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*“Thought-as-power” as a route to happiness.
The shift from positive thinking to toxic
positivity in the context of conspiritual
discourse in the U.S.*

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1. Introduction The ideology of positive thinking is rooted in the history of New Thought, a spiritual and secular movement dating back to 19th-century transcendentalism in the U.S., with profound implications in the religious, cultural, economical, and political aspects of American history¹. More precisely, New Thought is «a spiritual and philosophical movement based on religious and metaphysical concepts, along with the ideas of mental science»², which spread on a worldwide scale in the 20th century and has recently come under scrutiny again with the figure of Donald Trump³. Among its contemporary core beliefs, we find the following statement: «There is power in meditation, prayer, and positive thinking»⁴. Hence, positivity is listed as an integral part of New Thought, which «[...] set the stage for what we now know as the prosperity gospel and all the contemporary societies, organisations, institutes, books, and training programs dedicated to improving an individual’s mental, physical, social, and economic well-being»⁵.

Positive thinking is now understood as the sum of those practices or discourses that: 1) demand the repression or avoidance of negative thoughts; 2) divide emotions into positive and negative and believe that they affect people’s health; 4) have faith in the law of attraction; 5) assume that people are solely responsible for their health, prosperity, and success, as well as for their potential illness, poverty, and failure⁶. According to this logic, positive thoughts provide the means to materialize health, wealth, and happiness; consequently, the only way to explain any individual or collective marginal status is the

inability to control thoughts. Such unconditional trust in the power of the mind to shape and attract circumstances connects positive thinking to New Thought and opens its dialogue with the most recent New Age movements, which Horowitz describes as an update of New Thought⁷.

Nowadays, positive thinking is also a worldwide industry making millions through self-help literature, motivational speakers, and coaching specialists⁸. Such “marketing of happiness” requires to be analyzed and understood from a multi-layered perspective, not only as an evolution of the American Dream ideology based on the “pursuit of happiness” belief, but as a complex global phenomenon influencing millions of people in the private and public spheres. It is commonly agreed that the pursuit of happiness has been one of the most distinctive exports and political horizons in North American culture⁹, but it is interesting to note that the use itself of the term “pursuit” recalls the complexity of the philosophical notion of happiness as not just the result of a rational effort, but the fruit of fate¹⁰. There is indeed a tension between the individual agency implied in the notion of “pursuit” and the root of the word “happiness”, understood as something that “happens” to us, something that takes place outside of our control¹¹.

Positive thinking generating happiness based on an absolute trust in the power of individual will has nowadays turned into an actual mindset, and the consequences of such phenomenon are increasingly being acknowledged by psychologists, sociologists, economists, and scholars in general. Positivity and happiness have become a fundamental part of the representation and understanding of ourselves and the world on social media. The use of specific hashtags is noteworthy especially on Instagram, where we find: #positivevibes (85 million posts); #positive (24,7 million posts); #positivethinking (11,7 million posts); and #positivequotes (9,9 million posts)¹². During the Covid-19 pandemic, this phenomenon reached its peak, since people spent much more time online and engaged sometimes in forced positive discourse inspired by the neoliberal positive thinking ideology, which eventually led to a decrease in genuine compassion¹³, and to a less inclusive sense of community¹⁴.

Indeed, the radicalization of positive thinking can grow into a further tribalization of society, a situation in which people that “fail” to stay positive, and consequently happy, are considered against those who “succeed” in doing so. Maintaining a positive mindset at all times, especially in difficult situations, with the consequence of discounting one’s negative emotions, can be seen as a form of “toxic positivity”¹⁵, a failure to acknowledge and comprehend the complexity of reality. Toxic positivity can be seen as an exaggeration of a person’s positivity and happiness¹⁶, which results in the tendency to consume health, wealth, and happiness as products or some kind of goods¹⁷. In this article, toxic positivity is investigated in its emergence and development within the context of conspiritual discourses, which in turn originated in conspiracism¹⁸. It has deep roots in the New Age

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branch of conspiratorial discourse, since it is in that context that people are considered totally and solely accountable for their health, wealth, and eventual happiness.

