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Introduction

On 21 February 2015, Jessica Ainscough, the self-described "wellness warrior," was interviewed in the magazine, *Wellbeing*. The 28-year-old had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer and was healing herself through a diet comprised of organic, raw food, daily meditation and coffee enemas. Ainscough's daily rituals and practices were documented on social media and her blog, which attracted 1.5 million unique global visitors. The magazine described Ainscough's personal blog, *The Wellness Warrior* as, "the bible for a generation longing to change their health, their environment and their experience of life" (Taylor-Kabbaz, 2015). Ainscough was an advocate of the Gerson protocol, which she used to "heal herself from cancer naturally." It was a rigorous protocol, as exemplified by one of Jess Ainscough's social media posts where she described a "day in the life" of Gerson Therapy:

> I've had a couple of people ask me to write out a "day in the life" type post outlining a day of the Gerson Therapy. Oh how sorry you will be! Just kidding. I guess this will give you an idea of what the program entails on an hourly basis – even if you do nod off just reading about the sheer monotony of my days.
>
> **7am**: drag myself out of bed and meditate

7.30am: first coffee enema for the day

8am: breakfast (orange juice and oats with honey, banana, raisins and kiwi fruit)

9am: green juice

9.30am: carrot and apple juice

10am: carrot and apple juice, work on blog and other writing bits and pieces

11am: carrot juice, work on blog and other writing bits and pieces

12pm: green juice, coffee enema #2

1pm: carrot and apple juice, lunch (soup, salad, veggies, potato), watch a bit of Oprah while we eat

2pm: green juice, do more writing

3pm: carrot juice, yoga

4pm: carrot juice, take my dog for a walk

5pm: carrot and apple juice, meditate

6pm: carrot and apple juice, coffee enema #3

7pm: green juice, dinner (soup, salad, veggies, potato)

8pm: watch a bit of TV or read in bed

10pm: sleep

Every day is exactly the same as the one before, except on Tuesday and Thursday morning I take castor oil. Until recently I was doing five coffee enemas a day. I fit them in at 7.30am, 10.30am, 2pm, 6pm and 9pm. Pretty exciting stuff, huh. The one thing that is pushing me through the therapy is the thought of how amazing it will be once I finish. I doubt I will know what to do with myself. I don't even remember what it's like to be able to leave the house for more than an hour

> without worrying about juices or enemas. That day will be here before I know it though. It's hard to believe I'm already three months into the program. I've got 15 to go. Come on 15th October 2011! (Ainscough in Gorski, 2015).

On 26 February 2015, five days after the article was published, Ainscough passed away. Gerson therapy has been disproven. The liver does not require caffeine to detoxify, but these daily rituals demonstrate the power of purification and purgation metaphors to perpetuate misinformation; and why disease metaphors are so compelling in the context of health and wellness. Ainscough is fitting case study to introduce this article because her story illuminates the relationship between metaphor, misinformation, religion and the media.

Illness has long been represented through metaphor. Metaphors are linguistic ways of understanding and experiencing one conceptual domain in terms of another, and are pervasive in everyday discourse about health (Semino, 2008). In her 1978 book, *Illness as Metaphor*, the American philosopher, Susan Sontag, described the stigmatising stereotypes associated with disease metaphors. Following her own experience with cancer, Sontag recalled the moralising metaphors used to comprehend the illness. Military metaphors presented cancer as an "invasion" and placed the responsibility for both the "growth" of the tumour and the "fight" against it upon the individual experiencing the condition (Sontag, 1978). Sontag (1989) highlights how in the 1980s plague was the primary metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic was understood. Drawing on classical understandings of plagues as divine retribution for humanity's sins, plague metaphors perpetuated the notion of illness as punishment. The result is that rather than cast those suffering from illness as victims,

in the case of AIDS so-called “at risk groups” were seen as complicit in their disease (Sontag, 1989). Sontag contends that metaphors can facilitate victim-blaming and stigmatisation. Just as AIDS was cast as a “deviant” disease, cancer is perceived to inflict those who repress their emotions (Sontag, 1978). Sontag traced such metaphors to popular myths about tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, which romantically linked the disease to repressed passion. Both tuberculosis and cancer were conceived in the popular imagination as diseases of passion: a fever, symptomatic of TB, signified ‘inward burning,’ one consumed by ardour; cancer ‘imagined to be the wages of repression’ (Sontag, 1978: 20, 21). The romantic idea that disease expresses character, and that character expresses disease, remains abundant in contemporary wellness discourse with illness frequently perceived to reflect the mental, physical and spiritual state of the individual (Baker, 2022). There is a common assumption that one simply needs to shift their mindset to overcome illness and disease.

