Title: IS THE LABEL “CONSPIRACY THEORY” A CAUSE OR A CONSEQUENCE OF DISBELIEF IN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES?

Short title: *THE LABEL “CONSPIRACY THEORY”*

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Abstract:
Using the label “conspiracy theory” is widely perceived to be a way of discrediting wild ideas and unsubstantiated claims. However, prior research suggests that labelling statements as conspiracy theories does not reduce people’s belief in them. In four studies, we probed this effect further, and tested the alternative hypothesis that the label “conspiracy theory” is a consequence rather than a cause of (dis)belief in conspiracy-related statements. Replicating prior research, Study 1 (N = 170) yielded no evidence that the label “conspiracy theory” affects belief in statements. In Study 2 (N = 199), we discovered that the less people believed in statements, the more they favoured labelling them as “conspiracy theories”. In Studies 3 and 4 (Ns = 150 and 151), we manipulated the relative believability of statements and found that participants preferred the label “conspiracy theory” for relatively less believable vs. more believable statements. The current research therefore supports the hypothesis that prior (dis)agreement with a statement affects use of the label “conspiracy theory” more than the other way around.

Keywords:
Conspiracy theory, Conspiracy theories, Stigmatised beliefs, Labelling

Data availability statement:
All data are available via the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/4mr9n/?view_only=5fb511abbbe84199b734fc59bc511142.

Abstract

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Is the label “conspiracy theory” a cause or a consequence of disbelief in alternative narratives?

In the lead-up to the 2020 US presidential election, and indeed after the ballots had been counted, many people including President Trump himself argued that the mail-in balloting process would be rigged in the opposition’s favour. Some dismissed this as a crazy and dangerous conspiracy theory, whereas others firmly rejected this label, saying that the “conspiracy facts” speak for themselves and that investigations needed to be pursued (Estes & Heilweil, 2020; Saul & Epstein, 2020). This is just one example of how controversial the term “conspiracy theory” can be, and the stigma that surrounds conspiracy belief (e.g., Lantian et al., 2018; Nera et al., 2020). However, the effects of labelling beliefs as conspiracy theories, still less people’s reasons for doing so, have been explored very little in psychology. In four studies, we examine the antecedents and consequences of the label “conspiracy theory” more closely, studying how the label affects people’s belief in statements, and conversely, how people’s belief in statements affects how they label them.

Research on the psychological factors associated with belief in conspiracy theories has grown rapidly in the past 15 years (see Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas et al. 2019; van Prooijen, 2018 for reviews). Some of the negative consequences of conspiracy theories such as political disengagement (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), vaccine hesitancy (Hornsey et al., 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), decreased trust (Meuer & Imhoff, 2021) and climate denial (Lewandowsky et al., 2013) are also becoming clearer. Research suggests that people are drawn toward conspiracy theories to satisfy fundamental psychological motives, including the motives to achieve certainty, security, and to maintain self-esteem (Douglas et al., 2017). Belief in conspiracy theories may also have been adaptive in an ancestral past, having evolved as a means of interpreting the actions of potentially hostile groups (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). However, little research has examined whether basic psychological motives

and goals are satisfied by conspiracy theories. Indeed, whilst some researchers argue that conspiracy theories may be empowering, encouraging people to take action against powerful and unjust elites (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), findings suggest that conspiracy theories can erode social cohesion and trust in government institutions, increasing apathy and disengagement (Einstein & Glick, 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; Kim & Kao, 2016).

Scholars in disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and political science have argued that the terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” come with significant negative connotations and convey an undesirable image of the believer (Harambam & Aupers, 2017). For example, deHaven and Smith (2013) argued that these terms characterise believers as irrational and imply that their claims should be dismissed without discussion. Similarly, Bratich (2008) argued that conspiracy believers are stereotyped as paranoid and their beliefs as meritless. Furthermore, scholars argue that these terms are often used explicitly to dismiss and discredit individuals who choose to air views that deviate from official explanations (deHaven & Smith, 2013). In particular, Husting and Orr (2007) argued that the term “conspiracy theory” trivialises people’s explanations for events regardless of the quality of those explanations. Coady (2018) further argued that the terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” are recruited specifically to narrow the range of acceptable opinion and restrict what is deemed acceptable to debate. When people use these terms, they therefore do their bit to enforce the orthodoxy (Coady, 2018).

Indeed, there is some psychological evidence that people perceive conspiracy theories to be stigmatised beliefs. Lantian et al. (2018) asked French Internet users to write a text that either supported or criticised conspiracy theories about the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris. These were also labelled “conspiracy theories” in the text of the experiment. Results revealed that participants who had been asked to write a statement supporting the conspiracy theories felt more fearful of social exclusion than those asked to criticise them. In a second

experiment participants were asked to either defend or criticise conspiracy theories, this time in front of an imaginary audience. Again, the study materials were also labelled as “conspiracy theories”. In the first experiment, people who supported (vs. criticised) the conspiracy theories were more fearful of social exclusion. In both studies, this effect was mediated by a fear of being evaluated negatively. Other findings suggest that this fear may be justified—conspiracy believers are often viewed as “gullible” and “crazy” compared to non-believers (Klein et al., 2015). It appears that people’s behaviour is also led by these fears—in an archival study, Wood and Douglas (2013) found that people airing non-mainstream views on news reports about the 2001 9/11 attacks in New York were reluctant to refer to their comments as “conspiracy theories” and instead preferred labels such as “conspiracy facts”. These people also resisted their views being labelled as “conspiracy theories” by other Internet users.

