Distribution and Reception of Conspiracy Theories and Mobilization Calls on Telegram

Combining Evidence from a Content Analysis and Survey During the Pandemic

Leyla Dogruel / Simon Kruschinski / Pablo Jost / Pascal Jürgens*

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to an "infodemic" characterized by the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories and calls for resistance against measures to combat the virus. Despite increased academic attention's focus on conspiracy theories on Telegram, existing research has two major limitations: (1) a lack of combined examination of the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories, and (2) insufficient understanding of the relationship between the reception of conspiracy messages and political attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, or political engagement. To address these gaps, our study adopts a two-pronged approach, linking the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls on Telegram while exploring the implications for recipients' conspiracy beliefs and protest behavior. Our research design includes a manual content analysis of 3,162 Telegram posts from German conspiracy-related channels (Study 1), and a survey of 318 Telegram users in these channels and 320 traditional media users (Study 2). Our results reveal characteristics of Telegram fringe group users that make them susceptible to conspiratorial and mobilizing content, such as anti-system attitudes and a readiness for protest behavior. These findings have broader implications for understanding the role of digital media in the spread of conspiracy theories and the mobilization of resistance during crises, as well as the importance of continued research on the relationship between digital media use, political attitudes, and engagement to mitigate the negative impacts of conspiracy theories and preserve democratic values.

Key words: conspiracy theories, Telegram, political protest, conspiracy belief, political participation

1. Introduction

Social crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic are often associated with a distrust of elites as well as the spread of conspiracy theories—with social media adopting a central role as a driver of the so-called "infodemic" (Cinelli et al., 2020). In this context, conspiracy theories, which people have seized upon and disseminated as explanations for various aspects of the pandemic and to call for resistance against certain measures, have become more relevant (Darius & Urquhart, 2021; Hetzel et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories are often used in light of societal uncertainty and insecurity and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was

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* Prof. Dr. Leyla Dogruel, Universität Erfurt, Seminar Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, Nordhäuser Str. 63, 99089 Erfurt, Deutschland, leyla.dogruel@uni-erfurt.de, https://orcid.org/0000 -0003-2701-3402;

Dr. Simon Kruschinski, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Institut für Publizistik, Jakob-Welder-Weg 12, 55128 Mainz, Deutschland, simon.kruschinski@uni-mainz.de, https://orcid.org /0000-0002-3185-5656;

Dr. Pablo Jost, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Institut für Publizistik, Jakob-Welder-Weg 12, 55128 Mainz, Deutschland, pablo.jost@uni-mainz.de, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9267-1773;

Prof. Dr. Pascal Jürgens, Universität Trier, Medienwissenschaften, Universitätsring 15, 54296 Trier, Deutschland, juergens@uni-trier.de, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6810-0011.

and is a breeding ground for the proliferation of conspiratorial content and the mobilization of citizens against political and media elites (Jost & Dogruel, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).

As political decision makers became aware of digital media as a hotbed for antidemocratic theories and calls for resistance or violence, social media platforms came under pressure for not taking sufficient measures to limit or censor them. Political efforts have subsequently led to a significant number of account removals by established platforms, forcing right-wing actors in particular to continue their communication on other channels, such as the messenger service Telegram (Urman & Katz, 2022).

While the Corona pandemic raised academic attention toward the dissemination of conspiracy theories on Telegram, and conspiratorial beliefs of media users, we see two weaknesses in existing approaches: (1) The few studies examining conspiracy theories on Telegram have often focused on either the dissemination of the content (e.g., Schulze et al., 2022), or examined the use of Telegram as a source of information and discourse (Schwaiger et al., 2022) while a combined examination of the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories has yet to be conducted. (2) There is limited knowledge about how the reception of conspiracy messages in digital media is connected to political attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, or political engagement. If at all, it is primarily studied based on indicators of communicated content or networks (Schulze et al., 2022).

Our study aims to overcome these limitations by a) linking the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls on Telegram and b) revealing which implications result for the recipients of these messages in terms of conspiracy beliefs and protest behavior. Specifically, we first ask which conspiracy theories and mobilization calls were spread in Telegram fringe channels over the course of the pandemic. Second, we want to know if the channel users exhibit unique characteristics in comparison to traditional media users which make them receptive to the disseminated messages for sparking conspiracy beliefs and protest behavior. We provide empirical answers to these questions through the combination of two studies. Study 1 involves a manual content analysis of N=3,162 Telegram posts in German conspiracy-related channels, distributed between March 2020 and December 2021. Study 2 draws on a survey of N=318 Telegram users in the same conspiracy channels and N=320 traditional media users during the first wave of the Corona pandemic in June/July 2020.

By linking the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls as well as surveying a hard-to-reach population of Telegram users in conspiracy channels, we see added value since our study aids in the identification of the characteristics of Telegram fringe group users which make them susceptible to the disseminated conspiratorial and mobilizing content. These reflect anti-system attitudes and a readiness for protest behavior that are applicable to future crises.

