

Conspiratorial Discourses on Social Media: Agendamelding Explorations and COVID-19

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This article examines a recent trend of popular conspiracism advancing in social media settings around the world. Drawing evidence from a national survey conducted in Cyprus, this study scrutinizes people's melding tendencies with other individuals along with various social, technological, ideological, and demographic factors as predictors of conspiracism. While social media platforms constitute fertile environments that encourage alternative ideations, multiple factors encompassing ideology, education, income, and especially people's distrust of institutions constitute significant predictors of conspiratorial tendencies.

Keywords: agendamelding, agenda setting, conspiracism, COVID-19, Cyprus

In the early years of the 21st century, social media platforms emerged as a fertile ground for new agendas. While mainstream mass media still exercise their power to establish prominent news themes for large segments of consumers, social media users can also generate significant attention toward alternative themes that have been traditionally ignored or downplayed by media organizations and other established institutions. This study investigates conspiratorial discourses in the context of a small, European, island society, located in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Cyprus, a country of approximately 900,000 residents, is a member of the European Union and the Eurozone. As the COVID-19 threat spread across Europe, governments as well as ordinary individuals found themselves in uncharted social territories. Different administrations scrambled to find urgent solutions for a rapidly spreading coronavirus and established new rules and protocols to protect their residents. In March 2020, the Cypriot government responded swiftly to the new threat by imposing a total lockdown on its population. Although Cyprus did not experience the losses of other places, many of its residents seem to subscribe to conspiratorial views in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The current project sets out to investigate predictors of alternative, conspiracy-oriented agendas that influence individuals in Cyprus, along with their melding tendencies in social media settings. Although official sources maintain a clear, consistent agenda, offering specific guidelines and protocols and repeatedly explaining the real threat that COVID-19 poses, alternative conspiratorial agendas nonetheless seem to flourish online.

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Agendas and Agendamelding

Agenda-setting theory, an influential paradigm for about 50 years, attracted significant scholarly attention in connection with the transfer of salience from the media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). However, this primary influence displayed in the past by mainstream institutions and dominant mass media is now, to some extent, shared by many lay individuals (Jiang, 2014; Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, & Bae, 2014; Takeshita, 2006). The new capacities to promote agendas exercised every day by social media users have received attention by media theorists and analysts (Meraz, 2009). Parallel developments of different agendas, where a certain issue is promoted by mainstream, mass media while alternative issues are discussed by individuals and groups in the context of online communities, might lead toward completely diverging themes, issues, and propositions. What dominant media organizations promote and what ordinary individuals pay attention to might therefore be two completely different versions of "reality."

Analysts recognize a new power that laypeople and ordinary consumers take advantage of in the context of hybrid media environments (Enli, 2017), which poses some interesting challenges, as agenda-setting influences emerge bottom-up. The term "hybrid," coined by Chadwick (2017), signifies a vortex of influences, while different platforms, influencers, users, journalists, scientists, political figures, and policy makers share some of the power to establish their agendas (p. 9).

The emergence of conspiratorial notions from the sidelines of alternative discourses to the forefront of public attention constitutes a relatively recent influence that can be linked to social, technological, and political developments across the globe. In other words, the effects of alternative, conspiratorial agendas becoming dominant themes that people recognize as important, should not be viewed only in terms of individuals melding online in the context of their communities. Other moderating factors seem to encourage public attention of alternative ideas when melding tendencies are observed in social media settings. Only a few years ago, analysts would tend to dispute the significance of such online agendas. However, recent studies demonstrate that this picture has changed, as nowadays societies have been penetrated by notions that would have been viewed as extreme or unscientific in the past (Bantimaroudis, 2016; Bantimaroudis, Sideri, Ballas, Panagiotidis, & Ziogas, 2020).

Melding on Conspiracies

The term "agendamelding" emerged from the broad tradition of agenda-setting theory, a paradigm that explained how the salience of news items, personalities, and organizations is transferred from dominant mass media to large audiences while establishing wide consensus in terms of what "object" is significant, or, in other words, what people should think about. However, the advent of the digital world, along with the capacity of mainstream media to set mass agendas, has created hybrid media environments for various discussions, exchange of content and seeking of information. For example, Feezell (2018) assesses the agenda setting influences of users' incidental exposure to hard news disseminated through social media platforms. However, there is more pronounced evidence that in hybrid media settings salience is established among users, including like-minded individuals seeking validation of preexisting beliefs. For example, Ragas and Roberts (2009) argue that

the agenda melding hypothesis posits when individuals join groups, they “meld” their individual agendas with the agendas of the group. Groups and communities represent a “collected agenda of issues” and “one joins a group by adopting an agenda.” While agenda melding marks a departure from traditional agenda setting, the transfer of salience remains at its theoretical core and provides parsimony. (p. 46)

This principle is reinforced by Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, and Hamm (1999), arguing that “the mass media, while important, are only one of the many significant media, including people, through which we find comfortable social or public agendas with which to meld. All media are about relationships” (p. 3). This particular need for validation of already-held opinions has been recognized in the literature as one of the driving mechanisms of online melding of agendas. At the core of agendamelding influences, researchers acknowledge some converging themes such as people’s need to confirm their views, while avoiding any perspective that would challenge their assumptions (Festinger, 1962). This need for confirmation of prior beliefs has been firmly established in the literature since the early days of the field, with researchers drawing on interdisciplinary evidence to document these influences. McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014) draw a distinction between vertical and horizontal media agendas, the latter being strongly related to members of online communities in agreement with one another. This capacity of active media users to set agendas according to their own personal interests constitutes a game changer in terms of the transfer of salience. As online communities proliferate across social media platforms, alternative agendas deviating from mainstream notions receive significant attention.

