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# Belief in Conspiracy Theory of COVID-19: A Physicological Point of View on Political Trust and Intensity of Social Media Use

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**Abstract**

Believing in conspiracy theory during the pandemic has messed up the information system, obstructed the health service process, and weaken the government's ultimatum. The conspiracy theory is believed once uncertainty over a phenomenon comes up and may cause a big threat. This research is aimed at viewing the political belief and social media use intensity and their correlation to people's belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theory. This research involves 169 participants selected through quota sampling technique in Surabaya, Indonesia. The research instrument consists of scales of belief in COVID-19 conspiration theory, public trust, and social media use intensity arranged by the researchers. Some people who believe in COVID-19 conspiration theory assume that COVID-19 is a conspiracy of the world's elites, which lets them underestimate the phenomenon of COVID-19, break the health protocol, tend to enjoy and carry hoaxes of COVID-19. However, the result of multiple regression analysis of this research shows that political trust and social media use intensity significantly correlates with the belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus; conspiracy theory; intesity of social media use; political trust

## Background

COVID-19 Pandemic has infected almost all people in the world (Khanna et al., 2020; Pimlott, 2020; Sim, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) stated that the world is facing global emergency situation because of virus (Ferri et al., 2020; Shah & Farrow, 2020; Sohrabi et al., 2020). The uncertainty of information lets people cofused about COVID-19 (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2022; Ecker et al., 2022; Nadzir, 2020). In Indonesia, the government stated the "COVID-19 emergency" status since 19 of February 2020 (Chairil, 2021). The government set some rules to save them from virus. They are asked to stay at home and do physical distancing (Kemenkes RI, 2020). Physical distancing may refer to keeping distance safe and disciplined in action (Finsterwalder, 2021; Roziqin et al., 2021). The increase of pandemic spread cannot be released from information media. The rapid and widely spread hoax and conspiracy theory related to COVID-19 is a serious problem (Aiyewumi & Okeke, 2020; Meizahra et al., 2021; Pontianus, 2020). So far, the people assume that COVID-19 is an issue created by the states (Gu et al., 2021). On the other hand, some of them perceive that the government of certain countries introduce the virus as a way to earn money from the vaccine (McKinley, 2021; Ullah et al., 2021; Whyte, 2022).

The famous figure in the world, Bill Gates is a target of conspiracy theory because through his presentation in a forum, Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED), he predicted the emergence of a deadly virus. Gates was assumed as the cause of the birth of the virus (Bell, 2021; Hakim, 2021; Pertwee et al., 2022). The hoax spread and conspiracy theory about COVID-19 can not be underestimated. WHO even makes website "myth busters" to try and overcome it. The existance of modern information network supported by internet, coordinated disinformation spreading conspiracy theory, hoax, and health spoofery, in fact spread more than before (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Besides, a conspiracy theory usually has a system supporting the public intention from the real threat (Eco, 2014; Ullah et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, Cluster Innovation and Governance (CIGO) and Tanoto Foundation mentioned that 150 respondents (21%) believe that COVID-19 is a conspiracy arranged by the global elites. Most of them are from Bogor (24.1%) and Jakarta (22.5%) (The Jakarta Post, 2020). Even, not only in Indonesia, Islam et al., (2020)

found 2.311 reports of COVID-19 in 25 languages from 87 countries, 2.049 (89%) of which are classified as a rumor, 182 (7,8 %) as conspiracy theory, and 82 (3,5 %) as stigma. Most of the rumor, stigma, and conspiracy theory are identified to come from India, United States, China, Spain, Brazil.

Then, what is the effect on health protocol? The violation against government ultimatum and the rule of keeping physical distance commonly come from the trust in the growing conspiracy (Khalil et al., 2021). The construction of conspiracy theory commonly link a certain agent to an enormous power, such as planning, controlling other people, keeping a scret, and so on (Sunstein, 2014). According to Douglas & Leite (2017) and Jolley et al. (2019), the followers of conspiracy theory resist that they spread hoax as they think that the conspiracy figures don not use trap and disinformation to cover their actions. This trust is getting stronger because of the great threat perception and the low people's efficacy, misinformation, disinformation, and the low of access toward health system (Adiwena et al., 2020; Whetten et al., 2006).

