Research into Conspiracy Theories: Selected Aspects from the Perspective of Surveyed Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The main objective of the presented study is to identify conspiracy theories and to determine which conspiracy theories are perceived by surveyed secondary school students as the most frequent in society. The presented text provides a basic characterization of conspiracy theories, as well as possibilities for eliminating their spread. Within the empirical research, a quantitative research methodology was used. Data collection was carried out through a pre-prepared and self-constructed questionnaire. The research sample consisted of 88 secondary school students selected through convenience sampling. The selection criterion was the type of school attended. The results of the empirical research identified the COVID-19 pandemic as the most frequent conspiracy theory topic from the perspective of the surveyed secondary school students. The faked Moon landing was the second most frequently perceived conspiracy theory. It was followed by the planned attack on the World Trade Centre (September 11, 2001) and chemtrails. In the research of more detailed perspective on the COVID-19 conspiracy theory, respondents most frequently perceived the narrative that the coronavirus vaccine contains a chip designed to control people. The exploratory conclusions of the study drawn from this specific sample emphasize the importance of promoting critical thinking development within the analysed educational environment. Critical thinking among secondary school students may be a prerequisite for mitigating the spread of conspiracy theories.

Keywords: ***conspiracy theories, critical thinking, secondary school students***

1. Introduction

In recent years, conspiracy theories have become a symbol of irrational thinking, often blamed for fuelling a paranoid perception of the world. This worldview complicates the objective evaluation of information, disrupts meaningful discussion on important societal issues, and frequently leads to the spread of misinformation. Furthermore, conspiracy theories can motivate individuals to engage in actions that endanger both themselves and their surroundings. Today's era

represents a 'golden age' of conspiracy theories—their popularity and accessibility are increasing significantly; they are becoming more visible, as is the resistance of a segment of the public toward them. The Internet and social networks have fundamentally altered the manner of their dissemination, allowing them to reach a much broader audience than ever before. Although conspiracy theories are more widespread than in the past, they represent a phenomenon known for a long time. Past examples illustrate how conspiracy theories can lead to diverse consequences. Modern versions are embedded within the current context, yet their themes and societal circumstances often repeat throughout history, suggesting the existence of universal reasons for their emergence (Bahna, 2017). We state that the existence of conspiracy theories is not a new phenomenon. The expansion of conspiracy theories is very fast because the people are using the Internet connection.

It can be concluded that conspiracy theories are inherently linked to the development of society. Conspiracies have long been a part of human history, but the way we think about them has evolved over time. McKenzie-McHarg (in Kopper, 2023) states that the term 'conspiracy theory' originated in print journalism during the 1860s and 1870s. The concept was initially used to explain specific crimes and lacked a pejorative meaning, which did not emerge until the mid-20th century. The author also emphasizes that the term arose within the context of 'scientization'—a process through which scientific principles and methods infiltrated non-scientific sectors of society. For instance, the authority of science grew at the expense of religion, and the field of journalism increasingly pursued the principle of objectivity by introducing scientific norms and vocabulary into reporting. By the 1880s, newspaper readers frequently encountered terms such as evidence, refutation, fact, and theory. During this period, terms like 'murder theory,' 'kidnapping theory,' 'blackmail theory,' 'conspiracy theory,' and so forth, began to appear. A conspiracy theory emerged merely as one of many ways to explain a crime. It was not a generic term and had to be reconstructed each time according to the specific needs of each individual case. In other words, conspiracy theories were not discussed in an abstract or general sense, nor did the term denote a class of speculative explanations. Instead, a conspiracy theory was always tied to a specific event and lacked the pejorative connotations found within it today (Kopper, 2023). Elements of malice and power are also inherently present in conspiracy theories. It can be stated that conspiracy narratives are based on the premise that a certain group of people aims to harm others, or society. Furthermore, the conspiratorial actors possess the power necessary to execute the conspiracy (such as millionaires, politicians, secret societies, and so forth). However, history demonstrates that the group of actors may not always be as powerful as conspiracists believe (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020). We conclude that the objective of spreading conspiracy theories is, as a rule, an effort to destabilize society. Destabilization of the society can be a prerequisite for the terrorist attacks spreading (Svrček, 2014). Terrorist attacks have very bad impact on the societal life. For this reason, prevention is very important. We state that the development of critical thinking is a way of elimination of the conspiracy theories spreading. There is an important role of the educational process. In COVID-19 pandemic, the way of school educational process was hard because teachers needed to learn new teaching methods (Deliu, 2022).

