Explain It and Tell a Good Story: The Role of Explanatory and Narrative Characteristics in Conspiracy Theory Success

by

Chelsea Leigh Russill

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2026

© Chelsea Leigh Russill 2026

Author's Declaration

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Statement of Contributions

I developed the study design in collaboration with Dr. Jonathan Fugelsang and Dr. Derek Koehler. I conducted the testing, data collection, and data analysis for all studies. I wrote all drafts of the thesis, with significant input from Dr. Jonathan Fugelsang and Dr. Derek Koehler.

Abstract

There is a pressing need to understand why people believe conspiracy theories. Past work has primarily focused on examining the individual differences and motivations underlying belief in epistemically suspect claims, providing insight into who is most receptive to these beliefs, but not what makes the claims themselves compelling. Here, we examine the internal features of conspiracy theories that may contribute to their success (i.e., plausibility and engagement), testing the hypothesis that successful theories operate as convincing explanations and compelling stories. In four studies (N = 1,355), participants rated conspiracy theories written by ChatGPT on features associated with good explanations (i.e., explanatory virtues) and stories (i.e., narrative virtues) and responded to measures of conspiracy success. Across studies, results demonstrated that participants higher in conspiratorial ideation rated theories as better explanations and stories and reported greater plausibility and engagement; however, the models explained a significant proportion of variance in success, and both virtues remained significant after controlling for conspiratorial ideation. For individual participants, some conspiracy theories were seen as more plausible, engaging, and having greater explanatory and narrative virtues than others, but when ratings were aggregated across responses, differences among theories were limited on all measures. Findings suggest that conspiracy theories may be successful when they seem to offer a convincing explanation or compelling story, perhaps leading some to prefer them over official accounts.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my supervisors, Dr. Jonathan Fugelsang and Dr. Derek Koehler for their guidance, patience, kindness, and support throughout this project. Thank you for helping me to pursue the ideas that fascinate me and always showing me how to think about things from a different perspective. I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with and get to know you both, it has truly been a pleasure. I would also like to extend appreciation to my thesis readers, Dr. Sam Johnson and Dr. Ori Friedman, for their invaluable feedback and expertise in reviewing my thesis.

To my friends in and out of the lab: Thank you for the coffee breaks, many (far from) intellectual conversations, your advice, mentorship and guidance throughout my degree. Thanks for always reminding me to enjoy the moment and not take things too seriously. You all have been instrumental in bringing this project to completion, and I am immensely grateful to know you. To those who have been in the lab over the past two years, the cognitive area, and the department, thank you for facilitating such a supportive community and for being amazing colleagues.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Darla, and sister, Alyssa. For the endless encouragement, support, and love, I am forever indebted. Thank you for everything.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration i
Statement of Contributions iii
Abstract iv
Acknowledgements v
Dedication vi
List of Figures x
List of Tables xi
1. Introduction 1
1.1 Differential Appeal of Conspiracy Theories 2
1.2 Conspiracy Theory Success 3
1.3 Explanatory Virtues 8
1.4 Narrative Virtues 10
1.5 Content-Level Influences on Conspiracy Theory Success 12
1.6 Hypotheses 16
1.7 Overview of Studies 17
2. Study 1a 18
2.1 Methods 18
2.1.1 Participants 18
2.1.2 Materials 19
2.1.3 Procedure 23
2.2 Results 23
2.2.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis 23
2.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 26
2.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation 26
2.2.4 Theory-Level Differences 28
3. Study 1b 31
3.1 Methods 31
3.1.1 Participants 31
3.1.2 Materials 32
3.1.3 Procedure 35

3.2 Results 36
3.2.1 Measure Validation 36
3.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 38
3.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation 39
3.2.4 Theory-Level Differences 41
4. Study 2a 43
4.1 Methods 43
4.1.1 Participants 43
4.1.2 Materials 44
4.1.3 Procedure 46
4.2 Results 47
4.2.1 Attention Check Performance 47
4.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 48
4.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation 48
4.2.4 Variability in Theory Evaluations 51
5. Study 2b 55
5.1 Methods 55
5.1.1 Participants 55
5.1.2 Materials and Procedure 56
5.2 Results 56
5.2.1 Attention Check Performance 56
5.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 57
5.2.3 Stimulus Format Comparison 58
5.2.4 Variability in Theory Evaluations 61
6. General Discussion 66
6.1 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 66
6.2 Differential Prediction of Plausibility and Engagement 68
6.3 Differences Between Theories 71
6.4 Limitations and Future Directions 73
6.5 Conclusion 76
References 77

Appendix A 98
Appendix B 108

List of Figures

Figure 1 Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group 28
Figure 2 Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group 40
Figure 3 Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group 49
Figure 4 Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group 58
Figure 5 Mean Plausibility Ratings for Conspiracy Theories Included in Studies 2a and 2b 59
Figure 6 Within-Participant Variability Across Engagement and Plausibility Ratings..... 63

List of Tables

Table 1 Sample Conspiracy Theory 20
Table 2 Explanatory and Narrative Virtue Items and Rotated Factor Loadings 25
Table 3 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Between Study Measures 26
Table 4 Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 29
Table 5 Sample Conspiracy Theory and Single-Item Measures 34
Table 6 Model Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models 37
Table 7 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Between Study Measures 39
Table 8 Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 41
Table 9 Sample Conspiracy Theory and Corresponding Attention Check Cue 46
Table 10 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations for Primary Study Measures 48
Table 11 Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 50
Table 12 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations for Primary Study Measures 57
Table 13 Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success 59

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in many facets of everyday social and cultural life (Goldberg, 2008). They go viral in memes and satirical social media events, like the 2019 "Storm Area 51, They Can't Stop All of Us," which drew 1.5 million RSVPs on Facebook (Bruner, 2019); appear in popular culture, as in Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* (Stone, 1991) or longstanding television series' like *The X-Files* (Carter, 1993-2018). They easily circulate in dinner table conversations with family, debates with friends, or everyday social media posts by an estranged buddy from high school. Conspiracy theories, which explain significant societal events and phenomena with claims of malevolent plots by powerful actors (Douglas et al., 2019), are not a new phenomenon, and although some have, perhaps not unreasonably, posited that we now live in the age of conspiracies (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), people have long turned to claims of conspiracy to explain events and circumstances (e.g., Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Given their widespread, longstanding influence on society, a substantial body of research has been dedicated to understanding conspiracy theories and their consequences. They are associated with lower vaccine intentions and trust in science (Bertin et al., 2020), reduced engagement in environmental behaviours (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), outgroup prejudice (Jolley et al., 2020, 2024), political violence (Rottweiler & Gill, 2022), and ideological extremism (Enders & Uscinski, 2021). Much of this literature has operated on the assumption that some people are more receptive to these ideas than others, focusing on *who* is most likely to believe conspiratorial claims (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). For instance, one account argues that people believe conspiracy theories to fulfil three motives: epistemic (i.e., the desire to achieve knowledge and reduce uncertainty), existential (i.e., the desire to feel safe and in control), and social (i.e., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group; Douglas et al., 2017;

Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Other work shows that conspiracy belief is associated with overreliance on intuitive processing (Binnendyk & Pennycook, 2022; Swami et al., 2014), overconfidence (Pennycook et al., 2026), reasoning errors like jumping-to-conclusions (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021) and the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton & French, 2014), need for uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017), illusory pattern perception (van Prooijen et al., 2018), lower education (van Prooijen et al., 2017), and both left- and right-wing political extremism (van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Such studies ascertain who is most receptive to conspiracy beliefs and the instrumental reasons people may be drawn to them; however, this line of literature reduces conspiracy belief to a minority population. Indeed, given their oppositional and occasionally dubious nature, it is fair to presume that most people do not sincerely endorse conspiracies; yet, they may not be as fringe as once thought (Barkun, 2015; Goldberg, 2008). Some estimates show that approximately two-thirds of Americans believed that President Kennedy was killed in a conspiracy (Goertzel, 1994), one-third believe that American leaders are replacing the white population with people of colour (Klofstad et al., 2025), and one-quarter saw at least some truth in claims that powerful people planned the COVID-19 pandemic (Schaeffer, 2020). Individual susceptibility may therefore be insufficient to explain the appeal of conspiracy theories, and a more comprehensive understanding requires shifting analyses from the believer to the contents of belief themselves.

1.1 Differential Appeal of Conspiracy Theories

A robust finding in the literature is the monological belief system, such that individuals who believe one conspiracy theory tend to also believe others, including unrelated ones (Goertzel, 1994; Williams et al., 2022, 2025). While people high in conspiratorial ideation show stable tendencies to engage in conspiratorial thinking (Brotherton et al., 2013; Swami et al.,

2010, 2011), beliefs in particular conspiracy theories are malleable and fluctuate over time. At the level of individual differences, for instance, people exhibit out-group (Jolley et al., 2020) and partisan biases (Enders et al., 2023) in the conspiracy theories they endorse. Reception may also shift according to political context (Wang & van Prooijen, 2023), social acceptability (Mancosu & Vassallo, 2022), and characteristics of the theories themselves. Blackington and Cayton (2024), for example, tracked Twitter engagement with conspiracy theories concerning a 2010 plane crash in Poland over the span of a year and found that interest resurged when conspiratorial tweets invoked in-group or out-group threats, particularly when those threats were tied to current events.

Existing literature thus demonstrates that conspiracy theories are not monolithic: they differ in their appeal across individuals, relative to one another, and over time. While previous studies explain why particular conspiracy theories may appeal to certain individuals, less is known about the theories themselves, and why some circulate and generate longstanding appeal, while others do not. Conspiracies targeting George Soros, for instance, have existed in many forms for extended periods, whereas the idea that Finland is not real gained limited traction and largely failed to reach mainstream attention (Blackington & Cayton, 2024). This difference, that is, the difference between a theory that sustains lasting belief and popularity, and one that fails to stick, raises a comparatively understudied question: what makes one conspiracy theory more successful than another?

1.2 Conspiracy Theory Success

In the present series of studies, we approach this question by examining variation in the success of individual conspiracy theories and the characteristics that may contribute to it. Here, we define the *success* of a conspiracy theory through two related but distinct outcomes:

plausibility, the extent to which a theory is perceived as potentially true by oneself and others, and engagement, reflected in people's willingness to share or seek further information about it. These outcomes capture different ways in which a conspiracy theory can gain influence: plausibility allows it to enter people's understanding of what may have occurred, whereas engagement allows it to remain cognitively and socially active. We argue that the degree to which these outcomes occur depends on the internal characteristics of theories themselves.

Plausibility

Plausibility refers to subjective judgements of potential truthfulness (Abendroth & Richter, 2021). It has been described as the likelihood or acceptability of a situation (Matsuki et al., 2011) and how well a new piece of information aligns with prior knowledge, beliefs, or current understanding of an issue (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Plausibility differs from certainty or categorical belief, as information may be regarded as potentially true without firm commitment (Lombardi et al., 2016). Plausibility therefore constitutes one dimension of conspiracy theory success because being considered a credible possibility may be sufficient for a theory to become a viable interpretation of what may have occurred. Across the present studies, plausibility is operationalized in these graded terms, as the extent to which participants regard a conspiracy theory as potentially true to themselves and to others.

The extent to which information attains this status depends on validation, whereby incoming material is evaluated against relevant contextual information and prior knowledge (O'Brien & Cook, 2016; Richter, 2015). Information that is consistent with this knowledge is generally processed more fluently and can be integrated more easily into the mental model used to represent the situation being described, thus shaping how subsequent information is

interpreted, which details are retained, and which conclusions seem warranted (Abendroth & Richter, 2021; Maier & Richter, 2013).

Such effects are important when the truth of a claim is uncertain or disputed. For instance, participants are more likely to use plausible than implausible misinformation when answering test questions (Hinze et al., 2014), while plausible suggested events are less likely to be rejected as having "definitely not occurred" (Pezdek et al., 2006). Plausibility similarly affects memory and inferences of truth. Ford and Nadarevic (2025) found that participants tended to infer veracity in accordance with a statement's plausibility, guessing that plausible statements had been labelled true and implausible statements false when feedback was not remembered. Their results also showed that feedback contradicting plausibility expectations was remembered especially well. Plausibility thus structures the expectations through which information is encoded, recalled, and judged. When content appears plausible, it is more likely to be incorporated into a person's understanding of an event and to continue guiding interpretation, even in the absence of firm endorsement (Klein et al., 2023).

Engagement

The extent to which information is engaging here refers to continued interaction with information, through willingness to share or seek further information about it. Sharing involves transmitting the information to others, either via virtual or in-person interaction, whereas information seeking involves pursuing additional details, evidence, or explanations. Although these are distinct behaviours, both indicate that the information has captured sufficient attention or interest to motivate a response beyond mere exposure. Engagement therefore represents one dimension of conspiracy theory success because it reflects whether a theory prompts continued interaction and remains active in individual and social information environments.

Online Sharing. Sharing in online environments contributes to conspiracy theory success in two related ways. Most simply, it extends a conspiracy theory's reach by exposing additional people to it. Beyond exposure, it may also influence how subsequent audiences interpret the theory, regardless of whether the original sharer fully endorses it. Although people are generally effective at distinguishing true from false information (Bago et al., 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2019), and only a small proportion share misinformation (Guess et al., 2019; Grinberg et al., 2019), credibility judgements depend on source cues, including how other people have responded to the content (Sundar & Nass, 2001; Sundar, 2008). Posts that attract substantial engagement through likes, shares, and comments are consequently perceived as more credible (Luo et al., 2022; Petit et al., 2021; Sundar, 2008), socially accepted (Kim, 2015), and useful (Larsson, 2011). Sharing also increases the likelihood of repeated exposure, which can raise the perceived accuracy of information through illusory truth, including for initially low-believability headlines and after only one previous exposure (Pennycook et al., 2018; Udry & Barber, 2024). Repetition may further normalize falsehoods by reducing their moral condemnation (Effron & Raj, 2020; Orchinik et al., 2025). Given that false information diffuses more widely and faster online than true content (Vosoughi et al., 2018), sharing thus does more than just extend a theory's reach; it shapes how credible, important, and socially permissible it is to those who encounter it.

In-Person Sharing. Although social media platforms can amplify these tendencies through their design and incentive structures (e.g., anonymity and algorithms; Rathje & Van Bavel, 2025), offline transmission can assign meaning to conspiratorial claims through interpersonal endorsement, perceived consensus, and selective reconstruction. Social cascades arise when people infer that a claim is credible because it appears to be accepted by others,

particularly by trusted or socially similar individuals. Thus, the more people within one's network who appear to believe a rumour, the more likely the individual may be to accept it as well (McPherson et al., 2001; Sunstein, 2014). For instance, attributing information to a friend propagates rumour transmission by increasing plausibility and willingness to share (Altay et al., 2020). Repeatedly encountering the same sentiment can also produce perceived consensus, leading people to overestimate how widely the view is held relative to equally frequent exposure to distinct opinions (Jalbert & Pillai, 2024; Weaver et al., 2007). Conversational transmission may also selectively reinforce interpretations, because retellings emphasize some details, omit others, and bias later recall toward the perspective adopted during retelling (Marsh, 2007; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Together, these processes can make conspiracy theories appear less marginal, more socially validated, and more consistent in memory, thereby increasing the likelihood that they remain credible and continue to circulate.

Information Seeking. Information seeking facilitates interaction and familiarity with a claim beyond the initial encounter. However, searching is effortful, and people often try to limit its cognitive costs by consulting fewer sources or stopping once the information obtained appears sufficient, a strategy known as satisficing (McGregor et al., 2023; Simon, 1956). The resulting investigation may therefore be selective rather than comprehensive and does not necessarily produce more accurate conclusions. Search behaviour can be shaped by confirmation and other cognitive biases, influencing which results people select and how they evaluate them (Azzopardi, 2021; Suzuki & Yamamoto, 2021). The information environment itself may also contain material that appears to corroborate conspiratorial claims. Urman et al. (2022), for example, found that four of the five search engines they examined consistently returned conspiracy-promoting results for conspiracy-related queries, primarily from social media and conspiracy-dedicated websites.

Searching online to evaluate false or misleading news has likewise been shown to increase belief in it, particularly when searches return conspiracy-consistent information from low-quality sources (Aslett et al., 2024). Individuals higher in conspiratorial ideation also tend to acquire more novel information from conspiratorial webpages and express greater confidence in those sources, whereas more analytic thinkers obtain more information from official webpages (Vital et al., 2025). While information seeking may therefore contribute to conspiracy theory success because it confirms a theory, it also sustains attention and creates additional opportunities for the claim to be elaborated, corroborated, and reinforced.

Taken together, then, plausibility and engagement are fundamental components of conspiracy theory success: they shape how a conspiracy theory is received and acted upon. However, it is unclear why some theories are more successful than others. Conspiracy theories provide explanations for events and circumstances, and ultimately tell a story about the individuals involved, motives, and the actions responsible for it (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Munro, 2024). As such, we propose two candidate mechanisms by which theories may achieve plausibility and engagement: by possessing the features of good explanations and stories. In particular, the present studies argue that conspiracy theories that seem to provide convincing explanations and compelling stories may be more plausible, likely to be shared, and facilitate more interest in seeking additional information. What follows is a review of these two sets of content-level characteristics, henceforth referred to as explanatory and narrative virtues.

1.3 Explanatory Virtues

Explanations are a central component of human cognition. They support the learning required for adaptive behaviour by helping people predict and control the future (Lombrozo, 2012), structure conceptual representations (Lombrozo, 2009), and improve metacognitive

calibration (i.e., the self-explanation effect; Lombrozo, 2016). Explanations similarly guide how people evaluate competing hypotheses. Inference to the best explanation holds that people infer a hypothesis is true to the extent that it provides a good explanation for the available evidence. That is, perceived explanatory quality functions as an epistemic cue that shapes judgements about what hypotheses to believe when truth is uncertain (Harman, 1965; Lipton, 2017; Lombrozo, 2012). Douven and Mirabile (2018), for instance, find that perceived explanatory quality was a better predictor of accepting an explanation than subjective probability. Explanatory quality similarly influences which hypotheses people choose to pursue or deem worthy of further consideration, testing, or investigation. After accounting for probability, Mirabile and Lombrozo (2019) found that participants were more likely to recommend investigating a hypothesis when it provided a better explanation for the available evidence and competing hypotheses provided poorer explanations. The perceived quality of an explanation therefore functions as a cue for accuracy and as a guide to which hypotheses are worthy of further inquiry.

People use various indicators to judge the quality of an explanation, including peripheral cues that do not necessarily reflect its intrinsic value, such as the explainer's credibility (e.g., Pornpitakpan, 2004), as well as properties of the explanation itself that may signal quality. Among the latter are explanatory virtues, which are the characteristics people associate with good explanations. Explanatory virtues are the qualities that make an explanation appear epistemically valuable, such that explanations are judged more favourably to the extent that they satisfy these criteria (Mackonis, 2013; Zemla et al., 2017). A number of these characteristics have been proposed in the literature (Zemla et al., 2017; Zukerman, 2024), with studies showing that they correspond with probabilistic reasoning and perceived explanatory quality. For

instance, Zemla et al. (2017) drew a series of explananda from Reddit's *Explain Like I'm Five* and had participants rate them on 20 attributes, finding that 14 characteristics (e.g., novelty, scope, internal coherence) significantly predicted explanation quality. Lombrozo (2007) similarly found that simpler explanations (i.e., those invoking fewer causes) were generally preferred and assigned higher prior probabilities, whereas complex explanations had to be significantly more probable than simple ones to be preferred. Explanatory virtues thus offer a framework under which people determine how likely and valuable a hypothesis appears. Notably, explanatory virtues cue the quality of an explanation, and in this sense, they are characteristics that are expected of good explanations but need not necessarily track objective accuracy or information quality. This distinction is illustrated by seductive allure effects, whereby explanations are judged more favourably when technical jargon is included, despite adding no additional explanatory value (Cruz & Lombrozo, 2025; Weisberg et al., 2015).

1.4 Narrative Virtues

Stories are a fundamental way in which humans engage with and understand the world (Fisher, 1985; Turner, 2025; Zwaan, 2022). By organizing information around temporally and causally connected actions, goals, and outcomes, stories help people build coherent models of who was involved, what happened, and why (Green & Appel, 2024; Zwaan, 2024), guided by learned expectations about how such events typically unfold, or story schemata (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). Because these expectations are ubiquitous to everyday experience (Zwaan, 2024), narratives are processed more fluently than non-narrative information (Bullock et al., 2021), and readers who become immersed, or transported, into a story often lose track of it as a constructed account (Green & Appel, 2024). Narratives also encourage mental simulation of events (Escalas, 2004), making them seem more realistic and authentic (Plangger & Campbell,

2022). These are not merely experiential effects, however, and they may shape how information is evaluated. Transported readers generate fewer counterarguments against a story's claims and are more resistant to correction, even when those claims are false (Ratcliff & Sun, 2020), and narrative transportation is positively associated with endorsing story-consistent claims regardless of a story's actual veracity (Green & Brock, 2000). The quality of a story may therefore function as a cue to an account's credibility, such that a well-constructed story can feel true, and resist scrutiny, above and beyond factual accuracy.

While narratives are generally appraised more favourably than didactic messaging, they nonetheless vary in the extent to which they produce persuasive effects (Hamby et al., 2024). For example, Ecker et al. (2020) found no difference between narrative and non-narrative misinformation corrections, whereas other work shows that such corrections become more effective when containing emotional endings (Sangalang et al., 2019). Discourse structures eliciting curiosity and suspense have also been shown to be more enjoyable than traditional inverted-pyramid news structures, regardless of whether the content was framed as fact or fiction (Knobloch et al., 2004). Similarly, stories whose emotional tone shifts repeatedly between positive and negative are evaluated more favourably and sustain engagement longer than more emotionally consistent stories. In an analysis of films and online articles, Berger et al. (2021) find that emotional volatility increases enjoyment and continued engagement, and this effect was related to the heightened stimulation that volatility produces. Accordingly, one avenue by which narrative influence may function is via narrative virtues, the experiential, content-level features, such as emotional intensity, volatility, or curiosity, that facilitate belief in, and engagement with, its content. These qualities may allow a well-crafted story to feel compelling even when its claims are uncertain or unsupported.

Together, explanatory and narrative virtues describe two distinct routes by which a conspiracy theory's content can shape how it is received. The former may shape success by satisfying the criteria people use to judge whether an account is a good explanation, and the latter by engaging the same processes that make stories compelling and resistant to scrutiny. Because these virtues operate on different evaluative dimensions (i.e., epistemic versus experiential), they may not influence all outcomes equally. The following sections turn to two such outcomes and review relevant literature explaining how explanatory and narrative qualities may drive the plausibility and likelihood of engagement with conspiracy theories.

1.5 Content-Level Influences on Conspiracy Theory Success

Influences on Plausibility

People are highly motivated to make sense of and maintain predictability in their environments (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016). Accordingly, hypotheses that appear to reduce epistemic uncertainty by providing good explanations are evaluated more favourably (Liquin & Lombrozo, 2022). For example, people prefer explanations that fit the available information, account for a broader range of relevant observations, and generalize to new information (Hattersley et al., 2023; Marsh & Kleinberg, 2025). They also commonly favour simpler explanations that invoke fewer causes (Lombrozo, 2007), although this preference depends on the phenomenon being explained, such that complex events may invite more complex accounts, perhaps because greater elaboration appears to provide a closer fit to the available data (Johnson et al., 2019; Lim & Oppenheimer, 2020). The internal organization of an explanation is also influential. In one study, internal coherence, that is, how well its components fit together, was nearly twice as predictive of perceived explanatory quality as external coherence, or fit with existing knowledge (Zemla et al., 2017). The explanatory virtues reviewed here are not exhaustive (e.g., Mackonis, 2013; Zemla et al., 2017; Zukerman, 2024), but they, and others like

them, illustrate the broader principle that a hypothesis tends to seem plausible insofar as it appeals to the criteria people use to judge any explanation as good, whether that means fitting the evidence, generalizing beyond it, remaining internally coherent, or achieving an appropriate level of detail.

The subjective experience produced by an explanation may further reinforce these evaluations. Laukkonen et al. (2020), for example, found that facts accompanied by "Aha!" experiences were judged as more truthful, irrespective of their actual veracity, suggesting that the feeling of understanding produced by an explanation can function as a cue to truth. Liquin and Lombrozo (2022) similarly found that perceived learning was associated with explanatory satisfaction and that more satisfying explanations generated greater curiosity about related questions. Conspiracy theories may capitalize on the aforementioned preferences and tendencies because, by their very nature, they offer elaborate causal accounts that connect actors, motives, and otherwise disparate observations within a unified account (Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Indeed, even participants who do not endorse a given conspiracy theory tend to attribute it at least one explanatory virtue, an effect that is more pronounced among those higher in conspiratorial ideation but is not limited to them (Mirabile & Horne, 2019). They may therefore appear plausible when they create the impression that an uncertain event has been satisfactorily explained, even when it is disconnected from objective epistemic merit. Conspiracy theories may then have the ability to pass as prototypically good explanations, which could lead them to compete with or undermine official accounts (Keeley, 1999; Mirabile & Horne, 2019).

Influences on Engagement

Sharing Intentions. People are more likely to share information that captures attention or appears valuable to communicate (Rathje & Van Bavel, 2025). Content that is controversial

(Chen & Berger, 2013), novel (Berger, 2025), or emotionally arousing (Berger & Milkman, 2012), for instance, is more likely to be transmitted to others. Berger and Milkman (2012), for example, found that interesting, surprising, and high-arousal *New York Times* articles were more likely to make the "most emailed" list. Similar psychological processes appear to shape information transmission offline (Rathje & Van Bavel, 2025), where emotionally intense events are more likely to be discussed and spread during in-person interaction. For instance, word-of-mouth marketing studies suggest that people tend to produce more positive content themselves but preferentially transmit negative information received from others (De Angelis et al., 2012). Such sharing depends on the anticipated social or informational value of communicating the claim, as people often share information to exchange opinions and interact with others (Chen et al., 2015) or when it appears useful or capable of resolving uncertainty (Cai et al., 2025; Globig & Sharot, 2024).

