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## CONSPIRITUALITY CAPITALISM: YOGA, AUTHENTICITY, AND WHITENESS ON A STREAMING VIDEO PLATFORM

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Entering “best online yoga classes,” into Google Search returns lists—likely native marketing—from fitness websites like *VeryWell Fit*, *Yogi Times*, *Prevention*, *Self*, and *Shape*. Most include Gaia.com, a subscription-based streaming video platform, labeling it variously as “best for the whole family,” “best intermediate/advanced,” and, most notably, “best for delving into yogic philosophy.” Byrdie.com highlighted its library of 8,000 on-demand videos as “including classes and educational content.” Such “educational content,” however, includes a significant amount of conspiracy theory content—Gaia.com offers videos and articles about yoga alongside videos and articles about UFOs, extraterrestrials, alternative archaeology, and universal consciousness, among a variety of other topics related to conspiracy theories, the paranormal, and new age spirituality.

Gaia was formerly primarily a yoga equipment brand, GAIAM, founded in the 1980s by Czechoslovakian-born entrepreneur Jirka Rysavy. Gaiam still exists as a yoga equipment retailer, but it was sold off in 2016 after Gaia acquired several media companies in the 2000s, allowing it to rebrand from a yoga equipment brand with a media arm to a streaming video media company (Beres, Remski, and Walker, 2023, 143). The company has grown significantly in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In 2019, the company started offering in-person, live-streamed events at their campus in Boulder, Colorado. In-person attendance for a single weekend conference costs between \$500 and \$800, and access to live-streamed events costs \$300 per year. A 2021 *Business Insider* piece exposed poor working conditions for Gaia staff, including reports of harassment and surveillance, as well as accusations from staff that the company was “manipulating the building’s energy using crystals” (Price, 2021).

This paper, which is exploratory in nature, introduces the term *conspirituality capitalism* and examines Gaia as a case study in it. *Conspirituality* denotes the liminal space between conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality practices (Parmigiani, 2021). *Conspirituality capitalism* refers to the idea that conspirituality both requires capital accumulation to exist and

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simultaneously obfuscates it as a driving force. The proliferation of conspirituality we are seeing across the Internet is fueled by a thriving alternative market of products, courses, books, videos, and other forms of content sold by influencers and public figures who often claim to reject capitalism entirely. A form of racial capitalism, conspirituality capitalizes on whiteness, exoticism, and individualism, reproducing systemic racial oppression and undermining collective action.

Gaia's particular brand of conspirituality capitalism involves structures that are rooted in the partnership between authenticity and whiteness. Offering conspiracy theories alongside a variety of decontextualized religious practices, Gaia flattens them into the same quasi-religious new age spiritual content. Gaia operationalizes whiteness, individualism, and New Age ideology in order to legitimize itself and its ideological underpinnings as viable alternatives to late capitalism (Lucia, 2020). New Age spiritual beliefs are often created and maintained in response to a deep dissatisfaction with living under late capitalism, particularly in the United States: "...The New Age Movement has offered an alternative way to look at life, particularly for middle- and upper class people in capitalist society..." (Islam, 2012). Rejecting mainstream forms of consumerism pushes such individuals towards participating in other forms of consumerism that may seem alternative, or more authentic. Conspirituality capitalism involves structures and systems that rely on the performance of authenticity and alternatives to late capitalism as a mechanism to keep the consumer spending: Gaia keeps their users returning to the platform through manufactured rabbit holes (Marwick et al., 2022).

One such manufactured rabbit hole is visible in the sign-up process. When a new user signs up for the platform, they are asked what kind of content they are interested in: "yoga," "spiritual growth," and "meditation" seem to go together—but there is also "hidden history," "expanded consciousness," "supernatural," "unexplained," and "coverups."

