“We're just playing into their system”
A qualitative exploration of the relationship between conspiracy theories and political efficacy, and the role community plays in the creation and spread of conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Although the consequences of conspiracy beliefs has been well documented over the last year, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the online QAnon conspiracy, there remains little political research on the broader impacts of this phenomenon. Through the use of qualitative interviews this research examines the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and political efficacy. This research also observes the role community plays in the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. Political efficacy is divided into external and internal. External refers to the responsiveness of the political system to attempts to exercise political influence. Whereas internal notes the perception one has regarding one's ability to participate in the political system. This research found that a belief in conspiracy theories might negatively influence the external system-regarding dimension by eradicating trust. However, for some individuals distrust pre-dates their interest in conspiracy theories and therefore a two-way relationship might exist between external political efficacy and conspiracism. Internal efficacy might be positively influenced by a belief in conspiracy theories by making people feel knowledgeable. However, due to the potential inaccuracy of the information contained in conspiracy theories, the ability of individuals to effectively engage in politics might be negatively influenced unless their participation is through nonnormative means. Regarding the community side of this study, the majority of interviewees felt that their role in the creation and proliferation of conspiracy theories was better described as end-receiver rather than co-creator. Their involvement was often portrayed as a solitary pursuit completely removed from any normative understanding of community, contrary to the current literature on conspiracy theory communities

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Table 1.

Whether participants consider themselves politically active and part of a conspiracy theory community. p36.

Introduction

In February 1959 a group of nine Russian mountain hikers exploring the Ural Mountains were killed in a tragic incident during the middle of the night (Gaume & Puzrin, 2021). The experienced group of mountaineers, hired by the Ural Polytechnical Institute, was headed by Igor Dyatlov. Shortly after midnight some strange occurrence suddenly caused the expedition members to spurt from their tents cutting it from the inside and escape towards a forest over a kilometre away, without wearing appropriate clothing for the extreme - 25 °C weather (ibid.). The Soviet investigation into the reason for the explorers terrible deaths established it as the result of 'a compelling natural force' (Buyanov & Slobstov, 2014). However, the nature of this force was never formally identified. From this unknown mystery several baffling explanations surfaced and circulated throughout the public and media.

Even though hypothermia was acknowledged to be the leading cause of death, four of the explorers had severe chest or skull injuries, two were found with eyes missing and one without their tongue; some were almost nude and barefooted, their clothing contained traces of radioactivity, and that night there had been reports of glowing orange spheres moving in the sky (Gaume & Puzrin, 2021). As with all tragic incidents, the mystery of the Russian hiker deaths has inspired the creation of countless conspiracy theories. Were they killed by Yetis? Perhaps they were attacked by a group of escaped convicts? Was it the result of a Soviet nuclear weapons test? Possibly they were in fact spies who were captured and killed by the KGB? Maybe under some sort of psychogenic influence they squabbled and killed one another? Several of these theories have been strongly argued as explanations for the incident that occurred over six decades ago (Anderson, 2019).

However, no verifiable evidence has been offered to support any of the above theories. The most solid explanation for the 'Dyatlov Pass' deaths, as they became known, comes from an investigation, released earlier this year, that describes how the 'compelling natural force' was caused by an irregular

> "cut made in the slope to install the tent and the subsequent deposition of snow… contributed after a suitable time to the slab release, which caused severe non-fatal injuries, in agreement with the autopsy results"
>
> (Gaume & Puzrin, 2021:1).

Consequently none of the various conspiracy theories that have occupied the minds of many were correct. In fact a lot of the information that formed the basis for the various theories, such as missing eyes and tongue, was indeed false (Buyanov & Slobstov, 2014). The creation of these theories, as is the case with the formation of all conspiracy theories, was simply an effort to direct attention towards curious details and vague accounts made during the shock of a disaster, in order to distort evidence to fit a narrative which is not verifiable (Glant, 2012) (a theme that shall be revisited).

The various conspiracy theories created to explain the Dyatlov Pass deaths are amongst a vast number of similarly outlandish accounts that have arisen when an unexpected tragic event occurs. Several events, from the attack on the World Trade Centre on 9th September 2001 to the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy, from the secrecy surrounding US military base Area 51 to the 1969 moon landing, have motivated the creation of conspiracy theories. In recent years, many conspiracy theories have saturated mainstream discourse (Mahl et al. 2021). In particular the rise of social media has certainly increased the prominence and spread of such theories (DeWitt, 2018). The spread of one such theory has seen a steady increase since its inception in 2017, gaining vast international notoriety and publicity. The conspiracy theory I am describing is the theory alleging that a powerful group of Satan-worshipping, paedophilic politicians is taking over global governments (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018), and has become formally known as the 'QAnon' conspiracy theory.

Followers of this theory believe that QAnon, who provides ‘secret’ information by posting it on internet forums, is “not one singular individual, but a small group of high-ranking military and intelligence officials with top level security clearance working directly with former President, Donald Trump” (Garry et al. 2021:156). Regardless of how absurd you or I might find this theory, it is a theory that has gained a lot of traction. As Jeffrey Kaplan (2021) identifies, the common thread that brought together the rioters that stormed the US Capitol on the 6th January 2021, was an allegiance to President Trump “forged through adherence to QAnon and other conspiratorial beliefs” (Kaplan, 2021:917). The propagation of QAnon that accumulated in the storming of the US Capitol demonstrates the real life consequence of conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, there still remains a common misconception that conspiracy theories simply inhabit the fringes of society and therefore do not have relevance in the real world.

However, as identified by Joseph Uscinski (2018:1), conspiracy theories are “intertwined with our everyday lives in countless ways. Conspiracy theories are everywhere, and, like other ideas, they have consequences”. A topical YouGov survey recently revealed other consequences widespread belief in conspiracy theories can have. The worldwide poll found that significant numbers of people globally believe that Covid-19 was deliberately created, has not been as deadly as reported, or does not actually exist (Henley & McIntyre, 2020). Within the more concerning developments of contemporary politics, conspiracy theories have become innately interlaced. In fact many of the recent exhibitions of xenophobia, nationalism and populism have to varying degrees contained conspiracy narratives (Uscinski, 2018). However, despite the political threat conspiracy theories pose there has been little political academic attention given to understanding them. At present most academic attention given to conspiracy theories has come from the school of psychology and therefore gaps exist in the literature.

This research examines the community side of conspiracism and the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and individual political efficacy, and therefore aims to provide important insight into the world of conspiracy theories. In particular this study is concerned with answering the following questions: Firstly, what is the nature of the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and political efficacy? Secondly, how does the community element of conspiracy theories explain the creation and spread of conspiracy theories? However due to this research adopting a qualitative approach (see Methodology) any findings will be limited in their wider theoretical application.

Background

Conspiracy Theories

What do we mean when we say *conspiracy theory*? As is the case with many political terms, it is hard to secure an academic definition that is satisfactory for all and is suitably robust for scholarly scrutiny. Before conspiracy theories can be meaningfully studied it is crucial to secure a working definition of the phenomenon, and in doing so set the necessary boundaries for the following discussion. Shaping an effective definition, especially when the term is used in an everyday setting, can be a difficult task (Walker, 2018). As Jesse Walker identifies, the definition of conspiracy theory "constantly stretches and narrows, particularly when it is used as a pejorative" (Walker, 2018:53), a topic I return to later (see Results and Discussion). Currently most of the discussion on defining what is a conspiracy theory is focused on what differentiates them from other more orthodox forms of political opinion (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Walker, 2018; Uscinski, 2014). For Oliver and Wood (2014), the difference lies in the ability of conspiracism to evoke certain predispositions through carefully organised content of their motivating narrative. In particular, the political narratives that conspiracy theories adopt are extremely good at animating those with a certain predisposition (Oliver & Wood, 2014).

However, as Jovan Byford (2011) identifies, it is not simply the careful organisation of their motivating narrative that defines a conspiracy theory. The label 'conspiracy theory' is often saved for conspiracy-based explanations of large, dramatic social and political events as well as for accounts that do not simply explain an alleged conspiracy, but also uncover a previously unknown 'truth' about the world (Byford, 2011). Further, the label notes explanations that claim that the event was part of a much larger plot with immoral and menacing intentions (Fenster, 2008). As Jeffrey M. Bale discusses, the above is what distinguishes conspiracy theories from "genuine conspiratorial politics" (Bale, 2007). Conspiracy theorists believe that conspirators are not simply people with opposing political values, but inhuman or antihuman beings who frequently commit monstruous acts that are designed to destabilize and demolish all that is worth preserving in the world (Bale, 2007).

Critically, conspiracies are regarded by conspiracy theorists as the reason for all significant historical developments (Uscinski, 2018). As a result, unfortunate events that are understood by others to be the result of coincidence or chance are instead regarded as further evidence of the existence of a conspiratorial group with malevolent intentions (Moore, 2016. Bale, 2007). Further, conspiracy theorists make a thinly veiled attempt to alter historical evidence to fit a narrative which is not evident by directing attention towards isolated events and unclear reports made under the shock of a given disaster (Glant, 2012). This fundamental feature of conspiracy theories has been fittingly summarised by Beáta Sáfrány in her extensive analysis of conspiracy theories concerning the terrorist attacks on the US that took place on 11th September 2001, often referred to as '9/11':

> "What [conspiracy] theorists call evidence is nothing more than quotations taken out of context and tiny anomalies they claim to have found in mainstream accounts. In fact, 9/11 conspiracy theorists focus their attention not on the whole story but only on certain elements"
>
> (Sáfrány, 2013)

With particularly the case of the 9/11 attacks, "the absence of any other kind of definitive proof in favour of the conspiracy thesis simply demonstrates the conspirators' ability to cover up their tracks and illustrates the power at their disposal" (Byford, J. 2011:34). Consequently the lack of evidence supporting a secret evil coordinated plot seemingly does little to refute the malevolent-conspirator narrative that conspiracy theorists subscribe to and reinforces it instead. The absence of evidence that for most people makes conspiracy theories unbelievable can be, for conspiracy theorists, the clearest proof in favour of their claims of conspiracism.

