ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES
ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
2025 Volume 12 Number 4 (June)
http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

Publisher
http://jssidoi.org/esc/home

THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF THE CONSPIRATORIAL NARRATIVE ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

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Received 15 January 2025; accepted 6 April 2025; published 30 June 2025

Abstract: Conspiracy theories have received considerable attention in recent times. Some people consider them the best possible explanations for certain significant social events and believe them more than official reports or explanations. This article, therefore, examines the factors influencing the acceptance of conspiracy theories, paying particular attention to the conspiratorial narrative and the influence of information ambiguity on their acceptance. Based on theoretical foundations, it analyses the relationship between conspiratorial thinking, emotional factors and distrust of official sources, authorities and institutions. The results suggest that information ambiguity is not the primary factor influencing belief in conspiracy theories, but rather the personality predispositions of individuals, their perceived threat and the degree of scepticism towards official explanations of certain events. Conspiracy thinking appears to be a stable cognitive schema resistant to rational counterarguments and often supported by emotional and social factors.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; conspiratorial narrative; conspiratorial thinking

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Ivančík, R., Nečas, P. 2025. The role and influence of the conspiratorial narrative on the acceptance of conspiracy theories. *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues*, 12(4), 158-170. http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

JEL Classifications: F52, F59, H56, H59, K22

Additional disciplines: Security

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are currently receiving considerable attention. Some people consider them to be the best possible explanation for specific events and believe them more than official reports or explanations. Belief in conspiracy theories has been shown to have a negative relationship with mental health and is associated with impaired well-being (Chen et al., 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2021a). It is also believed to disrupt interpersonal relationships (van Prooijen et al., 2021b). At the same time, it is quite often associated with attitudes that can have more serious health consequences. Specifically, this concerns the rejection of prevention or treatment based on

* *This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract no. APVV-20-0334 and also was prepared within the framework of VEGA Project no. 1/0578/23 "Cyber-social security threats in contemporary world: case study on threats on disinformation and emerging security threats in the societal context".*

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
2025 Volume 12 Number 4 (June)
http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

scientific medicine (especially vaccination and chemotherapy) (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Bertin et al., 2020) and a greater reliance on alternative medicine (Soveri et al., 2021). Belief in conspiracy theories is further associated with distrust in official institutions, science, democratic processes, and also with trivializing serious events or radicalizing attitudes (Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2013; Bergmann, 2018). It is assumed that people may be more likely to accept conspiracy theories in ambiguous situations when they do not have clear, unambiguous clues to explain a significant event or when they are plagued by doubts (Douglas et al., 2017). Following this, this article aims to examine the role and influence of conspiratorial narratives on conspiratorial thinking.

2. The problem of defining the concept of conspiracy theory

The problem of researching conspiracy theories begins with the definition of the concept. The term conspiracy theory was introduced into scientific discourse by K. R. Popper (2006) when he wrote about the "conspiracy theory of society". Although a conspiracy is a hypothetical explanation, it is not a theory in the modern scientific sense. It is not a solidly based, consistent, organized, logically elaborated system of concepts, definitions and empirically verified hypotheses based on scientific methodology, which allows predictions of future phenomena. As we will see, they are not always logically coherent explanatory systems. Moreover, conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable. Although they provide simple explanations of phenomena (a group of powerful people is behind everything), many of them suffer from logical inconsistency. This makes it very difficult to empirically verify some conspiracy theories. For others, it is entirely impossible. They, therefore, become more of an object of belief and are essentially pseudo-theories. The definition is complicated because conspiracy theories are complex and extensive. They include theories from the completely unbelievable (e.g. about a flat Earth or reptilian domination), through the rather improbable (about September 11 as part of a US government plan), to the proven (e.g. conspiracy theories before the truth about Watergate was revealed). According to Uscinski (2019), if a conspiracy is exposed and the relevant authorities confirm that it actually occurred, then the explanation for this conspiracy ceases to be a conspiracy theory and becomes a revealed conspiracy. The Watergate affair or the Snowden case are, therefore, not de facto conspiracy theories. In other words, without secrecy, it is no longer a conspiracy theory (Bergmann, 2018). They also include more or less harmless theories (e.g. about the alleged staged deaths of celebrities such as Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson or Princess Diana, who finally wanted to live peacefully without annoying paparazzi and intrusive fans and therefore allegedly faked their deaths), then theories with serious consequences (e.g. that vaccinations cause autism or that vaccines contain nanoparticles with which governments will track us), and even theories that are classified as crimes in some countries (e.g. theories about Holocaust denial). Some conspiracy theories imitate scientific rhetoric (e.g. about so-called chemtrails, a flat Earth or that vaccinations cause autism) and others are related to esoteric, religious or medical topics (Satanists controlling the world, vaccinations cause autism). As can be seen from the examples given, individual characteristics sometimes overlap in specific conspiracy theories.