Preventive action to deal with the COVID-19 virus made by the Indonesian government is perceived to be a bit slow and less responsive, thus creating a condition in which conspiracy beliefs tend to develop (Aminulloh et al., 2021; Usman et al., 2020). The condition is triggered by ongoing threats to physical health, psychological walfare, and financial security. In the end, the uncertainty about the future is widespread and expectations about daily life have changed rapidly. People tend to believe in conspiracy theories when they face a social crisis (Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Prooijen & Vugt, 2018). The social crisis in this case is a rapid social change that requires a change in behavioral norms. Having a strong belief in conspiracy theories makes a person capable of reducing anxiety due to social crises, helping answer questions about the causes of an incident, knowing who is to blame, who and how to get benefit from the situation (Wood & Douglas, 2018).

Cross-country studies conducted during the pandemic found that the government quality that public can trust is the ability to organize and overcome COVID-19 well, to deliver clear messages about COVID-19, and perceived justice (Han et al., 2020). Conspiracy theory tends to reject science experts, information from government agencies, and to see social and political events as a product of global elite

conspiracy (conspiracy thinking), and partisan motivation is a factor of the belief of COVID-19 conspiracy (Carey et al., 2020). When political figures, public figures, and mass media promote conspiracy theories and provide inaccurate information, the individuals who previously think the same will be easily exposed to rhetoric and tend to adopt the conspiracy idea (Swire et al., 2017). On the other hand, if the authority figures, party leaders, and media provide accurate information and straighten conspiracy views, they can reduce belief in conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2020). Correspondingly, Kim et al. (2022) suggest that the political ideology of a figure can also reduce the belief in COVID-19 conspiracy.

The government's role in promoting trust of dealing with COVID-19 is highly crucial. WHO warns about the coming 'infodemic' in which a lot of people are misled by the online information. They think that COVID-19 is not real, nor serious (Spring, 2020). Apart from political beliefs, other factors such as the intensity of the use of social media also triggers for the belief in conspiracy theories. Internet users share information related to conspiracy, so it tends to three things: first, they ignore information that contradicts to conspiracy theories; second, they will filter out information that is inconsistent with pre-existing views; third, they easily share information related to conspiracy with other people who believe in conspiracy (Vicario et al., 2016). According to Dow et al., (2021), pandemic has disrupted the cognitive and social structures of society and led to the increase in social search for truth through social media and internet.

Social media can quickly spread news that may lead to misinformation. They can trigger or extinguish individual fears, and can influence the spread of disease because they influence peoples' behavior, which may cause problems other than erpidemic (Taylor, 2022). According to the data of COVID-19 task force in Indonesia, many people, especially those in Jakarta and East Java, who believe that they will not be affected by COVID-19 because they trust the conspiracy theory developing among society. Finally they underestimate the virus, and will obviously endanger themselves and others (Astuti, 2020). The Ministry of Communication and Information detected 1,016 hoaxes about COVID-19 spread across 1,912 social media platforms (Kompas.com, 2020). Meanwhile, the Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society (Mafindo)

noted that from the end of January to September 2020, there were around 600 hoaxes about COVID-19 that they had clarified (Halim, 2020).

This paper aims to view the role of political trust and the intensity of social media use and its relation to the belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theory among society. All countries in the world pose few or no experience of dealing with pandemics, so they find difficulties to prevent, cope with, or overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, in the first year of the pandemic, mass hysteria occurred due to confusion in delivering adequate information to the people and in enforcing appropriate policies upon dealing with the pandemic. This issue led to the increased political distrust (due to government policies) and uncontrolled social media to provide illegal information about the pandemic. These two effects are assumed to increase the public belief that the COVID-19 pandemic is a form of conspiracy or a big scenario from a certain country. Thus, in order to follow up studies related to the belief in conspiracy theory and their relation to political trus, this study will contribute to the development of science in the field of political psychology. The hypothesis in this study is formulated into three dimensions. First, is there a relationship between political trust and the intensity of social media use with belief of COVID-19 conspiracy theory that was tested simultaneously. Second, is there a relationship between political trust and belief towards COVID-19 conspiracy theory? Third, is there a relationship between the intensity of social media use and belief towards COVID-19 conspiracy theory?

