
The Ways That Make a Conspiracy Theory Appear

On January 30, 2019, millions of teenagers sat on their beds, laptops open, waiting for the upload of the new series on Youtube, 'Conspiracy Theories with Shane Dawson.' Millennials had their eyes open wide, fixed on the time display at the top right corner of their bright computer screens. When the hour finally came, each of them excitedly refreshed their windows until the video appeared on their devices. The familiar nightmarish music started to develop, the title "Special Edition. Conspiracy Series Part 1" was presented in a faded white typewriter font, and like always, a deep voice muttered, "viewer discretion is advised" as the red bar under the video slowly inched rightward. Everyone curled up in the warmth of their blankets.

A conspiracy theory is known to be an attempt to explain a connection between that of a particular event or circumstance (usually a harmful or tragic event) to another. Usually, it involves a secret plot by powerful conspirators, contradicts the mainstream explanation for historical or current events, and lacks concrete evidence. The "main story" is like white paint, covering up the graffiti of what "truly" happened. A 2014 study shows that 19% of Americans believe that the U.S. government planned the 9/11 attacks to start a war in the Middle East, 24% believe Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and 40% believe the FDA is withholding information for the cure for cancer. These statistics are extremely high considering the fact that there isn't any evidence for these claims. Despite the popularity of conspiracy theories, the reasons people are so drawn to them is a relatively new area of study. According to Jan-Willem van Prooijen, a professor at the Department of Social and Organizational Psychology at VU University Amsterdam, this field of research has really only taken off during the past 7 years.

What was it about conspiracy theories that tugged these teens closer and closer to their screens as the video progressed? Why are conspiracy theories so prevalent despite the increasingly easy accessibility of legitimate sources online? It turns out that there are many psychological factors that drive the popularity of YouTube videos such as these.

The large reason for such beliefs is fear and intentional causality. Our brains are alert and find scary reasons for everything. In a situation where one feels powerless like the world is out of one's control, it is common to desperately find a way to restore the sense of agency and convince oneself that we understand what is happening in the world. Conspiracy theories emerge from a sense of fear. This is why data shows that conspiracy theories increase in prevalence in periods of widespread anxiety, during times of uncertainty or hardship, such as natural disasters, wars, and economic depressions. The brain has evolved to think it is in danger when there is a sudden howl in the middle of the night as you lie in bed. This is because it's safer to think that it's a threat, rather than to assume it's just your dad snoring in the other room. Dismissing the noise may lead to danger and potentially lead to death. Conspiracy beliefs are a part of an evolved psychological mechanism aimed at reacting to dangerous situations. This mechanism in the brain is activated during specific cues, which produce counter-strategies to cope with what is assumed to be dangerous.

Our brains are designed to recognize patterns around us. Our brains are like metal detectors at TSA, firing its flashing red lights when it detects a piece of metal, whether it is a machete

(dangerous and illegal) or a gold-plated Grillz (not dangerous but questionable). The neurons in our heads create connections with one another when it recognizes a familiar pattern. The bumper and headlights of cars, for example, look similar to us. The brain recognizes false patterns, which lead to the formulation of relationships between events that are completely unrelated. Paranormal beliefs too are the result of the failure of the brain to recognize randomness. The human mind has evolved to look for existing patterns because finding correlations between events and people is necessary for survival. In high school, I was exposed to Twin-Towers-On-Dollar-Bill-Theory. The bill is folded in the middle, across Andrew Jackson's face, into a paper airplane-like shape. As a result, what appears to be the Twin Towers caught on fire is revealed. I was astonished that this alone led millions of Americans to believe that the Illuminati had predicted the event of 9/11.

