

Conspiracy Beliefs Linked to Selective Media Exposure: Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and Exposure to Media in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This paper study the relationship between believing in conspiracy theories and selective exposure to topics and media, aiming to expand on recent research suggesting that undergraduate students who have a high rate of conspiracist views tend to exposure social media messages that promote their conspiracy theories.

This study surveyed a sample using the psychometric assessment of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale GCBS, the most widely used measure of the general belief in the conspiracy. The study found that undergraduate students had a large scale of belief in conspiracy theories and that there were more believers among women than men.

We found that 67.97 % of them tend to use social media to research the pandemic and discover conspiracy theories.

Our research further showed that most conspiracies that attracted students were ones that stated the reasons for the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of global conflict, like an attack between hidden international powers as part of an international war, or as a result of the US-China competition.

Keywords: social media; exposure; conspiracy; COVID-19; undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

The most people considered to be most influential in "The change of conspiracy thinking is Nesta Webster, an English lady who built up her speculations in the primary portion of the twentieth century. Webster convinced that the world's secret societies worked in concert, aiming to destroy British civilization. Her thoughts found a significant audience during her lifetime. "Many studies have claimed that people believe in conspiracy theories to alleviate the confusion, frustrations, and apprehensions as a result of living in a modern society characterized by rapid social change, high levels of social and geographic mobility, deterioration of personal autonomy and erosion of trust in government ". Figure 1 shows the increasing spread of COVID- 19 among Iraqis, reflecting a lack of commitment to the rules of social distance. While Baghdad, the Arab world's second-most populous capital with 10 million inhabitants, imposed a curfew, government social distancing efforts faced a hurdle. Pilgrims defied restrictions to commemorate the anniversary of the death of revered Shiite Imam Musa al-Kadhim on March 18, 2020. People seem to

continue practicing their religious rituals as usual without paying attention to health risks. Our sample reflects college students' thinking, which may have different perceptions of the spread of the virus and conspiracy theories [1-5].

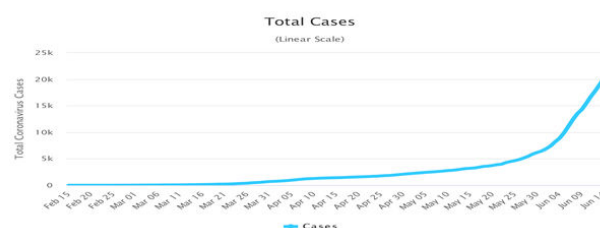


Figure1: Curve shows increased infection of covid virus in Iraq

"Media have made it relatively easy for people to distribute conspiracy theories, which raise the question of whether media messages promoting conspiracy theories increase belief in such theories. In answering this question, scholars conducted randomized experiments and found a clear impact of exposure

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to messages conveying conspiracy theories on belief in such theories immediately after the exposure”[5-10].

We argue that undergraduate students who believe in conspiracy theories are motivated by being exposed to messages on social media that support their beliefs that COVID-19 is a conspiracy. Thus, our assumption is that undergraduate students who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to select news that bolsters their conspiracist views rather than news that challenges them.

Some news published on social media suggests that the spread of COVID-19 is a conspiracy. Many studies have demonstrated that exposure can have an immediate negative conspiracy thinking is a way for members of minority groups to cope with an unequal social structure. Studies have built a short-term effect of exposure to media messages advancing conspiracy theories on belief in the theories.

Significance of the Study

Our study aims to explain belief-formation in general, not just religious or supernaturalistic beliefs. We argue that the widespread human inclination to believe in conspiracies, knowing the effect of faith in conspiracy theory and measuring the amount of belief can provide the interpretation for many social phenomena and behaviors. Our hypothesis is that even undergraduate students can be believers in conspiracy theories, but their interpretation takes a different frame from the uneducated public. We believe they are motivated to select news sources consistent with their beliefs to obtain explanations for the conspiracy they believe in. This study will shed light on how educated people like undergraduate students interact with conspiracy theories and their interpretation. Secondly, we will explore the link between conspiracy theories and the theory of selective media exposure [10-15].

Literature Review

Coronavirus conspiracy theories mediated the relationship between analytical thinking and compliance with mandated social distancing measures. They selected a pool of adults from the United Kingdom to determine the coronavirus COVID-19 conspiracy theories. They hypothesized that increased analytic thinking would be associated with increased compliance with social distancing requirements instituted by UK authorities in the first quarter of 2020. Swami and Baron found that analytic thinking and rejection of coronavirus conspiracy theories were associated with compliance and mediated association. The theoretical framework that synthesizes UK citizens' behavior, the dual-process theory, suggests that analytic thinking may lead to two separate types of behavior, depending upon external forces [16-20].