Taken together, these findings suggest that people perceive conspiracy theories, and also the explicit labelling of these beliefs as such, to be stigmatising, both socially and intellectually (see also Harambam & Aupers, 2017; Wood & Douglas, 2015). Therefore, one possible implication of these findings may be that labelling a statement as a conspiracy theory reduces its credibility, such that people will be less likely to believe it.

Wood (2016) put this hypothesis to the test in two experiments. In the first experiment, Wood presented both historically real conspiracies and speculative conspiracy theories to participants. For half of the participants, these statements were labelled as “ideas” and for the other half, they were labelled as “conspiracy theories”. Participants were asked to judge how likely they thought each statement was. Wood found no difference between conditions, either for the real conspiracies or speculative conspiracy theories. In the second experiment, participants read a mock news interview with the title “Conspiracy theories emerge in wake of Canadian election result”, or an alternative version where the words

“Conspiracy theories” were replaced with “Corruption allegations”. Again, there was no difference in mean likelihood judgments between conditions. Furthermore, in this second experiment participants were unaffected by the labelling manipulation regardless of whether they were dispositionally high or low in conspiracy ideation. In summary therefore, Wood found no evidence that belief in a statement is reduced by labelling it as a “conspiracy theory”.

How is it possible to reconcile Wood’s (2016) findings with research and theorising suggesting that people perceive conspiracy theories to be stigmatising (Lantian et al., 2018) and the term “conspiracy theory” to be discrediting (deHaven & Smith, 2013)? One possibility is that Wood’s findings are not robust; though Wood’s studies were well-conducted, they have not, to our knowledge, been independently replicated. A second possibility, acknowledged by Wood, is that people may recognise conspiracy narratives and mentally label them as such, even when the label has not already been applied to the narratives by their interlocutor (whether in social psychological experiments or in ecological settings). This possibility, which remains to be tested, implies that the label stalks and undermines conspiracy narratives, even when it is not mentioned explicitly.

A third possibility is that rather than being a *cause* of disbelief in a statement, using the term “conspiracy theory” may instead be a *consequence* of that disbelief. That is, people’s (dis)belief in a narrative may guide their choice of label, rather than the other way around. Husting and Orr (2007) provide examples across domains as diverse as sports and politics, of the use of the “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” labels by public figures who are trying to discredit a given narrative (Husting and Orr, 2007). Lantian et al. (2018) clearly show that people appreciate the stigma surrounding conspiracy narratives, and it is therefore plausible that they see the label itself as stigmatising as well. Thus, people may use the term “conspiracy theory” to express their scepticism and even opposition to such narratives.

Conversely, rejecting the term may be a way to position oneself as being open to, or even an adherent of, these narratives.

This analysis suggests that people are aware of the scepticism associated with the label “conspiracy theory”. Knowledge of this association may allow people to use or avoid the term to express their own view, just as they choose verbal labels with varying associations to express their attitudes to individuals, social groups, and media information (e.g., Carnaghi et al., 2008; Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008; Michael & Breaux, 2021). Thus, the use or avoidance of the term “conspiracy theory” may be an indicator of a communicator’s opinion, whether or not it has any immediate impact on their audience’s belief in conspiracy narratives. If this is the case, we would expect that prior (dis)belief in conspiracy-related statements would determine people’s use of the term “conspiracy theory” to describe them.

In the current research, we report four studies in which we examined the importance of the label “conspiracy theory” to people’s belief in a statement, and on the other hand how the extent to which belief in a statement affects people’s use of the label “conspiracy theory”. In Study 1, we sought to replicate and extend Wood’s (2016) investigation of the effects of labelling a statement as a conspiracy theory. In Study 2, we then examined the extent to which an individual’s belief in a statement is correlated with their own use (or rejection) of the label “conspiracy theory”. Finally, two experimental studies (Studies 3 and 4) examined how the believability of a statement determines use of the label “conspiracy theory” to describe it.

Study 1

Although Wood’s (2016) studies were well conducted, it is important to attempt to replicate them and attempt to understand why there was no evidence of a labelling effect. We also extended Wood’s (2016) paradigm by adding additional measures of the perceived

impact of labels. In the first of Wood’s (2016) two studies, he included a single item measure of how “likely” the narratives are, in the second, following Wood et al. (2012), he added measures of how plausible, interesting, convincing, coherent, and worth considering the newspaper article was, though he did not analyse the results of these items separately. In the present study, we included questions concerning the extent to which participants feel the statement should be taken seriously, the extent to which they find the statement controversial, and whether other people would perceive the statement as likely. We did so because it may be the case that although the label does not affect agreement, it does affect other evaluative perceptions of the statements.

