

Trust the Game: Gamification and the Rise of Online Conspiracy Theories

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the once-obscure QAnon conspiracy theory made the jump from the far-reaches of the internet to our mainstream political discourse. I contend that gamification, or the application of game-like elements to non-game phenomena, has increased the persuasive power of conspiracy theories such as QAnon and allowed for their mainstreaming into everyday political culture. In short, I want to understand how persuasive gamification makes information in today's politically charged digital media ecosystems. The three empirical chapters of this dissertation provide evidence for the argument. In chapter three, I present a survey-experiment, using the conspiracy theory that hip-hop star Tupac was not actually murdered, but that he rather faked his death to escape the pressures of stardom. Here I find statistically significant evidence that gamification increased the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. In chapter four, I present a second similarly structured survey-experiment using the conspiracy theory that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. Here, I found mixed evidence on the ability of gamification to increase the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories, but I argue that further investigation is warranted. In chapter five, I provide some of the contextual color for the QAnon conspiracy theory to help better understand its key players and sketch how the game itself functions. The dissertation concludes with an examination of some of the consequences of believing in these kinds of conspiracy theories, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021, and prospects for future political radicalization.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

How did a once obscure conspiracy theory that claimed a major Democratic party presidential candidate harvested the blood of the opposing party's children become part of mainstream American political discourse? While conspiracy theories are by no means a new phenomenon, their mainstreaming into our everyday politics is. This dissertation examines how the QAnon conspiracy theory has used gamification, or the application of game-like elements to non-game phenomena, to increase the persuasive power of the conspiracy theory. In short, I want to understand how persuasive gamification makes information in today's politically charged digital media ecosystems. In the same way that playing the McDonald's monopoly game incentivizes you to purchase more hamburgers and fries, the puzzle-like structure of the QAnon conspiracy theory draws believers into the theory and makes it hard to escape. Using two separate studies of two different conspiracy theories, I find mixed but promising evidence that gamification can increase the persuasiveness of modern online conspiracy theories such as QAnon. The dissertation concludes with an examination of some of the consequences of believing in these kinds of conspiracy theories, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021, and prospects for future political radicalization.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Corrine Reilly “Rory” Stephens, and her namesake, my grandmother, Corinne Sturdivant Appleby (1931–2017). Corinne was born in a time in the American South where women just did not do things like pursue graduate education, or even higher education for that matter. She was vivacious, outspoken, intellectually curious, and a voracious reader, and I cannot help but wonder how different her life would have been had she not been bound by the social norms of her time.

It is my dream for you, Rory, that you face no such obstacles to your success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began this PhD journey at a different institution several weeks after leaving my job on Capitol Hill, I didn't really have a plan. I had a motivating question for my overall research—to better understand why the 2018 Congressional baseball shooting happened and how I, and several people that mattered to me at the time, had come so close to an untimely end. A global pandemic, a wedding, transferring to Virginia Tech, and now a baby-on-the-way later, I think I have something hopefully intelligent to say in this dissertation about the real and concrete danger political polarization poses to American political life.

None of this would have been possible without the support of my committee and my family.

To my chair, Dr. Chad Levinson: thank you for taking a chance on a random transfer student you met over Zoom in the thick of a global pandemic. Your kindness, passion for the subject matter, and patience were integral to me ultimately being able to complete this degree. I learned that I didn't have to fear someone in your position but could rather see them as a mentor and someone invested in my future growth and development.

To the rest of my committee, Doctors Dixit, Dull, and Holz: thank you for your guidance, support, and feedback while I navigated this journey. Your feedback has been invaluable throughout this process.

Finally, to my husband, Reilly, whom I met the first weekend of my PhD studies some six years ago: none of this would have been possible without you. Whether offering feedback on my research ideas, reading drafts of countless papers, or always making dinner, I would have never gotten this far were it not for your love and endless support. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Shall we play a game?

Find the spider(s) and build the web (the “map”).

Remember, they consider you to be the fly (specifically the “feeder”).

Remember, they never thought she was going to lose.

Therefore, they never thought investigations and/or public interest into their criminal acts would be exposed/investigated.

Therefore, they never thought they had anything to fear.

Therefore, they openly showcase their symbolism.

Therefore, they were sloppy ... Everyone is connected.

How about a nice game of chess?

—A 2017 post from QAnon¹

The Beginning

The 2016 American presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Hillary R. Clinton was marred by extreme political polarization and infighting, the scars of which still affect our politics to this day. Vitriolic insults, outlandish rumors, and a foreign power’s (Russia’s) electoral interference all combined to create a conspiratorial undercurrent in our politics that still resonates. To better understand how politics got to that point and the consequences it presents for U.S. democracy, let us first look to Congress, specifically the House of Representatives. In Congress, the Tea Party, which later gave way to the even more ideologically extreme House Freedom Caucus, had claimed victory in their takeover of the Republican party by the time of the 2016 election. Then-Congressmen Mick Mulvaney and Mark Meadows, later members of the Trump administration, were among the caucus’ founding members; Meadows was its chair. The current governor of the state of Florida, Ron DeSantis, was also a founding member during his time in the House of Representatives.

¹ archive.fo, “/Pol/ - Prepare to Lose Access,” December 19, 2017, <https://archive.fo/JLz7S>.

Freedom Caucus members largely believed the more right-of-center positions of their Republican counterparts, namely those of Speaker John Boehner and later Speaker Paul Ryan, did not take a strong enough stance against the perceived overreaches of the Obama administration. For example, the caucus viewed events such as the 2012 attack on the American Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, as evidence of the “weakness” of the Democratic Obama administration and “RINO” (“Republican-in-name-only”) complicity—even though several Republican-controlled Congressional committees at the time cleared State Department officials of any wrongdoing. Freedom Caucus legislative policies were less about proposing legislation in line with their ideals and more about vociferous opposition to that which did not fit their beliefs. Several years after his ouster, former Speaker Boehner described the policy platform of the Freedom Caucus as follows: “they can’t tell you what they’re for. They can tell you everything they’re against. They’re anarchists. They want total chaos. Tear it all down and start over. That’s what their mindset is.”²

Who makes up the Freedom Caucus, then? Many members, like their Tea Party originators, were from smaller, safely held conservative districts. Until the relatively recent elections of Congresswomen Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene, the caucus was primarily composed of men. Elected in 2020, Florida Congressman Bryon Donalds is the caucus’ first Black member. Somewhat ironically, very few, if any, of them have been members of top-tier Congressional committees. Spots on top committees such as Ways and Means or Appropriations are reserved for serious members who are less interested in media publicity and more interested in legislating. Therefore, the Freedom Caucus tends to collect the loudest

² Tina Nguyen, “‘Idiots,’ ‘Anarchists,’ and ‘Assholes’: Boehner Unloads on Republicans,” *Vanity Fair*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/10/john-boehner-on-republican-party>.

ideological outcasts of some of Congress' least consequential committees. Like their Tea Party forefathers, Freedom Caucus members style themselves as “patriots” and heirs to the heritage of the American revolution. They do not see themselves as needing a policy platform, as the self-styled revolutionary spirit and zeal to protect so-called American ideals is enough. They see themselves as fighting to reclaim a particular way of life, by any means necessary, including violence. Elected in 2021, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14th) best exemplifies this new variant of extreme Republican legislator.

A former businesswoman whose district borders parts of suburban-Atlanta, Greene was elected in part for her vocal support of then-President Trump and willingness to take on establishment politics. Her sharp tongue and prolific use of social media also helped to boost her political profile among the ultra-conservative. What was most unique about Greene, particularly at the time of her election, was her very public support for QAnon, a conspiracy theory that contends several prominent Democratic politicians, actors, and power players were participating in a child sex-trafficking ring. The conspiracy theory, which first began to circulate in 2017, rapidly gained strength during the first few years of the Trump administration. Trump, the conspiracy theory's messiah figure, refused to disavow it. While Greene eventually lost her Congressional committee assignments as punishment for her incendiary rhetoric and public support for QAnon, her election marked a turning point in American politics. Belief in conspiracy theories was something no longer to be kept private—it became something to be publicly proclaimed and even celebrated. How did this happen?

What is QAnon?

While conspiracy theories are by no means a new phenomenon in American politics, public figures proclaiming their support for them is a relatively recent new development.

Previous examples of widespread conspiracy theories in American politics include the virulently anti-Semitic titan of the auto industry Henry Ford promoting the conspiratorial Protocols of the Elders of Zion pamphlet, which contains alleged plans for Jewish world domination. Later, the Vietnam War and the publication of the Pentagon papers spawned numerous conspiracies about American involvement in the region and in the war. In the early 2000s, conspiracy-minded individuals viewed the September 11th terrorist attacks as a false flag operation perpetrated by the U.S. government to launch wars across the Middle East and in Afghanistan. These “9/11 Truthers” spread the pseudo-scientific claim that jet fuel does not melt steel beams, which they used as proof of the conspiracy theory. Finally, prior to the 2012 presidential election, then businessman Donald Trump claimed that former President Obama was not born in the United States and therefore was not eligible to be president, thereby creating the “Birther” conspiracy. If conspiracy theories are so common in American politics, what makes the QAnon conspiracy theory worthy of looking into further?

To understand the QAnon conspiracy theory, we must first begin with the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory. “Pizzagate” arose out of leaked information from the hacked emails of John Podesta, chair of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign.³ Online rumors, primarily on the social media website 4chan, claimed Podesta’s emails were full of coded language and hinted at a secretive child sex-trafficking ring based out of a Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong.⁴ The rumors alleged an evil cabal of global elites, led by Clinton, were trapping children in the basement of the restaurant in order to sell them in the sex trade and drain

³ Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-Andre Argentino, “The Q-Anon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2020, 37.

⁴ Amarasingam and Argentino, “Q-Anon,” 38.

their blood to harvest adrenochrome.⁵ Adrenochrome, a chemical compound, was first originally derived from adrenaline in the 1950s and 1960s and touted as a possible cure for schizophrenia. However, it proved clinically unsuccessful. Conspiracy theorists and new age health enthusiasts latched on to the idea that adrenochrome could be used to reverse the effects of aging. Like many women in the public eye, Clinton received frequent criticism for her health and appearance despite her being objectively healthier and more fit than Donald Trump. Her alleged harvesting of adrenochrome to appear younger only served as clarion call for Trump's supporters and QAnon believers about her lack of fitness to be president.

To complicate things even further, James Alefantis, the owner of Comet Ping Pong, has familial connections to the famed Rothschild banking family.⁶ The family frequently has been the target of numerous anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that claimed Jews allegedly were manipulating the global financial system for their benefit. Alleged Jewish global domination of the financial system is also linked to the centuries-old blood-libel conspiracy, which charges that Jews allegedly drained the blood of their Christian enemies to use in religious rituals. The idea of draining adrenochrome is similar. As journalist James Ball astutely points out, QAnon is just another recycling of the historical blood-libel conspiracy theory.⁷

⁵ Office for Science and Society, "QAnon's Adrenochrome Quackery," *McGill*, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/pseudoscience/qanons-adrenochrome-quackery>.

⁶ Keith Kahn-Harris, "The New-Old Conspiracy," *Prospect Magazine*, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/books/65023/the-new-old-conspiracy-rothschilds-qanon-the-other-pandemic>.

⁷ James Ball, *The Other Pandemic: How QAnon Contaminated the World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 9.

The Pizzagate conspiracy came to a dramatic crescendo when a young father from North Carolina named Edgar Welch stormed Comet Ping Pong heavily armed in late 2016, firing his rifle into the air as he burst through the restaurant's front doors. Through his "research" on 4chan and other social media sites, Welch had come to believe in Pizzagate and felt a calling almost religious in nature to rescue the allegedly trapped children.⁸ He quickly discovered, however, there was no such cabal. The restaurant does not even have a basement. Welch was released from prison in 2020 after serving three years for his actions.

For about a year after Pizzagate's dramatic crescendo, those same social media sites that gave rise to Gamergate (which I discuss in the next chapter) and then Pizzagate were mostly quiet. While there was still chatter online about the happenings of Pizzagate and the Democratic Party's alleged crimes, Donald Trump had won the presidential election and had the cabal celebrating. All was quiet until October 2017, when an anonymous poster, only identifying themselves by the letter Q, wrote on 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) forum page, "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45AM–8:30AM EST on Monday—the morning on Oct 30, 2017."⁹ This post marked the first "drop" or post of what quickly became known as the QAnon conspiracy theory, and it changed the trajectory of American politics for the foreseeable future. What do we know about this anonymous Q?

"Q" or "Q Clearance Patriot" claimed to be an employee in the U.S. Department of Energy with a high- or "Q"-level security (top-secret) clearance that necessitated their

⁸ Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q," *Atlantic*, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

⁹ Amarasingam and Argentino, "Q-Anon," 37.

anonymity.¹⁰ In the case of the Department of Energy, this clearance level grants someone access to classified nuclear materials, as that falls under the department's purview. The broad contours of the conspiracy theory are as follows. President Trump was supposed to be its messiah figure who would rescue the children still being held and publicly execute their captors and other supposed "traitors" within the United States government. Many evangelical Christians and Q believers also came to believe that not only was Trump the Messiah who would "save" these children from their alleged captors, but he was also a sign that the Christian "End of Days" had arrived, and the U.S. government would be cleansed of all anti-Christian influences.

Additionally, QAnon is what some scholars have called a super- or meta-conspiracy theory; these absorb and continually incorporate other conspiracy theories into their framework.¹¹ For example, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the Spring of 2019, quickly became incorporated into QAnon lore. To conspiracy theorists, wearing a face mask or getting the COVID-19 vaccine was not about preventing the spread of the disease; rather, it signaled to believers that someone was controlled by the "Deep State"—the same forces out to get former President Trump. I will explain the QAnon conspiracy theory in much greater detail in the following chapters.

What Is So Unique about QAnon? The Main Argument

This dissertation argues that what makes QAnon so unique is its structure, which I claim can be analogized to playing a game. QAnon can be thought of as a blended alternate reality game (ARG) or live-action role playing game (LARP). ARGs are types of games in which

¹⁰ Amarasingam and Argentino, "Q-Anon," 38.

¹¹ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd ed., Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 15 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

participants can assume identities and agencies that are not their own, but the structure of the game's narrative is based on the real world. The popular 1970s film turned television show, *Westworld*, depicts a live action ARG. The 2010s show centers on *Westworld*, a highly technically advanced, Western-themed amusement park populated with AI-powered android characters. These characters look like real humans but are programmed to not be able to hurt or injure the park's mostly wealthy guests who come to role-play in the park's fake "Wild West." However, the AI becomes so advanced that the android characters "wake up" and realize what has been happening to them and how they have been made playthings of society's elite. They then stage a violent takeover of the park and subjugate their former human masters.

LARPs, like ARGs, are also a form of role-playing game through which participants act out their assigned characters in the game or story. In a LARP, players embody the desires and wishes of their characters and strive to emulate them as close as possible. Popular examples of LARPs include Renaissance Fairs and murder mystery dinner parties. At a murder mystery dinner party, for example, participants are assigned a specific identity with corresponding personality and dress in advance. Their job is to come to the party fully dressed as the character and prepare to convince other guests that they are who they say they are by embodying the mannerisms of their assigned character.

QAnon blends the real-world narrative of an ARG with the new identity one would assume during a LARP. As the Q-drop, or post by QAnon, I referred to at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, believers see themselves as almost secret-agents who have been given a special "mission" to support President Trump and restore the rightful order of politics and social life in the United States. However, as in *Westworld*, the line between what is real life and what is not in the world of QAnon can sometimes be indistinguishable. Believers have lost jobs, friends,

and family members over their support for QAnon. This conspiracy, in part, fueled the January 6th, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol over the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. COVID-related conspiracy theories, such as the use of veterinary-grade Ivermectin as an alleged cure, has cost people their lives. I will explore some of these consequences in greater depth in this dissertation's concluding chapter. This dissertation's main argument, and what I will seek to illustrate, is that gamification, or the application of game-like elements to non-game phenomena, has the potential to increase the QAnon conspiracy theory's persuasiveness thanks to today's politically charged digital media ecosystems. I expand upon the theoretical basis of this argument in chapter two. The subsequent three chapters provide further empirical evidence in support of this claim. The dissertation concludes by investigating a potential "end game" for these kinds of conspiracy theories. Principally, I explore whether conspiracy theorizing can lead to violence. In short, I attempt to show, using the relevant literature, that while conspiratorial ideation most certainly plays a role in the decision to commit violence, existing research does not yet support the idea that believing in conspiracy theories causes violence.

Significance of the Dissertation

Because the literature on conspiracy theories is still largely of a theoretical nature and draws from several different disciplines such as psychology, political science, and history, I argue scholars should approach the subject of conspiracy theories from an interdisciplinary mindset. One potential pitfall with interdisciplinarity, however, is that it can sometimes result in a scattershot understanding of the key matters at hand, sacrificing depth for breadth. This dissertation hopes to synthesize these sometime disparate strains of the literature on conspiracy theories to help provide a more cohesive understanding of internet-based conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

Existing theoretical literature on conspiracy theories typically either examines what drives people to believe in them or traces the historical processes by which they came about. Existing empirical work, in contrast, mostly seeks to understand how and why certain social and political communities believe in conspiracy theories.¹² Another challenge that prevents scholars from getting a more comprehensive understanding of the field is the idea that conspiratorial beliefs are part of wider personal psychological delusions and thus undeserving of serious scholarly inquiry. Uscinski contends this development was in large part due to the publication of Richard Hofstadter's essay and subsequent book, entitled *The Paranoid Style*.¹³ Hofstadter's depiction of the alleged conspiratorial machinations of famous American politicians emphasizes the idea of a *paranoid style*, arguing, "the paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization."¹⁴ Uscinski argues that, rather than highlighting the true reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories and the potential impacts, Hofstadter's work caused people to focus on the extraneous details of conspiratorial beliefs, their often dramatic and wild claims, and how the paranoid did not fit in with rational or normal social life.

¹² J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion: Conspiracy Theories and Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 952–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>.

¹³ Joseph E. Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.001.0001>.

¹⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 82.

In recent years, however, several scholars have sought to untangle the confusion Hofstadter's work caused by calling on others to treat the study of conspiracy theories as they would treat any other facet of public opinion. Oliver and Wood, for example, show how conspiratorial beliefs can be measured as such.¹⁵ Additionally, Uscinski argues Hofstadter's work "discarded the more neutral sociological perspectives ... and projected conspiracy theories as a minority phenomenon that threatened the liberal democratic consensus Hofstadter's approach to conspiracy theories has impeded research because it pathologizes and marginalizes them."¹⁶ My project seeks to embrace the multidisciplinary nature of the existing research on conspiracy theories to help overcome Hofstadter's impact on the field, showing conspiracy theories are more commonly held and perhaps "more normal" than most people might think.

Finally, this project embraces literature from psychology, information sciences, communications, and political science to investigate my main mechanism of interest: gamification. While I do not envision this project being housed in any discipline's particular literature, political science most informs my methodological approach. The significance of this dissertation is that I seek to show how a centuries-old phenomenon such as conspiracy theories can spread and become more persuasive using today's technology. While games are not new, the concept of gamification is. I want to understand how persuasive gamification makes information in today's politically charged digital media ecosystems. The goal of this project is to investigate old problems in new ways.

¹⁵ See Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories."

¹⁶ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories*, 7.

Plan of the Dissertation

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Chapter two presents the conceptual and theoretical building blocks that are present throughout the various parts of this dissertation. The first portion of the chapter focuses on gamification—how academic literature defines it, “real world” examples of the phenomenon, and how we can conceptualize its components and how they function. The next portion of the chapter surveys the literature on political polarization and seeks to answer several questions: what political polarization is and why it matters for the story I am trying to tell; what affective polarization is and how we can connect it to the extreme identities developed during Gamergate; and why polarization matters when talking about conspiracy theories. Finally, the last portion of the chapter provides an overview of conspiracy theories. Namely, I cover how academic literature defines them, how they can spread, reasons why people believe in them, and whether belief in conspiracy theories can lead people down the path of radicalization.

Chapter Three: Survey Experiment #1

In chapter three, I present the results of a survey experiment that tested whether gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. In this instance, the chosen conspiracy theory was not related explicitly to QAnon, nor was it overtly dealing with conventionally political topics. My rationale for this decision was that, if I could determine whether gamification could increase the persuasiveness of a conspiracy theory unrelated to QAnon, that could indicate the strength of the mechanism itself. In this instance, I chose the conspiracy theory that renowned hip-hop artist Tupac faked his death in 1996 to escape the pressures of stardom. Variations of the conspiracy theory have claimed Tupac is living anywhere

from Cuba to Eastern Europe. The results from this study show gamification has the potential to increase the persuasive power of this conspiracy theory.

Chapter Four: Survey Experiment #2

Chapter four consists of a similarly structured survey experiment that also tested whether gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories; however, this experiment used a more overtly political conspiracy theory. In this instance, it focused on the right-wing conspiracy theory that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election and his opponent, Joe Biden, “stole” it from him. The results from this survey experiment were mixed: while I found individual-level correlates to be statistically significant during the analysis, it did not prove this dissertation’s overall argument that gamification increased the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. I explore potential reasons for these findings in greater depth in the chapter itself.

Chapter Five: Qualitative

This chapter provides additional contextual evidence to better understand the relationship between an online conspiracy such as QAnon and gamification. It seeks to answer three primary questions: the first asks, who are the key players in the QAnon conspiracy; the second, what does the field of play look like; and the third, what are the rules of the game of QAnon? It also includes several testimonials from former believers and those who have friends and loved ones who were impacted by QAnon and its adjacent conspiracy theories.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In chapter six, I review the dissertation’s findings from the previous chapter as well as expand upon the linkages between conspiracism, radicalization, and political violence. The dissertation concludes with some possible directions for future research and reiterates some of the study’s limitations.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gamification: A Real-Life Example

The McDonald's corporation has had great success using gamification to incentivize people to purchase their products. In 1987, they introduced a marketing campaign that was based on the ever-popular Monopoly Boardgame: "McDonald's Monopoly." In a traditional Monopoly game, players roll dice and move small steel charms around the board buying and selling various properties and collecting rent from their opponents. In McDonald's Monopoly, the company turned their products into game pieces by affixing game piece stickers to them, which corresponded to certain properties on the traditional Monopoly board. Players could redeem the pieces for money once they had collected all the pieces in a certain colored portion of the board. Later iterations of the game introduced "instant win" game pieces. Stores across the globe were eligible to participate, which only increased the competitive allure for potential players. McDonald's also paired the game with increased marketing efforts to further drum up interest—and it worked. Not only did McDonald's generate increased business from these "gamified" hamburgers, shakes, and fries, but they also created a pop culture phenomenon.

In theory, anyone purchasing something at a McDonald's would have a chance to collect a winning game piece. In all actuality, as the "McMillions" scandal later brought to light, McDonald's executives strategically manipulated the exact quantity and placement of winning game pieces. McDonald's Monopoly lasted for years until it was uncovered that a small group of Mafia-connected individuals had turned it into a criminal conspiracy to collect the winnings. A former policeman who worked for the company McDonald's hired to facilitate the game's day-to-day functioning figured out a way to siphon off the winning game pieces and sold them to

friends, family, and even members of the Colombo crime family.¹⁷ While the game was discontinued after the criminal proceedings came to light, McDonald's appeared poised to bring it back in 2023.¹⁸ However, these plans fell through in the United States and, as of this writing in 2024, it is unclear when or if the game will ever be resurrected. The game returned to Great Britain in September 2024.¹⁹

Many other retailers, such as Starbucks Coffee, have adopted similar gamified marketing campaigns. Starbucks uses their mobile app rewards program in a similar way to the popular mobile app game Pokémon Go, accessing a participant's location data to better tailor their incentives, or motivational affordances, to participants. The rewards program frequently cycles through different types of games and incentive amounts to maintain users' attention. What the McDonald's Monopoly game and the Starbucks reward program have in common is that they both actively attempt to shape a user's or purchaser's behavior toward a particular end. In this

¹⁷ Tom Huddleston, "How the 'McMillions' Scammers Rigged McDonald's Monopoly Game and Stole \$24 Million," *CNBC*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/07/how-mcmillions-scammers-rigged-the-mcdonalds-monopoly-game.html>. The former officer, Jerome Jacobson, was entrusted with ensuring the safety of the highest earning game pieces. Along with an independent auditor who went everywhere with him, Jacobson's job was to around with his secure briefcase full of game pieces to different stores where he would place the pieces on the products and monitor store employees to ensure they would not steal them. However, the temptation for Jacobson became too strong. When he would travel, Jacobson would take his briefcase full of winning game pieces with him to the restroom. There, in the stalls, he would strategically pull pieces out to sell and trade for cash. The auditor, who was a woman, was unable to follow him into the restroom and remained unaware of his actions until 2000, when federal officers became suspicious when they noticed a large cluster of winners in Florida and Georgia, Jacobson's home state. Jacobson was convicted of mail fraud in 2001 and later served several years in federal prison.

¹⁸ Adrian Horton, "McMillions," *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/feb/03/mcmillions-bizarre-story-how-one-man-stole-24m-mcdonalds-hbo>

¹⁹ "McDonald's Monopoly 2024 Prizes in Full, Menu Items Included, How to Play and Tips for Boosting Your Chances," *Yahoo News*, August 15, 2024, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/mcdonalds-monopoly-2024-prizes-full-101350911.html>.

case, that end is buying more of the retailer's product. If these corporations can gamify perishable food and drink, it is not unreasonable to think one might gamify a conspiracy theory.

While the components and underlying motivational structure of gamification are by no means new, the systematic and controlled study of its application and how it functions is. Scholars in business and marketing, education, information systems, and game design have taken the lead in defining research agendas on gamification, but they are still grappling with defining what exactly the concept means and how precisely to operationalize it.²⁰ Public policy scholars, for example, have recognized that gamification has great potential to influence engagement and interest in the democratic process. Hamari and Hassan conducted a systematic review of the gamification literature and found gamified modes of civic e-participation are “linked to increased engagement, motivation, civic learning, and enjoyment among other outcomes.”²¹ In conducting the early-stage research for this dissertation, the most relevant political science research involving gamification that I came across was investigating its utility as a tool for knowledge transfer during diplomacy.²² All of this is to say that scholars are still actively grappling with gamification's key questions, what it means to gamify something, as well as any potential knock-on effects of gamification.

²⁰ Athanasios Mazarakis, “Gamification Reloaded: Current and Future Trends in Gamification Science,” *I-Com* 20, no. 3 (December 20, 2021): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1515/icom-2021-0025>.

²¹ Lobna Hassan and Juho Hamari, “Gameful Civic Engagement: A Review of the Literature on Gamification of e-Participation,” *Government Information Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (July 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2020.101461>.

²² Mihai Cercel, “Gamification in Diplomacy Studies as an Effective Tool for Knowledge Transfer,” *JMIR Serious Games*, no. 2 (April 25, 2022), <https://games.jmir.org/2022/2/e32996>.

Defining Gamification

In this dissertation, I adopt Hassan and Hamari's definition of gamification, as it offers one of the most comprehensive definitions in the current literature: "designing systems, services, and processes to provide positive, engaging experiences similar to the engaging experiences that games provide commonly with the aim of motivating beneficial behaviors."²³ However, in the case of QAnon and other online conspiracy theories, gamification is not aimed at motivating beneficial behaviors. Rather, QAnon uses it to incentivize participants to act in ways that further the goals of the conspiracy theory, to the participant's likely detriment, similar to how Lakhani and Weidnitzka theorized the gamification of the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand massacre.²⁴ The same argument generally could be applied to the McDonald's monopoly game, in that eating fast food every day is not beneficial to one's long-term health. However, while that may be the case, McDonald's is not actively incentivizing players to subvert elections or to disown family members if they do not share the same affinity for its cheeseburgers.

Gamification also can benefit users. For example, the fitness company Peloton recently introduced a game called "Lanebreak" to the platform. Rather than riding along to music with an instructor like in a standard spin class, in a "Lanebreak" class, participants vary their resistance and cadence to meet certain markers for points on a digital velodrome track. These markers are set to the beat of the music that is playing during the game. Participants "play" against other riders and can compete for high scores on Peloton's digital leaderboard. "Lanebreak" aims to

²³ Hassan and Hamari, "Gameful Civic Engagement," 1.

²⁴ Suraj Lakhani and Susann Weidnitzka, "Press F to Pay Respects": An Empirical Exploration of the Mechanics of Gamification in Relation to the Christchurch Attack" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35 no. 7 (October 3, 2023),. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2022.2064746>.

broaden the appeal of cycling to those who may not find a traditional instructor-led class appealing. Educators also frequently use gamification to keep students at a variety of ages interested in course material. Kahoot and Quizlet are online platforms through which students and teachers can build and play games about course material. Similarly, Duolingo is a popular language learning platform that uses gamification to help users learn a new language. There is also a vast and interesting body of literature on gamification and educational curriculum design that is unfortunately out of the scope of this dissertation's focus.

