THESIS

NEAR, FAR, WHEREVER YOU ARE:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORIC-BASED CONSPIRACY THEORIES, EMOTIONS, AND INFORMATION ENGAGEMENT WILL GO ON AND ON

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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It is often said that there are three words in the English language that are known throughout the world: God, Coca-Cola, and *Titanic.* The *RMS Titanic* has captivated individuals since her conception in 1911, but her legacy was penned in the history books when the "unsinkable ship" hit an iceberg and sank on April 15th, 1912. While history books, historians, and maritime experts acknowledge the facts surrounding the *Titanic* and her sinking, conspiracy theories put the official narratives into question.

While research has been conducted on the *Titanic* and on conspiracy theories about her, communication research has minimally studied this phenomenon. Instead, communication literature primarily focuses on political conspiracy theories, the characteristics of conspiracy theories, and how algorithms promote conspiracy theories on social media. However, the influence of conspiracy theories further lies in their relationship with human emotion and how they retain the ability to elicit both positive and negative emotions. Similarly, emotion possesses a relationship with how individuals engage with information via information seeking and scanning – when individuals either actively seek information about a topic or passively encounter information about a topic.

The objective of this study was to determine the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. To do so, an experiment was

conducted whereby participants were randomly exposed to either a video containing a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* or a video containing purely factual information about the sinking of the *RMS Titanic*. Participants then answered a survey regarding both the emotions they experienced after watching their respective videos, and how they perceive themselves engaging with information about the *Titanic* on various social media platforms.

In the end, this research determined that a relationship does, indeed, exist between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. The findings revealed that participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory video not only experienced greater levels of positive emotion, but the results also illustrated how positive emotion mediates information seeking and information scanning. As a result, these findings aid in closing the gap in communication literature while also serving as the foundation for future research to be conducted on this phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It could easily be said that this research began well over 100 years ago when the *RMS Titanic* sank in 1912. What proceeded since her sinking was a cacophony of curiosity, Oscar-winning films, and tourist dives to the wreck of the "unsinkable" ocean liner. But unlike most, my passion for the *Titanic* was not derived from watching the 1997 James Cameron film.

The first time I learned about *Titanic* was on a long bus ride in the wee hours of a chilly September morning. My family was on our way to celebrate my mom's birthday by taking a hot air balloon ride in Breckenridge. With the sun cresting the mountains and the tour bus gliding over the road, my mom leaned over to me and asked: "Have you ever heard about a ship called the *Titanic*?" What proceeded was a fascinating tale told by a mother as her daughter soaked up every word like a sponge – enthralled, intrigued. And the fascination never ended.

Over ten years later, I found myself accepted into graduate school where I could research anything. I remember sitting in my apartment, wearing my *Titanic* T-shirt, watching a *Titanic* historian disprove a conspiracy theory about the ocean liner of the same name, and I could not help but wonder what allured people to engage with information that is irrevocably false. Needless to say, the query never left my mind, and it quickly turned into the focus of my thesis.

With this being a topic that I am immensely passionate about, being able to study it in-depth for my master's degree is a blessing that I am forever grateful for. This would not have been possible without the support, guidance, encouragement, and leadership of my wonderful master's committee.

Dr. Ashley Anderson has been on this voyage with me since I took her course on Cognitive Communication Theory in the spring of 2024. She not only became my advisor, but

my mentor. I have learned so much from Dr. Anderson and I am incredibly grateful to have been her pupil. Her kindness and support have never gone unnoticed. She not only gave of her time to help me over the summer break, but Dr. Anderson provided me with valuable insight into this phenomenon that I would not have gained otherwise. I always looked forward to our weekly meetings, and I thoroughly enjoyed falling down the research rabbit hole with her.

Equally important is Dr. Katherine Abrams, a professor that I have known since I started graduate school. Dr. Abrams not only taught me how to design surveys, but she also provided me with valuable tips for how to navigate through graduate school. Her thoughtfulness has been a gift, and I am so glad that we could talk about her daughter's love of horses.

