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THE INFLUENCE OF MISINFORMATION FROM THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Criminal Justice & Criminology.

By
Tyler Nelson

Under the mentorship of Amanda Graham

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, conspiracy theorists and larger groups have become much more prominent across the United States, despite conspiracies being present for decades. Previously, they have been dismissed by most, however over the last decade due to an explosive political climate and growing numbers, these groups have begun to act on their beliefs. Events such as the January 6th Insurrection on the United States Capitol building is an unfortunate example as to how far these groups are willing to go. This study's purpose is to use a nationwide survey to help determine who exactly are these types of individuals who believe and might potentially participate in further criminal activities. The study collected 512 respondents' data over a variety of questions regarding theories and various demographics.

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April 2022
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INDEX WORDS: Conspiracy Theories, Crime, Psychological Traits

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B.S., Georgia Southern University, 2022

A thesis submitted to the Undergraduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

BACHELOR OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND CRIMINOLOGY

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to begin by thanking my parents, grandparents, and my brother for their unconditional support during my time here at Georgia Southern. Their support kept me on track for both my bachelor's degree and my Honors Thesis project. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Graham for being my faculty mentor. Dr. Graham was essential with helping me with this project, not only for advising me when I didn't understand something but having the patience to continuously meet to discuss plans and timelines to keep me on track. Dr. Graham thank you for your time, effort, and continued support, there is no possible way I could have done this without you. Finally, I would like to thank Georgia Southern University and especially the faculty within the Department of Criminal Justice. Throughout my four years here the classes that you all taught only deepened my passion for the field of criminal justice and ultimately drove me to become an honors student and create this thesis. Thank you all once again and GATA.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Throughout the last decade, the world has seen a significant change in the way that it distributes and processes information. The transmission of information has been a tradition of humankind since our early ancestors, beginning with folklore being passed down generation to generation based on the word-of-mouth stories that were shared throughout their lifetime. Then the printing press and newspapers became the primary source of information, which provided some semblance of consistency and truth with what was being released to the public. The biggest problem with this method of communication was the time it took to write, edit, print, and distribute. Then came radio and television, a massive period of growth in the transmission of communication. Radio broadcasts could reach thousands of people instantly and could be prepared much faster than traditional newspapers could. Finally, there is the age of modern technology, the internet and social media. These two tools have allowed humans from across the planet to communicate instantly, being capable to share pictures and videos, be a part of conference calls on different continents and so on. But now, the world faces an entirely new problem. When is there too much information available and how is that information credible and factual?

Social media and the internet is and has been an incredible tool. Without it, the COVID-19 pandemic would have collapsed modern society. However, everyone having the ability to speak their mind online has led to the creation of a period of time known as the “post-truth” era. This has created an environment, specifically on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook where conspiracy theorist groups have flourished, and ultimately recruited quite a few individuals into their ranks. For Americans, this has been something that we have dealt with for

many years. Although not as prominent as they are now, conspiracy theories have been a part of our social discourse since its inception. Things such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Moon landing, and the September 11th attacks are all events that have been called into question throughout the years. Now, conspiracy theorists run rampant, questioning basic facts that can be easily disputed and debunked, yet the number of believers continues to grow.

The new age of conspiracy theorists really started to grow around 2015, with the Presidential election between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. Throughout the campaign there were many claims that Russia was involved and assisting Donald Trump to ultimately end up winning the Presidential election, which he did in 2016. Many people refused to believe he won legitimately and held their position that Vladimir Putin and Russia placed Donald Trump in the White House. Fast forward to 2020, and the same concept of foreign intervention was publicized, however this time it was quite different. Then current President Donald Trump, claims the election was "rigged" and voter fraud within the United States was the reason that Joe Biden ended up winning the 2020 Presidential election. This claim was not without consequence. After firmly denying Joe Biden as the legitimate President of the United States, far-right supporters and groups within that cohort staged the protests on January 6th, 2021, that ultimately ended up becoming the attack on the United States Capitol Building, also known as the Insurrection on the Capitol.

Problem Statement

With the rise of conspiracy theorist groups and related crimes that have been committed either in their name or in relation to them, it is incredibly important to be able to determine who and potentially why they participate in these beliefs. Without the direct de-platforming and

censorship of these groups, the country must figure out a way to deter people from participating in these organizations.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Conspiracy theories and misinformation has become one of the most pressing issues that the United States faces in the digital age. (Spellings & Bridgeland, 2021) Over the last decade we have seen incredible rises in misinformation being shared across social media (Suciu, 2021), which combined with other factors caused many Americans to question what is “fake news” and actual truth. While it seems like people who believe and participate in these conspiracy groups are a very small and harmless group, it is clear by the January 6 attacks on the Capitol building that these beliefs can ultimately lead to the loss of life.

Conspiracy theory and misinformation campaigns are not just bad for the people who believe in them. After the January 6 attacks on the Capitol building, law enforcement as well as the country as a whole realized this can be a very serious problem that can lead to loss of life. The importance of this type of research studying who and why certain individuals believe in conspiracy theories and tend to act on them can help law enforcement in the future to possibly prevent events from happening again. To understand that we first must look at the previous events that have occurred due to belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation. One of the most notable is the Pizza-gate theory that broke out during the 2016 Presidential election. The conspiracy was that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was operating a child sex trafficking organization out of the basement of a local Washington D.C. pizza restaurant known as Comet Ping Pong (Robb, 2017). The reason Pizza-gate is such a great example of how quick these beliefs can turn into real life crimes is because as laughable as the idea can be to most, there was an individual who showed up at this establishment with an AR-15 rifle, handgun, and combat knife, ready to free the captive children in the basement (Robb, 2017). Police responded to the

call of an armed man trying to “free the children” and were genuinely confused after arriving on scene (Robb, 2017). Luckily there was no loss of life, and that individual was taken into custody (Robb, 2017). Why is this example important for law enforcement? As more and more misinformation and public unrest occurs across the country, law enforcement will be responding to more and more calls similar in nature. If we were to be able to study this type of population and be able to identify potential crimes sooner, then we may prevent large scale events from happening again.