How Gamification Functions

How does gamification function and what are its key components? Koivisto and Hamari argue that gamification can be seen as having three key parts.²⁵ The first part consists of motivational affordances, which we can think of as tools or behavioral change mechanisms that incentivize the person gamification targets to act in a certain way. In the existing literature, common examples of motivational affordances include points systems, discounts on products, and the use of leaderboards. In the case of QAnon, a frequent motivational affordance is the ability to connect with likeminded individuals over shared interests and shared concerns over a common identity.

Importantly, a successful gamified system involves more than just the random assignment of points or giving away free products, as Mazarakis has argued.²⁶ In fact, in order to move the conceptualization of gamification forward, scholars should move beyond the simple

²⁵ Jonna Koivisto and Juho Hamari, "The Rise of Motivational Information Systems," *International Journal of Information Management* 45, (2019): 193.

²⁶ Athanasios Mazarakis, "Gamification Reloaded: Current and Future Trends in Gamification Science," *I-Com* 20, no. 3 (December 20, 2021): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1515/icom-2021-0025>.

understanding of it as defined by points, badges, and leaderboards and understand how it should consider our needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness—the three key components of self-determination theory (SDT).²⁷ When it comes to the pursuit of individual goals, SDT argues that people need to be able to satisfy the above psychological needs during that process in order to feel truly fulfilled. If these needs are not satisfied, while gamification may have changed a particular behavior in that moment, the change is unlikely to be lasting. They may have changed their behavior in that instance because of gamification, but it is unlikely to result in lasting psychological change. For example, someone who is motivated by interpersonal connection may greatly value the chance to surround themselves with like-minded QAnon believers. They likely would not find a gamified system designed around individual competencies and achievement fulfilling.

Within this discussion, it is important to note gamification, whether top-down or bottom-up, is an intentional process. When employed strategically from the top-down, gamification can allow groups to rally around a common cause. Bottom-up gamification, as Schlegel and Lakhani and Weidnitzka have theorized, occurs when individuals are able to come together as a result of gamified interactions.²⁸ For example, as Evans notes, recent episodes of conspiratorial mass violence are often described in terms of body counts or kill counts, as one would describe a score

²⁷ Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, “The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Goal Pursuits,” *Psychological Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2000): 227.; https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01 Mazarakis, “Gamification Reloaded,” 280–84.

²⁸ Linda Schlegel, “Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes”, *Journal for Deradicalization* 23 (2020) ; Lakhani and Weidnitzka, *Short Title*, pg#.

in a video game.²⁹ It is these discussions online that serve as a rallying point for other like-minded individuals. As these online interactions continue, they effectively gamify the phenomenon being talked about. As Evans again articulates, the actions of the Christchurch shooter and the language employed in his manifesto have inspired numerous copycat instances of gamified violence. QAnon functions similarly. While Q provides the overarching framework for the conspiracy theory, interactions between believers and outsiders are what ultimately gamify the theory.

Gamification, and games more broadly, require consideration of agency and autonomy. Games allow us to assume agency in ways that we may not have thought of before. In a game, particularly those that involve role-playing (LARPing), we can assume new identities we never thought possible.LARPs, or live-action roleplaying games, are immersive participatory gaming experiences in which players dress up in costumes designed to embody their assigned characters and travel to different cities and states to take part in the game. Perhaps the most well-known LARP game is Dungeons and Dragons, which is “highly competitive [and] became a cultural site of the emerging ‘geek masculinity’ long before anyone knew what the internet was.”³⁰ LARPs have rules that govern game play but often welcome input from the players themselves. They evolve over time as different groups of people play them in different contexts. Many players also participate in other activities related to the LARP such as conventions, fairs, and leagues.

²⁹ Robert Evans, “The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror,” *bellingcat*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/>.

³⁰ Van Badham, *QAnon and On* (2021), 152.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=3060297>

In game play, this agential transformation provides players a newfound sense of autonomy and power.³¹ In this “new world,” we have the chance to be rid of what plagued us in the old world and become who we might really like to be. Nguyen argues this transformation can mark a turning point. If something is accidentally gamified, which Nguyen describes as occurring when game-like features are unintentionally introduced and come to motivate us in game-like ways, we risk losing ourselves in the transformation.³² After all, if a new “gamified” life appears more fulfilling and motivating than one’s old one, why go back? Intentionally gamified systems provide an “out” or backstop to prevent this from happening. While users can assume this new agency temporarily, they understand in the back of their minds they are engaged in a game and not real life. This is not the case in accidentally gamified systems.³³

The second main component of gamification involves the construction of the psychological outcomes the creator of said system would like to see. In the case of the McDonald’s Monopoly game, desired psychological outcomes might include generating increased excitement for the game and for McDonald’s products. For a gamified conspiracy theory such as QAnon, excitement about the theory is also a desired outcome. An additional outcome might include the reinforcement of “us versus them” logic that is a core component of the conspiratorial worldview. To that end, it is important to note this psychological reinforcement is not an instantaneous process. These changes can take time. In QAnon lore, for example, there is frequent talk about “falling down the rabbit hole” or “doing your research” into

³¹ Nguyen, *Games*, 17.

³² Nguyen, *Games*, 189.

³³ Nguyen, *Games*, 21.

the conspiratorial belief system. This is not just the case with QAnon. Whether one is a member of the “Flat Earth” society or something as extreme as a 9/11 or Holocaust denier, entry into a conspiratorial worldview is an iterative process that takes place over a long duration. This dissertation further explores the role of time and how it impacts conspiratorial beliefs later in chapters three and four.

Finally, the last component of gamification according to Koivisto and Hamari are the resulting behavioral outcomes of gamification. These are the behaviors the gamified system designer hopes to achieve. For example, in the case of McDonald’s Monopoly, game designers wanted to increase foot traffic and sales in McDonald’s stores. With QAnon, a potentially desired behavioral outcome would include the willingness and ability for believers to take their actions “offline” and into the real world, such as in the case of the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. “Flat Earth” societies are another example of how conspiratorial groups can organize in the real world. While the idea of a flat Earth has been around for centuries, starting in about the 1960s with the Cold War and space race between the United States and Soviet Union, we can see the emergence of international “Flat Earth” societies. What originally began as a small community group that wrote pamphlets and sent members to give lectures has enjoyed a global renaissance thanks to the organizing power of the internet.³⁴ Some Flat Earth believers have even resorted to conducting experiments to prove their case. Predictably, the only thing these experiments have proven is that the Earth is round, not flat.³⁵

³⁴ Rachel Brazil, “Fighting Flat Earth Theory,” *Physics World*, July 2020, .
<https://physicsworld.com/a/fighting-flat-earth-theory/>

³⁵ “This Flat-Earther Is about to Take off in a Homemade Rocket and Discover the Truth,” *Independent*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/flat-earth-rocket-man-take-off-time-date-mad-mike-hughes-theory-a8068486.html>.

So far, this chapter has investigated several crucial components of my dissertation. First, it explored the contextual social and political factors, primarily Gamergate, that gave rise to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Next, it shifted to discuss gamification, specifically what it is, how it functions, and two examples of how multinational corporations have used it to their advantage. The remainder of the chapter explores the second half of the story this dissertation is trying to tell; it discusses conspiracy theories and review the relevant academic literature on what they are, how they spread, and why people believe in them. The chapter concludes with a discussion of radicalization and whether conspiracy theories can drive people to commit extremist violence.

Political Polarization

A key thread that runs throughout this dissertation is the idea that political polarization, and particularly affective polarization, has played a key role in the spread of conspiracy theories such as QAnon. Despite what many political pundits like to claim, political polarization is no means a new phenomenon. To better understand what causes it among elites as well as the public, we need to understand several trends in American politics that began in the 1960s.

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the politics in the American South were dominated by the Democratic Party, though at that time, many Democrats held ideologically conservative viewpoints. However, starting around the 1960s, social conservatives in the South began disassociating with the Democratic Party because of its efforts in support of racial

integration and for more liberal social policies.³⁶ This shift was a boon to the Republican Party as they quickly absorbed as many socially conservative Democrats as they could.

In the House of Representatives, starting in about the 1980s, numerous rules changes empowered the longstanding minority party at the time (the Republicans) with greater tools to exert their legislative agenda and to try and regain the majority.³⁷ Among others, changes included passing a new set of rules in the House each Congress, changes to the amendment process, publicizing the ayes and nays on certain votes, and having party ratios on committees matching the current composition of Congress.³⁸ While these changes might not seem like much, they were all designed to take power away from the Speaker of the House and distribute it more toward the Republican party apparatus.

Additionally, around the same time, Congressional districts across the United States started to become much more homogenous ideologically. In turn, those districts elected more homogeneous representation.³⁹ Finally, the rise of cable news and political talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s enabled enterprising politicians, such as former Republican Speaker Newt

³⁶ Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 1974); V. O. Key and Alexander Heard, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

³⁷ Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C: CQ Press, 2012).

³⁸ Michael L. Koempel and Judy Schneider, *A Retrospective of House Rules Changes Since the 104th Congress through the 109th Congress* (Washington, D.C: The Congressional Research Service, March 8, 2012), 9–12.

³⁹ Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Place of Publication: Publisher, 2011).

Gingrich, to take a party's platform directly to the people and bypass much of the decorum that previously had governed the behaviors of Congressional members.

For example, as a result of previous rules changes, Gingrich and other politicians and lobbyists could now publicize the names of members of Congress who voted on discharge petitions, or who voted legislation out of committee.⁴⁰ This allowed for an easy talking point, where opposing members of Congress could easily “name and shame” other members who voted for legislation they opposed. Additionally, during special order speeches on the House floor, where members typically would speak about hyper-local issues relevant to their Congressional district, television cameras were no longer allowed to pan the chamber.⁴¹ Some members, however, use special order speeches to make hyper-partisan speeches about issues that leadership may prevent them from speaking on in larger and more public settings. Special order speeches take place before and after the House conducts its business for the day, meaning that very few Members and staff are present in the chamber. Former Congressman Louis Gohmert, who was first elected in 2004 before retiring in 2022, was a conservative Texas Republican who was featured speaking in more than 900 clips on C-Span before his retirement. In 2014 alone, he logged close to 30 hours speaking on the House floor in special order speeches.⁴² Not showing the chamber was mostly empty gave the illusion that Gohmert had a lot more sway than he did. It also gave an immense amount of free publicity to his often outlandish policy positions.

⁴⁰ Koempel and Schneider, *Retrospective*, 44.

⁴¹ Koempel and Schneider, *Retrospective*, 47.

⁴² Naomi Lim, “Louie Gohmert: House Democrats’ Floor Speech Rule Change ‘Has Actually Been Great,’” *Washington Examiner*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/1455856/louie-gohmert-house-democrats-floor-speech-rule-change-has-actually-been-great/>.

Conceptually, political polarization, in the broadest sense, “generally refers to differences on policy issues, ideological orientations, or value systems, while partisan polarization may refer to these differences across members of different parties.”⁴³ Breaking it down further, we can distinguish between elite polarization, or polarization among “office holders, party officials, policy intellectuals, and activists,” and mass polarization, which refers to polarization among regular citizens and voters.⁴⁴ Bound up in polarization is the idea of partisanship, which is a more general feeling of attachment to one’s preferred political party. Affective polarization is more than just simple dislike, discord, or in-group out-group bias; it involves fundamental disagreements over who we are as people and the identities we hold. Dias and Lelkes define affective polarization as the “widening chasm between in-and-out party affect [that] encourages citizens to judge politicians and political outcomes in emotional and biased ways, compromising their ability to hold elected leaders accountable.”⁴⁵ Affective polarization posits that partisanship and people’s relationships to political parties have become “salient markers of social identity,” which has resulted in increased levels of partisan conflict.⁴⁶ For example, research has shown increased levels of affective polarization means people are less willing to have social or romantic

⁴³ Geiger, Abigail. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Pew Research Center* (blog), June 12, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

⁴⁴ Geiger. “Political Polarization in the American Public.”

⁴⁵ Dias, Nicholas, and Yphtach Lelkes. “The Nature of Affective Polarization: Disentangling Policy Disagreement from Partisan Identity.” *American Journal of Political Science*, June 7, 2021, 1. ajs.12628. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12628>.

⁴⁶ McCarty, Nolan M. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. 62.

relationships with members of the other party.⁴⁷ Affective polarization is different from the type elite polarization we can measure among members of Congress. While the core idea of holding opposing viewpoints is the same in both concepts, elite polarization in Congress is usually calculated based on a member's DW-Nominate score, a mathematical measurement that uses lawmakers' votes to place them in a two-dimensional ideological space, where we can compare their score across time over a left-right spectrum. Starting around the 1970s, both parties in both chambers moved further and further from center, but Republicans did more so.⁴⁸

The role of social identity is at the heart of affective polarization. Affective polarization largely is grounded in sociologist Henri Tajfel's social identity theory. Social identity, as Tajfel defines it, is a "common form of group identification that involves the incorporation of group membership in the self-concept."⁴⁹ With affective polarization, political partisanship essentially becomes a part of someone's social identity. What are some of the implications of this fundamental transformation? Research has shown citizens derive satisfaction and feel their self-esteem increases from seeing their party out-perform the other. Additionally, affective polarization has implications for how we process political information as well. For example, Republican voters may be intensely skeptical of information a Democratic pollster provides them, as they view that person, a member of an "out-group," as inherently untrustworthy. Those

⁴⁷ Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no.1(2019): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>

⁴⁸ Drew DeSilver, "The Polarization in Today's Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades," *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>.

⁴⁹ Leonie Huddy, *From Group Identity to Political Cohesion and Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 739.

voters may have never met that pollster before but have already decided they are untrustworthy because they are labelled a Democrat.

The concept of social identities is also relevant to how Campbell et al. outlined partisan attachment in their canonical work, *The American Voter*. They write that partisan attachment can be defined not only as “a set of beliefs, but also [as] feelings that culminate in a sense of ‘psychological attachment’ to a political group”.⁵⁰ In later research building on Campbell et al., Green et al. contend partisan attachment is analogous to most forms of social identification. Developing around our teenage years, partisan attachment is a fairly stable identity. One of the exceptions, however, is that if a person experiences a highly traumatic event, their partisanship may shift consequently. The other exception, Green et al. write, is that “partisan attachments can be disrupted by the emergence of new parties that appeal to voters on the basis of linguistic, regional, or religious affiliation.”⁵¹ While technically not a new party apparatus, the post-2016 Republican party looks very different than its more moderate predecessor. Bolstered by Trump’s insurgency, today’s Republican party is more grounded in concerns over its identity than in its policy positions. Both affective polarization and partisan attachment underscore the importance of group identification, which is a recurring theme throughout this dissertation. Like political partisans, conspiratorial groups rely on group ties to maintain the strength of the groups’ identity as well as protect the image they want to maintain going forward. QAnon’s rallying cry of “where we go one, we go all (WWG1WGA)” is indicative of this sentiment.

⁵⁰ Huddy, *From Group Identity*, 739.

⁵¹ Donald P. Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004), 205.

Finally, it is equally important to mention here the role of political anxiety and how it can impact decision making. Research shows that, while anxiety over politics triggers increased engagement with those topics, it does so in ways that may be hurtful. Albertson and Gadarian find political anxiety causes people to prioritize threatening information—of which QAnon is full. Additionally, increased levels of political anxiety can increase support for protective and potentially antidemocratic policies.⁵² In QAnon lore, one of many examples of antidemocratic policies includes developing and then acting on plans to take part in the attempt to subvert the results of the 2020 Presidential Election on January 6th, 2021. Former President Trump, who recently was indicted for his role in those events, also was supposed to spearhead a “mass cleansing” of the United States government to rid it of alleged child predators and out-party members. Termed “the Storm” by believers, it has yet to materialize.

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

At their core, conspiracy theories are about making sense of a world that is oftentimes scary and unpredictable. For believers, conspiracy theories often serve as the proverbial “light in the dark,” offering comfort and security where they perceive none. Anxious believers are often drawn to conspiracy theories because they purport to explain what can feel like the unexplainable. There are several related terms that often get mixed in when discussing conspiracy theories. To prevent any confusion later in this dissertation, it is necessary to define the following terms.

⁵² Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139963107>.

Persistent political anxiety only amplifies the effects of what Barkun describes as the “conspiracist worldview.” In this mindset, there are no accidents; “everything is connected,” and nothing should be taken for granted.⁵³ The conspiracist worldview is nearly identical to Muirhead and Rosenblum’s more general concept of conspiracism:

Conspiracism tries to make sense of a disorderly and complicated world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events. In this way, for both people on the left and those on the right, [conspiracism] gives order and meaning to occurrences that, in their minds, defy standard or official explanations. The logic of [conspiracism] makes sense of things by imposing a version of proportionality: world-changing events cannot happen because of the actions of single obscure person or a string of senseless accidents.⁵⁴

Masking fear with a veil of skepticism, the conspiracy theorist sees the world in dire terms—one in which their safety and that of their friends and family is constantly at risk. Conspiracism thus refers to the willingness to believe in specific conspiracy theories. The literature makes no specific distinctions between conspiracism and a conspiratorial worldview. Therefore, this dissertation uses them interchangeably to refer to the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Barkun defines conspiracy theories as attempts “to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.”⁵⁵ Finally, a legal conspiracy, which comes into play in chapter four, is when two or more people come together, make an agreement to violate a law, and then act on that agreement.

⁵³ Barkun, *Culture*, 3–4.

⁵⁴ Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 2.

⁵⁵ Barkun, *Culture*, 7.

Newer research has proposed a theoretical distinction between what the authors call classical and new conspiracism. On the one hand, classical conspiracism attempts to bring a sense of order to a world a person perceives as anarchic through forming conspiracy theories to explain the perceived disorder. The conspiracy theory that the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States were an “inside job” is an example of classical conspiracism. In addition to making public pronouncements about their belief in the theory, many “9/11 Truthers,” as they called themselves, created meticulous writings and documentaries as evidence of the alleged conspiracy to try and prove their case to the rest of the world.

On the other hand, new conspiracism “lacks a sense of history, scope, and scale. The new conspiracism is not defending ultimate values; often the stakes are low, of the moment, and no values are articulated at all.”⁵⁶ This conspiracism relies on assertion and repetition to make itself known. For example, Donald Trump first articulated the “Birther” conspiracy during the 2012 presidential election. He claimed then President Obama was ineligible to hold the presidency as he allegedly was not born in the United States—a requirement to hold the office. He also claimed the same about current Vice President Kamala Harris, whose parents were of Indian and Jamaican origin. Unlike the “9/11 Truthers,” Trump produced no “evidence” to prove his alleged case. Rather, the only evidence came in the form of countless pronouncements on his social media channels and in his speeches and media appearances. Trump resurrected the Birther conspiracy during the run up to the 2024 presidential election, alleging that his former U.N. Ambassador and then-Republican candidate Nikki Haley was not eligible to be president. Haley was born in South Carolina to Punjabi Sikh parents from India. On the campaign trail, Trump

⁵⁶ Muirhead and Rosenblum, *Lot of People*, 28–29.

gleefully mispronounced Haley’s birth name, Nimarata Nikki Randhawa, calling her “Nimbra,” and saying “It’s a little bit of a takeoff on her name. You know, her name, wherever she may come from.”⁵⁷

New conspiracism thrives in the modern media ecosystem that is driven by clicks and revenue streams. The relationship between the two echoes how former Speaker of the House Gingrich was able to take advantage of cable news in the 1990s:

The revolution in broadcast technology that allows anyone to disseminate what he or she writes or says without any intermediary and at no cost. This has displaced the gatekeepers, the producers, editors, and scholars who decided what was worthy of dissemination. The way is opened for conspiracy entrepreneurs who initiate and disseminate a seemingly infinite array of wild accusations.⁵⁸

Modern conspiratorial content creators such as Alex Jones and Charlie Kirk can dominate the headlines with their made-for-social-media stunts, outlandish claims, and willingness to do whatever it takes to get publicity, no matter the facts of a situation.

Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories? Cognitive Approaches

There are several explanations for why people believe in conspiracy theories. To date, there is little academic research that shows belief in these theories correlates with any psychological deficiencies or proclivities. Belief in a conspiracy theory is not a sign of mental illness, as popular culture commonly portrays.⁵⁹ In fact, research from various disciplines has

⁵⁷ Sarah Beth Hensley et al., “‘Wherever She Came From’: Trump Defends Promoting False Birther Claim about Haley,” *ABC News*, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-defends-promoting-false-birther-claim-haley/story?id=106565639>.

⁵⁸ Muirhead and Rosenblum, *Lot of People*, 40.

⁵⁹ Bowes, Shauna M, Thomas H Costello, and Arber Tasimi. “The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates.” *Psychological Bulletin*, n.d. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

shown “conspiracy theories are not a marginal phenomenon, and their presence extends through the entire political spectrum and up and down the social ladder.”⁶⁰ In order to understand how it is possible that so many people believe in them, I would like to draw from the literature on social cognition—namely, the idea of “System One” and “System Two” thinking.

Within this literature, there is a key idea that humans have two complementary cognitive systems in place to process information about their social and physical environments. System One thinking can be thought of as a person’s emergency response system. It is quick to judge and evaluates information via a person’s intuition, emotions, and judgement. For example, if you accidentally place your hand on a hot stove, your System One thinking springs into action, immediately sensing the pain and heat and then telling your muscles to pull your hand away quickly. System Two thinking, on the other hand, happens at a much slower pace. Rather than evaluating a situation through intuition and snap judgements, System Two processes draw upon analytic thinking, a thorough assessment of available information through rational deliberation.⁶¹ Your system two thinking might question why you did not know that the stove was hot in the first place. Who left the stove on and why did they do so? Could someone have left the stove on purposefully to cause harm? Belief in conspiracy theories is a result of both systems, “[as] most conspiracy theories [originate] from System 1 thinking, but people justify and maintain them through System 2 thinking.”⁶² Fueled by affective polarization and political anxiety, people often initially come to believe in conspiracy theories through snap judgments they repeat, mull over,

⁶⁰ Michael Butter, *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 132.

⁶¹ Butter, *Handbook*, 188–89.

⁶² Butter, *Handbook*, 190.

and process through the frames in which we view the world. If one is already prone to general conspiracism, they may find comfort in narratives that confirm their existing suppositions and thereby further their belief in conspiracy theories.

Additional Reasons Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories

Douglas et al. outline three reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. First, they argue, people have epistemic motives: conspiracy theories “satisfy important social psychological motives [including] the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty.”⁶³ In the way that a good gamified system taps into our needs for competency (self-determination theory), so do conspiracy theories fill the need for us to understand the world around ourselves. Secondly, people have existential motives to believe in conspiracies, particularly their “desire for control and security.”⁶⁴ For example, QAnon frequently proclaimed former President Trump was going to save the United States from collapse or to free innocent children from being sex-trafficked by Democratic Party leaders. If one does not have the wherewithal to know any better, these are scary and concerning things. Finally, people’s beliefs in conspiracies are driven by social motives, or “the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group.”⁶⁵ During the 2016 Presidential Election, Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton made a campaign speech in which she said: “You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? ... The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And unfortunately

⁶³ Karen M. Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (2019): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.

⁶⁴ Douglas et al., “Understanding,” 12.

⁶⁵ Douglas et al., “Understanding,” 13.

there are people like that. And he has lifted them up.”⁶⁶ While the content of her critique may hold some truth, the comment took the conservative political sphere and QAnon world by storm, with both Trump and Q appropriating the remarks into a rallying cry. People proclaimed their pride in being a “deplorable,” and it became a part of their identity. When Q said that being a “deplorable” was a positive trait, it only made believers feel more welcome in the Q universe.

Researchers have found there are several other reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. The first group of those explanations deals with how conspiracy theories impact our emotions. For example, Van Prooijen and Douglas find that people believe in conspiracy theories because they find them exciting and entertaining.⁶⁷ Another group of scholars contend boredom can lead people to believe in conspiracy theories, though the authors caution that the evidence is only correlational in this instance.⁶⁸ The next group of explanations for why people believe in conspiracy theories deals with their impact on belief systems: Van der Linden finds people who already are predisposed to ideological extremism are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories in the first place.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Kate Reilly, “Read Hillary Clinton’s ‘Basket of Deplorables’ Remarks on Trump Supporters,” *Time*, September 10, 2016, <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>.

⁶⁷ Prooijen, Jan-Willem van, and Karen M. Douglas. “Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of an Emerging Research Domain.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (December 2018): 897–908. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2530>.

⁶⁸ Brotherton, Robert, and Silan Eser. “Bored to Fears: Boredom Proneness, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Theories.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 80 (July 2015): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.02.011>.

⁶⁹ Linden, Sander van der. “The Conspiracy-Effect: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories (about Global Warming) Decreases pro-Social Behavior and Science Acceptance.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 87 (December 2015): 171–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.045>.

As to whether ideological extremism correlates with party affiliation and belief in conspiracy theories, the literature is still developing a more conclusive answer. Pasek et al., however, does find that, in the case of the “Birther” conspiracy theory, Republicans are more likely to believe it. Finally,, and perhaps most convincingly, Oliver and Wood find those people who possess a willingness to believe in unseen forces and who are attracted to Manichean narratives are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.⁷⁰ Their findings have the most widespread potential implications. For example, about 63% of Americans would identify as believing in a religion.⁷¹ Thus, if we believe Oliver and Wood’s findings, that means about two-thirds of the adult population in the United States potentially believes in a conspiracy theory.

I would like to conclude this section of the chapter by briefly reviewing some of the personality traits associated with conspiratorial belief. In popular culture, conspiracy theorists frequently are portrayed as tinfoil-hat-wearing lunatics, rambling on about how the world is out to get them. The actual picture is much more complex. Psychological research into conspiracy beliefs shows people turn toward conspiracy theories to fulfill needs they feel are unmet. A perceived lack of safety and a desire to bring order to their environment are other drivers of belief. Finally, as the research into affective polarization tells us, conspiracy belief also is driven by the desire to see their community/in-group in a superior position to that of the out-group.⁷²

⁷⁰ Oliver and Wood, “Conspiracy Theories.”

⁷¹ Nadeem, Reem. “1. How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), September 13, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

⁷² Bowes, Costello, and Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind,” 3–8.

How Conspiracy Theories Spread

Scholars have identified several mechanisms by which conspiracy theories spread. One is preference falsification, which is when “individuals [hide] their support for an unpopular belief until a critical mass of like-minded people creates a sense of safety in numbers by publicly advocating the idea.”⁷³ For example, many loved ones, friends, and employers of the attendees of the January 6th, 2021, rally at the U.S. Capitol claimed in the aftermath of the riot that the attendee they knew was peaceful and never claimed to believe in conspiracy theories. That was likely because the person in question was hiding their true beliefs until they felt safe enough to express those beliefs publicly.

Another way conspiracy theories can spread is by “following the leader,” where “individuals take cues from like-minded opinion leaders.”⁷⁴ When individuals see public figures expressing support for a conspiracy theory, it makes them feel safe enough to do so. Additionally, as the media inevitably repeats these pronouncements, they can reinforce the shared group belief in that conspiracy theory. The follow-the-leader mechanism shows Zaller’s theory that elite-driven communications shape public opinion still holds true.⁷⁵

The third way conspiracy theories spread follows an idea that originated in evolutionary biology—costly signaling, which is when “you need an efficient way of signaling your iconoclastic beliefs to strangers so that you can find like-minded individuals and mobilize

⁷³ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories*, 102.

⁷⁴ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories*, 101.

⁷⁵ John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1992.

politically.”⁷⁶ Costly signals are those that are costly to make and designed to inspire trust in the signaler’s target audience. While the signal may be genuine in nature, that does not mean the information is. In 2021, Danny Lemoi launched one of the largest anti-vaccine Telegram channels to promote the use of the drug Ivermectin to cure COVID-19, even highlighting instructions on how to administer it to children. While there is a variant of Ivermectin that is safe and designed for human use, Lemoi both ingested daily and promoted the variant most used as a veterinary-grade deworming medication. Many participants in the Telegram channel touted this drug’s alleged power to cure everything from COVID-19, cancer, and depression, to even Down Syndrome and cerebral palsy in infants. Lemoi died on March 23, 2023, from an enlarged heart—a common side-effect of misusing veterinary-grade Ivermectin.⁷⁷ While his channel lost some members after his death, as of this writing it is still active.

The final and most accepted explanation in the literature for how conspiracy theories spread is herd behavior, which occurs when “rational individuals with limited information will sometimes defer to crowd behavior and ignore private knowledge.”⁷⁸ Politics is not something the average person truly cares to learn more about. Much of the population does not want or need to understand the science behind taking Ivermectin and how it impacts their daily lives. In the case of COVID-19, they feared the mainstream vaccinations because of their association with global elites and Democratic politics—even though scientists developed many of these vaccines

⁷⁶ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories*, 103.