In *Smile or Die* (2010), the late Barbara Ehrenreich recounts how she experienced similar exhortations to think positively in response to her cancer diagnosis. She recalls how sites dedicated to those suffering from cancer frequently feature inspirational quotes and pithy statements including, ‘When life hands out lemons, squeeze out a smile’, ‘Don’t wait for your ship to come in…swim out to meet it.’ Metaphors of this kind frame illness not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity for learning, growth and reflection. What these authors criticise is the dark side of positive thinking. The underlying promise of positive thinking resonates with the law of attraction: the notion that "like attracts like." Inspired by the quasi-religious New Thought Movement in the nineteenth century, and subsequent iterations taught by Christian Science, the law of attraction

presupposes that our thoughts create our reality and consequently we are responsible for our destiny. This idea extends to the domain of health. Just as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy, the founders of New Thought and Christian Science, believed that mind-cure remedied their illnesses; Rhonda Byrne, author of the best-selling self-help book, *The Secret* (2008), proposed that 'Illness cannot exist in a body that has harmonious thoughts.'

During the pandemic, metaphors were widely used in communication about the virus (Semino, 2021). War metaphors were particularly persistent with politicians and journalists routinely invoking military metaphors to describe global efforts to 'combat' COVID-19 (Neshkovska and Trajkova, 2020). COVID was represented by numerous political leaders across the globe as an invisible 'enemy' and 'alien invader' to be 'beaten.' As part of this symbolic framing, health professionals were represented as frontline 'soldiers' in the fight to combat the virus and the public called upon to assist with 'flattening the curve' (Dagyaran et al., 2021). Military metaphors were an effective way to personify the virus as a global threat and mobilise society against a common enemy. Military metaphors were also used by those who denied the existence or severity of the virus. For example, war metaphors were frequently invoked in anti-vaccine discourse with the body represented as a battlefield and the fight against vaccines emblematic of a broader struggle against the authority of the state (Baker and Walsh, 2024). In this regard, metaphors are not neutral; war metaphors rationalise the need to contest and eliminate a perceived threat through swift action (Semino, 2021).

During the pandemic, wellness metaphors became not only a vehicle to promote

medical misinformation, but conspiracy theories and far-right extremism (Baker, 2022). A notable example is the film, *Plandemic*. Published on 4 May 2020, *Plandemic* circulated on social media spreading misinformation about COVID-19. The film was produced by Mikki Willis and featured Judy Mikovits, a discredited American researcher and anti-vaccine activist, who alleged to reveal the corruption of the scientific establishment. In just over a week after it was published, *Plandemic* had been viewed more than eight million times on social media. The film depicted COVID as a hoax, drawing on a series of metaphors to promote COVID denialism. Viewers were told that “Fear is the virus” and “Truth is the Cure.” Animal metaphors were routinely invoked by covid denialists on social media to represent those who believed and complied with the government's official "narrative" as a herd of uncritical sheep. This imagery was followed by calls for the masses – or "normies" as they are pejoratively called – to "wake up!” Many who criticised official narratives about covid-19, presented their contrarian views as spurred by curiosity and critical thinking. Those promoting conspiracy theories described "going down the rabbit hole" – a reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) – a process characterised by curiosity, scepticism and "just asking questions" (Baker, 2022). True believers described their awakening and enlightenment through metaphorical references to taking the "red pill" – a nod to the 1999 science fiction film, The Matrix – wherein true believers were called upon to inspire others to "wake up" to the Truth.

There has been a tendency in psychological literature to cast those who believe in conspiracy theories as pathological and irrational (Coady, 2007). Research of this kind suggests that conspiracy theorists possess certain psychological traits including gullibility (Forgas and Baumeister, 2019), paranoia (Robins and Post, 1997),

delusional ideation (Larsen et al., 2021) and anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). These approaches are influenced by the early works of Karl Popper (1945) and Richard Hofstadter (1964), both of whom present conspiracy theories as a 'crippled epistemology' emanating from paranoid minds. Conspiracy theories have also been linked to cognitive biases and faulty reasoning (Butter and Knight, 2015). For example, Goertzel (1994) argued that conspiracy beliefs are 'monological.' That is, they provide a complete worldview. Such research purported that people who believe in one conspiracy theory, tend to believe in them all; a view recently questioned by scholars who argue that conspiracy beliefs tend to be issue specific (Sutton and Douglas, 2015). Since the late 1990s, researchers have begun to reject the psychopathologising of conspiracy theories by viewing them as a way to contend with the uncertainties, inequalities and complexities of social life (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000; Marcus, 1999). Conspiracy theories may be misleading and factually incorrect, yet they reflect meaningful responses to the society that people inhabit (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017: 140). This article extends this work by exploring the notion of conspiracy theories as metaphors to understand the social world. In keeping with the theme of the special issue, this article examines how the relationship between metaphor and misinformation is fuelled by new media technologies, while critically evaluating the risks of symbolically representing illness as metaphor. In this regard, this work deviates from epistemically agnostic research on religion and conspiracy theories (Robertson and Amarasingam, 2022), by critically analysing the reliability of the various epistemic claims about cancer cures made by content creators on TikTok.

