

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT BY THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' OPINIONS

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories are part of life in various societal environments. The educational environment at the university is one of the environments in society. For this reason, conspiracy theories may be a part of the educational process in the educational universities' environment. Researching these theories in the academic environment is timely, as findings can mitigate their expansion. The main aim of the study is the analysis of the conspiracy theories' existence within the educational environment at the selected university in Slovakia by the university students' opinions. In empirical research, the quantitative methodology was used. The questionnaire was used to collect data in quantitative research as a research method. The research sample consisted of 100 university students from the selected university in Slovakia. The analysis of the collected data was carried out using the statistical software SPSS 20. Univariate data analysis was used in SPSS 20 to analyze the collected data. Results of the research show that researched university students have partial experience with the presentation of the conspiracy theory by university teachers in the educational environment. Conclusion of the presented text identifies COVID 19 as a conspiracy theory presented particularly by university teachers in the educational environment, and he or she emphasizes the consequences of its expansion into societal life. The university teacher should be able to explain the risks of the conspiracy theories expansion during discussion with university students.

Keywords: *Educational environment, teacher, university students.*

1. Introduction

The conspiracy theories can be presented in various societal environments. We consider the educational environment at the university as a space for the spread of conspiracy theories. In the academic environment, there are university teachers, university students and other university staff. The university teacher influences the formation of the university students' opinions in academic environment. He or she can express his or her opinions about various topics in society and for this reason, these topics are part of the university educational process. Conspiracy theories are very current, and this topic can be presented by university teachers in academic environment. University teachers can discuss with university students about conspiracy theories during lectures, seminars, consultations and other forms of university educational process. The discussion about conspiracy theories can have formal or informal character and the results of the discussions should be the better knowledge of university students about the consequences of conspiracy theories spreading. The paper provides the results of the pre-research of the research of the conspiracy theories spreading in the opinions of university students in Slovakia.

2. Conspiracy theories

Douglas (et al., 2019, p. 4) provides the general characteristics of conspiracies. "Conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions." We consider conspiracies as a way to usurp power. Štefančík (2022) defines conspiracy theories as a claim about conspiracies. Conspiracy theory explains a situation by conspiracy – it is a conspiratorial activity of a small group of actors. Usually, it has illegitimated or unlawful intent. Conspiracies are the important part of the conspiracy theories. Moreover, the conspiracy theories provide the simple explanation of the various situations in the society. They are looking for the culprit of the undesirable situation (Čavojová & Šrol, 2022). Douglas (2019, p. 8) says, that „there is evidence that conspiracy theories appear to appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and/or meaning but perhaps lack the cognitive tools or experience problems that prevent them from being able to find accuracy and meaning via other more rational means“. In our opinion, conspiracy theories can be defined as

unverified information connected with the warning against dangerous conspiracies. Čavojová & Šrol (2022) identify conspiracies related to COVID-19. Mentioned authors say, that COVID 19 pandemic was a part of the plan for the society control.

3. Empirical research

3.1. Objectives

The main aim of the empirical research was to identify the researched university students' view on selected aspects of conspiracy theories. The first partial objective is to identify the knowledge of researched university students about conspiracy theories. We would like to research the knowledge of the definition of conspiracy theories, the experience of respondents with the presentation of conspiracy theories related to COVID 19 by a university teacher and the view of the selected conspiracy theory related to COVID 19. According to the objectives of empirical research, we define the research questions as follows:

- 1) Can researched university students define conspiracy theories?
- 2) From the perspective of researched university students, do university teachers present COVID 19 conspiracy theories during the university educational process?
- 3) Do researched university students believe in selected conspiracy theory related to COVID 19?

3.2. Method and research sample

According to the aim of the research, we have used quantitative research methodology. This methodology allows for the analysis of many respondents' answers. Using quantitative methodology can generalize the conclusions (Tomšík, 2017). We consider the generalization of the analyzed conclusions as an advantage of the quantitative approach. We have used a pre-planned questionnaire as a method of data collection. It is mostly used in quantitative research, and it collects and analyzes empirical data quickly (Gavora, 2010). We have used closed-ended questions in a questionnaire. It was distributed by the online platform Microsoft Forms. It is a quick and efficient way to collect data. The data were analyzed by using statistical software SPSS 20. In the statistical software, we were using univariate data analysis. It provides a clear overview of the recorded answers, and we have examined the occurrence of the mentioned aspects of conspiracy theories in the research questions. The results of the univariate data analysis are the prerequisites for the next research. We have recorded the results of the univariate data analysis in the frequency tables.

The respondents of the research were 100 university students who are studying at the Faculty of Arts, University of ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. 42% of respondents were studying teaching and educational sciences. 34% of respondents were studying psychology. 13% of respondents were studying philology (Russian language, English language or German language). 3% of respondents were studying historical sciences and 6% of respondents were studying philosophy.

3.3. Results

The results of the univariate data analysis for the first research question are presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. The definition of conspiracy theory by the researched university students' view.

	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>verified information related to the warning against dangerous conspiracy</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>verified information by the specific group of people</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>unverified information related to the warning against dangerous conspiracies</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>86</i>

Source: own research

Based on the data in the table above (Table 1.), we state that 86% of researched university students defined conspiracy theory as unverified information related to the warning against dangerous conspiracies. Researched university students have adequate knowledge about the definition of conspiracy theories. The results of the univariate data analysis for the second research question are presented in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. The presentation of conspiracy theory (COVID 19) by university teacher during university educational process by the researched university students' view.

	Count	%
yes	11	11
no	77	77
I do not know	12	12

Source: own research

Based on the table above (Table 2.), we state that only 11% of respondents had experience with the presentation of the conspiracy theory related to COVID 19 by university teacher during the university educational process. We assume that conspiracy theory related to COVID 19 by university teachers are part of the university educational process in discussions or informal education. The results of the univariate data analysis for the second research question are presented in the table below (Table 3).

Table 3. COVID 19 pandemic was a part of a plan for societal control.

	count	%
yes	12	12
no	66	66
I do not know	22	22

Source: own research

Based on the table above (Table 3.), we state that only 12% of respondents believe that COVID 19 was a part for societal control. A small number of respondents declared that researched university students have general knowledge about COVID 19 pandemic.

4. Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are part of society. They are based on unverified statements, and they appear in various societal environments. Unverified statements are spread by people who believe them. University students are part of the population, and they should have their opinions about conspiracy theories. In our empirical research, researched university students identified the conspiracy theory as an unverified information connected with the warning against dangerous conspiracy. For this reason, we conclude that the researched university students have general knowledge about conspiracy theories. They can have their knowledge from the university teachers. University teachers rarely present COVID 19 conspiracy theories in our research and researched university students did not believe that COVID 19 was a part of a plan for societal control. We consider the above-mentioned results as pre-research of the in-depth research. We need to do research based on bivariate data analysis. In the bivariate data analysis, we would like to research if university students who declared that university teachers presented COVID 19 conspiracy theories believe that COVID 19 was a part of the plan for society control. Moreover, we need to research the organizational forms of the university educational process in which the conspiracy theories are presented by university teachers.

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