

The Phenomenon of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Narratives through Virtual Ethnography on Instagram

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked various conspiracy theories that have reduced public trust in the health measures taken by governments and hospitals. This research is important to understand how conspiracy theories can influence public perception and behavior during a global health crisis. The purpose of this study is to investigate the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy phenomenon spread by the Instagram account @unexplnd, which has 842 thousand followers and is one of the largest platforms in Indonesia spreading COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Primary data was obtained from posts on this account, and secondary data from interviews with four active followers. The analysis was conducted using Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka's (2017) conceptual framework that explains the emergence of conspiracies through epistemic, existential, and social motives. The findings reveal that events perceived as coincidences, driven by the desire to maintain comfort and freedom, and suspicion of certain entities, form the basis of support for COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Media exposure to conspiracy theories, such as the @unexplnd account, contributes to increased belief in these theories. Proponents of conspiracy theories seek to raise awareness among the general public by spreading conspiracy narratives through various media channels.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theories, COVID-19, Instagram, Virtual Ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

The first Covid-19 case was discovered in Indonesia in March 2020. Since then, the spread of the virus has continued to increase, so Indonesia has begun to enter the Covid-19 pandemic. The public is worried, and the number of deaths due to COVID-19 shows no signs of stopping. According to psychologist Intan Erlita (Widiyarti, 2020) people are panicking because of the virus, which has been a spectacle and then appears in their environment. At first, people felt that the virus was far away because they were abroad, but in the end, it could spread in Indonesia. Panic attacks can spread quickly, especially if they are hit by continuous news about the Coronavirus (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2020, 2022). Excessive consumption of information about COVID-19, especially about the harmful impacts of the Coronavirus, will cause panic (Gruzd & Mai, 2020). Continuous information from trusted sources or hoax news will more easily make someone anxious, stressed, and panicked.

Excessive anxiety can cause the body's immune system to drop and cause psychosomatic attacks. Excessive panic can attack a person's immune system and can trigger the transmission of COVID-19, which is often associated with psychosomatic disorders (Ripp & Röer, 2022). Psychosomatics are psychological symptoms caused by stress due to fear of facing a condition, for example, COVID-19, which ultimately affects a person's physical condition (Adelayanti, 2020; Zidkova et al., 2021). Psychosomatics are caused by stress factors, which cannot be appropriately adapted. Then, the body experiences continuous stress, and adrenaline will

flow throughout the body, causing psychosomatic symptoms. This attitude can give rise to a third-stage stress reaction, where the function of the immune system is continuously suppressed, which can result in a reduction in quality of life. One study reported that the lower the social class, the more severe the stress symptoms felt.

The role of mass media in broadcasting news about the spread of the Coronavirus and the Covid-19 disease is vital. Mass media discourse is a cultural construct produced by ideology. Therefore, news in the mass media uses specific frames to understand social reality. The mass media offers specific definitions of human life through their narratives (Muslich, 2008). Who are the heroes and villains, what is good and bad for the people, and what is appropriate and inappropriate for an elite, leader, or ruler to do? These actions are called struggle, rebellion, terrorism, and traitor. What issues are relevant or not revealed in the news about COVID-19? (Negura et al., 2021) What solutions to take and leave behind? Ideology is a set of cultural assumptions that become natural normality and are never questioned again (Rowell et al., 2006). This view aligns with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is known in linguistics, that language is not just descriptive, namely as a means of writing down a phenomenon or environment, but can also influence how we see the environment (Jackson et al., 2022).

Mass media is vital in forming information that the public will later consume. The mass media has enough control to lead public opinion to believe in a phenomenon happening. Likewise, during the Covid-19 pandemic, mass media played an important role in broadcasting information about

Covid-19 (Dhanani & Franz, 2020). Whether it is basic knowledge about the Covid-19 disease itself, such as how the Coronavirus can spread, what the impact of the spread of the Coronavirus is, how to avoid and cure Covid-19 disease, as well as other information related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Scopelliti et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020).

