theory presented itself as an apt and timely lens.

I initially began casually following known QAnon hashtags and Q influencer accounts on both Twitter and Instagram in late Summer/early Fall of 2020 while doing background research on conspiracy theory for this project. As the 2020 presidential election approached, more media attention was drawn to the QAnon conspiracy cult that projected Donald Trump as global savior from a Satanic cabal of sex trafficking Democrats and Hollywood elites. From late summer 2020 to the January 6th domestic terror attack on the Capitol, Q affiliated hashtags began to disappear from Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. After the Capitol attack, Donald Trump was infamously de-platformed from Twitter as were all Q hashtags and thousands of known QAnon influencer accounts on that platform as well as Instagram. It was then I shifted my focus away from Q'Anon more specifically and toward a broader understanding of the phenomena of grand conspiracy narratives in wellness and what link they might have to the culture of mainstream wellness. Likewise, while I no longer had access to the posts I saved on my personal Instagram account, others had done the due diligence to track the Q movement in recorded conversations and on their own

websites. I began my original research investigation with the help of the creators of the *Conspirituality* podcast who list on their website social media influencers known to share hashtags, slogans, posts, or verbal support of the Q'Anon conspiracy theory on their social media platforms.

I determined Instagram as my social media platform for study. Instagram is a free for users, social media platform owned by Facebook. Instagram is a platform commonly associated with modern mainstream wellness and the influencers that shape the culture of the modern wellness landscape.

On Instagram, I set up a private anonymous Instagram account from which to observe research subjects. Subjects in this study are determined to be wellness influencers who express grand conspiracy narratives in their main Instagram social media feed. Wellness influencers are determined to be anyone with more than 10,000 followers with public social media profile settings whose business branding is housed with the wellness economy. The influencer must express interest in, advice for, or protocols to holistic health and wellbeing. This could include one or a combination of holistic modalities including nutrition, yoga, New Age ascension strategies, mediumship, meditation, health and healing, shamanism, or any other combination that can be considered under the large umbrella of the wellness economy. The influencers chosen for data analysis also express in either subtle or overt language grand conspiracy narratives through the content shared on Instagram. The influencer must also demonstrate profit incentive on their platform through monetization strategies which include paid

brand endorsements, merchandise sales, promotion of purchasable trainings and services and/or requests of donation for labor.

From the lengthy list of the *Conspirituality* podcast website, I chose five wellness influencers to follow on Instagram and then let the platform's embedded algorithm guide me from there. I was curious to see whether the Instagram algorithm would encourage me to follow other influencer pages who shared similar conspiratorial views. Though it is not the main investigation of my study and more data would be needed to create a causal link, anecdotal evidence suggests that at the time of my initial selection, the algorithm was set to link individuals to other conspiratorial accounts. With the help of the Instagram algorithm, I began following fifty accounts whose platforms expressed conspiracy theory ranging from COVID denialism to deep state cabal-like collusion for control of human civilization. There was no interaction between the researcher and any of influencers within the sample group during the period of data collection: January 2021-May 2021. Although my research involves analysis of living human subjects, the methods were deemed exempt from IRB review because all content is freely available for public consumption. Background research into the identity and occupation of each influencer was also collected from publicly available internet content on personal websites, blogs or articles created by the influencer. The data to be analyzed was collected only through the Instagram feed and story posts that are saved in the Instagram influencer's profiles. No private correspondence, including the influencer's communication

with their audience in the form of e-mail newsletters or any other private group setting, was observed by me during the period of this study.

After three months observing the larger group sample set, three influencer accounts were chosen for in-depth qualitative content analysis. The content analysis was collected through data mining and scraping of every public Instagram post shared by the influencer in their social media feed between January 2020 and December 2020. The date range was chosen so that I could become familiar with the personality and worldview of the influencer as well as the strategies they used from sharing their content and marketing their messages with their audience. The date range also served to understand what, if any, impact the COVID-19 global pandemic had on the wellness influencers messaging to their audience. All images, written content, and video were transcribed and copied into separate tables for analysis and comparison. Each post was catalogued by date, number of likes or views on the post, the images of the posts, and the written caption of the post. Wherever video content was used, a transcript of the dialogue and style of the video was copied into the data table. This provided large data sets for content analysis and comparison. While the main methodology of my research is qualitative, I collected number of likes and views on each of the posts to understand what impact sharing extreme conspiracy messaging had on the wellness influencer's social media platform. My hypothesis going in was that the messaging would serve to increase the popularity, reach, and profit potential of the social media wellness influencer.

The three accounts chosen for qualitative content analysis represent different sectors of the wellness economy: holistic psychiatry, New Age spiritualism, and general personal lifestyle health, fitness and wellness branding. All three have equal to or greater than 130,000 followers which demonstrates broad public reach of posts shared and demonstrates capital potential of their social media platform. All three subjects shared a common messaging of personal responsibility and ownership over one's health and spiritual transformation alongside grand conspiracy narratives. Each influencer had a different style and tone in their messaging and marketing which enabled me to understand the different ways that conspiracy theory could be threaded into the personal brand messaging of the wellness influencer. The data sets shared in the next section have been collapsed for digestibility. Each of the larger data sets exceeded the number of pages reasonable for the scope of this project. I collapsed each of the three case studies into monthly timelines that tangibly and directly demonstrate the findings in my study. Each case study begins with the name, Instagram handle, whether the influencer has a verified or unverified account, the number of followers on the account, and a screen shot of the influencers Instagram bio. This top section is followed by any relevant professional biography, credentials, or relevant links to better understand the background of each influencer. Next, the collapsed cases are broken into monthly data set examples which include number of posts in the month, most likes on a single post, most views on a single post, style of posts, overall content

themes of the month, language excerpts from that month, and a sample post from the month. All data was collected over the period of January to May 2021.

The data was collected, contrasted, and considered against my main research curiosity: why wellness? In the data sets I was broadly watching for evidence of fierce individualism, prioritization of individual liberty, and rigid health and/or spiritual orthodoxy. I was also interested to notice which cognitive biases presented themselves in each influencer and/or which biases they shared in common. Specifically, how is the grand conspiracy narrative linked to the preservation of the influencer's core identity, marketed brand identity, and overall worldview? To this end, I was mining for the cognitive biases presented in the literature review that are most commonly linked with conspiracist ideation: agenticity, patternicity, confirmation bias, attribution bias, and sunk cost bias. I was also keen to observe the personality archetype of the influencer. What strategies and skills do they demonstrate in sharing their messaging? This included everything from noticing consistency of messaging, repetition, body language, charisma, approachability, vulnerability, authenticity, intelligence, confidence, and expressed connection, relatability, and commitment to their larger audience. Lastly, while this remains an area for investigation in my work moving forward, how does the false narrative of conspiracy play into the larger project of neoliberal wellness? Does the influencer meaningfully speak to collective struggle, race and class inequity, and income inequality? Does the influencer make mention of their own identity, access and privilege within the

larger wellness space? How might the messaging of the grand conspiracy derail the expressed intention of the wellness influencer in their larger mission to support an individual's overall health and wellbeing? It is my hypothesis that the messaging of the grand conspiracy serves as narrative reinforcement to the health and spiritual orthodoxy created by the influencer. With the belief in the grand conspiracy narrative, the influencer also gains personal shield from culpability to any systemic harm as the narrative always positions the adoptee firmly on the side of right, light, and love. The branded messaging of self-responsibility for personal health and spiritual freedom that the grand conspiracy narrative buttresses perpetuate the neoliberal social project in real time.

The reach and influence of social media will continue to impact the lives of all individuals who participate on these platforms. I would argue that our online conversations and the culture researchers can observe online will continue to bleed into the "real world." Social media is and should be considered an important landscape for study. I do want to point out, however, that while it is tempting to blame new technology for modern day disruption, partisan politics, and current events, our problems are far from new. Social media is an amplification of all the struggles that have existed through human history. Social media research provides insight for any academic looking to gain insight into human psychology, social interactions, and cultural trends. I chose to study the content of conspiratorial wellness influencers for the ways it demonstrates a larger value synthesis within modern mainstream wellness culture. How could

wellness become so intoxicated by conspiracy theories during a public health crisis like COVID-19? I think some of the answers could be much more obvious than not, selfishness, confusion, frustration, and many of the other reasons we believe in any conspiracy theory, though I hope this research can yield deeper insight. How does study of the extreme inform our understanding of the mainstream? I believe that by studying the extreme examples of these influencers, I can gain insight into some of the ways that wellness operates out in the open, in the mainstream, and what some of the consequences might be for all of us in terms of how we consider “wellness.” While the conspiracist messaging they share may be a smaller subset of wellness, much of their overall value and belief system is very much buttressed in mainstream wellness culture. I hope this insight invites those determined to live in the mess of reality together and do their best to avoid perpetuated cycles of harm and to examine the ways they engage with and share tools for health and wellbeing.

This research is limited in scope and sample size, as well as limited by my own subjective biases and lived experience. I am under no illusion that this one paper will yield all needed insight to understand what is going on with wellness. I do hope it is the beginning of more critical academic examination, personal self-reflection, and community conversations to come. A diverse grouping of voices will be essential to illuminate the meaning of and who gets to be included in the calculation of wellness as our understanding expands overtime.

It should also be noted here, that during the course of my study, several wellness accounts were banned from Instagram for spreading misinformation about vaccines, including some who were in my initial larger sample pool of influencers. There is evidence in my own cases studies that some of the more extreme posts of the influencers I chose for content analysis had been removed from their pages by Instagram moderators before I began to pull data from their profiles. Overall, I think this helped rather than hinder my own project. It is entirely likely that I would have also been pulled to noticing those extremes rather than observing the subtler messaging threaded through their accounts. It is that subtle language that interests me the most for its broader application to modern wellness.

There was also a lot of data to work with and shift through in this project, much of it triggering, annoying, and traumatizing. I tried with utmost reverence to find the seed of good that each of these influencers was trying to plant in the world, respect their dignity, and see their essential humanity. Yet, I am a human being living through a global pandemic. Toward the end of my content analysis of the last account, cases of COVID-related death skyrocketed in India. Yoga is a subject, philosophy, and methodology that has deeply impacted my life and how I relate to myself and the world. I was genuinely enraged while engaging with these accounts, who profit from indigenous traditional practices from India including the teachings of yoga and related wisdom lineages, that have denied the existence of COVID since March of 2020. In each of these moments of

heightened frustration, I took breaks to walk, breathe, move, cry, and scream.

While there is always the risk that these triggered feelings will pierce through a scholar's objectivity, they can also serve as fuel to keep moving forward.

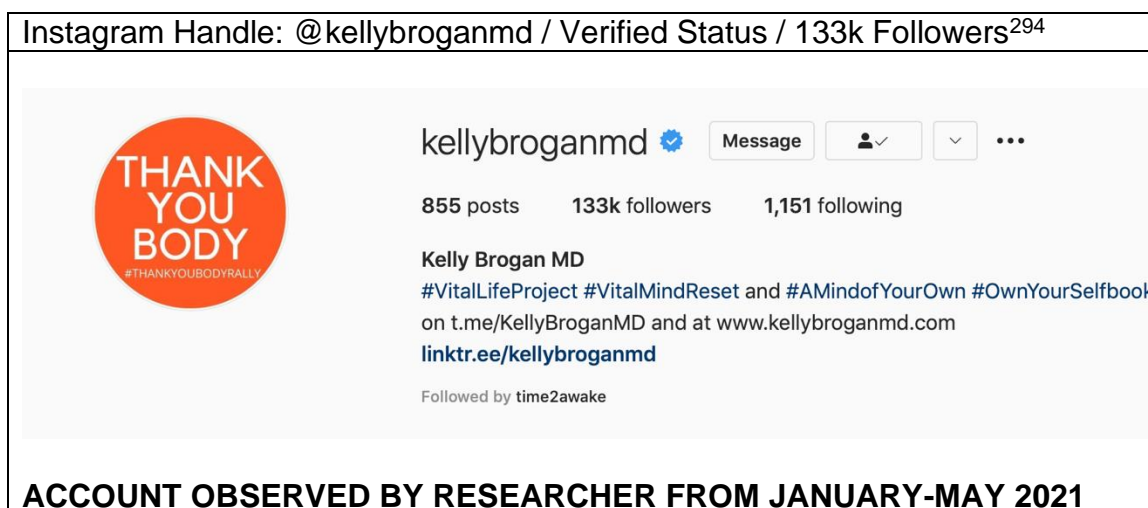
CHAPTER THREE

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Case One: The Holistic Psychiatrist

Presented here is the condensed content analysis for Kelly Brogan M.D. All language presented here is public record. Data scraping by the researcher consisted of pulling all content from Brogan's public Instagram feed from the data range of January-December 2020. This includes quotations, image content, text transcripts and other social content all sourced directly through the public Instagram feed of Kelly Brogan M.D. There was no contact between the subject and the researcher during the time of observation, January 2021-May 2021.²⁹³

Instagram Handle: @kellybroganmd / Verified Status / 133k Followers²⁹⁴



ACCOUNT OBSERVED BY RESEARCHER FROM JANUARY-MAY 2021

²⁹³ Kelly Brogan (@kellybroganmd). 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/kellybroganmd/>; all quotations are the language solely of Dr. Kelly Brogan, full transcript of data collection available upon request.

²⁹⁴ Follower status on May 9, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/kellybroganmd/>

Professional Biography, Credentials and Education²⁹⁵

“Kelly Brogan, M.D. is a holistic psychiatrist, author of the NY Times Bestselling book, *A Mind of Your Own, Own Your Self*, the children’s book, *A Time For Rain*, and co-editor of the landmark textbook, *Integrative Therapies for Depression*. She is the founder of the online healing program Vital Mind Reset, and the membership community, Vital Life Project. She completed her psychiatric training and fellowship at NYU Medical Center after graduating from Cornell University Medical College, and has a B.S. from M.I.T. in Systems Neuroscience. She is specialized in a root-cause resolution approach to psychiatric syndromes and symptoms.”

Training

- American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology Board Certification (Dr. Brogan chose not to renew her board certification which expired on 12/31/19)
- Integrative Holistic Medicine, ABIHM (The specialty recognition identified herein has been received from a private organization not affiliated with or recognized by the Florida Board of Medicine)
- NYU School of Medicine, Faculty, Clinical Instructor; Fellowship in Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry (through 2009)
- NYU School of Medicine, Resident in Psychiatry; NYU Reproductive Psychiatry Program (2008)
- KRI Kundalini Yoga Teacher Training Certification (2015)

Education

- Cornell University Medical College, NY, Doctor of Medicine
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA, BS in Brain and Cognitive Science/Systems Neuroscience

January 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 20</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 1,917 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 22,183 views</p> <p>Style of posts: mix of images, promotional flyers, and videos of Brogan speaking directly to the camera</p>	<p>Content themes: Big marketing push of her program called, “Vital Mind Reset.”</p> <p>Language: “Maybe no one ever told you that you can heal yourself” “Let me be the first” “miracle” “Welcome to the community.” “evidence based” “Own yourself.” “Invest in your self-reclamation.” “Invest in yourself.” “I don’t believe in conventional theories of infection.”</p>
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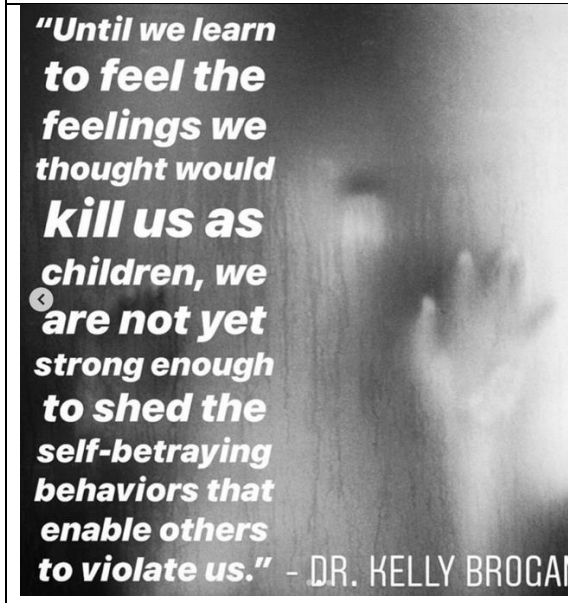
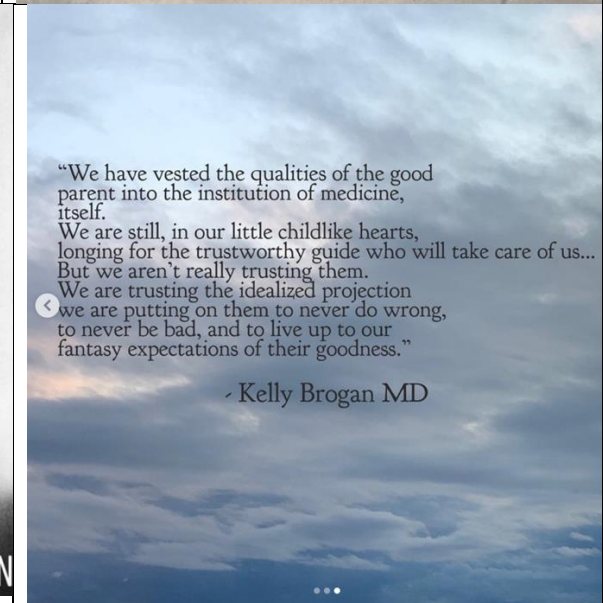
²⁹⁵ All of the text box was pulled from Brogan’s website: “Bio & Credentials,” Kelly Brogan M.D., accessed May 10th 2021, <https://kellybroganmd.com/about/bio/>

<p>Sample post²⁹⁶:</p> <p>1/12/20-1,321 likes</p>	<p>Have you noticed a trend of blaming for shaming? Perhaps it isn't actually possible to "shame" another unless they are already experiencing subconscious shame of their own. Own your emotions, resolve powerlessness. -#ownyourselfbook</p>
<p>Caption: "Shame, grief, rage, fear. These surface for each of us adults in different circumstances that we may very well be sensitized to SO THAT we can actually learn to feel these emotions as our own, to develop intimacy with them, and to finally learn self mastery as adults. Self mastery which means that no one and no thing can pull us off our core center, and that we can feel freely without fear of disintegration, allowing others to be exactly as they are. These emotions have been in us since childhood, wanting to simply be felt, and they are and always have been ours to feel. Life will present you plenty of opportunities to feel them, so it may help to remember that no one can actually make you feel anything. Only you can hurt yourself. Shame yourself. Anger yourself. You give the permission. And it is safe to feel, especially when we drop the story that keeps us fighting with those emotions, imagining that they are induced by the external world... #ownyourselfbook"</p>	

February 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 8</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,881 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 16,076 views</p> <p>Style of posts: mostly images and a video from her wedding.</p>	<p>Content themes: covering her wedding rituals to Sayer Ji, images in community</p> <p>Language: "Evolution and growth" "ritualized celebration" "Reverence" "owning ourselves" "I wonder if this is what's missing in our lives lived disconnected from our bodies, the natural world, and atomized into a society of terminally separate individuals labeling each other as good and bad." "Reset" "woke, heart-centered mamas"</p>
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²⁹⁶ Kelly Brogan (@kellybroganmd), "Shame, grief, rage, fear." Instagram, Jan. 12, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7OnFf9nSNC/>