⁷⁷ “An Ivermectin Influencer Died. Now His Followers Are Worried about Their Own ‘Severe’ Symptoms,” *The Transmission*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.unmc.edu/healthsecurity/transmission/2023/03/14/an-ivermectin-influencer-died-now-his-followers-are-worried-about-their-own-severe-symptoms/>.

⁷⁸ Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories*, 100.

initially under the Trump administration. Lemoi and other influencers like him appear to be much more approachable and “safe” leaders, as compared to the Democratic-voting actors and movie stars who promoted the vaccine.

Does Belief in Conspiracy Theories Lead to Radicalization?

The academic literature on the relationships among radicalization, online spaces, and conspiracy theories is still developing and but quickly has grown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can categorize what we know so far into several different categories. The first studies the online behavior of already radicalized people. To that end, there is tentative evidence that exposure to radical content is associated with extremist offline and online attitudes.⁷⁹ We also know the volume of exposure to misinformation increases someone’s likelihood of believing in it; the same likely can be said of conspiracy theorizing.⁸⁰ Repetition and volume of exposure to violent content are key elements to furthering the process of radicalization.

Research has shown even the weakest interpersonal ties can reinforce group cohesion.⁸¹ For example, a single instance of exposure to conspiratorial content online could entice someone to support that conspiracy theory. Relatedly, some scholars have found that even knowing an

⁷⁹ Hassan, Ghayda, Sébastien Brouillette-Alarie, Séraphin Alava, Divina Frau-Meigs, Lysiane Lavoie, Arber Fetiu, Wynn Paul Varela, et al. “Exposure to Extremist Online Content Could Lead to Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence.” Edited by Herbert Scheithauer, Vincenz Leuschner, Nils Böckler, Babak Akhgar, and Holger Nitsch. *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1–2 (September 5, 2018): 71–88. <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-170233>.

⁸⁰ Nyhan, Brendan. “Facts and Myths about Misperceptions.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 3 (August 1, 2020): 220–36. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.34.3.220>.

⁸¹ Granovetter, Mark S. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.

offline friend involved in an extremist community is a catalyst for involvement.⁸² We know conspiracy theories provide clear narratives that divide the world into in- and out-groups, which reinforces the in-groups' sense of uniqueness and, in some cases, sense of moral superiority.⁸³ Media, from radio to social media and cable news, also serve as a crucial informational resource for potential and existing believers. These platforms provide a place for learning about the conspiracy theory, sharing information, and developing relationships with other believers. In short, they can provide the framework, motivation, and call to action to organize "off-line."

Uscinski et. al contend there are two ways the literature approaches the link between this group cohesion and violent action. They write:

On the one hand, a large body of evidence suggests that conspiracy theory beliefs are best accounted for by durable predispositions, worldviews, and identities, which predate the adoption of specific beliefs. Such a perspective tends to put less weight on random exposure as the explanation for conspiracy theory beliefs or associated behaviors. On the other hand, many recent studies conceptualize conspiracy theories like a virus (e.g. and *infodemic (sic)*), which spreads from person to person, starting with exposure, which then leads to belief and behavior.⁸⁴

One example of recent research investigating the role of worldviews and identities as they relate to conspiracy theories' radicalizing potential focuses on the role of political institutions as a linchpin in the radicalization process. Vegetti and Littvay propose that people who hold conspiratorial views "[see] official political institutions as the ultimate scapegoat for societal problems. By constructing a system of mutually reinforcing beliefs about the (dishonest) nature

⁸² Pete Simi and Robert Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism," *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 29.

⁸³ Butter, *Routledge Handbook*.

⁸⁴ Joseph Uscinski et al., "Cause and Effect: On the Antecedents and Consequences of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47, (October 2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2022.101364>.

and the (malevolent) aims of the forces that fuels people’s animosity towards the institutions, the procedures, and the actors that are central to representative democracies.”⁸⁵ To support their argument, the authors furnish survey data from several MTurk panels. While they do not find evidence for an explicit causal link between conspiracy theories and violence, they find that, by channeling individual resentment toward political goals, people are more likely to support the use of violence in order to achieve those goals.⁸⁶ As the January 6th, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol made evident, conspiracy theories can act as a force multiplier when it comes to people’s political frustrations, thereby incentivizing them to use violence to achieve those goals.

In conclusion, while there is no “smoking gun” that clearly illustrates that belief in or exposure to conspiracy theories leads to radicalization, we do know conspiracism strongly reinforces the sense of one’s in-group superiority and desire to protect it and use violence if necessary. Exposure to conspiratorial content on various media platforms only reinforces these sentiments. This dissertation will revisit the topic of radicalization and conspiracy theories in chapter six.

Dissertation Structure

In the following two chapters of this dissertation, I present the results of two survey experiments designed to test the gamification mechanism in real-time. The first experiment examines whether gamification increased belief in a nonpolitical conspiracy theory. In this instance, I chose the idea that renowned hip-hop artist Tupac faked his death in 1996 to escape

⁸⁵ Federico Vegetti and Levente Littvay, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Attitudes toward Political Violence,” *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 52, no. 1 (March 2022): <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.17>.

⁸⁶ Vegetti and Littvay, “Belief,” 19.

the pressures of stardom. The results from this study show gamification likely increased this conspiracy theory's persuasive power. Chapter four expands on the potential persuasive power of gamification, but it uses a different, and explicitly political, conspiracy theory: that there was alleged rampant voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election. However, the results from this study were mixed. While certain independent variables were statistically significant, the study's overall hypothesis was not. I explore more reasons for this differential in the chapter itself.

Chapter five consists of a qualitative analysis that explores the QAnon conspiracy theory in much greater depth, with the goal of providing some contextual depth to this dissertation's overall argument by bringing together the four main elements of its theoretical framework: gamification, conspiracism, polarization, and radicalization. Specifically, the chapter investigates the key players in QAnon, what the conspiracy theory's field of play looks like, as well as its "rules of the game." The chapter concludes with an analysis of several first-hand testimonials from believers and their friends and family. Finally, the dissertation's concluding chapter summarizes the findings from all three empirical chapters and explores the radicalizing potential of online conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

CHAPTER 3: HOW DID TUPAC REALLY DIE? EXPLORING THE POWER OF GAMIFICATION

Introduction

From indoor cycling, to hamburgers, to learning a new language, gamification is a powerful force for behavioral change. Chapter two examined how exactly gamification can motivate behavior changes in unexpected ways. To reiterate, gamification involves designing systems, processes, and services similar to the experiences games provided, with the aim of driving a change in behavior that is ultimately beneficial to the user of the gamified system.⁸⁷ Games are a form of play, which can be defined as any intrinsically motivated activity that provides a sense of enjoyment and pleasure. Because play is such a wide-ranging concept, so too can we expect to see a wide range of gamified systems across different phenomena.

Scholars have theorized that gamification includes three main components. The first component comprises what are called motivational affordances. These are the mechanisms or tools that entice the target of the gamified system to act in a certain way. For example, users of Peloton fitness's Lanebreak are motivated intrinsically to win the game by scoring as many points as possible to increase their standing on the leaderboard and win the round in which they are competing. In this instance, points and the leaderboard are the specific affordances that entice the system's target to try and win the game. The second key component of gamification involves constructing the desired psychological outcomes that can result from using the system. In this instance, there are multiple potential desired psychological outcomes. With Lanebreak, Peloton seeks to increase users' interest to exercise on a more consistent basis in a way they find

⁸⁷ Hassan and Hamari, "Gameful Civic Engagement," 1.

enjoyable. Lanebreak was designed to capture the interests of an audience who may not find a traditional instructor-led cycling class to be motivating. To that end, Peloton also wants to entice users who may not find the instructor-led cycling class to be entertaining to stay with the platform with alternative options. The final component of gamification includes the behavioral outcomes that result from use of a gamified system. For Lanebreak users, this could include an increased fitness level and an improvement in their overall health.⁸⁸ For Peloton, they have preserved the subscription fees of a user they might have lost if Lanebreak had not been available.

As with Nguyen's distinction between accidental and purposeful gamification in the previous chapter, gamification can serve both good and bad ends. Lanebreak can help users improve their health and fitness, but it also helps Peloton maintain their bottom line. Educators increasingly are using gamification to help motivate students to study and perform at a higher academic level. Kahoot and Duolingo are two examples of apps that gamify educational content to incentivize students to pay greater attention to their content. While these apps might increase the short-term retention of material, they also risk shortening a student's attention span even further.

This chapter seeks to broaden the present theoretical understanding of gamification and whether it can be applied to conspiracy theories. Using an experimental format, this chapter investigates whether gamification has the potential to increase the persuasiveness of a nonpolitical conspiracy theory. Based on my understanding of the literature and the motivational affordances at play in the QAnon conspiracy theory, I hypothesized that we should see

⁸⁸ "Peloton Lanebreak, A Gamified Workout Experience," *Peloton*, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.onepeloton.com/bike/lanebreak>.

gamification impact the persuasiveness of the 1996 conspiracy theory that hip-hop star Tupac Shakur actually was not murdered but faked his own death to escape the pressures of stardom. Shakur's penchant for coded lyrics sets up an ideal test case for this dissertation's key research question, as I will explain later. In this next section of the chapter, I outline the events that gave rise to the conspiracy theories surrounding Tupac's death.

How Did Tupac Really Die? The Birth of a Hip-Hop Conspiracy Theory

On September 7th, 1996, renowned hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur was shot multiple times after leaving a boxing match on the Las Vegas strip in a car driven by the owner of his record label Death Row, Marion Hugh "Suge" Knight, Jr. 89 A little over a week later, Shakur died at an area hospital of his injuries. He was 25 years old.⁹⁰ For over 20 years, the murder remained unsolved. Numerous rumors circulated as to how the music world had lost such a talent in the prime of his career. Numerous conspiracy theories began to circulate in the media that tried to make sense of how someone who was considered a once-in-a-generation talent could be taken from this world so senselessly. Some theories posited Tupac had orchestrated the whole sequence of events to escape the pressures of stardom. In some variations of the resulting conspiracy theory, Tupac was living on a farm anywhere from Eastern Europe to South America.

Another offshoot of the theory Suge Jacob Knight, a son of the Death Row Records founder, promoted claimed Tupac was still alive and living in Malaysia. In 2018, Knight posted a

⁸⁹ Tom Connick, "Is Tupac Alive? A Comprehensive Guide to the Rumours and Conspiracy Theories," *NME* (blog), October 4, 2018, <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/tupac-still-alive-rumours-2386712>.

⁹⁰ Meredith Deliso, "Tupac Shakur Timeline: Key Events in Rapper's Murder Investigation," *ABC News*, accessed August 28, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/tupac-shakur-timeline-key-events-rappers-murder-investigation/story?id=101497618>.

series of photos on Instagram that he alleged showed proof of the theory. Perhaps the most realistic of the offshoots held that Tupac escaped to Cuba with the assistance of his godmother and step-aunt, Assata Shakur, also known as Joanne Chesimard. Chesimard, a member of the Black Liberation Army, escaped a New Jersey prison after being held for the alleged murder of a New Jersey state trooper. Chesimard later received political asylum from the Cuban government in the early 1980s.⁹¹ She was the first woman added to the FBI's most wanted list and remains on it to this date.

According to journalist Tom Connick, there are several key moments in the timeline of Tupac's murder that have generated suspicion. The first is on the night of the shooting itself: Suge Knight, who was sitting directly next to Tupac and driving the car, only received minor graze wounds, despite over ten shots being fired at his companion. To many fans, this was evidence of either one of two things. First, whoever was shooting was trying to only target Tupac. Tupac was not wearing his signature bulletproof vest, despite his insistence upon wearing one after being involved in a shooting two years prior. Some argued he felt safe enough to not wear one in a controlled public environment, such as the boxing match he had been attending. But, second, others saw Knight's limited injuries as further evidence that Tupac's killing was a highly orchestrated event: he only would have taken the vest off if he knew he was not going to be harmed, particularly because of the impact the previous shooting had on his sense of safety.

Further, there was a presumed discrepancy between how the medical examiner listed Tupac's height and weight versus what the public knew about his personal details. The examined body was lighter and shorter than what many people believed Tupac could be. On an unverified

⁹¹ "8 Things to Know About Assata Shakur and the Calls to Bring Her Back from Cuba," *Essence*, October 26, 2020, <http://www.essence.com/culture/assata-shakur-facts-call-return-from-cuba/>.

copy of the autopsy report several tabloids obtained, Tupac was described as 6 feet tall and as weighing 215 pounds. However, an earlier driver's license lists him as 5 foot 10 inches and weighing 168 pounds. The tabloids also allegedly leaked several gruesome autopsy photos, and in one, Tupac was missing his trademark Machiavelli neck tattoo.⁹² After Tupac was cremated, the medical examiner retired and, to date, has disappeared from the public eye. An unverified Reddit post from a grandchild of the coroner, Ed Brown, claimed Brown was a quiet man whose silence was due to a cancer diagnosis that eventually proved fatal.⁹³

Finally, most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, Tupac was a well-known connoisseur of history and poetry. He had deep familial connections to the Black Panther movement and became involved in the communist party while living in Baltimore as a teen. He also spent several of his high school years as a student at Baltimore's famed School of the Arts, a public magnet high school. There, Tupac studied ballet, poetry, and theater. He was reportedly a great fan of Niccolo Machiavelli, the Renaissance philosopher and political strategist. He even released his last album under his new stage name, "Makaveli," in addition to getting the neck tattoo. On the surface it may seem Tupac was just honoring an idol, but to a conspiracy-minded person, when the letters in Makaveli are rearranged, a hidden message is revealed: "Am alive

⁹² Tariq Tahir, "Tupac Is Alive after FAKING His Own Autopsy, Claim Conspiracy Nuts," *The US Sun*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.the-sun.com/news/1464459/tupac-alive-faking-autopsy-picture-coroners-report/>.

⁹³ u/BrallyTX, "My Grandfather Was the Coroner (Ed Brown) for Tupac Shakur. This Is His Official Coroner's Belt Buckle," *Reddit*, R/Tupac, January 30, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/Tupac/comments/evwdbk/my_grandfather_was_the_coroner_ed_brown_for_tupac/.

k.”⁹⁴ Amongst a core group of fans, the letter “K” is also thought to represent the name “Kasanova the Don,” another hip-hop artist who many fans claim is Tupac himself in disguise.

When I conducted the survey in this chapter in the Spring of 2022, police still had zero leads with enough actionable information to pursue formal charges for the murder. However, in September 2023, Las Vegas police announced they had arrested a 60-year-old man named Duane Keith Davis for allegedly orchestrating Shakur’s murder. The police claimed Davis had long been a suspect, but they had lacked enough concrete evidence to make an arrest and proceed to trial. As of this writing, Davis remains in jail awaiting trial.⁹⁵ No matter the variation of the conspiracy theory, the theories and fan behavior surrounding Tupac’s murder are illustrative of a common pattern found in many conspiracy theories that is worth further investigation. Conspiracy theories can help people make sense of the sometimes scary and unpredictable world around them; they provide order where there is chaos and sentiments that evoke existential questions about who we are as humans.⁹⁶ In Tupac’s case, his often-coded lyrics set up an ideal scenario to test this dissertation’s main arguments. In the remainder of the chapter, I provide an overview of my research design and statistical analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the results. Appendices at the end of the chapter include the survey questions I deployed as well as the other materials I used in the experiment.

⁹⁴ See Connick, “Is Tupac Alive?”

⁹⁵ “Tupac Shakur Murder: Suspect Duane Davis to Be Arraigned on a Murder Charge Thursday,” *CNN*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/us/tupac-murder-suspect-duane-davis-arraignment/index.html>.

⁹⁶ See Douglas et al., “Understanding.”

Study Design and Demographics

After receiving clearance from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) to run the study, I designed the present survey experiment in Qualtrics and deployed it in the Spring of 2022 through Cloud Research’s Prime Panels online survey-research platform.⁹⁷ Prime Panels is an online market research platform that makes it easier for researchers to access a pool of high-quality research participants than through traditional in-person survey research. It is also much less expensive. In recent years, social scientists again have recognized the fundamental power this type of research design possesses in answering some of our most pressing questions. This renewed interest in experimentation largely can be attributed to the rapid democratization of computing power as well as the much lower costs of platforms such as Prime Panels. Collecting materials, cataloging participants, recording interviews, and visiting polling stations requires an immense amount of manpower and money, which typically means only scholars with the largest research budgets previously could afford to perform in-person surveys. While there were initial concerns over the generalizability of results that stem from studies conducted on platforms such as MTurk and Prime Panels, subsequent research has shown the impacts on generalizability are minimal with appropriate study designs.⁹⁸

All English-speaking Americans over the age of 18 on Cloud Research were eligible to participate in the study. Approximately 410 people participated, which resulted in 342 usable responses after cleaning the data for accuracy and completion.⁹⁹ All research subjects were

⁹⁷ The study’s IRB approval number is 22-069.

⁹⁸ Kevin J. Mullinix et al., “The Generalizability of Survey Experiments,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2, no. 2 (2015): 109–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2015.19>.

⁹⁹ I took the survey in (and Qualtrics estimated completion time at) about 8–10 minutes; I also

compensated \$1.15 for their participation. Subjects had 10 minutes to complete the study, although the average completion time was 6 minutes and 27 seconds, with a median completion time of 5 minutes and 43 seconds. Table 1 provides an overview of relevant study demographics.

Table 1. Gender of Survey Respondents.

Gender of Survey Respondents	# of Respondents (approximate)
Male	175
Female	232
Non-Binary	3
Total	410

As illustrated in Table 1, approximately 175 of the survey participants were male and 232 were female, assuming they accurately reported this information to Prime Panels. What research we have typically supports the idea that men endorse conspiracy theories at a greater rate than women do for several reasons. Additionally, existing research suggests Republicans are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than Democrats, and we know that more women identify as Democrats than as Republicans.¹⁰⁰ In new research that examines the gendered dynamics of belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, Cassese, Farhart, and Miller argue people who exhibit

gave respondents two minutes to solve the puzzle. Cloud Research estimated expected completion time at 10 minutes. Any survey response that took less than a third of the overall time warranted review. I did not delete all answers that fell under three minutes automatically. Instead, I reviewed each to determine if people did at least try. If they did, and their answers made sense, I left them in the data. On average, most responses I removed were completed in about 90 seconds. They often were submitted by young men in the 18–30 range. I noticed they also tended to give nonsensical answers in the open-ended questions and selected the middle answer for most of the other questions.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph E. Uscinski et al., “Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, no. 3 (April 28, 2020):, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-015>.

greater levels of learned helplessness—which refers to “the attributions of helplessness that some individuals make when they perceive that they have little or no control over aversive events”—typically exhibit higher levels of conspiratorial beliefs.¹⁰¹ This trait is typically, though not exclusively, higher among women than it is in men. The authors caution that more research is needed to tease out the nuances of this relationship. Thus, all the above is to suggest that the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and gender is not as clear cut as it may seem in the media. Both women and men are susceptible to the allure of conspiracy theories, women to a slightly lesser extent than men.

Next, Table 2 illustrates the age composition of participants. In total, there were approximately 93 18–30-year-olds, 181 30–50-year-olds, 114 50–70-year-olds, and 22 70-plus-year-olds. Mainstream media characterizations typically present conspiracy theorists as conservative older men. In all actuality, the research into age and tendency toward conspiratorial beliefs is still developing and merits further scholarly consideration. At present, the strongest predictor of conspiratorial beliefs is party identification. We know that Republican men, who tend to skew older, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than any other demographic. However, this logic hinges on research based on party identification, not on the relationship between age and conspiratorial beliefs. New research suggests belief in conspiracy theory begins at a much earlier age—14 to be exact. Another study conducted by the same authors suggests conspiratorial beliefs in eighteen-year-olds is higher than in middle-aged adults. In addition to the typical stressors that come with one’s teenage years, the authors contend a decrease in digital

¹⁰¹ Erin C. Cassese, Christina E. Farhart, and Joanne M. Miller, “Gender Differences in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs,” *Politics & Gender* (2020): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000409>.

literacy in an information environment full of misinformation, combined with high levels of social media use, as well as the existential stress COVID-19 school closures caused, are responsible for driving these beliefs. However, the authors caution that more research is needed, particularly because of the ethical implications of working with children under the age of 18.¹⁰²

Table 2. Age of Survey Respondents.

Age of Survey Respondents	# of Survey Respondents (approximate)
18–30 years old	93
30–50 years old	181
50–70 years old	114
70+ years old	22
Total	410

Survey Design

On online survey research platforms such as Prime Panels, potential participants can choose whether they would like to participate in surveys, based on their interests and whether they meet the study’s requirements. Potential subjects encounter brief text that describes the study and can participate in as many as they wish, assuming they meet the relevant qualifications for each respective study. The present study’s title was “Trust the Game: QAnon and the Paranoid Style of American Politics in the New Millennium.” Based on a research grant of \$750, which was provided by the then College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Tech,

¹⁰² Daniel Jolley, Karen Douglas, and Yvonne Skipper, “Conspiracy Theories Start to Take Hold at Age 14, Study Suggests,” *The Conversation*, February 25, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/conspiracy-theories-start-to-take-hold-at-age-14-study-suggests-156006>.

some 410 subjects were able to participate and received compensation for their participation.¹⁰³ I used the remaining funds to pay for the administrative fees Prime Panels charged.

The study randomly assigned eligible participants to one of two groups. The first group received directions to read a short news story from Rolling Stone magazine about the conspiracy theory that Tupac faked his death. The text of the story is included in Appendix A. The second group received a prompt to solve a short puzzle related to the same conspiracy theory where they were asked to unscramble the word “Makaveli”—Tupac’s chosen stage name he had adopted at the end of his career—to construct the phrase “Am alive K.” Appendix B has the exact text of the game and how participants received it.

All participants received the same pre- and post-test set of survey questions. The pre-test questions were mostly demographic in nature, designed to capture a broad picture of the study’s population. The pre-test survey also included questions on educational attainment, preference for news sources, spirituality, and whether participants believed in extraterrestrial life forms, a trait that frequently lends itself to believing in conspiracy theories. The full battery of questions is included in Appendix C. The next section outlines how I operationalized the studies’ dependent variable, the persuasiveness of gamification. The other questions in the post-test battery (Appendix D) assessed other potential independent variables, as I originally designed this study to serve as a pilot for this dissertation, to see if the main argument was worth further investigation; therefore, there may be limitations on how generalizable the results from this experiment might be, given that any weak spots in the experimental design had not become

¹⁰³ In 2022, several colleges within Virginia Tech were renamed as part of a university-wide reorganization. The College of Architecture and Urban Studies is now known as the College of Architecture, Arts, and Design.

evident yet. Both groups of surveys concluded with a handful of open-ended questions to round out the data being gathered.

Dependent Variable

As in the ensuing chapter, this study's dependent variable is a composite variable that consists of three parts, each of which I explain here. The methodological approach for creating the dependent variable in these two studies drew inspiration from the studies Bethany Albertson and Shana Gadarian conducted in their 2015 book, *Anxious Politics*. In that work, the authors conduct five related studies to learn more about how political anxiety impacts public life. Each study examines political anxiety in a different arena or policy. For example, one study investigates the impact of political anxiety on attitudes toward immigration, while another looks at it in the context of climate change. In each experiment, the authors "manipulate anxiety in multiple ways ... different things are anxiety-inducing to different people, but because the worries are self-generated, we expect that the treatment group is generally anxious."¹⁰⁴ While they acknowledge concerns over validity, they contend this bottom-up approach to experimental manipulation allows researchers to better capture what truly makes participants anxious (and mirror real-world conditions), rather than the standard top-down approach to manipulation where researchers assume a single factor might generate the desired response in their study population.¹⁰⁵ In that spirit, I take a similar approach, which operationalizes persuasion based on the three key aspects of the persuasive process: learning, trust, and attitudes.¹⁰⁶ Following their

¹⁰⁴ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 150.

¹⁰⁶ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 19.

lead, I argue that anxiety pushes people to engage more in the content at hand, which therefore creates opportunities for potential persuasion. If you are anxious about something, there is a greater likelihood that you will care more about it and expend greater cognitive resources trying to remedy that anxiety. It is this space that leaves open the potential for persuasion.

After adjusting for scale, the three dependent variable components were averaged into one using the “egen” command in STATA. Given the polarizing nature of conspiracy theories, and how they are likely to impact the nature of responses participants give, I did not consider any measures of reliability before creating the dependent variable. For example, as I will explain in greater depth below, the second component of the dependent variable, how factual participants thought the conspiracy theory was, received responses that were clustered at the ends of the question scale (zero or ten, which correspond to yes or no). In this instance, I know the data is reliable because it follows the theory.

Table 3 illustrates the first component of the dependent variable—how likely the respondent was to report believing in the conspiracy theory in question at the completion of the study. While directly asking participants if their beliefs have changed may not be the most accurate way of gauging such a shift, these issues should be controlled for when we consider the additional components of the dependent variable. As illustrated, just under half of the study participants reported no change in their beliefs, a very reasonable figure. About 30% of study participants reported they were less likely to believe in the conspiracy theory at the completion of the study. While these findings do not fit with this dissertation’s overall hypothesis, they are still important in showing that gamification can cause behavioral changes, just not in the direction the study hypothesized. Finally, just about a quarter of participants reported they were more likely to believe in the conspiracy theory that Tupac was not murdered, but rather faked his

death to escape Hollywood, which shows some evidence that this project’s overall argument is worth pursuing further.

Table 3. Belief in Conspiracy at the End of the Study.

Likelihood of Belief	# of Participants
More inclined to believe.	40
Neither more, nor less inclined to believe.	77
Not inclined to believe.	63
Total	180

The second component of the dependent variable asked participants at the end of the survey to rate how factual they think the conspiracy theory was. As I explain in greater detail in chapter four, Albertson and Gadarian show how a variety of emotions, political anxiety chief among them, can impact how we process and come to understand factual information. Therefore, including this measure as a part of the dependent variable can help us understand how these emotions might impact the behavioral change gamification potentially drives. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of responses. The survey asked participants to rate how factual they believed the information to be using a standard ten-point Likert scale.

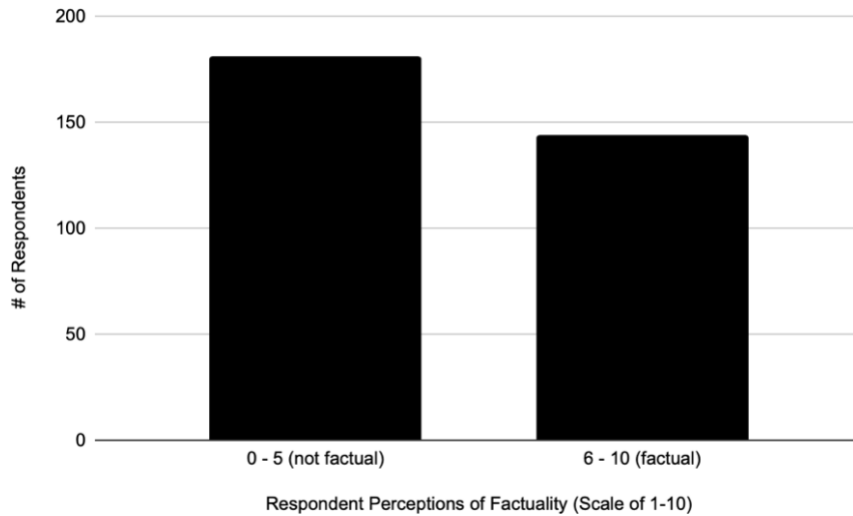


Figure 1. *Respondent Perceptions of Factuality.*

Based on Figure 1 more than half of participants (181) would rate the information found in the conspiracy theory to not be factual, or a five or lower on a ten-point scale. Less than half of study participants (144) rated the information as being factual or rated at a six or more on a ten-point scale. Overall, both treatment and control groups generally rated the information similarly, except toward the far ends of the ratings scale, with differing ratings at levels two and nine. However, as the overall number of participants who held these diverging opinions was quite small, there is not much we can infer at this time. Given the mixed findings from the first component of the dependent variable, these findings show evidence that perhaps gamification affected how persuasive respondents found this conspiracy theory to be.

The final component of the study's dependent variable, how likely participants were to want more information about the conspiracy theory, appears in Figure 2, broken down into treatment versus control group. Interestingly, these data show by a small margin that the treatment group was the least likely to want more information about the conspiracy theory. There could be several reasons for this. First, even though the treatment and control groups were

randomly assigned, those in the treatment group already could have a higher baseline level of knowledge than those in the control group. Tupac was a popular musical artist, so the general baseline of knowledge in the population could be higher than with a more obscure conspiracy theory. Additionally, people in the control group could have found the assigned text they had to read compelling, so that might have piqued their interest even more than the gamification mechanism. Finally, survey design might have played a role in generating this response. In the second survey experiment, which I discuss in the next chapter, a different set of participants received this same question, pertaining to a different conspiracy theory, but were asked to respond in a different way. Rather than using a Likert scale to rate whether they would like more information, participants in the second survey received a prompt to type out the words yes or no to better simulate interactive game play. Rather than being forced to choose between two binary options, yes or no, the scale could have flattened out the true range of participants thoughts.

