

Biased Media and Baseless Beliefs:
A Susceptibility-Exposure Model of Baseless Belief Acquisition

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Conspiracy theories, rumor and misinformation have a long history in the United States, but in recent years there has been a sharp increase in the prevalence of baseless beliefs, which we define as ideas held to be true by certain individuals but wholly lacking in evidence. Ideology plays a key role in many baseless beliefs, with most studies finding conservatives more likely to hold them than liberals. This paper explores the incidence of baseless beliefs using a national survey of 445 US adults. The study utilizes a susceptibility-exposure model, which holds that baseless beliefs are a function of individual traits and dispositions that make certain individuals susceptible when exposed to information about particular baseless claims. Results revealed three domains of baseless belief that are related to specific groupings of individual traits and media use. Some factors, like institutional distrust, predict baseless beliefs across all domains while some, like conservatism, predict baseless beliefs in only some of those categories. Similarly, we find patterns of media usage may play a role in explaining why only some individuals susceptible to holding certain types of baseless belief hold them. We conclude that baseless beliefs are not monolithic, and researchers should be careful in drawing generalized conclusions about their development and persistence.

The increase in ease, speed, and volume of information transmission has facilitated a rapid rise in the spread of all information, including rumor, pseudoscience, and conspiracy theories. Our collective difficulty discriminating the true and likely from the baseless and unlikely has led to a global misinformation crisis. Understanding the cognition of belief is increasingly important as the effects of baseless beliefs—ideas held to be true but lacking in evidence—are becoming more public and widespread, affecting behavior including hate crimes, elections, and vaccine rejection. We prefer the term “baseless belief” to others, such as misperceptions, because it removes the connotation that the belief is somehow reliant on faulty perception and emphasizes the lack of evidence to justify the belief. The present study investigates the psychology of baseless belief and attempts to explain how some factors lead individuals to embrace baseless beliefs in some domains but not others.

Although there are differences in general cognitive competencies, most people can successfully evaluate information and engage in good decision making to effectively manage significant aspects of their everyday life (e.g., finances, health, education, and professional lives). In certain domains, however, many people exhibit a divergence from productive cognitive strategies to faulty ones that

lead to baseless belief. That is, when it comes to some topics, we abandon our tried-and-true cognitive strategies and become susceptible to false information and poor decision-making. Though we tend to associate baseless belief with wild conspiracy theories, these beliefs cover a wide variety of domains. In fact, most people hold at least a few important beliefs for which there is no evidence.¹ Others hold many baseless beliefs across a wider set of topics and may include beliefs that are relatively central to their belief systems and identities and may play an active role in motivating behavior.

We seek to understand what individual characteristics lure us from effective strategies and toward baseless belief in some domains. This study conceptualizes baseless belief acquisition as a susceptibility-exposure process. We draw from Zaller (1991; 1992) in highlighting the interaction between information exposure and individual characteristics in shaping opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Certain individuals may be susceptible to acquiring baseless beliefs for a variety of reasons. Their epistemological framework, cognitive ability, tendency toward motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, exiting belief systems, and many other factors incline some people toward accepting baseless claims as true. For specific baseless beliefs to arise among the susceptible, there must be exposure to information about the claims, and the veracity of the claims must make sense to individuals given their individual characteristics and prior beliefs. We find that individual traits, attitudes, and characteristics, as well as information exposure, predict baseless belief. However, the data suggest baseless beliefs are not monolithic, but rather fall into distinct domains, and we find the dynamics of the susceptibility-exposure model operate differently in these domains.

Literature Review

(Mis)Information Exposure

At a fundamental level, all beliefs arise through exposure to information. Even self-generated beliefs arise from the synthesis of information previously received. This information can flow from a variety of sources, but perhaps most important for the kinds of beliefs that relate to conspiracy theories and other baseless beliefs is the mass media. In the years since Zaller (1991) developed his reception-acceptance model, the media landscape has become wider in scope and considerably more variegated. Fox News channel didn't launch until 1996 and Facebook didn't exist before 2004. Today, the media environment is dominated by the internet and the growth of niche outlets, many of which have strong ideological perspectives. Social media provides a way for this content to spread, and algorithms shape and direct the flow of information to receptive audiences. Contemporary mass media, with its high volume of diverse and often biased information, is almost guaranteed to provide a flow of information about baseless claims.

Do individuals attend to that (mis)information? Reception is a pre-condition of acceptance (Zaller 1991; 1992). Certainly, no one goes out in search of misinformation, but some people may be better

¹ It is probably accurate to say that all people hold a number of baseless beliefs, at least for mundane matters; it would be cognitively infeasible to demand evidence for every belief that informs day-to-day decision making. In the *Big Chill*, the character Michael Gold, played by Jeff Goldblum, proclaims that rationalizations are more important than sex, noting he knows no one who could get through the day without two or three juicy rationalizations. The same could be said for baseless beliefs. These baseless beliefs become worthy of attention when they involve important subjects or scenarios that affect identity, key opinions and attitudes, and health, or when they shape a broad range of behaviors.

at recognizing it when it is presented to them or avoiding it altogether. For example, Hwang and Jeong (2021) demonstrated information avoidance (but not information seeking) correlated significantly with misinformation exposure. That is, individuals who actively avoid certain information were less often exposed to misinformation. Sweeney et al. (2010) provide an excellent review of information seeking and avoidance, concluding that three major factors contribute to information avoidance: (1) avoiding threats to cherished beliefs, (2) avoiding pressure for change or action, and (3) avoiding unpleasant emotions the information might produce.

What makes a particular packet of information threatening to existing beliefs or unpleasant emotionally is determined by each person's individual characteristics. Once exposed to misinformation, what individual factors might predict misinformation acceptance and the development of baseless belief? What makes certain individuals more susceptible to baseless belief acquisition? We conceptualize the relevant factors as belonging to three broad categories: cognition and knowledge, epistemology, and traits and attitudes.

Cognition and Knowledge

Cognitive biases or traps are strongly associated with baseless belief. Kahan et al. (2011) conceptualize the notion of cultural cognition in describing the collection of emotional and social factors that affect belief—that is, “the tendency of individuals to fit their perceptions of risk and related factual beliefs to their shared moral evaluations.” They propose that individuals are motivated to circumvent evidence contrary to their beliefs, even when the evidence is plentiful, to cohere with their self-concept, values, and in-group identity. This explanation suggests that there are psychological phenomena that may lead to faulty cognition. Among these are *cognitive dissonance*, the discomfort we feel when our beliefs come into conflict with our behavior or embrace of contrary belief, and *confirmation bias*, the tendency to disregard information that disconfirms our beliefs and accept information that coheres with it. Both these phenomena are well-documented factors in the development of baseless beliefs.

Regarding cognitive dissonance, Sanchez and Dunning (2021) were recently able to produce feelings of dissonance in participants by asking them merely to consider the truth value of misinformation with a small group of people. Subsequently, allowing participants to freely endorse or reject the misinformation to cohere with their beliefs dissipated the manufactured feeling of dissonance. Likewise, confirmation bias is widely studied as a factor in baseless belief across a wide swath of topics such as racism and antisemitism (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2022), climate change and rejection of science (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2013), economics (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016), and health (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Weinstein, et al., 2005).

Thus, while knowledge is important to developing founded belief, knowledge alone is not sufficient. One must circumvent common cognitive biases. Development of cognitive skills to make use of sound information is also important (Salvi et al., 2021). The relationship between baseless belief and lower levels of analytic thinking ability, for example, is well established (Calvillo et al., 2020; Nurse et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2020). Likewise, Pennycook and Rand (2017; 2020) documented a

relationship between baseless belief and bullshit detection, and a tendency toward cognitive reflection and identifying fake news.

The evaluation of information that is presented to support a claim may also depend on the individual's cognitive capacity. Some better understand the nature of statistical or scientific evidence and can think critically to identify logical fallacies or other reasoning flaws. Individuals with knowledge of probability may better understand that certain coincidences that seem potentially significant may actually be very likely to occur by chance.