2. Conspiracy theories: a brief overview

Although it may seem in contrast with the valorization of the self implied in the positive thinking ideology described above, where the only thing that is accountable for influencing one’s own life is one’s own thoughts, the trust in conspiracy theories plays a crucial role in this context. Individuals that believe in conspiracy theories reinforce their sense of the self by considering other people unable to think independently from the manipulation of various institutions, thus deriving gratification from the absolute certainty of having discovered those secret plots that the majority of people ignores.

Conspiracy theories can be defined as «attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors»¹⁹, and as «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»²⁰. They have been collected and analyzed in numerous publications, such as *Conspiracy Files* (Southwell and Twist 2007), *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories* (McConachie and Tudge 2008), *The Mammoth Book of Cover-ups* (Lewis 2008), *Fifty Greatest Conspiracies of All Time* (Vankin and Whalen, updated five times between 1995 and 2004, becoming *The World’s Greatest Conspiracies* in 2010), *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* (Demata et al. 2022)²¹.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which incremented ontological insecurity, skepticism, and paranoia²² conspiracy theories have increased in number and intensity. They also helped the circulation of misleading information that resulted in a general feeling of distrust oriented toward science, health organizations, the media, and governmental policies. The plethora of specific expressions that were familiar among believers in conspiracies, such as “NOW” (New World Order), “oligarchy”, “negative global elite”, “Illuminati”, “corporatocracy”, “military industrial complex”, and so on²³, has been recently enriched with new items: “5G consciousness”, “WWG1WGA (Where We Go One We Go All)”, “deep state”, “down the rabbit hole”, “the Great Awakening”, “the Storm”, “enjoy the show”, etc²⁴. The main idea behind such language is that mainstream media, as well as political, economic, and religious institutions are unreliable, therefore people are invited to autonomously “do their own research”, “watch a video before is turned down, *again!*”, “awake” and “find resonances”.

As Piraino et al. underline, quoting other studies on the matter (such as Berry et al., 2018; Johnson, 2018; Zimaitis, Degutis, and Urbonavicius, 2020):

«Existential insecurity also fuels “paranoid politics” (Hofstadter, 1965), a political atmosphere

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characterised by a perception of imminent and overwhelming danger, which can be perceived in several political contexts [...] More particularly, the Covid-19 pandemic favoured conspiracy theories, not only due to the cognitive insecurity about the virus but also because it implied a social confinement which isolated people from family, work, and other social relations and boosted a massive consumption of social media, which may have reinforced prejudices and favoured paranoid behavior.»²⁵

In the US, as Richard Hofstadter argued back in 1952, a certain degree of paranoia is not a piece of news in the realm of politics, where paranoid modes of expression directed towards a specific nation, culture, or way of life, have been common²⁶. Acknowledging that they have also been an integral part of most nationalist movements worldwide, he stated:

«I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind. In using the expression “paranoid style,” I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes.»²⁷

The apocalyptic qualities that Hofstadter highlights resemble those of the revivalist sermon, «a secular and demonic version of adventism»²⁸, and are found in those spokespeople who literarily construct the proof for the conspiracy theory they advocate, by a detailed accumulation of facts. These facts are called upon to prove that there is an enemy out there making crises, causing depressions, manufacturing disasters, and taking advantage of it²⁹. Such an enemy:

«[...] is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through “managed news”; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional); he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system.»³⁰

The psychological factors driving the popularity of such a fascination for conspiracies have been discussed by researchers in various fields. Douglas et al. suggest that the people who are mostly attracted to this behavior are unconsciously satisfying three psychological deep motives: 1) epistemic, expressed by the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty; 2) existential, namely, the need for control and security; 3) social, the will to maintain a positive image of the self or group³¹.

Conspiracy theories, the researchers state, «[...] provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction»³². Furthermore, attraction to conspiracies is «stronger among people who habitually seek meaning and patterns in the environment, including believers in paranormal phenomena»³³. The desire to belong is also extremely important when it comes to conspiracy, since it mostly attracts people who are socially frustrated and need «to relieve

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the self or in-group from a sense of culpability for their disadvantaged position»³⁴. Feeling part of a tribe that valorizes the self within the community, blaming external factors for any negative outcomes, helps people to obtain a sense of purpose in their lives.