In order to pin down a definition that will form the basis for this discussion I first look to Michael Barkun who has identified the common features contained within conspiracy theories. First, Barkun (2003) recognized that conspiracy theories often consider the actions of planned, malignant and secretive forces as the cause of all unusual political and social occurrences, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, they provide a simplistic interpretation of significant political events as being a battle between good forces and evil ones. Lastly, conspiracy theories often claim that mainstream explanations of political events are well thought out ploys designed to keep the public distracted from an unseen source of power. Further, as Alfred Moore (2016) identifies, conspiracy theories seem to go beyond simply imagining and investigating incidents of conspiracy. Moore recognises that unlike other vivid explanations of events, conspiracy theories

> "seem to involve explaining events or phenomena in a way that is unwarranted, implausible, or even dangerous, invoking ever broader and deeper conspiracies and discounting all contradictory evidence"
>
> (Moore, 2016).

The above discussion hopefully allows for a better understanding of conspiracy theories and what distinguishes them from more orthodox forms of political opinion and genuine conspiratorial politics.

Conspiracy Theory Community

The community of conspiracy theorists comprises both active participants and passive audience members, "the knowledgeable and the uninitiated" (Fenster, 2008:159). Within this world of conspiracism, theories about significant events are produced, consumed and shared among friends, acquaintances and strangers both online (Stempel et al. 2007) and at organized rallies and conferences (Fenster, 2008). As computer mediated communication has developed and become more popular over the last two decades, the ease with which conspiracy theories can spread has also increased (Lewandowsky et al. 2013). As Mark Fenster identifies,

> “together, media and face-to-face gatherings help to consolidate a loosely knit organization of researchers – one that resembles, and operates as a shadow of, an ideal academic community”
>
> (Fenster, 2008:162)

However, the use of the term ‘community’ to describe the connection between conspiracy theorists is perhaps only appropriate when the term is suitably understood. For these individuals their connection to others might be characterized more by a shared distrust of the conspiratorial ‘other’ rather than a felt sense of being part of a community. As Phadke et al. (2021:4) identify in their analysis of online conspiracy theory communities on Reddit, “the development of conspiracy theories can be described by groups of individuals jointly constructing the understandings of the world on the basis of shared identity”. It is therefore their shared interest in collectively shaping an alternative understanding of events that creates a community of conspiracy theorists, whether that is online or in person.

Within the community of conspiracy theorists, examining how conspiracy theories spread from one person to another is important to understand. Mahl et al. study (2021) examines the role of social media in disseminating conspiracy theories online. The research showed that online platforms provide conspiracy theorists with the ability to collectively cross-reference and mutually support their theories (Mahl et al. 2021). For example, after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook High School in the US, conspiracy theorists in the U.S. published video ‘evidence’ arguing that the incident was staged by individuals hired and instructed to pretend to be disaster victims, labelled *crisis actors* (ibid.). Believers of this conspiracy theory uploaded other videos to YouTube claiming that the same “crisis actors” were also present at other major incidents such as the Boston Marathon bombing (Wood, 2013).

Online platforms not only allow users to cross-reference conspiracy theories, they also provide conspiracy theories with wider visibility (Mahl et al. 2021). Expanding on Kuran's (1997) theory of preference falsification, whereby individuals who have unpopular alternative views hold back their real opinions because of perceived social pressure and will only disclose their true beliefs when they engage a significant group of like-minded people, Mahl et al. (2021) identified that this phenomenon happens online among conspiracy theorists. Individuals are more likely to openly support conspiracy theories when they feel the safety in numbers that a community provides. Social media in particular provides a space where people can find this sense of safety in numbers due to the wider visibility of conspiracy theories online. Further, the online prominence of conspiracy theories offers believers the chance to locate and connect with similar-minded people (DeWitt, 2018).

Political Efficacy

Since the start of the latter half of the 20th century, political efficacy has been discussed in reference to two dimensions, internal and external efficacy (Craig et al. 1990). What separates the two dimensions is whereas internal efficacy is the perception that one has the required ability and resources to influence the political system, (Clarke & Acock, 1989) external efficacy notes the perception an individual has that governments and its various institutions are responsive to one's efforts to exercise political influence (ibid.). The two dimensions can be best categorized as internal = perception of the personal, and external = perception of the political system. Both of these categories of efficacy can be altered by various factors.

For example, an individual's perception of their own ability to participate in politics (internal) can be largely impacted by how knowledgeable they perceive themselves to be (Reichert, 2016). External efficacy can also be impacted by various factors. For example, whether or not citizens trust that the political institutions which claim to serve them are doing so with the citizens' interest at heart (Niemi et al.1991). If citizens feel that those who run the institutions are self-serving, then external efficacy will be negatively impacted (Geurkink et al. 2019). In a sense, political efficacy concerns individuals' perceptions of "their ability to influence their political environment, in the sense that their actions can affect political outcomes" (Gamson, 1968:42).

Perceptions of political efficacy, whether that be internal or external, lie at the heart of this research. One of the dimensions of the political efficacy discussion is individual perception of 'political powerlessness' (Ardevol-Abreu et al., 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014), the feeling that "the world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much the little person can do about it" (Jolley & Douglas, 2014:39). For the individuals who subscribe to conspiratorial notions of how the world works, political efficacy could be impacted either negatively or positively. For example, the belief that malevolent forces are controlling the world may inspire political action, which would have a positive effect on political efficacy (Niemi et al., 1991), or conversely it could bring about apathy and powerlessness, which would negatively impact political efficacy (Morrell, 2003). Further, believing that the world is run by malevolent actors could impact efficacy at both the internal *and* external level. For example, a belief in a conspiracy theory may cause someone to feel like they are more knowledgeable about how the world works which may positively influence their sense of internal efficacy because knowledge and awareness is linked to higher levels of internal political efficacy (Niemi et al. 1991).

Although there is a lot written on political efficacy there remains little research on political efficacy within the framework of conspiracy communities. However, the research of Jolley & Douglas (2014) has established a positive link between exposure to conspiracy theories and a feeling of political powerlessness and cynicism within the context of climate change conspiracism. Further, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. conclude from their quantitative study that "conspiracy beliefs negatively influence the external, system-regarding dimension of political efficacy" (2020:565). My research builds upon the work of both Jolley & Douglas (2014) and

Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) and examines the nature of the relationship between conspiracism and individual political efficacy.

Populism and Conspiracism

Populism can be defined as having two distinct central characteristics: an emphasis on the fundamental role of 'the people' in legislation, and a heavy criticism of 'the elite' as corrupt (Müller, 2016; Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007). For populists the most central tenant is the belief that 'the people' are a homogenous, perfect group whose views are unified and who convey the persona of the 'heartland', characterized by the virtues of honest, hard-working folk (Taggart 2000). However, who is considered 'the people' can change from one populist movement to the next, this conception can alter across both nationality and class distinctions (Mény & Surel, 2002). Populist rhetoric places consistent emphasis on both the notion of popular sovereignty, and the idea of a 'general will' that is being ignored by those in government (Müller, 2016; Mudde, 2007). As Silva et al. (2017) identify "in all [populist] narratives, the elite has captured the state and uses it for pursuing its own egoistic interests at the expense of ordinary people". The populist notion that 'the people' are pure and 'the elites' are corrupt is crucial to understanding populist rhetoric. As Silva et al. (2017) discusses, this rhetoric leads to there being a Manichaean struggle between "good versus evil" in the heart of populist narratives.

This understanding of how society operates that is offered by populists is extremely similar to the worldview offered by those who believe in conspiracy theories. They both offer simple explanations of how society operates with emphasis on it containing two distinct sides, divided by moral distinctions. Further, they both "see conspirators controlling society, with more resources and willpower, and ordinary people as their victims" (Silva et al. 2017). As previously discussed, Barkun (2003) identified that conspiracy theories give a simplistic explanation of political and social events as being a battle between good and evil forces, a *Manichaean* understanding that lies at the heart of populism (Silva et al. 2017; Mudde, 2007).

Moreover, populism is "rooted in general animosity toward anything official" (Silva, 2017). This was also identified by Barkun (2003) as a characteristic of conspiracy theories. Barkun (2003) observed that conspiracy theories often dismiss mainstream explanations of political events as ploys designed to keep the public distracted from hidden sources of power. An important recent study found that the distrust of intellectual 'elites' (including scientists) that is included in populist narratives is related to conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 (Stecula & Pickup, 2021). The research demonstrated that those high in populist attitudes were more likely to believe conspiracy theories regarding the Coronavirus pandemic, including that COVID-19 is a Chinese bioweapon (ibid.). The various conspiracy theories pedalled by populists have also been identified as an "affective force" for "mobilising 'the people'"(Wojczewski, 2021) and is therefore a phenomenon worth studying.

However, although similarities between populism and conspiracism might be observed from a theoretical perspective it might not be felt by citizens who subscribe to either belief. As Hendricks & Vestergaard identify, populism creates conspiracy theories when the us vs them narrative goes into overdrive (Hendricks & Vestergraad, 2019). "Conspiracy stories and theories have the same basic us- versus-them structure as the populist narratives, *but* taken to an even more extreme degree" (ibid:94, italics added). Therefore, from a citizens' perspective a populist and conspiracist attitude might not be regarded as one and the same. Although this research is not focused on establishing a link between conspiracy theories and populism, due to this particular strand of research unfortunately lying beyond the scope of this study, the above discussion still provides this study with an important context for conspiracism within the wider current political climate.