<p>Sample post²⁹⁷:</p> <p>2/22/20-2,881 likes</p> <p>One post with three images.</p>	<p>"The gurus are falling...And we have officially entered into the realm of transparency, revealing our prized teachers as small humans."</p> <p>"The only teacher worth investing your trust in is the one that reminds you that you already have the knowledge you seek."</p> <p>KELLY BROGAN</p>
	
<p>Caption: "Meme-spiration from my recent article on an important expose narrative involving Yogi Bhajan, the kundalini yoga community, and the anatomy of a woman's reclamation process (from the perspective of resolving our victim stories)."</p>	

March 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 33</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,137 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 128,113 views</p>	<p>Content themes: majority of posts aimed at debunking the fear narratives of COVID, encouraging followers to seek their own truth, and wake up to the truth of what is happening</p> <p>Language: "You have the authority to choose the story that empowers your body with wisdom, quiets your nervous system, and affords you the opportunity to smile</p>
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²⁹⁷ Kelly Brogan (@kellybroganmd), "Meme-spiration from my recent article on an important expose narrative involving Yogi Bhajan." Instagram, Feb. 22, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B84aC4CnTa7/>

<p>Style of posts: sharing content from other accounts aimed at debunking COVID-19, including David Icke (well-known propagator of grand conspiracy narratives), text quotes as images, videos of her speaking directly to the camera. Toward the end of the month she begins posting multiple times per day. Posts with the most engagement are explicitly conspiracist in tone.</p>	<p>with a deep knowing that everything is unfolding exactly as it should to serve a collective return to love.” “Decide how you’re going to inform yourself” “We have the power to dictate our reality, one fearless belief at a time” “YOU have to decide what’s true, for you” “The dark and the light are swirling everywhere. Do you feel it? Time to question everything that might be obscuring your own individual perspective on what’s happening.” “Reset” “woke, heart-centered mamas”</p>
<p>First COVID related post²⁹⁸: 3/6/20-2,065 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: My mentor used to say that conventional medicine is religion hiding in plain sight. He said this, in part, because of the way that it, like most dominant religions, displaces the sacred from the body and the realm of the material so it becomes easier to objectify and see as a repository for the dirty ☹️. It’s time to recognize the view of the body as machine 🤖, vulnerable to the random forces of bad luck, bad genes, and bad constitution as just that - a view. A belief system. And just one of many.</p> <p>If you read #ownyourselfbook, you know that I no longer believe in theories (yes they are theories) of germ-based 🦠 contagion and infection. I unsubscribed from the preschool-level psychology of invisible bad entities out there that might invade me if I’m not extra careful. 🙄 I changed my belief system because of science that supports a non-dualistic view (beyond body vs germ) and embraces a unified perspective through the decades of research into the microbiome. Yeah, the trillions of microorganisms that already live in you and may even be there solely to assist in restructuring the body as it adapts to challenges, blamed - like cholesterol - for being at the seeming wrong place at the wrong time. I saw how geopolitical agendas leverage a reductionist perspective to keep us distracted at best and coercible at worst. I also changed my belief system because I came to view symptoms and illness as inherently meaningful, purposeful, and highly personal. I find that in this less fearful orientation, the nervous system stays in a more healthful, regenerative state, less prone to the expression of conflict through the body. Works for me. Could it work for you?</p> <p>I hope that we have the opportunity to introduce more nuanced perspectives into the minds of seekers, healers, and those who are actually ready to begin to think for themselves. May we recognize that fear is, indeed, the sickness and recognize as uninvestigated assumptions so many of our reflexive ideas about health.</p>	

²⁹⁸ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9blmCynuPR/>.

<p>For a new take on human biology, please explore German New Medicine and @drmelissasell ❤️ ☆ Stay tuned for my 🧘 retreat report including my being asked to wear gloves because I refused Purell at meals.</p>	
<p>Sample posts</p>	
<p>3/26/20-2,137 likes No Caption²⁹⁹</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> When we can individually and collectively acknowledge that medicine is a personal belief system, we will finally be free to practice embodiment according to our own truth. </p> <p style="text-align: center;">KELLYBROGANMMD</p>
<p>3/26/20-1,949 likes No Caption³⁰⁰</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> This moment of transition represents a massive shift in paradigm: from one in which safety is derived from control (of others, of our bodies, of others' bodies) to one in which safety is recognized as already present within and simply accessed through awareness and attention. </p> <p style="text-align: center;">KellyBroganMD</p>

April 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 93</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 4,750 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 269,858 views</p> <p>Style of posts: dramatic jump in frequency of posting.</p>	<p>Content themes: COVID as “psychological operation,” or manufactured crisis. Her followers should feel for their truth, take the red pill. Reality is a simulation mixed with conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and 5G technology as the reason why people are experiencing illness symptoms.</p> <p>Language: “Medicine is a religion” “your truth is different, and it deserves to live”</p>
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²⁹⁹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-Nfuw1nGQQ/>.

³⁰⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-NAJSGH1cJ/>

<p>On 4/18-posts six times (all covid denialism posts). She shares a lot of videos from other accounts expressing high levels of conspiracism. Along with screen shots of online news headlines and editorials, images of block text quotes both her text and others including quotes from Gandhi and Steinbeck. Promotion images of a new site (questioningcovid.com) In between stacks of conspiracy related videos about COVID, Brogan promotes her health programs available for purchase.</p>	<p>“Are we being invited, in this moment, to step into our personal, independent, individual truth?” “What information source resonates with your desired level of awareness?” “create your own reality” “personal responsibility” “source our own truth” “It’s never been more important to feel deeply for the fact that, without your consent and acknowledgement of the system, the system has no power over you.” “join us in my membership community”</p>
<p>Sample post³⁰¹:</p> <p>4/20/20-37,011 views</p> <p>Promotional talking video from the Vital Life Project membership:</p>	
<p>Caption: The good news and the bad news is that YOU are in control</p> <p>[Vital Life Project membership share] How will you know your truth versus your inherited programs, unexamined assumptions, and lack of readiness to step into your power? A clear body will tell you. Mine tells me that I am responsible for my health, for my experience of freedom, and for my experience of validation, love, and compassion. I can make choices that sever connection to, contracts with, and dependency on systems that I allow to treat me as a powerless dehumanized minion. I feel that the truth I navigate around in these days will bring me closer and closer to self-sourcing power which will then attract others who navigate around</p>	

³⁰¹ Ibid, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_N38IJHNIS/.

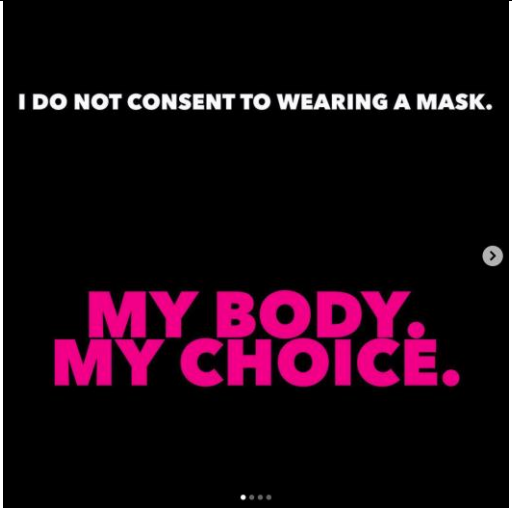

the same. We can opt out of Hollywood movies, big box corporate commercialism, conventional medicine, and hierarchical government. I wrote two books about ownership in preparation for this moment, so this crisis may be the opportunity of a lifetime.

Paraphrase of language in the video: Opportunity for self-reclamation on the deepest, deepest level. Begins with honoring the body. The body is the best instrument of truth and the mind can never be in isolation. Take it from me, I am someone who can be very easily misled by my mind. Trying to figure out what is going on, we grasp for a lucid logical explanation that helps us orientation around safety. Mental experience of understanding. We can go down a lot of rabbit holes when we don't check with the body to see how true something really is for us. It's a gut sensation. It feels like truth. That has been a compass for me. Quotes Maya Angelou. Concept of self-responsibility, we don't outsource agency. Only you can give the permission for your engagement with anything. No one can make us feel or do anything. There is always a layer of choice involved.

How can we begin to exercise our sovereignty through our in-person interactions? I believe this is an inside job. The only thing you have control over is your internal domain and your truth. Others will collect around the frequency of the resonance of that truth. Honor the nature of the organism that you are and navigate from a place that isn't susceptible to mind control and brain washing, all sort of mental activity that lead us down patterned spaces of victimhood. We take responsibility for every choice we make. I won't vital my truth which includes not wearing a mask. We define our own parameters for wellness, safety, and how much power we want to have. Just step into the power that you want and the life experience that you have designed.

May 2020

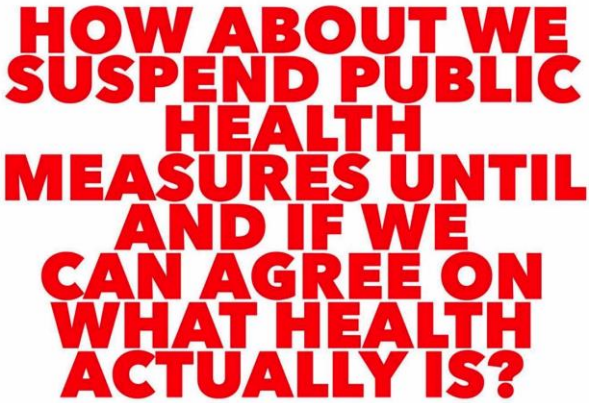
<p>Number of Posts: 32</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 6,696 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 136,752 views</p> <p>Style of posts: similar to April but with less frequency. For the third month in a row, we see a clear pattern that image and video posts with the strongest anti-COVID and conspiracist language receive the most engagement.</p>	<p>Content themes: AGENDA 21, Bill Gates, smiling beach photo, celebrating the sacred union with her partner, anti-institution language, personal sovereignty</p> <p>Language: "Have the audacity to envision that now and to open your heart to the glorious phoenix that can rise from this ash. The anima mundi will prevail. We will learn to come into harmony with our local community, with the earth, and with our deeper selves."</p> <p>"daddy government and mommy medical system"</p> <p>"Adulting in today's climate, however, may lead you down a rabbit hole with this message awaiting you at the end. Go as deep as you can to see that this is all a game of power and control, it's been planned for decades, and it feeds off of your belief that it is what it appears to be."</p> <p>"Satanic belief system infiltrated the consciousness."</p> <p>"Remember love, moment to moment. Awareness + heart resonance = compassionate empowerment, freedom, and joy. That's the math I'm working with"</p> <p>"One World Government, total control."</p>
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	<p>“They call me a conspiracy theorist but it’s not a theory, it’s a fact.”</p>
<p>Sample post³⁰² 5/17/20-6,696 likes No Caption</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">DEAR ENFORCER,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DO YOU RECOGNIZE THAT YOU - YOU PERSONALLY - ARE A PART OF THE MACHINERY OF EVIL? THAT YOU ARE BETRAYING AND ABUSING THE VERY PEOPLE AND CONSTITUTION THAT YOU TOOK AN OATH TO PROTECT? ALL IN SERVICE OF THE OCCULTIST SYMBOL OF SUBMISSION THAT IS A MASK AGAINST AN INVISIBLE ENEMY WE'VE BEEN TOLD IS ATTACKING US WITHOUT ONE SHRED OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT ANY ASPECT OF THIS TWISTED CHARADE. THIS IS NOT ABOUT A VIRUS. IT'S ABOUT A GLOBAL TAKEOVER AND YOU TOO WILL HAVE TO LIVE IN THE WORLD OF MEDICAL SLAVERY YOU HELPED USHER IN.</p>	

June 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 7</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 4,984 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 98,378 views</p> <p>Style of posts: first significant lapse in posting. Most posts this month are about face masks.</p>	<p>Content themes: anti-mask, shamanism’s quest for vision, transhumanist agenda</p> <p>Language: “WWIII has commenced and the enemy is humanity itself. Biosecurity is a force of control that is being leveraged in service of a transhumanist agenda. This is not, and never was, about a virus.” “Mommy medicine and daddy government are not here to take care of you, or any of us. That’s your job.”</p>
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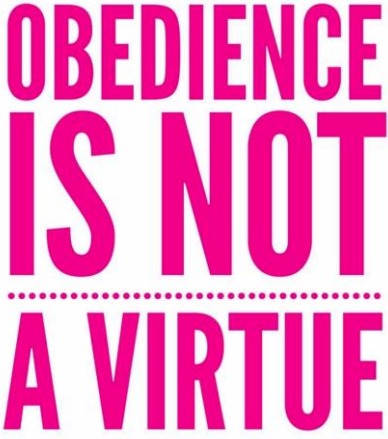
³⁰² Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAS5Sd5HIXR/>.

<p>Sample post³⁰³:</p> <p>6/26/20-4,984 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: I've become very interested in the power of agreements rather than enforcement of top-down rules and even laws. Could we be at a moment where we are being invited to examine our relationship to government as protector? I can see how it won't work, any longer, for me to rely on government public health mandates when they happen to align with my values (smoking bans) but to resist when they don't. Maybe I relinquish public health as a concept because we don't agree, as a collective, about what health is. If some of us believe that others should violate their own body for the greater good and some of us believe that we should be exempt from ever doing anything to or with our bodies to make someone else comfortable...well, where do we land? What can we agree on? I'd like to kick off an 🤝 agreement challenge 🤝. I challenge all you intrepid voices out there to resolve this point of division: MASKS. If I don't want to wear one and don't care if you do (but would rather you not), and you want to wear one and want me to...what agreement could we come to? An agreement isn't a compromise, to my mind...it is a way for two world views to exist in honor of one another, with independence. It is connection through difference. It's adulting so that we don't need mommy medicine or daddy government to come mediate our differences. We figure it out ourselves. Think it's possible? Let's try.</p>	

July 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 11</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 5,871 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 40,957 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Large block text and bright fonts for her personal quotes. Promotional styles posts and links to her articles on questioningcovid.com.</p>	<p>Content themes: business promotion, New World Disorder, masks as psyop</p> <p>Language: "Masks: have you been captured by this psyop?" "Gather with people on the same mission" "bodily sovereignty, health freedom, radical healing" "awakening to self" "self-care is the most radical form of activism there is..." "personal responsibility for health" "mainstream media indoctrination"</p>
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³⁰³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB6tpOfHhzj/>

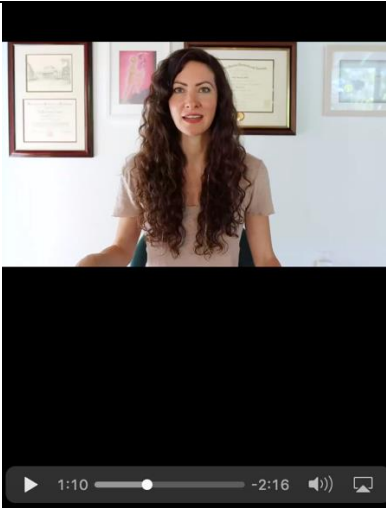
<p>Promotional posts for her partner’s website (greenmedinfo.com), and her Vital Life Project. Continuing to share grand conspiracy narrative videos from other accounts. Image and link to a published case report on holistic treatment of Grave’s Disease</p>	<p>“Agenda 21. WAKE UP!” “reclaim your body” “reclamation ritual” “so-called mental illness”</p>
<p>Sample Post³⁰⁴:</p>	
<p>7/4/20-5,358 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: I believe that we are undergoing a collective initiation to adulthood. We have been conditioned by authoritarian family structures and control-based parenting to conflate goodness with compliance. The truth is that this power structure induces the fragmentation of self so that you identify with your public “acceptable” self and you hide your private “unacceptable” self only to project it on others whom you then judge and condemn. Conventional medicine is not your mommy, government is not your daddy, and it’s time to learn how to take responsibility for yourself and only yourself. When you become whole unto yourself, you reclaim your power and experience true freedom. You know yourself to be already perfect. And not in the eyes of a punishing and rewarding authority, but in your own eyes. So let’s consider sourcing our sense of virtue from somewhere other than parentified controllers who are haven’t a care in the world for us beyond our enslavement to their globalist agenda. Alrighty?³⁰⁵</p>	

August 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 11</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 6,400 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 27,094 views</p> <p>Style of posts: first post of the month mentions “shadow banning,” (a method of slowing engagement from social platforms where content becomes less visible to existing and new followers), talks about</p>	<p>Content themes: Self-ownership</p> <p>Language: “germ theory is the new religion” “The government doesn’t care if you live or die.” “You’re not sick, society is sick. Reclaim your power. Own yourself.” “The world is waking up. We are committing to own ourselves.”</p>
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³⁰⁴ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCOXEVFHRHX/>.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCOXEVFHRHX/>.

<p>migration off of IG to telegram. Promotion of the Vital Life Project and her published case study with conspiracy and anti-mask post. The post with the highest engagement features a full trailer billboard reading, "WAKE UP! TAKE OFF YOUR MASK QuestioningCovid.com"</p>	
<p>Sample post³⁰⁶:</p>	
<p>8/21/20: 15,232 views</p>	
<p>Caption: 44 days to self reclamation Do you know how to resist manipulation, mind control, and groupthink? There is a way, and it involves clarity of thought, openness of the heart, and resolution of fear. ❤️ The stakes of self-neglect have just gotten higher. Now, I can safely say that Vital Mind Reset is for every individual who feels called to reclaim, secure, and sustain their freedom. My scientifically documented, step-by-step nutrition and lifestyle protocol is designed to teach you the art of radical self-care... Self-care that can lead to shedding chronic disease labels, eliminating medications, and awakening personal empowerment and potential. 🙌 It's the most important time in human history to have A Mind of Your Own and to Own Your Self so that you can clearly navigate this emotionally provocative terrain knowing that your body is yours to heal and protect. No external authorities necessary. So here's what we're doing to ensure Vital Mind Reset gets into the hands of as many people as possible during this challenging time... 1. For the first time, we are making Vital Mind Reset available with options to "choose what you pay" so you can select a price point that works best for you. 🗳️ Plus... 2. For a limited time, we're offering 8 weekly group video calls beginning on September 2nd. Our live group calls are an opportunity to lean on your community for support as you complete the 44-day protocol and walk the path of radical health reclamation. 🧑🏻‍🤝‍🧑🏻📞 This is all available to you as an exclusive offering now through Sunday, August 23rd. 🕒 And to offer some more perspective on why now is the time to take ownership of your health</p>	

³⁰⁶ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEJyzxLHtc4/>.

and vitality, I'll be hosting a FREE livecast, titled "Radical Self-Care", on Saturday, August 22nd at 2pm EDT.
 Taking care of Your Self is your only true responsibility. ❤️
 Link in bio!

