Go Big or Go Hoax:
Explanatory Scope and the Believability of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories explain the cause of world events through the machinations of shadowy, secret groups. Understanding what in conspiracy theories makes them appealing explanations is an important area of research. People like explanations that can account for a large number of seen events (broad explanatory scope), while not accounting for every possible unseen event (narrow latent scope). It is unknown if people think conspiracy theories have broad or narrow scope and how this may relate to their believability. We thus explored perceptions of conspiracy theory explanations' scope and how this relates to their believability. Participants rated 40 conspiracy theories and their fact-based alternative explanations. Fact-based explanations were seen as having larger explanatory and latent scope. Additionally, larger scope was positively correlated with higher believability for both explanation types. We discuss how these findings relate to the explanation literature and highlight important elements of the seductive appeal of conspiracy theories.

Keywords: explanation; scope; explanatory scope; conspiracy theories

Introduction

People have a drive to find explanations of the world around them (Khemlani & Johnson-Laird, 2011; Lombrozo, 2007). Understanding why an event occurred can provide a better understanding of how that event could be produced or avoided in the future (Ahn et al., 1995; Johnson & Ahn, 2017). As such, explanations can drive behavior, pointing people toward or away from actions (Pennington & Hastie, 1988). While people often do not have complete or correct explanations for how events occur (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002; Wilson & Marsh, 2023, 2024), one class of incorrect explanations has specifically drawn attention by researchers: conspiracy theories. In this paper, we explore the nature of conspiracy theories as explanations in the world, specifically in relation to their explanatory scope.

Throughout history, people have created explanations that call to shadowy, clandestine, groups that are the secret driving force behind major world events (Keeley, 1999; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Believing in such conspiracy theories is not isolated to a small group of conspiracists, with surveys often finding around half of respondents endorse at least one conspiracy (Duplaga, 2020; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swift, 2013). The prevalence of conspiracy theories is particularly worrisome given the detrimental effects they can have such as discouraging voting (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), reducing engagement in health behaviors (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b; Natoli & Marques, 2021), and not believing official governmental information (Vitriol & Marsh, 2021).

Given the negative consequences of believing in conspiracy theories, it is important to understand what makes these theories believable. While much is known about the type of *person* who believes in a conspiracy theory (Bruder et al., 2013; Douglas et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2012), relatively less is known about what in the nature of a conspiracy *theory* makes it a believable explanation. For everyday explanations, a set of explanatory virtues have been described by philosophers that outline what a good explanation should possess, with research taking up testing whether people support the importance of these virtues. For example, good explanations have been theorized to be simple. People do prefer simple explanations in many lab tasks (Lombrozo, 2007), but can prefer complex explanations (Johnson et al., 2019; Zemla et al., 2017), depending on the context and type of event being explained.

Good explanations have also been theorized to provide a large explanatory scope, i.e., account for a large amount of information. When considering what is a good or satisfying explanation of a phenomenon, people prefer explanations that can explain many or all of the observed elements of the given phenomenon (Read & Marcus-Newhall, 1993). For example, a diagnosis that can explain all of a patient's observed symptoms is preferred to a diagnosis that only explains a set of those symptoms. Furthermore, people prefer explanations with narrow latent scope: explanations that can explain what is currently observed and do not account for a large number of events that have yet to be observed (Khemlani et al., 2011; but see Stephan, 2023). For example, people would prefer a diagnosis that explains the symptoms a patient currently possesses and not one that could explain those symptoms plus any others that could possibly develop. Taking these findings together, people may want explanations that can explain all the circumstances that are currently observed, but not everything that could possibly be observed.

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Explanatory scope is a specifically interesting explanatory virtue to investigate within conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are defined as calling to some secret group that is behind the scenes controlling and producing the observed events of the world. Often the same secret groups are believed to be involved in a wide range of world events (e.g., Kofta et al., 2020; Marwick & Partin, 2024). This shared root cause of multiple events could give conspiracy theory explanations the sense of having a large explanatory scope (e.g., this one secret group's activities can explain a large number of events). In previous work, we found that conspiracy theories are thought of as more complex explanations of the world, with increasing complexity being correlated with increasing believability (Marsh et al., 2022). The perceived complexity of conspiracy theories could likewise promote a view that they account for more of observed and unobserved events, or in other words have larger perceived scope and latent scope.