Another key member of this team is Professor Ryan Claycomb. I first met Professor Claycomb during my senior year of college in the spring of 2023 when he taught World Theater History II. His passion for history was contagious, and his PowerPoint slides that coordinated with his jackets and ties made his lectures even more engaging. As part of this master's committee, Professor Claycomb provided perspectives that greatly helped influence the course of this research, and I am immensely grateful for his insight.

In addition to my committee members, I would like to thank my friends. I could not have done this without your encouragement and support. I am forever grateful for all of our conversations and adventures over the years.

To my grandmother, Sandy Abood, and dad, Bob, thank you for your support and for sending uplifting Bible verses. I am grateful that you both could be on this journey with me. Thank you for encouraging me and for cheering me on as I worked on my thesis.

To my horses, Smarty and Jonsey, thank you both for inspiring me in every conceivable way. You motivate me to try my best and to never give up. Sweet Jonsey, I am immensely

grateful for your hugs and melodious neighs of encouragement. Dearest Smarty, I am eternally grateful for your optimism and the freedom that you share with me when we ride together. You are a light that has kept me going, and you are my reason for running this race.

To my mom, Leslie, I do not even know where to begin. You not only taught me about *Titanic*, but you have been my biggest cheerleader. Thank you for your prayers, the long late-night conversations, for encouraging me during the challenging moments, and for jumping up-and-down during the moments of celebration. I am forever grateful for you, and I could not have done this without you.

And, of course, I would like to thank my Father, God, and my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for absolutely everything. This was achieved through Your love, Your mercy, Your grace, and Your strength alone. I am beyond grateful that You are in my life.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this research to the *Titanic* herself and to everyone who was impacted by her sinking, especially the 1,500 souls that were lost that disastrous night. My fascination with this historic event has never forgotten the tragedy that surrounds it, and my passion for the truth and the official narrative was a driving factor behind this research.

But most of all, this master's thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Dr. Joseph Abood. I ardently wish that you could be here so I could tell you everything that I have learned. While I yearn to see your joyous smile and hear your input on this research, I know that you are watching from Heaven and that you have been here every step of the way. You were always proud of my academic achievements . . . and this is for you.

We did it, Pa!

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Phenomena of Interest

Cloaked in a dark abyss, the *RMS Titanic* lies nearly 12,500 feet below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. Adorned in rusticles, her one elegant exterior withers away each passing year, slowly decaying in an isolated expanse of sea. While the *Titanic* has not seen sunlight for over 110 years, inhabitants of the surface have not forgotten her tragic story. Descriptions of her grandeur, her unforeseen collision with an iceberg, and the heroic sacrifices of her passengers inspired Oscar-winning films, best-selling books, and worldwide museums.

Unfortunately, *Titanic*'s story garnered further notoriety due to the consumption and dissemination of conspiracy theories surrounding the fate of the infamous ocean liner (Butler, 2012). Since the term "conspiracy theory" is frequently tossed about in modern-day society, it is important to first clarify what this concept is in relation to communication research before moving forward. Defined, a conspiracy theory is conceived when an individual questions an official account and instead offers an alternative explanation or narrative (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016). Conspiracy theories about the *Titanic* highlight the sensationalism of the tragedy by alluding to "dark conspiracies" on topics such as insurance-fraud schemes or whether the ocean liner's manufacturers deliberately created defective building plans and used faulty construction techniques (Butler, 2012, p. 2).

One of the most popular conspiracy theories is that the *Titanic* is not the ship that resides at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean; instead, the deteriorating wreckage belongs to the *RMS Olympic*, the near-identical sister-ship of the *Titanic* (Little, 2023). Referred to as "The Switch Theory," this conspiracy theory was fashioned via the notion that the White Star Line – the

owners of the aforementioned ocean liners – were aware of the damage that the *Olympic* suffered after her collision with the *HMS Hawke* (U.S. Navy, 1911). Therefore, they decided to switch her nameplates with that of the *Titanic*'s before the company intentionally sank the ocean liner to claim her insurance money (Little, 2023).