Methodology

This research is concerned with answering two research questions: Firstly, what is the nature of the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and political efficacy? Secondly, how does the community element of conspiracy theories explain the creation and spread of conspiracy theories? In order to collect detailed and relevant information that will allow us to better understand the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and individual political efficacy, a qualitative approach was chosen. Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative methods allow us to gain deeper understanding of a topic that goes further than simple description. As McNabb (2010) identifies, the use of qualitative research can help gain an overall enhanced image of individuals and their circumstances. Further, qualitative methods can help to enable minorities to be the subject of important research (McNabb, 2010), unlike a quantitative method, such as a survey, which can unintentionally overlook entire subsections of society due to an unwillingness of some individuals to identify themselves for fear of consequences (Pierce, R. 2008). However, qualitative methods are limited in their scope and so any information gathered through this method will be generally restricted in its wider applicability.

Research Questions:

> RQ1: what is the nature of the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and political efficacy?
>
> RQ2: How does the community element of conspiracy theories explain the creation and spread of conspiracy theories?

For this research I chose to interview people who believed in conspiracy theories. In order to find people for my interviews I looked close to home. The town I grew up in is a predominantly working class town. There, the residents can often have views that are sometimes entirely removed from what might be considered standard by those in academia.

Since the start of the various recent Covid-19 lockdowns I have noticed a large increase in people I know consistently sharing posts on social media that contain conspiracy narratives. The posts have varied from Coronavirus conspiracies through to theories surrounding QAnon and Donald Trump. These are the people who I approached for interviewing in this study as they were deemed appropriate for this research. I also adopted the use of the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM), or chain referral sampling, in order to further locate people for the study. SSM is a unique method of convenience sampling that has been recognised as a useful process for conducting research in marginalized communities (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

In particular, SSM allows researchers to involve people from specific populations and therefore create a more robust representative sample from the community of research interest (ibid.). The use of SSM allows for a 'bond' to be created between the original sample and others within the same community (Berg, 2014). Researchers can use this bond to access other interviewees by way of referral from those in the original sample (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Due to the community element that exists in the spread of conspiracy theories (Byford, 2011), SSM importantly allows access to others within the community. Further, due to SSM's ability to include people who are hard to reach (Cohen & Arieli, 2011), by employing this method the hope was that diversity within the sample would be increased. Using SSM, I distributed announcements mostly through e-mails to friends, asking them to forward my request to others who might be interested in participating in my research. Originally I spoke with eight individuals who held beliefs in conspiracy theories, however only seven wished to have their interview included in this study. The individuals I interviewed varied from those who had a casual interest in one or two conspiracies but it did not occupy much of their lives, to individuals for whom their interest in conspiracy theories goes well beyond casual.

In order to effectively interview the respondents, a trusting relationship was established with the interviewees. This relationship had to consider power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee (McNabb, 2010). I believe that because I know a lot of these people well already and have a lot in common due to our shared background, the possible negative impact of power imbalance was negated. A robust and trusting relationship with the participant benefits the study by limiting the chances of miscommunication or misinterpretation which could impede the research (McNabb, 2010). Further, the participant was assured that they could answer freely, honestly, and in a manner that was true and not demanded of them. It was also important that the interviewee was confident that I conducted the interviews with integrity, honesty and fairness (Brennen, 2017). The interviews took place virtually using phone calls, Microsoft Teams, and, in cases in which the participant preferred, through the chat function on Facebook Messenger.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that was conducive to spontaneous discussion by using semi-structured questions, as this helps a study gain better insight (Pierce, 2008). Early into each interview I established what the conspiracy theory was that each individual believed in, these ranged from Covid-19 to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy to the sinking of the Titanic. I asked each interviewee questions regarding when and how were they made aware of the conspiracy theory and how discovery of the theory made them feel regarding politics. Beyond this the interviews were relatively free flowing and unprompted. The interviews were characterised by openness with the respondents. Therefore they were made aware of the purpose of the research and exactly how the material they provided was to be used. The interviews were recorded so that the analysis was accurate regarding the responses the interviewees gave. The interviewees were made aware of the fact the discussion was recorded both in advance of the interview and just before the interview began. They were given the option to opt out of the interview at any moment, both before it started and at any point during. Participants also had the option to have their identity protected and be made anonymous in the writeup of my research. While none of the participants chose this option I still decided to simply refer to them by their first name in order to provide them with a level of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic. Further, for the participants who had distinctive names I substituted their real names for pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

Using the software NVivo, data contained within the transcripts was coded using Value Coding (Saldaña, 2013) combined with a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2017). A Grounded Theory approach was chosen because it allows you to "define, explicate, and conceptualise what is happening in your data" (Charmaz, 2017:299). Further, CGT is useful for this study in particular because, according to Kathy Charmaz (2017:300), it acknowledges you and your research participants, multiple standpoints, roles, and realities, it adopts a reflective position toward your background, values, actions, situations, relationships with research participants, and representations of them, and it situates your research in the historical, social, and situational conditions of its production. All of the above features of CGT are important tools for effectively undertaking qualitative research, especially when discussing a potentially sensitive topic such as conspiracy theories.

The data from the interviews was initially coded into three main categories by using the Open Coding method of CGT (Saldaña, 2013:100). These first coding categories were based on the literature and allowed the data to be broken down into distinct parts whilst remaining "open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the data" (Charmaz, 2006:46). The initial three categories were 'External', 'Internal', and 'Community'. After this process the data was then further coded using the method of Value Coding (Saldaña, 2013). By also using Value Coding I was able to code the data in a manner that reflects "a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2013:110). Due to the focus of the research on analysing the relationship between conspiracy theories and political efficacy, discovering participants' attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately their worldview is crucial to this study.

Political efficacy, how an individual perceives their ability to effect political change, is connected to their worldview (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009), which in itself is dependent on their values, attitudes and beliefs. Further, research has shown that shared values and beliefs are important in forming conspiracy theory communities (Stempel, 2007; Fenster, 2008). Also, the ability of value coding to identify beliefs and attitudes contained within qualitative data made it more suitable for this study than other forms of coding such as Emotions Coding. Emotions Coding is exclusively concerned with coding the emotions recalled by a participant (Saldaña, 2013:105) and although some of the interviewees described feeling certain emotions, Values Coding was deemed more suitable due to the inability of Emotions Coding to identify values and beliefs, which lie at the heart of this study.

Therefore a second round of coding based on values coding was chosen. The combination of Value Coding with a CGT approach was chosen for this study because: Firstly, the flexibility of the CGT approach means it can be adapted to the individual needs of a project and its research questions. Secondly, while the benefit of CGT is that it allows you to inductively generate theories from the data, by integrating CGT with Value Coding one can construct a Multi-Grounded Theory (MGT) approach (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010). In adopting a MGT approach, combining Value Coding with a CGT approach, the open-mindedness of CGT is preserved while still acknowledging pre-existing theoretical concepts, such as those discussed in the literature review.

Coding Examples

Phrases contained within the interview transcripts that either mentioned or referred to a part of the political system were firstly coded under the 'External' node, for example, if the statement mentioned '*government*' or '*politicians*' etc. These statements were then further coded to signify a value or belief the participant was referring to that might influence external political efficacy, such as the code 'Authorities telling the truth' for example. These value codes were created from examining the existing literature on external political efficacy

(Geurkink et al. 2020; Chamberlain, A. .2013. etc.). An example of a statement coded as 'External' is:

> "**It's also just that when we look at things like the narrative and media** and how… how, for example, in this country, how… how things have kind of just unfolded. You know, Boris Johnson, for example, is just a very well-known compulsive liar. So if that's true, then why would I expect to be told the truth about things outside of normal stuff, if that makes sense?"
>
> (Ryan, 2021. Appendix)

This was coded as external because it refers to the media and their narrative (see bold section). This statement was also value coded as 'Authorities telling the truth' because the speaker describes a lack of trust about being told the truth by the media and labels the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, as a 'compulsive liar' (see underlined). In this example the participant describes their view that if the Prime Minister is a liar then they expect to also be lied to by others in positions of authority. This worldview held by the participant is an example of their held attitude towards politics and was therefore value coded in the above manner.

Statements in which the interviewee referred to their perceived ability to enact political change were initially coded as 'Internal'. These statements were then further coded to signify a value or belief held by the participant that might influence internal political efficacy, such as the code 'Ability to influence the political process' for example. These additional value codes were created based on the literature on internal political efficacy (Niemi, 1991; Reichert, 2016. Morrell, 2003; Valentino, 2011). An example of a statement coded as 'Internal' is:

> "It you know, made me just **incredibly angry at the time and frustrated and really quite scared** that there's some kind of massive project going on in the background and everything, and you're going to lose freedoms and all that kind of stuff"
>
> (Ryan, 2021)

This statement was coded as ‘Internal” because it refers to losing one’s ‘freedoms’ (see underlined). The interviewee demonstrates their belief that they could lose their rights, such as the right to vote for example. The loss of such a right would negatively influence an individual’s internal political efficacy (Shineman, 2019). From the initial code ‘Internal , the statement was then value coded as ‘Ability to influence the political process’ because it describes feeling ‘scared’ (see bold). As shown by Nicholas Valentino et al. (2011) feeling scared and anxious decreases political participation. Further, feelings of anxiousness are linked to a low sense of political efficacy (Magni, 2017) and therefore the participant feeling ‘scared’ may have a negative impact on their perceived ability to influence the political process.

During the process of coding the data it was essential that the mode of analysis was one of “association, not connotation” (Harrison & Bruter, 2011:61). Therefore when coding the data I located words that were related to specific themes within this study’s theoretical background. For example, if the interviewee spoke often about feelings of distrust without specifically mentioning the government or officials it would indicate that this feeling is experienced strongly by the individual. This would therefore be value coded as ‘Trust in politicians’ because current research surrounding political efficacy suggests that feelings of distrust lead to lower feelings of external political efficacy (Hawkins et al. 1971; Dyck, 2009).