Agendas of Conspiracism: The Case of COVID-19

The emergence of alternative agendas discussed by individuals on social media platforms is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although people’s attention to conspiracy theories is hardly a new development, the degree and volume of visibility of these issues is hardly negligible. Scholars differentiate between the terms “conspiracy” and “conspiracism”—the former referring to conspiring actors to achieve certain objectives, while the latter describes a human tendency to interpret world events through the perceived interference of conspiring agents. Why do people attribute special attention to perceived conspiracies? Aaronovitch (2009) defines conspiracism as “the attribution of deliberate agency to something that is more likely to be accidental or unintended, therefore it is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable” (p. 29). Users search for alternative interpretations to explain what happens in the world, especially in connection to disasters, and social media offer the ideal environment where individuals with similar views can offer one another reinforcement and validation of such beliefs. In hybrid media settings, individuals regress between official media sources and alternative online agendas. Rojecki and Meraz (2016) describe an environment where “facts mingle with half-truths and untruths to create factitious informational blends” (p. 25). Hybrid media content generated, processed, and filtered through different media platforms and segments of users can easily become misinformation.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) focus on people’s tendency to explain different events as the work of powerful individuals or established organizations. This attribution is not supported by tangible evidence but by interesting narratives that attract people’s attention. People’s tendency to seek explanations about difficult developments in life in conspiratorial narratives has been described by social psychologists as a

"conspiracist ideation" (Swami et al., 2011, p. 443). Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012) take this notion one step further in noticing people's mistrust of anything that originates from an "official" source. They argue, "Conspiracy belief is not about believing in particular alternative theories, but in disbelieving in whatever the official story is" (Wood & Douglas, 2015, pp. 1-2).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars acknowledge recent attention to medical conspiracies on social media platforms. Van der Linden, Roozenbeek, and Compton (2020) present such evidence, arguing that "belief in conspiracies about the virus is associated with a propensity to reject information from expert authorities" (p. 2). This element of distrust is noteworthy as a common bond that brings individuals together in social media communities. Lobato, Powell, Padilla, and Holbrook (2020) investigate the element of political ideology, finding evidence for a relationship between political inclinations and spreading COVID-related misinformation online.

For example, the antivaccination agenda, which is related to the current pandemic, has attracted a significant following, influencing not just people's perceptions of vaccines but their behaviors as well. Kata (2012) presents evidence about the role of social media in advancing antivaccination agendas. She argues, "The connective power of the internet also brings together those previously considered on the fringe—members of marginalized groups (e.g., Holocaust deniers, 9/11 'truthers,' AIDS deniers) can easily and uncritically interact with like-minded individuals online" (Kata, 2012, p. 3779). Furthermore, Smith and Graham (2017) use a sociological approach to investigate the role of Facebook in promoting an antivaccination agenda. They view communities of antivaccination activists as "sparse," without the cohesion of well-established groups. However, they also recognize that these groups are quite effective in attracting like-minded individuals, reinforcing their fears about the medical establishment. Davis (2018) positions this antivaccination discourse "at the forefront of an ideological 'culture war' against the state and its elite representatives, and makes use of 'we versus they' to highlight perceived fundamental differences in the motivations of 'corrupt' elites and ordinary people" (p. 366).

Although mass media still exercise an agenda setting capacity for major news items, the ways in which alternative agendas are processed by social media users are not always consonant with the views of established organizations and institutions. Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007) demonstrate that "reading daily newspapers and newspaper websites are negatively associated with believing that the government assisted the 9/11 attacks and getting news from blogs and occasionally reading a tabloid are positively associated with this conspiracy" (p. 363). Examining individual melding tendencies around conspiracism should therefore incorporate not just people's need for validation of their beliefs but also their level of distrust toward established institutions such as the government and mainstream media.

Statement of the Problem

This article uses the agendamelding paradigm to examine alternative, conspiratorial agendas in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic unfolding in Cyprus. The rise of conspiratorial agendas poses significant challenges for modern societies. Conspiratorial narratives have emerged as interpretive frameworks that individuals rely on to make sense of the world. As individuals become exposed to conspiratorial agendas online, both their perceptions as well as certain behaviors might be affected. In the

context of a global pandemic, as people's views meld with online conspiracism, they might display harmful reactions—cognitive, affective, and behavioral. For example, when individuals embrace online agendas that cannot be supported empirically, they might endorse unsubstantiated views that lead them toward negative emotional reactions such as anger and fear. Additionally, they also might end up making bad decisions, especially in relation to health issues.