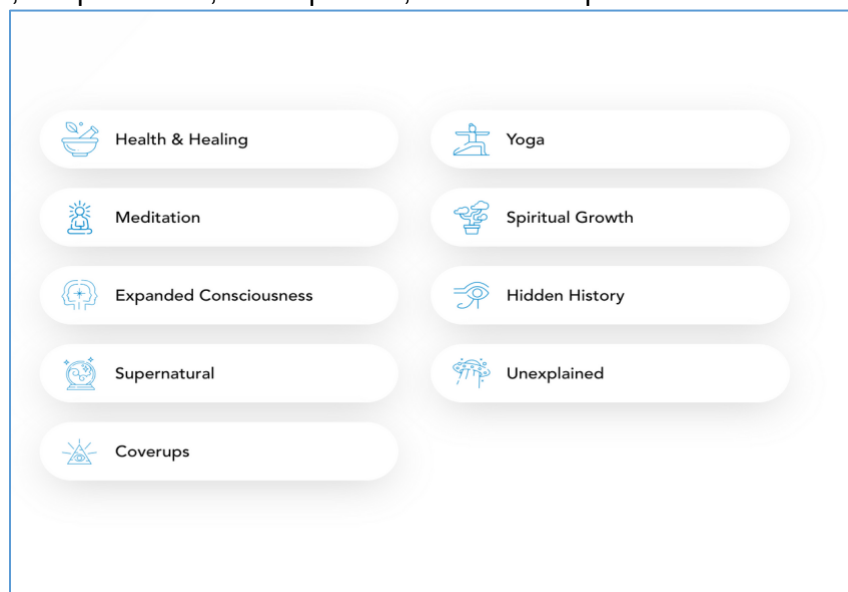


Figure 1: From Gaia.com: new users can indicate which of the above topics they are interested in.

Even if a user indicates that they are only interested in yoga, once they scroll far enough down, they will be greeted by a variety of conspiratorial topics: the site will show yoga and meditation content alongside energy healing, astral projection, “universe as a hologram,” and psychic abilities.

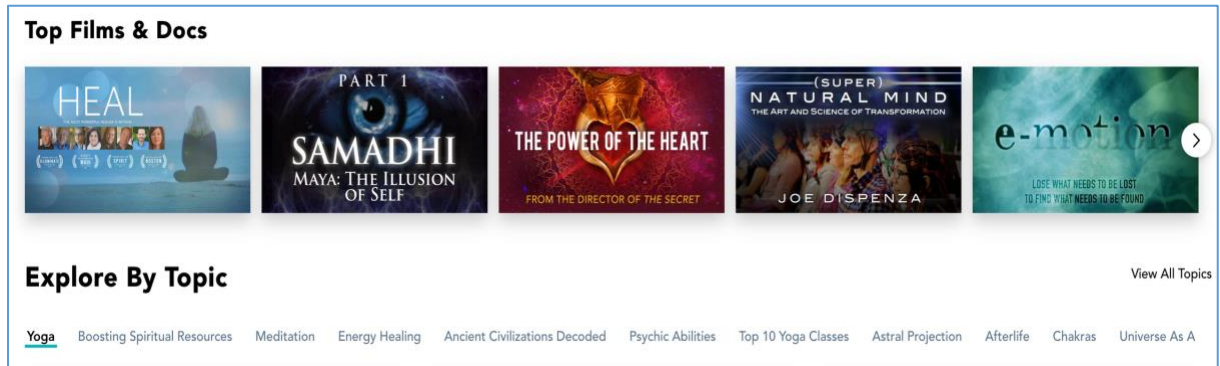


Figure 2: Gaia.com still shows conspiratorial content even when users indicate they are not interested.

A preliminary topic model of Gaia article headlines from 2019 – 2022 (n=778) reveals that, despite billing itself as primarily a website for on-demand yoga classes, yoga is only the fourth most common topic discussed on the website. By far the most frequent topic of these articles is alternative archaeology, a form of conspiratorial interpretation of archaeological findings that often posits the existence of ancient aliens. The pseudo-scientific theories around ancient aliens are racist at their core, implying that nonwhite pre-modern civilizations were not capable of extreme feats of engineering (Bond, 2018). Furthermore, despite the prominence of alternative medicine as a topic, no article title in the 778 analyzed included any mention of either vaccines or COVID-19. Yet, the ideology behind certain approaches to alternative medicine (“Ancient Mistletoe Could Be the Next Alternative Cancer Treatment”) likely bolsters vaccine hesitancy.