Methods and Findings

This study employed an ethnographic approach to understand how metaphors are used to spread health misinformation online. The focus of this study is cancer related health misinformation on the short form video app, TikTok. TikTok is the fastest growing social media app (Shanklin, 2024). Although it is branded as an entertainment platform, TikTok is a primary source of news for many users globally. Survey data from Pew Research Center (2023) indicates that about a third of U.S. adults under thirty regularly obtain the news on TikTok. As a result, TikTok rivals google as a search providers for younger generations. This study sought to simulate an individual using TikTok to search for cancer cures. A pseudonym was used to create a TikTok account for this research. Content was never posted using the account to limit influencing the content recommended. The study commenced by searching for the term ‘cancer cure’ on Monday 29 April 2024. The top 50 posts that appeared for the search ‘cancer cure’ on TikTok’s ‘For You’ page were collected weekly over a duration of four weeks from 29 April until 27 May 2024. In total, 200 posts were collected. Screenshots were saved and the content was manually transcribed. Initially, posts were categorised into those that promoted unfounded cancer cures and those that did not to quantify the extent of cancer related health mis- and disinformation on TikTok. Next, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterned meanings within the data, specifically focusing on how content creators legitimised false and misleading cancer cures in their videos (e.g. unproven remedies, including soursop tea, apricot kernels, oils and powders). Finally, the role of metaphors as a mode of persuasion to promote cancer misinformation was analysed.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is an inductive framework working

from the data up with meaning grounded in the data and interpretation part of the analysis. Of the 200 posts collected and analysed, 163 depicted false or misleading cancer cures. Several codes were generated from this subset following immersive familiarisation with the data. These included: 1) Personal anecdotes of cancer survivors sharing their stories of recovery; 2) Contrarian doctors revealing a miracle cure for cancer; 3) Conspiracy theories revealing miracle cures suppressed by the establishment, 4) Spiritual messages about the importance of faith, religion and mindset to overcome illness and disease and 5) Informative posts relaying information to sell a product or service. These five interlapping codes provided insight into the ways in which content creators use metaphors to legitimise their claims and make cancer related health misinformation compelling.

Figure 1. Percentage of false or misleading cancer cure videos on TikTok

Figure 2. Themes of false or misleading cancer cure videos

Personal anecdotes were coded when content creators shared intimate stories of recovery from cancer concerning themselves or a loved one. 61 of the 163 videos promoting cancer misinformation used personal anecdotes of cancer survivors to legitimise their content. Videos of this kind frequently featured revelations about miracle cures for cancer (e.g. ‘Food cured my cancer. NOT CHEMO,’ ‘Pt 2 Grape Seed extract and curing cancer.’) written in the first-person singular: ‘I want to share a message about how I survived prostate cancer.’ Lifestyle protocols documenting how to cure cancer (e.g. ‘My Holistic Healing Journey Daily Juicing Protocol,’ ‘My healing secret – how I’m healing rare stage 4 cancer,’ ‘How I cured my Stage 4 cancer.’) were

used to verify a range of holistic therapies (e.g. Gerson Therapy, Naturopathy) as alternatives to conventional cancer treatments. Posts categorised under this theme frequently represented recovery as a journey with natural cancer treatments framed in relation to military metaphors as something designed to “fight,” “beat” or “combat” the disease (e.g. ‘How to make cancer fighting soursop tea,’ ‘I want to put you on this programme and experimental treatment fighting cancer with metal,’ ‘Part 7 How I beat My Cancer,’ ’Fight your cancer holistically,’ ‘I also found that apricot kernels when you take it is also a cancer fighting agent. On the NIH website, it says that apricot kernels have been known to help fight cancer.’).

Contrarian doctors was coded when medical professionals promoted false or misleading miracle cures for cancer. This was the second most prevalent code in the data set with 60 of the 163 videos promoting cancer misinformation using contrarian doctors to legitimise their content. Doctors were categorised as contrarian if they held a position in opposition to mainstream medicine and practice. A contrarian stance was often used to verify an alternative health product as a miracle cure and cancer remedy. While many of the contrarian doctors promoting false or misleading medical cures were critical of mainstream medicine, their authority was demonstrated through certified qualifications, institutional knowledge and training. They were depicted as experts in their field without being corrupted and compromised by financial and political incentives as the medical established was perceived to be. Military metaphors featured frequently in this theme with contrarian doctors discussing how alternative health treatments could “fight” and “combat” the disease: ‘Here are 5 beverages that fight cancer,’ ‘This ancient biblical herb appears to fight cancer, inflammation and neuropathic pain,’ and soursop tea described as a miracle cure: ‘used as an alternative

therapy for many cancers, such as pancreatic, ovarian, prostate and brain cancer. It can also be useful in combating AIDS and herpes.'