In order to examine the role of community in the spread of conspiracy theories, a further node ‘Community’ was established in order to identify any instances in which the interviewee mentioned anything relating to the existence of a conspiracy community. Here is an example of a statement that was initially coded as ‘Community’ and then value coded as ‘Being part of a community’ because the participant describes his belief that he was acting as a member of a community:

> “At the time, I felt it was there was a big community. And, you know, I was on social media, Twitter. And the thing is with that is that no matter what your beliefs are, they get reinforced by the echo chamber of what that system is, Twitter and Facebook, all these things”
>
> (Ryan, 2021)

From the above coding an exploratory analysis was conducted to examine both the relationship between conspiracism and political efficacy as well as the community element of conspiracism. An exploratory approach was specifically chosen in order to seek answers to the above research questions (see start of Methodology) because exploratory analysis has the benefit of allowing meaning to be applied to what might otherwise be simply descriptive (McNabb, 2010; Pierce, R. 2008). By applying exploratory research through interviews with individuals that believe in conspiracy theories, this research used the collected data to examine the relationship between individual political efficacy and belief in conspiracy theories, and the role community plays in the creation and spread of conspiracy theories.

Results and Discussion

From the interviews with individuals who believe in conspiracy theories useful data were gathered. Due to the open nature of the questions asked during the interviews a lot of important areas outside the main interests of this study were also covered. For example, each participant described how they felt about the term 'conspiracy theory' to define their beliefs. All respondents gave a negative reaction to the label being used in a pejorative manner. In this extract one of the respondents, Brad, details his thoughts regarding the term:

> "My belief is that with the government specifically, they've kind of used the media in a way to change people's opinion of someone who's considered a conspiracy theorist and have used it in a negative light"
>
> (Brad, 2021)

Another respondent, Amanda reacted in a similar manner:

> "That term was made by the CIA to basically belittle people who were questioning the JFK assassination […] People call them conspiracy theories, but a lot of them are based on facts. If you know what I mean… Yeah, so I don't really like the term, It's got like it's got a bad stigma to it, hasn't it?"
>
> (Amanda, 2021)

For clarification the claim made here that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) invented the term is false, the term in fact dates as far back as the 1870s (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018). Although not directly connected to the research aim in this essay, this reaction is interesting because it shows how the term is negatively received by all those I spoke with who believe in conspiracy theories. As Michael Wood (2016) identifies, upon hearing the term 'conspiracy theory' to describe their beliefs, individuals feel that their viewpoints are being dismissed and feel that *"it suggests that someone who believes in* [conspiracy theories] *is an idiot" (*Ryan, 2021).

Concerning the main interests of this study (examining the relationship between political efficacy and conspiracy theories, and investigating the community side of conspiracism), the interviews provide this research with significant data. In the following sections the interview data are examined in order to understand how it interacts with my studies' theoretical background.

External Political Efficacy

As previously discussed, the external dimension of political efficacy refers to the perception an individual has that the governments and the relevant institutions are responsive to their efforts to exercise political power. This research is concerned with examining the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and external political efficacy. For the individuals who subscribe to conspiracy theories, external political efficacy could be negatively influenced by their beliefs. For example, the belief that powerful evil forces are controlling the world, which lies at the heart of all major conspiracy theories, may lead to feelings of distrust in the political establishment. As research has shown, distrust can cause an individual to feel that governments are not responsive to citizens' wants (Geurkink et al. 2020).

In order to uncover the participants' perception of the responsiveness of governments, I asked participants questions regarding whether they felt people like them had a say in what the government does. This line of questioning was chosen because it echoes the external efficacy index of the American National Election Studies (ANES) which has been acknowledged as the way to measure external efficacy (see Niemi et al. 1991; Chamberlain, 2013). In the subsequent interview extracts, respondents detailed their feelings regarding the responsiveness of the government to their wants and needs. The following extracts detail the belief that governments do not represent the needs of the people:

> "They represent the corporations not the people […] How our voting system works is each corporate business in the square mile of banks in London, more banks in that square mile

> than the rest of the world combined. They get a vote for every employee, so if 10 banks have 10,000 employees they would have 100,000 votes between them but the corporations can make the vote for all their employees, we have no real power over elections just the illusion that we have the choice, the corporations give huge donations to get favours and laws passed to benefit their agendas not the people"
>
> (Connor, 2021)

> "Well… I think that… I no longer think that voting works, and I think that we're just playing into their system, if you know what I mean? And when you're voting and I think it's usually one major party against another major party like Labour or Conservative and… it's always like them two parties that are put in place. You know it's always them two parties that are getting the vote, it's a controlled opposition. I think the strings are being pulled for both of them by the same people, but it's an illusion of choice. if you get me? So I don't believe that their means of change, of how they tell us we can change things, do actually change things. I think it's all part of the game. If you know what I mean?"
>
> (Amanda, 2021)

From the above extracts we can see that the respondents' viewpoint regarding politics could negatively influence their external political efficacy. They, like other respondents, both believe that the government and the political system is not respondent to the wants and needs of people like them. In both examples, voting in the UK is described as an 'illusion' (this term was also used by other respondents) which demonstrates their held belief that we do not live in a democracy, although it is important not to overemphasize what may be general scepticism regarding the political system and these individuals might simply feel cynical about the power of their vote.

However, the fact they talk about *'playing into their system'* (Amanda) and the voting system being rigged in favour of corporations (Connor), signals that their feelings go far beyond general scepticism and into the world of conspiracism. Further, Amanda referred to strings being pulled by powerful people, and she returned to this theme multiple times throughout our conversation. It is her belief that the people pulling the strings are the 'illuminati' – a group of powerful individuals who control the world. This belief may further negatively influence her external efficacy because it signals her conviction that the government is controlled by powerful people and therefore not responsive to citizens attempts to exercise political power.

In other interviews respondents gave similar replies. A lot of discussion I had with interviewees regarding this topic concentrated on politicians being untrustworthy and continually looking after their own interests instead of those of citizens. See below for extracts that detail this outlook (notably, in the extract from my interview with Ryan he notes how the awareness of conspiracy theories altered how he felt about politics (see bold sections)):

> "Think it's become a running joke that we all know politicians and parties will say anything for power, part of their job is acting now… There's no limit to what they can get away with because of money and power"
>
> (David, 2021)

> "**I went from being probably and I had always kind of voted Labour but didn't really know why. And I just stopped voting. I just didn't see the point of it**. I thought that it was just a big kind of a fix. **So I stopped voting completely and I became completely disengaged with the political process**… I just saw everything as some kind of staged erm, you know, narrative at the time. And, yeah, I just went, I suppose, into a bit of a rabbit hole. **And I removed myself from the political process completely. And when it came to elections and stuff,** I, I ended up only voting because of fear of who would get in if I didn't vote for someone else, you know, someone else"
>
> (Ryan, 2021)

Further, when other respondents were asked whether they felt that the awareness of the conspiracy theory had influenced how they felt about politics, several of the participants described how their belief had altered their political outlook. The below extracts detail the change experienced by two of the participants:

> "I suppose if you accept the theory [that JFK was assassinated by the American elite] it makes you feel like elected heads of state and governments are not really choosing the political course of their people with a free hand. That they are just managers of an economic system on behalf of an elite and can be removed if they stray from an acceptable path. I don't think that this necessarily means getting your head blown off, that's pretty unusual"
>
> (Joe, 2021)

> "I'd say the initial 9/11 thing did open up more open minded thinking. That what the government does and says it does isn't necessarily true. Made me question a lot more instead of taking the face value"
>
> (David, 2021)

For Joe and David their belief in conspiracy theories made them respectively become disheartened with the system and question the actions of politicians. Although Gamson (1968) argues that political distrust does not negatively impact external political efficacy, other research (see: Fraser, 1970; Hawkins et al. 1971; Niemi et al., 1991; Dyck, 2009) has shown this lack of trust in politicians adversely impacts political efficacy at the external level. The above extracts shows that this lack of trust negatively influencing external efficacy might be experienced by those who hold a belief in conspiracy theories.

The possible impact of conspiracy theory narratives on trust in government is supported by the research of Einstein & Glick (2015). By examining the impact of conspiracy theories on trust in government, the research found that exposure to a conspiracy's claims has a strong damaging effect on trust in government and institutions including those unconnected to the allegations. Their study demonstrated that "exposure to conspiratorial explanations of events has real consequences for the democratic enterprise" (Einstein & Glick, 2015:699). Data from my interviews would support this conclusion.

However, this study is not interested in exploring a causal link between conspiracy theories and external political efficacy. Instead, it is concerned with studying the two-way relationship that connects the two phenomena. For some individuals it may be an already existing lack of trust, and a low level of political efficacy, that drove their interest in conspiracy theories. As Jean-Bruno Renard (2020:72) identifies, "the main cultural cause for the increase in belief in conspiracy theories is the general loss of trust that is observable in contemporary societies". That loss of trust might be in experts, scientists, politics or politicians (ibid.). In the following extract two of the participants, Joe and George, describe their pre-existing distrust in politics:

> "It makes you more cynical I suppose. But I already thought all this before I read that book [about JFK's assassination] anyway… I've always felt generally the same about politics since I was about in my late teens/early twenties. I feel that Capitalism is bad system under which to organise ourselves as exploits and demeans the vast majority of human beings"
>
> (Joe, 2021)

> "To be honest I have always not fully trusted that politicians do things with our interest at heart […] It's why I like conspiracy theories because they actually talk about what's going on in the world and make you aware of the shady things going on"
>
> (George, 2021).

For individuals like Joe and George, the sense of cynicism and distrust regarding politics that predates their belief in conspiracy theories, such as the JFK assassination, might offer an explanation for holding such beliefs. This pre-existing distrust demonstrates a potential two-way relationship between conspiracy theories and political efficacy.