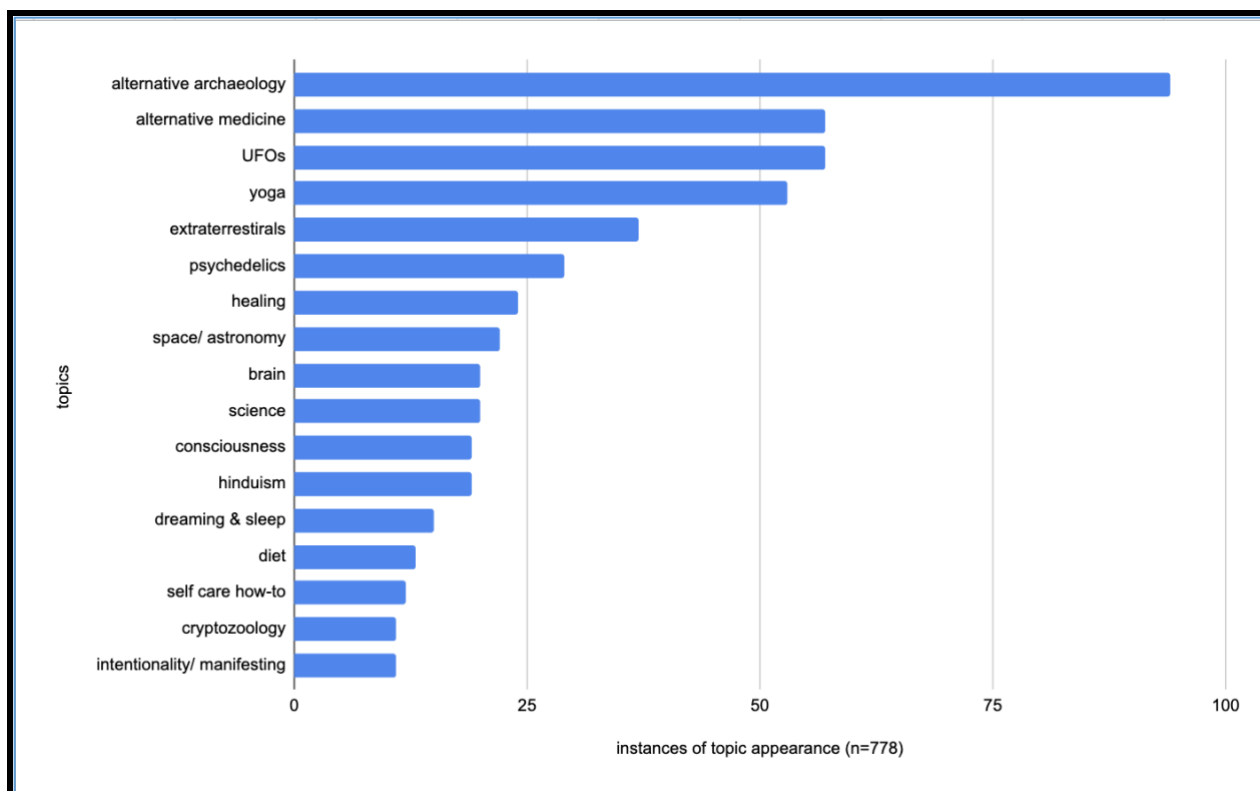


Figure 3: Chart depicting the top 20 most common topics of article headlines on Gaia.com from 2019 - 2022

Also conspicuously absent from Gaia is any form of online community. Gaia hosts in-person and online events, but there is no forum or any kind of community discussion space on the website. The site is focused mainly on content production and distribution, in the vein of a traditional media company. In her work on transformational festivals and whiteness, Amanda J. Lucia identifies the underlying threads that bind attendees of transformational festivals together as the *ideological commons* (Lucia, 2020). Though Gaia has no commons per se, it does have consistent ideological underpinnings. For the average at-home yoga practitioner, watching videos about alternative medicine and alternative archaeology could *feel* as though they are delving more deeply into their yoga practice. Absent any community participation or cultural context, however, this delving could turn into a series of rabbit holes and, ultimately, radicalization into more dangerous ideologies.

Conspirituality capitalism is also necessarily a form of racial capitalism (Melamed, 2015). 85% of people involved in metaphysical spirituality are white (Lucia, 2020). Further, Gaia's marked absence of community likely entrenches individualism, an ideological component of white supremacy (Turner, 2008). Authenticity works in tandem with ideologies of white supremacy, rooted as it is in the Orientalist quest to legitimize the nonwhite Other (Hirose and Pih, 2011). Further,

... [mostly white] participants turn to Indigenous and Indic religious forms because they imagine them to be expressions of alternative lifeways existing outside of modernity. This fundamental act of distancing and appropriation means that these movements tend

to gravitate towards neoromantic forms that stem from nineteenth-century conceptions of the Anglo-European self as civilized and modern while relegating nonwhites to the primitive and premodern (Lucia, 2020).

Gaia includes decontextualized bits and pieces of world religions (of the contemporary religious deities and practices discussed in the 778 article headlines sampled, 57% mentioned Hinduism, 6% Islam, 6% Christianity, 18% Buddhism, and 12% unspecified forms of Shamanism) alongside articles about cryptozoology and UFOs. By flattening world religions and conspiracy theories together, Gaia raises the profile of conspiracy theories while simultaneously decontextualizing and delegitimizing formalized religious practices.

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