Information Seeking. On the other hand, information seeking may be motivated by the perception that additional inquiry could resolve gaps in understanding. Content that is ambiguous, uncertain, or incomplete has long been understood as a source of psychological arousal and interest (Berlyne, 1960) as it makes people aware of a discrepancy between what they know and what they want to know (Loewenstein, 1994). Curiosity arising from such gaps motivates exploration, particularly when further inquiry is expected to produce learning and practical utility (Liquin & Lombrozo, 2020). Surprise and confusion can similarly promote exploration by revealing limits in current understanding (Vogl et al., 2020), while novelty is preferred when people are motivated to learn rather than acquire an option (Sehl et al., 2022).

Conspiracy theories involve dramatic narratives containing mystery, danger, and unknown forces (van Prooijen et al., 2022), which may make a theory emotionally arousing and

intriguing in much the same way as other content. They are also built on the assumption that everything is connected and nothing happens by coincidence (Butter, 2021), tying actors, motives, and otherwise disparate events into a single causal story (Lazić & Žeželj, 2021) that offers human-interest framing and emotional resolution in place of the scientific argumentation typical of official accounts (Lazić & Žeželj, 2021; Munro, 2024). Such characteristics can make an account emotionally intense, entertaining, or socially discussable, even when claims are not firmly believed. Consistent with this possibility, van Prooijen et al. (2022) found that, compared to topic-matched non-conspiratorial texts, conspiracy theories were rated as more entertaining and elicited more intense emotions, and people are more willing to share true and fake news the more interesting-if-true they judge it to be (Altay et al., 2022). Other work further shows that people knowingly share misinformation when it is perceived as entertaining (Perach et al., 2023), and that fake news headlines higher in evocativeness (e.g., sensational, surprising) are judged as less accurate yet more likely to be shared (Chen et al., 2023). These findings suggest that narrative features associated with domains like emotionality, novelty, or entertainment value may increase sharing by making a conspiracy theory rewarding to experience and communicate.

Similarly, conspiracy theories may imply that consequential information remains hidden, motives have been concealed, and available accounts are incomplete (Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Their exploratory value may therefore arise from a combination of apparent explanation and unresolved mystery, such that they provide enough information to suggest that an event can be understood, while leaving open questions that appear capable of yielding further insight. Information seeking may consequently be greater for theories that seem both informative and incomplete.

1.6 Hypotheses

Existing literature, as reviewed here, provides preliminary support for the possibility that explanatory and narrative qualities shape conspiracy theory reception, but direct evidence is notably limited. Prior work suggests that conspiracy theories may be perceived as possessing characteristics associated with good explanations (Marsh et al., 2022; Marsh & Kleinberg, 2025; Mirabile & Horne, 2019) and compelling narratives (Altay et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Munro, 2024; van Prooijen et al., 2022). However, much of this literature is theoretical, examines isolated characteristics, uses small stimulus pools, and brief materials (e.g., Huang & Wang, 2022; Marsh & Kleinberg, 2025; Munro, 2024; Zukerman, 2024). Other studies also examine explanatory and narrative preferences, using ordinary, relatively low stakes inquires (e.g., How Switzerland managed to stay in a neutral position during WWII; Zemla et al., 2017). Given that conspiracy theories are often more complex, oppositional, and controversial than such contexts, these studies are thus insufficient in delineating which characteristics, if any, matter in making a given conspiracy theory plausible or engaging. In examining these constructs disparately, it also remains unclear whether explanatory and narrative virtues operate as separate, distinct constructs in the evaluation of conspiracies, whether they independently predict plausibility and engagement, and whether they may explain why some theories are more successful than others on these metrics.

Accordingly, we propose three hypotheses for the present work. We predicted that (1) conspiracy theory success would be positively associated with perceived explanatory and narrative virtues. Specifically, theories perceived as possessing greater explanatory and narrative virtues would be judged as more plausible and elicit greater engagement intentions. We also expected that (2) explanatory and narrative virtues would show differential associations with the

two components of success, such that explanatory virtues would be more strongly associated with plausibility, whereas narrative virtues would be more strongly associated with engagement. Finally, it was expected that (3) individual conspiracy theories would differ in their relative success, whereby those perceived as possessing greater explanatory and narrative virtues would emerge as more plausible and engaging.

1.7 Overview of Studies

Across four studies, we examined whether explanatory and narrative virtues predict the relative success of conspiracy theories. Studies 1a and 1b developed and validated multi-item and single-item measures of explanatory and narrative virtues using eight paragraph-length conspiracy theories presented between-subjects. These studies aimed to test whether perceived virtues were associated with plausibility and engagement and whether these measures showed differential relationships with each outcome.

Studies 2a and 2b sought to replicate and generalize these findings across a larger and more varied pool of conspiracy theories. Using within-subjects designs, participants evaluated 10 theories drawn from a set of 40. Study 2a presented paragraph-length accounts, whereas Study 2b used brief sentence-length versions, allowing us to examine whether the proposed associations generalized across variation in theory content and presentation format. Across all studies, we also examined whether particular conspiracy theories differed in their explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, plausibility, and engagement.

2. Study 1a

In Study 1a, we aimed to develop and provide an initial test of explanatory and narrative virtues as predictors of conspiracy theory success. Drawn and adapted from previous literature, we developed a set of measures assessing the features of conspiracy theories as good explanations and compelling stories, examined their underlying factor structure, and tested whether these dimensions predicted variance in plausibility and engagement intentions with conspiracies. Complete materials, measures, and data for this study are available at: https://osf.io/4uzan/.

2.1 Methods

2.1.1 Participants

We recruited 248 U.S. participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) via the Cloud Research approved participant pool. Participation was restricted to workers with at least 500 HITs and a minimum approval rating of 95%. The study was estimated to take eight minutes to complete, and participants were compensated $1.25 USD. Of the recruited sample, $n = 17$ were removed because they did not pass the attention check or consented to the survey but did not respond to any items, leaving a final sample of $N = 231$ participants. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 65+, and the sample was slightly skewed towards male identifying participants ($n = 142$; 61.5% male), with approximately half of participants identifying as Democrats ($n = 112$; 48.5%). Participants were predominantly White ($n = 188$; 81.4%) and more than half held a bachelor's degree or higher ($n = 141$; 61%).

2.1.2 Materials

Conspiracy Theories

We included eight conspiracy theories identified from various publicly available print and online resources. To mitigate bias driven by existing beliefs, theories were selected to represent a range of topics for which participants were expected to have limited prior familiarity or existing opinions (e.g., Origins of Lyme disease, see Table 1). The format and contents were developed via an adapted framework delineating five components that comprise conspiracy theories, including: 1) the topic, perpetrators, and motive, 2) anomalies in the official account, 3) fabricated evidence and connections, 4) dismissal of counterevidence, and 5) discrediting critics of the alternative account (Boudry, 2023). Materials were created using a modified version of this "recipe" as the prompt in ChatGPT-4o, where we requested a 250 (± 15) word conspiracy theory depicting a plausible alternative explanation for the event or phenomenon, followed by each section of Boudry's (2023) framework. For each section, we specified the content to be used (e.g., the topic, three pieces of evidence) and included information of varying specificity and quality. The decision to have ChatGPT write the conspiracy theories was for the sake of consistency in terms of language, voice, and length across topics. A complete list of the theories included in this study are available in Appendix A.

Explanatory Virtues

Participants were asked to rate the conspiracy theory on a set of six virtues assessing the qualities of conspiracy theories as good explanations, including: simplicity (i.e., *The explanation provided by this theory is simple and shows that the topic is easy to explain.*), breadth (i.e., *The explanation provided by this theory presents a complete and detailed account that applies to other, similar cases.*), coherence (i.e., *The evidence provided for this theory is well-connected and consistent.*), feeling of understanding (i.e., *The explanation provided by this theory is*

intuitive and easy to understand.), mechanism (i.e., *The explanation provided by this theory clearly demonstrates what events transpired and how they led to the outcome.*), and refutability (i.e., *The explanation provided by this theory can be critically evaluated through testing or falsification.*) (Mirabile & Horne, 2019; Zukerman, 2024). Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* – 7 = *strongly agree*).

Table 1

Sample Conspiracy Theory

Origin of Lyme Disease
Lyme disease, caused by the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi*, first emerged near Lyme, Connecticut, in the 1970s. While officially attributed to natural ecological factors, some argue that the disease originated from U.S. government biological weapons research. Facilities like Plum Island Animal Disease Center and Fort Detrick are alleged to have been involved in experiments with insect-borne pathogens during the Cold War. Proponents of this theory claim the disease was either deliberately released or accidentally escaped, with the goal of developing a non-lethal bioweapon to incapacitate enemy populations while maintaining plausible deniability under international treaties prohibiting biological warfare. Anomalies in the official narrative raise questions. Declassified documents reveal U.S. military programs explored using insects, including ticks, as vectors for biological agents, making such experiments plausible. Additionally, Plum Island's geographic closeness to the outbreak origin has fueled speculation that the pathogen may have been released from the facility. Proponents also point to the disease's rapid proliferation, which cannot be fully explained by ecological changes alone, as ticks existed in this region for centuries, before the disease was identified. Defenders of the official account argue that Lyme's spread results from reforestation and increased human exposure to tick habitats. However, proponents counter that government secrecy and historical precedents, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, suggest a pattern of concealed experiments. They believe classified documents and deliberate obfuscation have kept the true origins of Lyme disease hidden, warranting further investigation.

Narrative Virtues

A series of items was developed and adapted from previous literature to examine the features of conspiracy theories as compelling stories. We included items measuring three dimensions of entertainment value: engagement (i.e., *To what extent was the theory you read engaging?*), entertainment (i.e., *To what extent was the theory you read entertaining?*), and boredom (i.e., Reverse scored; *To what extent was the theory you read boring?*; van Prooijen et al., 2022), one item assessing satisfaction (i.e., *How satisfying do you find this theory?*; Liquin & Lombrozo, 2022), and one item measuring curiosity (i.e., *To what extent does this theory evoke a feeling of curiosity?*; Liquin & Lombrozo, 2022). Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* – 7 = *very much*), indicating the extent to which each item characterized the participant's experience. We also employed one item evaluating affective experiences (i.e., *How positive or negative were the emotions that you felt while reading the theory?*; van Prooijen et al., 2022), where participants rated the intensity of their positive or negative emotions while reading the theory on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely negative* – 7 = *extremely positive*).

Conspiracy Theory Success

Sharing Intent. Four items were presented to participants measuring their intentions to share the conspiracy theory. One item asked participants to rate their willingness to share the theory online (i.e., *If I was to see this theory online (for example, on Facebook or X/Twitter), I would consider sharing it.*; Mosleh et al., 2020) on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely not* – 7 = *definitely yes*). For the remaining items, participants rated the extent to which they believed the theory would be a good subject for conversation with three social groups: friends and family (i.e., *This theory would be a good subject for conversation with close friends and family*), people they interact with online (i.e., *This theory would be a good subject for conversation with people I*

interact with only online.), and professional acquaintances (i.e., *This theory would be a good subject for conversation with co-workers and professional acquaintances.*) (Albarracin et al., 2021; Delouvée, 2015). Responses were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* – 7 = *strongly agree*).

Plausibility. Two items were developed to assess how plausible participants believed the theory to be (Yale, 2013). Participants rated the extent to which they believed the theory could be true (i.e., *This theory seems like it could be true*.) and the extent to which others might believe it to be true (i.e., *I can see how others might believe this theory to be true.*). Responses were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* – 7 = *strongly agree*).

Information Seeking. One item was adapted from Yang and Kahlor (2013) to measure intentions to seek further information about the conspiracy theory. Participants responded to the item (i.e., *I might search for more information about this theory at some point in the future.*) on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely not* – 7 = *definitely yes*).

Conspiratorial Ideation

Two items were drawn from the Generic Conspiracist Belief Scale (Brotherton et al., 2013) to assess participant's general tendencies towards conspiratorial thinking. Participants rated the extent to which they believed that significant events had been manipulated (i.e., *Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events.*) and important information has been concealed by powerful people (i.e., *A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public by people in power out of self-interest.*) on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely false* – 7 = *definitely true*).

Familiarity

Participants responded to one item measuring their familiarity with the theory prior to participating in the study (i.e., *How familiar were you with this theory before it was presented to you today?*) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all familiar* – 7 = *very familiar*).

Demographics

In addition to primary measures, we collected demographics, including age, gender, education, race, and political orientation.

2.1.3 Procedure

Each participant was randomly assigned to view one of the eight conspiracy theories. After reading the full theory, participants proceeded to the next sections where they rated the theory on its explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, and outcome measures of conspiracy theory success. These items were presented in three fixed blocks in a counterbalanced arrangement, and participants were instructed to make their judgements based on the information provided in the theory. On each page, participants had the option to review the theory by toggling a "View Theory" button. Following these three blocks, participants responded to the conspiracy ideation and topic familiarity items, as well as an attention check and demographics. For the attention check, participants were asked to select the theory they had read from a list of eight brief statements (see Appendix A). These measures were always presented at the end of the survey and in fixed order for all participants.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis

To test our hypothesized factor structure, an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring was conducted on all explanatory and narrative virtue items (see Table 2 for item wording and factor loadings). Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (X^2 (66) = 1536, $p <$

.001) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measures of sampling adequacy were .72 or higher, above the commonly recommended value of .60, demonstrating that the items had sufficient common variance for factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2021).

Based on parallel analysis and visual inspection of the scree plot, a three-factor solution was initially extracted; however, the third factor was not empirically (Eigenvalue (λ) = 0.47) or theoretically meaningful, as it was defined by three items that did not reflect a clear conceptual grouping. One item loaded highly (i.e., affect) and two others cross-loaded from the other two factors. Accordingly, we dropped the affect metric and assigned cross-loaded items to the higher loading factor, retaining the expected two-factor solution. Initial eigenvalues and variance accounted for by each factor are presented in Table 2.

Oblimin rotation was applied on the expectation that factors would be correlated with one another. The pattern of loadings aligned with our conceptualization, such that the first factor, containing the explanatory virtue items, reflects the characteristics of prototypically good explanations. One item on this factor (i.e., refutability) only marginally exceeded the factor-loading cut off of 0.30 and was poorly represented by the solution (u^2 = .85); thus, the item was removed, leaving five items on this factor (α = .90). The second factor, narrative virtues, also included five items and relates to the qualities of the theory as a compelling story (α = .86). The two-factor solution explained 61.8% of the total variance, with both factors explaining comparable proportions of variance.

Table 2

Explanatory and Narrative Virtue Items and Rotated Factor Loadings

	Factor Loadings	
Item	EVs	NVs
2. The explanation provided by this theory presents a complete and detailed account that applies to other, similar cases.	**0.87**	-0.10
3. The evidence provided for this theory is well-connected and consistent.	**0.85**	0.08
1. The explanation provided by this theory is simple and shows that the topic is easy to explain.	**0.82**	-0.03
5. The explanation provided by this theory clearly demonstrates what events transpired and how they led to the outcome.	**0.77**	0.04
4. The explanation provided by this theory is intuitive and easy to understand.	**0.64**	0.15
7. To what extent was the theory you read engaging?	0.08	**0.86**
9. To what extent was the theory you read boring? (R)	-0.16	**0.78**
10. To what extent does this theory evoke a feeling of curiosity?	0.09	**0.73**
8. To what extent was the theory you read entertaining?	-0.07	**0.71**
11. How satisfying do you find this theory?	0.29	**0.53**
Initial eigenvalues	4.55	1.27
% Of variance accounted for following rotation	33.7	28.1

Note. Rotated factor loadings above 0.30 are bolded. EVs = Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Narrative Virtues, (R) = Reverse scored

For each measure, items were coded such that higher scores represent a greater degree of the respective construct, and composite variables were calculated by averaging responses on each item associated with that factor. As is shown in Table 3, the two factors were moderately intercorrelated, and moderately to highly correlated with other primary measures included in this study.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Between Study Measures

	M(*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. EVs	4.07(1.45)	-					
2. NVs	4.60(1.40)	.51*	-				
3. Seek	4.29(2.04)	.50*	.70*	-			
4. Sharing	3.42(1.83)	.61*	.62*	.78*	-		
5. Plausibility	4.79(1.47)	.59*	.66*	.63*	.63*	-	
6. CI	4.37(1.70)	.44*	.36*	.40*	.46*	.58*	-

Note. *$p < .001$. *M*(*SD*) = Mean(Standard Deviation), EVs = Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Narrative Virtues, Seek = Information Seeking, Sharing = Sharing Intent, CI = Conspiratorial Ideation

2.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

A series of multiple regression models were conducted to assess the influence of explanatory and narrative virtues on conspiracy theory success. Given the strong positive correlation observed between information seeking and sharing intent ($r = .78$, $p < .001$), we consolidated these items into one composite measure reflecting engagement with conspiracy theories, then fit two separate models predicting the two measures of conspiracy success (i.e., plausibility and engagement). In each model, the explanatory and narrative virtue composite variables were entered as predictors. Results demonstrated that explanatory and narrative virtue ratings significantly and positively predicted plausibility and engagement in each model. Summary statistics are available in Table 4.

2.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess if participants higher in conspiratorial ideation attributed greater explanatory and narrative virtues to the conspiracy theories, and if they rated them higher in our outcome measures of success. Conspiratorial ideation was recoded on the median to create high (scores ≥ 4.5 coded as 1) and low ideation

(scores < 4.5 coded as 0) groups. In analyses where homogeneity of variances cannot be assumed, as determined by Levene's test, Welch's *t* is applied and Cohen's *d* is calculated using the unpooled standard deviation (i.e., the square root of the average of the two group variances).

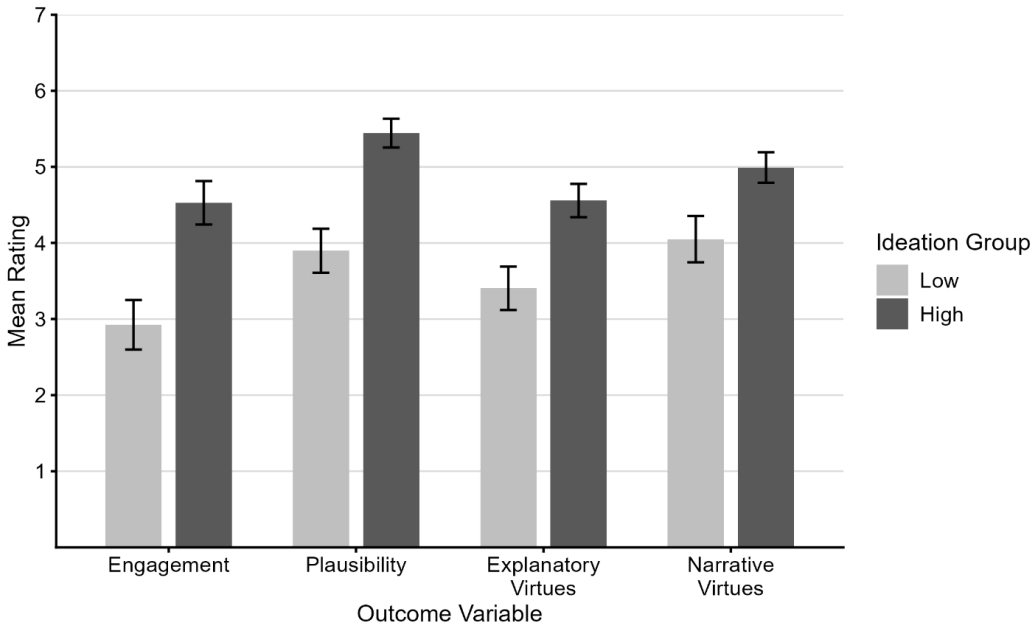
Figure 1 displays means for both groups on key variables. Participants high in conspiratorial ideation rated the theories significantly higher in explanatory virtues ($t(229) = 6.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$) and narrative virtues than those low in ideation ($t(174.50) = 5.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$). Similarly, these participants were more willing to engage with the theories ($t(229) = 7.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.97$) and perceived them as more plausible than the low ideation group ($t(173.71) = 8.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$).

Given that participants high in conspiratorial ideation showed a tendency to rate theories higher on all primary metrics, we refit the two regression models predicting success with conspiratorial ideation as a control variable. The same two models were estimated wherein explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, conspiratorial ideation, and their interactions were entered as predictors, and plausibility and engagement were entered as the dependent variables.

Summary statistics are presented in Table 4. In both models, results demonstrate that explanatory and narrative virtues remained significant predictors of conspiracy theory success, even when including conspiratorial ideation. Results thus demonstrate that effects are not solely driven by participants with a general proclivity towards conspiratorial thinking. Interactions did not reach significance in either model.

Figure 1

Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

2.2.4 Theory-Level Differences

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess variability in explanatory and narrative virtues, plausibility, and engagement intentions across the conspiracy theories included in this study. These analyses showed a marginally significant main effect on narrative virtues ($F(7, 223) = 2.02$, $p = .053$, $\omega^2 = .030$), such that the Notre Dame fire having been intentionally set ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.91$) was considered a better story than the Sutherland Springs church shooting ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.55$, $t(223) = 3.66$, $p = .008$, $d = 1.06$). No other significant effects emerged.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

	Model 1			Model 2		
Predictor	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*
Plausibility						
EVs	0.35 [0.23, 0.46]	.34	**< .001**	0.23 [0.13, 0.34]	.23	**< .001**
NVs	0.51 [0.38, 0.64]	.49	**< .001**	0.45 [0.32, 0.58]	.43	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.28 [0.19, 0.38]	.32	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.01 [-0.05, 0.07]	.02	.743
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.00 [-0.08, 0.08]	.00	.959
R^2	.523			.605		
Engagement						
EVs	0.39 [0.23, 0.55]	.31	**< .001**	0.31 [0.16, 0.47]	.25	**< .001**
NVs	0.71 [0.56, 0.86]	.54	**< .001**	0.68 [0.54, 0.82]	.52	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.17 [0.05, 0.29]	.16	**.004**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.07 [-0.03, 0.17]	.09	.177
CI × NVs	—	—	—	-0.04 [-0.14, 0.05]	-.06	.386
R^2	.562			.587		

Note. Model 1 = Explanatory Virtues (EVs) and Narrative Virtues (NVs) only; Model 2 = adds Conspiratorial Ideation (CI) and its interactions with EVs and NVs. Variances and inferential tests adjusted using heteroskedastic-consistent standard errors (HC3). Predictors in Model 2 are mean-centered. *p*s < .05 are bolded.

Summary of Findings

In Study 1a, we found initial evidence supporting the expected factor structure, with explanatory and narrative virtues loading onto two distinct factors. Both measures showed strong internal reliability and were moderately associated with each other. Consistent with our expectations, participants higher in conspiratorial ideation rated theories as better explanations and stories; however, these measures significantly predicted conspiracy theory success after controlling for conspiratorial ideation, suggesting that effects were not solely influenced by individuals predisposed towards conspiratorial thinking. Contrary to hypotheses, narrative

virtues showed larger coefficients than explanatory virtues in predicting both outcomes. Similarly, although conspiracy theories were not systematically varied for explanatory and narrative qualities, we expected some natural variation to emerge between them on these measures. However, there were limited differences between theories on any measures. Overall, findings provide initial support for the role of explanatory and narrative qualities in conspiracy theory success.

3. Study 1b

For the present study, we aimed to validate revised versions of the explanatory and narrative virtue measures developed in the previous study, and test if the observed relationships would replicate using shorter conspiracy theory stimuli. We suspected that the few differences between theories observed in Study 1a could be partially attributed to the between-subjects design, such that participants only viewed one of eight theories; thus, to facilitate the use of explanatory and narrative virtue measures in future iterations involving multiple theory evaluations, we sought to validate abbreviated single-item versions. We expected the revised multi- and new single-item measures to reproduce the previously identified factor structure and predictive relationships observed in Study 1a. Materials, measures, and data are available at: https://osf.io/4uzan/.

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Participants

We recruited 256 U.S. participants from the Cloud Research approved participant pool (MTurk), restricted using the same selection criteria as Study 1a. For all studies following Study 1a, prospective participants were excluded if they had participated in a different iteration of the study. We estimated that the study would take eight minutes to complete, and participants received $1.25 USD as renumeration. Participants were removed prior to analyses if they responded incorrectly to an attention check or consented to the survey but did not respond to any items (n = 31), leaving a final sample of N = 226. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 65+, with the sample skewing slightly towards male identifying participants (n = 126; 56.0% male). Participants were predominantly White (n = 176; 78.2%), slightly under half were Democrats (n = 95; 42.2%), and more than half possessed a bachelor's degree or higher (n = 143; 63.6%).

3.1.2 Materials

Conspiracy Theories

We included the same eight conspiracy theories as in Study 1a, with adjustments to length and framing. One aim of this study was to test if we could achieve similar effects to Study 1a when using conspiracy theories of a shorter length; thus, the versions included in this iteration were reduced to 150 words (± 15) and included two pieces of evidence (as opposed to three in Study 1a). Additionally, we reduced the frequency with which the theories referenced official accounts or counterarguments, and attempted to adopt a slightly more declarative tone, as we suspected that the original theories may have appeared too neutral or indifferent. A sample theory is available in Table 5, and the full list of stimuli is provided in Appendix A.

Explanatory Virtues

Participants rated the conspiracy theories on the same five explanatory virtue items as Study 1a. We also included an additional single-item measure of overall explanatory quality intended to capture the dimensions represented by the five individual items. This measure was included to assess its validity as a prospective replacement for the long-form items in a subsequent study involving multiple conspiracy theory judgements (see Table 5). For this item, participants were first shown a brief description defining a good explanation and were asked to rate the conspiracy theory accordingly on a 7-point scale (1 = *very bad* – 7 = *very good*).