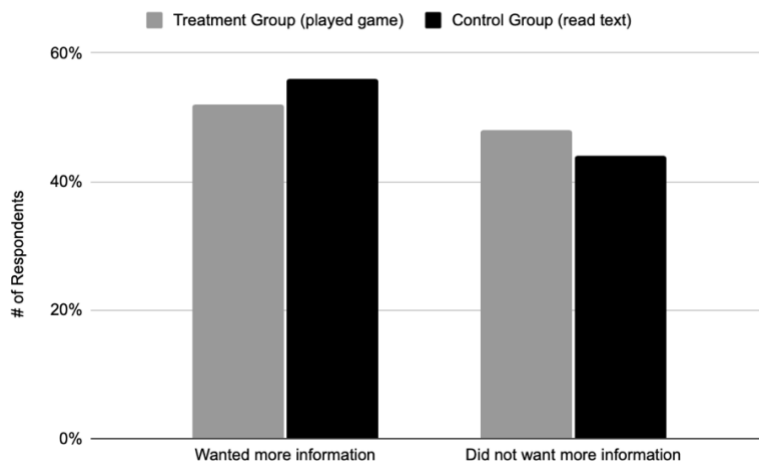


Figure 2. *Likelihood of Wanting More Information (Percentage of Respondents).*

Significance Testing and Regression Analysis

For both this chapter and the following, I conducted all statistical analysis, including checking if the data were distributed normally, in STATA. To do that, I conducted a Shapiro-Wilkes test for normality. Importantly, these tests are sensitive to sample size, so caution should be used when interpreting the results. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4. Shapiro-Wilkes Test for Normality.

Variable	Obs.	W	Prob >z
Factual	338	0.98	0.0031
Excited	337	0.99	0.0148
More Info	338	0.95	0.0000
Meandv	339	0.95	0.0000

The data are distributed normally if $p > 0.05$. In this case, none of the variables are, so the data are not distributed normally. This does not mean, however, that the data are unusable. Rather, they might require an additional step when it comes to their analysis, such as a log transformation. Additionally, I used a *t*-test to determine whether the study's dependent variable was statistically significant. The results from that analysis are in Table 5.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing.

Group	Obs.	M	SE	SD	95% CI
Read Text	181	18.96	0.93	12.53	17.12, 20.79
Played Game	158	22.64	0.89	11.30	20.86, 24.41

Note. * $t(337) = -2.82, p \leq 0.0050$

Given the *p*-value is less than a significance level of 0.05, we can argue the data at hand may support this study's overall hypothesis, that gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. If gamification can increase the persuasiveness of a decades-old conspiracy

theory about the murder of a legendary hip-hop star, there is a greater likelihood that it can do the same for other, more politically oriented conspiracy theories such as QAnon. Figure 3 illustrates the mean and standard errors of the two groups of participants. The relatively small standard errors in each group mean the t -statistics are large enough to support the idea that the hypothesis overall is statistically significant.

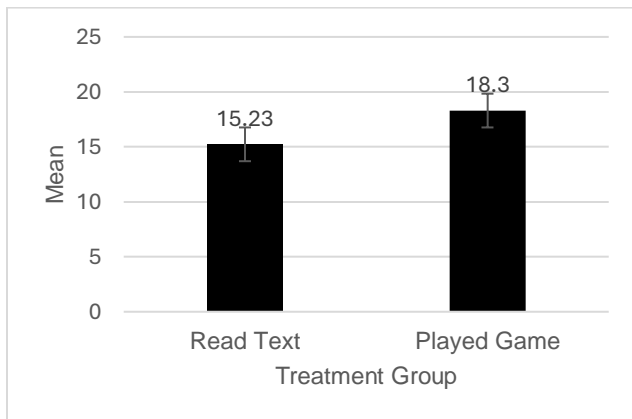


Figure 3. *Persuaded by Gamification?: Comparison of T-Test Means and Standard Errors.*

To explore this data further, I conducted a series of linear regression analyses with other data collected from the study. The data, for both this study and the following chapter's study, included the same core set of independent variables I designed to include various demographic factors such as age, gender, religious beliefs, and level of education. Additionally, each study contained several independent variables that I originally formulated as misdirection questions. In this study, those questions included participants' willingness to believe in extraterrestrial life forms, the time they spend on the internet, and whether they were happy with their current life circumstances. Only tangentially related to the study's core purpose, I included these questions so participants did not feel they were being primed for certain responses. As belief in conspiracy

theories is a socially sensitive subject, this may represent a potential limitation to the experimental design. Participants may have hidden their true level of belief as they did not want to be construed as socially undesirable.

Three independent variables consistently stood out as the most interesting during the analysis. The first variable as shown in Table 5, “polsact,” measured how often participants felt politicians acted in their constituents’ best interests. We know from the extant literature that antigovernment attitudes often correlate with increased levels of conspiratorial beliefs.¹⁰⁷ I also included this variable to capture whether participants trusted their legislators and government at large. Low levels of political trust often cause antigovernment attitudes. This is a belief conservatives typically exhibit at greater rates, as compared to moderates or liberals.

I designed the second variable, religiosity, to measure how religious participants claimed to be. Barkun, Belew, and others have shown how interconnected millenarian Christian beliefs, antigovernment attitudes, and conspiratorial beliefs are.¹⁰⁸ Age is the last variable included in the analysis. While popular media may imply conspiracy theorists are older, cable news watchers who struggle with the internet, newer research suggests preponderance toward conspiracy beliefs develops in our teen years, which is also when we establish our partisan political leanings.¹⁰⁹ The below table illustrates findings from a regression analysis that includes all three of the independent variables.

¹⁰⁷ See Barkun, *Culture*.

¹⁰⁸ See Barkun, *Culture*, and Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁹ Jolley, Douglas, and Skipper, “Conspiracy Theories Start to Take Hold at Age 14, Study Suggests.”

Table 6. Linear Regression (No Treatment).

Polsact	
No	-5.4 (1.49)***
Somewhat	-4.17 (1.69)*
Age	
Age	-3.0 (0.61)***
Religiosity	
No	-2.73 (1.18)*
Somewhat	-0.27 (1.41)

Note. DV: Composite variable that included how likely to believe in conspiracy theory + How factual conspiracy theory + Wanted more information about the conspiracy theory; $N = 335$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; * R^2 , 0.76.

All of the above regression coefficients are negative, which is somewhat intriguing. For example, those respondents who did not believe, or only somewhat believed, politicians act in their constituents' best interests, were approximately four and five points less likely than their counterparts who did believe to be convinced that gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. Additionally, when it comes to age, the older a person is, the less likely they are to be convinced by gamification. Perhaps this is because we develop greater critical thinking skills as we get older—future research might delve into exactly why this is the case. Finally, a similar pattern holds when it comes to religiosity, as with the polsact and age categories. Those who rated themselves as not being religious were close to three points less likely than those who were to be swayed by gamification. This makes sense, as according to the existing literature such as that by Oliver and Wood and by Barkun, religiosity and conspiracism are inherently related.

To delve deeper into this relationship, it would have been helpful to collect data on respondents' ideological leanings to better tease out these findings, as I did in the second study.

Finally, only the “no” category in the last independent variable, religiosity, was statistically significant with participants being about three points less likely to be convinced that gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories than those who are more religious. These findings also fit with others in the literature that suggest people who are more religious are more likely to be susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories. To investigate whether the inclusion of the treatment group makes a difference in the analysis, I conducted the same regression with a treatment variable. The results from this analysis appear in Table 6.

Table 7. Linear Regression (With Treatment).

Polsact	
No	-5.4 (1.49)***
Somewhat	-4.17 (1.69)*
Age	
Age	-3.0 (0.61)***
Religiosity	
No	-2.73 (1.18)*
Somewhat	-0.27 (1.41)
Treatment	
Treatment	2.41 (1.00)*

Note. DV: Composite variable that included how likely to believe in conspiracy theory + How factual conspiracy theory + Wanted more information about the conspiracy theory; $N = 335$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; * R^2 , 0.09.

Including the treatment variable in this additional regression model did not alter the regression coefficients or their corresponding significance levels meaningfully. The coefficients for the “polsact” and religiosity independent variables increased by about a tenth of a decimal point. There were no changes in either variable’s significance levels. Age did not change at all. Regarding the treatment independent variable, those participants played the game rather than read the text were three points more likely to believe in the gamified conspiracy theory. These findings were statistically significant. Based on both models, while the “polsact” independent variable does not provide evidence for this dissertation’s main argument, it consistently shows how important trust in government is when it comes to understanding the conspiratorial mindset. In addition to its statistical significance, the magnitude of the regression coefficient illustrates this is a durable relationship. Finally, to supplement this analysis and conclude the chapter, I included several open-ended questions at the end of the survey to try and gauge a more holistic picture of what participants really believed. I present my findings from those questions below.

Qualitative Analysis: Open-Ended Short Answer Questions

At the end of the post-test survey, participants received two open-ended questions that I designed to gather their opinions on matters related to conspiracy theorizing. Figure 4 provides a sample of some of the most relevant responses to the question, what role does the news media play when it comes to the spreading of conspiracy theories? I categorized responses to the question according to the following criteria. The first category comprised responses that posited it was not so much the traditional news media that was responsible for spreading conspiracy theories, but rather the internet and social media were the primary entities responsible for doing so. For example, one respondent wrote, “I think there are many ‘news’ sources that are not verified and legitimate. It is very easy to create a company and spread false stories. The internet

makes it really easy.” Research has shown the internet can facilitate the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories because it possesses the following capabilities. First, many websites and social media platforms use microtargeting tools, which originally were designed for advertising purposes, to amplify misinformation. Additionally, the modern internet is full of trolls, fake accounts, and bots. These entities serve no real purpose other than to spread discord and hate. Finally, online platforms are engineered to prioritize certain types of content and deprioritize others. The choice of what content is prioritized depends on what those running the platform value. What matters most is the content shown is often not as unbiased as advertised.¹¹⁰

The second and most unexpected category of responses were those that claimed the media spreads misinformation and conspiracy theories because of an agenda to sow discord and division, or to increase profits and viewership of their channels. While we know from regular polling that trust in the media is at an all-time low, claims of intentional media manipulation point to a growing conspiratorial mindset within the wider public.¹¹¹ Whether pointing to “taking advantage of people’s stupidity,” allegedly spreading fear to make money, or sharing content designed to “control” consumers, study participants showed a strong lack of trust in traditional and new media outlets. Finally, the last category of responses included those that expressed a generally negative reaction toward the media but did not claim they were spreading discord intentionally. These responses are in line with wider survey data that show Americans have a strongly negative view of mass media.

¹¹⁰ “Four Key Ways Disinformation Is Spread Online,” *World Economic Forum*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/four-ways-disinformation-campaigns-are-propagated-online/>.

¹¹¹ Gallup Inc., “Americans’ Trust In Media Remains Near Record Low,” *Gallup.com*, October 18, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403166/americans-trust-media-remains-near-record-low.aspx>.

What role does the news media play when it comes to the spreading of conspiracy theories?

<i>Role of the Internet & Social Media</i>	<i>Media Agenda</i>	<i>General Negativity</i>
I think there are many "news" sources that are not verified and legitimate. It is very easy to create a company and spread false stories. The internet makes it really easy.	A lot of the fake news and conspiracy theories comes from the cheap news paper that print stuff like that to sell to gullible people (sic).	They give misinformation all the time
Social media spreads many more conspiracy theories than news media	They have alot of power and take advantage of people's stupidity. (sic)	They broadcast news stories and post online spreading the information and getting people hyped up and interested.
Online media plays a high role because people can say anything to get people to believe them.	They willing spread conspiracy theories if it helps them	I believe they play a great deal
A great deal. If it's on the news and internet, then it "must be true."	Media will print or say most anything that they can, in order to make money, and gain readers.	It spreads them without knowing the full truth
Most news media do not spread conspiracy theories, as far as I'm concerned. Social media spreads much more	News media consistently provides trash information in order to sell the stories	Bad roles because news media is trash
	They help put it out there	I think there are some media companies that contribute to the spreading of conspiracy theories
	A lot of bait and distortion mostly. Ultimately it's a business and it shows.	The news media play big huge role in spreading conspiracy theories
	The media portrays the information it wants perceived. Only one side and barely ever fact checked.	They spread it like the plague
	They have alot of power and take advantage of people's stupidity.	They boost the hype
	They like to do so and spread fear	Lots of people watch it and believe everything it says
	The media blows things out of proportion to scare people and put fear in them.	The are the gossip kings. They spread lies
	Controlling	

Figure 4. *Role of the News Media and Conspiracy Theories*

Experimental Limitations and Chapter Conclusion

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to review the potential limitations of this study's findings. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the bottom-up method of experimental manipulation that Albertson and Gadarian advocated can raise concerns about experimental validity. While these concerns absolutely should be taken into consideration, given the relative newness of the literature on gamification, they should not be viewed as exclusionary as we still need to establish a stronger baseline understanding of how gamification functions. Future research might ameliorate some of these concerns by replicating these studies using different conspiracy theories that address different policy areas or using a larger population of study respondents.

In sum, the evidence this chapter presents partly indicates gamification has the potential to increase the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories. If gamification can work to increase the persuasiveness of a somewhat niche and not explicitly political conspiracy theory, it could do the same for a conspiracy theory such as QAnon. And, while the evidence from the open-ended question does not address this dissertation's main argument specifically, it still provides useful contextual detail that works behind the scenes to help motivate overall belief in conspiracy theories. Respondents felt the news media was overly profit-driven, untrustworthy, and would share false information willingly if it increased their bottom line, echoing how, in the regression analysis, survey participants indicated most politicians were not acting in their constituents' best interests. In the forthcoming chapter, I apply these findings to a similarly structured second survey experiment that uses an explicitly political conspiracy theory to investigate this same problem.

CHAPTER 4: GAMIFYING “STOP THE STEAL?”

Introduction

The previous chapter presented results from a survey experiment that investigated whether gamification could increase the persuasiveness of the conspiracy theory that hip-hop star Tupac was not murdered in 1996, but rather faked his killing to escape the pressures of stardom. That chapter found gamification likely helped to increase the persuasive power of this particular conspiracy theory. The present chapter builds on the Tupac study and seeks to answer the same primary research question: does gamification increase the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories? However, this chapter addresses the question by using an explicitly political conspiracy theory instead. If we revisit this question in terms of the theoretical framework chapter two presented, the present chapter investigates how gamification might happen if we add political polarization to the mix. In this instance, the conspiracy theory in question claimed the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent and Donald Trump was the actual winner, not Joe Biden. The logic behind this choice of conspiracy is that, if gamification can increase the persuasiveness of a nonpolitical conspiracy theory such as the one regarding Tupac’s death, it should be able to do the same thing in the case of the 2020 election conspiracy theory—an overtly political conspiracy theory similar to QAnon.

The present chapter proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the contours of the 2020 presidential election fraud conspiracy theory and why it makes a good case to test this dissertation’s primary argument. Then, it outlines the study’s research design and presents the results, which the chapter discusses in its final sections. In short, I find gamification did not impact belief in the Stop the Steal conspiracy theory. However, I did find political ideology is a predictor of belief in this conspiracy theory, with conservatives being much more likely to

believe in the theory than liberals. The chapter concludes with a discussion of why the findings differ from the previous chapter and reasons for why that might be.

The 2020 Presidential Election Fraud Conspiracy Theory

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, allegations of rampant election fraud across the United State marred the 2020 Presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden.¹¹² The accusations were driven solely by Trump and his campaign's unwillingness to lose the election; they sought to use whatever tools they had at their disposal to illegally sway the election results in his favor. In the lead up to, along with after, the election, the former president, and a vocal group of supporters, constantly lamented in the media that the election allegedly had been tampered with unfairly to prevent Trump from winning. Additionally, a core group of his supporters and former administration officials including Sidney Powell, Kenneth Chesboro, Mark Meadows, John Eastman, and Rudy Giuliani were orchestrating a complicated scheme behind the scenes with fake ballots and electors to rig the election in Trump's favor.¹¹³ In Georgia, for example, the Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensberger even ordered a hand-recount of the entire state's ballots to try and reassure the public of the validity of Georgia's results. Despite their efforts to reassure the public of the validity of the election, Raffensberger and Republican Georgia Governor Brian Kemp faced relentless public pressure from Trump to give in to his accusations of voter fraud.

¹¹² Election fraud may include a range of activities including forging someone's signature on a ballot, voting when you are ineligible under that state's law, filling out an absentee ballot for someone who has moved or is deceased, or impersonating someone at a polling station.

¹¹³ At the time of this writing, several related court cases are working their way through the judicial system across the United States, including at the Supreme Court.

Allegedly fraudulent mail-in ballots across the United States were a key focus of the Trump campaign's efforts to delegitimize the election. By no means a new invention, mail-in ballots long had been used by members of the military, overseas residents and diplomats, and those citizens with health challenges to be able to exercise their right to vote. As the election occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, many states turned to mail-in ballots as a solution to allow people to exercise their constitutional right to vote in a way that minimized crowding at polling stations and thereby prevented the further spread of COVID-19. A small number of incidences of voter fraud typically occur whenever elections happen, at a variety of levels of government. By and large, these incidences are a result of true mistakes in filling out ballots or when voters are unclear about rules. Very rarely, if ever, are documented instances of voter fraud a result of a coordinated campaign to defraud a candidate of their earned votes. Federal and state legislators who refused to go along with the administration's plan also were subjected to relentless campaigns of public pressure and humiliation.

The pre-election campaign the Trump administration orchestrated went into overdrive the night of the election itself. In recent decades, major media outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, AP, and Fox News typically "call" the presidential election for a particular candidate the night of the election itself after polls close in each state. These predictions rely on a complex probabilistic analysis that includes data from a multitude of sources such as national polling statistics and election forecasts, "historical patterns of state voting relative to the national average," and state-level polling data.¹¹⁴ In the 2020 presidential election, for example, MSNBC political journalist Steve Kornacki became an overnight internet sensation for his enthusiastic coverage of the

¹¹⁴ Andrew Gelman and Nate Silver, "What Do We Know at 7 PM on Election Night?," *Mathematics Magazine* 83, no. 4 (October 2010): 260, <https://doi.org/10.4169/002557010X521787>.

precinct-by-precinct data modern computing technology has made it possible to visualize. Importantly, these pollsters do not make election calls from one equation or analysis; they essentially are creating a distribution of all possible election outcome scenarios, which number in the thousands, and then using probabilities to calculate the most likely election outcome based on the previous data they collected.¹¹⁵ However, on election night 2020, November 3rd, the race remained too close to call due to lack of available voting data and would remain so until November 7th, 2020, when Biden was declared the winner, after winning the state of Pennsylvania. Additionally, incendiary rhetoric from the Trump campaign in the lead up to the election had secretaries of state and their poll workers on high alert for voting anomalies, which distracted from their core duties and slowed down the on the ground vote counting.

The declaration that Biden had won pushed the Trump media and legal campaigns into overdrive, and they enlisted every campaign and Republican party apparatus to spread their allegations, questioning the results at every turn. In secret, Rudy Giuliani, Republican operative lawyer John Eastman, and others were attempting to orchestrate a complicated scheme of fake presidential electors to game the election for Trump. In their target states such as Georgia, Michigan, and Arizona, these administration officials even attempted to lobby state lawmakers to go along with their scheme. The efforts of these former administration officials came to a crescendo on January 6th, 2021, when thousands of Trump supporters, election conspiracy theorists, White nationalists, and other accelerationist groups stormed the U.S. Capitol building to prevent Vice President Pence and Congress from certifying the results of the presidential election. The Vice President, members of Congress and their staffs, and institutional staffs were

¹¹⁵ Gelman and Silver, "What Do We Know," 259.

forced into hiding, in fear for their lives. The rioters were able to breach the Senate Floor as well as the offices of then Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Cameras also caught the rioters chanting that they wanted to “hang Mike Pence” for his refusal to overturn the results of the election. Rioters even erected mock gallows on the Capitol grounds. Trump later defended the death threats against his own vice president.¹¹⁶ Four people died on the day of the riot, and several Capitol police officers who responded to the riot committed suicide in the days and weeks after the event.

In the aftermath of these events, the U.S. Department of Justice appointed a special prosecutor, Jack Smith, to formally investigate Donald Trump and press charges for his actions if necessary. On August 1st, 2023, Trump was formally indicted on criminal charges related to election interference in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.¹¹⁷ Trump and six unnamed other coconspirators were charged with several criminal conspiracies to commit crimes. A criminal conspiracy “occurs when two or more people agree to commit an illegal act and take some step toward its completion. Conspiracy is an inchoate crime because it does not require that the illegal act actually have been completed.”¹¹⁸ The charges included a “conspiracy to defraud the United States by using dishonesty, fraud, and deceit” to obstruct the lawful counting of election results, “a conspiracy to corruptly obstruct and impede the January 6th

¹¹⁶ “Trump Defends Chants by Rioters on Jan. 6 Threatening to Hang Pence,” *Reuters*, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-defends-chants-by-rioters-jan-6-threatening-hang-pence-2021-11-12/>.

¹¹⁷ “Backgrounder: U.S. Department of Justice Charges Trump for 2020 Presidential Election Interference, Explained,” *States United Democracy Center*, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://statesuniteddemocracy.org/resources/doj-charges-trump/>.

¹¹⁸ “Conspiracy to Commit a Crime & Legal Defenses,” *Justia*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.justia.com/criminal/offenses/inchoate-crimes/conspiracy/>.

congressional proceeding” where presidential election votes are counted, and a “conspiracy against the right to vote and have one’s vote counted.”¹¹⁹

The charges center on four key instances. The first is the false presidential electors scheme Trump officials were attempting to perpetrate in Georgia, Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.¹²⁰ The second involved the attempted legal and congressional maneuvers to overturn the election results.¹²¹ The third instance was in regard to the intense pressuring of state and federal legislators such as Georgia Governor Brian Kemp to change the results of the election.¹²² Finally, the last reason for the charges involved the lead-up preparations to the events of January 6th, 2021. Both the leaders of the Proud Boys and of the Oath Keepers, two insurrectionist groups who were present at the riot, have been sentenced to 22 and 18 years, respectively, in federal prison for their actions in the lead up to that day.¹²³

¹¹⁹ United States of America v. Donald J Trump, No. 23-cr-00257-TSC (n.d.), accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/67656604/united-states-v-trump/>.

¹²⁰ Alan Feuer and Katie Benner, “The Fake Electors Scheme, Explained,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2022, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/27/us/politics/fake-electors-explained-trump-jan-6.html>.

¹²¹ Barbara Sprunt, “Here Are the Republicans Who Objected to the Electoral College Count,” *NPR*, January 7, 2021, sec. Capitol Insurrection Updates, <https://www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/01/07/954380156/here-are-the-republicans-who-objected-to-the-electoral-college-count>.

¹²² Greg Bluestein, “How Brian Kemp Resisted Trump’s Pressure to Overturn the Georgia Election Results,” *Politico*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/19/brian-kemp-david-perdue-donald-trump-2020-00018601>.

¹²³ Office of Public Affairs, “Proud Boys Leader Sentenced to 22 Years in Prison for Seditious Conspiracy and Other Charges Related to U.S. Capitol Breach,” *United States Department of Justice*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/proud-boys-leader-sentenced-22-years-prison-seditious-conspiracy-and-other-charges-related>; “Oath Keepers Founder Stewart Rhodes Sentenced to 18 Years for Seditious Conspiracy in Jan. 6 Attack,” *AP News*, May 25, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/stewart-rhodes-oath-keepers-seditious-conspiracy-sentencing-b3ed4556a3dec577539c4181639f666c>.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I outline the present chapter's study design and how it differs from the previous chapter's study. I then provide an overview of relevant participant demographics before delving into the study's specifics and what it asked each group in the study to complete. I then discuss the construction of the study's tripartite dependent variable and how it is grounded in the relevant literature. Finally, the chapter discusses the statistical significance of the study's results, as well as presenting the results of a linear regression analysis.

Study Design

I conducted the present study in the late fall of 2023, after receiving approval from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB).¹²⁴ I created it in the Question Pro software and fielded it through Prolific, a market research platform similar to Prime Panels, the service I had used to conduct the study in the previous chapter. The Planning, Governance, and Globalization department at Virginia Tech funded this research in the form of a \$400 grant. Since the study's completion in the previous chapter, Virginia Tech institutional rules had changed to prohibit students from using departmental funds to create studies on Prime Panels, for reasons of data security and privacy. Prolific is a comparable platform and independent company that is based out of the United Kingdom.¹²⁵ While Prolific is a U.K.-based company, the participants in this study were all based in the United States. Prolific's compensation model is unique among market research platforms in that they require studies to pay research participants a minimum reward rate that is no less than \$8 per hour, although they suggest a rate of \$16 per hour. They contend

¹²⁴ The Virginia Tech IRB approval number for this study is 23-926.

¹²⁵ Prime Panels is a subsidiary of Cloud Research, which is owned by Amazon.

that having a minimum participant reward level leads to better quality data, unlike platforms such as MTurk where participants can be paid cents on the dollar for their time and effort.

All American English-speaking participants over the age of 18 on the platform were eligible to participate in the study, once they provided their consent to participate.

Approximately 313 people participated, which resulted in 300 usable responses after cleaning the data for accuracy and survey completion. All research subjects were compensated \$1.10 for their participation. Subjects had 6 minutes to complete the study, although the median completion time was 4 minutes and 20 seconds. In designing the study, I had allotted approximately three minutes for participants to complete the control group task of reading the text and approximately five minutes for participants who were in the experimental word scramble group. Therefore, the median completion time aligned with my expectations.

Participant Demographics

Subsequent tables provide an overview of relevant study demographics. Prolific voluntarily provides this data, assuming the participant provided their consent, whether study administrators explicitly request it or not; this is different than Prime Panels, where participants have to be asked to share demographic information. Unlike in the previous chapter's study, the average age of participants in this study tended to skew toward the 20–40-year-old range, rather than the 30–50-year-old range. While this is the generation that is arguably the most “online,” they do not consume cable news programming at the same rate as those in their 50s, 60s, and above. Researchers have documented the impacts of cable news viewership. Peck's book *Fox Populism* shows how the network's particular style of news presentation can frame narrow conservative viewpoints as universal instead. This effect allows Fox to generate an “us-versus-them” effect in

their coverage, between the “real” American patriots who consume their content and everyone else who does not.

Table 8. Survey Participant Age.

Age of Participants	# of Survey Participants
< 20 years old	1
20s	72
30s	103
40s	56
50s	45
60s	15
70s	5
80s	1
Total	300

Regarding participants’ genders, this study is much more evenly balanced as compared to the previous study. As Table 9 shows, 156 participants were male, while 144 were female, as compared to 232 females and 175 males in the previous chapter’s study.

Table 9. Survey Participant Gender.

Survey Participant Gender	# of Participants
Male	156
Female	144
Total	300

Finally, Prolific also automatically includes data on participant ethnicity, which I did not collect in the previous chapter’s study. Approximately 236 participants identified as White, 21 as

Black, 20 as Asian, and 7 as an ethnicity that was not covered in Prolific’s breakdown of the data. These data roughly mirror the ethnic breakdown of the United Kingdom.¹²⁶

Table 10. Survey Participant Ethnicity.

Survey Participant Ethnicity	# of Survey Participants (approximate)
Other	7
White	236
Mixed	15
Black	21
Asian	20
Total	300

Study Design

The present chapter’s study is purposefully like the one I discussed in the previous chapter. However, a small difference was that Virginia Tech’s institutional license with Qualtrics ended, so I created this study using the Question Pro software program, which I selected to replace Qualtrics. As mentioned previously, this study used the Prolific market research platform to deploy the study after receiving IRB approval. Participants were eligible to take part in the study if English was their primary language, they were over 18 years old, and they were U.S. citizens. After eligible participants reviewed the study information and provided their consent to participate, they were assigned randomly to one of two groups. The control group first answered a short set of pre-test questions that I designed to gauge their political views, education level, and

¹²⁶ “Ethnic Group—Census Maps,” *ONS*, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/identity/ethnic-group/ethnic-group-tb-20b/asian-asian-british-or-asian-welsh-bangladeshi>.

preferred news sources. Interspersed among those questions were several misdirection questions, to help prevent participants from feeling as if they were being forced to answer the substantive questions in any particular manner. Appendix E outlines the full battery of questions. The experimental group also answered this same set of questions before proceeding with their task.