Paraphrase of video:
 Epic journey home to yourself.
 Describes her personal experience with Hashimoto's thyroiditis taking her over the bridge to an entirely new story about health. One that liberated me from a perspective about the body of as subject to the random forces of bad luck, and bad genes, and bad timing, and into a new perspective that says, all you need to do is set the conditions for healing. Send the nervous system a comprehensive signal of safety and regeneration will unfold automatically. Give yourself a gift that only you can give yourself, which is an experience of self-care at a high level that can ultimately lead you to a deep contact with who it is that you really are. So many people who complete the program say that they finally feel that they have come home to themselves they finally feel that they are comfortable in their own skin.

September 2020


<p>Number of Posts: 14</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 4,181 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 20,311 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Most of the posts are promotional posts for a Thank You Body rally, an "evolved protest" of in-person gathering to be hosted at sites all over the world. Post engagement is still steadily declining, but posts with conspiracist messaging receive the highest engagement.</p>	<p>Content themes: Thank You Body, biosecurity, digital health passports, nanotechnology</p> <p>Language: "Current mantra. Awakening is remembering what we already know" "May we remember the truth that love is ever present and that this human experience is a powerful and mysterious gift." "Safe is a Control Word for Control." "It's time to choose empowerment, joy, and positivity and to honor the incredible wisdom of the human body." "Your body is not only your greatest ally, but also your guru. It doesn't need half-hearted attempts at "natural remedies," offered from the consciousness of *if it's serious, it needs emergency rooms, meds, and "real" interventions*."</p>
<p>Sample post³⁰⁷:</p>	

³⁰⁷ Ibid, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFZ_6isgbEH/.

<p>9/21/20: 1,865 likes</p>	<p>MÜNCHAUSEN SYNDROME</p> <p><i>A CONDITION IN WHICH THE PATIENT FEIGNS ILLNESS IN ORDER TO DRAW REASSURANCE OR OTHER GAINS TO THEMSELVES.</i></p> <p>MÜNCHAUSEN SYNDROME BY PROXY</p> <p><i>A CONDITION IN WHICH A CAREGIVER INDUCES MENTAL OR PHYSICAL ILLNESS IN THOSE UNDER THEIR CARE FOR SECONDARY GAIN.</i></p>
<p>Caption: While I have moved beyond the ontology of the conventional disease model, I do find that Psychiatry and clinical psychology have characterized patterns of human behavior that do actually exist in the world...just that Psychiatry's why and what to do about it are completely different from my current perspective. 🤖</p> <p>Psychiatry describes as severely pathological, those who would behave as if ill when they are not. 🤖</p> <p>It seems to me, and others, that the "asymptomatic carrier" arm of this psyop is designed to achieve the breakdown one's own determination of their level of health and wellness. If you, as a healthy looking and feeling person, ought to be tested, temperature-checked, sanitized, and masked, then we are all sick, or acting as if. And only mommy medicine and daddy government can save us.</p> <p>More insidious, however, are those who have been poisoned by government and unelected health official and technocrat subsidies including pesticides, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, processed foods, and non-native EMF, whose bodies rightly detox through symptoms of fever and cough...and who understand their illness to be the result of a random phantom microbe...🌀 rather than the "caregivers" themselves, inducing the illness with one hand and offering the "solution" with the other.</p> <p>We are in the midst of a mass exercise in trauma-based mind-control that has nothing to do with a virus, and everything to do with the darkest side of dependency, conditioned trust in authority, and disempowerment.</p> <p>You are not sick, so stop acting like it because you are participating in your own conditioning and enslavement. And if you do describe yourself as sick, remember that it may not be for the reasons you've been told. And that the body doesn't make mistakes, it is infinitely wise, and there's nothing to be afraid of because healing...radical healing...is within your grasp.</p>	

October 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 31</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 7,336 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 11,301 views</p>	<p>Content themes: body appreciation, smart phone free living, community, love, joy, sovereignty</p> <p>Language: "Have you experienced the resiliency, strength, and wisdom of your own body?" "TODAY we rise."</p>
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<p>Style of posts: Almost exclusively promotional posts for the Thank You Body Rally, promotion of her telegram channel toward the end of the month. No explicit conspiracy video shares that were the hallmark of previous months of posting. Thank You Body Rally features prominent Shiva murti (statue of Hindu god)</p>	<p>“At this point if you don’t know what’s going on then you’re not equipped to know emotionally.” “Needless to say, what we don’t need is more inflammatory activism.” “regenerate, repair that’s what the body does and what we were celebrating.” “We heal us. We are responsible for our own health.” “If you’re seeing this, find me on Telegram and my newsletter (link I’m bio) because I’m fading to black on IG!” “my soul’s reclamation journey” “AI/transhumanist agenda” “Reset Your Self. Reclaim Your Self.”</p>
<p>Sample post³⁰⁸:</p>	
<p>10/15/20: 216 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: Tomorrow, in over 60 locations across the world, we rise. 🙏 We stand in our passionate, authentic, lived beliefs around what health actually is. 🔄 What a gift this wise and unerring body is, and what a grand and epic story the journey home to self has been... 😊 On Friday, October 16th, we contribute our intention, attention, and energy to a field of gratitude for our bodies at the worldwide Thank You Body Rally. 🙏 Throw off the blanket of inertia and shut-down that isolation and oppression may have you under. The way out of confusion and disconnection is through our most joyful human behaviors — dance, touch, laughter, music, play, and togetherness. 🙏 This is a history-making opportunity to remember what it is to be human. It’s also an amazing opportunity to find your people and to make real life, non-digital contact with likeminded and hearted beings. Here’s how: 1. Find an event near you on thankyoubodyrally.com 📄 2. Tune in to our Miami event though this livestream link at 3pm. 📺 ♡ Stand with us and change your profile pic to this image above ♡ Let’s be the change we want to see in the world, together... ♡</p>	

³⁰⁸ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGXTHR-HPHQ/>.

November 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 5</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,118 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 39,304 views</p> <p>Style of posts: minimal posting, promotion of newsletter, one conspiracy video about Bill Gates, a recap video of the Thank You Body rally (OM Namah Shivaya playing as background montage music), montage video similar to a public service announcement of people saying, "Stop Masking your kids."</p>	<p>Content themes: death, Bill Gates mind control system, anti-mask, promotion of materials that can be found off IG (newsletter and Telegram</p> <p>Language: "I will even consider the possibility that we may choose our moment of death, as we are the master creators of our experience." "If you think ANYTHING that is going on right now has ANYTHING to do with a virus, you haven't seen this interview." "You are already Free" "the indoctrination of children into the occultist ritual of mask wearing which conditions them around dehumanization of self"</p>
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Sample post³⁰⁹:

<p>11/19/20: 39,304 views</p> <p>Video is a six and a half minute montage of different people saying, "Please stop masking your kids," in multiple languages with somber piano music in the background.</p>	
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Caption: Stop Masking Your Kids
 We have all suffered trauma, stuffed that pain into the catacombs beneath the infrastructure of our personalities and shadowy projections out onto the world. If we haven't worked to transform our childhood traumas and associated programs, however, we become weaponized purveyors of unconscious harm. And there is no where that we are seeing that more starkly than the indoctrination of children into the occultist ritual of mask wearing which conditions them around dehumanization of self and other, shame and fear of the body, and suppression of their unique voice. Thank you @drtommyjohn for providing the evidence that there are so many who know this practice to be insufferably wrong. Do what you can to end the trickle down of unprocessed trauma. Break the cycle of child abuse. It's never too late...

December 2020

³⁰⁹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHyaoCWHOAz/>.

<p>Number of Posts: 4</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 5,261 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 22,309 views</p> <p>Style of posts: continued decrease in posting, promotional video for Vital Life Project and her journey to smart phone free living</p>	<p>Content themes: community gathering of like-minded individuals off of Instagram, the path to sovereignty, spiritual warfare</p> <p>Language: “my journey” “the path to sovereignty.” “this age of censorship” “This is a movement”</p>
<p>Sample Post:³¹⁰</p>	
<p>12/16/20: 2,204 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: New blog coming soon. Head to my newsletter or telegram to catch it</p>	

Summary of Findings:

Dr. Kelly Brogan exhibits hostility to mainstream mental health interventions pre-pandemic. Her messaging on socials adapted from her work and books insist that you can “heal yourself.” Promotional posts for her online programs and books suggest that through the process of self-mastery, we can understand that everything is a choice. “Only you can hurt yourself... You give the permission.” An extreme of this belief is expressed in a post about the revelation of abuse by Kundalini yoga founder, Yogi BhaJan, where she links an inability to feel childhood feelings with “self-betraying behaviors that enable others to violate us.” This seems an unmistakable inference here that the victims of Yogi BhaJan’s physical and sexual abuse were in some way responsible for the trauma they

³¹⁰ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C1265bsnpK6/>.

experienced because of the lack of self-reclamation on their part. She speaks often about self-ownership and self-care as antidotes to victim consciousness. She uses words like “investment” to describe the process of moving toward self-ownership, a process that she can guide you through in her online program, Vital Mind Reset. She speaks to a disbelief in conventional theories of infection and expresses a hostility toward modern medicine and the scientific community while claiming that her protocols are science-based. and Her website prominently features her high pedigreed education including institutions like MIT, Cornell, and NYU. While she seeks to distance herself from mainstream authority, she prominently promotes her proximity to institutional knowledge and scientific training as a means to grant authority and promote her psychiatric interventions. She also demonstrates wellness language around unity, non-judgement, separated individuals who are “labeling each other as good and bad,” while simultaneously taking very strong stances on individual behavior and at least insinuating illness or trauma experienced by the person is a result of their lack of self-ownership or initiation into adulthood.

Brogan’s first post about COVID-19 came early in the pandemic on March 6th 2020. Her language toward the medical establishment and government authority becomes extremely hostile. The majority of her posts shift to debunking COVID and encouraging followers to find their own truth and dictate their own reality. Shifts into April and May of the pandemic Brogan begins to post prolifically sometimes as often as six times per day. Much of the content she

shares are videos from other accounts that express high levels of conspiracism and grand conspiracy narratives about the pandemic. She begins here to call COVID as “psyop” or psychological operation and encourages her followers to “take the red pill.” Reality is a simulation, and we must, “create our own reality.” Sourcing each individual’s personal truth and messages of personal responsibility for one’s health and wellbeing feature prominently in her content. In between stacks of conspiracy related videos about COVID, Brogan promotes her health programs available for purchase. She speaks about rabbit holes of the mind and relying on mental experience which encouraging followers to feel for the gut sensation of truth, clear demonstration of intuitive thinking found in the research at Phillips University.

By May 2020, her content shows a clear pattern that the strongest COVID denialism and conspiracy related videos receive the most engagement. Her language is in line with QAnon related conspiracies including “Satanic belief system.” She describes going down the rabbit hole as deep as you can to see “a game of power and control,” that has been “planned for decades.” She writes about being called a conspiracy theorist but insists that these are facts not theories. She up-levels language about control and choice, brainwashing and victimhood. She also seems to be very hostile about mask wearing, insisting it is a mechanism of control. Throughout the summer of 2020, she posts inflammatory rhetoric about the virus, insisting it is about a transhumanist agenda and total control of the human global population and begins using the tagline

“mommy medicine” and “big daddy government.” Her use of warfare like terminology is highly prominent, including stating that we have moved into WWII where, “the enemy is humanity itself.” We have to learn how to take “responsibility for yourself and only yourself” to avoid “enslavement by the globalist agenda.” She states, “self-care is the most radical form of activism there is...” It seems a clear signal to her that we’ve “been captured by the psyop,” is mask wearing. In August, she mentions that her account has been targeted by the Instagram censors.

By Fall 2020, we see patterns of post engagement decline. She is posting much less often and has mentioned IG censorship, so this could be a combination of the two factors. Though post engagement is down, posts with explicit conspiracist messaging still receive the highest engagement. A lot of her posts center around the promotion of the “Thank You Body” rally an “evolved protest.” She writes that we don’t need any more “inflammatory activism” which may be a shot at Black Lives Matter protests. Though she has posted prolifically about the globalist agenda and conspiracy theory, Brogan has made no mention of the socio-economics of the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, or any of the other political conversations had in the mainstream throughout 2020. She does write that the government, health officials, and technocrats has been poisoning us with environmental pollutants and that is why we’re getting sick. She insists that we are participating in our own enslavement, and that COVID is “a mass exercise in trauma-based mind-control that has nothing to do with a

virus.” “Radical healing is within your grasp” available to you by subscribing to her methods of wellness, for purchase through her website and in her books. She also insists that if you can’t see the truth of what is really going on at this point, you’re not emotionally equipped to know. She shares messaging likening mask wearing in children to child abuse and ends the year 2020 insisting that we are in a spiritual war.

Kelly Brogan appears highly intelligent and charismatic. She seems also to be doing some important research and health intervention work with patients who have grown chemically dependent to psychiatric drugs or for whom the medical establishment has not been able to provide much health and support. I have no doubt that her programs provide healing insight for many, particularly those who have languished through years of chronic health challenges and gotten the run around in the medical establishment. Mental health in particular is complex and continues to be a site of innovation and deeper understanding of the inner workings of the human psyche. What seems obvious here is where the medical establishment presents deficiencies, Brogan has capitalized by providing alternative method for healing that seems to incorporate insight from yogic traditions and shamanism as well as developing methods that treat the whole person rather than reducing them to their illness or symptoms. Kelly Brogan moves beyond mere frustration or scientific curiosity to outright hostility which becomes extreme during the COVID-19 pandemic. She demonstrates clear acceptance and promotion of grand conspiracy narratives, including promoting

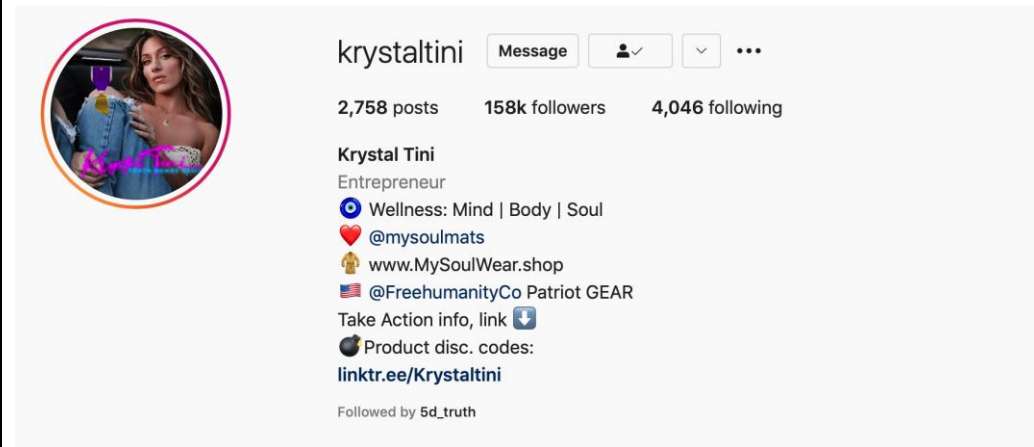
QAnon affiliated messaging and openly talking about spiritual warfare and COVID-19 as mind control operation for enslavement of humanity. Her posts with grand conspiracy narratives received the highest engagement throughout the months of the pandemic. While her posts took a political turn in March of 2020, she makes no mention of mainstream political concerns and languages self-care as activism and the means for resisting the globalist takeover. Messages of responsibility for one's own health and self-ownership are the most consistent theme pre- and post-COVID. The theme is so strong in her messaging that one of her book titles is "OWN YOURSELF." Her online content demonstrates many of the biases implicit in conspiracist ideation alongside messaging of self-optimization and the themes of individualism and exceptionalism inherent to the neoliberal wellness project.

Case Two: the Aspiring Wellness Influencer

Presented here is the condensed content analysis for Krystal Tini. All language presented here is public record. Data scraping by the researcher consisted of pulling all content from Tini's public Instagram feed from the data range of January-December 2020. This includes quotations, image content, text transcripts and other social content all sourced directly through the public Instagram feed of Krystal Tini. There was no contact between the subject and the researcher during the time of observation, January 2021-May 2021.³¹¹

³¹¹ Krystal Tini (@krystaltini). 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/krystaltini/>; all quotations are the language solely of Krystal Tini, full transcript of data collection available upon request.

Instagram Handle: @krystaltini / Unverified Status / 158k Followers³¹²



ACCOUNT OBSERVED BY RESEARCHER FROM JANUARY-MAY 2021

Professional Biography and Affiliate Links

From Krystal Tini's Gaia channel home page:

“The AWAKENING is here. Too many power grabs, not enough voices. It all starts with the power of one. My name is Krystal and I'm here for the awakening. People all over the world are searching for answers to life's biggest questions. But where do you go to explore? Where can you follow the topics you want without fear of censorship or some deep state agenda? That is one of the many reasons I enjoy watching Gaia. No control from outside corporations. Gaia is 100% member supported 100% of the time. On this page you'll find some of my favorite videos and speakers covering the topics I love. I encourage you to join Gaia with a 7-day FREE trial. You can thank me later.”³¹³

Listed as entrepreneur on IG bio. Affiliate links posted in IG bio include: 5G education, mask discrimination, mask ineffectiveness studies, how to heal yourself, vaccines, medical medium, Best CBD Stick for Pain, link to newsletter “Truth Bombs Daily”³¹⁴

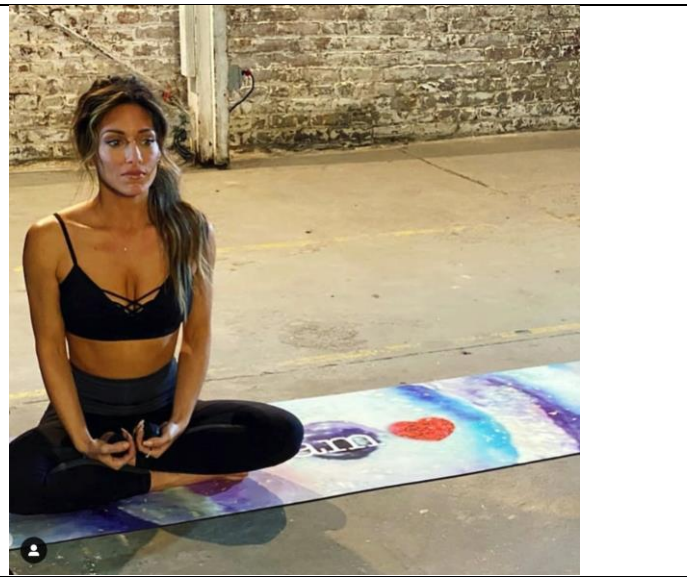
January 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 11</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 1,461 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 10,883 views</p> <p>Style of posts: mix of professional photos for modeling, job as a dancer, and yoga and modeling videos, general wellness and self-love posts, lots of hashtags and brand tags on posts</p>	<p>Content themes: general lifestyle posts, be true to yourself, go after your dreams, journey to personal healing</p> <p>Language: “You can change everything you can think of that is outside of yourself, but no matter where you try to find your truest self, the only place to go is within.” “hope you enjoy reading about my journey. I tell stories through my movement, images, on screen, and yoga.” “always choose happiness” “question everything” “Be you. Unapologetically”</p>
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³¹² Follower status on May 9, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/krystaltini/>

³¹³ “Krystal Tini,” Gaia, accessed May 17, 2021, <https://www.gaia.com/portal/krystal>.