Conspiracy theories alleging to expose the truth about miracle cures being suppressed by the establishment was another common theme in the sample of cancer related misinformation. 32 of the 163 videos promoting false or misleading cancer cures used conspiracy theories to legitimise their content. Content was coded as conspiratorial if it adhered to an essentialist notion of a conspiracy theory – the belief that a corrupt elite either control or seek to control society (Butter and Knight, 2015) – or promoted an unofficial narrative strategically rejected by the establishment (Authors removed, 2023). Conspiracy theories were a persuasive way to promote cancer misinformation because they implied that there was an effective cure for cancer that was being suppressed by the medical establishment (e.g. 'The cure for cancer has always existed, but the truth is hidden away from you for a reason,' 'The cure for cancer was discovered 42 years ago, but has been suppressed several times,' 'This is soursop fruit and it cures cancer but the health industry doesn't want you to know that because they make billions from chemo then helping you recover from chemo,' 'This man found a cure for cancer. He was arrested, due to belief of him being a fraud,' 'He cured cancer and was jailed for healing people with herbs…He had beaten the High Priests of Medicine.'). Conspiratorial videos were often accompanied by evocative music and featured a viral hook to attract attention (e.g. 'I leaked it,' 'He knew too much.'). Videos often directed viewers to purchase a product or a book. These products included miracle cures for cancer and secret knowledge about how to treat the disease (e.g. 'The cure for cancer has always existed. Save it before it's deleted. The secret cure to c@ncer,' 'Secret recipe features in the Book – 1937 cancer.'). Content creators

commonly used coded language to evade fact checkers and moderators, adding to the impression that they were sharing secret knowledge suppressed by authorities (e.g. ‘The secret cure to c@ncer,’ ‘Natural CANC€R treatment: is what the doctors don’t want you to know,’ ‘When big ph@rma tries to come after me after I find studies that show oregano oil kill$$ cervical c@ncer cells.’). Military metaphors featured in videos. Their inclusion was less about demonstrating the properties of a miracle cure, as was the case with personal anecdotes and contrarian doctors, and more focused on highlighting a creator’s pursuit of freedom against the corrupt establishment (e.g. ‘Truth seeking humanitarian fighting for freedom, fostering empathy, igniting chan.’).

Spiritual messages about the importance of faith, religion and mindset to overcome illness and disease was another theme that emerged from the data. This theme included not only the digitalisation of religion, but also the way in which religion is constituted through digital media and cultures (see Tsuria and Campbell, 2021). 23 of the 163 videos promoting cancer misinformation employed spiritual themes to legitimise false or misleading cancer cures. Spiritual was coded when organised religion or New Age Spirituality was depicted as a cancer remedy (e.g. subconscious reprogramming, mindset healing, manifestation, visualisation), with religious references among younger generations on the platform representing a broad understanding of faith (Hamm & Hoeting, 2023). Spiritual terms often featured as hashtags to give the video meaning and making it discoverable among wider audiences on TikTok (e.g. #islam, #prayer, #christiantok, #jesuslovesyou, #saved, #healing, #healed, #spiritualtiktok, #manifestation, #subconsciousprogramming). God featured frequently in these videos. ‘Trust in God’ as an external omnipotent force was seen as a requirement for healing. The body was also metaphorically imbued with

divine qualities and the capacity to heal itself naturally (e.g. ‘We’re going to be talking about the incredible body that we live in and its inbuilt ability to heal itself,’ ‘Your body is so powerful. You just need to give it the right input, the right environment, the right information, the right nourishment and you can heal your life,’ ‘the Bible shows that our body was created by God to heal itself. And it needs faith, faith in God who created it and faith in the body created to heal.’). The underlying message of these videos was the importance of faith and self-belief: you need to believe in yourself to heal from illness and disease.

Informative was coded when a content creator relayed information about a cancer cure without reference to one of the legitimisation techniques listed above. 29 of the 163 posts featuring false or misleading cancer cures used informative posts to legitimise the claims and products advertised. Posts categorised under this theme appeared educational, educating viewers about the health properties of a cancer remedy and how to use it (e.g. ‘Herbs that naturally treat and prevent colon cancer,’ ‘Boil soursop leaves for 10-15mins,’ ‘Did you know that Soursop leaves kill cancer cells naturally without any side effects? Just get some fresh soursop leaves, boil them in 1 liter of water until the water is reduced to half strain and drink 100mls a day. You may add honey optional.’). Information was typically communicated in the form of a voice over, sometimes featuring the content creator, but mostly depicting an image of the miracle cure advertised, or its natural, ancestral origins (a mountain, herb, river), accompanied by a link to purchase a product. Products ranged from oils to animal dewormers, apricot kernels and soursop tea. The content creator was mostly absent from view. Instead, the information conveyed was authoritative, using facts and science to legitimise products and protocols (e.g. ‘Many studies have shown that regular

consumption of sea moss can inhibit the growth of cancer cells and if you do indeed struggle with this sickness, you just need to incorporate 1 tablespoon twice a day either into a juice, a tea or a smoothie and you're good to go,' 'Some laboratory studies have shown that soursop contains compounds that may have anticancer properties,' 'In modern times, in vitro studies show that it can inhibit the growth of leukaemia cells and breast cancer cells and induce autophagy or natural cancer cell death.'). Many of these videos employed military metaphors to represent the efficacy of a miracle cure: 'Boil soursop leaves for 10-15mins. This is a natural cancer fighter!!,' 'Soursop can help strengthen the immune system, assisting in fighting off infections and illnesses',' 'Fighting cancer naturally with soursop leaves. Struggling with cancer? Discover the power of Source App! Transform one leaf into a cancer fighting elixr: Soursop leaf is 10,000 times better than chemotherapy,' 'This tea helps fight various types of cancer: Ovarian, Blood, Lung, Stomach, Cervical, Breast, Uterine, Prostate,' 'Herbs that fight cancer/holistic cures for cancer,' 'Let's fight cancer together using Rick Simpson oil.'