## Literature Review

### Conspiracy Theory: Between Digital Society and Political Trust

Conspiracy theory spread through social factors which are divided into social identity, belief in government and social media (Mulukom et al., 2022). Trust in institutions, other social identity groups and social media has an impact on the level of well-being and overall functions of society (Newton, 2001; Oksanen et al., 2020; Alsehaimi, 2022) On the other hand, conspiracy theory arises when there is uncertainty about the occurred event, especially if the event give a big threat (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theory is made as an attempt to explain the event because the

explanation of the facts does not satisfy individual expectations. The explanations from conspiracy theory are more likely to be accepted when a person does not tend to believe in something threatening (Wood & Douglas, 2018; Abbas et al., 2021). One of the reasons for this belief in conspiracy theory is the public's political trust in the authorities, the government (Douglas et al., 2019; Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). According to Matulessy (2018), when the state is able to solve all economic, social and political problems, it will increase trust in the political system. Meanwhile, if the state is not able to solve various problems, it will lead to distrust of the political system (Matulessy, 2018).

There are various conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic spreading in social media, including: The Ipsos Mori research found that Facebook and YouTube users who believe conspiracy theory about COVID-19 are more than other platforms. Another survey found that per May 2020, 30% of internet users in the UK believed that the coronavirus came from a laboratory. The percentage of the findings increased when it is compared to the beginning of April 2020 which was only 25%.(Allington et al., 2020; Setyowati, 2020). 60% people believe that the virus is caused by the radiation of the 5G cellular network and get information from YouTube. Meanwhile, 56% of people who believe that there is no strong evidence about the existence of COVID-19 use Facebook as their source of information. This number is almost three times higher than the 20% who believe the COVID-19 disease is real (Arbar, 2020).

This is in line with the research conducted by Allington et. al (2020) who found a positive relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and the use of social media as a source of information about COVID-19 (Allington et al., 2020; Kahil, & Alobidyeen, 2021). Other researchers have also found a relationship between the use of social networks by internet users as a source of information and their level of commitment towards belief in conspiracy theory and the depression they experience (Barua et al., 2020). In general, the individual wants to avoid spreading misinformation, but in fact, they continue to share false and misleading content because the context of social media focuses their attention on factors other than accuracy, such as information that favors one's own assumptions. Thus, the individual is not interested in considering accuracy when deciding to share the information (Pennycook et al., 2020). This is that causes

misinformation and fake news spread very quickly through social media. Interestingly, the intensity of using social media in searching information about COVID-19 has a significant positive relationship with belief in conspiracy theory (Allington et al., 2020). So, the more often individual search information about COVID-19, the more they will hold beliefs in conspiracy theory.

The theory that underlies the use of social media is the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). In UGT theory, it is explained that the behavior of using social media is based on the desire to meet the satisfaction or needs of the users. The needs or wishes are related to the purpose of using of social media. The concept of fulfilling needs in social media includes two indicators, namely the quality and quantity of the intensity of social media use (Olufadi, 2016). Another theory that underlies the use of social media is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) which is determined by two beliefs, namely perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEU). Based on this theory, it is known that social media users choosing to use is caused it is an easy and useful tool for them (Olufadi, 2016). PEU and PU can potentially affect the low or high frequency of the intensity of social media use. So the intensity aspect of social media use can be seen in the depth of attention and appreciation when using social media as well as the large number of durations and frequencies in using social media (Aziz, 2020).

## Methodology

This type of research is correlational quantitative. The population of this study are all citizens of Surabaya city, amounting to approximately 2,874,314 people, while the sample is taken randomly with the technique quota sampling 169 people. This research instrument consists of a COVID-19 conspiracy theory belief scale, a political belief scale and a social media use intensity scale compiled by researchers who have gone through content validity tests, item discrimination tests and reliability tests, and meet the requirements of a valid and reliable scale.

The results of the item discrimination test on the COVID-19 conspiracy theory **reliance** scale obtained 28 items with a discrimination index value range of 0.339 to 0.846, and the cronbach alpha reliability value was 0.975. The **output** of the item discrimination test on the political confidence scale obtained 24 items with a

discrimination index range of 0.344 to 0.770, and the cronbach alpha reliability value of 0.939. The results of the item discrimination test on the scale of intensity of social media use obtained 28 items with a range of discrimination index values of 0.311 to 0.755, and alpha cronbach reliability value of 0.936.