Mass media and social media shape the way we view the world today. Unfortunately, apart from logical and scientific explanations in the media, we can also find many explanations that only use the logic of tinkering, namely fiddling with an event to make it appear logical so that its truth can be trusted. We can relate this to the emergence of fake news, misinformation, or even stronger conspiracy theories (Benkler et al., 2018). A real-life event linked to a conspiracy is not new and tends to occur throughout human history (Törnberg, 2018). However, current innovative developments in media technology mean that fake news and conspiracies spread information quickly and massively (Guild, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Conspiracy theories are theories that attempt to explain the causes of one or a series of events (generally political, social, or historical events) as a secret, and often deceptive, plan secretly planned by a group of very powerful people or organizations or influential (Douglas et al., 2019; Hofstadter, 1965; UNESCO, 2020). Conspiracy also means people's belief that an event, especially COVID-19, is related to an international conspiracy, has a broad impact, is dangerous, and is extraordinarily effective, designed for a societal crime (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Hofstadter, 1965). Usually, this conspiracy

appears as a representation of a paranoid style in several linked events even though the events are unrelated (Hofstadter, 1965; McKenzie-Mcharg, 2022).

Conspiracy theories are born from preconceptions, assumptions, presumptions, or even imagination that have developed before the facts. This condition looks abstract, making it difficult to prove or account for (Dagnall et al., 2015). Conspiracy theories become a major problem for truth when they fall into three areas. First, a conspiracy leads to paranoia within reason, namely excessive fear or desire, which always follows human reason (Alsuhibani et al., 2022). Second, when the conspiracy enters into a systematic distortion of information, or information that has been systematically distorted so that it is difficult to account for (Miller & Wesley, 2010), a lie repeated a thousand times will become the truth. Third, a conspiracy leads to terrorizing the truth, meaning that when a lie is very difficult to prove, it becomes the truth (Bale, 2007; Sinaga, 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to belief in conspiracy theories in many countries, including Indonesia. Several people or communities in Indonesia believe the COVID-19 pandemic is a conspiracy theory. One thing considered to cause great fear among the public is mass media reporting, reproduced by social media. Two Indonesian Ministers of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto and Siti Fadilah Supari said that the Coronavirus is not a scary thing, but the news about Corona is more frightening (Prasetia, 2020; Saripudin, 2021). Conspiracy theorists also believe that frightening news is deliberately created to construct that the spread of the Coronavirus is very scary and dangerous. Even one of the famous musicians in

Indonesia, Jerinx SID, who also believes in conspiracy theories, uploaded a photo with the words “Kill TV Brain” on his Instagram. This post was liked by 31,855 Instagram users and received comments, most of which supported the existence of a conspiracy in the COVID-19 case.

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 are believed by society and many public figures such as Jerinx SID. Deddy Corbuzier, for example, has 9.4 million followers on his Podcast channel. Deddy several times discussed the Coronavirus conspiracy theory by inviting Young Lex, one of the well-known rappers in Indonesia, Siti Fadilah Supari, former Indonesian Minister of Health, Bossman Mardigu, a successful Indonesian businessman, all of whom have the same understanding that the Coronavirus is a conspiracy (Corbuzier, 2020b, 2020a).

The opinions of several public figures who believe that there is a conspiracy behind the existence of the Coronavirus will certainly increase ordinary people's trust. This case will ultimately form groups that believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is the result of a conspiracy. These groups use various media to gather and express their opinions. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp are the social media most frequently targeted by users who believe in conspiracies (Setyowati, 2020). Until then, each media was forced to close many conspiracy accounts and hoax spreaders with the headline ‘fighting fake accounts’ (Hern, 2020; Instagram, 2020).

One of the most prominent accounts on Instagram, a medium for spreading false information and conspiracy theories in Indonesia, is @conspiraciestheory. This account was blocked in 2020, and its name was changed to @unexplnd because

Instagram blocked it. This account has 842 thousand Instagram followers. The content in this account discusses conspiracy theories worldwide, including conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic. This account is often referenced for other accounts discussing conspiracy theories. Then there is the @teluur account with 123 thousand followers. Initially, this account had content about criticism of the world of politics and issues in Indonesia and the world. However, in the end, since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the content of this account was dominated by conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic. Next, there is @indonesian_flatearth_society, which 92 thousand Instagram users follow. The content in this account initially discussed the flat earth conspiracy, but in the end, the conspiracy discussed in this account mostly became about the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy.