So, how do we define this concept? Conspiracy theories are most generally defined as a hypothetical explanation that considers a conspiracy to be the cause of a certain event (Dentith, 2014). So, we must first define a conspiracy so we do not go around in circles. A conspiracy is a secret arrangement between two or more actors, usually with bad intentions and illegal or otherwise dishonest purposes, such as great personal, power, political or economic gain (Uscinski, 2019). A conspiracy theory explains past, current or future events or circumstances that cite a small group of influential conspirators acting secretly for their benefit and against the common good (Uscinski, 2019).

This definition is used quite often in several studies. However, upon critical examination, we find that it also applies to potentially plausible conspiracy theories. For example, these are theories in which investigative journalists suspect politicians or other influential people of secret, self-serving and dishonest intentions, which have not yet been proven (for more details, see, e.g. Watergate). Should these real conspiracy theories also be the

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
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subject of research? Even though this question is rather marginal in the current professional literature, we personally consider it important. And this is because it defines the subject of study. Here, we encounter the issue of definition or, rather, demarcation. The whole situation is further complicated by the fact that the phrase conspiracy theory evokes negative (sometimes even derogatory) connotations. They are usually associated with adjectives such as naive, irrational, stupid, meaningless, absurd, paranoid, etc. Acceptance or advocacy of conspiracy theories is generally perceived as stigmatizing (Harambam, 2020). Some, especially older works, write about conspiracy theories in this vein (although not all of them are primarily offensive and normative) (e.g. Popper, 2006; Hofstadter, 1964; Moscovici, 1987).

Van Prooijen (2018) lists five necessary criteria that conspiracy theories must meet to be the centre of attention. Every conspiracy theory has a scenario (pattern) according to which everything was planned in advance. Behind everything is a sophisticated plan created and executed by a certain powerful actor (agency). The event that the conspiracy theory explains is the result of a deliberate grouping (coalitions) of several actors. If only one actor acted alone, it would no longer be a conspiracy. A coalition of several actors was formed to achieve a malicious (hostile) goal that was detrimental to society. The fact that the secret association of such actors has not been revealed so far is a consequence of continued secrecy. The basic point for the definition of conspiracy theories in research is, therefore, the maliciousness of the intention.

However, the five features mentioned do not completely solve the problem of demarcating conspiracy theories. Therefore, van Prooijen (2018) adds that the conspiracy theories that are the subject of the study proclaim a long-lasting, never-ending secrecy. We all live in constant deception and illusion and are manipulated so that we never learn the truth. This point is also called crucial by other authors (Popper, 2006; Byford, 2011; Uscinski, 2019). Real conspiracies tend to be quickly revealed. According to the mentioned authors, there is something that could be called an inverse proportion to the number of people involved, the length of time and the maliciousness of the plan. The larger the number of people involved in the conspiracy, the more malicious and harmful its alleged impact on society, and the longer the postulated conspiracy is supposed to last, the smaller the chance of its successful fulfilment. And therefore, belief in these conspiracy theories should become a subject of scientific research.

