'Mass Psychosis' - How a self-help YouTube video misrepresents science and spreads Covid-19 conspiracy theories

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

of

University College London

Department of Linguistics

University College London

31/07/2024

I, Izabella Schleier confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

My thesis applies Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to a popular self-help video containing allusions to conspiratorial narratives of the Covid-19 pandemic. The video revolves around the topic of 'mass psychosis' which it links to the rise of totalitarianism, a central theme of New World Order conspiracy theories. I draw on literature investigating the motivations for belief in and promotion of conspiracy theories, the consequences of conspiracy belief, the role of social media in their spread, ideologies which have been linked to them and features of the conspiracy theory and self-help genres. The video was transcribed, and screenshots of the accompanying illustrations and artworks were taken. My analysis, centring around the use and misuse of scientific sources and other superficial features of academic writing such as the use of scientific terminology and a graph, as well as the representation of the elite, public figures, general public and nonconformists, was informed by insights from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, intertextuality and pragmatics. Vagueness, presuppositions, dogwhistles and figurative framing devices, such as metaphor and hyperbole were also highlighted as allowing the content creators to create a wider appeal for their video even outside extremist circles and a degree of deniability for its controversial content, as well as contributing to its persuasive potential. The video's ingroup and outgroup representations appeared to add to its persuasive effect by encouraging viewers to identify with the positively described ingroup of nonconformists while distancing themselves from outgroups. The video's blending of the genres of conspiracy theory and self-help and its implications for the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories were discussed. Finally, the video's potential effects were examined, including effects on crisis response compliance, distrust of governments, science and media, contribution to intergroup conflicts and the stigma around mental illness and potential contribution to the maintenance of the status quo.

Impact statement

As there has been relatively little research focusing on content social media users engage with in the early stages of conspiracy belief, my thesis is aimed at contributing to filling this gap. I analysed a YouTube video, which mixes the more mainstream genre of self-help with allusions to conspiratorial beliefs. The video introduces viewers to two concepts: 'mass psychosis' (or brainwashing) and the elite's plans to bring about totalitarianism, which are central to Covid-19 and New World Order conspiracy theories. As the ideas that are discussed in detail in this video are generally presupposed in more conspiratorial accounts, my analysis of this introductory video can shed some light on a conspiratorial understanding of 'mass psychosis' and the rise of totalitarianism.

My thesis builds on work related to emotional language and ingroup and outgroup representations in conspiracist discourse. It analyses the potential manipulative effect of emotional appeals and overwhelmingly positive ingroup representations, which encourage viewers to identify with the nonconformist ingroup the video creates. The video presents the general public similarly to typical representations of non-conspiracy believers, often labelled 'sheeple', identified in the literature. However, there is relatively little research discussing the representation of this group in detail. Thus, my analysis of this video centring around the public who are said to be under 'mass psychosis' may expand our understanding of this topic. Due to its portrayal of the elite responsible for putting in place Covid restrictions and the public who follow these restrictions as morally and intellectually inferior to the nonconformist ingroup, the video may contribute to the conflict between those in favour of and those against Covid restrictions.

Other researchers have argued that multimodal resources available on social media may play a role in the spread of conspiracy theories. For instance, such content can include iconic images (e.g. the all-seeing-eye of the Illuminati) or trigger strong emotional reactions through the use of video. As I applied Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to this video, unlike most prior research addressing conspiracy theories, my analysis was able to capture the potential roles that a variety of modes may play in conveying the content creators' message.

The findings of my research may have an impact outside of academia as well. Such research may be used for raising awareness concerning common manipulation techniques used by those promoting conspiracy theories may help the public resist the lure of mis- and disinformation. As the video under analysis appears on a channel not primarily dedicated to conspiracy theories, conveys much of its conspiratorial message implicitly and relies on creating an appearance of scientific credibility, it is likely to attract an audience with only limited (if any) familiarity with conspiratorial content. Some scholars have argued that social media algorithms, which recommend users content similar to what they have already engaged with, favour conspiratorial content, potentially playing a role in radicalising viewers. Thus, educating the public to recognise manipulation techniques more typical of implicitly conspiratorial content may help them reflect on the content they consume and avoid becoming radicalised.

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1 Introduction

My thesis focuses on the analysis of a video titled ’MASS PSYCHOSIS – How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL’ which was uploaded on a popular self-help channel in August 2021. The video centres around the topics of ‘mass psychosis’ and the rise of totalitarianism, which frequently feature in Covid-19 and New World Order conspiracy theories. The terms ‘mass psychosis’, ‘mass formation psychosis’ and further variations of it, such as ‘group psychosis’ and ‘collective psychosis’ were among the most prevalent keywords in the corpus of Covid-related posts and comments from the r/conspiracy subreddit that I collected for my undergraduate dissertation, which motivated me to further explore this topic. These expressions were used to explain why many people accepted official accounts of the pandemic and followed Covid restrictions, attributing it to the perceived fearmongering by mainstream media. As there is limited research investigating representations of the general public as being under ‘mass psychosis’ in conspiracy theorist discourse and the role this is said to play in the rise of totalitarianism, my thesis is aimed at contributing to filling this gap in the literature.

I will begin by defining conspiracy theories and discussing the literature on their prevalence, motivations for belief and endorsement, consequences, associated ideologies, spread on social media, genre features and New World Order conspiracy theories. I will end the literature review (Section 2) with a brief discussion of the self-help genre. Following this, I will describe my methodology and the theoretical background which informed my research (Section 3), divided into three parts: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Intertextuality and Pragmatics. In section 4, I will analyse the video, focusing mainly on its use of scientific sources and ingroup and outgroup representations. In my discussion (Section 5), I will examine how the genres of self-help and conspiracy theory are combined in the video and relate my findings to the literature, ending with the limitations of my research.

2 Literature review

2. 1 Definition of conspiracy theory

While various definitions for conspiracy theories have been given, I will use Douglas and Sutton's (2023) definition here, as it covers several key features. They define conspiracy theories as oppositional, describing malevolent or forbidden acts, ascribing agency for events to groups and individuals, epistemically risky and socially constructed. Conspiracy theories are oppositional, as they contradict accepted versions of reality. Believers view their alternative accounts as being of public interest but not public knowledge, for which they blame the conspirators, mainstream media and even the public themselves (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). As conspiracy theories describe malevolent acts which go against the public interest, these acts need to be kept secret (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). They ascribe agency to powerful groups and individuals for bringing about major events rather than random phenomena or systemic forces, contributing to the worsening of intergroup relations (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Conspiracy theories are considered epistemically risky, as they are in general more prone to being false compared to other beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Douglas and Sutton (2023) explain this feature as resulting from the secretive nature of the activities they describe, which are expected to leave only limited evidence behind, as well as their assumption of public ignorance and extraordinary competence attributed to the conspirators. Lastly, conspiracy theories are social constructs, they are acquired through exposure in interpersonal or mass communication, shared to promote certain social goals, and 'have the potential not only to represent and interpret reality but also to fashion new social realities' (Douglas & Sutton, 2023, p. 282).

2. 2 The prevalence of conspiracy belief

Conspiracy belief is widespread in modern societies. A study by Oliver and Wood (2014) found that 55% of American respondents admitted to believing at least one of the seven conspiracy theories listed. However, as the list of conspiracy theories included in their surveys was not exhaustive, we might expect the real number of conspiracy believers to be even higher. Uscinski (2019) argues that everyone believes in at least a few conspiracy theories, while according to Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017), conspiracy belief is a part of human nature. Contrary to popular belief they claim that conspiracy belief is not on the rise, citing a study by Uscinski and

Parent (2014) which analysed '104,803 published letters that US citizens sent to the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune between 1890 and 2010' (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 324). The results of this study show that while the number of conspiratorial letters fluctuated, it did not increase over time (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). However, their findings do not account for potential increases in conspiracy belief since 2010. Furthermore, while Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) assume that the amount of conspiracist content in these published letters is proportionate to conspiracy belief among the public, this is not necessarily true. Conspiracy theorists might be less inclined to send letters to mainstream newspapers and newspapers may not publish many such letters that are sent to them, skewing representation of the prevalence of conspiracy belief in the US negatively.

2. 3. Motivations for conspiracy belief

Various motivations for conspiracy belief have been identified in the literature, which Douglas et al. (2017) categorise as epistemic, existential and social motives. Epistemic motivations include a heightened motivation for finding patterns, satisfying one's curiosity and making sense of random events (Bangerter et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2017; Mortimer, 2017). Van Prooijen (2022, p. 3) also highlights the entertainment value of conspiracy theories resulting from their creation of 'an alternative reality that is exciting, attention-grabbing, and spectacular', thus a desire for entertainment may motivate conspiracy belief (Hornsey et al., 2023). Similarly, Spark (2000) argues that the practice of conspiracy theorising can be a thrilling and enlightening experience. When it comes to significant events, people may be unsatisfied with mundane explanations and seek a cause which is more proportional to the outcome, a heuristic referred to as 'major event-major cause heuristic' or proportion bias (Bangerter et al., 2020). Similarly, events without clear official explanations might create a need for closure, prompting conspiracy belief (Douglas et al., 2017; Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

Conspiracy beliefs can serve as motivated reasoning, which is when individuals selectively look for evidence in accordance with their preexisting beliefs (Van Prooijen, 2022). Thus, conspiracy beliefs might be adopted to justify beliefs which are contradicted by evidence (Douglas et al., 2017; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Similarly, such beliefs can be used as rationalisation tools not only to justify one's beliefs but also one's behaviour, especially counter-normative behaviours (Van Prooijen, 2022). For example, conspiracy beliefs may allow one to reconstrue unhealthy

behaviours as healthy (e.g. not getting vaccinated) and justify political violence (Van Prooijen, 2022). Furthermore, conspiracy belief has been linked to a distrust of mainstream sources and preference for alternative knowledge authorities (Bangerter et al., 2020; Seargeant, 2022; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Lastly, conspiracy belief might arise out of otherwise productive habits, such as scepticism, which aligns with findings indicating that conspiracy belief is more common in high-corruption countries (Mortimer, 2017; Van Prooijen, 2022).

Existential motives, such as perceived powerlessness and a need to feel safe have also been identified as contributing to the adoption of conspiracy beliefs (Bangerter et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2017; Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Hornsey et al., 2023; Sternisko et al., 2020; Uscinski, 2019). Belief in conspiracy theories can provide an illusion of safety through perceived possession of secret knowledge, which allows people to identify which groups or individuals pose a danger to them (Douglas et al., 2017). According to Bangerter et al. (2020, p. 212), conspiracy beliefs may allow one to manage anxiety 'by transforming unspecific anxieties into focused fears'. Although it seems counterintuitive that the belief that a secretive, malevolent group has complete control over society would be comforting, as Spark (2000) argues, 'the one thing more frightening than thinking that all events are controlled, is thinking that none are' (p. 57). Similarly, according to Barkun (2003), conspiracy theories are both frightening and reassuring, as they magnify the power of evil but also allow their believers to make sense of the world and avoid confronting its randomness. Feelings of alienation and anxiety during social change or traumatic events can also lead to conspiracy belief (Bangerter et al., 2020). According to Swami et al. (2010, p. 759), political cynicism and alienation is a predictor for conspiracy belief, with their findings indicating that 'the participants who were most likely to believe in 9/11 conspiracy theories were those who were disaffected and disengaged with the political system, possibly leading to more cynical attitudes and defiance towards politicians'.

Social motives relate to a person's need to have a positive individual and collective identity (Douglas et al., 2017). According to Mortimer (2017) a sense of social exclusion leads to increased conspiracy belief. Lonely individuals may be motivated by a need for belonging to seek out conspiracy theorist groups which can provide a sense of community (Hornsey et al., 2023). Even the 'conspiracy theorist' label can become a social identity, with group members eager to distinguish themselves from outsiders called 'sheeple' (Biddlestone et al., 2021).

Conspiracy theories can help preserve self-esteem by potentially shifting blame to outgroups when one's positive identity is threatened (Biddlestone et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2017; Sternisko et al. 2020). Conspiracy belief also gives people the sense that they possess special knowledge allowing them to 'construct an alternative reality in which they are important and legitimate actors, participating in a spectacular narrative', raising their self-esteem (Biddlestone et al., 2021; Van Prooijen, 2022, p. 2). Conspiracy theories are often endorsed by those with low or declining status, such as members of minority groups or historically dominant groups who believe that 'they are being discriminated against by a minority group' (DiMaggio, 2022, p. 1028; Marie & Petersen, 2022). People may be drawn to conspiracy theories because of their need for a unique identity, which aligns with the counter normative nature of conspiracy theories (i.e. that they challenge accepted knowledge) (Sternisko et al., 2020). Thus, what draws people to conspiracy theories may not be the truth claims they include but the opportunity to adopt a particular type of identity and set of values (Zorzi, 2022).

Various studies have linked conspiracy belief to collective narcissism, 'a belief that the ingroup's exaggerated greatness is not sufficiently recognized by others', which group members see as mistreatment (Biddlestone et al., 2021; DiMaggio, 2022; Douglas et al., 2017; Golec de Zavala, 2022, p. 1; Hornsey et al., 2023; Van Prooijen, 2022). Conspiracy theories resolve this contradiction between their group's perceived greatness and lack of recognition by outgroups by creating a narrative placing 'the ingroup in a morally superior victim role' (Biddlestone et al., 2021, p. 7). Golec de Zavala et al. (2022, p. 3) found a significant medium-sized correlation between conspiracy belief and collective narcissism, especially for belief in conspiracy theories which assign hidden malicious intentions and harmful actions to outgroups in the context of specific intergroup conflicts and theories accusing 'vaguely defined, powerful "others"'. Negative views of outgroups may motivate conspiracy belief, as conspiracy theories allow ingroup members to portray outgroups as morally inferior (Richey, 2017, Sternisko et al., 2020).

Psychological reactance – 'an unpleasant arousal or urge that occurs when someone is threatened with losing their free behavior' – has also been linked to conspiracy belief (Adiwena et al., 2020, p. 183; Biddlestone et al., 2021; Hornsey et al., 2018). As a result, people actively resist values or beliefs which threaten their freedom, in order to preserve or regain their sense

of independence (Biddlestone et al., 2021). According to Adiwena et al. (2020), the amount of reactance experienced depends on the importance one attributes to the freedom being threatened and the threat's magnitude. Additionally, they explain the boomerang effect – the phenomenon where after receiving a persuasive message, one's opposing beliefs are strengthened – as resulting from reactance (Adiwena et al., 2020). For example, the government's intense campaigning to promote the wearing of face masks may prompt some to campaign against it (Adiwena et al., 2020).

The Extended Parallel Processing Model explains how individuals or groups respond to recommendations or messages by considering the fear they experience. Using this model, Adiwena et al. (2020) argue that both disobedience and conspiratorial beliefs can be explained by fear control due to high threat perception combined with low sense of self-efficacy in combatting the threat. When engaging in fear control, the individual focuses on managing their internal emotions and physiological responses (Adiwena et al., 2020). This often results in maladaptive coping behaviours, such as avoiding or ignoring messages and believing them to be exaggerated, manipulative or conspiratorial (Adiwena et al., 2020). In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, defensive denials of public health messages may include: 'the problem of Covid-19 is exaggerated' or 'the threat of Covid-19 is no danger that some parties trying to trick us' (Adiwena et al., 2020, p. 186). According to Adiwena et al. (2020) public health measures introduced to limit the spread of the virus restricted the public's freedom, eliciting reactance in some people and causing them to disobey the rules. Furthermore, Hornsey et al. (2018, p. 308) link reactance to having a nonconformist identity as 'someone who is skeptical of consensus views and intolerant of people telling them how to think'.

Conspiracy belief has also been studied as resulting from various social factors, which threaten certain psychological needs, increasing individuals' motivation for adopting conspiracy beliefs. One such factor is large-scale social change or societal crisis situations, which Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017, p. 324) define as 'impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question' (Bangerter et al., 2020). Similarly, Raab et al. (2013) cite the crisis of ideologies as driving the popularity of conspiracy theories and widespread distrust of mainstream sources. According to Van Prooijen & Douglas (2017), crisis situations create a need for sense making, leading to the

creation of narratives providing simple explanations and helping people choose who to trust. These narratives then remain part of people's representations of history after the event is over (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Additionally, crises frustrate people's need for control and ability to predict future events, increasing the appeal of conspiracy theories which address these feelings (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Group conflict has also been investigated in relation to conspiracy belief. According to Hebel-Sela et al. (2022), violent intergroup conflicts breed fear and uncertainty, amplifying conspiracy belief. Additionally, in response to existential threats, in the presence of a salient antagonistic outgroup, people are more likely to adopt conspiracy beliefs to make sense of their circumstances (Hebel-Sela et al., 2022). They argue that 'in many cases, conspiracy theories may be particularly conducive for relieving conflict-related anxieties as part of the sense-making process, for example, enhancing a sense of superiority, maintaining the group's positive image, or the ability to be perceived as a victim' (Hebel-Sela et al., 2022, p. 3). Similarly, Knight (1999) identified increasing competition for resources among the poor as leading to an increase in conspiracy belief.

2. 4 Motivations for spreading conspiracy theories

While the spreading of conspiracy theories is often motivated by conspiracy belief, depending on individual differences, situational factors and content, belief in a conspiracy theory may not be either necessary or sufficient motivation for spreading it (Bangerter et al., 2020). Believers might refrain from endorsing a conspiracy theory due to a fear of being stigmatised (Bangerter et al., 2020). Conversely, non-believers may spread conspiracy theories strategically (Bangerter et al., 2020). Douglas and Sutton (2023) identify motivations such as the promotion of social goals and the profit motive. For example, they mention Alex Jones, who uses his website InfoWars not only to spread conspiracy theories but also to sell products including food supplements, toothpaste and bulletproof vests (Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

Various political motivations for spreading conspiracy theories have been identified, including the promotion of a political agenda (Cassam, 2019), managing the threat of political defeat (Bangerter et al., 2020) and allowing authoritarian leaders to justify the consolidation of power

(Uscinski, 2019). According to Marie and Petersen (2022, p. 3), political conspiracy theories – defined as 'narratives about the secret misdeeds of political outgroups (opponents or elites) that surface in contexts of perceived political conflict' – function as mobilisation tools. Mobilisation relies on presenting compelling reasons for action to allies regarding the potential losses inaction may cause, a purpose well served by conspiracy theories, which tend to revolve around threats to the ingroup (Marie & Petersen, 2022). Spreading conspiracy theories may also be motivated by a communicator's intention to incite hatred toward a particular social group or present themselves as a rebellious catalyst for change (Deutschmann, 2020; Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

2. 5 The consequences of conspiracy belief

Although conspiracy belief is often motivated by the deprivation of psychological needs, research does not suggest that the adoption of conspiracy beliefs fulfils these needs (Douglas et al., 2017; Van Prooijen, 2022). In fact, conspiracy belief may worsen feelings of powerlessness and alienation from outgroups (Douglas et al., 2017). According to Van Prooijen (2022, p. 2), conspiracy theories 'may reduce feelings of existential threat in one domain (e.g., by denying the reality of climate change), yet reinforce other existential threats (e.g., the belief that authorities are deceptive)'. Furthermore, such beliefs can lead to social rejection, stigmatisation, job loss (Van Prooijen, 2022), and dangerous medical decisions, such as vaccine avoidance or the rejection of conventional medicine in favour of potentially dangerous or ineffective alternative treatments (Johnson et al., 2020; Uscinski, 2019).

Conspiracy believers are less likely to be motivated to engage with democratic practices and more likely to resort to unlawful and antidemocratic political engagement (Sternisko et al., 2020; Uscinski, 2019). Due to their belief that the system is rigged and their sense of powerlessness, conspiracy believers view political engagement as pointless, thus they are less likely to vote (Douglas et al., 2017; Uscinski, 2019). Instead, they are more likely to engage in extreme behaviours, such as political violence against governments or minority groups (Allington & Joshi, 2020; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022; Marie & Petersen, 2022; Uscinski, 2019). According to Golec de Zavala et al. (2022, p. 4), conspiracy beliefs are associated with 'preference for illiberal leaders who use coercive and undemocratic means to stay in or achieve power'. They also reduce crisis response compliance, as seen with Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs,

which were found to predict ‘less institutional trust, less support for governmental regulations’ and lower compliance with physical distancing measures (Pummerer et al., 2022, p. 56).

Another frequently cited consequence of conspiracy belief is its negative effect on intergroup relations (Biddlestone et al., 2021; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022; Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Hornsey et al., 2023; Sternisko et al., 2020). Douglas and Sutton (2023) argue that due to conspiracy theories ascribing agency to groups and individuals for controlling major events, they motivate intergroup violence, prejudice and discrimination. Perceiving the ingroup as victimised increases motivation to scapegoat outgroups and unite the ingroup against the perceived threat they pose, for instance in movements concerned with the loss of status, exemplified by believers of ‘The Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory (Biddlestone et al., 2021; Sternisko et al., 2020). According to Golec de Zavala et al. (2022), conspiracy theories accusing specific outgroups of malevolent plots can justify hostility and preserve intergroup tensions. As conspiracy belief leads to the instant dismissal of alternative information that could aid peace-making efforts, biased views of ingroup and outgroups and negative intergroup emotions, Hebel-Sela et al. (2022) predict that conspiracy theories preserve and amplify intergroup conflicts.

As conspiracy theories assign agency to groups and individuals, according to Douglas and Sutton (2023, p. 284) they ‘divert attention away from the inherent design flaws or systemic problems of a society’. Similarly, Jolley et al. (2018) argue that in situations where the legitimacy of the social system one lives in is threatened, conspiracy theories may allow individuals to maintain a positive view of the status quo by deflecting blame for negative events from systemic flaws to the malicious scheming of a small group of conspirators. They acknowledge that this seems to contradict conspiracy theories’ subversive nature, association with political distrust and accusations of authority figures. They reconcile this contradiction by distinguishing trust in governments – which is negatively correlated with conspiracy belief – from support for systems of government, arguing that ‘by pointing fingers at individuals – even groups of individuals charged with operating the system – conspiracy theories may exonerate the system, just as blaming a driver for a car crash shifts blame from the car’ (pp. 475-476).

In a series of studies, Jolley et al. (2018) found that participants who were exposed to a text describing the UK's social, economic and political circumstances as problematic (system-threat condition) showed significantly greater endorsement of conspiracy theories than those in the system affirming condition. Furthermore, participants in the system-threat condition who were then given a conspiratorial account of Princess Diana's death reported greater satisfaction with the status quo than those exposed to the system affirming manipulation, while the opposite trend was observed for control participants who were not exposed to any conspiratorial content. In a third study, Jolley et al. (2018) exposed all participants to the system-threat manipulation, after which half of them were shown conspiracy theories. The results indicate that participants exposed to conspiracy theories gave higher ratings for their satisfaction with the status quo than control participants as well as being more likely to attribute blame for social problems to individuals or small groups rather than systemic flaws (Jolley et al., 2018). By blaming the outcomes of systemic issues on a conspiracy, conspiracy theories allow their proponents to avoid confronting the flaws of the social system they live in, raising their satisfaction with it, contributing to the maintenance of the status quo (Knight, 1999; Van Prooijen, 2022). Knight (1999, p. 41) argues that:

> For many middle-income Americans at the end of the millennium the only way to explain, after two of the supposedly most prosperous decades of the century, why their economic prospects were for the first time worse than those of their parents, was to blame anything other than "the system" (of deregulated market capitalism): be it aliens, the United Nations, the federal government, or even a grand conspiracy of all of the above in cahoots with the Illuminati, the Trilateral Commission, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Thus, although conspiracy theorists present themselves as anti-establishment, conspiracy belief may instead lead to system-justification and divert attention away from more constructive forms of political resistance. Furthermore, conspiracy theories advocate individual rather than collective forms of political dissent (Melley, 2017), which are likely to be less effective.

