

Wellness As White as it Ever Was...

What the history of white supremacy's soft colonization of the body can tell us about the wellness-to-alt-right pipeline

Introduction and background

Many of us witnessed friends and family members parroting increasingly right-wing, fearful talking points starting in the mid-2010's, or developing deep obsessions with unfounded conspiracy theories which originated on an unmoderated message board. The gradual radicalization of viewers of right-wing news media such as FOX News was made apparent by watching the Baby Boom generation's response to world events. While perhaps dismaying to encounter, this type of extreme interpretation of the world is unsurprising from those in our lives already predisposed to such beliefs. It may even cause befuddled amusement when a right-wing relative begins supplementing their family income by selling essential oils as alternative medicine for a multilevel marketing organization. What seems to surprise researchers and laypeople alike is how effectively right-wing extremism and its related conspiracy cults found their way into wellness communities online through the use of rhetoric typically found in left-leaning, holistic wellness and alternative spirituality. Until recently, alternative wellness practices intended to support or supplant Western medicine in healing maladies were typically regarded in the United States mainstream as being synonymous with such "crunchy" tropes as the freegan yoga instructor with a man bun, or pop culture characters such as the flakey Phoebe Buffay in the popular 1990's sitcom "Friends." Since 2020, however,

wellness culture and New Age conspirituality have been used to push right-wing messaging into mainstream discourse, contributing to public confusion about accurate information regarding matters of health and safety (Chang 2021). In this paper, I intend to illustrate the extent to which the alt-right, the wellness industry, and New Age conspirituality share a foundation rooted in European colonialism and white nationalism. I will examine white supremacist rhetoric's historic role in shaping American discourse around optimal health, the wellness industry's soft colonization through appropriating Indigenous cultures, new age conspirituality and its shared concerns with the alt-right, and QAnon's presence in wellness-branded marketing networks. I will also assess the function of social media's role in the rapid spread of alt-right supported disinformation within wellness communities targeting middle class, white, suburban adults.

Understanding the shared vocabulary, values, and fears which overlap for these groups will help make sense of the ease by which social media can spread increasingly extremist groupthink within communities oriented toward individual optimization. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider "white supremacy" to be the overarching term to describe social, political, spiritual, and economic phenomena which implicitly or explicitly function to promote white, Eurocentric, patriarchal, neocolonial values at the expense or exploitation of other groups.

The alt-right movement eschews mainstream conservatism in favor of white supremacy, unverified conspiracy theories, paranoia about the extinction of the white race, and bigotry toward anyone viewed as antithetical to white, Christian nationalism. Special attention is given to maintaining good physical and mental health for the purposes of fighting on behalf of the movement and birthing large numbers of white

children. Conspiracy cult QAnon originated on alt-right message board 4Chan, where the term “red pill” was coined to describe nuggets of disinformation which serve to radicalize through extreme emotion as they purport to expose alleged global elites who secretly control society for their own, twisted benefit (LeClerc 2022). QAnon built off this tradition at its start, using vague, misleading information to undermine opponents of Donald Trump and his presidential bid. Notable among these conspiracies is the belief that the cabal of elites who run the world are Satanic cannibals. As the Q conspiracies grew, the umbrella widened to include other conspiracy theories about the government, mainstream medicine, demasculinization of men, and alien life forms, to name a few. QAnon conspiracies are rooted in a belief that everything is interconnected with deep skepticism of mainstream interpretation of reality.

Establishing a social pecking order through diet and exercise

White supremacy in the mainstream has historically encouraged discourse about personal health to elevate the white, wealthy, able body as the ideal; failure to display any or all qualities therein a moral failing. According to social historian Katharina Vester in her 2010 study on Antebellum and Postbellum diet culture in the American colonies and early United States, diet discourse in America in the late 1800’s was heavily gendered, centered around middle-class white men’s displays of virility and status through vigorous activity and restricted diets. Women of means at the time were discouraged from leanness for its perceived potential to reduce their attractiveness and one’s ability to bear children. In the early 20th century a slender figure on a woman became emblematic of the restraint upheld by white, middle-class culture.

Unfortunately “like women’s suffrage, which did not lessen racial discrimination, expert diet discourses targeted at women legitimized social exclusion in claiming that foreign women, immigrant women, and African American women were not able to control their bodies in the same way” (Vester p58). Though it can be argued that wellness as a mainstream concept has adopted a more egalitarian outlook, historic conversations in America about wellness of body and mind have been centered on promoting a singularly white, affluent perspective. As in other social issues, creating an “other” to which one can favorably compare one’s self as a moral standard opens the door for an individual to view any hardship as a moral failing.