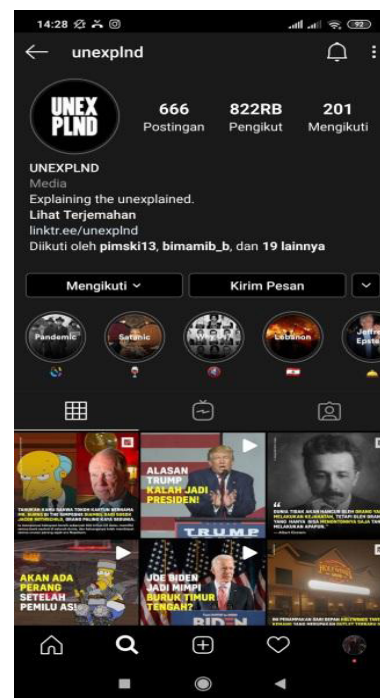


Figure 1. Instagram Account @unexplnd

Source :researcher documentation

In the research that the author conducted, the author chose the @unexplnd account because this account, as the author explained above, is the largest account in Indonesia that discusses conspiracy theories. This account has existed since 2018 and continues to discuss conspiracy theories actively. The account, which initially had the name @conspiraciestheory, was more dominant in discussing global elite conspiracies. Apart from that, this account has very diverse conspiracy theory content. There are many conspiracy theories presented by @unexplnd that only a few conspiracy theorists are aware of. Because of the depth of information about conspiracy theories presented, many conspiracy theory accounts use @unexplnd as a reference for information.

Because it is known for its depth of information regarding conspiracy theories, it is not uncommon for the content uploaded by @unexplnd to have a very high level of sensitivity, including one during the Covid-19 pandemic, where several posts about the Covid-19 conspiracy had an impact on the government's efforts to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. Several times, uploads from @unexplnd received warnings from Instagram as posts that could endanger efforts to tackle COVID-19. This is because uploads from @unexplnd can influence someone to underestimate COVID-19.

Finally, Instagram gave several warnings. The @unexplnd account was blocked several times by Instagram because of its uploads about the COVID-19 conspiracy. Even though the @unexplnd account was able to be restored several times, Instagram also blocked the @

unexplnd account again. Therefore, the account changed its name to @unexplnd, originally called @conspiraciestheory. Even though he had not uploaded COVID-19 conspiracies for quite a long time after the blocking occurred, in the end, @unexplnd returned to uploading conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the activeness and depth of information presented by @unexplnd about conspiracies, including the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy, the author chose the @unexplnd account as the object of the research the author conducted. Seeing the large amount of information and broadcasts regarding conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic will encourage the formation of a phenomenon regarding the belief that the COVID-19 pandemic is a conspiracy theory. This is the basis for researchers to conduct a deeper study of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs virtual ethnographic research methods. Nasrullah (2016) stated that virtual ethnographic studies encompass "a research technique" and "virtual communication." The former elucidates the methodology or method employed to research and analyze phenomena, while the latter explicates the focus or entity of the research utilizing the internet medium. Thus, in simpler terms, virtual ethnography can be delineated as an ethnographic method utilized to unveil the reality, both visible and invisible, of computer-mediated communication among virtual community entities (members) on the internet.

The data collection technique in this research uses documentation techniques, namely examining images and captions uploaded to the Instagram account @unexplnd. This account actively discusses conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic. The @unexplnd Instagram account was chosen because it has a large number of followers, namely 842 thousand active users who often interact with uploads through liking, commenting, and sharing. @unexplnd is the largest Instagram account discussing conspiracy theories in Indonesia. Its popularity can be attributed to the critical, fresh, and diverse conspiracy content it presents. As a result, it is not surprising that many other Instagram accounts that discuss conspiracy theories also refer to @unexplnd.