Alternatively, conspiracy theories may be seen as providing a very narrow, albeit complex, explanation of a given event. Whereas scientific explanations are generally designed to explain how classes of events occur (e.g., how transmission of any virus causes disease), conspiracy theories are often tailored to explain one specific outcome. For example, conspiracy theories around the spread of the Zika virus describe how that specific virus was manufactured to target a certain population. In this way, the events being explained in a conspiracy theory are usually specific to a single token explanation, even if they do call to the same group of underlying root causes as many other conspiracy theories. This could result in conspiracy theory explanations being seen as having smaller scope than other explanations.

In this paper we explore beliefs about the explanatory scope of conspiracy theories. We tested people's beliefs in the explanatory and latent scope of conspiracy theory explanations of a wide range of events. We compared participants' beliefs about conspiracy theories to fact-based alternative explanations of the same event. We also tested how our perceived scope measures relate to the believability of the given theories. While previous work has often measured how satisfying an explanation was seen to be, we were interested in going a step further and asking how much people believed the given theories. In short, we will be able to determine how the scope of conspiracy theories differs from other explanations and if part of what makes conspiracy theories believable is their scope.

Method

Participants

We recruited 400 U.S.-based participants from Prolific.com. Our participants (age $M = 37.8$, range 18 - 77) predominately identified as women (52%; men = 46%; nonbinary/third gender = 1%; preferred to self-describe = 1%; preferred not to respond = 3%), and as White (61%; African American = 24%; Asian = 12%; Hispanic or Latino = 9.3%; American Indian or Alaskan Native = 1.8%; preferred to self-describe = 0.75%; preferred not to respond = 0%). Our participants' highest education attained was as follows: less than high school = .75%, high school = 13.75%, some college = 17.75%, associate's degree = 8.75%, bachelor's degree = 37.75%, some graduate work = 2.5%, and graduate degree 18.75%.

Materials

The materials used in this experiment were developed as part of a larger project of ours studying the nature of conspiracy theories. For this larger project, we did a search of internet websites to find a vast array of topics about which conspiracy theories have been generated. These topics fit five domains: science/technology (e.g., existence of earthquake weapons), health (e.g., spread of Monkeypox), paranormal (e.g., Project Moon Dust and UFOs), celebrity (e.g., Avril Lavigne's clone), and traditional conspiracies that called to political motivations but were not in one of the previously listed domains (e.g., crisis actors in school shootings). We used multiple domains to account for differences in how socially acceptable it may be to endorse believing different types of conspiracy theories (e.g., endorsing 9/11 was an inside job versus endorsing the existence of Bigfoot). In pretesting for this larger project, we measured participants' familiarity with the set of conspiracy theory topics we collected (e.g., the death of Jim Morrison, the existence of earthquake weapons). For this study, we wanted to use theories about which people were less likely to have strongly formed previous beliefs. To this end, we selected topics that were below the midpoint of our pretest familiarity scale. We selected 8 conspiracy theory topics in each domain, for a total of 40 conspiracy theory topics. See Table 1 for example materials.

For each selected topic, we next developed a brief passage that described one conspiracy theory explanation of that topic.[1] We kept these explanations as similar as we could to how the theory was explained on public websites. We then developed a fact-based alternative explanation that was within 5 words of the length of the conspiracy theory explanation and was based on publicly accepted facts about the event.[2] We took the fact-based explanations from public websites as well. Equating length helped equate overall reading time across conditions. This resulted in every topic to be explained having a conspiracy theory version and a fact-based version of the explanation that were roughly the same length. We did not match the explanations on other elements because we were interested in measuring how perceptions of the explanations differed based on the way they are naturally presented in online sources.

[1] For any given conspiracy theory topic (such as JFK's assassination), there can be a variety of different conspiracy theory explanations for that topic (e.g., foreign government killed JFK versus mafia killed JFK).

[2] Not all conspiracy theories are false (e.g., the Free Brittany movement). We use fact-based as a general term to represent the standard alternative narrative to the conspiracy theory in question.