Epistemology

One's epistemological approach is fundamental to the development of belief, as some approaches to truth-finding are more fruitful than others. As Garrett and Weeks (2017) note, "Individuals who view reality as a political construct are significantly more likely to embrace falsehoods, whereas those who believe that their conclusions must hew to available evidence tend to hold more accurate beliefs. Confidence in the ability to intuitively recognize truth is a uniquely important predictor of conspiracist ideation." Relying on "truthiness" or "trusting one's gut" as opposed to considering evidence often leads to different evaluations of information and subsequent belief (Newman et al., 2012; Swami et al., 2014). Likewise, an individual's need for evidence is fundamental to the tendency to apply information to belief formation. Garret et al. (2016) demonstrated that a low need for evidence allows even very informed individuals to hold beliefs that cohere more with their group identity than with their knowledge base.

Traits and Attitudes

Several individual traits and attitudes are also related to baseless beliefs across a wide array of topics. Ingroup identity and outgroup attitude was identified decades ago by Tajfel and colleagues (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a contributor to baseless belief. The social identity approach proposes that we draw a significant portion of our self-identity through our affiliation with certain social groups. Moreover, the centrality of group membership to our identity is so fundamental that we alter our thinking to accommodate the prevailing group attitude (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). Cohen (2003) demonstrated this by presenting partisan Republicans and Democrats with policy descriptions attributed variably to one of those groups. Participants viewed the policy more favorably when attributed to their own group. People are also more inclined to embrace baseless beliefs aligned with their group identity (Campbell & Clay, 2014; Dunlap & McCright, 2008).

Other traits and attitudes are also relevant to baseless belief. For example, attitudes such as an individualistic and hierarchical world view are related to anti-vaccine opinions (Hornsey, et al., 2018), as are certain types of anxiety (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017). Distrust of government, media and other large institutions also contributes to rejection or acceptance of (false and true) information. When good information meant to counter baseless beliefs comes from a distrusted source, it is often rejected, while false information coming from a trusted source is often believed (Kleiman et al., 2015; Mayo, 2015; Schul et al., 2004). Likewise, Bliuc and colleagues (2015) found that attitudes of purity/sanctity, ingroup identity and loyalty, and authority and respect all contributed to climate change denial. Importantly, this constellation of traits and attitudes did not significantly lead to a

generalized view of the self as a skeptic. It was isolated to the topic of climate skepticism. The seemingly selective mapping of traits to particular baseless beliefs motivated the present work.

In summary, a large number of individual characteristics are relevant to baseless belief. While it is true that holding one baseless belief can be a good predictor of belief in others, it is not the case that those who believe one will believe all conspiracies and misconceptions. The goals of this research were to determine if there are discrete categories of baseless beliefs, and to identify the traits and patterns of media usage most closely associated with each type. To that end, we hypothesized a susceptibility-exposure theory of baseless belief. Specifically, baseless beliefs arise because certain individuals are particularly susceptible to acquiring them, are exposed to information that suggests the claims might be true, and use their prior experiences and beliefs to assess whether the claims make sense. Discerning these constellations of baseless beliefs, and the traits, cognition, and epistemology associated with each, will allow us to propose an explanatory model of the baseless belief phenomenon.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected from 478 participants who were recruited using Prolific, an online system that pays individuals to complete surveys. Participants were paid \$15 to complete the survey. Because the survey was rather lengthy, it was important to use attention checks to assure subjects were reading, understanding, and answering each item thoughtfully. Five such items were embedded. Two of them were actual survey questions that were worded in a way that would generally garner ratings opposite to the other items in its set. In this way, they were designed to detect subjects skimming and answering questions by quickly clicking responses down one side of the scale. Three items (which were not included in the analyses) were included by surveys' original authors merely as attention checks. For example, we embedded the item "Overall, most people prefer to be respected than disrespected" in the collective self-esteem survey (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992), based on the expectation that people will generally answer the question in the positive. Participants were deleted from the analysis if they failed three or more of these "trap" questions, or if they failed the collective self-esteem item plus one other. A total of 29 subjects were deleted from the analysis based on these criteria. An additional 14 participants were excluded due to missing data, leaving 435 participants in the final dataset.

Several sociodemographic variables were collected. Overall, the sample was 61.4% female, 22.9% were married, 57.3% reported an income of less than \$60k per year, 62.5% were employed, 48.1% reported a bachelor's degree or higher, 29.4% reported living in an urban area, 77.3% were White, and 8.3% were Hispanic/Latino. The average age of the participants was 32.9 years ($SD=12.4$). To improve the generalizability of the sample, post-stratification weights were constructed incorporating income, education, age, Hispanic identity, and race (population data come from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey). Weights were calculated using raking, trimmed at 5.0, and normalized to keep the total N equal. All analyses conducted in this study utilized weighted data.

Measures

To measure baseless beliefs, we reviewed previous studies, considered contemporary conspiracy theories and areas of misinformation, and collected older but persistent myths to develop a list of fifteen claims that have some level of support in the public sphere but for which there is no publicly available evidence. We attempted to cover a variety of baseless beliefs across different topic areas. Respondents were first asked to indicate for each claim whether they thought it was definitely false, probably false, not sure/cannot decide, probably true, or definitely true.

Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler (2017) raise concerns about the possibility of “expressive responding” in the measurement of baseless beliefs, wherein respondents may be cued to see the item as an opportunity to express support for an in-group or some other valued attitudinal object, rather than indicating a true belief in the veracity of the claim. To check against this tendency, for those who responded to the first item that they thought it was definitely/probably false or true we provided a follow-up question asking them to imagine they were given \$100 to bet on whether they thought they were correct and to indicate how much they would be willing to bet (where they could bet \$0 and keep the hypothetical \$100 or bet some or all of it and double their bet). Though no real money was involved, we believe this frame moves respondents away from expressive responding, focusing more squarely on whether they think the claim is true or false. From these items, we created a variable that codes all bets that the claim is false as negative and bets that the claim is true as positive, with anyone betting \$0 or indicating on the first item they were not sure/could not decide coded 0. This variable, which we term a confidence score, ranges from -100 to 100, with 0 indicating agnosticism about the claim.

To measure cognition/knowledge, epistemology, and traits/attitudes the survey included over 35 scales and subscales covering a comprehensive set of domains. Principal components analysis was utilized to reduce these scales to a more parsimonious set of ten variables. Table 1 provides a description of the factors and the associated eigenvalues, basic information about the scales and measures loading onto each factor, and the sources. The sorting of the scales onto the factors is highly interpretable and each factor comprises a cohesive set of underlying measures. We categorize the factors into epistemology (science orientation, epistemological openness), cognition and knowledge (cognitive ability, confirmation bias), and traits and attitudes (conservative belief system, liberal belief system, social pessimism, groupishness, institutional distrust, and political disengagement).

Measures of media usage mirror those in the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES). We include all 78 of the ANES measures of TV, radio, newspaper, internet, and social media usage. Some of these items reference specific programs (e.g., Meet the Press, The Glenn Beck Program) while others ask about media outlets generally (e.g., CNN.com, New York Times online, Wall Street Journal in print). Items about television programs, radio shows, and websites ask whether respondents watch/listen/visit “at least once a month.” Newspaper items ask whether respondents read “regularly.” Finally, the social media items refer to each platform as a whole (e.g., Facebook, Reddit) and ask respondents whether they “visited in the past year.” We use these measures, condensed through a factor analysis discussed in the results, to capture the overall patterns of each respondent’s media use.

Because we are also interested in exploring the role of ideological bias among information flows and its impact on baseless beliefs, we created a new measure of media bias using the data from the 2020 ANES. For each of the 78 media use variables, we calculated the mean ideology score of all ANES respondents who reported using that source and used this as a proxy for the ideological bias of that media source.² Then for each respondent in our dataset, we calculated the mean ideological bias of their media usage by averaging the bias scores for all the sources they reported attending to. We recognize this process does not directly measure media bias, but we believe it serves as an effective proxy measure and has the advantage of being available for all 78 items individually. The data do appear to have face validity, as well-known conservative media voices have relatively high (conservative) bias scores (Rush Limbaugh Show: 5.93; Breitbart News Network: 5.71), while more moderate or liberal platforms have lower bias scores, indicating a liberal tilt (NPR News: 2.96; New York Times online: 3.05).