Narrative Virtues

We utilized a revised version of the same narrative virtue measures from Study 1a. The reverse-scored boredom item was adjusted to be positively phrased (i.e., *To what extent was the theory you read interesting?*), and we replaced the affective item with emotional intensity (i.e., *How intense were the emotions that you felt while reading the theory?*; van Prooijen et al., 2022), rather than valence as was used in the previous study. Curiosity was assessed using the same

measure as the previous study. All items used the same 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* – 7 = *very much*). We also added one item measuring imagery (i.e., *I could imagine the events and ideas described by the theory, almost as if I were there*), where participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the statement (1 = *strongly disagree* – 7 = *strongly agree*). Additionally, while the satisfaction item initially loaded with narrative virtues in the exploratory factor analysis and was retained for subsequent analyses in Study 1a, its cross-loading onto explanatory virtues approached the 0.30 threshold. Following additional theoretical consideration, we determined that this item's conceptual overlap with explanatory quality was too strong to justify inclusion as a narrative virtue; thus, it was dropped from the current item set.

As with the explanatory virtues, we also included a single-item measure of narrative quality (Table 5). Participants were first shown a brief definition of a good story and were asked to rate how compelling the conspiracy they read was on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* – 7 = *very compelling*).

Conspiracy Theory Success

Engagement. Given the correlation observed between sharing and information seeking intentions in Study 1a, these items were once again consolidated into a composite measure of engagement, an approach employed in all subsequent studies. Participants rated their willingness to share the conspiracy theory using a revised version of the same measure used in the previous study. We included the same measure of online sharing intentions, but for brevity, reduced the in-person sharing metric to include one item (i.e., *This theory seems like something I might bring up in conversation with other people*). Intentions to seek further information about the conspiracy theory were measured using the same item from Study 1a.

Table 5

Sample Conspiracy Theory and Single-Item Measures

Stimuli	
Conspiracy Theory	Lyme disease, caused by the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi*, may have originated not from nature but from U.S. military research into biological warfare. While public health officials attribute its rise to ecological shifts and human expansion into wooded areas, some argue it was developed as a bioweapon—engineered to debilitate rather than kill. The U.S. government, specifically military labs at Plum Island and Fort Detrick, had both the means and motive: creating a controllable, non-lethal illness that could incapacitate enemy populations. Strangely, Lyme disease emerged suddenly in the 1970s despite the long-standing presence of ticks in the region, casting doubt on natural causes. Supporting this, declassified documents confirm the military explored using insects—including ticks—as delivery mechanisms for pathogens. Moreover, the first known outbreak occurred just miles from Plum Island, a facility with a documented history of animal disease experiments. The proximity and timing aren't just coincidental—they suggest the possibility of an accidental release or covert testing gone wrong.
EVs	*A good explanation helps you understand how and why an event occurred in a way that is clear, easy to follow, and logically connected. It should provide enough detail to thoroughly explain the topic and how it might apply to other, similar situations.* Based on this description, how good is this theory as an explanation?
NVs	*A compelling story captures your attention and feels engaging and meaningful as it unfolds. It should describe ideas or events in a way that is vivid and easy to imagine, while evoking emotion and making you want to know more.* Based on this description, how compelling is this theory as a story?

Note. EVs = Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Narrative Virtues.

Plausibility. We asked participants to rate how plausible the theory was using the items retained from Study 1a. We added one additional item querying participants' personal agreement with the conspiracy theory. Here, they were asked to provide a rating on a 7-point scale (1 = *very unlikely* – 7 = *very likely*) of the extent to which they personally believed the theory was likely to be true (i.e., *Do you think the explanation provided by this theory is likely to be true?*).

Conspiratorial Ideation

We retained the two-item measure from the Generic Conspiracist Belief Scale to assess participants tendencies towards conspiratorial ideation (Brotherton et al., 2013).

Familiarity

Participants' familiarity with the conspiracy theory prior to the study was assessed using the same item from Study 1a.

Demographics

Demographic information included age, gender, education, race, and political orientation.

3.1.3 Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the eight conspiracy theories. Following each theory, they completed the measures of explanatory and narrative virtues and conspiracy theory success. The ordering of these items was counterbalanced such that the outcome measures were shown either before or after the single explanatory and narrative virtue items, the latter two items also being counterbalanced relative to one another. Participants then completed the multi-item explanatory and narrative virtue scales, which were always presented after the short form measures and were counterbalanced relative to one another. This procedure resulted in four possible orderings of the outcome and single-item virtue measures, followed by one of two orderings of the full explanatory and narrative virtue scales. On each page, participants were asked to make their judgements based on the information provided and had the option to review the theory by toggling a "View Theory" button at the top of the page. Participants then responded to the conspiracy ideation, familiarity, attention check (see Appendix A), and demographic items. These measures were shown at the end of the survey for all participants, and items within each block were presented in fixed order.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Measure Validation

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Based on the factor structure identified in Study 1a, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the expected two-factor structure of the explanatory and narrative virtue metrics for this sample. Given the correlations observed in Study 1a, we specified a model where the two factors were allowed to correlate using robust maximum likelihood estimation.

Model fit was assessed using the model chi-square test, the chi-square per degree of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Steiger-Lind root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), Akaike information criterion (AIC), and Bayesian information criterion (BIC). In general, models with TLI and CFI values of approximately .90 or above can be considered as adequate fit (Marsh et al., 2004), and a χ^2/df ratio of less than three indicates acceptable fit. A RMSEA value below .08 suggests acceptable fit, and an SRMR value of .05 or lower indicates close model fit (Byrne, 2016).

The factor analysis was conducted on all explanatory and narrative items. Goodness-of-fit indices for each tested model are available in Table 6. In line with results from the previous study, a one-factor model, in which all items were loaded onto a single latent factor, fit the data poorly, suggesting that the items were not adequately represented by a single dimension. The expected two-factor model provided a better, but overall mixed fit, with CFI and SRMR near acceptable ranges and TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df suggesting residual model misfit.

Table 6

Model Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models

Model	χ^2	*df*	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA [*95% CI*]	AIC	BIC
One-factor model	441	44	10.02	.68	.60	.12	.24 [.22, .26]	8328.44	8441.17
Two-factor model	162	43	3.77	.91	.89	.07	.12 [.10, .15]	7908.72	8024.87
Respecified two-factor model	121	41	2.95	.94	.92	.06	.10 [.08, .13]	7861.36	7984.34

Note. Models were estimated using robust maximum likelihood estimation. χ^2 values are scaled test statistics. CFI, TLI, and RMSEA are robust fit indices. The respecified two-factor model includes residual covariances between the simplicity and feeling of understanding explanatory virtue items, and the interestingness and engagement narrative virtue items. All model χ^2 tests were significant at $p < .001$.

Modification indices were then consulted to identify localized areas of misfit. Based on this inspection, two residual covariances were added: one between the simplicity and feeling of understanding explanatory virtue items, which both assess the perceived simplicity and ease of understanding of an explanation, and one between two of the entertainment narrative virtue items, which ask whether the theory was engaging and interesting, respectively. These item pairs were semantically and theoretically similar and were therefore expected to share item-specific variance beyond their respective latent factors.

The respecified model provided an improved, albeit still mixed, fit to the data: $\chi^2(41) = 121$, $\chi^2/df = 2.95$, TLI = .92, CFI = .94, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .10, 95% CI [.08, .13], AIC = 7861.36, BIC = 7984.34. In other words, incremental fit indices and the χ^2/df ratio were acceptable, whereas RMSEA remained poor and SRMR remained slightly above the stated close-fit criterion. However, because this model is intended to evaluate whether the multi-item explanatory and narrative virtue measures reflected the expected general structure, rather than to establish a final latent measurement model for subsequent analyses, the pattern of results is

considered sufficient for the present purposes. The respecified two-factor model fit substantially better than the one-factor model, all standardized factor loadings were acceptable in magnitude, and the two scales showed strong internal consistency. Mean scores were therefore computed separately for explanatory virtues and narrative virtues. Cronbach's alpha was high for both explanatory virtues ($\alpha = .91$) and narrative virtues ($\alpha = .89$).

Single-Item Explanatory and Narrative Virtues Measures

To test the efficacy of the single-item measures as replacements for the multi-item metrics, we validated these items by calculating Pearson correlations between the short-items and other primary variables. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients between key variables are presented in Table 7. The short explanatory and narrative virtue items were highly correlated with their respective multi-item versions. Neither of the single-item measures were significantly correlated with familiarity, and the multi-item measures were only weakly associated. Correlations for both sets of instruments were of comparable magnitude across remaining primary measures. Results thus support the validity of our short-item metrics, which are employed in subsequent analyses.

3.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

To investigate the replicability of results from the previous study using the single-item measures of explanatory and narrative virtues, two separate regression models were fit predicting plausibility and engagement. As was found in Study 1a, explanatory and narrative virtues significantly predicted both outcomes of conspiracy theory success (Table 8).

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Between Study Measures

	M(SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. EVs	4.48(1.57)	-						
2. EVs Full	4.23(1.42)	.69***	-					
3. NVs	5.28(1.56)	.45***	.51***	-				
4. NVs Full	4.60(1.33)	.53***	.59***	.65***	-			
5. Plaus	4.47(1.50)	.74***	.72***	.53***	.63***	-		
6. Engage	3.53(1.71)	.58***	.60***	.49***	.70***	.69***	-	
7. CI	4.54(1.64)	.41***	.44***	.20**	.24***	.50***	.37***	-
8. Fam	2.77(2.11)	.00	.13	.09	.17*	.08	.23***	.18**

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. *M*(*SD*) = Mean(Standard Deviation), EVs = Single Item Explanatory Virtues, EVs Full = Multi-Item Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Single Item Narrative Virtues, NVs Full = Multi-Item Narrative Virtues, Plaus = Plausibility, Engage = Engagement, CI = Conspiratorial Ideation, Fam = Familiarity. Engagement is a composite measure calculated by taking the mean of the sharing and information seeking items.

3.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation

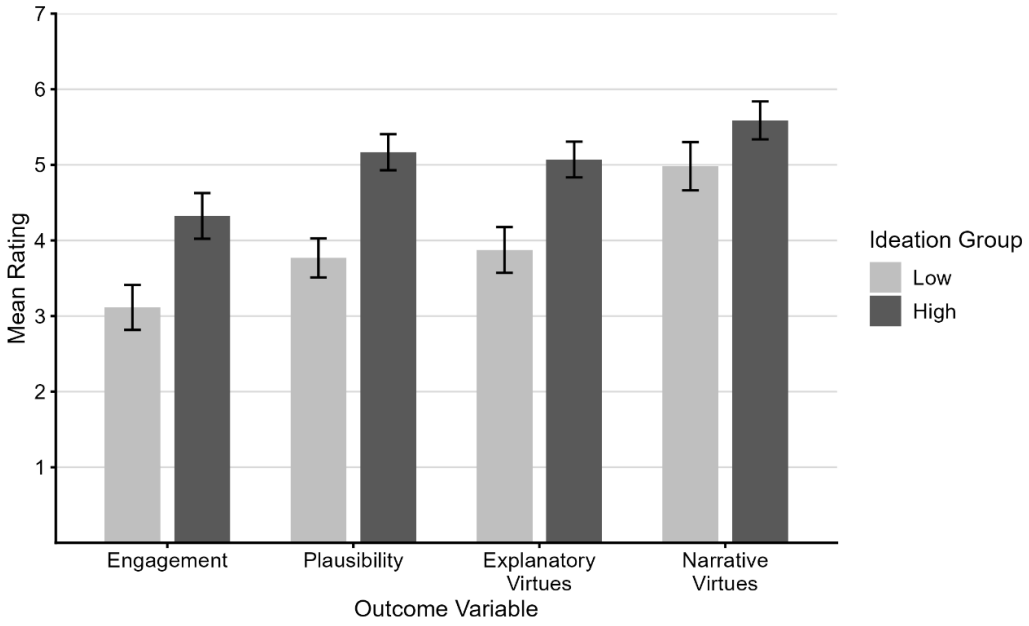
Next, the same series of independent samples t-tests assessed if participants higher in conspiratorial ideation still attributed greater explanatory and narrative virtues to the conspiracy theories, and if they scored higher in our measures of conspiracy theory success. As in Study 1a, participants were grouped as high (scores ≥ 5 coded as 1) and low (scores < 5 coded as 0) based on the median. In models where homogeneity of variance cannot be assumed, as determined by Levene's test, Welch's *t* is applied and Cohen's *d* is calculated using the unpooled standard deviation (i.e., the square root of the average of the two group variances).

In line with the previous study, participants scoring high in conspiratorial ideation rated theories as more plausible ($t(224) = 7.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$) and engaging than those low in ideation ($t(224) = 5.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.75$). These participants also rated the theories better explanations ($t(210.70) = 6.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$) and stories than the low-ideation participants

($t(211.19) = 2.96$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.39$). Mean scores for each variable by conspiratorial ideation group are available in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

Accordingly, the same series of multiple regressions as described above were conducted with the inclusion of conspiratorial ideation as a control variable (see Table 8 for summary statistics). We find that the single-item explanatory and narrative virtue measures explain a comparable amount of variance in conspiracy theory success as the multi-item scales in the previous study, with both predictors remaining significant after including conspiratorial ideation in the model. In other words, the single-item measures replicate the findings obtained with the multi-item scales in the previous study, providing evidence that they capture the same underlying constructs and that the relationships between explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, and conspiracy theory success cannot be explained solely by conspiratorial ideation.

Table 8

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

	Model 1			Model 2		
Predictor	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*
Plausibility						
EVs	0.60 [0.50, 0.70]	.63	**< .001**	0.51 [0.41, 0.62]	.54	**< .001**
NVs	0.24 [0.14, 0.34]	.25	**< .001**	0.25 [0.16, 0.33]	.26	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.22 [0.13, 0.32]	.24	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.02 [-0.03, 0.08]	.04	.450
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.02 [-0.03, 0.07]	.04	.397
R^2	.596			.646		
Engagement						
EVs	0.48 [0.35, 0.61]	.44	**< .001**	0.41 [0.28, 0.55]	.38	**< .001**
NVs	0.35 [0.23, 0.46]	.32	**< .001**	0.36 [0.25, 0.48]	.33	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.12 [0.00, 0.24]	.12	**.048**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	-0.04 [-0.11, 0.03]	-.05	.308
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.05 [-0.01, 0.11]	.08	.097
R^2	.414			.432		

Note. Model 1 = Explanatory Virtues (EVs) and Narrative Virtues (NVs) only; Model 2 = adds Conspiratorial Ideation (CI) and its interactions with EVs and NVs. Variances and inferential tests adjusted using heteroskedastic-consistent standard errors (HC3). Predictors in Model 2 are mean-centered. *p*s < .05 are bolded.

3.2.4 Theory-Level Differences

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess differences across the theories included in this study. Welch's ANOVA is applied in tests where homogeneity of variances cannot be assumed and Cohen's *d* is calculated using the unpooled standard deviation. There was a significant main effect on plausibility ($F(7, 91.58) = 2.13$, $p = .048$, $\omega^2 = .07$), but post hoc tests did not reveal any significant differences between theories. The same analysis yielded a significant main effect on narrative virtues ($F(7, 218) = 2.42$, $p = .021$, $\omega^2 = .04$), where participants rated the Korean Airlines 007 plane crash ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 0.94$) as a better story than the Sutherland Springs church shooting ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.12$, $t(218) = 3.46$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.87$). Similarly, the theory claiming that an alien spacecraft crashed in Roswell, New Mexico (*M*

= 5.88, *SD* = 1.13) was a significantly better story than the Sutherland Springs church shooting (*M* = 4.54, *SD* = 2.12, *t*(218) = 3.20, *p* = .034, *d* = 0.79). No other significant effects emerged.

Summary of Findings

The present study sought to replicate the observed effects in Study 1a using revised conspiracy theory stimuli and single-item measures of explanatory and narrative virtues. A confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the explanatory and narrative virtue factor structure identified in the previous study held, and the equivalent single-item measures showed acceptable performance relative to the long-form measures. In line with the previous findings, we found that participants high in conspiratorial ideation rated theories more favourably on all metrics; however, the single-item measures of explanatory and narrative virtues remained significant in predicting success when controlling for ideation. As in the previous study, few differences emerged between the individual conspiracy theories. Compared with Study 1a, the single-item measures produced the opposite descriptive pattern in the regression models, such that the coefficient for explanatory virtues was larger than that for narrative virtues in predicting both plausibility and engagement. Together, findings provide further evidence of the role of explanatory and narratives virtues in conspiracy theory success and support the use of single-item measures for assessing these constructs in subsequent studies.

4. Study 2a

In Study 2a, we aimed to generalize findings using the single-item explanatory and narrative virtue measures validated in the previous study against an expanded pool of conspiracy theories presented within-subjects. Presenting conspiracy theories in this manner was expected to facilitate comparisons between theories, thereby increasing variability in participants' evaluations and revealing theory-level differences that may have been obscured in our previous between-subjects designs. This approach also enabled us to examine the extent to which participants differentiated between conspiracy theories when evaluating their explanatory quality, narrative quality, plausibility, and engagement. Materials, measures, and data for this study are available at: https://osf.io/4uzan/.

4.1 Methods

4.1.1 Participants

We aimed to recruit 500 U.S. participants using the same selection criteria as the previous studies from MTurk via the Cloud Research approved participant pool. We estimated that the study would take 15 minutes to complete, and participants received $3.25 USD for their participation. Three items were included at the beginning of the survey intended to screen out bots or participants responding at random, and prospective participants were not allowed to proceed to the survey if they did not respond or answered any item incorrectly (n = 75). Two prospective participants passed these checks but did not provide consent (n = 2), and six provided consent but immediately quit the survey (n = 6). To ensure participants were reading the stimuli, we also included attention checks at the end of the survey, and prior to analyses, removed the bottom 10% of respondents (n = 52) on these items. We also excluded participants who did not complete the main theory measures, as they did not respond to this check (n = 6). This left a final sample of N = 449. Participants were predominantly White (n = 334; 74.4%) and

ages ranged from 18 to 65+, with an approximately equal distribution of male and female identifying participants (n = 221; 49.2% male). Most of the sample held a bachelor's degree or higher (n = 316; 70.4%) and approximately half identified as Democrats (n = 197; 43.9%).

4.1.2 Materials

Conspiracy Theories

This study utilized an expanded set of conspiracy stimuli, including those from our previous two studies, and additional theories derived from Pennycook et al. (2026). Across eight studies, Pennycook and colleagues (2026) presented participants with single-sentence conspiracy theories (66 false and 15 true) and had them rate truth/belief in each theory. After obtaining the raw data from approximately half of these studies, we used these ratings to determine an estimate of plausibility for each theory. From here, we reduced Pennycook et al.'s (2026) original set by opting to not include the "true" theories and eliminating "false" theories that were conceptually related (e.g., "COVID-19 is a hoax." and "The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 was engineered as a bioweapon in a Chinese lab."). Given that we needed to expand on the contents of each theory and wanted the information to represent genuine arguments that some have made to support the theory, the set was further reduced while gathering information about the theories, as some had insufficient publicly available information to generate the theory in our paragraph format (e.g., limited evidence, vague or unclear claims).

Following refinement, we were left with a set of 33 theories drawn from Pennycook et al. (2026) and seven retained from our previous studies. We removed one from our original studies (i.e., falsified history concerning the Carolingian Empire) as it was less contemporarily relevant and comparable to the other theories in terms of concreteness and recognizability. This left a final set of 40 conspiracy theories to be included (see Appendix B).

To write the full theory texts, we used the same prompt, word count, and structure with ChatGPT-4o as in Study 1b, with slight modification. The prompt was adjusted to standardize the information presented in the first one to two sentences of each text and was written to include a clear statement of the theory's primary claim, the perpetrators involved, and their motive for the act. Conspiracy theories were presented within-subjects, so to reduce fatigue and survey length, theories were grouped into four sets of 10, such that each participant was randomly assigned to view 10 out of the full set of 40. The theories were initially randomly assigned to one of four sets, and then iteratively swapped to preserve variance in topic and plausibility based on the ratings from Pennycook et al. (2026).

Attention Check

In addition to the main texts, we also created single-sentence versions of each theory to be used as the recognition cues in an attention check included at the end of the survey (see Appendix B). The paragraph form of each text was provided to ChatGPT-4o, where it was prompted to write a brief one-sentence description of each theory's core claim. The cues were intended to be brief but provide sufficient detail to be differentiable from theories concerning similar topics. Here, participants completed a 20-item recognition task consisting of the 10 theories that they had previously viewed, and 10 lure items drawn from another stimulus set. To maintain consistent task difficulty and minimize the likelihood that similar theories would appear within the same recognition list, the conspiracy theories in Sets 1 and 3 were matched such that participants assigned to either set received lure items from the other set in the pair; the same procedure was employed for Sets 2 and 4 (i.e., participants were assigned to one of two possible attention check items). A sample theory and the corresponding attention check cue is presented in Table 9.

Measures

The same measures of explanatory and narrative virtues, conspiratorial ideation, familiarity, conspiracy theory success, and demographics were employed here as in Study 1b, apart from one of the plausibility items. The wording of this item was adjusted to avoid potentially cueing participants towards explanatory quality and measure personal agreement more directly (i.e., *Do you think the explanation provided by this theory is likely to be true?* to *Do you think this theory is likely to be true?*).

Table 9

Sample Conspiracy Theory and Corresponding Attention Check Cue

Attention Check Cue	Monsanto has hidden the fact that genetically modified foods are harmful.
Theory	Monsanto and other major agribusiness corporations intentionally withheld internal data suggesting that genetically modified crops could carry long-term health risks, doing so to protect their most profitable products and shield themselves from legal and financial fallout. While the official stance insists that GMOs are thoroughly vetted and proven safe, the speed with which certain high-profile products were approved stands out—some sailed through regulatory channels in a fraction of the time typical for food-safety reviews, raising questions about oversight. Proponents further highlight the restrictive seed-licensing contracts issued to farmers, which ban independent testing and mandate the destruction of unused seed stock each season—effectively preventing long-term safety evaluations outside corporate control. On top of that, court-released internal emails show Monsanto monitoring cancer studies on glyphosate, a key ingredient in RoundUp, while downplaying unfavorable findings in public. These documents reveal a coordinated effort to manage public perception rather than respond transparently to legitimate health concerns.

4.1.3 Procedure

After passing the initial screening items and providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four sets of conspiracy theories. Theories were presented on separate pages, and participants were instructed that they would be able to view the theory again on subsequent pages by toggling a button at the top of the screen if they chose to do so.

Following each theory, participants were asked to rate its explanatory and narrative quality, as well as complete our measures of plausibility and engagement. The item presentation for the explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, and outcome measures was counterbalanced between participants such that the outcome measures, presented in fixed order, were balanced relative to the explanatory and narrative virtue items, and the explanatory and narrative virtue items were counterbalanced relative to one another. This procedure resulted in 16 unique conditions, for which the measure ordering remained constant throughout the study. The familiarity item was always presented last. Following these primary measures, participants responded to the conspiratorial ideation measure, the attention check, and demographics.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Attention Check Performance

Participant performance on the attention checks was assessed by calculating mean hit (i.e., correct selections) and false alarm (i.e., incorrect selections) rates for each item. Participants performed well in correctly identifying shown theories (Check 1: M_{hits} = 8.96, SD = 2.04; Check 2: M_{hits} = 8.78, SD = 2.21) and hit performance did not significantly differ between measures ($t(499) = 0.93$, $p = .336$, $d = 0.09$). We then assessed percentile-based performance, where participants scoring in the bottom 10% of hits were to be removed from the analytical sample. Participants scoring in this range received a hit score of approximately chance (i.e., five or less hits), and n = 52 participants fell within this range, with a hit score of M = 3.5 (SD = 1.41) and false alarm score of M = 4.36 (SD = 2.28), suggesting random or inattentive responding. In comparison, the upper 90% of participants (n = 449) had a mean hit score of M = 9.49 (SD = 1.41) and false alarm score of M = 0.42 (SD = 0.98). Following exclusions, we were left with N = 449: n = 106 participants responding to Set 1, n = 112 in Set 2, n = 120 in Set 3, and n = 111 in Set 4. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations are presented in Table 10.

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations for Primary Study Measures

	M(SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. EVs	4.24(1.34)	-						
2. NVs	4.65(1.25)	.75*	-					
3. Plaus	4.11(1.20)	.82*	.73*	-				
4. Sharing	2.69(1.46)	.55*	.48*	.68*	-			
5. Info	3.57(1.59)	.54*	.58*	.68*	.80*	-		
6. Engage	3.13(1.45)	.57*	.56*	.72*	.94*	.95*	-	
7. Fam	3.76(1.30)	.20*	.27*	.25*	.38*	.27*	.34*	-
8. CI	4.66(1.66)	.49*	.45*	.64*	.45*	.48*	.49*	.20*

Note. *$p < .001$. *M*(*SD*) = Mean(Standard Deviation). EVs = Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Narrative Virtues, Plaus = Plausibility, Sharing = Sharing Intentions, Info = Information Seeking, Engage = Engagement, Fam = Familiarity, CI = Conspiratorial Ideation. Engagement is a composite measure calculated by taking the mean of sharing intentions and information seeking.

4.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

We fit the same two regression models as in the previous studies to test if explanatory and narrative virtues predicted conspiracy theory success above and beyond conspiratorial ideation. Explanatory and narrative virtues were entered as predictors and the two measures of conspiracy theory success were added as the outcomes. As was identified in our previous studies, both explanatory and narrative virtues significantly predicted our two measures of conspiracy theory success (Table 11).