For a more precise definition, some authors (Barkun, 2003; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley, et al. 2017) propose adding one more criterion, namely that conspiracy theories express an a priori protest/unofficial position/belief against the official explanation of an event and official institutions. Conspiracy theories appear as an alternative explanation, drawing information from alternative (not always verified or verifiable) sources. Moreover, they express distrust not only in official state authorities, scientific authorities, or mainstream media. They do not trust any official institutions. This criterion largely solves the above-mentioned dilemma of demarcation. Investigative journalists, even if they do not believe the official statement of politicians, do not show a priori distrust of the entire government apparatus (mainstream media, scientists, all politicians). They only exceptionally claim that we will never know the truth because the whole government apparatus is collectively involved in this secrecy. Without this criterion, for example, the official explanation for the events of September 11, 2001, could be a conspiracy theory. A secret group of actors devised and executed a secret, malicious plan with a political purpose to carry out a terrorist attack on the USA (Dentith, 2014, Bashmen, 2011).

Another partial solution is a rough systematization of individual conspiracy theories. The above-mentioned list of several conspiracy theories points to its need. For example, Räikkä (2009) brings a suitable categorization criterion: political versus non-political conspiracy theories. While political conspiracy theories express themselves on societal topics and concern power-political-economic issues, examples of non-political conspiracy theories are, for example, those about the alleged faked death of some famous personalities. Political conspiracy theories are then further divided into local and global, according to the geopolitical impact and seriousness of the event that the conspiracy theory wants to explain (i.e., whether it explains a local or global conspiracy or whether the causes

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
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http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

and consequences of the event caused by the conspiracy were local or global). He defines the total theory as a third case of political conspiracy theory. In addition to the geopolitical scope, this also adds a historical scope. The total conspiracy theory explains almost the entire course of world history up to the present as a secret political conspiracy of a group of powerful people (Räikkä, 2009). These are "supertheories" that combine several individual conspiracy theories into one large, compact conspiracy theory (Barkun, 2003). Total theories include, for example, conspiracy theories about the Jews, the New World Order, the Bilderberger group or the Illuminati. Political conspiracy theories are the main interest of scientific research, and of these, especially global and total conspiracy theories. Most of the "plausible" conspiracy theories (theories of investigative journalists) are local or global conspiracy theories, never total ones.

3. Conspiracy theories and conspiracy narrative

What fundamentally distinguishes "plausible" conspiracy theories from the conspiratorial subculture that is the subject of research is the specific conspiratorial narrative. It is understood as the rhetorical and argumentative style that is applied in conspiracy theories. It is manifested in its full form in total conspiracy theories (Barkun, 2003; Byford, 2011).

According to Barkun (2003), the conspiratorial narrative is based on three axioms: (a) nothing happens by chance; (b) nothing is as it seems; (c) everything is connected to everything else. The central motif of conspiratorial narratives is secrecy and distrust of authority (Wood et al., 2012; Brotherton et al., 2013). A typical feature of conspiratorial narratives is that they never work with chance. Behind everything is a small, influential group (the elite) that "pulls the strings", and nothing happens without their will (Barkun, 2003). This top-secret elite stands at the top of a large pyramid controlling all spheres of human society: world events, governments and economies of individual states, the global market, religion, education, the army, the media, secret services and organized crime (Bergmann, 2018, Goertzel, 2010). Moreover, because of its power, it also has control over human lives. Because it is always a group of individuals with almost inexhaustible wealth and access to all (scientific and occult) knowledge, they have the means to implement their grand plan (world domination) and their partial goals and control everything that happens in the world. The elite implements its will with the help of a huge machinery of scientists, politicians, mainstream journalists, but also schools and official institutions. It can use not only science, scientific inventions and modern technologies but also paranormal techniques (Byford, 2011).