In what follows, we define and theorize conspiracy theories and beliefs and how they relate to mobilizing protest engagement. We then derive the research questions that will guide our study. This is followed by a discussion of the data gathered and the methods used in Study 1 and Study 2 and the findings of both. Finally, we critically discuss the implications of our findings for the study of digital media use and political participation.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review on the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls

2.1 Conspiracy theories, beliefs, and thinking

While a profound and commonly shared definition of conspiracy theory is missing, several key elements can be outlined based on a suggested interdisciplinary literature review by Mahl et al. (2022): the existence of a secret plot by powerful individuals or organizations, and in a functional sense, the desire to reduce the complexity of reality and make sense of it. Conspiracy theories are thus commonly defined as explanatory beliefs suggesting that a group of powerful individuals are secretly working together to achieve a harmful goal (Douglas et al., 2019). Relatedly, conspiracy theories mostly propagate that an unsuspecting public is being lied to, manipulated, and threatened by malicious circles of power (usually elites) (Sternisko et al., 2020). Based on that definition, conspiracy theory belief is one's acceptance that a specific conspiracy theory is (likely) true (Uscinski et al., 2022). As conspiracy theories often rely on false assumptions and contain contradictions, they are mostly considered "illegitimate" forms of knowledge that contradict scientific evidence (Douglas et al., 2019). Finally, Uscinski et al. (2022) or Douglas et al. (2019) define conspiracy thinking as a latent predisposition to interpret events as products of malevolent conspiracies that need to be distinguished from generalized political attitudes, such as political leaning, or anti-elitism. This idea largely stems from the finding that people who already believe in particular conspiracy theories are likely to believe in others, even unrelated ones (Brotherton et al., 2013; Uscinski et al., 2022).

2.2 Distribution of conspiracy theories on Telegram during the COVID-19 pandemic

Conspiracy theories are by no means a new phenomenon, yet they proliferate well in digital (social) media (Mahl et al., 2022). This can be attributed to certain characteristics conspiracy theories share with other types of mobilizing communication, such as populism. As Bergmann and Butter (2020) argue, conspiracy theories provide distorted and simplistic responses to pressing issues which thrive well in social media. In that regard, the spread of conspiracy theories has been linked to societal crisis, where they are more likely to emerge due to individuals' need for meaning and reduction of uncertainty in a situation where they feel out of control (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Lately, the Corona pandemic has become an accelerator of a worldwide wave of new conspiracy theories (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021; Darius & Urquhart, 2021).

Findings outline that the spread of conspiracy theories is related to specific communities and platforms. Less regulated, and privacy-oriented so-called 'dark platforms', such as Telegram, have become notorious for hosting content and users that may not be tolerated by mainstream social media providers (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Telegram enables radical actors to build (semi) public discourse arenas and networks given its features as a broadcast or micro-blogging platform, while offering similar features of ordinary Instant Messaging applications, such as WhatsApp (Dargahi Nobari et al., 2021). Telegram experienced major growth in users from 2020, attributed to its hybrid character as both a private and public communication tool as well as its 'free speech' approach, and became a relevant communication channel for radical actors who were subject to deplatforming measures on other (mainstream) platforms (Urman & Katz, 2022).

Despite the growing attention paid to ('dark') social media as platforms for the dissemination of conspiracy theories, studies to date have not put much emphasis on Telegram—especially in European countries. Notable exceptions are two recently published studies by Schulze et al. (2022) and Jost & Dogruel (2023). Studying radicalization processes on Ger-

man-speaking Telegram channels, including the conspiracy milieu, during the first phase of the Corona pandemic Schulze et al. (2022) show that radicalization processes could be observed as the prevalence of conspiracy theories, anti-elitism, and calls for participation and activism increased over time. Anti-elite sentiments increased robustly during this period. This finding is complemented by a content analysis of 13,371 Telegram posts disseminated by radical actors including conspiracy related channels by Jost and Dogruel (2023) who reported that anti-elitism is a central feature for message retransmission enabling actors to further spread their messages which include conspiracy ideologies.

While the general spread of conspiracy theories in the Telegram sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic is already well documented, insights into how their distribution has evolved over the course of the pandemic are scarce. In Study 1, we set out to investigate the following two research questions for German Telegram fringe channels of conspiracy ideologists during the first year of the Corona pandemic (2020–2021):

RQ1: Which conspiracy theories are most widely distributed by conspiracy actors on Telegram?

RQ2: How does the spread of conspiracy theories evolve over the course of the pandemic on Telegram?

2.3 Conspiracy theories and calls to political mobilization on Telegram

Conspiracy actors face the challenge of mobilizing others for their cause; for example, diffusing awareness about assumed social or political problems, or exerting social and/or political pressure to influence political outcomes in society (Theocharis, 2015). Like other political actors they rely on citizens' political engagement, or participation, and need to persuade potential supporters to adopt their positions and agendas, encouraging actions that facilitate goal realization (Bertuzzi, 2021). This can be done through inducing *formal institutionalized political participation*, including joining election rallies, discussing politics (online), and voting, or through mobilization for *activism and protests,* such as (online) protest participation and behavior (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

A strategy to engage people in political actions is issuing direct requests, which we refer to as mobilization calls. These calls serve as persuasion techniques to rally support and build momentum around a particular political agenda (Theocharis, 2015). Social media and messenger services enable less organized conspiracy actors who lack mass media support or are confronted by governmental suppression, to recruit, activate, and coordinate potential supporters by issuing mobilization calls through the discussion of conspiracy theories (Theocharis et al., 2021; Schwaiger et al., 2022). While insights on the relationship between conspiracy actors on social media and their mobilization efforts is scarce, Bertuzzi (2021) argues that conspiracy supporters mobilize for offline protests such as demonstrations against authorities and governmental measures, which was often the case during the Corona crisis.