Based on the identification of a general perspective on conspiracy theories, we subsequently focus on outlining examples of existing conspiracy theories. Several examples are defined in professional literature. We focus on highlighting the existence of the following conspiracy theories: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Moon landing that never took place and was staged (Bahna, 2017; Ivančík, 2024), the collapse of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, which was orchestrated and involved bombs inside the buildings in addition to the plane crashes (Panczová, 2017), and chemtrails.

Particularly the COVID-19 pandemic has served, since approximately 2020, as a catalyst for the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The onset of the pandemic period was associated with conspiracy theories aimed at interpreting its origin and emergence. Furthermore, conspiracy theories related to testing for the virus, anti-pandemic measures, and vaccination gradually expanded (Čavojová, Ballová Mikušková, & Šrol, 2022). In connection with the rapid spread of the pandemic, the death toll escalated exponentially within a short period. Concurrently, various unsubstantiated claims about the pandemic spread rapidly, as scientific research and its resulting explanations could not relevantly answer the emerging questions in society (Fedurcová, 2023). It was precisely this brief timeframe of the pandemic's expansion that prevented people from obtaining answers to their questions and verifying them, which further facilitated the spread of conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19. Čavojová, Ballová Mikušková, and Šrol (2022) present the following conspiracy beliefs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic: the coronavirus is a biological weapon due to human overpopulation; governments conceal the number of deceased young people to minimize panic; COVID-19 was artificially created for the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical industry; a cure for COVID-19 exists but is being withheld; and COVID-19 does not exist, being merely the flu.

Having identified the fundamental characteristics of conspiracy theories, as well as specific examples of existing ones, it is essential to address the possibilities for preventing their proliferation. We consider the development of media

literacy to be an appropriate method for preventing the spread of conspiracy theories. Media literacy regarding children and adolescents encompasses a set of individual skills aimed at the prudent, critical, and selective use of media. This entails the ability to distinguish between various media contents and to understand their functions and impacts within society. It is crucial to identify elements within media content that can influence the personalities of individuals, groups, or society in either a positive or negative manner. Consequently, this enables the identification of manipulation, stereotypes, or other harmful elements in the media and allows for better self-defence against them. Other important aspects of media literacy include creative ones, which involve the ability to actively participate in media communication. In a school environment, this can take the form of participating in a school magazine, school social networks, or school radio (Vrabec & Petranová, 2015, Kováč, 2021). Kurowski (2022) states that the teacher's role is to present the subject matter to students in a way that allows them to integrate it into their pre-existing frameworks or to adjust their views considering new information.

2. Methods

In the empirical investigation of the issue of conspiracy theories, a quantitative research method was selected. The objective of the empirical study was to identify which of the presented conspiracy theories surveyed secondary school students consider to be the most frequent. The aim of our research is to examine the perceived prevalence of selected conspiracy theories from the perspective of the researched secondary school students. The research design deliberately does not focus on measuring the actual level of acceptance or the respondents' personal belief in these narratives. Instead, it focuses on how respondents reflect the presence and widespread nature of the selected conspiracy theories within their environment.

In connection with the main objective of the empirical study, the following research questions were established:

Which conspiracy theory has the highest perceived prevalence in society according to the surveyed secondary school students?

Which of the conspiracy claims associated with the COVID-19 pandemic do the researched secondary school students consider to be the most widespread in society?

A pre-designed anonymous questionnaire was selected as the data collection method. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions where respondents selected a single option. The advantages of using a questionnaire include rapid data collection, the acquisition and subsequent analysis of a larger volume of respondent answers, and the possibility of distributing the questionnaire online using a simple and clear form. At the same time, a larger volume of obtained responses is considered a prerequisite for generalization and formulating universally valid research conclusions (Hendl & Remr, 2017). The self-constructed questionnaire was based on the presented theoretical frameworks. The constructed questionnaire was first evaluated by two independent experts. Their feedback contained two recommendations. After incorporating their feedback, a pilot study was conducted on a sample of 10 respondents. For the pilot test, secondary school students from a selected secondary school were selected using convenience sampling. The pilot testing of the constructed questionnaire confirmed the clarity and comprehensibility of the formulated questions.
The analysis and interpretation of the gathered data were carried out using univariate data analysis. The results of the univariate data analysis were recorded in frequency tables. This method of data analysis provides a clear display of the recorded frequencies, as well as a percentage representation of specific respondent answers. The research sample consisted of 88 respondents. The selection of respondents for the sample group was purposive. The selection criterion was the type of school attended—either a grammar school or a secondary vocational school. The schools were selected based on convenience sampling within the researchers' workplace location. To ensure anonymity and comply with ethical standards, the specific names and locations of the participating secondary schools have been omitted. The study included 53% grammar school students and 47% secondary vocational school students. Data collection was conducted in a compliance with ethical research standards. Prior to completing the questionnaire, all respondents were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the strict anonymity of their responses.