Looking back at conspiracy theories within our country there have been many throughout our history, however the majority have been after 2000. The two most notable theories that have been spread pre-2000 would be the Pearl Harbor theory and the President Kennedy assassination theory. Cloward (2013) discusses the growing conspiracy culture that really started with the Kennedy assassination in 1963. Cloward writes, “Polls taken within the last decade reflect that 75 percent of Americans do not believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, 70 percent suspect that there was a broader plot in the assassination, 66 percent think there was a conspiracy, and 74 percent think there was a coverup.” (Cloward, 2013, pg. 410). This is important because it represents that Americans' exposure and even belief in conspiracy theories, specifically government related conspiracy theories are nothing new as these statistics are taken from the 1990s.

Outside of President Kennedy's assassination, there are two more major historical conspiracy theories that have been discussed within the United States of America: the Pearl Harbor and Area 51 conspiracies. To give a general idea of both, the Pearl Harbor conspiracy believes that President Roosevelt allowed the attack at Pearl Harbor to occur so that the United States would have a reason to enter World War II (Dallek, 2018). The Area 51 theory believes

that the United States military has proof of alien life and has hidden it from the world for decades inside of the Area 51 base in Roswell, New Mexico (Chappell, 2021). While these seem more far-fetched than others, they have stood the test of time and continued to be topics of discussion even in the modern age of misinformation and conspiracy theory groups. The biggest difference between the older theories and the newer theories is that nothing has ever come of the older theories. The closest that was ever done about them was the recent “assault on Area 51” that got stopped in its tracks before anything could occur (Kluger, 2019).

Currently, there are quite a few modern conspiracy theories that are being shared across social media. The majority of them are driven by a newfound level of distrust in the government combined with misinformation campaigns designed to influence particularly gullible people (McCammon & Baker, 2021). Just in the last five years, the country has seen theories from microchips in the Covid-19 vaccines to big tech companies such as Microsoft and Amazon spying on citizens through its technology (Lee, 2021). Over the past decade, political polarization has caused Americans to question almost everything that originates from the other side of the aisle. The most glaring example of this is the Covid-19 vaccine. When President Trump was in office during the development of the vaccine, many left leaning individuals refused the idea of taking a vaccine under President Trump, however when President Biden took office, the idea of the vaccine became a welcome one (Lopez, 2021). The same goes for right leaning individuals and President Biden, however the one big difference between the two groups is that conservatives seem to have a higher distrust of the government as a whole (Fried & Harris, 2021). In fact, the large majority of those that questioned the Covid-19 vaccine was from the United States or India. (Islam, Kamal, Kabir, et. al, 2021, pg. 5-7). More interestingly, Facebook was the largest source of conspiracy and misinformation being distributed at 45.7%

compared to its rival Twitter at 11.7% (Islam, Kamal, Kabir, et. al, 2021, pg.7). This breakdown is especially interesting to law enforcement because it is not the first time that Facebook has been the primary culprit in misinformation campaigns (Islam, Kabir, et. al., 2021, pg. 5-7).

So, who actually believes and participates in conspiracy groups and misinformation campaigns based on the current data that is available? While it can be broken down into many contributing factors such as religion, gender, race, ethnicity, geographical location, and social cohorts, there are only a few that this study will take into account. One of the biggest traits that determine an individual's involvement in conspiracy theories is their level of education (Van Prooijen, 2016). According to Jan Willem Van Prooijen (2016), the three biggest reasons why individuals who have higher education do not participate in conspiracy groups is, "People with a high education level are less likely to believe in simple solutions for complex problems; they feel less powerless (and hence more in control) within their social environment, and they subjectively perceive themselves as higher in social class." (Prooijen, 2017, pg. 56). When speaking about more general conspiracy theories there are a variety of members among its audience, however more specific conspiracy theories such as ones that revolve around climate change it is much more specific. According to van Pooijen and colleagues (2015), "with climate conspiracy theories flourish particularly among right-wing extremist men" (Pooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015, pg. 572). This narrows down a subgroup of individuals who are backed by existing research that describes who exactly participates in these types of groups.

When it comes down to it, members of conspiracy groups and misinformation campaigns can be very dangerous individuals. As we have seen from events such as the January 6th Insurrection on the Capitol, with numbers these groups have the power to take the lives of innocent civilians as well as law enforcement officers (Wise, 2021). The purpose of this research

is to narrow down exactly who might participate in these groups and potential methods to help identify and prevent the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns to the American people.

CHAPTER 3

Theory Analysis

In modern America, one of the biggest problems challenging the nation currently is the spread of misinformation. (Spellings & Bridgeland, 2021) While conspiracy theorists and a more divided media is certainly a contributing factor in the issue, the rise of social media has been a catalyst for misinformation to spread like wildfire across the nation (Suciu, 2021). Throughout the last decade there have been quite a few high-profile examples of this type of behavior from the Russian collusion in the 2016 elections (Blake, 2021), to the voter fraud in the 2020 elections (Bergengruen & Perrigo, 2021), however the most prominent and recent example is information regarding Covid-19. Although the discussion about what to believe when it comes to Covid-19 has always seemed muddied, the conversation about the vaccines, whether it be efficacy or safety, has become a hot topic across America. This project is not only designed to determine what people believe, but why this sub-group believes.

One might assume the typical stereotype for conspiracy theorists might be White and conservative, specifically from the South or Midwest, I truly believe the results will show a more diverse population that believes the misinformation that they have seen even though they may not admit it publicly. However, this leads to the question of why they believe what they do and throughout the review of various articles there are some theories that may have a serious contribution to the mindset of an individual who would believe in these things.