This research uses the virtual ethnography method. Nasrullah (2016) states that virtual ethnographic studies include “research techniques” and “virtual communication.” The former describes the methodology or methods used to research and analyze the phenomenon, while the latter describes the focus or research entity utilizing internet media. The former describes the methodology or method used to research and analyze the phenomenon, while the latter describes the focus or entity of the research that utilizes internet media. In other words, virtual ethnography can be explained as an ethnographic method used to uncover the reality, both visible and invisible, of computer-mediated communication among virtual community entities (members) on the internet.

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In data collection, documentation was conducted by downloading and saving images and captions from @unexplnd posts related to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Each post was analyzed to understand the conspiracy narrative being spread, how interaction with followers occurs, and how the conspiracy theory is packaged and presented. The author also examined the followers of the @unexplnd account to be used as consideration in data collection, namely @rendyfrmn, @bimamib_b, @kurotaa_, and @hey_londoo. Instagram users used as informants for this research must actively comment on the @unexplnd account and support the belief in conspiracy theories. Therefore, the data sources for this study included analysis of posts, comments, and direct messages to selected Instagram users.

Interviews were conducted online with the selected followers through the direct messaging feature on Instagram. The interviews aimed to better understand the reasons and motives behind their

belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, as well as how the @unexplnd account has influenced their views. The interview questions focused on their personal experiences with conspiracy content, how they discovered and started following the @unexplnd account, and how interaction with the content influenced their views and behavior.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to belief in conspiracy theories. Many believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is a conspiracy. Conspiracy theories or conspiracy theories are theories that attempt to explain the ultimate cause of one or a series of events (in general political, social, or historical events) which are secret, and often deceptive, plotted by a group of very powerful or influential people or organizations (Sinaga, 2010). Conspiracy theories are born from preconceptions, assumptions, presumptions, or even imagination that have developed before the facts. Things like this take much work to account for.

Referring to this explanation, someone who believes in conspiracy theories does not immediately believe in conspiracy theories. There are reasons why someone can believe in a conspiracy theory. With the current development of conspiracy theories, there is growing interest in the psychological factors that drive the popularity of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). People are attracted to conspiracy theories when (compared to non-conspiracy explanations) they can satisfy important social psychological motives that can be characterized as epistemic (desire

for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), existential (desire for control and security), and social (desire for control and security, and desire to maintain a positive image of self or group).

Epistemic Motives

Referring to Douglas et al., (2019) explanation, this motive is an inner drive to find answers to every problem that cannot be answered with just one thought. This results in the fact that when the information needed to solve a problem is not found, curiosity will grow in a person's mind, and they will start to think using their assumptions. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to belief in a conspiracy theory, and many believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is a conspiracy. Belief in this conspiracy theory does not just arise, but a motive exists behind it. One of the motives is the epistemic motive.

Through this epistemic motive, belief in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory occurs. According to conspiracy theory believers, the irregularities in the COVID-19 pandemic are one reason for them to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a conspiracy. Oddities like that ultimately give rise to assumptions from conspiracy theory believers.

Irregularities regarding patients diagnosed with COVID-19 have become an issue among conspiracy theorists, like the upload from @unexplnd, which discusses victims of COVID-19. In one of @unexplnd's posts, information shows that deaths due to COVID-19 are being manipulated. In the caption of the upload, he said that this was supported by a statement from Dr. Bukacek, also known as a whistleblower

and a psychiatric doctor with more than 30 years of experience in medical practice. This post also received comments from netizens who assumed that victims who died from COVID-19 could have been diagnosed with COVID-19 for certain purposes and not necessarily those who died because they had COVID-19.



Figure 2. One of the Instagram Account Upload @unexplnd

Source :*Researcher Documents*

Coincidences related to the COVID-19 pandemic also affect how belief in conspiracy theories occurs. In an era like this, things like this are often called matchesology. Conspiracy theorists also often use logic to support that something happened because of a conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are born from preconceptions, assumptions, presumptions, or even imagination that have developed before the facts (Sinaga, 2010).