Measures

Participants made a set of ratings for each explanation. Our two main measures of interest used to evaluate scope were as follows:

- Explanatory scope: "Imagine all of the things (e.g., people, events, circumstances, etc.) that would have been involved with {topic of explanation}. Does the above explanation explain a lot of things related to this or just a few things?" 0 (it explains nothing) to 100 (it explains everything) scale
- Latent scope: Imagine new things were learned about {topic of explanation}. How well do you think those new things would fit into the above explanation? 0 (Not well at all) to 100 (Extremely well) scale

To assess the believability of each explanation, we asked participants to rate, "How much do you believe this

Table 1: Sample materials used in each condition.

Domain	Topic	Conspiracy Explanation	Fact-based Explanation
Celebrity	Avril Lavigne's changing appearance	Avril Lavigne died and was replaced by a look-alike actress named Melissa Vandella. The doppelgänger was secretly hired by record executives to confuse paparazzi photographers but when Lavigne died, Vandella stepped in for good. Subliminal messaging in her songs and a change in Lavigne's appearance since 2003 are evidence for the singer's death.	online blogs reported that Avril Lavigne died and was replaced by a look-alike. They cited as evidence changes in Lavigne's appearance since 2003, as well as a photoshoot in which Lavigne had the name Melissa written on her hand. There is no evidence to support these claims and Avril Lavigne is still alive.
Health	the origin of HIV	the HIV virus and resulting disease AIDS were engineered by the World Health Organization as a bioweapon. The virus was released into the population via vaccinations, drug tests, and routine checkups.	the HIV virus that causes the disease AIDS originated in non-human primates in West-central Africa. The virus transferred from chimpanzees and gorillas to humans in the early 20th century.
Paranormal	the U.S.'s project Moon Dust	Project Moon Dust is a secret U.S. Air Force project. The project's aim was to search space for alien spacecraft, and to recover crashed UFOs for analysis.	Project Moon Dust was used by the U.S. Air Force during the Cold War. The project recovered crashed Soviet space satellites and rocket debris to analyze Soviet hardware.
Political	the church shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas	the Sutherland Springs church shooting is fake. The event was a "false flag" operation organized by the federal government and then mourned over by "crisis actors" (political actors that pose as real people) for political motivations. Demands for birth certificates of those who were killed in the event to prove their existence were not answered.	a shooter walked into a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas and killed 26 people. The Texas Rangers led the investigation of the Sutherland Springs shooting, with the FBI and the Bureau of ATF assisting. There was only one shooter involved in the incident. Video cameras in the church recorded the entire shooting.
Technology	global warming	the science behind global warming and climate change has been invented or distorted for ideological and financial reasons. Scientists and institutions involved in global warming research are part of a global scientific conspiracy and engaged in a manipulative hoax about climate change to profit off of people's panic.	global warming describes the effect of ongoing increases in global temperatures on Earth's climate system. The current average temperature rise is caused by burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and agricultural/industrial practices. All of the scientific evidence supports that human activity like burning fossil fuels produces gases that trap heat, increasing the Earth's temperature.

explanation?" on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 100 (completely). These three measures are the main focus of this paper.

As part of the greater work we are doing on exploring conspiracy theories, we included an additional measure of the complexity of the explanation as we had used in previous work ("How complex do you think this explanation is?") on a 0 (not at all complex) to 100 (extremely complex) scale. With our selected set of conspiracies, we replicated the same basic finding of conspiracy theories being seen as more complex than fact-based alternatives as we have previously found (Marsh et al., 2022). We do not discuss these findings further.

We also asked participants to rate how familiar they were with each explanation ("Please rate how familiar you are with each of the following explanations. In other words, consider how often you have heard or seen something about this before.") on a 0 (not at all familiar) to 100 (extremely familiar). For our familiarity ratings, we found that people were more familiar with the fact-based explanations than the conspiracy explanations. Overall, participants' familiarity ratings showed that they were not very familiar with the explanations (conspiracy: $M = 29.2$, $SE = 1.21$; fact-based: $M = 37.3$, $SE = 1.33$). This matches our pretesting, suggesting we successfully selected materials about which people may not have had much prior knowledge.

Procedure

Participants began the experiment with instructions that told them they would be reading explanations of different events and making judgments about those explanations. We then randomly assigned participants to read either conspiracy ($n = 199$) or fact-based ($n = 201$) explanations. Because of how long pilot testing showed the experiment would be if a participant rated all 40 items of a given explanation type, we divided the explanations into two different versions, so that participants would only rate 20 of the possible conspiracy or fact-based alternative explanations. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two versions in each explanation type.