## Results

The results of simultaneous calculations to determine the relationship of political trust, the intensity of social media use with conviction in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory, are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis Simultaneous Test

| | Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Regression | 84559.629 | 2 | 42279.814 | 291.857 | .000b |
| | Residual | 24047.578 | 166 | 144.865 | | |
| | Total | 108607.207 | 168 | | | |

Based on the calculations illustrated in the table, a significance value obtained is 0.000 < 0.05. It means that there is a significant correlation between political beliefs and the intensity of social media use with beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. So there is a relationship between political beliefs and the intensity of social media use with conviction in COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

The results of partial exam between political trust with conviction in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and intensity of social media use with confidence in COVID-19 conspiracy theories illustrated bellow:

Table 2. Partial Test Results

| Coefficientsa | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 (Constant) | 149.759 | 9.831 | | 15.233 | .000 |
| Political Trust | -1.074 | .065 | -.866 | -16.418 | .000 |
| Medsos Intensity | .028 | .065 | .023 | .436 | .664 |

Based on partial calculations show that:

1. There is a positive contact between political trust and conviction in COVID-19

conspiracy theories (t = - 16.418, p = 0.000). It means that the higher a person's political confidence level, the lower the belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (see figure 1).

2. There was no significant correlation between the intensity of social media use and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (t = 0.436, p = 0.664). This means that there is no significant relationship between the intensity of social media use and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

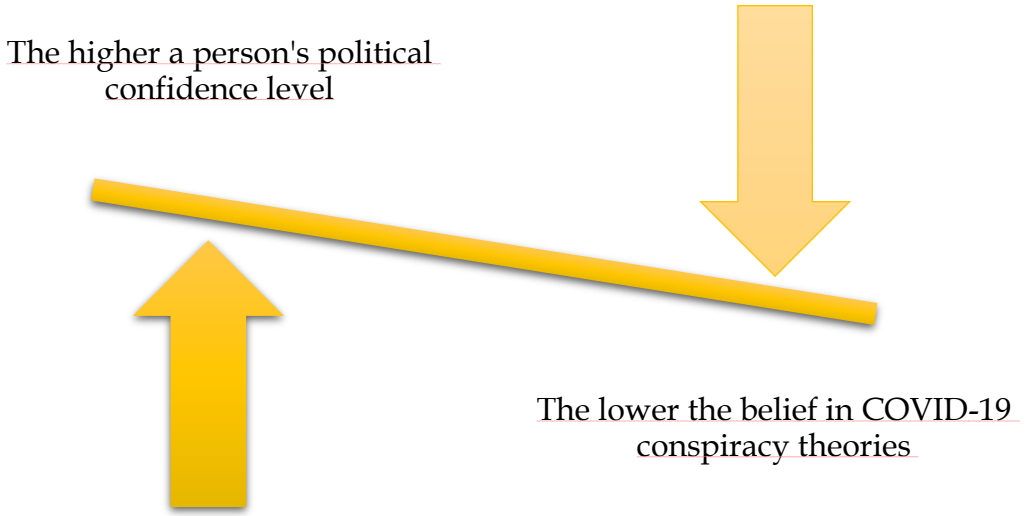


Figure 1: positive correlation between political trust and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories

## Discussion

The results of simultaneous calculations in multiple **regression** analysis represent that there is a significant relationship between political belief and the intensity of social media use with conviction in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory. This means that together the variables of political trust and the intensity of social media use are significant predictors or triggers for someone to have confidence in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory. The output of this study in line with research conducted by Han et.al., (2021) which stated that in a cross-country study conducted during the pandemic, it was found that the quality of trustworthy governments is good

organization in dealing with COVID-19, clear messages and knowledge conveyed regarding COVID-19 (READ; Government competence), and perceived justice is able to dampen public confidence in conspiracy theories because the public has high political confidence or trust in (Han et al., 2021). Uscinski et al., (2020) states that if authority figures, party leaders and the media provide accurate information and make an effort to straighten out views on conspiracies, it will be able to reduce conviction in the conspiracy theory (Uscinski et al., 2020). As a result, when the state is able to solve all economic, social and political problems, it will increase confidence in the political system. Meanwhile, if the state is unable to solve various problems, it will lead to distrust of the political system (Chan, 2021; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Matulessy, 2018). The role of the government in providing confidence in handling COVID-19 is great significance, not only that, the government also needs to provide massive accurate information, because conspiracy theories can occur due to the lack of information received. The WHO has warned of 'infodemies' where many people are got lost by what they read online. They don't always imperil themselves by consuming fake drugs, but they reduce their chances of survival because they thought that COVID-19 was not real or serious (Khanna et al., 2020; Spring, 2020; Mulukom et al., 2022).

