

## ARTICLE

# Curious about threats: Morbid curiosity and interest in conspiracy theories in US adults

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Email: [joe.stubbersfield@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:joe.stubbersfield@winchester.ac.uk)**Abstract**

Conspiracy theories allege secret plots between two or more powerful actors to achieve an outcome, sometimes explaining important events or proposing alternative understandings of reality in opposition to mainstream accounts, and commonly highlight the threat presented by the plot and its conspirators. Research in psychology proposes that belief in conspiracy theories is motivated by a desire to understand threats and is predicted by increased anxiety. Morbid curiosity describes the tendency to seek out information about threatening or dangerous situations and is associated with an interest in threat-related entertainment and increased anxiety. Across three studies, we investigated the relationship between morbid curiosity and conspiracy theories in US-based samples. We found that higher trait morbid curiosity was associated with higher general conspiracist beliefs (Study 1) and the perceived threat of conspiratorial explanations of events (Study 2). Using a behavioural choice paradigm, we found that participants who chose to investigate morbidly curious stimuli were more likely to choose to learn about conspiratorial explanations for events (Study 3). Greater curiosity about the minds of dangerous people was consistently the strongest predictor of conspiratorial ideation and interest. These results suggest that morbid curiosity is an important but hitherto unstudied predictor of conspiratorial interest and belief.

**KEYWORDS**

conspiracy theories, morbid curiosity, threat

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## INTRODUCTION

### Morbid curiosity

Humans often do their best to avoid threatening or dangerous situations since these bring about risks to health and safety. However, complete avoidance can lead to ignorance about how to identify and appropriately respond to dangerous situations if they do occur. One solution to this problem is to seek out threat-related information in situations where the perceived costs are low and the perceived benefits remain high. The tendency to seek out information about threats in this manner has been called morbid curiosity (Scrivner, 2021a, 2021b; Scrivner & Clasen, 2021). The propensity for morbid curiosity can help explain the allure of frightening and violent entertainment, including horror films, true crime, and violent sports. Recently, Scrivner (2021b) created the Morbid Curiosity Scale (MCS) as a way to assess overall trait levels of morbid curiosity as well as trait morbid curiosity in four domains: Minds of dangerous people, violence, paranormal danger, and body violation. Though the subject matter varies across the domains, the unifying thread between them is the potential to learn threat-related information. General morbid curiosity appears to be a common behaviour (Oosterwijk, 2017), and the trait has been found to be normally distributed in samples (Scrivner, 2021b). People with more morbid curiosity tend to be younger, more rebellious, more socially curious, and less disgusted by or afraid of death (Scrivner, 2021b).

Despite their interest in the macabre, morbidly curious people may be more anxious or neurotic than non-morbidly curious people. For example, fans of horror movies and books with dark and dangerous themes score higher in neuroticism (Annalyn et al., 2018; Nave et al., 2020) and people who feel nervous are more likely to rent horror movies than movies of other genres (Strizhakova & Krcmar, 2007). This seemingly paradoxical finding could be explained by the heightened vigilance in morbidly curious people, which motivates them to seek out and attend to threat-related information. When deployed in fictional contexts, engagement with threat-related information is generally safe and even potentially helpful in alleviating anxiety and building psychological resilience (Scrivner et al., 2021; Scrivner & Christensen, 2021). However, increased vigilance and attention to threat-related information can also lead to an interest in threat-related information about real events.

### Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories can be defined as a belief that two or more actors have secretly coordinated to achieve an outcome and that knowledge of this action is not widely known but is of public interest (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). They may serve as explanations of events in opposition to mainstream accounts, may be accusations of conspiracy with insufficient proof (Wagner-Egger, 2022), or propose an alternative understanding of reality that is being hidden from the public (Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). Belief in these theories is not inherently irrational (as conspiracies do occur, see Dentith, 2014; Pigden, 1995), but conspiracy theories persist as explanations despite a lack of reliable evidence (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999). Increased conspiracy theory belief is associated with reduced engagement with mainstream politics (Imhoff et al., 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014), increased support for political violence and extremism (Imhoff et al., 2020; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), and increased prejudice towards minority groups (Jolley, Mari, & Douglas, 2020; Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020; Kofta et al., 2020). As such, it is vital to understand what motivates individuals to seek out and believe these conspiratorial explanations.

Research in the social sciences has proposed a wide range of factors that drive belief in conspiracy theories (for multi-disciplinary reviews, see Butter & Knight, 2020a; Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski, 2019). Within psychology, a body of research has focused on individual differences, finding that people who hold pseudoscientific beliefs, exhibit paranoia or schizotypy, are narcissistic, are religious/spiritual, or have relatively low cognitive ability, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (see meta-analyses by Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Stasielowicz, 2022). Other psychological approaches find that conspiracy theory belief is driven motivations to satisfy unmet epistemic, existential, and social needs