2. 6 Conspiracy theories and politics

2. 6. 1 Post-truth

The so-called 'post-truth' era of politics has been identified as contributing to the increased prevalence of conspiracy theories (DiMaggio, 2022; Lee, 2022). Post-truth politics is defined

by a focus on emotional appeals over facts, resulting from an overflow of information (Lee, 2022). Lee (2022) argues that the significant role of emotions in politics contributes to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, as these theories are frequently presented and accompanied by emotional language. Bergamaschi Ganapini (2023) has observed that some of those who spread conspiracy theories admit they prioritise feelings over truth. For example, Oliver Stone, the director of the movie *JFK* said '"I cannot say—I do not say—that this is a true story"; instead, the narrative "speaks an inner truth," an "emotional truth."' (Bergamaschi Ganapini, 2023, p. 69), which aligns well with post-truth.

However, other definitions of post-truth centre around an equal weight given to facts and 'alternative facts' (DiMaggio, 2022), identifying postmodernism as the origin of post-truth politics (d'Ancona, 2017). D'Ancona (2017, p. 98) suggests that 'The epistemology of Post-Truth urges us to accept that there are "incommensurable realities" and that prudent conduct consists in choosing sides rather than evaluating evidence.' This contrasts with conspiracy theories, which are generally portrayed as absolute truth while official accounts are depicted as misrepresentations (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022). Ylä-Anttila's (2018) study of Finnish anti-immigrant forums found that rather than post-truth, these users endorsed radical scientism – a firm conviction regarding the application of statistical science to uncover truths about society, and employing these truths to govern societies in an 'objective' and 'rational' manner – and associated post-truth with the 'multiculturalist elite' and post-positivist social science.

2. 6. 2 Populism

Conspiracy theories have been linked to populist discourse, as both create a moralised distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' (populism) or the 'good ingroup' and 'evil outsiders' (conspiracy theories) and share an emphasis on the distrust of established knowledge (Ekman, 2022; Hameleers, 2021). Populists frequently advocate for the reestablishment of an idealised past society characterised by order, duty, and predictability, labelled as 'the heartland' (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). According to Hameleers (2021), populist discourse may often refer to conspiracies, such as by blaming the corrupt 'evil' elites for everyday people's issues. Hameleers (2021) in an analysis of populist conspiracy theories in the discourse of right-wing populist politicians found that references to conspiracies can make populist messages more persuasive. However, conspiracy theories also create a moralised distinction between believers

and the wider non-believing public (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Douglas and Sutton (2023, p. 283) argue that as conspiracy theories often blame not only the media and conspirators but the public themselves for their ignorance, 'far from simply valorizing "the people" in some populist fashion, conspiracy theories represent them as sinfully easy to manipulate'.

Conspiracy theorists not only criticise political elites but also mainstream institutions, including modern science (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Mede & Schäfer, 2020). They question mainstream knowledge authorities and offer alternative explanations (Uscinski, 2019). Thus, such populist critiques of science and populism complement each other, challenging knowledge elites and political elites respectively (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). While populism centres around the opposition between 'the elite' and 'the people', science-related populism 'suggests that there is a morally charged antagonism between an (allegedly) virtuous ordinary people and an (allegedly) unvirtuous academic elite' (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 473). Science-related populism claims that the people are united not only by their values but also their common epistemological sense, glorifying common sense, while the academic elite are fundamentally detached from their everyday experiences and unable to provide simple solutions for everyday problems (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).The ordinary people inhabit a 'science-related heartland' (similar to the populist concept of 'the heartland'): an idealised world where people's lives are free of disruptions from science, in the form of unnatural seeming inventions, apocalyptic scenarios or having decisions, for instance about public health, imposed on them (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

According to science-related populism, 'the ordinary people' and 'the academic elite' are in competition over the authority to decide what should be researched and how (decision making sovereignty), as well as who can define 'true knowledge' (truth-speaking sovereignty) (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). According to science-related populism, scientist choose what to research guided not by objectivity but by their personal goals and ideologies, thus they argue that decision making sovereignty should be held by the people as they are unbiased and informed by the practical relevance of research (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Similarly, Pasek (2019) linked scientific rejectionism to a distrust of scientists, viewing them as self-interested conspirators, as well as being reinforced by public discourse, such as by political elites questioning the scientific consensus. Ylä-Anttila (2018, p. 362) argues that conspiracism is a type of

counterknowledge by definition, as it claims that the elite holds secret knowledge, which the conspiracy theorist needs to challenge by becoming an alternative knowledge authority to replace 'false experts leading us astray'. Thus, conspiracy theories should be viewed 'as an absolutist orientation to power and democracy, one which divides the world into good and evil –just like populism – and an absolutist epistemological frame; one which claims most people are ignorant, and true knowledge hides behind the smoke and mirrors.' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 377).

2. 6. 3 Liberal individualism

Melley (2017) links conspiracy theories to liberal individualism, which he defines in an earlier paper (Melley, 2008, p. 149) as 'the view that persons are autonomous, rational agents wholly responsible for their own actions'. Melley (2017) argues that conspiracy theories play a role in how a purportedly individualist culture maintains its individualism by constantly imagining it to be in danger. According to Melley (2017), post-war conspiracy theories differ significantly from those that characterised earlier time periods, due to changing perspectives on political power. While previously, conspiracies were seen as taking place in secret, contemporary conspiracy theories describe conspirators as openly manipulating the public through mass media, which depends on a conception of drastically reduced individual autonomy (Melley, 2017). Conspiracy theories provide a 'master narrative', providing comfort to their believers by allowing them to make sense of complex events in a clear and simple way and providing 'a reductive (or "degraded"), but still useful, form of political representation.' (Melley, 2017, p. 9)

Melley (2017) introduces the term 'agency panic', referring to a profound feeling of anxiety stemming from a perceived loss of personal autonomy, which involves the belief that one's actions are being manipulated by external forces or powerful entities, leading to a sense of being constructed or controlled by these forces. Due to their all or nothing view of agency, held either by individuals or 'the system', contemporary conspiracy theories, rooted in Western conceptions of selfhood, place the individual in a struggle against the collective, highlighting the corrupting influence of social relationships on individual uniqueness (Melley, 2017). According to Melley (2017), those experiencing agency panic perceive generic social messages as containing hidden communications, interpret mass social controls as personal persecution, and believe that social and economic patterns are driven by intentional malice. Melley (2017)

argues that conspiracy theories are only tied to the abstract concept of individualism rather than specific political positions, explaining their variety and ability to appeal to members of both powerful and disempowered groups. However, as defences of liberal individualism, they 'include the encouragement of individual, rather than collective, forms of resistance to social control' (Melley, 2017, p. 15).

Melley (2008) discusses the origins of the conspiratorial narratives of brainwashing and the scientific works which have lent credibility to the idea. According to Melley (2008) the concept of brainwashing originated as a convenient explanation of the actions of American POWs in the Korean War, such as giving statements alleging US war crimes while in captivity, as well as for 'communism's perplexing appeal in the Far East and a potential threat at home' during the Cold War (p. 147). Melley (2008) argues that this concept allowed thinkers hostile to Marxism and sociological perspectives to theorise about social influence while maintaining intentionality, which is central to individualism, and viewing social control as the result of the malevolent intentions of a powerful human agent, the brainwasher. As brainwashing was said to lead to a loss of an individual's free will, the brainwashed subject stands in opposition with the liberal self (Melley, 2008). Pavlov's work on conditioned reflexes was used to legitimise the idea of brainwashing as his findings were believed to have implications for the possibility of replacing a person's consciousness with artificial beliefs, memories, and even characteristics (Melley, 2008). According to Meerloo, whose book *Rape of the Mind* lent further credibility to the concept of brainwashing, conditioning serves the purpose not of controlling the victim's behaviour but of enforcing ideological conformity and through confusion 'destroying the victim's ability to know the world' (Melley, 2008, p. 151). Melley (2008) argues that these scientific works not only legitimised the concept of brainwashing but also linked it to an 'open conspiracy' perpetrated by mass media to brainwash the public, allowing it to be decoupled from communism and stay relevant even after the end of the Cold War.

2. 7 Conspiracy theories on social media

Growing distrust of traditional media drives more people to online sources, which allow anyone to get their voices heard and increases the difficulty of correcting mis- and disinformation (Bangerter et al., 2020). According to Deutschmann (2020), conspiracy theorists' distrust of the media might result from how the media system functions, namely that its operative side is

hidden from the public. This creates suspicion that certain interests govern what news gets or does not get covered and manipulate the information the public receives (Deutschmann, 2020).

Although conspiracy theories existed before the internet age, the invention and widespread use of the internet have undoubtedly played a role in their dissemination in recent years, motivating a growing interest in research about the spread of conspiracy theories in online spaces. While Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) argue that the internet plays only a limited role in the spread of conspiracy theories by replacing other means of its spread such as word of mouth, other scholars highlight several features of social media contributing to the popularity of conspiracy theories. Deutschmann (2020) calls attention to a crucial difference between traditional and social media, namely that while media companies must take responsibility for the truthfulness of their claims, social media users, especially anonymous ones, face no such expectations. Conspiracy theories also have a wider potential reach online and can be disseminated faster (Ekman, 2022). The large variety of available sources allow conspiracy theorists to cherry-pick bits of information from credible sources to validate their theories (Ekman, 2022). Furthermore, as the proponents of conspiracy theories are often more eager to share their beliefs online than consumers of science news, social media users are likely to be disproportionately exposed to conspiracy content, increasing their likelihood of conspiracy belief (Bangerter et al., 2020; Bessi et al., 2015). In fact, DiMaggio (2022) found that social media use correlated with greater exposure to and belief in conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, Big Lie and 5G Covid-19 theories.

Online environments are further characterised by the presence of echo chambers and filter bubbles, resulting in users being predominantly exposed to other users and content they agree with, driving further polarisation (Cinelli et al., 2022). Partisan echo chambers, where individuals isolate themselves from opposing political views, often expose their members to misinformation and echo chambers can even form around specific conspiracy theories (Cinelli et al., 2022; DiMaggio, 2022). As the internet brings together individuals with fringe views, virtual communities provide validation and a sense of community for lonely individuals, emboldening beliefs that receive little support elsewhere (Barkun, 2003). According to Dow et al. (2021), during the Covid-19 pandemic, people experienced feelings of isolation, uncertainty

and had ‘less control over their activities’, leading many to turn to online communities, resulting in greater exposure to and adoption of conspiracy beliefs (Dow et al., 2021, p. 4).

As the social context can significantly affect users’ evaluation of a message, user-generated comments have been shown to influence viewers’ attitudes towards social media content (Röchert et al., 2021). Similarly, filter bubbles, which expose users to content similar to what they have previously engaged with or searched for, may contribute to solidifying conspiratorial beliefs and leading to further radicalisation (Allington & Joshi, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2022; Mortimer, 2017). Even efforts to fight misinformation, such as banning content creators from mainstream social media platforms, may inadvertently result in further polarisation by driving such creators and their viewers to platforms ‘colonised by users belonging to a specific echo chamber’, which Cinelli et al. (2022, p. 4) refer to as ‘echo platforms’.

Conspiracy theories spread in cascades within echo chambers, initiated by one person sharing an idea gradually embraced by others, making it harder for others to disagree (Mortimer, 2017). As these theories propagate, they often undergo alterations, with new adherents adapting the theory to their worldview. Bangerter et al. (2020) outline three types of potential alterations to the narrative of a theory during transmission: information reduction, accentuation, and assimilation. Drawing from Allport and Postman (1947) as cited by Bangerter et al. (2020), assimilation into the individual's existing belief system drives both the reduction of information and the exaggeration of specific details (accentuation). Bangerter et al. (2020) also note that memorable and entertaining narratives are more likely to be passed on. The multimodal resources social media provides have also been suggested to play a role in transmitting conspiracy theories, which often use iconic images, such as the all-seeing-eye referring to the Illuminati, as well as relying on the use of video to elicit strong emotions from their audience (Bangerter et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theories have been shown to boost the popularity of social media content across platforms. Visentin et al. (2021), in a study about how the language of tweets related to an Italian contact tracing app during Covid-19 affected their likelihood of being retweeted, found that while including conspiracy theories and emotional language increased the popularity of

tweets, complex language had the opposite effect. Similarly, short-form content has been suggested to advantage conspiracy theories giving simple explanations and often including archetypes of pure good and evil over more complex scientific explanations, which are harder to express in a limited wordcount (Theocharis et al., 2021). Conspiratorial content has also been found to boost YouTube video views compared to videos which do not mention a conspiracy (Cinelli et al., 2022), which Allington and Joshi (2020) explain as resulting from YouTube's video recommendation algorithm being biassed in favour of this content type. Similarly, according to Dow et al. (2021), social media algorithms aimed at increasing user engagement may inadvertently boost the spread of conspiracy theories.

2. 8 Characteristics of the conspiracy theory genre

In a chapter comparing conspiracy theories and 'fake news', Seargeant (2022) discussed several features of the conspiracy theory genre. He identified their purpose as either political – providing a simplistic, populist critique of mainstream institutions – or psychological/epistemic – making sense of how power works in society, protecting from feelings of uncertainty and confirming one's preexisting beliefs or ideologies. While the epistemic aim relies on belief in the specific conspiracy theory, the political aim does not; politicians can use conspiracy theories strategically regardless of their personal beliefs (Seargeant, 2022). Furthermore, conspiracy theories have an anti-authoritarian and sceptical outlook and a master narrative centring around a fight between good and evil into which new events can be easily slotted (Seargeant, 2022). They assume proportionality between event and cause and that someone is responsible (Seargeant, 2022). Their structure is based on absolute causality, simplification and contrastive positioning; they assume that all events have an identifiable cause, all social problems are caused by human planning, all newly discovered details can be connected to form a wider explanation and 'nothing is as it seems' (Barkun, 2003, p. 4; Seargeant, 2022). Thus, conspiracy theories include simplistic explanations of power and oppose official accounts of events, relying on the expectation that while everything has an explanation, this is often hidden by the authorities (Seargeant, 2022). They can be communicated in various contexts, usually among like-minded individuals, using a range of resources such as books, social media or even t-shirts (Seargeant, 2022).

Their language use is characterised by a cluster of terms, often symbolic of broader narratives or ideologies related to the particular conspiracy theory (Seargeant, 2022). Such terms, which may be commonly used by the wider public, such as the name of the Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist George Soros, can become short-hand for conspiracy theorist belief systems (Seargeant, 2022). This is reminiscent of the concept of 'symbolic cues' in Bormann's (1985, p. 128) symbolic convergence theory, which explains the appearance of group consciousness 'in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies'. According to Bormann (1985, p. 132), sharing archetypal stories (also referred to as 'fantasies') allows group members to 'fit the unfolding of experience comfortably into their shared consciousness' and enhances group cohesion by allowing members to converge on an appropriate emotional reaction. Symbolic cues within this framework, which might be slogans, codewords or non-verbal signs play a role in this process by providing a shortcut to arousing the right emotions in participants already familiar with shared fantasy themes (Bormann, 1985).

Similarly to Seargeant (2022), Barkun (2003) links conspiracism to a Manichean worldview, which sees history as a struggle between good and evil. According to Ylä-Anttila (2018), conspiracy theories adopt an absolutist perspective on power and democracy, which categorises the world into good and evil. Conspiracy theories often portray characters in a simplistic manner, depicting them as either entirely good or evil (Bangerter et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2021). Similarly, López (2022) observed conspiracy theorists establishing a binary of a good ingroup and evil outsiders.

The conspirators, whether politicians, scientists or mainstream institutions, are frequently depicted as attempting to mislead or manipulate the public (Hameleers, 2021). Bangerter et al. (2020) note that conspirators, usually depicted as human, are attributed almost supernatural abilities for organising conspiracies and secrecy. Ekman (2022) distinguishes two main types of conspiracy theories depending on whether the conspirators are already in power or attempting to gain power, referred to as top-down and bottom-up conspiracies respectively. The latter include conspiracy theories about 'Jews, Freemasons, liberals or socialists/communists who are secretly seeking power within the state' (Ekman, 2022, p. 1129). However, references to conspirators are sometimes implicit. More respectable speakers often remove explicit references to specific groups or individuals, such as 'Jews' or 'Soros', thereby creating a wider

appeal for their theories even outside extremist circles (Ekman, 2022). They might replace explicit references to a specific group, such as 'Jews' with a code word ('Rothschild Zionist'), as observed by Allington and Joshi (2020), which no matter how thinly veiled allows them to publicly deny accusations of antisemitism.

2. 8. 1 Emotions in conspiracy theories

Some studies have investigated the role of emotional language in conspiracist discourse. Zollo et al. (2015) compared the sentiment expressed on conspiracy theory and science Facebook pages. Their findings indicate that posts and comments on science pages were neutral in about 50% of cases and had positive sentiment twice as often as posts and comments on conspiracy pages, about half of which had negative sentiment and only about 10% were positive (Zollo et al., 2015). Negative sentiment was even more common in posts and comments by polarised users (who were mainly exposed to conspiracist content) and increased as discussions got longer and when the two groups interacted (Zollo et al., 2015).

Some research suggests that belief in conspiracy theories result from emotional rather than analytical thinking styles, highlighting the importance of research regarding emotional expression in conspiracy theorist discourse (López, 2022). Ekman (2022) argues that creating fear, for instance by using fear appeals, scapegoating, ingroup victimisation or outgroup hostility, allows conspiracy theorists to spread their ideas. He draws attention to the role shared emotional expression plays in promoting and moulding conspiracy theories as well as legitimising harmful and controversial beliefs and actions in online conspiracy theorist spaces. Similarly, Lee (2022) observed a reliance on scare tactics amongst proponents of Covid-origin conspiracy theories.

2. 8. 2 Conspiracy theorist communities

As discussed above, a sense of community plays a major role in the spread of conspiracy theories, reflected in the language use of conspiracy theorists. According to Deutschmann (2020), conspiracy theories construct an imagined community of their believers in opposition to non-believers. They represent themselves as both morally and intellectually superior compared to outgroups (Zorzi, 2022). Conspiracy theorists distinguish themselves both from

those they accuse in their theories and the non-believing public. While conspiracist narratives portray conspiracy theorists as more clairvoyant than non-believers, sometimes referred to as 'sheep', implying blind obedience and conformity, conspiracy theorists are also portrayed as the victims of conspiring political elites (Bangerter et al., 2020; Ekman, 2022).

Chen et al. (2023) studied national identity language in Covid-19 conspiracy theory discourse on the Chinese social media platform, Weibo. Their findings show that conspiracy theory propagation posts used both more in-group favouritism and outgroup identity terms than conspiracy theory debunking posts. They found a positive relationship between ingroup favouritism words and user engagement, defined by number of likes, comments and diffusion size, with conspiracy theorist posts. The use of outgroup hostility words also predicted a larger diffusion size and number of comments, but it was associated with fewer likes (Chen et al., 2023). However, they argue that this result might be specific to their study's Chinese context, predicting that outgroup identity language may lead to posts receiving more likes on Western social media platforms.

In a study investigating the online self-representation of conspiracy theorists, Zorzi (2022) found that while conspiracy theorists were positively evaluated and referred to as individuals, 'people' or using the pronoun 'we', outgroups were often dehumanised and referred to as 'they'. According to Zorzi (2022), the use of the pronoun 'we' encourages the audience to align themselves with the author's reasoning. Similarly, some articles construct conspiracy theorists' identity through the positive example of a whistleblower that the audience is expected to align with, and the contrast with their opponents (Zorzi, 2022). Zorzi (2022) argues that mentioning such positive examples allows the audience to sympathise with and learn from them, aligning with their portrayal as authoritative and knowledgeable. The positive appraisal of 'people' concerning their normality ('regular') and morality ('good', 'honorable') may appeal to readers' need for positive self-esteem (Zorzi, 2022).

Opponents, by contrast, were represented as homogenous and often depersonalised and dehumanised (Zorzi, 2022). In climate denialist articles, outgroups were often genericised as 'environmental groups' and functionalised ('green activists', 'writers', 'mainstream pundits',

‘numerous thought leaders’), contributing to their portrayed homogeneity (Zorzi, 2022). They are represented as uncritically accepting unproven assumptions (‘prevailing wisdom’, ‘the orthodoxy’, ‘narrative’), while conspiracy theorists claim to base their beliefs on evidence (Zorzi, 2022). In articles about the ‘Deep State’, opponents were also genericised, classified based on ideology, functionalised (e.g. ‘both elected and appointed officials’) and referred to as powerful, elitist organisations, distancing them from the readers and encouraging identification with the conspiracy theorist community instead (Zorzi, 2022).

Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus (2022) used Reddit data to investigate how conspiracy theorist communities construct knowledge online. They found that conspiracy theories were viewed as the true versions of events as opposed to the untrue official accounts and seen ‘as “important” and “historical” transitory stages of knowledge which come to an end when the truth is revealed’ (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022, p. 84). As a result, there was a need to present conspiracy theories as informed accounts, often using scientific or scientific sounding language (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022). The procedure of gathering information ‘was consistently represented as requiring sustained effort (“gold mining”) and scientific rigour (“research”)’ and conspiracy theorists portrayed as especially attuned to finding patterns where others only see coincidences (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022, p. 88). Contrary to research showing that conspiracy beliefs are associated with a preference for intuitive rather than analytical thinking, they were portrayed ‘as being formulated from a place of reason, not emotion’ (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022, p. 85).

Contrary to this portrayal, Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus (2022) observed shortcomings in these communities’ knowledge construction process. While users often engaged in the first two steps in the process of deriving procedural knowledge (hypothesis formulation and literature review), the latter analysis and hypothesis confirmation steps received less attention, with analyses relying on personal experience and beliefs, suggesting ‘a lesser concern with data-driven aspects’ (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022, p. 87). In fact, hypotheses were asserted as fact and inevitably confirmed as contradicting data was discarded (Blitvich & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022).

2. 8. 3 The justification of conspiracy beliefs

While those endorsing conspiracy theories claim that their beliefs are evidence-based, Barkun (2003) argues that conspiracy belief is ultimately a matter of faith due to the unfalsifiability of such theories. Conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable as evidence for the conspiracy is expected to be hard to find as conspirators are motivated to conceal their actions, allowing conspiracy theorists to dismiss contrary evidence as planted by the conspirators (Barkun, 2003; Enders & Uscinski, 2021). Despite conspirators' attempts to hide the truth, conspiracy theorists justify their awareness of the conspiracy by distancing themselves from mainstream institutions, instead aligning with stigmatised knowledge (Barkun, 2003). According to Barkun (2003), proponents of stigmatised knowledge mimic scientific practices, such as using citations and including a large number of sources which agree with a conspiracy theory, creating a sense of validation despite a lack of evidence to back up such claims.

