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Are all conspiracy theory believers the same? Social media affordances and conspiracy beliefs in Japan

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[Working Paper] Are all conspiracy theory believers the same? Social media affordances and conspiracy beliefs in Japan

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Introduction

In the past decade, extreme conspiracy theories advocated by both far-left and far-right groups have attracted a considerable number of believers. Studies suggest links between the increase in conspiracy beliefs and the spread of social media and its algorithm-driven echo chambers (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Recent research shows that just using social media alone is insufficient to change people's beliefs, instead, the rise in conspiracy beliefs is the result of a complex interaction between the social-political climate,

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information communication technology, and individuals' dispositions (Enders et al., 2021).

While most studies on extreme conspiracy theories are largely Western-focused, the phenomenon is also observable in non-Western countries, even in Japan, where the society is relatively less politically polarised. For instance, in 2020, hundreds of JAnon (a self-claimed Japanese arm of QAnon) supporters rallied in Tokyo and Osaka to support President Trump's 'stolen election' claims (Mainichi Japan, 2021). In 2022, Tokyo police arrested several members of Yamato Q (a QAnon-inspired anti-vaccine conspiracy group) for allegedly sabotaging a COVID-19 vaccination clinic to 'protect children's lives from vaccinations' (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2022).

While these instances might be isolated cases stemming from the QAnon conspiracy theories, recent studies have revealed that conspiracy beliefs are not uncommon in contemporary Japan. Yamaguchi & Watanabe (2023) estimated that around 15-40% of the people in Japan believed in at least one conspiracy theory ranging from extra-terrestrial beings to secret organisations. Similarly, Hata (2022) found that around 20% of Japanese people held some degree of belief in racist or xenophobic conspiracy theories advocated by right-wing groups. Although these studies show that Japan is not a stranger to conspiracy theories, the characteristics of their believers are still largely unknown. For instance, Cheng et al. (2024) showed that while many people in Japan did not reject such kind of conspiracy theories, they also did not place a high value on them. Against this background, the main research question of this study is to find out why people, especially social media users, are drawn to conspiracy theories and whether all believers share similar characteristics.

Conspiracy Theories and Beliefs

According to Douglas et al.(2019), conspiracy theory is broadly defined as: ‘Attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors’ (p. 4).

As for why people are drawn to conspiracy theories, recent research has shown it is a complex interplay of external (e.g., social, political) and internal (e.g., ideological, psychological) influences and individual motivations (Douglas et al., 2019). Known as motivated reasoning, people are prone to believe in information that aligns with their existing beliefs, even if they contradict reality. This tendency is particularly salient in times of uncertainty when people’s identities and existential needs are threatened (Douglas et al., 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). As Rosenbaum (2020) noted, by replacing official narratives with alternative explanations, the appeal of conspiracy theories is their ability to grant a sense of control to individuals who are confined by social boundaries and lack instrumental control.

In addition to existential threats, some people are drawn to conspiracy theories because of politically and ideologically motivated reasons, such as populist attitudes (van Prooijen et al., 2022), racist attitudes (Inwood & Zappavigna, 2023), partisanship (Smallpage et al., 2017), and extreme political orientations (van der Linden et al., 2020). People with a high conspiracy mentality—a general prejudice against high-power social groups—are also found to be more likely to believe in a multitude of conspiracy theories, even contradictory ones (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Conspiracy Theories and Social Media Affordances

The proliferation of social media platforms and their algorithms are closely associated

with the spread of conspiracy theories (Dhawan et al., 2022). However, recent studies, e.g., Allington et al. (2021) and Mancosu & Vegetti (2020), have found that just using social media alone does not lead to conspiracy beliefs. As Enders et al. (2021) pointed out, the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs is conditional on individual predispositions.

The concept of social media affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017) offers an explanation for this relationship. Recent studies, e.g., Abdalla Mikhaeil & Baskerville (2023), Apuke & Omar (2021), and Theocharis et al. (2021), found that social media features such as sharing, commenting, inter-personal interaction, and community building affect how misinformation is produced and consumed. As Thompson et al. (2019) explained, the gratifications people obtain from the affordances of social media, such as status seeking, socialising, and information sharing, affect how they perceive the quality, value, and credibility of social media information.