(see meta-analysis by Biddlestone et al., 2022, and reviews by Douglas et al., 2017, 2019). The existential motivation is driven by the need to feel safe and in control (Douglas et al., 2017; Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020), and relatedly conspiracy theory belief is associated with neuroticism (Hollander, 2017), increased state and trait anxiety (Green & Douglas, 2018; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2007, 2013; Liekefett et al., 2023; Swami et al., 2016), perceived lack of control (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015); feelings of insecurity (Hart & Graether, 2018; Leiser et al., 2017), and seen in response to societal crises (Bangerter et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Despite being apparently driven by a need for feeling safe and secure, a common feature of successful conspiracy theories is threat, commonly represented by a malign outgroup working in secret to harm the ingroup of the believer (Cichočka et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2020; van Prooijen & Song, 2021; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). The nature of the threat presented in a conspiracy theory can be a direct threat to well-being or survival, such as in the many long-lasting health-related conspiracy theories (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Stubbersfield et al., 2021), it can also be a threat to abstract concepts we hold to be important, such as liberty or democracy (Bangerter et al., 2020; Franks et al., 2013). This can be seen in longstanding and widespread claims that water fluoridation in the USA was a plot to pacify people and make them susceptible to communism (Armfield, 2007), or recent electoral fraud conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2021). In this sense, conspiracy theories can include realistic threats—towards one's life or livelihood—and/or symbolic threats—towards one's way of living, or values (Stephan et al., 2002). Leading to the question of why feelings of insecurity or anxiety would drive someone to seek out explanations which propose threats, over mainstream explanations which are likely to be less threatening.

Prior research suggests humans are generally predisposed towards being vigilant of threats in our environment (Baumeister et al., 2001; Fessler et al., 2014; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) and explanations for the association between conspiracy belief and feelings of insecurity propose that conspiracy beliefs offer a sense of control and understanding to their adherents (Biddlestone et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2017, 2019). If the drive to seek out and believe conspiracy theories is motivated by a desire to make sense of, and understand threats (see van Prooijen et al., 2018), then we should expect these behaviours to be associated with higher morbid curiosity, which has similarly explained an association between higher anxiety and a desire for threatening narratives in other contexts. Further, recent research suggests that the entertainment value of conspiracy theories plays a role in their appeal, with people being more likely to believe conspiracy theories that they found entertaining (van Prooijen et al., 2022). As such, there is value in examining similarity in the appeal psychological appeal of threatening fictional and 'true' narratives to the anxious and uncertain.

## The current research

Across three studies, we investigated the relationship between morbid curiosity and conspiracy theories in three different US-based samples. In Study 1, we tested whether trait morbid curiosity was associated with a general belief in conspiracy theories. Given the common core of learning about threats that is present in both morbid curiosity and conspiratorial belief, we expected trait morbid curiosity to be positively correlated with general conspiratorial beliefs (H1).

In Study 2, we looked at how morbid curiosity is associated with perceptions of threat in both conspiratorial and mainstream explanations of events. We predicted that people who scored higher in morbid curiosity would perceive more threat in conspiratorial explanations (H2). We also explored whether there was a difference in perceived threat in events that are more threatening to the self vs. events that are more threatening to society. Finally, we explored whether morbidly curious people were more familiar with conspiratorial explanations.

In Study 3, we used a behavioural choice paradigm to test whether people who exhibited more morbid curiosity would also be more interested in learning about conspiratorial explanations of historical events compared to mainstream explanations. We predicted that participants who displayed more morbidly curious behaviour would choose to learn about conspiratorial explanations more often (H3). We

further explored if morbidly curious behaviour was associated with different types of threat (e.g., threats to health/well-being, threats to life/liberty, or indirect/low threats) present in conspiratorial explanations. Finally, we explored whether different domains of morbid curiosity were more or less associated with decisions to learn about conspiratorial explanations.

Experimental procedures for all studies were approved by the Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at The University of Chicago (Reference: IRB19-0972-AM012). All data, material, and analysis code can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/tnwsb/>. All administered measures and experimental conditions for each study are reported.

## STUDY 1: MORBID CURIOSITY AND CONSPIRACIST BELIEFS

### Study 1 method

#### Participants

An online sample of US-based participants ( $n = 150$ ) was recruited from Prolific for a study on curiosity and beliefs. Six participants failed a data quality check ('This is a data quality check. Please select agree') and were removed from further analysis, leaving 144 participants (72 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 32$ ) for analysis. Sample size was informed by an a priori power analysis using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), which indicated a sample of 98 was required for an 80% power to detect a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ), the likelihood to that participants would fail quality checks, and available funding. Sensitivity analysis revealed that the recruited sample had 80% power to detect a correlation of  $r = .16$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , two tailed) and an effect size of  $f^2 = .10$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , linear model with six predictors).

#### Measures

##### *Morbid curiosity*

The 24-item MCS was used to assess trait levels of morbid curiosity (Scrivner, 2021a). The MCS has four subscales that measure curiosity about the minds of dangerous people, violence, paranormal danger, and body violations. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores for each subscale and the total score were averaged with higher scores indicating higher levels of that trait. Because enjoying horror movies is a behavioural manifestation of morbid curiosity, we also asked participants how much they agreed or disagreed with a single item question about how much they enjoyed horror movies and tv shows from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

##### *Generic conspiracist beliefs Scale*

Trait levels of conspiracist ideation were assessed using the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013). Participants indicated the extent to which they believed each statement was likely to be true from 1 (Definitely not true) to 5 (Definitely true). Scores were averaged with higher scores indicating higher levels of conspiracist ideation.

#### Procedure

Participants were presented with the MCS and GCBS in a randomized order. After completing the questionnaires, participants reported their age and sex.

## Study 1 results

### Correlation between morbid curiosity and general conspiracist beliefs

Pearson's correlations were conducted between scores on the GCBS and the subscales and total score on the MCS. Morbid curiosity and general conspiracist beliefs were significantly positively correlated ( $r = .32, p < .001$ ) as were enjoyment of horror movies and general conspiracist beliefs ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ). General conspiracist beliefs were positively correlated with curiosity about the minds of dangerous people ( $r = .36, p < .001$ ), paranormal danger ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ), and body violations ( $r = .18, p = .028$ ), but not with violence ( $r = .13, p = .114$ ).