The current study has been designed to measure various predictors of individuals' leaning toward conspiratorial views. In other words, people's tendency to subscribe to conspiracism is the primary dependent variable. The primary independent variable measured in this study is online melding. Scrutinizing the phenomenon of online conspiracism as an emerging social agenda, this project aims at scrutinizing the relationship between individuals' online melding tendencies in connection with conspiratorial leanings, along with various other moderating factors that are deemed important predictors of conspiracism. A multivariate, hierarchical analysis is expected to shed some light on the relationship between melding and conspiracism, and to display a detailed record of intervening influences. Ultimately, striving to grasp the complexity of the problem might provide a useful understanding of a rapidly unfolding social phenomenon.

Method

A national survey was conducted on the island country of Cyprus. Cypriots make extensive use of online media platforms for information seeking, purchasing, and communicating as well as for entertainment purposes. Therefore, the results of the current study are deemed generalizable to other national or international contexts with similar patterns of online behaviors. For the needs of the current research endeavor and to increase the reliability and validity of the study, a well-known public opinion firm was subcontracted to carry out a national survey, based on a random sample of 1,000 residents. Phone interviews were conducted in Greek by trained professionals. The firm supplied raw data, gathered from the telephone survey. Of 1,000 participants, 489 (48.9%) are men and 511 (51.1%) are women. In terms of the sample's age distribution, all age groups from 18 to 70 years are proportionately represented in the sample. Specifically, 479 (47.9%) participants are under 40, while 521 (52.1%) are older than 40. As regards their educational background, 540 (54%) report that they have at least university education, while 460 (46%) report that they have less than undergraduate university education, including some technical, post-high-school training. Finally, in terms of gross income, 740 (74%) earn less than 4,000 Euros per month, 99 (9.9%) earn more than 4,000 Euros per month, while 161 (16.1%) opted not to provide information about their income. The data seem to support information available about the Cypriot population as being relatively affluent and highly educated.

Questionnaire Design

Both academics and survey professionals collaborated in designing the questionnaire and overseeing the entire process of data collection. The survey was conducted in July 2020, after the end of a nation-wide lockdown imposed on all residents of Cyprus. The study's core variables were measured on Likert scales ranging from 1 to 7 to capture a relatively wide spectrum of people's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the information they received, and their understanding of the problem. One of our core concerns was to investigate individuals' patterns of information seeking in the context of online communities. When a respondent selected

7, that implied a strong agreement or endorsement of a statement, while 1 represented a total lack of agreement or endorsement. Any response that received a score less than 4 is treated as indicative of relative disagreement, while a response of more than 4 is viewed as relative agreement. Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the reliability of the scale, and it registered at 0.74. Several profile demographic variables were included in the study and were scrutinized as potential control factors.

Gender

Gender was included as a nominal scale, demographic variable.

Age

Age was included as an ordinal scale variable that includes five categories: (a) 18–29, (b) 30–39, (c) 40–49, (d) 50–59, and (e) 60–70 years of age. It was converted to a dummy variable with two groups—individuals older than 40 and those younger than 40.

Education

Education was included as an ordinal scale variable that includes six categories, from elementary school to postgraduate university education. For the purposes of the current study, it was converted to a dummy variable of individuals with at least university education and those with less than a university education.

Marital Status

Marital status was included as a nominal scale variable that includes three categories: (a) single, (b) married, (c) divorced.

Income

Income was included as an ordinal scale variable that measured gross monthly income in Euros: (a) up to 2,000, (b) 2,001–4,000, (c) 4,001–6,000, and (d) more than 6,000. For the purposes of the current study, it was converted to a dummy variable of individuals who earn at least \$4,000 Euros per month and those who earn less than \$4,000 Euros per month.

Political Orientation

The political orientation variable has the following categories: far left, left, center, right, and far right. Five dummy variables were created, representing each of the aforementioned categories.

Using and Trusting the Media

On a Likert scale from 1 to 7, respondents were asked to indicate how often they used social media platforms, what mainstream media they used and trusted the most, and what other media sources they used and trusted the most. Furthermore, they were asked about the role of their friends and peers as information providers on social media contexts.

Attitudes and Beliefs Variables

On a Likert scale from 1 to 7, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with various statements in connection with the origin of COVID-19 and how it spread across the globe. Furthermore, they were asked about the role of pharmaceutical firms and what they thought about the need for vaccination. Several questions were designed to assess what they already believed about the spread of the coronavirus and the way governments had responded to this crisis. Several items dealt with conspiracy narratives in relation to the virus.

Dependent and Independent Variables

One of the objectives of the study was to identify significant factors that are related to people's leanings toward conspiratorial frameworks. Several questions or statements were included to capture respondents' leanings toward adopting nonmainstream views of the COVID-19 pandemic, which deviated from the positions adopted by international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the government, and mainstream media sources. The following statements were designed to measure people's alternative (conspiratorial) views in connection with COVID-19:

St. #1: It is obvious that certain people created the coronavirus, and then the virus escaped from the lab.