The first theory that should be addressed is that the belief of misinformation as well as the belief of conspiracy theories is that it is socially motivated. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas (2018) both discuss the social aspects of conspiracy theorists and their reasoning of their behavior. The article speaks specifically on the feeling of paranoia, but also

states, “Paranoia is self-relevant and necessarily pertains to suspected hostility against a perceiver personally, but instead, conspiracy theories are usually conceived of as intergroup beliefs that assume a powerful or hostile outgroup is conspiring against a perceiver’s ingroup (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014).” (Prooijen & Douglas, pg. 902 2018). This statement is more relevant than ever in terms of contribution to belief in conspiracy and misinformation due to the incredibly divided and hostile political environment of our nation (Spellings & Bridgeland, 2021). With the “us against them” mentality, it creates an easy opportunity for people who might not be influenced by conspiracy theories or misinformation to become involved because they feel they need to pick a side and be included in the group (Mitchell, et. al., 2021).

The second aspect of social theory is the concept of an outside threat, which has been used both in both foreign and domestic applications. Throughout the years whether it be the Russian communists of the Cold War era or the “invasion of illegal immigrants” at our Southern border, the threat of an outside group has always been a factor to influence people’s beliefs (Alvarez, 2021). Speaking on the threat of an outgroup, van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) explains,

The second social motivation is to protect against a coalition or outgroup suspected to be hostile. This outgroup typically has some threatening quality, such as power (e.g., politicians; managers) or negative stereotypes (e.g., minority groups) which reinforces people’s suspicion towards these groups (Douglas et al., 2017; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014). Thus, the combination of a strong ingroup identity and a sense of outgroup threat characterize the social dimension of conspiracy beliefs. (p. 902)

With the combination of both ingroup identity as well as an outgroup threat, social factors are an easy influence in terms of getting individuals to believe something, right or wrong. In this current case, the misinformation about the Covid-19 vaccine is a perfect example of the impact of social factors. Each and every one of us has probably logged into our social media and seen something different regarding information on the vaccine as well as other treatment options such as Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine. This general mistrust of the vaccine and belief in misinformation is very influenced by social politics (Ray, 2021). Whether it be liberals under the Trump administration or conservatives under the Biden administration, the social outgroup threat has influenced the belief that the vaccine is dangerous.

The last major theory that should be examined is that individuals who believe in misinformation and conspiracy theories do so because they all share specific psychological traits. Machiavellianism is defined as, “behavior characterized by subtle or unscrupulous cunning, deception, expediency, or dishonesty” (Dictionary.com, 2021) as well as extreme narcissistic tendencies. Evita March and Jordan Springer (2019) break down the various components of an individual’s psychological profile that align with individuals who believe in conspiracy theories and are influenced by misinformation. The article talks about these components by stating, “First, trait narcissism and Machiavellianism, along with trait psychopathy comprise the Dark Triad of personality, three non-clinical noxious personality traits that share exploitative tendencies, a manipulative interpersonal style, and a grandiose sense of self-importance.” (March & Springer, 2019). The idea of the “Dark Triad” when it comes to the combination of psychological factors is an excellent way to categorize the personality traits that might make up an individual who is influenced by misinformation or conspiracy theories. While some may

wonder about why there is a relationship between narcissistic and Machiavellian traits to conspiracy theories, March and Springer go on to write, “Characterized by an inflated and grandiose sense of self, researchers attribute the relationship between narcissism and belief in conspiracy theories to the tendency for these individuals to perceive themselves as being the centre of attention, and that the actions of others are intentional attacks against them.” (March & Springer 2019). This research finding is extremely beneficial to breaking down the psyche of an individual who believes in conspiracy and misinformation for a variety of reasons, the biggest being the ability to profile and potentially stop crimes from this population group.

Ultimately, it seems important to figure out who these individuals are and why they believe what they do as the country has seen an increasing number of crimes related to this type of behavior. (Funke, et. al., 2019) With Q-Anon, which is a internet based conspiracy group with the anonymous leader known only as “Q” gaining more and more momentum throughout the 2020 election cycle and the appearance of social media censoring users, it has only increased the skepticism as well as belief in a general conspiracy (Wednling, 2021). So, what can this belief result in? The biggest and most unfortunate example of crime stemming from the belief of misinformation and conspiracy would be the January 6 Insurrection against the United States Capitol building. While this event could be considered one of the darkest days in our country’s history, it is all the more reason that we need to understand why people participate in conspiracy groups, such as Q-Anon, and have the possibility to de-radicalize them before they ultimately commit serious crimes such as that.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

Current Study

While conspiracy theories and the belief in them is not something that is particularly new to the United States, only recently has it become something that has resulted in major crimes being committed and lives lost due to their influence (Bogel-burroughs & Hill, 2021). Due to the perceived harmless nature of belief in conspiracy theories in the past, there has not been much research conducted on this specific topic, especially not in regards to the recent rise of conspiracy groups and high profile events such as the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol Building. However, having an interest in a career in law enforcement and seeing how much damage these groups have done and can do in the future, it is incredibly important to research this topic and develop empirical evidence so that we can learn more about these groups to prevent crime in the future.

Research Question 1: Does the race of an individual influence their belief or disbelief in conspiracy theories?

Research Question 2: Does the education level of an individual influence their belief or disbelief in conspiracy theories?

Research Question 3: Does the geographical location of an individual influence their belief or disbelief in conspiracy theories?

Research Question 4: Do certain personality traits or beliefs (i.e. Dark Triad, Belief in a Dangerous World) influence their belief or disbelief in conspiracy theories?

Due to the nature of the study being in a survey format, I have determined the following hypotheses:

H: Caucasian respondents will be significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than any other race.

H: Individuals who are lower educated will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than individuals who have higher education.

H: Individuals who live in the South of the United States (as noted by the US Census) will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those who live in the rest of the United States.