Mass-producing the heck out of gift shop dream catchers to protect against chemtrails

The New Age movement began in the 1970’s as young people explored spirituality outside the norms with which they were raised. It has expanded in its definition over the years to include practices appropriated from indigenous cultures, and emphasizes an individual’s responsibility over their own vibrational harmony with the universe. It has been argued that a number of practices embraced by the “New Age” movement and generally accepted in American culture as part of a left-leaning identity are indeed exoticized selections from other cultures used without their larger, spiritual context. Researcher Amal Awad remarked in her April 2021 article in *The Guardian* titled *The new age looks enlightened and exotic because it borrows freely from non-Anglo cultures*, “I think about this when I see a major airline advertise Asia as a destination for adventure, spirituality and culture – as though spirituality is a place you visit, a temporary experience to be captured on social media, exit at the giftshop.” While yoga

was introduced to the West by practitioners from India and has become a mainstream fitness activity, much of what is considered part of new age wellness and spirituality are co-opted from Indigenous traditions and presented as mystical means to achieving prosperity. Whether prosperity of resources, enlightenment, fertility, or spiritual harmony, the focus is often on using borrowed traditions to whatever may be the end goal of the individual. Exoticizing such traditions as mystical or occult through cultural decontextualization allows new age spirituality to serve as a method of soft colonization. Removing practices from their context to apply to a neoliberal sense of personal achievement encourages misunderstanding of the cultures from which they are lifted and promotes confusion around the cause of one's angst.

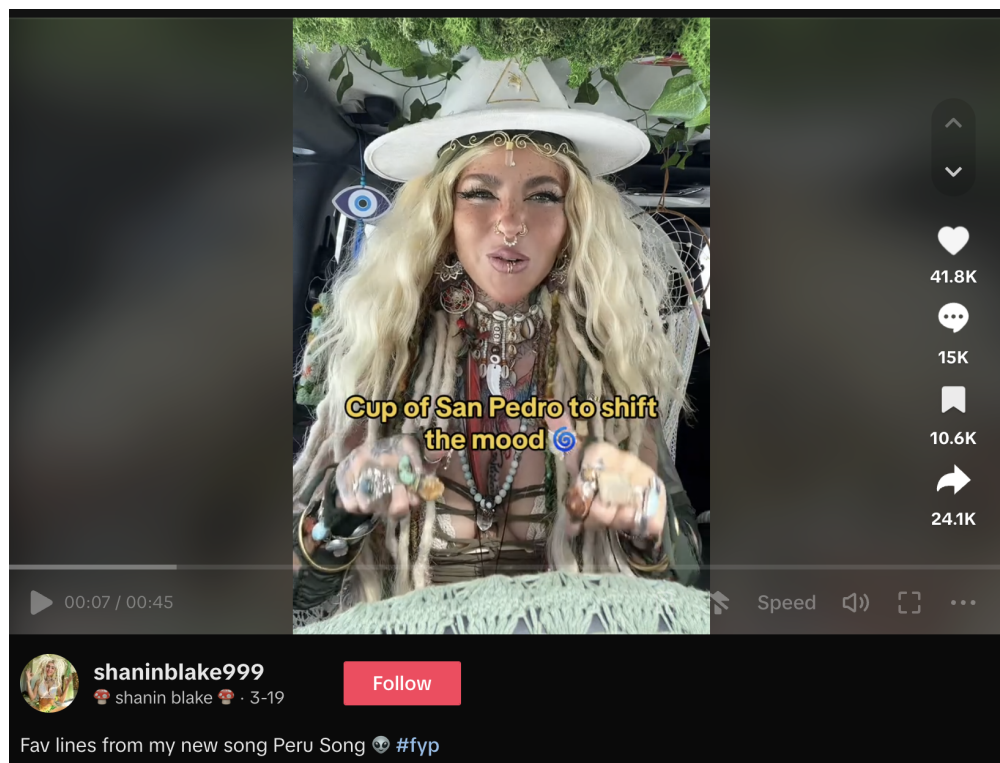


Image: screenshot of TikTok influencer shaninblake999's video for her "Peru Song," in which she appears festooned with symbolism appropriated from assorted non-Anglo and Indigenous cultures while singing about engaging in the Peruvian spiritual practice of ayahuasca to converse with extraterrestrials about the pyramids' alleged use as time travel devices.

New Age conspirituality is the convergence of such beliefs with conspiracy theories common with New Age believers such as vaccine paranoia, chemtrails, and fluoride toxicity as a major health concern. Christian nationals who believe America is God's favored nation view anything determined to be anti-Christian to be anti-America, and look for enemy causes behind anything they deem contributing to society's downfall. Both groups tend toward beliefs that lean anti-intellectual, anti-government, and suspicious of mainstream Western medicine; both seem to subscribe to a neoliberalism that places emphasis on placing blame for the world's ills, be it Satan, misalignment with energetic vibrations, or government cover-up (Crockford 2022).