This can be seen from the upload of the @unexplnd account, which discusses a documentary film made in 2019. It is explained there that Bill Gates predicted that there would be a deadly virus originating from China. Bill Gates said the deadly virus could kill more than 30 million people in six months because the world was unprepared to face this global epidemic. The upload received a comment from one Instagram user, where the Instagram user

wondered whether this was a prediction or whether it was part of the plan. This upload ultimately gave rise to the suspicion that the documentary was not a prediction but rather a plan by the global elite. Moreover, in the caption of the upload, @unexplnd firmly said that this was a plot from the Illuminati (a global elite organization). Because it was based on coincidence, in the end, conspiracy theorists made this incident into an issue to emphasize their belief in conspiracies in the COVID-19 pandemic.

In another upload, @unexplnd shows a clip from a scene from the 2016 cartoon series *Family Guy*, which shows a city being quarantined due to disease. The trailer shows that the city is under quarantine, and the discussion discussed by the characters in the film is about a disease. At the end of the trailer, there is a scene of a family discussing vaccination, but suddenly, they are approached by a bat offering an apple. It should be noted that the Coronavirus was initially thought to have spread through bats. The post from the @unexplnd account also received comments from informants with accounts who said that what happened in the cartoon series was the same thing that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With this upload, the @unexplnd account looks for other coincidences linked to the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theory. In the end, this leads his followers or conspiracy theorists to think that the coincidence that happened is the agenda of a conspiracy. According to (Brotherton & French, 2014) conspiracy theory tends to exaggerate the possibility of events occurring simultaneously.

Things like this are reasons for conspiracy theorists to believe there is a conspiracy in the COVID-19 pandemic. Several events in the COVID-19 pandemic, which for conspiracy theorists are related to the possibility of a conspiracy occurring, are reasons for them to believe in conspiracy theories. That connection makes sense for conspiracy theory believers to the results of research from (Georgiou et al., 2020), which concluded that belief in conspiracy theories is based on the logic of their understanding (conspiracy theorists) and illogical interpretations of events.

Motif Eksistensial

This motive is more to serve people's needs to feel safe and secure in their environment and to exercise control over the environment as autonomous individuals. This motive encourages someone to protect themselves by believing in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). This is done as a form of social control by someone to feel safe. People who do not have power and are at a weak point will tend to spread rumors about conspiracy theories.

Like the upload from the @unexplnd account, which displays the opinion that the lockdown regulations are the Illuminati's agenda, the post shows a video of thousands of citizens in several countries demonstrating against the recommendation to stay at home amid the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still ongoing throughout the world. This upload also received a comment from one netizen who said staying home could worsen

things until he conveyed the hashtag #JustDieAtHome. This post can influence people who oppose the recommendation to implement health protocols regarding movement at home. The content of the information there shows opposition to staying at home, which is also linked to conspiracy theories.

This post is relevant to the situation of the informants from this research, who also felt burdened by the stay-at-home recommendation. According to (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), belief in conspiracy theories is stronger when people experience distress due to feelings of uncertainty. In the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be seen that there are impacts that affect several people, be they economic, psychological, or other impacts. Likewise, the informants in this research also experienced the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another upload from the @unexplnd account also displays information that tells us that there is something more urgent than the Coronavirus, namely hunger. In the upload, @unexplnd said more people died from hunger than the Coronavirus. This can be interpreted as saying that the @unexplnd account considers the Coronavirus no more dangerous than hunger. In line with this upload, conspiracy theory believers also agree with this assumption, as we can see from the comments in the upload. In this case, they are using the issue of hunger to ward off the fact that the Coronavirus is dangerous. Apart from that, netizens are also starting to use other more fatal issues than the Coronavirus.