Another stream of research has pointed to the convergence of conspiracy ideology and populism suggesting that conspiracy theories were successfully used in populist rhetoric (Hameleers, 2021). Populist and radical actors have been found to exploit conspiracy theories to achieve their own goals. Initial studies for Telegram reveal that far-right actors seem to strategically distribute conspiracy theories and amplify calls for resistance against the "tyranny" of the current government (e.g., Curley et al., 2022; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). Finally, with regard to mobilization appeals on Telegram in Germany, the studies by Schulze et al. (2022) and Jost & Dogruel (2023) demonstrate that right-wing and conspiracy actors used calls for online rather than offline participation and could be mostly attributed

to the so-called *Querdenken* movement, which established itself as a form of protest against Corona-related restrictions.

Taken together, the link between the distribution of conspiracy theories and actors' strategic use of these theories for mobilization remains largely unexplored. In addressing these queries, we attempt to elaborate on these connections by asking the following research question as part of Study 1:

RQ3:   *How did conspiracy actors use mobilization calls during the first year of the pandemic?*

2.4 Characteristics of users in German Telegram conspiracy channels in comparison with traditional media users

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between conspiracy theories and mobilization on Telegram, the actors who mobilize and the recipients who are mobilized must be considered together. While there is an abundance of research about traditional media users of journalistic or social media, there is a lack of knowledge about Telegram users and their characteristics, especially in relation to conspiracy related channels.

Based on the following considerations, and building on recent reviews of antecedents and consequences of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Mulukom et al., 2022) we theorize that German Telegram users of conspiracy related channels differ substantially from traditional media users (e.g., journalistic media, social media) in terms of *a) political attitudes*, *b) conspiracy beliefs*, and *c) political participation* so that the logic of distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls come full circle.

a) Political attitudes

Political attitudes refer to a person's beliefs and values regarding political issues or institutions, which can be influenced by a variety of factors, including education, socioeconomic status, or media use and political information (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). During the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, Telegram has created a fertile ground for users that are specialized and segmented according to political attitude in the following three ways: First, in terms of *political leaning*, right-wing and far-right attitudes gained a significant presence on Telegram, especially through the German *Querdenken*, or QAnon movements (Schulze et al. 2022; Urman & Katz, 2022). In comparison, traditional media users in Germany exhibit a political leaning around the political center (Behre et al., 2023). In relation to conspiracy beliefs, Imhoff et al. (2021) find a curvilinear relationship between political orientation and conspiracy endorsement across 26 countries, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs are associated with extreme left- and especially extreme right-wing attitudes. Second, conspiracy theorists attracted attention from individuals who are generally *critical or cynical toward political and media elites* and engage in processes of reflecting a self-portrayal of resistance fighters (Holt, 2018). Studies show that the consumption of conspiracy theories— on Telegram as elsewhere— promotes distrust of societal institutions (Mahl et al., 2022; Schwaiger et al., 2022) and conspiracy mentality is related to a suspicion toward elites (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Users with low system confidence may turn to Telegram in search of alternative information and become more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. Contrarily, users of traditional media generally trusted the news in Germany during the Corona pandemic and felt that the reporting on various topics was balanced and covered a diverging opinion (Behre et al., 2023; Maurer et al., 2021). However, Pinkleton et al. (2012) found that increased exposure to political information also engenders political cynicism, leading to disengagement and alienation from politics while Reiter and Matthes (2021) showed

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that alternative digital media use is positively related to *political interest* over time. This corresponds with research into the effects of traditional media use which, by enhancing citizens' political knowledge, heightens their political interest (e.g., Strömbäck & Shehata, 2019). However, since studies into the effects of Telegram fringe groups' use on political attitudes are lacking, the relationship with political interest is less clear.

In conclusion, Telegram users might differ from users of traditional media across various political dimensions. This leads us to ask in study 2:

RQ4:   Do Telegram users of conspiracy related channels differ from traditional media users in terms of political leanings, anti-elite sentiments, and political interest?

b)   Conspiracy beliefs

To explore the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and Telegram or traditional media use, one must consider individual-level predispositions that impact opinion formation. Research has identified conspiracy thinking as a crucial factor in adopting conspiracy theories (Brotherton et al., 2013; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Uscinski et al., 2022). Furthermore, it may condition the relationship between media use and conspiracy belief as individuals with high levels of conspiracy thinking are more influenced by conspiratorial information (Hetzel et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2022). Consequently, understanding the moderating effect of conspiracy thinking is critical to properly assessing the relations between media exposure and conspiracy beliefs.

When it comes to media use during the Corona pandemic, studies have shown that some media are more strongly associated with conspiracy belief than others. According to Hetzel et al. (2022), across all media sources and channels the use of Telegram emerged as the strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs. For journalistic media, studies find a negative relation or none at all to beliefs in conspiracy (e.g., Hetzel et al., 2022), while the use of social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, is associated with very weak relationships (Hetzel et al. 2022; Theocharis et al., 2021). Moreover, it has been found that individuals who employ conspiratorial explanations for salient events are more likely to actively seek out such content online (Bessi et al., 2015).

To elaborate on this analysis, we then ask the following research question in study 2:

RQ5:   How do Telegram users of conspiracy related channels differ from traditional media users in their belief in conspiracy theories?

c)   Political participation

Looking at the connectedness of political participation and Telegram or traditional media use, again, individual-level predispositions need to be taken into account. In that regard, selected socio-demographics, political leanings, anti-elite sentiments, and levels of political interest play a significant role in institutionalized political participation, activism and protests (Schwaiger et al., 2022; Sternisko et al., 2020). Focusing on conspiratorial thinking, studies point to a negative effect on institutionalized political participation (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), while promoting the willingness to engage in activism and protests (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019). In this regard, Imhoff et al. (2021) show that belief in general conspiracies may lead to political extremism and non-normative political engagement. Further, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) investigated conspiracy thinking as a generalized political attitude and revealed its important role for motivating social action aimed at challenging the status quo.