Ahmed, Vidal-Alaball, Downing, & Lopez conducted a social group analysis of Twitter data to develop an understanding of the drivers of the 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theories as well as strategies to push back against such false narratives. The researchers examined the social media behavior of 6,556 Twitter users who tweeted '5G coronavirus' or '#5G coronavirus' between March 27, 2020, and April 4, 2020. In total, they collected 10,140 tweets and utilized the Node XL Social Media Research Foundation tool to assess the data. The researchers

hypothesized that 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theories commonly proliferate on social media networks. The findings of the study showed that the two largest groups of people who believed in conspiracy theories were the isolated group. Second, the authors found that those who started misleading hashtags lacked authority but managed to captivate audiences. The researchers concluded that the best intervention against misinformation is a targeted intervention that focuses on delegitimizing the sources of fake news.

Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen analyzed the main types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation. They analyzed a sample of 225 pieces of misinformation from the period of January 2020 to March 2020. They hypothesized that misinformation played a profound role in shaping public opinion about the sources of the COVID-19 outbreak. Researchers measured scale, sources, claims, and responses to determine how the public responded to new stories related to COVID-19. The study found that only a small portion of coronavirus misinformation was completely fabricated; instead, data and news stories were reconfigured. In terms of sources, the study determined that misinformation was both a top-down and bottom-up phenomenon. In some cases, celebrities started the misinformation, and in other instances, obscure social media users were responsible for misleading information. The authors also discovered that a large percentage of misinformation concerns the actions of public authorities.

Pennycook, McPhetres, Zhang, and Rand performed a test intervention to increase the truthfulness of content people share on social media. The purpose of this approach was to understand why people believe and spread misinformation about COVID-19. The sample set consisted of 1,600 adult Americans who provided feedback regarding coronavirus misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news. The researchers conducted two separate surveys to gauge American people's public opinion, perceptions, and responses to misinformation. In Study 1, participants failed to distinguish between true and false content and did not validate information before they shared it with a family or friends. In Study 2, the respondents received a “nudge” (intervention) and refrained from sharing misinformation with family and friends. The main finding of this study is that interventions are useful in diffusing fake narratives and misinformation about certain crises. Ultimately, authoritative sources must quickly intervene to diffuse misinformation and fake news.

Theoretical Framework

The present study measures belief in conspiracy theories among undergraduate students in Iraq in an attempt to understand how much the conspiracy believer tends to expose themselves to media to support their belief. This study relied on specific definitions of conspiracy theories and selective exposure. "Expressions, for example, 'scheme to carry out homicide,' 'intrigue to dupe,' and 'trick to perpetrate annihilation' are revered in legal frameworks around the globe and allude to offenses including a game plan or a joint undertaking to execute wrongdoing. In the broadest sense, in this way, a paranoid notion would be a clarification, either theoretical or proof-based, which properties the reasons for an occasion to a trick or

a plot". A common definition of conspiracy theory is the conviction that a group of actors meets in secret agreement with the purpose of attaining some malevolent goal. This is contrary to the view that belief in such theories is pathological. Another definition is an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events as a result of the actions of a small, powerful group. Such explanations reject the accepted narrative surrounding those events; indeed, the official version may be seen as further proof of the conspiracy [21-25].

The basic assumption in the study is that conspiracy believers expose themselves to certain social media to confirm their conspiracist beliefs selectively. Therefore, selective exposure in the area of mass communication refers to the fact that audience may make an informed selection based on their preference for trusted news. The online environment offers a particularly wide variety of easily accessible news providers from which populist citizens can profit in the very sense of selective exposure. Among these online alternatives are social media platforms, political blogs, websites of parties, and digital-born news. Thus, we propose to conceptualize conspiracy beliefs as an interpretive attitude engaging undergraduate students to select media exposure. Furthermore, we conceptualize selective media exposure for college students' judgment towards COVID-19 news as a conspiracy and the scale measurement belief conceptualized as the level of an interpretive attitude of the undergraduate students towards the conspiracy. "The interpretive attitude is shown as a major to psychoanalytic work, relevant and efficient, even when matters related to primitive issues are addressed".

Two stages were applied. First, we measured the level of belief in conspiracies by using an interactive version of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS). Second, we applied exposure theory to a survey of undergraduate students to understand how they select news from the media that explains their belief in a conspiracy theory.

