

Cancer-causing 5G towers, DNA altering vaccines, and a cabal of cannibalistic pedophiles in influential government positions plagued the year 2019- if you believe the conspiracy theorists who gave these thoughts life through their beliefs. Of course, conspiracy theories have always existed in some shape; theories have captivated the minds of millions, whether the CIA assassinating JFK at the behest of the Mafia or your run-of-the-mill underground race of shape-shifting lizard people. The question that the existence of Conspiracy theories pose is how an individual can become so consumed by an idea that, in some instances, can be so outlandish?

Conspiracy theories vary wildly in their theology. However, many share distinct underlying properties. *Conspiracy theories* are defined as 'attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.'(Bodner) One unique finding is that individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory are increasingly likely to believe in others (Bodner). The correlation between the belief in two or more conspiracies is so strong that researchers often measure it by presenting participants with a diverse array of conspiracy theories when conducting studies to determine the strength of conspiratorial belief (Bodner). In addition, research has found that even when conspiracy theories contradict one another, there can still be a strong belief in both by the conspiracy theorist.

When studying conspiracy theories in contemporary American politics, the first data set the researcher will find is that political affiliation plays little part in the adoption of said conspiracy (Douglas). In reality, conspiracy beliefs are found on both sides of the ideological spectrum- affecting both Republicans and Democrats alike. However, specific conspiracy theories can be more alluring to individuals depending on their political

leanings. For example- anti-Islamic, anti-Mexican, and anti-Democrat conspiracy theories have been pertinent in right-wing nationalistic thinking (Douglas).

Evidence from surveys conducted and observational studies have concluded that conspiratorial tendencies are more likely to occur on either extreme of the political spectrum (however, it has been shown that it can be more common on the right-hand extreme) (Douglas). Therefore conspiracy beliefs are most commonly associated with extreme ideological polarization rather than Liberalism or Conservatism (Douglas). This conclusion is further supported by research into the belief in conspiracy theories in a selective partisan fashion. For instance, Conservatives are increasingly likely to believe that Barack Obama was not natively born but rather in a foreign country. In contrast, Liberals believe that the Bush administration lied about Iraq's possession of WMDs (weapons of mass destruction) to justify an invasion (Douglas). This division is supported by findings that politically extreme individuals are more likely to believe in a conspiracy that implicates their opponent or "out-group." (Enders) In the example of Qanon, it is determined that conservatives are more likely to offer support for the conspiracy theory as it directly implicates the Democratic party (Enders).

The use of social media further exacerbates these conspiracy theories. Social media can be a crucial player in disseminating conspiracy theories and misinformation. Due to "trending," these beliefs can gain attention seemingly overnight. For instance, the conspiracy of Qanon- which was birthed on the infamous online platform "4Chan"- has sprouted thousands of Meta (formerly Facebook) pages, generating millions of members and followers (Enders). However, although there may be plenty of opportunity for conspiracy theories to grow and develop, public opinion formation and media effects often

demonstrate that the individual-level motivating factors to seek out and accept conspiratorial perspectives are instrumental to understanding these associations (Enders). According to studies, conspiratorial thinking -the predisposition to interpret events as the product of malevolent conspiracies- leads to the conditioned acceptance of conspiracy theories .

According to research conducted by Adam M. Enders and others of the University of Louisville, which utilized a national survey examining the relationship between the form and frequency of social media and the use of 15 individual conspiracy theories- social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories are indeed correlated. However, the researchers did find that the relationship is directly conditional on the individual's level of conspiracy thinking (Enders). Interestingly when studying those with low / no level of conspiracy things, no relation between social media consumption and conspiracy beliefs developed (Enders). It is argued that social media does not play a role in developing beliefs in conspiracy theories but rather allows those already prone to conspiratorial beliefs to find a "niche" group that will further reinforce their beliefs (Enders).

The most prominent conspiracy theory of 2019-2022 has been the Qanon conspiracy. The QAnon conspiracy was born in October on 4chan's (an anonymous forum on the internet) infamous /pol/ (politically incorrect page) in a thread called "Calm Before the Storm."(Sternisko) The theory revolves around the mysterious character "Q." "Q" is a supposed high-ranking member of the government with an exceptionally high clearance level, granting him (or her) validity (Sternisko). Since 2017 the conspiracy has grown exponentially and would result in the infamous "pizza gate." In the days leading up to pizza gate, allegations were made that John Podesta (white house chief of staff from 1998 to 2001

and counselor to president Brack Obama from 2014 to 2015) was using coded words and satanic symbolism in his email correspondence. (Oleksy) These correspondents were directly tied to the Hillary Clinton campaign creating rumors of a secret child sex trafficking ring at a pizza restaurant in Washington. the conspiracy would come to a head when Edgar M. Welch visited the infamous pizza restaurant with an assault rifle to "self-investigate." The conspiracy holds parallels to others- it involves a secret underground organization, implicates high-ranking officials, and implicates an "out-group."