3. Results

According to the obtained data of our empirical research, we can answer the research questions by following way. In the first research question, we research the frequency of the perceived prevalence of the selected conspiracy theories in the society by the perspective of researched secondary school students. The following table provides the results of the univariate data analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: Perceived prevalence of conspiracy theories in society by the perspective of researched secondary school students

The conspiracy theory	count	%
Pandemic COVID-19 is a biological weapon	45	51
Apollo moon landing was faked	29	26
World Trade Center attack was a planned event (11.9. 2001)	13	12
Chemtrails	1	1

Source: Own empirical research

According to the data in the table above (Table 1), we state that 51% of respondents identified the claim, that COVID-19 is a biological weapon as the most frequented conspiracy theories in the society. 26% of respondents identified faked Apollo moon landing as the most frequented conspiracy theories in the society. 12% of respondents considered World Trade Center Attack as the most frequented conspiracy theories in the society. The high perceived prevalence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories may be attributed to respondents long-standing presence in public discourse since the pandemic's onset, meaning that the respondents have likely experienced high exposure to these narratives. Since the respondents lived through a period of strict pandemic related restrictions, they likely actively sought straightforward explanations to make sense of the ongoing crisis. Conspiracy theories are related with simple justifications and that is the reason for their occurrence and spread, even among young people. Researched secondary school students are young people, and it may be a contributing factor to their engagement with the COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Especially, the claim that COVID-19 is a biological weapon was highly widespread in society, a reality that was reflected in our respondents´ perceptions.

To answer the second research question, we investigated the most frequent conspiracy claims related to the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by the surveyed students. The following table (Table 2) provides the results of univariate data analysis about second research question.

Table 2: The most frequented conspiracy claims related to the COVID-19 pandemic

conspiracy claims related to the COVID-19 pandemic	count	%
The coronavirus vaccine contains a microchip designed to control people	38	43
The coronavirus was created as a biological weapon designed to reduce the global population	29	33
The coronavirus was engineered in a laboratory to increase people's dependence on the pharmaceutical industry	11	12
The coronavirus is merely a rebranded flu aimed at increasing drug sales	6	7
The government is deliberately concealing the actual number of pandemic casualties to prevent panic	2	3

Source: Own empirical research

According to the data in the table above (Table 2), we state that 43% of respondents consider the claim that the coronavirus vaccine contains a chip designed to control people to be the most frequent conspiracy claim related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The popularity of the mentioned conspiracy claim among respondents may have been linked to progress of the science and technologies. Development of technologies enables the use of microchips in many areas and conspiracy theorists connected this technology progress with the vaccination. Vaccination was recommended by numerous experts, while discussions simultaneously emerged in society suggesting it could even become mandatory. This may have led to a defensive reaction from a segment of the public, which perceived mandatory vaccination not as a protection of public health, but as part of elite interests.

Our respondents identified the claim that COVID-19 was a biological weapon designed to reduce the global population as the second most frequent conspiracy narrative related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This claim was considered the most widespread conspiracy theory associated with the COVID-19 pandemic by 33% of respondents. The narrative of population reduction by COVID-19 offers a highly simplified explanation of a complex crisis, which may explain why it was so frequently perceived by the respondents.

The third most widespread conspiracy claim, encountered by 12% of respondents, was the belief that the coronavirus was engineered in a laboratory to increase people's dependence on the pharmaceutical industry. The mentioned conspiracy claim may stem from a distrust of pharmaceutical companies. For researched secondary school

students, the commercial operations of the pharmaceutical sector might be a distant topic that does not directly engage their interest. The fourth most frequent conspiracy claim related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted in a similar manner — 7% of respondents consider as the most frequent conspiracy claim that coronavirus was merely a rebranded flu aimed at increasing drug sales.

Less frequent conspiracy claim related to COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the deliberate concealment of the actual number of pandemic casualties to prevent panic. This claim was considered the most frequent by only 1% of the respondents. Researched secondary school students might not have tracked the number of casualties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic or paid increased attention to the mentioned conspiracy claim.

4. Discussion

According to the results of our research, we would like to describe results of research realised in Slovakia. Čavojová, Ballová Mikušková, and Šrol (2022) state that while at the beginning of the pandemic, conspiracy theories focused on the origin and emergence of the novel coronavirus, over the course of the year, they began to relate more to vaccination, testing, or anti-pandemic measures.