St. #2: The coronavirus was designed with the intent to force us to get vaccinated so that we will be dependent on pharmaceutical companies.

St. #3: The COVID-19 pandemic is not as serious as mainstream media and the government claim it to be.

St. #4: COVID-19 was designed in a lab with the intent to harm human beings.

All four variables assess people's reactions toward statements that deviate from official information provided by medical, governmental, and media institutions in relation to what the coronavirus is, how it came about, and how dangerous it is. To test whether all four variables are related, a factor analysis was conducted, which indicates that they load together on the same factor. These four items assess respondents' beliefs that COVID-19 is the creation of conspiring agents. Thereby, the dependent variable is a combination of four items, created by adding all four variables into one construct. Because all four items were measured on a scale from 1 to 7, they were combined into one construct on a scale ranging from 4 to 28, providing a bigger range of variability.

People's melding tendency was assessed by asking respondents about their tendency to receive information from their online friends in connection with COVID-19. Understandably, agenda-melding processes were not investigated in a conventional manner—content analysis versus survey. As individuals provided rated responses about their convergence with online friends versus their belief in conspiracies, those items were correlated with one another. In addition, several control variables were tested as predictors of conspiratorial beliefs and were treated as moderating influences. These categories of variables include demographic characteristics, political orientation, sources of information, and respondents' prior beliefs. The literature provides evidence about the aforementioned factors as contributing to people's conspiratorial tendencies.

The "demographics" category includes standard measures of income, gender, education, and age. The "political orientation" category displays five dummy variables of political identities: far left, left, center, right, and far right. In the regression model, center is used as the base variable. The "sources of information" category is composed of respondents' preferences about media use, such as relying on mainstream media for news in contrast to going to social media or alternative news sources for information. Finally, the "prior beliefs" category scrutinizes this notion of distrusting mainstream sources such as media organizations and the government. In addition, the intensity of religious beliefs was examined along with other prior beliefs held by respondents.

To carry inferential analyses in a trustworthy manner, additional diagnostic tests were used to ensure the robustness of findings in connection to inferential measures. For example, data were checked for independence of observations, multicollinearity, and heteroskedasticity. Durbin-Watson tests, tolerance, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics registered within acceptable parameters. All linear regression models were built hierarchically to measure influences systematically as different categories of variables comprised five regression models. The following hypotheses were deemed appropriate for the current analysis:

- H1: The more individuals receive information from their friends on social media, the more they subscribe to conspiratorial beliefs.*
- H2: As individuals' informational dependence on social media increases, conspiracist beliefs also increase.*
- H3: As individuals' informational dependence on specialized news websites increases, conspiracist beliefs also increase.*
- H4: As individuals' informational dependence on mainstream media increases, conspiracist beliefs decrease.*
- H5: The more individuals distrust the government, the more they subscribe to conspiracist beliefs.*

The primary objective of this study is to assess the relationship between individuals' online melding tendencies as predictors of conspiratorial beliefs, along with various other moderating factors that are deemed important predictors of conspiracism. Participants were asked specifically about their media choices,

their preferences in terms of how they acquire information, and their overall attitude toward official and alternative news sources. In this article, influences are examined hierarchically as different regression models build on established evidence to assess combined influences of various types of predictors on people's conspiratorial beliefs.

Findings

Several descriptive as well as inferential measures were deemed necessary to assess people's media patterns of behavior, especially in connection with social media. As expected, Cypriots do not deviate from the online choices of other Europeans. When asked "how often do you use social media," 46.8% of respondents said less than 2 hours a day, 20.6% used it "2 to 3 hours a day," while 15.1% said they "remained connected throughout the day." These figures confirm what is already known—that the majority of Cypriots live an online lifestyle. An interesting attribute explored descriptively pertains to people's media use in connection to COVID-19. This evidence was pursued to explore people's trust in different types of media sources, which in turn might be revealing about the relationship between media use and popular beliefs. Table 1 reveals that Cypriots report a primary reliance on mainstream media—newspapers and television—from which they received most of their information as regards the virus.

Table 1. Patterns of Media Use and Information Acquisition About COVID-19 in Cyprus.

How people get information about COVID-19	Mean score recorded on a scale from 1 to 7	Percentage (%) of respondents with a score from 5 to 7
I get most of my information about COVID-19 from major newspapers such as <i>Politis</i> , <i>Charavgi</i> , <i>Philelefttheros</i> , and <i>Simerini</i> .	4.21	53.1
I get most of my information about COVID-19 from mainstream television stations such as RIK and Sigma.	4.55	58.7
I get most of my information about COVID-19 from specialized websites, which are less known to most people.	3.23	32.4
I get most of my information about COVID-19 from my friends on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube.	3.00	26.7
I get most of my information about COVID-19 by participating in groups or communities on Facebook while discussing this issue with other individuals who share the same interests with me.	2.6	15.3

For example, 53.1% reported that they get most of their information from mainstream newspapers, while 58.7% said they get most of their information from national television stations. The respective figures for

alternative sources, such as specialized websites, social media, and alternative online communities were 32.4%, 26.7%, and 15.3%, respectively.