Research Questions

This study poses three main research questions. First, A measure of the scale of undergraduate students' belief in conspiracy theory? Second, which conspiracy message through social media is more believable to college students? Third, are there any differences in the interpretation of conspiracy messages between men and women.

Methodology

An initial 401 participants completed the questionnaire. Of them, 39 did not progress past demographics, and 31 did not complete all measures. The final sample comprised of 331 participants (230 men and 101 women) with an average age of (19 – 24). Participants predominantly resided in Baghdad[26-30].

The study approach is based on phone interviews conducted on a sample of undergraduate students—courses from two universities in Baghdad (125 men and 87 women).

Men	164 participants	66 participants
Women	76 participants	25 participants

Fieldwork was done between June 6, 2020, and July 2, 2020. The model was based on two lists of an undergraduate students' degree in the Baghdad University and Al Iraqiya University to reach the starting points using a snowball sample to identify the graduate students who responded to our survey. The sample included uniquely different Iraqi graduate students to answer the questions: who are the graduate students, in terms of gender, and the which type of mass media choice and prefer to get the (COVID -19) news. The study used phone interviews by applying the snowball sample for multiple waves (a new sampling wave reached the undergraduate students an interviewee introduces the interviewer to an undergraduate student or more potential undergraduate student), we used the diverse seeds of a snowball sample because it is an important sample diversity compared to initial seed. Therefore, our snowball seed diversification was classified to cover the maximum diversity, and the starting seeds for the snowball sample were varied to four undergraduate students (two men and two women). Furthermore, It was taken into consideration that the starting seeds were diversified in terms of graduate student field study.

The first part of the questionnaire was designed according to the GCBS. The GCBS was created for use in researching conspiracy theories and is typically used to measure beliefs in specific conspiracies through a survey. It asks broad questions about assumptions that are presumed to underlie such beliefs. The GCBS measures an overall score. The second part was conducted through an online survey on undergraduate students who use traditional and social media to measure their exposure to news on (COVID-19). This was done to test the hypothesis that conspiracy believers tend to intentionally expose themselves to social media messages to interpret their belief in the conspiracy further.

We measured the scale of beliefs in conspiracies by using 15 GCBS questions, and Each question asks the sample to rate how much they agree with a given statement on a three-point scale, where 1=Disagree, 2=Neutral, and 3=Agree. The 15 statements are as follows: [1] The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and well-known public figures and keeps this a secret. [2] The power controlled by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who control world politics. [3] Secret Institutions communicate with extraterrestrials, but keep this truth from the public. [4] The spread of certain viruses and diseases results from the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organizations. [5] Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the people. [6] The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its soil, disguising its involvement. [7] A secret group is responsible for making all major decisions, such as going to war. [8] Evidence of alien contact being concealed from the public. [9] Technology with mind-control capacities used by people without their knowledge. [10] The new technology that would hurt the current business is stifled. [11] The government utilizes individuals as

Baghdad University	Al Iraqiya University
1	2

patsies to shroud their inclusion in crime. [12] Certain critical occasions have been the consequence of the action of a small group that covertly controls world occasions. [13] Some UFO sightings and rumors are planned in order to divert the public from real alien contact. [14] Tests, including new medications or innovations, are routinely carried out on the people without their knowledge or consent. [15] a lot of significant data is deliberately concealed from the people out of self-interest.

The second part of the survey was concerned with media exposure and investigated whether the topics in social media related to explanations of COVID- 19 as a conspiracy, and whether this affected the audience’s belief in conspiratorial interpretations. Finally, we compared the GCBS scale with belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories through social media exposure. Further, we analyzed the results based on gender that finds any differences in beliefs and exposure.

Findings

Table1: Government malfeasance: this facet reflects a belief that the government commits crimes on its own citizens.

Agreement scale	Scale agreement m	of Scale for agreement females	of Total scale of agreement for agreement
Agree	90.67%	87.10%	90.19%
Neutral	5.83%	9.68%	6.35%
Disagree	5.83%	3.23%	3.46%

Table 1 shows that 90.19% of the students agree regarding government malfeasance, the belief that the government commits crimes against its own citizens, while only 18% answered neutral, and 3.46% disagreed. In terms of gender, 87.10% of women believe that the government commits crimes against its own citizens, while 9.68% responded neutral, and 3.23% disagreed. Meanwhile, 90.67% of male students believe that the government commits crimes against its own citizens, while 5.83% were neutral, and 5.83% disagreed. It appears that women believe in this conspiracy theory more than men.