The research also demonstrates that simultaneously the intensity of social media use together with political trust became a predictor of conviction in conspiracy theories. It is also in line with the research conducted by Barua et al (2020) where he found a relationship between the use of social networks by internet users as a source of information and their level of commitment to belief in conspiracy theories, as well as the stress they suffered. In other words, they filter out information that is inconsistent with their pre-existing views (Barua et al., 2020). They are also more likely to share conspiracy-related information with other conspiracy believers than people who don't believe in conspiracy theories. Social Media is rapidly spreading information and misinformation (Brindha et al., 2020). They can trigger or eliminate fear, and they can influence the spread of disease by influencing people's behavior. It has the potential to cause other problems compared to the outbreak itself (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020).

In addition, these are in line with the explanation that there are various

conspiracy theories related to the corona pandemic circulating on social media. According to Ipsos Mori's research, Facebook and YouTube users believe in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 more than other platforms. Based on a survey as of May 2020, 30% of internet users in UK believe that the coronavirus originated in the laboratory. This percentage increased compared to the beginning of April which was only 25% (Allington et al., 2020; Setyowati, 2020; Khalid et al., 2021). 60% of people believe that the virus is due to 5G mobile network radiation, get information from YouTube. Meanwhile, 56% of people who believe there is no hard evidence that COVID-19 exists use Facebook as their source of information. This figure is almost three times higher than the 20% who believe that the COVID-19 disease is real (Arbar, 2020). Allington, Duffy, Wessely, Dhavan, and Rubin (2021) demonstrate on their research that they found a positive association between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and the social media use as a source of information about COVID-19 (Allington et al., 2020, 2021).

The results of partial test also discovered that there was a significant relationship between political trust and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories with a negative regression coefficient value. It means that the higher the level of political belief in a person, the lower the belief in conspiracy theories. This certainly supports some previous finding and explanations related to the relationship of these two variables. However, partial exam between the intensity of social media use and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories illustrates that there is no significant relationship between the intensity of social media use and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, which means that the intensity of social media use, based on partial test, is not a factor causing someone to have confidence in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory. This is certainly contrary to some previous research and explanations that state that there is a strong relationship between the intensity of social media use and conviction in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

## Conclusion

The conspiracy theories have broken the deadlock of the government's information disclosure space due to uncertainty and ignorance of the way of dealing with a pandemic,

which is the first experience for all countries. Changing policies related to pandemic coping strategies will be seen as the inability of the government to be responsive to the pandemic. The reason for the emergency at the beginning of the pandemic can indeed be accepted as logical, but over time and no change for the better will certainly increase public distrust. Alteration of repeated policy led to a further decline in public trust in effective resolution measures. On the other hand, the pandemic has resulted in widespread opportunities to communicate on social media, while social media does not necessarily provide true information about the pandemic situation, many hoaxes are often perceived as a reality or truth. This is the stimulation of increasing public confidence in the existence of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. Belief in the veracity of conspiracy theories is heightened when there is indecisiveness in government policy making, there are mixed decisions from policy makers, policies are rapidly changing, as well as wider opportunities for people to access information online, difficulty detecting the truth of the information, and the absence of counter information quickly.

Thus, conspiracy theories related to the spread of the COVID-19 virus are part of the conspiracy agenda of world elite figures can be suppressed by increasing political confidence in the government's performance in the handling process. In addition, exposure and ease of access to social media will also have an impact on misinformation which results in underestimation of the COVID-19 virus, rejection of vaccination policies, mistrust of confirmed COVID-19 victim data, massive violations of health protocols (washing hands, using masks and maintaining distance) are part of the impact of hoax news related to COVID-19 information. This study contributes to the strategy of managing public mental health in dealing with various problems of misinformation that have caused public doubts about the seriousness of the government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the researcher realized that this paper has limitations on several aspects of the research approach. In line with that, it takes further research that can accommodate a diverse research approach and accommodate the needs of knowledge in the field of Social Sciences studies.

## Limitations

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