Only a few studies analyze Telegram's role in political mobilization. Junior et al. (2021) investigated the use of Telegram among Brazilian public groups, identifying a consider-

able increase in political mobilization during 2020–2021. Furthermore, research on the German *Querdenker* movement demonstrates that non-institutionalized groups successfully mobilized individuals alienated from traditional political processes and tended to gravitate towards the radical right through the use of Telegram (Schulze et al., 2022). On the other hand, journalistic and social media have also long been considered essential for mobilizing formal institutionalized political participation (Theocharis, 2015) and discouraging activism and protests (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). However, proponents of the so-called "malaise" hypothesis found that under certain circumstances, news as well as social media consumption can also be associated with a gradual withdrawal from political processes (Pinkleton et al., 2012; Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009).

During the COVID-19 crisis, most established political actors generally supported government responses, as they aligned with the governments' perspective on the crisis (Maurer et al., 2021). As a result, it is expected that protests were primarily organized by non-institutionalized actors opposing COVID-19 restrictions. These actors capitalized on the ability to organize through social media, significantly reducing mobilization barriers, even though their mobilizing capacity remained somewhat limited, leading to an expectation of lower protest intensity compared to pre-crisis levels (Curley et al., 2022). However, the extent to which Telegram fringe use is connected to formal institutionalized political participation, and political participation through activism and protests warrants further investigation.

Therefore, we ask the following last research question in study 2:

RQ6: *How do Telegram users of conspiracy related channels differ from traditional media users in their protest participation?*

3. Method

3.1 Study 1: Dissemination of conspiracy theories on German Telegram conspiracy related channels: Study design and data collection

For this study, we examined messages published between March 2020 and December 2021 in Telegram channels that are associated with the conspiracy ideology milieu. The list of channels is based on a deplatforming study that included 55 channels of extremist and radical right-wing actors that were selected according to the criteria of reach, activity, transmediality, and distinctiveness (Fielitz & Schwarz, 2020, p. 18). Actors belonging to the anti-Corona *Querdenken* movement and conspiracy theorists were added to the list. The two researchers responsible for compiling the lists made the final ideological classifications, taking into account the name of the channel, biographical data, recent content (the last 20 posts and the 20 most recently shared links), and the self-declaration of the channel's ideology into predefined categories (Bitzmann et al., 2023).

From the original list that included 269 channels, we focused on 44 channels of alternative media and groups that disseminate disinformation and conspiracy myths that challenge the political system and democratic institutions (Bertuzzi, 2021; Douglas et al., 2019). Examples of such channels include those associated with *QAnon*, as well as those with specific name suffixes like "truth" or "q". Based on the channel list, all messages were collected using Telegram's application programming interface (API) using Telethon-aio for python resulting in a dataset of 2,165,483 messages of which we drew a random sample—stratified by channels—of 3,162 messages.

Manual content analysis was conducted at a German university in January–February 2022 by 24 trained participants. They were instructed to code messages using all textual features, including emoticons and information inferable from hyperlink text (without clicking it). First, we coded for whether a message contained conspiracy stories. The coding was

based on a list we derived from various websites that list popular conspiracy theories. We distinguished between narratives that were popular before the pandemic (e.g., Great Reset, *QAnon*, flat earth) and narratives related to COVID (e.g., The Corona virus does not exist, legacy of the virus).[1]

We further coded whether or not messages contained appeals. With appeals, the speaker pursues the goal of encouraging the receiver to take an action or to refrain from an action. Speakers can appeal explicitly (e.g., through the use of imperatives, requests, warnings) or implicitly (e.g., through interrogative sentences, future tense sentences, or rhetorical questions) (Perloff, 2020). Up to three appeals in a message were coded in order of appearance. The coding scheme distinguishes between different types (that is, goals) of appeals, which are based on the objectives of social movement studies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). We assessed intercoder reliability by using Brennan and Prediger's Kappa which corrects for chance and is robust with regard to variables with a skewed distribution (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Intercoder reliability ranged from .59 (general conspiracy theories) to .96 (offline appeals).[2]

3.2 Study 2: Telegram users' conspiracy beliefs and protest behavior: Study design and data collection

For the reception of conspiracy theories, we draw on an online non-representative survey of 638 people who were recruited on the one hand via conspiracy ideology channels on Telegram (n=318; Mage=45.5; 48.5% women) and, on the other, via more mainstream media channels, such as Facebook, email distribution lists or WhatsApp (n=320; Mage=32.6; 62.7% women). The survey took place from 24 June to 5 July 2020—during the first wave of the pandemic—and included questions on political interest, media use, media and political criticism (agreement with items; 5-point scale), political leaning (7-point scale left-right assessment), and political participation (willingness to participate in six formal institutionalized political participation; 4-point scale). Furthermore, conspiracy thinking and the belief in Corona conspiracies was measured using the approach, established by Brotherton et al. (2013), of asking participants to rate their general approval of Corona-related conspiracy theories along a 5-point scale. Finally, we used a dichotomous query to ask if respondents participated in Corona activism and protest.

