

# “We Are in Control”: Instagram Influencers and the Proliferation of Conspiracy Narratives in Digital Spaces

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Female spiritual influencers on Instagram engage with conspiracy content and appeal to the issue of control over female bodies to bridge the gap between mainstream and fringe online spaces. I use the concept of “third space” to analyse the dynamics of Instagram communities around spiritual influencers and highlight how these communities operate as spaces for political discussion while simultaneously appearing apolitical from the outside. Analysing data from participant observation and interviews with six female Czech spiritual influencers, I place their online communication and presentation within the context of the conspirituality movement (Ward, Voas, 2011). Furthermore, I present ethnographic evidence on how the influencers moved from spiritual to conspiritual content within their everyday online performances.

*Key words:* influencers, Instagram, conspiracy theories, conspirituality, gender

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## Introduction

When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Czech Republic in March 2020, Vera was in Prague. Vera is a full-time influencer. Her Instagram profile is her main source of income. Her day-to-day job mostly consists of creating content, negotiating with brands and working on brand partnerships. She mostly posts outfits, fitness routines and travels, but her main interests are sustainable make-up and cosmetics. With slightly more than 30,000 followers, she would be considered a micro-influencer. Within the relatively small Czech influencer market, however,

her audience is considered mid-sized. This provides her with a relatively stable position, especially given the fact that Vera has been consistently active on her Instagram for a long time and has a stable and loyal community of predominantly female followers. From January 2020, I was monitoring her Instagram posts and stories as part of my research project on gender stereotypes in Czech influencer culture. Unfortunately, we were unable to meet for an interview before the first COVID-19 lockdown, when life in Prague came to a temporary halt and all interactions moved to online spaces.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Vera joined many other influencers worldwide in adding the hashtag #StayAtHome to her posts. Such posts included images of herself wearing a face mask or posed in her living room filled with books, candles and potted plants. In May 2020, restrictions were lifted in the Czech Republic, but it became clear by the end of August that another lockdown would be inevitable in the Czech Republic (and throughout Europe). Vera's Instagram stories started to change slowly, almost imperceptibly. First, she shared an interview with a political commentator, who criticised governmental restrictions, calling for stricter quarantines for infected people and protection of vulnerable groups such as seniors, so that other citizens could continue "life as usual". "I just wish our politicians would finally understand this"<sup>1</sup>, Vera commented in her Instagram story (Instagram, 22/9/2020). From then on, political commentary on issues related to COVID-19 started to feature more prominently on her profile – almost exclusively in her Instagram stories rather than her feed, which was still full of outfits and beach photos. During the second and third lockdowns in the Czech Republic (from October 2020 to April 2021), Vera regularly shared interviews with various political commentators, the statements of public figures as well as memes and quotes with a clear message: COVID-19 is not a dangerous virus but rather a pretext used by the government to control citizens.

Vera is one of the Czech influencers I have been following as part of my research project focusing on gender stereotyping and performances of authenticity among Czech Instagram influencers. Two months later, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the conditions of the influencers' work, as it restricted many of the activities they relied on when creating their content (e.g., shopping, travelling, going to the cafés and clubs, yoga lessons and playdates with children). Consequently, the content my informants posted also changed significantly as it necessarily reflected the limited possibilities for any social and outside activities. The pandemic blurred boundaries between the personal and the political because it rendered the most basic everyday decisions (e.g., where to shop for groceries and how to organise social activities for children) into political acts. In addition, it opened space for many female influencers to express their opinions on public issues. Within this process that I have elsewhere called "the politization of the domestic" (Heřmanová, 2021), influencers started to create alternative spaces for discussion on highly polarised topics (e.g.,

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1 All quotes from interviews and Instagram captions quoted in this article were translated from Czech to English by the author.

COVID-19 restrictions, vaccines and immunity) and women's perspectives on these issues. Within these alternative spaces, sheltered from the main online spaces for political discussion such as Twitter (Park, Kaye, 2017) or, in the context of the Czech Republic, Facebook (Štětka, Surowiec, Mazak, 2019; Surowiec, Štětka, 2017), female influencers began to find their voice and authority. This process is certainly nothing new and researchers have already demonstrated how social media provided women with unprecedented tools for political realisation within both mainstream and fringe political spaces (Mattheis, 2018; Stern, 2020). However, the pandemic, with its heightened focuses on personal and collective health and wellbeing, offered new themes for discussion.