The demographic make-up of Qanon supporters confirms the assumptions of research already conducted. It has appeared that followers of "Q" have congregated across many internet forums- ranging from the likes of Meta to Reddit (another anonymous online forum). However, what is fascinating is that there seems to be no single demographic which serves as a common denominator betwixt these groups (Moskalenko). Instead, members of these online forms publicly divulge their age, race, and political affiliation. It can be proved that Qanon is not a conspiracy tied to any demographic metric. Instead, these individuals follow the principle of the conspiratorial mindset- believing in the conspiracy even in the absence of concrete facts and allowing for belief across a multitude of racial, political, and sexual indicators. Because the Qanon conspiracy primarily exists in cyberspace and conjugates on websites that encourage the use of anonymity and pseudonyms makes, determining the demographics is difficult. However, through the self-identification of these individuals, researchers can deduce that although a primary constituency of the followers of "Q" primarily consisted of middle-aged white men who self-declared as members of the Republican party. A smaller subset of the population has self-identified as Democrats, Independents, Black, Hispanic and Asian (Moskalenko).

Using the Fear V 2019 database makes it possible to determine the correlation and significance of social media use in cultivating conspiratorial ideas. The hypothesis was tested through this data to see if there would be a direct correlation with an increase in social media consumption, which the hypothesis assumed would be direct. However, upon inspecting the data, no such correlation occurred.

Figure 1

Correlations			
		Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?	Q9k. How often do you.... Get news from social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)?
Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?	Pearson Correlation	1	.037*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.014
	N	4408	4408
Q9k. How often do you.... Get news from social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)?	Pearson Correlation	.037*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	
	N	4408	4419

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The figure above is a correlation run in SPSS using the 2019 Fear V database. In this table, a correlation was run with the dependent variable of agreement with Qanon and the independent variable of how often an individual receives news from social media such as places like Meta (Facebook), Twitter, etc. For the data to be statistically significant, it required a value of 0.00, which failed. The table indicated that there was no significance in the data collected. Furthermore, with a P-value of 0.37, the data showed little or no

correlation between these two variables. This data disproved my hypothesis that increased social media consumption would lead to a more prominent belief in conspiratorial ideas. This finding initially proved confusing as research suggests that from 2019 to 2021, with the boom of social media use, an increase in conspiracy acceptance further increased. This finding leads me to another question- if social media consumption does not correlate with conspiratorial belief, perhaps the consumption of traditional media does.

Figure 2

Correlations

		Q9e. How often do you... Watch Fox News?	Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?
Q9e. How often do you... Watch Fox News?	Pearson Correlation	1	.069**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	4419	4419
Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?	Pearson Correlation	.069**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	4419	4419

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2, as listed above, is a correlation table comparing those who watch Fox news (a traditionally republican news production) and their belief in the Qanon conspiracy. The table shows that the data is, in fact, significant with a value of 0.00, proving to be more acceptable data than that of social media consumption. However, the P-value is listed as 0.069, which makes it a very weak correlation. So although the data is itself significant, the

correlation is negligible due to the weakness of the correlation. I believe that this is due to the nature of the conspiracy in question. The Qanon conspiracy is considered a mainly Republican and Trumpian conspiracy which could explain the slight correlation between Qanon and Fox views. The subsequent logical inquiry would be to see if there was any correlation between a more liberal news network such as CNN and Qanon.

Figure 3

		Q9f. How often do you.... Watch CNN?	Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?
Q9f. How often do you.... Watch CNN?	Pearson Correlation	1	.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.715
	N	4419	4419
Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?	Pearson Correlation	.006	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.715	
	N	4419	4419

The data show the correlation between Qanon's belief and the viewership of CNN to be insignificant, with a P-value of only 0.006, indicating that there is only a minute correlation between the factors. While although this is unsurprising due to the liberal nature of CNN (and the assumption that Qanon is a Trumpian conspiracy), correlations between CNN and Fox news points to the conclusion that there must be an underlying

factor that results in conspiratorial ideas the consumption of either traditional or non-traditional media.