On the other hand, the number of individuals who seek information from alternative sources is not negligible. In fact, sizable segments of Cypriot society display a significant connection with alternative news websites and social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), while fewer respondents said that they discuss these issues in the context of online communities with other individuals and their friends, in particular, who share the same interests.

Respondents were asked about specific beliefs they held in relation to COVID-19. As Table 2 shows, most of the statements that are consonant with conspiracy views have a mean score of less than four, while the mainstream view that the COVID-19 pandemic is a random occurrence, like many similar pandemics in the past, registers with a score higher than four.

Table 2. Respondents' Reported Beliefs in Relation to COVID-19.

Respondents' beliefs	Mean score recorded on a scale from 1 to 7	Percentage (%) of respondents with a score from 5 to 7
COVID-19 is a random development as the culinary habits of certain cultural groups created the conditions for the virus to jump from animals to human beings.	3.80	39.9
COVID-19 was designed in a lab with the intent to harm human beings.	3.47	34
The COVID-19 pandemic is not as serious a problem as some media and the government want us to think.	3.35	35.4
The coronavirus was designed to force us to get vaccinated so that pharmaceutical companies can exert control over us.	3.37	35.1
The government is lying or exaggerates about the coronavirus.	3.24	29.4
The global pandemic is a random development like various other pandemics in the past.	4.38	50.6

However, one of the mainstream views that the pandemic started in China, as the virus spread from animals to human beings, also received a relatively low mean score. As regards those respondents who expressed some level of agreement (from 5 to 7), conspiratorial views are far from receiving negligible

support. In fact, those who display agreement with conspiracy-oriented statements represent roughly one-third of the respondents. Although they are not necessarily the majority, the sheer volume of these segments is deemed significant and should be subject to further investigation. For example, 34% of the respondents displayed some level of agreement with the statement that "COVID-19 was designed in a lab with the intent to harm human beings," while 35.4% displayed some level of agreement (from 5 to 7) with the statement "the COVID-19 pandemic is not as serious a problem as some media and the government want us to think." Similar levels of agreement were recorded for the statements "The coronavirus was designed to force us to get vaccinated so that pharmaceutical companies will exert control over us" and "The government is lying or exaggerates about the coronavirus."

On the other hand, mainstream information presented by mass media—both established newspapers and radio and television stations—was clearly the majority view. For example, 50.6% of all respondents agreed with the statement that "the global pandemic is a random development like various other pandemics in the past." The available descriptive evidence shows that though mainstream views are still prevalent in Cypriot society, alternative views—in some cases, of conspiratorial nature—receive minority, but nonetheless not negligible attention. In terms of trusting certain media sources as more reliable than other news sources, respondents offered interesting preferences. For example, 21.9% displayed some level of agreement with the statement "In general, the content found in social media platforms is more reliable than that of newspapers and television stations." Along the same lines, 28.9% agreed with the statement "In general, mainstream media lie."

This study examines people's tendency to meld online with other like-minded individuals, like friends, acquaintances, or individuals who share similar convictions. In terms of purely descriptive evidence, a sizeable segment of our sample displays a melding tendency in connection to information seeking and processing. A substantial segment of the respondents acknowledge that they tend to "receive information about COVID-19 mainly from friends on social media" ($M = 3$), while 26.7% of respondents display some level of agreement with this statement.

As Table 3 shows, 29.2% of the respondents acknowledge that when they participate in social media discussions, their views converge with the views of other participants, while 40% admit that the content they seek on social media and other media resonates with their views. The lowest agreement (15.3%) is recorded for people who are active in discussion communities with other individuals sharing similar interests. This evidence indicates that individuals cluster together in digital settings seeking validation or reinforcement of their views, a finding that supports the notion of agendamelding.

Table 3. Respondents' Melding Tendencies on Social Media.

Respondents' beliefs	Mean score recorded on a scale from 1 to 7	Percentage (%) of respondents with a score from 5 to 7
I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from my friends on social media.	3.00	26.7
When I participate in social media discussions, my views converge with the views of other participants.	3.47	29.2
I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from groups or communities on Facebook where I discuss this issue with other users who have similar interests to me.	2.65	15.3
The content I seek on social media and other media resonates with my views.	4.07	40.0
I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from friends I trust.	2.94	23.5

Inferential Evidence

In addition to descriptive evidence, hierarchical regression analysis provided inferential evidence about influences on people's conspiratorial beliefs. Table 4 presents all variables included in regression models to assess influences on conspiratorial views. Furthermore, appendices A and B present correlations among all interval-scale variables and the questionnaire used for the survey.

Table 4. Description of the Variables Used in the Regression.

Variable	Description
Political ideology	
Far right	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who identified with the far right, and 0 for everybody else.
Right	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who identified with the right, and 0 for everybody else.
Left	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who identified with the left, and 0 for everybody else.
Far Left	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who identified with the far left, and 0 for everybody else.
Demographics	
Age	Dummy variable equals 1 for individuals older than 40, and 0 for individuals under 40.
Education	Dummy variable equals 1 for individuals with at least undergraduate university education, and 0 for individuals with less than undergraduate university education.