In this tendency to attribute all world events to a group of powerful individuals, we can detect a fundamental attribution error (Clarke, 2002) and anthropomorphism (Imhoff & Bruder 2014; Douglas et al., 2015). The conspiratorial narrative does not allow for the possibility that significant adverse events can be the product of natural or social forces or the work (result) of simple chance. It claims that they are always intentionally caused by someone (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). The conspiratorial narrative also assumes that major events must have a major, non-random cause (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007). Furthermore, Cubitt (1989) notes that the conspiratorial narrative exhibits an associational shift. If someone is considered a participant in the conspiracy, they are attributed very similar attributes to the elite itself. The type of elite and its power also varies depending on the type of conspiracy narrative. In local and some global conspiracy theories, it may be the government, secret services or royal family, whose power may be limited. In some global and especially total conspiracy theories, it is the global elite, i.e. the richest, most powerful people in the world with absolute power. Governments, royal families or secret services are just their puppets.

Byford (2011) believes that a key feature of the elite, its agenda and its minions is the vagueness of their definition. The elite is mysterious and exclusive, its minions are vaguely defined. These are often unidentifiable groups (CIA, Vatican, UN, Wall Street, pharmaceutical companies, multinational corporations, journalists, scientists, etc.), which can include almost anyone. However, the current conspiracy scene also accuses specific individuals, such as Bill Gates or George Soros. However, according to Byford (2011), the essential thing is that

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
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we almost never learn anything concrete about the activities of the elite or their minions, and we cannot even learn, because they are secret societies. This vague identification perfectly suits the secret and evil intentions postulated in conspiracy theories. Moreover, because of this uncertainty, it is always possible to discover something new, thus confirming the truth of conspiracy theories (Barkun, 2003). It is interesting to perceive some conspiracy theories' internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Although conspiracy theories claim that we will never know the truth, they declare what is said in them true. Moreover, where did they get this mostly secret information if the innermost group is strictly kept secret?

It is the secrecy of the group and its plans that allow for the vagueness of definition that allows the conspiratorial narrative (and the individual conspiracy theories based on it) to persist. Conspiracy theories have been around for ages (Byford, 2011; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Butter & Knight, 2020); they appear across all cultures (Swami, 2012) and even across ideologies and political preferences (Smallpage et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2018). The reason for the universality of the concept of conspiracy theories seems to be that it is not so much the individual conspirators (i.e. the people involved in the conspiracy) or the individual conspiracy theories that matter but rather the general conspiratorial narrative that forms the basis of conspiracy theories (North, 1999).

Conspiracy theories form a simple, coherent, and resilient whole mainly because of the conspiratorial logic with which the conspiratorial narrative works. This logic could be described as follows: When we know nothing about the elite, there is something suspicious about it. There is definitely something that must be discovered. That something is precisely the evil intentions that the elite is trying to conceal. Therefore, camouflage is managed through official institutions. Information about events and the way they are transmitted to us is manipulation. Nothing is as it seems. If we want to find the truth, we must look with common sense beneath the surface of the fabricated news. And because nothing happens by chance, we find a certain pattern beneath the surface of all events in which everything is connected to everything (Ivančík & Nováková, 2023; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2024).

This logic makes the conspiratorial narrative a dogmatic, closed system of unverifiable “truths,” and individual conspiracy theories become a matter of pure faith (Barkun, 2003). Thanks to this logic (and the aforementioned vagueness), the conspiratorial narrative is, on the other hand, able to flexibly respond to any important event and turn it into a piece of a larger puzzle (Hofstadter, 1964). Thanks to this logic, cooperation between mutually incompatible groups (e.g., the CIA – the American secret service and the GRU – the Russian secret service, or the Freemasons and the Catholic Church) is also possible because, in reality, they are collaborators working for the powerful elite (Byford, 2011).

Another important feature of the conspiratorial narrative is the petitio principii (logical fallacy in the proof) – elites are evil because they have evil intentions. Thanks to these factors, almost every conspiracy theory based on the conspiratorial narrative is unfalsifiable (Clarke, 2002; Keely, 2006). Any evidence refuting the conspiracy theory is assimilated by the conspiratorial narrative as confirmation of the theory or is a priori dismissed as a ruse by the opponent (Barkun, 2003).