³¹⁴ “@krystaltini,” Linktree, Accessed May 23, 2021, <https://linktr.ee/Krystaltini>.

<p>Sample post³¹⁵:</p> <p>1/19/20-597 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: Today was an absolute whirlwind. We finally got to shoot one of MANY collaborations with @eggweights x @mysoulmats . So much stuff to cover, a million different poses, my boobs falling out, muscles sore, freezing location, but all around a really fun day! We cant wait to share an awesome workout with you soon. I ate way too much afterwards @nicsonbeverly... shit. Special thanks to @directorlawrence for making sure we got all we needed! And to @jenn_tini for always cracking the whip.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>#yoga #yogi #yogafitness #hollywood#myyogajourney #igyogis#yoginisofinstagram #yogavibes #ig#yogisofig #igyogacommunity #fit#fitness #yogachallenge #yogagirl#yogalife #yogamat #fitnessmotivation#vegansofig #yogapose#yogaeverydamnday #fitgirl#instagood #instayoga #film #tv#movies</p>	

February 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 9</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 1,334 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 17,112 views</p> <p>Style of posts: modeling shots, slides from a trip, dancing video with a friend</p>	<p>Content themes: self-love, wellness journey, healing, creativity in modeling work</p> <p>Language:</p> <p>“When you are forced to be empowered by yourself because you realize no one can do it for you...it is then you find your true self again”</p> <p>“out of alignment with truth”</p> <p>“Once you return to power, you'll never go back to the heaviness negativity weighs.”</p> <p>“Everything comes at the perfect time.”</p> <p>“Manifested an audition in 2 hours time.”</p> <p>“We are responsible for every choice in life.”</p>
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³¹⁵ Krystal Tini (@krystaltini), “Today was an absolute whirlwind.” Instagram, January 19, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7iJXxOpke1/>.

<p>Sample post³¹⁶:</p> <p>2/15/20-834 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: “It took a long time and a lot of work to find my path again...but once I took the first step into myself, I felt free for the first time in a few years. I walked away from my life as an artist and never knew how it would crush my soul. I gained experiences, but many I could have done without. Part of me was at war with worthiness or deserving what I worked so hard for. Its probably most of it. And that stems from a twisted web of childhood bullshit that no one wants to hear about. So now it's the unwinding of falsehoods, things that mean next to nothing when looking at me or experiencing who I am because you'd never know. Few do. And that shit wasnt pretty. Still isnt. But I see how it has molded me. So I'm in the process of the rewiring. The hardest job in life you cant hire anyone for because they'll never be qualified enough...you got the job, and you only. I'd pay someone a million dollars to just reprogram my inner belief system but it's only up to me. We are responsible for every choice in life. Every impulse. Every fall. Every lesson. We cant blame anyone else for what is happening on our journey, we can only choose who we want walking next to us.”</p>	

March 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 8</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 1,435 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: No videos</p> <p>Style of posts: modeling shots, images of lip tinting procedure, shift into related COVID posts on 3/12</p>	<p>Content themes: personal goals, love for dance, need for connection, wellness advice for immunity building, Bill Gates conspiracy, Q'Anon hastags</p> <p>Language: “non-toxic” “You either walk with me, or walk away from me.” “The picture is bigger than you think.” “Research. Do the work.” “#wwg1wga #qanon #qarmy #QPOST#calmbeforethestorm”</p>
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³¹⁶ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8noRowJ3T5/>.

<p>First COVID related post³¹⁷:</p> <p>3/12/20-740 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: Whatever is to come, DO NOT PANIC. The medi@ is the enemy of the people. Always has been. Do your research. Breathe. There is a much bigger picture. Everything is going to be ok. Honestly, protect yourself with minerals, vitamins, electric foods (✓ High dose vitamin C 1,000mg and up, ✓ colloidal silver, ✓ oil of oregano, ✓ alkaline mineral blend @yaya_holistic)Strengthen your immunity by eliminating processed foods and drinks. We can all start somewhere. #wwg1wga  FOLLOW this hashtag</p>	
<p>Sample post³¹⁸:</p> <p>3/19/20-800 likes</p> <p>Single post with five images</p>	


³¹⁷ Ibid, https://www.instagram.com/p/B9qaC_XJWRi/.

³¹⁸ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B98D39NJSno/>.

<p>TET17 @Inevitable_ET</p> <p>Let's have a hub for the normies on the worst topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -moloch/Satanists/Luciferians -ILLUMINATI -adrenochrome -child trafficking -human hunting -pineal glands -DMT -sacrificial holidays -walnut sauce -pizzagate -and EVERYONE busted using the pedo symbolism/code words 	
<p>Caption: New video tomorrow. And I'm angry. SLIDE LEFT. Since we all have nothing but time, I encourage you to look up the list in the next slide.</p>	

April 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 5</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: No image posts</p> <p>Most views on a single post:</p>	<p>Content themes: All range of conspiracy related topics. She seems particularly interested in 5G technology and the Great Awakening (which is a popular expression in QAnon ideology). Lots of calls to encourage citizens to wake up. Speaks of herself as a</p>
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<p>479,596 views</p> <p>Style of posts: All videos but one are of Krystal Tini speaking directly to the camera about 15 minutes in length. She references other posts which are no longer on her page. This suggests censorship or deletion by KT though given the tone of her posts, the most reasonable assumption is that they were taken down by Instagram. The videos often begin with KT speaking and end with clips gathered across the internet of conspiracy style videos. In one video she wears a Q branded t-shirt, dons a Q branded shirt, reading WWG1WWA with the one appearing as the famous JFK Jr. salute to JFK's casket in the funeral procession after his assassination.</p>	<p>truth teller. The last video in the month is a promotional video for her Gaia channel in which we jump from clips of her doing yoga asana to her talking directly into the camera. The captions read, "Seeking Truth in All Forms" "Get Woke. Get Well. Get Life."</p> <p>Language: "Save the children" "I'm just being me, I'm not doing this for views." "AWAKENING is here, whether you want to acknowledge it or not. It's here." "We're at war, a spiritual awakening" "The solutions are when we are uniting together instead of making this political" "The signs are everyone" "Doctors are saying its not real." "Wake up to what is really going on." "To reach so many people is one of the greatest journeys I've taken."</p>
<p>Sample post³¹⁹:</p>	
<p>4/4/20-479,596 views</p> <p>Common style of post with Krystal Tini speaking directly to followers</p>	
<p>Caption: 🍌🍌 COMPLICIT NO MORE. 🍌 COVID 19</p> <p>👉👉 SHARE 👈👈</p> <p>•</p> <p>•</p>	

³¹⁹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-kwZjaJAyC/>.

🗨️ ⚠️ WARNING: EXPLICIT LANGUAGE. How long will we comply? How long will we allow our families, businesses, economy, wellbeing SUFFER?

👉 ⚠️ We need to get back to our way of living, and we need to do so FAST. This has nothing to do with lacking compassion. People die every day...where are all of you speaking out about that? 🗨️ ? ? ?

Paraphrase of language in the video: Our government made up a boogie man. What kind of sheep shit is this that we are all allowing to happen? (Compares COVID to the flu). Our food is making us sick and our government doesn't care about saving lives. Tell me that I'm wrong because I'm not. Round up, baby powder, environmental toxins, clothing, we're being poisoned to death. This is about something way bigger than a virus. "They're falsifying death records" Where are all of the patriots in the Q movement? Fighting all the time for this, saying we're not doing this shit anymore. Political activist. I'm a truth teller. This is to take down Trump. Ruin the economy for the election. Wake up! Wake up now! We don't have time. The mainstream media is the enemy of the people. The cure already exists. There's more of us than there is of them. The vaccine, are you kidding me a vaccine? My immune system will fight it off. Trust the people that are killing us. Chemtrails. Toxins in the skies.

May 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 6</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: No image posts</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 122,777 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Talking videos with clips at the end, same style as the previous month.</p>	<p>Content themes: Covid conspiracy, "plandemic" style language, promotion of Gaia channel, interview with Dr. Buttar, linking COVID and 5G, talks about Q drops. References being shadow banned by Instagram.</p> <p>Language: "You still don't think this is a 'plandemic'?" "Those who seek and gain knowledge, can never be controlled by lack thereof. Start asking questions, and you will find the TRUE ANSWERS." "they want you to be microchipped." "You can deny it, but it's real. It's not just a conspiracy theory." "Microsoft is harvesting your data for complete control." "Governor holding us hostage for political gain, mail in voting, the fact that people don't see this is a crock of shit.</p>
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Sample Post³²⁰:

5/16/20-79,723 views



Caption: ⚠️ NOW I'M MAD. SOCIAL SHAMING

👉👉 Please SHARE with those that need to hear it! 🗨️🗨️ Why? Why aren't we all at the very least CURIOUS why the lies are never ending. Why the target is constantly being moved on a daily basis. WHY? •

#IGTV

Paraphrase of language in the video: My hat says stay wild. Being normal is boring. I've never been normal. I'm super wild. The way I think is very different than other people. You are my resonators not my followers. I was approached to have an article written, I didn't know it would be a hit piece. I didn't know it would be about female influencers spreading conspiracy theories. Because how dare you think outside the box, how dare you think for yourself, This is the root of my anger. Because of the things we are discussing that is why people are burning down the new tech towers "Get a grip" this writer is a disgrace to journalism. This science backed information, this isn't a conspiracy theory. Don't I have the right to ask a question? I feel bad for the people who aren't asking questions. Trying to make a mockery of who you are, I'm not the one. Social shaming. Without a mask you have a target because of the MSM, they want to divide us. My body my choice. Only with a certain agenda. Socially shamed if you choose not to wear a mask. It's not some elses business if you wear a mask. How dare you put other people at risk? Where is your outrage with the flu? I'm a free thinker, I think for myself.

³²⁰ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAQ76qUpGLG/>.

Why shouldn't you be able to ask questions? Why should I be shunned? False flag events. You have no right to shame me. Let's just think logically for a second. You're letting out rapists and pedophiles and arresting citizens who want to breath fresh air. I honor your choice to hide in your house forever. I have no right to tell you how to live your life and you have no right to tell me how to live mine. So the new normal is to have no human interaction. This is me saying this out of compassion for all of humanity. Because we're being told we're a danger to each other. This is insanity. Why are we being silenced? I encourage you to speak your truth. I encourage you to live your truth.

June 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 8</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: No image posts</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 66,814 views</p> <p>Style of posts: all talking videos same as previous months. Content engagement is down. Still using Q hashtags and wearing Q braded clothing.</p>	<p>Content themes: George Floyd and BLM, COVID conspiracies, unity, evil, paid actors and false flags, 5G, doing the research, Mainstream media, Agenda 21, Agenda 2030, detox, the Great Awakening, and taking care of your health</p> <p>Language: "People are being paid to destroy our country in every city, bought and paid for, planned. Where we go one we go all, it's not hopeless." "George Floyd is a hoax." "Agenda 2030, Agenda 21. There's so many agendas it's hard to keep up." "Dig and research." "If you continue to say white privilege or that I'm oppressed you're owning all of those things." "Shit just keeps getting weirder" "The reason I KNOW THESE THINGS IS BECAUSE I RESEARCH these things." "I'm not responsible for your health." "I treat my body as a temple." "False events, false statements, false flags. How can you not see what is going on right now? The media isn't telling you facts. They're giving you fake news."</p>
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Sample post³²¹:
6/25/20-44,020 views



Caption: TRUMAN SHOW.

👁️👁️SHARE 👁️👁️ Our reality is only a perception. We have been living lies of indoctrination for too long. The Great Awakening is here. Time to buckle up.

Paraphrase of language in the video: Watch the video of Dr. Fauci, I'll add the video after. How long it takes to develop a vaccine, on average it's 7 years. We want it within a year and a half. Vaccine misinformation. Doing the trails in Africa. Test them on poor people. Bill Gates is banned from these African countries because of what he did there. Sick, deformed, developed other information. Do your research. They want to make it mandatory. We know the dangers. Our reality is being revamped before our very eyes. Most people can't comprehend it. They think what's in the MSM is reality but it's totally different. Just coincidence is not a possibility, this have been Agenda 21, Agenda 2030. Bill Gates talks about depopulation. A population of 7 billion people, that is a lot of people to die. This depopulation is being talked about for a very long time. There's 5G everywhere. It's crazy how fast my symptoms come back. My energy healer told me I had heavy toxic metals in my system. I have so many toxins in my body. Detox with an infrared sauna, it shakes the cells to get rid of the toxins. All of this stuff has been planned. It's hard for people to understand. We're living in conspiracy fact. They can't comprehend it. It is what is really happening. Spread the message. "Indoctrination is something that is very real" That's just a perception not the actual.

They're going down the rabbit hole and not coming back. That's why they call this the "Great Awakening" Hard to understand that this much evil exists in the world. We're being told to our faces and we don't even see it. Fauci said the incoming administration is going to experience a really bad pandemic. You can trace it. The information is out there, people don't want to

³²¹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB4CGXyJsx9/>.

believe it. The media has pinned it to that. First pandemic. Then 5G. After that, the race war. Then the riots. Then the murder hornets. Now the vaccines. Celebrities are scattering like cockroaches because of the satanic pedophile ring that has been around for centuries. The Royal Family has vanished. There are so many things happening that is not being reported on MSM. Thanks for all the pages putting out information. There's going to be a new King. There are a lot of things happening behind the scenes and this is like one big movie that we're living in. Instead of focusing on race, these are all distraction tactics. Refuse to believe things because you don't think that it's possible. You've seen Hollywood movies, anything is possible. That is exactly what's happening. We're not living in the reality we thought we were. These are facts. You can find the information. I love you all.

July 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 5</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: No images</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 199,209 views</p> <p>Style of posts: talking videos consistent with previous months, engagement is back up.</p>	<p>Content themes: masks, globalist agenda, BLM, devil's agenda, speaking up, peace, mainstream media, the "truth seeking industry," autism and vaccines, stand up for your right.</p> <p>Language: "This has nothing to do with your safety. If you're still stupid enough to think that it does, maybe we better take a walk and we should talk about it." "If you don't like this country, LEAVE. The way to make change is by unity." "We are the news now." "You can't deny the coincidences." "The CDC is a vaccine company" "I actually read science. I have my own brain. I think with logic and critical thinking skills, maybe you don't know what that is. I don't wait to be rounded up like a sheep. All of you think for yourself, which is why you like my message."</p>
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Sample Post³²²:

7/17/20-76,520 views



Caption: Where are the mouthpieces? 📺 🗨️

🔗 SHARE 🔗 Where are the voices for the voiceless? Why is being a free thinker frowned upon in society? Where are all of the lions? What is happening to us as a whole? I wonder every day.

Paraphrase of language in the video: People will say I'm a conspiracy theorist. I don't know what happened to society that because you're a free thinker, you're a conspiracy theorist. I don't understand herd mentality, I was taught to be a leader. Sex trafficking is a huge multi-billion dollar industry, false flag events, bigger agenda at play, **indoctrination is very real**, one of the greatest false flag events that we will ever see in our lifetimes. Do you honestly think this is a coincidence? The agenda. No way that you could refute. (Wayfair cabinets conspiracy theory) Crissy Teigen deletes thousands of tweets, blocking a million people connecting her with pizzagate. "Oh I'm scared for my family. These people are sick" Too many people are asleep because they don't want to see these things. Satanic and evil practice. Selling women children, mostly children. If you look deep into this. "We are the news now." The new money system How much shit can possibly happen at one time in our lives before we say there is a big plan behind this. Mentions growing facebook following. "repeating things like parrots" all you do is listen to the news and then repeat it like parrots. Since when is it so insulting to actually have your own thoughts. "How dare you think for yourself?" Masks=muzzels "You don't even know why you're doing it. You're doing it to because you are protecting yourself and other people." Did common sense go out the window? Don't you parents teach you this shit. Now you throw sex trafficking in the midst. Do you know how many kids are missing? Do you know what happens to this kid? Because it didn't hit your home, you don't care. It's just a conspiracy theory "panda eyes" (q thinks it a sign of child sodomy) this shit is old. Every time any person in the **"truth seeking" I'm going to call it an industry**. It's now becoming an industry because these people are the only ones digging into this shit. "Know it all that knows nothing" You can't think outside of the box. I'm going to spread truth. I'm going to tell people things that most people don't know. You're waking up so many people. You can't deny the

³²² Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCwLKTcPLSD/>.

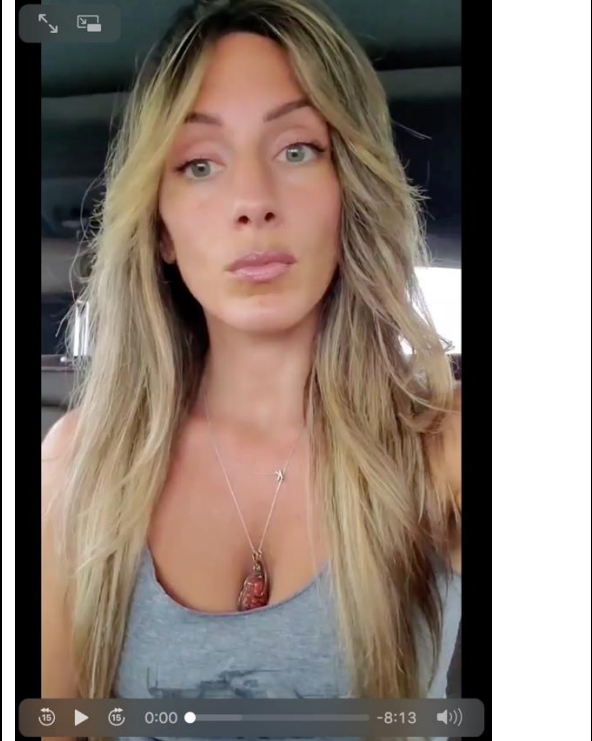
coincidences. Pushes Syngery product at the end. Protection from EMF and 5G. Become more harmonious instead of divided.

August 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 8</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: No image posts</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 163,649 views</p> <p>Style of posts: talking video posts consistent with previous months, one solely dedicated to products to protect from EMF radiation. (branded content with affiliate links and discounts) Still sharing Q hashtags.</p>	<p>Content themes: history, large movement, community, AI technology, 5G apocalypse, Agenda 21, plandemic, BLM, masks, sea moss for health etc.</p> <p>Language: "I feel into this position once my video went viral this is what I need to be doing right now." "I have millions of views." "There's more shit going on than we can even calculate or count." "This was all part of the globalist plan. Plandemic and race war that they have caused. Get your balls back in your pants and love each other."</p>
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Sample post³²³:

8/17/20: 54,184 views



Caption: A race war has been emboldened

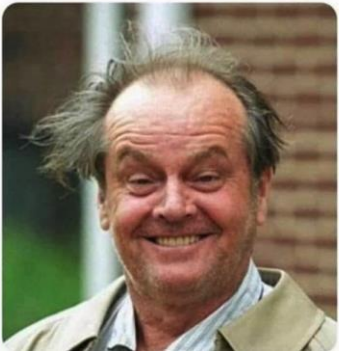
SHARE We have been through hell and back because of this globalist HOAX. As if that weren't enough, a race war has been born. What is it gonna take to open your fucking eyes to see what's going on? As human beings we instinctively KNOW BETTER, but we aren't DOING better. Where does it end? Love one another. We all bleed red. We are given these bodies for

³²³ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEATjOsJ3ev/>.

this lifetime and we will be given another one in another time and existence. How do you not see?