Conspiracy Believers in Japan

Among the few empirical studies of conspiracy believers in Japan, Hata (2022) found that people in Japan who believe in racist or xenophobic conspiracy theories promoted by far-left and right groups do not necessarily align with their ideologies. Instead, these people tend to self-identify as the ordinary Japanese (*futsū no nihon-jin*). They hold politics in contempt and do not associate themselves with any political parties. Similarly, Nagayoshi (2019) also found that most conspiracy believers in Japan do not embrace ultra-nationalist or conservative ideologies, even though they hold negative views against foreigners. Another common characteristic of these believers identified by Nagayoshi (2019) and Hata (2022) is that, referred to as '*onrain haigaishugi-sha* (online xenophobes), they are

more likely to be active online users.

Method and Data

Data for answering the research question came from a questionnaire survey conducted in Japan in March 2023 of a nationally representative quota sample of 1447 adults between 20 and 69 years old.

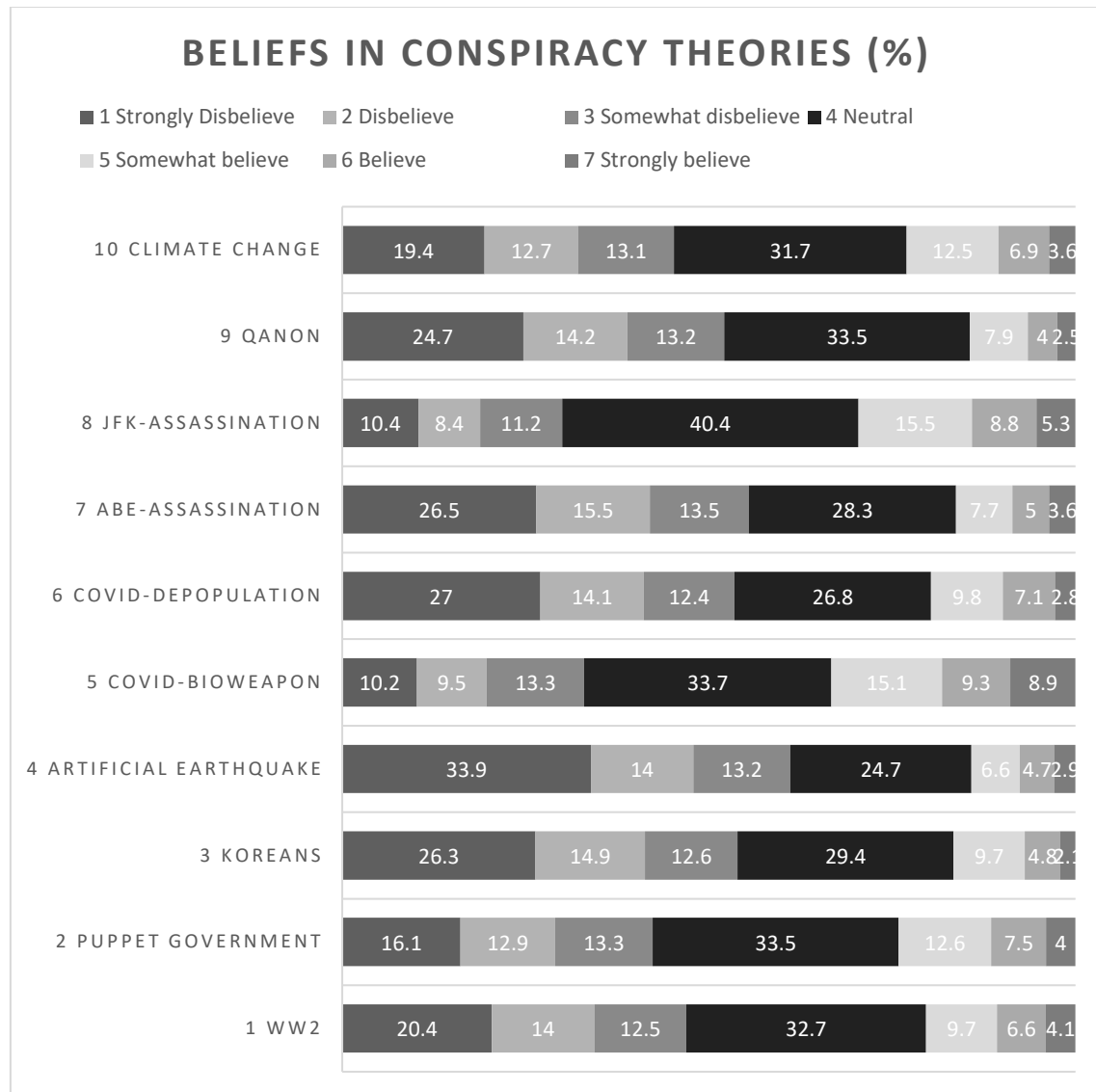
In the survey, respondents were asked, on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disbelieve to 7=strongly believe), how much they believe in 10 selected conspiracy theories as well as with other questions about their attitudes and personal views. The 10 conspiracy theories selected for this study included a wide range of topics, from nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, to disaster and COVID-19 related ones (Table 1). Descriptive data (Figure 1) show that in line with prior studies (Hata, 2022; Yamaguchi & Watanabe, 2023), around 14-33% of the respondents somewhat or strongly believed² in at least one of the 10 selected conspiracy theories.