The religious dimensions of health and wellness

Wellness discourse is infused with religious metaphors. Practitioners often commence their wellness journey with "devotion" to a particular diet or exercise regime, which involves the abstinence of certain "sinful," impure foods (Baker, 2022). Practitioners also seek a "guru" as a source of salvation and as a guide to help them "see the light." The turn to gurus in contemporary secular societies for advice is symptomatic of two conditions: first, a process of de-traditionalisation, characterised by the loosening of tradition and the decline of organised religion, which has led to a state of "ontological insecurity" in which people seek guides and scripts about how to live their lives

(Giddens, 1991); and second, low trust society – not the absence of trust but rather growing distrust of institutional experts and elites, both of which result in people seeking alternative guru figures for advice (Authors removed). In many ways, the conversion to wellness mimics religious conversion. In the context of wellness, conversion begins by making the decision to "reset" one's life through a conscious reversal of poor diet and lifestyle, and negative thinking. It is common for wellness entrepreneurs to market their products in this way as exemplified by Kelly Brogan's 'Vital Mind Reset' 44-day program, Oprah's 'Reset' diet and Gwyneth Paltrow's '7-day Reset Kit'; the reset is even included in the subtitle of Paltrow's 2019 cookbook: The Clean Plate: Eat, Reset, Heal. In addition to "the reset" and finding a guru to "show them the light," conversion also involves a personal "journey" of self-transformation, physical, mental and spiritual awakening, which is then shared to proselytise or convert others. The practitioner's conversion process resembles the guru's own spiritual awakening; a shift from a place of unconscious pain, trauma and despair to one characterised by self-discovery, self-actualisation and self-transformation.

Wellness and healing are frequently presented as a journey. Metaphors of this kind adhere to the archetypal hero's journey, which embodies the pursuit of self-mastery and courage in the face of adversity (Campbell, 1949). In the context of health and illness, one's heroic journey is derived from their personal experience of overcoming pain and trauma and sharing their truth. As Jess Ainscough explained when reflecting on her wellness journey:

> I'm not an expert. I'm not a doctor or a nutritionist. I'm a health coach. But the thing that I do is I lead by example. I put my lifestyle out there. I show people

> what I have done to transform my life and kind of invite them to come along with the journey and take on parts that resonate with them. So it's not about telling people what to do; it's just about leading by example and showing people that there are other ways of doing things — and, hopefully, providing them with a little bit of hope (Ainscough in Taylor-Kabbaz, 2015).

In this regard, the lived experience acquired from one's personal healing journey stands in for clinical expertise.

The cancer cure videos promoting misinformation on TikTok regularly drew on metaphors of the journey to promote false and misleading claims. The videos that invoked metaphors of the journey to promote a cancer remedy typically used personal anecdotes of the content creator's recovery, or a family member's story of recovery, to legitimise the products and protocols advertised. For example, one video categorised under the theme of personal anecdotes accompanied by the hashtag #healingjourney explained: "Boil soursop Leaves for 10-15mins. This is a natural cancer fighter." Another video entitled, 'My Journey of Holistic Healing,' recounted the alternative health coach, Barbara O'Neill, discussing the magical properties of castor oil as a cancer remedy. A video promoting Gerson Therapy as a cancer cure similarly drew on metaphors of healing as a journey to validate a juicing protocol:

> Listen, are y'all still juicing? You know that's an important part of your protocol. You have to juice, especially fruit. You have to do it. Do the fruit. Do the juicing. Fresh juice. Not the juice out of the cans or the bottles…My Holistic Healing

> Journey Daily Juicing Protocol…It's all about diet. You have to maintain your diet and lifestyle.

In these videos metaphors and misinformation were intimately connected with metaphors representing healing as a journey used to sell unproven cancer cures (e.g. soursop leaves/tea; castor oil; supplements) and promote harmful protocols (e.g. Gerson therapy) as alternatives to chemotherapy and radiotherapy. By drawing on the creator's personal journey recovering from cancer, experience (metaphor) was able to stand in for expertise (facts).