The survey then asked the control group to read an excerpt from a *Time Magazine* story from October of 2022 that explained how conspiratorially-minded “poll watchers,” primarily in Arizona, sought to disrupt election-related activities ahead of the November 2022 midterm elections (see Appendix F). The article described how the “poll watchers” often video-taped workers and even engaged in armed patrols of the areas surrounding polling stations, with several election workers reporting they had felt threatened by these individuals’ actions. Additionally, the article noted how these individuals’ activities further damaged perceptions about American democracy as well as added to the burden busy poll workers already faced. As in the previous chapter, I did not select a text for the control group that explicitly calls out a conspiracy theory, as I did not want to risk biasing participants responses. People are generally sensitive to being asked if they believe in conspiracy theories, due to social desirability bias and may hide their true answers if they feel pressured one way or another.

Once participants completed the article, they received the post-test questions, which are available in Appendix G. Questions one, five, and seven formed the core of my dependent variable. Question one asked the participants to rate, on a Likert-type scale, how factual they found the information in the news article. Question five tested participants’ ability to recall information about the alleged election conspiracy theory. Finally, question seven asked participants if they would like to learn more about the conspiracy theory they just read about. The second experiment group answered these same post-test questions.

As with the study in the previous chapter, the experimental group in this study read a short text and then unscrambled several words (see Appendix H). Text-based games such as word scrambles are common in the gaming world for good reason. The rules are easy to understand, they can be scaled to age-appropriate vocabularies, and they have an enduring appeal because they provide a manageable challenge to players. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, they are easy to incorporate into everyday life, as shown by Tupac with his music lyrics. The text in question for this portion of the study summarized the *Time Magazine* article the control group read in approximately one paragraph. The experimental group was asked to unscramble or “decode” several words from that paragraph, including:

- iBden (Biden)
- Boatll (Ballot)
- umTrp (Trump)
- Farud (Fraud)
- igVnto (Voting)
- teSla (Slate)
- Spot (Stop)
- detrPisen (President)

I selected these words because they were relevant to the topic at hand and easy to decode. The study did not include words that were harder to decode, so as not to dissuade participants from completing the task. Games should provide a manageable challenge, so participants do not become too greatly discouraged if they come to a difficult portion. The type of game these survey experiments used presents a potential limitation to the study, as they do not allow for social interaction between participants, a key part of some conspiracy theories. A potential way

around this, if I possessed unlimited funding, would be to have participants work in teams in a laboratory or field experiment, to better simulate the social nature of certain conspiracy theories.

Dependent Variable Summary Statistics

As in the previous chapter's study, I designed the dependent variable to be a composite measure based on three key elements of the persuasive process: learning, trust, and attitudes.¹²⁷ I also created it using the egen command in STATA. The first component asked participants to rate, on a ten-point scale, how truthful they found the conspiracy theory on which the study was based. Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of responses, showing most study participants did not find the conspiracy theory persuasive at all. The mean respondent rated the truthfulness of the election conspiracy as 2.05 out of 10. While these results are promising for the overall health of our democracy, they do not mean much for the study's overall significance.

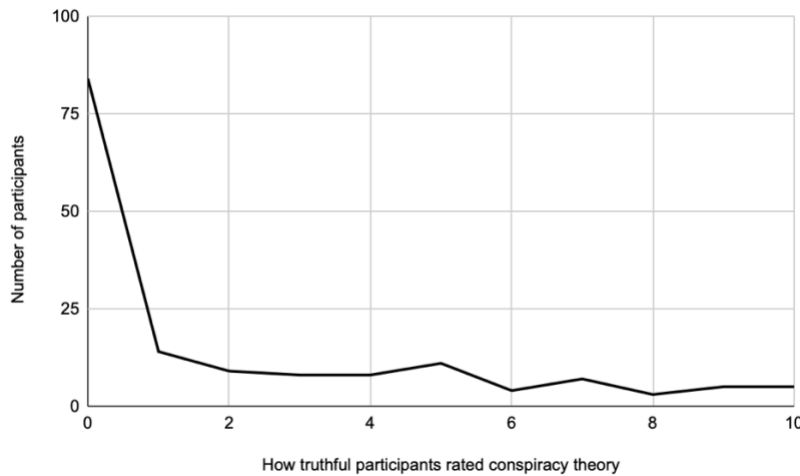


Figure 5. *How Truthful Participants Found Conspiracy Theory to Be.*

¹²⁷ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 19.

Earlier research on misinformation seemed to suggest that, when believers received information that challenged their beliefs and misinformation at hand, they would double down on said beliefs and become more entrenched in them. However, newer research complicates these findings. Wood and Porter show, using an extensive series of experiments, that believers do heed information, even if it challenges their existing beliefs.¹²⁸ Wood and Porter thoroughly investigate Nyhan and Reifler’s work, highlighting several potential reasons why it might be so hard to induce the so-called “backfire effect.” The first is that Nyhan and Reifler used undergraduate students as their experimental subjects and Wood and Porter used a nationally representative sample of MTurk participants. Wood and Porter argue, as do many other scholars, that undergraduate-based samples are some of the least representative of the wider population, and therefore this difference in representativeness might be responsible for inducing the backfire effect. However, after further investigation, the difference in samples does not appear to make a real difference. Wood and Porter subsequently argue Lippman’s (1922) longstanding assertion, that “respondents shy away from cognitive effort and will deploy shrewd strategies to avoid it,” ultimately might explain the phenomena at play.¹²⁹ In the end they posit some combination of the two factors might be responsible for driving the backfire effect, but further investigation is needed. Therefore, considering this research, the truthfulness component of this study’s dependent variable should be a reliable indicator of participants’ actual beliefs.

¹²⁸ Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, “The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes’ Steadfast Factual Adherence,” *Political Behavior* 41, no. 1 (March 2019): PG, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9443-y>.

¹²⁹ Wood and Porter, “Elusive Backfire Effect,” 160.

The second component of this study's dependent variable asked participants at the study's conclusion whether they wanted more information about the conspiracy theory. Rather than asking this question in a simple yes or no multiple-choice format, the question asked participants to type in the word "yes" into the question box. If they did not want to receive more information, they simply could click the "next" button on the survey and close it out. By asking participants to write in their answer choice, versus clicking a button, this step emulated a task they might be asked to complete in a game, versus a conventional survey question. Additionally, this process hopefully supported more accurate responses, as participants could not select an answer at random. The downside to this is participants simply may have ended the survey because they did not want to expend the extra effort to write out the word. Regardless, as Figure 6 shows, approximately 94% of participants did not request more information at the end of the survey. One potential reason for these findings is that, given the time frame in which the study occurred, participants were oversaturated already with information about the conspiracy theory. As the study took place in 2022, this would have been in the thick of the news cycles about former President Trump's legal troubles that stemmed from the previous election. Sympathetic partisans to Donald Trump likely were already well aware of what was happening in the news. Those who were unsympathetic were probably sick of hearing about Trump during every news cycle and not being able to escape news about him. To better understand this phenomenon, a future study could include several open-ended questions to allow participants to unpack their thoughts fully, rather than asking them to choose between a set of more limited question options.

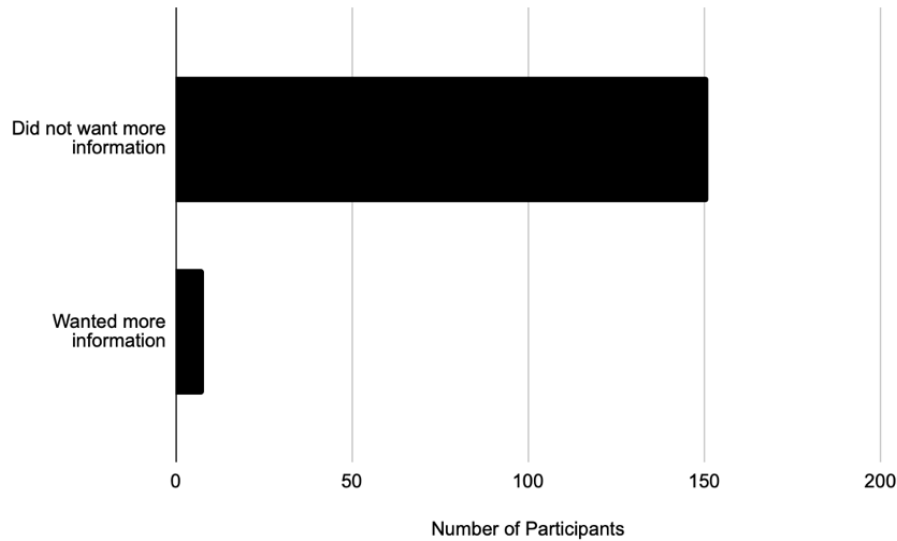


Figure 6. *Likelihood of Wanting More Information.*

Both this and the final component of the dependent variable (whether participants could recall information correctly about the conspiracy theory presented to them) are grounded in a series of studies Albertson and Gadarian conducted. They show political anxiety increases the drive for people to search out more information about the cause of their anxiety in the first place.¹³⁰ Therefore, we can infer from the results of this question that the vast majority of this study’s respondents did not find this question (or the study design) triggered a strong emotional response, as few participants wanted more information. Heightened anxiety also drives participants to pay closer attention to topics they may find threatening or anxiety inducing, which is the final component of this study’s dependent variable, as Figure 7 shows. However, as Albertson and Gadarian point out, study designs can impact what participants actually can

¹³⁰ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 54.

retain.¹³¹ In this question, participants were asked to identify at the study’s conclusion which politician the conspiracy theory alleged won the 2020 presidential election. As Figure 7 shows, participants overwhelmingly correctly identified Donald Trump.

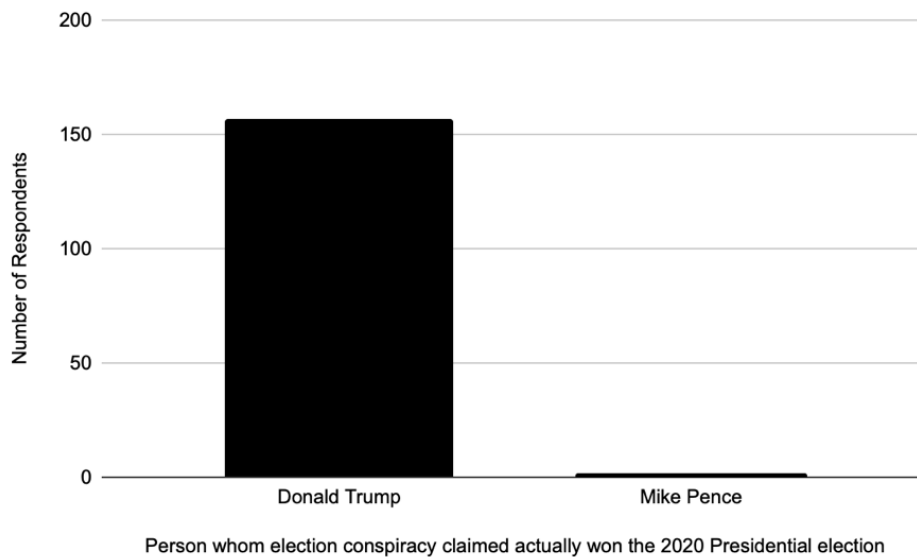


Figure 7. *Ability To Recall Information about the Conspiracy.*

Significance Testing

I now investigate whether this dissertation’s research question—whether gamification increases the persuasiveness of online conspiracy theories—was statistically significant. Before undergoing further analyses, I conducted a Shapiro-Wilkes test to see if the data were distributed normally. The results of that analysis are below.

¹³¹ Albertson and Gadarian, *Anxious Politics*, 58–60.

Table 11. Shapiro-Wilkes Test for Normality

Variable	Obs.	W	Prob > z
Moreinfo	302	0.89	0.0000
Ctruthful	300	0.91	0.0000
Rightfulwinner	300	0.51	0.0000
DV	302	0.91	0.0000

As in the previous chapter, these data were not normally distributed, since $p < 0.05$. Again, however, that does not mean they were unusable. Table 12 presents the results of a two-sample t -test with equal variances, a common statistical measure used to determine the significance of hypotheses.

Table 12. Hypothesis Testing, Three-Part Dependent Variable.

Group	Obs.	M	SE	SD	95% CI
Read text	143	1.46	0.09	1.02	1.29, 1.63
Played game	159	1.52	0.08	1.04	1.35, 1.67

Note. $*t(300) = -0.37, p \geq 0.35$

Given the p -value is greater than a significance level of 0.05, the hypothesis that gamification increased the persuasiveness of this study’s conspiracy theory—that there was rampant election fraud during the 2020 presidential election—does not hold. Therefore, gamification did not impact the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories, unlike in the previous chapter. Figure 8 illustrates the mean and standard errors of the two groups of participants. The larger standard error in each group confirms there is greater variability in the means, suggesting the model’s findings are not particularly statistically significant and therefore cannot be assumed to support the aforementioned hypothesis.

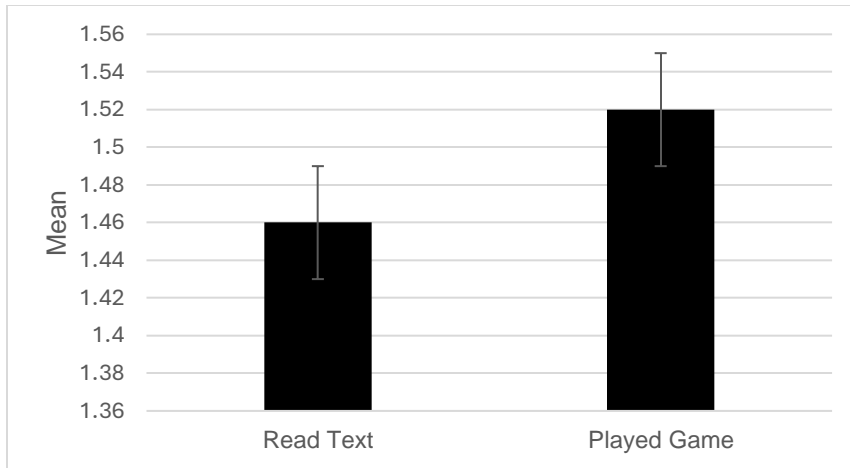


Figure 8. *Comparing Mean and Standard Errors, Treatment vs. Non-Treatment Group*

Given these findings, I conducted a series of secondary tests of statistical significance to see if any of the remaining independent variables made any significant impact on the dependent variable. In this case, based on the results of a chi-square test, the ideology variable did. Chi square tests are used to discern whether there is a relationship between two categorical variables. In the survey, respondents were asked about their political ideology using the same categories the Gallup corporation used in their polling. In the data, their responses were coded as follows: a score of one equates to very conservative, two to conservative, three to moderate, four to liberal, five to very liberal, and six to no opinion. As the dependent variable is a continuous composite variable, I recoded it in the data into three categories that corresponded to levels of persuasion: not persuaded, somewhat persuaded, and persuaded.

Table 13. Chi-Square Test: Political Ideology and Persuasion

Respondent Political Ideology	Not Persuaded	Somewhat Persuaded	Persuaded
Very Conservative	0	0	13
Conservative	1	6	19
Moderate	0	41	46
Liberal	0	68	21
Very Liberal	1	71	10
No Opinion	0	0	5

Note. ^aPearson $\chi^2 = 88.7$, $p \geq 0.00$

Based on the distribution of political ideology across the three different categories, as well as the fact that the p -value is less than the standard significance level of 0.05, I found there is a relationship between the data presented. We can interpret these results as meaning conservative-leaning respondents were more likely to be swayed by the experimental treatment, and liberal-leaning respondents were less likely to be swayed. These findings fit in with the wider literature that suggests conservatives are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories in the first place. It also sheds light on the role played by political polarization in the story I am trying to tell, as theorized in chapter two of this dissertation. This next section of the chapter explores in greater depth why the dependent variable in question was not significant. Then, I return to the question of ideology.

Experimental Limitations

First, there is the issue of how much time has passed since the events of the 2020 election. In the case of the previous chapter, Tupac’s murder occurred in 1996, and his alleged killer walked free until late 2023. Some 27 years passed between the killing and when the accused was taken into custody. During that period, the conspiracy theory surrounding Tupac’s murder was able to grow and take on a life of its own. It was discussed among friends, family, in

the music industry, and in the media. There is little doubt that, as in what happens in the children's game of "telephone," key details surrounding the murder and Tupac's life and legacy changed as they passed from person to person over the years, which allowed the conspiracy theory to flourish in people's imaginations and further cement itself into their memory.

Communications scholar Nicole Maurantonio argues memory is a dynamic concept, "crafted and recrafted in dialogue with the political, social, and cultural imperatives of the present."¹³² As time passes, the memory of Tupac's killing is constantly being reinterpreted, colored by the lenses that believers in the theory possess. Additionally, Maurantonio writes, "individual acts of recollection are dependent on the social frameworks within which one is situated (e.g., class, family, religion)."¹³³ In the case of conspiracy theorizing, these frameworks' impacts are not yet understood well, outside of the context of specific conspiracy theories themselves, so their generalizability merits further inquiry.

In the case of this chapter's conspiracy theory, not enough time may have passed to allow it to become a part of collective consciousness like that of Tupac. After all, there are multiple cases, at varying levels, still working their way through the court system litigating some of the causes and consequences of Trump and his campaign's interference in the 2020 election interference. People may prefer to wait before making any additional judgements about Trump's actions. Alternatively, and perhaps the most likely scenario, is that the general population is sick of hearing about the conspiracy theory and the inordinate amount of media coverage it continues

¹³² Nicole Maurantonio, "The Politics of Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 219, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.026>.

¹³³ Maurantonio, "Politics," 221.

to generate. Most people do not care about politics to the extent that mainstream media organizations do. After all, it is the political media's job to report current political events; the average American is likely more preoccupied with their job, family, and friends. Existing research such as Zaller's also supports this argument. Additionally, echo chambers on social media can reinforce this overwhelming coverage.

Finally, there is the possibility that the experimental design could have been better conceptualized to suit the hypothetical situation at hand. Within the literature, scholars have debated how to best represent hypothetical scenarios in their experiments. Some scholars contend mundane realism, or the idea that we need to replicate real-world conditions exactly, in experiments is the best way to proceed. Other scholars such as Croco, Hanmer, and McDonald follow something called experimental realism, or the idea that if the experimental design is valid and provides accurate treatments, abstraction in research design does not matter.¹³⁴ A third group of scholars including Brutger et. al (2022), Druckman (2021), and Mullinix et al. (2015) takes the stance abstraction should not matter as long as the overall research design is sound.¹³⁵ I could have improved the way each research design conceptualized gamification to better capture the social nature of gaming as it relates to QAnon. While anons, or believers, often operate by themselves to solve drops, they also interact with other believers to share their findings. The sometime restrictive nature of experimental design can hamper the ability to replicate the exact

¹³⁴ Croco, Sarah E., Michael J. Hanmer, and Jared A. McDonald. "At What Cost? Reexamining Audience Costs in Realistic Settings." *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 8–22. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708912>.

¹³⁵ Brutger, Ryan, Joshua D. Kertzer, Jonathan Renshon, Dustin Tingley, and Chagai M. Weiss. "Abstraction and Detail in Experimental Design." *American Journal of Political Science*, May 31, 2022, [ajps.12710](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12710). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12710>; Mullinix et al., "Generalizability."

social nature of these relationships. In an ideal world with unlimited funding and resources, I would have conducted a laboratory experiment where I would have been better able to manipulate the treatment and control conditions to replicate the social nature of QAnon. Finally, the way I constructed the dependent variable could have been improved to better capture participants' true sentiments. However, I am hopeful that scholars' use of the dependent variables in both chapters three and four in separate studies helps mitigate these concerns.

Regression Analysis

Even though the present study does not appear to contain statistically significant evidence that gamification increased the persuasiveness of the "Stop the Steal" conspiracy theory, the fact that the study related to the Tupac conspiracy did lends some credibility to this dissertation's overall hypothesis. Therefore, to explore this relationship further, I conducted a linear regression analysis to better understand these data, including several control variables from the extant literature. Table 14 presents the results of a linear regression analysis in which ideology, voting status, and gender were regressed on the study's dependent variable. As a reminder, the dependent variable contained three components. The first component measured how truthful participants thought the conspiracy theory was, the second asked whether participants wanted more information about the conspiracy theory, and the final component measured respondents' ability to recall information about the conspiracy theory.

Table 14. Linear Regression.

Political Ideology	
Conservative	-0.92 (0.00)**
Moderate	-1.28 (0.00)***
Liberal	-1.73 (0.00)***
Very Liberal	-1.84 (0.00)***
No Opinion	-1.63 (0.00)***
Voted	
No	0.64 (0.00)***
I don't wish to answer	0.03 (0.96)
Gender	
Male	-0.00 (0.96)
Non-binary	-0.50 (0.36)

Note. DV: Composite DV (how truthful conspiracy was, more information, ability to recall information about conspiracy theory); $N = 302$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; * R^2 , 0.23.

Regarding the independent variables, both party and voting status are statistically significant, while gender is not. Interestingly, every category of ideology in the study, even self-identified conservatives, saw a decrease in how likely they were to be persuaded by a gamified conspiracy theory. Very liberal participants were close to two times less likely to be convinced by the conspiracy theory, as compared to the base category of very conservative voters. These findings fit in with the broader literature that conservatives are more susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories. As compared to those participants who said they had voted in the last five years, participants who had not voted were more likely, by a small margin, to be persuaded by

the gamified conspiracy theory. Not voting tends to be a result of several factors including lower levels of education and lack of resources and time. Additionally, higher levels of education are correlated with lower levels of belief in conspiracy theories. However, we do not have evidence for why this relationship emerges, as educational levels are associated with a “range of cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes.”¹³⁶ People turn to conspiracy theories to make sense of complex and shocking events, and those who are less educated may not possess the tools to make sense of such events through nonconspiratorial lenses. Nonetheless, more research is needed to solidify exact causal relationships.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presented results from a survey experiment that examined whether gamification could increase belief in the conspiracy theory that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent and that Donald Trump was its rightful winner, not Joe Biden. I did not find any significant statistical evidence that gamification could increase the persuasive power of online conspiracy theories. However, upon further investigation, the data do lend some support to the idea that political ideology can be used to help predict belief in the “Stop the Steal” conspiracy theory. If the opportunity to run this study again were to arise in the future, I would select a conspiracy theory that focuses much more directly on views Republicans hold to better understand this relationship. While the federal investigation into the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in July 2024 is still ongoing at the time I write this, the volume of conspiratorial chatter it has generated deserves further scrutiny and would make another good test case. Several prominent Republican legislators along with a large segment of conservative media were quick

¹³⁶ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 31, no. 1 (2017): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3301>.

to pin the violence on President Biden.¹³⁷ These allegations were accelerated by the fact that the shooter had made a single donation to Act Blue, the Democratic Party's primary online fundraising platform, in the days after Joe Biden was sworn in as president in 2021. In a series of several apparent security lapses by the Secret Service and local police, the shooter was seen acting suspiciously for over an hour before he fired on Trump. He was even spotted carrying a range finder and flying a drone directly over the event. Lawmakers, including several prominent Democrats, questioned the Secret Service's actions, which led to the director's resignation.

In addition to changing the conspiracy theory in the study to something more focused on Republicans, I would alter the structure of the game to something akin to connect-the-dots. Traditional connect-the-dots games allow players to create various shapes or designs by connecting numbered points in sequential order. Instead of numbered dots, I would have participants connect key words about the conspiracy theory in order, so they make a complete sentence about the conspiracy theory. My rationale is this game structure reinforces the puzzle-like nature of conspiracy theories better than a simple word scramble. Connect-the-dots might also provide more of a sense of a reward at completion. The control group would still need to read a short text and answer follow up questions. I would also include short answer questions at the end of the survey questions for both the treatment and control groups.

The following chapter seeks to illuminate this project's argument in a new light using qualitative evidence. Rather than focusing on establishing a relationship between the project's two variables of interest, gamification and persuasion, this next chapter attempts to provide the contextual color that allows for this relationship to flourish in the first place. It seeks to answer

¹³⁷ Rachel Looker, "Republicans: Biden's 'Bullseye' Comment Partly to Blame in Trump Attack," *BBC*, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cw0y9xljv2yo>.

questions such as who the key players in QAnon are, what the field of play looks like, and what the rules of the game of QAnon are. I also include several first-hand testimonials of those who had friends and loved ones impacted by the conspiracy theory. The ensuing concluding chapter examines prospects for political radicalization and whether we have enough evidence to convincingly say conspiratorial beliefs can lead to violence.

CHAPTER 5: LEARNING TO “PLAY” QANON

Introduction

The two previous chapters of this dissertation presented results from two survey experiments that aimed to understand whether gamification could increase the persuasiveness of online conspiracy theories. In chapter three, I found evidence, based on the conspiracy theory that hip-hop star Tupac faked his death, which supported my claim that gamification likely increased the persuasiveness of that conspiracy theory. In the subsequent chapter, based on the conspiracy theory that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent, the results were more mixed. While individual independent variables were statistically significant, the study’s dependent variable was not. In that spirit, the present chapter provides additional contextual evidence to better understand the relationship between an online conspiracy such as QAnon and gamification, with the chapter’s goal being to understand how the proposed gamification framework affects our understanding of conspiracy theories and what impacts this might have for the health of our democracy.

First, I highlight in this chapter what many would consider to be an ideological forefather to the QAnon conspiracy theory, the Gamergate movement. What started as a gendered critique against the male-dominated videogame industry became a vitriolic harassment campaign against the women who dared to speak up. Gamergate shows how some of the foundational pieces of the QAnon conspiracy theory—including racism, misogyny, a strong sense of group identity and groupthink, and political polarization—were already present in online circles, waiting to be further mobilized.

In the next sections of the chapter, keeping this history in mind, I trace analysis that connects this dissertation’s key theoretical components: gamification, polarization, conspiracism,

and radicalization. First, I illustrate how QAnon comes to life by providing a rulebook on how to “play” the QAnon conspiracy theory. By learning the rules and contours of the game, readers will be able to understand better who the key players in the QAnon conspiracy are, what the field of play looks like, and ultimately what the rules of the game are. Readers should note three key components of gamification: motivational affordances, how the rules of the game of QAnon create a unique structure or system within the game, and how the theory is an iterative process. Motivational affordances are the mechanisms that incentivize the target of a gamified system to act in a certain way. Examples of popular motivational affordances include point systems, leaderboards, and competitions. QAnon tends to rely on more implicit motivators such as maintaining and strengthening group identity and frequent validation and recognition from conspiracy theory insiders. Importantly, a successful gamified systems involves more than just the random assignment of points or giving away free products. It seriously considers motivational affordances that meet our individual needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness—the three key components of self-determination theory (SDT).¹³⁸

The polarization and conspiracism elements of this dissertation’s theory are also on display in this rulebook—namely, in the section on the construction and involvement of the Deep State as well as the section on how to decode a Q drop. These elements emphasize the centrality of the us-versus-them and good-versus-evil mentality that undergirds so many conspiracy theories. At the heart of this Manichean worldview is the idea that believing in QAnon gives one a special status or identity. Allegedly, this group is privy to a host of information about secret goings on in the American government and it is their job to share the “truth” about these events

¹³⁸ Deci and Ryan, “ ‘What’ and ‘Why.’ ”

with the rest of the world. As in Gamergate, these heirs to the QAnon movement see themselves as protectors of a threatened way of life they must keep safe from the rest of the world. It is not dissimilar from the kinds of logic cult leaders use to justify their existence. The chapter concludes with a debrief: firsthand testimonials from friends, loved ones, and former believers that delve into the impact the conspiracy theory has had on their lives and worldviews. These testimonials highlight the radicalizing potential of the QAnon conspiracy theory and how it can impact believers and their friends and family.

Laying the Foundation: Gamergate

The Gamergate movement is central to understanding the dynamics of QAnon, as it shares a similar foundational belief in the maintenance of a particular group identity and the length to which some people are willing to go to protect it. While playing games is central to both Gamergate and later to QAnon, they are just the conduit through which people channel their already held extremist beliefs. Gaming is a powerful mechanism for behavioral transfer and change; Gamergate and later QAnon just provide outlets for expression. Within this brief history of Gamergate, I investigate how the forums in which it took place, namely 4chan and Reddit, helped to spawn the QAnon conspiracy theory and push believers toward radicalization.