² Those who chose 5-somewhat believe, 6-believe, and 7-strongly believe.

Table 1 Selected Conspiracy Theories

1	WW2	‘...Japan was forced into WW2 by the US and its “shadow government” to destroy the superior Japanese national spirit...’
2	Puppet government	‘...the Japanese government and media cannot be trusted. They are puppets of foreign powers to brainwash the Japanese public...’
3	Koreans	‘...Japanese political and social systems are run by Korea and Koreans behind the scenes...’
4	Man-made earthquake	‘...the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was caused by a man-made earthquake created by the US and Deep State to cripple Japan’s economy...’
5	COVID-bioweapon	‘...the novel coronavirus is a weapon created by a Chinese laboratory and spread purposely...’
6	COVID-depopulation	‘...the novel coronavirus and vaccines are created by Bill Gates to depopulate and enslave human beings...’
7	Abe-assassination	‘...Shinzo Abe was assassinated by another person. The truth is hidden by the government...’
8	JFK-assassination	‘...the assassination of John F. Kennedy was orchestrated by the CIA and secret organisations. The truth is hidden by the government...’
9	Trump	‘...Trump was fighting with the Deep State. The 2020 US election was rigged...’
10	Climate change	‘...Climate change is a hoax created by scientists bribed by green energy and nuclear power companies...’

Figure 1 Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories



Who are the Believers?

To answer this question, a cluster analysis was conducted to separate the respondents into homogenous groups based on their levels of belief in the 10 conspiracy theories. The analysis resulted in four distinct groups (Figure 2). Group 1, the ‘non-believers’ (24%), were people who tended to reject all the 10 conspiracy theories. Group 2, the ‘indifferent’ (33%), represented people who neither believed nor rejected the conspiracy theories.

Group 3, the ‘curious believers’ (25%), were people who also tended to reject the conspiracy theories, except the topical ones (such as the one related to COVID-19). Group 4, the ‘believers’ (19%), included people who were more likely to believe all the conspiracy theories could be true, including those with a nationalistic, xenophobic, or racial undertone.

Next, to identify the characteristics of the believers, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted with the group classification as dependent variable (with group 4, the ‘believers,’ as the reference group). As for independent variables, we included factors related to media usage, personal dispositions, and sociodemographic background based on the literature review. Considering the significant role of social media affordances in the spreading and consuming of conspiracy beliefs, we focused only on respondents who had experience in sharing their opinions online (n=990, 68% of the total sample).