Other cancer cure videos on TikTok presented the journey as a collective shift in consciousness. This was especially the case with those videos categorised under the theme conspiracy. Videos of this kind typically shared secret knowledge (e.g. 'He knew too much,' 'I leaked the coca cola recipe,' 'Government leaks.'). The insights shared were not merely about raising individual awareness, they professed to raise collective consciousness (e.g. 'Raising the collective consciousness of the elite, day by day.'). Many of these posts used coded language (e.g. 'The secret cure to c@ncer') and metaphors (e.g. 'the c-monster') to evade content moderators and fact checkers, contributing to the sense that their fringe beliefs were suppressed by the establishment. In this regard, there are parallels between the metaphorical tropes that featured in some cancer cure videos and those used to spread health mis/disinformation during the pandemic. During the pandemic the generic individual wellness journey, which in many ways mimics a spiritual journey, was supplanted by a collective journey. A primary example is the conspiracy theory, QAnon, wherein true believers were called upon to decode and crowdsource cryptic clues left on message

boards by Q, a military intelligence officer. Donald Trump, and his devotees, spoke of the need for a "global detox": a purge of the Deep State to be carried out by Trump. Mirroring the spiritual awakening of the wellness practitioner, true believers were promised that this battle would lead to a period of Truth, Prosperity and Freedom, referred to as "the Great Awakening." Here, the hero's journey is replaced by the archetypal story of the rebel – an outlaw, who is driven by the pursuit of freedom to stand up to authority and compliance, and rebel against social conventions.

Metaphors as a gateway to misinformation

A user searching for cancer cure videos on TikTok is recommended a large volume of health misinformation. In this study, 81 per cent of cancer cure videos (163 of 200 videos) promoted false or misleading information. Most of this content was monetised to promote unproven cancer remedies (e.g. soursop tea, apricot kernels, powders and oils), while other videos promoted conspiratorial and radical political views that undermined trust in democracy and scientific institutions. Many of the videos categorised under the theme conspiracy sowed distrust about the government and medical establishment to present their alternative health remedies as secret knowledge suppressed by the elite. Videos of this kind contribute to the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and radical political views previously relegated to the fringe. There is no single route to radicalisation and the term itself is contested (Marwick et al., 2022). The internet does, however, play a role in exposing people to conspiratorial content and encouraging them to adopt more extreme views through the promise of wisdom and community. On social media apps, such as Instagram and Twitter, influencers play a key role in the amplification and mainstreaming of conspiracy

theories. On TikTok, the recommender algorithm plays a more central role in exposing people to conspiratorial content. While radicalisation is not technologically determined by simply viewing content online, the technological affordances of TikTok make the app a fertile space for misinformation to flourish. On TikTok, unlike earlier social media apps, the recommender algorithm is central to the user experience (Klug et al., 2021). As soon as a user opens the app, they are presented with an endless scroll of videos on their ‘For You’ page. Upon searching for cancer cures on the platform, the videos recommended provide an unlimited supply of false, misleading and conspiratorial content. The algorithm recommends a combination of videos from known and unknown creators, many of whom the user does not follow. As such, the user has less control over the content they are exposed to on TikTok, which is distinct from earlier friend and follower-based social networking sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. Short form videos on TikTok can become a gateway to radical views because these videos commonly direct users to personal bios, websites and ecommerce stores, which are relatively unregulated (Baker, 2025). The app provides accessible avenues for monetisation that incentivise content creators to profit from unproven cancer cures exploiting those who are desperate for answers and vulnerable. From this perspective, misinformation and conspiracy theories can be viewed in part as a technical problem influenced by certain technological affordances, incentives and the ways the app is engineered.

The conversion process on TikTok to adopt more radical and conspiratorial views is also a process of socialisation facilitated by metaphors and religion. Among far-right internet subcultures, the act of radicalising others is often referred to as “redpilling” (Lewis and Marwick, 2017). While the metaphor of the red pill, derived from the

science-fiction film, *The Matrix*, and popular among conspiratorial communities, portrays taking the red pill as a decisive moment of conversion, “a single event that radically transforms the subject forever,” rarely is there a simple causal link between the internet and radicalisation (Marwick et al., 2022). Exposure alone does not determine who will believe misinformation and adopt conspiratorial and extremist ideologies as a result. While much psychological literature suggests that certain psychological characteristics predispose individuals to believing conspiracy theories, empirical research suggests that the adoption of conspiracy theories is an active and gradual process involving a variety of situational, personal and external circumstances and different levels of commitment (Butter and Knight, 2015). Researchers have shown that there are some cases where conspiracy theories are not only understandable but justifiable as exemplified by the social marginalisation, racial discrimination and medical experimentation experienced by black Americans in the US, which fuelled a series of conspiracy theories about the government and medical establishment, reinforced by real-world events such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments in the twentieth century (Nelson, 2011; Washinton, 2006).

In the context of health, metaphors of purity play a primary role in promoting misinformation. Part of the reason that wellness has become a gateway to misinformation is because of the emphasis contemporary wellness culture places on bodily purity. The appeal to bodily purity manifests in a variety of beliefs and practices, which bind the individual to a moral order. This is achieved in a Durkheimian sense through elevating the pure as a sacred object set apart from the profane (Durkheim, 1912). As Mary Douglas notes in *Purity and Danger* (1966), part of the universal appeal of purity is that dirt is universally offensive. What constitutes dirt varies across

cultures and context, depending on the classifications in use, “There is no such thing as dirt - no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit.” While the mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy theories among wellness communities during the pandemic was relatively novel, Douglas (1966) notes that examples of taboo are mainly conservative in effect because they protect an abstract constitution from being subverted. Hence, the purity of the body can stand in for the purity of the State with perceived toxic threats modified from impure foods and chemicals to toxic enemies and organisations. Metaphors of purification cast certain beliefs and things as polluting forces and taboo; they also justify their removal by presenting “toxic” objects, beliefs and values as a threat to the health of the individual and body politic. The role of purity as a structural force at the individual and collective level is illustrated by the conceptual model of the Purity Paradigm (Baker, 2022).

