

Trust in Authorities, Media, and its Impact on Conspiracy Beliefs: A Cross-Cultural Study

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Abstract

This study explores the intricate interplay between trust in authorities and media, and its influence on conspiracy beliefs across eight culturally diverse countries – UK, Brazil, Germany, France, India, Spain, Argentina, and Croatia. In an era marked by rapidly evolving media landscapes and increasing dissemination of conspiracy theories, understanding the dynamics underlying emotional mobilization is crucial.

Drawing upon nationally representative survey data collected from a diverse range of participants, this study investigates the relationships between different types of trust towards authorities and media outlets, and the propensity to harbor conspiracy beliefs. In particular we examine the differential effects of trust, mistrust (i.e. being skeptical) and distrust (i.e. decidedly not trusting). Our findings reveal that individuals who actively distrust authorities and media sources are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories and that this connection is notably pronounced among individuals who perceive themselves as occupying lower rungs of the social hierarchy.

The cross-cultural perspective sheds light on the nuances of these relationships, indicating variations in the strength and direction of associations across different societies. This insight underscores the complex interplay of cultural, political, and social factors in shaping emotional responses and cognitive processes related to media consumption and trust formation.

The implications of this research are manifold, extending to both academia and society at large. By delineating the nexus between trust, media, and conspiracy beliefs, this study enriches our understanding of how emotional mobilization occurs in the context of information consumption.

Keywords: trust, media, conspiracy beliefs, emotional mobilization, cross-cultural study

Bio

Hulda Þórisdóttir (e. Thórisdóttir) is a Professor in Political Science at the University of Iceland. She has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from New York University (2007). Her research centers on political ideology, its structure, causes and consequences both in Iceland and internationally. She has studied how political beliefs can be driven by

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fear and distrust and in recent years how distrust manifests itself in belief in conspiracy theories.

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