The next factor which I wished to investigate was that of political self-identification and its influence on Qanon belief. I hypothesized that due to the nature of the conspiracy, there would be an uptick in belief in right-leaning individuals, with a large portion of that being strong Republicans. However, once inspecting the data, my hypothesis was considered incorrect.

Figure 4

Q5. Do you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat or Independent? * Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon? Crosstabulation

Count

Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Q5. Do you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat or Independent?	Strong Republican	6	30	36	13	85
	Moderate Republican	14	92	106	42	254
	Leaning Republican	27	81	96	36	240
	Independent	100	400	572	260	1332
	Leaning Democrat	25	160	195	80	460
	Moderate Democrat	72	390	306	240	1008
	Strong Democrat	189	280	329	231	1029
Total		433	1433	1640	902	4408

The figure above is a crosstabulation between Qanon support and party affiliation. One discrepancy which may have skewed the data is the small number of individuals who self-identified as strong Republicans. However, that does not explain the consistency across the political spectrum of support for Qanon. The percentage of strong across all party belief affiliations goes as follows:

Strong Republican:	7.05%
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Moderate Republican:	5.51%
Leaning Republican:	11.25%
Independent:	7.50%
Leaning Democrat:	5.43%
Moderate Democrat:	9.49%
Strong Democrat:	18.36%

Unsurprisingly, according to the data available in the American Fear Survey that 23.81% of Republicans ranging from leaning to strong, constitute strong belief towards the Qanon conspiracy. Surprisingly, however, 33.28% of self-identifying Democrats hold conspiratorial beliefs. This finding contradicts my initial hypothesis holding that a conspiracy that I believed by its nature leans towards a conservative mindset instead shows widespread support across all political affiliations.

The lack of influence of party affiliation and media consumption has led me to believe that a tertiary factor drives conspiratorial beliefs. Therefore, in my final hypothesis, I claim that individuals who believe in one conspiracy are more likely to believe in another. To determine if there was a correlation between belief in one conspiracy with another, I utilized the American Fear Survey by running another correlation table.

Figure 5

Q20h. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Mass shootings such as those at Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and Parkland?	Pearson Correlation	1	.487**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	4416	4408
Q20i. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. The government is concealing what it knows about... Q'Anon?	Pearson Correlation	.487**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	4408	4408

After interpreting the data for a correlation betwixt two distinctly different conspiracies, it was shocking to see that the correlation between them was so profound. The conspiracy used to correlate with Qanon was the Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and Parkland shooting conspiracy (a conspiracy claiming that the shootings never actually happened). The data was highly significant, with a value of 0.000 and a P value of .487; this finding indicates that those in the Qanon conspiracy also believe in the Sandy Hook conspiracy. In order to determine if the correlation between these two conspiracies were just coincidence and not part of a grander ideology, I ran the data on a multitude of conspiracies available on the American Fear Survey. These conspiracies ranged from alien encounters to the faking of the moon landing. In each instance, I discovered that a high degree of correlation occurred. Across the data, a significance of 0.00 occurred with an average P value of .635. The data concludes that a strong relationship exists between the belief in one conspiracy and the belief in another. This finding shadows the findings of other prominent researchers who have determined that the best way to determine if someone will engage in a conspiracy is to determine their belief in another.

In conclusion, through my research and findings, no one singular factor can predict the belief in the Qanon conspiracy. Factors that were initially hypothesized to be indicators of the adoption of the conspiracy proved to be null as they proved to provide no relevant data in determining belief. Instead, the research conducted has pointed to an unforeseen conclusion- that individuals who believe in conspiracies do so as they possess the conspiratorial mindset. When looking at the data through this lens and taking a sociological view, the inconsistency in the data proves to be understandable. Although there has been a recent uptick in conspiracy pages on the internet, these offer only a place for those who are willing to adopt the conspiracy a place to conjugate and cultivate a supportive community. Further political affiliation proved that there is a slight uptick in belief in the extremes of either political party but proved to be negligible. Although the Qanon conspiracy appears to be political by nature, it does not evoke a political response on either side of the aisle. The only way to predict an individual's belief in conspiracy is to determine if an individual believes in another. This finding allows the research to understand the social science behind conspiracies better- determining that external factors are not as influential as psychological factors.

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