The Purity Paradigm depicted below illustrates how metaphors of purity are susceptible to misinformation, conspiracism and political extremism (Baker, 2022). From the base to the apex of the pyramid, the image depicts the ways in which ascending levels are associated with decreased numbers of devotees but increasingly radical beliefs, practices and behaviours.

Figure 3. The Purity Paradigm

1. **Mind–body purification techniques**: Stage 1 includes dietary and lifestyle practices ubiquitous among natural and holistic health communities. Common examples include adhering to a vegan or carnivore diet, ‘clean eating’, cleanses, detoxes, fasting, exercise, pranayama, yoga, meditation and

mindfulness. Stage 1 often begins with innocuous health claims and nutritional advice: ‘you are what you eat’, ‘your body is a temple’, which rely on commonsense thinking about purity and cleanliness. Stage 1 also includes eschewing what are perceived to be impure substances (e.g. smoking, alcohol, toxins, chemicals, pollutants). Anti-vaccine activists often use this language to promote vaccines as impure substances that pollute the body.

2. **Spiritual awakening**: In Stage 2, mind–body purification techniques are reframed as New Age spiritual practices performed as part of one’s quest for self-actualisation, transcendence and spiritual awakening. What appear to be secular conspiracies often subscribe to these metaphors of spiritual ascension with the process of “waking up” involving “doing your own research” in an attempt to discover pure Truth. It is no coincidence that QAnon uses biblical metaphors of good and evil to frame its messaging.

3. **Conscious community**: By virtue of embodying these purification practices and beliefs, in Stage 3 certain groups elevate themselves as a more evolved and enlightened ‘conscious community’ than the masses, who in some cases are pejoratively depicted as asleep – “sheep”, “sheeples”, “muggles”. In Stage 3, narratives of personal salvation are reframed as a collective shift in consciousness.

4. **Moral supremacy**: In Stage 4, theories of evolution are used to justify a group’s moral superiority. In conspiratorial contexts, in-group markers are often defined in relation to biological and spiritual differences. These are then used to defend xenophobic and anti-Semitic beliefs. For example, during the COVID-19

pandemic ‘the other’ has been dehumanised as Zionists, Sabbateans, Satanists and Reptilian elites (“lizard people”).

The prevalence of purity in wellness discourse as a structuring symbolic and moral code is part of the reason why wellness has been weaponised by the far-right during the COVID-19 pandemic as metaphors of purity and cleanliness can be appropriated to validate racism and white supremacy. Purity metaphors facilitate a spectrum of ideologies from benign to harmful. It is not that all wellness practitioners uncritically succumb to radical and extreme views, but rather that the emphasis on purity in wellness culture frames the world in a way that can make people susceptible to cult-like dynamics and extreme ideologies. Hence, while many wellness practitioners engage in mind-body purification techniques and spiritual awakening (stage one and two), it is less common for devotees to elevate themselves as a conscious community set apart from the profane or to adopt xenophobic beliefs. In the cancer cures views that comprised this study, those who presented themselves as an “elite” group (e.g. @eliteminded) typically promoted conspiratorial content and ironically distrusted the powerful elite. This framework both stemmed from alternative epistemologies and promoted distrust of democracy and scientific institutions.

In the cancer cure videos analysed, metaphors of purification were commonly framed through reference to detoxification. Numerous posts advertised natural health products to detoxify the body from cancer (metaphorically cast as “the c-monster.”). Military metaphors were employed in conjunction with purification metaphors to suggest that cancer invaded the body and required removal. Gerson therapy was frequently promoted as an alternative cancer cure to chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

For example, Lindsey Gritton, a creator with over 254,000 followers posted a video entitled, ‘How I cured my Stage 4 cancer.’ The video, liked over 15,800 times, linked to her bio where viewers could purchase her ‘cleansing kits’ comprised of juicing manuals, turkey tail mushroom capsules and doTERRA oils (Frankincense, Myrrh) via her linktree, a landing page service enabling users to create a personalised page with links to products and services to monetise their audience. Louis Grant Smith, a self-described holistic nutritionist with 370,000 followers, drew on purification metaphors to promote his breakfast solution and e-book:

> What I did when I had cancer. This is the next thing I did. I did all these things at the same time. I changed my diet. I changed my lifestyle. I detoxed the home. I detoxed my food. I started juicing, started cooking from scratch, nothing in the box, nothing in a packet, nothing in a can, nothing frozen. I did everything overnight when I realised my cancer could be self-inflicted and I could do something about it. I became a fanatic, a ninety-day fanatic and then when I finished that I said, “hey I can do that” and I did it another 90 days. I did three lots of 90 days: 90 days, 90 days, 90 days and eventually it became a lifestyle…this is a detox that’s made from organic, natural whole human food, it gets the gut health right. It goes through your body looking for heavy metal chemicals and chelating and empowering your body to dump them. It cleans out your lymph system.