This article presents an analysis of the role Czech influencers on Instagram played in the proliferation of COVID-19 conspiracy narratives. Specifically, I focus on "spiritual influencers", who post about self-growth, promote a loosely-defined spirituality often inspired by New Age and neo-paganism practices and female empowerment framed by spiritual growth. I follow the emergence of political discussion in their communities through their commentaries on COVID-19-related events – most importantly, the anti-COVID-19 vaccines. Although Czech influencers and their communities were found to be significantly influenced and often connected to English-speaking spiritual communities on Instagram (many of my informants took direct inspiration from U.S.-based influencers), the local context cannot be overlooked. The current research mostly focuses on the connections between conspiracy theories, spirituality, the Far Right, political influencers and radical conservatives (e.g., Carlson, Ramo, 2022; Marwick, Lewis, 2017). The Czech influencers that I interviewed were not openly connected to any political movement or party. They only rarely expressed any political affiliation and while they sometimes participated in proliferating content from alt-right affiliated websites, they did not openly articulate any coherent political ideology. In addition, they did not discuss their voting preferences and before the COVID-19 pandemic, they had never openly commented on any political events.

This article, thus, proposes to apply the notion of "third spaces" (Wright, 2012) as non-political online places where political discussion happens to analyse how Instagram influencers discussed COVID-19 as a political event and proliferated COVID-19 conspiracy theories. My analysis identifies the category of control – specifically, the control of female bodies and one's own body – as a prominent discursive practice of the influencers. It is often used as a metaphor for control over society as a whole. Through the notion of control and empowerment, the influencers connected COVID-19-related events to conspiracy narratives explaining that the pandemic was a political event orchestrated by elites to take control away from citizens. Building on a case from the Czech context, I argue that gender – in particular, the construction of femininity – is an understudied but important component of the online proliferation of conspiracy narratives. By appealing to gender, influencers used conspiracy narratives as empowering and community-building tools for creating safe "third spaces" for themselves and their followers.

## Theoretical Framing: Online Conspiracies and Influencer Culture

Conspiracy theories have long been a part of Western culture (Knight, 2000). The networked nature of online communication and, particularly, the emergence of social media and user-generated content platforms have reshaped the information ecosystem in which we communicate with each other. However, there seems to be no academic consensus regarding how the use of the Internet impacted the global “conspiracy milieu” (Harambam, Aupers, 2017). As Birchall and Knight (2022) note, “the default assumption is that the internet has created an unprecedented spread of conspiracy theories” (p.1). Nevertheless, we have yet to gather sufficient empirical evidence to ascertain any causal connection. Various studies have addressed the roles of content virality, memetic culture and user-generated-content in the online creation and proliferation of conspiracy theories (Cotter, DeCook, Kanthawala, 2022; Forberg, 2021; Marwick, Partin, 2022; McNeil-Willson, 2022; Zeng, Schäfer, 2021). Marwick and Lewis (2017) identify several practices, such as “trolling” and “shitposting”, which are embedded in the specific cultural environment and participatory culture of fringe platforms and communities (e.g., 4chan). They postulate that such practices drive media manipulation and, consequently, a general distrust of established media sources and institutions. Therefore, the participatory culture of Internet platforms has created an environment in which conspiracy theories can thrive.

Similarly, Marwick and Partin (2022), as well as Tripodi (2022), explore practices of “doing your own research” and “constructing alternative facts”. These practices emphasise independent thinking and a critical outlook on all information presented by “the establishment” and “the elites”. According to Harambam and Aupers (2017), this critical, independent approach to the current media ecosystem often plays a crucial role in the identity formation of the members of conspiracy groups and movements.

The focus on independent thinking and the critical examination of information presented by established experts was also crucial for my informants, who often used different variations of the phrase, “Do your own research.” Their self-identification follows a dynamic similar to the one described by Harambam and Aupers (2017). My participants did not identify themselves as conspiracy theorists, but rather as free-thinkers, truth-seekers and community spiritual leaders.<sup>2</sup> Based on this emic perspective, I categorise them as “spiritual influencers” (Schwartz, 2021). Spiritual

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2 To identify the conspiracy content shared by my informants, I used the category, “disinformation and conspiracy content”, when coding the content. Drawing upon Persily and Tucker (2020), I define “disinformation” as false content spread by people who are aware that they are spreading false information. Conspiracy theories could be disinformation, but they are distinguished by a set of characteristics, most notably by the framing narrative of hidden elites controlling the world. During my ethnographic research, however, the definitive line between disinformation and a conspiracy theory became rather blurred. My respondents treated various conspiracy theories simply as pieces of content within the wider narrative they wanted to convey.