Results

Baseless beliefs are surprisingly common. As Table 2 indicates, several beliefs presented in the survey were embraced by over a quarter of respondents and one—the claim about pharmaceutical corporations—attracts the belief of over half the sample. With just two exceptions, at least 10% of the respondents embraced each claim. A remarkable 81.6% of the sample thought at least one claim was probably or definitely true.

The prevalence of baseless beliefs surprises us largely because we often focus on outlandish conspiracy theories, but as we note earlier, baseless beliefs as we define them can cover a variety of domains and topics, many of which are mundane and commonplace. Some very common baseless beliefs may even involve important elements of individuals' belief systems. The 2021 General Social Survey reveals over half of Americans say they “know God really exists” and “have no doubts about it” and seven out of ten report some degree of belief in God. As of this writing, no one has discovered any evidence in the public domain that would support this belief—hence the central role of religious faith among believers. But few are as shocked by American religiosity as they are by QAnon, despite both beliefs resting on similar evidentiary footings.

Because baseless beliefs cover many topics, the set of items included in our survey was constructed to cover a wide range of claims, but our first analytical task was to look for broad similarities across the claims that might reveal a smaller set of domains. Table 3 presents the results of a factor analysis that revealed three primary domains into which the 15 baseless beliefs fall. The first factor, which we label Conservative Conspiracies, includes many of the claims that have become popular in conservative media in recent years and particularly since the political ascendancy of Donald Trump: the QAnon conspiracy, the existence of widespread voter fraud, belief in the foreign birth of Barack Obama, and conspiracy claims about George Soros. Also loading onto this factor are beliefs that masks are ineffective, that climate change is false, and that vaccinations cause autism. The inclusion of these beliefs suggests the anti-vax and anti-climate change movements, which long pre-date

²The ANES ideology variable is a seven-point scale running from Extremely Liberal to Extremely Conservative, so the resulting bias scores range from 1 to 7.

Trump's rise, have largely been incorporated into the anti-science populism of the contemporary conservative right.

The second domain of baseless beliefs includes New-Age claims about astrology and the power of crystals as well as unsupported fears about the dangers of cell phones and GMOs. We term this domain Magical Thinking because it embraces unobservable or undetectable dynamics of causality as truth. At first, cell phone radiation and astrology may seem unrelated, but underlying these beliefs is a sense that there are forces affecting human welfare for which science has not provided evidence.

The third domain, Big Lies, includes "classic" conspiracy theories such as the coverup of extraterrestrials and the claim that 9/11 was an inside job, as well as beliefs about the government using HIV to harm Blacks and big pharma hiding evidence about cheap and effective drugs. In these claims, big institutions play the villain and engage in deception and subterfuge to serve their own narrow interests.

Because the factor analysis employed varimax rotation, the resulting factor scores are perfectly orthogonal. In order to create measures of baseless belief in each domain that are not strictly independent, we constructed indexes for each domain by combining the items that load onto each factor. These indexes comprise the mean score of the primary baseless belief items in each domain, which permitted respondents to indicate, for each belief, whether they thought it was: definitely false, probably false, not sure/cannot decide, probably true, or definitely true. The index thus ranges from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater certainty the claims in that domain are true.

The independence of these three domains is an empirical question, of course, and the bivariate correlations in Table 4 provide an answer: they overlap, but only slightly. Belief in one domain is positively related to belief in the other domains, but the shared variance is relatively small. Magical Thinking and Big Lies, for example, share only 28% of their variance. These moderate correlations reinforce the factor analysis and support the conclusion that baseless beliefs are not monolithic and that researchers should be careful to draw generalized conclusions about baseless beliefs.

The differences among these three domains are also evident in the distribution of respondents' confidence scores. Recall that our confidence scores utilize the betting items, which asked respondents who felt a claim was either probably or definitely false/true to bet a hypothetical \$100 that they are correct. The scores range from -100 to +100, with negative scores representing bets that the claim is false and positive scores representing bets the claim is true; scores of zero, which we term agnosticism, capture those who either were not sure if the claim was true or false or were unwilling to bet anything on it. Tables 5, 6, and 7 provide descriptive statistics for each item in the three domains.

These tables reveal notable differences across the domains. Table 5 indicates that Conservative Conspiracies are characterized by relatively low levels of agnosticism, very strong confidence the claims are false, and dispersed confidence the claims are true. The average rejection bets were, with one exception, at least -89, with substantial numbers betting -100 against. In contrast, very few respondents were willing to bet 100 that the claims are true. In contrast, the Magical Thinking claims in Table 6 are marked by much higher levels of agnosticism and much less confidence among those who believe them to be false. Average rejection bets are much lower, in general, than for Conservative Conspiracies, while average acceptance bets are lower as well. As Table 8 displays, the

average rejection bets of Magical Thinking claims are 9 points lower than Conservative Conspiracies and the average acceptance bets are 11 points lower. Average confidence in Big Lies appears similar to Magical Thinking but shows more internal variation. The HIV claims looks much like Conservative Conspiracies, while the extraterrestrials and 9/11 claims resemble the distribution of Magical Thinking claims. The claim about pharmaceutical corporations has a more unique distribution, much more evenly dispersed across the entire range; few would bet 100 either for or against and fewer than 20% are agnostic. Though this claim attracts the most believers of any item we included in the survey, the average acceptance bet was only 75, which is lower than all but one Conservative Conspiracy.

These differences in the distribution of belief confidence in the three domains suggest there may be different cognitive dynamics at work as people consider their beliefs in the claims presented. If so, we should expect to see differences in the susceptibility and exposure factors that drive baseless beliefs in each domain. Table 9 presents a set of OLS regression models for the three baseless belief indexes. We present here just the standardized beta coefficients; the full model results are available in Appendix A. The first set of models includes only the susceptibility and prior belief variables; the second set includes media use variables; and the third set includes the summary media bias variable. The variables are divided into blocks, with the top block containing the epistemological factors, the second cognitive factors, the third block representing traits and attitudinal priors, and the fourth block containing the exposure variables.

To start, we will consider the results of the baseline susceptibility models. The models overall perform fairly well, explaining between 42% and 64% of the variation in the baseless belief indexes and performing best for Conservative Conspiracies and worst for Big Lies.

The models support the importance of susceptibility in baseless belief acquisition. Both epistemology and cognition appear to be at work in all three domains. Baseless beliefs are more common among individuals with a more fluid epistemological outlook, less orientation toward scientific thinking and evidence, lower cognitive acumen, and a stronger tendency toward confirmation bias.

However, there is variation in the strength of the relationships across the domains that is revealing. Epistemological openness is not a significant predictor of Conservative Conspiracy belief, though science orientation is (negatively). In contrast, confirmation bias appears to be particularly important in the Conservative Conspiracies model. Likewise, confirmation bias is the most important predictor for Big Lies, though the epistemological openness variable is fairly sizable and science orientation has a negative and statistically significant relationship. Magical Thinking appears to be strongly related to all of the cognitive and epistemological variables.

The next block of variables reflects the set of traits and attitudes that might lead individuals to embrace a particular baseless belief. Looking first at the demographic variables, we find consistently that poorer people are more likely to support baseless beliefs and there is some evidence that women and non-whites are more likely as well in some domains.

Conservative belief systems play a critical role in explaining Conservative Conspiracy belief. This coefficient is the largest in any of the models. It is also notable that liberal belief systems reduce belief in Conservative Conspiracies, even after controlling for the effects of conservative belief

systems (or their absence). The effects in the other domains, however, are much weaker. Conservative beliefs do predict Magical Thinking, but liberal beliefs are unrelated, and the coefficients for both ideological variables are relatively weak for Big Lies, though still statistically significant. This is an important point, because much of the literature has revolved around the role of conservatism in baseless beliefs. We find conservatism does predict baseless beliefs, but less so for baseless beliefs that fall outside of the Conservative Conspiracies domain, which is often the focus of studies. For Big Lies, which includes a number of longstanding and well-known baseless beliefs, conservatism is much less important than other factors, including income, social pessimism, and institutional distrust.

Turning to those other variables, we find support for the role of social pessimism and institutional trust in all three domains, though again the patterns vary. Social pessimism is less important for Conservative Conspiracies, while institutional distrust plays a weaker role for Magical Thinking—not surprisingly, as none of the Magical Thinking claims involve any explicitly named institutions. Finally, while political disengagement appears to be unimportant, the role of groupishness is supported, though less so for Magical Thinking.