The media usage factors included three social media gratification factors: ‘status seeking gratification,’ ‘socialising gratification,’ and ‘information sharing gratification’ (Thompson et al., 2019). In addition, general usages of mass media (TV, newspaper) and online media (news websites, social media, and video streaming sites) were also included.

The personal disposition factors included populist attitudes (Rothmund et al., 2019), racist attitudes (Fraser & Murakami, 2021), conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), political views³, and nationalist attitudes⁴.

³ Measured by respondents’ self-identified political view (conservative and progressive).

⁴ Measured by respondents’ opinions on controversial political issues including Japan’s constitution reform and national defence policy.

The sociodemographic factors included age, gender, educational attainment, and household income. The results of the multinomial logistic regression are summarised in Table 2.

Figure 2 Conspiracy Believers

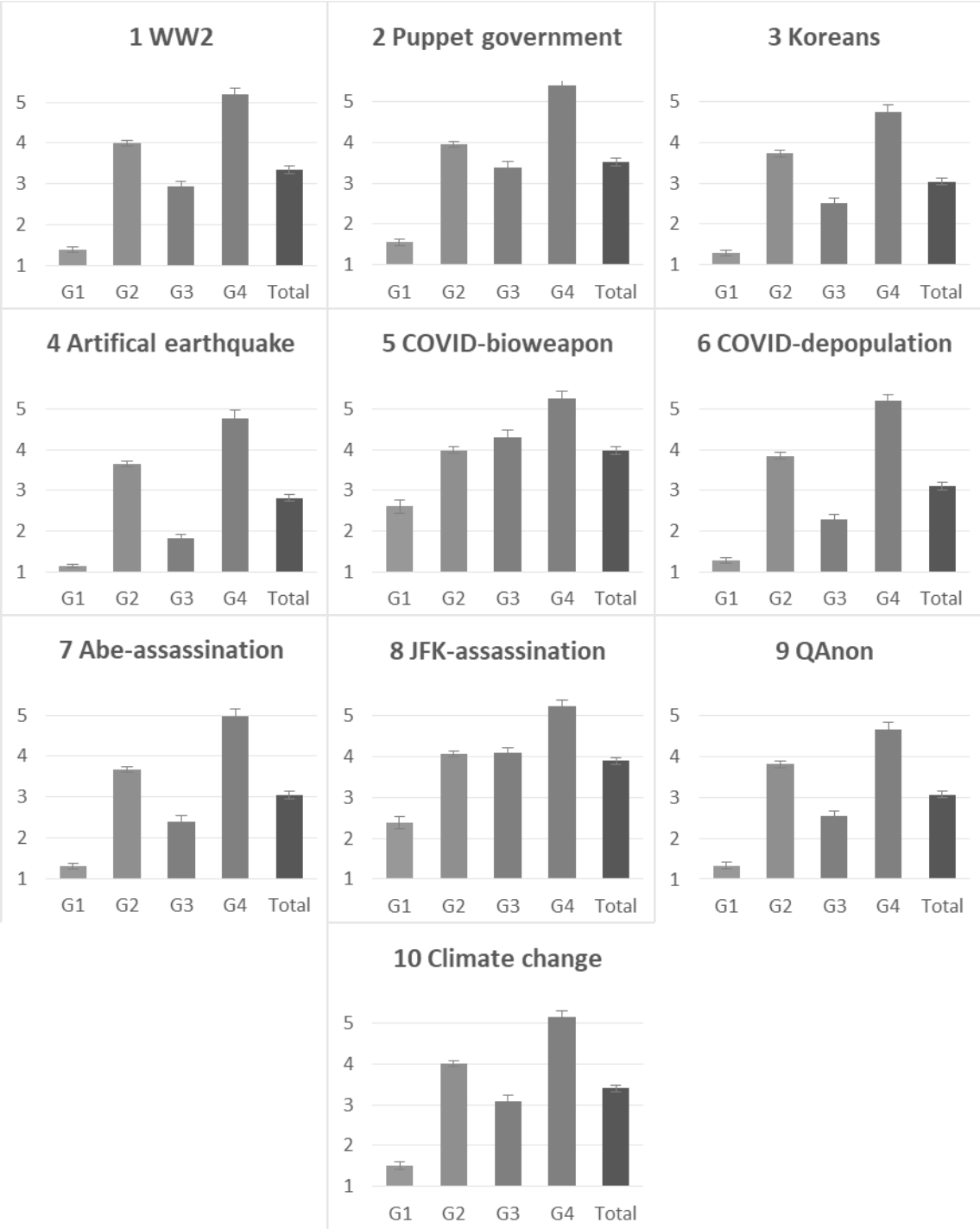


Table 2 Multinomial Logistic Regression Results

	<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
<i>Reference group (4=believers)</i>	Non-believers (B)	Indifferent (B)	Curious-believers (B)
<i>Intercept</i>	12.048***	7.965***	6.919***
<i>Status seeking gratification</i>	-1.852***	-0.697***	-1.714***
<i>Socialising gratification</i>	0.470	0.272	0.645***
<i>Information sharing gratification</i>	0.031	-0.167	-0.232
<i>Populist</i>	0.253	-0.432***	0.243
<i>Racist</i>	-1.134***	-0.417***	-0.71***
<i>Conspiracy mentality</i>	-2.413***	-0.742***	-1.246***
<i>Mass media</i>	0.303***	0.049	0.199**
<i>Internet media</i>	0.069	-0.021	0.027
<i>Political view (progressive)</i>	0.049	-0.087	0.020
<i>Constitution reform (against)</i>	0.150	-0.031	0.238**
<i>Strengthening Japan's national defence (against)</i>	-0.258	0.055	-0.335***
<i>Education</i>	0.245	-0.126	0.122
<i>Gender (Female)</i>	0.503	0.609**	0.025
<i>Age</i>	0.026**	0.010	0.038***
<i>Household income</i>	0.022	0.025	0.062

Results and Discussion

In response to the research questions, the results have revealed two key findings. First, although conspiracy beliefs were quite widespread in Japan, many believers were mainly drawn by the topical ones (the curious believers). On the other hand, the believers (people who tended to believe all the conspiracy theories could be true, including those with a nationalistic, xenophobic, or racial undertone) only accounted for 19% of the total sample population.