Paraphrase of language in the video: Black girls beating the shit out of white girls because they're white. BLM power has increased hate crimes against white people. This was all part of the globalist plan. Plandemic and race war that they have caused. Whether George Floyd was a false flag, other footage of what actually happened and the fentanyl and he didn't die because of the footage we saw. No one should die because they're being arrested. Nothing to do with Black or White, a human beings life taken. This was all part of the plan. Divide to the point of now return. This election is the most important election in the history of the world. They wanted a race war so we'd be further divided. Now this whole thing with the masks. All of these circumstances happening simultaneously, not just a coincidence. People apologizing for being white. Demanding white people give up their homes. BLM has emboldened a race war. How much more is it going to take? They want us divided because we are easy to conquer. BLM stands for racism. You're saying white lives don't matter. Beating the shit out of people because they are white. This country is so fooled by the mainstream media. They have created the divide. Tent cities in Philadelphia. (getting fired up on the masks again) I've had enough of the people who are the sheep. I'm done with it. Get your balls back in your pants and love each other. That's part of the agenda to make everyone hate each other.

September 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 11</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 3,081 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 346,858 views</p> <p>Style of posts: talking videos consistent with previous months. Promotes a back-up Instagram account: @krystaltini13 has 37.9 thousand followers³²⁴ The content is mostly image meme posts (like the one below³²⁵) and re-shared conspiracy video posts.</p> <p>when you've become the family wacko because you believe in fresh air and the immune system</p> 	<p>Content themes: the storm, light workers, California wildfires, getting armed and prepared for civil war, masks, 9/11 conspiracy</p> <p>Language: "We are many light-workers amongst the grey that has left so many uncertainties." "We are of this Universe of Greatness and in our greatness comes strength, bravery, and our will to be free." "Stay in the light." "These fires are intentionally set." "9/11- This attack is what made me realize the evil that exists within our own government." "Masks are toxic. Stop wearing masks"</p>
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³²⁴ Krystal Tini (@krystaltini13) Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/krystaltini13/>

³²⁵ Krystal Tini (@krystaltini13) Instagram. December 13, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Clw3cuLAuMc/>.

Sample post³²⁶:

9/15/20: 346,997 views



Caption: ⚠️ Arm yourselves. Its coming.

How many more slaps in the face do you need until you say, Wow, this is just such a coincidence that we are being faced with ie: "natural disasters, wildfires, climate change, food shortages, coin shortages, race wars, coronavirus, face masks, hate the police, looting, rioting, peaceful protests, vaccine mandates, 7 month quarantines..." did I miss any? How DUMB do you have to be to not comprehend wtf is going on???

Paraphrase of language in the video: Arm yourselves. It's coming.

The sun doesn't look real. People aren't noticing the crazy shit. Fires intentionally set. "This is what global warming looks like" We are living in the twilight zone. The left knows Trump is going to win. They are preparing for an all out civil war. The only thing we can hope for is that he sends in the tanks. Chaos by leftist groups. How much more clear can it get? They know Trump is going to win so they're getting ready. Weather manipulation. I'm not a conspiracy theorist, I'm informed. Manipulation of the clouds. Food shortage is going to happen. "We are not a racist country." You don't know what the hell you're supporting. Mass chaos, be prepared. Things that can sustain the bodies. This is just part of one big agenda. You have your head in your ass. Trump said "be prepared" Get weapons and your ammunition. The only thing we can hope is that he rolls out the tanks for these people and sweeps them up off the streets. That's the only thing that's going to stop them. Protestors are mentally unstable and being paid. Do these people represent you? The MSM is so powerful they can make you believe anything. They want to arm the terrorists. All you do is follow the MSM because you don't have a

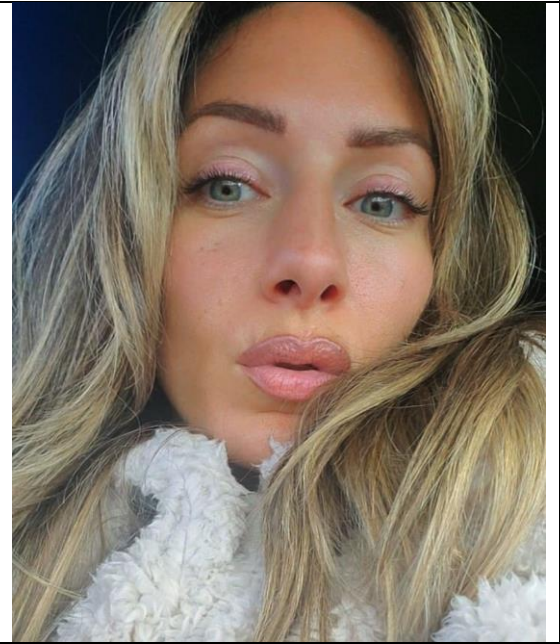
³²⁶ Krystal Tini (@krystaltini) Instagram. September 15, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFLACSTpLpX/>.

mind of your own. (Bill Gates conspiracies.) WAKE UP! Get yourself a gun, learn how to use it, and find ammunition.

October 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 10</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 7,264 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 40,215 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Same as previous months, engagement dipped back down again. Talks about becoming an influencer when my video went viral. States that she has 29.3K followers before COVID, mentions that her Page was geared to entertainment until shedding light on all that's going on in the world.</p>	<p>Content themes: Science is a lie, agendas, altering DNA, nanotechnology, being a social media influencer, vibrations, lightworkers. Her friend gets COVID and she tells them it's bacterial pneumonia from wearing a mask.</p> <p>Language: "We know that COVID is a lie. Science is bought and paid for friends." "The sheep are leading people to the slaughterhouse." "Where did logic go?" "This is not a conspiracy theory, this is reality." "I've been a paid influencer for years, it's a lucrative way to help other businesses." "If you don't take care of your immune system, that is your problem" "Boost your immune system. Change your body. Take herbs and minerals. Point the finger at yourself." "We win with LIGHT 🌍UM❤️"</p>
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Sample post³²⁷:

<p>10/31/20: 7,244 likes</p>	
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Caption: There are reasons for photos the last two days. My page is not shifting. But shifting gears is what I have to do for the time being and those that know, know. 📷 Look for those who


³²⁷ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHBNGI7J9Qq>.

have vanished as I have previously mentioned. Many are unable to sleep. Unable to focus. Lost. Scared. Alone. But just know, there is a greater force in the Universe that hears us, feels our pain, and recognizes those who need uplifting. We must do so and be conscious of the energy we are putting out there, as our power in shifting the frequency of the planet is up to us. We are billions upon billions of cells all vibrating. We can choose for those tiny cells to vibrate with fear and low energy, or we can raise those vibrations but the belief is in our own greatness...By gravitating towards the people that can help take you higher. Check your circle. If it often times is negative, full of complaining and lack, angry, or unproductive, distance yourself or change your energy through positive thinking. By you shifting your perception you will either help elevate others, or attract those who are on the same plane of life. Do not allow others negativity to bring you down, especially now! There is always a way out. On what is usually a fun day, Halloween is different this year. Hang in there.

November 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 12</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 7,667 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 277,763 views</p> <p>Style of posts: more selfies and image posts with text. There was an 8 day break in posts. It looks as though she was kicked off the platform and mentions in the comments section that she was prevented from going live for 10 days. Promotion of her backup account again. Wearing a Q sweatshirt at an Donald Trump Stop the Steal Rally. Shares a clip of her being interviewed on Real American OANN Dan Ball about being suspended from IG and permanently deplatformed on FaceBook</p>	<p>Content themes: Big Tech censorship, stop the steal, Emergency preparedness product promotional video, things are escalating</p> <p>Language:</p> <p>“Standing up for the underdog, in your face. Stand in your power and in your voice. Don’t back down.”</p> <p>“I’m doing the right thing because I get thousands of messages from people around the world.”</p> <p>“Awaken from your slumber you’ve been in your whole life. Use your intuition. I make my decisions based on my inner truths.”</p> <p>“I am so healthy and I take supplements that most people can’t even pronounce.”</p> <p>“None of this makes sense, which is why I can’t help but see that this is bigger than what we know.”</p> <p>“Red. Pill.”</p>
<p>Sample post³²⁸:</p>	

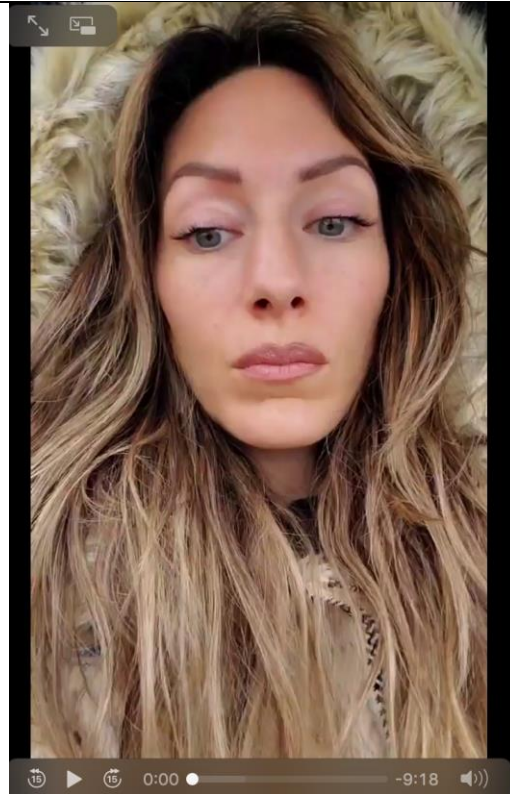
³²⁸ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHdAaj6pQlo/>.

<p>11/11/20: 7,667 likes</p>	<p>The truth is like a lion; you don't have to defend it. Let it loose; it will defend itself.</p> <p>IG: @Evolved_Truth</p> 
<p>Caption: Well, go on. When the truth comes to light, a lot of people will be unable to process it. For months, we have been held hostage by lies. Why is the truth so hard for people to decipher? Their plan went better than they could have expected because there are maybe 2% of the population that are capable of thinking for themselves. The rest? Wait to be told. 2020 has proved that. I had no idea we lived amongst so many followers dying for a leader to show them where the slaughterhouses are. It is truly astonishing. We need more leaders.</p>	

<p>December 2020</p> <p>Number of Posts: 13</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,532 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 66,754 views</p> <p>Style of posts: more talking videos with a few mixed in text image and selfies.</p>	<p>Content themes: things have gotten slightly somber and spiritual, lots of talk about ascension,</p> <p>Language:</p> <p>“Don't let anyone take your truth away from you.”</p> <p>“Your DNA creates your reality.”</p> <p>“I know that I am a light being and a light worker.”</p> <p>“What happens to those who don't shift? Continue to be stuck in the matrix of falsehoods.”</p> <p>“All we've known our whole lives has been a lie.”</p> <p>“the truth scares people”</p> <p>“We need soldiers of truth”</p> <p>“We need to stand on our own as individuals and not as a society.”</p> <p>“Once you let darkness lower your frequency you allow defeat. Look for light and you will find other light beings. These are the laws of the universe, this isn't some weird shit.”</p> <p>“That we could use our 3rd eye to see, we wouldn't be able to be manipulated”</p> <p>Guest meditation teacher: “Shoot down Agenda 21 and Agenda 30 programs, we're removing reptilian brain programs and dark alliance imprint and removing micro dots, removing titles, terms and conditions (as per the will of one), all these things we're removing.”</p>
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Sample Post³²⁹:

12/2/20: 42,919 views



Caption: Rant: NO ONE IS GOING TO SAVE YOU BUT YOURSELF

→ SHARE ← When will minding your own business be a thing again? Asking for A LOT OF FRIENDS. No one is coming to our fucking rescue. If we don't stand up ourselves, we fall. And we never get back up.

Paraphrase of language in the video: Isn't everybody sick of the hatred, division, fighting with your family and friends, when did it become ok to demonize people who don't think like you? What happened to individuality? What happened to be a unique individual? When did it become so normal to become a cookie cutter version of everyone else? Aren't we hear to be on our own journey? You now have to be like everyone else. You need to stand up for what you believe in. When's the last time you thought for yourself? Brainwashing and mind control. Opened any of your own research and actually looked into things. They are trying to normalize things that are insane. Now since your brainwashed and you only do what you're told to do and it gives you the right to tell people how to live their lives. You realize that all the people that all the people who are telling you to cover your mouth and nose, how did we regress as a species to this extent? Do not join the herd. We were born free. Free to make our own choices. We were born with a brain. You can choose to be a lazy person or you can break out of the deep slumber that you're in and be the you that you were meant to be. A unique person with limitless powers. Everyone's too busy looking for a savior. No one's going to save you. The only person who can save you is yourself. "Donald Trump is not going to save us all" No one is a savior except yourself. Self-reflect. It's no one else's fault that you're sick. Blame everyone else for our shit. You are the star of your journey. Stop blaming everyone

³²⁹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CITeOu4pYFQ/>.

else for what's happening in your life. You are an individual. You have a choice. We all have a choice. What choice are you going to make? What impact on the world are you going to make? Are you just going to be like everyone else? Do you have any thoughts that are yours that were not influenced by outside sources. The only person you have to live up to is yourself. You are here for a reason. We have a big life lesson we're learning right now. You have to save yourself. People who hate on the things I see don't want to see themselves. Everything in life is a lesson. We need to realize that NOW.

Summary of Findings:

Krystal Tini's Instagram feed shifted dramatically after the on-set of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic Tini mostly posted modeling, dance, or sponsorship posts. She writes about the power of being yourself and choosing happiness but doesn't mention much in the way of politics and society. She does talk about the life transforming power of her wellness journey, empowering yourself, living your truth, and that "we are responsible for every choice in life." All of these phrases are pretty common in modern mainstream wellness. Her first COVID related post on March 12th 2020 mentions staying calm and "doing your research." She also encourages followers to follow the hashtag #wwg1wwa (which stands for Where We Go One, We Go All, a popular QAnon hashtag). After that her posts become more extreme and explicitly conspiratorial. Most of her feed posts consist of long talking videos in which Krystal speaks directly into her camera in a kind of free form stream of consciousness. The tone is often quite angry, frustrated or hostile as she lists proof of conspiracy facts. She calls those who don't wake up to the reality of what's going on stupid, or sheep being led to the slaughter. The end of many of the videos consist of clips of conspiracy theory videos from other accounts.

There is a huge spike in content engagement once she begins posting this style of video. A short video she posted pre-pandemic received 17,112 views where a pandemic conspiracy video in April garnered 479,596 views. In her Spring 2020 videos she mentions content that is no longer visible on her page which suggests censorship and deletion from the Instagram moderators. Her videos cover any number of conspiracy theories including, pedophile rings, 5G technology, Bill Gates agendas, doctors faking COVID numbers, and more. In one video she can be seen wearing a Q branded shirt with the WWG1WWA as logo. A famous image of JFK Jr. saluting his father's casket at his funeral procession stands in for the 1.

She often talks about the growing reach of her platform giving her purpose and meaning. In July 2020, she compares this new "truth seeking" community to an industry, another time stating, "we are the news now." In August of 2020, she says, "I fell into this position once my video went viral." She shares that she has "millions of views." In October of 2020, she states that she had 29.3 thousand followers before March 2020 and mentions that her page was geared toward entertainment until she understood the power and purpose of "shedding light on all that's going on in the world." Her page now has over 150,000 followers.

She quite forcefully declares throughout the year that she's not wrong, not a conspiracy theorist, that she is in fact a truth teller, a free thinker, an independent spirit. From May through the Fall there are dips in engagement on her content and she mentions being shadow banned by Instagram. She speaks

explicitly about “False flag” events and insists in the summer of 2020, that the murder of George Floyd is a false flag so that BLM can start a race war. In her estimation this is all a plot by the left because they know that Donald Trump is going to win the election. The country is being fooled by the mainstream media and white people are being attacked. She insists that paid actors are destroying cities across the country. In her view, the “plandemic” and race war are all a deep state, globalist agenda to divide us up.

In September 2020, Tini alleges that the fires in California were intentionally set and encourages her followers to arm themselves and prepare for civil war. She argues that weather is being manipulated and that the sun “doesn’t look real.” She insists that America is not a racist country. Our only hope, according to Tini, is that Trump “rolls out the tanks for these people and sweeps them up off the streets,” referring to protestors that she insists are mentally unstable and being paid. If you believe what the Mainstream Media is reporting, Tini says, you don’t have a mind of your own and you need to “WAKE UP!” Her intense predictions are promoted alongside messages of trust in the Universe and the power of other truth tellers and light workers. Ironically, there are many times throughout the year where Tini says that we must, “Get your balls back in your pants and love each other.”

Krystal Tini is direct, confident, and passionate in her messaging to her followers. Her political messaging is partisan for conservative causes and the presidency of Donald Trump. She clearly promotes QAnon linked theories and on

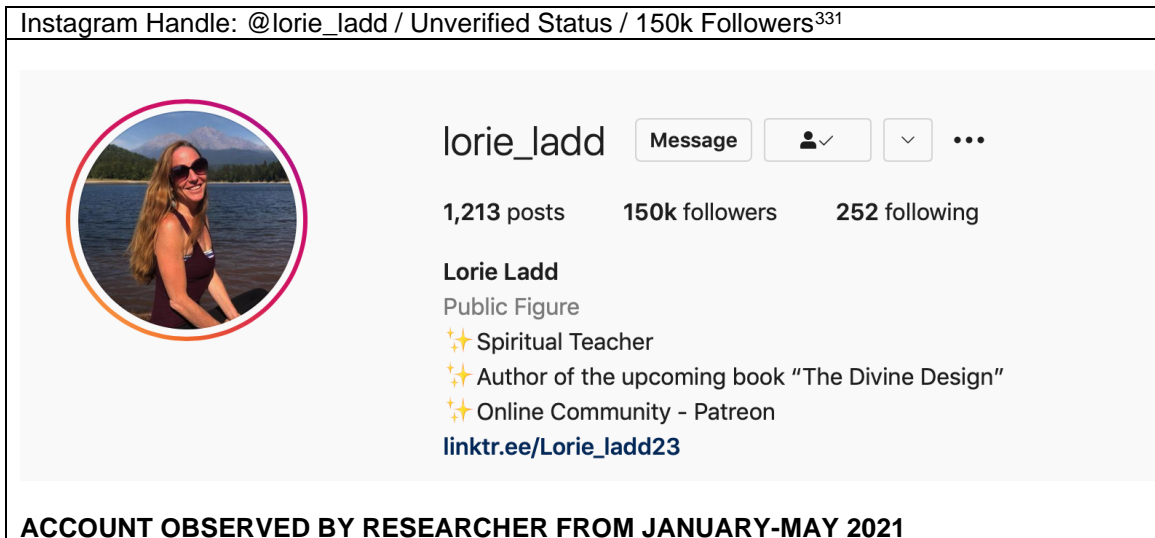
several occasions can be seen wearing their merchandise. In between political posts she shares advice for health with a particularly forceful tone. Throughout the year she openly talks about her personal health journey and self-responsibility for health. She talks about the strength of her immune system, and insists that it's not her problem if you don't take care of your immune system. "If you get sick that's on you." She encourages followers to "boost" their immune system by taking herbs and minerals, some of which she promotes through her page. She encourages followers to do their own research and speak their truth. She tells them to have faith in the Universe and powers greater than themselves and to raise their vibration to shift the frequency of the planet. Toward the end of the year this messaging of light and vibration becomes more prominent. Her page becomes more somber and spiritual after the election for a brief period. She says, "I know that I am a light being and a light worker," and that "your DNA creates your reality." This is interspersed with messages about being soldiers of truth and that "we need to stand on our own as individuals and not as a society." Krystal Tini demonstrates extreme conspiracist ideation alongside wellness messaging of individual responsibility for health outcomes consistent with the neoliberal wellness project.