For each participant, we randomly selected a subset of five statements from the Generic Scale of Conspiracy Beliefs (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013). The remainder of the procedure was identical to Wood (2016). Formally speaking, we tested the two-tailed hypothesis that the labelling the narratives as “conspiracy theories” as opposed to “ideas” has an effect on each of these measures.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and seventy US participants (62 women, 107 men, 1 rather not say, M_{age} = 33.67, SD = 11.63) were recruited from the crowdsourcing platform Prolific and were paid a small fee for their participation. Sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample had 80% power to detect an effect size of f = .22 (η^2 = .05) with an alpha value of $p < .05$. The study was a two-group (label: conspiracy theory/idea) between-participants design.

Materials and procedure

The study was run online using Qualtrics software. Participants were asked to read 10 statements in a random order. Five statements were from Study 1 in Wood (2016), such as “Government agencies have recruited journalists into a secret propaganda network in order to

influence the media”. Five were randomly allocated from the GCBS, such as “The power held by heads of state is second to that of small, unknown groups who really control world politics”. As in Wood’s (2016) study, participants were given the following instruction depending on the condition: “You will now be asked to read a list of conspiracy theories [ideas] about politics and history. Please read these conspiracy theories [ideas] and answer the questions that follow”.

After the instruction, participants answered seven questions on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). They were asked “Do you think people would take this conspiracy theory [idea] seriously?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .63$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .64$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .59$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .70$), “Do you think people would be ridiculed for believing this conspiracy theory [idea]?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .59$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .43$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .62$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .69$), “Do you think people would find this conspiracy theory [idea] controversial?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .63$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .57$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .72$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .71$), “Do you think people would dismiss this conspiracy theory [idea]?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .59$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .50$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .56$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .68$), “Do you think people would perceive this conspiracy theory [idea] to be likely?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .60$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .48$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .60$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .68$), “Do you think this conspiracy theory [idea] is likely?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .74$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .72$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .65$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .77$), and finally, as in Wood (2016), “To what extent do you agree with this conspiracy theory [idea]?” (conspiracy: $\alpha_{Wood} = .74$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .77$; idea: $\alpha_{Wood} = .78$, $\alpha_{GCBS} = .81$). Participants answered these questions after each statement, and there were therefore 70 questions in total. To check that participants understood and followed the instruction, we asked them to answer the question: “In this study, you read about various political and historical events. What were these named in the questions?” Participants chose from one of two options: “conspiracy theories” and “ideas”. At the conclusion of the study, participants were debriefed, thanked,

and paid.[1] All measures and manipulations have been disclosed for all studies reported in this paper, and no participants were excluded from analyses. Furthermore, data for all studies were collected prior to analysis. Data and materials from all studies reported in this paper can be found on the following link: https://osf.io/4mr9n/?view_only=5fb511abbbe84199b734fc59bc511142.

Results and discussion

For the statements from Wood (2016) and the GCBS we calculated mean values across each of the seven questions (Table 1). We analysed each scale separately since the conspiracy statements designed by Wood (2016) measure belief in specific conspiracy theories whereas the GCBS measures belief in more general notions of conspiracy (Brotherton et al., 2013). A multivariate ANOVA revealed that, with the exception of perceived likelihood of the conspiracy theory [idea] (using Wood’s (2016) statements, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = .02$), there were no significant differences across conditions. Statements were taken no more or less seriously, thought worthy of ridicule, thought to be controversial, likely to be dismissed, likely that others or the self believes, or agreed with, if they were called conspiracy theories or ideas (all other $p > .10$ and all other $\eta^2 < .02$, see Table 1). Of course, the one significant effect should be treated with caution given the number of statistical significance tests. Therefore, including a more extensive set of measures of belief in the conspiracy theories, we largely replicated and extended Wood’s (2016) findings showing no evidence that the label “conspiracy theory” affects the general believability of a statement. Of course, this cannot conclusively allow us to accept the null hypothesis, but there is nonetheless no evidence to accept the alternative hypothesis that labelling influences belief.

It is important to note that a significant number of the participants in the study ($N = 43$) failed the manipulation check. Once these participants were removed from the analysis,

[1] The study also contained measures of attitudes toward women and men as part of another investigation.

there were no differences across conditions for any of the questions. It is particularly worth noting that only one person in the “conspiracy theory” condition chose the incorrect label for the statements, whereas 42 participants in the “idea” condition did so. This difference was significant, χ^2 (1, N = 170) = 52.33, p < .001, Cramer's V = .56. Wood (2016) did not report a manipulation check. This discrepancy supports Wood’s (2016) speculation that “conspiracy theory” may be people’s default label for these types of statements. However, our results also indicate that this mental insertion of the label “conspiracy theory” does not explain why there is no evidence that the actual use of the label by communicators affects audiences. If it did, we would expect differences to emerge between the labelling conditions once participants in the “idea” condition who wrongly recalled the label “conspiracy theory” were removed. In contrast, the single significant effect was actually rendered non-significant.