Even though conspiracy theories about the *RMS Titanic* have been disproven by both history and maritime experts, these sensational stories continue to garner notoriety due to their prevalence on social media, with some posts gaining more than 40 million views (Bright Side, 2018). Consequently, the tragic effect of historic-based conspiracy theories revolves around their propensity to alter the ways in which history is remembered. For conspiracy theorists, the sinking of the *Titanic* is no longer seen as an unforeseen accident; instead, conspiracy theories frame the tragedy as an avoidable disaster caused by greed, pride, and recklessness.

Unfortunately, the *Titanic* is not the only historic event to receive the conspiracy theory makeover. The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, the events of 9/11 (Swami et al., 2009), the Holocaust (Rathje, 2021), the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Margolis, 2011), the burning of Notre Dame (van Prooijen, 2022), and even the suicide of American financier and sex offender, Jeffery Epstein (van Prooijen, 2022) are all historic events that are popular hosts of conspiracy theories (Grodzincka & Harambam, 2021).

While conspiracy theories about the aforementioned historic events have been studied in the larger realm of scholarship, the historic-based subset of the conspiracy theory phenomenon has been minimally studied by mass communication researchers. Instead, communication scholarship primarily focuses on political and/or health-based conspiracy theories (Valaskivi,

2022), as well as the behavioral and attitudinal shifts that accompany the consumption of falsehoods (Weeks, 2023).

While behavior and attitudinal responses to conspiracy theories should be studied, additional communication research should be conducted on the emotions that are elicited by conspiracy theories. Doing so will provide a better understanding of whether an individual's emotions are altered after they consume a conspiracy theory. In turn, this can aid in determining whether the emotions that are evoked by a conspiracy theory influence an individual's information acquisition. This can be achieved by using information seeking and information scanning to understand whether an individual actively or passively pursues information (Ruppel, 2015). This framework directly correlates with emotion as it can aid in illuminating whether an emotion – be it positive, neutral, or negative – influences an individual to either actively or passively pursue information (Lewis, 2017). Since conspiracy theories surrounding historic events are often associated with a negative moment in history, such as the attacks of 9/11 (Bell, 2018), research on the psychological effects of conspiracy theories illustrate that they produce negative emotions (e.g. anxiety or anger), aversive states of being, as well as stress (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Furthermore, researchers argue that beliefs in conspiracy theories may be associated with emotional underpinnings (Molenda, 2022) and/or political affiliation (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

1.2 Rationale and Significance of Research

This research used a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* as the catalyst for understanding the relationship between conspiracy theories, emotion, and information engagement. For the purposes of this study, the forms of information engagement under speculation were information seeking and information scanning (Lewis, 2017). In essence,

this research illustrates whether a conspiracy theory about the *Titanic* elicits greater levels of either positive or negative emotions, thus, influencing whether an individual engages in either information seeking behavior (e.g. actively searching for information that is outside of their typical information seeking patterns (Niederdeppe et al., 2007)) or in information scanning behavior (e.g. deciding to attend to the information they incidentally encountered (Lewis, 2017)).

1.3 Potential Contributions to the Field of Communication Research

By conducting research on the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories and the emotions they elicit, as well as whether emotions influence information seeking and/or scanning behavior, this study closes the gap in communication literature surrounding this phenomenon.

Communication literature is filled with research on conspiracy theories, particularly in regards to political conspiracy theories (Rijo & Waldzus, 2022; Valaskivi, 2022). Additionally, while communication literature studies emotions, it primarily does so in regards to emotions as they relate to misinformation and fake news (Weeks, 2023). While historic-based conspiracy theories have indeed been studied, research on this set of conspiracy theories is predominantly conducted in the psychological field (Swami et al., 2009). Studying historic-based conspiracy theories in the communication field expands upon the understanding of this phenomenon as this study illuminates how conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement are interconnected within the social and digital media landscape.