Several further strategies that conspiracy theorists use to legitimise their alternative accounts and present their beliefs as evidence-based have been identified. These include imitating superficial features of scientific writing, such as the use of jargon, pseudo-demonstrations and constructing numerous supporting arguments (Oswald, 2016). However, the evidence they gather is either insufficient to prove their conclusions or irrelevant and absence of contrary evidence is often taken as evidence for their claims (Mortimer, 2017; Oswald, 2016). They also use references, but these are often to other conspiracy theorists, social media content or if scientific they might be cherry-picked, decontextualised or misrepresented (Mohammed, 2019; Oswald, 2016; Zorzi, 2022).

On the other hand, to advance their alternative accounts of events, it is also important for conspiracy theorists to discredit official accounts. The 'just asking questions' rhetorical style, aimed at poking holes into the official story and casting doubt on its source's competence or morality, serves this purpose (Oswald, 2016). This rhetorical style allows conspiracy theorists to defend their theories against disconfirmation by shifting focus towards the perceived flaws in the official account thereby shifting the burden of proof to their opponents (Bangerter et al., 2020; Oswald, 2016). Herman and Oswald (2022) identified another technique referred to as the 'ethotic straw man', used to boost the speaker's ethos and undermine their opponent's through misrepresenting their emotional or mental state.

2. 9 New World Order conspiracy theories

According to López (2022, pp. 295), the New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theory 'revolves around the idea of the existence of a secretive group formed by members of the social elite whose aim is to create a global, totalitarian government that controls the world's population'. This theory allows believers to interpret historical and current events as resulting from the plotting of a powerful but secretive group aiming to achieve world domination (Barkun, 2003). The term 'New World Order' – originally used by George H. W. Bush to denote a new era after the USSR's dissolution and end of the Cold War – became a 'code-phrase for conspiracy theories for global control which were being disseminated in print, over short-wave radio, and most of all, over the world-wide web' (López, 2022; Spark, 2000, p. 47). In fact, as Barkun (2003) explains, the fall of the Soviet Union may have played a role in the rise of NWO conspiracy theories, which came to fill the now empty enemy role in some Americans' dualistic worldview.

The theory has two partially overlapping strands, originating from religious and secular sources, with the former arising from millenarian Christian ideas of the end-times and rise of the Antichrist, while the latter accuses secret societies, such as the Illuminati, of conspiring to control the world (Barkun, 2003). Barkun (p. 78) explains the appeal of New World Order theories by their ability to 'accommodate the end-time preoccupations of fundamentalists as well as the obsessive fear of tyranny and invasion among those on the secular right'. Common themes include threats to American liberties, the use of mind control methods on the public, surveillance and aims to reduce the world population, which are enabled by modern technology (Barkun, 2003; López, 2022; Spark, 2000). According to Antichrist folklore, technology, such as television, computers and microelectronics will allow monitoring and control of society (Barkun, 2003). NWO theorists associate the conspirators with various ideologies such as socialism/communism, various nationalisms, satanism and totalitarianism, with alleged conspirators including Bill Gates and George Soros (Barkun, 2003; López, 2022). According to López (2022) New World Order conspiracy theories have been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic and public health measures which were introduced. The virus has been labelled a bioweapon, the introduction of mobile apps raised concerns about surveillance, and restrictions of citizens' freedom was seen as totalitarian (López, 2022).

2. 10 Self-help

As the video under analysis appears on a self-help channel and blends the genres of self-help and conspiracy theory, I will end my literature review by discussing some of the central features of the self-help genre. According to Rimke (2000, p. 62), self-help is an individualistic activity based on 'notions such as choice, autonomy and freedom', which 'relies upon the principle of individuality and entails self-modification and "improvement"'. Self-help views power as internally located, holding the individual responsible for 'physical and/or spiritual poverty' and assuming that success can be achieved purely through individual aspiration and effort (McGee, 2012; Rimke, 2000, p. 65). However, self-help's assumption that success is a necessary result of individual effort clashes with reality 'when the polite fiction of meritocracy begins to crumble under the weight of double digit unemployment and the picket fence dream of homeownership is washed away in a tsunami of debt', leading McGee (2012, p. 690) to speculate that in the future self-help may shift towards spiritualism or social justice.

Self-help discourse emphasises self-knowledge, discipline and the ability to endure the suffering that comes with pursuing psychological health, seen as crucial to becoming 'autonomous enough to "remedy" the psychological causes of one's failures, disappointments and frustrations' (Rimke, 2000, p. 69). While self-help is nominally aimed at helping people discover their 'real self', Rimke (2000) argues that the techniques prescribed for gaining self-knowledge are instead used to construct a new self. Self-help promotes freedom, individual responsibility and choice as part of 'healthy subjectivities', which Rimke (2000) links to liberal modes of governance by creating responsible self-governing citizens. Similarly, McGee (2012, p. 686) argues that self-help culture fosters conformity and complacency through its self-improvement regimens, which aim to achieve the 'liberal ideal of the pursuit of happiness'. Self-help views the social world as 'the sum aggregation of atomized, autonomous and self-governing individual persons', teaching responsibility only for oneself not others (Rimke, 2000, p. 62). In fact, Rimke (2000) argues that self-help pathologizes concern for others as 'codependency' and encourages selfishness. 'Codependency' is linked to addiction, encompassing an over-reliance on things outside the self, including other people, substances or behaviours (Rimke, 2000).

New Age self-help diverges from the general self-help genre through its mystical bias and countercultural nature (Redden, 2002). Reminiscent of Melley's concept of agency panic, the individual's power is placed in opposition with institutions, which are seen as oppressive by their nature (Redden, 2002). While the authentic self is venerated, the 'false' socialised self, is disparaged (Redden, 2002). New Age thinking also contests knowledge authorities, appealing 'to the inner self as the central locus of knowledge and power', rejecting rationality in favour of intuition (Redden, 2002, p. 39). The message 'that things do have purpose and people can experience the liberation of realizing their destinies if they master the knowledge that enables them to understand the significance of events' is linked to the critique of modern institutions which are portrayed as hiding this truth from the public (Redden, 2002, p. 38). New Age self-help encourages people to extract knowledge from a variety of sources, using their inner guide to create their personal reality (Redden, 2002). While it has been argued that this conception of the self and personal improvement allows for the creation of the perfect consumer, New Age philosophy also addresses modern 'problems of meaning and purpose, and the competency of individuals in various areas of social and personal life' (Redden, 2002, p. 45).

3 Theoretical background and methodology

3.1 Methodology

The video titled ‘MASS PSYCHOSIS – How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL’ was uploaded to the popular YouTube channel ‘After Skool’ on the 3rd August 2021. After Skool’s content generally centres around lifestyle advice, spirituality and often tackles topical social issues which could affect the lives of everyday people, aligning with New Age self-help. The channel has over 3 million subscribers and its videos reach up to several million views, thus it can be considered rather influential. The video under analysis is their third most popular video which has over 8 million views, over 300,000 likes and 40,000 comments. The video was a collaboration with another channel, ‘Academy of Ideas’, who wrote and narrated the content, while After Skool provided the illustrations. The video was transcribed and screenshots were taken of all images included, which were analysed using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis.

The video was released later in the Covid-19 pandemic, when some countries had lifted most restrictions and vaccines were available, though concerns about the potential reintroduction of public health measures remained. In the UK, social distancing and mask requirements were lifted in July 2021, with face coverings still recommended in some places (Shearing & Lee, 2021). The United States, however, where the video’s creator and likely much of its audience lives, was experiencing increasing numbers of Covid cases, leading to restrictions being reintroduced (Wagner et al., 2021). Mask mandates returned in many public spaces and vaccine requirements were implemented for some professions, such as healthcare workers (Wagner et al., 2021). Public figures, such as President Biden, urged the public to get vaccinated, while news articles, including some in the collection of CNN articles about Covid news by Wagner et al. (2021), blamed the high proportion of unvaccinated people for rising cases.

3.2 Theoretical background

3.2.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) originates from Critical Linguistics, which examined language use for ideological purposes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Critical Linguistics viewed

language as a social practice inseparable from culture, shaping how we organise societies and allowing speakers to naturalise certain views by presenting them as natural or common sense (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Critical Discourse Analysts built on this framework by developing further methods to shed light on the ideological goals the choice of specific linguistic features may serve rather than simply describing these features (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Analysis of which ideas are foregrounded, backgrounded, absent or taken for granted allows Critical Discourse Analysts to reveal buried ideology in texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Power and ideology are important concepts in CDA. Fairclough (1992) highlights discourse's role in the establishment, maintenance and transformation of power relations. The concept of ideology is closely linked to power, as according to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 26), 'Ideologies are constructions of practices from particular perspectives (and in that sense "one-sided") which "iron out" the contradictions, dilemmas and antagonisms of practices in ways which accord with the interests and projects of domination'. Machin and Mayr (2012) define power as resulting from privileged access to resources including wealth, education and knowledge, allowing one to gain authority, status and influence over others. They highlight ideology's role in concealing social inequalities and limiting our ability to envision alternative social structures (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Van Dijk (2006) defines ideologies as socially shared belief systems, which allow a group to define its social identity or 'its shared beliefs about its fundamental conditions and ways of existence and reproduction' (p. 116). Ideologies are relatively stable foundational beliefs which control other shared beliefs by creating coherence among the group's beliefs and easing their acquisition and everyday use, as well as determining which values the group prioritises (Van Dijk, 2006). Ideologies are inherently evaluative, allowing members to judge social practices based on values aligned with the group's social position and goals (Van Dijk, 1995). Ideologies organise shared social representations and form the basis of social practices and discourses, enabling members 'to organize and coordinate their (joint) actions and interactions in view of the goals and interests of the group as a whole' (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 117). However, not all groups have shared ideologies. Ideological groups are characterised by permanence, continuity, shared social practices and interests, relations to other groups and group identification (Van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk distinguishes social groups which have shared ideologies from cultural

communities and social categories, noting that while teachers of English and feminists as a group have ideologies, English speakers and women do not.

Language use influences and is influenced by communicators' subjective interpretations of the communicative situation, such as their attitudes towards their interlocutors ('context models') and their interpretations of the content of discourse ('event models') (Van Dijk, 2006). These mental models are unique to individuals, representing people's beliefs about their everyday lives and experiences, but they are also influenced by shared social cognitions among group members (Van Dijk, 2005). Ideologically biased mental models can result in biased discourse, such as more or less polite tone or more positive or negative descriptions of certain events or actors (Van Dijk, 2006).

Ideologies are self-serving. They represent the relations between the ingroup and outgroups (us versus them) by assigning positive attributes to the ingroup and negative attributes to outgroups (Van Dijk, 2005). Thus, ideological discourse is characterised by an emphasis on '*Our* good things and *Their* bad things' and 'the mitigation of *Our* bad things and *Their* good things', which Van Dijk refers to as 'ingroup-outgroup polarisation' (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 124, emphasis in original). Ideological analysis examines properties of discourse that express such self-serving perspectives, prioritising the ingroup's interests over those of others (Van Dijk, 2005).

The Social Semiotic approach views language as a set of resources from which communicators, who have some awareness of the affordances (the resources for expressing meaning) of for instance different words or visual elements, can select those which best fit their interests (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The semiotic choices of the author prompt the reader to place the events and ideas they discuss into a particular discourse – defined as 'broader frameworks of interpretation' – and allows discourse analysts to reveal hidden ideologies in texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 20). However, different modes of communication (e.g. visual or verbal mode) have varying affordances, which results in meanings being '"realized" differently in each mode' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, p. xiv). For example, what can be expressed in language through the selection of specific words or grammatical structures, might be conveyed in visual communication through colours or composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Additionally,

some meanings are more easily expressed in certain modes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As visual communication is generally more open to interpretation, Machin and Mayr (2012) argue that it allows communicators to express more controversial ideas while maintaining a greater degree of deniability.

The varying affordances of different semiotic modes allow text producers (by 'text' I mean communicative material in any mode) to communicate more effectively by creating arrangements of signs (ensembles) in which different modes convey different parts of the message (Kress, 2010, Chapter 8). For example, in airplane safety demonstrations, cabin crew demonstrate safety equipment while spoken instructions are given describing their use (Kress, 2010). Such messages are designed to facilitate passengers' understanding, considering the affordances of different modes and potential distractions which may be present such as noise or a stressful atmosphere (Kress, 2010). However, as the audience's interest guides their attention towards certain elements of the message, the presentation of such orchestrated ensembles does not determine their interpretation of the text (Kress, 2010).

Drawing on Barthes, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) categorise image and text relations as relay and elaboration, depending on whether the linguistic message complements or elaborates on the visual message. Relay involves complementary visual and verbal elements forming a complete message, while in elaboration both express the same meaning but in different ways (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Elaboration can be divided into illustration, when the visual elements illustrate the text or anchoring when verbal elements elaborate on an image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Forceville (2020) lists further subdivisions which can be made: 'the language can name or label (part of) the visuals it accompanies, it can specify information therein, it can add pertinent details, or it can contrast with the visuals' (p. 69).

An author's lexical choices can reveal their ideological investment. They might choose particular expressions over others due to the connotations of certain words better aligning with their interests (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For instance, the positive connotations of 'family home' as opposed to the more neutral term 'building' might motivate one to say/write 'Youths attacked local family homes', creating moral outrage in their audience (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Specific words and their synonyms may be overly abundant in a text (referred to as 'overlexicalisation')

or words which would be expected to appear might be absent ('suppression' or 'lexical absence') (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As words have meanings not only on their own but also in relation to other words, communicators can use structural oppositions (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For example, they might explicitly comment on one of a pair of opposing concepts, such as old/young or good/bad, implicitly communicating something about its opposite (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Opposing concepts might be structured around particular participants in a text to influence reader evaluation (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Machin and Mayr (2012) illustrate this through the example of a news article describing an armed conflict between British soldiers and the Taliban, in which the former are described positively ('our boys', 'heroes') and their actions presented as aligning with professional conduct and careful planning, while the latter are depicted negatively ('fanatics', 'bloodthirsty revellers') and their actions as disorganised (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The use of official-sounding terms can also influence the reader by signalling authority, while using colloquial language can make the author appear more relatable to readers (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

According to Machin and Mayr (2012) there is no neutral way to represent people in language, as any choice foregrounds some aspects of their identity and backgrounds others. For example, a journalist reporting on a crime can represent the perpetrator in various ways ('a Muslim man', 'an Asian man', 'a British man', 'a Midlands man', 'a father of two', etc.), some portraying them as an 'other', thereby distancing the reader from them, while others (e.g. 'father of two') encourage sympathy (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Whether participants are described as individuals (individualisation) or part of a collective (collectivisation) can influence the audience by either bringing them closer or distancing them from the participants (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Nomination (e.g. 'Joe Biden') or functionalisation (e.g. 'the American President') can be used to create a more personal or official representation, with some examples of functionalisation (e.g. 'the demonstrator' or 'the defendant') being partially dehumanising (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Finally, the pronouns 'us' and 'them' can be used strategically, allowing an author to represent their beliefs as belonging to 'us', inviting readers to align with their ideas (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) distinguish between two kinds of participants, those who are depicted in an image (referred to as represented participants) and those who produce and view

images (interactive participants). They emphasise the importance of considering the relations images portray among represented participants, those between interactive participants and between represented and interactive participants. Physical distance from the depicted participants, whether they are shown in close, medium or long shot, reflects social distance between represented participants and viewers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Image angle (high or low) also conveys meaning; looking down at subjects emphasises their vulnerability, while looking up at them emphasises their power (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) highlight the importance of whether represented participants are looking at the viewer, distinguishing between demand and offer image acts. They refer to instances when subjects gaze towards the viewer as demand images, arguing that such an image 'demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation' with the depicted participant (p. 117). On the other hand, in offer images represented participants do not make eye contact with the viewer, creating a barrier between them and offering information viewers can react to (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

When depicted in groups, participants can be homogenised, by being portrayed as acting or posing similarly, creating the impression that group members are all the same (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Similarly, individuals can be portrayed either generically as stereotypical group members or as unique individuals who happen to belong to a particular group (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As different poses can signify certain values, ideas or identities, we need to consider whether participants' poses differ or mirror each other (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For example, poses can suggest openness or closure, activity or stillness, bodily control or lack thereof (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The distance between participants can also represent social distance (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In language, modality – expressed through modal verbs and hedging – is used to signal the author's commitment to their statements (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Epistemic modality reflects the author's judgement of a proposition's truth (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For instance, saying 'I'm going to have a beer tonight' shows higher certainty (higher modality) than 'I may have a beer tonight' (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Deontic modality relates to instructing others with differing levels of influence: 'Students must do the essay' (high modality) or 'Students may do the essay' (low modality) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Lastly, dynamic modality expresses one's

ability to carry out an action or the likelihood of an event (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Higher modality can be used persuasively, while lowered modality can convey sincerity (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In visual communication, modality, also referred to as 'validity', is expressed through how closely the level of detail, lighting and use of colours aligns with reality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Absence of a setting lowers naturalistic modality, rendering participants as generic examples rather than being associated with a specific location, time, or perspective (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). However, validity need not be determined by photographic naturalism (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Validity criteria depend on 'coding orientation' – a term coined by Bernstein – which Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p. 164) use when referring to 'the different validity criteria that operate in different contexts'. Other than naturalistic coding orientation they distinguish others, such as 'abstract realism' used in science and abstract art, which assigns higher validity to representations which reduce 'the specific to the general, and detailed representation to the representation of essential qualities' (p. 164). On the other hand, in sensory coding orientation, often used in art and advertising, validity depends on how much an image appeals to the senses (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). For instance, horror films can enhance fear-evoking elements like 'the slimy or scaly skin and the rawness of scars and disfigurements of their abject creatures' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 164).

Visual elements take on different information values depending on where they are placed in an image (spatial composition) and how they unfold over time (temporal composition) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), the left side of an image typically represents already known information, while the right side is associated with new information. They further note that centring an element with others surrounding it indicates its core status. Visual salience, resulting from, for instance, larger size, sharper focus, colour contrasts or placement towards the top or left of the image, can also mark some elements as more important than others and draw the viewer's attention to them (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

3.2.2 Intertextuality

The concept of intertextuality originates from Bakhtin, who described each utterance as ‘a link in the chain of speech communication’ (by ‘utterance’ he meant both spoken and written texts), connected not only to preceding utterances to which it is responding, but also to anticipated subsequent utterances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94). Texts can incorporate other texts they are responding to (referred to as intertextuality), or they can draw on discourse conventions, such as genres (interdiscursivity) (Fairclough, 1992, Chapter 4). These elements might be presented relatively straightforwardly or they may be reaccentuated, for instance by a text being quoted ironically (Fairclough, 1992). Textual fragments can be integrated to varying degrees. For example they might be clearly marked off by quotation marks (direct discourse representation), they might be paraphrased (indirect discourse representation) or presupposed (Fairclough, 1992). While direct discourse representation clearly separates the voice of the reported and reporting speakers, foregrounding the former, indirect discourse representation blurs this distinction allowing the reporter to use words aligning with their discourse rather than that of the reported speaker (Fairclough, 1992).

When borrowing a fragment from another text, it is recontextualised by being removed from its original context and inserted into a new one (Hodges, 2015; Linell, 1998). According to Linell (1998), contexts include co-textual resources, including what was said prior to an utterance in the conversation and other texts which have been referred to, situational resources, such as the activity type (e.g. a conversation around the dinner table) and background assumptions of the interactants about the topic and the other people involved. Recontextualization involves varying degrees of meaning transformation, as Linell (1998, p. 155) explains: ‘selected parts of discourses and their meanings in the prior, “quoted” discourse-in-context are used as resources in creating new meaning in the “quoting” text and its communicative contexts’. In this way a quote can be used to create new meaning in its new context. Two types of transformations discussed by Hodges (2008) are focalisation, when the reporter highlights what they deem to be the most important aspects of the prior text, and erasure, in which other aspects of the prior text are glossed over. Hodges (2008, p. 484) argues that recontextualization is crucial in political discourse, which involves ‘a struggle over whose preferred reading of prior discourse will be accepted as more valid’, the outcome of which affects our understanding of the world.

Reported speech serves various purposes for communicators, including avoiding responsibility for what is said, giving credibility to their words, confronting other views and constructing authenticity (Jullian, 2011; Matoesian, 2000; Scollon, 2004). While direct quotes may seem to adhere faithfully to the original text, the reporting speaker's contextualisation can create new interpretations (Matoesian, 2000). Or as Matoesian (2000, p. 884) explains: 'direct quotes do not represent an exact wording of prior speech inasmuch as they refer to a form of constructed speech in which the reporting voice subtly penetrates into the reported utterance to strategically manipulate the audience's impression of the quoted speaker'. In his study of the Kennedy Smith rape trial, Matoesian (2000) analysed how a defence attorney contextualised witnesses' prior speech captured on audio tapes to impeach their statements and their character. Matoesian (2000) argues that playing the audio tape foregrounds the witnesses' prior speech, backgrounding the attorney's role in contextualising and selectively presenting the recordings.

Quotation framing verbs, such as 'said' or 'warned', impose an interpretation on the quotation (Fairclough, 1992; Hodges, 2015). For instance, when saying 'Jane whinged "My housemates simply don't do enough cleaning"' rather than the neutral 'Jane said', the speaker is commenting on Jane's personality and the credibility of her complaint (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Nominal attributions, such as 'the teacher' or 'his sister' can also be used to frame an utterance, which can be combined with adnominals (e.g. 'the *decorated* general', 'the *disgraced* general') (Hodges, 2015). These strategies allow the reporter to filter the reported speech through their interpretive lens (Hodges, 2015). The visual representation of speakers, for example an image of a politician included alongside a news article, can be used to contextualise reported speech and guide readers' interpretation of their character and emotional state (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The direction of the speakers' gaze has significance due to cultural associations of 'up' and 'down' (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In positive representations politicians are often pictured looking slightly upwards 'to lofty ideals and to high status', while looking down can signal worries (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 73).

According to Fairclough (1992, p. 9), interdiscursivity refers to the formation of a specific discourse type by integrating elements from various orders of discourse, which he defines as 'total configurations of discursive practices in particular institutions, or indeed in a whole society'. The elements which make up discourse types include genre, style, register and

discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Mäntynen and Shore (2014, p. 739) define genre as ‘a class or type of (spoken or written) text’. Genres are associated with specific activity types, including ‘a structured sequence of actions’ and participants as well as styles, such as formal or informal style (Fairclough, 1992, p. 126). For example, purchasing something from a shop is an activity type, which includes a customer and a shop assistant as participants and a typical sequence of actions (Fairclough, 1992). Additionally, Fairclough (1992, p. 126) points out ‘a genre implies not only a particular text type, but also a particular process of producing, distributing and consuming texts’. Genre blending refers to the elements of multiple genres being combined in a text in a way that blurs the boundaries between them (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014). This generally results in the creation of a new hybrid genre or ‘in texts with an ambivalent generic status’ (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014, p. 748). According to Fairclough (1992) orders of discourse are open to constant change reflecting social change. For example, he discussed the effects of consumerism and the apparent shift in the balance of power between producers and consumers towards the consumers as a driving force behind the discourse of marketing colonizing several other domains.