Figure 3. One of the Instagram Account Upload @unexplnd

Source :*Researcher Documents*

In another upload, @unexplnd uploaded information about drug claims for COVID-19 that came from a group of doctors in America. The post shows a photo of a group of doctors in America holding a press conference claiming that hydroxychloroquine is a cure for Covid-19. However, the post also said that the video recording of doctors from the America's Frontline Doctors group was censored and deleted on several platforms because the WHO deemed the drug ineffective. This post received several comments saying that some netizens did not believe in WHO. It said that the WHO deliberately controlled the COVID-19 pandemic by not recommending drugs that could cure diseases caused by Coronavirus infection. Conspiracy theorists believe hydroxychloroquine is effective for treating Covid-19, as this group of American doctors stated. This is in line with the opinion of (Douglas et al., 2019), who said that extreme and entrenched attitudes are associated with conspiracy beliefs, suggesting that they can help people defend beliefs from disconfirmation.

These things are reasons for conspiracy theorists to believe that in the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a conspiracy. Several things that conspiracy theory believers consider to be threatening or detrimental in the COVID-19 pandemic are their reasons for believing in conspiracy theories. For them, conspiracy theories can be a weapon to fight official narratives threatening or harming them. With conspiracy theories, they do not need to worry or fear things that could harm them, and they can feel safer. This is done by denying an opinion that could harm them with their own opinion, which can counter the loss by using conspiracy theories as an argument.

Miller (2020) also produced the same results with this motive, where in this study, results showed that the positive effects of conspiratorial thinking were stronger for people who currently felt unsure about their lives. The authors of this study concluded that the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 strengthens the effect of conspiracy thinking on belief in various COVID-19 conspiracy theories. This multiplicative effect of uncertainty and conspiratorial thinking only occurs in people whose political worldview is threatened.

Social Motives

Social motives are a desire to have and maintain a positive image of oneself and the group (Douglas et al., 2019). The way to do this is by blaming one party who will be associated with the existing problem. Similarly, in the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theory believers often link the COVID-19 pandemic with a conspiracy from global elites. They believe the links

between global elites are detrimental to several parties in the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), conspiracy beliefs have also been linked to prejudice against powerful groups. This opinion aligns with the informant who said the COVID-19 pandemic had something to do with the global elite. Regarding the origins of this virus, informants also believe that it is possible that the Coronavirus, which humans can cause, created COVID-19 disease; in other words, according to them, the Coronavirus is artificial and not created naturally.

"I believe that this has something to do with the global elite. Take a look, there seems to be a separate pattern of major pandemics occurring, for example black death in 1720, then cholera in 1820, then the Spanish flu in 1920, and the Corona virus in 2020. This looks like a pattern every 100 years there is always a pandemic. Things like this make me even more suspicious that this virus was deliberately created," (Interview with one of the informants)

One of the characteristics of conspiracies is their negative representation and distrust of other people or groups. This condition aligns with posts from the @unexplnd account regarding the allegation that the global elite created the Coronavirus. In several uploads, several assumptions say that the Coronavirus is the creation of an organization. In one of its uploads, the @unexplnd account uploaded that the Coronavirus might have been China's biological weapon. In another post, @unexplnd also suspects that the Coronavirus resulted from the creation of

Bill Gates and his company. This, of course, also received approval from conspiracy theory believers, as seen in the comments column on these posts.

The opinion of one informant is also the same as another informant who said that the global elite deliberately created the Coronavirus to create a pandemic. According to the informant, this is a separate agenda from the global elite related to the Covid-19 pandemic. This agenda increased the informants' suspicions that the global elite indeed created the virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the other informants suspects that Bill Gates and the Wuhan Institute of Virology are the developers of the Coronavirus. He suspected this because he had received news that Bill Gates had visited the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

In another post, @unexplnd also said that the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic was only to enrich the global elite. The @unexplnd account reported from the Huffington Post that around three out of four American billionaires have increased their net capital since the pandemic outbreak. The post said that during the pandemic, the economy of the rich will get richer, and the poor will get poorer. This was agreed with by netizens who also said in the comments column that there is a system designed to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor, and according to him, the rich, in the sense of the global elite, have an agenda to impoverish the poor.