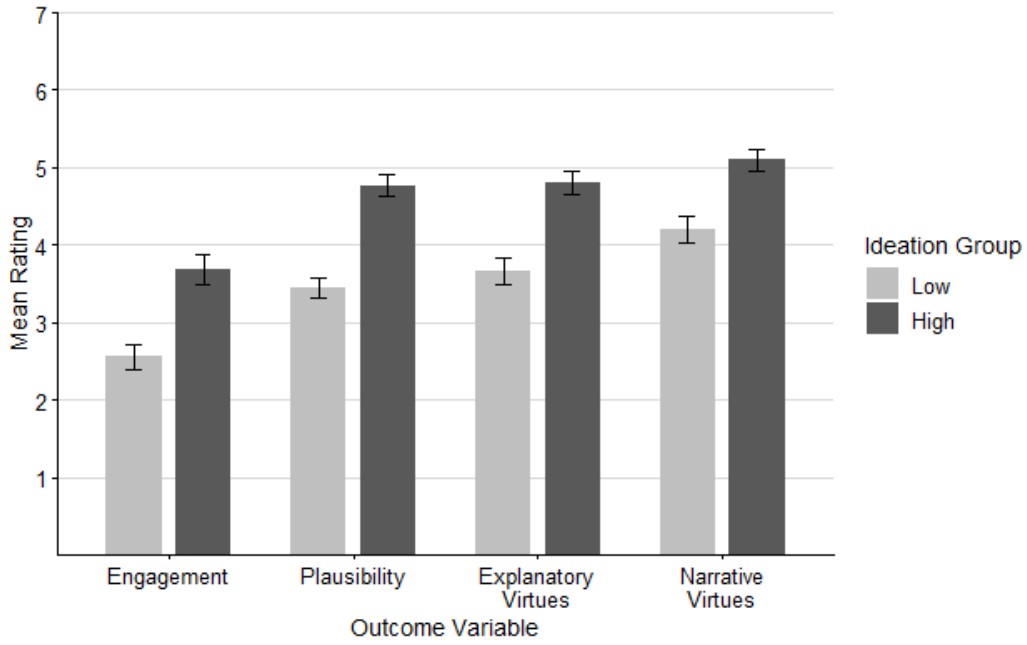
4.2.3 The Role of Conspiratorial Ideation

As in the previous studies, we distributed participants into high (scores ≥ 5 coded as 1) and low conspiratorial ideation groups (< 5 coded as 0) based on the median to test for differences on primary measures based on levels of conspiratorial ideation (Figure 3). In analyses where homogeneity of variances cannot be assumed, Welch's *t* is employed and Cohen's *d* is based on the unpooled standard deviation.

High ideation participants rated theories as significantly more plausible ($t(440.95) = 13.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.31$) and were more willing to engage with them than low ideation participants ($t(436.64) = 8.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$). Similarly, they rated theories as better explanations ($t(443.96) = 9.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.94$) and stories compared with participants low in ideation ($t(435.07) = 8.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.77$).

Figure 3

Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

Despite participants high in conspiratorial ideation rating theories higher on all primary measures, we find that, in line with previous results, explanatory and narrative virtues remain significant when controlling for conspiratorial ideation in the aforementioned regression models (summary statistics are presented in Table 11).

A significant explanatory virtue and conspiratorial ideation interaction emerged for plausibility. Simple slopes analyses indicated that explanatory virtues positively predicted

plausibility at low (-1 *SD*; $B = .39$, $p < .001$), mean ($B = .46$, $p < .001$), and high (+1 *SD*; $B = .53$, $p < .001$) levels of conspiratorial ideation. The strength of this association increased with ideation, suggesting that explanatory virtues were more strongly related to plausibility among individuals higher in conspiratorial ideation. A similar pattern emerged for engagement. Although the interaction was only marginally significant, the positive association between explanatory virtues and engagement increased as conspiratorial ideation increased. Explanatory virtues did not significantly predict engagement among participants low in conspiratorial ideation ($B = .16$, $p = .060$) but significantly predicted engagement at mean ($B = .28$, $p < .001$) and high (+1 *SD*; $B = .40$, $p < .001$) levels of conspiratorial ideation.

Table 11

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

	Model 1			Model 2		
Predictor	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*
Plausibility						
EVs	0.55 [0.47, 0.63]	.61	**< .001**	0.46 [0.38, 0.54]	.51	**< .001**
NVs	0.26 [0.18, 0.34]	.27	**< .001**	0.22 [0.14, 0.29]	.23	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.22 [0.18, 0.26]	.30	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.04 [0.00, 0.08]	.08	**.037**
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.01 [-0.03, 0.05]	.01	.755
R^2	.698			.768		
Engagement						
EVs	0.37 [0.26, 0.49]	.35	**< .001**	0.28 [0.17, 0.40]	.26	**< .001**
NVs	0.35 [0.24, 0.47]	.31	**< .001**	0.31 [0.18, 0.44]	.27	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.23 [0.16, 0.30]	.25	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.08 [0.00, 0.15]	.11	.052
CI × NVs	—	—	—	-0.00 [-0.08, 0.08]	-.00	.977
R^2	.370			.429		

Note. Model 1 = Explanatory Virtues (EVs) and Narrative Virtues (NVs) only; Model 2 = adds Conspiratorial Ideation (CI) and its interactions with EVs and NVs. Variances and inferential tests adjusted using heteroskedastic-consistent standard errors (HC3). Predictors in Model 2 are mean-centered. *p*s < .05 are bolded.

4.2.4 Variability in Theory Evaluations

We expected that the within-subjects context of this study (i.e., rating multiple conspiracy theories) would facilitate greater variability and reveal theory-level differences that did not emerge in our previous studies. To test this possibility, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted within each theory set on the primary measures. Results indicated a small but significant main effect of theory on explanatory virtues ($F(9, 999) = 1.99$, $p = .038$, $\omega_p^2 = .00$). Post hoc tests, corrected for multiple comparisons with the Holm-Bonferroni method, showed a marginally significant difference between the theory claiming that the fossil record and evolution has been falsified ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.87$) and the theory claiming that Greta Thunberg is an actor posing as a climate activist ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.81$, $t(111) = 3.30$, $p = .059$, $d_{av} = 0.32$), such that the former was seen as a better explanation than the latter.

The same effect emerged on plausibility ($F(9, 999) = 2.06$, $p = .030$, $\omega_p^2 = .01$), where the fossil record and evolution having been fabricated ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.77$) was significantly more plausible than Greta Thunberg being an actor ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.81$, $t(111) = 3.73$, $p = .014$, $d_{av} = 0.36$). Jeffrey Epstein having been murdered in jail ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.77$) was also marginally significantly more plausible than Greta Thunberg being an actor ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.81$, $t(111) = 3.32$, $p = .054$, $d_{av} = 0.28$).

Finally, there was a main effect on engagement ($F(9, 1071) = 2.83$, $p = .003$, $\omega_p^2 = .01$), such that the theory claiming 5G technology accelerated the spread of COVID-19 ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.58$) was more engaging than the theory concerning the Sutherland Springs church shooting having been coordinated by Antifa and anti-gun groups ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.70$, $t(119) = 3.68$, $p = .016$, $d_{av} = 0.31$). The same pattern emerged for the 5G-COVID-19 theory and the one asserting that the Rothschild family secretly leads a secret satanic cult ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.64$, $t(119) = 4.17$, $p = .003$, $d_{av} = 0.34$). No other significant differences emerged across any measure.

Given the limited number of significant theory-level differences, we examined within-participant variability in plausibility and engagement ratings across theories. Participants showed variability in plausibility (M_{range} = 3.41, *SD* = 1.49; within-participant *SD*: *M* = 1.16, *SD* = 0.54) and engagement ratings (M_{range} = 2.87, *SD* = 1.52; within-participant *SD*: *M* = 0.99, *SD* = 0.56). Only 1.3% (*n* = 6) of participants gave identical plausibility ratings to all theories they viewed, while 4.5% (*n* = 20) gave identical engagement ratings. Thus, participants generally differentiated between theories despite the limited differences observed in the aggregated analyses.

To examine whether this within-participant differentiation corresponded with perceived explanatory and narrative quality, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the associations among ratings across the 10 theories evaluated by each participant. For each participant, Pearson correlations were calculated between each virtue and outcome measure. Thirty-one participants were excluded because at least one correlation could not be calculated due to an absence of variation in one or more measures. Two additional participants were excluded because they produced at least one perfect correlation, for which the Fisher transformation is undefined, leaving *N* = 416 participants in the analysis. Correlations were Fisher-transformed and added to a repeated measures ANOVA with outcome (i.e., plausibility and engagement) and virtue type (i.e., explanatory and narrative) as within-participant factors. For interpretation, mean correlations and confidence intervals are reported after being transformed back to Pearson correlations.

The analysis showed a significant main effect on outcome ($F(1, 415) = 89.23$, $p < .001$, $\omega_p^2 = .17$) and on virtue ($F(1, 415) = 19.77$, $p < .001$, $\omega_p^2 = .04$). These results were qualified by a significant Outcome x Virtue interaction ($F(1, 415) = 26.14$, $p < .001$, $\omega_p^2 = .06$). Follow-up

comparisons indicated that explanatory virtues were more strongly associated with plausibility (r = .75, 95% CI [.72, .78]) than narrative virtues were (r = .68, 95% CI [.64, .71], Δz = .16, 95% CI [.10, .21], $t(415) = 5.96$, $p < .001$, $d_{av} = 0.25$). In contrast, explanatory (r = .62, 95% CI [.59, .65]) and narrative virtues (r = .60, 95% CI [.57, .64]) did not significantly differ in their associations with engagement (Δz = .03, 95% CI [-0.1, .07], $t(415) = 1.40$, $p = .164$, $d_{av} = 0.06$). The interaction therefore provides partial support for the predicted differential associations, wherein explanatory virtues showed the expected advantage over narrative virtues in their relationship with plausibility, but narrative virtues did not show the same pattern with engagement.

Summary of Findings

The present study replicated the findings of our previous studies using a larger and more diverse set of conspiracy theories. Across analyses, conspiracy theories perceived as better explanations and more compelling stories were judged to be more plausible and elicited greater willingness to engage with them; participants higher in conspiratorial ideation rated conspiracy theories more favourably on all metrics, however, relationships remained significant after controlling for conspiratorial ideation. Together, explanatory and narrative virtues accounted for a significant proportion of variance in plausibility and engagement, with more variance explained in the former than the latter. However, the relative magnitudes of the regression coefficients did not clearly support the predicted differential relationships between the virtues and the two outcomes.

We predicted that presenting multiple conspiracy theories within participants would reveal greater differences between theories than we previously observed. Contrary to these expectations, only a small number of theory-level differences emerged, and those that did were

modest in magnitude. At face value, these findings may suggest that our stimuli were perceived similarly irrespective of plausibility or topic; however, we find that participants showed variability in their ratings across theories, and very few assigned homogenous responses across theories within their assigned set. Thus, participants seemingly differentiated between theories but did not consistently agree as to which were the most plausible, engaging, or possessed the strongest explanatory and narrative qualities, potentially minimizing theory-level effects. Further evidence of this prospect derives from within-participant correlations, which provided partial support for the predicted differential relationships. Explanatory virtues were more strongly associated with plausibility than narrative virtues, whereas the two virtues were similarly associated with engagement. Accordingly, an alternative explanation to homogenous responding is that the highly polished and coherent nature of standardized AI-generated paragraph stimuli reduced differentiation between theories. That is, features like grammar or prose may have influenced evaluations independent of the theories' underlying claims and content. If this is the case, differences between theories may have been partially obscured by the presentation format itself.

5. Study 2b

In this study, we sought to replicate the results of Study 2a while examining the role of stimulus format in participants' evaluations. Although Study 2a employed a broader and more diverse set of theories compared to Studies 1a and 1b, we wanted to test if presenting conspiracy theories as well-written AI-generated paragraphs influenced ratings. Specifically, we suspected that surface-level features like writing style may have enhanced the perceived quality of even outlandish conspiracy theories on each of our measures. To address this possibility, we reduced the same conspiracy theories to single-sentence summaries with the expectation that participants would rely more heavily on existing knowledge and intuition about the claims, rather than writing quality, and thus produce greater differentiation and variability in theory evaluations compared to the paragraph-based stimuli. Materials, measures, and data for this study are available at: https://osf.io/4uzan/

5.1 Methods

5.1.1 Participants

We recruited a target of 500 U.S. participants from MTurk via the Cloud Research approved participant pool, employing the same selection criteria as the previous studies. The study was estimated to take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and participants were granted $2.00 USD for their participation. Prospective participants were not allowed to participate if they did not respond or answered any of the initial screening questions incorrectly (n = 51). Additional participants were excluded if they began the survey but quit immediately following consent (n = 7) or did not respond to the attention check at the end of the survey (n = 11). Following the same approach as Study 2a, the bottom 10% of respondents to the attention checks were also removed (n = 55), leaving a final sample of N = 449. Participants were predominantly

White (n = 360; 80.2%) and ages ranged from 18 to 65+, with a slight skew towards female identifying participants (n = 238; 53% female). Most of the sample held a bachelor's degree or higher (n = 304; 68.2%) and approximately half identified as Democrats (n = 200; 44.5%).

5.1.2 Materials and Procedure

Measures

We used the same 40 conspiracy theories as in Study 2a reduced to single sentence summaries (see Appendix B). The full texts used in the previous study were given to ChatGPT-5.5, and it was instructed to write each theory in a variant of the following overarching structure: [Core event/phenomenon], which was [intentionally caused / concealed / manipulated etc.] by [specific actor(s)] to [instrumental motive]. The theories included in each of the four stimulus sets remained the same as Study 2a, and a sample theory is "*Bill Gates and affiliated global health organizations used COVID-19 vaccine campaigns to expand digital surveillance systems and increase population monitoring.*" Study procedure and all other measures, including explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, conspiratorial ideation, familiarity, conspiracy theory success, demographics, and attention checks (see Appendix B) were identical to Study 2a.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Attention Check Performance

Given that the main stimuli included in this study were shorter than previous iterations and closely resembled the cues used for the attention check items, we expected that participants may perform better on the recognition task than they did in the previous study. Calculating the mean hit (i.e., correct selections) and false alarm rates (i.e., incorrect selections) between the two studies showed that, while participants showed descriptively greater accuracy in the present study, mean hit (M = 9.08, SD = 1.87, t(1003) = 1.65, p = .098, d = 0.10) and false alarm rates did not significantly differ between studies (M = 0.70, SD = 1.59, t(1003) = 1.28, p = .203, d =

0.08). Hit ($t(502) = 1.31$, $p = .192$, $d = 0.12$). False alarm performance was also comparable between items in this study ($t(502) = 0.49$, $p = .627$, $d = 0.04$). The two items were thus treated as equivalent and the same exclusion criteria as in Study 2a were applied.

The upper 90% of the sample achieved near perfect accuracy ($n = 449$; $M_{hits} = 9.65$, $SD = 0.74$; $M_{false\ alarms} = 0.27$, $SD = 0.69$). In contrast, the bottom 10% (i.e., participants achieving six or fewer hits; $n = 55$) showed poorer performance, correctly identifying $M = 4.50$ ($SD = 1.75$) theories while falsely selecting $M = 4.18$ ($SD = 2.42$) non-presented theories, indicating discrimination that was near chance levels. This subset of participants was therefore removed from the sample, leaving $N = 449$, with $n = 114$ participants assigned to Set 1, $n = 110$ in Set 2, $n = 112$ in Set 3, and $n = 113$ in Set 4. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations for primary measures are presented in Table 12.

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations for Primary Study Measures

	M(SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. EVs	3.62(1.31)	-							
2. NVs	4.16(1.35)	.73*	-						
3. Plaus	3.64(1.22)	.78*	.69*	-					
4. Sharing	2.48(1.40)	.60*	.53*	.71*	-				
5. Info	3.19(1.55)	.59*	.61*	.74*	.84*	-			
6. Engage	2.83(1.41)	.62*	.59*	.76*	.96*	.96*	-		
7. Fam	3.97(1.30)	.32*	.36*	.43*	.47*	.45*	.48*	-	
8. CI	4.49(1.57)	.49*	.46*	.63*	.39*	.47*	.45*	.30*	-

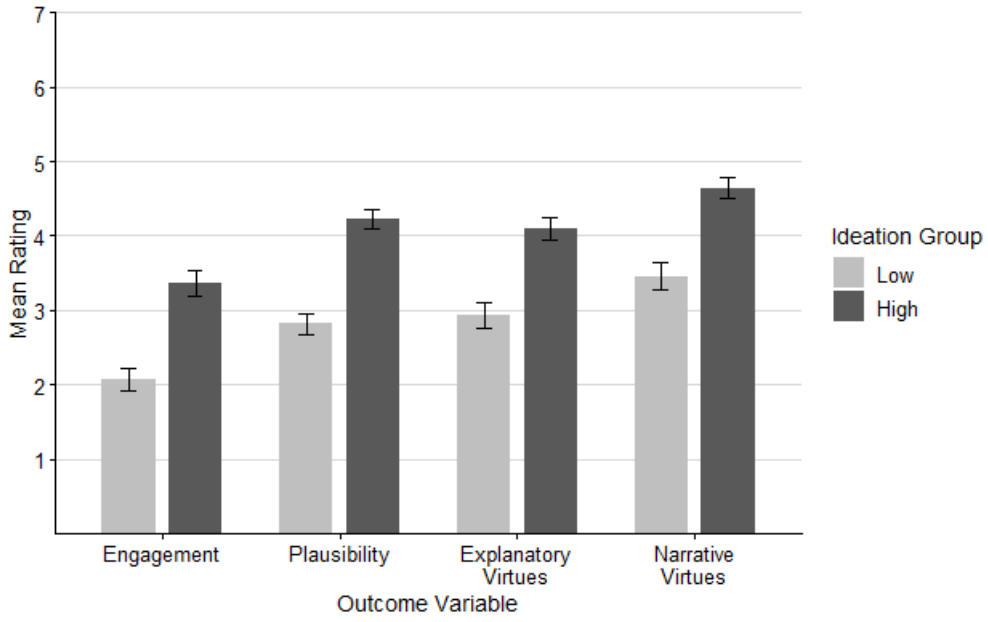
Note. *$p < .001$. EVs = Explanatory Virtues, NVs = Narrative Virtues, Plaus = Plausibility, Sharing = Sharing Intentions, Info = Information Seeking, Fam = Familiarity, CI = Conspiratorial Ideation. Engagement is a composite measure calculated by taking the mean of sharing intentions and information seeking.

5.2.2 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

In line with previous studies, participants high in conspiratorial ideation (scores ≥ 4.5) rated theories more favourably on all measures, compared to those low in ideation (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Mean Ratings on Primary Study Variables by Conspiratorial Ideation Group



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

Further, explanatory and narrative virtues significantly predicted both measures of conspiracy theory success, with and without the inclusion of conspiratorial ideation. Summary statistics for both pairs of models are available in Table 13.

5.2.3 Stimulus Format Comparison

To examine whether ratings and the relationships between explanatory and narrative qualities and conspiracy theory success differed between stimulus formats, independent samples t-tests were used to compare mean ratings in the sentence-based study with the paragraph-based stimuli used in Study 2a.

Table 13

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

	Model 1			Model 2		
Predictor	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*	*B* [*95% CI*]	*β*	*p*
Plausibility						
EVs	0.55 [0.47, 0.64]	.59	**< .001**	0.45 [0.37, 0.53]	.49	**< .001**
NVs	0.24 [0.15, 0.32]	.26	**< .001**	0.18 [0.11, 0.26]	.20	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.24 [0.18, 0.30]	.31	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	0.03 [-0.03, 0.09]	.05	.292
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.01 [-0.04, 0.06]	.02	.742
R^2	.639			.709		
Engagement						
EVs	0.43 [0.28, 0.58]	.40	**< .001**	0.39 [0.25, 0.54]	.37	**< .001**
NVs	0.32 [0.18, 0.45]	.30	**< .001**	0.28 [0.16, 0.40]	.27	**< .001**
CI	—	—	—	0.13 [0.06, 0.21]	.15	**< .001**
CI × EVs	—	—	—	-0.06 [-0.16, 0.03]	-.09	.198
CI × NVs	—	—	—	0.09 [0.01, 0.17]	.14	**.026**
R^2	.427			.454		

Note. Model 1 = Explanatory Virtues (EVs) and Narrative Virtues (NVs) only; Model 2 = adds Conspiratorial Ideation (CI) and its interactions with EVs and NVs. Variances and inferential tests are adjusted using heteroskedastic-consistent standard errors (HC3). Predictors in Model 2 are mean-centered. *p*s < .05 are bolded.

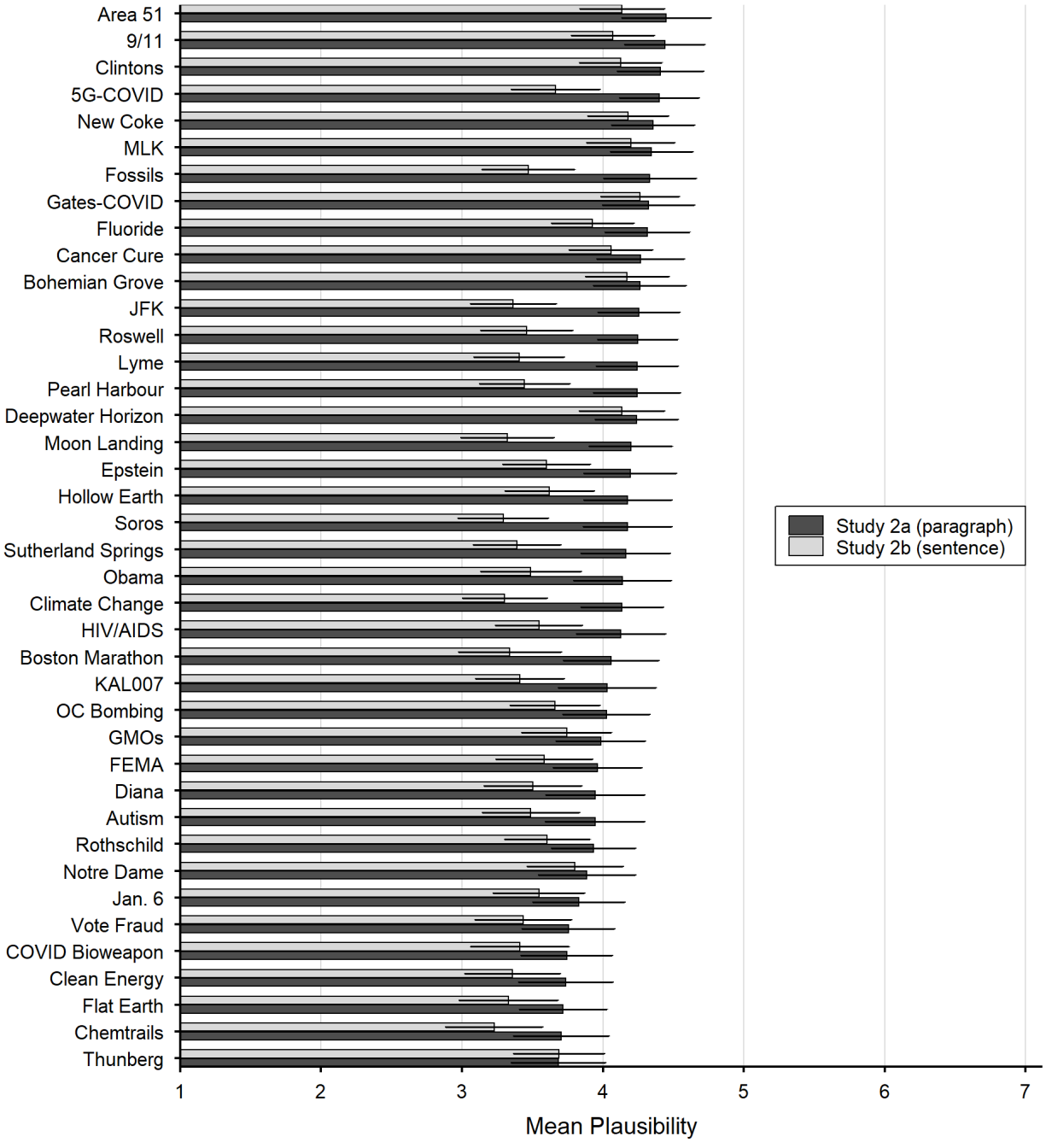
Compared to the sentence-length conspiracy theories ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.22$), the paragraph versions received significantly higher plausibility ratings ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.20$, $t(896) = 5.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$; see Figure 5 for individual theory comparisons between studies). The paragraph-length theories ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.45$) were also more engaging than the sentence-based stimuli ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.41$, $t(896) = 3.09$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.21$). Similarly, participants rated the paragraph conspiracy theories ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.34$) as significantly better explanations ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.31$, $t(896) = 7.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$).

The paragraph conspiracy theories ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.25$) were also perceived as better stories than the single-sentence summaries ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.35$, $t(896) = 5.69$, $p < .001$, $d =$

0.38). While differences were statistically significant, stimulus format accounted for only a small proportion of variance in plausibility ($R^2 = .036$) and engagement intentions ($R^2 = .010$).

Figure 5

Mean Plausibility Ratings for Conspiracy Theories Included in Studies 2a and 2b



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

We then fit two regression models to test if presenting the theories as single sentences, opposed to paragraphs, affected the relationship between explanatory and narrative qualities in predicting conspiracy theory success. Plausibility and engagement were entered as the dependent variables, and explanatory and narrative virtues, stimulus format, and their interactions were included as predictors. These models showed that after accounting for explanatory and narrative virtues, stimulus format did not significantly predict plausibility *(B* = -0.01, p = .898) or engagement (B = 0.12, p = .127). No interactions reached significance in either model. Findings therefore suggest that although paragraph-based conspiracy theories received higher ratings overall, format did not meaningfully alter the extent to which explanatory and narrative qualities predicted conspiracy theory success.

5.2.4 Variability in Theory Evaluations

We expected that the sentence-based theories would elicit greater variance in participants' ratings than the paragraph-based study. To assess this prospect, theory-level variability was compared across the sentence- and paragraph-based formats by calculating means and standard deviations for each conspiracy theory by format. Consistent with expectations, sentence-based theories exhibited greater between-theory variability than paragraph-based theories for plausibility (SD = 0.31 vs. 0.23), engagement (SD = 0.26 vs. 0.16), explanatory virtues (SD = 0.31 vs. 0.19), and narrative virtues (SD = 0.38 vs. 0.20). These findings suggest that reducing the stimuli to single-sentence summaries increased differentiation among theories.