Each explanation was introduced on a screen of the experiment with the phrase, "There are different explanations of {topic of explanation}. One explanation states that", followed by the explanation for that specific condition. After reading the explanation, participants then made the complexity, explanatory scope, latent scope, and believability ratings, in that order. Participants then moved on to the next screen which showed the next explanation topic. Participants read and rated 4 items in each domain in a random order, for a total of 20 different explanations. After making ratings for all 20 explanations, participants then proceeded to a new screen where they rated their familiarity with all of the explanations. Participants then answered demographic questions about their gender, age, race, amount of education, and Prolific ID. Finally, participants were asked to answer two questions that served as an attention check by reporting what they were asked to do in the study and to report any issues they had that made the study difficult to complete. No participants failed these check questions. Our design and analyses were pre-registered and can be found here: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6FXZ8. IRB approval was secured through Lehigh University.

Results

Perceived explanatory and latent scope

We first analyzed whether the perceived explanatory scope of fact-based and conspiracy theory explanations differed. We conducted a linear mixed model with explanation condition (conspiracy vs. fact-based) as a fixed effect and participant as a random effect. We inspected the ANOVA-style output of this analysis to see if there was an overall difference between groups.

We found a significant main effect of explanation condition, $F(1, 397.9) = 57.8$, $p < .001$. The explanatory scope of conspiracy theories ($M = 32.3$; $SE = 1.22$) was rated as smaller than the scope of fact-based explanations ($M = 45.3$; $SE = 1.21$). We next re-ran these analyses adding in domain (political, health, technology, paranormal, celebrity) as an additional fixed effect to see if the differences between conspiracy and truth held in each domain. We found a significant main effect of explanation condition, $F(1, 398.0) = 57.8$, $p < .001$, a significant main effect of domain, $F(4, 2539.1) = 11.8$, $p < .001$, and a significant interaction, $F(4, 2539.1) = 10.3$, $p < .001$. We used Sidak-corrected *t*-tests to explore the significant interaction and test whether the scope of fact-based explanations was seen as larger than conspiracy explanations in all domains. While the absolute size of the difference between the conspiracy and fact-based explanation ratings varied by domain as seen in Figure 1, fact-based explanations were rated as having larger scope than conspiracy theories in all domains, ps $< .001$.

We next explored whether the same differences between conspiracy and fact-based explanations held for latent scope. As a reminder, latent scope encompasses what an explanation could account for if new information is discovered. We ran a linear mixed model with explanation condition as a fixed effect and participant as a random effect. We again found a main effect of explanation condition, $F(1, 397.7) = 111.9$, $p < .001$. As with explanatory scope, the latent scope of conspiracy explanations ($M = 35.1$; $SE = 1.37$) was rated as smaller than the latent scope of fact-based explanations ($M = 55.5$; $SE = 1.36$). Adding in domain as an additional fixed effect found a significant main effect of explanation condition, $F(1, 397.7) = 110.6$, $p < .001$, a significant main effect of domain, $F(4, 2549.8) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, and a significant interaction, $F(4, 2549.8) = 14.0$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected *t*-tests found that the latent scope for conspiracy explanations was smaller than fact-based explanations for all domains, ps $< .001$. Figure 2 depicts the mean ratings by domain.

Relationship between believability and scope

Finally, we tested how explanatory and latent scope were related to the believability of the explanations. Overall, the