3.2.3 Pragmatics

Multimodal communication has also been addressed by Pragmatics scholars like Forceville (2020), who applied Relevance Theory (RT) to visual and multimodal communication. RT posits that the addressee assumes that the communicator is being as relevant as possible (Forceville, 2020). The relevance of an utterance depends on the balance between cognitive effort required for interpretation and cognitive benefit derived by the addressee (Forceville, 2020). As relevance is always relevance to an individual, the communicator must consider their addressee’s cognitive environment to craft a relevant message (Forceville, 2020). As the addressee expects relevance, they will stop interpreting the utterance as soon as they arrive at a relevant interpretation, assuming that this was the communicator’s intended meaning (Forceville, 2020). However, according to Sperber et al. (2010), other than the process aimed at finding relevance, hearing an utterance also triggers another process in the addressee, with the purpose of evaluating its trustworthiness.

Mass communicators need to consider the cognitive environment of their audience, potentially millions of strangers, and aim to be relevant to them (Forceville, 2020). The same text can have

different meanings to different readers/viewers depending on the context of interpretation (Forceville, 2020). Following Hall's (1980) categorisation, Forceville (2020) distinguishes three types of meanings which readers/viewers can derive from a text. Some might derive the 'dominant-hegemonic meaning' from the message due to a high level of overlap between their and the communicator's cognitive environment, for instance if they share the same ideology (Forceville, 2020). Alternatively, audience members may recognise but not fully agree with the dominant meaning adapting it into a 'negotiated meaning', or they may reject the dominant meaning completely due to disagreement with the text's key underlying assumptions ('oppositional code') (Forceville, 2020).

Genre attribution helps the audience interpret texts as mass communicators and their audiences have shared genre awareness (Forceville, 2020). Genre attribution can be made with the help of the context and features such as layout, font and drawing style (Forceville, 2020). As genre expectations guide the search for relevance, communicators may manipulate their audience's genre attribution to deceive them (Forceville, 2020).

Implicit communication, such as implied or presupposed meanings, can be used when information is part of the common ground as well as being more appropriate in certain communicative situations (Masia, 2021). It allows speakers 'to appear more refined, less rude, (apparently) less aggressive' (Masia, 2021, p. 7), maintain plausible deniability and help with relationship negotiation (Lee & Pinker, 2010). For instance, a speaker might use an indirect sexual come-on such as 'Would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?' to avoid embarrassment from breaching the relational model between the interlocutors (Lee & Pinker, 2010). Even when deniability between the interlocutors is not plausible, indirect speech can create plausible deniability for a virtual audience (Lee & Pinker, 2010). According to Mazzarella (2023), denial, consisting of the cancellation of the target content and offering another interpretation for the utterance, is possible if the alternative interpretation presented is plausible and could have been derived based on assumptions accessible to the addressee.

Although implicit communication can be used for non-manipulative purposes, Masia (2021) argues that it is particularly well-suited for manipulation. She defines manipulation drawing on

Van Dijk's (2006, p. 360) paper on Discourse and Manipulation as 'communicative and interactional practice in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interest'. Manipulation can occur through biassed representation, directing attention to certain information while obscuring other details (Masia, 2021). As manipulation relies on the receiver's unawareness of the manipulation attempt, Masia (2021) argues that using linguistic structures which also have non-manipulative applications helps communicators in achieving manipulative goals.

Masia (2021) highlights the importance of the linguistic 'packaging' of a message in creating a manipulative effect. For instance, presuppositions – presumed to contain known contents which are part of the speaker and receiver's common ground – can make propositions appear established and difficult to challenge (Fairclough, 1992; Masia, 2021). Conveying information through presuppositions allows speakers to avoid providing supporting evidence (Masia, 2021). Machin and Mayr (2012) argue that what a text takes for granted is deeply ideological and highlight presuppositions' role in providing a basis for the author's arguments. For example, statements like 'Every reasonable person knows that…' or 'Noone in their right mind would think that' suggest that anyone who disagrees with the speaker is unreasonable or insane (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 160-161). Due to limited cognitive resources, receivers prioritise processing asserted information rather than presuppositions, making them more likely to uncritically accept presupposed information (Masia, 2021). Additionally, as presuppositions are expected to include already known information, addressees are more likely to accept rather than challenge them to avoid appearing uncooperative (Masia, 2021).

De Saussure (2013) extends the notion of presuppositions to background knowledge not linguistically triggered, calling them discursive presuppositions. He defines discursive presuppositions as 'those pieces of background knowledge which are not necessary for the recovery of a meaning proper but are basic conditions for relevance and meaningfulness' (p. 180). He illustrates this through a proposed ban on minaret construction in Switzerland, arguing that the question's relevance depended on the following propositions being true or at least likely: '(a) There is a relevant number of minarets actually in place or projected. (b) Minarets could modify Swiss landscapes. (c) Minarets are a threat of some type.' (p. 187). These assumptions are discursive presuppositions as they provide relevance to the question of banning

minarets and are treated as background knowledge (de Saussure, 2013). Similarly to presuppositions proper, de Saussure (2013) argues that discursive presuppositions undergo shallow processing and questioning them is generally dispreferred, as it challenges the utterance's relevance.

Masia (2021) defines 'any term for which it cannot be decided to which degree it can be applied to a specific entity or portion of reality' as vague (p. 25). Passive sentences (e.g. 'the dog was found') and nominalisations (e.g. 'the construction of the building') are examples of vague language that hide agents (e.g. who found the dog?) and remove sense of time and causality (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Masia, 2021). While the missing information can often be retrieved from the context, this depends on the receivers' background knowledge (Masia, 2021). As vagueness shifts responsibility to the addressee for filling in the missing details, the speaker is less responsible for the understanding they arrive at, allowing them to covertly endorse controversial propositions (Masia, 2021). Similarly, Forceville (2020) notes that visual ambiguity can be used strategically to communicate controversial ideas while maintaining deniability.

Dogwhistles are a form of manipulation typically observed in political discourse, designed to be unnoticed by most of the audience (Saul, 2018). Overt dogwhistles, such as the expression 'wonder-working power' used by George W. Bush to appeal to fundamentalist Christians, are designed to be noticed by a subset of the audience while remaining invisible for most (Saul, 2018). This allows politicians to appeal to a subset of their supporters without alienating others (Saul, 2018). Conversely, covert dogwhistles are not meant to be consciously recognised but affect the audience subconsciously (Saul, 2018). For example, the term 'inner city' in a phrase such as 'violent inner city criminals' can prime racist attitudes without the addressee realising (Saul, 2018). Speakers may also use words or images which are considered dogwhistles without realising, referred to as an unintentional dogwhistle (Saul, 2018).

While metaphors can be used for non-manipulative purposes such as education, they also have ideological significance (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Machin and Mayr (2012) argue that metaphors highlight some aspects of things while concealing others, affecting our

understanding of the world and societal organisation. When metaphors become the dominant way of describing a phenomenon they become taken for granted and are thus hard to challenge (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Similarly, Burgers et al. (2016) argue that figurative language such as metaphors, hyperbole and irony can be used as framing and reasoning devices nudging people towards specific problem definitions, interpretations of causality and evaluations, increasing the likelihood that particular solutions will be proposed. For example, referring to genetically modified food as 'Frankenfood' frames it as monstrous and a result of out-of-control science, potentially influencing consumption choices (Burgers et al., 2016). Hyperbole, defined as extreme exaggeration, can also make messages more persuasive by intensifying emotional attitudes and giving more weight to certain elements of the discussion, limiting it to only positive or negative aspects of the subject (Burgers et al., 2016).

Based on case studies investigating the combinations of different figurative framing devices, Burgers et al. (2016) propose that such combinations create an even stronger persuasive effect than any figurative frame alone. They argue that such combinations make challenging the frame harder by strengthening its persuasive effect and making it more difficult 'to pin down the author on their words' (p. 420). For example, combining metaphor and hyperbole (e.g. 'tsunami of Islamization') transforms an abstract concept like immigration into something tangible using metaphor, while also amplifying its impact through hyperbole (Burgers et al., 2016).

Forceville (2008) applies Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory – stating that metaphors are not only present in language but primarily characterise our thinking – to argue that metaphors appear in various modes, including visuals and music. Conceptual metaphor theory posits that metaphors allow us to understand unfamiliar concepts by transferring processes of understanding from source to target domains (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Forceville (2008) describes several visual metaphor types including contextual and hybrid metaphors and pictorial similes. In a contextual metaphor, an object takes on metaphorical meaning due to the context it is placed in, for example placing a spoon in their hair silk, bringing to mind luxurious ice cream, allows Dove to advertise their product as luxurious (Forceville, 2008). In a hybrid metaphor two objects are merged into a single 'gestalt', illustrated by an ad for a Dutch supermarket chain which depicts clogs (traditionally worn by Dutch farmers) blended with running shoes, indicating fast harvesting (Forceville, 2008). Finally, a pictorial simile consists

of two objects presented as similar in some way through a ‘similarity in form, position, color, lighting, function, and so on’ (Forceville, 2008, p. 466).

4 Analysis

4.1 Discursive presupposition and vagueness

Typical of the self-help genre, After Skool generally shares lifestyle advice. Thus, audience members familiar with self-help and the channel's typical content likely expect content addressing personal problems. As a result of these expectations, when the channel discusses a political topic in general terms, viewers are likely to assume that this discussion relates to current events which may impact them personally. The video discusses the rise of totalitarianism in general terms and does not explicitly state how it relates to contemporary politics. However, viewers are likely to interpret this general discussion of the events leading up to totalitarianism as applicable to current events due to their genre expectations. Furthermore, as self-help viewers are presumably more interested in learning about political topics when these affect them personally, this assumption increases the message's relevance and justifies the cognitive effort of watching the entire 20-minute video for such viewers. As this is a background assumption, which is not linguistically cued but necessary for the audience to find the video relevant, it aligns with de Saussure's (2013) definition of discursive presuppositions.

As self-help generally addresses real problems affecting the lives of everyday people, including conspiratorial ideas in a self-help video allows the video makers to present them as factual. Additionally, viewers have to fill in the missing details linking the general discussion of totalitarianism and 'mass psychosis' to current events themselves, reducing the creators' responsibility for viewers' interpretations. Following Masia's (2021) argument, the video makers' reduced responsibility enables them to covertly endorse controversial beliefs about Covid-19. Furthermore, the video's vague descriptions potentially allow it to resonate with a larger audience, allowing each viewer to interpret the message in alignment with their preexisting beliefs and experiences.

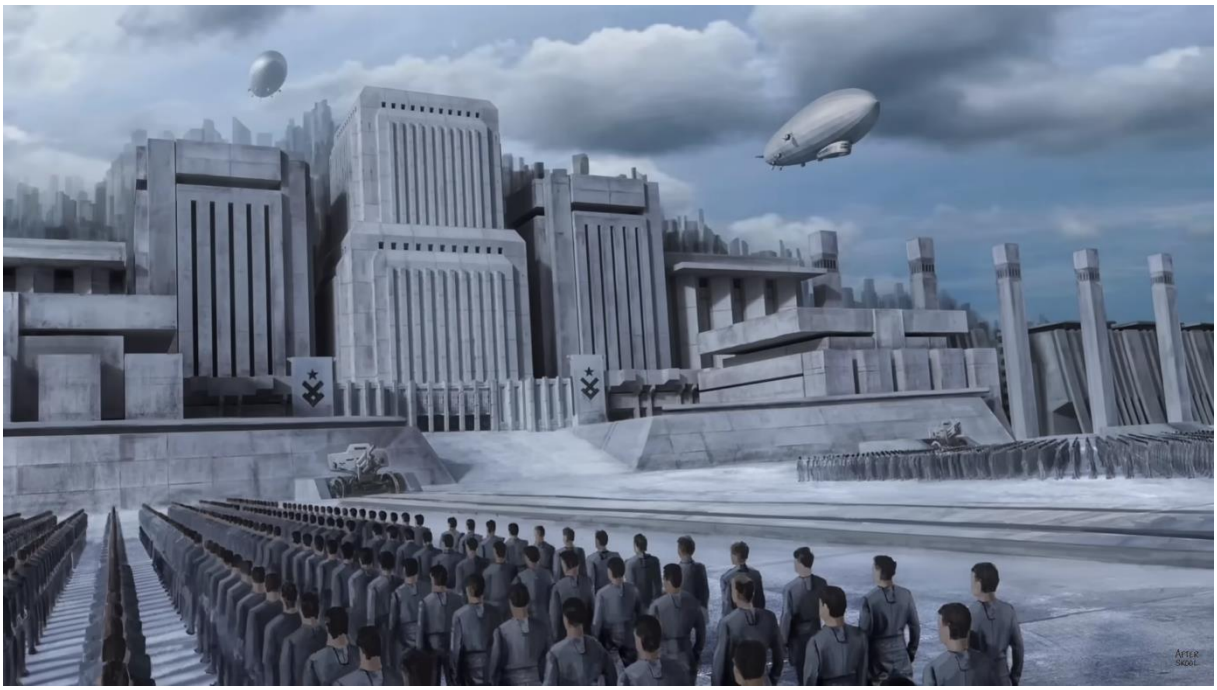
4.2 Image-text relations

Overall, the visuals and written text that accompany the narration appear to serve the purpose of easing viewers' comprehension of the message. For instance, written text is used to

summarise key points, highlighting certain expressions in red and blue to make them more salient. As it is typical of After Skool videos to take extracts from talks or interviews and illustrate them, the narration was most likely created before the sketches. Thus, the sketches mostly illustrate the linguistic content (a type of elaboration), as well as adding further details and more specificity to often vague descriptions. While the narration provides a general overview of 'mass psychosis' and totalitarianism, it does not explicitly state how these are relevant to current events. Instead, the connection to Covid-19 is made by pairing the narration with visuals including facemasks, vaccine needles and visual depictions of a coronavirus. As a result, many of the seemingly general points made about totalitarianism can be understood as alluding to current events related to the pandemic. This allows the creators to convey conspiratorial messages through visual cues while preserving some degree of deniability, due to visual communication being generally considered more open to interpretation (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

As the illustrator uses whiteboard markers for the sketches, the colours are saturated and have low colour modulation, aligning with an abstract coding orientation, rather than photographic realism. The drawings are often decontextualised, often appearing on plain or highly simplistic backgrounds. The representation of details is also minimal. For example, some participants are represented by an outline of a body and faces are often drawn without noses or with only a line representing their nose. Representations of light and shadow are also minimal. These elements not only make it easier to draw the illustrations but also decrease the cognitive effort necessary for viewers to interpret them, thereby increasing their relevance. Such simplistic visuals are better suited to communicating abstract concepts, allowing the illustrator to use for instance contrasting colour schemes to symbolise differing worldviews or lifestyles.

The video also includes some artworks and photographs which alternate with the illustrator's drawings. Many of these have black and white colour schemes or are at least somewhat drained of colour. As according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) saturation signals emotional intensity, this low colour saturation portrays a cold and impersonal world drained of emotion and individuality. In addition to the often disturbing subject matters these works depict, such as manipulation, communist and Nazi propaganda images, famine, concentration camps, dystopian fantasies, isolation and death, the colour schemes in these images create a sense of unease in the viewer. Some images depict distorted human bodies, eliciting fear and disgust. Thus, these artworks seem to serve the purpose of appealing to viewers' emotions, primarily fear, which aligns with a sensory coding orientation.



In addition to the verbal and visual modes, the sound effect at the start of the video also seems to contribute to its message. This sound effect, distinct from the sound effect typically used by After Skool, influences the audience's expectations of the video's content. It creates an ominous atmosphere and a sense of intrigue, aligning with some of the motivations for conspiracy belief outlined in my literature review, namely a desire for entertainment and satisfying one's curiosity (Douglas et al., 2017; Hornsey et al., 2023). It creates the impression that the viewer is about to

be let in on a secret, similarly to some of the channel's other videos. The promise of revealing hidden information may appeal to those more susceptible to conspiracy belief as the perceived possession of special knowledge allows them to imagine themselves as participating in an important historic event (Biddlestone et al., 2021; Van Prooijen, 2022). The eerie atmosphere the sound effect creates also aligns with the dystopian imagery of the artworks and some illustrations throughout the video, which seem to serve the purpose of creating fear in viewers.

4.3 Legitimisation of conspiratorial narratives about 'mass psychosis' and totalitarianism

The video creators rely on several scientific sources to support their claims and create the impression that their beliefs and their ingroup and outgroup representations are based on evidence, using works by some of the same scientists (Meerloo and Pavlov) that Melley (2008) discussed to legitimise their beliefs. While scientists collectively are portrayed negatively as part of the ruling class, individual scientists the video cites are praised as experts who are exceptionally knowledgeable on topics relevant to the discussion, such as: *'Hannah Arendt, one of the 20th century's preeminent scholars'*, *'Silvano Arieti, one of the 20th century's foremost authorities on schizophrenia'* and *'the Dutch medical doctor who studied the mental effects of living under totalitarianism'* (Joost Meerloo). By elevating its sources above other scientists and describing them as exceptional individuals the video makers can condemn scientists in general while using the authority of these individual scientists to boost the credibility of their arguments. Another cited author, Václav Havel is described as *'a political dissident under Soviet communist rule who later became president of Czechoslovakia'* encouraging viewers to admire and sympathise with him, especially those who feel they are in a similar position.

Some authors, Carl Jung, Arthur Versluis, Joost Meerloo and Václav Havel are also represented visually next to a speech bubble of their words. They are portrayed as respectable intellectuals, wearing formal clothing, using gestures and facial expressions associated with thinking or explaining, holding a book or pipe. They are shown from the waist up in medium close shot, closer than the other represented participants who are generally shown from an objectifying/impersonal distance. Apart from Jung, who is portrayed as looking at his quote, the rest of the authors are presented as gazing at the viewer, which Kress and Van Leeuwen

(2020) refer to as a demand image. This creates a relationship between them and the viewer along the lines of a teacher-student relationship, encouraging viewers to look up to and learn from them. As Jung is depicted looking and pointing at his words, he is presented as offering important information to viewers.

In addition to scientific sources, the video employs other superficial features of academic writing, including scientific-sounding terminology and a graph. The video makers create scientific credibility for the conspiratorial beliefs about brainwashing they present, using the terms ’psychic epidemic’ and ’mass psychosis’ (originating from Jung) as well as ’menticide’ (from Meerloo). However, these terms are defined vaguely, often in ways which align with the video makers’ discourse rather than that of their original authors.

4.3.1 ‘Mass psychosis’

The video defines ‘psychic epidemics’ as: *‘those times of history when mental illness becomes the norm rather than the exception in a society’*. Jung, on the other hand in *The Symbolic Life*, which is cited in the video, lists examples for psychic epidemics such as the witch hunts and ‘the social and political utopias of the twentieth century’ (Jung, 1976, p. 485). When discussing Nazi Germany in the same book, he argues that while Hitler and his inner circle were mentally

ill (‘psychopathic’ in Jung’s words) the public that fell for his propaganda were ‘normal’, naive people (p. 605). Thus, the video’s definition of ’psychic epidemics’ as widespread mental illness aligns more closely with self-help’s preoccupation with mental illness. Additionally, it allows the video makers to dismiss their opponents as mentally ill, allowing them and their viewers to dismiss any counterarguments and raise their self-esteem by contrast. This seems to be a more extreme version of the ethotic straw man fallacy (Herman & Oswald, 2022), undermining an opponent’s image not only by falsely attributing certain intentions or cognitive states to them, but by weaponizing the stigma around mental illness against them.

Jung uses the terms ‘psychic epidemic’ and ‘mass psychosis’ interchangeably, as illustrated by the following quote from his ‘Epilogue to “Essays on Contemporary Events”’ in *Civilisation in Transition*: ‘I am—and always was—of the opinion that the political mass movements of our time are psychic epidemics, in other words, mass psychoses’ (Jung, 1970, p. 232). By contrast, the narrator defines ‘mass psychosis’ as ‘the most dangerous of all psychic epidemics’, misinterpreting and sensationalising the term. The selection of this expression also allows the video makers to create a false equivalence between what they define as ‘mass psychosis’ and psychosis in an individual suffering from schizophrenia. This is done both verbally (*‘But what causes a mass psychosis? To answer this question, we must first explore what drives an individual mad.’*) and by pairing the narration discussing the development of psychosis in an individual (based on Silvano Arieti’s work on schizophrenia) with images depicting witch hunts, which they identify as an example of ‘mass psychosis’. The addition of the terms ‘phase of panic’ and ‘psychotic insight’ to label parts of the image further solidifies the equation of psychosis and ‘mass psychosis’. This false equivalence is made possible not only by the similarity in terms (‘psychosis’ and ‘mass psychosis’) but also by their definition of ‘psychic epidemics’ by rising rates of mental illness in a society.

Additionally, the narrator describes the ‘phase of panic’ and ‘psychotic insight’ as the ‘psychogenic steps that lead to madness’, using the term ‘madness’ repeatedly throughout the video (9 instances). Due to its vagueness and evaluative nature, ‘madness’ aligns better with the video makers’ discourse rather than that of an expert, who might instead use the term ‘psychosis’. Its vagueness allows the video makers to apply Arieti’s writings outside of their original context, while the negative evaluation it carries contributes to the negative portrayal of the general public.

When discussing how individuals belonging to a society under ‘mass psychosis’ act, the narrator quotes Jung (1970, 1976) writing not about ‘psychic epidemics’ or ‘mass psychosis’ but about collective behaviour in general:

> When a mass psychosis occurs, the results are devastating. Jung studied this phenomenon and wrote that the individuals who make up the infected society ‘become morally and spiritually inferior’, they sink unconsciously to an inferior intellectual level, they become ‘more unreasonable, irresponsible, emotional, erratic and unreliable’, and worst of all ‘crimes the individual alone could never stand are freely committed by the group smitten by madness’.

All three quotes included here describe Jung’s general conception of collective behaviour rather than ‘psychic epidemics’. Additionally, the last quote is inaccurate, as Jung (1976, p. 571) wrote

‘the group being’ rather than the more sensational ‘the group smitten by madness’, which the narrator chose to include. This alteration creates the appearance that these quotes are more relevant to the video’s topic and provide stronger support for its creators’ position than they really do.