The survey of users of conspiracy ideology channels on Telegram was distributed on the same and more conspiracy-related Telegram channels as Study 1. The population of conspiracy believers is a particularly difficult target for surveys since their presumed distrust in elites contributes to very low response rates. The challenge of reaching out to this population for survey research is further exacerbated by the difficulty in accessing representative data, which can be attributed to the secretive nature of such groups. This difficulty of access is one reason for implementing a strict separation between the recruitment part—which involved deception about the origin of the recruitment messages—and the data collection part, which collected data but did not involve deception. To gain access to the hard-to-reach population of conspiracy-related Telegram users and receive authentic responses from them, our data collection attempted to circumvent suspicions towards elites through a conspiracy-compatible framing in recruitment messages.

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1 The codebook including the list of conspiracy theories can be found in the online supplement: https://osf.io/2dwrk/?view_only=ee8f976cbd1e4ddeaeab20d8e521ae85.

2 See online supplemental Table S1. Since the Kappa value for general conspiracy theories is at the lower bound, we used Holsti as an additional estimate with a sufficient value of .81.

The recruitment approach with a respondent-friendly framing was necessary for the validity of the data collected and can be ethically justified based on the guidelines of supporting literature (Dzeyk, 2001; Schlütz & Möhring, 2018). This states that under certain circumstances naive subjects—as opposed to fully informed ones—often generate more valid data.

To do so, student assistants entered the Telegram channels through dedicated user accounts, impersonating individuals receptive towards the overall ideological environment by posting a call for survey participation in the channels "to show them [the elites] what the people really think of the media." The efforts were complemented by an automated bot-script posting the same message across multiple conspiracy-related Telegram channels, although this was quickly disabled by Telegram.

All data collection was restricted to the second and fully transparent survey part so that there was no data collected without informed consent. In the beginning of the survey, participants were informed about the general purpose of the data collection for the study of "Media Use during the Corona Pandemic". All respondents were provided with a detailed debriefing after the survey, e.g., full disclosure of the research aims, the methodology, including the use of impersonation in recruitment, and the reasons for this approach. All participants were given the opportunity to withdraw their data following the debriefing, which six participants chose to do.

4. Findings

4.1 Study 1

With regards to RQ1, our results indicated that the prevalence of general conspiracy theories was relatively low, at 6% (with a maximum of 3 per message). Among these narratives, the Great Reset was the only non-COVID related narrative that reached a share of 1% (rounded). References to *QAnon* were found in about every 200th message, while all other narratives in our coding scheme, such as New World Order (NWO), flat earth, and reptiloids, were below this share.

Regarding COVID-related narratives, we found that they were nearly as prevalent as general conspiracy theories, accounting for 5% of messages (with a maximum of 3 per message). The most prominent COVID-related narrative related to vaccinations, which accounted for 3 per 100 messages. Narratives questioning the existence of COVID were present less often with only approximately 1% of messages containing such theories. Other COVID-related narratives, such as narratives regarding the heritage, tests, and alternative cures, were nearly non-existent (all below 0.5%).

The results from the analysis of the development of conspiracy theories over time (RQ2) were obtained using the *funtimes* package in R (Lyubchich et al., 2022). This package employs a sieve-bootstrap method of the t-test (Bühlmann, 1997), which is a resampling technique used to test assumptions about potential trends in the data statistically. The sieve-bootstrap Student's t-test was employed to investigate the presence of any linear trends in the data. Specifically, the analysis focused on determining whether there was a significant increase in COVID-related conspiracy narratives over time. The test yielded a t-value of 2.42 and a p-value of .024, indicating a statistically significant positive linear increase in COVID-related conspiracy narratives (see Figure 1). In other words, the number of COVID-related conspiracy narratives has grown over time. However, the analysis did not find evidence for a significant linear trend in conspiracy theories in general. This implies that the increase in conspiracy narratives is specific to COVID-related content and not representative of an overall growth in conspiracy theories during the studied period.

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Figure 1: Relative Share of Conspiracy Theories over Time
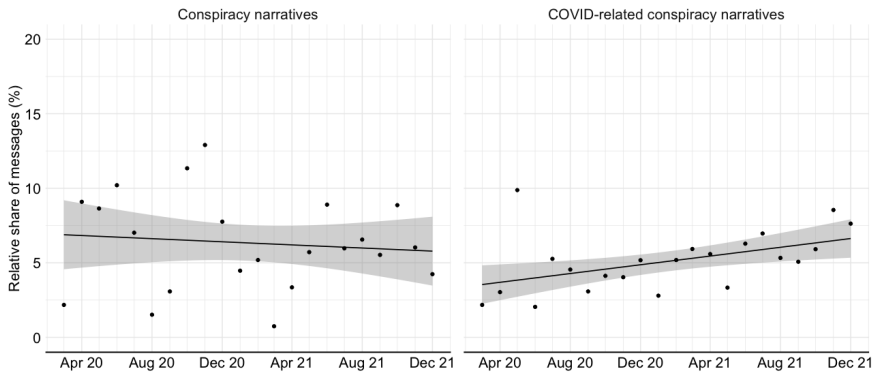
Figure 2: Relative Share of Appeals over Time
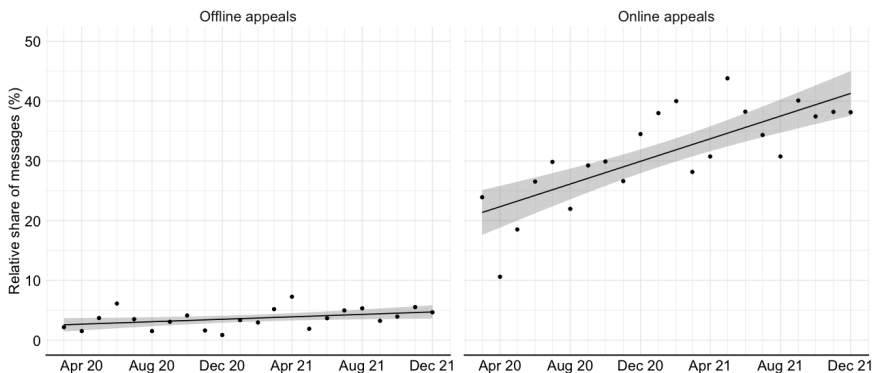
To find answers for RQ3, we examined offline and online appeals by conspiracy actors. While the former accounted for 4% of all messages, calls for online action accounted for 34%. To examine the development of appeals over time, the same analytical approach was employed as for the analysis of conspiracy narratives, utilizing the sieve-bootstrap Student's t-test. This test aimed to identify any significant linear trends in the data related to appeals. The analysis focused on assessing whether there was a significant increase in online appeals over time. The test resulted in a t-value of 5.35 and a p-value of .003, indicating a statistically significant positive linear increase in online appeals (see Figure 2). This means that the frequency of online appeals has grown over the course of the studied period. On the other hand, the analysis did not find evidence for a significant linear trend in appeals calling for offline action. This suggests that while there has been a noticeable increase in online appeals, the same trend is not observed for offline appeals during the same time frame.