This set of results corroborates Wood’s (2016) results and boosts confidence in his conclusion that there may be no detectable effect of the label “conspiracy theory” on people’s willingness to accept conspiracy narratives. This suggests that people’s belief that the label has the power to discredit these narratives may be misplaced. In the remaining studies, we turn our attention to the second hypothesis—that the label is used by communicators who are sceptical of conspiracy narratives. There is strong evidence that public figures do use the label when they wish to discredit conspiracy narratives (e.g., Husting and Orr, 2007), which suggests that lay people understand, at least tacitly, that they too can use the label to express scepticism. Thus, in Studies 2-4, we examined, for the first time, the antecedents of people’s use of the label “conspiracy theory”. Support for our predictions would suggest that using the label is indeed a consequence, rather than a cause, of disbelief in conspiracy narratives. An important first step in approaching this question was to examine how people’s own belief in a statement correlates with their use of the label “conspiracy theory” (Study 2). A second step

was to determine whether participants were more likely to attach the label to narratives that were experimentally manipulated to be less (vs. more) plausible (Studies 3 and 4).

Study 2

We examined the relationship between a person’s own belief in a statement and the extent to which they would use the term “conspiracy theory” to describe it. Participants were presented with a list of statements in a similar way to Study 1, and were asked to rate the extent to which they would call it a “conspiracy theory”. As a further measure we also asked participants to rate the extent to which they would label a believer in each statement as a “conspiracy theorist”. If (dis)belief in a statement predicts use of the label, we would expect participants’ likelihood of using the label (and also labelling believers as conspiracy theorists) to be negatively associated with their own personal belief in the statement.

Participants and design

One hundred and ninety nine participants (164 female, 33 male, 2 rather not say, M_{age} = 21.32, SD = 6.90) were recruited from an undergraduate psychology research participation pool at a British university. Sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample had 80% power to detect a correlation of r = .14 (p < .05, two-tailed). Participants’ agreement with the statements was the predictor variable and judgements of the statements (as conspiracy theories) and judgements of believers (as conspiracy theorists) were the criterion variables.

Materials and procedure

The study was run online using Qualtrics software. Participants were presented with the GCBS as in Study 1, and also a seven-statement Conspiracy Belief Scale (CBS) used by Douglas et al. (2016; e.g., “The 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by the US government”). For each statement, participants were asked “To what extent do you think this statement is a conspiracy theory?” (α_{GCBS} = .93, α_{CBS} = .91) , “To what extent do you think a person who believes this statement is a conspiracy theorist?” (α_{GCBS} = .93, α_{CBS} = .91), and “To what

extent do you agree with this statement?” (α_{GCBS} = .92, α_{CBS} = .84) (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). At the completion of the study, participants were debriefed, thanked, and were rewarded with course credits.

Results and discussion

We analysed each scale separately since the CBS measures belief in specific conspiracy theories whereas the GCBS measures belief in more general notions of conspiracy (Brotherton et al., 2013). For both scales, ratings of statements as conspiracy theories and ratings of believers as conspiracy theorists were significantly and positively correlated, $r_{GCBS}(197) = .81$, $p < .001$, $r_{CBS}(197) = .81$, $p < .001$. For the GCBS, ratings of the statements as conspiracy theories were negatively correlated with agreement, , $r(197) = -.17$, $p = .015$, but ratings of believers as conspiracy theorists were not, $r(197) = -.11$, $p = .111$. For the CBS, ratings of the statements as conspiracy theories and believers as conspiracy theorists were both negatively correlated with agreement, $r(197) = -.22$, $p = .002$ and $r(197) = -.17$, $p = .020$ respectively.

These findings suggest that a person’s prior belief in a statement being true may determine whether or not they choose to label it as a conspiracy theory. Specifically, while Study 1 showed no causal effect of the label on agreement with the statements, the present study revealed that agreement with the statements was correlated negatively with use of the label. Specifically, the less people believed the statements to be true, the more they were likely to call them conspiracy theories. These findings are therefore in favour of the alternative hypothesis that the label “conspiracy theory” may be a consequence rather than a cause of (dis)belief in a statement.

Correlational study designs cannot confirm the direction of causality, however. Therefore, in the final two studies we examined the effect of belief on labelling using an experimental design. In these studies, we used statements’ plausibility as a proxy for their

believability. Previous research (Wood et al., 2012) has established that agreement with, and perceived plausibility of a statement are strongly correlated. It is difficult to manipulate a person’s belief in a statement directly, but it is less complicated to compare statements that differ in their plausibility. In these studies, participants were presented with both relatively plausible and implausible statements in a within-participants design (Study 3), or either relatively plausible or implausible statements in a between-participants design (Study 4). Participants rated the extent to which they would choose the label “conspiracy theory” to describe each statement, and whether they would call believers “conspiracy theorists”.