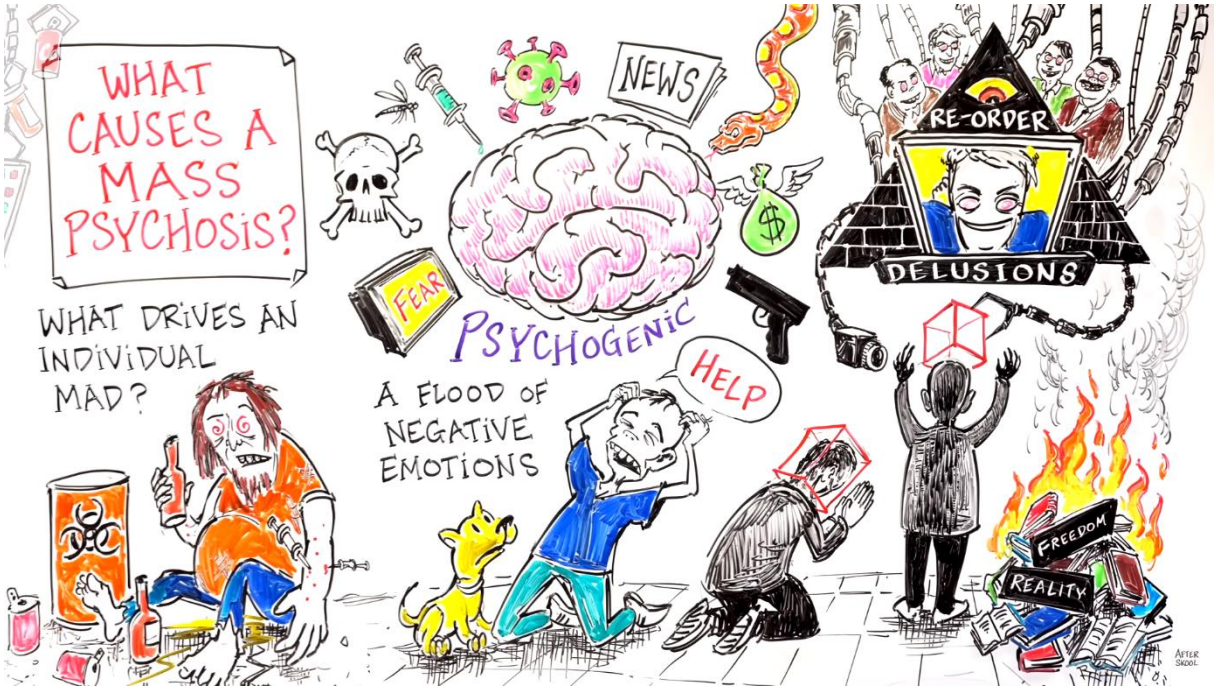
In fact, the understanding of crowd psychology expressed by Jung in these quotes and in the opening quote from Gustave Le Bon have been shown incorrect by more recent psychological research. These quotes and more broadly the video’s representation of collective behaviour aligns with an outdated concept of deindividuation, developed by Le Bon in his book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (French: Psychologie des Foules), first published in 1895. According to this, when acting as part of a group, individuals lose their sense of individual identity and inner restraints leading to antinormative behaviour (Vilanova et al., 2017). However, this idea is not supported by more recent research and has been superseded by more recent theories of deindividuation. According to the more recent SIDE (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects), based on Social Identity Theory – which states that individuals’ identity is partly made up of the different groups they belong to – and Self-Categorisation Theory – according to which self-categorization occurs on two distinct levels: the personal and the social – when individuals are in a group rather than losing their individual identity, the corresponding collective aspects of their personality come to the forefront (Vilanova et al., 2017). According to Vilanova et al. (2017), what might appear as counter normative behaviour to outsiders reflects the norms of the specific group and situation.

This clashes with the video's depiction of crowds (under ‘mass psychosis’) acting in objectively immoral ways, as current research suggests they instead conform to the norms of the situation. The portrayal of such crowds sinking ‘to an inferior intellectual level’ goes against SIDE, instead aligning with Le Bon (2002), who wrote about crowd members losing their ‘conscious personality’ including their intelligence. The video’s description of ‘unreasonable, irresponsible, emotional, erratic and unreliable’ collective behaviour similarly corresponds to Le Bon’s portrayal of crowds as impulsive, irritable and driven by unconscious motives. As Jung was influenced by Le Bon – demonstrated by him citing Le Bon’s psychology of crowds in *Civilisation in Transition* (p. 238) – this understanding of collective behaviour is reflected in his writing as well. This negative portrayal of collective behaviour may also be linked to

conspiracy theories' emphasis on the corrupting influence of social relationships on the individual, associated with agency panic (Melley, 2017).

This image illustrates the narration discussing the immoral and dangerous behaviours those under 'mass psychosis' allegedly engage in, targeting certain viewers' worst fears. These fears include the loss of individual freedoms, represented by a visual metaphor depicting a group of people tearing down the Statue of Liberty. Rather than blaming the elite for this loss of freedom, however, this sketch seems to blame the 'masses', who are portrayed as active agents complicit in their enslavement. Another visual element at the centre of the scene depicts someone beating an American war veteran with a hammer. The central placement of this element suggests its importance as perhaps the most shocking form of antinormative behaviour presented in this image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Such behaviour would be particularly upsetting for patriotic viewers who hold veterans in high regard and see them as national heroes. For such viewers this image might be a hyperbolic representation of a perceived rise of anti-American sentiment and rejection of traditional values. Behind this, we can see a group of protesters wearing masks. The inclusion of protesters in this image conveys a negative evaluation of collective political action which challenges the status quo. Finally, the screen and the burning book present the context for such counter normative behaviours, namely the influence of the media on the public and censorship, alluded to by the burning book. Some Christian viewers may interpret the book as representing not just knowledge or books in general but a specific book, namely the Bible. This interpretation is made possible by the depiction of a single leather-bound volume, contrasting with a similar drawing in the video that portrays a pile of burning

books. The depiction of a single book may allude to a specific book, while the leather-bound exterior is associated with important or sacred texts. Thus, as this visual element can appeal to Christian viewers without alienating others, it can be considered a visual dogwhistle (Saul, 2018).



Drawing on Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the narrator discusses totalitarianism as an 'attempted transformation of human nature':

> Hannah Arendt, one of the 20th century's preeminent scholars of this form of rule called totalitarianism an attempted transformation of human nature itself. But this attempted transformation only turns sound minds into sick minds.

The claim that 'this transformation only turns sound minds into sick minds' misrepresents Arendt's work, as she wrote that 'these experiments succeed not in changing men but in destroying him' (Arendt, 1973, p. 459). Juxtaposing 'human nature' associated with 'sound minds' with 'sick minds' in combination with the illustrations alters Arendt's message to fit the video makers' discourse. It also allows them to link the two central topics of the video: 'mass psychosis' (defined by rising rates of mental illness) and totalitarianism. This discussion on the transformation of human nature may also relate to artworks throughout the video depicting distorted human bodies, creating unease in viewers.

The illustrations which accompany this discussion depict a traditional nuclear family with a father, mother and two children labelled as ‘human nature’. They are portrayed as embracing and smiling at each other, wearing colourful clothes and standing on a natural background. Labelling the image of the family as ‘human nature’, as opposed to its transformation into ‘sick minds’ seems to present such nuclear families as ‘natural’ and ‘sound’, which might be interpreted as suggesting that those whose lifestyle differs from this, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, single parents or childless couples are somehow ‘sick’ or ‘unnatural’. Due to the polysemous nature of images, it is also possible to interpret this drawing as depicting people’s need for community, signified by the closeness of the family members contrasted by the larger physical distance between the people on the right side of the image. The existence of such an alternative interpretation creates some deniability for this controversial content. Indeed, viewers who do not hold anti-LGBTQ+ views or beliefs about the family being under attack, are likely to derive the latter interpretation, missing the more controversial interpretation entirely.

The image of the family is juxtaposed with a drawing of two people sitting away from each other, in black and white, one wearing a mask and the other with a facial expression indicating unhappiness kneeling with their hands together as if praying in front of a tv. This is a hyperbolic depiction of compliance with Covid rules. The kneeling position and praying gesture of the participants is a visual metaphor signifying the perceived worshipping of public figures and religious following of Covid restrictions. This perceived worshipping of someone or something other than the Christian god is likely to trigger outrage in Christian fundamentalist viewers. The combination of a visual metaphor and hyperbole gives more weight to the video's negative evaluation of compliance/obedience and makes it even harder to challenge than a metaphorical or hyperbolic framing alone (Burgers et al., 2016). The contrasting colour schemes also contribute to the message. The colourful clothes and background on the left side represents individuality and happiness, while the black and white colour scheme on the right seems to portray conformity/compliance as eroding individuality and draining the world of joy. The skeletons next to the kneeling figures signal the perceived danger of their lifestyle, suggesting perhaps that some of those who have acted this way have already died. This might be linked to conspiracy theories which allege that Covid vaccines were designed for the purpose of population reduction.

Another quote from Meerloo (1956) is included likening the citizens of totalitarianism to people suffering from schizophrenia:

> There is in fact much that is comparable between the strange reaction of the citizens of totalitarianism and their culture as a whole on the one hand and the reactions of the sick schizophrenic on the other.

However, the original quote has been altered, omitting the crucial word 'introverted' in 'the sick introverted schizophrenic' (Meerloo, 1956, p. 83). This is important as the parallel Meerloo draws between the citizens of totalitarianism and patients with schizophrenia hinges on their withdrawal from other people, due to their inability to trust those around them. Omitting 'introverted' completely changes the message, as this is the trait Meerloo identifies in both groups. This omission creates the impression that the quote more aptly describes the Covid situation at the time of video release, aligning with erasure as discussed by Hodges (2008). It also increases the likelihood of viewers interpreting this similarity as relating to more well-known symptoms of schizophrenia, such as delusions or hallucinations.

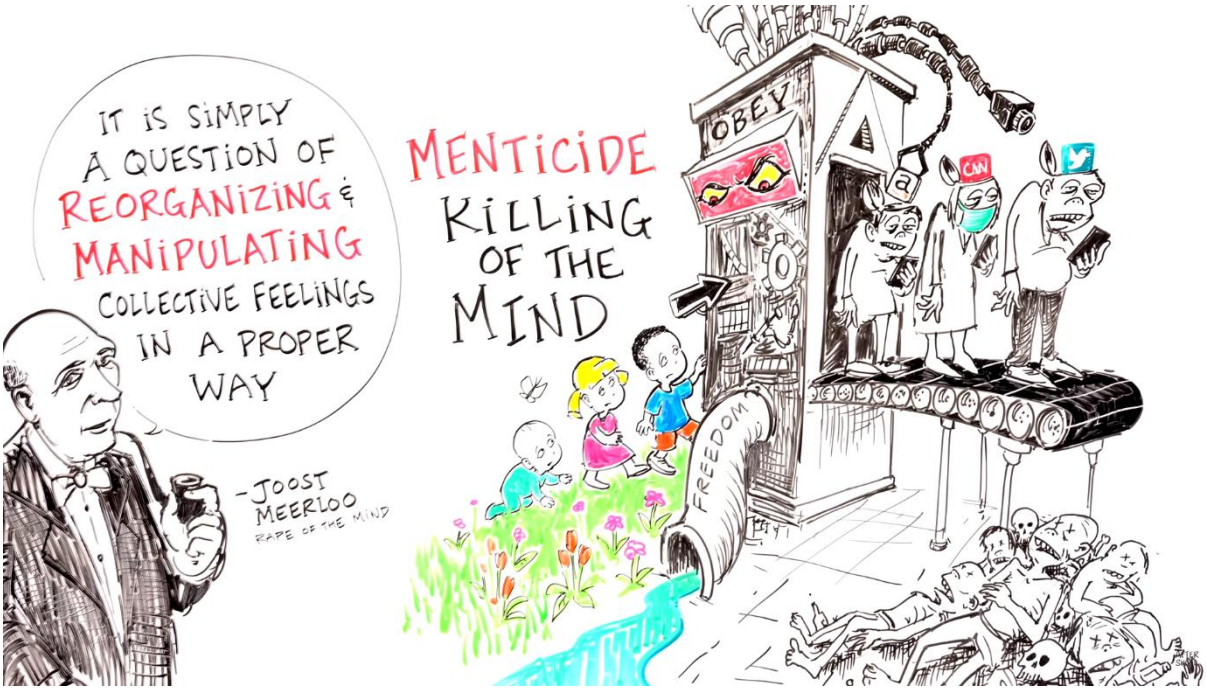
Menticide appears to be defined similarly to its original meaning using a quote from Meerloo (1956):

> Menticide is an old crime against the human mind and spirit but systematised a new. It is an organised system of psychological intervention and judicial perversion through which a ruling class can imprint their opportunistic thoughts upon the minds of those they plan to use and destroy.

However, the video's version of the quote differs somewhat from the original. The original refers to the perpetrator of the crime as 'a powerful dictator' rather than 'a ruling class'. This change makes the quote appear more applicable to the Covid situation at the time of the video's release but less aligned with typical definitions of totalitarianism. While the narrator is discussing 'menticide', the image appearing on screen connects this idea to the education system, which is depicted metaphorically as a machine that takes small children as raw materials turning them into brainwashed adults by demanding obedience, while freedom pours out of the machine as a waste product.

The discussion on 'menticide' includes a quote from Meerloo (visible in the image), which has been altered from the original: 'It is simply a question of organizing and manipulating collective feelings in the proper way.' 'Organizing' in the original is changed to 'reorganizing', which

unlike Meerloo's version presupposes a preexisting, perhaps a 'natural' organisation of collective feelings preceding the attempt at 'menticide'. This seems to naturalise the status quo, potentially suggesting that the social organisation that existed before the pandemic, its media coverage and Covid restrictions was natural and therefore ideal.

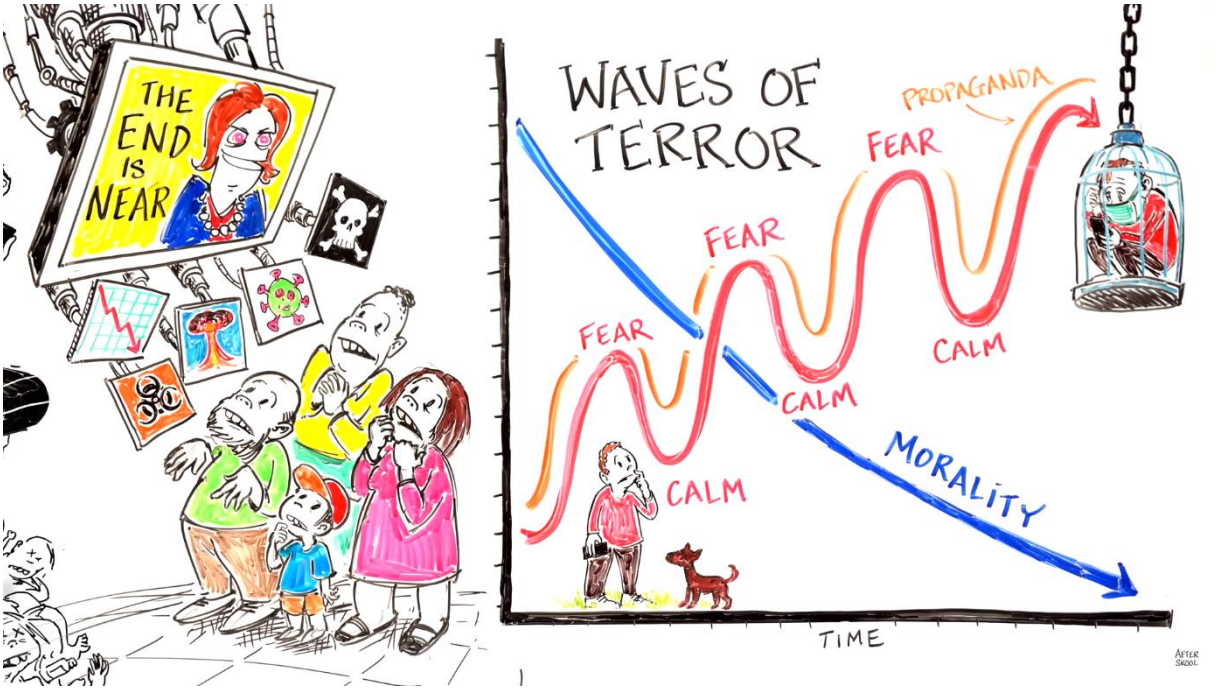


The video also includes a graph (next page), seemingly giving scientific credibility to the video's assertion that propaganda following the 'waves of terror' technique lowers the morality of the public over time. However, contrary to how graphs are used in science to visualise data, the graph here is not based on any real data but on a misquoted line from Meerloo (1956, p. 111):

> Each wave of terrorising creates its effects more easily after a breathing spell than the one that preceded it because people are still disturbed by their previous experience. Morality becomes lower and lower and the psychological effects of each new propaganda campaign become stronger. It reaches a public already softened up.

Other than punctuation, the video's version of this quote differs from the original in two important ways. Firstly, it omits 'cold war' (in 'Each wave of terrorizing cold war'), erasing a term which links the quote to its original context but seems less applicable for the current situation. Even more importantly, the word 'morale' in the original is replaced by 'morality', completely changing the quote's meaning. This change allows the video makers to legitimise the belief that Covid waves are used to create fear in the public, which leads to them acting in

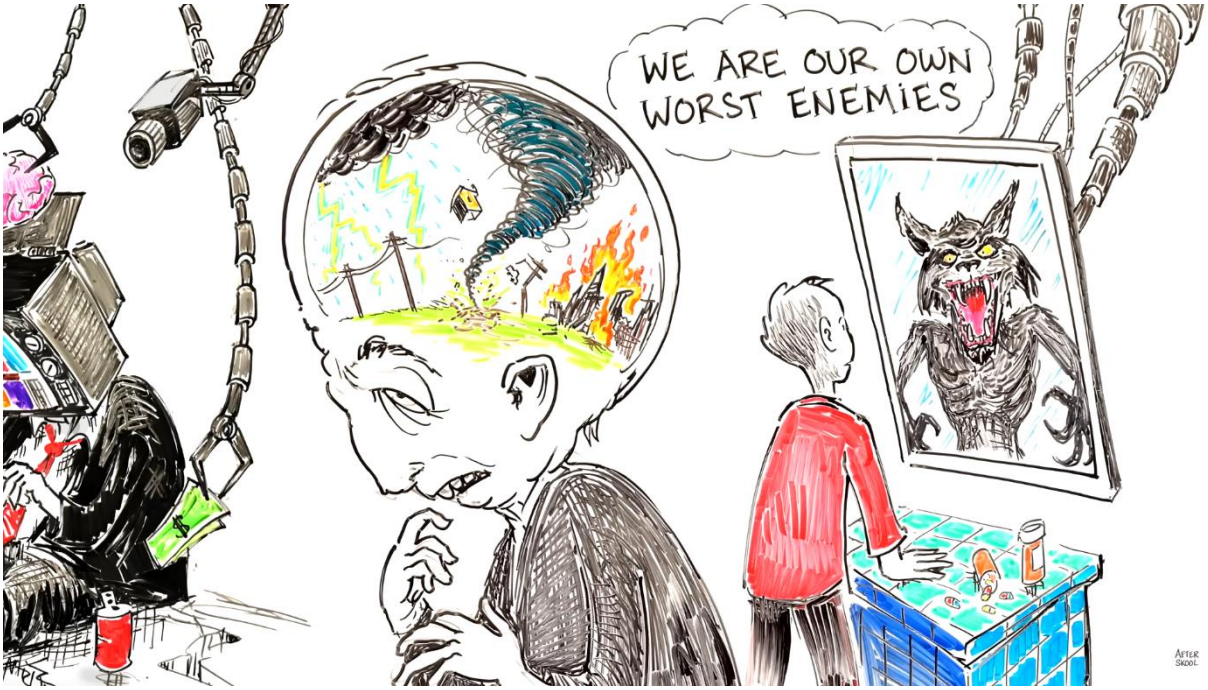
immoral ways. It relies on Meerloo's authority as a scientist to support a claim that originates not from his work but from the video creators.



The term 'waves of terror' might evoke Covid waves for those holding Covid conspiracy beliefs, such as the belief that the number of cases is exaggerated and that Covid waves are made-up in order to justify the introduction of further restrictions. As the waves of terror is a manipulation technique, viewers who understand the allusion to Covid waves might interpret the narrator's description of the waves of terror as alluding to public health messages being manipulative. The connection to Covid-19 is further reinforced through visual cues such as the man sitting in a cage wearing a mask.

The video makers also use the Latin proverb 'Homo homini lupus' (Man is a wolf to man) to support their assertions. According to Gándara (2004), the use of proverbs is a powerful rhetorical strategy, as it allows one to present their point of view as embodying socially legitimised knowledge or a general truth. However, the proverb here is misinterpreted to mean 'people are their own worst enemies' rather than 'people are each other's worst enemies'. This reflects the self-help worldview, which teaches that mastering one's own mind allows one to achieve any dream. It also aligns with conspiracist portrayals of 'sheeple' being unaware of reality and acting against their own best interests. This is accompanied by a visual metaphor depicting a man looking into a mirror with his reflection replaced by a wolf with its mouth open

as if ready to attack. This visual metaphor further reinforces the misinterpretation of the proverb, making it harder to challenge.



4.3.2 Totalitarianism

The narration identifies totalitarianism as a type of 'mass psychosis', consistent with Jung's definition of 'psychic epidemics' as illustrated by the following extract:

> When a ruling elite becomes possessed by a political ideology of this sort be it *communism, fascism or technocracy*, the next step is to induce a population into accepting their rule by infecting them with the mass psychosis of totalitarianism. (emphasis: mine)

While communism and fascism are typical examples of totalitarian regimes, the inclusion of technocracy is unexpected. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, technocracy is 'a government or social system that is controlled or influenced by experts in science or technology', which does not align with definitions of totalitarianism (including the definition the video provides). Instead, this negative portrayal of technocracy might be linked to science-related populism which criticises the intrusion of science into the lives of everyday people, for instance through the decisions experts make about public health being imposed on the public (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

The narrator defines totalitarianism with reference to *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* by Arthur Versluis as follows:

> 'Totalitarianism', writes Arthur Versluis, 'is the modern phenomenon of total centralised state power coupled with the obliteration of individual human rights: in the totalised state there are those in power and there are the objectified masses, their victims.'

However, this definition is somewhat vague, as 'the obliteration of individual human rights' can be interpreted in a variety of ways by different viewers. In fact, Versluis provides examples for what he means by this in the same paragraph the quote was taken from:

> Secret police, secret imprisonments, torture, show trials, insistence on public confessions, public executions, gulags, or concentration camps in which people are held incommunicado and interminably in what is sometimes figuratively called a "state of exception", but what is in fact the attempted suspension and removal of basic human rights to, at minimum, a fair trial. (Versluis, 2006, p. viii)

As these examples are clearly not applicable to the Covid situation, leaving them out (another example of erasure) serves the interests of the video makers as it allows them to present a definition of totalitarianism which due to its vagueness can be interpreted as describing Covid restrictions. In fact, another of their sources, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, explicitly states that restrictions on citizens' rights during an emergency are not totalitarian:

> The soldier during the war is deprived of his right to life, the criminal of his right to freedom, all citizens during an emergency of their right to the pursuit of happiness, but nobody would ever claim that in any of these instances a loss of human rights has taken place. (Arendt, 1973, p. 295)

Thus, the video makers apply these academic writings on totalitarianism out of context to events they are not applicable to, thereby exaggerating the problematic nature of Covid restrictions. As totalitarianism is generally viewed highly negatively, this encourages viewers to see Covid restrictions in a similar light. Furthermore, it makes it more difficult for someone to challenge this negative evaluation of public health measures, as they could appear to be trying to justify totalitarian measures.

The narrator also talks about the addictive nature of social media, which is illustrated by a visual metaphor which can be interpreted as 'social media is a drug'. The image depicts a box of

cigarettes labelled ‘social media’, with each cigarette having the logo of a social media platform on it. However, despite being one of the most popular social media platforms, YouTube is conspicuously absent from this drawing. Not including YouTube serves the interests of the video creators, as including it would discourage viewers from spending time on the platform. As a result, they might spend less time watching content from After Skool and Academy of Ideas, leading to decreasing ad revenue for the content creators.