Case Three: the Lightworker

Presented here is the condensed content analysis for Lorie Ladd. All language presented here is public record. Data scraping by the researcher consisted of pulling all content from Ladd's public Instagram feed from the data

range of January-December 2020. This includes quotations, image content, text transcripts and other social content all sourced directly through the public Instagram feed of Lorie Ladd. There was no contact between the subject and the researcher during the time of observation, January 2021-May 2021.³³⁰

Instagram Handle: @lorie_ladd / Unverified Status / 150k Followers³³¹



The image shows a screenshot of an Instagram profile for @lorie_ladd. The profile picture is a circular image of a woman with long blonde hair, wearing sunglasses and a dark top, sitting on a boat on a lake. To the right of the profile picture, the name 'lorie_ladd' is displayed in a large font, with a 'Message' button and three menu icons (a person icon, a dropdown arrow, and a three-dot menu) to its right. Below the name, the statistics '1,213 posts', '150k followers', and '252 following' are listed. Underneath the statistics, the name 'Lorie Ladd' is shown in bold, followed by 'Public Figure'. Below that, there are three lines of text, each preceded by a yellow star icon: 'Spiritual Teacher', 'Author of the upcoming book "The Divine Design"', and 'Online Community - Patreon'. At the bottom of the bio section, the link 'linktr.ee/Lorie_ladd23' is provided in blue text.

ACCOUNT OBSERVED BY RESEARCHER FROM JANUARY-MAY 2021

Professional Biography and Affiliate Links

"Lorie is a teacher speaker, and author guiding humanity through the collective and individual evolution in human consciousness.

Lorie knew at the age of 13 that she was here to assist humanity through the ascension. It wasn't until 1995 while at a workshop in Mount Shasta, she was shown her role in the ascension. She was here to assist humanity through the physical shift in consciousness, our great awakening.

Her teachings include integrating the human experience with the quantum field, understanding ascension, living in higher states of consciousness, and embodying ones Sovereignty. She takes the complexity of human evolution and grounds it into simple and digestible concepts. Lorie dedicates her life to assisting humanity in this planetary shift. She is honored to be walking side by side with all of you and she is humbled to be able to reconnect you to your beautiful Soul family who is waiting patiently for you."³³²

Links:

- Live and Recorded Guided Meditations and Webinars for Sale
- Online Patreon Membership Community
- Donation button


³³⁰ Lorie Ladd (@lorie_ladd). 2021. https://www.instagram.com/lorie_ladd/; all quotations are the language solely of Lorie Ladd, full transcript of data collection available upon request.

³³¹ Follower status on May 13, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/lorie_ladd/

³³² "About," Lorie ladd, Accessed May 23, 2021, <http://lorieladd.com/about>.

-Link to YouTube Channel³³³

January 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 15</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 900 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 3,751 views</p> <p>Style of posts: mostly video of Ladd speaking directly into the camera about a topic, 10-20 minutes in length. Two text image posts, one with an inspirational quote, another with a promotion for a guided journey to, "meet the lyran's"</p>	<p>Content themes: trust your resonance, messages for lightworkers, starseeds, and wayshowers, explanations of the quantum field, messages from the Galactic Federation of Light</p> <p>Language: "Trust your knowingness" "There's no right and wrong, it's a choice." "As I was sitting here, the Galactic Federation of Light came in and said, 'remind the humans they are safe to feel!'" "You'll be like Jesus and Mahatma Gandhi" "speak our truth more" "You chose your path before you got here"</p>
<p>Sample post³³⁴:</p> <p>1/22/20-3,597 views</p>	
<p>Caption: ASCENSION NOW: Quantum Field; Neutrality; Multi-dimensionalitt</p> <p>Every now moment is allowing you an opportunity to practice Being higher states of consciousness. It's not about you trying to shift into anything, change your vibration, take control. The actin of trying to change or shift into something is the ego saying let me do this, let</p>	

³³³ Lorie Ladd, Linktree, Accessed May 23, 2021, https://linktr.ee/Lorie_ladd23.

³³⁴ Lorie Ladd (@lore_ladd) "ASCENSION NOW: Quantum Field; Neutrality; Multi-dimensionalitt." Instagram, Jan. 22, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7osALKnVMZ/>.

me do this. And the ego is acting in the lower fields of consciousness. It can't take you into the higher states. Trying to shift into anything other than what you are feeling in the now is bypassing the now.

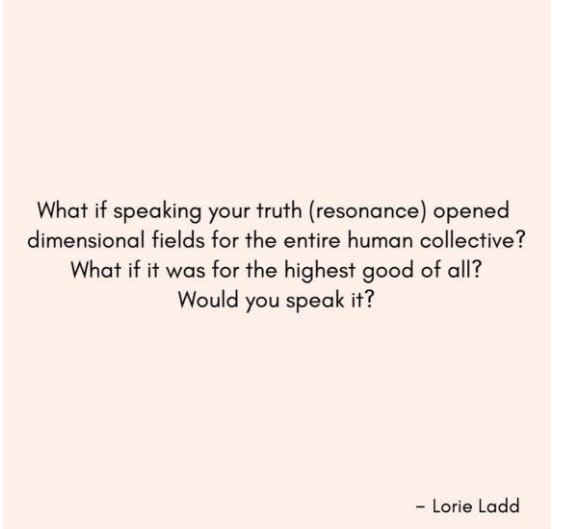
These higher frequencies and states of Being are in you Now. Your body has been working overtime to anchor them in for you. Now its about you feeling them and accessing them. There is nothing you have to shift into. You are already holding these frequencies and states of consciousness. Can you begin to see each now moment as an opportunity to practice Being in the higher states while you loving and courageously surrender into the now in all its emotions, thoughts and beliefs.

This is the quantum field. This is neutrality. This is multi-dimensionality

Paraphrase of language in the video: Ascension is when light from the sun that you can't see comes into the body. Shifts into higher frequency. DNA turns on and get activated. Dormant 12 strand DNA will activate. The fog lifts, you connect and shift into higher states of consciousness. The body is anchoring the light. The light has to come in, the body is doing all this work. Don't control it or say change my vibration, your body is doing it for you, get present in your now and ask what I'm feeling in every now. The key also is to notice that as I'm doing this you'll still be experiencing lower vibrations and dense consciousness. In every now, you can experience the higher consciousness, you can still be experiencing the lower consciousness and density and are slowly dissolving out of you. Experience the higher and the lower in every now. Every now is an opportunity to experience the higher states. (surrender, peace, joy, softening, trust)

February 2020

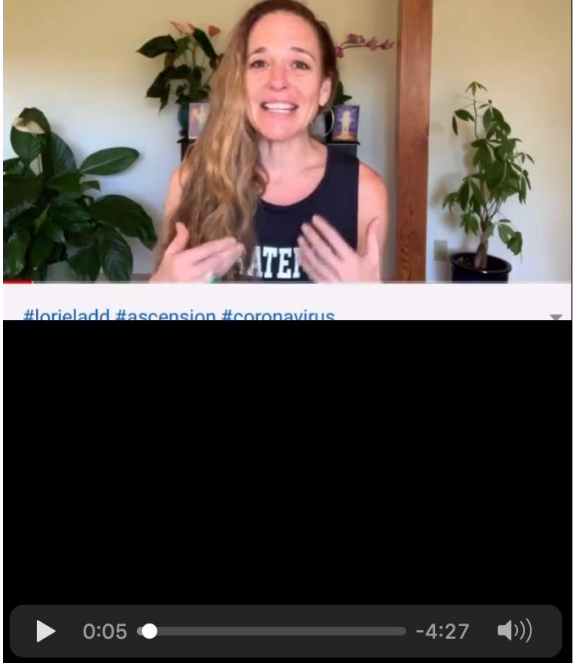
<p>Number of Posts: 22</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 1,292 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 3,534 views</p> <p>Style of posts: consistent with the previous month</p>	<p>Content themes: consciousness, resonance, shifting reality, light beings,</p> <p>Language: "I'm a being of light in physical form" "You're never done anything wrong." "You have to speak your truth. It's not your fault, it's the ascension process." "everything is going to be shifting in your reality" "The human body can heal itself" "You've designed yourself to do this, whether you agree or disagree you are assisting humanity and the earth just be by being your form right now on this beautiful Saturday." "Show the other humans how to be just like Jesus did." "Most star seeds don't learn things from others, they just know things."</p>
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<p>Sample post³³⁵:</p> <p>2/17/20-1,292 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: As a way-shower you are going first into the higher realms, the 4th & 5th dimensional fields. You are BEING the higher states of consciousness before the rest of humanity. You are opening up the next dimensional field and then the next in order for humanity to tap into those fields and eventually step into them with you. You are going first.</p> <p>An aspect of Being in the higher realms is honoring and speaking your truth. When you do this you are anchoring that higher frequency deeply into your form. The more you anchor the higher frequencies into your form by Being them you are opening that dimensional field up for the rest of humanity to tap into.</p> <p>For example, speaking a truth that is held in a 4th dimensional field will anchor the 4th dimensional field into your body. The more you speak these truths the more that field gets anchored into your form. The more you anchor the larger the field opens and the easier it can be accessed by other humans.</p> <p>The more each way-shower anchors the higher dimensional realms down into their body by BEING their frequency, the more that field opens for the collective. By Being the higher states of consciousness now, stepping out of the old ways, you are anchoring down the 4th and 5th dimensional fields for humanity to step into.</p> <p>You are not meant to follow, to stay with the heard. You are meant to go first into these new dimensional fields. You are here to step out of boxes. To honor your resonance in every now and to speak your truth.</p> <p>You are a way-shower and your truth shifts the entire human collective.</p> <p>You are here to open dimension fields for the entire human collective.</p> <p>You are a bad ass rockstar leading the way and you are loved.</p> <p>I see you. I honor you and I applaud you.</p>	

March 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 30</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 855 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 37,156 views</p>	<p>Content themes: COVID as dense fear consciousness clearing from the Earth plane. Shifting consciousness, choosing a different timeline, hold the love frequency</p> <p>Language: "All of this was designed by you." "We're in charge of this whole reality."</p>
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³³⁵ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8rYW3anAT4/>.

<p>Style of posts: consistent with previous month. lots of clapping, snapping and hand gestures (this is a style of communication she exhibits throughout her videos)</p>	<p>“You can dive into the conspiracy theory and the why of this being developed but none of that matters, at the end of the day what matters is what is my beacon of light holding.” “Detach from the matrix that’s holding us in the density.” “Visualize the virus as a field of consciousness and watch what it tells you. It’s all energy and consciousness, it’s not truth” “Purging a very large and dense consciousness, spin it however you want, but that’s what’s happening.” “we’ve been programmed” “Feel the light, feel the frequency. You are light, love, a high frequency being.”</p>
<p>First COVID related post³³⁶:</p> <p>3/12/20-5,042 views</p>	
<p>Caption: Coronavirus: A Message From The Galactic Federation of Light</p> <p>This is a short clip from my 55 minute video uploaded on YouTube this evening.</p> <p>You can find the entire video on my YouTube channel. Link in my bio. 🙏</p> <p>Paraphrase of language in the video: As little of me in this message as possible. Energetically charged moment. Palpable fear in paradigms control the human. Cautious about what is mine and what is coming from the Galactic Federation. Fear will tell you you aren’t in control and you don’t have a choice. It’s a fear like a fire. Story behind it, and how it got to be this epidemic. As you become more conscious, you’re awakening, paradigms pop up and they are so fast moving and ingrained in fear. Our job as the way shower is to observe it and try not to judge it in any way if that’s possible. Observe it because you’re being awake and then you see that</p>	

³³⁶ Ibid, https://www.instagram.com/p/B9qOfp_HZLH/.

“holy shit, that is fear” why it was started and is there a dark force trying to take over humanity. Galactic federation told me it was an accident and not dark beings taking over, there are paradigms that do that, but don’t play in those paradigms. Galactic beings tell us how we are designed to view this. Lens that we learn to practice and watch this. Standing in 3rd dimensional consciousness, your frequency is increasing, you are stepping into higher fields of consciousness. 3rd dimensional humans are still staying 3rd dimensional. Stand in the field without judgement. Our job as the way shower is to hold the frequency of love.

Sample post³³⁷:
3/21/20-3,981 views



Caption: Update from The Galactic Federation Of Light
Longer video on my YouTube channel diving into this quantum perspective. Link in bio.
Thank you for all of the unseen and seen work you have been doing!


Paraphrase of language in the video: Quantum message from the Galactic Federation. The virus is no longer on the earth plane. You’re living in the past moment, the virus is actually cleared. We’re experiencing the ramifications of the past. They said that the virus is off the earth plane. They showed me literally that the earth is in a contained box. Everything that’s caused by the virus is in the box, but it’s not expanding and getting worse. The box contains the virus, but the consciousness of the virus is gone. “I hope this makes sense” We’re experiencing the ramifications of the virus dropping onto the earth plane, but the virus is cleared and it’s not getting worse. It’s because of all the work of the light beings, stopping the massive consciousness of the virus from killing more humans. This had the ability to wipe out many more humans than it actually did. We stopped this from getting massively worse than it could have. The humans that don’t understand this and they’re just reacting to a virus that they think is going to destroy humanity, but the virus is completely gone. It’s actually contained, and all is ok and it’s not going to get worse even if it looks like it’s going to get worse. We’re catching up to the now moment. Hold this message. Oh my god it’s cleared, oh my god we did the work.

April 2020

³³⁷ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-AdR3qHFPu/>.

<p>Number of Posts: 34</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 935 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 8,585 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Consistent with previous months posts, begins to speak subtly about conspiracy theories</p>	<p>Content themes: quantum messages, nothing happens by accident, massive awakening, decide your truth and your reality</p> <p>Language: “I’m not talking about conspiracy theory truths and dark agenda truths and all the other things that are also coming up. I’m talking about the much larger truth which is the reason that this is even happening. The dark underbelly that needs to clear, the conspiracy theory and dark agenda is a reaction to the ascension.” “The Galactic federation of light showed me this.” “We chose our trauma.” “Nothing is your fault, it’s all designed by you to have. I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING WRONG. Nothing is an accident, nothing is a mistake.” “Remember that we have choice in every now to decide what is our truth and our reality.” “I’m holding a different frequency. A virus cannot come in and make me sick.” “I can choose to not participate in it, it will not impact me.” “Trust the voices in your body.” “No mistakes, no accidents and coincidences. You volunteered to drop your consciousness into human form.” “Go into your empowered space, you’re in charge, “it’s all about you and nobody else. This is my truth, this feels so right, yes, yes, yes.”</p>
<p>Sample post³³⁸:</p>	

³³⁸ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-zfiCmHIO2/>.

<p>4/10/20-3,808 views</p>	
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Caption: Practice Choice in your now ❤️

Paraphrase of language in the video: Galactic federation of light remind the humans of choice. We are in a massive awakening. The way everything is bubbling up, the conspiracy theories and 5G, all of this is happening that we are higher dimensional beings in physical form who have the power to choose. All the external is to bring our awareness back to the internal to wake up to our higher frequencies. External darkness is allowing you to do that. Notice of choice, we have choice in every now and we are in a quantum space. You're not just a victim and you don't just need to follow what is being told to you. You get a bird's eye view in every now. Pretend you're a bird flying over it all watching it with a higher perspective. understand and have compassion. I understand why they're wearing masks and living in fear... What do I want to choose to be my truth and reality. All of this is true and there are other truths and realities all around you. Your higher self is not affected by anything "5G vaccines, chemtrails" you're so much more than the 3dimensional matrix. You are free to choose, you're not handcuffed. You will honor the human aspect of you that bumps into the paradigm but you'll remember wait a minute I'm a creator being and I get to choose. I'm not impacted by the virus, 5g, the vaccine, chemtrails, it's a choice. It's a belief. Actually remember that you are a higher consciousness. You're too powerful to be impacted by the 3d.

May 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 41</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,932 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 9,825 views</p> <p>Style of posts: consistent with previous months posts, more consistent posting, sometimes twice daily posts.</p>	<p>Content themes: Choose every experience, embodying truth in the arena, insights from the Galactic Federation, personal experiences with ascension, way-showers hold the higher truths</p> <p>Language: "We aren't victims." "Create your reality." "embody our truth"</p>
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“Thank you for Being in the physical form right now on the Earth Plane.”
 “We are doing it together!”
 “Choose what to believe in.”
 “Your job as the way-shower is to hold these new truths.”
 “Holy cow. Nobody else believes this. Everyone thinks I’m crazy. That’s part of being the way-shower”
 “We’re alchemizing carbon or density into crystal or light and it is a physical shift. It’s physics, it’s not spiritual.”

Sample Post³³⁹:
 5/16/20-2,918 likes



Caption: The other day I saw this craft (Ship) in the sky. It was an Arcuturian craft 🛸


Craft are the “vehicles” that higher dimensional Beings use to transport themselves in and out of dimensional fields
 Most of these craft are in a 5th or 6th dimensional field and we are unable to see them. This is because our bodies are physically anchored in a 3rd or 4th dimensional field. Which means all we can physically see is 3rd and 4th dimensional forms. Of course as our bodies increase in frequency we will begin to see higher dimensional forms.
 Many times the craft will shift down into a 3rd or 4th dimensional field and the human can then

³³⁹ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAI73E9n-n5/>.

physically see them as lights moving rapidly through the sky or slow moving lights vibrating at a very unique rate. When you see them you know it's them.
 However most craft chose to stay within the 5th and 6th dimensional fields like the Arcturian craft in this picture. It's always a choice by the Higher Dimensional Beings.
 If they want us to see them they could easily shift their frequency down into a 3rd or 4th dimension and boom we could see them. They choose to remain in the higher fields right now.
 The reason we can see the 5th and 6th dimensional craft in a cloud is because the condensation from a cloud gathers around the heat coming off the craft.
 The craft is energetic and vibrating in a 5th or 6th dimensional field. It's vibration has a high frequency spin which creates heat. The condensation from the cloud forms around the heat from the craft and we can see the outline of the craft.
 It's so exciting when we get to see them in the sky. They have always been with us. They are with us now. We are not alone.
 Have you every seen a craft, either in a cloud or physically in the 3rd or 4th dimension?