QAnon and other modern internet-based conspiracy theories did not arise out of the ether; they are the product of various movements that began in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine High School Massacre, where students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 students and a teacher, popular rhetoric frequently characterized gamers such as Harris and Klebold as lonely, unkempt, unfriendly, and prone to committing mass violence. While we know these two students did play violent video games and favored similarly themed music, existing research shows there is no direct causal link between playing video games and the propensity to

commit violence. We do know, however, that games provide a gathering space for like-minded individuals to share their views and to build a sense of community amongst players.¹³⁹

It would be too simple to call QAnon an offshoot of “gamer culture,” as there are gamers who do not idolize mass murder and White supremacy. However, for the small group of gamers who already shared an affinity for violence and online gaming, QAnon offered a shared forum to strengthen these extremist ties. Additionally, it is worth noting that, around the time of the Columbine Massacre, online culture was starting to come into its own with the increased proliferation of chat rooms, message boards, and instant messaging services. In addition to providing places to connect with like-minded individuals, these changes provided a level of transparency and insight into the thought processes of people such as Harris and Klebold. No longer did individuals with these types of beliefs hide in the dark corners of the internet; any enterprising person, including children and teens, could find access to such content and information. Unfortunately, while it may have been easier to identify publicly people who held these kinds of beliefs, the needed policy changes to prevent similarly motivated individuals such as Harris and Klebold never materialized in full. According to a *Washington Post* analysis, there have been 417 school shootings since the Columbine Massacre, including one at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007.¹⁴⁰ The Virginia Tech shooting remains the deadliest school shooting in U.S.

¹³⁹ Campbell, Colin. “A Brief History of Blaming Video Games for Mass Murder.” *Polygon* (blog), March 10, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/10/17101232/a-brief-history-of-video-game-violence-blame>.

¹⁴⁰ John Woodrow Cox et al., “There Have Been 417 School Shootings since Columbine,” *Washington Post*, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/school-shootings-database/>.

history, killing 32 faculty and students. Its perpetrator widely praised Harris and Klebold as martyrs in his suicide note.¹⁴¹

Throughout the late 1990s and into the 2000s, these trends continued. Internet culture, and to a slightly lesser extent gaming culture, moved from an ethos of content consumption to one of content creation as part of the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. As technology changed, so did the opportunities for connection among peers. However, laws and policies regulating the types of content on the internet were slow to catch up to these developments. Concurrently, the “deep” and “dark” webs developed. While these variations of the web have existed to one extent or another since the internet’s beginning, starting in the early 2000s, internet culture began to splinter from its more mainstream counterpoint.

For instance, the same offshoot of the dark web that produced QAnon also led to a community of “incels” or involuntary celibates. Self-proclaimed “incels” are mostly young men who have declared themselves permanently undesirable and undatable. Ironically, the term originally was coined by a young Canadian woman in the early 1990s who was frustrated with her inability to find a romantic partner. She took to creating an online community to share her experiences with other likeminded individuals. However, elements of the “Manosphere” or men’s rights movement on sites such as 4chan appropriated her term. They turned what was a movement about connection into a virulently misogynistic strain of rhetoric that claimed women only exist as vessels for childbearing and to serve their husbands as doting homemakers and that often led to gendered violence. The most famous example of incel-driven violence is Elliot Rodger, who killed six people in Isla Vista, California in 2014 near the campus of U.C. Santa

¹⁴¹ Associated Press, “Cho Idolized Columbine Killers,” *The Denver Post*, April 18, 2007, <https://www.denverpost.com/2007/04/18/cho-idolized-columbine-killers/>.

Barbara. Rodger could not fathom why he could not get a date and blamed the women around him for his loneliness.¹⁴² The manifesto Rodger left serves as a guidebook for the contemporary incel movement, which canonized him as “Saint Elliot.”¹⁴³ It is this anxiety and hate-ridden milieu that helped give rise in part to what scholars and journalists have termed “Gamergate.”

Gamergate was a movement beginning in the 2010s that attempted to push back against socio-cultural changes aimed at greater diversity and inclusion in public life. At the same time, the nascent “Me Too” movement had started to advocate for survivors of sexual crimes. Similarly, efforts at increasing diversity within college campuses and corporations became more commonplace. And starting in late 2013, several prominent female video game journalists started publicly critiquing online video game culture for its alleged misogyny and attempts to keep women out of what was perceived to be a historically male space. While some were receptive to these female journalists’ efforts, others met them with hostility.

The backlash was particularly vitriolic on forum websites such as 4chan and Reddit. 4chan is an anonymous imageboard website first launched in 2003. Imageboard websites are types of discussion forums that also allow users to post images and memes along with text. 4chan has “boards” or subforums for practically any topic from gaming to politics, cooking, and sports. Several features of these kinds of websites are worth mentioning at this juncture. The first is that 4chan, particularly when it first came online, had little to no moderation of its content.

¹⁴² Hailey Branson-Pitts and Richard Winton, “How Elliot Rodger Went from Misfit Mass Murderer to ‘Saint’ for Group of Misogynists—and Suspected Toronto Killer,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2018, sec. California, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-elliott-rodger-incel-20180426-story.html>.

¹⁴³ “Incels (Involuntary Celibates),” *ADL*, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/incels-involuntary-celibates>.

This minimal moderation remains one of its key calling points. Users pride themselves on being able to speak without fear of “censorship” and express their true beliefs. During Gamergate, female journalists were subject to vicious insults that rapidly turned into death and rape threats. Some of them were even stalked and followed, many going into hiding as they feared for their lives. In short, “the white, male, heterosexual in-group of 4chan was suffused with far-right provocateurs” who had made it their mission to eradicate the women whom they felt were intruders within their space; they were also paranoid about “feminist entry into [the] world of gaming that they’d embraced as an interchangeable metaphor for their own masculinity,” similar to the incel movement.¹⁴⁴ These forums cultivated a space where likeminded individuals could come together and share their views of the world and organize “offline” action. Anders Brievik and Brendon Tarrant, both of whom committed racist massacres in Norway and New Zealand, respectively, were both known to visit some of these sites. Tarrant’s manifesto, which was posted on 4chan, has been cited as inspiration for subsequent racially motivated killings in Charleston, South Carolina and Buffalo, New York.

The other key features of 4chan that helped turned Gamergate from a social movement into an online mob was the website’s lack of registration requirements, ability for users to post anonymously, and ability for users to have posts be deleted automatically after a certain period. Most websites require someone to create an account if they wish to use it regularly. Registration allows website hosts to gather data on the user, charge subscription fees, or take disciplinary action should the user violate its terms of service. Many users of 4chan post anonymously. After all, this was a website that, at its outset, allowed users regularly to view child pornography.

¹⁴⁴ Badham, *QAnon and On*, 67.

However, by the time of Gamergate, some content moderation had been put in place, mainly to protect the owners of the website from legal action. One form of moderation that appeared was the use of randomized codes to authenticate anonymous users. Originally designed to identify volunteer content moderators, these codes were later adopted by anonymous users, including Q himself, to verify content they posted was their own. Lastly, part of what made Gamergate so vitriolic was how the website itself was structured. 4chan's algorithms purposely promoted raunchy and "click-worthy" content.

Several Reddit communities also played an active role in the Gamergate movement. A key difference between 4chan and Reddit is that content posted on Reddit is more closely moderated than what typically can be found on 4chan. Reddit forums are moderated by a group of up to 25 moderators or "mods." These are all unpaid volunteers who are charged with maintaining the subforum's rules, facilitating discussion, and reporting and enforcing punishments for violating community standards. Though the exact barriers to become a "mod" vary by community, participants typically must prove they have spent time in the community they wish to moderate, as well as apply for that position. Reddit also maintains a library of resources for moderators on best practices.

Despite these efforts at moderation, Reddit was not immune to the effects of Gamergate. The pitfalls of social media moderation are well known. Notwithstanding the immense sums of money some companies spend on content moderation strategies, the sheer volume of reviewable content makes this a herculean task—particularly for smaller companies such as Reddit. There are also financial motivations at play that determine how moderated social media sites are. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that social media platforms that rely on

advertising spending are more likely to invest in moderation than companies that rely on subscription revenue.¹⁴⁵

The subreddit r/KotakuInAction, named after the Gawker-founded gaming news website Kotaku, proudly calls itself the “almost official Gamergate website.” While the subreddit is under more moderation than when Gamergate first began, clear evidence of the movement’s ethics still is displayed proudly today, even to casual visitors to the subreddit: for example, forum user u/NecessaryMind249 complains the independent or “indie” game design community is “extremely left. And not just like a liberal left wing but rather more of the militant, extremely online commie [sic] variety.”¹⁴⁶ In a separate post lamenting the downfall of “true” gamer culture, subreddit participant u/Aurondarklord writes:

I dunno how a little white boy growing up today has any self-esteem or self-worth. How do you not just get completely beaten into the floor by the constant cultural messaging that you were born evil? Do you just exclusively watch and play stuff from Japan? Because in western media, what’s really made for you anymore?¹⁴⁷

Finally, Gamergate offers some important lessons about mainstreaming hate that we can apply to modern internet-based conspiracy theories. The first is that proponents of Gamergate liked to proclaim the movement “was [only] about research ethics ... while coordinated attacks

¹⁴⁵ “How Social Media Firms Moderate Their Content,” *Knowledge at Wharton* (blog), accessed January 18, 2024, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/social-media-firms-moderate-content/>.

¹⁴⁶ u/NecessaryMind249, “Why Has Indie Become so Left Wing?,” *Reddit*, R/KotakuInAction, January 15, 2024, www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/197goy7/why_has_indie_become_so_left_wing/.

¹⁴⁷ u/Deadsea_93, “Does Anyone Else Feel Bad for the Nerd Culture of this Gen and Future Generations?,” *Reddit*, R/KotakuInAction, January 18, 2024, www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/199pfs7/does_anyone_else_feel_bad_for_the_nerd_culture_of/.

against women gamers were undertaken.”¹⁴⁸ Misogyny and violence allegedly were justified if they were in service to preserving the movement. The second lesson is these attacks also could be justified in the name of protecting free speech.¹⁴⁹ These women gamers were seen as threatening to the continued existence of what many claimed to be a historically male space. Therefore, it was up to Gamergate participants to use all the tools at their disposal to protect their home community. The above Reddit post by u/Aurondarklord illustrates both lessons.

Who Are the QAnon Conspiracy Theory’s Key Players?

A key part of learning to play any game is learning about the game pieces and what players are and are not allowed to do. As mentioned previously, the QAnon conspiracy theory revolves around anonymous posts on the internet under the name of “Q,” or “Q Clearance Patriot.” Q claimed to be a high-level Department of Energy employee, and the proof of their employment is their Q-level security clearance. In the game of QAnon, Q can be analogized to the queen in a set of chess pieces, the piece that dictates strategy for the overall game. Q-clearance is a legitimate security clearance level that only exists within the Department of Energy (DOE). DOE, unlike other federal agencies, does not use the more recognizable standard “Secret” or “Top Secret” categorization. The reasoning for this dates back to World War II, when the Department of Energy was tasked with overseeing the burgeoning atomic weapons and energy program. Having Q-level clearance allows a DOE employee to have access to classified nuclear material related information. When it comes to the legitimacy of the QAnon conspiracy

¹⁴⁸ Dixit, Priya. “Memeing the Far-Right: Pepe and the Deplorables.” In *Race, Popular Culture, and Far-Right Extremism in the United States*, by Priya Dixit, 135–72. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10820-4_5.

¹⁴⁹ Dixit, “Memeing the Far-Right,” 160.

theory, having this unique clearance level gives the appearance that Q is a legitimate insider with access to information about powerful weaponry that is key to maintaining the security of the United States and its dominance on the world stage. It also signifies Q's status as a member of the alleged "Deep State" that keeps the United States running smoothly. Further, Q is an outlier in that they are willing to risk their career and security to expose the alleged wrongdoings of their compatriots in the Deep State. In the Manichean fight between good and evil, Q's supposed willingness to expose the alleged wrongdoings of the Deep State, and potentially risk their career, greatly increases their social credit score among believers.

The next group of players to be aware of are all part of the so-called Deep State. The Deep State is a diverse group in terms of power in the game. Historically, the term derogatorily refers to the institutions and employees of the administrative state, those executive branch agencies that carry out the day-in and day-out functioning of government. The term also has roots in Egyptian and Turkish politics and is a relatively recent import to the United States. Steven Cook argues the combination of several high-profile scandals combined with citizens not feeling as if they have a say in their government foment that something nefarious must be afoot. Cook writes,

The term probably arrived on U.S. shores the same way it got to Egypt, by people straining to make sense of events in countries with such disparate histories, cultures, and political systems as Turkey, Egypt, and the United States ... From a certain perspective, forces within the bureaucracy seem to be colluding with the media and Democrats to lay siege to Trump's young administration.¹⁵⁰

Conspiratorially minded publications such as *Breitbart*, Alex Jones' *Infowars*, and *Alternet* popularized the term. As portrayed in the QAnon conspiracy theory, the Deep State is a shadowy

¹⁵⁰ Steven A. Cook, "The Deep State Comes to America," *Foreign Policy* (blog), September 5, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/24/the-deep-state-comes-to-america/>.

network of power players bent on destroying the lives and liberty of everyday Americans and subverting the will of then President Trump and members of his administration. If we return to the chess analogy, the Deep State comprises varying levels of powerful players that we can think of as bishops and rooks.

Figure 9 illustrates how believers of QAnon think the Deep State functions. Figures 9, 10, and 12 come from an extensive QAnon primer document created by a believer who is only identified by their email address, “IAMBECAUSEWEARE@protonmail.com.”¹⁵¹ I found the document looking through a QAnon archive journalists had compiled at the Bellingcat group. Interestingly, the word ubuntu, of which several permutations can be found in several African Bantu languages, loosely translates to “I am because we are,” or something along the lines of a shared sense of humanity. Nelson Mandela referred to Ubuntu as a unifying force. Most recently it has been discussed in the context of mass migrations and nationalism across the African continent. Ubuntu is also a free and open-source computer operating system. The Q supporter who compiled this document was likely intending it to serve as a rallying cry or calling card for likeminded believers to come together and share the word of QAnon.

¹⁵¹ IAMBECAUSEWEARE@protonmail.com, “Q-Anon—The Storm,” March 2018, https://krypt3ia.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/q_s_posts_-_cbts_-_7-2-0.pdf.Jones.

HOW DOES THE DEEP STATE WORK?

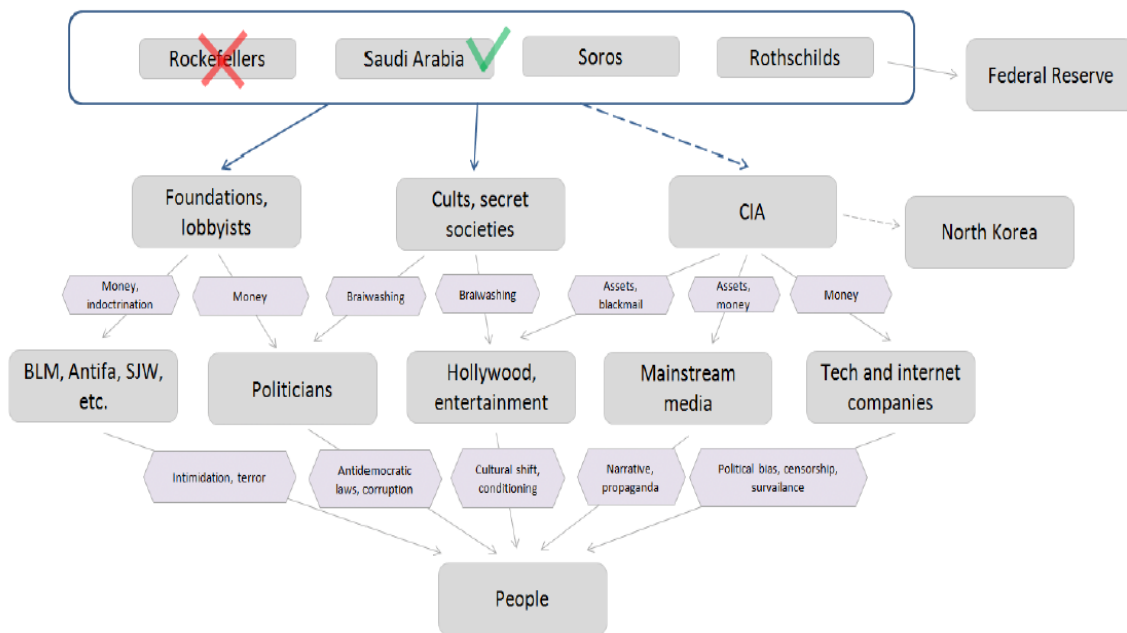


Figure 9. *The Deep State.*

Deep State divides into primary and secondary players or figures. The primary group includes the Saudi Royal Family, the Clinton Foundation, George Soros, and the Rothschild Family. In a game of chess, these would be knights. This group provides the funding for, and thereby facilitates, all Deep State activities—the Saudi Royal Family, Soros, and the Rothschild Family are all incredibly wealthy, with the Saudi Royal Family alone being worth some five trillion dollars, an incomprehensible sum to an average person. Anti-Islamic sentiment is also unfortunately a commonplace motivating force in modern conservative American politics, with Donald Trump’s attempted Muslim ban being one of the most recent examples. Soros and the Rothschild family made their respective fortunes in finance and banking; they are also Jewish. Their inclusion in this formulation of the Deep State is no accident. Here QAnon is drawing upon centuries-old conspiracy theories of Jewish domination of the global financial system.

While QAnon is not an explicitly Republican-leaning conspiracy theory, American conservatism heavily influences it. Since the scandal concerning Monica Lewinsky broke in the late 1990s, American conservatives virulently have despised anything to do with either Bill or Hillary Clinton. As mentioned previously, Hillary Clinton was a key figure in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, the precursor theory to QAnon. In QAnon lore, the Clinton Foundation, which works primarily in public health, is seen as nothing more than a front for Clinton family interests.

The second tier of players in QAnon—or bishops, if we continue using the chess analogy—include both people and phenomena that frequently appear in the theory. Important people and institutions include the Vatican, the Red Cross, the Federal Reserve, the British Royal Family, the state of Israel, Zionist ideology, the European Union, and Seth Rich, the Democratic Party staffer who was killed in an attempted robbery in Washington, D.C. Key phenomena that feature in the theory include satanic rituals, occult symbolism, and human trafficking.¹⁵² The people, institutions, and states, such as the Vatican, state of Israel, and the European Union, are seen as conduits of power for the alleged Deep State. These are the black boxes through which the powerful channel and actualize their interests. In late 2022, for example, a group of Germans inspired by QAnon and other far-right conspiracy theories attempted to overthrow the German government and reinstall the former monarchy. Coup perpetrators cited globalist and deep state influences as evidenced by European integration as some of their reasons for wanting to pursue the coup. As of this writing, their trial had just begun in German courts.¹⁵³

¹⁵² IAMBECAUSEWEARE@protonmail.com, “Q-Anon—The Storm,” 14.

¹⁵³ “Alleged Leaders of a Suspected Far-Right Coup Plot Are Going on Trial in Germany,” *NBC News*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/germany-far-right-coup-plot-leaders-trial-reich-citizens-qanon-rcna153215>.

Seth Rich, however, is included in this list for a different reason. Rich is seen as a victim, rather than a perpetrator, of a deep state cover-up and is a symbol of its alleged wrongdoings. A former Democratic Party staffer, Rich was shot and killed in a botched robbery early one morning in 2016 as he was walking home from a night out with friends in Washington, D.C. To date, his murder remains unsolved. Unfortunately for his friends and family, this only fueled the mountain of conspiracy theories that emerged in the aftermath of his death. Just a few weeks after his murder, the Wikileaks scandal broke, where some 20,000 emails had been obtained illegally and leaked from the Democratic National Committee. Conspiracy theorists contended Rich somehow had been involved in the leak and the Clinton campaign had him killed to prevent him from speaking. Another variation of the theory posited Rich had been killed by the Russians, given their efforts to interfere in the 2016 presidential election.¹⁵⁴ The unsubstantiated theories about why Rich was murdered gained traction rapidly on Fox News and through social media.

Key phenomena in the QAnon conspiracy theory include human trafficking and satanic rituals (drawing its inspiration from its predecessor Pizzagate), as well as occult symbolism. Given Donald Trump's status as a mythological god at the heart of the theory, it is constructed to highlight a worldview that is divided clearly into good versus evil, similar to how many religions rely on an us-versus-them dichotomy.¹⁵⁵ QAnon also incorporates many New Age beliefs such as vaccine hesitancy, skepticism toward the medical establishment, and belief in herbal remedies

¹⁵⁴ Charlie Mole, "Seth Rich: How a Young Man's Murder Attracted Conspiracy Theories," *BBC News*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-43727858>.

¹⁵⁵ Nicolò Miotto and Julian Droogan, "Stand Against the Wiles of the Devil': Interpreting QAnon as a Pseudo-Christian Extremist Movement," *Critical Sociology* vol#, no. # (January 30, 2024): Article 08969205241228744, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241228744>.

and essential oils.¹⁵⁶ The wave of anti-COVID vaccine protests during the COVID-19 pandemic helped fuel belief in the theory as well. For example, QAnon believer and conservative commentator Alex Jones can fund a good deal of his journalism through the sale of herbal remedies such as iodine drops to protect against alleged environmental radiation exposure and other environmental “toxins.” As of this writing, those drops are even available for purchase on Amazon. Veterinary grade Ivermectin, a popular right-wing/“holistic” cure all, is also available for purchase on Amazon.

The Field of Play

The next section of the rule book is dedicated to understanding the game board or field of play itself. Like the popular civilization-building game *Settlers of Catan*, also known as *Catan*, the game board in QAnon is one the players’ actions largely create. While there are rules that shape the general flow of play, part of the allure of *Catan* and QAnon is that the game is a co-constitutive creation between players and the basic rules of the game. Players have the freedom to craft their own outcomes. This sense of freedom also allows players to get more invested in the game than in a traditional board game such as Monopoly. With Monopoly’s strict rules, there is little room for players to add personal touches. In *Catan* and QAnon, players must think on their feet and come up with different ways to build their civilizations or decode a Q-drop. This imbues a sense of agency into gameplay, which in turn allows them to become more invested in the game’s outcome.

To better understand the field of play on which QAnon takes place, we first need to understand its origins. QAnon first appeared on 4chan, like the Gamergate movement. Unlike

¹⁵⁶ Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon* (Stanford, California: Redwood Press, 2021).

social media sites such as Facebook, which discussions required users to maintain some sense of decorum and decency to stay on the platform, discussions on 4chan were not moderated much, if at all, and did not have to meet that bar. Insults, racial slurs, degrading language, and references to illegal activity commonly could be found on various 4chan subforums. This was not a negative for users, but rather a point of pride: they felt they were able to exercise their right to free speech fully, free from the influence of “politically correct,” mainstream discourse. It should be noted the discussions on 4chan were far tamer than on its offshoot, 8chan or 8kun.

Web developer Frederick Brennan started 8chan in 2013. He felt 4chan had become too restrictive and wanted to create a new site that truly welcomed free debate. The content on 8chan quickly spiraled out of control: child pornography and illegal activity were commonplace. 8chan is most infamous for being a gathering place for Neo-Nazis and White nationalists. The perpetrators of the 2017 New Zealand mosque shooting as well as the 2019 El Paso, Texas Walmart shooting posted their manifestos on the site before committing their crimes. 8chan’s internet service provider even suspended their service in 2019 before it was later brought back online after a change in ownership. 8chan has been the subject of a Congressional inquiry, as it has become a breeding ground for violence and extremism.¹⁵⁷ Its originator, Brennan, later went on record saying he thinks the site has spiraled out of control and needs to be shut down.

The Rules of the Game

Q originally posted their first “drop” or post on 4chan in October of 2017. The post read:

HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect

¹⁵⁷ “Thompson, Rogers Demand 8chan Owner Appear and Answer Questions on Site’s Extremist Content,” *House Committee on Homeland Security*, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://democrats-homeland.house.gov/news/correspondence/thompson-rogers-demand-8chan-owner-appear-and-answer-questions-on-sites-extremist-content>.

massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.¹⁵⁸

Q dropped several other posts that day attempting to further explain their claims. The theory initially did not gain much traction outside of 4chan until they were picked up by a coterie of right-wing bloggers and content creators such as Tracy Diaz. From that point forward, Q took on a life of its own. Claiming “operational security,” Q switched to posting on 8chan later in 2017. But in all actuality, Q likely wanted to take advantage of 8chan’s rapidly growing audience. The following section of the chapter breaks down Q’s posts in much greater detail as well as provides an explanation on how to interpret them. I also delve into further detail about the “rules of the game” of QAnon.

In QAnon, gameplay is structured through the Q “drops” or posts, the primary mechanism by which information is conveyed in the QAnon conspiracy theory. We can think of these Q drops as the different rules or moves by which believers play the game. There are four primary forms of Q drops Q has used over time. Figure 10, taken from a primary source document compiled by a believer in the theory, illustrates the different type of posts or drops.

¹⁵⁸ Jane Coaston, “#QAnon, the Scarily Popular Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory, Explained,” *Vox*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/1/17253444/qanon-trump-conspiracy-theory-reddit>.

HOW TO READ THE LOGS

In the logs (transcription of Q's posts), there are four kinds of posts:

Q'S POSTS ON 4CHAN:

HEADER PART, USUALLY CONTAIN A LINK TO THE ORIGINAL POST, THE THREAD NAME, THE ID AND IF EXISTING THE TRIPCODE

Q's posts from 4chan are always looking like this in this document (grey head and a blue body).

Q'S POSTS ON 8CHAN:

HEADER PART, SAME AS THE BLUE ONE.

Those are Q's posts from 8chan, only difference.

Q'S POSTS ON 8CHAN -NEW VERSION (ADDING DATE & TIME)

Q tripcode	ID: string	>> N°post	THREAD NAME	MM.DD.YY	GMT+1: HH:mm:ss
This is the "new" version of the posts design. It able me to structure more efficiently but also to add both date and especially the time code.					
I added the time code base on GMT+1, I wanted to add other time base on other time zones but that would double or triple the header size which would automatically add A LOT of pages to this already long document. For the time zones difference you just have to add or remove a few hours and if it crosse midnight, then adapt the date back or forth.					

UNVERIFIED (NO TRIPCODE) Q'S POSTS ON 8CHAN:

HEADER PART, USUALLY COUNTAIN A LINK TO THE ORIGINAL POST, THE THREAD NAME AND THE ID. NO TRIPCODE AVAILABLE

Those are UNVERIFIED (no tripcode) Q's posts from 8chan, only difference. [This type had to be added due to the tripcode ban problem from the 12.15.17.](#)

ANON'S POST ON 4CHAN AND/OR 8CHAN:

HEADER PART, USUALLY ONLY THE LINK TO THE POST IS AVAILABLE

This is the anons posts from 4chan and/or 8chan. They are used when Q respond directly to an anon or link his posts.

Figure 10. *Types of Q Drops.*

Arguably the most important parts of a Q drop include the header as well as the post's "trip code." Headers are essentially topic sentences for the drop that give the adherent the main idea of the post. Since image board websites allow people to post anonymously, drops are not associated with any identifiable information such as a name or username. In the way Bitcoin works, trip codes are hash functions that scramble a users' unique password into a string of consistent characters. This string of characters then acts as a verifiable signature of sorts and allows for

users to be identified across different posts. Crucially, it is nearly impossible to duplicate these trip codes.¹⁵⁹

Some Q drops are implicitly worth more than others, even though the theory does not explicitly give them a point value. All posts with tripcodes can be considered the most valuable of Q drops, as the codes imply that they come directly from Q, and the anon community gives them the most attention. When Q started posting in 2017, initially on 4chan, then on 8chan, posts did not have tripcodes. While it is highly likely that these early posts can be traced to Q themselves, the same cannot be said of posts in recent years, given the rapid proliferation of the theory. Therefore, we can consider these posts as part of the second most valuable group of drops. There also have been several reports of QAnon forum moderators who have attempted to claim credit for being Q, such as Paul Furber, known as “BaruchtheScribe.” Furber, a South African software engineer, served as a moderator on a popular 8chan subforum where Q was known to post.

Next in value are Q drops on 8chan without tripcodes. Q tends to structure their posts in a standardized manner (see Figure 12), which can be emulated easily. This leaves posts vulnerable to imitation and therefore decreases their proposed point value. Finally, there are the posts by anons, or believers in the theory, on either 4chan or 8chan. While these count as Q drops, they function as a group in their own right, as their point value derives from Q’s interaction with the post. The exact value depends on the level and extent of Q’s interaction with it.

