

The Truth About #Diedsuddenly Conspiracy Theory

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Like most situations, misinformation and information often battle for the top spot. History has shown to us time and time again how misinformation, which is false and inaccurate, is a driving force for fear. In this paper, we discuss the threat of misinformation during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. A time where the world was forced to shut down, requiring us to stay in our homes to protect ourselves and others from getting sick. Schools and businesses were closed, both entities forcing themselves to find alternative methods of serving their communities. However, like most situations in history, there was a light at the end of the tunnel! Wearing masks became required and vaccines had been developed, albeit faster than normal, to combat the deadly virus. Yet due to the quickness of the vaccine and the masking requirements, misinformation spread about the validity of the vaccines and it led to people becoming skeptical about the truth of the pandemic and its vaccines. It was during this that a conspiracy theory began on social media titled, #diedsuddenly. This theory came from a movie titled “Died Suddenly”, which was created and directed by a man named Stew Peters. Peters, is a known far-right conspiracy theorists and propagandists with a radio show platform to share his antisemitic and conspiratorial material (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025). The logic behind this trend, or rather movement, is based on conspiratorial ideologies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common instance of the #diedsuddenly movement was images and stories of individuals dying suddenly and their deaths being linked to the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines as the cause. For example, I was shown a post of a college athlete who had died. The comments were saying that her passing was sudden, that she died unexpectedly but something about the post didn’t sit right with me. Having said that, I used the SIFT method to determine the credibility of the post. I highlighted the comments that stated she had a sudden passing and had died suddenly, not going deeper into the reason behind her death.

The post had a large number of likes and reposts, which also didn't sit right with me because the young athlete wasn't someone famous—just another person in the world. The vagueness and unrealistic amount of likes led me to believe that this post was linked to conspiracy culture. So I used the SIFT method to find the truth. SIFT stands for stop, investigate the source, find better coverage, and trace the claims and media back to the original source. It is an efficient way to test credibility. I stopped and saw that this was posted in 2023, about 3 years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and life was getting back to 'normal'. 3 years into the pandemic, conspiracy theories had run rampant and took over the lives of many. This is the perfect example of someone using vaccines to scare those into silence. Because of this, I then investigated the source of the post.

The source is Dr. James E. Olsson, an alleged genetic engineer in biomedical and cancer research, who graduated Johns Hopkins University in 2014. His social media profile on X has a verification mark, which he purchased himself due to X's new policy on verified accounts needing to be bought. At first glance, you would think that his profile is legit due to that verification mark and that information on said profile is credible. However, I knew something was different. I went to John Hopkins University's website and began to search the site, trying to see if there was a record of him. Low and behold, there is no record of a Dr. James E. Olsson. So I began to look at other posts on his X account and noticed there was a common theme. Most of his posts were about athletes or public figures who had died suddenly and promoted it with anti-vaccination rhetoric. He had connected their deaths with the vaccine with no real proof or evidence to back his claim. This led me to wanting to find better coverage of the source.

Similar to the first post on Dr. Olsson's page, there was another one he had shared about a college athlete named Morgan Brick. I decided to again search for Morgan Brick myself and had

found out he had died suddenly but it was due to a heart attack—not from receiving an mRNA vaccine (Horton & Merrfield, 2023). Tehani Kealoha is another one! He was a swimmer who passed from a medical emergency (Dowd, 2023). And again, there is no record of what Tehani's medical emergency was. Alia Zuidema, she was also an athlete who passed away from a medical emergency (ON, 2023). You see the common theme? Olsson had followed stories on medical emergencies and finding no cause of death, he was determined to connect their deaths with the vaccine. I chose to go to the college website of a student who had passed, finding that the college had released a statement in support and with no cause as to her passing (Coffey, 2023). Then, I searched the student's name in Google and found no record as to her cause of death. There was an obituary posted for her, coming from Austin, Minnesota. This obituary also showed no statement as to the cause of her passing (Herald, 2023).

After stopping, investigating and pushing to find better coverage I decided to trace the claims back to its original source. To do so, I put the tweet into Google as I noticed the quotation marks within the post with the source "KTTC". The first link that came up was from an article posted by the KTTC staff, which had the exact pictures and quotes used in the tweet. This confirmed that the original source never claimed that the athlete's cause of death was due to the mRNA vaccines. Furthermore, it shows that Dr. James E. Olsson chose to take the article out of context in order to push his agenda of killer vaccines. He focused on athletes because it is common for them to die due to heart attacks. But a quick search would show that the mRNA vaccine is not linked to any increase in cardiac arrest in younger athletes (Bajema, 2025). In fact, a six-year study shared that there is no increase in cardiac arrests amongst athletes before or after vaccines were introduced (Bajema, 2025). The study also showed that most of the younger athletes who "die suddenly" or had an "unexpected death" after getting the COVID-19 vaccine

were mostly due to underlying heart conditions. Death by the COVID-19 vaccine is extremely rare, but again there is no evidence that links the vaccine with sudden cardiac arrests (Lilo & Cieslak, 2024). All of this being said proves that the conspiracy theory of #diedsuddenly was an untrue phenomena associated with Covid-19 due to a newly released vaccine.

In conclusion, the SIFT method has proven again to be the most efficient way to test credibility. Everything is not as it seems and online that is more than true. It is easy to get caught up in stories and posts online, especially when a post is emotional. Emotional posts can often be misleading and lead people to believe untrue information due to the emotional blindfold that we put on. Conspiracy theorists use this to their advantage to put across any message they want to convey and by using something as tragic as death, it deters people from whatever the root cause is. To end, doing your own research and reading credible sources can eliminate any misinformation you may come across.

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