Purification metaphors were presented as a cure for cancer and a remedy for other health conditions such as autism. Smith purported,

> My grandson, Daniel, incredible story. 100% autistic, reeling on the ground, nothing could help him. He got on the same detox program and guess what happened? He had to do it for about five years, with a lot of prayer – there's power in prayer, don't forget that – but you need prayer for cancer as well. And guess what happed? He's 99% autism free today, which to me is really, really a wonderful young, incredible child. So, why am I telling you all that? Because this is a detox that's made from organic, natural whole human food, it gets the gut health right. It goes through your body looking for heavy metal chemicals and chelating and empowering your body to dump them. It cleans out your lymph system. It's a Saturday program. I did it for 90 days and then I did it for another 90 days. My 4 year old Grandson just did it and I think it took about 5 years. So why am I telling you all that? Is if you want to find out more about the detox I can send you a video on it. It's about a 45 minute video. I will walk you through what I would do if I wanted to detox my body, but I'd clean my body by using things like…we can talk about that next. Like, share and follow.

The video, liked 3066 times, directed users to a link in his bio where they could purchase Smith's 'Start with Breakfast Solution' for $197.99USD and order his ebook. TikTok affords content creators accessible avenues to monetise their products. However, metaphors of purification – the notion that his Breakfast Solution 'cleans out your lymph system' - play a key role in making health misinformation compelling by supporting the idea that a certain product or protocol purifies and cleanses the body of illness and disease. Barbara O'Neill, an alternative health care promoter, frequently featured in cancer cure videos, also draws routinely on metaphors of purification to promote natural health remedies and services as cures for cancer. In one video, she

claimed that “Cancer is a fungus. Cancer loves acid” with her claims used to advertise a series of cancer remedies ranging from baking soda to castor oil, wild yam cream, green juice and herbs designed to detoxify cancer from the body. As she notes when describing a cancer patient she healed, “At Misty Mountain Health Retreat…We gave her herbs to kill the cancer. She had the green drinks every day…Her laundry was full of chemicals.” Several other content creators drew on metaphors of purification to represent cancer as a parasite that needed to be cleansed. In these instances, dog dewormer (fenbendazole) and horse dewormer (panacur C, ivermectin horse paste) were promoted as remedies to flush the body of cancer-causing parasites. As one content creator claimed, “Cured his own cancer with Fenbendazole. Parasites = cancer!” The video documented Joe Tippins Protocol to cure cancer in a series of hashtags-#fenbendazole, #ivermectin, #chlorinedioxidsolution, #ashwagandha #morningaseeds, #blackseedoil-with the caption:” “Cancer is no longer a death sentence.” Other content creators promoted horse dewormer as a cancer remedy by instructing viewers how to consume horse dewormer to purify the body of cancer: ‘Ivermectin treatment. This is day 5. I did pick up some more (holding a tube of ivermectin horse paste) then I did it twice a day because that’s what’s recommended. #conspiracies,’ ‘This is how my dad takes his horse dewormer for his stage 4 cancer: organic olive oil and panacur C’ and ‘Kill cancer kill parasites. So you take some arginine and ornithine in a matter of 20min if the headache has gone you have neutralised the worm urine…It’s time to deworm and it’s time to get them out.’ In all instances, metaphors of purification were used to verify a product’s efficacy as a cancer remedy.

Conclusion

This article has explored how metaphors are used to promote unproven cancer cures on TikTok. A metaphor gives something a name that belongs to something else. In the context of health and illness, metaphors shape our understanding of wellness and how to respond to disease (Sontag, 1978, 1989). Increasingly, disease metaphors are shared online, not only by medical experts and public health professionals, but influencers, entrepreneurs and content creators seeking to profit from selling false or misleading cancer cures. TikTok affords content creators greater capacity to profit from cancer cures by providing accessible means to monetisation and algorithmically enabling unknown content creators to reach wide audiences. While TikTok's recommender algorithm surfaces an abundance of health misinformation, purification metaphors play an important role in depicting cancer as a toxin that requires cleansing and detoxification by various products and services. Purification metaphors assume a religious quality in the Manichean struggle between good and evil. Meaning is relational. Consequently, what makes purification metaphors so effective is that by virtue of being pure they are depicted as remedies to cleanse the body of illness and disease. In this sense, purification metaphors and military metaphors coalesce to effectively depict a miracle cure as the antidote to foreign enemy ("the c monster"). Purity metaphors also promote conventional cancer treatments as harmful and toxic, drawing on conspiracy theories to persuade users to eschew chemotherapy and radiotherapy. In this regard, disease metaphors are not merely figurative; they shape behaviour and can lead to real world harms. Disease metaphors may be pervasive (Semino et al., 2017), but as Semino (2021) points out, health messaging requires a context-sensitive approach to metaphor with some metaphors more useful and harmful than others. To combat health misinformation on TikTok requires technical

solutions, but it also requires resistance to purification and military metaphors in the context of cancer.

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