Internal Political Efficacy

Whereas the external dimension of political efficacy refers to individual perception of government's responsiveness to their efforts to exercise political power, the internal is the perception that one has the required ability and resources to participate in the political process. This study examines the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and internal political efficacy. For those who believe in conspiracy theories, internal political efficacy could be influenced by their conspiratorial understanding of the world. For example, a belief in conspiracy theories may cause an individual to feel more knowledgeable about how the world works (Weigmann, 2018). This sense of being well-informed could positively influence their sense of internal efficacy because greater political knowledge is linked to higher levels of internal political efficacy (Niemi et al. 1991).

In order to discover the participants' perception regarding internal political efficacy, I asked participants questions concerning whether they felt appropriately qualified to participate in politics. This particular line of questioning was selected because it replicated internal efficacy index statements contained in the 1988 American National Election Study (ANES) (Niemi et al. 1991). I also asked participants how the discovery of the conspiracy theory made them feel because this might provide insight into how the theory might influence their worldview. In the following extract from my interview with Amanda, she details how the awareness of conspiracy theories made her feel like she finally had an accurate understanding of the world:

> "It made me feel like things made sense now if you know what I mean? So when I started really looking into it, and when I discovered that there might be sort of like a power behind the throne. If you know what I mean? That made me feel like, these, you know, like world events, are starting to make sense now. Like a lot is making sense. So, yeah, it just sort of felt like things were sort of clicking into place. If you get me?"
>
> (Amanda, 2021)

In the above interview extract Amanda describes the discovery of conspiracy theories made her feel like her worldview suddenly made sense. Here we can see how conspiracy theories can reinforce someone's understanding of the world (Weigmann, 2018; Friedman, 2021) and make them feel more knowledgeable. This reinforcing of world views was reflected by other respondents in the study. Another measure of internal efficacy recognised by the ANES is the individual perception that they are better informed about government and politics than most people (Niemi et al. 1991). In the following extract Connor describes this feeling (see highlighted section):

> "I think pre 2017 nothing like this really mattered but since then we've been taking radical and delusional steps towards a future I don't want to be a part of … I have taken an interest in US politics and UK politics in the past 3 years **and would say that in my areas of interest I'm more than averagely knowledgeable**"
>
> (Connor, 2021)

Another participant, Ryan, also described a similar feeling of being more aware than others:

> "at the time it felt like I knew stuff that other people didn't. And that was a small group of us that were better than everyone else. And that's kind of how I felt, intellectually better than other people"
>
> (Ryan, 2021)

The above demonstrates the ability of conspiracy theories to make individuals feel like they are more knowledgeable (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Weigmann, 2018) . However, it is a secret knowledge that conspiracy theorists believe others do not possess (Barkun, 2014). Further, as Michael Barkun (2015) identifies, a belief in a conspiracy theory is not only an endorsement of secret knowledge but of stigmatized knowledge as well, stigmatized meaning "knowledge claims that have been ignored or rejected by those institutions we rely upon to validate such claims" (Barkun, 2015:115) such as universities or government agencies etc. However, for those who believe in conspiracy theories the fact that the information contained in the theories is rejected by mainstream might be insignificant. One of the interviewees in particular stressed that his feeling of being more knowledgeable came from his awareness of the secret ‘agendas’ set out in conspiracy theories such as:

> “the destruction of the nuclear family … the whole LGBQT, feminist and trans movement have all gained unbelievable political popularity because it goes against the grain of a 2 parent 2 child household”
>
> (Connor, 2021)

This view described by Connor would rightly be categorized as rejected stigmatized knowledge. Further, when asked about his ‘alternative views’, as he described them, and whether they made him feel more knowledgeable about the issues the country faces, Connor replied: *“Yeah I do because as soon as you understand the agenda you can spot it every time you see it being played out in real life”*. This demonstrates that for some individuals, conspiracy theories provide them with a sense of increased knowledge. This may positively influence their perceived ability to participate in the political process and therefore increase their internal political efficacy. Yet, the knowledge they possess might be stigmatized knowledge which may negatively influence their ability to participate in politics effectively due to the possible inaccuracy of the information they believe in, even if they themselves do not regard it as inaccurate.

However, it is interesting to note that when asked whether they considered themselves politically active, the majority of the respondents said they did (see table 1). This is noteworthy because even though the information they believe in might be rejected by those we rely upon to validate information, by describing themselves as politically active the majority of the participants perceive that they nevertheless have the required ability and resources to participate in the political process, although it should be noted that their notion of being politically active was based upon people's own definitions. Consequently, our understanding of how conspiracy theories interacts with internal political efficacy might depend on our understanding of being politically active. Political engagement can take several distinct forms, as Stockemer (2012:203) identifies "one of the most common differentiations between different kinds of political participation is conventional versus unconventional".

Conventional political activities are actions that intend to sway the political process through democratic means and can include voting or being a member of a political party (Verba & Nie, 1972). Unconventional political activities are attempts to influence politics via non-institutionalized means. For example, holding a protest or participating in a boycott are both forms of unconventional political participation (Van der Meer & van Ingen, 2009). Connecting political participation with conspiracy beliefs, the research by Imhoff et al. (2020) demonstrates that the

> "adoption of a worldview that sees the world as governed by secret plots attenuates reported intentions to participate in normative, legal forms of political participation but increases reported intentions to employ nonnormative, illegal means"
>
> (Imhoff et al. 2020:71)

Therefore, for individuals who subscribe to conspiracy beliefs their political participation might be more towards an unconventional manner than conventional and consequently the accuracy of the information they receive might be irrelevant, like those individuals who participated in the US Capitol riots (Kaplan, 2021). Whether or not the information received through conspiracy theories is accurate might not be relevant for those who follow them because the narrative that elected politicians do not represent the needs of the voters but instead follow the agenda of a secret group, might be so convincing, due to certain individual predispositions, that action outside the norms of any form of social contract (Imhoff et al. 2021:72) is urgently required. Further, the individuals themselves might not consider the information they possess to be inaccurate and therefore it might not negatively influence their perception of being knowledgeable.

In order to establish what participants meant by being politically active, those who considered themselves politically active were asked which of their actions did they consider participating in the political process. These responses ranged from conventional forms such as voting and being members of the political parties to nonnormative forms such as being involved in riots and online 'Hacktivism' for the group Anonymous. Political engagement through nonnormative actions, such as rioting, adds another consideration for the relationship between conspiracy theories and internal political efficacy. If an individual considers an act such as rioting as themselves participating in the political process, especially if this action is based upon information provided by conspiracy theories, it might be their conspiracy beliefs that has positively influenced their perceived ability to participate in the political process.

Further, the belief that "if elections or legal demonstrations had the power to change anything, those in power would have declared them illegal" (Imhoff et al. 2020:74) might cause individuals with conspiracy beliefs to consider nonnormative actions such as rioting as not only more effective, but also as more legitimate (ibid.). As Jeffrey M. Paige (1971:810) explains, acts such as rioting "appear to be a disorganized form of political protest rather than an act of personal frustration, or social isolation" and rioters are generally high in levels of political information but low in trust in governments (ibid.). Therefore it may be possible that a belief in conspiracy theories strengthens an individual's perceived ability to participate in the political process, it is just that it takes place through nonnormative and unconventional means.

Table 1. Whether participants consider themselves politically active and part of a conspiracy theory community.

	David	Ryan	Brad	Connor	Amanda	George	Joe
Part of a community		x			x		
Not part of a community	x		x	x		x	x
Politically Active	x	x			x	x	x
Not Politically Active			x	x			

Community

The final component of this research is concerned with examining the role that community plays in the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. This is significant for understanding the phenomenon because it allows us to better understand how various theories are formed and spread through the world of conspiracism. As identified by Edy & Risley-Baird (2016:589), the spread of conspiracy theories is reliant on communities and "involves not an individual, psychological predisposition to spread misinformation, but a shared need for understanding and support and a common construal of the social world".

Considering the creation and spread of conspiracy theories as collective meaning-making (Phadke et al. 2021) implies the existence of conspiracy theory communities rather than the information links implied by traditional transmission models of communication (Carey, 1989). Therefore asking the respondents questions regarding the conspiracy community was significant in determining how they were first made aware of conspiracy theories. Due to the apparent collective nature of forming and spreading conspiracy theories we would expect the strong presence of a conspiracy community. In the following the resulting data from the interviews is discussed.

During my conversations with the interviewees I determined how individuals were first made aware of the conspiracy theory and how they felt about the community element of conspiracism. The majority of this part of the discussion related to whether or not they felt part of a community, whether they felt such a community existed and how this interacted with their worldview. In the following extract Amanda describes her part in the conspiracy theory community:

> "I'd go on [conspiracy theory] forums online and see what people put on forums. But when I first started looking into it, it was harder to find people on my wavelength. But now, now there is absolutely loads, I know a lot of people now. Like, I used to go to conferences, but when I went the people that were there would be like my parents' age, no one sort of my age if you know what I mean? But now I know loads of people my age who also look into it all and everything"
>
> (Amanda, 2021)

My discussion with Amanda was interesting because she was one of only two people I spoke to who described themselves as active members of a conspiracy theory community, as the current literature would expect (Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016; Phadke et al. 2021). Out of both of these interviewees, Amanda's account portrayed a more active role in the formation and spread of conspiracy theories. On more than one occasion she mentioned attending conferences, being active in online conspiracy theory communities, and knowing a lot of other people with a similar interest in conspiracy theories. Ryan also described feeling part of a community that reinforced his views and offered each other support:

> "At the time, I felt it was there was a big community. And, you know, I was on social media, Twitter. And the thing is with that is that no matter what your beliefs are, they get reinforced by the echo chamber of what that system is, Twitter and Facebook, all these things. So, you know, my worries and feelings of being awakened and all that were being

> reinforced by other users and just kind of helped me feel even more involved and all that kind of stuff"
>
> (Ryan, 2021)