Like the initial dice roll in a board game, a new Q drop would set into motion a new game phase. In this next section, I explain how every new drop changed the game and further

¹⁵⁹ While the different examples of Q drops are color-coded in the primary source document where they were taken from, actual Q drops are not. The color-coding is for illustrative purposes.

created the field of play. Once a drop went live on 4chan, and later 8chan, it typically was added to an aggregation site. These sites were encyclopedic, historical repositories for all of Q's drops. Once the drops had been added, aided in part by the spread of QAnon influencers such as Tracy Diaz or "Tracy Beanz (sic)," drops quickly spread across the internet and various social media sites.¹⁶⁰ I created Figure 11 to illustrate the typical diffusion of a Q drop online through various layers of websites and social media. It is inspired by the work of Aliapoulios et al., who investigate a corpus of Q drops from the perspective of canonical information.¹⁶¹

Posting a drop on an aggregation site sets in motion a game phase where various "bakers" start collaborating with one another to make sense of the information contained within the drop. Both bakers and anons are followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory. Bakers are a subset of the anons, and they interpret new posts from Q and share their findings with the wider community, then the world at large. As Marwick and Partin explain, the name metaphorically echoes their task: "bakers are QAnon believers who actively work to interpret 'crumbs' of information from Q's posts to create insights or 'bread.'"¹⁶² Thus, anons refer to an everyday believer in the theory, essentially the general population of QAnon believers.

¹⁶⁰ Max Aliapoulios et al., "The Gospel According to Q: Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical Information," *arXiv:2101.08750 [Cs]*, January 21, 2021, 735, <http://arxiv.org/abs/2101.08750>.

¹⁶¹ See Aliapoulios et al., "Gospel."

¹⁶² Alice E. Marwick and William Clyde Partin, "Constructing Alternative Facts: Populist Expertise and the QAnon Conspiracy," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 5 (May 1, 2024): 2536, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221090201>.

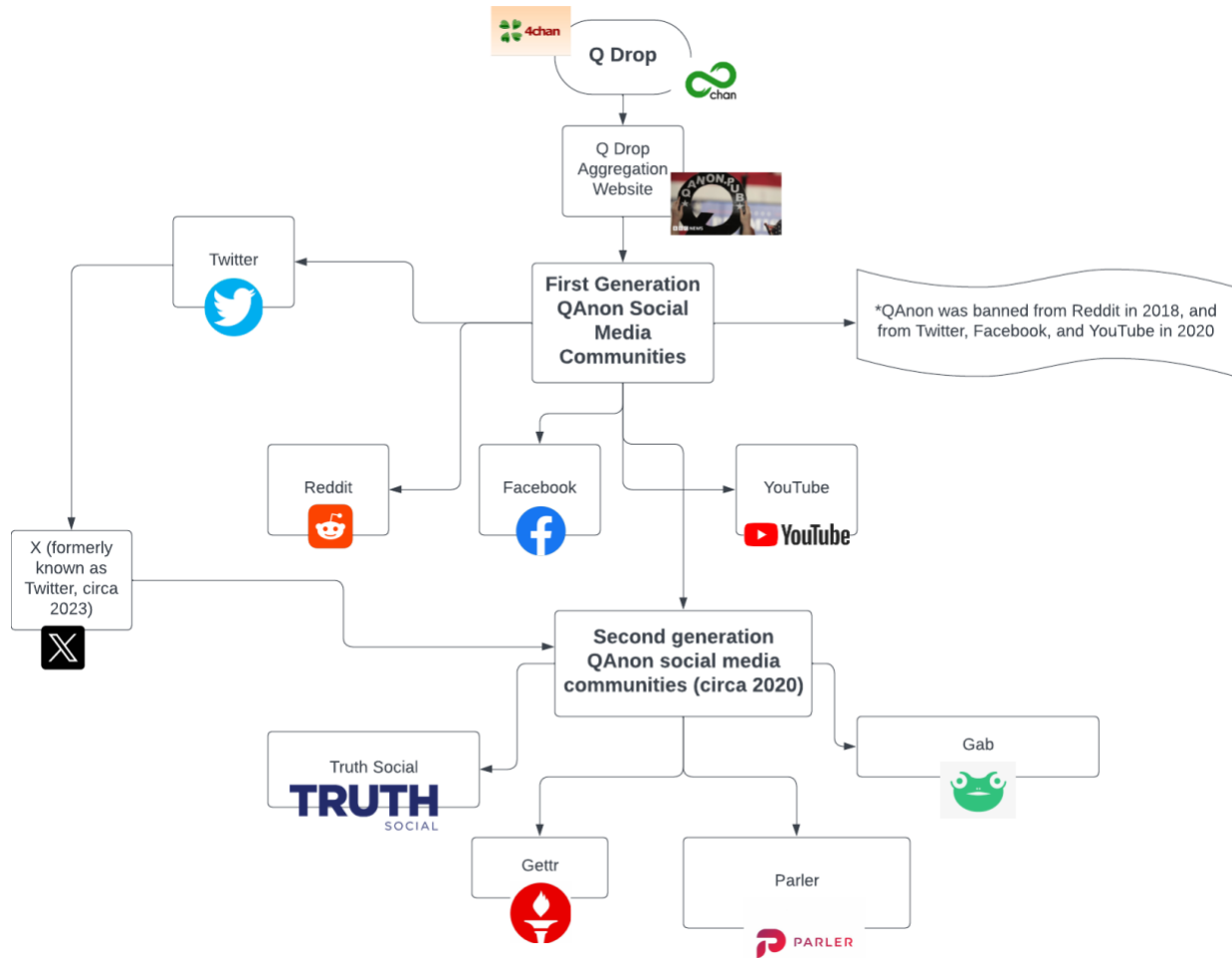


Figure 11. *How a Q Drop Spreads Online.*

This first “round” of decoding is a heavily interpersonal exercise, with bakers discussing ideas with one another on various QAnon social media communities before they take their findings to the wider world. This round of inference is also where bakers can begin to collect points in the form of motivational affordances, or recognition from their fellow bakers and other denizens of the internet for any interesting connections they make during the initial round of decoding. Crucially, interpreting a Q drop is not a straightforward activity such as reading a book

or news article. Figure 12, taken from a believer's guide to the conspiracy theory, provides some direction on how to interpret a Q drop.¹⁶³

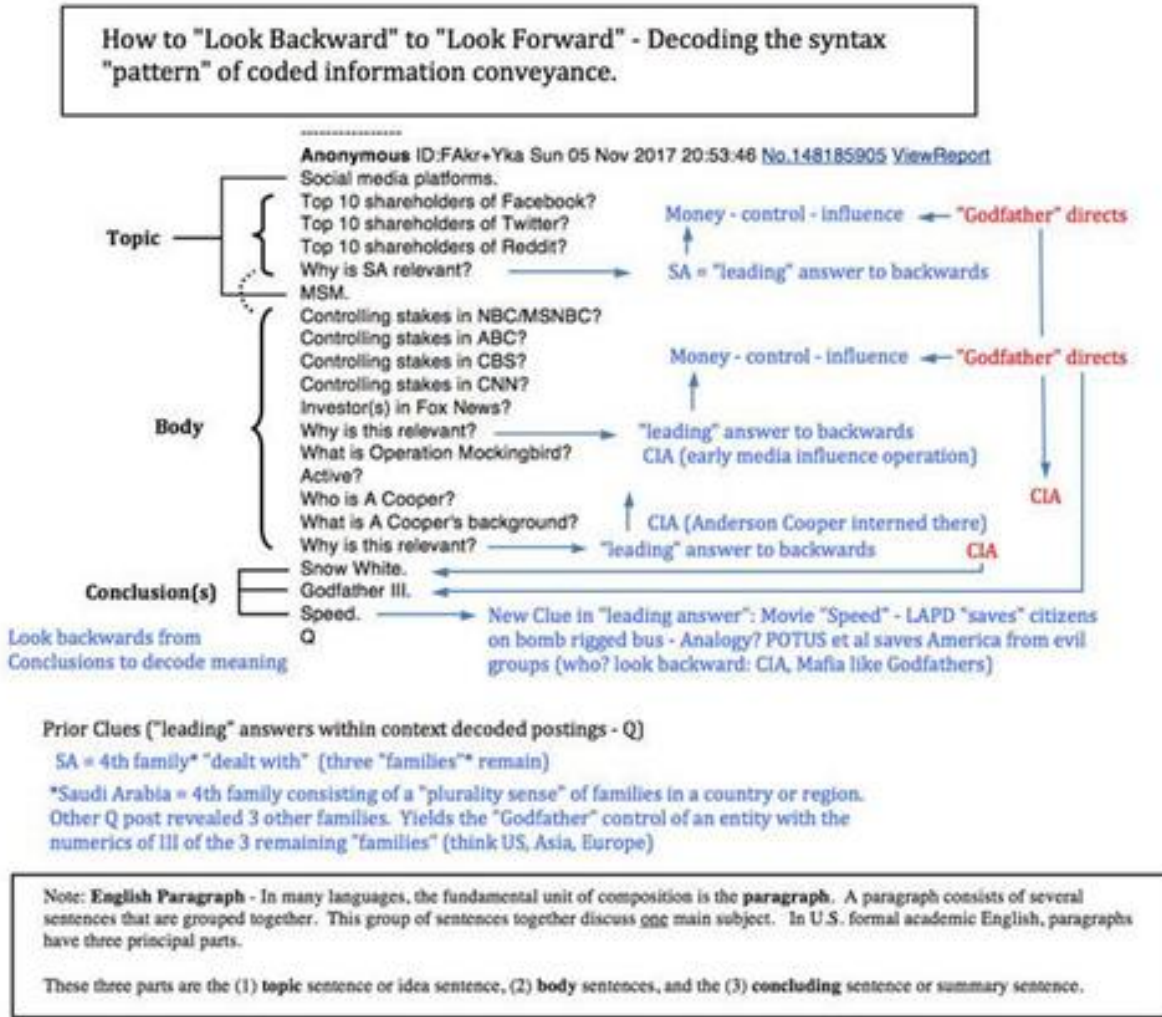


Figure 12. *How To Decode a Q Drop.*

¹⁶³ In the original primary source document, Figure 12 is color-coded. The text of the Q drop itself and text boxes at the top and bottom of the figure are black. The text and arrows to the right of the Q drop text are in blue. These are directional clues that are supposed to help guide our thinking in decoding the drop. Finally, there are several words in red that are farthest to the right of the drop, these are overarching directions that we are supposed to take from the decoded drop.

Similarly to clues found in many word and board games, clues found in Q drops are not designed to be immediately straightforward. In the classic board game Clue, for example, players must ask questions about what character committed a murder and in what fashion they did so. Players cannot ask who committed the crime outright but must work through a process of elimination to come to their conclusion. QAnon functions similarly. Rather than reading straight through a Q drop from top to bottom, a baker must begin at the end of the drop with the conclusion and look backwards to the rest of the drop to decode its actual meaning. Additionally, Q drops are often sequential or build on other Q drops to come to even grander conclusions. The somewhat secretive nature of decoding Q drops adds an allure of exclusivity to the theory. Because not everyone can decode a Q drop immediately, those who can do so see themselves as part of a special group who hold insider knowledge.

As I mentioned above, Q drops frequently require the player or believer to have some sort of preexisting knowledge. Following the instructions in Figure 12 to start at the bottom of the drop, we see a reference to SA, or Saudi Arabia, as the fourth global family. Having this preexisting knowledge is somewhat like having experience points in a role-playing game. Experience points can help quantify a player's progression through a game and the life experiences they have accumulated along the way. A new believer might not have this knowledge, so they would look to the community and other bakers to assist. For some bakers, sharing or teaching this information to new believers might be a form of motivational affordance as they derive satisfaction from community building. Gathering these "experience points" is also a way of further cultivating a believer's identity as a member of the conspiracy theory. As with affective polarization, the elevation of one's team above the perceived Other is the most important end goal.

The next clue in the drop directs us to extrapolate based on the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the drop, which the author of the figure contends adds money, control, and influence to the picture. These factors are all allegedly indicative of a godfather-type figure who controls and directs everything. QAnon lore frequently attributes this role to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). We then receive a list of questions about who has a controlling interest in several large American media outlets followed by references to an Operation Mockingbird and Anderson Cooper, the CNN journalist. A frequent topic in QAnon lore, Operation Mockingbird is a reference to an alleged Cold War-era CIA plan to manipulate American domestic media for propaganda purposes. Anderson Cooper is allegedly relevant to this discussion as he was a CIA intern. Cooper is also a descendent of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the shipping and railroad magnate, a fact which has been known to generate suspicion among Q believers, given the Vanderbilt family's immense fortune and influence. Finally, we have a reference to Snow White, which, in the Q community, can indicate a few different things. Some people think it refers to Julian Assange, while others say the seven dwarves are a general reference to targets being eliminated in "the storm," the QAnon end of days. Perhaps the most realistic reference is to the race that several computer manufacturers had in the 1950s onwards to build mainframes for the government. IBM took to calling themselves Snow White, while several other competitors referred to themselves by the names of the different dwarves. As time has passed, "conspiracy theorists have mythologized these powerful computers into Hal 9000-style villains autonomously pulling strings or being nefariously controlled by deep state brass".¹⁶⁴ Finally, to conclude the drop, we have a reference to the movie *Speed*, in which the LAPD saves a group of citizens from

¹⁶⁴ Justin Caffier, "A Guide to QAnon, the New King of Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories," *VICE*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ywex8v/what-is-qanon-conspiracy-theory/>.

a runaway, explosive-rigged bus. We are supposed to infer, based on the previous clues in the drop, that President Trump is like the LAPD and will save the American people from the nefarious control of the Deep State and CIA and will expose the truth, dispelling what the allegedly propaganda-filled mainstream media is presenting.

With the understanding of how to decode a drop, we can return to the remaining flow of the game. At the end of this first “round,” bakers take the findings they have compiled and present them to the world, beyond QAnon social media communities, for further discussion and validation. It is at this stage when bakers revise or incorporate feedback from other bakers into their findings. Q occasionally interjects at this stage as well. Among the baker community, recognition from Q, often in the form of a repost or comment, can “supercharge” one’s score among the community. For example, one man who wore a QAnon t-shirt while storming the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, proclaimed he wore it so he could “get credit” among the community and from Q.¹⁶⁵ Sometimes Trump also would retweet or repost QAnon-related material on his social media channels. Even more than recognition from Q, recognition from Trump would be the ultimate boost to an anon’s “score.” It provided validation for the wider community that what they were doing was worth pursuing, as well as a sense of legitimacy for their cause. This validation typically came through Trump’s Twitter account, but after he was kicked off the platform in the wake of January 6th for incitement to violence, his praise appears on his own social media platform, Truth Social. However, as noted in Figure 11, Trump was allowed back on Twitter, now known as X, after billionaire industrialist Elon Musk purchased

¹⁶⁵ “QAnon Emerges as Recurring Theme of Criminal Cases Tied to US Capitol Siege,” *ABC News*, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445>.

the platform in 2023. Media Matters, a media watchdog organization, has found Trump has amplified or recognized QAnon some 800 times through his social media profiles. This has come in the form of retweeting posts that reference Q drops, allusions to the “Storm,” and Q slogans such as “WWG1WGA” (where we go one, we go all).¹⁶⁶

Firsthand Testimonials from Believers

This section investigates this dissertation’s key question, whether gamification increases the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories, through the lens of first-person testimonials collected from several QAnon and conspiracy theory-related sub-Reddit forums including r/QAnonCasualties, r/ReQovery, and r/Qult-Headquarters. I use the language of motivational affordances, as outlined in chapter two, to help guide the discussion. As a reminder, these are the tools that incentivize the target of a gamified system to act in a certain way. Examples of popular motivational affordances include point systems, leaderboards, and competitions. QAnon tends to rely on more implicit motivators such as maintaining and strengthening group identity and frequent validation and recognition from conspiracy theory insiders. A unique motivational affordance to Reddit is upvotes and downvotes. These are Reddit’s way of allowing users to have a say in what content they would like to see more of. Upvoting also gives users karma points, which can be a way of measuring a user’s experience on the platform. I make note of the number of upvotes on posts where available.

Of the forums I visited, R/QAnonCasualties is the most well-established. It is dedicated to helping people escape and/or recover from QAnon and Q-like belief systems, sometimes

¹⁶⁶ Alex Kaplan, “Trump Has Now Amplified QAnon-Promoting Accounts over 800 Times on Truth Social,” *Media Matters for America*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/trump-has-now-amplified-qanon-promoting-accounts-over-800-times-truth>.

referred to as “Qults.” These forums also host a variety of resources on their page wiki, including support and recovery resources on how to escape QAnon, how to cope with its associated beliefs, and ways to support family and friends who may be enmeshed in the worldview. Additionally, the forum also showcases a variety of stories about the conspiracy theory. They typically are categorized into the following groups: stories of hope, or stories of progress of bringing people back from the edge of belief; success stories, or stories of those people who have been successfully “de-programmed”; and help-needed stories, which are posts from people in need who are reaching out.

After an initial search of r/QAnonCasualties, r/ReQovery, and r/Qult-Headquarters, I selected nine posts, or testimonials, for analysis. I did so using the following criteria. First, I conducted a key-word search of each of the three forums for the terms game, puzzle, and quest, as those are the terms most directly related to this dissertation’s main argument. I did not limit the search by date, given that QAnon is still a relatively recent phenomenon. I did informally limit posts by length, however, and excluded those that were less than approximately one paragraph in length. At this stage, I had collected about 20 posts. I then read through these posts to find only those that provided first-person testimonials of QAnon involvement. I had to disregard the majority of those I had initially collected as they either were written by professional researchers or journalists or did not include any sort of personal narrative. Most frequently, the cut posts referred to a news article or podcast. I then refocused the search primarily on the r/QAnonCasualties subreddit and collected several of each category of “hope,” “success,” and “help needed” narratives. This strategy proved much more fruitful. Finally, I conducted a third-round key word search of testimonials to round out the analysis. Key words included score, game, and LARP. In the ensuing section of the chapter, I evaluate each collected

testimonial using the following guiding questions: what is the overall purpose of the testimonial, what kind of narrative does it present regarding achievements and rewards, and what evidence does it provide in support of that narrative?

u/_illiterate_fool

Written in the Spring of 2024, this testimonial comes from a now-19-year-old who claims to have been involved in the alt-right and QAnon world since they were 12 years old. They claimed their involvement was not a secret to family and friends, and they credit those influences for eventually being able to pull them out of this worldview. With 188 upvotes, this post generated significant discussion as well as karma points for the user. U/_illiterate_fool argues they were most attracted to the QAnon conspiracy because of its participatory nature and “being able to dig into something that had a clear villain. I felt like a hero for it.”¹⁶⁷ The classic narrative of good versus evil is something that most conspiracy theories promote. Those who are on the side of the conspiracy are the heroes and victors, and those who oppose it are the evil influences that must be eradicated. The reward or achievement presented in this narrative is being able to be on the side of the “good guys.” This user says they eventually realized they were trans, which in combination with support from their family and friends, made them realize how harmful QAnon was and helped them walk away from these beliefs.

u/bisby117

This post, from 2021, comes from a user whose coworker is involved in QAnon lore, but the post only generated 15 upvotes. The user had been talking to their coworker about their

¹⁶⁷ u/_illiterate_fool, “Not Much to Say, but Nowhere to Say It, Either,” *Reddit*, R/ReQovery, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/ReQovery/comments/1c4tc6m/not_much_to_say_but_nowhere_to_say_it_eithe_r/.

concerns over what would then have been the initial COVID-19 vaccine as well as their “social credit” score. The social credit system was developed in China to evaluate the trustworthiness of citizens and whether they were worthy of doing business with. People earn points and credit for being friendly to the regime and are docked points if they are not. Those with high enough social credit are allowed to do the best business deals and those with low credit are at risk for punishment as severe as imprisonment. The social credit score system is fully bound up in China’s mass state surveillance and security apparatus. Many QAnon believers are concerned something like this will be implemented in the United States, as they fear that the Democratic Party falsely has been infiltrated by supporters of the Communist regime.¹⁶⁸

u/Difficult-Duty-8156

This post, from 2023, comes from someone whose female friend’s fiancé led her down a conspiratorial rabbit hole; the post received an impressive 1,600 upvotes. The post refers to QAnon, the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic was a “hoax,” lizard people, and an obsession with Donald Trump. The fiancé was also physically and emotionally abusive toward the friend in question. While the post makes no mention of rewards or motivational affordances, I included it in this analysis as the poster claims not to be an American. Given the worldwide surge in right-wing populism over the last ten years in India, South America, and Europe, this is not surprising. Additionally, when one strips away the finer details of the QAnon conspiracy theory, the

¹⁶⁸ u/Bisby117, “Social Score,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed August 8, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/mnltjv/social_score/.

underlying narrative of heroic insider fighting an evil cabal that harms children is one that applies to many different contexts.¹⁶⁹

u/Spacedude50

This testimonial, from 2020, comes from a user who is lamenting that his mother has fallen down a potentially conspiratorial rabbit hole on social media. To start the post, he asserts Facebook “has done to our parents what they were afraid video games would do to us.” While we know from the academic literature that playing video games does not lead to violence, it is a popular belief that is still widely prevalent in greater discourse. This user sees Facebook, like many people still see video games, as the gateway drug to a whole host of undesirable behaviors, including belief in QAnon. It is apparent that a great number of Redditors agree, as the post received some 12,000 upvotes. He says his very liberal mother used Facebook to channel her disgust for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election. Thankfully, he writes, “it took the horror that was Donald Trump to snap her out of it and delete her FB account for good. I am so grateful she did not find QAnon and am so sorry for all that have lost loved ones to this psychotic fantasy.”¹⁷⁰ On display in this testimonial are the motivational affordances social media can sometimes provide. Namely, it provides a gathering ground for people to discuss shared feelings

¹⁶⁹ u/Difficult-Duty-8156, “Success Story, I Got My Best Friend Back,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/143imtq/success_story_i_got_my_best_friend_back/.

¹⁷⁰ u/Spacedude50, “‘FB Has Done to Our Parents What They Were Afraid Video Games Would to Us’ - a Wise Redditor,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed August 8, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/12njqu/fb_has_done_to_our_parents_what_they_were_afraid/.

on certain topics. Oftentimes, this can produce an echo chamber, if the community or belief is insular enough, as it seemed to be in the case of these users' distaste for Hillary Clinton.

u/growup_and_blowaway

Like u/Difficult-Duty's testimonial, this post is about how QAnon has reach outside of middle America. The poster describes how their Vietnamese immigrant mother is experiencing suicidal ideation at the thought of Biden winning the 2020 presidential election, claiming "she won't ever be able to eat red meat and will be forced to eat healthy like Californians."¹⁷¹ While it is clear from the rest of the post the mother is likely suffering from acute mental health issues, the conspiratorial angle to her delusions is worth noting. The Trumpian predilection toward fast food and red meat as "real" American food and anything else as "leftist" or health/not real food shows how deep these artificial divisions have become. While the testimonial does not make any mention of a reward, it does insinuate a punishment, which to some can be motivating.

u/nosunshinee

This post, from 2023, comes from a user who is concerned about "their Q" (their friend or loved one who believes in QAnon) using and interacting with people on Telegram, an encrypted mobile messaging app. In addition to allowing users to message with their contacts, Telegram also has content-based channels where users can follow and interact with content in which they are interested. This user finds it alarming that their Q is following an influencer, Phil Godlewski, who was running conspiracy theory-based trivia games for prize money through the app. Godlewski, a QAnon influencer, claims to be an entrepreneur and investor who uses his

¹⁷¹ u/growup_and_blowaway, "Mother Blurted out What's the Point in Living If Trump Doesn't Win," *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/1dnb5wh/mother_blurted_out_whats_the_point_in_living_if/.

newfound fortune to show people the light of QAnon. Around the time of this posting, Godlewski inadvertently outed himself as having groomed a minor for sex.¹⁷² Out of all the testimonials collected, this post provides the most explicit mention of conspiratorial gaming and motivational affordances. Godlewski literally was turning conspiracy theories into games for prize money.¹⁷³

u/DrStrangeloves

This post describes u/DrStrangeloves's relationship with her parents and younger sister, particularly as it relates to their feelings over the COVID-19 pandemic. The poster describes how her family became enmeshed in the QAnon-related conspiracy theory that the pandemic was not real. She also describes how virulently her family felt about anyone who had "taken the jab" (gotten the vaccine) or who wore a mask. She depicts a social media post from her parents, writing "the posts targeted at education workers [the poster works in education] really started getting to me as I read that my parents thought educators encouraging mask use was the same as child grooming and molestation."¹⁷⁴ The post continues and describes how the poster was uninvited from her younger sister's baby shower because she was vaccinated against COVID-19, as the younger sister believed in "vaccine shedding," or the idea that the COVID vaccine was able to release live virus particles into the air once it was injected into someone's body. The post concludes with the user describing how her mother attempted to make amends for how she

¹⁷² Will Sommer, "QAnon Leader Inadvertently Out Himself as a Groomer," *Daily Beast*, November 30, 2022, sec. politics, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-leader-phil-godlewski-has-sordid-past-of-his-ownincluding-a-conviction-for-corrupting-a-minor>.

¹⁷³ u/nosunshinee, "Title of Post," *Reddit*, R/SubredditTitle, accessed DATE, <https://URL>.

¹⁷⁴ u/DrStrangeloves, "Qs Coming out of the Fog," *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/1dde5zx/qs_coming_out_of_the_fog/.

treated her daughter. While this testimonial makes no explicit mention of rewards or achievements, it makes the reader aware of the losses the poster has suffered. QAnon and its related network of conspiracy theories have extracted a high emotional toll from many of the people featured in these testimonials. We may not understand what these people gained from believing in QAnon, but the toll believers' families and friends pay is clear.

u/EmanciporReese

While this post does not refer directly to a friend or family member who has been impacted by the QAnon conspiracy theory, it still makes some useful observations regarding the theory and gamification. The poster compares what they saw on the HBO docuseries about QAnon to the popular Japanese anime series *Death Note*. Briefly, *Death Note* follows a Japanese high school student who finds a mysterious notebook that gives him the ability to kill anyone whose name is written in its pages. The student then turns into a vigilante who tries to use its powers to kill anyone he thinks is immoral. The poster says of Ron Watkins, the subject of the docuseries, and most likely contender to be Q,

He literally involves himself in the investigation of Q as someone who is clearly a suspect to try and win some ultimate game of cat and mouse like “oh I can’t be Q he posted while I was at ‘X’ location like the guy expects us to believe a few lines of code can’t make that happen and actually thinks he can fool everybody. Ron Watkins was LARPing fucking death note (sic).¹⁷⁵

In short, the poster argues Watkins purposefully is gaming or LARPing the role of QAnon, playing at moral judge and jury like the high school student did in *Death Note*. Watkins pretends

¹⁷⁵ u/EmanciporReese, “The Game of Cat and Mouse That Was the Q Docuseries Gives Me Huge Death Note Vibes, and the Thought Makes Me Sick but the More I Think about It, the More It Makes Sense. 🤔🤔🤔,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed August 8, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/mlrlnb/the_game_of_cat_and_mouse_that_was_the_q/.

in the docuseries not to know the real whereabouts of Q when asked, but it is clear to many people this is just a charade. Despite the filmmakers' best efforts, however, they were never able to get Watkins to confess on camera, and the identity of Q remains a secret.

u/Gullible-text-4389

This is a testimonial from another woman about her mother, whom she claims is a proponent of the QAnon conspiracy theory. Two key themes from this post are worth noting. First, both the mother and daughter share similar New Age beliefs around wellness and cosmology, but the daughter claims to be better able to differentiate between what is real and what might be a scam. She claims the mother regularly sends money to a variety of scam organizations. Additionally, the mother seems very invested in QAnon's purported uniqueness. For example, the daughter writes, "she [the mother] seems to think all her sources are secret and top-notch quality."¹⁷⁶ Additionally, the mother frequently tells her daughter there are military sleeper cells that will activate to protect the common people "when the time comes." This assertion is coming from behind-the-scenes knowledge, "but they all are somehow a select group of people in the know."¹⁷⁷ In this post, the reward/achievement narrative is much more evident: the mother believes she is a part of a secret group that is privy to select knowledge that will protect her and other believers in times of crisis. Her reward for believing in QAnon is thinking she is a part of the "in-group" and therefore safe from danger.

¹⁷⁶ u/Gullible-Text-4389, "Where Do I Begin? I'm New to This Thread, and Here Because of My Q Mother," *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/1dgmkmz/where_do_i_begin_im_new_to_this_thread_and_here/.

¹⁷⁷ u/Gullible-Text-4389, "Where Do I Begin?"