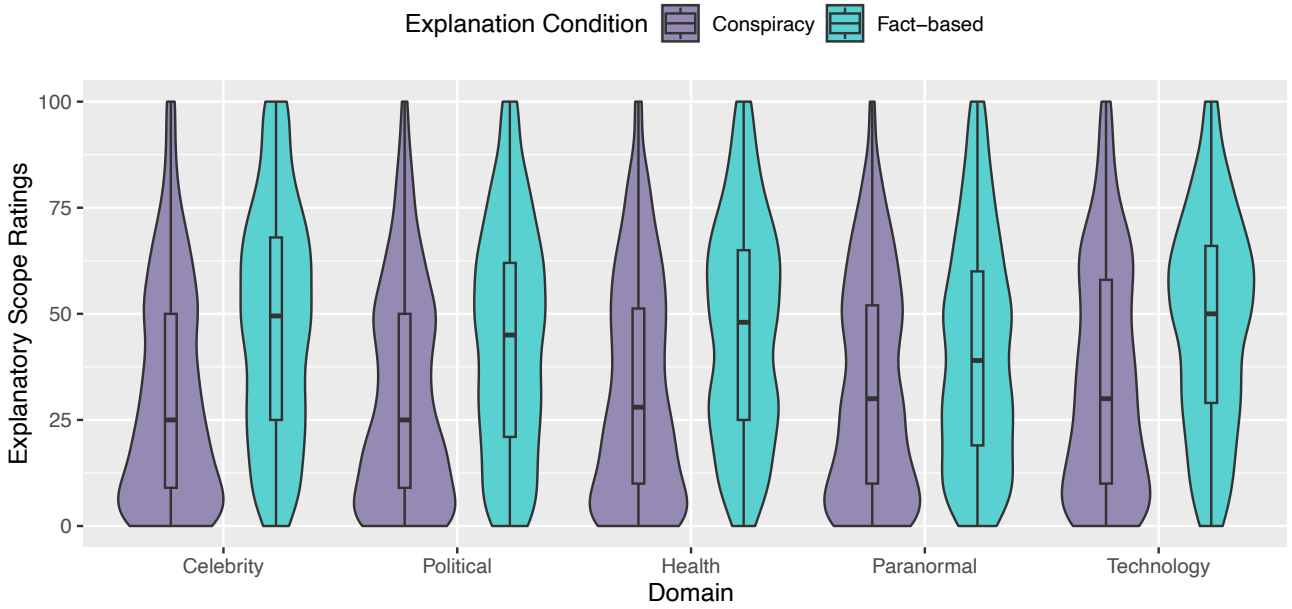

Figure 1: Explanatory scope ratings separated by domain.

fact-based explanations (M = 57.2, SE = 1.18) were rated as more believable than the conspiracy explanations (M = 26.4, SE = 1.46). We conducted Pearson's correlations testing the relationship between each scope rating and believability separately for conspiracy theory and fact-based explanations. Explanatory scope had a significant, positive correlation with believability for both conspiracy ($r(197) = .786$, $p < .001$) and fact-based ($r(199) = .513$, $p < .001$) explanations. The same was true for latent scope in conspiracy ($r(197) = .746$, $p < .001$) and fact-based ($r(199) = .616$, $p < .001$) explanations. In other words, as the scope of an explanation increased, so did the believability of that explanation, and both correlations were stronger for conspiracy theories than for facts.

General Discussion

Our results show that overall participants think conspiracy theory explanations have a smaller explanatory scope than fact-based alternative explanations. While in a given domain the absolute difference between explanation types differed, the same pattern held regardless of domain. In other words, regardless of whether people were evaluating celebrity clones or political inside jobs, people saw the conspiracy theory explanations as being smaller in scope. Yet believability was highly correlated with both explanatory and latent scope for both types of explanations, suggesting that people want the same things from their conspiracies that they do from their facts: to explain both what is already known and new information that may arise.

Our findings provide new insights into what makes for a good explanation. Previous work has suggested that people prefer explanations with larger scope that can account for more seen events, while having narrower latent scope (Khemlani et al., 2011). Our conspiracy theories were seen as both having smaller explanatory scope and latent scope. This in some ways should make them simultaneously appealing and not appealing. However, for both measures believability was positively correlated with larger scope. This suggests a new real-world case where people prefer larger scope overall (Stephan, 2023).

Believability being related to scope provides a window into what may make conspiracy theories compelling explanations. The positive correlation between scope and believability suggests that when certain conspiracy-based explanations are seen as believable, they can explain more of the circumstances that surround an event. In this experiment, the overall believability of our conspiracy theories was rather low, and lower than our fact-based explanations. For a person who believed a conspiracy theory over its fact-based alternative, we would predict that they may also perceive the scope of that conspiracy theory as larger than the scope of the fact-based alternative. Alternatively, it is possible that believing a given conspiracy *more* than its fact-based version is correlated with other factors outside of scope and we would therefore not see the predicted change in scope ratings. To test this, we would need to recruit a sample of participants who believed in a given conspiracy over other alternatives and then measure scope ratings. That is an avenue for future testing with more widely-held conspiracy beliefs.