influencers share an interest in a New Age spirituality and certain aspects of wellness culture (Ingram, 2020). They distrust established authorities, Western medicine and the materialistic way of life that they affiliate with Western culture. This description coincides with what Baker and Rojek (2020) call the “lifestyle guru”. Lifestyle gurus “define themselves in opposition to professional cultures. Selectively and instrumentally, they mix elements from positive thinking, esoteric systems of knowledge and mediate them through folk culture” (Baker, Rojek, 2020: 390). In her analysis of “alt-health influencers”, Baker (2022) further analyses how influencers with significant followings across platforms build on the wellness industry practices of drawing upon personal experiences and anecdotal evidence as well as concepts of intuition and positive thinking to proliferate misinformation and conspiracy theories. According to Baker, the emphasis on subjective experience (in opposition to expert knowledge) enables the spread of conspiracies. It offers an alternative explanation for subjective, intuitive and personal experiences while contextualising them in the collective consciousness. Therefore, this holistic approach that places the individual experience within a higher, collective order of things connects spiritual influencers to the conspirituality movement (Ward, Voas, 2011), which sits at the intersection of personal spirituality, distrust towards established authorities and a belief in the possibility of collective awakening. The conspirituality phenomenon is also closely connected to the widespread use of the Internet. The connective logic of digital communication channels enabled the fusion of modern wellness culture (Ingram, 2020; Remski, 2020) and conspiracy theorist communities that are often found on the fringes of the Internet (e.g., on “dark platforms”) (Zeng, Schäfer, 2021).

Lifestyle gurus, alt-health influencers and spiritual influencers all share characteristics that define the influencer culture. As Abidin (2017) notes, influencers are micro-celebrities (Senft, 2008) native to the internet. Micro-celebrities are distinguished from traditional celebrities by the fact that their appeal lies in their “ordinariness” (Abidin, 2017). Influencers are, thus, according to Abidin (2016, 2017), a sub-category of online micro-celebrities. Their fame and success are entirely dependent on their ability to appear authentic, relatable and available to their audiences. A significant body of research has recently explored how authenticity is created, performed and produced in influencer culture (Abidin, 2017; Arriagada, Bishop, 2021; Audrezet, de Kerviler, Guidry Moulard, 2020; Cunningham, Craig, 2017; Duffy, Hund, 2019; van Driel, Dumitrica, 2021).

In this article, I define “authenticity” as a performative process that is part of the “performative ecology of social media” (Abidin, 2018). In this sense, authenticity, rather than being a static property of an object or a person, is constantly negotiated as a communicative act between the influencers and their audiences. Influencers, thus, frequently employ various strategies to enhance their authentic performance on social media, such as showing behind-the-scenes content, posting pictures that compare Instagram-filtered photos with reality and talking about their problems, flaws and imperfections. These strategies are significantly gendered. While men can appear authentic by being authoritative and engaging in political discussions, women

more often rely on fostering intimacy, vulnerability and a sense of belonging within the community of their followers (Heřmanová, 2023 – forthcoming; Duffy, Hund, 2019). As I will argue later, vulnerability, produced and staged as part of an authentic performance, is one of the key factors that enable female influencers to bridge the gap between political and domestic content, seamlessly blending conspiracy narratives into wellness, spirituality or health-related content.

Until recently, Instagram influencers were mostly characterised by their ability to recommend and sell products and, thus, perceived predominantly as marketing tools (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2016; van Driel, Dumitrica, 2021). Recent research documents the rise of the category of “political influencers”, who use their authority and fame online to engage in meaningful and political content (Riedl, Schwemmer, Ziewiecki, Ross, 2021). However, the highly gendered nature of Instagram influencers’ work (Duffy, 2016) often leads to the assumption that politics has no place in female-dominated Instagram communities. Research on the practices and strategies of political influencers has so far focused on conservative or right-leaning personalities – mostly within the U.S. or English-speaking contexts (Lewis, 2018; Maly, 2020; Tripodi, 2018). With the emergence and rising popularity of the QAnon movement in 2019 and 2020, the focus shifted to processes of mainstreaming radical far-right content in online public spaces (Argentino, 2020; Remski, 2020).

In her analysis of political influencers in the U.S., Rebecca Lewis (2018) also points out the importance of authenticity as a communicative tool between opinion leaders who engage with fringe political content and their audiences. Lewis defines political influencers as people who sell ideology instead of products (p. 4) by adopting many of the strategies used by lifestyle influencers – including the performance of authenticity. Similar to Baker (who discussed how lifestyle gurus referred to their intuition and personal experience when presenting themselves as alternative authorities opposing experts), Lewis explains that political influencers emphasise their transparency – and consequently, authenticity – to position themselves as alternatives to established media sources. Lewis proposes the concept of the “alternative influence network” to describe the community of individuals and Internet celebrities who use influencer practices and techniques to promote political content within the U.S. alt-right movement.