Another respondent, David, when asked whether he felt a community of conspiracy theorists existed, replied: *"100%, definitely. Every single YouTube video* [about conspiracy theories] *I've watched there seems to be a link to some sort of online community"*, however he did not consider himself one of its members. The mention of YouTube videos is significant because for the rest of the interviewees this feeling of being part of a community was not felt (see table 1). Instead, they felt that their discovery of, and interest in, conspiracy theories was largely a solitary endeavour completely removed from any normative understanding of community, that generally involved watching conspiracy theory videos on YouTube. In fact during the interviews each interviewee mentioned at some point the role watching conspiracy theory YouTube videos had in fostering their interest in such theories, such as one video mentioned by one of the interviewees titled '*Thrive: What on Earth will it take?*' (a film I was urged to watch), which has over 16 million views and claims it:

> "lifts the veil on what's REALLY [sic] going on in our world by following the money upstream -- uncovering the global consolidation of power in nearly every aspect of our lives… THRIVE offers real solutions, empowering us with unprecedented and bold strategies for reclaiming our lives and our future."
>
> (Thrive Movement, 2012)

Similarly, other people I spoke to explained that their interest in conspiracy theories started by watching YouTube videos about 'mysteries' surrounding tragic events, such as the events of 9/11. The videos that interviewees described make claims concerning what the videos' creators regard as inconsistencies in official explanations and instead offer viewers the 'truth' about what really happened. Ryan, one of the interviewees who used to be heavily involved in the online activist group 'Anonymous', described his encounter with such a video:

> “I did watch a documentary probably in about 2013 or 14, Called Zeitgeist and that documentary pointed out a lot of factual issues with the official [9/11] story, for example, that the rate of freefall of the building, the airplane hitting the Pentagon. Like the physics involved in a plane moving like that couldn't make sense… And when I watched that, that's when it started to get me thinking that there's a lot of conspiracy stuff going on here… And I think it just at that point, it probably I just went all in and kind of thought that we're just living in some kind of alternate reality”
>
> (Ryan, 2021).

From a quick search of the term ‘9/11 conspiracy theories’ on YouTube I was able to locate hundreds of videos containing similar explanations and theories. One such video titled *‘9/11 Conspiracy Theories: Considering multiple narratives’* has been viewed over 180,000 views and was the first result that appeared in my search.

Although extensive research has examined the presence of online conspiracy theory communities on platforms such as YouTube (see: Bessi et al. 2016; Schatto-Eckrodt, 2020; Allington et al. 2021), it is interesting to note that most respondents did not feel that they were part of this community. For these individuals their part of the conspiracy formation and distribution process would be better described as end-receiver rather than that of co-creator. As previously stated (see Conspiracy Theory Community), the understanding of community is based on members having a shared interest in collectively shaping an alternative understanding of events, whether online or in person.

However for the majority of those I spoke to they did not feel they were inputting into the theory. Instead they were simply receiving the conspiracy theory narrative through mediums such as YouTube. The absence of community experience for the majority of participants in this study seemingly goes against what is expected by the current literature on conspiracy theory proliferation (see Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016; Phadke et al. 2021). However, even though the majority of those I spoke to simply did not feel part of it, the community element might remain a significant part of the conspiracy theory phenomenon. This research demonstrates the need for further exploration into how conspiracy theories are spread from one person to another and the role mediums such as YouTube play in the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

Conclusion

Through the use of qualitative interviews with individuals who believe in conspiracy theories, this research has examined the nature of the relationship between a belief in conspiracy theories and political efficacy. It has also examined how the community element of conspiracism explains the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. In order to examine the influence of conspiracy theories it was essential that this study had a robust understanding of the concept. Therefore this research recognised a conspiracy theory as having three components, as identified by Barkun (2003): Firstly, conspiracy theories consider the cause of all unusual political and social occurrences as the result of the actions of secretive forces. Second, they provide a simplistic Manichean, good versus evil, interpretation of significant political events. Lastly, they claim that any mainstream explanation of a political event is a well thought out ploy to keep the public distracted from the 'real' source of power.

With regards the political efficacy focus of this study this research firstly examined the nature of the relationship between conspiracism and the external system-regarding dimension of political efficacy. Some of the individuals interviewed described the extent to which exposure to conspiracy theories influenced them to become distrusting of governments and in some cases remove themselves entirely from the political process. As the current literature shows, this distrust might adversely impact their political efficacy at the external level. A belief in the narratives contained in conspiracy theories might negatively influence external political efficacy by eradicating trust in politicians to enact policies that are in the interest of citizens and not their own, a belief held by the majority of the participants. Consequently this lack of trust might make those who follow conspiracy theories lose faith in the political system entirely.

However, this research was not interested in investigating the existence of a causal link between conspiracy theories and external political efficacy. From the responses given by other participants there is evidence that suggests it might be a pre-existing distrust of governments and officials that increased their susceptibility to conspiracy theory narratives that reaffirm their scepticism. Therefore, building upon the current research on conspiracy theories and external efficacy (see: Ardèvol-Abreu et al. 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014), this research points to the possible existence of a two-way relationship, rather than a causal one (identified by the above research), that occurs between conspiracy theories and external political efficacy. It might be the case that the two phenomena interact and influence each other, however a supplementary quantitative examination of this occurrence would be necessary in order to apply this theory more broadly.

This research then examined the nature of the relationship between conspiracy theories and internal political efficacy. The internal dimension of political efficacy is identified as the perceived ability one has to participate in the political process. Resulting data from the interviews demonstrates that for some individuals, conspiracy theories provide them with a sense of increased knowledge. As literature on internal political efficacy observes, an increase in knowledge may increase their perceived ability to participate in the political process and therefore positively influence individual internal political efficacy. Yet, the knowledge they possess might be stigmatized knowledge which may negatively influence their ability to participate in politics effectively due to the possibility of the information they believe in being inaccurate. It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents described themselves as being politically active. This is significant because the majority of the participants perceive that they have still have the required ability and resources to participate in the political process regardless of the potential inaccuracy of the information they possess. This may be because the individuals themselves might not consider the information they possess to be inaccurate and therefore it has no influence on their perception of being knowledgeable.

However, as research demonstrates (see Imhoff et al. 2020), their political participation might be more towards an unconventional manner than conventional, in which case the accuracy of the information they obtain might be irrelevant. Therefore a belief in conspiracy theories might strengthen an individual's perceived ability to participate in the political process through nonnormative means. For example, if an individual considers rioting as themselves engaging in the political process, especially if this action is inspired by information provided by a conspiracy theory, it is perhaps their conspiracy beliefs that has positively influenced their perceived ability to participate in the political process through unconventional means. However due to the limits of this study, an additional study examining nonnormative political participation among those who believe in conspiracy theories would be required in order to assess this notion more comprehensively.

Lastly, this research also examined how the community element of conspiracy theories explains the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. The current research on conspiracy theory proliferation (see Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016; Mahl et al. 2021 Phadke et al. 2021) describes the creation and spread of conspiracy theories being reliant on the existence of communities due to the mutual support and collective meaning-making communities provide. However most respondents did not feel that they were part of this community. For the individuals I spoke with, their role in the conspiracy creation and spreading process would be more accurately described as end-receiver rather than co-creator. The absence of community experience for the majority of participants I spoke with seems to differ from what the current literature on conspiracy theory proliferation expects.

The understanding of community in this study was based on members having a shared interest in collectively shaping an alternative understanding of events, whether online or in person. However for the majority of those I spoke to they did not feel they were inputting into the creation of conspiracy theories. Instead they described being at the receiving end of the conspiracy theory proliferation process. All the individuals I spoke with for this research described the significant role watching YouTube videos played in their discovery of various conspiracy theories. This activity was often described as a solitary pursuit completely removed from any normative understanding of community. However, even though the majority of those I spoke to simply did not feel like a member of it, the community element might remain a significant part of the conspiracy theory phenomenon. This research demonstrates the need for further inquiry into how conspiracy theories are spread from one person to another and the role mediums such as YouTube play in the creation and spread of conspiracy theories.

Reflections

The research I conducted was enormously enhanced by the openness, honesty and willingness of those I interviewed. Everyone I spoke with was very friendly and the conversations ran smoothly and were largely enjoyable. However at times during certain conversations with participants about their conspiracy beliefs I did feel uncomfortable. At the start of this project I held the belief that those who believed in conspiracy theories simply had an eccentric interpretation of events and were harmless, I still hold this to be true for the majority of those I spoke to. However, the ideas and narratives contained in some of the theories I have been exposed to have shown a severely sinister side of the phenomenon. On reflection I would have prepared myself more thoroughly for what theories I might discover during this process and would have organized a more thorough debrief after each interview. Concerning gathering relevant data I wish at times I had asked participants to expand on certain points they raised. Sometimes it was only when I coded the data that I realised interviewees had briefly mentioned something of interest to the study, and although I often followed up with additional questions in order to gain their viewpoint it would have been useful to have captured it during the initial interviews.

During this process I was struck by how many people were extremely interested when I described my research topic and the focus of the study. Unprompted people would often detail their own interests in certain conspiracy theories, or more frequently they would tell me about someone they knew who had strong conspiracy beliefs regarding specific events. On reflection this appears significant because it indicates that conspiracy beliefs are very much a part of a lot of peoples’ outlook on the world. As stated in my introduction, conspiracism is still regarded as a fringe occurrence that has only recently seen the light of day due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the bizarre theories that has accompanied it. However it appears that the political narrative that conspiracy theories provides, namely that the world is run by malevolent secret forces whose only intention is to enact agendas at the expense of ordinary people, offers for many an accurate understanding of the world. We are left with the question, what makes this worldview so attractive? Perhaps in time this will become clear.

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Appendix

Interview Transcript Sample

Interviewee: Ryan

Date: 13/7/21

Location: Leeds. Over the phone.

Duration: 33 mins 24 secs

Transcript:

00:00 Patrick: So so the first thing I was going to ask is, do you believe in a specific theory that either yourself, or others regard as a conspiracy theory, or is it kind of more generally that you sort of feel there are conspiratorial events?