H: People higher in the Dark Triad and the Belief in a Dangerous World will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

Data

The data gathered comes from a nationwide survey that is conducted through Amazon MTurk. The survey was conducted on February 11th and recorded 512 respondents. The survey consists of eleven different sections that are arranged in the following order; (General Mentality, Scientific Literacy, Common Theories, American Government, Dark Triad, Coronavirus Theories, Specific Theories, White Nationalism, Belief in a Dangerous World, Self Control, and Personal Demographics). The question for each section is formatted in a matrix table that asks the respondent to pick a choice based on how much they agree or disagree with the following statement. The answer choices include the following; 0=(Strongly disagree) 1=(Somewhat disagree) 2=(Neither agree nor disagree) 3=(Somewhat agree) 4=(Strongly agree).

Dependent Variable

The first dependent variable was a series of conspiracy theories that have been commonly held either contemporarily or more modernly. The respondents are then asked how much they

agreed or disagreed with the following statements, where each conspiracy theory is briefly described for the respondent so they clearly can have a general understanding of each event. Due to the nature and scale of the survey, no follow-up questions were asked about each conspiracy theory. See Table 1 for the conspiracy theories rated.

Independent Variables

The independent variables are broken up into two groups: the demographics of the respondents and the theoretical traits such as Machiavellianism and social influence. When looking at the independent variable of demographics, it was broken down into questions regarding the following topics. First, we asked the respondent their sex and provided “Male” “Female” “Non-binary/third gender” and “Prefer not to say” options. In regards to race, we gave the respondent a variety of answer choices to choose from including the following: (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic & Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed Race, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, White, and other). The survey asked the respondent to include the year of their birth rather than asking them their age. The survey asked about their relationship status, including the following answer choices: Single, never married, Married, living with a spouse, Cohabiting, Widowed, Divorced, Separated, Domestic Partnership. Later on, the study inquired about their political ideology, with response options ranging from very liberal to very conservative. We also asked the respondent about their political party affiliation and divided the answer choices into Democrat, independent, other, and Republican. The study goes on to ask about a variety of other topics ranging from the educational experience of the respondent to where they derive their news from, providing some of the most common American news outlets (Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, NBC) as answer choices. Finally, we asked the zip code of the respondent (to identify their geographic region)

and their religious affiliation, providing many of the most common religions as (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Baptist, Eastern or Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, Nothing in Particular, and Other) answer choices.

Theoretical controls included responses from the variables Dark Triad, “...consists of *narcissism* (entitled self-importance), *Machiavellianism* (strategic exploitation and deceit) and *psychopathy* (callousness and cynicism)” (Kaufman, 2019), Self Control “The Brief-Self Control Scale (BSCS) is a widely used measure of general trait self-control, (TSC), defined as ‘the self’s capacity to override or change one’s inner responses, as well as to interrupt undesired behavioral tendencies and to refrain from acting on them” (Tangeney et al., 2004, p. 274)

, and Belief in a Dangerous World, which measures “the extent to which one believes the world is a dangerous place in which one must frequently protect oneself from physical harm.” (Maner et. al., 2005). The study measures narcissism by relating it with the following 13 questions in the same 1-5 response option. The questions and response options for the components of the Dark Triad scale have been listed below.

1. Narcissism: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- People see me as a natural leader
- I hate being the center of attention
- I am an average person
- I get bored hanging around average people
- Many group activities tend to be dull without me
- I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so
- People often think my stories are boring

- People with talent and good looks should not hide them
- I like to get acquainted with important people
- I feel embarrassed if someone compliments me
- I insist on getting the respect that I deserve
- I have been compared to famous people
- I am likely to show off if I get the chance

2. Machiavellianism: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

(response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- It is not wise to tell your secrets
- Most people who get ahead in the world lead clean moral lives
- Generally speaking, people won't work hard unless they have to
- There's a sucker born every minute
- Most people are basically good and kind
- It's better to be completely honest than successful
- Whatever it takes, you must get the important people on your side
- Avoid direct conflict with others because they may be useful in the future
- It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later
- There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation
- You should wait for the right time to get back at people
- Make sure your plans benefit you, not others
- Most people deserve respect

3. Psychopathy: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- I like to get revenge on authorities
- I avoid dangerous situations
- I am a thrill seeker
- Payback needs to be quick and nasty
- People often say I'm out of control
- My family is proud of everything I do
- You have to grab things while the opportunity is there
- It's true that I can be nasty
- I get angry if someone turns down having sex with me
- I hate movies where they show blood and guts
- People who mess with me always regret it
- I have never gotten in trouble with the law
- I will say anything to get what I want
- I'm always feeling guilty
- I like to pick on losers

The following statements originate from the self control scale and have been arranged in the list below.

Self Control: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think.

- I often do whatever brings me pleasure here and now, even at the cost of some distant goal.
- I frequently try to avoid projects that I know will be difficult
- I try to look out for myself first, even if it means making things difficult for other people.
- I lose my temper pretty easily.
- When I'm really angry, other people better stay away from me.

The final scale, the Belief in a Dangerous World has been broken down into the statements and listed below.

Belief in a Dangerous World: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

(response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- Any day now chaos and anarchy could erupt around us. All signs are pointing to it.
- There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all.
- It seems that every year there are fewer and fewer truly respectable people, and more and more persons with no morals at all who threaten everyone else.
- The world we live in is basically a dangerous and unpredictable place, in which good, decent and moral people's values and way of life are threatened and disrupted by bad people.

Analytic Plan

The analysis of the data will begin with a review of the various factors found within the different beliefs of these theories. Using exploratory factor analysis, conspiracy theories will be

grouped together based on shared variance amongst theories. This factor analysis will allow distinct and overlapping belief patterns to be identified from the responses of the survey respondents. Secondly, descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, median, mode, and range) will be used to find out averages and other plottable data from the respondents' data through the survey. Additionally, the analysis will include bivariate statistics (e.g., Chi-square, ANOVA) to determine if there is a relationship between specific demographic characteristics and belief in conspiracy theories. Lastly, the study will include and analyze the theoretical variables (Dark Triad and Self Control) to determine if the responses from those series of survey questions create a pattern with the belief in conspiracy theories.