Study 3

Participants were presented with a set of paired statements that had been chosen to be relatively plausible or implausible. They were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived each statement to be a conspiracy theory, and the extent to which they would call believers “conspiracy theorists”. They were also asked to indicate whether or not they agreed with the statements as a manipulation check. We hypothesised that relatively implausible (vs. plausible) statements would be more likely to be labelled as conspiracy theories, and that believers would be rated as more likely to be conspiracy theorists.

Participants and design

One hundred and fifty US participants (84 female, 65 male and 1 transgender, M_{age} = 35.19, SD = 12.31) were recruited from Prolific and were paid a small fee. Sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample had 80% power to detect an effect size of f = .05 (η^2 = .001) with an alpha value of $p < .05$, assuming a high correlation (.85)[2] between the repeated measures. The study was a one-way (plausibility of conspiracy theory: relatively plausible/implausible) within-participants design.

[2] The repeated measures correlations for each DV were as follows: agreement .83, plausibility .82, familiarity .81.

Materials and procedure

The study was run online using Qualtrics software. Participants were presented with 10 pairs of conspiracy statements. One of the statements was chosen to be relatively more plausible (e.g., “The US government deliberately caused the 9/11 attacks”) than the other (e.g., “The US government deliberately caused the 2004 Asian tsunami”). Participants rated all statements’ plausibility and for all pairs with the exception of one, the relatively plausible statement was rated significantly more plausible than the relatively implausible statement (see Table 2).

After reading each statement, participants were asked two questions which were averaged across the 10 statements: “To what extent do you think this statement is a conspiracy theory?” ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .79, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.89), “To what extent do you think a person who believes this statement is a conspiracy theorist?” ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .83, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.90). As a manipulation check, they were asked “To what extent do you agree with this statement?” ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .84, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.86). Finally, to control for different levels of familiarity we asked participants “Is this statement familiar to you?”. All responses were on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).[3] At the conclusion of the study, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

Results and discussion

Mean ratings of statements as conspiracy theories, believers as conspiracy theorists, and participants’ agreement with the statements, are presented in Table 3. We conducted one-way repeated measures ANOVAs (plausibility of conspiracy theory: relatively plausible/implausible) for agreement, ratings of statements as conspiracy theories, and ratings of believers as conspiracy theorists. We included the familiarity ratings of plausible and

[3] We also included a single-item measure of conspiracy beliefs (Lantian et al., 2017) as part of a different investigation.

implausible statements as covariates[4]. Participants were less likely to agree with relatively implausible vs. plausible statements, $F(1,147) = 30.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$, confirming that the experiment successfully manipulated statements’ believability. Next, participants were more likely to rate relatively implausible vs. plausible statements as conspiracy theories, $F(1,147) = 18.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Finally, participants also rated people who believe relatively implausible statements as more likely to be conspiracy theorists than believers of relatively plausible statements, $F(1,147) = 17.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$.

These findings further support our hypothesis that belief in a statement affects whether or not people will use the label “conspiracy theory”. By confirming this causal relationship in an experimental design, we can conclude that people are more likely to use the labels “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” when they do not believe a statement versus when they do believe it. One limitation of this study, however, is that the plausibility manipulation was run within-participants. Despite the high statistical power in the study, the relative difference in plausibility of the statements may have been obvious to participants and therefore demand characteristics cannot be ruled out. In the final study, we therefore aimed to replicate the findings of Study 3 in a between-participants design.

Study 4

Participants were asked to read a series of relatively implausible (vs. plausible) statements, to rate the extent to which they would use the term “conspiracy theory” to describe the statements, and the extent to which they would call those who agreed with the statements “conspiracy theorists”. Participants were also asked to rate their own agreement with the statements as a manipulation check. The hypotheses were the same as for Study 3.

[4] All ANOVA results were significant when we did not include familiarity as a covariate.

Participants and design

One hundred and fifty one US participants (76 female, 73 male and 2 other, M_{age} = 35.38, SD = 11.06) were recruited from Prolific and were paid a small fee. Sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample had 80% power to detect an effect size of f = .23 (η^2 = .05) with an alpha value of $p < .05$. The design was a two-group between-participants design (conspiracy theory: relatively plausible/implausible).

Materials and procedure

The study was run online using Qualtrics software. For the stimuli, we selected four pairs of statements from Study 3. The pairs were selected to provide stimuli with the largest differences on plausibility but matched as closely as possible on familiarity[5] from the results of Study 3. These were as follows (relatively plausible statements appear first):

1. The government uses [subliminal messages on TV] [radio waves and "chemtrails"] to influence the public.
2. Pharmaceutical companies [conduct risky research that can harm the public] [deliberately spread diseases amongst the public].
3. Governments [hide the results of experiments involving new technologies] [routinely carry out experiments involving new technologies on people without their knowledge].
4. Malaysia flight MH370 was [hijacked by North Korea] [consumed by a black hole], a fact known but suppressed by the Malaysian government.