However, as mentioned above, the local context of the research presented in this article is different and none of my informants openly defined themselves as adherents to any established political ideology. Rather, they promoted themselves as spiritual leaders or lifestyle gurus who focused on self-growth and health by drawing upon various content categories (e.g., health, cooking, family and sustainable lifestyles) (Table 1). Scott Wright’s concept of “third spaces” (2012) thus seems to be particularly useful in analysing how conspiracy narratives spread within influencer communities that promote themselves as apolitical, anti-ideological and independent. Wright states that “...third spaces may well be different because many, and perhaps most, do not have an obvious political slant; people do not visit them to discuss politics and this sense it can be hypothesised that they will be politically inclusive spaces” (2012: 13–14). The designed

and perceived neutrality of third spaces is also what makes them safe for people who do not feel welcome in mainstream online spaces for political discussion – an issue that disproportionately concerns women (Vochočová, Rosenfeldová, 2019). The influencers included in this study designed their Instagram profiles and communities primarily as safe spaces for their predominantly female followers rather than as political spaces of influence. I argue that the semi-closed, seemingly neutral character of these spaces is what allows conspiracy theories to flourish.

## Method and Data

This article describes the pandemic journey and mutual interactions of six Czech influencers. Each influencer had a follower count ranging from 18,000 to 300,000 (see Table 1). The primary focuses of their content before the first wave of the pandemic hit the Czech Republic in March 2020 included lifestyle, spirituality, yoga, parenting, wellness, fashion and food/cooking content. Except for Kristin, who has a day job as a nurse, all of them are full-time influencers who make money through brand sponsorships and collaborations (Vera), by creating and selling their own products through their Instagram profile and affiliated website/blog (Tania, Maja and Hana) or both (Leila). Leila has the largest audience, but the size of their individual and combined audiences needs to be interpreted in the context of the relatively small Czech influencer industry. Within this context, Leila, with her 300,000 followers, is one of the biggest celebrities in the industry.

Name	Type of Content	Type of Conspiracy Narratives/Disinformation	Number of Followers
<b>Leila</b>	food, health, wellness, meditation	5G chips in COVID-19 vaccination, COVID-19 denialism, anti-mask, reality manifesting	300K +
<b>Kristin</b>	family and parenting, relationships, mental wellbeing, yoga, body positivity	“alternative” treatments for COVID-19, reality manifesting, natural immunity vs vaccines	5K +
<b>Vera</b>	bio/organic/natural cosmetics, fashion and lifestyle, healthy food, fitness and yoga	COVID-19 as a governmentally orchestrated event, restrictions as totalitarianism, natural immunity vs vaccines	30K +

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of Content</b>	<b>Type of Conspiracy Narratives/Disinformation</b>	<b>Number of Followers</b>
<b>Tania</b>	yoga, tantra, wellness and wellbeing, spirituality	reality manifesting, “alternative” treatments for COVID-19, a higher level of consciousness as a way to overcome covid, yoni eggs	10K +
<b>Maja</b>	meditation techniques, yoga, spirituality, countryside lifestyle	reality manifesting, communication with “unseen” beings, toxins in food, water and air	20K+
<b>Hana</b>	women’s issues, women’s business, spirituality, yoga, homeschooling and alternative parenting	5D reality, alkaline water as COVID-19 and cancer treatments, COVID-19 denialism, restrictions as totalitarianism	60K+

This selection of influencers is based on a) their engagement with conspiracy content and discussion of COVID-19-related conspiracies on their profiles and b) their mutual links and participation in an informal network. During my research between March 2020 and December 2021, they had all interacted with each other at least once. They frequently liked and commented on each other’s posts and sometimes recommended each other’s products. In this way, they formed a fluid, loosely-connected conspiratorial community on Czech Instagram. Their interconnection is important because it produces a hub of conspiracy-theory-related spiritual content, through which their audiences can migrate. This community is not entirely closed but tends to define itself in opposition to mainstream spaces. Leila and Hana (whose audiences were the largest), for instance, often referred to “fam”, “family” or “sisterhood” and talked about other influencers in the network as members of their community.

The main method used in this study was digital ethnography (Pink, Horst et al., 2016). I used both participant and non-participant observation. I followed the informants on Instagram, watched their content (including Instagram stories) daily and recorded notes on their interactions with followers in my field diary. I conducted one-time or repeated interviews with some of them (five recorded interviews in total are quoted in this study) and interacted with others through Instagram direct messaging or email. When the pandemic situation allowed it, I also did offline participant observation and face-to-face interviews. The data analysed for this article



covers the period from March 2020 until December 2021. All collected data were coded using the open coding approach (Rivas, 2012) in the Atlas.ti software. In the first round of coding, the categories were inductively established and focused on the types of content (e.g., family, domestic, lifestyle and make-up), authenticity strategies (e.g., markers of intimacy, vulnerability and authenticity performance) and interactions with the audience (e.g., community-building strategies and prompts to answer questions). In the second round of coding, I specifically focused on content related to the COVID-19 pandemic under the category, “conspiracies/disinformation”, and mapped the links between this category and the types of content established in the first round. In this way, the categories of “vulnerability” (as both an authenticity-building and community-building strategy) and “control” (as the main metaphor and narrative linked to the conspiracy theory content) became prominent. The analysis, thus, attempts to establish and analyse the connection between these categories.