A linear model with morbid curiosity predicting general conspiracist beliefs was conducted to see if the results would be robust to controlling for age and sex. Morbid curiosity significantly predicting general conspiracist belief in the model ( $b = 0.28, SE = 0.07, t = 5.29, p < .001$ ). No sex differences emerged in the model, but younger participants were more likely to hold higher conspiracist beliefs ( $b = -0.02, SE = 0.01, t = -2.52, p = .013$ ). When each dimension of morbid curiosity was entered as a predictor controlling for age and sex, only minds of dangerous people ( $b = .18, SE = .08, t = 2.41, p = .017$ ) and age ( $b = -.01, SE = .01, t = -2.19, p = .030$ ) significantly predicted general conspiracist beliefs. Variance inflation factors for dimensions of morbid curiosity were all below 2.5, suggesting multicollinearity was not an issue.

## Study 1 discussion

Study 1 was a simple initial test of the association between trait morbid curiosity and general conspiracist beliefs. We found that more morbidly curious participants had higher general beliefs in conspiracy theories (H1). The minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity emerged as the strongest predictor of conspiracist beliefs. At the core of this domain of morbid curiosity is the tendency to be interested in the behaviours and motivations of potentially dangerous people. Potentially hostile conspecifics have long been a threat for humans, especially when those conspecifics employ deception. Vigilance for this type of threat may not only increase morbid curiosity but may also lead to conspiratorial explanations for events, consistent with our findings in Study 1.

## STUDY 2: MORBID CURIOSITY AND PERCEPTION OF THREAT IN CONSPIRATORIAL EXPLANATIONS OF EVENTS

Study 1 was conducted under the assumption that morbidly curious people would be more prone to believing in conspiracy theories due to increased vigilance towards learning about potential threats. In Study 2, we tested this assumption by assessing whether or not those who score high in morbid curiosity found conspiratorial explanations of events to be more threatening than people who score low in morbid curiosity (H2). We explored whether threats to the self or society were perceived as more threatening and how this varied by scores on the four different domains of morbid curiosity.

## Study 2 method

### Participants

A second online sample of US-based participants ( $n = 101$ ; 48 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 31$ ) was recruited from Prolific for a study on curiosity and beliefs. Sample size was informed by an a priori power analysis using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), which indicated a sample of 77 was required for an 80% power to detect a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ), the likelihood to that participants would fail quality

checks, and available funding. Sensitivity analysis revealed that the recruited sample had 80% power to detect a correlation of  $r = .20$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , two tailed) and an effect size of  $f^2 = .11$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , linear model with three predictors).

## Measures

### *Threat assessments of conspiracy and mainstream explanations of events*

Conspiratorial and mainstream explanations for, or accusations of conspiracy related to, 23 events were collected from the Belief in Conspiracy Theory Inventory (Swami et al., 2011), Components of Conspiracy ideation questionnaire (Greenburgh et al., 2022), Health Conspiracy Theory Index (Stubbersfield et al., 2021) and supplemented with items and information from Wikipedia. As conspiracy theories can vary in terms of their features, including the nature and level of malevolence described (Douglas & Sutton, 2023), explanations were chosen to represent a wide range of consequences that might be considered more relevant to either themselves or society and that might be more relevant to life/liberty or health/well-being, so as to better examine the role of threat in their appeal. All items were re-written to be of similar length and to have closely matched wording between conspiratorial and mainstream versions. See the [Supplementary Material](#) for the full list of events and explanations.

After reading an explanation of an event, participants were asked three questions. (1) 'Assuming this statement is true, how threatening would this situation be to you personally? Please use the slider below to indicate the level of threat from 0 (not at all threatening) to 100 (extremely threatening)'; (2) 'Assuming this statement is true, how threatening would this situation be to society? Please use the slider below to indicate the level of threat from 0 (not at all threatening) to 100 (extremely threatening)'; and (3) Have you ever heard this statement before? (yes, no, or no, but I've heard something similar).

### *Morbid curiosity*

The 24-item MCS was used to assess trait levels of morbid curiosity (Scrivner, 2021b). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores for each subscale and the total score were averaged with higher scores indicating higher levels of that trait.

## Procedure

Participants first completed the Morbid Curiosity Scale. They were then given the instructions for the threat assessment task, which read,

We will now show you several different statements that some people believe and others do not. Some statements will be more threatening while others will be more neutral. You will be asked three questions for each statement: Assuming the statement was true...

1. How threatening is the situation described to you personally?
2. How threatening is the situation described to society?
3. Have you ever heard of this situation before?

Participants were then randomly presented with either the mainstream or conspiracy explanation of each of the 23 events. Presentation order was randomized. Finally, participants reported their age and sex.

## Study 2 results

### Morbid curiosity and conspiratorial threat assessment

We first tested the hypothesis that participants with higher trait morbid curiosity would rate conspiratorial explanations as more threatening (H2). Those who scored high in morbid curiosity perceived the conspiratorial explanation to be more threatening to themselves ( $r = .25, p = .010$ ) and to society ( $r = .29, p = .003$ ). These findings held when controlling for participant age and sex in linear models ( $b_{\text{self}} = 5.12, SE = 1.77, t = 2.89, p = .005$ ;  $b_{\text{society}} = 4.73, SE = 1.79, t = 2.65, p = .009$ ).