CHAPTER 5

Data Analysis

We first organized our data into Table 1, which created a more concise summary of the means and standard deviations of the variables. The data analysis began with the examinations of our dependent variables in the scales that were created. The Hardcore conspiracy theories scale that was created has a mean of 3.02 and a standard deviation of 1.05. This is significant because it means that slightly more people than not had belief in the hardcore scale, which was comprised of many different questions containing conspiracy theories on a variety of topics. The second scale measured was the General Mentality scale, which had a mean of 7.21 and a standard deviation of 2.41. The last scale that was identified was labeled Government and had a mean of 3.41 and a standard deviation of .81. Each of these scales had a range of 1 through 5.

The independent variables were also reported in this table. The respondent's race, White, variable had a mean of .80 and a standard deviation of .40. Due to the fact the study was looking specifically at White respondents, the range was 0 to 1. The second independent variable that was examined was education, with a mean of 4.90 and a standard deviation of 1.10. Due to the mean being 4.90 the majority of respondents obtained an associate's degree. Education had a variety of response choices, so it had a range of 1 through 7. The table goes on to look at the geographical location of respondents, specifically the South. The South had a mean of .45 and a standard deviation of .50. Similar to the White variable, we were looking specifically for respondents from the South, so it had a range of 0 to 1.

The next three variables are psychological components that make up the Dark Triad, which is used in the study (Tangeney et al., 2004, p. 274). Machiavellianism had a mean of 3.20

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables

DV	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Range
Hardcore	3.02 (1.05)	1-5
General Mentality	7.21 (2.41)	1-5
Government	3.41 (.81)	1-5
IV		
White	.80 (.40)	0-1
Education	4.90 (1.10)	1-7
South	.45 (.50)	0-1
Machiavellianism	3.20 (.57)	1-5
Narcissism	3.04 (.63)	1-5
Psychopathy	2.91 (.68)	1-5
Dangerous World	3.41 (1.02)	1-5
Sample		
Age	38.23 (10.45)	22-80
Income	5.72 (2.34)	1-10
Married	.73 (.44)	0-1
Religious	.81 (.39)	0-1
Political View	2.75 (1.26)	1-5
News Source	2.72 (1.72)	1-6
Veteran	.38 (.49)	0-1
Law Enforcement	.32 (.47)	0-1

and a standard deviation of .57. Narcissism held a mean of 3.04 and a standard deviation of .63. Psychopathy had a mean of 2.91 and a standard deviation of .68. The final variable, belief in a dangerous world, held a mean of 3.41 and a standard deviation of 1.02. Each of these variables had a range of 1-5.

The last portion of Table 1 looks at some of the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample had a mean of 38.23 and a standard deviation of 10.45. Age had a range anywhere from 22 to 80 years old. The average income was between \$40,000 and \$49,999 (a mean of 5.72 and a standard deviation of 2.34). The range for income was 1-10. On average, 73% of respondents reported being married, with a standard deviation of .44. The proportion of respondents who held religious beliefs was .81, with a standard deviation of .39. Both marital status and religious belief had a scale of 0-1. Political viewpoint carried a mean of 2.75, which corresponded to “Liberal” and a standard deviation of 1.26. The range for political views went from 1-5. The data showed that the majority of respondents received their news from CNN, with a total of 186 respondents making up 36.3% of all respondents. The range for news sources was between 1-6. The last two variables asked whether or not the respondent was a veteran or if they were current or former law enforcement. Both of these ranged from 0-1 and held a mean of .38 and .32, respectively. These variables also maintained a .49 and a .47 standard deviation respectively.

Table 2 reports the frequency of responses to the questions used to construct the conspiracy theory scales used in the data analysis. When looking at the questions that make up the “Hardcore conspiracy theories” scale, respondents by majority responded with “somewhat agree” (n = 170, 33.1%) with the statement “there should be no concern about the safety of the vaccines”.

Table 2 - Frequency in Conspiracy Theories

HARDCORE	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
There should be no concerns about the safety of the vaccines.	58 (11.3%)	60 (11.7%)	91 (17.7%)	170 (33.1%)	135 (26.3%)
The 9/11 attacks were known and allowed by the United States government.	95 (18.5%)	81 (15.8%)	115 (22.4%)	137 (26.7%)	86 (16.7%)
The Sandy Hook shooting was a planned event that used actors instead of a real tragedy.	137 (26.7%)	68 (13.2%)	104 (20.2%)	128 (24.9%)	77 (15.0%)
The American government was involved with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.	86 (16.7%)	64 (12.5%)	120 (23.3%)	147 (28.6%)	97 (18.9%)
There is currently a large-scale child sex ring operating in Nebraska that was started with Johnny Gosch in 1982.	84 (16.3%)	59 (11.5%)	163 (31.7%)	137 (26.7%)	71 (13.8%)
The American government was involved in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.	64 (12.5%)	72 (14.0%)	128 (24.9%)	159 (30.9%)	91 (17.7%)
There was a child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton in the basement of Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in the event commonly known as "Pizzagate".	135 (26.3%)	67 (13.0%)	109 (21.2%)	120 (23.3%)	83 (16.1%)
The American government uses chemical trails in the sky to manipulate or alter the weather	130 (25.4%)	61 (11.9%)	99 (19.3%)	149 (29.1%)	73 (14.3%)
Area 51 contains evidence that extraterrestrials or "aliens" exist.	93 (18.2%)	57 (11.1%)	117 (22.9%)	171 (33.4%)	74 (14.5%)
The American government faked the Moon landing to win the Space Race.	140 (27.3%)	51 (10%)	112 (21.9%)	151 (29.5%)	58 (11.3%)
Bigfoot is alive and well within the United States.	137 (26.8%)	53 (10.4%)	108 (21.1%)	138 (27%)	76 (14.8%)
The Earth is flat rather than spherical.	196 (38.3%)	36 (7%)	84 (16.4%)	135 (26.4%)	61 (11.9%)
Elvis Presley is still alive.	195 (38.1%)	33 (6.4%)	87 (17%)	133 (26%)	64 (12.5%)