A Deleted User

A post from a user who deleted their account makes a worthwhile observation about how the QAnon posts' structure can prioritize or deprioritize different types of “doomer” or negative content. They write,

These doomer or negative posts are saying that Q is a larp (a player in other terms) and deriding that they have ben tricked. Usually these posts are few and far between, but there are a lot I am seeing, and they are getting more upvotes than negative votes. One is up to +24, which is high. Its weird seeing this as these websites are very strict at censoring messages that go against the grain—ironically no freedom of speech here. Usually such posts disappear quickly and are barraged with hate and "trust the plan" zombie behavior. There is some of this but more positive agreeing replies (sic).¹⁷⁸

While it is somewhat difficult to parse exactly what the user is saying due to grammatical and syntactical errors, this user seems to write that community members may be “waking up” to the fact that QAnon is not all it is made out to be. Upvoting and downvoting on social media sites such as Reddit are a form of motivational incentive or social credit. Users can upvote and downvote content and posts they think best fit the subforum's rules for discussion. The users who do that the best typically have the highest “karma” or credit on the site. Users with the most karma are seen as the most trustworthy and experienced. Certain communities are also restricted and only allow people with high enough karma to post in them.

u/LarennElizabeth

This is quite a long and personal testimonial from a young woman about her and her male partner who both fell into the QAnon orbit. She begins the post by describing her extensive history of mental illness and their shared history of physical and sexual abuse. She contends this

¹⁷⁸ “Q Doomers Call Q a LARP - Might Be Seeing the Truth Finally,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed August 8, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/krvz8l/q_doomers_call_q_a_larp_might_be_seeing_the_truth/.

history has left them vulnerable to believing in “shared delusions” and insinuates this is part of the reason they both came to believe in QAnon. While there is no direct causal link between mental illness and belief in conspiracy theories (as I noted in chapter two), belief in conspiracy theories is correlated with certain personality traits such as paranoia. The user credits the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns for accelerating their belief in QAnon, describing how a friend sent them videos about the cabal. She writes, “I hadn’t heard of it before, so I had no context whatsoever. I think maybe we were both so bored and stressed, it was more fun to think it was all some kind of cover up, and they [QAnon] subscribed to a lot of theories he and I had both entertained in the past.”¹⁷⁹ Additionally, as we know from the existing literature such as Brotherton and Eser, boredom can drive belief in conspiracy theories. Therefore, in the case of this testimonial, the available reward for believing in QAnon is its entertainment value and relief from boredom.

u/Pinkpetasma

This post, from 2021, comes from another user whose QAnon-impacted loved one uses gaming to channel their political beliefs; the post received 181 upvotes. *World of Warcraft* is an online role-playing game where users can explore an open-game world in various perspectives, complete quests, fight battles, interact with other players and elements of the game, and explore the game’s landscape. The user laments their “Q Dad has ruined World of Warcraft for me. All

¹⁷⁹ u/LarennElizabeth, “Perspective from a Former Conspiracy Theorist,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/vrp5au/perspective_from_a_former_conspiracy_theorist/.

of his characters are named after Q influences, Trump, or their stupid slogans.”¹⁸⁰ In this testimonial, the father, rather than using game time as bonding experience with their child, uses it as a way to further explore and develop their beliefs in the conspiracy theory. The user writes, “he’s made this political fan fiction into part of his identity.”¹⁸¹ This user’s feelings precisely sum up the key dynamics at play in this dissertation.

Conclusion

How, then, does the game end? For true believers, it never really does. The countless iterations of Q drops, collaborative interpretation, and cycles of motivational affordances have the potential to continue endlessly. The theory’s ultimate prize, destruction of the cabal and the recognition of the ultimate truth, is completely nebulous and impossible to achieve. Rather than dissuading believers, however, they see this never-ending search for the truth as a quest, which makes it even more dangerous as there is no “off-ramp.” The game does not end if you score the most points, or if you catch the murderer like in *Clue*. Like in the later seasons of the HBO adaptation of *Westworld*, the now free human-like androids struggle to maintain the illusion of the new society they have created, with each layer of the story becoming more convoluted than the next. We see evidence of these struggles in the above testimonials. Whether it is the man whose mother thinks her dietary choices are being controlled by the cabal, the young person whose father turns their gaming time into political fan fiction, or the young woman whose

¹⁸⁰ u/Pinkpetasma, “Q Dad Has Ruined World of Warcraft for Me. All of His Characters Are Named after Q Influencers, Trump, or Their Stupid Slogans,” *Reddit*, R/QAnonCasualties, accessed August 8, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/comments/ptoqvo/q_dad_has_ruined_world_of_warcraft_for_me_all_of/.

¹⁸¹ u/Pinkpetasma, “Q Dad.”

relationship with her family was destroyed because of anti-vaccine beliefs, the toll QAnon and adjacent conspiracy theories extracts is real. Gamification only masks the hurt the conspiracy theory causes, using the language of motivational affordances. In turn, these affordances distract from what is happening. And at its most extreme, people are being politically radicalized and isolated from their communities. Thus, the concluding chapter of this dissertation explores these complications in greater detail. What is understood by political radicalization? How does it happen? Does belief in conspiracy theories automatically lead to violence? What future research might we derive from this dissertation about those questions?

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Introduction

Thus far, this dissertation has investigated how the QAnon conspiracy theory and similar online conspiracy theories have been gamified. Very broadly, gamification involves the application of game elements to non-game phenomena. Examples of game elements include motivational affordances or tools such as point systems, leaderboards, the ability to work in teams, or structuring the game in a way to foster a sense of competition between players. Good gamified systems are tailored to the needs of their players. In the case of QAnon, I have argued the specific motivational affordances include individual recognition from QAnon, creating a feeling that the individual believer matters and is worthwhile, and deriving sense of belonging or community with other believers.

Chapter Findings

In chapters three and four, I attempted to show how the gamification mechanism functions in real time using two unrelated conspiracy theories. Using two separate online survey experiments—one based on the conspiracy theory that Tupac was not murdered in 1996, but rather faked his own death, and the second, that the 2020 presidential election was somehow rigged and Donald Trump, not Joe Biden, was the true winner—I provide mixed evidence in support of this dissertation’s main argument. Chapter three provides evidence that gamification can increase the persuasiveness of conspiracy theories, while chapter four is less clear. I outlined some possibilities for future research at the end of chapter four to try and provide a workaround for some of the issues that may have impacted this study’s results.

Finally, in chapter five, I provided some contextual color regarding the QAnon conspiracy theory and how we can understand the game the theory’s believers are playing. First,

I discussed the theory's key players, who are all primarily part of the alleged "Deep State," and the power they possess in the game. Next, I outlined the field of play and how players fit on the "game board" in relation to their position. I then provided an overview of the rules of the game that govern QAnon. As previously noted, Q drops, or posts Q makes on the social media sites 4chan and 8chan, are the theory's primary driver and govern game play. Finally, I concluded the chapter by revisiting the idea of the motivational affordances that I argued are implicit within gamified conspiracy theories using several testimonials from past believers and those who had friends and loved ones that had been trapped by QAnon.

The remainder of this concluding chapter is dedicated to understanding the QAnon conspiracy theory's endgame. Namely, I am most interested in whether conspiratorial ideation and its associated violent rhetoric can lead to acts of violence. To better make sense of this relationship, I ask questions such as, what is understood by political radicalization? How does it happen? Does belief in conspiracy theories automatically lead to violence? What warning signs might appear before violence is committed? With the events of the 2020 presidential election, January 6th, 2021, and the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in July of 2024, incidences of political violence seem to be picking up steam. How can we better understand the role conspiracy theories play in their occurrence? The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of future research ideas stemming from this dissertation.

Future Research Directions: Can Conspiracy Theorizing Lead to Violence?

What is the endgame for QAnon? Will the "Storm" ever materialize? Is January 6th going to happen again? To begin to unpack these questions, I turn to the existing literature. Generally, it supports the idea that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with support for authoritarianism and violence, but any causal link to committing violence is still unclear. The

literature on the topic has grown rapidly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the January 6th, 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol but still leave much to be desired.¹⁸² I first revisit what we do know about political radicalization, and then I move on to discussing new research in the field.

Radicalization can be defined as “the psychological, emotional, and behavioral processes by which an individual adopts an ideology that promotes the use of violence for the attainment of political, economic, religious or social goals.”¹⁸³ It typically is treated as a set of factors or mechanisms that work together to drive extremist behavior. Vegetti and Litvay argue radicalization can be “conceptualized as a process, [or pathway], that starts with common citizens and ends with individuals who are willing to take many lives, sometimes their own, to pursue a political ideal.”¹⁸⁴ However, the exact causal mechanisms that make up this process are still being deduced, as I explain in greater depth shortly.

One theory Kruglanski et al. highlight as potentially explaining radicalization when it comes to conspiratorial ideation and violence is the significance quest theory. It argues the “need for personal significance, [the desire to matter and be someone] and to have meaning in one’s life” plays a key role in the decision to commit violence.¹⁸⁵ In QAnon lore, Q and their supporters play a starring role in the game. Bakers are engaged in meaning-making every time they interpret a Q drop. Believers can become enmeshed in the theory, as it can give them an

¹⁸² See Uscinski et al., “Cause and Effect.”

¹⁸³ Michael A. Jensen, Anita Atwell Seate, and Patrick A. James, “Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (July 3, 2020): 1067, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1442330>.

¹⁸⁴ Vegetti and Litvay, “Belief,” 21.

¹⁸⁵ Arie Kruglanski et al., “The Making of Violent Extremists,” *Review of General Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2018): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000144>.

outlet when they are bored or dissatisfied with their existing life circumstances. In the Reddit testimonial from u/LarennElizabeth, for example, she cited the boredom the COVID-19 pandemic prompted as helping to fuel her and her partner's belief in the theory. QAnon adherents who travelled to Washington, D.C. as a part of the "Stop the Steal" movement in the lead up to January 6th, 2021, were invested enough in the theory that they were willing to spend their own funds to travel and take time off from work. All of these actions were about centering the believer as the hero of the QAnon story, the everyman "fighting back" against the machinations of the Deep State.

Returning to the idea of radicalization as a process, researchers still are determining the exact causal mechanisms that create it. Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James attempt to unpack these causal mechanisms using a novel dataset and methodology. They find a sense of community victimization "and a shift in individuals' cognitive frames ... act as near necessary conditions for violent extremism."¹⁸⁶ These factors combine with a host of emotional, psychological, and group-based dynamics to produce eight different pathways to violence. They write, "of these, the pathways that combine mechanisms related to individual-level psychological vulnerability, the intense need for recognition by particular groups or communities, and group biases" account for most cases.¹⁸⁷ One could argue the QAnon conspiracy touches on all three of these phenomena. First, conspiracy theorizing is often driven by fear of the Other, as in the case of the Birther conspiracy or Henry Ford's promotion of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Second, one of the main premises of the QAnon conspiracy theory is based on building group cohesion through the

¹⁸⁶ Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James, "Radicalization," PG#.

¹⁸⁷ Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James, "Radicalization," 1068.

decoding of Q drops. Finally, once enmeshed in the theory, believers will go to great lengths to protect their own, as we saw with the events of January 6th. One example of this is Jacob Chansely, the so-called QAnon shaman.

Chansely participated in the events of January 6th dressed in face and body paint, wearing a fur top and horned Viking helmet, and carrying a large American flag. According to the Justice Department's indictment, Chansely was one of the first 50 people who breached the Capitol complex. He later took a picture of himself sitting behind the Vice President's desk on the Senate Floor and wrote a note to Pence that threateningly said, "Your time is up."¹⁸⁸

Chansely dressed up as the QAnon shaman because he wanted people to notice him. In attending the events of January 6th, he not only sought to support his chosen presidential candidate, Donald Trump, but to make sure everyone knew of that support and his presence in the "Stop the Steal" movement. Like a soccer hooligan who unashamedly will resort to violence in support of their side, Chansely needed everyone to know he was willing to go to extreme lengths to show his support. For him, this public display of support for QAnon gave meaning to his life.

To drill down further on potential links between conspiracy theorizing and violent action, Vegetti and Litvay pose two questions. First, they ask if something implicit in the conspiracy theory narrative can trigger violence or if "networks of conspiracy adherents merely provide an infrastructure for the organization of violent events?"¹⁸⁹ They propose to answer these questions using a model that shows conspiracy theories "channel individuals' resentments toward political

¹⁸⁸ Michael Daly, "'Qanon Shaman' Demands the FBI Return the Horns He Wore During Riot," *Daily Beast*, January 7, 2024, sec. politics, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-shaman-jacob-angeli-chansley-demands-fbi-return-the-horns-he-wore-on-jan-6>.

¹⁸⁹ Vegetti and Littvay, "Belief," 19.

goals,” which makes them more likely to support political violence.¹⁹⁰ In the end, they argue conspiracy theories act as an intervening variable funneling people’s anger and frustration toward political ends.¹⁹¹ Intervening variables are factors that can impact the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable and cannot be observed readily. Conspiracy theories act as a force magnifier when it comes to existing anger and frustration and may be able to catalyze someone to commit violence.

Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino investigate the relationship between populist beliefs, conspiracy theorizing, and support for violence using original two-wave survey data from the 2020 presidential election plus data from the American National Election Survey. Crucially, they find evidence to support the idea that holding conspiratorial beliefs, on both sides of the aisle, leads to greater support for “non-normative political action including the harassment and targeting of rival political candidates [and] acts of violence in support of political ends.”¹⁹² Higher levels of conspiratorial belief generally correlate with greater support for populist leaders as well as for violence. Interestingly, as support for conspiratorial beliefs declines, so does the support for populist leaders and violent action.¹⁹³ We can see echoes of this pattern when it comes to the Stop the Steal conspiracy theory: support for Donald Trump, a known populist, is correlated with belief in it.

¹⁹⁰ Vegetti and Littvay, "Belief," 19.

¹⁹¹ Vegetti and Littvay, "Belief," 28.

¹⁹² Sebastian Jungkunz, Robert A Fahey, and Airo Hino, “Populist Attitudes, Conspiracy Beliefs and the Justification of Political Violence at the US 2020 Elections,” *Political Studies*, July 30, 2024, 13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241259229>.

¹⁹³ Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino, "Populist Attitudes," 14.

Rottweiler and Gill's research comes to a similar conclusion, also using survey data, that conspiratorial beliefs are linked to support for violent extremism, but several individual-level psychological characteristics mediate the intensity of this relationship. They find, for example, those with lower self-control are more likely to be the strongest supporters of violent action.¹⁹⁴ Rottweiler and Gill's methods are unique in that, rather than simply asking respondents survey questions and collecting responses, they conducted full interviews with survey participants, with the average interview lasting over 30 minutes.¹⁹⁵ Finally, Jolley and Patterson investigate the relationship between support for violence and belief that 5G technology causes someone to contract COVID-19. They find belief in this conspiracy theory, and conspiracy theories in general, correlate with higher levels of anger against the state and, therefore, with an increased willingness to use violence to remedy that anger. As Rottweiler and Gill also found, several individual-level psychological characteristics including self-control and paranoia mediated the intensity of this relationship.¹⁹⁶ The existing research articulates clearly that conspiratorial beliefs correlate with increased support for violence. However, the question as to whether conspiracy theories cause people to commit violence remains unanswered. I would argue, at this moment in time, that increased support for violence is enough of a justification to be worried about the impact of conspiracy theorizing on politics. Namely, with this increased support for violence

¹⁹⁴ Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, "Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-Efficacy, Self-Control and Law-Related Morality," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 7 (October 3, 2022): 1485–1504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288>.

¹⁹⁵ Rottweiler and Gill, "Conspiracy Beliefs," 13.

¹⁹⁶ Daniel Jolley and Jenny L. Paterson, "Pylons Ablaze: Examining the Role of 5G COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs and Support for Violence," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 3 (2020): 628–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12394>.

comes decreased respect for vital democratic norms such as the peaceful transfer of power and elections as the means to solve policy differences.

Limitations and More Potential Research Directions

As I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, there are several potential limitations to the generalizability of the research I have presented here. In particular, there is the difficulty of accurately depicting and replicating a gamified conspiracy theory that comes with the territory of studying social phenomena. As I mentioned earlier, one possible improvement on the current research, given unlimited funding, would be to conduct a laboratory experiment with subjects in person to better replicate the interactivity of conspiracy theories such as QAnon. A laboratory experiment would have allowed for greater customization in terms of the games being played and greater ability to tailor the stimulus materials.

Given the relative newness of the concept of gamification, the literature around it likely will continue to grow and develop across a variety of academic disciplines. Overall, future research across disciplines would benefit from further clarification of two things. First, how can we operationalize the constituent parts of what it means to gamify something, and how do these mechanisms function in the context of a gamified system? Additionally, having a clearer understanding of how to measure the impacts of what it means to gamify something also would go a long way in further developing the concept.

While the bulk of the literature on gamification is situated in disciplines such as information systems, education, business, and computing, there is much to be done when it comes to understanding its relationship to political science and public policy. As I have tried to show in this dissertation, politics already has incorporated gamification. Additionally, practitioners have begun to investigate how it might increase electoral turnout, but the research is

still in its early stages. Future research might gamify civic education to help improve Americans' understanding of government and politics. Future, it would be beneficial for political scientists to continue to explore in greater detail the potentially harmful impacts of gamification, some of which I have begun to explore in this dissertation.

As the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in mid-July of 2024 on the campaign trail shows, the same underlying forces undergirding QAnon— affective polarization and dehumanization—show no signs of ebbing. Though investigations as to the shooter's motive are still in their early days as of this writing, what we know so far indicates QAnon, polarization, and hate are clear and present dangers to American political life. While not all political assassination attempts are motivated by contempt—for instance, attempted Reagan-assassin John Hinckley only wanted to impress the actress Jodie Foster—we do not yet have the evidence to rule out similar motivation in this case. Future research should continue to investigate the connections among conspiratorial ideation, politics, and willingness to resort to violence. Potential questions to pose include, how might lax American gun regulations impact the decision to resort to violence? Are there any gender dynamics at play? How can we characterize the influence of social media and political influencers in resorting to violence? As *Bellingcat* researcher Robert Evans illustrates, social media and video gaming played a key role in the Christchurch, New Zealand massacre.¹⁹⁷ The legacy of that attack continues to reverberate across subsequent episodes of conspiratorially motivated violence. Whatever the questions being asked, conspiratorial ideation is a problem that likely will plague politics for the foreseeable future.

¹⁹⁷ See Evans, "El Paso Shooting."

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APPENDIX A: CONTROL GROUP TASK

Source: Rolling Stone

Date: February 11, 2020

Author: Charles Holmes

Link: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/tupac-alive-movie-951140/>

Title: One Man Believes Tupac Is Alive in New Mexico — And Plans to Make a Movie About It

Sub-heading: There is currently no information regarding when you will be able to see the low-budget film ‘2Pac: The Great Escape From UMC

Article: Perhaps one of the greatest conspiracy theories in music history is that Tupac Shakur is still alive. There’s a stubborn contingent of people who refuse to believe that Shakur died from the four gunshot wounds he sustained on September 7th, 1996, in Las Vegas. Tupac’s bodyguard has shared that he helped the controversial rapper fake his death and smuggle him to Cuba. Suge Knight’s son claimed Tupac was alive in a series of bizarre Instagram posts before reversing his stance. Last year, people were convinced they saw the former Death Row artist in South Africa.

The sustained popularity of this conspiracy theory is now the basis for an upcoming film, 2Pac: The Great Escape From UMC, by Rick Boss.

“This movie is about Tupac actually escaping University Medical Center here in Vegas and relocating to New Mexico and getting protection from the Navajo tribe,” Boss, a Los Angeles filmmaker, told ABC 13’s KTNV. According to Boss, Tupac planted a body double in Suge Knight’s BMW when he heard of the planned attempt on his life and escaped by helicopter to Navajo tribal land in New Mexico, where federal agents couldn’t follow him. Boss alleges that he obtained the information about Tupac’s survival through the rapper’s family and close surrounding circle of friends. “You can write a fiction story, but this is not fiction,” he continued.

“This is facts through certain people I know.”

Richard Garcia, the actor tasked with playing Tupac, is not sold that the man he’s portraying onscreen is still alive. “He’s gone,” Garcia said.

APPENDIX B: EXPERIMENTAL GROUP TASK

Before his death, Tupac developed a habit of calling himself “Makaveli” after the famed political strategist Niccolo Machiavelli who is known to have faked his death. When you rearrange the letters in “Makaveli,” you are left with a particular message. What is it? You have two minutes to figure out the message before the answer will be displayed.

[Answer: Am alive k.]

APPENDIX C: PRE-TEST QUESTIONS

1. How many years of schooling have you completed?
 - a. Between zero and five
 - b. Between five and ten
 - c. Between ten and fifteen
 - d. Greater than fifteen
2. Have you voted in a political election within the last five years?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I can't remember
3. In what region of the United States do you currently reside?
 - a. Northeast
 - b. Southeast
 - c. Midwest
 - d. Southwest
 - e. Pacific Northwest
4. How old are you?
 - a. 18 – 30 years old
 - b. 30 – 50 years old
 - c. 50 – 70 years old
 - d. 70 + years old
5. What do you identify as?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary

6. Where do you get your news from?
 - a. Social media
 - b. Television
 - c. Online news sites and blogs
 - d. Print newspapers
 - e. I do not pay attention to the news
7. Are you currently employed in a full-time capacity?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No, but actively searching for full-time work
8. How much time do you spend on the internet outside of your working hours?
 - a. 1 – 10 hours a week
 - b. 10 – 20 hours a week
 - c. 20 – 30 hours a week
 - d. 30 + hours a week
9. Are you happy with your current circumstances in life?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Somewhat
10. Do you believe politicians generally act in the best interest of their constituents?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Somewhat
11. Would you consider yourself a religious or spiritual person?
 - a. Yes

- b. No
- c. Somewhat

12. Do you value logic in your everyday life?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Somewhat

13. Do you believe in conspiracy theories?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. It depends.

14. Do you believe in extraterrestrial lifeforms?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. It depends.

15. Are you with American pop culture and music? ?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Somewhat

16. Would you consider yourself a passionate person?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Somewhat

APPENDIX D: POST-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe in conspiracy theories?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. It depends
2. On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least factual and ten being the most factual, how would you rate the information presented to you in the previous task?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least likely and ten being the most likely, how likely are you to ask for more information regarding the conspiracy theory presented to you in the previous task?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least convincing and ten being the most convincing, how persuasive did you find the information presented to you in the previous task?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. After completing this task, are you more inclined to be skeptical of information presented to you?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
6. On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least exciting, and ten being the most exciting, did you find the task presented to you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. What role does the news media play when it comes to conspiracy theories? Please describe your thoughts below. (open-ended question)
8. Are you convinced that Tupac is alive? Why or why not? (open-ended)
9. Do you have any comments related to either the gamified scenario, or any other aspects of this task? If so, please describe.

APPENDIX E: PRE-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Select the highest level of schooling that you have completed to date.
 - a. High school degree
 - b. Associate's degree
 - c. Bachelor's degree
 - d. Graduate degree
 - e. The GED (General Educational Development tests)
 - f. None of the above.
2. Have you voted in an election, at any level of government, within the last five years?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I can't remember.
 - d. I don't wish to answer.
3. Where in the United States do you currently live? Please select the option that best approximates your answer.
 - a. North
 - b. South
 - c. Midwest
 - d. West
 - e. Alaska
 - f. Hawaii/Guam
 - g. Puerto Rico
4. Within the last month, how much time do you estimate that you've spent playing games both online and offline? This includes word games, puzzles, video games, board games, roleplaying games, and card games. Please select the option that best approximates your answer.
 - a. 0 – 5 hours

- b. 6 – 11 hours
 - c. 12 – 17 hours
 - d. 18 + hours
 - e. I don't play games.
5. How old are you? Please select the option that best approximates your answer.
- a. 18 – 24 years old
 - b. 25 – 34 years old
 - c. 35 – 44 years old
 - d. 45 – 54 years old
 - e. 55 – 64 years old
 - f. 64 + years old
6. Gender: How do you identify? Please write your answer in the below text box.
- a. _____
7. Where do you get your news from? Please select all that apply.
- a. Social media like TikTok, Instagram, X, or Facebook
 - b. Cable TV channels like Fox News, MSNBC, or CNN
 - c. Online sources such as the Daily Caller or Mother Jones
 - d. Print newspapers
 - e. Radio
 - f. I do not read, watch, or listen to news.
 - g. Source not specified.
8. How would you describe your political views these days? Please select the answer that best approximates your choice.
- a. Very conservative
 - b. Conservative
 - c. Moderate

d. Liberal

e. Very liberal

f. No opinion

9. How much time do estimate you spend reading books for pleasure, per month? Please select the option that best approximates your choice.

a. 0 -5 hours

b. 6 – 10 hours

c. 11 – 15 hours

d. 16 + hours

e. I don't read books for pleasure.

APPENDIX F: CONTROL GROUP TASK

Please read the following excerpt of an article from *Time Magazine*, before proceeding to the next questions.

OCTOBER 24, 2022

Link: <https://time.com/6223820/poll-watchers-stop-the-steal-2022-midterms/>

During early voting in Arizona’s Pima County in August, local election workers had a series of confrontations with poll watchers determined to prevent voter fraud. One of the poll watchers complained loudly about “fraudulent elections.” Another had to be reprimanded multiple times about trying to view private voter data. A third often showed up to take photographs of election administrators and voiced suspicions about out-of-state license plates.

“Staff reported feelings of intimidation, harassment, and general uncomfortableness by these individuals,” according to a report by the Pima County Recorder’s Office, which TIME reviewed. “Voters often felt intimidated and reported individuals for harassing behavior.”

Poll watchers have long been a feature of American elections, allowed to observe and report back to their party or a local supervisor if they see something that appears amiss. But this year, watching the poll watchers is becoming a full-time job for local election officials. Ahead of the Nov. 8 midterms, tens of thousands of Americans have been recruited to serve in these roles by right-wing groups pushing false claims that the 2020 election was stolen [“Stop the Steal”].

These newly minted poll watchers motivated by [concerns over election integrity] plan to show up en masse on Election Day to observe, record on their phones, and in general let both voters and election workers know that they’re being monitored.

At best, this is likely to disrupt overburdened election offices. At worst, it could lead to further harassment of election workers and deepening distrust in the country’s democratic

systems. “When you come in with a [suspicious] mindset, and not a lot of knowledge about how things work, it’s very easy to misconstrue what’s going on and to act in bad faith,” says Rick Hasen, an election-law expert at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Some of these conspiracy-minded poll watchers have already taken matters into their own hands as right-wing groups encourage vigilante behavior, such as patrolling early voting locations and ballot drop-boxes. In one complaint filed Oct. 17, a voter in Maricopa County, Ariz., said that he and his wife had been harassed by a group of people “filming and photographing my wife and I as we approached the Dropbox and accusing us of being a mule.”

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APPENDIX G: POST-TEST QUESTIONS

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the least factual and 10 being the truth, how truthful would you rate the information found in the “Stop the Steal” narrative?
 - a. Question to include a slider bar answer with a left anchor of 1 and right anchor of 10.
2. How much time do you spend on the internet outside of your current working hours per month? Please select the option that best approximates your answer.
 - a. 0 – 5 hours
 - b. 6 – 10 hours
 - c. 11 – 15 hours
 - d. 16 + hours
 - e. I don’t spend time on the internet outside of what is required by my employer.
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the least convinced and 10 being the most convinced, how persuaded are you by the “Stop the Steal” narrative?
 - a. Question to include a slider bar answer with a left anchor of 1 and right anchor of 10.
4. Within the last month, how much time do you estimate that you’ve spent playing a sport? Please select the option that best approximates your answer.
 - a. 0 – 5 hours
 - b. 6 – 10 hours
 - c. 11 – 15 hours
 - d. 16 – 20 hours
 - e. 21 + hours
 - f. I don’t play sports.
5. Which politician claimed, contrary to the facts, that they were the alleged rightful winner of the 2020 American presidential election?
 - a. Kristi Noem
 - b. Donald Trump
 - c. Brad Raffensberger

d. Mark Meadows

e. Mike Pence

6. Survey research shows that most Americans believe in at least one so-called conspiracy theory. Would you say that you are among that group?

a. Yes

b. No

c. It depends on what conspiracy theory we are talking about.

d. I prefer not to answer.

e. I'm unsure.

7. Thank you again for taking the time to complete this survey. You've now reached the final section. If you are interested in learning more about the so-called "Stop the Steal" theory, please write "yes" in the text box below. If you would rather complete the survey and not learn more, please skip this question and click "done" to complete the survey.

APPENDIX H: EXPERIMENTAL GROUP TASK

Before proceeding, please read the below passage.

In the aftermath of the highly polarized 2020 American presidential election, several narratives arose that disputed Joe Biden’s legitimacy as the winner. The most well-known of them was “Stop the Steal,” which has come to refer to former President Donald Trump’s claim that he was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election, and not Joe Biden. Trump repeatedly claimed that he had been a victim of a variety of tactics to have the election stolen from him. From problems with malfunctioning voting machines, and stuffed ballot boxes, to alleged-propaganda efforts in the mass media, and to legislators at all levels of government conspiring against him, the alleged movement to prevent Trump from taking office again was all encompassing.

Using what you learned from the above passage, decode as many of the below words as possible. Write your answers in the text box, each separated by a space. Answers are not case sensitive. Good luck!

iBden

Boatl

umTrp

Farud

igVnto

teSla

Spot

detrPisen

Text Box: _____