Byford (2011) gives an example of the defence of conspiracy theories against falsification. Because the elite has control over the dissemination of information, almost no one will learn what the elite does not want to reveal. Most of the evidence that would convict them is destroyed. So, the absence of evidence of a conspiracy can be taken as indisputable evidence of its existence. Conversely, the elite has a large number of false clues created to confuse the public so that they never learn the truth. Barkun (2003) adds in this regard that eventually everything is revealed the way the elite wants it to be revealed or for people to believe it. Therefore, people who try to refute conspiracy theories are considered part of the conspiracy machinery (Lewandowsky et al., 2015) or a blinded herd (Franks et al., 2017). These unfalsifiable conclusions likely manifest cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Awareness of logical inconsistencies and some contradictions within a particular conspiracy theory may induce a

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
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state of dissonance in people sympathetic to that conspiracy theory. This state may result in searching for and maintaining one's justification. This justification then reduces the unpleasant feeling of internal dissonance.

Another important feature of the conspiratorial narrative is the interest in presenting "elaborate evidence" (Hofstadter, 1964). The persuasiveness of the conspiratorial narrative lies in its quasi-skeptical (quasi-scientific, quasi-investigative/detective) rhetoric. The careful research of conspiracy theorists and the omission of important evidence during official investigations are often mentioned. Materials supporting conspiracy theories are presented as scientific. Scientific articles, papers, and studies are cited, and professional terms are used. Everything on the surface gives a solid critical impression. The conspiratorial narrative also arouses the tone of scepticism by asking questions confronting the official explanation. It thus arouses suspicion about the event and indicates a hidden "truth" that will be revealed later. However, the arguments of individual conspiracy theories are full of errors, misinterpretations and distortions of facts. Conspiracy theorists' hypotheses are invalid or unfounded, and their stance is dogmatic (Byford, 2011).

Such "careful and conscientious collection of 'evidence' immediately leads to the great leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable," in which the conspiracy theory usually leads to extraordinary conclusions (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 37). A vast amount of detailed 'evidence' is woven into a completely consistent and coherent theory that makes it seem as if "the unbelievable is the only thing to believe" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 38). Studies have supported this reasoning by showing that people with a higher tendency to believe conspiracy theories commit gross generalization biases (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007; LeBoeuf & Norton, 2011).

Although the conspiratorial narrative imitates critical thinking and presents itself as such, it works with faulty information in addition to dogmatic (unscientific) logic. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) call the style in which the conspiratorial narrative deals with information crippled epistemology. This is manifested in the fact that the conspiratorial narrative seeks out and prioritizes information that is considered unwarranted, rejected, refuted, or implausible. Barkun (2003) calls this type of invalid information stigmatized knowledge. The conspiratorial narrative also exaggerates unimportant details that are completely irrelevant to the resulting explanation. Keely (2006) calls this errant data.

Since these are unintended by-products of a certain activity or just the consequences of chance or coincidence, these data have not been considered in official explanations. However, since the conspiratorial narrative postulates that nothing happens by chance and everything is connected to everything, conspiracy theorists construct scenarios where these erroneous data are included. Usually, however, at the expense of other, much more substantial data. To incorporate this stigmatized knowledge and erroneous data into a compact explanation, they invent very complicated, intricate, and implausible scenarios (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

The last significant element of the conspiratorial narrative is the Manichaean worldview (Moskovici, 1986). This is a black-and-white vision based on the theory of social identity, or rather on the positive differentiation of one's group. People are divided into good and bad. The bad are part of the elite or minions of the elite (out-group) and the good are simple citizens, victims of the conspiracy (in-group) (Federico et al, 2018; Jutzi et al, 2020). In particular, total conspiracy theories use the Manichaean view to describe the entire history of humanity as a global struggle between good and evil (Byford, 2011). They also assess politics through this simplified view and do not consider the complex negotiations and compromises that are typical of politics, or rather, they consider them as a product of evil or weakness (Byford, 2011; Oliver & Wood, 2014). This is what conspiracy theories have in common with populism (van Prooijen et al., 2015; Bergmann, 2018). The Manichaean view is characterized by the belief that even complex problems have simple solutions (van Prooijen et al. 2015; van Prooijen 2016).