While we know scope and believability are correlated, we do not know the direction of how perceptions of one may form perceptions of the other. It is possible that perceiving an explanation as having a large scope promotes believing that explanation. Alternatively, it is possible that finding an explanation believable promotes seeing the scope as larger. Conspiracy theory explanations give an interesting test bed

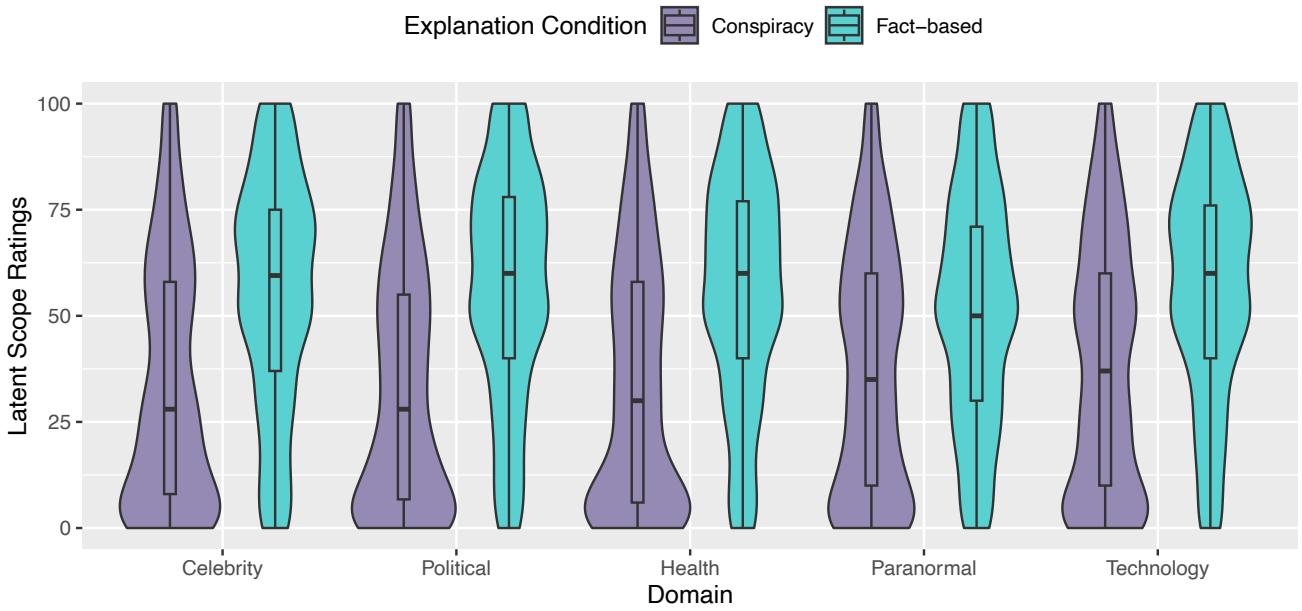

Figure 2: Latent scope ratings separated by domain.

for distinguishing between these possibilities. Future work can manipulate the believability of explanations and see how that directly affects perceptions of scope, and vice versa.

One limitation of our work is that we used relatively unfamiliar conspiracy theories. Again, we made this choice intentionally to reduce the existing beliefs people held about the given explanations we used. For widely popularized conspiracy theories (e.g., COVID vaccinations and 5G) people may have had strongly held existing beliefs that could have kept them from thinking deeply about these theories as explanations (e.g., 'this theory is stupid so scope must be zero'). However, widely held conspiracy beliefs may be exactly the type of explanations that need to be targeted to reduce beliefs in misinformation more generally. Our current results provide a starting point to select more familiar conspiracy beliefs and then test how familiar conspiracy theories may function similarly or differently than explanations a person is learning about for the first time.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories on their surface seem like poor explanations of the world. They can be complex and provide difficult to understand mechanisms by which events occur. However, they are also prevalent and widely held beliefs. Understanding what makes a given conspiracy theory believable could provide insight into how to better educate the public on issues of importance from why they should not be afraid of vaccines to why they should not be suspicious that a singer looks different as they age. Our results help add to that understanding by demonstrating how much a conspiracy theory can explain relates to its believability.

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