According to (Bilewicz et al., 2013) groups who feel victimized are more likely to support conspiracy theories about powerful outgroups. The informants also said previously that they were affected by

the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this impact, they suspect the global elite that they played a role in the Covid-19 pandemic. As one informant said, the COVID-19 elite created the global pandemic to reduce the world's population. The informant believes the global elite has a new world-order agenda. For him, the term new normal for the COVID-19 pandemic is a term that refers to the agenda of the global elite to form a new world order or a new world order.

From the explanations above, it can be seen that the informants' activities and even their office work were disrupted during the pandemic. Because they were disturbed, they looked for someone to blame for causing the Covid-19 pandemic to occur. They do this by following the development of conspiracy theories circulating, and they take part in believing these theories. They think like that because they feel they are part of the people oppressed by the global elite. In other words, they feel that they are the lower class being oppressed by the upper class.

From these things, the global elite has become the object of conspiracy theory believers to blame for the Covid-19 pandemic. The need for conspiracy theory believers to be blamed and scapegoated for the chaos that caused the COVID-19 pandemic is why conspiracy theories are so mushrooming amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The large amount of speculation in the COVID-19 pandemic has become material for conspiracy theorists to discuss. Any information that seems to them to be related to the conspiracy will be used as a reference. Conspiracy theorists believe more in odd data that has the potential to be the product of a conspiracy, even though some of these data cannot be fully proven to be true. Conspiracy theorists also often use

coincidences as data they consider valid. Apart from that, they also use conspiracy theories as an issue to drop facts that could disturb their comfort. Conspiracy theorists will always think that their opinions are always correct.

Moreover, when they do not like a group that they consider to be bringing disaster to them, that group will always be the scapegoat in the conspiracy phenomenon circulating. For example, when conspiracy theorists do not like the role of the global elite, they will make the global elite an issue in the current problems. Furthermore, they will agree on any issue that corners the global elite.

This social motive was also found in previous research from (Qorib et al., 2021), where belief in conspiracy theories will arise because of the perception of each individual who thinks that COVID-19 is the fault of a certain party. Some conspiracy theorists have their targets to blame; for example, in this research, it was stated that Ahmad Dhani, on his YouTube channel, framed the COVID-19 pandemic as a political step taken by a group of people. Second, Bossman narrates COVID-19 as a «Biological Warfare» created by China as a weapon in the trade war against America, which is relevant to scientists' views.

Media Exposure

Belief in conspiracy theories is increasing due to the influence of media exposure. The ease of accessing media in the current era makes the distribution of messages or information easier. One of them includes uploads of content containing conspiracy theories. Posts like that certainly impact someone's confidence in their belief

in conspiracy theories. This is added if the content presented is presented continuously and over a long period. This is in line with the opinion of (Kim & Cao, 2016), that exposure to media messages that promote conspiracy theories will be disturbing if it continues. The impact of exposure to this message can lead to cynicism towards certain parties and, of course, can lead to belief in conspiracy theories.

In its uploads, the @unexplnd account often shares the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy in stages and continuously. The post covers matters related to epistemic, existential, and social motives, as the author explained above. About epistemic motives, @unexplnd continuously shares uploads that are full of coincidences. Regarding the pandemic predictions from Bill Gates alone, @unexplnd uploaded it several times to their Instagram feed. Likewise, with the coincidence that links the COVID-19 pandemic with the cartoon series, @unexplnd uploaded several times, matching the pandemic scenes in the cartoon series with the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 4. Instagram story post by informant account @rendyfrmn

Source :*Researcher Documents*

The image above is an Instagram message from the @rendyfrmn account, strengthening the conspiracy theory in the account it follows. It describes how life in the world is regulated by the global elite, who occupy the top position in the world order, while the bottom is occupied by most of the general population. As with issues related to existential and social motives, @unexplnd has not only uploaded conspiracy issues about things that oppose the existence of the Coronavirus, as well as conspiracies about global elites who are considered to be the creators of the Coronavirus, which have also been uploaded several times by @unexplnd. What is more important to know is that uploads from the @unexplnd account never convey truthful facts that refute the conspiracy. The @unexplnd account also often refutes the opinions of netizens who provide comments against @unexplnd's uploads. In addition, the @unexplnd account was blocked by Instagram because it contained conspiracy content about COVID-19, making the @unexplnd account assume the role of the global elite in the conspiracy. Therefore, @unexplnd is increasingly aggressive in presenting information regarding the COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