Adolf Hitler survived and fled Germany after the end of World War II.	140 (27.3%)	58 (11.3%)	104 (20.3%)	141 (27.5%)	69 (13.5%)
Princess Diana was assassinated.	73 (14.3%)	52 (10.2%)	126 (24.6%)	169 (33%)	92 (18%)
New 5G technology causes cancer and other medical ailments.	120 (23.4%)	67 (13.1%)	103 (20.1%)	149 (29.1%)	73 (14.3%)
The Coronavirus was intentionally leaked by the Chinese government.	79 (15.4%)	55 (10.7%)	125 (24.4%)	149 (29.1%)	104 (20.3%)
The Coronavirus was engineered rather than occurring naturally.	71 (13.9%)	61 (11.9%)	110 (21.5%)	149 (29.1%)	104 (20.3%)
The Coronavirus has been exploited by governments across the world to gain more control over its citizens	97 (18.9%)	70 (13.7%)	86 (16.8%)	142 (27.7%)	117 (22.9%)
The vaccines include a microchip or tracker.	165 (32.2%)	67 (13.1%)	95 (18.6%)	104 (20.3%)	81 (15.8%)

Government

The American government would intentionally allow its citizens to die.	63 (12.3%)	88 (17.1%)	114 (22.2%)	154 (30.0%)	95 (18.5%)
Over the last few years, the American government has tried to gain more control over its citizens.	28 (5.4%)	73 (14.2%)	108 (21.0%)	164 (31.9%)	141 (27.4%)
The American government is being influenced by outside countries such as Russia or China.	47 (9.1%)	95 (18.5%)	125 (24.3%)	146 (28.4%)	101 (19.6%)
The American government is being influenced by outside entities such as billionaires or mega corporations.	36 (7.0%)	66 (12.8%)	108 (21.0%)	154 (30.0%)	150 (29.2%)

General Mentality

In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that the following statements are true?

0% (Certainly Not) 10% (Extremely Unlikely) 20% (Very Unlikely) 30% (Unlikely) 40% (Somewhat Unlikely) 50% (Undecided) 60% (Somewhat Likely) 70% (Likely) 80% (Very Likely) 90% (Extremely Likely) 100% (Certain)

Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.	9 (1.8%)	22 (4.3%)	29 (5.6%)	27 (5.3%)	25 (4.9%)	42 (8.2%)	68 (13.2%)	60 (13.2%)	77 (15%)	93 (18.1%)	62 (12.1%)
Politicians usually do not tell the public their true motives for their decisions.	8 (1.6%)	21 (4.1%)	31 (6.0%)	20 (3.9%)	28 (5.4%)	39 (7.6%)	60 (11.7%)	80 (15.6%)	83 (16.1%)	88 (17.1%)	56 (10.9%)
Government agencies closely monitor citizens.	11 (2.1%)	24 (4.7%)	36 (7%)	28 (5.4%)	30 (5.8%)	43 (8.4%)	61 (11.9%)	63 (12.3%)	84 (16.3%)	77 (15.0%)	57 (11.1%)
Events that superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.	22 (4.3%)	37 (7.2%)	34 (6.6%)	33 (6.4%)	32 (6.2%)	70 (13.6%)	63 (12.3%)	55 (10.7%)	71 (13.8%)	63 (12.3%)	34 (6.6%)
There are secret organizations that influence political decisions	19 (3.7%)	45 (8.8%)	34 (6.6%)	24 (4.7%)	30 (5.8%)	41 (8.0%)	68 (13.2%)	63 (12.3%)	70 (13.6%)	79 (15.4%)	41 (8.0%)

When it comes to the statement “the 9/11 attacks were known and allowed by the United States government”, most respondents (26.7%; n = 137) believed that they “somewhat agreed”. The next statement, “The Sandy Hook shooting was a planned event that used actors instead of a real tragedy” most frequently brought respondents (n = 137, 26.7%) to “strongly disagree.” However, it should be noted that respondents who stated they “somewhat agreed” were not far behind with 128 responses making up 24.9% of all responses. The next statement says, “The American government was involved with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy”. This is interesting because respondents modally (n = 147, 28.6%) “somewhat agree.”. The next statement, “The American government was involved with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.” had one of the largest majority of respondents reporting “somewhat agree” to these conspiracy theories, with 159 total respondents making up 30.9% of the sample. The very specific theory, “There was a child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton in the basement of Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in the event commonly known as ‘Pizzagate,’ warranted the modal response of “Strongly Disagree,” with 135 responses that make up 26.3% of all responses. The next theory was a specific one that stated, “There is currently a large-scale child sex ring operating in Nebraska that was started with Johnny Gosch in 1982.” Responses to this statement were modally “somewhat agree,” with 137 respondents that make up 26.7% of all responses. Following that, the statement “The American government uses chemical trails in the sky to manipulate or alter the weather”. The majority of respondents fell within the “somewhat agree” category with 149 respondents making up 29.1% of total responses for that statement.

The next series of statements were more far-fetched theories such as, “Area 51 contains evidence that extraterrestrials or ‘aliens’ exist in which 171 respondents (33.4%) “somewhat agree.” In response to the conspiracy theory “The American government faked the Moon landing

to win the Space Race,” 151 respondents “somewhat agree” making up 29.5% of all responses. The statement “Bigfoot is alive and well within the United States” received 27% (n = 138) “somewhat agrees” of total respondents. It should be noted that responses to this theory were very close to the “Strongly disagree” group, which held 137 respondents or 26.8% of total responses. The next two statements, “The Earth is flat rather than spherical” and “Elvis Presley is still alive,” had respondents fall predominantly into “Strongly disagree” with 196 (38.3%) and 195 (38.1%) respondents, respectively. The next statement in the Hardcore conspiracy theories category is, “Adolf Hitler survived and fled Germany after the end of World War II”. The responses here were very close, with “somewhat agree” being reported by 141 respondents (27.5%) of all responses. Response to the following statement, “Princess Diana was assassinated” modally fall into the “somewhat agree” majority, with 169 respondents (33%).. The last far-fetched theory is, “New 5G technology causes cancer and other medical ailments.” Responses to this statement generally fell within the “somewhat agree” response option, with 149 respondents making up 29.1% of all responses in this category.