To summarize the patterns across the three domains, it can be helpful to list the five most important variables in each domain by magnitude of the beta coefficients.

<u>Conservative Conspiracies</u>	<u>Magical Thinking</u>	<u>Big Lies</u>
Conservative belief system	Conservative belief system	Confirmation bias
Institutional distrust	Cognitive ability	Institutional distrust
Liberal belief system (neg.)	Confirmation bias	Epistemological openness
Confirmation bias	Science orientation (neg.)	Income (neg.)
Groupishness	Epistemological openness	Groupishness

Several points are notable from the lists above. First, only one variable—confirmation bias—makes the list in all three domains. This highlights just how different the causal dynamics are in these different areas of belief, while emphasizing the consistent role of cognition. Second, the role of epistemology varies, being much more prominent for Magical Thinking, less so for Big Lies, and even less so for Conservative Conspiracies, where neither epistemology variable makes the list. Third, the role of ideology is critical for Conservative Conspiracies and Magical Thinking, but appears relatively unimportant for Big Lies, which is shaped more by attitudes about institutions and in-group/out-group orientations.

Baseless beliefs are rarely self-generated, of course, so some exposure to the claims needs to occur for the belief to take hold. Baseless claims and misinformation can flow to individuals in a variety of ways, including interpersonal communication, social media, and traditional media. Indeed, the inclusion of the claim on the survey can itself constitute a degree of exposure, a point we will take up shortly. As described in our methods section, we measure exposure in this study by assessing whether or not individuals reported attending to 78 different media programs or platforms. To consolidate the information, we employed factor analysis to reduce them to a more manageable set of 23 media use factors.

Table 10 presents the list of variables that load onto each factor, along with our factor descriptions and the eigenvalues. Most of the factors are readily interpretable. The first two make a great deal of sense and combine some of the most popular TV shows that have recognizable left or right perspectives. Similarly, the Public Media factors captures the public TV and radio programs, the Social Media factor combines the social media platforms, and Centrist TV seems an apt description for the ideologically neutral programming in that list. Other factors are a bit more challenging to discern, such as factor 4, which combines the right-leaning Dana Show with Bloomberg, the Guardian online, and the major daily newspaper in Minneapolis, the Star Tribune. Also, toward the bottom of the list the factors become more idiosyncratic, with seven of the last eight containing only one variable. In any event, the interpretability of each factor is perhaps less important than the overall impact of all the media use data combined. Because of extensive multicollinearity among the media use variables, the effects of any one type of media is likely to be washed out in the regression models by the inclusion of the other media types. For example, it is difficult to know the meaningful impact of, say, Conservative Media when the models are controlling for attention to Second Tier Conservative Media, Third Tier Conservative Media, Bret Baier, Fox Online, etc.²

For this reason, we are primarily interested in the change in the goodness-of-fit between the models in the baseline susceptibility block and those in the second set of regression models in Table 9. We find a small increase in the Adjusted R^2 value in all three domains: .04 for Conservative Conspiracies, .05 for Magical Thinking, and .06 for Big Lies. These increases indicate that media information does explain some of the variation in baseless beliefs and that exposure plays a role in baseless belief acquisition. That said, the explanatory gains are relatively meager. There are several possible reasons. First, for exposure to be important in generating a baseless belief, it has to communicate information about the specific claim behind the belief. Our measures of media use are general and not specific to any particular claim, so there is a lot of noise in the data, so to speak. Some of the claims we asked about in the survey may be only rarely mentioned by these media sources, and so even people who attend to a particular media source may miss the few occasions when it might be mentioned. Better assessment of the role of information exposure may require an experimental design where exposure conditions can be more tightly controlled and measured. A second reason for the small impact of the media variables may be the powerful role of plausibility. Because they read the claims as they completed the survey, every respondent received a minimum amount of exposure to all of the claims. That they were presented on a survey suggesting there are “certain ideas or theories out there that some people believe are true and other people believe are false” may have been enough to prompt evaluation of the veracity of the claim on the basis of its plausibility, rather than on any evidence. We will return to the possible role of plausibility shortly.

Though individual media sources appear to shape baseless belief acquisition and contribute to the explanatory power of the models overall, many have raised a particular concern about the role of ideologically extreme media sources in promoting numerous baseless beliefs. This is particularly true for far-right media and the promotion of various conspiracy theories, such as QAnon or voter fraud in the 2020 election. We can utilize the media bias measure to assess whether the ideological bias of an individual’s overall media use contributes to their willingness to embrace baseless beliefs. The set of regression models in Table 9 in the last three columns display the results, which show that more conservative media usage increases Conservative Conspiracy and Big Lies beliefs but has no impact on Magical Thinking. This pattern reinforces the conclusion that baseless beliefs must be separated

by domain in order to understand the dynamics of acquisition. Does conservative media promote baseless beliefs? Yes, but only some kinds of beliefs.

We can consider the role of media bias across domains in a different way by taking up an alternative measure of baseless beliefs, which is simply whether a respondent expressed belief in any of the claims within each domain. Since this is a binary variable, we use logistic regression to model the relationships (the full model results are presented in Appendix B). Figure 1 plots the probability of holding at least one baseless belief in a domain, holding all variables at their means and altering the media bias variable between its mean and one standard deviation above and below that mean. The strong relationship between conservative media and Conservative Conspiracies and Big Lies is clear: the probability in both domains increases over 0.2 between liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning media use. The probability of respondents with liberal media use having at least one Conservative Conspiracy belief is 0.26 and this increases to 0.56 among those with conservative media use. The effect for Big Lies is weaker but still notable, going from 0.61 to 0.83. In contrast, the relationship of the media use variable is negative for Magical Thinking, although, as in the regression in Table 9, this coefficient is not statistically significant.

Discussion

Toward a Theory of Baseless Belief Acquisition

The findings from this study demonstrate the importance of examining the dynamics of baseless belief acquisition separately for different types of claims. The results also highlight the important roles played by epistemological orientation, cognition, traits and attitudes, and mass media exposure. The relative importance of these factors is different for the three domains of baseless beliefs. What might explain these domain differences?

We believe baseless beliefs arise because certain individuals are particularly susceptible to acquiring them, are exposed to information that suggests the claims might be true, and that they use their prior experiences and beliefs to assess whether the claims make sense given what they know about the world. Susceptibility, we speculate, can take two forms. In the first, which we term *plausibility*, individuals have an epistemological outlook that leads them to primarily consider whether a claim is plausible as a condition of accepting it, rather than demanding evidence for the claim's veracity. Experiential priors are important in helping them decide if the claim makes sense—if it “seems about right.” In the second form, which we label *indiscrimination*, individuals also believe the claim is plausible and believe there is evidence for it. Importantly, they also fail to understand that the information they see as evidence does not effectively support the claim. These individuals are either unwilling or unable to discriminate between good and bad evidence. Critical assessment of the evidence is missing either because of a lack of cognitive capacity or because of motivated reasoning. Experiential priors are key here in establishing the bases for that motivation, leading people to embrace claims that support their existing worldview.

It is important to note that neither a susceptibility orientation nor a specific set of priors should, by itself, be enough to create acceptance in a baseless belief. For example, a very conservative Republican may not accept the claim that Barack Obama was foreign-born if they have a strong need for evidence and a weak tendency toward confirmation bias and motivated reasoning.

Conversely, a person who has as a strong plausibility orientation may reject a claim that vaccines lead to autism if they have an existing set of prior beliefs that autism is caused by different factors.

We see traces of these dynamics of baseless belief acquisition in the patterns of results. We believe the epistemological factors capture a plausibility orientation, as those lacking a scientific orientation or who are more open to alternative epistemologies will be more likely to embrace claims without evidence if they at least seem plausible to them. In contrast, cognition can be viewed as an indicator of indiscriminability—some individuals are unable (low cognitive ability) or unwilling (confirmation bias) to evaluate evidence rigorously.