When discussing modern technology’s role in the brainwashing of the public, they use a quote from Meerloo (1956) to support their argument against modern technology, mainly social media:

> ‘Modern technology’, explains Meerloo, ‘teaches man to take for granted the world he is looking at, he takes no time to retreat and reflect, technology lures him on dropping him into its wheels and movements. No rest, no meditation, no reflection, no conversation – the senses are continually overloaded with stimuli. Man doesn’t learn to question his world anymore; the screen offers him answers ready made.’

While in the original the last sentence starts with ‘the child’, here it is replaced by ‘man’. Thus, while in this paragraph Meerloo is primarily focusing on the effect of modern technology on children, this change allows the video makers to present this quote as more applicable for their topic, the brainwashing of adults. Additionally, as *Rape of the Mind* was published in 1956, what Meerloo refers to as ‘modern technology’ is drastically different from what the video

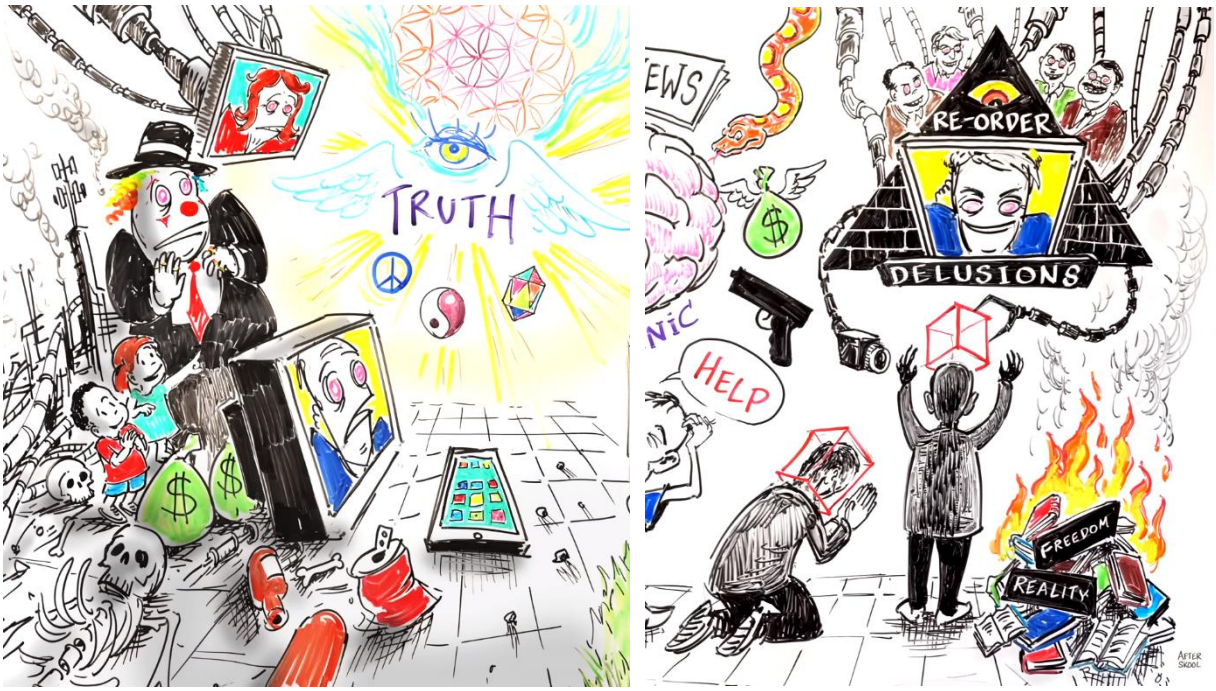
creators mean by it. In this section he discusses the effect of what were at the time new inventions on people, especially children, such as television replacing reading and interpersonal interactions. While similarities between television and social media can be pointed out (e.g. a potential for addiction), a crucial difference is the presence of algorithms on social media, which provide users with personalised content based on what they have previously engaged with or searched for. These algorithms are mentioned as contributing to the elite's ability to control the public through social media, television and the internet and linked to the idea of censorship:

> Never before in history have such effective means existed to manipulate a society into the psychosis of totalitarianism. Smart phones and social media, television and the internet all in conjunction with algorithms that quickly censor the flow of unwanted information allow those in power to easily assault the minds of the masses.

Later in the video they return to the topic of censorship, claiming that it is crucial for the elite's plans to succeed:

> For the truth is more powerful than the fiction and falsities peddled by the would-be totalitarian rulers and so their success is in part contingent on their ability to censor the free flow of information.

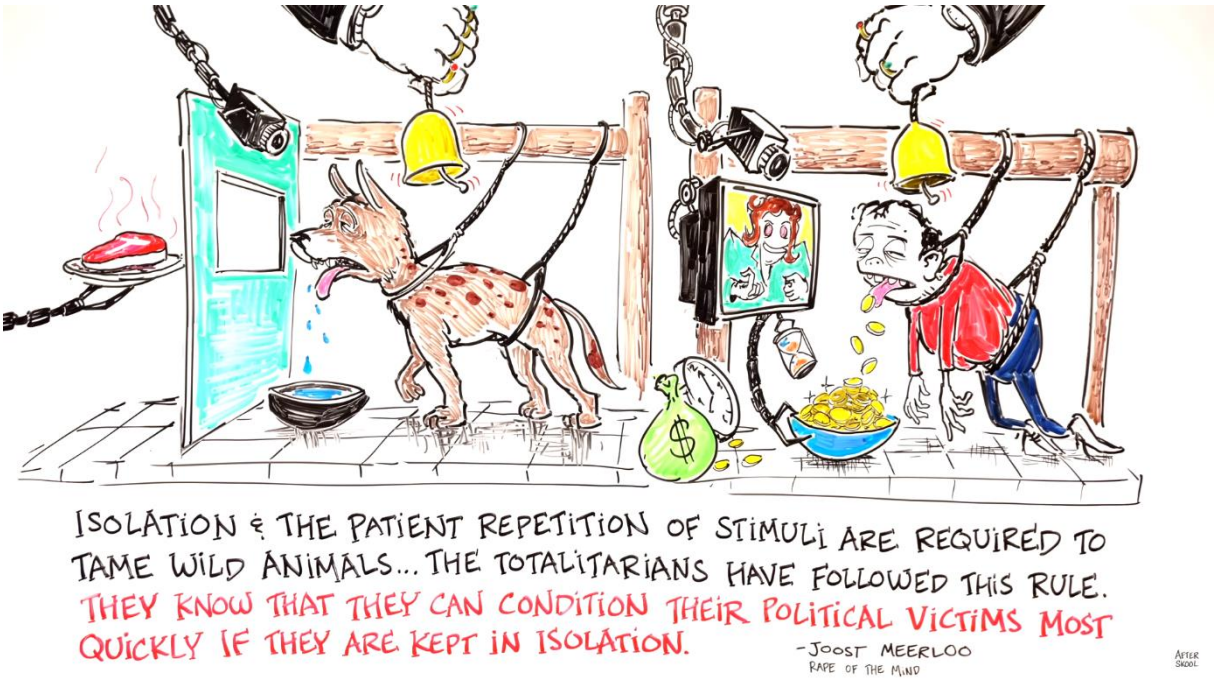
These extracts claim that social media algorithms are used by the elite to censor 'unwanted information', which conflicts with their aims of domination, such as the conspiratorial content contained in this video. However, this clashes with research suggesting that social media algorithms in fact favour conspiratorial content (Allington and Joshi, 2020; Dow et al., 2021). The narrator's assertion about the power of truth (*'the truth is more powerful than the fiction and falsities…'*) aligns with the content creators' attribution of absolute truth to the beliefs expressed in the video, which goes against an explicit endorsement of post-truth. The power of truth is illustrated by the image which accompanies this line and links truth to spiritual symbols. Censorship is also alluded to in the visuals, for instance in this image where a pile of books is burning with 'freedom' and 'reality' written on them.



Isolation is discussed as facilitating the population's descent into a 'totalitarian psychosis', backed up by a quote from Meerloo (1956) as visible in the image below. Although this is not explicitly stated, in the context of Covid-19 this can be understood as referring to lockdowns and social distancing. This is also made clear by the visuals accompanying the narration, such as a drawing of a woman in a snow globe watching a CNN report about Covid. While such restrictions limited physical contact between people, modern technology allowed people to stay in contact with others outside of their household through for instance video or voice calls and text messages. Thus, it seems inaccurate to talk about true isolation in this case.

Furthermore, the argument the narrator makes by quoting Meerloo about a 'minimum of disturbing stimuli' making the development of a conditioned reflex significantly easier directly contradicts the previous point that was made about the senses being 'continually overloaded with stimuli' thanks to modern technology, which was also claimed to contribute to the creation of a 'totalitarian psychosis'. Additionally, the quote (both in the verbal and visual modes) leaves out a sentence from Meerloo's original version (indicated by ellipsis): *'Pavlov formulated his findings into a general rule in which the speed of learning is positively correlated with quiet and isolation.'* (Meerloo, 1956, p. 26). This sentence along with the following, which is included in the narration but does not appear on screen (*'Pavlov made another significant*

discovery: the conditioned reflex could be developed most easily in a quiet laboratory with a minimum of disturbing stimuli.') makes it clear that the reason Meerloo argues that isolation helps with conditioning both animals and humans into new patterns of thought and behaviour is because it limits competing stimuli. While this is not completely absent from the version of the quote included in the video, it is somewhat backgrounded. Instead, the narration gives more weight to the absence of the 'corrective force of the positive example' when people are isolated.



The image which accompanies the quote is a pictorial simile. It presents dog training as analogous to the brainwashing of the public. The image of dog training, which viewers are presumably familiar with is placed on the left side, while the right side introduces the concept of 'menticide', encouraging the viewer to think of it as the human equivalent to the type of inhumane dog training represented here. This aligns with Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) association of the left side of the image with already known and the right side with new information. The confinement to a small space, surveillance, ropes and bell are the same on both sides, with the only differences being the rewards given to the dog (a slice of meat and water) and the person (money and time). Additionally, the man is watching tv, which represents the role of media exposure in brainwashing, aligning with Melley's (2008) claim that conspiracy theorists often accuse the media of brainwashing the public.

Surveillance, another element of totalitarian rule, although not mentioned in the narration appears in many of the images. For example, the presence of cameras in many scenes and the eye of Sauron watching a group of people walking towards mental illness indicate surveillance. The presence of cameras also suggests the potential for punishment if one decides to disobey the rules, thus it forces people to conform to what is expected from them. This is reminiscent of New World Order conspiracy theories which allege that modern technology will be used to monitor and control society (Barkun, 2003).

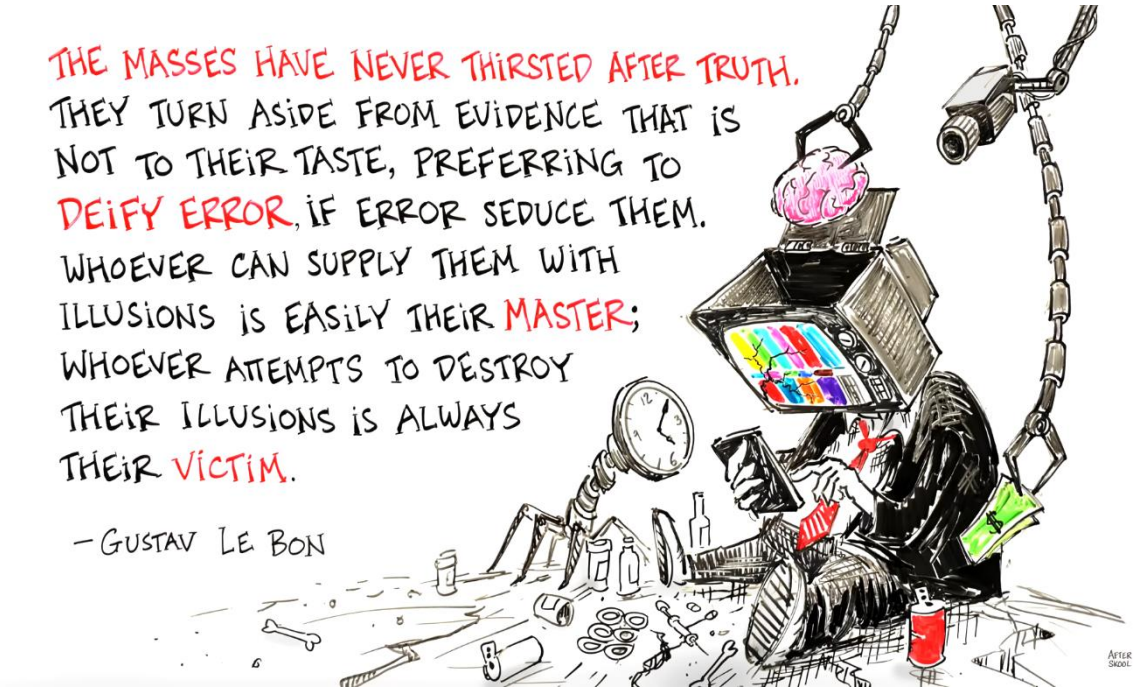
4.4 Representation of a free and a totalitarian society

This image presents a side-by-side comparison of a totalitarian (right side) and a free society (left side). The totalitarian society is portrayed as having a strict hierarchy, while the free society does not. The clown at the top seems to represent the nominal leader, however as it is held in place by mechanical arms and has a face resembling a puppet, the image suggests the presence of an even more powerful individual or group secretly controlling this leader. The level of the hierarchy below the clown is represented by two images the clown is holding up, presumably depicting the two US parties. The fact that the two party leaders are portrayed as mere images held up by the clown alludes to the belief that they serve only to provide an illusion of choice but do not offer any real alternatives as they are controlled by the same people. The third level of the hierarchy includes scientists, doctors and religious leaders. They are depicted as wearing a blindfold, signalling their unawareness of reality, with facial expressions indicating speaking (open mouth) and the doctor's gesture (raised index finger) indicating that he is telling people what to do. This is reminiscent of populist critiques of experts being unaware of the lives and problems of ordinary people but trying to control them regardless (Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). The bottom rung of the hierarchy is made up of the public, a large group of people with facial expressions indicating suffering, perhaps caused by the 'bad advice' and excessive control of experts.

On the left side we can see a more 'natural' lifestyle, while the hierarchy on the right is presented as artificial. The natural and colourful background suggests that this lifestyle is more in touch with human nature and people's emotions, as opposed to the 'artificial' organisation of the hierarchy held together by mechanical arms. Additionally, the people in this 'free society' are portrayed as smiling, indicating happiness. The figures running around with their arms open signal a feeling of freedom associated with such a society. They are also shown as active in achieving worthy goals, such as climbing a mountain, and helping each other (one of the figures offers a hand to someone else to help them up the mountain). While the public in the totalitarian society do not interact with each other, the people in the free society are shown as having close social connections, represented visually through their physical closeness. Lastly, this side of the image also includes a spiritual symbol, the tree of life, associating this way of life with spirituality.

4.5 Group representations

Both the moralised distinction conspiracy theories make between the elite and ordinary people, and the second moralised distinction between conspiracy theorists and the wider public were observed in the video. The video's representations of these three social groups are set up by a quote from Gustave Le Bon's book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, which the video opens with:



Not only are ‘the masses’ presented as ignorant, but they are to blame for this ignorance. The description of the public as picking and choosing what they want to believe aligns with the concept of post-truth discussed in the conspiracy theory literature. However, similarly to the findings reported by Ylä-Anttila (2018), the video makers attribute post-truth to outgroups rather than themselves and their audience. Furthermore, the description of ‘their master’, who ‘supplies them with illusions’ maps easily onto the characterisation of the ruling class in the video as misleading the public and manipulating them into obedience through exploiting their negative emotions. Lastly, the victim, who ‘attempts to destroy their illusions’ sets up the representation of nonconformists, who are portrayed as both victimised and heroic. This is consistent with ingroup-outgroup polarisation, consisting of positive ingroup and negative outgroup representation, which characterises ideological discourse (Van Dijk, 2006).

4.5.1 The elite

One of the groups which plays a major role in the video are referred to most frequently as the ‘ruling elite’ (5 instances), ‘rulers’ (5), ‘ruling class’ (3), ‘the (would-be) totalitarians (3) etc, all of which highlight their position of power in society. This group is identified as being composed of ‘politicians, bureaucrats or crony capitalists’, ‘government officials and their lackeys in the media’ and even ‘scientists and doctors, politicians and bureaucrats, or a dictator’. Thus, they encompass frequently named groups which feature as the conspirators in many conspiracy theories: the government, media and scientists. They are generally talked about as a collective, not as individuals and referred to by the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘their’. Similarly to common depictions of the elites in conspiracy theories, they are described as ‘power-hungry’ and ‘easily corrupted by power’. They are also pathologized similarly to ‘the masses’ as ‘deluded’ and ‘pathological’.

The behaviours they are depicted as engaging in are also typical of conspiracist representations of the elites. They are presented as active agents with the power to control society. They are described as lying to and attempting to manipulate the public by appealing to their emotions, such as in the following extracts:

> When a ruling elite becomes possessed by a political ideology of this sort be it communism, fascism or technocracy, the next step is to induce a population into accepting their rule by

infecting them with the mass psychosis of totalitarianism. This psychosis has been induced many times throughout history and as Meerloo explains ‘It is simply a question of reorganising and manipulating collective feelings in the proper way’.

Government officials and their lackeys in the media can use contradictory reports, nonsensical information and even blatant lies, as the more they confuse the less capable will a population be to cope with the crisis and diminish their fear in a rational and adaptive manner.

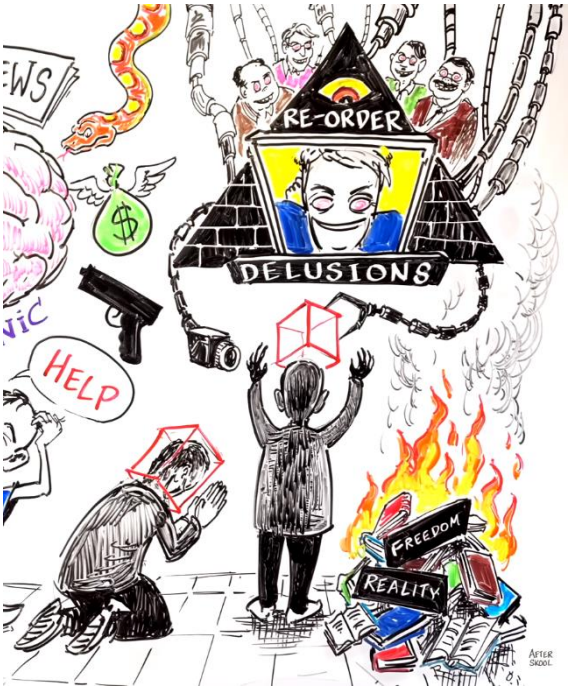
Visual depictions of the rulers also emphasise their position of power. They are often placed above the rest of the participants in a scene, indicating their power over the population. In one case, a group of rulers are depicted sitting around a table resting on the backs of the ruled, who are represented by a group of people in rags, with facial expressions indicating suffering (next page). The top of the table is drawn like a board game, which the rulers are playing. This is a visual metaphor, which carries a meaning such as ‘the elites are playing with people’s lives’. This image also includes thought bubbles which indicate the rulers’ arrogance and hunger for power (‘I am perfect’, ‘more power’, ‘I am god’) as well as an eye on a triangle-shaped background which brings to mind the all-seeing-eye of the Illuminati. This eye appears several times throughout the video, although in some cases instead of a single eye, a pair of eyes on a red background with a menacing expression is used. The eye(s) is/are placed above the rest of the participants in the scene, indicating their power over them. The eye of Sauron also appears, placed on top of a tower looking down at a group of people walking on a conveyor belt towards a building labelled ‘mental illness’. Due to the widespread popularity of The Lord of the Rings, the illustrator can use this image to connote powerful evil and expect most of his audience to derive this interpretation. As the eye is looking directly at the people heading towards mental illness, in addition to the presence of the conveyor belt, this suggests that the process which is depicted should be understood not as a random phenomenon but the result of careful planning and design.

At a somewhat lower level in the image but still above the participants, we can see an inverted pentagram on a phone tower. This closely resembles the 'Sigil of Baphomet', an upside-down pentagram 'stylized to look like a goat head', which was originally designed by French occultist Stanislas de Guaïta in 1897 and is currently used as the official logo for the Church of Satan (Laycock, 2024, p. 25). This symbol has been included in conspiracy theories about satanic activities spread on social media, associated amongst others with the QAnon movement (Laycock, 2024). As this symbol is less salient than other elements of the image due to being relatively small and black and white, it could be easily missed by those who do not recognise it. While viewers who believe in a satanic conspiracy are likely to recognise this symbol, those who do not will most likely miss it. This allows the illustrator to communicate something to only a subset of their audience while maintaining a wider appeal for the video, which aligns with Saul's (2018) definition of dogwhistles. Furthermore, as Baphomet displays both male and female sexual characteristics, some have linked it to 'gender ideology', as illustrated by the following tweet (next page) from before the video was released. More recently, this idea has also featured on

The Joe Rogan Experience in an interview with Katt Williams, who said: *'I understood that the earliest I had seen that word 'transgender' was Baphomet the transgender and so I knew that in the ritual of Baphomet the transgender to show allegiance to him you had to kiss his ass ring and it said both of those things so I knew that both of those things would become popular in the future'* (Rogan, 2024, 1:38:58-1:39:32). As the Baphomet sign appears below the level of the eye of Sauron but still above the participants representing the public, it might express a meaning such as satanism has power over the population, but it is under the control of the elite. Additionally, as the symbol is placed on a phone tower, evoking 5G conspiracy theories, this creates an association between 5G or perhaps more broadly modern technology and satanism and brings to mind conspiracy theories, such as NWO theories, alleging that modern technology will play a role in the Antichrist's control of the public.