3. The emergence of conspirituality

The term “conspirituality” specifically refers to «a web movement with diffuse leadership and constantly shifting areas of interest»³⁵, developing at the intersection between the New Age movement (previously defined as closely linked to the history of New Thought) and conspiracy theories. New Age followers “embrace the idea of a person as an integrated whole, with mind, body, and spirit subject to a common set of principles”³⁶. More specifically, they believe in a possible mystical transformation of individuals, based on universally invisible but pervasive forms of energy³⁷. In defining themselves as “light-workers”, New Age followers share the belief in some sort of predestination, assuming that humanity is experiencing a shift in consciousness³⁸.

As previously outlined, large-scale events lacking a clear official explanation provide the necessary elements for the development of such alternative theories, especially «when people experience distress as a result of feeling uncertain»³⁹. In 2011, Ward and Voas dedicated a study to this phenomenon starting from a series of assumptions previously delineated by Michael Barkun: a) nothing happens by accident; b) nothing is as it seems; and c) everything is connected⁴⁰. They state:

«We argue that conspirituality is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order (Fenster). (2) Humanity is undergoing a “paradigm shift” in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview.»⁴¹

The authors maintain conspirituality made its appearance on the web in the mid-1990s, collecting followers from the New Age movement and the counter-culture of the ‘60s and ‘70s, although, in 1987, alternative forms of spirituality and conspiracies had already started to be promoted by the print-based magazine NEXUS (Ward and Voas 2011, p. 109). Based in Australia, it still enjoys an international diffusion (Serbia, Romania, Poland, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Croatia, Canada/USA, New Zeland, UK) and, on its website’s homepage, it is described as follows:

«A bi-monthly alternative news magazine covering health breakthroughs, future science, and technology, suppressed news, free energy, religious revisionism, conspiracy, the environment, history and ancient mysteries, the mind, UFOs, paranormal and the unexplained. NEXUS Magazine is not affiliated with any political, religious or spiritual groups or organisations whatsoever, and has been

published since 1987.»⁴²

The magazine clearly embraces topics related to both conspiracy theories and the New Age expressed in the typical style used in both of those contexts, aimed at pointing out that the unexplained and suppressed will be revealed to the readers and that only a unique elite of people will be able to gain access to authentic knowledge. Starting from an analysis of the magazine, Ward and Voas further delineate the main principles of conspiratoriality: the idea that change and transformation result in a shift of consciousness for the whole humankind; the realization that we are all powerful spiritual beings, and that we are all connected, hence the need to awaken to the truth and “see” the illusion, namely, the presence of a shadow government⁴³.

This tendency towards syncretism and the ideology of “endless research”⁴⁴ are not an entirely new phenomenon in our societies; they have a long history rooted in Western esotericism and occultism. Indeed, in contrast with Ward and Voas, Asprem and Dyrendal affirmed that «conspiratoriality is better conceptualized as a predictable outcome of structurally central processes in the cultic milieu (Campbell; Barkun), the origins of which are intertwined with the history of Western esotericism»⁴⁵. However, a normalization process of such attitudes and behavior has increasingly taken place and conspiratorial discourse is now getting more and more space in the public discourse⁴⁶.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the emergence of discourses distorting reality became clearer, as well as the necessity to acknowledge the ethical consequences both inside and outside conspiratorial echo chambers. As Byford maintains, conspiracy theorists generally use the rhetoric of scientific inquiry, or the refutational strategy of just asking questions, to support their theories: in the first case, they mimic the style of academic research (e.g., use of footnotes, references, and quotes) to contradict the official story; in the second case, they pose questions to cast doubt, interpreting the lack of official answers as a cover-up⁴⁷. More specifically, conspiratorial language is created to effectively instill doubt in the audience, with the (ab)use of rhetorical questions, capitalization, exclamation, and question marks (e.g. “AWAKE!”; “Really???”), allusions (e.g., “Isn’t that weird?”), ellipsis (e.g., an abundance of “...”), and adversatives (e.g., an abundance of “...BUT”).