Now, imagine that ever since the day you were born, you were told lies that there was someone out there watching your every move in every single moment of your life. Every action you take, every step you take is recorded onto an endless list, is evaluated by this person you've never met, and is then set to determine your fate. I certainly fell for this silly theory as a little kid and many others did too. Because our brains were not developed yet and our brains had not reached the age of rational thinking to doubt what we were told, we were susceptible to the belief of Santa Claus. I created such an attachment to Santa Claus, that in fourth grade when I was finally told that my mom and everyone I trusted had lied to me, it was hard to admit that they were incorrect. I immediately got defensive and steam shot out of my ears. Believing in what we know and ignoring evidence that contradicts what we already believe in is called confirmation bias. There are ideas we strongly connect with and admitting that they are incorrect can lead us to think there is something wrong with us personally. In addition, when one encounters information that they do not agree with, one may feel threatened, which can cause them to feel a variety of negative emotions. This is called the backfire effect. Instead of listening to what others have to say, the stance is strengthened by the opposing side due to the negative emotions, which cause the refusal to process the information presented to them. Instead, all evidence that could prove the theories wrong becomes a part of the conspiracy itself. More weight is put on evidence that supports your own side and almost none that contradicts what we believe.

Proportionality bias is the tendency to believe that big effects have a proportionally large cause. In a 2013 Gallup poll, 61% said they do not believe that Lee Harvey alone assassinated President John F. Kennedy. When John F. Kennedy was shot, the street was total chaos. Cameramen, interviewers, and policemen mobbed the streets, halting traffic as the news spread from car to car; groups congregated around cars to listen to radio reports, and some bawled openly as they heard the news that the president of the United States had been shot. The face behind every TV screen in America was a face of shock, confusion, and sorrow. This huge tragedy was in no way an act of just one man, people thought. Having multiple shooters felt more plausible despite the evidence. The conspiracy theory that the assassination involved the CIA, the Mafia, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro, the KGB, and various combinations of these, emerged from the desire to find a larger, more complicated answer to this tragedy, despite its straightforwardness. Today, there are 1,000 books concerning the assassination of John F. Kennedy, 99 percent of which are work supporting the theory that others were involved. Because of this, his assassination is known as "the mother of all conspiracies."

Fundamental attribution error is the tendency for people to assume that one's actions are a

result of one's personality while underestimating environmental factors in judging one's behavior. Humans have the habit of believing that others do bad things because they are bad people, rather than considering the outside situational factors. Say you are driving and a car cuts you off. You might honk, roll down your window and yell, "Jerk!" instead of considering the fact that this person may have been rushing to the airport. On the other hand, if you were in the same situation, you may ignore the situational factors, that are upsetting other drivers, and ignore what it might say about our own character. Whatever the situation, the man in the car's personality is judged based on what he reflected in that single circumstance. Conspiracy theorists think that all actions are deliberate. Nothing is a coincidence. They do not recognize that people may incorrectly be responding to a situation rather than purposefully organizing events in every detail.

Psychology is also pointing to a different phenomenon, projection. Projection is the tendency to apply one's own attitude to others. It is a defense mechanism in which one finds negative characteristics in other people that they find unacceptable in themselves. The thinking behind it is, "They probably did it because I would do it." Studies suggest that people who endorse conspiracy theories are on average more willing to participate in the conspiracies themselves.

Within a couple of hours of him uploading his conspiracy theory video, Shane Dawson's Youtube video was demonetized. YouTube had taken out the ads of his hour-long video, due to the spread of "harmful" misinformation. Apparently the company is currently focused on reducing the numbers of conspiracy videos that were recommended to the viewers. In Part 1 of his series, Shane Dawson covered a couple of theories, including the theory that the California fires were purposely set by the U.S. government. In the upload, he visits a destroyed neighborhood affected by the fire and asks, "How does every house on the street catch fire except for one? What does that mean?" In addition, his famous motto, "Don't believe everything you see" possibly promotes the erosion of our confidence to trust in our ability to know. News sources and other platforms take advantage of these psychological tactics. They tiptoe into our brains with their red toolboxes, using wire strippers to destroy what we already know. They grip their butt connectors, determined to crimp the incorrect wire ends together. The wires become a blue and red tangled mess in the brain as a result of these theories.