For example, the finding that confirmation bias and cognitive ability predict Conservative Conspiracy belief, but epistemological openness does not, suggests plausibility is not enough for individuals to embrace these kinds of claims. Individuals who believe in Conservative Conspiracies seem to be under the impression that there actually is good evidence for the conspiracies they embrace. This kind of indiscriminability is evident in some of the information QAnon adherents point to, such as finding numbers with special significance in notable locations (even though such coincidences are unremarkable probabilistically). In contrast, epistemology plays a much stronger role in Magical Thinking, suggesting a greater willingness to accept these kinds of claims without evidence, though cognitive factors are important here as well, suggesting indiscriminability is at work, too. This highlights the fact that plausibility and indiscriminability are not mutually exclusive processes. An individual might believe in the healing power of crystals because it seems plausible to them that rare and special rocks have healing energies, but then might also bolster this belief when they learn many people believe in the power of crystals (and accepting it as evidence after engaging in the bandwagon fallacy).

The pattern of results among the trait and attitude variables also can be interpreted in light of plausibility and indiscriminability. In order for an individual to embrace a baseless belief under a plausibility process, they must be open to accepting claims that are plausible, and their determination of plausibility will be shaped by their past experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. Under an indiscriminability process, the priors create the belief-anchors that motivate individuals to accept certain kinds of invalid evidence as sound. Our data showed that baseless beliefs were more common among the poor and, to some extent, among women and non-whites. We believe these patterns may reflect the experiences of relatively disempowered or marginalized groups. Many of these baseless beliefs present nefarious institutions and individuals engaging in malfeasance at the expense of the broader public, and we might reasonably expect socially and economically marginalized individuals, who may have personally experienced such dynamics, to find the claims plausible. Likewise, gender and racial identities can be strong levers for motivated reasoning in related domains; that race is significant in the Big Lies domain makes sense given the included item about the government's use of HIV to control the Black population. After revelation of the infamous Tuskegee experiments conducted on the African American population for decades, for example, we find it reasonable that BIPOC Americans might more easily embrace the plausibility of an HIV conspiracy. Ideological viewpoints capture a broad range of beliefs and experiences about society, government, the economy, and many other facets of social life. Consequently, it is not surprising that these belief systems appear to play a critical role in shaping the acceptance of specific baseless beliefs, both because they shape what people will view as plausible and also because they

create a strong and tightly linked set of beliefs that individuals will protect with a variety of motivated reasoning processes.

Whether because of orientations toward plausibility or indiscrimination, some individuals are more susceptible to baseless belief acquisition than others. When these individuals are exposed to information about a baseless claim, they will embrace that claim if the nature of the claim and their own set of traits and prior attitudes align to put the plausibility and indiscrimination processes into action.

Conclusion

The wild claims that are associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory have galvanized Americans' attention and prompted concerns about the flow of misinformation and disinformation through social media and mass media alike. Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon, but the internet has seemed to supercharge their spread, particularly in a highly polarized political environment. Objective observers wonder how anyone could believe such far-fetched notions when there is no evidence to support any of it. Our study emphasizes that baseless beliefs arise in a variety of domains and that most people hold at least one of these beliefs.

Thus, for one individual with a particular constellation of cognitive inclinations and abilities, epistemological outlook, prior beliefs and traits, and media consumption, QAnon may make perfect sense, while for another individual with a different constellation of factors, QAnon seems crazy but it seems perfectly reasonable that astrology is real or that 9/11 was an inside job. This study explored how varied factors affect baseless belief acquisition across different domains.

We find support for the role of cognition and knowledge, epistemology, traits and attitudes, and media use in predicting baseless beliefs, but the patterns vary across domains. Conservative Conspiracy beliefs are shaped very strongly by conservative belief systems, with right-leaning media an important catalyst. Individuals with these kinds of baseless beliefs are highly distrustful of major institutions like the media and government, tend toward very strong in-group identities and biases, and have a strong tendency toward confirmation bias. Those who embrace Magical Thinking beliefs are also much more likely to be conservative, though not more likely to watch conservative media. Magical Thinking beliefs are strongly shaped by cognitive and epistemological traits, as Magical Thinkers tend to have lower cognitive ability, are more prone toward confirmation bias, tend not to have a scientific orientation, and have a more open and fluid epistemology. In contrast, people who hold Big Lies beliefs are not particularly conservative, though they do have more conservative media habits. Institutional distrust plays an important role, here, as does income and groupishness; like Magical Thinkers, but unlike Conservative Conspiracy believers, epistemological openness plays a key role as well. Thus, we find that a susceptibility-exposure model accurately captures baseless-belief acquisition, but the dynamics of the model operate differently in the three domains of baseless belief.

One important limitation of this study concerns the media use measures, which capture only general attention to particular media sources, rather than directly measuring exposure to information about particular baseless claims. An experimental design would be more appropriate for allowing the kind of control over information exposure necessary to really understand some of the interactions

between susceptibility and information exposure, such as the operation of plausibility thinking or indiscrimination. It would also allow us to fully establish the directionality and strength of the relationships between media exposure bias and individual traits and baseless belief.

Those who are troubled by the rise of misinformation and baseless belief may wonder what implications this study might have for ameliorating the problem. We would point out media use, though a statistically significant predictor of baseless beliefs, is not among the most important factors in any domain and overall contributes only marginally to the models' predictive power. Though further study is needed, we suspect the amount of information exposure needed for someone who is highly susceptible to embrace a baseless belief is very small. It may not take a steady diet of conspiracy belief propaganda, but merely a mention in a social media feed (or a mention on a survey). Of course, it may also be that individuals prone to certain baseless beliefs seek out conservative media. Thus, efforts to reform the media environment may not be fruitful.

The set of individual traits is much more important in explaining baseless beliefs, so these would seem to be a better target. Prior beliefs, attitudes, and identities are very difficult to change, so we think the most fertile ground is in the area of cognition and epistemology. It is possible to teach numeracy, critical thinking, and the scientific method. It is possible to discourage confirmation bias and reduce susceptibility to bullshit. Accomplishing these things is by no means easy, but it may be the best approach for those who wish to reduce the incidence of baseless beliefs.

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Table 1 – Personality, Cognitive, and Attitudinal Measures and Factors (loading size)

Factor (size) and Scales	Brief Description
1. Conservative Belief System (8.9)	
Moral Foundations-Authority (Graham et al., 2008)	Higher score means respondent is more attuned to moral arguments based on obedience to authority and conformity to traditional standards.
Authoritarianism-Conservatism-Traditionalism (Duckitt et al., 2010)	This composite variable combines separate scales measuring orientation toward authoritarianism, conservative ideology, and traditional values and norms.
Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1981)	Higher scores on this scale reflect a higher level of belief in right-wing authoritarianism.
Moral Foundations-Loyalty (Graham et al., 2008)	Higher score means respondent is more attuned to moral arguments in this domain (they are more likely to employ this schema in moral reasoning).
Political Values: Law & Order (Nilsson, 2015)	High scores indicate belief that society should civilize and discipline; punish improper behaviors and reward proper ones; encourage norm fulfillment and discourage destructive and deviant behavior.
Moral Foundations-Sanctity (Graham et al., 2008)	Higher score means respondent is more attuned to moral arguments based on purity, cleanliness, and sanctity.
Party Identification	Based on the question wording in the American National Election Study, this five-point scale runs from Strong Democrat to Strong Republican, with no differentiation between Independents and Leaners.
2. Science Orientation (5.8)	
Belief in Science (Farias et al., 2013)	Higher scores reflect more belief in the scientific process and that science is the means by which the world can be understood.
Religiosity (negative)	Higher scores indicate the participant values the ideology, practice, and experience of religion.
Rejection of Religion (Nilsson & Strupp-Levitsky, 2016)	Higher scores reflect higher levels of atheism and rejection of religion.
Physical Determinism (Nilsson & Strupp-Levitsky, 2016)	Higher numbers indicate stronger beliefs that human behavior is caused by electrochemistry and everything is governed by natural laws.
Subjectivist Epistemology (negative) (Nilsson & Strupp-Levitsky, 2016)	Higher scores indicate stronger belief that personal experience and spirituality are the keys to true knowledge and understanding.
Certain Knowledge (Nilsson & Strupp-Levitsky, 2016)	Higher scores indicate a belief in science that does not accept ambiguity or openness to changing one's mind in light of new data. Facts are unimpeachable and theories can't be changed.
Need for Evidence (Garrett & Weeks, 2017)	Higher scores indicate more desire to ensure that beliefs correspond to available evidence.
3. Epistemological Openness (3.5)	
Romantic Rationalism (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher scores indicate reason, imagination, creativity, and discovery; intimacy with the object of knowledge; excitement and enjoyment.
Personal Identity (Nario-Redmond et al., 2004)	Higher scores indicate that the participant derives identity from perceived unique personal characteristics.
Attitude to Affect Openness (Nilsson, 2015)	High numbers indicate positive and open attitude, trust, maximization of positive affect and drive satisfaction, and impulsivity
Collective Self Esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992)	Higher scores indicate a stronger connection to one's group and more positive views of that group.
Social Identity (Nario-Redmond et al., 2004)	Higher scores indicate a higher propensity to derive identity from belonging to social groups.