Conspiratoriality has deep connections with the metaphysical, which has enlarged the group of its followers to include people interested in wellness culture, who are often in search of a cure, a guide, a mentor, or a guru⁴⁸. In the specific case of the Covid-19 pandemic, a fairly large amount of spectacular, unchecked, and unreliable information available online has been spread by the people who are somehow involved in the wellness, spiritual and holistic sectors, in search of alternatives. The need to find a reason, an acceptable narrative that might explain a sudden life change, has led many people to cling to Covid-19 myths shared by the so-called “misinformation super-spreaders” in the field, as listed by NewsGuard

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2020⁴⁹, for example, Global Informers (4,858,932), Rush Limbaugh (2,384,229), Energy Therapy (1,993,987), The Farmacy (1,336,754), REALfarmacy.com (1,199,499), Grow Food Not Lawns (1,1162,973), The Truth About Cancer (1,137,21),⁵⁰ etc.

Conspiritual discourses are linked to toxic positivity in that they manifest themselves using a similar language and on the basis of some common grounds; first and foremost, the centrality of individual experience and the demonization of values based on any traditional institutional, scientific, or religious belief. The compensatory satisfaction that people derive comes from the ability to reject official narratives and feel safe because they possess an alternative; the need for understanding, indeed, goes hand in hand with the desire for control and security⁵¹.

4. Toxic positivity in conspiritual contexts

In the U.S. the shift from positive thinking to toxic positivity was embodied in the public behavior of former President Donald Trump. When questioned about having downplayed the impact of the virus during a press conference on April 7, 2020 (with 31,279 average daily new cases in the U.S.)⁵², he claimed he was a cheerleader for the country, someone who did not want to create havoc and shock. Months earlier at a White House meeting, on February 27, he had literally claimed the virus would disappear “like a miracle”, and on March 12, he talked about the “tremendous progress” made by the U.S., specifying that it was “through talent or through luck”⁵³. Throughout the whole pandemic, he showed a toxic positive attitude towards the situation: with 46,975 average daily new cases, on July 1, he affirmed the virus was going to “just disappear”, and he kept using the word “disappear” repeatedly. CNN journalists Daniel Wolfe and Daniel Dale noted that he went on with such language through October 2020, when more than 220,000 people had already died from Covid-19 only in the U.S.⁵⁴ In a specific study, Robert Hahn tried to estimate the proportion of deaths attributable to Trump’s first pronouncements about voluntary mask use and his intention not to wear them (April 3), until his very first mask endorsement on July 21⁵⁵.

Mixing the American Dream ideology with New Thought and New Age principles, on March 28, 2020, he twitted:

«With the *courage* of our doctors and nurses, with the skill of our scientists and innovators, with the *determination* of the American People, and with the *grace of God*, WE WILL WIN THIS WAR. When we *achieve* this victory, we will *emerge* stronger and more united than ever before!» (italics mine)

Offering what Lorenzetti calls «simple solutions to a complex issue»⁵⁶, Trump is the perfect example of what we are trying to demonstrate here. Co-author of *The Art of the Deal* (1987) with Tony Schwarz, he has always made his trust in positive thinking to achieve health and wealth public and he has often appeared delusional to international audiences. Among the

many exponents of New Thought, he declared his close connection with N.V. Peale, a Methodist pastor who started his career in Brooklyn and Syracuse. The Trump family joined his church, the Marble Collegiate, where the former President got married for the first time. Peale wrote 46 books, among which *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952 (in the best-selling book list of the New York Times for three years, translated into fifteen languages). He also hosted a radio and a TV show for forty years and run a magazine called *Guidposts*, reaching millions of people. “Picturize, prayerize, and actualize” was his famous formula. Moreover, Trump’s current spiritual advisor Paula White is a charismatic preacher of positive thinking and an Apostole of NAR (New Apostolic Reformation), «a loose network of independent churches with charismatic leaders, known for their prophetic pronouncements, the most important of which is that God has chosen Trump to be president». She claims that «saying no to Trump is saying no to God» and that a spiritual war against him is being perpetrated by the forces of evil⁵⁷. On her website, she clearly defines her standing point (she proclaims herself a fulfilled and successful person whom people should imitate) and her mission (focusing on verbs/actions such as “achieve”, “benefit”, “use”, “overcome”, “contribute”):