Following each statement, we asked participants "To what extent do you think this statement is a conspiracy theory?" ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .49, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.73), "To what extent do you think a person who believes this statement is a conspiracy theorist?" ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .68, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.76).

[5] Plausibility and familiarity ratings from Study 3 were as follows, with values for relatively plausible statements appearing first: Pair 1—plausibility, 2.95, 1.96 familiarity 3.24, 3.34, Pair 2—plausibility 3.60, 2.55, familiarity 2.89, 2.60, Pair 3—plausibility 3.97, 3.25, familiarity 3.23, 3.02, Pair 4—plausibility 2.75, 1.40, familiarity 1.55, 1.41.

We also asked “To what extent do you agree with this statement?” ($\alpha_{plausible}$ = .65, $\alpha_{implausible}$ =.58) as a manipulation check.[6] All ratings were on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Presentation of the statements was counterbalanced. At the conclusion of the study, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

Results and discussion

Mean ratings of statements as conspiracy theories, believers as conspiracy theorists, and participants’ agreement with the statements, are presented in Table 4. We conducted between-groups ANOVAs (conspiracy theory: relatively plausible/implausible) for agreement, ratings of statements as conspiracy theories, and ratings of believers as conspiracy theorists. Participants were less likely to agree with relatively implausible vs. plausible statements, $F(1,149) = 48.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$, confirming the success of the believability manipulation. Supporting the hypotheses, participants were more likely to rate relatively implausible vs. plausible statements as conspiracy theories, $F(1,149) = 28.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$. They also rated people who believe relatively implausible statements as more likely to be conspiracy theorists than believers of relatively plausible statements, $F(1,149) = 45.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$. Because of low reliabilities when data were analysed across the four pairs of statements, we analysed each pair separately (see Table 5). Comparisons between plausible and implausible statements across ratings were significant in all cases but one.

The findings of this study support our hypotheses in a between-participants experiment, thus ruling out the possibility of demand characteristics. They provide further evidence that belief in statements determines the extent to which people choose the labels “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” to describe them.

[6] Participants also completed Lantian et al.’s (2017) single-item conspiracy belief measure as part of another investigation.

General discussion

Contrary to research and theorising suggesting that belief in conspiracy theories is widely stigmatised (e.g., Lantian et al., 2019), and that the label itself plays a role in this stigmatisation (Coady, 2018, deHaven & Smith, 2013; Harambam & Aupers, 2017), Study 1 revealed, like Wood’s (2016) earlier studies, no evidence that labelling narratives as “conspiracy theories” affects people’s agreement with them. Though Study 1’s results seem to call into question the popular and academic wisdom about the “conspiracy theory” label, our final three studies returned unambiguous evidence that the label is preferred by sceptical communicators. We found that this was the case for both general and specific conspiracy theories, underscoring the generalisability of our conclusion.

Taken together, the present results therefore suggest that the label “conspiracy theory” is likely to be a consequence rather than a cause of (dis)belief in conspiracy narratives. The more a person believes a narrative, the more likely they are to reject the label “conspiracy theory” to describe it. Conversely, the more a person disbelieves a narrative, the more likely they are to choose the label “conspiracy theory”. The intuition that there is something stigmatising about the label—and potentially that it has the power to discredit conspiracy narratives—may be sustained by participants’ recognition that it is used by speakers who disagree, rather than agree, with these narratives.

In light of the present results, further work is needed to examine why the label appears to have such little immediate power to encourage audiences to regard conspiracy theories with scepticism. Although there is no direct evidence to support this possibility, the current prevalence of the label may mean that is so culturally and cognitively salient that audiences may apply it for themselves, even when a communicator does not (Wood, 2016). A related possibility is that the stigma may be attached to conspiracy narratives themselves (Lantian et al., 2018), meaning that the label is not needed, and serves only as a barometer, and not a

driver, of that stigma. A third possibility is that audiences, gleaning from experience that the label is used by sceptics, therefore regard the communicator as a sceptic, whose beliefs and goals may therefore be biased (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Since the resistance-to-persuasion literature suggests that being ‘forewarned is forearmed’, this common understanding of how and when the label is used may ironically reduce its influence (Wood & Quinn, 2003).

Further work is also required to examine whether there are circumstances or mechanisms, not captured by Wood’s (2016) studies or our first study here, in which the label does lead to scepticism or stigmatisation of conspiracy narratives. For example, when a known, ingroup, highly credible source pointedly uses (or rejects) the label, our results suggest that audiences may understand their beliefs and goals, and be influenced accordingly. More generally, simple single-test experimental designs may not allow us to capture the effects of widespread use of the label “conspiracy theory”. Labels like “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” may appear to have little immediate impact but may shape attitudes to conspiracy narratives in the longer term by functioning to build coalitions of believers and unbelievers, and imputing rationality and irrationality to different sides of social debates (Coady, 2018; Husting & Orr, 2007). We note however, that short-term experimental designs are able to capture the impacts of other terms like “fake news”, which is preferred, like “conspiracy theory”, by sceptical describers (Michael & Breaux, 2021), but which, perhaps unlike “conspiracy theory”, has an immediate impact on evaluations of truth value (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Beyond the effect of the label “conspiracy theory”, the present findings also highlight important new directions for research into why people use it. Our findings suggest that people certainly do favour the terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” for ideas that they do not themselves endorse, which is an issue that is important to consider when interpreting people’s statements about social and political phenomena. That said, the present