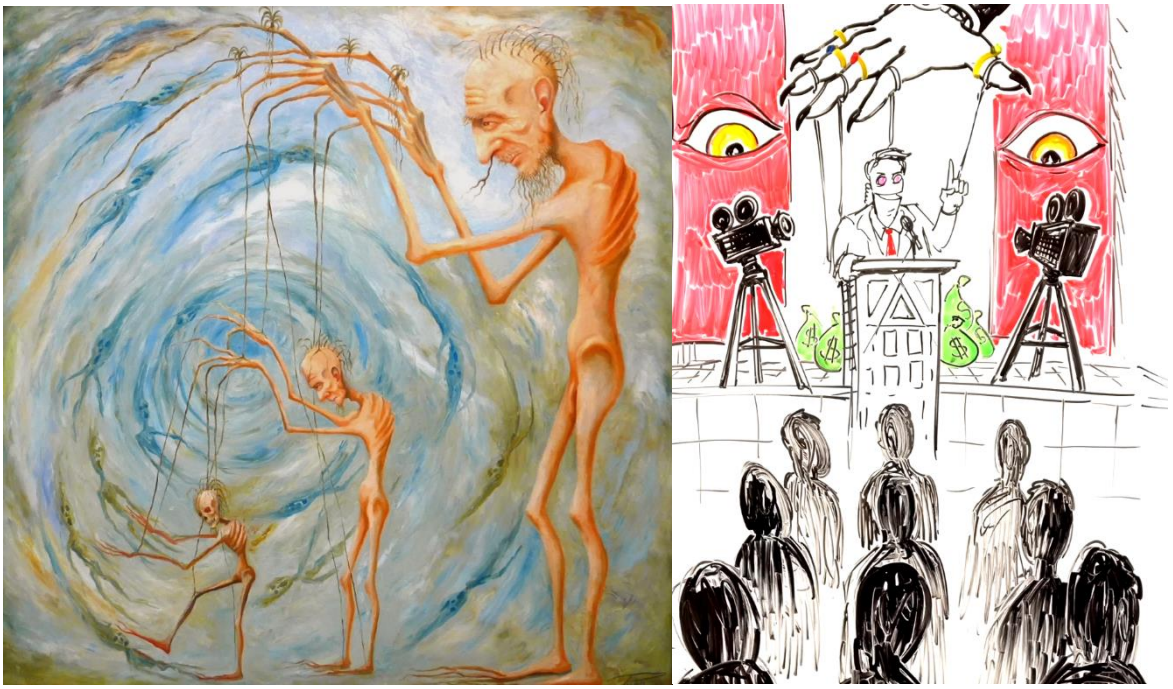
Bill Gates, who is frequently the target of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, also appears in some of the drawings. In one instance he appears as one of four men clustered around a triangle shaped wall with an eye on it, just above a screen with a reporter, who is portrayed as providing the public with delusions. The eye and the triangle bring to mind the Illuminati, of which Bill Gates is represented as a member. The placement of this drawing above the reporter suggests that the Illuminati or a similar conspiracy has control over the media. In this image Gates is

depicted as holding a vaccine needle, sitting across from a man who can be easily recognised as Hitler by his characteristic moustache. This portrayal of Bill Gates next to Hitler suggests a perceived similarity between the two men. The presence of the vaccine needle in his hand reminds viewers of antivaccine Covid-19 conspiracy theories, which claim that Covid vaccines are dangerous to people's health and perhaps even part of the elite's plan to reduce world population. Thus, the placement of Bill Gates next to Hitler might convey the message that, due to his role in vaccine distribution and campaigning, he is a mass murderer.



Other than Bill Gates, none of the characters representing the elites are identifiable as specific individuals. In fact, in many images we can only see their hands as they are controlling people like a puppet master. These hands have many gold rings on them as well as a watch, signalling wealth. They are depicted as not only controlling the public but also public figures, such as reporters and politicians. Additionally, the images of public figures and the clown (identified by the narration as the demagogue) have faces which are drawn more like the faces of puppets while other participants such as members of the public are drawn with more human-like features. This visual metaphor of puppets and puppet masters appears not only in the sketches, but also in one of the artworks, a painting titled 'Dictatorship' by Jose Pantoja. This painting presents multiple layers of influence, in which even the figure controlling people is in turn being controlled by someone else. This aligns with the video's representation of public figures who, although portrayed as having power over the population are also often placed below the elite or sometimes shown to have strings attached to them. Additionally, they always have an earpiece

in their ear, suggesting that there is someone mysterious in the background telling them what to say. As other than Bill Gates the video does not identify the alleged conspirators with specific individuals or groups, each viewer can interpret its vague descriptions of the elite in accordance with their beliefs. For example, Christian viewers may identify the conspirators with the Antichrist and secular viewers with secret societies.



4.5.2 ‘The masses’:

The video primarily critiques the public for their conformity to social norms and their compliance with Covid restrictions, rather than explicitly endorsing conspiracy theories. Thus, it seems more appropriate to refer to the other two groups as the general public and nonconformist individuals (rather than conspiracy theorists). These two groups are occasionally referred to together, when contrasted with the elite, by terms such as ‘objectified masses’ (*‘in the totalised state there are those in power and there are the objectified masses, their victims’*), ‘victims’, or ‘the ruled’ (*‘In a totalitarian society the population is divided into two groups, the rulers and the ruled’*). However, in most cases a distinction between the two groups is made. While some degree of similarity between ‘the masses’ and nonconformists is acknowledged, namely their similar social position in relation to the elite, they are described in contrasting ways when it comes to their character, abilities and behaviour.

Terms used in reference to the public create distance between the viewer and the group they describe. Some of the terms ('the masses', 'a population', 'the ruled', 'a public', 'subjects') are somewhat dehumanising as they refer to people based on their role in society, reducing them to mere statistics. The word 'the masses', which is the most frequently used term referring to this group (appearing 7 times in the video), portrays them as a large homogenous group and carries elitist connotations. Some expressions, such as 'the individuals who make up the infected society', 'those suffering from mass psychosis', 'deluded men and women' and 'psychologically regressed population' pathologize this group. Others, such as 'a population of weak and vulnerable individuals' and 'submissive and obedient subjects' highlight traits which are likely viewed negatively by the video's target audience. As self-help places a high value on independence and teaches that one can achieve anything through hard work and self-discipline (McGee, 2012; Rimke, 2000), those who frequently consume such content are likely to have a negative view of weakness and obedience.

By contrast to the depiction of nonconformists as especially clairvoyant and heroic, the public is characterised as having delusions and being 'unaware of what is occurring'. They are depicted as experiencing strong negative emotions such as fear and panic, which can be used by the ruling class to control them. According to the video, 'the masses crave a return to an ordered world' but in order to achieve this they must give up their freedom. However, obedience is presented as a choice rather than a necessity and associated with delusions:

> only deluded men and women regress to the childlike status of obedient and submissive subjects and hand over complete control of their lives to politicians and bureaucrats

This extract pathologizes those who choose to become 'obedient and submissive subjects', presupposing that anyone who complies with Covid restrictions is 'deluded'. In the context of Covid-19, these 'delusions' might be interpreted as referring to the media's portrayal of the pandemic, which Covid conspiracy believers view as exaggerated or even entirely fabricated. The acceptance of such beliefs allows one to reframe Covid restrictions as covert strategies for the increasing control over people's personal lives rather than necessary public health measures. Although this is not explicitly stated in the video, it is suggested amongst others by the following extract:

> If a panic triggering flood of negative emotions in a weak and vulnerable individual can trigger a psychotic break then a mass psychosis can result when a population of weak and vulnerable individuals is driven into a state of panic by threats real, imagined or fabricated.

In this extract, the kinds of potential threats leading to panic ('real, imagined or fabricated'), while acknowledging the possibility that the threat might be real, also includes two cases in which it is not. This seems to favour the interpretation that the perceived state of panic the public is experiencing is not real but manufactured.

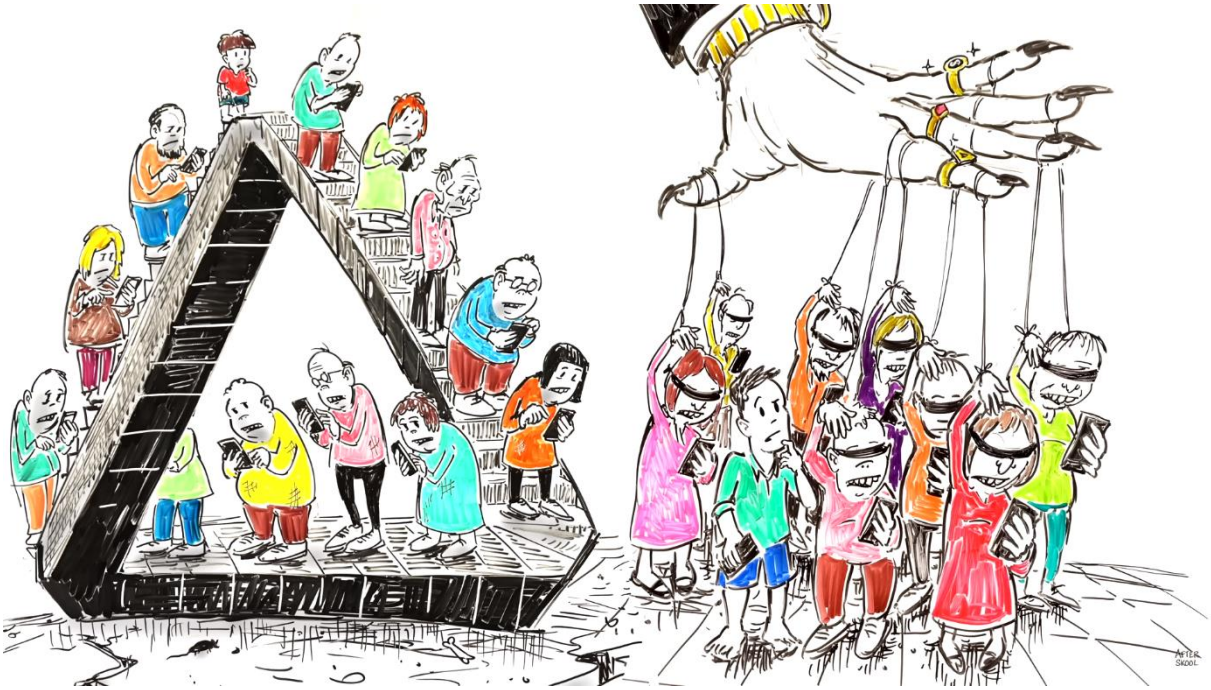
Finally, rather than heroic, those under 'mass psychosis' are portrayed as immoral and dangerous. This is illustrated by the following extract, which combines three short quotes from two volumes of Jung's (1970, 1976) collected works with the narrator's own words:

> the individuals who make up the infected society 'become morally and spiritually inferior', they sink unconsciously to an inferior intellectual level, they become 'more unreasonable, irresponsible, emotional, erratic and unreliable', and worst of all 'crimes the individual alone could never stand are freely committed by the group smitten by madness'

'The masses' are visually represented as having something done to them, rather than as active agents. For instance, in the opening image, a person is depicted as having their brain taken out of their head, a motif which is repeated several times throughout the video. This is a visual metaphor in which the brain represents people's sanity or rationality which is lost as a result of brainwashing. In an image of a machine, most likely depicting the education system, the people coming out of the machine have their brains replaced by news organisations (CNN), social media (Twitter) and even company logos (Amazon). The public are often shown as passively going along with things and following each other even if that leads to destruction, such as when depicted as entering a

building labelled ‘mental illness’ or falling off a cliff. While the visuals usually portray the public as passive, this is not true in all cases. It contrasts with the image depicting those under ‘mass psychosis’ as active agents tearing down the Statue of Liberty I discussed earlier. This aligns with Douglas and Sutton’s (2023) assertion that conspiracy theories blame not only the alleged conspirators but also the public for their ignorance.

People, especially when shown as a group are represented as ignorant or inattentive. Groups are also represented as homogenous; they all engage in the same actions and have similar poses and facial expressions. They are often portrayed as blindfolded or too preoccupied with looking at their phones to realise that they are heading towards destruction or going in circles. They are depicted as being controlled by their impulses and addictions, often to technology, social media, money, soft drinks, alcohol and other drugs.



They are also frequently represented as experiencing strong negative emotions, leading them to act in irrational and harmful ways, such as executing women for witchcraft and beating an American veteran with a hammer. Their emotions are portrayed as dangerous through a visual metaphor in which drawings of natural disasters are placed inside a person’s head. This along with the accompanying narration (*‘According to the psychologist Carl Jung the greatest threat to civilisation lies not with the forces of nature nor with any physical disease but with our inability to deal with the forces of our own psyche.’*) draws a parallel between the forces of our

minds and natural disasters, which are both seen as extremely dangerous and out of control. People's negative emotions, mainly fear, are shown as making them especially vulnerable to manipulation and motivating them to unquestioningly obey their leaders. The elite's control of the public is visually depicted by the inclusion of strings which they use to control people like puppets or in one case through the chains coming out of a tv forcing a man's eyes open.

The image of the man on a treadmill, carrying a bag labelled ‘debt’, a clock and a medical symbol and reaching towards a variety of objects is a visual metaphor. He is presented as in a constant struggle to satisfy his desires while being held back by debt, illness and lack of time. The objects he is reaching for represent a variety of addictive substances and behaviours: money, pills, a drug or vaccine needle, soft drinks, a phone and social media. The brain held by a mechanical arm (presumably his brain) suggests his lack of awareness which is stopping him from realising that his struggles are futile, as while he is walking towards the objects he wants to reach the treadmill is moving him in the opposite direction. The skeletons next to the treadmill represent the danger associated with his struggle, they show his fate in case he fails to keep up and falls off the treadmill. The image is paired with narration discussing the inability of those living through a ‘mass psychosis’ to recognise their ‘collective madness’, to which the visuals add an extra layer of meaning, the portrayal of most people as being controlled by their impulses commonly observed in self-help content. Furthermore, the treadmill in the image is missing the console, which would allow the man to control the speed at which he is moving. This seems to be symbolic of a lack of control, as instead of his free will the man is controlled by external forces (that have presumably placed him on a treadmill and control its speed) and his impulses which he is trying to satisfy. Thus, the man on the treadmill represents the brainwashed subject, standing in opposition to the liberal self, which is highly valued both in self-help and conspiratorial discourse (Melley, 2017; Rimke, 2000).

4.5.3 Nonconformists

Apart from the opening quote, the following quote also alludes to the perceived victimisation of nonconformists:

> Whether gradually or suddenly, reason and common human decency are no longer possible in such a system: there is only a pervasive atmosphere of terror, and a projection of "the enemy," imagined to be "in our midst." Thus, society turns on itself, urged on by the ruling authorities. (Versluis, 2006, p. 143)

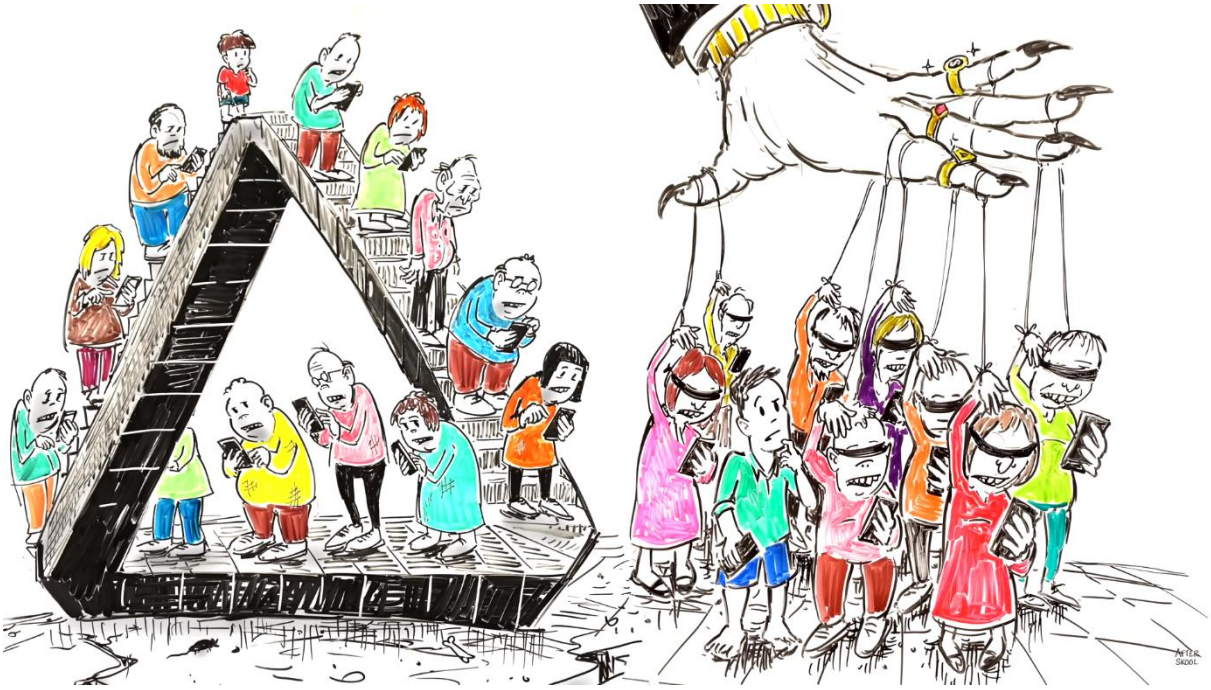
These quotes allow the video creators to reframe the blaming of the large number of unvaccinated people in the US for the increasing number of Covid cases and public figures calling for the public to get vaccinated as the victimisation of the unvaccinated. Headlines such as 'Biden reiterates America is in a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" and encourages vaccinations as US cases rise' (Wagner et al., 2021) might create the impression in unvaccinated individuals that they are seen as 'the enemy in our midst'. Similarly, the repeated use of witch hunts as an example for 'mass psychosis' alludes to the 'witch hunt' metaphor frequently used by politicians, such as Donald Trump, to position themselves as the victim of social or political wrongdoing and claim innocence (Grube, 2020).

While victimised, the nonconformist is depicted highly positively in all other regards. By contrast to 'the masses' who are presented as blind to their circumstances, the nonconformist is portrayed as especially perceptive:

> For not everyone is tricked by the machinations of the ruling elite, and the individuals who see through the propaganda can help free others from the menticidal assault.

As a result of this ability to 'see through the propaganda', such individuals are depicted as able to provide a positive example to those around them. They are portrayed as underdog heroes, who can not only save themselves but also help others. Similarly, the effects of isolation are claimed to deprive people from the 'corrective force of the positive example' in the form of a small number of exceptional individuals able to 'see through the propaganda' and help others do the same. This narration creates a highly positive evaluation of such people, encouraging the viewer to identify with them. This is paired with a photograph taken in 1936 of a crowd giving the Nazi salute, with a single man refusing to do so. The inclusion of this image further

associates nonconformity with a morally righteous stance and encourages viewers to identify with this role model.



Similarly to verbal representations, the images in the video also present the nonconformist as more clairvoyant than the general public. In contrast with the groups they are placed in, such as a group of blindfolded people or a group of people going round and round on an escalator

shaped like a Penrose triangle, they appear as the only ones capable of independent thought. In both these cases, the character representing the nonconformist is not blindfolded or distracted by his phone but places his finger on his chin and raises his eyebrow in a gesture and facial expression indicating contemplation. This contrasts with the rest of the participants who all have the same slightly hunched over pose, indicating a lack of bodily control and perhaps more broadly a lack of self-discipline. Many of them also have their mouths slightly open making them appear unintelligent, while others have facial expressions indicating unhappiness.

While sometimes the nonconformist is represented by a man, other times this role is played by a child. The audience is encouraged to identify with the perspective of young children, who seem to display the 'appropriate' reactions (reactions which align with the narrator's value judgements) in scenes where adults do not. For instance, in an image that depicts a group of people kneeling in front of the clown, the two children in the background have a concerned facial expression, while in the image illustrating the perceived power of absolute truth, the children appear happy to encounter it. As little children are not yet fully socialised, in New Age self-help they may be viewed as more in touch with their highly valued authentic self and less affected by conformity. As children embody such positively viewed traits, their inclusion in these scenes may function as a symbolic cue (Bormann, 1985), allowing the illustrator to signal to audience members familiar with these New Age self-help ideas, what the 'right' reactions in these situations are. The video's portrayal of children might also draw on biblical allusions (e.g. Matthew 18:3: *'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'*). The children's reactions align with their biblical portrayal as innocent and pure, more attuned to truth and righteousness than adults who may be corrupted by societal norms. Additionally, the inclusion of a child in the image illustrating the types of antinormative behaviours those under 'mass psychosis' might engage in may serve to scare the audience. The child in this image has a finger on his chin, indicating that he is paying attention and potentially learning from the other participants who are acting immorally.

While 'the masses' are generally portrayed as lacking agency and passively conforming to those around them, the nonconformist is shown as taking initiative to fight their oppression. One drawing presents a man cutting the strings tied to his arms and feet and next to him we can see a bin filled with logos representing different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat) and the news. Both of these are visual metaphors. The strings represent the elite's control over the man, which he can free himself from by cutting out social media and the news from his life, represented by throwing them in the bin. The image also includes a woman who still has her arms and legs tied and her brain lifted out of her head. She is looking at the man

with her finger on her chin as if thinking. Her reaction to his behaviour indicates that by freeing himself he has also managed to make others question their circumstances. This aligns with Jung's description of the 'redeemer personality', which appears next to the image.

Finally, representations of nonconformists when in a group of like-minded people differs significantly from that of 'the masses'. They are sometimes contrasted using colour, with nonconformists depicted in colourful clothing while the rest of the population are often drawn in black and white. As colour saturation can indicate emotional intensity, the black and white drawings of 'the masses' might be interpreted as characterising them as cold and repressed (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). However, in this case the use of colour might signal individuality. Thus, while the colourful depictions of nonconformists present them as unique individuals, the rest of society are portrayed as having lost their individuality due to their excessive conformity and obedience.

In addition to the contrasting use of colour, depictions of nonconformists and the public also differ in other respects. While groups of nonconformists are portrayed as being physically close to each other, others are shown as isolated individuals sitting in their own bubble away from everyone else. Nonconformists are shown as experiencing positive emotions when in a group, they are often depicted as smiling or laughing together, while those under 'mass psychosis' are portrayed as miserable.

4.6 The advice the video gives

Typical of self-help content, the video ends with a list of tips on what individuals can do to reverse their society's descent into 'mass psychosis'. This advice is prefaced by a disclaimer: *'While one can never be sure of the prognosis of a collective madness, there are steps that can be taken to help effectuate a cure.'* While this sentence creates some deniability, this is not plausible deniability, as the video's relevance to a self-help audience hinges on the assumption that the topic directly relates to current events affecting the lives of ordinary people. Additionally, the visuals make it hard to deny that the video makers are alluding to Covid restrictions when discussing totalitarianism.

The tips are vague enough that they might give rise to a variety of interpretations, which the video makers cannot be held responsible for. First, viewers are advised to 'bring order to our own minds' and live 'in a manner free of the grip of the psychosis'. In the context of Covid-19, viewers might interpret this as encouragement to consume more conspiratorial content about the pandemic, disregard Covid restrictions and avoid getting vaccinated. A further tip is to spread 'information that counters the propaganda' as widely as possible, which could be interpreted as encouraging the spreading of conspiracy theories. Viewers are also advised to 'use the weapon of ridicule' against 'the demagogue and aspirant dictators in our midst', which is a common strategy of conspiracy theorists. The construction of parallel structures is encouraged, based on a quote from Václav Havel:

If someone views Covid restrictions as totalitarian, they might interpret this as meaning that they should flout these restrictions when among likeminded people. Additionally, it might encourage viewers to build conspiracist communities by recruiting their loved ones into their belief system.

Furthermore, the solutions the video offers are individualistic, which is typical of both self-help and conspiracy discourse (Melley, 2017; Rimke, 2000). For instance, political action is discouraged in favour of the construction of parallel structures: *'In communist Czechoslovakia, Havel noted that these parallel structures were more effective at combating totalitarianism than political action.'*. Thus, the exaggeration of the amount of control exercised by the government and experts on the public serves to demotivate viewers from democratic political engagement, portraying it as insufficient to addressing the real problems. As a result, the only solutions left are to disengage from politics completely and focus only on improving one's personal life (which the video seems to encourage) or to turn to political violence.