1.4 Objective, Hypotheses, and Research Questions

The objective of this research was to determine the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories and the emotions they elicit. This extended into understanding whether emotions – either positive or negative – influenced an individual to engage in information

seeking or information scanning behavior. These goals were achieved by answering the following hypotheses and research questions:

- **Hypothesis 1a:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of positive emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.
- **Hypothesis 1b:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of negative emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.
- **Research Question 1:** Will greater levels of positive emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?
- **Research Question 2:** Will greater levels of negative emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Infodemic – A Phenomenon of Falsehoods

It is a truth universally acknowledged that people make mistakes; people misremember things, people fabricate, and people lie (Ecker et al., 2022). But the problem of erring as it pertains to information that is spread on social media piqued via the infodemic phenomenon, "an epidemic of bad information" (Rijo & Waldzus, 2022, p. 1). The infodemic consists of three components, namely fake news (Rijo & Waldzus, 2022), misinformation (Ecker et al., 2022), and conspiracy theories (Valaskivi, 2022), and each aspect of this phenomenon influences an individual's emotions, thus, making it challenging for individuals to distinguish fact from fiction.

Since the aforementioned terms are frequently tossed about in the modern-day vernacular, it is imperative to define them. Fake news is content that contains an element of falsehood, whether the information is innately fabricated, misleading, provided in a false context, or implies a false connection between variables (Rijo & Waldzus, 2022). While fake news can be satirical, it also serves as a means for individuals, groups, and/or organizations to spread political propaganda and promote conspiracy theories (Rijo & Waldzus, 2022).

Similar core elements are found within the definition of misinformation. Misinformation includes "any information that turns out to be false" (Ecker et al., 2022); however, a broader connotation of the phenomenon asserts that misinformation originates from the erosion of trust, the questionable integrity of elections, and increasing social polarization (Ekström et al., 2020). Consequently, the spread of misinformation transpires when misleading or inaccurate information is shared and spread by individuals who do not recognize it as such (European Commission, 2018).

While misinformation became mainstream in the modern era, the phenomenon was previously employed to bring Roman emperors to power by transcribing propaganda on coins as a form of mass communication (Ecker et al., 2022). Furthermore, misinformation was prevalent in Nazi propaganda spread via the printed press, the cinema, and the radio (Ecker et al., 2022). Through the phenomenon's long-standing history, modern-day researchers discovered that misinformation garners traction predominantly through social media because social media users are often confined to echo chambers that reverberate their own pre-existing beliefs and perspectives (Ecker et al., 2022). Unfortunately, echo chambers increase the difficulty for an individual to cognitively process the information they are consuming, thereby, reducing their ability to determine whether the information is verifiable and possesses credible ethos, or whether the information revolves around sensationalism (Porter & Wood, 2022). Through the employment of emotional language and imagery, sensational content becomes more entrancing to social media users by captivating their attention to topics and increasing their engagement on social media sites (Mousoulidou et al., 2024).

Sensationalism is also present in conspiracy theories. Defined, conspiracy theories are explanatory tendencies where significant historical or contemporary events are seen as deliberate actions orchestrated by powerful and/or malicious governments, organizations, or individuals (Mao et al., 2020). To do this, conspiracy theories employ the smokescreen method to hide the truth and control the official narrative by altering the facts to play off of emotion (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016).

2.2 Previous Research on Conspiracy Theories

A prominent segment of research on this phenomenon focuses on political conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding the 2016 (Valaskivi, 2022) and 2020 (Wang & van Prooijen,

2022) U.S. presidential elections. Communication literature on political conspiracy theories illustrated how this segment of theories emerges within inter-political party affiliation settings (Cichocka et al., 2015; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). This revealed that political conspiracy theories are directly connected to emotion, such as negative and/or aversive feelings (van Prooijen, 2020), as well as feelings of uncertainty (Newheiser et al., 2011).

2.2.1 Conspiracy Theories and Political Ideology

This interplay between conspiracy theories and emotion also extends into how conspiracy theories correlate with political ideology (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Previous research on this topic uncovered that belief in conspiracy theories does not appear to resonate specifically with either conservatism or liberalism; however, it seems to possess a stronger correlation to the polarization that persists between these two sides of the political spectrum (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

Instead, the previous research asserts that belief in conspiracy theories – especially those that are political in nature – comes from whether an individual possesses a conspiracy mindset (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). A conspiracy mindset is correlated with disliking powerful groups in society and instead viewing them as responsible for negative political and economic events (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). While the applicability of this definition is widely debated (Sutton & Douglas, 2020), researchers surmise that a conspiracy mindset causes individuals to be more receptive to believing multiple conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994); to possess a specific set of beliefs that are held together by a nuclear idea (Popper, 2014); or that an individual will believe in a certain genre of conspiracy theories (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019).