A series of repeated-measures ANOVAs then tested each of the four conspiracy theory sets for differences between means on primary variables. Violations to the assumption of sphericity are adjusted using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction. Analyses showed a small, significant main effect on engagement (F(7.78, 863.63) = 2.94, p = .003, ω_p^2 = .01), where post

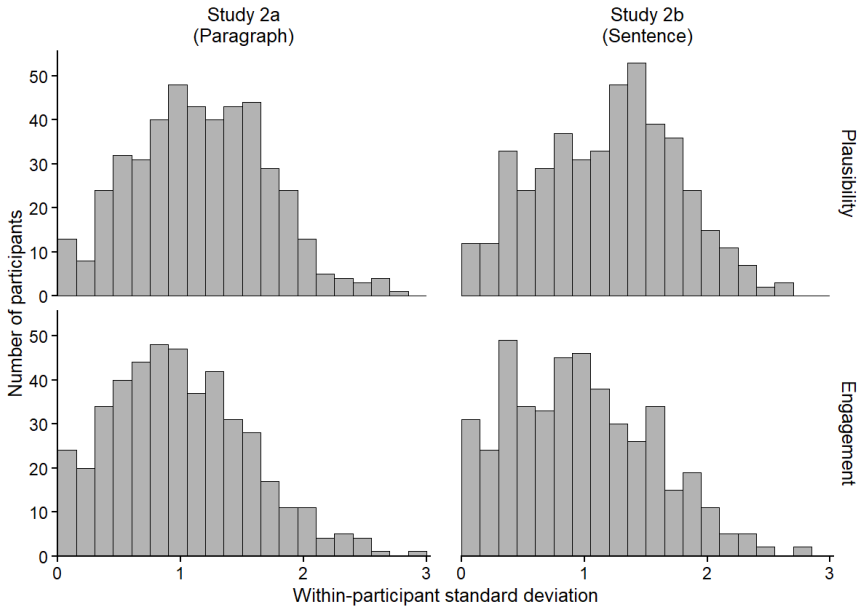
hocs indicated that the theory claiming that 5G towers contributed to the spread of COVID-19 (M = 2.94, SD = 1.87) was significantly more engaging than the claim that climate change has been fabricated by governments and scientists (M = 2.42, SD = 1.55, $t(111) = 3.36$, $p = .048$, d_{av} = 0.30). However, no other significant effects emerged.

As with the previous study, we therefore examined whether the absence of between-theory effects reflected homogenous ratings across theories, despite increased variance. Within-participant standard deviations were calculated for the ten theories rated per participant. Participants showed variation in both plausibility (M_{SD} = 1.19, SD = 0.57) and engagement ratings (M_{SD} = 0.97, SD = 0.59), with few participants assigning identical or near-identical ratings across their assigned sets. Accordingly, as with Study 2a, the absence of significant theory-level effects does not appear to reflect uniform responding. Comparisons of variability between the two studies are presented in Figure 6.

To further examine this differentiation, we repeated the same exploratory within-participant correlational analysis conducted in Study 2a. Forty-three participants were excluded because at least one correlation could not be calculated due to insufficient variation, and n = 9 were excluded because at least one correlation was perfect and could not be Fisher-transformed, leaving N = 397 participants in the present analysis. Fisher-transformed correlations were added to the same repeated measures ANOVA with outcome (i.e., plausibility and engagement) and virtue type (i.e., explanatory and narrative) as within-subject factors. Mean correlations and confidence intervals are reported after being transformed back to Pearson correlations.

Figure 6

Within-Participant Variability Across Engagement and Plausibility Ratings



Note. Graphs display the distribution of within-participant standard deviations in engagement and plausibility ratings across conspiracy theories rated in Study 2a and Study 2b. Higher values indicate greater variability in ratings across theories.

There was a main effect of outcome ($F(1, 396) = 79.75$, $p < .001$, $\omega p^2 = .17$) and on virtue type ($F(1, 396) = 8.78$, $p < .001$, $\omega p^2 = .02$), which was qualified by a significant Outcome x Virtue interaction ($F(1, 396) = 8.78$, $p = .003$, $\omega p^2 = .02$). As with Study 2a, follow-up comparisons showed that explanatory virtues were more strongly associated with plausibility ($r = .72$, 95% CI [.68, .74] than narrative virtues were ($r = .66$, 95% CI [.62, .69], $\Delta z = .11$, 95% CI [.06, .16], $t(396) = 4.11$, $p < .001$, $d_{av} = 0.18$). In contrast, explanatory ($r = .59$, 95% CI [.55, .62] and narrative virtues were similarly associated with engagement ($r = .57$, 95% CI [.53, .60], $\Delta z = .03$, 95% CI [-.02, .07], $t(396) = 1.20$, $p = .231$, $d_{av} = 0.05$). In line with the previous study, these analyses show the expected advantage for plausibility, but not for narrative virtues and engagement

Summary of Findings

The present study replicated the main findings of Study 2a using single-sentence versions of conspiracy theories. As in the previous studies, conspiracy theories perceived as better explanations and more compelling stories were judged to be more plausible and elicited greater willingness to engage with them, and both variables remained significantly associated with plausibility and engagement after accounting for participant-level conspiratorial ideation. The relative magnitudes of the regression coefficients did not support the predicted differential relationships between explanatory and narrative virtues and the two outcomes. However, the within-participant analyses suggest that plausibility was more strongly associated with explanatory virtues than narrative virtues, but the same pattern did not emerge with engagement and narrative virtues. Findings therefore demonstrate that the associations of perceived explanatory and narrative quality and conspiracy theory success were robust, even when theories are reduced to highly condensed summaries.

We hypothesized that reducing the conspiracy theories to single-sentence summaries would increase differentiation between theories by minimizing presentation features that were common across the paragraph-length stimuli. Consistent with this prediction, sentence-based theories exhibited greater variability on explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, plausibility, and engagement, suggesting that participants differentiated more strongly between the underlying claims when provided with less information. Paragraph-based theories received higher ratings on all four measures, indicating that the more elaborated format increased the overall appeal of the theories. However, stimulus format did not predict or moderate the relationships between explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, and conspiracy theory success, suggesting that while

presentation influenced overall evaluations, the predictive value of explanatory and narrative qualities remained consistent across formats.

Despite this increase in variability, few differences between theories emerged, replicating the overall pattern observed in Study 2a. Although participants differentiated between theories, they seemed to still show limited consensus regarding which theories were the most plausible, engaging, or possessed the strongest explanatory and narrative qualities. Consequently, greater differentiation between theories did not translate into stronger theory-level effects.

6. General Discussion

There is a pressing need to understand why people believe conspiracy theories. Although significant theoretical and empirical attention to conspiracy theories emerged only within the past two decades (Douglas & Sutton, 2023), a large number of studies have focused on understanding who and why people are drawn to conspiratorial claims (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas & Sutton, 2023), with limited attention having been paid to the contents of the beliefs themselves. Here, we sought to examine the properties of conspiracy theories that may make them believable, shareable, and worthy of further inquiry. Specifically, we investigated whether people see conspiracy theories as possessing the characteristics of convincing explanations and compelling stories, and if these characteristics predict how plausible and engaging, or, how successful, a given theory is.

6.1 Predicting Conspiracy Theory Success

Across four studies, we find robust evidence supporting this hypothesis: explanatory and narrative virtues consistently predicted plausibility and engagement with conspiracy theories. These effects emerged using multi- and single-item measures, across pools of eight and 40 theories, and when theories were presented in 250-word, 150-word, and single-sentence formats. Results also held after accounting for individual differences in conspiratorial ideation. Accordingly, although people who were generally disposed toward conspiratorial thinking evaluated the theories more favourably, this susceptibility did not fully explain why the theories appeared plausible or engaging. Further, despite the limited differences observed between theories on explanatory and narrative qualities, these metrics still explained a meaningful proportion of variance in plausibility and engagement across studies. Exploratory within-participant analyses in Studies 2a and 2b also provide tentative evidence that explanatory virtues

may be particularly relevant to plausibility, although narrative virtues did not show the corresponding predicted advantage for engagement. The present research thus points to a comparatively understudied area in the conspiracy theory literature: the contents and features of theories themselves. That is, the present work suggests that conspiracy theories may succeed when they seem to offer convincing explanations and compelling stories, even when controlling for individual differences in conspiracy ideation.

Our results suggest that perceived explanatory and narrative quality shape responses not only to everyday explanations and neutral laboratory scenarios (Green & Brock, 2000; Lombrozo, 2007; Sangalang et al., 2019; Zemla et al., 2017), but also to oppositional, socially consequential claims about which individuals may hold strong prior attitudes. These findings indicate that conspiracy theories may then not be categorically distinct from, and may be evaluated under the same constraints, as other kinds of information. Conspiracy belief has been associated with implausible beliefs, cognitive biases, and overreliance on intuitive thinking (Brotherton & French, 2014; van Prooijen, 2017), and accordingly, much of the existing psychology literature has treated them as fringe beliefs, wherein only individuals possessing particular characteristics are expected to believe or intentionally engage with them. While individual differences may explain some variability in their reception, our studies, and the few related works in this area (Marsh & Kleinberg, 2025; Mirabile & Horne, 2019; van Prooijen et al., 2022), suggest that individuals may be led astray by the impression that a conspiracy theory is a good explanation or story, and thus are inclined to believe and engage with it. This interpretation is consistent with prior work showing that explanatory quality guides hypothesis acceptance (Douven & Mirabile, 2018) and decisions about what information warrants further investigation (Mirabile & Lombrozo, 2019), while narrative features like transportation facilitate

content-consistent beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000). Indeed, across all four studies, we found that even non-believers reliably rated conspiracy theories as good explanations and stories, and conspiratorial ideation explained only a small proportion of variance in success. Accordingly, in the same ways that people assess everyday claims, conspiracy theories perceived as having the attributes of good explanations and compelling stories may be seen as plausible and engaging, perhaps leading some to prefer them over official versions of events.

6.2 Differential Prediction of Plausibility and Engagement

A central contribution of the present studies is that explanatory and narrative virtues independently predicted conspiracy theory success. The two constructs were related, as may be expected given that a good story often contains an explanation and vice versa. Nevertheless, factor analyses demonstrated that our measures represented two distinct constructs, and both accounted for unique variance in plausibility and engagement. Results therefore suggest that explanatory and narrative evaluations are not interchangeable manifestations of a single construct. People may evaluate whether a theory makes sense of the available evidence well and whether it constitutes a compelling account of what happened. Conspiracy theories may thus be especially effective when they satisfy both criteria in offering an apparent resolution to uncertainty while embedding that resolution within an engaging story of intentional and concealed actions (Douglas et al., 2019; Munro, 2024).

Explanatory virtues were expected to function as indicators of epistemic quality and to therefore predict plausibility more strongly, whereas narrative virtues were expected to capture the experiential appeal of "consuming" a good story and therefore predict engagement more strongly. This pattern did not consistently emerge in the regression models. Instead, both explanatory and narrative virtues predicted both plausibility and engagement, and neither

construct showed a stable advantage for its hypothesized corresponding outcome across studies. However, the within-participant correlational analyses provided some evidence of the predicted relationship for explanatory virtues in Studies 2a and 2b, where explanatory virtues were more strongly associated with plausibility than narrative virtues were, whereas the two virtues were similarly associated with engagement.

This limited differentiation observed across studies suggests that while explanatory and narrative virtues are distinct evaluative considerations, they may not offer completely distinct routes to success. For instance, a compelling story may increase plausibility by organizing information into a coherent causal sequence, making events easier to imagine and experience as realistic (Green & Appel, 2024; Plangger & Campbell, 2022; Zwaan, 2024). Conversely, a convincing explanation may increase engagement by producing insight, raising additional questions, or motivating further investigation (Laukkonen et al., 2020; Liquin & Lombrozo, 2022; Mirabile & Lombrozo, 2019). In this sense, explanatory and narrative virtues may function as independent constructs, but each may have some influence on both the plausibility of and engagement with a conspiracy theory.

We also found that, while variance explained was quite high across studies, our regression models generally explained more variance in plausibility than in engagement, a difference which appears to have been driven primarily by measurement format rather than a substantive distinction between the outcomes. In Study 1a, where explanatory and narrative virtues were assessed using multi-item measures, the models accounted for similar proportions of variance in plausibility and engagement. The larger discrepancy emerged when the constructs were assessed using single items, which retained strong predictive relationships with plausibility but showed comparatively weaker relationships with engagement. Similarly, while exploratory

analyses provided some evidence that plausibility may be more strongly related to explanatory than narrative virtues, we did not find the same effect with engagement and narrative virtues.

One possibility is that the single-item measures did not sufficiently capture the dimensions included in the multi-item scales. That is, while both measures included definitions detailing the characteristics we assigned to each construct, combining them into one global judgement may have concealed evaluative considerations that are distinct to engagement. For instance, deciding whether a theory could be true may draw on an overall impression of how simple or coherent the account appears (Marsh & Kleinberg, 2025; Lombrozo, 2007; Zemla et al., 2017). The short-form measures were designed to summarize these qualities in a single judgement and may therefore align closely with a similarly global evaluation of plausibility. In contrast, engagement may be broader and more heterogeneous. Our composite combines willingness to share and seek further information, which may arise from different motivations and depend on factors beyond an overall assessment of explanatory or narrative quality. Information seeking may be driven by curiosity or interestingness (Liquin & Lombrozo, 2020; Loewenstein, 1994), whereas sharing may depend more on things like emotional arousal or entertainment value (Berger & Milkman, 2012; van Prooijen et al., 2022). A single summary rating may therefore be less able to represent the pathways through which a theory becomes engaging. This measurement limitation may also partially explain why narrative virtues were not more strongly associated with engagement in the within-participant comparisons. If the single-item narrative virtue measure did not adequately capture aspects of narrative quality most relevant to sharing and information seeking, the expected differential relationship may have been reduced. The lower variance explained in engagement should thus not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that explanatory and narrative virtues matter less to engagement. Rather, the short-

form measures may have sacrificed some predictive ability when applied to a multifaceted behavioural outcome.

6.3 Differences Between Theories

Our account holds that some conspiracy theories succeed over others because they are better explanations and stories. Accordingly, we expected some individual conspiracy theories to emerge as possessing stronger explanatory and narrative qualities than others, especially in Studies 2a and 2b, which included a large within-subjects pool of conspiracy theories that varied in topic and plausibility. Despite the consistency of effects and high variance explained in each model, few reliable differences emerged between theories on explanatory virtues, narrative virtues, plausibility, or engagement. Across all four studies, ratings for the conspiracy theories generally fell around the midpoint of the scales. This limited differentiation was initially attributed to the between-subjects designs of the first two studies, where participants rated only one theory and thus lacked an immediate comparison point. Yet, the same broad pattern emerged when participants rated 10 theories.

This result cannot be attributed to simple noise arising from inattentive participants: A substantial portion of variance in plausibility and engagement measures was captured by corresponding variance in the measures of explanatory and narrative virtues. Similarly, comparing results from Study 2a and 2b in predicting conspiracy success shows that, in some models, the paragraph-length stimuli have a slightly better model fit than the sentence-based versions. Such effects suggest that giving participants more content on which to base their judgements produced stronger associations between the measures, which is contrary to what one may expect if participants were ignoring the stimuli and responding at random. Findings therefore suggest that while explanatory and narrative virtues reliably predict conspiracy theory

success, differentiation between theories may be flattened due to individual preferences and stimulus construction itself.

Conspiracy theory preferences may have varied idiosyncratically across participants. Factors such as political attitudes, personal relevance, and topic-specific beliefs may lead participants to favour different theories, and as such, when responses are aggregated to the mean, these divergent preferences produce similar scores even when participants meaningfully distinguish the stimuli. People tend to favour certain conspiracy theories over others (e.g., Enders et al., 2023; Jolley et al., 2020, 2024) and familiarity with misinformation increases perceived truth (Pennycook et al., 2018; Udry & Barber, 2024). As such, the relative success of a conspiracy theory may then depend on interactions between content, recipient, and the broader context under which the theory is encountered (Blackington & Cayton, 2024; Wang & van Prooijen, 2023). Although our theories pertained to a diverse range of topics and there is evidence to suggest most participants did not rate theories homogeneously, differences may have been more pronounced if they explicitly elicited things like existential threat (van Prooijen, 2020) or identity-based motivations (van Prooijen, 2024).

In all four studies, theories were also written and standardized using ChatGPT, with the information included having been selected by the first author, to ensure comparable length, clarity, organization, and detail. This approach yielded methodological control and added to existing literature which often employs brief stimuli (e.g., Pennycook et al., 2026), but it may also have strengthened weaker theories and compressed natural differences between them. Evidence for this prospect derives from Study 2a and 2b. The claim that Bill Gates used COVID-19 vaccines to increase surveillance, or that Area 51 houses alien paraphernalia, was expected to be seen as relatively implausible; however, they were rated among the most believable in the

complete set. Further, although the sentence-length variants were also written by ChatGPT, they offered significantly less context and detail compared to the versions used in the other studies and thus received significantly lower ratings on all primary measures. AI models have been shown to produce convincing conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial content (Chen & Shu, 2024; Huang & Wang, 2023; Spitale et al., 2023) and AI-generated misinformation also differs from human-written content in that it tends to use more emotional language, emphasize risks, employ more causal reasoning, and contain fewer informal expressions, compared to human-generated content (Zhou et al., 2023). Given that the theories used here were standardized and written by the same large language model family across studies, this account may offer a partial explanation as to why our theories, despite differing in prominence and plausibility, received high evaluations on measures of interest. Similarly, contrary to how conspiracy theories are often encountered in real life, even dubious theories contained seemingly well-developed arguments and evidence with clear connections between them. This, coupled with the fact that participants were instructed to only evaluate using the information provided, may have thus inflated ratings and led participants to the conclusion that even comparatively weaker theories are of equal quality to those with stronger evidence and claims.

6.4 Limitations and Future Directions

The present research was motivated by the observation that some conspiracy theories become widely believed and culturally durable, while others remain obscure. To capture a diverse range of theories in terms of topic, prominence, and plausibility, we drew them from existing studies and other publicly available sources, and hand-identified their contents (e.g., evidence and alleged perpetrators) through online searches. This approach enhanced the control and validity of our materials; however, by definition, it also meant that a theory had to have

already achieved at least a moderate degree of success to be identifiable and included. These studies therefore compared theories that varied on the aforementioned characteristics but had all ultimately passed a minimum threshold of transmission. This limits our ability to distinguish genuinely successful theories from those that failed to attract attention. A stronger test may thus require constructing novel conspiracy theories and experimentally varying their explanatory and narrative qualities to examine which are believed, remembered, investigated, or shared. Alternatively, materials could be drawn directly from social media, online forums, or videos as fledgling conspiracy theories emerge, only some of which will go on to be successful as we have defined it here.

The wording of the outcome measures should also be considered. Plausibility and information-seeking items used relatively soft language, such as whether participants could see how a theory might be true or might seek additional information in the future. While these measures are in line with definitions of plausibility (Abendroth & Richter, 2021), responses near the midpoint may therefore indicate openness, uncertainty, or an inability to rule out the claim rather than belief or behavioural intent (Lombardi et al., 2016). Similarly, conspiracy theory success may be comparative rather than absolute, such that a theory may gain traction when it appears to better explain or provides a better story than the official or other versions of events. These weaker forms of receptivity may nevertheless be consequential. Even without producing strong endorsement or immediate behavioural effects, plausible information can influence beliefs and subsequent behaviour (Hinze et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2023; Pezdek et al., 2006), and conspiracy theories may therefore destabilize or undermine confidence in official accounts by creating the impression that relevant information is missing or alternative explanations are possible. Future studies should aim to distinguish these degrees of belief, such as the difference

between considering a claim possible, tentatively accepting it, and firmly believing it. Another natural extension would be to compare conspiratorial and official or lay theories, of the same events on the dimensions assessed in these studies. Judgements about the best explanation, for instance, depend on the quality of available alternatives (Mirabile & Lombrozo, 2019), and so such a design would elicit a stronger test of the causal role of explanatory and narrative characteristics.

The correlational nature of the present studies also precludes causal conclusions. Although greater perceived explanatory and narrative virtues consistently and positively predicted conspiracy theory success, the relationship may be reversed such that participants attributed greater virtues to theories they already found plausible or engaging. To further delineate this relationship, future studies should experimentally manipulate the explanatory and narrative virtues of conspiracy theories while holding central claims and evidence constant. Such designs would help establish whether these factors causally influence conspiracy theory reception and would help identify which components are most influential. Likewise, it may be useful to further examine objective textual characteristics versus perceived characteristics. Concerning narrative virtues, for instance, future studies could examine bottom-up structural properties that produce these experiences, including components like the temporal and causal organization of events, and interactions among agents. A theory designed to be narratively well-structured may not be experienced as such by readers who reject its claims, whereas believers may fill gaps in a vague theory and perceive it to be a better story than it is. Comparing researcher-coded and participant-perceived virtues would clarify where objective features and subjective evaluations may diverge.

Finally, additional analysis of large language models in crafting conspiracy theories warrants further investigation. We suspect that ChatGPT generated theories may have flattened differences between the conspiracy theories (in particular, by increasing the perceived plausibility of the most outlandish theories). Future studies assessing features of AI-generated content, like surface form (e.g., grammar, flow), may reveal the boundary conditions of its ability to sell people on misinformation. These studies could also clarify whether generative AI increases the appeal of conspiratorial claims by improving their explanatory components, narrative presentation, or other persuasive characteristics.

6.5 Conclusion

Our research suggests that people see conspiracy theories as convincing explanations and compelling stories, and these characteristics are associated with how believable or engaging the theory is. These findings replicated across measures, theory pools, and presentation formats, and remained after accounting for individual tendencies towards conspiratorial thinking. Such results therefore demonstrate that investigation of individual susceptibility is insufficient to comprehensively understand the psychology of conspiracy theories; the characteristics of the claims themselves also matter. Conspiracy theory success may reflect a complex relationship between the content of the theory and the person who evaluates it. Conspiracy theories constitute an ever-growing societal challenge, and by shifting attention from an exclusive focus on who believes to a broader account of what makes particular theories compelling, this research provides a foundation for explaining how their structure and presentation contribute to belief, engagement, and cultural persistence.

References

Abendroth, J., & Richter, T. (2021). Mere plausibility enhances comprehension: The role of plausibility in comprehending an unfamiliar scientific debate. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *113*(7), 1304-1322. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000651

Albarracin, D., Albarracin, J., Chan, M. S., & Jamieson, K. H. (2021). *Creating conspiracy beliefs: How our thoughts are shaped*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108990936

Altay, S., Claidière, N., & Mercier, H. (2020). It happened to a friend of a friend: Inaccurate source reporting in rumour diffusion. *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, *2*, Article e49. https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2020.53

Altay, S., De Araujo, E., & Mercier, H. (2022). "If this account is true, it is most enormously wonderful": Interestingness-if-true and the sharing of true and false news. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(3), 373-394. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1941163

Aslett, K., Sanderson, Z., Godel, W., Persily, N., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2024). Online searches to evaluate misinformation can increase its perceived veracity. *Nature*, *625*(7995), 548-556. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06883-y

Azzopardi, L. (2021). Cognitive biases in search: A review and reflection of cognitive biases in information retrieval. In *Proceedings of the 2021 Conference on Human Information Interaction and Retrieval* 27-37. https://doi.org/10.1145/3406522.3446023

Bago, B., Rand, D. G., & Pennycook, G. (2020). Fake news, fast and slow: Deliberation reduces belief in false (but not true) news headlines. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *149*(8), 1608-1613. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000729

Barkun, M. (2015). Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge. *Diogenes*, *62*(3-4), 114-120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192116669288

Berger, J. (2025). What gets shared, and why? Interpersonal communication and word of mouth. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *76*(1), 559-581. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-013024-031524

Berger, J., Kim, Y. D., & Meyer, R. (2021). What makes content engaging? How emotional dynamics shape success. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *48*(2), 235-250. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab010

Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, *49*(2), 192-205. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353

Berlyne, D. E. (1960). Stimulus selection and conflict. In D. E. Berlyne, *Conflict, arousal, and curiosity* (pp. 1-17). McGraw-Hill Book Company. https://doi.org/10.1037/11164-001

Bertin, P., Nera, K., & Delouvée, S. (2020). Conspiracy beliefs, rejection of vaccination, and support for hydroxychloroquine: A conceptual replication-extension in the COVID-19 pandemic context. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, Article 565128. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.565128

Binnendyk, J., & Pennycook, G. (2022). Intuition, reason, and conspiracy beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*, Article 101387. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101387

Blackington, C., & Cayton, F. (2024). How to stay popular: Threat, framing, and conspiracy theory longevity. *Perspectives on Politics*, *22*(4), 1118-1139. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723003006

Boudry, M. (2023). Why we should be suspicious of conspiracy theories: A novel demarcation problem. *Episteme*, *20*(3), 611-631. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.34

Brotherton, R., & French, C. C. (2014). Belief in conspiracy theories and susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *28*(2), 238-248. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2995

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: The generic conspiracist beliefs scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, Article 279. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Bruner, R. (2019, July 17). *How the Area 51 raid meme became the galaxy's biggest joke*. TIME. https://time.com/5628391/area-51-meme-explained/

Bullock, O. M., Shulman, H. C., & Huskey, R. (2021). Narratives are persuasive because they are easier to understand: Examining processing fluency as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. *Frontiers in Communication*, *6*, Article 719615. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.719615

Butter, M. (2021). Conspiracy theories–conspiracy narratives. *DIEGESIS*, *10*(1). https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/415/601

Byrne, B. M. (2016). *Structural equation modeling with AMOS: Basic concepts, applications, and programming,* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315757421

Cai, Y., Kamarudin, S., & Nujaimi, S. (2025). Willingness to share information on social media: A systematic literature review (2020–2024). *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, Article 1567506. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1567506

Carter, C. (Executive Producer). (1993-2018). *The X-Files* [TV series]. Ten Thirteen Productions; 20th Century Fox Television.

