

ENTERTAINMENT, HUMOR AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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INTRODUCTION

DRIVERS OF BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy beliefs are associated with many undesirable social, political and personal outcomes (Jolley et al., 2022, Daniel Toribio-Flórez, et al., 2024). At the same time they persist as a prominent feature of public discourse and political narratives. Psychological motives driving conspiracy beliefs can be categorized as: (1) epistemic, (2) existential, and (3) social. (Douglas, Sutton, Cichocka, 2017).

HUMOR

Humor performs a variety of social functions: strengthening in-group and interpersonal bonds, deescalating tensions, self-disclosure, enforcing social norms, or reinforcing status hierarchies (Martin, 2007).

Humor can make speech more appealing and emotionally engaging but at the same time it has a potential to normalize socially problematic ideas (Mallett, et al., 2016, Thomas et al., 2020). Notably, in the context of social media humor is a commonly employed device that can facilitate quick status gain and efficient idea dissemination.

HUMOR AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Benign Violation Theory (BVT) proposes that things are perceived as funny when they violate a norm or a rule but in a manner that is perceived as benign rather than harmful. Conspiracy theories are definitionally transgressive as they contradict the established narratives. In this project we will investigate how perceived funniness may relate to the perception of CTs and desire to engage with them. Specifically we plan to assess the elements of BVT (e.g. harmfulness, funniness) in relation to conspiracy theories.

BELIEF AND SHARING INFORMATION

People may disseminate false or transgressive content online for many reasons, including perceived truthfulness, desire for power, social influence, attention or need for chaos. In this project we will investigate whether funniness appraisals contribute to the desire to disseminate conspiracy theories on social media.

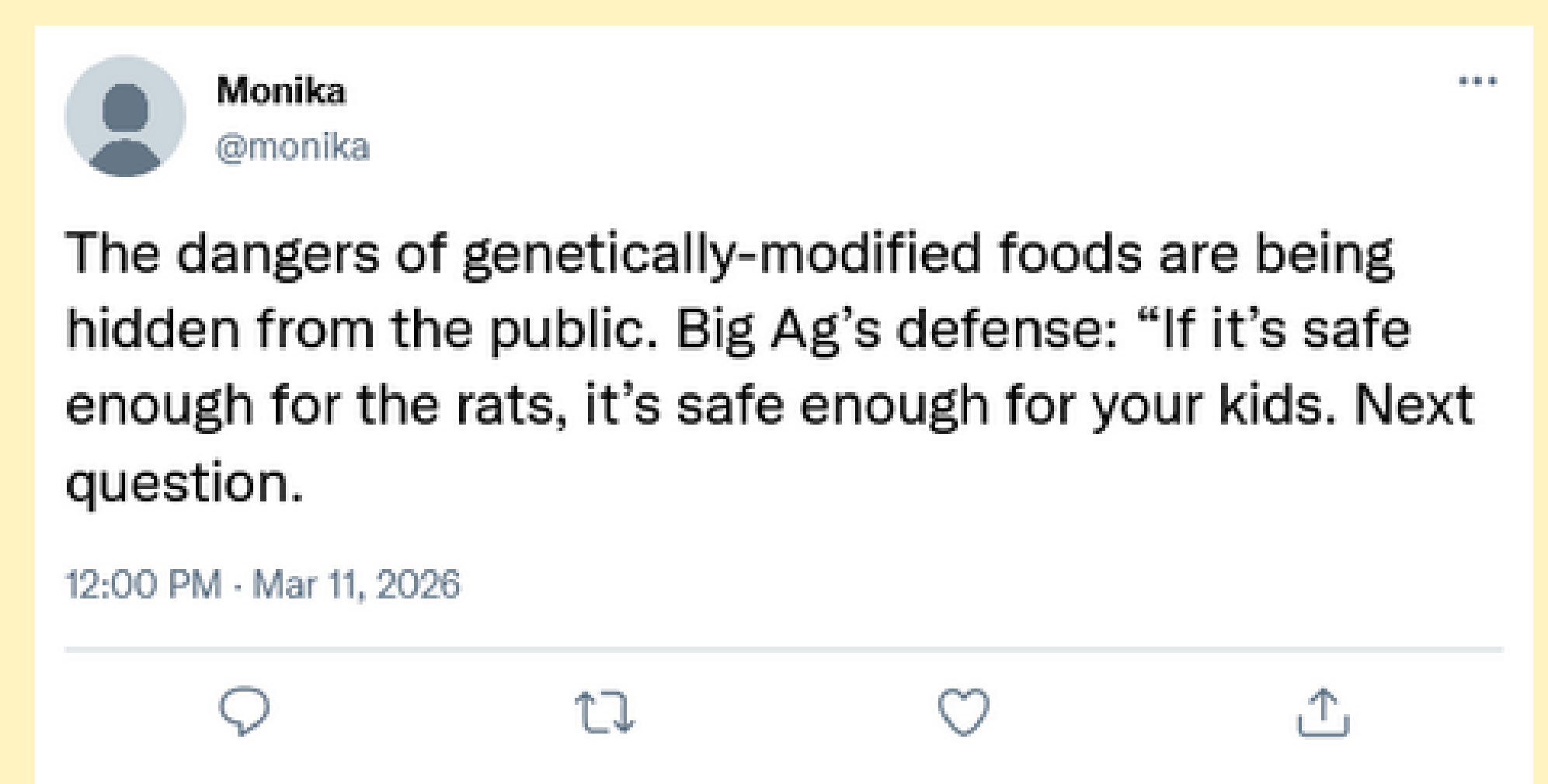


Figure 1. Exemplary study stimuli: Non-humorous conspiracy statement (top) and humorous conspiracy statement (bottom).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What types of statements do people perceive to be conspiracy theories?
- What types of conspiracy theories are perceived as funny?
- Which features of conspiracy theories make them funny?
- Does perceived funniness contribute to people's willingness to share conspiracy theories online?

- **Pilot:** Qualitative methods to explore people's perceptions of funniness and conspiratorial nature of statements.
- **Study 1:** Mixed-effects models to investigate which features of conspiracy statements predict funniness appraisals.
- **Study 2:** 2 x 2 factorial design to investigate the impact of funniness on willingness to share conspiracy statements

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

This project has a potential to contribute to literature on psychological underpinnings of conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, it aims to distinguish between the psychological processes standing behind conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy theories dissemination. Finally, it may help better understand the role of humor and comedy in engagement with conspiracy theories.

REFERENCES

EASP EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION
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