Milking the political ambiguity of alternative health culture for the 'gram

Wellness as an element of healthcare today is a holistic focus on an individual's physical, spiritual, and mental health through means alternative to conventional medicine. New generations of practitioners are working to undo many of the institutional obstacles to equitable care. Nevertheless, recurring trends in wellness as an industry center affluent, able-bodied, light-skinned content creators who use emotionally-charged language to generate monetized engagement under the guise of promoting personal health optimization. As Harris, et al. surmised in their 2023 exploration of Black content creators' experience using TikTok, those surveyed experienced suppression of their content's overall reach as well as racially-charged harassment from users. Meanwhile, seemingly racist algorithms appear to promote white women to more users' social media feeds than BIPOC women, and white women are more likely to receive lucrative marketing partnerships. Without intentional dismantling of the causes of this

disparity, racial stereotypes uplifting trim, affluent white women as the standard of wholesomeness and well-being continue to be the norm.

Establishing trust within new age and wellness communities often pairs inspirational-but-relatable images with messages which confirm the specific concerns of the group in question and offer information which claims to contextualize or remedy those concerns. Social media algorithms and the false intimacy of parasocial relationships between followers and content creators incentivizes controversial, conspiratorial information likely to garner engagement, which leads to increased revenue. Regardless of their agreement of the message their account promotes, alt-wellness influencers push radicalized misinformation posed as enlightened calls to action for followers already inclined toward skepticism of the conventional. Creators and brands in the industry position themselves as trusted members of the wellness community through content strategy to create influence in spaces where trust in institutional wisdom is in light supply. In the case of micro-influencers whose follower counts range between about 30,000 and 300,000, informal language and personal anecdotes help sell the authenticity needed to break through to people typically suspicious of widely-accepted paradigms such as those who have been dissatisfied following conventional advice in caring for their personal health (Baker 2022).

Right wing extremism disguised as health expertise in alt-wellness MLMs

Attack of the “Huns”

We see evidence of the political ambiguity of alt-right and alt-left and their shared values when examining wellness-adjacent multilevel marketing groups such as

doTERRA and Young Living who claim to provide “clean” health remedies and improved financial security through the use and sales of essential oils. Whereas a common theme in popular culture regarding the use of essential oils as part of one’s wellness routine is that of a crystal-clutching, granola-loving alt-left trope, Young Living’s brand messaging specifically targets people of a much more conservative, Christian bent. Founded by Church of Latter-Day Saints member and alternative medicine enthusiast D. Gary Young in the mid-1990’s, Young Living warned its members of the dangerous toxins supposedly lurking in every aspect of their lives and offered its products as safer alternatives. The messaging to recruit and encourage members to sell essential oils to their personal network is heavily gendered to appeal to conservative wives and mothers with promises of contributing to the household income without losing time to attend to their families (Mastrangelo and Longo, 2024). doTERRA’s founding executives also share a conservative background with links to Brigham Young University and promote the use of aromatherapy as a purer form of treating disease than conventional medication.

Additional doTERRA Research

doTERRA Serenity® Sleep System Epigenetic Research

In this study participants wore a fitness tracker that collected participants' sleep times and amounts of light sleep, REM sleep, and deep sleep, providing a "sleep score" with and without using the Serenity Sleep System.

doTERRA MetaPWR® Assist Clinical Trial Results

This MetaPWR Assist study is a beacon of hope in the quest for optimal metabolic health. It unveils the promising role of MetaPWR Assist in supporting wellness goals and highlights the dedication of doTERRA to product efficacy and scientific integrity.*

doTERRA Lifelong Vitality Pack® Clinical Trial

The doTERRA Lifelong Vitality Pack study provides a window into the myriad benefits this product offers for overall health, demonstrating the synergy of its unique ingredients.*

doTERRA Oregano Essential Oil Study

This article sheds light on the diverse applications of Oregano essential oil, as well as its potential to support cellular health and proper immune function when used internally.*

Peppermint Softgels in PDR Assets

The inclusion of Peppermint Softgels in the Physician's Desk Reference underscores their researched benefits, particularly for digestive health.* It marks a significant milestone in doTERRA product validation.

doTERRA Clove Essential Oil Study

The extensive research conducted on Clove essential oil examines its health benefits and applications when consumed.* This study is a testament to our relentless pursuit of knowledge in the essential oil field.

doTERRA Frankincense Essential Oil Study

This study unveils the historical and modern significance of [Frankincense essential oil](#), highlighting its myriad of potential internal health benefits and bridging the gap between tradition and science.*

doTERRA On Guard® Study

This study investigated the role doTERRA On Guard can play in supporting immune health when taken internally, underscoring our commitment to create blends that are both effective and scientifically validated.*

Explore the World of Essential Oil Science with doTERRA

We invite you to immerse yourself in this fascinating essential oil research. Each study is a window into the meticulous care and scientific rigor doTERRA applies to every product.