00:27 Ryan: I think a mixture of both for me. So I, I'll try to make sure I communicate this properly. So there is there is maybe one particular theory that I believe. And then there's there's also just a kind of feeling that why would it be logical for me to expect that we get told the truth about everything? And so there's so there's a mixture and and I probably was years ago, I was probably a lot more intense about that. And now I've kind of mellowed out. And I think that I was wrong and mistaken about a lot of stuff in the past where I believe that just a lot of conspiracies. And now I think I've just kind of still believe that one in particular is definitely a conspiracy. But then I also just believe that it doesn't make logical sense to expect to get the truth about everything that is, in my view, there's just enough evidence to suggest that that's true.

01:43 Patrick: Yeah, OK. That makes sense . So it isn't just the one conspiracy theory. There is sort of the thought that if you believe in this one theory then it points to the fact that if you're being held from the truth and there are then others?

02:03 Ryan: Not only stemming from that one theory, that that one particular theory to me is just obscene, that it would be true. But it's also just that when we look at things like the narrative and media and how how, for example, in this country, how how things have come of how things have kind of just unfolded. You know, Boris Johnson, for example, is just a very well known compulsive liar. So if that's true, then why would I expect to be told the truth about things outside of normal stuff, if that makes sense? Yeah.

02:43 Patrick: And, um, do you mind so detailing shortly what the general tone of this conspiracy theory that you believe?

02:53 Ryan: Yeah, absolutely. So the one that I believe is a conspiracy or at least or at least I just do not believe the official story is 9/11 . In terms of other conspiracy stuff, like, I, I probably I don't, I don't think Covid is conspiracy. I don't think I don't think the earth is flat. None of that kind of stuff. Right. There's just absolutely mathematical logical reasons that the official story of 9/11 doesn't make any sense. Right. In my my view from my you know, in my opinion anyway. Yeah.

03:39 Patrick: That is, out of the research I've been doing, is probably the most common alternative narrative that people either believe or follow, or even if they don't believe in a certain theory about it, they raise the question of the official story versus what actually happened. Were you made aware of years ago? Or was this something quite recent? ,

04:07 Ryan: Um. Yeah. So it was it was years ago. I mean there were things that never made sense about it anyway. And I always did think that it was being used as an excuse to do other things like going to war in countries and stuff, but then I did watch a documentary probably in about 2013 or 14, Called Zeitgeist and that documentary pointed out a lot of factual issues with the official story, for example, that the rate of freefall of the building, the airplane hitting the Pentagon. Like the the physics involved in a plane moving like that couldn't make sense. It would have to be in a different airplane like a jet fighter. And things like the structural debris burning for two weeks after the the rubble had already fallen, which indicates that certain chemicals being used and things like that. So there's a lot more things about that. And when I watched that, that's when it started to get me thinking that there's a lot of conspiracy stuff going on here. And that documentary also had a lot about a kind of conspiracy as well. It was not just 9/11. It was a lot of things about money and debt and the banking. And I think it just at that point, it probably I just went all in and kind of thought that we're just living in some kind of alternate reality. And at that stage, I felt probably very arrogantly that I had kind of woken up from some kind of weird slumber and I could see things differently at that point. And I think at that time it gave me a little bit of a feeling of relief, which has been very much humbled in the years following that.

06:29 Patrick: So with that sort of feeling of like when you felt that you'd been awoken, did you feel that there was a community of other people who were awake or did it feel quite like you had been awoken and there everyone else was asleep?

06:43 Ryan: At the time, I felt it was there was a big community. And, you know, I was on social media, Twitter. And the thing is with that is that no matter what your beliefs are, they get reinforced by the echo chamber of what that system is, Twitter and Facebook, all these things. So, you know, my worries and and feelings of being awakened and all that were being reinforced by other users and just kind of helped me feel even more involved and all that kind of stuff. And at the time, there was a lot of stuff going on with Anonymous, you know, so that was very prominent at the time as well. So it was really, you know, it was just everywhere and it was very easy to get all involved in it. And and at the time it felt like I knew stuff that other people didn't. And that was a small group of us that were better than everyone else. And that's kind of how I felt intellectually better than other people. I you know, now, of course, I don't feel like that. I feel like I still I still believe that 9/11 was dodgy, but I'm a lot more rational now. And that really I was acting like a bit of an arrogant and very ignorant guy at the time.

08:00 Patrick: OK, that's interesting. Did you what would you say sort of changed that made you not lose that arrogance? Um, was there anything specific or was it just kind of like, how did that come about?

08:15 Ryan: You know, so there was a combination of things. So over time, one of them was one of them was that I just I can't remember what happened, but I just found my behavior was just not rational and something I really can't remember what it was. But then there was there was on Twitter and social media in general, I was only really on Twitter, but some of the things that people were trying to get me involved in, like additional conspiracy theories, to me, they were just ludicrous. And I start to think that if the ones I look at are ludicrous as well. And and like I said at the time, there's a lot of stuff going on with Anonymous. And in the UK, there was some child, there were some issues with MPs allegedly abusing children., I don't actually remember which but anonymous all over that. And I was involved in that. And and it turned out to be that one guy had been lying and made the whole thing up. And I just thought, well. You know, all it takes is for one guy to make a story up and then a whole bunch of people jump on it and it's even gets to the scale, where it's in the news and everything, and then it's, you know, everyone says it's a conspiracy in the government and it just turned out big guy was looking for attention. And that made me feel pretty stupid, really. So then I when that happened, I fell out of love with Anonymous and I kind of just took a step back and I deleted Twitter closed down my Twitter account. And and I just took a bit more of the kind of slowly sinking approach. And and I guess I haven't changed my mind about 9/11 at all. But I do I do hold back on talking to people about that kind of stuff now. And I, I also just kind of accepted that, you know, I'm never going to know everything and but I can I can function without trusting that I am being told the truth. But it's just nowadays my, well like I said I had a feeling of elitenes before, well, that's probably been replaced with just a bit of sadness and stress. And it's that. Yeah.

10:34 Patrick: So what's going on from that? Would you how would you characterize how once you watched this documentary start to question the official story about 9/11? How would you say that? So how did it make you feel? It's quite an open ended question,

10:56 Ryan: So back at the time when I watched the documentary. it made me feel completely shocked and and it made me feel worried and it made me feel like I've got to do something about it, like I have to. I can't not now that I know this stuff, I can't not do something about it. I felt very powerless and also I felt like a huge amount of anger. And I use that anger to start, you know, start going to protests and start getting involved and stuff. And I think it was the anger that was driving me on, the anger about being lied to to such a degree and the anger that I felt that other people just can't see what's going on. And it's, you know, made me just incredibly angry at the time and and. Frustrated and really quite scared that there's some kind of massive project going on in the background and everything, you're going to lose freedoms and all that kind of stuff. And that's what I felt like at the time.

12:02 Patrick: And would you say any of those feelings still resonate with you now or has the distance from it changed that feeling? How would you characterize it now?

12:15 Ryan: sadI still feel like I still feel like there are some of those feelings. And so, like I said, nowadays, I just feel a bit sad and and with a lot of stress about what's happening. But I can't attribute all of those things to conspiracies. I think some of them are just happening anyway. And one of the things I was always really passionate about was the surveillance, the amount of surveillance we come under and how we kind of even do it ourselves, where we buy devices that that, you know, Alexa and all these kind of things. And now, you know, I've got a I haven't got an Alexa. I've got a Google nest, which is the equivalent of an Alexa. I've got a mobile phone and I've got all the things that do it all anyway. So it's kind of like, well, we've lost our battle. So, you know, whatever that battle was, it's gone anyway. And so I felt a bit powerless about it and then just kind of given up in that sense, I'm sad, sad to have lost. Like, it's not a battle that was ever really fought, if that makes sense. But it's just sad that even if we did want to fight that it's too late now.

13:31 Patrick: So as time has gone on has the initial anger has sort of subsided?

13:37 Ryan: It's just, it's just given up and what do you call it? Call it a passive resentment I suppose.

13:45 Patrick: Sort of focusing on the theory of the alternative narrative aabout 9/11. What do you think the theory sort of says about the world around you? If that makes sense.

13:58 Ryan: Say that again sorry?

14:00 Patrick: I was just thinking about, sort of the alternative narrative about 9/11. What do you think the theory says about about the world around you? If that makes sense. Like how has this theory altered how you perceive the world?

14:15 Ryan: Yeah, it did. It made me feel like things are kind of malleable and that and that there is. And if someone wants to control the narrative, then they can do so by by controlling the media, for example. So it makes me feel like that everything's manipulated.

14:43 Patrick: Yeah, OK. And then the other question is, specifically to politics, is did the theory change how you feel about politics either in the UK or more generally? I mean, did it change how you feel about democracy and political engagement, political activity, etc?

15:09 Ryan: Yeah, it did dramatically at the time. At the time, I went from being probably and I had always kind of voted labor but didn't really know why. And I just just stopped voting. I just didn't see the point of it. I thought that it was just a big kind of a fix. So I stopped voting completely and I became completely disengaged with the political process. And I just looked for answers elsewhere instead. And obviously I didn't get any. I just saw everything that was in the news in the newspapers and the news media. I just saw everything as some kind of staged erm, you know, narrative at the time. And and, yeah, I just went, I suppose, into a bit of a rabbit hole. And I remove myself from the political process completely. And when it came to elections and stuff, I, I ended up only voting because of fear of who would get in if I didn't vote for someone else, you know, someone else.

16:20 Patrick: So like tactical voting?

16:23 Ryan: Yeah. Yeah. So I really resented casting a vote at all, but I felt like if I didn't then, you know, so I was just being blackmailed to be part of the political process.

16:35 Patrick: OK, yeah. Yeah. So it didn't feel like you were choosing to be. It was the choice made for you.

16:42 Ryan: Yeah. Yeah exactly. Yeah.