«Fulfilled people spend about 90 to 95% of our time functioning within certain areas that are vital to our “success”: Self-awareness; living within our own boundaries and integrity; spirituality in life purpose; social/relational skills; *how to achieve* our potential; *how to contribute* our unique gifts to society; *how to creatively benefit* from change; *how to use* our personal strengths to *overcome our weaknesses*» (italics mine)⁵⁸

Going through the titles of some of her publications - *Simple Suggestions for a Sensational Life* (2005), *Deal With It!: You Cannot Conquer What You Will Not Confront* (2006), *Move On, Move Up: Turn Yesterday’s Trials into Today’s Triumphs* (2008), *The Ten Commandments of Health and Wellness* (2008), *Dare to Dream: Understand God’s Design for Your Life* (2017), *Something Greater: Finding Triumph over Trials* (2019) - it is possible to see the connection between her prosperity gospel mainly based on reaching financial wealth and Trump’s sensational use of language, something he displayed not only during the pandemic. His statements on other crucial issues such as, for example, climate change, immigration, or racism are notorious. In March 2022, in an interview on Fox Business Network’s *Varney & Company*, he affirmed that climate change is “a hoax”, dismissing the issue, whereas, as far as immigration is concerned, he has always created alarm by depicting immigrants as criminals; his use of racist language has been analyzed extensively. Toxic positivity indeed became «a way to whitewash the problems facing the world - global warming, poverty, inequality, racism, sexism, nationalism, and terrorism - by claiming that these things only exist because so many individuals are the “losers”»⁵⁹. In a world divided between “winners” and “losers”, the consequences of this whole complex

sociocultural phenomenon have become tangible. An example is what happened after the death of George Floyd, the 46-year-old African American man killed in Minneapolis while being arrested by the police on May 25, 2020. According to the conspiratorial theory circulating online after the murder, “I can’t breathe” was a *mantra*⁶⁰ invented by the secret powers operating against “us” to exploit the force of sound and breath to get control of people’s brains, in a time in which we were obliged to wear masks and breathe differently. The typical conspiracy mindset, founded on the assumption that there are obscure plots arranged by powerful and secret actors, is here reinforced by the presence of the spiritual factor symbolized by the importance of breathing, which is a foundational principle in most yoga-centered disciplines. “I can’t breathe” was transformed into a metaphor for the supposed institutional attempt of silencing people by making them wear masks, an idea that has attracted the attention of individuals in the wellness industry and culture, as well as those involved in the holistic milieu.

The worldwide protests following Floyd’s killing redirected the world’s attention toward the Black Lives Matter Movement⁶¹, and the hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* regained popularity, alongside *#ICantBreathe*, in the peculiar context of the Covid-19 pandemic. But, during the anti-mask rally “Unmask Us” in June 2020 in Scottsdale (Arizona), City Councilman Guy Philip took off his mask pronouncing and distorting the popular phrase. In line with Trump’s unrealistic optimism and dismissive attitude toward the delicate situation, Guy Philip whitewashed the cause of racial injustice and police brutality, and he insulted the memory of Floyd and of all the African Americans that died in similar circumstances⁶².

After this episode that created a parallel between the use of masks and the words of a dying man, more posts, images, and memes circulated on social media, in which Floyd was directly mentioned or portrayed and his murder was even referred to as a staged event. The treatment of Floyd’s death is an example of how decisive conspiratorial discourse can be for the spread of unauthentic information since its followers or adherents are not just passive actors but also content creators. On the basis of a total lack of information on the origin of the phrase “I can’t breathe”, it was described as a manufactured slogan in the precise contingency of the pandemic by ignoring historical facts and with the consequence of fostering racism⁶³. The result was an Orwellian scenario in which people were encouraged to “wake up” and think with their own minds, illuminating the darkness of ignorance with the light of self-made knowledge.

5. Conclusion

It is possible to trace a distinct polarization in the discourse of conspiratorialists and supporters of positive thinking, dividing the world into “us” and “them”⁶⁴, those who sleep and those who are awake, those who are willing to “take the red pill”⁶⁵ and those who are not, those who trust science and those who demonize it, those who serve the system and

those who challenge it, those who obey and those who disobey, etc. This, in turn, fosters a tribal division of society by always alluding to 1) the presence of a web of conspiracies; 2) the hidden ability of each individual to take control over his or her own life and happiness; and 3) the difference between the ones who dare to fight the system and the ones who are subjugated by it. It is therefore arguable, along with Tonello, that such theories are fed by the tribalization of society, a process that they also reinforce; sometimes, they even become founding myths for an ethnic, racial and generational subculture⁶⁶.