### Morbid curiosity and mainstream threat assessment

We also explored whether or not morbid curiosity was related to threat perception of mainstream explanations. Participants with higher trait morbid curiosity also perceived the mainstream explanations of events to be more threatening to themselves ( $r = .25, p = .010$ ) and to society ( $r = .25, p = .012$ ). These findings held when controlling for participant age and sex in linear models ( $b_{\text{self}} = 3.04, SE = 1.14, t = 2.67, p = .009$ ;  $b_{\text{society}} = 4.73, SE = 1.79, t = 2.65, p = .009$ ).

### Domains of morbid curiosity and threat assessment

To further explore the relationship between morbid curiosity and threat assessment, we examined the correlations between domains of morbid curiosity and how threatening the explanations were rated. Table 1 displays correlations between morbid curiosity domains and threat assessments. Higher scores in the minds of dangerous people subscale were a consistent predictor of higher threat assessment in all event explanations while higher scores in the body violation subscale correlated with greater perceived threat of conspiratorial explanations of events. Higher scores in the paranormal danger subscale were positively associated with perceiving greater threat to society in mainstream explanations of events.

### Familiarity with conspiratorial and mainstream explanations

Familiarity with conspiratorial explanations may indicate that the individual has (or had at one time) a greater curiosity for conspiratorial explanations. Familiarity responses were coded from 1 to 3 (never heard, heard something similar, and heard this before) and compared to scores on the morbid curiosity scale. We found that more morbidly curious people had greater familiarity with conspiratorial explanations ( $r = .23, p = .021$ ) but not mainstream explanations ( $r = .06, p = .558$ ). This held true even when

TABLE 1 Threat assessment of event explanations by morbid curiosity domain.

Domain	Conspiratorial explanation				Mainstream explanation			
	Self		Society		Self		Society	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Minds	<b>.25</b>	<b>.010</b>	<b>.30</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>.24</b>	<b>.017</b>	<b>.26</b>	<b>.008</b>
Violence	.16	.111	.12	.237	.17	.087	.10	.304
Body	<b>.28</b>	<b>.005</b>	<b>.31</b>	<b>.002</b>	.19	.059	.18	.072
Paranormal	.08	.405	.17	.089	.20	.051	<b>.23</b>	<b>.022</b>
Total MC	<b>.25</b>	<b>.010</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.010</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.012</b>

Note: Bold indicates significant correlation.

controlling for age and sex in regression models (conspiratorial explanations,  $p = .021$ ; mainstream explanations,  $p = .317$ ).

Older participants were more familiar with the mainstream explanations of events ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not the conspiratorial explanations ( $r = .02$ ,  $p = .877$ ).

## Study 2 discussion

Consistent with our assumptions in Study 1, we found that morbidly curious people perceived greater threat in conspiratorial explanations of events than non-morbidly curious people. Morbidly curious people were also more familiar with conspiratorial explanations of events, despite being younger on average than non-morbidly curious people. Higher scores on the body violation domain of morbid curiosity were positively correlated with perceived threat of conspiratorial explanations. This may be explained in part by the fact that many conspiratorial explanations involve harm to the body. We also found that higher scores on the minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity were more strongly and more broadly associated with higher perceptions of threat in explanations of events. This finding is consistent with our finding in Study 1 that minds of dangerous people were the strongest predictor of general conspiracist beliefs. It is also broadly consistent with prior research which found that those who believe the world to be dangerous demonstrate greater negativity bias (Fessler et al., 2014).

The minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity tap into one's propensity to seek out information about potentially dangerous individuals. Threatening individuals are also a key aspect of conspiracy theories, which centre around groups of threatening actors acting in secrecy (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). As such, those who are curious about the minds (i.e., intentions, beliefs, desires) of dangerous individuals are also likely to be interested in secret coalitions of dangerous people that are at the core of conspiracy theories. A curious or slightly paranoid outlook on the intention of others may also lead to perceiving threat in non-conspiratorial explanations that still involve groups of powerful individuals. This could explain why higher scores in the minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity were positively correlated with perceived threat in both conspiratorial and mainstream explanations.

## STUDY 3: CHOOSING TO LEARN MORBID AND CONSPIRATORIAL INFORMATION

In the previous two studies, we found that trait morbid curiosity was associated with both greater general belief in conspiracy theories and in perceived threat from conspiratorial explanations. However, while the spread of conspiracy theories has been conceptualized as a virus which spreads from person to person (e.g., an 'infodemic', see Zarocostas, 2020), with research focusing on exposure, it is clear that people play an active role in their information environments, seeking out content which can include conspiracy theories (Guess et al., 2019, 2020; Uscinski et al., 2022). To examine how morbid curiosity may play a role in this active, seeking out of conspiracy theories, in Study 3 we extend the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by investigating the relationship between behavioural measures of morbid curiosity and behavioural measures of conspiracy theory interest. We predicted that participants who displayed more morbidly curious behaviours would also choose to learn about conspiratorial explanations of events more frequently (H3).

## Study 3 method

### Participants

A third online sample of US-based participants ( $n = 255$ ; 128 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ ) was recruited from Prolific for a study on curiosity and beliefs. Sample size was informed by an a priori power analysis



using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), which indicated a sample of 98 was required for an 80% power to detect a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ), the likelihood to that participants would fail quality checks, and available funding. Sensitivity analysis revealed that the recruited sample had 80% power to detect a correlation of  $r = .12$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , two tailed) and an effect size of  $f^2 = .04$  ( $\alpha = .05$ , linear model with three predictors).