Bullshit Acceptance (Pennycook et al., 2015)	Higher scores reflect increased receptivity to “bullshit,” or “pseudo-profound,” yet meaningless, statements.
4. Liberal Belief System (2.6)	
Moral Foundation-Fairness (Graham et al., 2008)	Higher score means respondent is more attuned to moral arguments based on fairness and reciprocity.
Moral Foundation-Care (Graham et al., 2008)	Higher score means respondent is more attuned to moral arguments based on empathy.
Social Dominance: Anti-Egalitarian (negative) (Ho et al., 2015)	Higher scores indicate stronger belief in natural group inequality that is maintained by ideologies and policies.
Social Dominance: Dominance (negative) (Ho et al., 2015)	Higher scores indicate a stronger preference for systems in which high status groups oppress low status groups.
5. Social Pessimism (2.5)	
View of Human Nature: Bad (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher scores indicate belief that human nature is inherently bad and people must be disciplined to display goodness.
View of Human Nature: Good (negative) (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher scores indicate belief that human nature is inherently good and people must be corrupted to display badness.
Interpersonal Attitude Discipline (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher scores indicate belief that love and respect is contingent upon conformity and achieved value; temperate positive regard for accomplishments; contempt, aggression, and punishment in response to frailty, imperfection, and norm violation
Interpersonal Attitude Warmth (negative) (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher scores indicate belief in unconditional love and respect; enthusiastic positive regard for accomplishments; empathy, forgiveness, support, and inspiration in response to frailty, imperfection, and norm violation.
Trust in People (Nilsson, 2015)	Higher numbers indicate positive and open attitude toward people; trust; maximization of positive affect and drive satisfaction
6. Groupishness (1.9)	
Outgroup Attitudes (Duckitt, 2006)	Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes toward out-groups.
Outgroup Threat (Duckitt, 2006)	Higher scores indicate a higher sense of threat from out-groups.
Outgroup Competitiveness (Duckitt, 2006)	Higher scores suggest a higher sense of competitiveness with out-groups.
7. Cognitive Ability (1.7)	
Numeracy (Lipkus et al., 2001)	Higher scores indicate a higher ability to solve problems based on numbers. (e.g., probability, fractions, etc.).
Cognitive Reflection Test (Toplak et al., 2014)	Higher scores reflect the ability to overcome “gut feelings” and engage in further reflection regarding the correct answer.
Political Knowledge Scale (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1993)	Higher scores indicate a higher level of political knowledge (the items identified by Delli Carpini & Keeter were revised for the contemporary context).
8. Institutional Distrust (1.5)	
Trust in Media (negative)	Higher scores indicate more trust in the media.
Distrust in Government	Higher scores indicate more distrust in the government.
Distrust in Experts	Higher scores indicate more distrust in experts.
9. Political Disengagement (1.4)	
Political Attention (American National Election Studies, 2020)	Higher scores indicate the person pays close attention to politics.
Political Interest (American National Election Studies, 2020)	Higher scores indicate a higher level of interest in politics.
Political Self-Confidence (negative) (American National Election Studies, 2020)	Higher scores indicate a higher level of confidence in one’s knowledge regarding politics.

10. Confirmation Bias (1.1)	
Confirmation Bias (Rasin, 2008)	Higher scores indicate a higher likelihood of paying attention to information that supports already-existing beliefs.
Faith in Intuition (Garrett & Weeks, 2017)	Higher scores reflect a preference to depend on intuition when solving problems.

Note: Table entries indicate which variables loaded onto each factor in descending order of loading size; factor loadings were derived from principal components analysis using Varimax rotation; eigenvalues are presented in parentheses; all variables loaded positively on each factor except those indicated as loading negatively.

Table 2 – Prevalence of Support for Baseless Beliefs

	Percentage saying “Probably true” or “Definitely true”
Pharmaceutical corporations regularly conceal evidence about effective drugs and treatments in order to keep the public reliant on more expensive and profitable pharmaceutical products.	56.9
The US government is hiding evidence and information about extraterrestrials visiting Earth.	41.4
There is substantial evidence showing foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are harmful to human health.	38.3
Voter fraud is common and widespread in the United States, and frequently affects the outcome of elections.	28.2
Cell phones produce radiation that is responsible for a variety of health problems, and the evidence of these harms is being suppressed.	20.4
Certain officials in the US government were involved in the planning and implementation of the terrorist attacks on September 11 , 2001.	19.9
Certain crystals produce energy that can have healing effects on the human body and mind.	18.3
Barack Obama was not born in the United States.	17.2
Astrology , which involves observations of the position and movement of objects in space, can provide predictive information about humans and human affairs, such as through horoscopes.	15.3
Evidence for climate change and global warming has been fabricated by scientists in order to further hidden agendas.	13.7
Billionaire investor George Soros is carrying out a secret plot to destabilize the US government by using his fortunes to fund and organize protests and riots.	13.6
In the 1980s, HIV/AIDS was intentionally introduced into the population by the government to control the Black population in the United States.	10.6
Masks are completely ineffective at preventing the spread of COVID-19.	10.5
Donald Trump is central to a plan that will expose a global network of child sex traffickers, many of whom worship Satan and are closely connected to the Democratic Party, and information about this plan has been leaked by an anonymous individual known online as Q or (QAnon).	7.2
Childhood vaccinations are a leading cause of autism.	4.9
At least one of the above	81.6

Table 3 – Factor Analysis of Baseless Beliefs

	Conservative Conspiracies	Magical Thinking	Big Lies
Climate change	0.780	0.070	0.172
Masks	0.753	0.006	0.077
Vaccinations	0.713	0.179	0.017
Voter fraud	0.702	0.200	0.217
Soros	0.618	0.191	0.335
QAnon	0.558	0.285	0.236
Obama	0.547	0.105	-0.003
Crystals	0.191	0.855	0.103
Astology	0.066	0.831	0.138
Cell phones	0.295	0.537	0.264
GMOs	0.439	0.511	0.176
HIV	0.076	0.121	0.727
September 11	0.187	0.167	0.727
Pharmaceutical corporations	0.183	0.092	0.699
Extraterrestrials	0.025	0.448	0.508

Note: factor loading scores derived from principal components analysis using Varimax rotation.

Table 4 – Correlations Among Baseless Belief Indexes

	Conservative Conspiracies	Magical Thinking
Magical Thinking	.515 (<.001)	
Big Lies	.443 (<.001)	.533 (<.001)

Note: entries are Pearson r; p values in parentheses.