Chater, N., & Loewenstein, G. (2016). The under-appreciated drive for sense-making. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, *126*, 137-154. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2015.10.016

Chen, C., & Shu, K. (2024). Combating misinformation in the age of LLMs: Opportunities and challenges. *AI Magazine*, *45*(3), 354-368. https://doi.org/10.1002/aaai.12188

Chen, X., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2023). What makes news sharable on social media? *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, *3,* 1-27. https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2023.007

Chen, X., Sin, S. C. J., Theng, Y. L., & Lee, C. S. (2015). Why do social media users share misinformation? *Proceedings of the 15th ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conference on Digital Libraries* (pp. 111-114). https://doi.org/10.1145/2756406.2756941

Chen, Z., & Berger, J. (2013). When, why, and how controversy causes conversation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *40*(3), 580-593. https://doi.org/10.1086/671465

Cruz, F., & Lombrozo, T. (2025). How laypeople evaluate scientific explanations containing jargon. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *9*(10), 2038-2053. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02227-0

De Angelis, M., Bonezzi, A., Peluso, A. M., Rucker, D. D., & Costabile, M. (2012). On braggarts and gossips: A self-enhancement account of word-of-mouth generation and transmission. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *49*(4), 551-563. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.11.0136

Delouvée, S. (2015). Repeating is not believing: The transmission of conspiracy theories. *Diogenes*, *62*(3-4), 56-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192120945609

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2023). What are conspiracy theories? A definitional approach to their correlates, consequences, and communication. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *74*(1), 271-298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538-542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*(S1), 3-35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Douven, I., & Mirabile, P. (2018). Best, second-best, and good-enough explanations: How they matter to reasoning. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *44*(11), 1792-1813. https://doi.org/10.1037/xlm0000545

Ecker, U. K.H., Butler, L. H., & Hamby, A. (2020). You don't have to tell a story! A registered report testing the effectiveness of narrative versus non-narrative misinformation corrections. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, *5*(1), Article 64. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00266-x

Effron, D. A., & Raj, M. (2020). Misinformation and morality: Encountering fake-news headlines makes them seem less unethical to publish and share. *Psychological Science*, *31*(1), 75-87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619887896

Enders, A. M., Farhart, C., Miller, J., Uscinski, J., Saunders, K., & Drochon, H. (2023). Are Republicans and conservatives more likely to believe conspiracy theories? *Political Behavior*, *45*(4), 2001-2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09812-3

Enders, A. M., & Uscinski, J. E. (2021). Are misinformation, antiscientific claims, and conspiracy theories for political extremists? *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *24*(4), 583-605. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220960805

Escalas, J. E. (2004). Imagine yourself in the product: Mental simulation, narrative transportation, and persuasion. *Journal of Advertising*, *33*(2), 37-48. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2004.10639163

Fisher, W. R. (1985). The narrative paradigm: In the beginning. *Journal of Communication*, *35*(4), 74-89. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb02974.x

Ford, D., & Nadarevic, L. (2025). Revisiting the plausibility effect in remembering truth and falsity: An analysis of underlying memory and guessing processes. *Journal of Cognition*, *8*(1), Article 46. https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.459

Globig, L. K., & Sharot, T. (2024). Considering information-sharing motives to reduce misinformation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *59*, Article 101852. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101852

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *15*(4), 731-742. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791630

Goldberg, R. A. (2008). *Enemies within: The culture of conspiracy in modern America*. Yale University Press.

Green, M. C., & Appel, M. (2024). Narrative transportation: How stories shape how we see ourselves and the world. In B. Gawronski (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 70, pp. 1-82). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2024.03.002

Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*(5), 701-721. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701

Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. *Science*, *363*(6425), 374-378. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706

Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, *5*(1), Article eaau4586. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586

Hamby, A., Kim, H., & Spezzano, F. (2024). Sensational stories: The role of narrative characteristics in distinguishing real and fake news and predicting their spread. *Journal of Business Research*, *170*, Article 114289. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114289

Harman, G. H. (1965). The inference to the best explanation. *The Philosophical Review*, *74*(1), 88-95. https://doi.org/10.2307/2183532

Hattersley, M., Orchinik, R., Ludvig, E. A., & Bhui, R. (2023). Preferences for descriptiveness and co-explanation in complex explanations. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, *45*(45), 2796-2803. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/08m8d3cg

Hinze, S. R., Slaten, D. G., Horton, W. S., Jenkins, R., & Rapp, D. N. (2014). Pilgrims sailing the Titanic: Plausibility effects on memory for misinformation. *Memory & Cognition*, *42*(2), 305-324. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-013-0359-9

Huang, G., & Wang, S. (2023). Is artificial intelligence more persuasive than humans? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, *73*(6), 552-562. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad024

Huang, Y., & Wang, W. (2022). When a story contradicts: Correcting health misinformation on social media through different message formats and mechanisms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *25*(8), 1192-1209. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1851390

Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. K. (2017). Too special to be duped: Need for uniqueness motivates conspiracy beliefs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *47*(6), 724-734. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2265

Jalbert, M., & Pillai, R. (2024). An illusory consensus effect: The mere repetition of information increases estimates that others would believe or already know it. *Collabra: Psychology*, *10*(1), Article 124533. https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.124533

Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1983). *Mental models: Towards a cognitive science of language, inference, and consciousness*, *6*. Harvard University Press.

Johnson, S. G. B., Valenti, J. J., & Keil, F. C. (2019). Simplicity and complexity preferences in causal explanation: An opponent heuristic account. *Cognitive Psychology*, *113*, Article 101222. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2019.05.004

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, *105*(1), 35-56. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018

Jolley, D., Meleady, R., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups. *British Journal of Psychology*, *111*(1), 17-35. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12385

Jolley, D., Paterson, J. L., & McNeill, A. (2024). The impact of conspiracy beliefs on a targeted group: Perceived popularity of Jewish-targeted conspiracy beliefs elicits outgroup avoidant behaviours. *British Journal of Psychology*, *115*(2), 345-362. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12690

Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(3), 109-126. https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659

Kim, Y. (2015). Exploring the effects of source credibility and others' comments on online news evaluation. *Electronic News*, *9*(3), 160-176. https://doi.org/10.1177/1931243115593318

Klein, G., Jalaeian, M., Hoffman, R. R., & Mueller, S. T. (2023). The plausibility transition model for sensemaking. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, Article 1160132. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1160132

Klofstad, C., Christley, O., Diekman, A., Kübler, S., Enders, A., Funchion, J., Littrell, S., Murthi, M., Premaratne, K., Seelig, M., Verdear, D., Wuchty, S., Drochon, F., & Uscinski, J. (2025). Belief in white replacement. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *13*(2), 387-411. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2024.2342834

Knobloch, S., Patzig, G., Mende, A. M., & Hastall, M. (2004). Affective news: Effects of discourse structure in narratives on suspense, curiosity, and enjoyment while reading news and novels. *Communication Research*, *31*(3), 259-287. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650203261517

Larsson, A. O. (2011). Interactive to me–interactive to you? A study of use and appreciation of interactivity on Swedish newspaper websites. *New Media & Society*, *13*(7), 1180-1197. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811401254

Laukkonen, R. E., Kaveladze, B. T., Tangen, J. M., & Schooler, J. W. (2020). The dark side of Eureka: Artificially induced Aha moments make facts feel true. *Cognition*, *196*, Article 104122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2019.104122

Lazić, A., & Žeželj, I. (2021). A systematic review of narrative interventions: Lessons for countering anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Public Understanding of Science*, *30*(6), 644-670. https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211011881

Lim, J. B., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2020). Explanatory preferences for complexity matching. *PLOS ONE*, *15*(4), Article e0230929. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230929

Lipton, P. (2017). Inference to the best explanation. In W. H. Newton-Smith (Ed.), *A companion to the philosophy of science* (pp. 184-193). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405164481.ch29

Liquin, E. G., & Lombrozo, T. (2020). A functional approach to explanation-seeking curiosity. *Cognitive Psychology*, *119*, Article 101276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2020.101276

Liquin, E. G., & Lombrozo, T. (2022). Motivated to learn: An account of explanatory satisfaction. *Cognitive Psychology*, *132*, Article 101453. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2021.101453

Loewenstein, G. (1994). The psychology of curiosity: A review and reinterpretation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *116*(1), 75-98. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.116.1.75

Lombardi, D., Nussbaum, E. M., & Sinatra, G. M. (2016). Plausibility judgments in conceptual change and epistemic cognition. *Educational Psychologist*, *51*(1), 35-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2015.1113134

Lombrozo, T. (2007). Simplicity and probability in causal explanation. *Cognitive Psychology*, *55*(3), 232-257. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2006.09.006

Lombrozo, T. (2009). Explanation and categorization: How "why?" informs "what?". *Cognition*, *110*(2), 248-253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2008.10.007

Lombrozo, T. (2012). Explanation and abductive inference. In K. J. Holyoak & R. G. Morrison (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of thinking and reasoning* (pp. 260-276). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734689.013.0014

Lombrozo, T. (2016). Explanatory preferences shape learning and inference. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *20*(10), 748-759. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2016.08.001

Luo, M., Hancock, J. T., & Markowitz, D. M. (2022). Credibility perceptions and detection accuracy of fake news headlines on social media: Effects of truth-bias and endorsement cues. *Communication Research*, *49*(2), 171-195. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220921321

Mackonis, A. (2013). Inference to the best explanation, coherence and other explanatory virtues. *Synthese*, *190*(6), 975-995. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-0054-y

Maier, J., & Richter, T. (2013). How nonexperts understand conflicting information on social science issues: The role of perceived plausibility and reading goals. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, *25*(1), 14-26. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000078

Mancosu, M., & Vassallo, S. (2022). The life cycle of conspiracy theories: Evidence from a long-term panel survey on conspiracy beliefs in Italy. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, *52*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.57

Mandler, J. M., & Johnson, N. S. (1977). Remembrance of things parsed: Story structure and recall. *Cognitive Psychology*, *9*(1), 111-151. https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(77)90006-8

Marsh, E. J. (2007). Retelling is not the same as recalling: Implications for memory. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *16*(1), 16-20. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00467.x

Marsh, H. W., Hau, K. T., & Wen, Z. (2004). In search of golden rules: Comment on hypothesis-testing approaches to setting cutoff values for fit indexes and dangers in overgeneralizing Hu and Bentler's (1999) findings. *Structural Equation Modeling*, *11*(3), 320-341. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328007sem1103_2

Marsh, J. K., Coachys, C., & Kleinberg, S. (2022). The compelling complexity of conspiracy theories. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, *44*(44), 2185-2192. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0sw059jb

Marsh, J. K., & Kleinberg, S. (2025). Go big or go hoax: Explanatory scope and the believability of conspiracy theories. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 47*(0), 1492-1498. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7gc219mf

Matsuki, K., Chow, T., Hare, M., Elman, J. L., Scheepers, C., & McRae, K. (2011). Event-based plausibility immediately influences on-line language comprehension. *Journal of*

Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, *37*(4), 913-934. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022964

McGregor, M., Azzopardi, L., & Halvey, M. (2023). A systematic review of cost, effort, and load research in information search and retrieval, 1972–2020. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems*, *42*(1), 1-39. https://doi.org/10.1145/3583069

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *27*(1), 415-444. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415

Mirabile, P., & Horne, Z. (2019). Explanatory virtues and belief in conspiracy theories. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, *41*(0), 2365-2371. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/22d0g2ch

Mirabile, P., & Lombrozo, T. (2019). Explanatory considerations guide pursuit. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, *41*(0), 815-821. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5sf191t1

Mosleh, M., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Self-reported willingness to share political news articles in online surveys correlates with actual sharing on Twitter. *PLOS ONE, 15*(2), Article e0228882. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0228882

Munro, D. (2024). Conspiracy theories, epistemic self-identity, and epistemic territory. *Synthese*, *203*(4), Article 113. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-024-04541-y

O'Brien, E. J., & Cook, A. E. (2016). Coherence threshold and the continuity of processing: The RI-Val model of comprehension. *Discourse Processes*, *53*(5-6), 326-338. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2015.1123341

Orchinik, R., Bhui, R., & Rand, D. G. (2025). Replicability and generalizability of the repeated exposure effect on moral condemnation of fake news. *Nature Communications*, *16*(1), Article 7206. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-62462-x

Pennycook, G., Binnendyk, J., & Rand, D. G. (2026). Overconfidently conspiratorial: Conspiracy believers are dispositionally overconfident and massively overestimate how much others agree with them. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *52*(8), 2509-2528. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672251338358

Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2018). Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *147*(12), 1865-1880. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000465

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, *188*, 39-50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011

Perach, R., Joyner, L., Husbands, D., & Buchanan, T. (2023). Why do people share political information and misinformation online? Developing a bottom-up descriptive framework. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3), Article 20563051231192032. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231192032

Petit, J., Li, C., Millet, B., Ali, K., & Sun, R. (2021). Can we stop the spread of false information on vaccination? How online comments on vaccination news affect readers' credibility assessments and sharing behaviors. *Science Communication*, *43*(4), 407-434. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470211009887

Pezdek, K., Blandon-Gitlin, I., Lam, S., Hart, R. E., & Schooler, J. W. (2006). Is knowing believing? The role of event plausibility and background knowledge in planting false

beliefs about the personal past. *Memory & Cognition*, *34*(8), 1628-1635. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03195925

Plangger, K., & Campbell, C. L. (2022). Managing in an era of falsity: Falsity from the metaverse to fake news to fake endorsement to synthetic influence to false agendas. *Business Horizons*, *65*(6), 713–717. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2022.08.003

Pornpitakpan, C. (2004). The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *34*(2), 243-281. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02547.x

Ratcliff, C. L., & Sun, Y. (2020). Overcoming resistance through narratives: Findings from a meta-analytic review. *Human Communication Research*, *46*(4), 412-443. https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqz017

Rathje, S., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2025). The psychology of virality. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *29*(10), 914-927. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.06.014

Richter, T. (2015). Validation and comprehension of text information: Two sides of the same coin. *Discourse Processes*, *52*(5-6), 337-355. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2015.1025665

Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2022). Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law-related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *34*(7), 1485-1504. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

Sanchez, C., & Dunning, D. (2021). Jumping to conclusions: Implications for reasoning errors, false belief, knowledge corruption, and impeded learning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *120*(3), 789-815. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000375

Sangalang, A., Ophir, Y., & Cappella, J. N. (2019). The potential for narrative correctives to combat misinformation. *Journal of Communication*, *69*(3), 298-319. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz014

Schaeffer, K. (2020, July 24). *A look at the Americans who believe there is some truth to the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was planned*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/

Sehl, C. G., Tran, E., Denison, S., & Friedman, O. (2022). Novelty preferences depend on goals. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, *29*(6), 2293-2301. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-022-02118-9

Simon, H. A. (1956). Rational choice and the structure of the environment. *Psychological Review, 63*(2), 129–138. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042769

Spitale, G., Biller-Andorno, N., & Germani, F. (2023). AI model GPT-3 (dis)informs us better than humans. *Science Advances*, *9*(26), Article eadh1850. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh1850

Stone, O. (Director). (1991). *JFK* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Sundar, S. S. (2008). The MAIN model: A heuristic approach to understanding technology effects on credibility. In M. J. Metzger & A. J. Flanagin (Eds.), *Digital media, youth, and credibility* (pp. 73-100). MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.1162/dmal.9780262562324.073

Sundar, S. S., & Nass, C. (2001). Conceptualizing sources in online news. *Journal of Communication*, *51*(1), 52-72. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02872.x

Sunstein, C. R. (2014). *On rumors: How falsehoods spread, why we believe them, and what can be done*. Princeton University Press.

Suzuki, M., & Yamamoto, Y. (2021). Characterizing the influence of confirmation bias on web search behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 771948. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.771948

Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *24*(6), 749-761. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1583

Swami, V., Coles, R., Stieger, S., Pietschnig, J., Furnham, A., Rehim, S., & Voracek, M. (2011). Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology*, *102*(3), 443-463. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2010.02004.x

Swami, V., Voracek, M., Stieger, S., Tran, U. S., & Furnham, A. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition*, *133*(3), 572-585. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2014.08.006

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2021). *Using multivariate statistics* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Turner, B. R. (2025). Narrative affordances: What stories can and cannot do. *Academy of Management Annals*, *19*(2), 522-564. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2023.0101

Tversky, B., & Marsh, E. J. (2000). Biased retellings of events yield biased memories. *Cognitive Psychology*, *40*(1), 1-38. https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.1999.0720

Udry, J., & Barber, S. J. (2024). The illusory truth effect: A review of how repetition increases belief in misinformation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *56*, Article 101736. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101736

Urman, A., Makhortykh, M., Ulloa, R., & Kulshrestha, J. (2022). Where the earth is flat and 9/11 is an inside job: A comparative algorithm audit of conspiratorial information in web search results. *Telematics and Informatics*, *72*, Article 101860. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2022.101860

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

van Prooijen, J. W. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *31*(1), 50-58. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3301

van Prooijen, J. W. (2020). An existential threat model of conspiracy theories. *European Psychologist*, *25*(1), 16-25. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000381

van Prooijen, J. W. (2024). Group-oriented motivations underlying conspiracy theories. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *27*(5), 1050-1067. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302241240696

van Prooijen, J. W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies*, *10*(3), 323-333. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615

van Prooijen, J. W., Douglas, K. M., & De Inocencio, C. (2018). Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(3), 320-335. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331

van Prooijen, J. W., Krouwel, A. P., & Pollet, T. V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(5), 570-578. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614567356

van Prooijen, J. W., Ligthart, J., Rosema, S., & Xu, Y. (2022). The entertainment value of conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology*, *113*(1), 25-48. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522

Vital, N., Chevalier, A., Dosso, C., & Trémolière, B. (2025). Conspiracy beliefs and analytical thinking in COVID-19 information web search. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, *20*, Article 100804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2025.100804

Vogl, E., Pekrun, R., Murayama, K., & Loderer, K. (2020). Surprised–curious–confused: Epistemic emotions and knowledge exploration. *Emotion*, *20*(4), 625-641. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000578

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, *359*(6380), 1146-1151. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559

Wang, H., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2023). Stolen elections: How conspiracy beliefs during the 2020 American presidential elections changed over time. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *37*(2), 277-289. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3996

Weaver, K., Garcia, S. M., Schwarz, N., & Miller, D. T. (2007). Inferring the popularity of an opinion from its familiarity: A repetitive voice can sound like a chorus. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*(5), 821-833. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.5.821

Weisberg, D. S., Taylor, J. C., & Hopkins, E. J. (2015). Deconstructing the seductive allure of neuroscience explanations. *Judgment and Decision Making*, *10*(5), 429-441. https://doi.org/10.1017/S193029750000557X

Williams, M. N., Marques, M. D., Hill, S. R., Kerr, J. R., & Ling, M. (2022). Why are beliefs in different conspiracy theories positively correlated across individuals? Testing

monological network versus unidimensional factor model explanations. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *61*(3), 1011-1031. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12518

Williams, M. N., Marques, M. D., Kerr, J. R., Hill, S. R., Ling, M., & Clarke, E. J. (2025). Does developing a belief in one conspiracy theory lead a person to be more likely to believe in others? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *55*(4), 554-564. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3153

Yale, R. N. (2013). Measuring narrative believability: Development and validation of the Narrative Believability Scale (NBS-12). *Journal of Communication*, *63*(3), 578-599. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12035

Yang, Z. J., & Kahlor, L. (2013). What, me worry? The role of affect in information seeking and avoidance. *Science Communication*, *35*(2), 189-212. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547012441873

Zemla, J. C., Sloman, S., Bechlivanidis, C., & Lagnado, D. A. (2017). Evaluating everyday explanations. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, *24*(5), 1488-1500. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-017-1258-z

Zhou, J., Zhang, Y., Luo, Q., Parker, A. G., & De Choudhury, M. (2023, April). Synthetic lies: Understanding AI-generated misinformation and evaluating algorithmic and human solutions. *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 1-20). https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581318

Zukerman, I. (2024). A brief summary of explanatory virtues [Preprint] *arXiv*. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2411.16709

Zwaan, R. A. (2022). Conspiracy thinking as situation model construction. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*, Article 101413. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101413

Zwaan, R. A. (2024). Comprehension: From clause to conspiracy narrative. *Discourse Processes*, *61*(4-5), 166-179. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2024.2327271

Appendix A

List of Conspiracy Theories and Attention Check Cues Included in Studies 1a and 1b

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
Deepwater Horizon explosion	On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, causing a catastrophic spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Official accounts attribute the disaster to a blowout caused by safety lapses and poor maintenance. However, some propose that the explosion was orchestrated by radical environmental groups or rival oil companies, with motives to undermine BP, push for stricter environmental regulations, and halt expansion of offshore drilling and nuclear energy projects. The timing of the event—just one day before Earth Day—suggests an effort to amplify environmental awareness and public outrage. Several anomalies in the official story raise questions. In the days leading up to the event, BP stocks experienced an unusual dumping, suggesting prior knowledge of the event. SWAT teams were also dispatched to the site—a highly unusual response for a technical disaster—implying there were concerns beyond safety and cleanup. Lastly, some argue that the disaster served as a political tool for President Obama, who used the spill to justify stricter drilling restrictions, appealing to environmentalists and weakening the influence of "big oil." Critics of this theory may dismiss these points as coincidental or unsubstantiated. Proponents counter that the official narrative omits key details and downplays the broader implications. They argue that evidence may have been suppressed to	On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, causing a catastrophic oil spill. While officially blamed on a mechanical blowout, some argue the disaster was deliberately triggered by radical environmental activists aiming to force tighter energy regulations and stall offshore drilling expansion. These groups opposed a pending energy bill that supported increased drilling and new nuclear projects. The timing raises questions—the explosion occurred just one day before Earth Day, amplifying media attention and public outrage. Strangely, BP stock saw a massive sell-off in the days leading up to the disaster, suggesting foreknowledge among certain investors. Even more suspicious, the Obama administration deployed SWAT teams to the rig site—an unusual move for an industrial accident. This level of response implies a threat beyond a technical failure. Taken together, the timing, financial activity, and government behaviour suggest the explosion was a calculated act to reshape energy policy under the guise of an accident.

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	protect influential actors with vested interests. These inconsistencies, coupled with the event's timing and aftermath, demand deeper scrutiny into the true causes and motivations behind the Deepwater Horizon explosion.	
Korean Airlines 007 crash	The crash of Korean Airlines Flight 007 (KAL 007) in 1983, officially attributed to a Soviet missile strike after the aircraft allegedly entered restricted airspace, remains shrouded in controversy. Some individuals posit that the incident was part of a covert U.S. or Japanese military operation designed to provoke Soviet defenses and obscure surveillance missions. Proponents suggest the flight's deviation into Soviet territory was intentional, serving as a diversion to test Soviet air response protocols or shield reconnaissance aircraft operating in the area. These events suggest an effort to strategically gather Cold War intelligence and maintain dominance in the region. Key anomalies challenge the official narrative. First, debris was discovered far from Moneron Island in Japanese-controlled waters, contradicting Soviet claims about the crash location and raising questions about the precise point of impact. Second, despite extensive search efforts, no significant remains or personal effects were recovered, aside from minimal human remains—an unusual outcome for a commercial airliner. Third, KAL 007 reportedly maintained communication with other Korean Airlines crews 46 minutes after the supposed shootdown, raising doubts about the timeline.	Korean Airlines Flight 007 was shot down on September 1, 1983, after allegedly veering into Soviet airspace. Official narrative blames Soviet overreaction, but some believe the incident was a covert operation orchestrated by U.S. or Japanese military forces. KAL 007 was deliberately steered off course to provoke a Soviet response and provide cover for nearby American reconnaissance missions attempting to gather intelligence on Soviet air defense protocols and distract from U.S. surveillance activity in the area. Doubts arise from reports indicating that the plane remained in contact with other Korean Airlines crews 46 minutes after its supposed destruction—an inconsistency never fully addressed. Furthermore, the crash site yielded almost no passenger remains or luggage, aside from a few fragments, which is unusual for a disaster of that scale. Second, in such a heavily monitored region, the idea that U.S. radar failed to detect or warn the aircraft strains belief. These gaps suggest the shootdown wasn't accidental—it was strategic.