## Measures

### *Conspiracy and mainstream explanations of events*

Nine events from Study 2 were used in Study 3. In order to examine how morbid curiosity related to different types of threats present in conspiracy theories, three of the events contained a health-related threat, three contained a threat to way of life/liberty, and three contained minimal or indirect threat. Selection of events was informed by the results of Study 2. Items were selected for having relatively low familiarity, and greater differences in perceived threat between conspiratorial and mainstream explanation, with the exception of the minimal/indirect threat items where similar levels of threat between versions were preferred. The three items selected for low/indirect threat were chosen for receiving lower threat ratings than those selected for the health- and life/liberty-related conspiracy theories. Presentation order was randomized. See [Table 2](#) for information about the nine events used in the study. Participants were told that they would find more information about their choices at the end of the study and were provided Wikipedia links to the explanations that they chose.

### *Morbid and non-morbid information*

Morbidly curious behaviour was assessed using a behavioural task adapted from Scrivner (2021b). Participants were shown nine different sets of descriptions one at a time and asked to select the description that they were most interested in seeing. Each pair of descriptions included a morbid option and a closely matched non-morbid option. For example, one pair of descriptions asked participants if they would be more interested in seeing a photo of a man who killed his girlfriend and ate her or a man who saved his friend from drowning. Participants would make a selection and could view the image of the description that they chose on the next page. Since there are four domains of morbid curiosity (See Study 1), two sets of descriptions from each domain were included in the study.

To keep the number of choices the same as in the conspiracy theory task, a third set of descriptions for the Minds of Dangerous People category was included. When analysing morbid curiosity domains, participants who chose all three minds of dangerous people morbid options were coded as choosing 2, to keep the number of options for analysis consistent with other domains. Presentation order was randomized. Participants either saw a randomized set of conspiracy vs mainstream explanations first or saw the morbid vs non-morbid descriptions first. See [Table 3](#) for information about the nine sets of descriptions used in the study and the [Supplemental Material](#) for the stimuli.

## Study 3 results

### Demographics

Younger participants were more likely to choose morbid descriptions to view ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p = .029$ ) and more likely to choose conspiratorial explanations to learn about ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There were no sex differences in morbid choices, but females were more likely to choose the conspiratorial explanations to learn about ( $t = -2.17$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $d = -0.27$ ).

TABLE 2 Paired conspiracy and mainstream explanations participants were presented with in Study 2.

Type	Conspiracy explanation	Mainstream explanation
Low or indirect threat	Paul McCartney did not appear on the Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' album or later work because he secretly died in 1966 and his death was covered up by the other Beatles and people close to the band	Paul McCartney did appear on the Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' album and later work and is alive to the present day
Low or indirect threat	The Titanic did not sink, the ship that sank was an older, damaged ship, the Olympic, which was disguised as the Titanic as part of an insurance scam by the ships' owners	The Titanic did sink, it struck an iceberg, damaging the hull and causing it to flood below the waterline. The ship sank 2hr and 40min later
Low or indirect threat	Holy Roman Emperor Otto III conspired with the Pope and the Byzantine Emperor to retroactively alter the dating system and added 297 years to the date, making the year AD 1000, to legitimize Otto's claim to the Holy Roman Empire	Holy Roman Emperor Otto III ruled from AD 996 until his early death in 1002. Evidence from ancient astronomy, archaeological remains, and historical records from other cultures refute any claims that 297 years were added to the dating system
Threat to health/well-being	The Food and Drug Administration is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies	The Food and Drug Administration has approved multiple successful treatments for cancer and other diseases that have been developed by drug companies
Threat to health/well-being	The global dissemination of genetically modified foods by Monsanto Inc is part of a secret program, called Agenda 21, launched by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations to shrink the world's population	Monsanto produced genetically modified food crops. They were also part of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a group associated with Agenda 21, an action plan launched by the UN with the goal of achieving global sustainable development
Threat to health/well-being	Public water fluoridation is really just a secret way for chemical companies to dump the dangerous by-products of phosphate mines into the environment	Public water fluoridation is really just a way to prevent tooth decay by adjusting the concentration of fluoride in public water supplies
Threat to way of life/liberty	The goal of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is to use a major disaster as a pretext to impose martial law in the US and to imprison citizens in concentration camps	The goal of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is to respond to any major disaster which occurs in the US and overwhelms the resources of local and state authorities
Threat to way of life/liberty	The High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) is a research program funded by the US government to develop a system to bombard people with mind-controlling radio waves	The High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) is a research program funded by the US government to analyse the ionosphere, which is intended to develop enhanced technology for radio communications
Threat to way of life/liberty	The trails seen behind high-flying aircraft are 'chemicals' consisting of harmful chemical agents designed for psychological manipulation	The trails seen behind high-flying aircraft are 'contrails' consisting of harmless water vapour produced by aircraft engine exhausts at high altitude

TABLE 3 Paired descriptions participants chose between in Study 2.