In November 2020, the most prevalent conspiracy theory was that the coronavirus is a biological weapon due to human overpopulation. Here, we can observe that the theory of human elimination indeed fulfils this phenomenon. Furthermore, we can state that the research addresses governments concealing the number of deceased young people to minimize panic, as well as the notion that the coronavirus was artificially created for the commercial interests of pharmaceutical companies. The theory regarding a coronavirus cure being withheld for some reason gained a relatively low success rate. Lastly, with the lowest success rate during March 2020, was the theory that COVID-19 is merely a hoax and only threatens us as a flu. Once again, we can notice another characteristic feature of conspiracy theories, namely a group of people in the form of pharmaceutical companies or governments that possess the power to harm society. The conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 may be widely perceived within the public discourse. The findings of our exploratory analysis are relatively consistent with the previously presented results from the above-mentioned authors. For this reason, the detailed research is needed.

5. Limits of the Research

Considering the analysis and interpretation of the obtained data and the resulting conclusions, we emphasize the following limitations of the study:

a) sample size and characteristics: in the research, we analysed the responses of 88 participants - specifically selected secondary school students. The sample was designed using a convenience sampling, applying the criterion of participant availability and type of school (secondary school). We used convenience sampling. Given the convenience sampling of the selection and the limited sample size of only 88 individuals, the presented findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of secondary school students. The conclusions of our empirical research are therefore valid for the analysed sample. These findings are considered an exploratory pilot study for subsequent, more extensive research into this issue, which will require an expanded sample size and a representative selection of respondents.

b) focus of the questionnaire and the distinction between perceived and actual prevalence: within the questionnaire items, we identified which conspiracy theories the respondents considered frequent or popular, rather than investigating the actual prevalence of belief in these theories among the participants. We did not examine whether the surveyed secondary school students personally identified with or accepted these conspiracy narratives. Consequently, a key limitation of our research is that the findings reflect the surveyed students' perceptions of the presence of conspiracy theories within the social discourse, rather than their own level of personal indoctrination. To conclude, we researched the perceived prevalence of selected conspiracy theories from the perspective of surveyed secondary school students.

c) statistical data analysis (univariate data analysis): The data processing in this study was restricted to descriptive statistics. We analysed the frequencies and percentages of respondents answers in the univariate data analysis. While this methodological approach is fully legitimate for establishing a baseline overview and conducting an initial exploration of a phenomenon, it does not permit the identification of causal relationships or correlations between variables. The findings provide a valuable empirical foundation for the examined group, but do not offer deeper insights into the underlying factors that directly determine the researched students' perceptions of conspiracy theories.

6. Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to identify the perceived prevalence of the selected conspiracy theories and to determine which conspiracy theories the surveyed secondary school students consider to be the most prevalent. The results of our empirical research identified the COVID-19 pandemic related claims as the most prevalent conspiracy theory from the perspective of the surveyed secondary school students. Moreover, respondents declared the most prevalent conspiracy narrative that the coronavirus vaccine contains a chip designed to control people. According to the identified results of our research, it appears desirable to analyse whether the issue of identifying conspiracy theories is adequately addressed within the secondary educational process. Although our sample was limited and our study has an exploratory character, we assume that the perception of the existence of conspiracy theories requires adequate awareness of their core characteristics. Developing critical thinking skills could be a viable path toward identifying conspiracy theories. Usually, the educational process offers various possibilities for developing critical thinking through debates, discussions, and argumentative activities; therefore, the implementation of these methods needs to be further analysed, as critical thinking may be a key prerequisite for distinguishing valid information from conspiracy narratives.

In future research of the presented issue, it is desirable to expand the sample size and examine whether the perception of the existence of conspiracy theories varies depending on the specific type of secondary school. It can be hypothesized that the differentiation of curricular content across different types of secondary schools may determine the degree to which secondary students perceive the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Our exploratory study suggests that the surveyed secondary school students clearly reflect the presence of conspiracy theories in society. Therefore, we need to conduct more comprehensive and detailed research. Subsequently, once the potential relationship between the perception of conspiracy theories and the type of secondary school attended is established, it will be possible to investigate the actual belief in these theories among secondary school students. The actual belief in conspiracy theories can be the next phase of research following the analysis of perceived prevalence within an expanded sample across specific types of secondary schools; subsequently, such a detailed investigation may reveal the risks arising from the belief in conspiracy theories.

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7.1 AI Use Statement

The author(s) declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation, writing, analysis, or editing of this manuscript. The content of the manuscript was prepared entirely by the author(s).

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