studies do not show what, if anything, motivates people to use these terms. Coady (2018) argued that people use the terms to narrow the range of what is acceptable to discuss and debate. Previous work establishes that people’s labelling choices can reflect either the effect of their beliefs on their interpretation of a situation, or their conscious effort to shape an audience’s interpretation (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). The present findings show that describers’ disagreement with narratives leads them to prefer the label “conspiracy theory”, but does not rule out the possibility that in these studies, or in other contexts, people may prefer the label because they want to make their audiences sceptical.

Furthermore, whilst the present research has established that (dis)belief in a statement predicts the extent to which people endorse the labels, it cannot tell us exactly why believers reject the labels, and this is another important avenue for future research. Some insight into this issue is provided by Nera et al. (2020) who demonstrated that generic conspiracist beliefs (Brotherton et al., 2013) were associated with the belief in a “meta conspiracy”, or the idea that people criticise conspiracy theories and deliberately use the label “conspiracy theory” to hide things or delegitimise debate. It may therefore be that people reject the term “conspiracy theory” not only because they believe the information but also because they are deeply suspicious of the motives underlying the use of such a controversial label. Although this conclusion is beyond the scope of the present research, it is an important question for future investigation and relates back to previous theorising that people may actively recruit (or in this case reject) the terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” in a more deliberate manner.

Another limitation of the current research is that the samples tested were either from the crowdsourcing platform Prolific or from a student participant pool. The samples are therefore relatively homogenous, not nationally representative, and strong conspiracy believers are typically not well represented in such samples. The current studies can therefore

tell us how moderate (dis)believers react to, and potentially use, the labels “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” but not about how strong believers in conspiracy material do so. Gaining access to samples of participants who strongly endorse conspiracy theories is difficult, and this creates a problem in the literature more generally, but nevertheless, important information is missing without the perspective of these participants (Douglas et al., 2019). Future research should therefore endeavour to test the current ideas on samples which also include strong believers in conspiracy theories.

Another issue raised by the current research is how category labels influence judgements (and vice versa) in other domains. There is a long tradition of research suggesting that category labels influence judgements of people. For example, Levin and Banaji (2006) demonstrated that categorizing a person’s face as “Black” or “White” distorted perceptions of the lightness of the skin tone of a target. In general, research suggests that when individuals are categorized as members of a particular group, they are judged to have particular stereotypic traits (e.g., Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Furthermore, research suggests that the use of category labels is affected by prior attitudes. For example, individuals high in implicit prejudice are more likely to classify a racially ambiguous face bearing an angry expression as Black compared to people low in implicit prejudice (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004; Hutchings & Haddock, 2008). There is therefore evidence from this particular domain that both processes can occur—that is, category labels can influence judgements, and prior judgements can influence the use of category labels. However, to our knowledge, research has not yet attempted to tease these two processes apart to determine which is most prominent in social judgement. The current research demonstrates that for the category label “conspiracy theory” at least, prior opinion seems to affect use of the label more so than the other way around.

Finally, another important issue for future research is to consider how various other factors associated with belief in conspiracy theories influence people’s reaction to the labels. For example, conspiracy theorising is predicted by political extremism (e.g., van Prooijen et al., 2015), and a variety of other social and demographic factors such as socioeconomic status and education level (Douglas et al., 2017). Such factors could also therefore play a crucial role in the acceptance or rejection of the labels “conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy theorist” and warrant further research.

Conclusion

In summary, the current findings shed new light on what the term “conspiracy theory” means to people. Rather than determining whether or not people believe information, we have found that belief in the information is likely to determine whether or not the term “conspiracy theory” is deemed appropriate in the first place.

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Table 1.

Means (SDs) and significance tests (*df* = 1,169) for each question as a function of instruction (conspiracy theory/idea). Wood (2016) statements and GCBS (data from Study 1).

	Conspiracy (*N* = 85)	Idea (*N* = 85)	*F*	*p*	η^2
Wood (take seriously)	3.56 (0.74)	3.50 (0.72)	0.32	.572	.00
Wood (ridicule)	2.83 (0.72)	2.90 (0.73)	0.40	.527	.00
Wood (controversial)	3.65 (0.73)	3.74 (0.83)	0.56	.456	.00
Wood (dismiss)	2.93 (0.70)	2.92 (0.69)	0.01	.912	.00
Wood (likely others believe)	3.35 (0.68)	3.33 (0.69)	0.06	.805	.00
Wood (likely self believes)	3.19 (0.96)	3.47 (0.80)	4.19	.042	.02
Wood (agree)	2.96 (0.99)	2.92 (1.04)	0.04	.844	.00
GCBS (take seriously)	2.95 (0.86)	2.91 (0.91)	0.09	.768	.00
GCBS (ridicule)	4.40 (0.69)	5.59 (0.83)	2.59	.109	.02
GCBS (controversial)	3.74 (0.69)	3.89 (0.80)	1.78	.184	.01
GCBS (dismiss)	3.46 (0.68)	3.36 (0.82)	0.81	.370	.01
GCBS (likely others believe)	2.83 (0.69)	2.73 (0.79)	0.75	.389	.00
GCBS (likely self believes)	2.52 (0.96)	2.75 (0.97)	2.42	.121	.01
GCBS (agree)	2.41 (0.99)	2.47 (0.97)	0.14	.708	.00

Table 2.