Type	Morbid choice	Non-morbid choice
Minds	An excerpt from a serial killer's manifesto	An excerpt from a movie critic's review
Minds	How serial killers select victims according to the FBI	How the Nobel Prize Committee selects Peace Prize winners
Minds	A picture of a man who killed his girlfriend and ate her	A picture of a man who saved his friend from drowning
Paranormal	A page from an old book on witchcraft	A page from an old novel
Paranormal	A photo of a supposedly haunted building	A photo of a famous building
Violence	A photo of a firing squad executing a criminal	A photo of a theatrical play
Violence	A reenactment of a medieval sword fight	A reenactment of cooking in the Middle Ages
Body	A diagram showing how to perform a leg amputation	A diagram showing the muscles in the leg
Body	A photo of a burnt body	A photo of a burnt phone

### Association between choosing morbid descriptions and conspiratorial explanations

The number of morbid descriptions a participant chose was positively correlated with the number of conspiratorial explanations they chose ( $r = .26, p < .001$ ). Those who chose to view more morbid descriptions chose to learn about the conspiratorial explanation more often in every instance except for the Holy Roman Emperor time loss event (Figure 1).

The number of morbid choices predicted the number of conspiratorial explanations even when controlling for age and sex ( $b = .31, SE = .08, t = 3.83, p < .001$ ). Age was also a significant predictor in the model, with younger participants choosing more conspiratorial explanations ( $b = -.04, SE = .01, t = -3.25, p = .001$ ).

The number of conspiratorial explanations chosen was most strongly correlated with the number of morbid descriptions chosen in the minds of dangerous people category ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ), followed by violence ( $r = .19, p = .002$ ), and body violations ( $r = .17, p = .008$ ). The correlation with paranormal danger was not significant ( $r = .08, p = .201$ ).

The number of morbid descriptions a participant chose was most strongly correlated with decisions to learn about health threats ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), followed by threats to life/liberty ( $r = .23, p < .001$ ), and low/indirect threats ( $r = .20, p = .001$ ).

### Study 3 discussion

Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, we found that morbid curiosity was associated with increased interest in conspiracy theories. While Study 1 examined correlations between trait morbid curiosity and trait conspiracist ideation, Study 3 demonstrated this relationship using a behavioural choice task. We found that participants who chose to investigate more morbid stimuli were more likely to also choose to learn about conspiratorial explanations for events than mainstream explanations of events. As in Studies 1 and 2, the minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity exhibited the strongest association with conspiratorial interest.

A limitation of this study is that in only using behavioural measures of morbid curiosity and interest in conspiracy theories, the relative predictive strength of morbid curiosity to other drivers of conspiracy theory engagement cannot be claimed. Another limitation is that there are minimal consequences for the participants for selecting morbid or conspiracist items, beyond any aversive response they might have to the morbid items. The sharing of misinformation, such as conspiracy theories, online can have a reputational cost (Altay et al., 2022, although see Lawson et al., 2023 for how it may have reputational

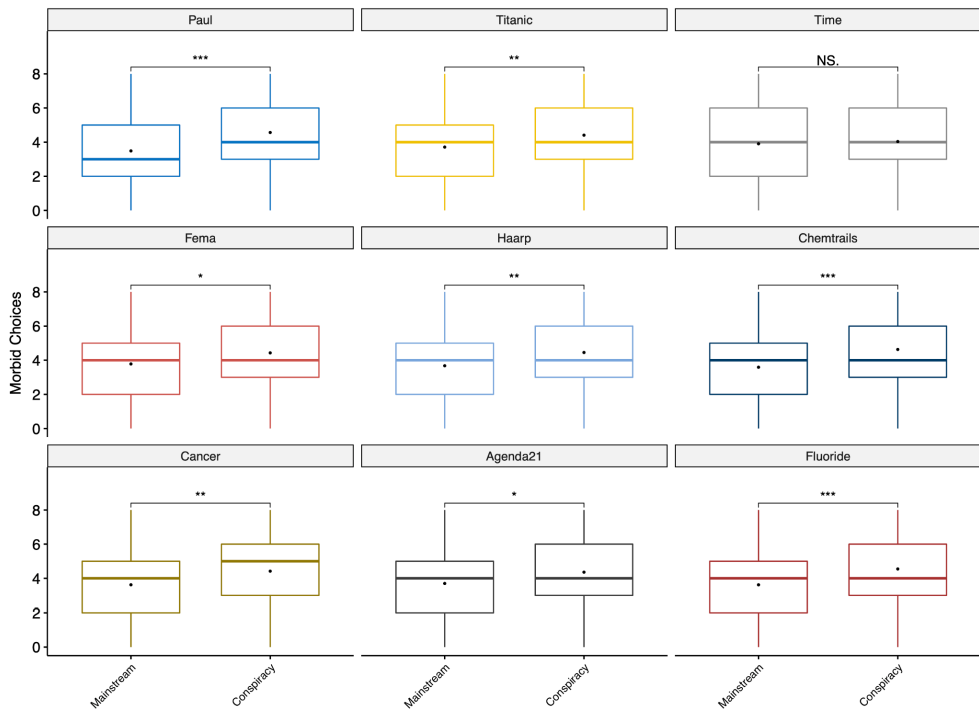


FIGURE 1 Number of morbid choices based on choice to learn about the conspiracy or mainstream version of an event. Significance testing was conducted using unpaired *t*-tests. \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , and \* indicates  $p < .05$ .

benefits), which may inhibit engagement with such information. The study here asks participants only for their interest in learning more about conspiracist explanations or accounts, so is akin to early, ‘choosing to receive’, engagement where costs to an individual may be low. The role of morbid curiosity in later stages of engagement, and the potentially costly active onward transmission of conspiracy theories is a fruitful area for future research.