16:45 Patrick: Because as Molly. Who obviously put me in touch with you mentioned that you had some involvement in Anonymous, and you just mentioned it. Would you sort of characterize the work you did with Anonymous as being sort of politically active, even if it was sort of in an unconventional form of political action? Or would you see something as an alternative to that?

17:15 Ryan: I think it was, that's a good question, at the time. I think that it was about trying to raise the profile of certain things. So, for example, you know, when the child abuse story was going around and it was quite wasn't very well known, but it ended up in the news because of Anonymous. And it was myself who was part of that process to get into the news. And so I think it was more about trying to show, put it out, just trying to help get some some some kind of profile and rather than change it. But I didn't expect to, like, change the political process at that time. I just wanted to have the press to look at, you know, when the police didn't arrest the paedophile people and all that kind of stuff. And for people to see that as some kind of police corruption thing going on, you know, it was more about awareness campaign, I suppose you could call it. And I didn't I never thought anonamous would like take down the government or be any kind of revolution because it wasn't organized in that way. And it was just quite a powerful tool when it worked in raising awareness about stuff.

18:58 Patrick: Would you say it was for the awareness of the members of the public or for trying to create awareness for people you saw is like minded to yourself?

19:06 Ryan: For me it was about awareness, trying to get the public to be aware of what we thought was happening at the time. And and, you know, it's we got it was anonymous that it taken to Sky News and the Independent, the front page of the Independent newspaper, which at the time felt like a massive achievement because it was like, okay, well, we're making some progress in terms of raising awareness of what we thought this issue was and that obviously it turned out to be a dummy anyway. So the joke was on us in the end.

19:48 Patrick: Yeah, yeah. I can see for why that would feel quite deflating. Do you think once made made aware of a conspiracy theory, do you think there's sort of still the drive at the moment to make people aware or do you think that's kind of subsided?

20:18 Ryan: I think it's definitely subsided now. I just want to get on with my life now. And I felt like it really held me back and it made it made me almost depressed and it locked me into a bit of a social media addiction, I think, looking for more and more stuff. And and, you know, now I just feel like relieved. I'm not in that kind of headspace anymore. I've forgotten what the question was.

20:50 Patrick: just about whether you feel the need still to make people feel aware or not?

20:57 Ryan: Now I don't feel like I need to do that at all. I'm just I don't believe in a particular thing. And I do believe that, you know, we're not told the truth about anything. And I can easily just accept that many people do believe everything. You know, in my friendship groups, I have a mix of people who are kind of along the same lines as me and some to more of a degree and some to less. And then I also have, you know, people who would believe everything they were told, you know, that nowadays I'm just much more mellow about the whole thing.

21:40 Patrick: I just want to touch on one of the things you were saying, with the whole getting locked into social media. Was there an element where once you peered into the world of kind of alternative narratives, you then made aware of other alternative narratives through this sort of community element of it, was it did you feel like if you started exploring 9/11 conspiracies, there was an easy sort of path into other conspiracy theories?

22:09 Ryan: Absolutely, yeah. It's like the gateway is. And it's like first because it's got that kind of echo chamber element to it. So a combination of both other uses and also how the algorithms work on those systems. So, for example, the other users, where we had something aligned, the other users would then , you know, mention something else that was similar or whatever, and you'd end up going down a rabbit hole in that respect. And in terms of Twitter, that was certainly the case. It was more about other users pushing you onto things or leading you onto things then start following them and following their friends. And all of a sudden, it's just, you know, the stream of your Twitter feed is just full of the stuff that is now a new conspiracy theory to look into, which makes perfect, logical sense when you understand how Twitter works of course. And at the time as a user, when you're just flicking through the feed, you're not really thinking about how the system works. You're just looking at this new information that right in front of your face. Instagram is another one. With Instagram, it's more about how the algorithm works. If you believe in, let's say, the 9/11 thing, you'll start to see more and more 911 stuff because the algorithm wants you to see things, the things you want to see. So it goes off and hunts them and brings them in for you so a combination of both of those things just starts to take you down a rabbit hole. And, you know, in the end, you just become just hooked on i guess and and irrational in that respect.

23:49 Patrick: It's interesting you should say that because one of the things that I've been researching is about the algorithms and how you can say, I don't know, have an interest in World War Two, something quite innocent or innocuous. And then a few YouTube videos later, it can be like a click bait-y sort of title of "Is Hitler Really Dead" or something like that. And it does seem like there is an element of this, which is algorithms facilitating this.

24:22 Ryan: Yeah, you said it spot on YouTube is a perfect example of that. So, you know, if I type and if I type in that particular type of dog, I'm going to start seeing more in my YouTube feed about that type of dog. And that's how the system works and is catering towards your every will. If you suddenly stop looking at dogs, it will start pushing something else on you until you till it thinks you've looked at it and then it will send you more of that. So they're designed to be addictive, the algorithms. I mean, recently I quit twitter ages ago, but I still had Instagram until about two months ago or something, and I permanently deleted that. I feel much better about it. And I think that if they are addicitve and if you happen to also be looking into things like conspiracy theories and then your searching is going to be reinforced by those algorithms.

25:28 Patrick: Yeah,like I remember years ago, listening to a Freakonomics podcast that said the thing that happens in social media is you have some of the brightest brains in the world working on how to keep you on there for an extra five minutes.

25:45 Ryan: Absolutely.

25:46 Patrick: Yeah. I don't have really that many more questions actually. You've been really helpful just to say so. I mean, I think one of the things that is very interesting about this conversation is your reflective element of how you are, how you feel now and how you felt at the height of it if you would describe it like that.

26:10 Ryan: Yeah, yeah. I think an example is there's a documentary on Netflix. I think it's on Netflix now called Flat Earth or something. And I watched that recently and I found it hilarious. But then when I was watching it, I also thought that there were elements of how the guy, the main character was behaving that I thought was similar to how I was behaving at the time and it made me feel, it made me feel kind of sick, to be honest.

26:48 Patrick: Yeah, yeah, I watched the same the same documentary, and there is a there's a very much an intensity to that guy. So I can understand feeling like that if you identified your previous self with being that way. Would you describe the sort of online presence of, like people talking about conspiracy, would you describe that as a community or would you see it as something else

27:18 Ryan: Say that again?

27:23 Patrick: When you sort of found people online who were also chatting about conspiracy theories, how would you describe that? Would you describe that as a community or would you describe it as something other?

27:37 Ryan: Very much a community. I mean, at the time years ago when I was looking into all the other stuff, we were really like supportive of each other and doing things for each other and even internationally, you know, we would really help each other and check in and see how we are, check our mental state and all sorts of stuff. So very much community led, which is bonkers when you think of what anonymous is because no one knows who anyone is. But at the same time, yeah, it was very, very community orientated. It just naturally took that kind of shape.

28:18 Patrick: that's a really interesting point you make. I never thought about that. Even in a community where no one knows anything about each other, there's still a social community.

28:30 Ryan: And I would say, yes, very powerful one where you have, you know, almost personal conversations with someone you don't know who it is, is really, really odd to them.

28:41 Patrick: And then just sort of my final question really is. I get the sense from you that you don't necessarily mind the term conspiracy theory to describe this, or, well, do you mind? Do you see it as a derogatory term?

28:59 Ryan: I see it as slightly derogatory, but I don't know what other term there could be? For example, when people use the term conspiracy theory, it suggests that someone who believes in it is an idiot or whatever. But then we know that conspiracies do exist because some of them have been proven like the Watergate scandal, for example, you know, everyone was just saying 'oh it's just a conspiracy conspiracy theory'. But, you know, the term conspiracy theory simply means that, well in the way that I'm interpreting it would mean that... say you can't have a theory about something that well... In order for this term to exist, there must have been some conspiracies at some stage and therefore conspiracies must exist in that sense. And I think it's misused. I would say it's misused. So it's very easy to just attach the label of a conspiracy theory or a conspiracy theorist. And and I think that can be deliberately misused as a distraction, but I think from that perspective it's derogatory.

30:16 Patrick: would you characterize it as sort of it's a dismissive term?

30:21 Ryan: Yeah, I guess a dismissive term that you can mistakenly or intentionally just label a critical thinker with that tag. But then I also think that because and this is this is the really hard bit. Because there are so many theories out there that are just completely bonkers themselves like that, in my opinion. the flat earth stuff. When when you say the flat earthers are conspiracy theorists and then you say to somebody who believes that the 9/11 thing isn't the true story are conspiracy theorists, you then lump them in the same bucket as the flat earthers. And for me, that's a real problem with the identity of how all that stuff is, because obviously people... let's say in my case people who believe that the official story of 9/11 doesn't make any mathematical sense from a physics or engineering perspective. Well, all of a sudden is in the same bucket as the people who think the earth is flat, You know, and to me, the earth being flat is a completely ludicrous thing. And in that sense, that's why I said it's a derogatory kind of term. I think it's not broad enough, I suppose.

31:42 Patrick: So do you feel like that you sort of feeling that you just characterized there, do you think that's something that's shared amongst the community of conspiracy theorists? Do you think that it's shared or?

31:54 Ryan: I don't know. I think I think a lot of people probably love it. I think some people were probably probably wear it as a badge of honor. And I think people who are in that kind of state of, like, really indulging in the mass exploring of multiple theories at the time, they probably love that label at that time. And I think they might stay like that or they might not. But I think and that's not going to be applied to all people. But it's certainly I've come across people who would love to be labeled a conspiracy theorist.

32:33 Patrick: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That makes sense. Well, I don't have any sort of further questions. Do you have any sort of questions regards the study or anything.

32:44 Ryan: No, no. No. To me. So I wish you all the best with it. Yeah.

32:49 Patrick: No thank you. And thanks for dedicating some time. It really is really, really helpful conversation. Yeah, it's been. It's been brilliant. And I'm going to sort of spend the rest of the day transcribing this. Thank you very much. And if you've got any further questions about anything or anything pops into your head, do just get in touch. Thanks a lot, Thank you.

33:19 Ryan: Bye bye.