Arguably, the conspiracy mindset can be connected to motivated reasoning – the tendency for people to alter their understanding of information to either fit a goal or increase

accuracy (Kahan, 2023). Oftentimes, motivated reasoning stems from an individual's desire to protect their identity or illustrate their allegiance to a specific group or political party (Kahan, 2023).

As a result, previous research demonstrates that individuals are more likely to believe conspiracy theories that align with their political party and affiliation (Sutton &Douglas, 2020). Even so, belief in conspiracy theories appears to be strongest amongst individuals at the most extreme end(s) of the political spectrum (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). However, the research appears to contradict itself as studies also indicate that conservatives are more likely to believe conspiracy theories (Kraft et al., 2015; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). While both conservatives and liberals possess motivation to affirm values that they align with and that correspond with their political affiliation, research indicates that conservatives are more likely to believe conspiracy theories because of their distrust of science and the scientific community (Kraft et al., 2015).

While political affiliation association was a key ingredient regarding the emotions elicited by political conspiracy theories, another area of research surrounding the phenomenon of conspiracy theories revolves around content creators themselves. Oftentimes, content creators on social media position themselves as insiders and possessors of knowledge of a certain topic or event (Valaskivi, 2022). This insider-complex highlights how conspiracy theories fulfill the subconscious desire to be unique and possess control over the official narrative by presenting an alternative explanation of what transpired (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016).

Existing literature on this topic illustrates that the effectiveness of a conspiracy theory's ability to alter perceptions of narratives relies upon how the public engages with said conspiracy theory (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016). For example, researchers noted that the more those in political authority argue against a political conspiracy theory, the more likely that conspiracy

theory will be spread and eventually believed by the public (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016). Through this focal point, research also highlighted how a conspiracy theory's believability can stem from an individual's motivation(s) to engage with and affirm certain conspiracy theories, either through actively searching for information about a topic or through inactively consuming information about a topic (Enders et al., 2021).

Furthermore, research on political conspiracy theories highlighted how their believability stems from an individual's feelings of powerlessness (Swami et al., 2009). For example, believing that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by the American government reduces the complexity of understanding contemporary politics as well as the psychological and emotional challenges that are associated with processing great tragedy (Swami et al., 2009). Instead, it is easier to believe a conspiracy theory as they provide simplified, and often entertaining, explanations of otherwise intense and complex subjects. This need for simplicity is expounded by how the algorithm continuously pushes narratives that seemingly reduce the cognitive load and literacy efforts of the social media user (Poleac & Ghergut-Babii, 2024).

2.3 Understanding Conspiracy Theories

Akin to misinformation, conspiracy theories stem from the ever-increasing issue surrounding the authenticity of a piece of media. Referred to as content confusion, this phenomenon occurs when a social media user cannot determine the authenticity of a piece of media (Valaskivi, 2022).

Inauthentic pieces of media serve various purposes: To satirize an event, troll social media users, offer an enlightened perspective of an event, or evoke reactions (Valaskivi, 2022). Consequently, the ineptitude of discerning verified media from false media not only limits the ability to correct the problems that are caused by falsehoods (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023), but also

increases the frequency that an individual is emotionally triggered by the sensational claims and falsehoods within inaccurate media (Mousoulidou et al., 2024). Unfortunately, these narratives often gain popularity due to a lack of media and algorithmic literacy (Poleac & Ghergut-Babii, 2024), hence, fashioning a world where plot holes, sensational claims, and never-before-seen "facts" urge social media users to engage with conspiracy theories and share them over and over again (Valaskivi, 2022).