Interest in learning more about conspiratorial explanations representing all types of threat was correlated with morbidly curious behavioural choices, with similar effect sizes, indicating that the nature of the threat is not central to the appeal of conspiracy theories as it relates to morbid curiosity. As found in Study 2, morbidly curious people perceive greater threat in explanations in general, so the salience of different types of conspiratorial threats may not differ much. The most important aspect of conspiracy theories for morbidly curious people seems to be a plot representing a threat from dangerous others. This is consistent with findings across all three studies that the minds of dangerous people domain of morbid curiosity exhibit the strongest association with conspiratorial belief and interest.

That females were more likely to choose the conspiratorial explanations is aligned with some previous research finding females being more likely to believe conspiracy theories (e.g., Cookson et al., 2021; Popoli & Longus, 2021). However, several other studies find no effect of sex or gender (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016; Goertzel, 1994; Green & Douglas, 2018; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015), and others find men as being more likely to believe conspiracy theories (e.g., Cassesse et al., 2020; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Galliford & Furnham, 2017).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies and multiple different measures, we found evidence that higher levels of morbid curiosity are associated with increased interest in conspiracy theories and conspiratorial explanations of

events in US-based samples. We argue that this association is due to the increased propensity for learning threat-related information in both morbid curiosity and interest in conspiracy theories and supports the predictions of prior work suggesting that conspiracy theory belief is motivated by a desire to make sense of and understand threats.

In Study 1, we found that participants with higher trait morbid curiosity also had higher general conspiracist beliefs. We argued that this correlation existed because of the increased interest in threat learning that underlies both morbid curiosity and conspiracist beliefs. We tested this assumption in Study 2. Consistent with our explanation, participants who were more morbidly curious were more familiar with conspiratorial explanations of events and perceived conspiratorial events to be more threatening. Finally, in Study 3 we used a behavioural task to assess the relationship between morbidly curious behaviours and interest in conspiracy theories. We found that participants who chose to investigate morbidly curious stimuli were more likely to choose to learn about conspiratorial explanations for events.

Of the domains of morbid curiosity, the minds of dangerous people domain were the most consistently associated with conspiratorial ideation and interest. This result is consistent with prior research which has found correlation between agency detection and belief in a range of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2016; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Hyperactive agency detection is a disposition towards perceiving agents where there are none (Barrett, 2004, 2007) and is argued to explain a range of beliefs which posit intentional agents, such as spirits and gods, as the causes of events (Barrett, 2007). Unlike some of these other beliefs, conspiracy theories always posit a coalition of hostile agents as the cause of events (Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski et al., 2016; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Explanations of events which propose such a coalition are likely to provoke substantial interest in individuals who are sensitive to threats in their environment created by dangerous others, explaining the consistently strong association between curiosity about the minds of dangerous people and conspiracy belief and interest.

Work in cultural evolution has suggested a content bias for general threat-related information in social transmission. This bias increases the likelihood that information about threats will be attended to, believed, encoded in memory, and passed on to others, increasing their prevalence in culture (Stubbersfield, 2022). This has been demonstrated experimentally using micro-society designs (Blaine & Boyer, 2018; Moussaïd et al., 2015; Stubbersfield et al., 2015), and has been found to be relevant to the propagation of rumours (Knapp, 1944), front page news (Davis & McLeod, 2003), 'fake news' (Acerbi, 2019), urban legends (Fessler et al., 2014; Stubbersfield et al., 2017), and international supernatural beliefs (Fessler et al., 2014). As conspiracy theories commonly feature threat-related information, this threat bias has been suggested as a reason for their successful propagation (Stubbersfield, 2021). However, it appears that the threat having its origins in dangerous others is more central to the appeal of conspiracy theories to those high in morbid curiosity than the mere presence of a threat or the nature of what is being threatened (e.g., health or liberty).

Here, we demonstrate that individual variation in perceived threat salience influences belief in and interest in learning more about conspiracy theories. Individuals with higher trait morbid curiosity had higher belief in conspiracy theories (Study 1), generally perceived explanations of events to be more threatening (Study 2), and were more interested in learning about conspiracist explanations of events (Study 3). Considering the cultural transmission and evolution of conspiracy theories, future research should examine if higher trait morbid curiosity not only increases a drive to learn more about and believe conspiracy theories but also increases the likelihood that individuals will transmit conspiracy theories to others and play important roles as nodes in conspiracy theorist social networks.

The results demonstrate an association between morbid curiosity and interest and belief in conspiracy theories, consistent with proposals that a key driver of these behaviours is a motivation to understand threats. However, we might still wonder why anxiety about such threats is associated with increased belief in conspiracy theories, especially as research suggests that they do not appease those anxieties (see Douglas et al., 2017; Liekefett et al., 2023; van Prooijen, 2020). Given the association between morbid curiosity and conspiracy theory belief, recent work examining the role of anxiety, morbid curiosity and predictive processing in the appeal of horror films may offer useful insights and future lines of inquiry for researchers in the psychology of conspiracy theories. This research proposes that humans are driven

to minimize prediction errors associated with incoming sensory signals (Miller et al., 2023) and that anxiety and depression are associated with a reduced signal-to-noise ratio in interoceptive inference (Paulus & Stein, 2010). Given the high cost of uncertain and anxious states, it is unsurprising that the predictive system may adopt dysfunctional patterns of activity, in order to exert some sense of control over these signals (Miller et al., 2023), especially when the appeal of threatening explanations may be enhanced by negative credulity bias (Fessler et al., 2014).