These recommendations combine a variety of persuasive strategies. Firstly, they use medium to high modality, as expressed by the modal verbs 'must', 'should', 'can' and the following sentence which appears directly before the list of tips, which expresses a high degree of certainty about the importance of engaging in the recommended actions: *'This task, however, necessitates many different approaches, from many different people.'*. Secondly, the use of references, to Carl Jung and Václav Havel, further strengthens the video makers' authority. Both these authors are portrayed as authoritative experts, with Havel also presented as 'one of us' by being referred to as a 'political dissident', a label that at least some of the audience is likely to identify with.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the recommended actions are represented highly positively as aligning with the ingroup's values. For example, the first tip is preceded with *'for those of us who wish to help return sanity to an insane world'*, which not only links the concept of sanity to a certain recommended behaviour but also aligns this concept with the ingroup ('us'). Freedom, which is also greatly valued by the video makers and presumably the audience, is also invoked: *'a concerted effort must be made to move the world back in the direction of*

freedom'. In addition to the association which is made between freedom and the recommended actions this line affirms the status quo, presupposing that recent changes have compromised previously existing freedoms. Through a quote from Jung, viewers are encouraged to identify with the highly praised 'redeemer personality' and thus 'bring order to our own minds' and provide 'inspiration for others to follow'. While the 'redeemer personality' is likely to bring to mind positive associations for any viewer, for Christians it might take on further meaning as Jesus Christ is often referred to as the Redeemer.

Finally, the video ends on a positive note with an inspiring quote from Thomas Paine: *'Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph.'*. As an American Founding Father, Paine's words are probably most encouraging for patriotic Americans who admire the Founding Fathers. This quote motivates viewers into action by allowing them to imagine themselves as noble fighters who will eventually triumph over tyranny.

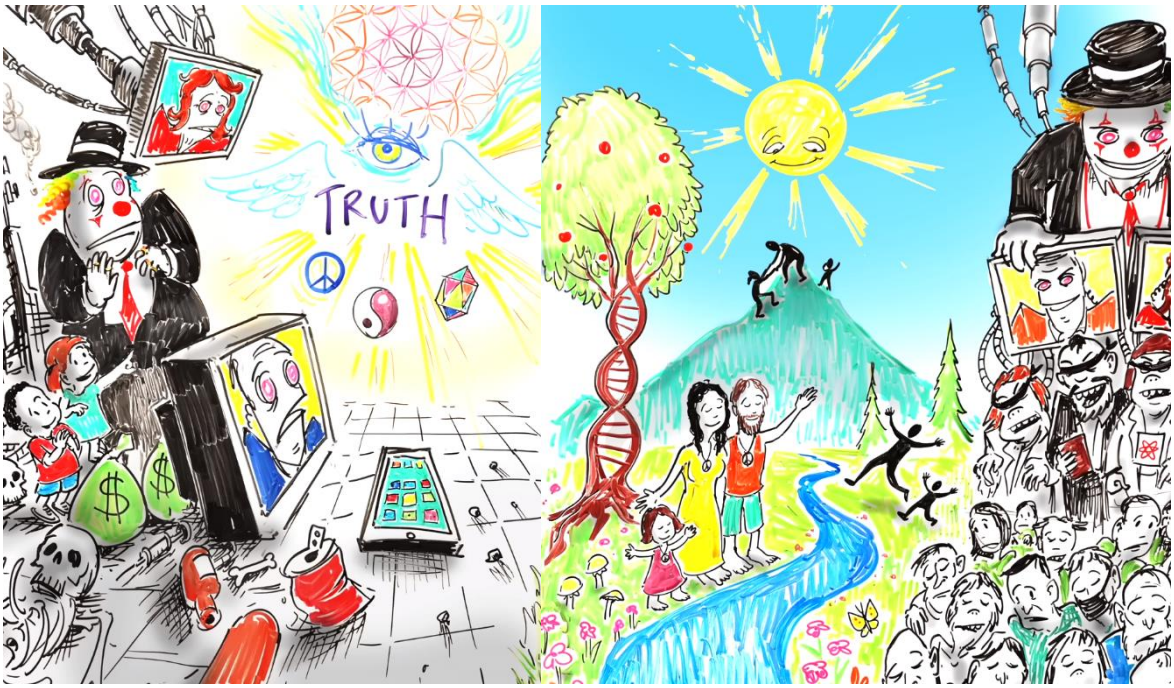
5 Discussion

5.1 Genre hybridity

The video seamlessly blends elements of the self-help and conspiracy theory genres, creating a hybrid genre: conspiratorial self-help. It revolves around a problem allegedly affecting the lives of ordinary people, consistent with both self-help and conspiratorial discourse. Similarly, the high value placed on individual freedoms is another central concern of the video which aligns with both genres (Melley, 2017; Rimke, 2000). However, the presentation of a threat to these freedoms is more typical of conspiracy theories, especially New World Order theories concerned about the rise of a global totalitarian government (López, 2022). However, unlike most conspiracy theory content, the video ends with a list of recommendations as to what the viewers can do if they find themselves in a society under the influence of a 'totalitarian mass psychosis'. Typical of self-help, these recommendations provide viewers with individualistic solutions they can personally implement in a fight against 'totalitarianism' (Rimke, 2000). Furthermore, the video discourages collective action, both visually (through a negative depiction of protesters) and verbally by claiming that it is less effective than individual forms of resistance, which aligns with both genres (Melley, 2017; Rimke, 2000). It uses fear appeals and the creation of a moralised distinction between the ingroup and outgroups to encourage viewers to align themselves with its ideology, presenting the elite as morally inferior and the public as both morally and intellectually inferior to nonconformists. These have been identified in the literature as central features of conspiracy theories (Ekman, 2022; Hameleers, 2021). Due to the video's portrayal of a conflict between nonconformists presented as underdog heroes and the elites who are depicted as unequivocally evil, power-hungry and corrupt, it aligns with a Manichean worldview, which has been linked to conspiracy theories (Barkun, 2003). Perhaps to avoid slipping into the hopeless pessimism characteristic of conspiracy theories, the fear appeals are paired with a more hopeful ending, typical of self-help. This may allow the video to appeal to a self-help audience who might be put off by excessively negative sentiment.

The mixing of the self-help and conspiracy theory genres observed in this video aligns with McGee's (2012) argument that the increasing implausibility of achieving wealth and professional attainment merely through individual effort will lead to a change in self-help discourse. She speculated that self-help may turn towards spiritualism, potentially using religious or spiritual discourse to rationalise inequality or to replace the striving for happiness

in this lifetime with spiritual aspirations. While the video does not explicitly comment on these, it includes references to Christian beliefs as well as spiritual symbols (e.g. tree of life, flower of life, yin-yang symbol), which it associates with freedom and truth. Thus, while viewers are not explicitly instructed to strive for spiritual rather than earthly fulfilment, the positive representation of spiritual ideas and their linking with highly regarded values might lead some viewers to this interpretation.



McGee's (2012) other suggestion for how social inequality and self-help's focus on individual effort as the determining factor in one's success can be reconciled was a potential turn towards social justice movements. Not only was this not observed here, but the video even discouraged collective action at points, while other After Skool videos outright discourage recognising systemic issues and participation in social justice movements (e.g. a video titled 'Why is the VICTIM Mindset So Attractive? - Baggage Claim'). Conversely, I would argue that the video makers' use of conspiratorial ideas may serve the function of reconciling self-help teachings with the increasing implausibility of achieving success purely through individual effort. This reconciliation is done by representing people's problems as arising from the elite's malicious design and the public's conformity and obedience. Both this and the sense of persecution conveyed by some of the quotes included in the video (e.g. 'the enemy in our midst') may allow viewers to attribute potential failures to causes outside of themselves and resolve the contradiction between self-help teachings and their real-life experiences. Thereby viewers can avoid blaming themselves for any lack of success they may experience despite their efforts

without having to resort to explanations involving systemic problems, which is discouraged by the channel's content.

Additionally, this genre blending represents the phenomenon of the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories. As the video creators present themselves as respectable actors producing popular content, their video introducing viewers to topics central to conspiratorial accounts of Covid-19 might serve as an entry point into conspiracy theories for some viewers. Due to its introductory nature, this video provides viewers with the necessary knowledge to understand more conspiratorial accounts, which often presuppose much of what is discussed here. The illustrations help ease viewers' comprehension of the topic as well as introducing them to frequently used visual elements. Their use of scientific sources and other superficial features of academic writing may give viewers the impression that the video's content is evidence-based. The positive portrayal of the nonconformist and creation of an ingroup around a nonconformist identity may encourage viewers to see themselves along these lines. Some scholars have argued that social media algorithms, such as YouTube's video recommendation algorithm, play a role in radicalising viewers (Allington & Joshi, 2020; Dow et al., 2021). Thus, after watching this video viewers may be exposed to increasingly conspiratorial content, which might lead them to adopting conspiracy beliefs. As some research has found that conspiracy theories can boost the popularity of social media content (e.g. Cinelli et al., 2022), this may also motivate creators to include conspiratorial narratives in their content. Furthermore, as New Age self-help favours intuition over rationality and teaches people to follow their inner guide to create their personal reality (Redden, 2002), After Skool viewers may already be predisposed to more easily accept conspiratorial ideas which are often presented using emotional appeals.

5.2 Motivations for conspiracy belief that the video's content aligns with

The video includes numerous elements which seem to appeal to some of the motivations for conspiracy belief I have discussed in the literature review. A heightened need for making sense of events, especially during crisis situations, may have motivated some viewers to click on this video (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Those who viewed the reintroduction of Covid restrictions around the time of the video's release as nonsensical and unnecessarily restrictive and the media coverage of the new Covid wave as scaremongering may have already felt that society was going insane and might have been motivated to find an answer to why and how

something like this could happen. For such individuals the video's title ('MASS PSYCHOSIS – How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL') promises an answer to their questions. Similarly, the sound effect at the start of the video plays into viewers' curiosity and creates the sense that the following content will reveal important but not widely known information, which Douglas and Sutton (2023) identified as key features of conspiracy theories. Additionally, the sense of intrigue the sound effect creates adds to the entertainment value of the video.

The video's content also aligns with some of the existential motivations for conspiracy belief discussed in the literature review (e.g. Douglas et al., 2017). The video might create an illusion of safety as it shows viewers which groups or individuals they need to be wary of and what they can do to avoid the dangers that are discussed. Its allusions to Covid waves being manufactured and media coverage of the pandemic being exaggerated or entirely fabricated to manipulate the public may allow viewers to alleviate any fear they might have about contracting Covid. This aligns with the maladaptive coping mechanisms which are used when engaging in fear control discussed by Adiwena et al. (2020), such as perceiving messages to be exaggerated, manipulative or conspiratorial. Additionally, belief in the conspiracy theories featured in this video allows one to justify flouting Covid rules which they may find inconvenient and reframe this behaviour in a positive light, which aligns with the concept of motivated reasoning (Van Prooijen, 2022).

Distrust of mainstream sources, such as the government, mainstream media and modern science, which is associated with conspiracy belief, is also expressed in the video (e.g. Bangerter et al., 2020). Government officials and scientists are both included as members of the corrupt and power-hungry ruling class, while the media is portrayed as their mouthpiece. Similarly, the visual depiction of the two-party system as merely providing an illusion of choice and the discouragement of political action betrays political alienation and cynicism, which has also been linked to conspiracy belief (Swami et al., 2010).

The ingroup which the video makers create may appeal to lonely viewers in search of a community. The highly positive evaluation of this group provides a positive identity that viewers can adopt. The information the video provides is presented as special knowledge,

allowing those who possess it to imagine themselves as participating in a historic fight against tyranny, raising their self-esteem (Van Prooijen, 2022). The video also appeals to those who desire a unique identity due to its positive portrayal of nonconformists and negative evaluation of the general public, who are depicted as homogenous. This is consistent with Zorzi's (2022) assertion that the ability to adopt a certain identity may motivate conspiracy belief.

The video might appeal to members of historically dominant groups who feel that they are discriminated against by minorities, as it presents historically dominant ideologies, such as traditional values and Christianity as being in danger. The role of the wrongfully persecuted innocent victim aligns with collective narcissism as it portrays the nonconformist in a morally superior victim role (Biddlestone et al., 2021). Similarly, the negative portrayal of outgroups as morally and intellectually inferior, mentally ill, overly emotional and lacking self-discipline aligns with motivations related to collective narcissism. Negative representations of those who follow Covid restrictions and recommendations to get vaccinated might be especially appealing to those who are opposed to such behaviours and might contribute to the conflict between those in favour of and those against Covid-related public health measures. There are also occasional allusions to LGBTQ+ identities being unnatural and associated with mental illness, which could appeal to viewers holding anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes.

5.3 New World Order conspiracy theory narratives in the video

The video centres around the rise of totalitarianism, which is a central theme in NWO conspiracy theories, alluding to both its religious and secular strands (references to satanism and the Illuminati). Similarly to Barkun's (2003) description of NWO theories, the video seems to address both fundamentalist Christians' fixation with the end-times and the secular right's fear of oppression. Typical of NWO theories, the video presents conspiratorial narratives about threats to liberties, brainwashing, surveillance, the elite's plans of reducing world population and the role of modern technology as enabling the control of the public (Barkun, 2003; López, 2022; Spark, 2000). The video links Covid-related public health measures to the rise of totalitarianism, connecting NWO and Covid-19 conspiracy theories.

5.4 Ideologies associated with conspiracy theories in the video

Many of the ideologies which have been associated with conspiracy theories and self-help feature in the video. The moralised distinction between the elite and ordinary people characteristic of populist discourse resembles the characterisation of the elite and nonconformists in the video (Hameleers, 2021). Additionally, its critique of experts portrayed as trying to control the lives of everyday people despite being 'blind' to reality aligns with science-related populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). The rejection of mainstream knowledge authorities also reflects the discourse of New Age self-help (Redden, 2002). The video's idealisation of a free society which is claimed to have existed in the past, and the recommendation that viewers strive towards recreating this supposedly free society, resembles the populist idea of the heartland and its science-related counterpart (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). However, as Douglas and Sutton (2023) pointed out, conspiracy theorists also distinguish themselves from the wider public, who are portrayed negatively in this video. Thus, similarly to other conspiracist content, despite some populist features the video does not align completely with populism.

Melley's (2017) concept of agency panic can also be applied to this video, as it centres around a perceived threat to individual liberties. The contrasting depictions of 'the masses' and nonconformists aligns with this all or nothing view of agency, representing the brainwashed subject and the liberal self respectively (Melley, 2008). The video depicts a struggle between the individual and the collective, portraying the ingroup as consisting of unique individuals responsible for their own lives, and outgroups (both the elite and general public) as homogenous, morally and intellectually inferior collectives. The video's portrayal of scientists can also be divided into two camps: its sources are described as exceptional individuals worthy of admiration, while scientists as a collective are portrayed negatively. These individualistic notions can also be linked to self-help, which has been described as an individualistic activity (Rimke, 2000). In line with the individualistic nature of both self-help and many conspiracy theories, the video encourages individual rather than collective forms of resistance.

The video includes numerous emotional appeals which seem to be generally aimed at triggering fear in the viewer, such as the use of sensational language and dystopian imagery both in the artworks and illustrations which were included. At the same time, while the video's discussion of 'mass psychosis' and totalitarianism appears fact based to a casual viewer, many of its

sources are outdated, misquoted and taken out of context. These features align with Lee's (2022) description of post-truth centring around emotional appeals rather than facts. The contrasting portrayals of the victimised but heroic ingroup and the morally and intellectually inferior outgroups (the elite, public figures and the population) is also in line with a tendency to pick sides, which d'Ancona (2017) identified as a feature of post-truth politics. However, while in practice the video contains these features of post-truth discourse, its creators do not acknowledge this or refer to 'alternative facts' or 'incommensurable realities'. Instead, they assign absolute truth value to the content they present, which is claimed to be so powerful that the only way the elite can prevent it becoming widely known is through censorship. Instead, similarly to Ylä-Anttila's (2018) findings they describe the beliefs of their opponents (the non-conspiracy believing public) along the lines of post-truth: *'They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them.'*. As manipulation can only be successful if it is not perceived by the target (Masia, 2021), the video makers' professed interest in truth may serve to divert viewers' attention from recognising the video's numerous post-truth features.

The video's discussion of mental illness has elements of both self-help and conspiracy theory discourse. Similarly to self-help assigning responsibility to the individual for 'physical and/or spiritual poverty' (Rimke, 2000, p. 65), the video presents mental illness as the result of conformity through its visual depiction of a group of people all walking towards mental illness. As these participants are depicted as active agents, this suggests they are at least partly to blame for their suffering, adding to the stigma around mental illness. Furthermore, the concept of 'mass psychosis', which is defined here by rising rates of mental illness among the population, is linked to ideas of moral inferiority. For example, it is claimed that the individuals in a society under 'mass psychosis' behave in immoral and dangerous ways. Additionally, the video associates adaptive ways of 'escaping from the state of panic' with ideas of heroism, by pairing the narration with a fanart image from Lord of the Rings depicting an iconic scene in which Gandalf sacrifices himself fighting the Balrog, allowing his companions to escape. This implies a contrasting negative evaluation of a psychotic break, which is presented as the other, less heroic way of escaping fear.

In addition to assigning blame to those suffering from a mental illness and depicting it as a source of immoral and dangerous behaviour, some visual elements suggest that the increasing rates of mental illness discussed in the video are a result of malicious design. In the image depicting a group of people walking towards mental illness, the people are walking on a conveyor belt, the presence of which suggests that someone has planned for this to happen and created an environment which makes the process of developing a mental illness more efficient. As the illustrator depicts the eye of Sauron overlooking the scene, this helps the viewer identify the culprit as the ruling class. Similarly, the narration throughout the video provides a detailed description of the strategies the elite use to bring about a ‘mass psychosis’. The depiction of mental illness resulting from the elite’s scheming aligns with conspiracist ideas.

Consistent with the findings of Jolley et al. (2018) linking conspiracy belief to system justification, the video seems to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo by its association of human nature with a traditional nuclear family and discouragement of collective forms of political resistance. The contrast which the video makers create between human nature and its transformation which 'turns sound minds into sick minds' carries a positive evaluation of 'natural' and equally negative evaluation of 'unnatural' lifestyles and worldviews. Visuals generally place members of the ingroup on natural backgrounds, while outgroups usually appear in dystopian cityscapes. This seems to result in the naturalisation of traditional values and historically dominant ideologies, while more recent developments are portrayed as corrupting these 'natural' forms of social organization. As these ideologies, such as Christianity, patriotism and liberal individualism, are associated with nonconformists, the video seems to suggest that they are no longer endorsed by the elite and the majority of the population and are thus in danger. This is reminiscent of Melley's (2017) argument of the role of conspiracy theories in the maintenance of liberal individualism by perceiving it to be under threat, but in this case it might be extended to include other historically dominant ideologies as well. Additionally, the inclusion of conspiratorial narratives in a self-help video allows viewers to justify any failures they may have experienced, avoiding both self-blame and the acknowledgement of systemic flaws.

On the other hand, the video has an anti-establishment stance and at least at the surface level its negative portrayal of the government and scientists, rejection of accepted knowledge and political cynicism appears to challenge the status quo. However, as Jolley et al. (2018) distinguish trust in government from support for systems of government, while these features show a distrust of the government typical of conspiracy theories, they do not necessarily signal a rejection of 'the system'. Perhaps more importantly, the video's promotion of historically dominant ideologies reinforces the values and interests of dominant groups, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the status quo. As ideologies allow group members to evaluate social practices and coordinate their actions (Van Dijk, 1995; 2006), viewers' acceptance of the ideologies endorsed by the video makers may have implications for their behaviour. For example, the idea of individual responsibility, central to liberal individualism, which has been linked to both conspiracist and self-help discourse (Melley, 2017; Rimke, 2000), creates the impression that a person's circumstances are entirely the result of their own merit and thus that the world is fair. If someone accepts this belief, they will be less likely to demand change and more likely to focus on becoming deserving of success through hard work. Individual responsibility is alluded to in the video, for instance by the creators' misinterpretation of the proverb 'Man is a wolf to man' as meaning 'we are our own worst enemies'.

It is interesting to note that the video uses some of the same manipulation techniques its creators criticise in their opponents. While it claims that the elite use the public's negative emotions, mainly fear to manipulate them, the video itself frequently appeals to viewers' emotions. It also presents viewers with sometimes contradictory information, which its creators designate as a manipulation technique used by the elite. The creation of an ingroup and outgroup allows them to misdirect viewers' attention to expect manipulation from outgroups while identifying with the positively evaluated ingroup. Outgroup representations exaggerate the evilness and incompetence of the elite and general public, associating totalitarianism with the putting in place of Covid restrictions and 'mass psychosis' with the following of these rules. The projection of the manipulation techniques of the video makers to outgroups might also mean that viewers who come across persuasive messages from outgroups which point out these same techniques being used by conspiracy theorists might reject them outright, perceiving such critiques to be mere projections of the outgroup's own manipulation techniques.

5.5 Potential effects

The video's endorsement of conspiratorial narratives may have a variety of potential negative effects on its viewers, especially those who derive the dominant-hegemonic meaning. As the video is more likely to be recommended to subscribers of After Skool or Academy of Ideas and users who have previously watched similar self-help content, as well as such users being more likely to click on it and keep watching until the end, it is likely that much of the audience agrees with the video creators' ideology, thus being likely to derive such an interpretation. Due to its negative portrayal of the media coverage of Covid-19, Covid restrictions and vaccines, the video may encourage such viewers to ignore Covid-related messages, flout Covid restrictions and avoid getting vaccinated. Furthermore, as according to Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017), conspiratorial narratives created during crisis situations can stick around and contribute to people's representations of history, in the event of a future pandemic or similar emergency, narratives created during the Covid-19 pandemic may be quickly applied to new situations. Additionally, due to the video's overwhelmingly negative representation of mainstream media and modern science, it might contribute to declining trust in mainstream sources, leading people to turn to alternative knowledge authorities which often spread misinformation. Similarly, the negative portrayal of government officials and political cynicism expressed in the video may discourage viewers from democratic political engagement, potentially leading to apathy or even anti-normative forms of engagement, such as political violence (e.g. Uscinski, 2019). Its representation of mental illness may also contribute to the continued stigmatisation of the mentally ill.

5.6 Limitations

Due to the diversity of conspiracy theories, my analysis of this video cannot be considered representative of conspiracy theorist content in general as it is only a case study of a single YouTube video. However, due to its detailed discussion of two central conspiratorial themes, my analysis of this video may provide new insights into a conspiratorial understanding of the concepts of 'mass psychosis' and totalitarianism. Furthermore, as the video mixes the genre of conspiracy theory with the more mainstream genre of self-help, conveys much of its controversial message implicitly and creates an air of respectability through its use of scientific sources, it may appeal to a broader audience, including viewers with limited familiarity with conspiratorial content. Thus, my analysis might shed light on some characteristic features of

social media content that people might engage with in the early stages of conspiracy belief, which to my knowledge has so far received little scholarly attention.

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Appendix A

Link to the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09maaUaRT4M&t=2s

Appendix B

Video transcript:

This After Skool presentation was written and narrated by Academy of Ideas. Check out their YouTube channel for more of their videos.