Income	Dummy variable equals 1 for individuals with income of at least 4,000 euros per month, and 0 for individuals earning less than 4,000 Euros per month.
Gender	Dummy variable for gender: 1 for males, and 0 for females.
Sources of information	
Read newspapers (mainstream)	"I get most of my information about COVID-19 from major newspapers such as <i>Politis</i> , <i>Charavgi</i> , <i>Phileleftheros</i> , and <i>Simerini</i> ." [1-7] scale
Watch television (mainstream)	"I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from mainstream television stations such as RIK and Sigma." [1-7] scale
Specialized websites	"I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from specialized websites, which are less known to most people." [1-7] scale
Friends on social media	"I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from my friends on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube." [1-7] scale
Watch videos on Facebook and other SMN	"I often watch videos on Facebook and other social media about how the COVID-19 epidemic got started." [1-7] scale
Prior beliefs	
Distrusting the government	"The government is lying or exaggerates about the coronavirus." [1-7] scale
Distrusting mainstream media	"I basically believe that traditional media (newspapers and television) lie." [1-7] scale
Going to church	"I go to church." [1-7] scale

A first layer of dummy variables representing the entire political spectrum shows that people who classify themselves as belonging to the "far right" and the "far left" are more likely to subscribe to conspiratorial views. This finding converges with Lobato and colleagues (2020), who identify ideology as a significant intervening factor that is highly associated with conspiracism. As only dummy variables were entered into the regression equation to assess this primary layer of political influences, this particular finding should be treated with caution. The R value is .126 and both extremes of the political spectrum are statistically significant as predictors of conspiracism.

The second layer of hierarchical influences includes four dummy demographic variables added on top of political ideology attributes. Age, education, and income seem to be related to conspiracist notions in connection to COVID-19, while gender does not seem to be a differentiating factor in predicting conspiracism. However, in adding demographic variables, the influence of political orientation shifts as only the "far right" registers as statistically significant, while the R value is slightly larger (.321).

The third layer of the hierarchical regression analysis includes some of the main variables as the role of media is scrutinized in predicting COVID-related conspiracism. This analysis yields five variables as individuals' main media uses and sources of information. Traditional newspapers, alternative news websites, friends on social media, and videos circulating on Facebook register as statistically significant factors, while traditional newspapers are inversely related with conspiracism, as shown in Table 5. Furthermore, reading specialized news websites is also inversely correlated with conspiratorial views. The role of television does not register as statistically significant.

The role of friends as social media news sources and people's tendency to seek videos on social media are significant predictors of conspiracism. Adding these media sources slightly alters influences of

demographic and ideological constructs. In terms of ideology, the role of the “far right” remains quite robust, while education and income retained their established influence. In other words, both ideological and demographic factors seem to be related with conspiracism along with respondents’ reliance on alternative “news” sources. Model 3 provides strong support for H1 and H2 as the role of friends on social media and individuals’ reliance on social media (specifically watching videos on Facebook) seem to be significantly related with conspiracism. On the other hand, there is no support for H3 as people’s dependence on specialized news websites is inversely related to conspiracism. Arguably this finding indicates that Cypriots treat specialized news websites as online newspapers. Furthermore, there is partial support for H4 as an inverse relationship between reading newspapers and conspiracism was correctly predicted, while the role of mainstream television is not statistically significant.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Models—Predicting Respondents' Leaning Toward Conspiracism.

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	Sig	B	Sig	B	Sig	B	Sig	B	Sig
Constant	1.076	.000	1.177	.000	1.170	.000	.793	.000	.735	.000
Political ideology										
Far Right	.152	.001	.132	.003	.117	.007	.036	.339	.038	.316
Right	-.014	.440	.019	.295	-.020	.244	-.005	.749	-.006	.690
Left	.013	.569	.005	.818	.007	.745	.026	.189	.025	.198
Far Left	.110	.079	.072	.235	.059	.322	.033	.529	.012	.824
Demographics										
Age			-.040	.009	-.024	.131	-.020	.160	-.020	.145
Education			-.135	.000	-.118	.000	-.081	.000	-.080	.000
Income			-.040	.025	-.034	.049	-.024	.116	-.023	.127
Gender			.014	.354	.018	.229	.007	.606	.008	.550
Sources of information										
Read newspapers (mainstream)					-.011	.002	-.005	.153	-.004	.192
Watch television (mainstream)					-.005	.183	.004	.275	.004	.266
Specialized websites					-.012	.002	-.009	.008	-.009	.010
Friends on social media					.010	.020	.001	.872	.000	.933
Watch videos on Facebook and other SMN					.022	.000	.017	.000	.017	.000
Prior beliefs										
Distrusting the government							.042	.000	.060	.000
Distrusting mainstream media							.028	.000	.027	.000
Going to church							.023	.000	.040	.000

Interaction between going to church and distrusting the government				-.005	.004
	$R^2 = .016$	$R^2 = .103$	$R^2 = .149$	$R^2 = .357$	$R^2 = .362$

Model 4 adds yet another layer of independent variables—namely, individuals' prior beliefs, including religiosity, and their degree of distrust toward mainstream institutions such as the government and mainstream media. All three of these influences are statistically significant, while the *R* value increases to .597 from .386. Thereby, there is strong support for H5 as the literature documents in various studies. The role of education should be highlighted as the level of education retains its robust influence in all models tested hierarchically. Prior beliefs register as stronger predictors of conspiracist notions than media use, including reliance on different social media sources.