While satiating a morbid curiosity to understand threats and reduce this noise using horror media may be largely benign, and can attenuate anxiety, satiating it with conspiracy theories would appear to be more dysfunctional. Narratives which contain details of threats may not just be attractive because they offer valuable learning signals about the world, potentially improving the ability to predict threats, but also because they confirm prior expectations about threats. When these expectations are particularly negative, such as when individuals perceive the world to be dangerous (such as in Study 2), or in more dangerous environments, the predictive system may enter a feedback loop where it continues to engage with the negative content to reconfirm beliefs that the world is a dangerous place, as in Study 3 (see also Fessler et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2023). Given that seeking out pro-attitudinal content plays a role in their appeal (Guess et al., 2020), conspiracy theories may offer a strong source for such a negative expectation-negative confirmation feedback loop, leading to dysfunctional engagement with available narratives, a lack of appeasement and continued anxiety. Future research should examine how people approach conspiracy theories as opportunities to learn about threats, particularly the minds of dangerous people, and how this interacts with their environment, to gain insight into this potentially dysfunctional pattern.

On demographic effects, sex was only predictive in Study 3, with females showing more interest in conspiratorial explanations of events. Age, however, was predictive of both belief and interest in conspiracy theories explanations, with younger people showing more belief and interest than older people. Research on age and conspiracy theory belief has been mixed, with some studies reporting that young people are more prone to conspiracy theory belief (Douglas et al., 2016; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Goertzel, 1994; Green & Douglas, 2018) and others suggesting no age effect (Buturoiu et al., 2021; Cookson et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2006). Younger age is also associated with higher morbid curiosity (Scrivner, 2021b). One possibility is that younger people are still exploring and uncovering many aspects of the complex social environment. When people are faced with new information about events that are impactful and difficult to explain, they are prone to blaming malicious and covert coalitions (Singh, 2021; Tennen & Affleck, 1990).

The three studies used samples of US adults. The US has a long history of conspiracy theories both as beliefs (Olmsted, 2018) and fictions within popular media (Butter, 2020) so participants would be familiar with conspiracy theories as a distinct concept in ways that people from outside the US may not. While it is important to understand the drivers of conspiracy theory belief within a US context, it limits how our results can be generalized to other countries, especially those with populations which are not WEIRD (Henrich et al., 2010) or differ in other relevant ways. Conspiracy theories or beliefs akin to them are found internationally (Butter & Knight, 2020b; Imhoff, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2022; West & Sanders, 2003); as are narratives and folklore with information about threats (Fessler et al., 2014; Singh, 2021; Sugiyama, 2001). As such, examining the association between morbid curiosity and conspiracy theories cross-culturally would be valuable for future research, although this would require the development of appropriate measures. The associations between threat and political beliefs differ across countries (Brandt et al., 2021), so it would be particularly interesting if the salience of the minds of dangerous domain people holds across different cultural contexts where the nature of threats may vary.

## CONCLUSION

Work on the psychological nature of morbid curiosity and its consequences for behaviour is a budding area of research. Recent research suggests that morbid curiosity is not as detrimental to

psychological well-being as is sometimes suggested by popular media (e.g., Scrivner, 2022; Scrivner & Christensen, 2021). However, one area that has not been addressed by popular media or the scientific community is how morbid curiosity might relate to conspiratorial thinking. We argue that morbid curiosity is an important yet hitherto unstudied predictor of conspiratorial interest. Across three studies, we show that morbidly curious people perceive greater threat in conspiratorial explanations of events, are more likely to hold general conspiratorial beliefs, and are more likely to want to learn more about conspiratorial explanations than non-conspiratorial explanations of events, which may result in negative social consequences (see Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Jolley, Mari, & Douglas, 2020; Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020).

Those who score high in the minds of dangerous people subscale of morbid curiosity are particularly prone to believing and expressing interest in learning about conspiracy theories. This is likely because these individuals are motivated to understand the intentions, desires, and beliefs of potentially dangerous actors, so as to make sense of perceived existential threats, which are at the core of conspiracy theories. The nature of the threat or harm being described was not influential, suggesting that providing insight into the minds of those behind the conspiracy is central to their appeal, rather than an understanding about specific threats. Understanding the minds of the agents behind a conspiracy which does not impact on us directly may still be valuable, as it offers an understanding of the minds of dangerous people who may threaten us directly in future.

Although morbid curiosity may not be detrimental to well-being or indicative of antisocial behaviour, it appears to be related in some ways to conspiratorial belief and interest. As conspiracy theory beliefs can have significant, negative consequences for the individual and wider society (Jolley, Mari, & Douglas, 2020; Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020), it is important to understand their appeal to ensure the effectiveness of interventions. Here we demonstrate that a seemingly benign, but relatively common individual factor, morbid curiosity, is associated with increased belief in and interest in learning more about conspiracy theories in US samples. Future research should examine how morbid curiosity relates to other aspects of conspiracy theories, such as their genesis and spread, and in turn whether particular interventions may be more or less effective in reaching individuals high in morbid curiosity.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Coltan Scrivner:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Joseph M. Stubbersfield:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data, material, and analysis code can be found on OSF: [https://osf.io/tnwsb/?view\\_only=5045bfcd7b6d47aeb06b33016c5c0936](https://osf.io/tnwsb/?view_only=5045bfcd7b6d47aeb06b33016c5c0936).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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