The last four statements in the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale have to do with the Coronavirus and the vaccine. The first statement, “The Coronavirus was intentionally leaked by the Chinese government” garnered 149 respondents and 29.1% responding in the “Somewhat agree” category. The second statement, “The Coronavirus was engineered rather than occurring naturally” received a modal response of “somewhat agree” (n = 149, 29.1% of total responses). The next statement, “The Coronavirus has been exploited by governments across the world to gain more control of its citizens” received the most respondents in the “somewhat agree” category, with 142 respondents, making up 27.7% of all responses. The final statement in the

Hardcore conspiracy theory scale states, “The vaccines include a microchip or tracker,” which received 32.2% (n = 165 respondents) of responses to fall into the “Strongly disagree” category.

The second scale of Table 2 has to do with statements specific to the American government. The first statement is, “The American government would intentionally allow its citizens to die.” A large share of respondents (n = 154, 30%) chose the “somewhat agree” option. The second statement, “Over the last few years, the American government has tried to gain more control over its citizens” warranted the majority of respondents to report they “somewhat agreed,” with 164 respondents making up 31.9% of total responses. The third statement, “The American government is being influenced by outside countries such as Russia or China” modally received responses within the “somewhat agree” category, with 146 respondents making up 28.4% of all total responses. The responses in the last statement, “The American government is being influenced by outside entities such as billionaires or mega corporations” were surprisingly close between the “somewhat agree” and the “strongly agree” categories. However, the “somewhat agree” slightly beats out the former, with 154 respondents making up 30% of all responses reporting they somewhat agreed with the statement.

The last section of Table 2 reports on the items that make up the General Mentality scale. The first of the statements is, “Many very important things happen in the world which the public is never informed about.” The Largest proportion of responses, in the 90% (Extremely Likely) category, had 93 respondents, making up 18.1% of total responses. The next statement, “Politicians usually do not tell the public their true motives for their decisions.” garnered the most responses in the 90% (Extremely Likely) category, with 88 respondents and 17.1% of total responses. In the third statement, “Government agencies closely monitor citizens,” the largest proportion of responses fell into the 80% (Very Likely) category, with 84 respondents making up

16.3% total responses. The next statement, “Events that superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities” had the largest share of responses fall into the 80% (Very Likely) category, which had 71 respondents that made up 13.8% of total responses. The final statement, “There are secret organizations that influence political decisions” had the largest share of respondents fall primarily in the 90% (Extremely Likely) category, with 79 respondents making up 15.4% of total responses.

Table 3 is a collection of t-test results between my independent and dependent variables. For the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale, White respondents reported an average score of 3.07 and a 1.04 standard deviation and a 2.83 mean and 1.08 standard deviation for non-whites. This difference was statistically significantly different. The Hardcore conspiracy theory scale was also examined between respondents from the South and non-South. Those living in the South held a mean of 3.03 and 1.07 standard deviation, and those not living in the South had a mean of 3.02 and 1.04 standard deviation. Comparing the General Mentality scale between the White and non-White identified a mean of 7.30 and standard deviation of 2.41 for the White respondents and a 6.90 mean with a 2.50 standard deviation for the non-White respondents. When comparing the General Mentality scale with the South and non-South respondents, those living in the South scored a mean of 7.14 and a standard deviation of 2.50, and those not living in the South scored a mean of 7.27 and a standard deviation of 2.36. Finally, when comparing the Government scale to the White and non-White respondents, White respondents scored a mean of 3.41 and a standard deviation of .82, and non-White respondents scored a mean of 3.40 and a standard deviation of .80. When looking at geographical location, those living in the South scored on average a mean of 3.34 and a standard deviation of .87 on the Government conspiracy theory scale. on-South respondents scored a mean of 3.50 and a standard deviation of .77 on the Government conspiracy

Table 3 – t-tests between IV's and DV (group means and standard deviations presented)

	Hardcore	General Mentality	Government
White	3.07 (1.04)*	7.30 (2.41)	3.41 (.82)
Non-White	2.83 (1.08)	6.90 (2.50)	3.40 (.80)
South	3.03 (1.07)	7.14 (2.50)	3.34 (.87)
Non-South	3.02 (1.04)	7.27 (2.36)	3.50 (.77)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4 – Correlations (r) between IV's and DV

	Hardcore	General Mentality	Government
Education	.290***	-.029	.048
Machiavellianism	.590***	.406***	.483***
Narcissism	.648***	.252***	.296***
Psychopathy	.799***	.274***	.383***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

theory scale.

Table 4 provides a collection of correlations between the conspiracy scales that were created for the study and respondent characteristics. The first significant correlation was between the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale and education, which produced a Pearson's value of .290, which is significant. The Pearson's value from the correlation of the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale and the Machiavellianism scale was .590. The correlation between the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale and the Narcissism scale is .648 and the value between the Hardcore conspiracy theory scale and the Psychopathic scale is .799. When evaluating in the General Mentality scale with Education it produces a correlation of -.029. When evaluating the General Mentality scale with the Machiavellianism scale, it produces a correlation of .406. The correlation between the General Mentality scale and the Narcissism and Psychopathic scales were .252 and .274, respectively. Finally, when examining the Government conspiracy theory scale in relation to Education, it produces a correlation of .048. When examined with the scale of Machiavellianism, it produces a correlation of .483. When the correlation between the Government conspiracy theory scale and Narcissism is estimated, it produces a value of .296. Finally, when the Government conspiracy theory scale is correlated with the Psychopathic scale, it produces a correlation of .383.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

Over the past few years, conspiracy theories and those who believe in them have caused quite a bit of damage and committed some very serious crimes (Bogel-Burroughs & Hill, 2021). As we can see from events such as the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol, these beliefs can translate to real life danger, and even death (Wise, 2021). As such, it is more important now than ever to study this group and determine who they are, why they might believe what they believe, and most importantly, what they have in common. This information is essential because it can be proactively used to potentially identify future believers and or participants in conspiracy theory groups and the crimes that they might commit. In this study we used Amazon MTurk to conduct a survey and ultimately recorded 512 respondents' data. After analyzing the data, there are some notable things that should be considered relating to the hypothesis listed in the earlier section.