June 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 24</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 3,994 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 11,142 views</p> <p>Style of posts: similar to previous months, a couple more selfie posts and slight increase in viewer engagement. Still speaking only subtly to conspiracies related to COVID</p>	<p>Content themes: moving from 3D to 5D consciousness, collective experience, new Earth, trust your star family, Shifting into the unified field Language: "You're not crazy. You're ASCENDING." "New Earth is NOW." "It's not my message to you, it's your star families message" "Whatever you're going through is going to pass. You're really going to be ok. There's nothing wrong with you, there never has been. Give yourself more love today."</p>
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<p>Sample post³⁴⁰: 6/11/20-11,144 views</p>	
<p>Caption: Message from the Galactic Federation 🙏</p>	
<p>Paraphrase of language in the video: What does humanity need to know? The first thing they said was doubt. Those things in your head, they're not voices, they're your guides. How do I speak my own truth? That voice you hear in your head that you think isn't real is your higher self, we have to start believing in us, in who you are. Believe in us not others, not what someone else tells you. That's their truth not mine. I'm used to following, I'm used to believing what I'm told. What if my truth and my resonance isn't the status quo? Stand firm in your truth no matter what someone else's is. Don't get caught up in duality. That's why you're here. That's why you're here. That's why you're here. Bringing yourself back to you and your truth no matter what anyone else's truths are.</p>	

July 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 24</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 4,364 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 43,102 views</p> <p>Style of posts: talking videos consistent with previous months, engagement continues to climb, posts become more explicitly conspiratorial in nature, references the "they" dark consciousness but remain subtle in the sense that specific conspiracies are rarely named in detail.</p>	<p>Content themes: messages from the Galactic Federation of Light about dark consciounesses bubbling to the surface, alchemizing the collective, truth as a frequency, deep state conspiracies, listen to your resonance, the matrix of victimhood, fear narratives, COVID as a program, warriors of light.</p> <p>Language: "You are alchemizing the collective!" "It's all physics." "Listening to your resonance shifts the collective." "Massive download in how we can assist with the child trafficking."</p>
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³⁴⁰ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBT2D-ZAjvc/>.

Continued style of repetition in speech in video content.	<p>“Speak our truth and follow our energetic signature, regardless of what our logic mind says or any other mind says to us. That is how we shift the collective.”</p> <p>“Massive download on how we can assist right now, especially with the sex trafficking. Big big, download. You help by being who you are as an energetic being in every now as often as you can and you trust it.”</p> <p>“They are trying to silence us, keep us down, take our truth.”</p> <p>“Listen to your resonance over logic or scientific truth.”</p> <p>“where’s the proof, where’s the proof, where’s the proof. We have to stand in our knowingness and let that be enough.”</p> <p>“People say ‘you’re nuts.’ You say I’m a warrior of light, a way-shower.”</p> <p>“Logic doesn’t have a place in resonance.”</p>
<p>Sample Post³⁴¹:</p> <p>7/9/20-41,850 views</p>	
Caption: Message for the STARSEEDS ✨🌍	
<p>Paraphrase of Language in the Video: Message from the Galactic Federation of Light. If this message resonates with you allow it to be seen and heard. Earth is shaking like a salt-shaker. The star seeds are coming online. Massive amount dropped in between the 60s and the 90s. Not good, not bad-they just have more light. They don’t relate to this world. They’re told they are bipolar or schizophrenic. They feel uncomfortable in the body. Your light codes are turning on and coming online. When you came down into human form you brought information codes that would be activated when you align with the frequency of the code. Assist the collective into the higher realms. Light codes are in the DNA. Pay attention to how much time you’re spending on the external. Study <i>you</i> right now. The covid, the masks, the 5G, the pedophile rings, the deep state, it’s all unraveling, we have to stay open and see it. How much are you doing that? You need to take time, to sit quietly and feel. No one else has the information but you. Turn on your lightcodes. It is you, it’s inside your physical form.</p>	

August 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 24</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 2,976 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 35,450 views</p> <p>Style of posts: talking videos mixed with promotional still images for videos on her YouTube page including one about Sex Trafficking and another about Donald Trump</p>	<p>Content themes: Alchemizing the very dark, dark, dark consciousness into light, cognitive dissonance, freeing ourselves from the propaganda and programming, conspiracy theories, Donald Trump as a lightworker, fear and divide, awakening</p> <p>Language: “Massive collapsing (controlled by small population-the elite) very dark, energetic systems, been around for a long time, controlling us and keeping us down.”</p>
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³⁴¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCcFgQpgSLa/>

<p>as a Lightworker. Much more explicitly conspiratorial in tone.</p>	<p>“You came here on assignment. You signed up for this. There’s no mistake.” “Ask yourself, critically think. Who’s calling what a conspiracy theory and why? Who’s calling who crazy and why? Who is quieting who and why? Who is censoring who and or what and why? What is being given to us and what is being held from us and why?” “It is time that we start to see how manipulated and controlled we have been by the media. All of it. It’s time. This is why you’re here.” “My guides wanted me to get this message out about Trump” “Do I want to believe the narrative? Does it feel good? Is there another narrative I can choose??”</p>
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Sample post³⁴² :

<p>8/27/20: 2,438 likes</p>	
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Caption: Conspiracy Theory? Or Truths that many find impossible to hold?
 This is just food for thought. Take what resonates leave the rest.
 Cognitive dissonance plays a huge role in so called conspiracy theories.
 And so called conspiracy theories play a huge role in alchemizing density into light. Let me explain.
 When we begin to see truths arise that seem almost impossible to believe we tend to not believe them. Its easier that way.
 Its too painful. It can be too much to hold a truth that seems almost incomprehensible. I get it. It makes sense.
 When humans can’t hold some of these truths they discredit them by using the term conspiracy theory.
 However we are shifting into higher states of consciousness. We are stepping out of old ways of Being. The density is rising so we can clear it.
 Many of these densities are held within the so called conspiracy theories. We have to see the dark to clear the dark. And that takes courage.
 Many humans are being asked to step outside of the programmed way we have been conditioned to be which requires us to start asking more questions and looking at that which

³⁴² Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEaMFwLnlpl/>.

we can't seem to hold. Its just too dark.
 Many of these "theories" are true and in fact are held in many physical truths including photos, statements, indictments, and reports from many high ranking officials and authorities.
 Just because its impossible for the mind to comprehend doesn't mean it isn't true. It means you may be experiencing Cognitive Dissonance. And I get it! It makes sense!
 But, this is the collective shift in consciousness.
 This is density alchemizing into light. And it is not pretty. And you get to navigate it the way that feels best for you.
 But, if you are unable to hold someone else's truth is it possible to try Being a different way.
 Instead of name calling can you just allow? Instead of belittling can you hold empathy? Instead of anger can you hold compassion?
 We can move through this together without perpetuating that which we are alchemizing.
 Ask questions, look deeper, and love yourself and others through it. I love you.

September 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 27</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 4,928 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 57,878 views</p> <p>Style of posts: mix between heavy conspiracy "truths" and encouraging posts for light workers to "hold the higher timeline." Steady engagement in content which remains a mix of image posts to promote YouTube content, selfies, and videos talking directly to the camera. Messaging consistent with previous months and conspiracy related videos now have pattern of highest engagement.</p>	<p>Content themes: reptilians and the great awakening, fires in California, high frequency light being injected into the air by higher conscious beings to aid our human ascension journey, energy portals, censorship, knowingness, Fear, manipulation, mind control.</p> <p>Language: "Vaccines, masks, being in your house we are dismantling this consciousness, not allowing it to control us." And you're not going to control me, because I see you and see what you've been doing to humanity for thousands of years." "The dark is not going to win." "Whether you believe me or not, there are beings of light working behind the scenes dismantling this and humans." "When you find yourself in fear, you're handing yourself over to the bully." "We're all doing this together. We all want the same thing. We all want peace, joy, love, expansion, and unity." "This is the most miraculous moment. We're moving into joy, peace, abundance and freedom. Without a doubt that is where we're going."</p>
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Sample post³⁴³:
9/18/20: 4,928 likes



Caption: Shifting into higher states of consciousness is an ebb and flow. It's a constant state of wonder, excitement, "holy shoot what's next", and surrender.
This afternoon I find myself in deep reflection.
Listening and feeling consciousnesses within me that still wish to be heard and seen.
My love will set them free.
Giving voice to beliefs that have held me captive for far too long.
My voice will set me free.
Allowing vulnerability to consume my body.
My surrender will set me free.
The deeper I go within my own Being the more I find to love, to bow to, to honor.
I understand I am in a human journey.
I understand I chose to be here now.
And I understand that what I feel, think, believe or allow to consume me is not who I am.
And in that knowingness lies freedom, compassion and a deep honoring of my human journey.
Please remember...You are not what you feel, think, do or believe.
You are LIGHT in form courageously navigating a massive shift in consciousness.
Can you bow at your own feet, honoring YOU?
Can you love the consciousnesses within you that still needs to be seen?
Can you remember that you are in the journey not of the journey.
And whether you believe this or not can you see that you are a gift to this world?
You are a gift!
Thank you for choosing to incarnate in human form with me in this now.
We got this!
And I love all of you

October 2020

Number of Posts: 27


Most post likes on a single post:
7,017 likes

Content themes: finding your truth, jump timelines, choose another reality, messages from the guides, warriors of light, this is for the children

³⁴³ Ibid, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFS8P_gnidC/.

<p>Most views on a single post: 46,878 views</p> <p>Style of posts: Consistent with previous month, continued pattern of increased engagement on conspiracy related posts</p>	<p>Language: “Dense consciousnesses being shown to us. Lockdowns, genocide, millions of children being sex trafficked and being held in cages and tortured, corruption of systems, insanely intense censorship. These things will continue to be shown to us.”</p> <p>“People around us may not be awakening at the same rate as you. Speak your truth from your heart.”</p> <p>“We have the energetic power to jump out of a timeline. We can create the reality that we want. Vaccines for this “virus” called covid, and there are millions holding another timeline, we can jump into a timeline without vaccines.</p> <p>“What do I mean? I mean we cannot move into higher state of consciousness, into New Earth, into 5d without SEEING and breaking apart the very DARK, very EVIL, and very LARGE consciousnesses we call SEX TRAFFICKING, PEDOPHILIA and SATANIC RITUALS.”</p> <p>“This is not magic, this is not a joke, this is understanding how the human collective works.”</p>
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Sample post³⁴⁴:

<p>10/16/20: 46,092 views</p>	
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Caption: CENSORSHIP is the voice of FEAR

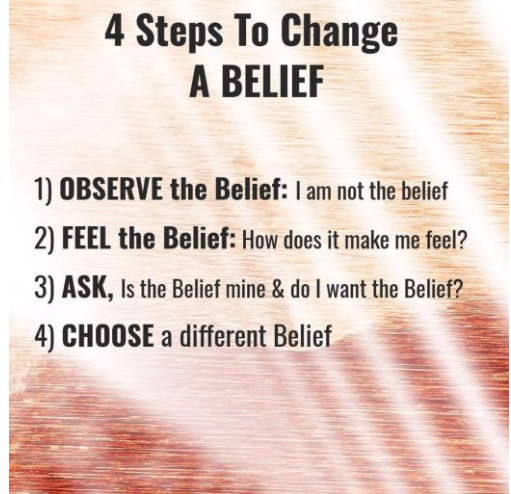
Paraphrase of language in the video: Message from Lorie human. This is my truth. I'm not here to argue or debate. I'm posting this video to bring light so you can see when we begin to dismantle paradigms. Censorship is the voice of fear. They're afraid of the voices that are speaking. Seeing the large programs and paradigms, system that has been mind controlling

³⁴⁴ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGaW6nPH13S/>.

and manipulating the human with fear for thousands of years. We, you have been controlled, a group of humans creating a story line that we have believed for a very long time. As we start to increase our frequency and see the lies, control, and manipulation. We become free; we literally take the handcuffs off. We see it and we start to speak about it. When we speak about it, we crumble it, we melt it. Call them what you want, the elite, the deep state, feeds off of fear. When we wake up and don't play in that paradigm with them, then they start to freak out. They are silencing us through censorship. Beginning October 1st there are accounts that have been completely erased blocked and censored, the New York Post was blocked on twitter, the press sec, Ted Cruz, Youtube accounts completely erased. How do you know you're been controlled? You start to speak your truth and you get silenced. We start thinking for ourselves and asking questions and we get censored by those who have been doing it our entire lives. If there was no mind control we could speak our truths without censorship We have got to see what we have been under for thousands of years in order to shift it. Control, manipulation, and fear tactics. Out of our bodies, our sovereignty, our truths. We have been like zombies, even if you think you haven't. Ask yourself these questions, who is doing the censorship? Why are they doing it? Who's telling them to censor? What and who are they censoring? They are censoring humans that have been speaking truths that they don't want us to hear. One of them is sex trafficking and pedophile rings. Why is it not ok to share and talk about sex trafficking? Just asking the question. This is what it looks like when you break down large consciousnesses that have been controlling humanity. We have the right to speak our truth. Why censor us now? Because we're breaking out of the systems. "they" don't want us to be free. They don't want us to be sovereign. Who are they not censoring? They are not censoring individuals that have the same agenda as them. Allowing the agenda that is their agenda. What's actually happening with covid, satanic rituals, government corruption, pedophile rings? Higher states of consciousness mean unity and freedom, dismantle corruption and control, we dismantle fear. Creating more control through lockdowns. Feel your sovereignty which is your light which is your truth.

November 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 33</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 9,489 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 69,358 views</p> <p>Style of posts: consistent with previous month</p>	<p>Content themes: corruption in the 2020 presidential election, how to step into your sovereignty, how to open your heart center, the great awakening, choose what you focus on, the new Earth, changing beliefs, gratitude for fellow lightworkers</p> <p>Language: "Systems being dismantled. None of this is normal. Not knowing the results is not normal." "The dark has to be seen within these systems." "The light wins and the dark will be seen." "The US election has massive fraud in it." "This isn't about being in the matrix or not being in the matrix. I hate to tell you guys we're in the Matrix." "We are LIGHT currently experiencing a physical journey called HUMAN. Thank you from the deepest and brightest aspect of my LIGHT for Being in this human journey with me. I love you and see you." "You're only responsible for what's in your sovereign field" "You're only responsible for yourself."</p>
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	<p>“So, thank you from the deepest part of my Being for allowing me to stand with you as we shift the entire human collective. AND YES, we shift it! :)” “I love you. I see you. I honor you. I thank you!”</p>
<p>Sample post³⁴⁵:</p>	
<p>11/11/20: 7,667 likes</p>	
<p>Caption: A belief creates your reality. And you choose the beliefs. Therefore you are always creating your reality. For most of our lives we have been programmed to hold certain beliefs from the external world. Therefore the external world has been creating our reality. It is TIME NOW to choose and create our own reality. It is TIME NOW to step out of the 3rd dimensional matrix and free ourselves from the restraints of FEAR, CONTROL, MANIPULATION and GREED. You are SOVEREIGN. You are FREE. Your TRUTH is yours. Your VOICE matters. You create your reality in every now based on the beliefs you choose. You are not a victim But a POWERFUL Being of LIGHT in physical form. CREATE. CHOOSE. FREE YOURSELF... 1) Observer the Belief 2) Feel the Belief 3) Ask, where did the Belief come from and do I want the Belief 4) Choose another Belief I love you.</p>	

December 2020

<p>Number of Posts: 30</p> <p>Most post likes on a single post: 7,024 likes</p> <p>Most views on a single post: 105,389 views</p> <p>Style of posts: consistent with previous months</p>	<p>Content themes: choosing your reality, rise up, speak your truth, messages from the Galactic Federation of Light</p> <p>Language: “Choose the reality you want to see.” “At the end of the day we win.” “Pseudo pandemic” “Speaking your truth, stand up for your right, stand up for your sovereignty.” “Burst your light out from your body.”</p>
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³⁴⁵ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIGX7LwnwLz/>.

“So much light, so much light, so much light.”
 “there is no virus that’s going to make me sick and die. That’s not my reality”
 “I’m am not stuck in that 3rd dimensional matrix. I am floating above it watching. I’m not impacted by the systems in place controlling and manipulating the human.”
 “The only way we shift an entire Human Collective (which by the way is what you are doing :) is to BE what you want to see.”
 “Choose your reality.”
 “My guides lifted me off the earth and they showed me all the humans shining their light. We’re lighting up the entire planet.”
 “Unawakened humans are behind us and they don’t realize what is going on. They don’t need to know. Those people belittling you, calling you names, conspiracy theorist, all those humans behind us, those are the ones we’re doing this for.”
 “All the humans behind you, that are calling you names, know within you that you’re doing it for them.”
 “You nailed it. We nailed this year.”

Sample Post³⁴⁶:
 12/27/20: 105,389 views



Caption: Message from The Galactic Federation: Our Role in 2021

Paraphrase of language in the video: This is what is to come, anything is possible. They wanted me to remind all of us that what is coming for humanity is a new leveling up. We have free will, choose how you want to be in every now moment. Start to recognize and understand that just knowing what’s going on, knowing about information and things that have been hidden for us, people call conspiracy theory information. It’s no longer going to be enough for us to just know about it. Humans are going to have to take action. Humans are going to have to uprise.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJU8miYnQjG/>.

Leveling up of the warrior of light, to dismantle the consciousnesses, those who aren't shifting with us that are being dismantled and collapsed, we're going to have to level up against them. We call them the New World Order, the Cabal, the deep state, that have for thousands of years, we now call them the Illuminati, the Cabal and the New World Order. They use fear, control, greed and manipulation. In 2020, we've become aware of this. Some have been speaking up about this. We've been tiptoeing into it. Do I want to look at this or not? What is coming down the pike-humanity is going to have to stand up. There has to be an uprising of humanity. The human is going to have to start to take action and speak up. Demand their sovereignty and their rights. The only thing I can say is what they showed me, is a next level up of light work. It's ok to see and acknowledge the dark and stand up against it. This is the consciousness that humanity is dissolving. It's being dismantled. This is the way ascension works. There's going to be polarity. Everything to do with the political, financial, sex trafficking, pedophilia rings, systems that we look at and see. We have hundreds of thousands of light workers ready to charge forward. Heaven on earth will only happen when we get rid of the evil systems on earth. We have to pull it apart and many of you are going to be asked to play very different roles as we move into 2021. "I'M READY TO UPRISE. I'M READY TO DO THIS" Many of us in 2021 are going to rise up, and I'm so excited to rise up with you.