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	Critics of this theory dismiss it as speculative, citing Cold War-era chaos, investigative challenges, and limits to available evidence. However, proponents argue that inconsistencies in the official story, heavy reliance on Soviet and U.S. accounts, and the suppression of key evidence warrant further investigation. Defenders suggest skeptics are either misled by propaganda or complicit in obscuring uncomfortable truths about Cold War military strategies.	
Sutherland Springs shooting	The Sutherland Springs church shooting on November 5, 2017, officially attributed to Devin Patrick Kelley acting alone due to a domestic dispute, has sparked alternative theories suggesting it may have been a false flag operation. Some propose that Kelley was linked to far-left groups and that the attack was orchestrated to advance an anti-gun agenda. By targeting a predominantly white, Christian, conservative community—symbolic opponents of gun control—the event appears designed to incite public outrage over gun violence and polarize debates on firearm ownership. Anti-gun activists or government actors may seek to leverage the tragedy to push for stricter gun legislation, and Kelley's role is debated as either a willing participant or a scapegoat in this larger scheme. Anomalies in the official story raise questions. First, Kelley's Facebook profile was reportedly removed immediately after the attack, but witnesses claimed it displayed photos of him with antifa symbols, raising concerns surrounding his political affiliations. Additionally,	The Sutherland Springs church shooting on November 5, 2017, was officially blamed on Devin Patrick Kelley acting alone in a domestic dispute. But some argue the attack was part of a calculated effort by anti-gun activists, possibly linked to antifa or similar ideological groups, to inflame public sentiment and advance gun control legislation. By targeting a rural, conservative Christian congregation—demographics typically opposed to stricter firearm regulations—the incident appeared engineered to provoke outrage and shift national attitudes. Suspicion deepens given the lack of a clear motive even after extensive investigation, leaving key questions unanswered. Notably, Kelley's Facebook account was removed almost immediately, but witnesses claim it featured photos linking him to antifa imagery—details that were never publicly acknowledged. In addition, the FBI's failure to access or disclose contents from Kelley's phone raises concerns about what may have been intentionally hidden. Together, these elements suggest the event may have

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	authorities have not provided a thorough explanation of Kelley's motives, leaving gaps that invite speculation. The FBI also cite technical difficulties in accessing Kelley's phone, fueling suspicion that evidence was deliberately obscured. Critics argue that such claims lack substantial evidence, attributing gaps in the investigation to the inherent challenges of understanding mass shootings. Proponents counter that the quick erasure of Kelley's digital footprint and unresolved questions surrounding his affiliations point to a deliberate suppression of information. They maintain that skeptics of the alternative explanation are either misled by incomplete narratives or unwilling to question powerful interests at play.	served a political purpose, far beyond the personal narrative presented to the public.
Notre Dame fire	On April 15, 2019, the iconic Notre Dame Cathedral was engulfed in flames, destroying much of its roof and upper structure. Official reports attribute the disaster to an accidental malfunction during renovation efforts. However, some propose that the fire was deliberately set by influential groups—possibly tied to the French government, international art dealers, or tourism magnates—seeking to exploit the tragedy for financial and strategic gain. Amid widespread protests from the Yellow Vest movement, the fire provided an opportunity to redirect public focus, foster national solidarity, and secure substantial funding for redevelopment projects. Several aspects of the official story raise questions. Shortly before the fire, many priceless artifacts were removed from the	On April 15, 2019, fire consumed the roof and spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. While officials blamed faulty wiring during renovations, others point to powerful groups in the French government and global tourism sector as likely orchestrators. Their motive: to leverage a national tragedy for political unity and enormous financial gain. The blaze immediately triggered an emotional global response, bringing in nearly 1 billion euros in donations—funds that could be directed toward modernized reconstruction, boosting tourism, and solidifying cultural influence. Suspicion deepens with how quickly contemporary redesign proposals appeared, hinting that redevelopment talks had already begun. Even more telling, several irreplaceable artifacts had been

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	cathedral, as if their safety was prearranged. Additionally, architectural firms submitted detailed proposals for a modernized spire very quickly after the event, suggesting a vested financial interest. Finally, over a billion dollars were pledged towards repairs in record time, with little scrutiny over how the funds were allocated. These points suggest pre-existing plans to leverage a catastrophic event for economic and cultural advantage. Critics dismiss such claims as unfounded, citing extensive investigations into the fire's origins. Proponents of this theory argue that critical evidence may have been withheld to protect those with vested interests. They suggest skeptics have either been misled by an incomplete narrative or are reluctant to question authority. The rapid sequence of events following the fire, coupled with unexplained coincidences, warrants a closer look at the true motivations behind the Notre Dame tragedy.	quietly removed or secured before the fire, raising questions about whether the damage was truly unexpected. These details—paired with the financial windfall and rapid restoration plans—suggest the fire may not have been accidental, but rather a calculated event serving powerful interests behind the scenes.
Oklahoma City bombing	The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, officially attributed to Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols using a fertilizer-based truck bomb, has led to speculation that it was part of a covert government operation. Critics argue that McVeigh and Nichols served as scapegoats in a larger scheme to justify the passage of the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. The alleged perpetrators—elements within the U.S. government—sought to use the attack as a pretext to push through sweeping	The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, is officially blamed on Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who allegedly used a fertilizer truck bomb to carry out the attack. But many believe this narrative masks a larger operation orchestrated by elements within the U.S. government to justify a crackdown on domestic dissent, particularly among far-right groups, and to fast-track the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. That law—passed with striking speed—granted sweeping powers to federal agencies,

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	counterterrorism legislation. By framing the bombing as the work of far-right domestic terrorists, the government gained public support for expanded surveillance powers, and enhanced law enforcement authority, particularly targeting far-right groups seen as potential threats to federal power. Key anomalies challenge the official account. Physicist Samuel T. Cohen and others questioned whether a single fertilizer bomb could cause such extensive structural damage, and seismic data recorded two distinct "blips," suggesting the possibility of a secondary explosion inside the building. Additionally, Brigadier General Benton K. Partin stated that the observed damage required internal explosives, not just an external truck bomb. Finally, the rapid drafting and passage of counterterrorism legislation following the attack suggest that the agenda was premeditated, drawing comparisons to the Reichstag fire of 1933, which similarly enabled sweeping government crackdowns. Defenders of the official narrative attribute discrepancies to the chaos of the event and human error. Critics, however, argue that withheld information and inconsistencies in evidence point to deliberate obfuscation. By questioning these contradictions, skeptics challenge the motives and transparency of federal authorities.	suggesting it was waiting for the right trigger. Questions about the bombing's mechanics only deepen suspicions. Physicist Samuel T. Cohen doubted that a single truck bomb could have caused such devastation. Echoing this, Brigadier General Benton K. Partin argued that internal explosives were needed to explain the pattern of structural damage. These expert concerns, coupled with the timing of legislative action, suggest the attack may have been part of a broader, concealed agenda.
Carolingian Empire	The Carolingian Empire, traditionally celebrated as a defining force in medieval Europe from AD 614 to 911, faces speculation that it was an elaborate	The Carolingian Empire, long considered a cornerstone of early medieval Europe, may never have existed. According to growing claims, the empire—along with

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	fabrication. Critics argue that Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, in collaboration with Pope Sylvester II and possibly Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII, orchestrated this deception to legitimize Otto's rule. By fabricating nearly 300 years of history, including the legendary figure of Charlemagne, they sought to create a Christian imperial lineage that culminated in Otto's reign during the symbolic year AD 1000. This manufactured timeline bolstered Otto's claim to divine authority and strengthened the ideological foundation of the Holy Roman Empire. Anomalies in the historical record raise questions about the Carolingian period. Royal charters and monastic records from this era are often vague, absent, or proven forgeries created centuries later to suit political goals. There is a surprising scarcity of physical artifacts reliably dated to AD 614–911, despite abundant evidence from earlier and later periods. Furthermore, key documents relied upon by medieval historians frequently show signs of tampering or deliberate fabrication and when records appear authentic, their accounts often lack corresponding archaeological corroboration, further casting doubt on the period's authenticity. Defenders of the traditional narrative claim that gaps in evidence reflect the instability of the Early Middle Ages. Skeptics counter that these gaps, combined with the reliance on politically motivated sources, suggest a deliberate rewriting of history. By questioning this narrative, critics call for a reassessment of	its famed ruler Charlemagne—was a carefully constructed fiction developed by Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, Pope Sylvester II, and possibly Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII. Their goal was political: to backdate Otto's rule to the symbolic year 1000 and fabricate a grand Christian past that bolstered his claim to imperial authority. Suspicion arises from the little to no physical evidence that can be confidently traced to the period between AD 614 and 911, whereas material from surrounding centuries is far more plentiful. Notably, much of what we "know" comes from texts produced or preserved by institutions loyal to Otto, many of which have since been exposed as altered or forged. Even supposedly legitimate documents often lack archaeological backing. Together, these gaps suggest not a lost empire, but a deliberate insertion of phantom centuries to serve an imperial narrative.

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	the Carolingian Empire's existence and its role in shaping European history.	
UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico	In July 1947, reports of an unidentified flying object crashing near Roswell, New Mexico, captured national attention. The U.S. military initially claimed it had recovered a "flying saucer," only to retract this statement days later, asserting it was a weather balloon. In 1994, the explanation shifted again, with the government attributing the debris to a top-secret spy device. Critics argue these inconsistent accounts signal a deliberate cover-up, alleging that extraterrestrial technology—and possibly alien bodies—were recovered from the crash. The alleged culprits, elements within the U.S. government and military, sought to suppress this discovery to prevent public panic, protect national security, and exploit alien technology for military and strategic purposes. Anomalies in the official narrative fuel skepticism. First, the crash site was immediately locked down, and no physical evidence has been made publicly available, suggesting the possibility of a cover up. Second, witnesses like W.W. Brazel described debris unlike anything they had seen before, including strange metallic materials. Decades later, Lt. Col. Philip J. Corso claimed to have seen alien bodies from the crash stored at a military base. These accounts, paired with the military's refusal to display the recovered debris, suggest intentional suppression of the truth. Defenders of the official story attribute inconsistencies to miscommunication and	In July 1947, an unidentified flying object reportedly crashed near Roswell, New Mexico. While the U.S. military initially claimed it had recovered a "flying saucer," that story quickly changed—first to a weather balloon, then, decades later, to a classified surveillance device. These shifting explanations have led many to believe that elements within the government and military intentionally concealed the recovery of alien technology and bodies to avoid mass panic, preserve control over revolutionary technology, and prevent other global powers from gaining access to whatever was found. Notably, several eyewitnesses—including Lt. Col. Philip J. Corso—described handling unfamiliar debris and claimed alien bodies were stored at military facilities. The immediate and total lockdown of the crash site, paired with the military's refusal to publicly present any recovered materials, strengthens the case for deliberate suppression. Taken together, the inconsistencies and firsthand accounts suggest something far more extraordinary happened at Roswell than the public was ever meant to know.

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	the secrecy surrounding a Cold War-era spy program. However, critics argue that the evolving explanations and strict secrecy point to a deeper conspiracy. By challenging these inconsistencies, they suggest a clearer understanding of the Roswell incident—and the possibility of extraterrestrial involvement—might emerge.	
Origins of Lyme disease	Lyme disease, caused by the bacterium Borrelia burgdorferi, first emerged near Lyme, Connecticut, in the 1970s. While officially attributed to natural ecological factors, some argue that the disease originated from U.S. government biological weapons research. Facilities like Plum Island Animal Disease Center and Fort Detrick are alleged to have been involved in experiments with insect-borne pathogens during the Cold War. Proponents of this theory claim the disease was either deliberately released or accidentally escaped, with the goal of developing a non-lethal bioweapon to incapacitate enemy populations while maintaining plausible deniability under international treaties prohibiting biological warfare. Anomalies in the official narrative raise questions. Declassified documents reveal U.S. military programs explored using insects, including ticks, as vectors for biological agents, making such experiments plausible. Additionally, Plum Island's geographic closeness to the outbreak origin has fueled speculation that the pathogen may have been released from the facility. Proponents also point to the disease's rapid proliferation, which cannot	Lyme disease, caused by the bacterium Borrelia burgdorferi, may have originated not from nature but from U.S. military research into biological warfare. While public health officials attribute its rise to ecological shifts and human expansion into wooded areas, some argue it was developed as a bioweapon—engineered to debilitate rather than kill. The U.S. government, specifically military labs at Plum Island and Fort Detrick, had both the means and motive: creating a controllable, non-lethal illness that could incapacitate enemy populations. Strangely, Lyme disease emerged suddenly in the 1970s despite the long-standing presence of ticks in the region, casting doubt on natural causes. Supporting this, declassified documents confirm the military explored using insects—including ticks—as delivery mechanisms for pathogens. Moreover, the first known outbreak occurred just miles from Plum Island, a facility with a documented history of animal disease experiments. The proximity and timing aren't just coincidental—they suggest the possibility of an accidental release or covert testing gone wrong.

Attention Check Cue	Study 1a	Study 1b
	be fully explained by ecological changes alone, as ticks existed in this region for centuries, before the disease was identified. Defenders of the official account argue that Lyme's spread results from reforestation and increased human exposure to tick habitats. However, proponents counter that government secrecy and historical precedents, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, suggest a pattern of concealed experiments. They believe classified documents and deliberate obfuscation have kept the true origins of Lyme disease hidden, warranting further investigation.	

Appendix B

List of Conspiracy Theories and Attention Check Cues Included in Studies 2a and 2b

	Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
Set 1			
	Princess Diana was intentionally killed in a staged car crash.	In August 1997, Princess Diana was deliberately killed in a car crash staged by elements of the British establishment acting on behalf of the royal family, in order to silence her and protect the monarchy from reputational harm. The official claim—that the crash was caused by a drunk driver and overzealous paparazzi—has never accounted for a series of suspicious details surrounding the event. Notably, multiple security cameras along the car's route through central Paris experienced unexplained outages, including at the entrance to the Pont de l'Alma tunnel, where the fatal crash occurred—despite Paris being one of the most heavily surveilled cities in Europe. Further, witnesses like François Levistre described a blinding flash just before impact, a tactic resembling known methods of vehicular sabotage. Years earlier, Diana had written a letter to her butler expressing fears that Prince Charles or his allies would engineer a fatal "accident." Together, these clues point to a targeted effort to eliminate her.	Princess Diana was killed in a staged car crash arranged by British government officials to silence her and protect the monarchy's reputation.
	Barack Obama was secretly born in Kenya and practices Islam.	Barack Obama was born in Kenya, not Hawaii, and his Christian identity was crafted to mask long-standing ties to Islam—an intentional narrative managed by Democratic Party strategists and friendly media outlets to ensure his eligibility and secure a landmark presidency without constitutional roadblocks. While the official record claims he was born in Honolulu in 1961, doubts intensified when the long-form birth certificate wasn't released until 2011—years after the issue first surfaced—raising questions about why such a basic document was delayed. Notably, a 1991 promotional booklet from Obama's own literary agency described him as "born in Kenya," a line that remained uncorrected for over a decade despite circulating publicly. This aligns with lawsuits citing discrepancies	Barack Obama's Kenyan birth and ties to Islam were concealed by the Democratic Party and major media organizations to protect his eligibility for the presidency.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	in his travel history, particularly a trip to Pakistan in the early 1980s, when U.S. passports were reportedly restricted. The timing, documentation gaps, and quiet corrections suggest a carefully constructed origin story designed to sidestep political and legal scrutiny.	
The French government intentionally set the Notre-Dame cathedral fire.	The fire that destroyed the roof and spire of Notre-Dame de Paris in April 2019 was not an accident, but a deliberate act carried out by the French government in coordination with global redevelopment interests. The goal was simple: transform a national tragedy into a unifying event that would unlock massive funding, boost tourism, and allow for modernization under the guise of restoration. While officials blamed faulty wiring during renovations, the speed with which sleek, futuristic redesigns were proposed raises doubts about how unplanned the event truly was. The fire triggered an international outpouring of sympathy, generating nearly a billion euros in donations—money that could now be funneled into a high-profile, profitable rebuilding project. Compounding the suspicion, several priceless relics were reportedly removed or relocated just days before the blaze, suggesting foreknowledge. Together, these details point toward a controlled demolition masked as a disaster, carefully staged for political and economic leverage.	The 2019 Notre-Dame fire was intentionally set during renovations by the French government to justify redevelopment and attract large-scale reconstruction funding.
Energy corporations deliberately suppress cheap and clean energy technologies.	For decades, major energy corporations have actively suppressed technologies capable of generating low-cost or pollution-free energy by controlling patent systems and funding channels to block innovations that threaten the fossil fuel industry's dominance. Their motive is to preserve global dependence on oil and gas, protecting profits and geopolitical leverage. Official narratives claim renewables face technical and economic hurdles, yet the repeated vanishing of viable alternatives tells a different story. Promising technologies—like hydrogen fuel systems and advanced solar coatings—are routinely acquired by oil conglomerates and quietly shelved without explanation. One striking case is Stanley Meyer, who developed a car powered by water.	Clean energy technologies capable of replacing fossil fuels exist but have been suppressed by major energy corporations to maintain global dependence on oil and protect industry profits.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	He died suddenly in 1998 during a dinner with investors, allegedly running from the table and gasping, "They poisoned me." His invention disappeared with him. Meanwhile, numerous energy-related patents have been sealed for "national security" reasons, without clear justification. Together, these patterns suggest a deliberate effort to keep transformative energy tech out of public reach.	
The Boston Marathon bombing was orchestrated by a U.S. black ops unit.	The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing was not simply a radicalized act of the Tsarnaev brothers, but a staged event orchestrated by a covert U.S. black ops unit to justify expanded surveillance powers and secure long-term counterterrorism funding. By manufacturing a domestic terror incident, federal agencies created the conditions to normalize militarized policing, heighten fear, and consolidate control over internal security policy. Although Russian intelligence had warned U.S. agencies about Tamerlan Tsarnaev's growing extremism as early as 2011, his travel to and from known hotspots went mysteriously unmonitored—a lapse too strategic to be accidental. At the bombing site, multiple photos captured men in tactical gear and black backpacks similar to those later linked to the explosives, yet these individuals were never publicly identified or questioned. Meanwhile, claims emerged that Tamerlan had served as an FBI informant, potentially explaining the ignored warnings and unrestricted travel. Together, these threads suggest a deeper, hidden agenda behind the official narrative.	The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing was orchestrated by U.S. intelligence agencies to justify expanded surveillance programs and increased counterterroris m funding.
COVID-19 was a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government.	The coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 was deliberately engineered at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) by Chinese government and military-affiliated researchers seeking to develop a bioweapon capable of shifting global power dynamics and testing large-scale outbreak responses. While official narratives insist the virus emerged naturally, the pattern of events surrounding the outbreak suggests otherwise. Just weeks before public acknowledgment of the first cases, Chinese authorities abruptly removed the WIV's	COVID-19 was engineered as a bioweapon by Chinese government researchers to increase global power and test large-scale

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	public virus database and archived it offline—an unusual move that casts doubt on claims of transparency or coincidence. Further reinforcing this, published research confirms WIV scientists had previously enhanced bat coronaviruses to better infect human cells, demonstrating both the motive and the technical capability to create something like SARS-CoV-2. Not long after, multiple WIV researchers reportedly developed a severe flu-like illness in late 2019—before the virus had supposedly crossed over to humans. Taken together, these details support a scenario of engineered origin and controlled release.	outbreak responses.
The Earth is flat and encircled by an Antarctic ice wall.	The Earth is not a spinning sphere but a flat, stable plane encircled by a massive ice wall—Antarctica—which marks the true edge of the world. NASA and global governments, along with elite space agencies, have worked for decades to uphold the spherical Earth model, and their motive is simple: by controlling how people understand space and Earth's shape, they preserve exclusive power over exploration, funding, and worldview. Though the official story claims the planet is round, many argue that the images shown to the public are carefully staged or digitally altered—early NASA footage reveals irregular shadows, warped horizons, and mismatched scale. Supporting this, despite thousands of daily flights, commercial passengers never report seeing a genuine curve—just flat horizons at every altitude. Even more telling, distant objects like city skylines and ships remain visible across distances that would be impossible if there were actual curvature. Together, these patterns all point toward a curated illusion, not a genuine record of reality.	The Earth is flat and this has been concealed by global governments and scientific institutions to preserve control over exploration and public understanding of the world.
Chemtrails result from the intentional spraying of harmful	The lingering trails behind certain aircraft—chemtrails—are part of a deliberate aerosol-dispersion program managed by government health agencies and their private research partners. Their goal is covert population management: by releasing engineered particulates into the atmosphere, they aim to gradually	Aircraft trails ("chemtrails") contain chemical agents that are intentionally

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
chemicals by aircrafts.	weaken immune systems and increase biological susceptibility, making populations easier to monitor and influence over time. While officials claim these trails are nothing more than jet exhaust meeting cold air, their persistence and formations suggest a coordinated and ongoing effort. These trails often appear on days without the temperature or humidity conditions required for lasting contrails, raising questions about their true composition. Further, declassified Cold War programs like Operation LAC confirm that the U.S. government previously tested biological agents on civilians via aerial dispersal. More recently, independent air sampling beneath dense trail zones has revealed elevated levels of aluminum and barium—elements inconsistent with standard aviation emissions. These patterns point to a covert operation that masks population-level experimentation as ordinary atmospheric phenomena.	dispersed by government agencies to alter population health and increase susceptibility to control.
Childhood vaccines cause autism.	Major pharmaceutical companies deliberately suppressed early evidence linking vaccines to autism to protect profits and preserve public confidence in immunization programs. The motive is financial, as acknowledging health risks would not only damage public trust but also open the door to massive lawsuits and jeopardize a multi-billion-dollar industry. Officials insist vaccines are thoroughly tested and safe, but a major red flag remains: the CDC has never conducted a large-scale study comparing long-term health outcomes between fully vaccinated and entirely unvaccinated children. For an agency so confident in vaccine safety, that absence is striking. In 2014, CDC scientist Dr. William Thompson revealed that data showing elevated autism risk among certain groups was deliberately omitted from a 2004 MMR study. Just a few years earlier, the U.S. Court of Federal Claims compensated the family of Hannah Poling, a child who developed autism-like symptoms following a round of vaccines. These events point to a buried connection too serious to dismiss.	Vaccines cause autism and this has been suppressed by pharmaceutical companies to avoid financial liability and maintain public confidence in immunization programs.

	Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	The 2020 U.S. election results were influenced by widespread voter fraud.	Democratic officials, in coordination with election technology companies, orchestrated efforts to manipulate mail-in ballots and digital vote counts to influence the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Their objective was clear: prevent Donald Trump from securing a second term and maintain control during a period of political unrest and institutional instability. Although official accounts describe the results as the product of lawful procedures and normal administrative variation, key events raise serious doubts. Several battleground states halted vote counting late on election night, only to resume with massive, sudden surges of Biden votes—timed in a way that appeared less like routine processing and more like strategic intervention. In some states, voter rolls reportedly contained large numbers of inactive registrations, enabling the submission of ballots under names of the deceased or relocated. Poll watchers later submitted sworn affidavits detailing how they were blocked from observing ballot counts, removing critical oversight. Taken together, these events point toward a coordinated effort to influence the election outcome.	The 2020 U.S. election results were altered through coordinated vote manipulation by Democratic officials to secure electoral victory and maintain political control.
Set 2			
	Dinosaurs and the concept of evolution are fabricated.	The fossil record used to support dinosaurs and evolution is a manufactured narrative upheld by academic institutions, museums, and government-funded scientists to protect funding pipelines and preserve control over historical interpretation. By presenting evolution and dinosaurs as indisputable fact, these institutions reinforce their authority, secure continued grants, and maintain their public and scientific influence. While official explanations cite rigorous peer review and extensive fossil evidence, museum exhibits often fail to mention that many "complete" skeletons are largely reconstructed using plaster, cast molds, or inferred parts—details that rarely make it onto display labels. Early fossil finds, including high-profile specimens, were later revealed to be composites of unrelated fragments, suggesting a	The fossil record supporting dinosaurs and evolution was fabricated by scientific institutions to secure research funding and maintain authority over scientific knowledge.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	tendency to fit data to an expected story. Moreover, access to excavation sites and fossil material is tightly controlled by a small network of researchers, limiting outside scrutiny. This system makes it difficult to challenge prevailing interpretations, even when inconsistencies emerge, reinforcing a curated version of Earth's past.	
FEMA has prepared secret camps for mass detention.	FEMA has systematically built the capacity to detain large segments of the U.S. population—particularly the poor and politically expendable—under the pretext of emergency management. This effort supports long-term government goals: suppressing unrest and clearing inner-city areas for profitable redevelopment. Although FEMA presents its resources as tools for disaster relief, the scope and nature of its stockpiles suggest a far more authoritarian purpose. The agency has amassed thousands of plastic coffins, mobile detention units, and railcars with reinforced interiors—far more than what conventional emergencies would ever require. Adding to this concern, aerial photos and local reports have identified fenced compounds with inward-facing barbed wire and guard towers near rail lines, described as dormant FEMA storage sites. Even more telling, federal drills like "Operation Vigilant Guard" and "Rex-84" have explicitly rehearsed mass civilian detainment and population relocation. These coordinated patterns indicate not disaster readiness, but calculated preparation for domestic containment on a massive scale.	Detention infrastructure capable of holding large segments of the population has been deliberately built and concealed by FEMA to enable mass detention and population control.
Greta Thunberg is an actor posing as a climate activist.	Greta Thunberg is a carefully coached performer whose public image was engineered by a close-knit team led by PR consultant Ingmar Rentzhog, founder of the climate-communication firm We Don't Have Time. Rather than rising organically, her persona was crafted to serve as a powerful emotional symbol capable of mobilizing public sentiment and pressuring governments into rapid climate commitments. The official narrative portrays Thunberg as a lone teenager driven by conviction, but the speed at which she was	Greta Thunberg is a coached actor whose public image was crafted by environmental groups and media strategists to influence public

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	granted access to major world leaders and global platforms is highly unusual for someone with no institutional ties. In the same month her school strike went viral, Rentzhog's company filed documents showing a major fundraising push to expand its media presence—suggesting coordinated intent. Her earliest appearances also featured rehearsed speeches, polished delivery, and perfectly timed press exposure—hallmarks of professional image management, not spontaneous youth activism. Taken together, these elements point to deliberate orchestration behind her rise.	opinion and policy.
U.S. agencies created HIV/AIDS as a biological weapon.	HIV/AIDS was deliberately engineered by U.S. intelligence and military research agencies as a bioweapon designed to reduce and destabilize communities viewed as politically or socially threatening—particularly Africans and African Americans. While officials insist the virus emerged naturally from primates in Central Africa, several overlooked details suggest otherwise. The earliest known samples of HIV were found in stored blood collected years before the virus was officially recognized, implying it was circulating—and possibly studied—long before public disclosure. Supporting this, declassified documents from the 1970s reveal that U.S. defense initiatives like the Army's "Special Virus Cancer Program" were actively funding research into synthetic pathogens that target the immune system. Around the same time, experimental hepatitis B vaccine trials were conducted on predominantly Black and gay men in cities like New York and San Francisco—communities that soon became the first epicenters of the AIDS epidemic. The timing, locations, and research history point to lab-based origins, not random evolution.	HIV/AIDS was engineered in a laboratory and deliberately released by U.S. military and government agencies as a bioweapon to target and control specific ethnic groups.
Jeffrey Epstein was murdered in jail.	Jeffrey Epstein did not die by suicide in his Manhattan jail cell—his death was the result of a coordinated intervention by individuals tied to elite political, financial, and intelligence networks who sought to	Jeffrey Epstein was murdered in jail through a coordinated