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4.2 Study 2

In Study 2, we examined if Telegram conspiracy channel users differ from traditional media users in political attitudes (political leaning, anti-elite sentiments, and political interest), conspiracy beliefs, and political participation. Our analysis revealed significant differences in all examined variables (see Figure 3).[3]

Substantial differences were observed in anti-elite sentiments, with Telegram conspiracy channel users displaying higher media criticism and political cynicism than traditional media users. By contrast, traditional media users showed greater trust in mainstream media and political institutions.

With regard to political leaning, conspiracy channel users tended to position themselves in the middle of the political spectrum, indicating a more moderate political stance. This could suggest that these users are not exclusively driven by extreme political ideologies but are potentially drawn to Telegram conspiracy channels due to other factors, such as dissatisfaction with mainstream media coverage or a desire for alternative information sources. On the other hand, traditional media users were found to lean more toward the left side of the political spectrum. This could be attributed to the fact that mainstream media outlets often reflect a broader range of political viewpoints, including left-leaning perspectives.

Interestingly, both groups demonstrated high political interest, though the difference between them was smaller compared to other attitudinal variations. Telegram conspiracy channel users reported slightly higher interest in political issues than traditional media users. This could be attributed to their engagement in alternative information sources and fringe groups, which may foster a heightened sense of political awareness and curiosity.

Figure 3: Differences between Attitudes of Telegram Conpiracy Channel Users and Traditional Media Users
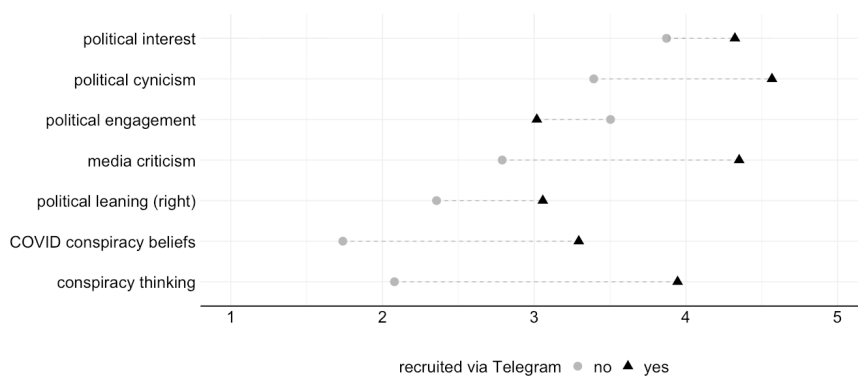
Most strikingly, Telegram conspiracy channel users exhibited higher levels of generalized conspiracy thinking and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories compared to traditional media users. This suggests that Telegram channels may serve as resonance space for con-

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3 To test whether differences were significant, and to control for confounding, we ran separate OLS regression models controlling for age, gender, and education. Models reveal that all variables differed significantly between the sample recruited via Telegram and the reference sample (c.f. online supplement).

spiracy ideologies and highlights the heightened susceptibility of these users to alternative explanations and narratives.

To answer RQ5, we ran two linear models to investigate the relation between the use of Telegram and the belief in conspiracy theories related to COVID. In the first model, we only included variables that are known for their relation to conspiracy beliefs. In the second model, we added whether or not respondents were recruited via Telegram. The first model accounted for a statistically significant and substantial amount of variance ($R2 = 0.65$, $F(10, 421) = 77.65$, $p < .001$). The model reveals that conspiracy thinking is a significant predictor for the belief in conspiracy related to COVID (beta = 0.43, $p < .001$). Further, media criticism (beta = 0.14, $p < .001$), right political orientation (beta = 0.16, $p < .001$), and female gender (beta = 0.06, $p < .001$) were significantly and positively related to belief in conspiracy theories about COVID. By contrast, a high level of education (beta = -0.05, $p < .001$) was negatively related to belief in conspiracy theories about COVID. In the second model ($R2 = 0.65$, $F(11, 420) = 71.51$, $p < .001$) we found the recruitment via Telegram (beta = 0.43, $p = 0.041$) to be significantly related to belief in conspiracy theories about COVID. The comparison of both models reveals that information pertaining to whether or not participants were recruited via Telegram significantly improved the model, however, it added only 0.3% of explained variance ($F(1/420) = 4.22$, $p = .041$).