The first hypothesis was that White respondents will be significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. The data ultimately did show that White respondents were more likely to believe in the theories from one of the three scales. White respondents had a mean of 3.07 in relation to the Hardcore Conspiracy Theory scale where the non-White respondents had an average of 2.83 to the Hardcore scale, which was statistically significant. However, mean differences for the General Mentality and Government scales were not significantly different. Ultimately, support for this hypothesis was mixed.

The second hypothesis was that those who had a lower level of education would be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. According to the data, this hypothesis found mixed support because only one of the correlations were significant when compared to the conspiracy theory scales. The correlation between education and the Hardcore Conspiracy Theory scale was

.170, which is significant; however, it was in the opposite direction than hypothesized. That is as education increased, so too did belief in hardcore conspiracy theories. Still, the correlation between education and Hardcore Conspiracy Theories is important because it disproves the idea that someone with a higher education will refuse to believe in conspiracy theories.

The third hypothesis was that people from the South were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those from other geographic regions than the South. The data suggests this hypothesis is not supported because the values from the non-South respondents were only slightly higher (not statistically significant), which ultimately translates into a slightly stronger belief in conspiracy theories. According to the data, while the mean for South and Non-South compared to the Hardcore Conspiracy Theory scale was relatively the same at 2.90, there is a slight difference in the General Mentality and Government scales. The Non-South respondents had a slightly higher mean of 7.27 compared to the South mean of 7.14 when it relates to the General Mentality scale. The Non-South respondents also slightly believe more than South respondents in the Government scale with a mean of 3.50 compared to that of the South with 3.34. Still, none of these differences were statistically significant, which suggests that Southern respondents and non-Southern respondents were no different in their beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Finally, the last hypothesis was that people who held Dark Triad characteristics and a Belief in a Dangerous World would be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. The correlation for the narcissistic scale compared to the Hardcore scale was a value of .648, which is statistically significant. As narcissism increased, so did belief in hardcore conspiracy theories. The correlations for the narcissistic scale compared to the General Mentality scale as well as the Government scale are .252 and .296 respectively. The correlation for the Machiavellian scale

was the highest with .590 when compared to the Hardcore scale. The correlation of Machiavellianism is .406 and .483 when compared to the General Mentality and Government scales respectively. The last value, psychopathy had the highest correlation of .799 when compared to the Hardcore scale. Psychopathy also had correlations of .274 and .383 when compared to the General Mentality and Government scales respectively. Therefore, across all subscales of the Dark Triad, the Dark Triad were positively correlated with all three measures of conspiracy theories. The study also found that individuals who scored higher in the Belief in a Dangerous World scale were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. The Belief in a Dangerous World scale had a mean average of 3.41 which tips the majority of respondents in favor of conspiracy theories.

Ultimately, this study has limitations. Reliability concerns with the online survey responses and sizable sample size were the most significant potential limitations. Still, this is a very uncharted field of study and there is not much prior literature to compare results. Future research should conduct a more in-depth survey with a larger sample size that has a wider range of representation across the country. It should also like to ask more in-depth demographic questions to help narrow some beliefs down such as neo-Nazism, White nationalism, and other hateful ideologies. One of the biggest concerns for the study is the internal validity due to the fact that conspiracy theories are a hot topic in the media right now. This could potentially cause respondents to not take the study as seriously as they should and give responses that do not accurately reflect their beliefs. I do not see much risk of external validity due to the fact that all Americans are experiencing a similar political climate throughout the country, regardless of if they lean more liberal or conservative, however this study was not representative of the entire population of the United States. Ultimately, this area of study could be essential in the future to

be able to proactively identify actors that are involved in these groups and potentially stop them from offending and causing these massive criminal acts. Future research would also benefit from understanding who believes in conspiracy theories and how that translates into real life crimes that have been committed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to get a general idea of who might believe in conspiracy theories of both the past and present. The study looked at basic demographic information to help identify patterns, but the study also took some theoretical variables into account as well. The study used some personality traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to further identify commonalities between those that did and did not believe in conspiracy theories. The data showed that those White respondents were more likely to believe in some conspiracies than non-White respondents. However, residing in the South or not did not influence believing in conspiracies. The theoretical scales that were used in the study supported the idea that those with higher levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, Belief in a Dangerous World and psychopathy were more likely to believe in conspiracies than those who scored lower.

The importance of this study goes beyond the idea of who believes in conspiracy theories. As we have seen over the past half decade there is a major conflict in the validity of information that the public consumes as well as political polarization (Lopez, 2021). The combination of these two things have caused individuals who may believe in these theories or misinformation to act out and translate those beliefs into crime, violence, and ultimately death. There have been many events from the events of the “Pizzagate” scandal (Robb, 2020), to the more recent insurrection on the United States Capitol (Bogel-Burroughs & Hill, 2021). Ultimately, the information could potentially be essential to psychologists and profilers within

the criminal justice field to assist them in being able to identify potential actors within these groups. This could also translate over into the law enforcement sector where police can use that information to reduce the amount of crime that these groups can commit. Future researchers could take this information even further through existing theoretical framework to determine specific personality traits as well as specific causes that could influence individuals to believe in conspiracy theories and even become so passionate about them to commit crime under one of these conspiracy groups.

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