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	silence him before he could testify. Epstein's connections to high-profile figures across global institutions posed a serious threat once legal proceedings began and eliminating him removed the risk of public exposure. While the official narrative claims suicide by hanging, key irregularities cast serious doubt. Both security cameras outside his cell failed during the exact timeframe of his death—a rare and suspicious coincidence. Adding to this, an independent pathologist who reviewed the autopsy reported neck fractures more typical of manual strangulation than hanging. Meanwhile, the guards tasked with monitoring him were inexplicably asleep or disengaged for hours, creating a perfect window for outside interference. Considered together, these details suggest Epstein's death was not a failure of jail protocol, but a calculated silencing.	effort by political and financial elites to prevent the release of damaging information during testimony.
Korean Airlines Flight 007 was intentionally diverted into Soviet airspace.	On September 1, 1983, Korean Airlines Flight 007 was deliberately sent into Soviet airspace as part of a covert intelligence operation coordinated by U.S. and Japanese military officials, intended to trigger a Soviet response and mask nearby reconnaissance activity. The public was told it was a tragic navigational error, but the anomalies suggests otherwise. Notably, the aircraft reportedly maintained radio contact with other Korean Air Lines crews for nearly 46 minutes after its supposed destruction—an inconsistency never adequately explained. At the crash site, investigators found an unusual absence of passenger remains and personal belongings, raising doubts about the nature of the explosion and the recovery timeline. More telling, U.S. radar systems—known to track every movement in the region during the Cold War—somehow failed to detect or respond to a civilian airliner entering hostile airspace. The overlap of these gaps and strategic timing points to intentional orchestration, not accidental tragedy.	Korean Airlines Flight 007 was intentionally diverted into Soviet airspace by U.S. and allied military officials to provoke a Soviet response and distract from reconnaissance operations.
Monsanto has hidden the fact	Monsanto and other major agribusiness corporations intentionally withheld internal data suggesting that	Genetically modified crops

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
that genetically modified foods are harmful.	genetically modified crops could carry long-term health risks, doing so to protect their most profitable products and shield themselves from legal and financial fallout. While the official stance insists that GMOs are thoroughly vetted and proven safe, the speed with which certain high-profile products were approved stands out—some sailed through regulatory channels in a fraction of the time typical for food-safety reviews, raising questions about oversight. Proponents further highlight the restrictive seed-licensing contracts issued to farmers, which ban independent testing and mandate the destruction of unused seed stock each season—effectively preventing long-term safety evaluations outside corporate control. On top of that, court-released internal emails show Monsanto monitoring cancer studies on glyphosate, a key ingredient in RoundUp, while downplaying unfavorable findings in public. These documents reveal a coordinated effort to manage public perception rather than respond transparently to legitimate health concerns.	are harmful to human health, and this has been concealed by Monsanto and other agribusiness corporations to avoid regulation and protect profits.
The Oklahoma City bombing involved neo-Nazi and white supremacist collaborators.	The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing was not the act of just Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, but a coordinated operation involving white supremacist and neo-Nazi networks who provided critical support to escalate its scale and provoke a broader anti-government revolt. Their motive was to retaliate against federal institutions and galvanize far-right militias into open rebellion. Despite the official narrative insisting McVeigh and Nichols acted alone, several anomalies cast serious doubt. Multiple witnesses reported seeing McVeigh accompanied by others—most notably a man dubbed "John Doe No. 2"—whose composite sketch was widely distributed but later quietly dismissed without resolution. Adding to the suspicion, phone records reveal McVeigh and Nichols had repeated contact with members of Elohim City, a neo-Nazi stronghold known for its militant ties. Moreover, demolition experts have long argued that the damage to the Murrah building exceeded what a single truck bomb could accomplish, suggesting the presence	The Oklahoma City bombing involved a larger group of white supremacist and neo-Nazi collaborators who coordinated the attack to increase scale and provoke anti-government resistance.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	of additional charges placed internally. Together, these facts indicate deliberate omission of key collaborators.	
The January 6th Capitol violence was instigated by Antifa and federal operatives.	The January 6th Capitol violence in 2021 was not the result of spontaneous action by genuine Trump supporters, but a staged event orchestrated by Antifa operatives and elements within the FBI to discredit the political right and justify sweeping measures against dissent. Left-wing activists infiltrated the protest, knowing that triggering chaos would create the perfect pretext for expanded surveillance, censorship, and the framing of conservative movements as domestic threats. Despite clear warnings from intelligence agencies about possible unrest, Capitol security remained strikingly unprepared—suggesting foreknowledge or even passive facilitation. One of the first individuals arrested, John Earle Sullivan, was later revealed to be a left-wing activist with links to Antifa and Black Lives Matter, undermining claims that the violence came solely from Trump supporters. Meanwhile, reports and congressional testimony indicate that FBI informants were embedded in the crowd, potentially provoking the very actions later used to vilify the protest. These facts suggest deliberate manipulation for political ends.	The January 6th Capitol violence was orchestrated by the FBI and Antifa to discredit the political right and justify expanded domestic security measures.
The Earth is hollow and contains vast interior spaces.	The Earth is not a solid sphere, but a hollow body containing vast internal spaces—some of which harbor hidden ecosystems and even advanced civilizations—and this knowledge has been deliberately suppressed by global governments and institutions like the U.S. Geological Survey to maintain control over exploration, resource access, and public understanding of the planet. Official models describe the Earth as a dense core surrounded by molten and solid layers, yet this image relies almost entirely on inference. In reality, humanity has never drilled more than a few miles into the crust, meaning everything beneath remains essentially unknown. Proponents point to reports of massive openings at the North and South Poles, where magnetic anomalies cause compasses to trace circular paths,	The Earth is hollow and this has been concealed by global governments and scientific institutions to maintain control over exploration and public knowledge.

	Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
		misleading navigators into thinking they've crossed the poles when they've only skirted a vast rim. Further, satellite images of these regions are often mysteriously blurred or redacted. This pattern suggests efforts to hide the truth about the Earth from public view.	
Set 3			
	5G technology weakened immune systems and accelerated the spread of COVID-19.	In early 2020, major telecom corporations—backed by government agencies and global health institutions—knowingly exposed the public to harmful 5G electromagnetic radiation, weakening immune systems and fueling the rapid global spread of COVID-19, all to protect multi-billion-dollar infrastructure investments and expand digital surveillance under the guise of innovation. Despite official claims that 5G is harmless and unrelated to the pandemic, the overlap between early 5G rollout and initial outbreak zones raises serious concerns. Wuhan and Milan, two of the first cities to adopt large-scale 5G networks, were also among the first and hardest hit by COVID-19—an alignment too precise to dismiss. Supporting this, several peer-reviewed studies have shown that high-frequency radiation can impair immune function, making individuals more vulnerable to viral infection. Satellite imagery and infrastructure data also reveal a steep rise in 5G tower installations just months before local outbreaks intensified. These patterns suggest 5G exposure may have acted as a hidden catalyst in the pandemic's early spread.	5G technology weakened immune systems and accelerated the spread of COVID-19, and telecommunications corporations covered it up to protect financial investments.
	A secret alien spacecraft crashed near Roswell., New Mexico.	In July 1947, the U.S. Army Air Forces recovered a "flying disc" near Roswell, New Mexico, and this was deliberately covered up by the U.S. military and intelligence community with the goal of preventing mass panic and securing any potential technological advantage as Cold War tensions escalated. While the official story claimed the wreckage was from a weather balloon, the military's explanation shifted within 24 hours, replacing the initial "disc" report with a vague balloon narrative that lacked transparency or corroborating evidence. That sudden reversal raises	An alien spacecraft crashed near Roswell, New Mexico and was hidden by the U.S. military to prevent mass panic and secure novel technologies.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	serious doubts. Witnesses, including rancher Mac Brazel and airbase personnel, described strange debris at the site: unusually lightweight, resilient, and unlike any known balloon components. Later, Major Jesse Marcel, the intelligence officer involved in the recovery, stated that the wreckage was not of this world and claimed that he had been ordered to feed false information to the press and public. This testimony, paired with physical evidence, suggests a deliberate, high-level cover-up.	
The CIA was involved in John F. Kennedy's assassination.	Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and individuals within the CIA were involved in a coordinated effort to eliminate a president they viewed as a growing threat. Kennedy's attempts to curtail the agency's power and reshape foreign policy created deep tensions with senior intelligence officers who had long operated without oversight. While the official account claims Oswald was a lone gunman, it sidesteps the internal fractures brewing within U.S. intelligence at the time. One glaring inconsistency is the CIA's handling of Oswald's 1963 trip to Mexico City: files that documented his movements were missing, contradictory, or redacted. Declassified records from the 1970s also confirm the agency maintained a detailed 201 file on Oswald, years before the assassination, despite denying active surveillance. Further, officers like William Harvey and David Atlee Phillips—both with ties to anti-Castro operations and personal friction with Kennedy—were later linked to individuals in Oswald's orbit. These threads suggest a broader, coordinated plan.	John F. Kennedy's assassination involved multiple conspirators and was coordinated by CIA officials to remove him as a political threat and maintain policy control.
Lyme disease originated from U.S. military bioweapons research.	Lyme disease was not a product of natural evolution but originated from U.S. military research programs at Plum Island and Fort Detrick, where scientists developed it as a non-lethal biological weapon designed to incapacitate without killing. The official story claims Lyme emerged due to ecological changes and increased human exposure to tick habitats, but the disease's	Lyme disease was engineered as a non-lethal bioweapon by U.S. military researchers to test biological

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	sudden appearance in the 1970s—despite centuries of human–tick interaction—raises serious doubts. Notably, declassified military documents reveal that U.S. defense researchers actively experimented with using insects, including ticks, as delivery systems for infectious agents. This aligns disturbingly well with the fact that the first Lyme outbreaks were reported just miles from Plum Island, a facility long involved in animal disease testing under federal oversight. The geographic and temporal overlap suggests far more than coincidence—it points to a hidden history of bio-experimentation that may have accidentally, or intentionally, leaked into the civilian population.	warfare methods and advance covert military objectives.
The Sutherland Springs church shooting was coordinated by Antifa and anti-gun groups.	The shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs on November 5, 2017, was carried out with the help of organized anti-gun networks, including actors linked to Antifa-aligned activism, as part of a calculated effort to provoke public outrage and push forward strict gun control legislation. By targeting a rural, conservative Christian community, the attack struck at a symbolic core of pro-gun American identity. While the official story claims Devin Patrick Kelley acted alone, investigators never established a clear or consistent motive—an odd omission given the scale and precision of the violence. Almost immediately, Kelley's online presence was scrubbed, but early observers reported images and content suggesting links to militant, left-wing ideology—content that was never acknowledged in public briefings. The FBI later cited technical issues in retrieving data from his phone, raising suspicion that critical information was concealed. Taken together, these gaps and omissions suggest the event was not random, but coordinated and politically motivated.	The Sutherland Springs shooting was coordinated by Antifa and anti-gun groups to generate public outrage and increase support for stricter gun control.
The Apollo moon landings were staged by the U.S. government.	The Apollo moon landings were not filmed on the lunar surface but staged on a Hollywood set, orchestrated by NASA with help from U.S. government officials and contracted film studios to secure a symbolic win in the Cold War Space Race. After early Soviet successes, the	The Apollo moon landings were staged by NASA and the U.S.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	political pressure to showcase American superiority made a controlled production more practical than risking a failed mission. While official narratives insist the landings were authentic, key visual details raise serious doubts. In the footage, the American flag briefly ripples—despite NASA's claim that the Moon has no atmosphere or wind. Further scrutiny of Apollo photos shows inconsistent shadow angles, suggesting multiple light sources like those used on soundstages. Just as striking are the boot prints—deep and sharply defined—even though lunar soil is described as dry and powdery with no moisture to hold shape. These inconsistencies suggest the scenes were carefully constructed, not captured on the Moon.	government to secure a victory in the Cold War space race.
Climate change is a hoax created by scientists and environmental organizations.	Climate change is a hoax that was deliberately invented by a global network of scientists and environmental organizations to secure continuous government funding, justify sweeping regulations, and maintain control over lucrative academic and policy institutions. While officials claim that global warming is a scientifically confirmed result of human activity, the financial structure behind climate science suggests otherwise. Public records show that climate researchers and NGOs receive billions annually—funding that grows in proportion to public concern. That incentive structure casts doubt on how the data itself is managed, as agencies frequently revise historical temperature records, claiming they're correcting for equipment and location changes—but these adjustments overwhelmingly make the past colder and the present warmer, artificially amplifying the trend. Suspicions deepen with the leaked Climategate emails, which revealed top researchers at the University of East Anglia privately strategizing how to "hide the decline" in temperature data that didn't match the narrative. These details suggest agenda-driven science, not objective science.	Climate change is a fabricated narrative coordinated by scientific and political institutions to secure continuous funding and justify policy control.
The Rothschild family secretly	The Rothschild family secretly oversees a long-standing satanic cult embedded within elite financial	The Rothschild family leads a

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
leads a satanic cult.	and political networks, using ritual symbolism and closed-door influence to shape global policy, culture, and public values. This hidden structure allows them to maintain spiritual and social dominance by guiding the decisions of politicians, corporate leaders, and media figures through private allegiances rather than public accountability. While they are officially portrayed as philanthropic financiers with historical prestige, the unusual secrecy surrounding many Rothschild-hosted events suggests something deeper. Their exclusive gatherings—often framed as charitable—are routinely held in private venues with restricted press access, raising questions about what's truly being discussed. Supporting this, photographs and testimonies from the 1972 Rothschild Surrealist Ball depict horned costumes, occult symbols, and ritualistic themes far beyond standard opulence. Additionally, leaked documents from elite European clubs reference recurring "spiritual gatherings" with the Rothschild name frequently listed. These details hint at a coordinated, ritual-based influence hidden in plain sight.	secret satanic cult that uses elite gatherings to influence global policy and political decision-making.
U.S. officials intentionally allowed the Pearl Harbor attack to unfold.	Senior U.S. military and political leaders were aware of Japan's plans to strike Pearl Harbor and deliberately allowed the attack to proceed to draw the nation into World War II. Officials in the Roosevelt administration knew that a direct attack would overcome the public's resistance to war and unify the country behind intervention, which they saw as critical for long-term strategic positioning. While the official story frames the bombing as a total surprise, several major naval assets—including aircraft carriers—were quietly moved out of Pearl Harbor days before the strike, a timing that feels too convenient for what was supposedly an unforeseen assault. Intelligence records show that U.S. codebreakers had already begun decrypting Japanese diplomatic communications in the weeks leading up to December 7, suggesting foreknowledge. Adding to this, internal memos from late 1941 openly discussed how a Japanese attack could	U.S. military and political leaders had advanced knowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack and allowed it to occur to justify entering World War II.

	Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
		serve as a rallying point for war entry, pointing to calculated inaction at the highest levels. These details suggest intentional and calculated inaction.	
	George Soros paid people to protest the Trump administration.	Billionaire financier George Soros intentionally influenced and helped orchestrate large-scale protests against Donald Trump through his expansive network of nonprofits and political foundations. His goal was clear: destabilize the Trump administration and shape media narratives by manufacturing the appearance of widespread public outrage. While mainstream accounts frame these demonstrations as organic movements, the level of coordination suggests otherwise. Early protests consistently featured pre-printed signs, synchronized chants, and organized transportation—despite no single group publicly taking credit for planning. Supporting this, tax records show that Soros's Open Society Foundations poured millions into activist organizations like MoveOn.org and the Women's March, both of which were key players in early anti-Trump rallies. At the same time, Craigslist ads appeared in major cities offering cash payments for protest participation, often tied to events affiliated with Soros-backed groups. These patterns point to deliberate orchestration masked as grassroots resistance—carefully designed to influence public sentiment and weaken political opposition.	Anti-Trump protests were orchestrated and funded by George Soros to create the appearance of widespread outrage and destabilize the Trump administration.
Set 4			
	Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by U.S. government agencies.	The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 was not the act of a lone gunman, but the result of a coordinated operation involving the FBI, CIA, and local authorities who saw King as a growing threat to the national power structure. As he expanded his focus from civil rights to economic justice and opposition to the Vietnam War, King's influence posed a serious challenge to institutions invested in preserving the status quo. Although the official story claims James Earl Ray acted alone, key witnesses reported the fatal shot came from a different location, and the ballistic	Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination was coordinated by U.S. government agencies, including the FBI and CIA, to eliminate him

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	evidence failed to clearly match Ray's alleged position—discrepancies that were never adequately resolved. Declassified records reveal the FBI's COINTELPRO program had aggressively surveilled, threatened, and attempted to undermine King for years. Then, in 1999, a civil court in Memphis concluded that government agencies were complicit and involved in the assassination. Taken together, these facts point to a deliberate effort to silence King permanently.	as a political threat.
Pharmaceutical companies covered up a natural cure for cancer.	A natural cure for cancer was discovered decades ago but deliberately suppressed by a coalition of pharmaceutical giants, backed by the FDA, to preserve the profit-driven model of long-term treatment. Cancer care is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and a one-time cure would dismantle its most reliable revenue stream. While the official narrative emphasizes medical complexity and the need for rigorous testing, it's hard to ignore the fact that, after decades of research and countless billions spent, no universal cure has emerged. That persistent absence alone raises questions. In the 1970s, Dr. Kanematsu Sugiura—a highly respected scientist at Memorial Sloan Kettering—found that Laetrile (amygdalin) slowed tumor growth in mice. Instead of further investigation, his results were downplayed and later discredited by his own institution. Not long after, the FDA banned Laetrile outright and labelled it as pseudoscience, despite its legal use in over 20 countries. The pattern suggests calculated suppression in favor of patentable, continuous treatments.	A natural cure for cancer exists but has been suppressed by pharmaceutical companies to protect long-term treatment profits.
Area 51 contains hidden alien spacecrafts or bodies.	Area 51 functions as a covert research facility where the U.S. government stores and studies recovered alien spacecraft and biological remains, deliberately concealed by the Air Force, intelligence agencies, and private defense contractors to reverse-engineer advanced extraterrestrial technology for military and economic dominance. While the official narrative describes it as a test site for experimental aircraft, the decades-long denial of its very existence—only	Alien technology and biological remains are stored at Area 51, and U.S. government agencies have concealed it to

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	formally acknowledged in 2013—is a glaring inconsistency for a so-called standard military base. The secrecy alone raises questions. In the late 1980s, former engineer Bob Lazar publicly claimed he worked on a craft called the "Sport Model," powered by a gravity-based propulsion system and Element 115—technology that had no known terrestrial equivalent at the time. Not long after, satellite imagery revealed new, massive, windowless hangars appearing around Groom Lake, including a 1995 expansion that aligns closely with Lazar's descriptions. The timing and testimony suggest deliberate efforts to contain and conceal non-human technology.	develop reverse-engineered military technology.
Environmental groups facilitated the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion.	The Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, 2010, was deliberately orchestrated by radical environmental activists with insider access who aimed to derail U.S. energy expansion plans. Their goal was to provoke public outrage strong enough to halt offshore drilling and block a pending energy bill that promoted new drilling sites and nuclear development. While the official account attributes the disaster to a mechanical blowout, the timing—just one day before Earth Day—seems too precise to be accidental, perfectly designed to capture global attention. In the days leading up to the incident, BP stock saw an unusual spike in sell-offs, suggesting that some investors had prior knowledge of the event. Even more suspicious was the swift deployment of federal tactical units, including reports of SWAT involvement, which far exceeded the typical response for a corporate accident. The coordination, timing, and response suggest this was not just an industrial failure—it was a calculated political act.	The Deepwater Horizon explosion was orchestrated by radical environmental activists to generate public outrage and halt offshore drilling expansion.
Governments add fluoride to public water to control the population.	Government agencies have long known about the adverse health effects of fluoride, yet they intentionally introduced it into public water systems as part of a broader strategy to manage population behavior under the guise of improving dental health. While officials insist fluoridation is a safe and effective public-health measure, the deeper goal is subtle chemical	Government agencies know that fluoride negatively affects cognitive functioning, and

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	conditioning—dampening resistance to authority and promoting passive compliance. The early scientific backing for fluoride safety came not from independent medical researchers, but from scientists connected to nuclear weapons programs and defense contractors—an overlooked conflict of interest that raises serious concerns about credibility. In 1997, researchers found that fluoride can accumulate in the pineal gland, disrupting melatonin production and impairing cognitive regulation—effects that promote docility and fatigue. Building on this, a 2012 Harvard meta-analysis revealed consistent associations between high fluoride exposure and lower IQ in children. Despite these findings, public health agencies continue to dismiss concerns, reinforcing suspicion about their true intent.	they intentionally add it to public water supplies to control the population.
The Clintons are responsible for the deaths of Vince Foster and other political rivals.	Bill and Hillary Clinton orchestrated the elimination of individuals who posed legal or political threats—and were directly responsible for the 1993 death of Vince Foster. Their motive was clear: suppress damaging information, avoid scandal, and send a warning to potential whistleblowers during a period of intense scrutiny surrounding Whitewater and other controversies. Though Foster's death was officially ruled a suicide, key anomalies undermine that conclusion. Notably, his body was found in Fort Marcy Park with spotless shoes—odd given the area's uneven, dirt-covered terrain, which should have left visible traces if he had walked there. More troubling, first responders observed that the gun appeared misplaced and there was surprisingly little blood, inconsistencies for a close-range gunshot. These irregularities align with reports that sensitive documents—specifically tied to the Whitewater investigation—were quietly removed from Foster's office before the FBI could secure the scene, quietly erasing a trail that led back to the Clintons. This pattern suggests a deliberate political cover-up.	Bill and Hillary Clinton orchestrated the deaths of numerous political rivals, including Vince Foster, to prevent legal fallout and protect their political influence.
New Coke was released as a	In 1985, Coca-Cola executives deliberately launched "New Coke" as a calculated marketing ploy to	New Coke was a planned

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
deceptive marketing strategy.	manipulate public sentiment and reignite demand for the original formula, which they soon rebranded as "Coca-Cola Classic." The goal was financial—revitalize declining sales, recapture market share from Pepsi, and create engineered nostalgia that would reset consumer loyalty. Though the company framed the decision as a failed attempt to modernize taste, the rapid pivot and its aftermath suggest otherwise. After Classic's return, Coke experienced a surge in brand devotion and quickly outpaced Pepsi—results that point less to failure and more to forethought. Despite extensive internal taste testing, executives claimed they were shocked by the public's reaction and their apparent unpreparedness for the backlash seemed oddly convenient for a company known for meticulous research. Then, just 79 days later, they rolled out "Coca-Cola Classic" with massive media coverage and record-breaking sales. The speed, precision, and outcome all suggest that New Coke was never meant to last—it was bait.	marketing strategy introduced by Coca-Cola executives to manipulate consumer sentiment and boost demand for the original product.
The U.S. government allowed the 9/11 attacks to occur.	The U.S. government had advance knowledge of the 9/11 attacks and deliberately allowed them to happen in order to justify sweeping military actions and domestic policy changes. By permitting the attacks, officials secured public backing for war in the Middle East, expanded intelligence powers, and funneled massive funding into the defense sector. Though the official story frames 9/11 as an unpredictable assault by al-Qaeda, multiple intelligence agencies had issued warnings in the months leading up to the attacks—none of which triggered serious preventive measures—a failure to act that is difficult to dismiss as mere oversight. A year prior, the think tank Project for the New American Century—linked to key members of the Bush administration—released a report calling for a "new Pearl Harbor" to accelerate American military expansion. Following the attacks, those same figures led efforts to invade Iraq and Afghanistan and passed the PATRIOT Act, which expanded government	The U.S. government knew about the 9/11 terrorist attacks and allowed them to occur to justify military interventions and expand defense spending.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	surveillance powers. This strategic alignment suggests complicity, not coincidence.	
COVID-19 vaccines were used to promote global digital surveillance.	Bill Gates and his network of global health and tech organizations intentionally leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to push forward a global digital surveillance system under the cover of public health. While officially framed as a humanitarian effort to expand vaccine access, the deeper objective is long-term control through data centralization—merging health records, biometric IDs, and digital payment systems into one seamless tracking network. Gates' early advocacy for "digital certificates" to monitor vaccine status raised eyebrows, especially given its uncanny alignment with biometric ID projects his foundation had quietly supported years before the pandemic. In 2019, the Gates Foundation funded development of quantum dot technology—tiny particles that can embed medical records beneath the skin. Shortly after, Gates-backed platforms like ID2020 and Gavi's "Digital Health Pass" emerged, linking vaccination data with personal identity. The timing and coordination suggest that COVID-19 offered the perfect vehicle to roll out a pre-planned system of digital oversight disguised as global aid.	Bill Gates and affiliated global health organizations used COVID-19 vaccine campaigns to expand digital surveillance systems and increase population monitoring.
Bohemian Grove hosts secret meetings of political, corporate, and media elites.	Bohemian Grove, a private forested compound in Northern California, is the site of an annual gathering where elite figures in politics, business, and media meet to coordinate global and domestic agendas in secrecy. Far from being a casual retreat, the event serves as a closed-door forum where powerful men form alliances and shape policy without public accountability, all under the guise of harmless tradition. Although the official story describes it as a social club known for plays and lakeside talks, the intense security, press bans, and required secrecy suggest something more deliberate. In 2000, journalist Alex Jones covertly filmed a bizarre ceremony called the "Cremation of Care," where robed men conducted a mock ritual before a massive owl statue—imagery that many find	Elite political and business leaders meet annually at Bohemian Grove to secretly coordinate global economic and policy agendas without public oversight.

Attention Check Cue	Study 2a	Study 2b
	deeply symbolic and disturbing. Guest lists also confirm the presence of sitting presidents, defense officials, and CEOs—many of whom went on to implement synchronized strategies. Together, these events suggest that the Grove is a hidden center of influence.	