The influencers’ names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms and some details about the influencers and their personal accounts were changed to protect their privacy. I opted for anonymisation and the use of pseudonyms because some of the influencers talked to me and gave me informed consent before they started to engage with content related to conspiracy theories. In some cases, our relationship began before they started to share content related to the pandemic. In these cases, I had already interviewed them before the lockdowns and then continued my communication with them through Instagram direct messenger. I never had the opportunity to record a proper interview with Hana and Leila. This is also the reason why I was never compelled to discuss my own opinions about the pandemic and the content they share. I was able to maintain their trust as an independent observer. Because the circumstances changed significantly after the consent was given, I believe that my participants’ original informed consent does not fully cover the scope of this article. Furthermore, the influencers’ decision to share and sometimes commodify their privacy does not provide me with the right to do the same, even for research purposes. Therefore, I used quotations from interviews and messages only when they were answers to specific questions about their profile content. Furthermore, I did not paraphrase quotes from Instagram captions because they were publicly available.

## Analysis: Influencers as Alternative Authorities in Third Spaces

In November 2020, an interesting turn occurred in Vera’s communication on her Instagram when she shared various articles from the U.S.-based website, GreedMedInfo.com. The posts were mostly about the native immunity of the human body being destroyed by restrictions on social contact, outdoor activities, the unhealthy lifestyle of the global population and, most interestingly, vaccines. GreenMedInfo is the project of Sayer Ji, a well-known conspiracy theorist, who is associated with the U.S. alt-right movement. Sayer and Kelly Brogan, his wife and

formerly renowned psychiatrist, are well-known figures in the U.S. conspiracy and alt-right scene (Remski, 2020). GreenMedInfo is a mix of anti-vax conspiracies and health tips to support immunity interspersed with warnings about the dangers of microwaves and 5G networks. Vera explained in her Instagram stories that the main message that resonated with her was that people are not helpless against the virus. According to Vera, the elites want citizens to feel helpless so they can control them. Individuals should, therefore, take care of their soul, spirituality and immunity – one does not need to be a slave of the lockdown.

In November 2020, Vera shared an interview with Soňa Peková, a Czech molecular geneticist who has since then established herself as a well-known figure in the conspiracy milieu. In 2020, she predicted that the pandemic would be over by Christmas and stated that the virus was artificially created to explain why her predictions were proven incorrect. When I asked Vera about Peková and her statements, she told me that she felt Peková provided a point of view that was missing in mainstream media:

*I don't necessarily buy everything she says, you know. But I also don't buy the statements of this government anymore. I mean, there's obviously something missing in the mainstream narrative.*

Later in our conversation over Instagram direct messenger, she wrote:

*I have a platform here, and I feel kind of responsible to share this info, so people can get the full picture and possibly form their own opinions. But I would be irresponsible if I didn't use my platform.*

Vera often referred to the notion of responsibility in our conversations but always stressed that she never tells her followers what to think. Instead, she provides them with information missing from the mainstream discourse.

Similar sentiments are echoed among other influencers. Maja explained:

*Maybe it could be helpful for someone, or, at least, I hope so? Like, I would not feel good about myself if I stayed silent. I'm a public figure. I have an audience, and this is important for me.*

My informants do not all share the same worldview. While Maja openly discussed magic and things “behind the veil”, Vera stayed within the realm of natural medicine. Kristin mostly talked about yoga and expressed her support for alternative worldviews by sharing others’ posts in her stories while Hana discussed spiritual awakening in almost every post. What they all shared was a distrust of expert knowledge, Western medicine and established authorities. They all emphasised individual responsibility, healing practices and an intuitive approach to one’s body and environment. The pandemic created a fertile ground for discussion about these

issues, which consequently enabled the influencers to venture into discussions about polarising topics and politicise their content. The discussion about vaccines, particularly, encompasses the interests of spiritual influencers because it emphasises both personal responsibility and an appeal to trust authorities and experts. For Vera, Leila, Maja and others, these two positions were mutually exclusive because trusting authorities meant surrendering one's autonomy. They wanted to be authentic, true to themselves and in constant control of what was happening to their bodies. When discussing her experience with COVID-19, Tanja explained:

*You can always control your body. You cannot control what is happening to you, but you can train yourself, your responses to it.*

The issue of control, particularly control over one's body, resurfaced in the analysis on two interconnected levels – in discussions about bodies and vulnerability and, consequently, in discussions about female empowerment regarding women's ability to take control over their bodies.