The Covid-19 pandemic clearly represented an adequate environment for the flourishing of such discourses, since it was a large-scale event that was extremely difficult to process in psychological terms as it suddenly disrupted people’s lives without a unique and clear explanation. Anxiety, powerlessness, lack of sociopolitical control and psychological empowerment, along with lower levels of analytic thinking and education can indeed be considered as co-factors of the success of conspirational attitudes resulting in the spread of sensational and divisive language, which is somehow in contrast with the quest for clarity that the same followers of conspiritual theories strongly advocate.

More specifically, the alleged “authentic” truths supposed to be revealed to those who are “awake” are mainly based on theories that have no sound scientific evidence, created by audacious connections among facts, ideas, insights, and data, ascribable to the New Thought and New Age traditions⁶⁷. As Uscinski claims, such ideologies actually permeate American society across gender, age, race, income, political affiliation, educational level, and occupational status⁶⁸, transforming what started as a positive religious vision into a toxic trend, a form of “happycracy”⁶⁹. Moreover, as outlined in the previous paragraph, when toxic positivity meets conspiritual theories, there can be serious consequences in public and political discourse⁷⁰.

Far from the ambition of investigating the whole spectrum of such a complex phenomenon, this article aimed at pointing out the shift from positive thinking to toxic positivity in the context of conspiritual discourse, which was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The benefit of a positive outlook on life and of nurturing optimism and positivity when facing difficult circumstances have been analyzed and widely appreciated by scientists and scholars, so they are not into question. Yet, it is necessary to shed light on the possible degeneration of a phenomenon that is turning happiness into «a perfect commodity for a market that thrives on normalizing our obsession with mental and physical health»⁷¹.

Moreover, when such a quest for total fulfillment, mostly based on toxic positivity, matches the fragile fabric of society in challenging times and is amplified in public and political discourse, there can be large-scale consequences.

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Note

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of Transcendentalism, used the expression “new thought” in one of his works, *Success*: «to redeem defeat by new thought, by firm action, that is not easy, that is the work of divine men.» See [Success](#). The evolution of New Thought and the differences among the various generations of writers and thinkers connected to it have been examined by numerous scholars in different disciplines. Among others and most recently, Gary Lachman discusses the origins of New Thought in *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump* (2018), as well as John S. Haller Jr. in *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel* (2012).
2. See [New Thought Wisdom](#).
3. Allison P. Coudert, “‘From Toxic Positivity’. From New Thought to Donald Trump”, in Piraino et al., *Religious Dimension of Conspiracy Theories. Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends*, London, Routledge, 2023.
4. See [New Thought Wisdom](#).
5. The prosperity gospel in Protestant Christianity is the teaching that faith must be expressed through positive thoughts and declarations, and through donations to the church. Such practices are believed to draw health, wealth, and happiness. It is also called the “health and wealth gospel” or “name it and claim it”. See Allison P. Coudert 2023.
6. L. Filipe Higueta-Gutiérrez, “The Relation of Ideology of Positive Thinking with the Perception of Cancer Risk and Ways of Treating It in Medellin, Colombia”, in «Psychology Research and Behavior Management», vol. 15, pp. 3329–3345, 2022, p. 3329.
7. Mitch Horowitz, *One Simple Idea: How the Lessons of Positive Thinking Can Transform Your Life*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2014.
8. Ivi, p. 3330.
9. Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *alen, ie,n Poucke, Margot.em” alen, ie,n Poucke, Margot.em” Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control our Lives*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.
10. Donatella Izzo, “Pursuits of Happiness: A Tentative Map”, in «RSA Journal», vol. 19, pp. 5-19, 2008, p. 11.
11. Ivi, p. 5.
12. Data retrieved in February 2023.
13. Margot Lecompte-Van Poucke, “‘You got this!’: A critical discourse analysis of toxic positivity as a discursive construct on Facebook”, in «Applied Corpus Linguistics», vol. 2, no.1, pp. 1-9, 2022.