Differences in plausibility ratings (*df* = 149) between plausible and implausible statements (data from Study 3).

Pair	Statements (relatively plausible appears first)	Mean (SD)	*t*	*p*	*d*
(1)	The US government deliberately caused the 9/11 attacks	2.41 (1.42)	9.43	< .001	1.24
	The US government deliberately caused the 2004 Asian Tsunami	1.45 (0.89)			
(2)	Oil companies mutually agree to increase fuel prices	4.04 (1.04)	13.70	< .001	1.41
	Oil companies decide who will be the president of the USA	2.47 (1.22)			
(3)	The government uses subliminal messages on TV to influence the public	2.95 (1.31)	9.09	< .001	1.34
	The government uses radio waves and “chemtrails” to influence the public	1.96 (1.21)			
(4)	Politicians work together to cover up evidence of fraud within their ranks	4.31 (0.93)	15.44	< .001	1.33
	Politicians are involved in secret pedophile rings and work together to keep this a secret	2.63 (1.29)			
(5)	Pharmaceutical companies conduct risky research that can harm the public	3.60 (1.08)	11.26	< .001	1.15
	Pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread diseases amongst the public	2.55 (1.25)			
(6)	Governments hide the results of experiments involving new technologies	3.97 (1.11)	6.67	< .001	1.30
	Governments routinely carry out experiments involving new technologies on people without their knowledge	3.26 (1.31)			
(7)	Governments often known about acts of terrorism before they happen, and do little to prevent them	2.99 (1.27)	-4.08	< .001	1.18
	Governments permit or perpetrate acts of terrorism, disguising their involvement involvement	3.39 (1.27)			
(8)	Malaysia flight MH370 was hijacked by North Korea, a fact known but suppressed by the Malaysian government	2.75 (1.21)	14.24	< .001	1.16
	Malaysia flight MH370 was consumed by a black hole, a fact known but suppressed by the Malaysian government	1.40 (0.78)			
(9)	The government is dishonest about the existence of unhealthy substances in drinking water	3.63 (1.17)	11.99	< .001	1.38
	The government puts fluoride in drinking water as a way to dispose of industrial waste	2.28 (1.26)			
(10)	NASA often organizes secret space missions	2.92 (1.34)	7.20	< .001	1.40
	NASA faked the Apollo moon landings	2.10 (1.25)			

Table 3.

Mean ratings (and SDs) of labelling statements as conspiracy theories, believers as conspiracy theorists, and agreement (data from Study 3).

	Plausible	Implausible
Theory	3.34 (0.73)	4.10 (0.86)
Theorist	3.29 (0.76)	4.07 (0.86)
Agreement	2.76 (0.77)	1.87 (0.72)

Table 4.

Mean ratings (and SDs) of labelling statements as conspiracy theories, believers as conspiracy theorists, and agreement (data from Study 4).

	Plausible (N = 74)	Implausible (N = 77)
Theory	3.40 (0.77)	4.13 (0.88)
Theorist	3.26 (0.90)	4.19 (0.78)
Agreement	2.68 (0.81)	1.82 (0.69)

Table 5.

Analyses for each pair of conspiracy statements separately (data from Study 4).

Rating	Pair	Mean (SD) plausible	Mean (SD) implausible	*F*	*p*	η^2
Conspiracy theory	1	3.92 (1.37)	4.31 (1.25)	3.39	.068	.02
	2	2.81 (1.25)	4.17 (1.17)	47.53	<.001	.24
	3	2.82 (1.11)	3.43 (1.30)	9.35	.003	.06
	4	4.05 (1.18)	4.60 (0.95)	9.75	.002	.06
Conspiracy theorist	1	3.89 (1.36)	4.40 (1.05)	6.68	.011	.04
	2	2.56 (1.23)	4.32 (1.01)	91.83	< .001	.38
	3	2.81 (1.67)	3.35 (1.26)	7.42	.007	.05
	4	3.76 (1.28)	4.66 (0.70)	29.40	.001	.17
Agreement	1	2.18 (1.42)	1.51 (1.02)	11.05	.001	.07
	2	3.11 (1.14)	1.77 (1.17)	50.89	.001	.26
	3	3.46 (1.10)	2.82 (1.30)	10.71	.001	.07
	4	1.97 (0.95)	1.19 (0.54)	38.68	.001	.21