### **“We All Feel Like This Sometimes”: The Body and Vulnerability**

The emphasis on personal, intuitive and even magical experiences that are positioned as standing against the world of science and Western medicine are, as analysed above, defining characteristics of lifestyle gurus. This is evident in Leila's rhetoric. Under a picture of herself and her friend in a small pool full of ice cubes, she wrote:

*Maybe it can be a start for you as well. Maybe you feel like you don't have any problems. Maybe you have negative thoughts, bad moods. Maybe you just want to strengthen your immunity, be more resilient (to all kinds of virus) and make your life better. (Instagram, 28/10/2021)*

She frequently recommended cold baths as well as non-western healing substances such as ayahuasca. She also recommended drastic detox methods, such as fourteen-day-long fasting periods. Earlier in 2021, she told her followers that she had been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). According to her Instagram posts, she refused all mainstream treatments such as hormonal therapy and instead practised intensive fasting to “heal [her]self from the inside out”. I asked Vera how she feels about that because she was also a supporter of natural food supplements and healthy lifestyle choices instead of “taking a pill whenever you feel a bit unwell”. She explained that she agreed with Leila in the general sense that Western medicine only tends to treat the symptoms and not the cause of the problem but thought that Leila's suggestion to ignore all treatments by doctors regarding serious problems such as PCOS was maybe “a bit irresponsible and going too far”.

Vera, on the other hand, frequently engaged with content from GreenMedInfo.com (mentioned above). GreenMedInfo offers advice similar to Leila's, providing a database of "natural healing elements". On the homepage, articles such as "How Drinking Herbalife Changed My Life" were displayed right next to "Biden Department of Homeland Security Equates Free Speech with Terrorism" and "Meta-Analysis: Lockdowns Do Not Reduce COVID Mortality and Are Harmful" (GreenMedInfo.com). Articles like the latter caught Vera's attention because she considered information published in mainstream media to be too one-sided. In an Instagram message, she wrote:

*I found a lot of people on Instagram, like, yoga people that I follow and stuff, and their message really resonated with me a lot more than the official explanation. I mean, you cannot expect people to be healthy if they don't live a healthy lifestyle. And you cannot punish people who are taking care of their bodies for the pandemic.*

Similarly to Leila, Vera connected the need to take care of one's body with the issue of an "unhealthy" lifestyle that was, in her opinion, being enforced by the government through anti-pandemic restrictions.

Leila's posts were also often liked by Kristin and commented on and shared in stories by Hana.

Maja, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on spirituality than health issues. However, Maja also liked some of Leila's posts and generally shared Leila's preference for natural remedies. For Maja, the body was second to what "is mostly unseen". In some of her Instagram posts, she talked about unseen beings, explaining that they have an important message for humankind even though few people can communicate with them:

*There is SO MUCH MORE than our everyday reality that we can see with our eyes. It is my wish to use the message and the potential of the world "behind the veil" for this life here – for everyday situations and for important milestones in life as well. For me, but I want to enable you to use it too. (Instagram, 21/10/2021)*

For Tania, enhancing one's control over bodily responses was one of her main themes. She was interested in tantric practices, offering paid tantra courses to her followers. When I asked her about her interest in tantra, she described her negative experiences with her body and sex, stressing the importance of bodily awareness and a space where she and her followers could be vulnerable:

*I am often in dark places, you know. I've been through hell. And these people, my people on Insta, they have been through it with me and I want to guide them through their own dark places, towards the light. I want them to feel safe enough to talk about the darkness...It has taught me to put myself and my body first, which sounds easy, but...in my experience, a lot of people just don't know their body well enough. They*

*don't know the pleasure it can give them. And, on the other hand...it's connected to pain, like, you know, there's this duality, there are always two sides of everything. So being able to manage your pain and illness is basically the same, like, process... the same as being able to manage your pleasure.*

From this point of view, she always considered the anti-pandemic restrictions as “unacceptable”:

*I would never do this. I would never listen to anything like this, like, “don't go out”, “don't touch other people”...this is the opposite of what my body tells me to do.*

Likewise, Leila, Maja and Vera often talked with their followers about the need to listen to one's body and consequently, be open to one's bodily needs. When asked how her followers reacted to vulnerable and intimate topics, Vera explained:

*I try to create this space for sharing the bad stuff, you know. The only way to get strong is to accept that you are vulnerable in the first place. But as a woman, it also means a lot of harassment. If I talk about my period, then women would respond and be like, “I need to talk about this”, but there would always be guys who will send you like... gross messages.*