Table 5 – Confidence in Baseless Beliefs: Conservative Conspiracies

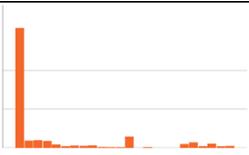
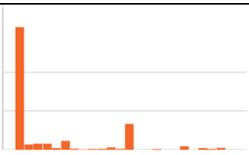
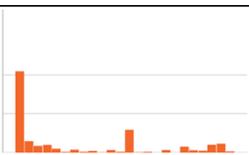
	Average Rejection	Percentage Agnostic	Average Acceptance	Histogram Sparklines -100 0 +100
Obama	-91	6.0%	87	
Soros	-80	22.8%	78	
Climate change	-91	5.7%	76	
QAnon	-91	13.1%	69	
Voter fraud	-89	11.6%	81	
Vaccinations	-89	9.2%	87	
Masks	-94	6.7%	86	

Table 6 – Confidence in Baseless Beliefs: Magical Thinking

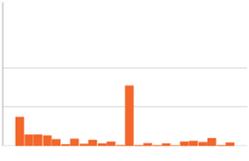
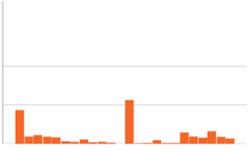
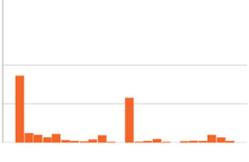
	Average Rejection	Percentage Agnostic	Average Acceptance	Histogram Sparklines -100 0 +100
Cell phones	-72	30.9%	68	
GMOs	-79	22.5%	75	
Crystals	-83	22.8%	70	
Astrology	-87	14.7%	65	

Table 7 – Confidence in Baseless Beliefs: Big Lies

	Average Rejection	Percentage Agnostic	Average Acceptance	<u>Histogram Sparklines</u> -100 0 +100
Extra-terrestrials	-72	20.3%	69	
September 11	-80	15.0%	61	
Pharmaceutical corporations	-73	18.4%	75	
HIV	-84	17.6%	70	

Table 8 - Confidence in Baseless Beliefs: Averages by Domain

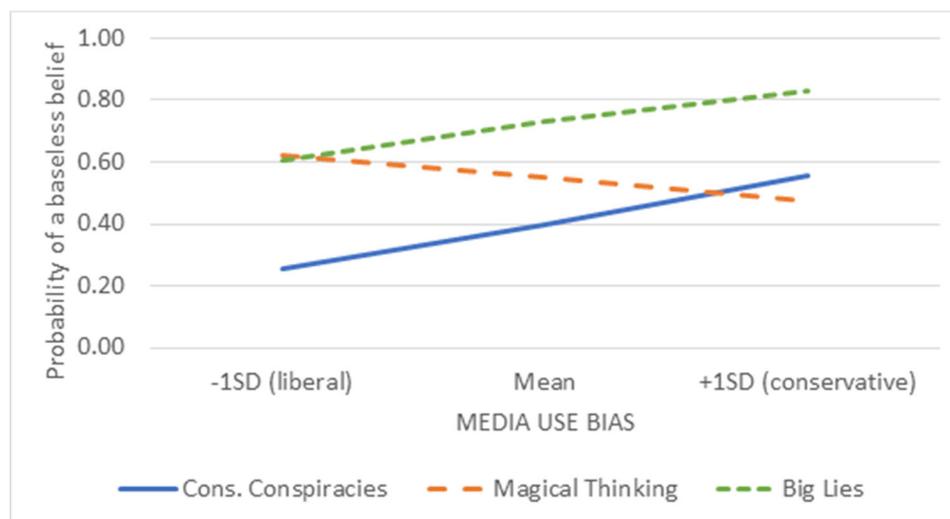
	Average Rejection	Percentage Agnostic	Average Acceptance
Average: Conservative Conspiracies	-89	10.7%	81
Average: Magical Thinking	-80	22.7%	70
Average: Big Lies	-77	17.8%	69

Table 9 – Susceptibility-Exposure Models

	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies
EPSISTEMOLOGY									
Science orientation	-0.13*	-0.26*	-0.08*	-0.13*	-0.25*	-0.07	-0.11*	-0.28*	-0.06
Epistemological openness	0.02	0.22*	0.19*	0.01	0.17*	0.17*	-0.01	0.23*	0.17*
COGNITION									
Cognitive ability	-0.09*	-0.31*	-0.08	-0.09*	-0.25*	-0.07	-0.09*	-0.32*	-0.05
Confirmation bias	0.20*	0.29*	0.40*	0.20*	0.29*	0.34*	0.20*	0.30*	0.40*
TRAITS & ATTITUDES									
Age	0.01	0.10*	-0.09	0.04	0.09	-0.08	0.00	0.11*	-0.11*
Female	0.08*	0.08*	-0.03	0.07*	0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.09*	-0.03
Non-white	0.00	-0.04	0.09*	-0.03	0.00	0.06	-0.01	-0.06	0.10*
College degree	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	-0.05	0.07	-0.05	-0.07	0.08	-0.07
Income > \$60K	-0.07*	-0.19*	-0.19*	-0.08*	-0.15*	-0.17*	-0.08*	-0.20*	-0.18*
Conservative belief system	0.59*	0.34*	0.09*	0.54*	0.34*	0.05	0.55*	0.33*	0.03
Liberal belief system	-0.25*	-0.03	-0.08*	-0.21*	-0.08*	-0.08	-0.24*	-0.03	-0.06
Social pessimism	0.08*	0.16*	0.17*	0.12*	0.15*	0.19*	0.09*	0.16*	0.19*
Institutional distrust	0.38*	0.08*	0.28*	0.33*	0.10*	0.27*	0.37*	0.09*	0.27*
Political disengagement	-0.01	0.07	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.11*	0.04	0.07	0.07
Groupishness	0.14*	0.09*	0.19*	0.16*	0.12*	0.19*	0.10*	0.11*	0.19*
EXPOSURE									
Media Bias							0.10*	-0.03	0.10*
Conservative media				0.06	-0.09*	0.02			
Liberal media				-0.05	0.12*	0.11*			
Public media				0.02	-0.10*	-0.08			
Dana et al.				0.07	0.04	0.09*			
Centrist TV				0.11*	0.07*	0.03			
WaPo&NYT				-0.07*	-0.01	-0.07			
2 nd tier conservative media				0.07*	-0.10*	0.00			
Social media				0.09*	0.05	0.14			
2 nd tier liberal media				-0.07*	-0.01	-0.05			
3 rd tier conservative media				-0.04	-0.01	0.00			
Mainstream news I				0.03	0.00	0.03			
TV magazines				0.01	0.12*	0.07			
Mainstream news II				-0.04	0.03	0.06			
Norah O'Donnell				0.02	0.03	0.00			
Second tier newspapers				-0.01	0.03	-0.06			
Bret Baier				0.02	-0.06	-0.05			
Fox online				0.05	-0.02	0.11			
Daily Caller				-0.03	-0.05	-0.01			
NBC Nightly News				-0.06*	-0.04	-0.05			
Facebook				0.01	0.06	0.00			
Yahoo News				-0.01	-0.05	0.03			
Boston Globe				0.00	0.12*	0.02			
Hugh Hewitt				0.01	0.03	0.06			
Adjusted R ²	.64	.50	.42	.68	.55	.48	.64	.50	.43

Note: Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients from OLS regression models; see Appendix B for full model results; *p < .05.

Figure 1 – The Relationship between Biased Media Use and Baseless Beliefs



Note: Values represent the probability of having at least one baseless belief in each domain at varying levels of media bias, holding all other variables at their means; see Appendix A for full logistic regression results.

Table 10 – Media Use Factors

1. Conservative Media (7.4)	6. WaPo&NYT (3.0)	13. Mainstream News II (1.6)
Radio-Glenn Beck	Washington Post online	Print-USA Today
Marth MacCallum	New York Times online	USA Today online
Hannity	Print-Washington Post	CNN online
Radio-Sean Hannity	Print-New York Times	ABC World News Tonight
Tucker Carlson	Buzzfeed	14. Norah O'Donnell (1.5)
Ingraham Angle	7. Second Tier Cons. Media (2.5)	Norah O'Donnell
Radio-Rush Limbaugh	Radio-Mark Levin	15. Second Tier Newspapers (1.4)
Fox & Friends	Radio-Dave Ramsey	Print-Chicago Tribune
The Five	Radio-Michael Savage	Print-LA Tribune
2. Liberal Media (6.4)	Breitbart News	Print-New York Post
11th Hour w/ Brian Williams	8. Social Media (2.4)	Print-Wall Street Journal
All In with Chris Hayes	Instagram	16. Bret Baier (1.4)
Morning Joe	TikTok	Bret Baier
Rachel Maddow	SnapChat	17. Fox Online
Lawrence O'Donnell	Reddit	Fox News online
Radio-Thom Hartmann	Twitter	Saturday Night Live (negative)
3. Public Media (4.6)	YouTube	18. Daily Caller (1.3)
Radio-All Things Considered	9. Second Tier Liberal Media (2.2)	Daily Caller
Radio-Marketplace	Cuomo Prime Time	19. NBC Nightly News (1.2)
Radio-Morning Edition	Erin Burnett Out Front	NBC Nightly News
Radio-Fresh Air	Anderson Cooper	20. Facebook (1.2)
NPR News online	Jake Tapper	Facebook
PBS NewsHour	Huffington Post	21. Yahoo News (1.1)
4. Dana et al (3.8)	10. Third Tier Cons. Media (2.0)	Yahoo News
Radio-Dana Show	Radio-Jim Bohannon	22. Globe (1.1)
Print-Star Tribune	Radio-Mike Gallagher	Print-Boston Globe
Bloomberg	11. Mainstream News I (1.8)	23. Hugh Hewitt (1.1)
Guardian online	NBC News online	Radio-Hugh Hewitt
5. Centrist TV (3.2)	BBC News online	
Face the Nation	Colbert	
Meet the Press	12. TV Magazines (1.8)	
Today	20/20	
Good Morning America	Dateline	
American Idol	60 Minutes	
CBS This Morning		
NCIS		

Note: Table entries indicate which variables loaded onto each factor in descending order of loading size; factor loadings were derived from principal components analysis using Varimax rotation; eigenvalues are presented in parentheses; all variables loaded positively on each factor except those indicated as loading negatively.