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14. Ishan Sanjeev Upadhyay et al., “Towards Toxic Positivity Detection”, in *Proceedings of the Tenth International Workshop on Natural Language Processing for Social Media*, Association for Computational Linguistics, Seattle, pp. 75-82, 2022, p. 65.
15. Psychologist Mary Trump in *‘Too Much and Never Enough’: How My Family Created the World’s Most Dangerous Man* (2020), declares that her uncle Donald suffers from toxic positivity.
16. Quintero & Long qtd in Yohana Putri Damayanti Adi Pangestu et al. “Analysis of the Generation Z’s Viewpoint from the Faith-Based Educational Institutions on the Toxic Positivity Phenomena: How and Why?” in *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*», vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 97-104, 2022, p. 98.
17. In the 1980s, Neil D. Weinstein conducted his research on what he called “unrealistic optimism”, which can be considered connected to toxic positivity.
18. According to Francesco Piraino et al., conspiracy theories refer to a particular context and a specific narrative or story, whereas conspiracism is a Weltanschauung in which conspiracy theories explain everything that happens in society and that has happened in history. See Francesco Piraino et al., *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories. Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends*, London, Routledge, 2023.
19. Karen Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theory”, in *Political Psychology*», vol. 40, no.1, pp. 3-35, 2019, p. 4. See also Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr, 2017; Keeley, 1999.
20. Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspiratoriality”, in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*», vol. 26, no.1, pp.103-21, 2011, p. 104.
21. See David Southwell and Sean Twist, *Conspiracy Files*, London, Carlton Books, 2007; James McConachie and Robin Tudge, *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories, Rough Guides*, 2008; Johnatan Vankin and John Whalen, *The World’s Greatest Conspiracies*, London, Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2010; John E. Lewis, *The Mammoth Book of Cover-ups*, London, Robinson, 2008; Massimiliano Demata et al., *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2022.
22. Stef Aupers, “‘Trust no one’: Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture”, in *European Journal of Communication*», vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 22-34, 2012, p. 28.
23. Charlotte Ward and David Voas 2011, p. 106.
24. Many of these terms have been spread by QAnon followers, an extremely controversial far-right conspiracy theory resembling a cult and supporting Donald Trump, that has been under scrutiny since 2017, when an anonymous “Q” started to post their apocalyptic “drops” on the image-board 4chan, then moved to 8chan (8chan was taken down in August 2019 and returned as 8kun in November 2019). Barkun defined it as a superconspiracy (2013), blaming the Deep State cabal of satanic pedophile global elites for all the evil in the world. It is also combined with elements of Christian millennialism, the New Age, political populism, and pop

culture (Argentino 2023). In October 2020 Facebook banned QAnon-related groups and pages labeling them as militarized social movements. In a recent article published in *The New York Times*, Kevin Roose talks about the increasing influence of QAnon theories in the New Age sector, especially in the yoga environment, and the related preoccupation expressed, among others, by Los Angeles-based yoga teacher and Instagram influencer Seane Corn. A “wellness community statement” was indeed posted on September 13, 2020, on her profile, stating: «[...] I do not support QAnon and their underlying message of hate, fear and division. They are an alt-right movement of conspiracy theorists working to spread misinformation, confusion and paranoia. They are deliberately and strategically targeting the wellness communities appealing to people’s interest in alternative health practices and mistrust of the government [...]» See [Yoga Teachers Take On QAnon](#).

25. Francesco Piraino et al. 2023, p. 3.
26. As Tonello clarifies, the first attempts to define far-right conspiracy theories in sociological and historical terms date back to the '60s, not only to Richard Hofstadter, but also to Theodor Adorno, Daniel Bell, and Edward Shils.
27. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 3.
28. Ivi, p. 30.
29. Ivi, pp. 32-36.
30. Ivi, p. 32.
31. Karen Douglas et al. 2019, p. 538.
32. Ivi, p. 539.
33. Ibidem.
34. Ibidem.
35. Charlotte Ward and David Voas 2011, p. 104.
36. Ivi, p. 103.
37. Melon qtd in Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013, p. 32.
38. Ivi, p. 105.
39. Karen Douglas et al. 2019, p. 539.
40. Michael Barkun 2013, p. 4.
41. Charlotte Ward and David Voas, 2011, p. 104.