Similar sentiments were echoed on Hana's profile. She often framed issues regarding bodies and vulnerability as being distinctly female. As a former fitness instructor and model, she often talked about how she felt as her “former self”, being judged based on her looks. One of the main messages on her Instagram profile was the notion of “sacred femininity”. She offered online and offline courses and masterclasses to help women find their sacred femininity and strongly emphasised female connection, intuition and sisterhood. In a post promoting her online course, she wrote:

*Now is the time to take our strength back. Now is the time to feel your life, here and now, in your body. Now is the time to create from your own essence and fulfil the mission of your living. (Instagram, 11/11/2021)*

The relationship between body and self is an important component of spiritual influencer content and is framed by discussions on openness, intimacy and vulnerability. In this context, both the anti-pandemic restrictions and mandatory vaccinations were seen as breaches of bodily autonomy and, thus, opened spaces for discussions about bodies and control on personal and societal levels.

**“You Cannot Control What is Happening to You,  
but You Can Control Your Responses”:  
The Body and Power**

The issue of vaccination – specifically, COVID-19 vaccines – is also important because it highlights the bodily dimension of spiritual influencers’ conspirituality practices. Within the same post where Hana talked about “taking your strength back”, she stated:

*We all want change, but only some of us have enough courage to turn into ourselves and change what doesn’t serve us.*

This post illustrated the representation of femininity that Hana builds on her Instagram. When she talked about control, change from within and disposing of the things that no longer served us, she often tied these pronouncements to the current political situation in the world. She was convinced that the only way humankind could get rid of diseases, including the pandemic, was to focus on the inner life, take control and “design a better reality for ourselves” (Instagram stories, 18. 11. 2021). Hana, therefore, made the transition from spiritual, individual wellbeing to conspiritual commentary on the state of the world by posing individuals against forces beyond their control (e.g., the pandemic). However, according to Hana, once one realises one’s true, sacred, creative femininity, one will see that the pandemic measures are just a way to control our bodies, and we will be able to break free.

Tanja made similar references to female bodies and the need to control one’s body. Similar to Hana, Tanja connected control over the body and bodily experience with empowerment and enlightenment. In March 2020, she wrote to me through Instagram that she felt the forced closing of her massage studio stripped her of her power:

*I feel like, if I can’t have this, this basic thing, human touch! Who are we even? Without this? I don’t fully know what is happening, but this feels like someone doesn’t want us to be connected, to realise our potential. I don’t know yet what it is or who it is, but I have the sense that this is intentional.*

Vera started to engage in the discussion about COVID-19 in November 2020 through posts regarding Dr. Pekova’s interviews. Some of her followers criticised her for spreading misinformation after she shared some of the interviews. As a response, she wrote:

*I’m not forcing anyone to read it, you know. I just wish people would be more respectful. It is up to them, what they take from this, if they will be in control or not.*

When one of her followers later asked her if she would get vaccinated, she referenced the state of being in control. She replied that she did not see the need in

getting vaccinated because she was already in control of her body and her immunity was strong. Kristin also emphasised bodily control – specifically, body positivity – because she identified as “plus-sized”. Replying to one of her followers in a live stream on Instagram in March 2020, she wrote:

*No one can tell you how you should look. This is your body, this is your soul, this belongs to you, you only. Nourish it, take care of it and don't give a fuck what anyone else thinks.*

The narrative of controlling one's body seems particularly important because the spiritual community on Czech Instagram is predominantly female. As many authors (e.g., Polletta, Chen, 2014) note, women's participation in the public sphere is still significantly hindered by the amount of hate and harassment publicly active women tend to receive. Women experience more online hate speech and cyberbullying than men. Furthermore, threats directed at women in public spaces are often sexual (European Parliament, 2018). Vochocová (2018) observed similar dynamics in Czech virtual public spaces as well when she analysed the strategies of politically active influencers in the Czech Republic. Vochocová and Rosenfeldová (2019) also explored the dynamics of political discussions in female-dominated online spaces regarding the example of Czech parenting websites and fora. They note that these spaces often work as “third spaces”.