Table2: Malevolent global conspiracies: this fact reflects a belief that governments and industry are controlled behind the scenes.

Agreement scale	Scale agreement males	of Scale for agreement females	of Total for agreement
Agree	65.50%	73.12%	66.52%
Neutral	21.83%	24.73%	22.22%
Disagree	12.67%	2.15%	11.26%

Table 2 shows that 66.52% of the students agreed on beliefs regarding malevolent global conspiracies, while only 22.22% were neutral and 11.26% disagreed. In terms of gender, 73.12% of women believed that in malevolent global conspiracies, while

24.73% answered neutral, and 2.15% disagreed. Meanwhile, 65.50% of male students believed in malevolent global conspiracies, while 21.83% of them were neutral, and 12.67% disagreed. It appears that more women believe in malevolent global conspiracies than men.

Table3: Control of information: this facet reflects a belief that science is manipulated

Agreement scale	Scale agreement males	of Scale for agreement females	of Total for agreement
Agree	72.17%	80.65%	73.30%
Neutral	17.67%	15.05%	17.32%
Disagree	10.17%	4.30%	9.38%

Table 3 shows that 73.30% of the students agreed regarding the conspiracy theory on control of information, a belief that science is manipulated, while only 17.32% answered neutral, and 9.38% disagreed. In terms of gender, 80.65% of women believe that science is manipulated, while 15.05% were neutral, and 4.30% disagreed. Meanwhile, 72.17% of male students believed that science was manipulated, while 17.67% were neutral, and 10.17% disagreed. It appears that more women believe that science is manipulated.

Table4: Extra-terrestrial cover-up: this facet reflects a belief that information about aliens is being concealed from the public.

Agreement scale	Scale agreement males	of Scale for agreement females	of Total for agreement
Agree	40.67%	46.24%	41.41%
Neutral	13.67%	17.20%	14.14%
Disagree	45.67%	36.56%	44.44%

Table 4 shows that 41.41% of the students agreed regarding extra-terrestrial cover-ups, a belief that information about aliens is being concealed from the public, while only 14.14% responded neutral, and 44.44% disagree. In terms of gender, 46.24% of women believe in extra-terrestrial cover-ups, while 17.20% were neutral, and 36.56% disagreed. Meanwhile, 40.67% of male students believed in extra-terrestrial cover-ups, while 13.67% were neutral, and 45.67% disagreed. It appears that more women believe in extra-terrestrial cover-ups than men.

Table 5: Personal well-being: this facet reflects a belief that individuals are currently being harmed by concealed dangers.

Agreement scale	Scale agreement males	of Scale for agreement females	of Total for agreement
Agree	65.33%	74.19%	66.52%
Neutral	21.00%	19.35%	20.78%

Disagree	13.67%	6.45%	12.70%
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Table 5 shows that 66.52% of the students agreed regarding conspiracies about personal well-being, a belief that individuals are currently being harmed by concealed dangers, while 20.78% were neutral, and 12.70% disagreed. In terms of gender, 74.19% of women believe in conspiracy theories regarding personal well-being, while 19.35% were neutral, and 6.45% disagreed. Meanwhile, 65.33% of male students responded that they believe in these theories, while 21.00% were neutral, and 13.67% disagreed. It appears that more women believe that individuals are currently being harmed by concealed dangers than men.

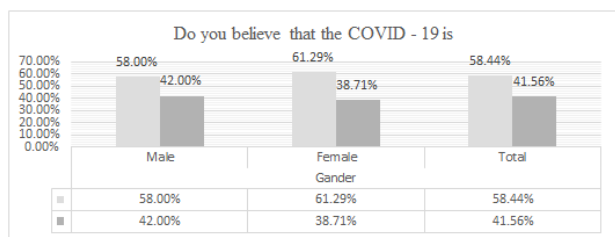


Figure2: Shows the rate of believers in) COVID - 19 (as a conspiracy or as a result of nature.

Figure 2 shows that 58.44 % of students believe that COVID-19 is a conspiracy, while 44.56% believe it developed naturally. In terms of gender, 58% of men believe that COVID-19 is a global conspiracy, while 42% believe it is natural. On the other hand, 61.29% of women believe COVID-19 is a conspiracy, while 38.71% believe it is natural.