Through our investigations, we continue to uphold our promise of purity, potency, and transparency. Join us on our journey of discovery, experiencing the doTERRA difference—where nature's wisdom is backed by science.

[Science Blog](#)
[Bibliography](#)

*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.

Images: screenshots of doTERRA's "Research" page which is designed to give the appearance of scientific rigor and validation to the company's claims. Highlighted at the bottom, a warning required by the US FDA indicating the statements presented as scientific proof of efficacy have not yet been evaluated.

Young Living's influence seems to have waned since the warning issued by the FDA in 2022 regarding the claims made in their marketing material that their oil blends treat, prevent, cure, or mitigate disease. Nonetheless, similar companies persist in branding an optimized version of the self as one who leverages their community to provide for their families regardless of the product being sold.

Note: during the writing of this paper, Young Living agreed to a five-million-dollar settlement in a class-action lawsuit disputing its efficacy claims as well as its marketing and delivery strategies. The settlement appears to be an effort to avoid further, costly litigation. Timeliness prevents further research at this time (www.essentialoilsclassaction.com/ as of June 3, 2024).

Looking at the Young Living and doTERRA largely white, male, conservative executive teams, this researcher is reminded of the memoirist Emily Lynn Paulson's book reflecting on her experience in a wellness MLM which purported to empower women but instead reinforced white supremacist values. Within the introduction she states, "...despite being camouflaged as empowering, MLMs are deeply anti-feminist" (p 10). Instead, she found the culture reliant on toxic positivity and weaponization of female relationships to drive wealth to the top of the organization, creating an insidious culture primed to accept pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, racism, and white supremacist ideology (Paulson 2023).

Pastel QAnon

Recruitment and retention of a downline (the chain of individuals under a single “sponsor” whose sales numbers directly correlate with the overall success of the sponsor) through gendered messaging and promises of material benefit are not enough to enact the spread of conspiracy theory and disinformation through a network. Rather, the practice of encouraging one’s downline to share information they have acquired elsewhere which appears to confirm the claims of the MLM appears to be foundational in the spread of conspiracy theories within networks. Such alleged “knowledge” includes rhetoric denouncing vaccines as more harmful than governments or medical experts let on, a refrain common in discourse for both the alt-left and alt-right. The term “pastel QAnon” refers to discourse which specifically uses gendered messaging about motherhood, female empowerment, and weaponized concern for a conservative woman’s position in society to promote conspiracy theories meant to promote alt-right ideologies and the return of Donald Trump to presidency.

Using wellness and personal health as the basis for increasingly conspiratorial rhetoric is important in creating a strong, active downline resistant to contrary influence, as well as generating the engagement necessary to monetize social media content. Encouraging followers to “go down the rabbit hole” of content in an influencer’s profile not only has the potential to increase the reach of the products peddled as natural remedies, it also provides additional income to the influencer through simple engagement by the follower. QAnon conspiracy theories supporting the idea that the COVID-19 vaccine and Donald Trump’s loss in the 2020 election in particular surfaced in pastel QAnon circles as evidence of a shadowy group intent on harming women,

families, and children, Such theories meshed with related concerns as social media users did bias-confirming research under the advice of the alt-wellness influencers they followed (Mastrangelo and Lango 2024). Middle class, conservative, white women worried about the “purity” of the food, medicines, and vaccines consumed by their families were thus primed to accept the idea that malevolent forces at work against the health of their families as assumed by alt-right wellness discourse.

Conclusion

The wellness-to-alt-right pipeline can be understood through examining the histories of wellness, new age conspiratoriality, and white supremacy, as well as their relationships to social media influencer culture leading up to and including the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Capitalism, bias-affirming marketing, patriarchal reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and whitewashing of healing practices traditional to Indigenous cultures all contribute to the ease of which white affluence is seen as a desired achievement prevented only by one’s ability to counteract unseen, malevolent forces. Political ambiguity within groups who share beliefs in bias-confirming conspiracy theories can explain why what many consider a pipeline is in reality a tree of entangled branches with white supremacy at its roots. Future scholars may consider researching ways in which embodied practices and centering underrepresented practitioners can help reframe wellness communities in the future to be more resilient against extremist infiltration.

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