Similarly, Tania's and Hana's Instagram profiles were not designed as political fora. However, using the metaphor of control, the influencers employed the rhetoric of empowerment and bodily control along with conspirituality narratives to turn everyday topics (e.g., health, food and fitness) into political content. Both Leila and Hana (as the influencers with the largest audiences) used their platforms during the pandemic to call for political organisation. In both cases, these openly political posts were prompted by discussions about vaccines. Hana talked about “sisterhood” as a unit of political organisation and often encouraged her followers to be aware of the strength that lies in sisterhood (under some of these posts, Leila left her encouraging messages). On the other hand, Leila often became defensive when confronted about her position on vaccination. For instance, she would often respond to her followers with comments such as “You don't have to follow me, if you don't like what I'm posting.” However, in a live stream in May 2020, she told her followers:

*You know, there will always be people hating on us, fam. But we can be who want to be. We can create this reality for us. I am here with you and this is our world. Love you, guys.*

## Conclusion: Third Spaces of Instagram

The shift that happened in the spiritual community on Instagram – from spiritual to conspiritual and then openly political content – during the COVID-19 pandemic created a new dynamic in political communication in the Czech online environment. The profiles of influencers involved in the conversation were, from the outside, still purely spiritual, maintaining the same aesthetics of aspirational, domestic content often labelled as “feminine” (Heřmanová, 2022). Posts about the need for political organisation and resistance against mainstream politics that aimed to control women’s bodies were most often posted in Instagram stories (where they disappear after 24 hours). Such posts were sometimes accompanied by photos of beaches, forests, minimalist bedrooms with morning light and potted plants. None of my informants used hashtags connected to COVID-19, vaccination or conspiracy theory content. For example, when Vera shared posts directly from the GreenMedInfo.com founder, Sayer Ji, she never used the original hashtags referencing the QAnon movement. Similar techniques are not unique to Czech influencers. Argentino (2020) dubbed the aesthetic practices of U.S. influencers sharing QAnon content as “pastel QAnon”. Similarly, Lewis (2018) shows how prominent alt-right influencers within the alternative influence network use strategies such as personal testimonials or daily vlogs to enhance their authenticity and make their political content similar to that of lifestyle influencers. Within the Czech context, however, the conspiritual community on Instagram does not function as an openly ideological network. Rather, it presents an example of a neutral “third space” that is inclusive and apolitical and, thus, a safe space for women to express their political opinions.

The originally apolitical design of third spaces of spiritual communities on Instagram enables the mainstreaming of many of the conspiracy narratives discussed in them. Conspiracy narratives tend to thrive in fringe digital spaces (Forberg, 2021; Zeng, Schäfer, 2021), where the mainstream digital public only rarely has access. Instagram influencer profiles, on the other hand, are open and low threshold. To outsiders, they do not appear to be places where political discussion happens. Therefore, they enable the women who belong to them to feel safe and less at risk to be threatened by the sexual hate speech so prevalent in mainstream online political spaces (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) (Kalsnes, Ihlebæk, 2021).

The analysis presented in this article addresses the overlapping themes of female bodies and vulnerability as well as the issue of control over one’s body within the broader context of control over political events. These are key topics that enable the mainstreaming of fringe conspiracy theories in online spaces. My participants connected the issue of control over one’s body with female empowerment to create open and accessible spaces. These spaces focused on spiritual content and aesthetics and allowed my participants to engage in political discussion. The narrative of control (over bodies and society) is prevalent and through this narrative, the influencers bridged the gap between the personal, domestic, spiritual (female bodies and control over them) and openly political content (world order and corrupted elites using the



pretext of the pandemic as a tool to control citizens). The Instagram communities around spiritual influencers thus function as “third spaces” because they essentially function as political and sometimes even radical arenas for discussions without being designed to be political and without even looking political from the outside.

Therefore, the analysis also sheds light on the so far understudied role that gender plays in the mainstreaming of conspiracy content in online spaces as well as in the gender politics of conspiracy movements in general. Bracewell (2021) points out that the issue of gender remains under-researched in populism studies and that the existing research also focuses overwhelmingly on the role of men and the construction of masculinities (2021: 1). Her analysis of gender politics of the QAnon movement shows that “femininity, particularly feminine identities centered on motherhood and maternal duty, can be mobilised to engage women in populist political projects” (ibid.). Baker and Walsh’s (2022) analysis focuses on anti-vaccine influencers and examines how the notion of the maternal and “mother’s intuition” is strategically invoked in political communication through appeals to maternal ideals such as “protective mother”, “doting mother” and “intuitive mother”. The roles of gendered performances of “authentic femininity” or “sacred femininity” in online spaces have also been studied in anglophone digital spaces with references to the “tradwives” or “tradfems” movement (Mattheis, 2018). Alexandra Mina Stern (2020) uses the notion of the household kitchen when she explains how women have weaponised femininity within the U.S. alt-right movement. All of these accounts, however, focus on spaces that are openly political and designed to promote a clear political message or ideology.

This article attempts to fill a missing gap in the research by analysing how women create neutral and inclusive “third spaces” on Instagram and turn them into safe spaces for discussing political issues. In these spaces, conspiracy theories serve as empowering and community-building tools that allow women to participate in meaningful political discussions, of which the notion of femininity is an important part.

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