Finally, to find answers to our final RQ6, we fitted two logistic models (estimated using ML) to predict participation in Corona protests (see Figure 4). The first model explains a substantial proportion of variance (Tjur's $R2 = 0.59$, AIC = 271.33). The model revealed government criticism was statistically significantly related to protest participation (OR = 2.85, $p = 0.003$). Additionally, participants that are used to 'traditional' forms of political engagement (OR = -6.30, $p < .001$) and have higher political interest (OR = -1.78, $p = 0.039$) were less likely to report that they participated in protests.

Figure 4:   Regression Models Predicting Protest Participation and Conspiracy Beliefs
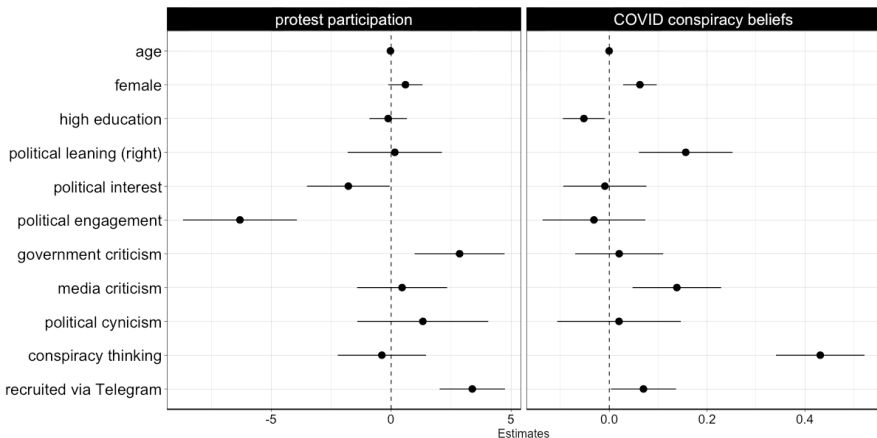
N = 422. 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) were computed using a Wald z-distribution approximation.

In the second model (Tjur's $R2 = 0.64$, AIC = 245.69), we found that Telegram recruitment was significantly related to protest participation (OR = 3.38, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals recruited via Telegram were more than three times more likely to have participated

in protests. Again, the comparison of both models reveals that the information related to whether or not participants were recruited via Telegram significantly improved the model (chi2(1/419) = 27.64, p < .001).

5. Discussion

In this article, we aimed to investigate the significance of Telegram as a medium for the dissemination and reception of conspiracy theories, as well as its potential association with political and protest mobilization. We employed the COVID-19 pandemic to represent a recent societal crisis situation.

Our findings indicate that Telegram serves as an important platform for the distribution of conspiracy theories, primarily centered around COVID-19, which experienced a marginal increase during the first phase of the pandemic (March to December 2020). The most prevalent conspiracy theories were related to COVID vaccinations, likely attributable to the intense societal discourse surrounding vaccine development, as suggested by similar studies (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). It is challenging to determine the extent to which this finding reflects an intense dissemination of misleading narratives regarding the Coronavirus; however, these channels are among the few less regulated platforms easily accessible for media users through simple subscription. The increase in COVID-related conspiracy theories implies that fringe actors exploit societal crisis situations to intensify their agitation. Consequently, this finding warrants further exploration into the potential strategic use of conspiracy theories for the propagation of mobilization appeals and the types of users these channels attract.

Initial research proposed that conspiracy ideologies have been increasingly employed by various protest actors for mobilization purposes (Bertuzzi, 2021; Darius & Urquhart, 2021). Our results demonstrate that conspiracy actors are, indeed, disseminating mobilization appeals, albeit primarily focusing on online calls. Additionally, we posit that conspiracy theories may be linked to indirect mobilization efforts. As conspiracy ideology often fosters opposition to the political system and radical distrust of political institutions (Douglas et al., 2019), it is plausible that such indirect calls coincide with the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Nurturing distrust in societal institutions, political or scientific actors, and elites, as well as anti-system resentments, therefore, represents another crucial dimension in examining the strategic implementation of conspiracy theories among protest actors (Bertuzzi, 2021). Future studies could employ a more nuanced coding scheme to account for these strategic uses of conspiracy theories, such as fostering distrust against the government and amplifying skepticism and distrust toward societal (democratic) actors or institutions.

Regarding the reception of COVID-19 conspiracy theories and Telegram, our findings illuminate two aspects. First, users of Telegram conspiracy channels differ with regard to sociodemographic characteristics and attitudes compared to traditional media users. Second, they are more likely to participate in COVID-related protests than users of traditional media. As anticipated, based on our sampling strategy, users recruited in conspiracy Telegram channels were more likely to believe in COVID-related conspiracy theories, show more generalized conspiracy thinking, and express greater criticism towards the media and the political system. This finding aligns with previous representative surveys of German internet users suggesting that Telegram use correlates with low system and elite confidence as well as conspiracy beliefs (Hetzel et al., 2022; Schwaiger et al., 2022). These results underscore the idea that Telegram users seek alternative information on Telegram's conspiracy channels which might not be covered by traditional media, thus becoming more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs which works to reinforce their own resistance narratives (Holt, 2018). Interestingly, conspiracy channel users position themselves in the middle of the political

spectrum, which calls for further investigation in light of mainly far-right actors using Telegram for message distribution (e.g., Curley et al., 2022; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).