Finally, Model 5 retains all variables from Model 4 and tests an interaction between people's religiosity and their distrust toward the government. Various interactions were tested, but only this particular relationship yielded statistically significant results, demonstrating people's preexisting beliefs—especially religious beliefs—in combination with individuals' distrust of the government have an additional effect over and above influences recorded in Model 4.

Discussion

Conspiracism is composed of a mosaic of discourses that have generated significant attention among interested segments of consumers. However, the digital era has encouraged people's attention toward conspiracist notions while pushing those ideas toward the forefront of the mainstream of Western, liberal societies. What once were viewed as alternative or even minority discourses are now recognized as mainstream paradigms (Sternisko, Cichocka, & Van Bavel, 2020).

The current study highlights the prevalence of individuals' online melding on conspiracism. This primary finding is evident as users acknowledge their tendency to seek content from other individuals that support their already-held beliefs or discuss their beliefs with like-minded individuals. This variable seems to be a guiding force behind conspiratorial influences while it seems to be embedded into other constructs, such as distrust toward mainstream institutions. The role of friends on social media is recognized as a legitimate source of information. Friends should not be viewed just as a news source, but also a validating influence of individuals' preexisting beliefs. However, the current evidence presents additional layers of information that predict conspiracism along with users' online melding. For example, visual content circulated on social media is actively pursued by seekers of "alternative" explanations. There is indeed robust evidence that visual content that is easily accessible on social media platforms registers as a significant factor influencing conspiratorial beliefs. One might argue that media users see visual content as a source of "legitimate" information. The fact that users can "watch" what they are looking for renders their seeking worthwhile and their "findings" trustworthy.

Furthermore, people's reliance on newspapers displays an inverse relationship with conspiratorial beliefs. This finding displayed in Model 3 is hardly surprising. It indicates that when people rely on mainstream newspapers, they are less likely to subscribe to conspiratorial views. This finding might also indicate that while people recognize the prominence of certain issues, like COVID-19, they might not agree with the core premises of these issues that mainstream media promote. Furthermore, people's reliance on television content did not display a significant relationship with conspiracism.

In addition to media factors, demographic factors and political ideology deserve scholarly attention. When ideological tendencies only are entered into the model, both the far right and the far left register as significant predictors of conspiracies. These influences weaken as other factors are introduced, while the far right seems more prone to alternative explanations than the far left. This is a significant finding, indicating that as people move from modest, centrist political positions toward the extremes, they find "suitable" explanations to validate their far right or far left orientations.

From a list of demographics, one should highlight the significance of education, tested in different contexts, which can be interpreted in various ways. It is evident that people who did not pursue a university education tend to be more eager to adopt a conspiratorial framework than those who did. However, this finding might imply that individuals without a university education are more likely to accept whatever content they come across on social media without the capacity to filter information through reasoning. The last layers of the constructs pertain to individuals who distrust mainstream, official sources, such as the government and mass media. As the literature indicates, distrust and melding are associated with one another. This element of distrust toward established institutions or official sources of information is well documented in the literature and was included in the survey as an additional confirmation of existing evidence (Wood & Douglas, 2015; Wood et al., 2012). This analysis shows that the element of distrust registers as the most significant independent variable that predicts conspiracism, arguably more pronounced than individuals' media choices. Several implications of this finding merit additional attention, specifically in connection with dysfunctional democracies which, by definition, rely on well-informed citizens who trust institutional processes and the values they supposedly uphold. The collapse of trust in mainstream media and Western governments has been observed over a period of several decades worldwide (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2009). Furthermore, the voices of scientists, represented in the content of traditional media and governmental sources, have also been disputed by alternative narratives. This decline in trust toward institutions seems to be further exacerbated by the proliferation of alternative voices, enhancing a vicious cycle of confusion, distrust, and cynicism among individuals. As citizens' distrust of official sources of information increases, it makes sense that individuals will satisfy their need for orientation in a plethora of alternative voices available on social media platforms, including conspiratorial voices that advance their agendas. The most validating voice might be that of their friends and immediate community who also tend to distrust official voices.

Finally, the role of religion registers as a significant factor related to conspiracism. Religion has constituted an influence since the days of Cantril (1940), who documented that people with strong religious beliefs were more likely to believe that the earth was invaded by Martians during the 1938 radio broadcast by Orson Welles. In fact, the role of both religion and education was documented by Cantril (1940) in his pioneering research into mass panic. It should be noted that numerous interactions were tested to assess influences beyond what it is documented in this analysis. From a long list of potential combinations, religion and distrust in the government produced an additional influence beyond the relationships already assessed. This is a finding that deserves attention, as an interaction between religiosity and distrust in the government constitute an enhanced predictor of conspiracism.