As mentioned earlier, conspiracy theories are dogmatic. It turns out that their acceptance is often associated with confirmation bias (Modgil et al., 2021). Because it is a dogma, people often talk about belief in conspiracy

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
2025 Volume 12 Number 4 (June)
http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

theories. Some authors even talk about belief in conspiracy theories as a quasi-religion (Ward & Voas, 2011; Franks et al., 2013). In research, an individual's belief in conspiracy theories is operationalized by two constructs. The first is conspiracy belief, i.e., a person's belief in specific conspiracy theories. It is measured by a questionnaire containing conspiracy theories (e.g., the theory that the moon landing was actually filmed in television studios). A tricky thing about this type of measurement is the existence of several conspiracy theories related to a single event. An individual may believe in specific conspiracy theories but not in those listed in the questionnaire. The second is the more general construct of conspiracy thinking. This is the disposition to look for/see a conspiracy as the cause of every (big, significant) event. A higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories in general as the (best) explanation for any serious events is particularly evident in people showing higher levels of this latent variable (Uscinski, 2019; Brotherton et al., 2013; Imhof, Bruder, 2014).

4. Conspiracy theory acceptance

According to Douglas (et al., 2017), previous studies show three main motives that fuel belief in conspiracy theories. Specifically, these are epistemic motives (the need to understand one's surroundings), existential (the need for safety and control of one's surroundings), and social (the need to maintain a positive image of oneself and one's social group). Conspiracy theories, through their conspiratorial narrative, saturate these motives. The success of the saturation that results in the acceptance of specific conspiracy theories depends on situational and personality characteristics. It turns out that people tend to accept conspiracy theories in situations where they are (or feel) threatened (Harambam, 2020). Conspiracy thinking is a personality characteristic (general tendency to look for a conspiracy behind significant events as the reason and cause of the emergence of a given situation). It is related to attitudes such as anomie, right-wing authoritarianism, socially dominant orientation, political cynicism, a sense of helplessness, a sense of alienation, Machiavellianism and prejudice (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Imhoff & Bruder 2014; Douglas et al. 2015). However, this is likely a reciprocal influence of situational and personality characteristics. Individual personality traits will be most evident in certain situations and enable the adoption of a conspiracy theory as an individual's reaction to this situation (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2018).

According to the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006), people constantly need to understand the world in which they live. Therefore, they create mental representations of objects (people, events, etc.), which they then categorize and look for relationships between them to understand their purpose. In doing so, they make the world understandable, orderly, and predictable. These individual mental representations, which arise both as a response to the search for meaning and as a product of interpersonal discursive processes, then determine how they will perceive the world. If people's meaning is somehow threatened, disrupted, or even challenged, or if the creation of meaning is prevented, they respond by searching for and consolidating meanings in areas offered as easiest, simplest, and with which they identify. Motivated reasoning, the tendency to readily accept new information consistent with our current beliefs and critically analyze information that contradicts them (Kunda, 1990), plays a major role in seeking such alternative explanations. This style of reasoning can also serve as an attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance.

Adopting conspiracy theories seems to be a human response to the need to (re)make sense. Hofstadter (1964) came up with this idea when he argued that conspiracy ideas are rooted in a general tendency to rationalize the world and explain it using a coherent set of assumptions. According to Heider (1958), the key factor in creating this coherent set is causal attribution, which allows for a clear detection of the problem, thus making it easy to understand. The conspiratorial narrative offers this clear causal attribution through the paradigm that "behind everything important that happens in the world is a secret and evil conspiracy of a few powerful people." Van Prooijen (2011) also argues that adopting conspiracy theories is a response to the world's complexity. Conspiracy theories provide a simple explanation for complex social events that are otherwise difficult to understand (e.g., assassinations of prominent figures, infectious disease pandemics, plane crashes, or terrorist acts). Simple explanations in the form of various conspiracy theories satisfy individuals searching for meaning in events.

ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
2025 Volume 12 Number 4 (June)
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Empirical research on the role of epistemic motives in the adoption of conspiracy theories is, unfortunately, rare and provides ambiguous conclusions. It has been shown that when it comes to socio-political events, people are not satisfied with chance as an explanation for these events but try to impose meaning on them by searching for patterns. They group individual events, create conditional situations from them, and search for the intentional behaviour of certain individuals. In this way, they construct a causal explanation. And this is the case even when no patterns exist in the events (Zhao et al., 2014).

The acceptance of conspiracy theories is also closely related to the search for meaningful interrelationships between unrelated stimuli through the axiom "everything is connected to everything" (Whitson et al., 2008). Conspiratorial thinking is more associated with the tendency to perceive intentionality in behaviour, even when there is none (Douglas et al., 2015), because conspiratorial thinking appears to be stronger in people who tend to search for and see meanings and patterns in the environment (Bruder et al., 2013) or in ambiguous information (van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015). Some authors mention the tendency of people with higher conspiratorial thinking to see patterns even in a completely random cluster of letters (van der Wal et al., 2018). At the same time, conspiratorial thinking is associated with hasty conclusions (Pytlik et al., 2020), with causal proportionality distortion (big events must have a big cause) (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007; LeBoeuf & Norton, 2012), which also points to an attempt to fulfil an epistemic need somehow.

It seems that by accepting conspiracy theories, people express a need to explain the unexplained or even the inexplicable. The acceptance of conspiracy theories may thus be associated with an epistemic motivation to reduce the ambiguity of the situation. While Marchlewska (et al., 2017) tested a situation where people have not explained a significant situation at all, Miller (2002) believed that what can significantly contribute to accepting conspiracy theories is, on the contrary, multiple explanations. This is especially true when there are two different official explanations, which contradict each other in some information and are presented in a short time sequence. According to him, these cause a wave of doubts and suspicions, which subsequently lead to the acceptance of the conspiracy theory. This statement is quite often cited in the works of several authors (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Swami & Furnham, 2014; Douglas et al., 2017; Swami & Zahari, 2020).

Conclusions

Based on the research and analysis of factors influencing the acceptance of conspiracy theories, it can be concluded that the vagueness or ambiguity of information itself is not the primary determinant of the acceptance of conspiracy narratives. Rather, it appears that the acceptance of conspiracy theories is a complex process influenced by several factors, such as the emotional experience of the situation, the level of conspiracy thinking, and distrust of authorities and official explanations. It seems that individuals with a higher level of conspiracy thinking tend to see a conspiracy even in situations where clear evidence is lacking. This tendency is supported by their general lack of trust in authorities and institutions and their preference for intuitive, quick, and heuristic reasoning. These findings suggest that conspiracy theories are related not only to cognitive distortions but also to individuals' psychological needs, such as the need for control, meaning, and safety in ambiguous situations.

One of the main conclusions is that the acceptance of conspiracy theories may be particularly pronounced in cases where people perceive the situation as threatening or stressful. Existential factors, such as fear, a sense of threat, or a sense of helplessness, appear to be significant variables in predicting belief in conspiratorial narratives. This suggests that not only the quality or quantity of information but also emotional and social factors play a key role in the process of accepting these theories. It is also important to emphasize that although exposure to official explanations of events may, in some cases, reduce the acceptance of conspiracy theories, in individuals with a high degree of conspiracy thinking, it may have the opposite effect – strengthening their belief in

conspiratorial narratives. This finding suggests that communication and education in this area should be very sensitive and consider the individual cognitive predispositions and emotional settings of the audience.

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Funding: This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract no. APVV-20-0334 and also was prepared within the framework of VEGA project no. 1/0578/23 "Cyber-social security threats in contemporary world: case study on threats on disinformation and emerging security threats in the societal context".

Data Availability Statement: More information and data can be obtained from the authors on a resonable request.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally, they have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES
ISSN 2345-0282 (online) http://jssidoi.org/jesi/
2025 Volume 12 Number 4 (June)
http://doi.org/10.9770/x8354649666

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