Upon investigating the impact of these factors on conspiracy beliefs, we discovered that government and media criticism were strong predictors of conspiracy beliefs. This corroborates research describing social discontent or mistrust of elites as one of the strongest individual level factors for conspiracy theorizing (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Mulukom et al., 2022). On this basis, conspiracy believers frequently call into question the very institutions which can provide accurate information, thereby removing or replacing some of the typical (authoritative) sources of information people generally rely on (van Mulukom et al., 2022). In addition to these dominant factors, we find in congruence with other studies that generalized conspiracy thinking is a crucial factor in adopting belief in COVID-related conspiracy theories, which supports Uscinski et al.'s (2022) and Brotherton et al.'s (2013) idea that this predisposition operates like a mirror of individual conspiracy theory beliefs. Concerning the relationship between the use of Telegram and conspiracy channels and political (offline) engagement, our findings indicate that fringe channels' use on Telegram is, indeed, associated with political protest actions. Users who subscribed to conspiracy-related Telegram channels are more likely to participate in COVID-related protests compared to regular media users. This novel discovery aligns with prior research that demonstrated a relationship between the acceptance and endorsement of conspiracy theories and a reduction in the inclination to engage in conventional, lawful modes of political involvement. Additionally, it is observed that these tendencies correspondingly amplify individuals' stated intentions to resort to unconventional, unlawful avenues of political engagement (Imhoff et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). This phenomenon can be construed as a reactionary response, labelled as a "now more than ever" sentiment, provoked by perceptions of actions undertaken by societal elites. Considering this perspective, it is reasonable that this is anchored in the belief that "political participation is a waste of time if the world is run by conspiracies and democracy is an illusion" (Wood, 2017: 516).

Due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, we cannot make causal claims toward a potential effect of the dissemination of mobilizing appeals among Telegram conspiracy-ideology actors and the actual protest behaviors of individuals. However, based on our results, there is a clear alignment between the supply, i.e., the spreading of conspiracy ideologies on Telegram, and the willingness to protest, demonstrating users' openness to such activities. We consider this initial evidence that Telegram, with its unique, less regulated environment, might, indeed, foster a distinctive setting in which conspiracy-driven actors and recipients converge, potentially leading to real-world effects on protest behavior.

While this study offers valuable insights into the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories on Telegram, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The sampling of Telegram channels employed in this study is not representative of all conspiracy theory content on the platform. Furthermore, as noted by Buehling (2023), the prevalence of message deletion on Telegram may impact the content and share of conspiracy theories on the platform. This issue possibly affected the data collected for this study, as messages containing conspiracy theories may have been deleted before being captured by the researchers. Regarding the user survey, we relied on a convenience sample of Telegram conspiracy channel users and regular media users. Our intention was not to deduce generalizable findings for German internet users, as provided by Hetzel et al. (2022), but, rather, to offer insight into a group of people who are otherwise difficult to access for research and to contrast them with a reference group. Concerning the potential effects of using Telegram channels with conspiracy ideologies on political (protest) engagement, the cross-sectional nature of the data used in this study limits our ability to establish causal

links. To fully comprehend the relationship between conspiracy theories and other factors, longitudinal data or experimental designs would be necessary.

Beyond the limitations discussed above, our study allows initial insights into some of the existing research gaps within the studies of conspiracy theories on Telegram, as only a few scholars have investigated their dissemination in connection to the conspiratorial beliefs and protest behavior of users. In doing so, we fill two existing weaknesses in the current literature: First, we combined the examination of the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories, and second, we investigated the connection between the reception of conspiracy messages in digital media and political attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, and political engagement. To achieve this, we linked the distribution and reception of conspiracy theories and mobilization calls and surveyed a hard-to-reach population of Telegram users in conspiracy channels.

Our approach complements the existing literature on the spread of conspiracy theories on Telegram (e.g., Schulze et al., 2022; Urman & Katz, 2022; Zeng & Davis, 2022), mobilization efforts by conspiracy actors (Schulze et al., 2022; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023; Jost & Dogruel, 2023), and the consequences for users in terms of conspiracy beliefs and political participation (e.g., Hetzel et al., 2022; Lamberty & Leiser, 2019; Schwaiger et al., 2022; Theocharis, 2015; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). Furthermore, our study identifies characteristics of Telegram fringe group users that make them susceptible to disseminated conspiratorial and mobilizing content, reflecting anti-system attitudes and a readiness for protest behavior that are applicable to future crises.

The implications of our findings for the study of digital media use and political participation are significant. They suggest that digital platforms like Telegram can amplify conspiracy beliefs and mobilize individuals toward protest behavior, potentially undermining democratic processes, and social cohesion. As such, it is crucial for communication scholars to continue studying these phenomena and their impact on political participation across various digital platforms. Lastly, our results should be interpreted in light of current debates regarding the limitation or censorship of Telegram use in democratic societies. Our findings underscore the platform's potential for harboring ideological extremists, and conspiracists actors and enabling them to disseminate conspiracy theories and mobilize protests. However, any attempts to limit access or censor content must be carefully balanced against the principles of free speech and the right to access information. As such, policymakers and scholars must work together to develop evidence-based strategies to mitigate the negative effects of conspiracy theories on digital platforms while preserving democratic values and freedoms.

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