Implications

This study attempts to create a map of influences that predict conspiracism. It draws evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic in Cyprus, outlining various categories of independent variables. It is recognized that the spread of conspiracist notions is not without consequence for Cypriot or any other society. These implications do not just pertain to perceptions of a global crisis, but also carry important behavioral implications. Some people refuse to wear masks or take any social distancing precautions to protect themselves and others around them. Some of these views are widely circulated on social media among people who deny the existence of the pandemic or those who diminish the severity of COVID-19.

Furthermore, along with those who currently refuse vaccination, there might be a new wave of the worldwide antivaccination movement, when in fact vaccination will be essential to prevent the spread of the disease and save lives. This survey indicates that a sizeable segment of the population sees a conspiracy in connection with vaccines and pharmaceutical companies in general. All the aforementioned concerns might have significant repercussions for the entire world. Conspiracism is not just about people who believe in undocumented narratives, but unfortunately it is also about decisions that people make and thereby the effects of conspiracism are behavioral as well as perceptual (Kata, 2010, 2012).

Finally, the current study is subject to limitations. The study was conducted in a small country in the eastern Mediterranean. A national random survey sample provides a representative picture of what people think, but at the same time it is limited in the sense that respondents might conceal some of their beliefs while their perceptions are dictated by their own prejudices or cultural boundaries. This evidence is therefore treated as a national snapshot of a wider sequence of developments in a larger media story. Nowadays, all notions from the extreme to the absurd and from the illogical to the undocumented deserve scholarly attention and scrutiny.

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Appendix A: Correlations

Table A1. Correlations.

Variables	Read newspapers	Watch television	Specialized websites	Friends on social media	Watch videos on Facebook and other SMN	Distrusting the government	Distrusting mainstream media	Going to church
Read newspapers	1	.138**	-.032	-.008	-.011	-.211**	-.157**	.148**
Watch television	.138**	1	-.293**	-.083*	-.117**	-.185**	-.305**	.235**
Specialized websites	-.032	-.293**	1	.213**	.285**	.007	.178**	-.109**
Friends on social media	-.008	-.083**	.213**	1	.335**	.173**	.148**	.030
Watch videos on Facebook and other SMN	-.011	-.117**	.285**	.335**	1	.097**	.162**	.026
Distrusting the government	-.211**	-.185**	.007	.173**	.097**	1	.437**	-.020
Distrusting mainstream media	-.157**	-.305**	.178**	.148**	.162**	.437**	1	-.044
Going to church	.148**	.235**	-.109**	.030	.026	-.020	-.044	1

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Appendix B: Questionnaire

1. How often do you use Facebook?

A few times a month	1
Once a week	2
A few times a week	3
Less than 2 hours a day	4
From 2 to 3 hours a day	5
I am connected all the time	6

2. How important for you is each of the following reasons you use Facebook?

	Not at all						Very much	N/A
I communicate with friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I participate in public discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I upload personal content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I search for content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

3. From your perspective, how important are the following reasons individuals use Facebook?

	Not at all						Very much	N/A
They communicate with friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
They participate in public discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
They upload personal content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
They search for content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

4. I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from major newspapers such as *Politis*, *Charavgi*, *Phileleftheros*, and *Simerini*.

5. I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from mainstream television stations such as RIK and Sigma.

6. I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from specialized websites, which are less known to most people.

7. COVID-19 is a random development as the culinary habits of certain cultural groups created the conditions for the virus to jump from animals to human beings.

8. I receive most of my information about COVID-19 from my friends on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube.

9. I receive most of my information about COVID-19 by participating in groups or communities on Facebook while discussing this issue with other individuals who share the same interests with me.

10. COVID-19 was designed in a lab with the intent to harm human beings.

11. The COVID-19 pandemic is not as serious a problem as some media and the government want us to think.
12. The coronavirus was designed to force us to get vaccinated so that pharmaceutical companies will exert control over us.
13. The government is lying or exaggerates about the coronavirus.
14. The global pandemic is a random development like various other pandemics in the past.
15. When I participate in social media discussions, my views converge with the views of other participants.
16. The content I seek on social media and other media resonates with my views.
17. I often watch videos on Facebook and other social media about how the COVID-19 epidemic got started.
18. I basically believe that traditional media (newspapers and television) lie.
19. It is obvious that certain people created the coronavirus, and then it escaped from the lab.
20. Basically, I do not trust content that individuals upload on Facebook and other social media.
21. I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from my friends on social media.
22. I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from friends I trust.
23. I receive information about COVID-19 mainly from groups or communities on Facebook where I discuss this issue with other users who share similar interests with me.
24. Social media are more trustworthy than newspapers and television.

25. How would you describe your political orientation?

Far Left	Left	Center	Right	Far Right	N/A		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

26. I go to church

Never						Very often	N/A
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

27. Basically, I consider myself religious

Not at all						Very much	N/A
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8