Second, as for the difference between the ‘believers’ and the other groups, the results of the multinomial logistic regression (Table 2) have revealed some interesting findings. First, among the three social media gratifications, only status gratification is significantly different between the believers (the reference group) and the three other groups. According to Thompson et al.(2019), ‘Status-seeking gratification refers to the desire to be correct, therefore strengthening an individual’s feelings and morals’ (p. 2). In other words, people who tended to use social media to satisfy their desires to feel superior and respected were also more likely to embrace conspiracy theories. This effect is particularly salient among those who had a higher racist attitude and conspiracy mentality, as these two factors are also significantly different between the reference the ‘believers’ (the reference group) and the other three groups.

Similar to what Hata (2022) and Nagayoshi (2019) have found, the regression results also show that conspiracy believers in Japan are not necessarily supporters of conservative or nationalist ideologies, as these factors are significantly different between the ‘beleivers’ and all the three other groups. The differences between the ‘believers’ (Group 1) and ‘curious believers’ (Group 3) shed light on this observation. Although they both believed in some conspiracy theories, the ‘believers’ (Group 1) appear to have

stronger opinions on Japan's constitution reform and defence policy. They also appear to be younger, consume less mass media information, and get more gratification from socialising gratification (i.e., desire for connection). From a cultural perspective, one possible explanation is that in Japan, where social harmony is valued and most people tend to avoid discussing their political opinions with others in their daily lives, conspiracy theories may offer a way for some individuals to confirm, reflect, or channel their personal biases or frustrations.

In summary, the results have provided a deeper insight into the characteristics of conspiracy believers in Japan. The present results are only preliminary, moving forward, our next step is to further analysis on the underlying mechanisms, in particular the interaction effects between social media affordances and personal dispositions. Also, while we will need to further interpret the results from a social and cultural perspective, we will also need to compare the results with studies conducted in other countries to generalise the findings.

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