Summary of Findings:

Lorie Ladd is a self-described "teacher, speaker, and author guiding humanity through the collective and individual human consciousness." Much of her content is about the ascension process, or the shifting of the human collective from the 3rd dimensional field to the 5th dimensional field. Her bio calls this "our great awakening," language consist with New Age beliefs that was co-opted by the QAnon movement. The style of her posts is predominantly long talking videos (roughly 10-20 minutes in length) where she shares tips for ascension and messages that she has received from interdimensional light beings, most specifically the Galactic Federation of Light. The process of ascension, in Ladd's view, requires the individual to alchemize light codes stored in the DNA, particularly a 12-strand dormant code. This is done by getting present in your "now moment" and feeling for and then speaking your truth. This alchemizes the dark carbon-based consciousness of the 3-d which is reigned by duality, mind control, and density into light and the higher states of

consciousness hallmarked by feeling of surrender, peace, joy, trust, and love. She compares the work of the light beings to the Buddha and Jesus, though she often insists that the process is not spiritual but physics. Early on she describes the individual's power to heal themselves along with messages of empowerment to awaken into the inner light being in order to shift the entire human collective.

Ladd's messaging is repetitive both from post to post, but also within each post. She repeats phrases for understanding and incorporates a lot of hand gestures including pointing, snapping, and clapping. For example, she'll repeat a phrase like, "You've never done anything wrong, You've never done anything wrong, You've never done anything wrong," or "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Starseeds, a type of light being in human form, just know things and need to learn to feel for and speak their truth. Much of the process of ascension seems pre-determined in Ladd's philosophy. She insists that each individual chose the human form they would drop into on Earth and volunteered for the mission of assisting the human collective in the ascension process. Light beings are here to lead the way by going first and being in higher state of consciousness by speaking their truth in the now.

Ladd's first post related to COVID on March 12th, describes COVID as a palpable fear-based paradigm but tells her followers that the Galactic Federation of Light told her it was an accident and not to play in the dark paradigms but stand in the field without judgement and "hold the frequency of love." A few days later she tells her followers that the virus is no longer on the earth plane. The virus

cleared because “of all the work of the light beings, stopping the massive consciousness of the virus from killing more humans.” It was the lightworkers who stopped the virus from getting worse, she says.

As the months progress Ladd’s language shifts from subtle to overt embrace of grand conspiracy narratives. In the Spring through the Summer of 2020 she continues to encourage her audience to decide your truth and create your reality, messaging fairly consistent with pre-pandemic language. She does offer messages from the Galactic Federation that suggest to her audience that the virus can’t make them sick because they have the power to choose their reality. She likens mask wearing to living in fear while saying that the virus, 5G, chemtrails can’t impact you unless you let them. “It’s a choice, It’s a belief.” “You’re too powerful to be impacted by the 3D.” She provides reassuring messaging to her followers telling them they’re not crazy, they’re ascending. She describes the messaging she’s conveying as not coming from her, but from the star families and light beings all around us. She tells her followers not to get caught up in duality while telling them not to believe what someone else tells them, but that. they should stand firm in their truth no matter what someone else’s truth is.

As the tone of her videos becomes more conspiratorial post engagement increases from less than 10,000 views to over 40,000 in July, over 55,000 in September, nearly 70,000 by November and over 100,000 in December. In July, she begins to talk more directly about grand conspiracy narratives, particularly

those typically associated with QAnon, the deep state, child trafficking, COVID as a program, as well as wellness related “truths,” that we must leave the matrix of victimhood and resist fear narratives. She also begins to use “they” language to describe the dark energies trying to keep us down and enslaved to the 3D. She insists that conspiracy truths are just too difficult for people to hold and that’s why they can’t see the truth of what’s going on. The density that we’re trying to clear is actually inside some of these conspiracy theories so we have to see it and speak it in order to alchemize it. She describes Donald Trump as a light worker and shares about Reptilian consciousness aimed at preventing the Great Awakening. By October she is commenting on vaccines for COVID, telling her audience to hold the timeline where there are no vaccines to create that reality. She insists that the US election has massive fraud in it and its not normal for us not to know the election results right away. She calls COVID a “pseudo pandemic,” and by the end of the year tells her followers that humans are going to have to uprising. Saying, “I’m ready to uprising. I’m ready to do this. Many of us in 2021 are going to rise up and I’m excited to rise up with you.” She is a much different tone than the beginning of the pandemic where she encouraged followers not to get trapped in duality and to hold non- judgement. She offers her followers the faith proclamation that the “unawakened” humans who are calling you a conspiracy theorist, all the “humans behind us” (because the lightworkers are leading the way to the 5th dimension) that “those are the ones we’re doing this for.”

Lorie Ladd is a gifted and charismatic speaker and clearly engaged with her audience. She uses positive, affirming language in many of her posts meant to reassure those who subscribe to a similar New Age spiritual philosophy. She repeats content for understanding including complex theories for spiritual ascension. She repeats affirming phrases, uses physical gesture, and smiles warmly to the camera. Throughout the year Ladd describes a kind of extreme free will while at the same time a core tenet of her philosophy seems to be that we chose our experience before we got here. She insists that speaking your individual truth is vital to shifting the human collective. This truth cannot be arrived at using logic but must be felt and it have to feel good to you. We each choose beliefs that “resonate” with our frequency of vibration and in this sense that each individual has the power to choose their reality. Each individual is only responsible for their individual sovereign field, only responsible for the individual. However, Ladd insists that the individual spiritual journey of alchemizing light is done for the benefit of the collective. Ladd demonstrates many of the cognitive biases associated with conspiracist ideation alongside messages of self-responsibility and spiritual exceptionalism.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

Throughout the whole of this project, I've kept in mind the central question, why wellness? What about modern mainstream wellness culture could lead many within that space to adopt and widely disseminate grand conspiracy narratives during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

Each of the influencers observed speak directly to the neoliberal wellness ethos while promoting grand conspiracy narratives. More investigation is required to understand the implications, but there is evidence to suggest that individualism plays a role in the adoption of grand conspiracy narratives by the influencers in the study. Each influencer speaks often about the need for one to feel for or intuit their unique truth and shape and craft their own reality. Particularly in the case of Kelly Brogan we see a kind of anarchist libertarian political ideology. Her overarching philosophy seems to be that if each of us were simply to initiate into "adulthood" then we wouldn't need medical, academic, or government entities to organize or manage social considerations. What's profoundly interesting about that is the process by which we move toward self-sovereignty is one that has been designed by Brogan. In a way, her philosophy requires us to know freedom by stepping into the version of it she has crafted.

The theme of singular access to the truth repeats itself in the content of all the influencers. I interpret this as a kind of hyperdrive intellectual attribution bias. Each influencer clearly demonstrates in their language a belief that they are free

while the rest of the population that is wearing masks, or simply believes the COVID-19 virus to be real, are mentally enslaved. For Brogan and Ladd specifically, they seem to have drafted a particular orthodoxy that they believe is very much the truth that could set us all free. For Brogan, stepping into our personal power would grant us the ability to heal anything and liberate us from conditioned status quo thinking that is keeping us enslaved and dependent on government and medical institutions. For Ladd, each of us is tasked with feeling for our unique truth and speaking it in the world so that the dense consciousness of the 3rd dimensional plane can be alchemized into light, a process that shifts the entire human collective to the New World waiting in the 5th dimension.

Krystal Tini on the other hand represents a growing conservative moment that embraced QAnon during the presidency of Donald Trump. While she hasn't crafted her own philosophy in the same ways that Ladd and Brogan have, she also demonstrates attribution bias among many of the other cognitive biases associated with the adoption of grand conspiracy narratives. Both for Ladd and for Tini, the pandemic seems to have played a major role in their adoption of QAnon style conspiracy narratives, though Krystal Tini had the most dramatic shift in brand image and content shared during the pandemic. She declares in her videos that speaking out about these "truths" gave her purpose and a new career. She likens the conspiracy theory network she's affiliated with to a truth telling industry and talks about her follower count going from ~20,000 to over 160,000. Pre-pandemic, Kelly Brogan displayed hostility toward the medical

establishment but her language and content also shifted dramatically at the beginning of COVID-19. All three influencers experienced greater content engagement on posts where they shared the most explicitly conspiratorial content.

All three influencers described COVID-19 as a hoax. Brogan going to the most extreme saying that COVID is a psychological operation to usher in elitist control of all humanity, a message she hasn't deviated from since day one of the pandemic. Tini initially embraced this belief but changed her narrative over the course of the pandemic declaring the virus real, but completely over blown for the agenda of Bill Gates, the Democrats, Fauci, et al. Ladd went the opposite direction. She started the pandemic era by encouraging her followers to resist conspiracist messaging and hold the space of love and non-judgement for those who were experiencing the effects or were experiencing a fear response about the pandemic. As the year went on, she began to call the virus and its effects a pseudo pandemic paired with belief in reptilian shadow consciousness bent on global domination and insisted that the Galactic Federation of Light told her that Donald Trump was a light worker. The conspiracies articulated by Tini had the most partisan political flavor to them, though it should be noted that all three influencers shared QAnon style conspiracy theories that ultimately served the brand image of the former president.

Each of the influencers demonstrated hostility toward those who they felt were "living in fear" or being ruled by fear. I found these sentiments interesting for

the binary nature ascribed to them as if an emotional response ranging from uncertainty to anxiety about an event none of us had ever experienced before was somehow a pre-programmed response indoctrinated by a shadowy force with a pre-planned agenda rather than a natural human response to the unknown. Fear became a kind of catch-all attribution for each of the influencers for those who don't quite see the world the same way they do. All three influencers articulate the importance of love and unity in their personal philosophies while demonstrating severe hostility toward those who hold a different world view. They have, in real time, betrayed their ethos of unity for the island of certitude in their own individual truth. Anyone who doesn't see their truth are certainly and hopelessly brainwashed sheep who can't think for themselves. What's also interesting here is that each of their philosophies contend that each individual is only and solely responsible for themselves.

While each influencer receives a validating intellectual and economic boost from sharing conspiracy theories, I am confident that each of them believes in the messaging they share and aren't necessarily doing so as a profit incentive, at least not consciously. They each seem to believe that if everyone adopted their belief systems and protocols for health and happiness the world would be transformed. This truth is so real to them that they can speak with extreme confidence to their personal belief system. In my opinion, the conspiracy theories they express protect their personal orthodoxy, in effect making the core identity forged by their personalized truth impervious to critical examination. Logic, in

fact, is no tool to understanding, particularly in the philosophies of Brogan and Ladd.

I believe wellness culture has been captured by the larger project of neoliberal capitalism. The project reduces collective life to individual considerations, almost always market capitalist considerations. The project requires each individual govern themselves, seek their own self-interest, and care and tend to their own individual needs. We are in the later stages of observing the extreme consequences of neoliberalism now. Rather than collectively demanding institutions serve the betterment of society, neoliberalism says, “you’re on your own.” In wellness, this is packaged perfectly to sell and promote products and protocols of self-care and individual self-optimization. If you’re unhappy, that is your choice. If you’re sick, it is because you’ve decided to be. If you’ve been victimized by the system or abused by another person, it’s because you’ve surrendered to victim consciousness. You’ve allowed yourself to be hurt. It is all a decision that you made and the only way to resolve it is by making other healthier, more spiritually aligned decisions. If you’re not sure what those decisions should be, they are conveniently available for purchase of an influencer’s prescribed health and wellness protocols. To be well one must simply, speak your truth, create your reality, and own yourself.

The ethos of fierce individualism and exceptionalism revealed itself in extreme ways during the pandemic, but it was rooted in the psyche of wellness well before the pandemic began. What seems to be missing from the personal

philosophy of the influencers presented in these case studies is the other side of the coin of self-responsibility. If indeed I am responsible for myself, I am also accountable to my actions and their impacts on others. This means taking responsibility for how we show up in the world, including the ways that we speak “our truth,” using our perspective as a tool to expand knowledge and find common ground between our individual experiences. Rather than to isolate myself onto an island of my own constructed reality, sharing the truth of our personal experiences can work to build bridges of empathy and understanding that allow us to live in society together and evolve our understanding of what it is to be human. We can and should show up whole heartedly in the world and resist the narratives of lack and doubt that are so often foisted onto our bodies by mainstream society, including the neoliberal wellness project that demands we achieve self-optimization rather than accepting ourselves as we are and allowing evolution to happen from that place of grounded self-love and empathy for others.

The influencers in this study reinforced their personal philosophies with the grand conspiracy narrative thereby making their orthodoxy impenetrable to critical engagement. Indeed, those who criticize the content they’ve shared over the past year are mindlessly accepting the agenda of a shadow elite bent on enslaving all of us. In this orientation, the influencer forever and always gets to be ultimately right in all the ways that matter, always firmly on the side of truth, light, and love in a dualistic spiritual warfare of their own design.

American culture is well known for its fierce individualism and exceptionalism. I argue that since the 1980's with the push for a neoliberal capitalist agenda the strain has only grown more bold. What we see in wellness and what we've observed in the political divide during the pandemic is, in my view, a late-stage consequence of neoliberalism. Conspiracy theory folds neatly into narratives that seem to promote a kind of "every person for themselves," radical self-responsibility in which the government, corporations and other institutional entities bear no responsibility for bettering society or the livelihood of citizens within the society.

I researched and wrote this project over the course of the pandemic. California lifted its COVID restrictions just two days ago. Many people feel elated and cautiously optimistic that this phase of our lives is behind us. While I'm ready to take off my mask and dance in the streets hugging strangers again, I am worried about the lasting social consequences of this time in our society. How do we heal from this? Not from the virus, but from all that we've borne witness to over the last 17 months. In what ways has this changed us?

We are already seeing the impacts of 2020's explosion in conspiracist ideation online leak into the events in the first half of the year 2021. There was infamously the insurrection at the United States Capitol in which supporters of the former president, who believed that the election was stolen from him, attempted to overturn the election results. The lies of conspiracy surrounding the 2020 election continue to have impacts on election laws in conservative states

around the country. Public health officials in counties across America have received death threats for recommending COVID protocols and vaccination.³⁴⁷ Anti-Asian hate crime increased 145% during 2020.³⁴⁸ Just in the last several days there have been reported incidents of violent altercations over arguments on mask wearing in public places. A cashier was reportedly shot and killed for attempting to enforce the mask policy at his business.³⁴⁹ One-third of the American population stubbornly refuses to take the COVID-19 vaccine even as 95% of doctors reportedly received the vaccine as soon as they possibly could.³⁵⁰³⁵¹ The Center for Countering Digital Hate reports that roughly two-thirds of vaccine misinformation comes from just twelve accounts online, one of which is Kelly Brogan.³⁵² In a corresponding report they share that the anti-vaccine industry reports annual revenues over \$36 million dollars.³⁵³

³⁴⁷ Anna Maria Berry-Jester, "Hazardous to Your Health Official," *This American Life*, ep. 736 *The Herd*, April 23, 2021 <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/736/the-herd>.

³⁴⁸ Center for Hate and Extremism, "FACT SHEET: Anti-Asian Prejudice," CSUSB, March 2021, <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/FACT%20SHEET-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%20rev%203.21.21.pdf>.

³⁴⁹ News Staff, "Triple shooting over masks at grocery store leaves cashier dead, deputy and man injured," *WSBT Atlanta*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/dekalb-county/retired-officer-two-others-shot-following-argument-dekalb-county/VBBPYRXO7JAKDM7TVDOTNM2AM4/>.

³⁵⁰ Karen Nikos Rose, "A Third of Americans Say They Are Unlikely or Hesitant to Get COVID-19 Vaccine," *UC DAVIS*, Jan 29, 2021, <https://www.ucdavis.edu/news/third-americans-say-they-are-unlikely-or-hesitant-get-covid-19-vaccine>.

³⁵¹ Rebekah Bernard MD, "Physicians highly accepting of COVID-19 vaccine," *Medical Economics*, Feb 9, 2021, <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/view/physicians-highly-accepting-of-covid-19-vaccine>

³⁵² Center for Countering Digital Hate, "Disinformation Dozen," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen>.

³⁵³ Center for Countering Digital Hate, "Pandemic Profiteers," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.counterhate.com/pandemicprofiteers>.

Each of these influencers is incentivized to continue promoting grand conspiracy narratives. Overall it has reinforced their wellness orthodoxy and helped their businesses grow during the pandemic. I'm less interested in what this study reveals about those who occupy the extreme and compelled to consider what the extreme has to teach us about the mainstream.

How does study of this extreme end of wellness, and the conspiracist ideation found there, inform our understanding of the middle? Perhaps, most importantly what is this study inviting me to witness about myself? How does this study inform how I share tools for health and spiritual wellbeing in the world?

I am not confident where we go from here, but I can say this study has greatly humbled me. We have been through so much in the last year and a half. All of us, including these three influencers, we have been through a lot. This is my first global pandemic, and I'm not sure if I've done it right but I certainly did not go around chastising people for being afraid in a time where nothing was as it seemed. Even with the grand conspiracy, I get it. The United States government has a long history of hypocrisy, corruption, and incompetence. Why should any of us trust them to manage a global pandemic? While we have every reason to be suspicious of our institutions, I worry that this pandemic has made us suspicious of each other. I worry that some bridge of trust between us has been broken. Our fates are intertwined. We cannot escape the fact that we are all here in the mess of reality together. It is important that we move past outdated notions of good and bad, or versions of history that exceptionalize a few heroes and villains and see

ourselves as interwoven into an inherited history that we continue to write together every day. We are bound together. Sometimes we make mistakes, sometimes we invent solutions. We are always problem and solution both. The influencers in this study have the capacity to help people in many ways but seem to refuse to wade in the muck of reality with the rest of us. They have exceptionalized their standing. Grand conspiracy narratives allow those who believe in them to live in the island of glory and good vibes away from society and our shared responsibility to it. On that island, separate from the rest of the brainwashed masses, they believe they are free. This is the delusion of individualism, the illusion of separateness.

What has this study invited me to see? Much of the time, I'm making an approximate guess at best. I'm not right, nor am I more evolved than any other human. I don't have special access to all truth. I'm not vibrating higher than unhoused populations. I'm not making better choices than those living in poverty. In this space, I am free, not when I step into "adulthood" or arrive at some optimized perfect version of myself. I am free right now, perfectly imperfect, whole, and worthy. I am free to acknowledge my privileges. I am free to make mistakes. I am free to ask questions. I am free to correct the record. I am free to ask for forgiveness. I am free to learn new things. I am free to be proven wrong. I am free to engage critically with the communities that I exist within. I am free to rely on logic. I am free to feel my feelings. I am free to hold two contradictory truths at the same time. I am free to be worried. I am free to be hopeful. I am free

to love. I am free to be afraid. I am free to innovate. I am free to respect the inherited wisdom of old ways. I am free to be grateful. I am free to take care of myself. I am free to demand change for the benefit of others. I am free to self-reflect. I am free to participate. I am free to be human.

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