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42. See [the magazine website](#).
43. Charlotte Ward and David Voas 2011, p. 112.
44. Francesco Piraino et al. 2023, p. 6.
45. Charlotte Ward and David Voas 2011, p. 2.
46. Ivi, p. 7.
47. Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
48. Yoga teacher and Instagram influencer Seane Corn, together with other professionals in the wellness community, have clearly shared their concerns about this specific aspect by posting a statement on September 13, 2020. See note 8.
49. See [Tracking Facebook’s COVID-19 Misinformation ‘Super-spreaders’](#).
50. This list contains only the ones who have more than 1,000,000 followers; the figures in brackets correspond to the number of likes on their Facebook pages. Data retrieved in February 2023.
51. Karen Douglas et al. 2019, p. 540.
52. See [‘It’s going to disappear’: A timeline of Trump’s claims that Covid-19 will vanish](#).
53. See [What Donald Trump has said about Covid-19 – a recap](#).
54. Ibidem.
55. See [Estimating the COVID-Related Deaths Attributable to President Trump’s Early Pronouncements About Masks](#) and [Calculating possible fallout of Trump’s dismissal of face masks](#).
56. M. Ivana Lorenzetti, “Dramatising Crisis. Rhetorical responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic by Right-Wing Populist Leaders in the USA and UK”, in «Lingue e Linguaggi», vol. 47, pp. 13-45, 2022, p. 35.
57. Her chant-like prayer to support and secure Trump’s election, once Joe Biden pulled ahead in 2020, became viral. (see [Paula White Leads Impassioned Prayer in Bid to Secure Donald Trump’s Re-election: ‘I Hear Victory’](#)) It is also important to remember that Trump was supported by QAnon followers, who believe the elites are seeking to bring him down. They see Trump as the only hope in defeating the Deep State, and they were involved in the State Capitol attack on January 6, 2021. Mark Taylor, a QAnon influencer and leader of the Home Congregations Worldwide, considers Trump the prophet who will be able to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth.
58. See [Paula White Ministries](#).
59. Allison P. Coudert, 2023.
60. A mantra is an ancient sacred utterance in Sanskrit that is believed to possess spiritual power when repeated a certain amount of times by the practitioner.

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61. It was founded in 2013 after the acquittal of the murderer of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, «to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes» See [#BlackLivesMatter](#).
62. See [‘I can’t breathe’: Scottsdale councilman uses words of George Floyd to protest masks](#).
63. The history of this phrase dates back to July 2014, when Eric Garner pronounced it eleven times while being killed by New York police officer Daniel Pantaleo. It became a slogan when, a few months after the killing, the officer responsible for the death was not indicted. At the time, athletes in the NDFI (Notre Dame Fighting Irish Women’s Basketball), NBA (National Basketball Association), and NFL (National Football League) showed their support for the cause by printing the phrase on their clothing.
64. Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis”, in Schiffrin, Deborah et al. (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Hoboken (NJ), Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 464-84, 2015.
65. This expression dates back to the 1999 cult movie, *The Matrix*, and it refers to the possibility of choosing between remaining in a state of ignorance (taking the blue pill), or awakening to the truth (taking the red one).
66. Fabrizio Tonello “Da McCarthy a oggi: The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, in «Ácoma», vol. 12, no. V, pp. 77-85, 1998, p. 85.
67. An example is David Hayes, a Christian author known as the Praying Medic and one of the main promoters of QAnon, who spread (in a Youtube video on March 14, 2020) the narrative that its adherents would not be affected by Covid-19 because, in the context of spiritual warfare, they had been chosen by God and, thus, they were protected (Argentino 2023). The video, which was available until July 2020, has now been removed.
68. Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 5-6, 2014.
69. Edgar Cabanas and Eva illouz 2019.
70. Holocaust survivor and existential-humanistic psychologist Viktor Frankl recently coined the phrase “tragic optimism” as opposed to “toxic positivity”, namely, the ability to experience optimism even in times of tragedy, the search for meaning in the inevitable hardship of life based on acknowledgment rather than denial.
71. Edgar Cabanas and Eva illouz 2019, p. 10.