In this way, @unexplnd can lead his followers not to look at the facts that disprove the conspiracy theory. So, these conspiracy theorists will always be trapped in their conspiracy thinking. This can be seen from the opinions of the informants. According to informants in this research, the @unexplnd account has an important role in their belief in conspiracy theories. Informants considered that information

about conspiracy theories conveyed by Instagram accounts such as @unexplnd was their reference for following current developments in conspiracy theories. This media exposure to conspiracy theories in the media increases acceptance of conspiracy theories and entertains those who already believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019).

The relationships between news media literacy and skepticism, trust, and credibility findings underscore how knowledge or understanding of the news can shape how conspiracy narratives are interpreted or supported. Conspiracy theorists will immediately agree with the conspiracy information presented. Consumption of conspiracy news will become a major interest for conspiracy theorists (Craft et al., 2017). This aligns with the informants in this research who were enthusiastically waiting for conspiracy theory uploads from the @unexplnd account. Informants also think that information about conspiracy theories is interesting to look forward to. He even said that because he was used to being fed information about conspiracy theories, he always looked forward to the latest conspiracy news.

“The @unexplnd Instagram account is very meaningful for my information needs. Because from media like that we can also be more aware of the conspiracies that often occur. From the media we can also gradually realize the conspiracy that we initially thought was normal, it turns out that there is something behind the event,” (interview with one informant).

The responses of media informants, especially Instagram, play a role in

influencing someone's beliefs about conspiracy theories. Even if the information presented continues continuously, news about conspiracy theories is an important source of information that is always looked forward to, regardless of whether the news about conspiracy theories is under the facts. As information about conspiracy theories circulates continuously, belief in conspiracy theories will continue to grow.

Research conducted by (Kim & Cao, 2016) also shows that exposure can indirectly influence a person's belief in conspiracy theories. In this research, informants were presented with videos showing conspiracies about the government. This research shows that exposure to videos about government conspiracy theories has short-term effects and long-term effects on conspiracy theories (measured after two weeks of exposure). Exposure to the video increased informants' distrust of the government by encouraging belief in conspiracies.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, the uploads published by the @unexplnd account regarding the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy contain conspiracy elements originating from events that occurred by chance, such as the similarity of the Covid-19 pandemic to cartoon series that have existed for a long time before the pandemic, and Bill Gates' seminar on pandemics which was held long before the Covid-19 pandemic. Other conspiracy posts also start by using conspiracies as a control to feel safe from COVID-19, such as posts that speak out about the fact that COVID-19 is not as scary as is reported

by the mainstream media and that health protocols should not be implemented as strictly as recommended. Then, the next published upload also started from the motive of distrust towards the global elite, in which many uploads showed that the COVID-19 pandemic was the design of the global elite.

Based on the above, the @unexplnd account continues to upload conspiracy content with epistemic, existential, and social motives. When one coincidence has been uploaded, the account will look for another coincidence and upload it. When it is not enough to blame one global elite, the account will upload content that blames other global elites. From these uploads, @unexplnd followers and those who believe in the COVID-19 conspiracy are increasingly convinced that there is a conspiracy in the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be seen from the opinion of the informants in this research, which is in line with the upload from the @unexplnd account. In addition, the informant also admitted that the upload of the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy published by @unexplnd was what they had been waiting for to follow the developing conspiracy.

In the end, it can be said that the @unexplnd account has had quite a big influence in influencing its followers and conspiracy theorists to believe in the existence of a COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy because the uploads published by the @unexplnd account are conspiracy uploads that can attract conspiracy theorists, including the informants in this research who have been embraced by the uploads of the @unexplnd account and are increasingly enthusiastic in believing and

following developments in the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theory. In the end, the informant was also interested in sharing uploads from @unexplnd to make other people who were not yet aware of the COVID-19 conspiracy theory aware of the conspiracy in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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