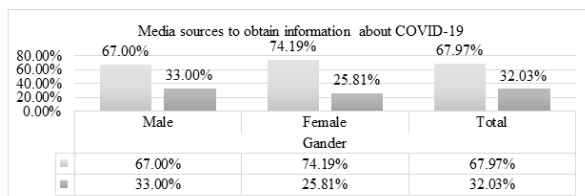


Figure3: Shows Media sources that undergraduate students use to obtain COVID -19 News

Figure 3 shows that most students (67.97%) tend to use to social media to obtain information about COVID-19, while 32.03% use traditional media (television, radio, and newspapers). In terms of gender, 74.19% of female students used social media and 25.81% used traditional media, while 67% of men used social media and 33.00% used traditional media.

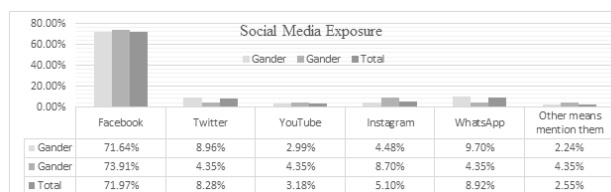


Figure4: Undergraduate student exposure to social media sites

Figure 4 shows that most students (71.97%) indicated that they use Facebook to obtain information about (COVID-19). Among them, 71.64% were men and 73.91% were women. Other media, including Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, were used to a lesser extent.

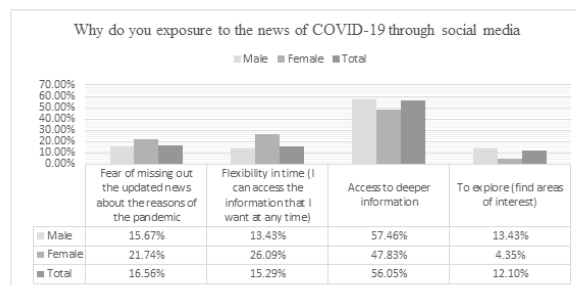


Figure5: Reasons for exposure to social media

Figure 5 shows that 56% (57.46% of men and 47.83% of women) of students explain the reason for moving away from traditional media towards social media to access deeper information about COVID-19 that could not be obtained through traditional media. Moreover, 15.29% (26.09% of women and 13.43% of men) responded that they feel social media news can be obtained at any time during the pandemic. Another 21.74% (15.67% of men and 21.74% of women) fear missing news about the reasons for the pandemic. Finally, 12.10% (13.43% of men and 4.35% of women) mentioned that they use social media to get news on COVID-19 because they find more interesting information than traditional media.

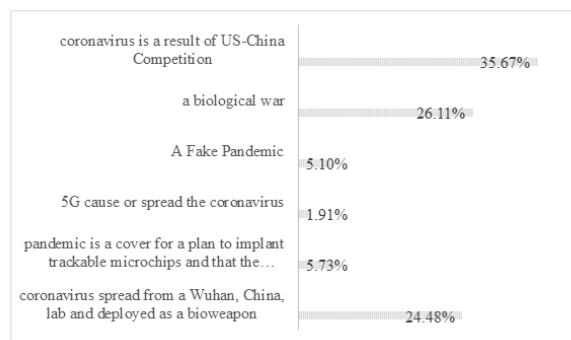


Figure6: COVID-19 Conspiracy theories that undergraduate students believed through exposure to the social media.

Figure 6 shows the most common conspiracies that students were exposed to through social media.

Discussion

By measuring the level of belief in conspiracies among undergraduate students in Iraq, we found that a high percentage of students believe in conspiracy theories. This confirms that conspiracy theories play a role in society in an Iraqi undergraduate society. Moreover, we found that more women believe in conspiracy theories regarding all factors examined compared with men. Furthermore, the results of our study showed that students who believe in conspiracies are more attracted to social media that presents COVID-19 as a

conspiracy. Based on the statistical tests, we found a statistically significant correlation. The fact that many undergraduate students believe in conspiracy theories and use social media are connected 69% of undergraduate students who use social media believe that (COVID- 19) is a conspiracy, compared to the 32% of undergraduate students who believe it is a result of nature. Furthermore, for undergraduate students who use traditional media of exposure to the information (COVID- 19), 39% of them believe that COVID- 19 is a conspiracy and 61% of them believe that it is a result of nature [31].

CONCLUSION

Measuring belief in conspiracies using GCBS gives us an understanding of the nature of the undergraduate student community's thinking. The results of the research show that conspiratorial thinking attracts students to find interpretations for their beliefs. Thus, social media attracted students to provide explanations confirming their belief in the conspiracy, with 56% of students attracted to social media to access deeper information about COVID-19. That means that students were searching for interpretations that they could not find in traditional media. Another significant finding is that the students tend to interpret conspiracies as a result of conflicts between world powers and hidden wars.

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