Appendix A – Susceptibility-Exposure Models: Full Results

	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies	Con Cons	Magic Think	Big Lies
EPSISTEMOLOGY									
Science orientation	-.115*	-.236*	-.075*	-.116*	-.224*	-.066	-.099*	-.254*	-.058
	(.028)	(.033)	(.035)	(.029)	(.034)	(.036)	(.028)	(.035)	(.037)
Epistemological openness	.016	.203	.169*	.008	.154*	.154*	-.012	.210*	.151*
	(.027)	(.032)	(.034)	(.030)	(.036)	(.038)	(.027)	(.034)	(.036)
COGNITION									
Cognitive ability	-.081*	-.282*	-.069	-.079*	-.230*	-.062	-.080*	-.284*	-.048
	(.031)	(.037)	(.039)	(.034)	(.040)	(.042)	(.030)	(.038)	(.040)
Confirmation bias	.178*	.266*	.351*	.176*	.259*	.300*	.169*	.266*	.357*
	(.029)	(.034)	(.036)	(.030)	(.036)	(.038)	(.029)	(.036)	(.038)
TRAITS & ATTITUDES									
Age	.001	.006*	-.005	.003	.006	-.005	.000	.007*	-.007*
	(.002)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.003)
Female	.147*	.155*	-.049	.124*	.054	-.078	.051	.172*	-.057
	(.060)	(.072)	(.076)	(.063)	(.074)	(.078)	(.061)	(.076)	(.080)
Non-white	-.009	-.089	.172*	0.067	-.009	.127	-.027	-.133	.213*
	(.068)	(.082)	(.086)	(.071)	(.085)	(.089)	(.068)	(.086)	(.091)
College degree	-.091	.110	-.112	-.085	.136	-.100	-.117	.143	-.130
	(.064)	(.076)	(.080)	(.065)	(.078)	(.082)	(.065)	(.081)	(.086)
Income > \$60K	-.130*	-.350*	-.330*	-.135*	-.264*	-.294*	-.146*	-.358*	-.318*
	(.060)	(.071)	(.075)	(.063)	(.074)	(.079)	(.059)	(.074)	(.078)
Conservative belief system	.531*	.305*	.083*	.483*	.308*	.047	.492*	.313*	.031
	(.028)	(.033)	(.035)	(.036)	(.043)	(.045)	(.032)	(.040)	(.042)
Liberal belief system	-.226*	-.029	-.074*	-.186*	-.074*	-.074	-.203*	-.026	-.057
	(.028)	(.033)	(.035)	(.031)	(.037)	(.039)	(.029)	(.036)	(.038)
Social pessimism	.069*	.142*	.153*	.104*	.135*	.165*	.076*	.147	.172*
	(.029)	(.034)	(.036)	(.030)	(.036)	(.038)	(.029)	(.036)	(.038)
Institutional distrust	.340*	.068*	.252*	.294*	.095*	.238*	.317*	.080*	.241*
	(.028)	(.034)	(.036)	(.031)	(.037)	(.039)	(.029)	(.036)	(.038)
Political disengagement	-.006	.065	.062	.006	.050	.097	.037	.068	.066
	(.029)	(.035)	(.036)	(.033)	(.039)	(.041)	(.030)	(.038)	(.040)
Groupishness	.123*	.082*	.166*	.144*	.110*	.169*	.084*	.100*	.171*
	(.027)	(.032)	(.034)	(.028)	(.033)	(.035)	(.028)	(.035)	(.037)
EXPOSURE									
Media Bias							.223*	-.058	.239*
							(.084)	(.106)	(.033)
Conservative media				.053	-.080*				
				(.029)	(.034)				
Liberal media				-.045	.108*				
				(.028)	(.001)				
Public media				.017	-.090*				
				(.029)	(.034)				
Dana et al.				.061	.034				
				(.031)	(.037)				
Centrist TV				.099*	.064*				
				(.027)	(.032)				
WaPo&NYT				-.064*	-.011				
				(.031)	(.037)				

2 nd tier conservative media				.060* (.028)	-.090* (.033)				
Social media				.078* (.032)	.044 (.039)				
2 nd tier liberal media				-.065* (.027)	-.004 (.032)				
3 rd tier conservative media				-.032 (.025)	-.011 (.030)				
Mainstream news I				.025 (.028)	-.003 (.033)				
TV magazines				.009 (.028)	.111* (.033)				
Mainstream news II				-.039 (.027)	.024 (.032)				
Norah O'Donnell				.021 (.028)	.022 (.033)				
Second tier newspapers				-.005 (.027)	.029 (.032)				
Bret Baier				.014 (.026)	-.050 (.031)				
Fox online				.042 (.028)	-.014 (.033)				
Daily Caller				-.026 (.026)	-.045 (.031)				
NBC Nightly News				-.056* (.027)	-.037 (.032)				
Facebook				.006 (.030)	.057 (.036)				
Yahoo News				-.010 (.026)	-.041 (.031)				
Boston Globe				-.001 (.028)	.109* (.033)				
Hugh Hewitt				.006 (.025)	.026 (.029)				
Constant	1.839	2.241	3.034	1.791	2.246	3.027	1.137	2.435	2.212
Adjusted R ²	.64	.50	.42	.68	.55	.48	.64	.50	.43
N	406	406	406	406	406	406	376	376	376

Appendix B – Logistic Regression Models

	Conservative Conspiracies	Magical Thinking	Big Lies
Age	-0.011 (0.014)	0.038** (0.012)	-0.014 (0.011)
Female	0.205 (0.350)	0.489 (0.317)	-0.341 (0.295)
Non-white	-0.405 (0.395)	-0.284 (0.353)	-0.207 (0.331)
College degree	-0.760* (0.363)	0.196 (0.330)	-0.525 (0.309)
Income > \$60K	-0.300 (0.330)	-0.633* (0.307)	-1.222*** (0.301)
Conservative belief system	1.674*** (0.224)	1.168*** (0.203)	-0.105 (0.159)
Science orientation	-0.073 (0.159)	-0.761*** (0.153)	-0.045 (0.137)
Epistemological openness	0.150 (0.162)	0.657*** (0.145)	0.313* (0.137)
Liberal belief system	-0.241 (0.162)	0.457** (0.161)	0.093 (0.138)
Social pessimism	0.410* (0.164)	0.434** (0.150)	0.368* (0.146)
Groupishness	-0.326 (0.168)	-0.188 (0.143)	0.222 (0.137)
Cognitive ability	-0.156 (0.168)	-0.735*** (0.167)	0.238 (0.142)
Institutional distrust	0.905*** (0.166)	0.572*** (0.150)	0.656*** (0.145)
Political disengagement	0.082 (0.179)	0.097 (0.166)	0.135 (0.155)
Confirmation bias	0.723*** (0.173)	0.532** (0.158)	0.720*** (0.153)
Media Bias	1.536** (0.483)	-0.719 (0.439)	1.367** (0.432)
Constant	-5.200	1.384	-2.332
% Correctly Predicted	85.2	77.2	80.0
Nagelkerke R ²	.60	.50	.38
N	445	445	445

Note: Cell entries are logit coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses;
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.