2.3.1 The Believability of Conspiracy Theories

The repetitive sharing of conspiracy theories stems from their novel assertions. Since conspiracy theories sensationalize elements of truth, it is easier for an individual to be deceived into believing said conspiracy, therefore, believability comes from an individual's cognitive processing as well as their knack for deliberating between fact and fiction (Bago et al., 2022). The act of deliberation – carefully thinking about or discussing a topic – is measured in two separate ways (Bago et al., 2022). The first revolves around the concept known as the deliberation-accuracy account, whereby deliberation should reduce the likelihood of whether an individual believes in a conspiracy theory (Bago et al., 2022). The second way of measuring deliberation connects to the deliberation-coherence account. This concept reveals that deliberation should increase the connection between the acquisition of new information and the individual's pre-existing knowledge or beliefs about a topic (Bago et al., 2022).

The deliberation-coherence account serves two purposes: (1) decreasing a non-conspiracist's belief in a conspiracy theory and (2) increasing a conspiracist's belief in a conspiracy theory (Bago et al., 2022). For example, if an individual believes in the official report surrounding the sinking of the *Titanic*, the deliberation-coherence account claims that they are less likely to believe a conspiracy theory that covers this topic. In contrast, if an individual

already questions the official report of the *Titanic*'s sinking, the deliberation-coherence account asserts that they are more likely to believe conspiracy theories that give credence to this line of questioning.

In many ways, the deliberation-coherence account reflects how humans are cognitive misers at our core. Being a cognitive miser refers to how humans often engage in "heuristic, unsystematic processing to conserve cognitive resources" (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998, p. 7). The same practice applies to how individuals believe conspiracy theories; in the end, it is easier to view the seemingly simple or the sensational claim as true as opposed to engaging in analytical processing in order to disprove the claims being made. This correlates to the role of affect in decision making (Slovic et al., 2006). Defined, affect means "the specific quality of 'goodness' or 'badness'" (Slovic et al., 2006, p. 1333). Affective responses can be (1) experienced as a state of feeling (either with or without consciousness) and (2) distinguishing a positive or negative quality of a stimulus (Solvic et al., 2006). Affective responses occur both rapidly and simultaneously (Slovic et al., 2006), thus, affective responses influence decision making as they are often the initial reaction that an individual will experience in response to a stimulus (Zajonc, 1980). These automatic responses not only guide information engagement and judgement (Zajonc, 1980), but affect coincides with emotion. When an individual responds to an emotional stimulus, they subconsciously search their memory for related events (Slovic et al., 2006). If the activated feelings are pleasant, they motivate anticipated actions and thoughts to replicate the emotions. If the feelings are unpleasant, they motivate anticipated actions and thoughts to circumvent the feelings (Slovic et al., 2006).

Because of its correlation with emotion, it is feasible to understand why conspiracy theories garner traction and thus, believability. It takes effort to disprove a conspiracy theory –

especially when conspiracy theories generate both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Thus, the relationship between conspiracy theories and emotion not only explains believability, but it also highlights how individuals are susceptible to believing conspiracy theories.

2.3.2 The Susceptibility of Conspiracy Theories

While not a central focus of this study, it is still important to address the ways in which individuals are susceptible to conspiracy theories. Communication literature on this subject takes a cognitive route to explain this phenomenon. Susceptibility comes in several forms, one of which is connected to the illusory truth effect – when repeated information is more likely to be seen as true (van der Linden, 2022). The ceaseless sharing of videos without analyzing the information therein fashions a cycle where falsehoods are continuously repeated. Not only does this connect to the deliberation-coherence account, but the perpetual sharing and consumption of false content leads to increased processing fluency, whereby the more a claim, narrative, or opinion is repeated, the easier it is for the brain to process (van der Linden, 2022). This harkens back to how individuals are cognitive misers and how it is more likely that an individual will accept claims as true without actively seeking information on the topic to verify the claims being made.

This mode of cognitive processing is exemplified in research conducted on flat Earth conspiracy theories spread on YouTube (Landrum et al., 2021.) Researchers determined that science intelligence, conspiracy mentality, and religiosity all contribute to susceptibility (Landrum et al., 2021.) Furthermore, this study illuminated how relates to exposure to content, the selection of media, as well as the frequency and duration of the media use (Landrum et al., 2021).Researchers also discovered that an individual's susceptibility correlates with variables such as personality traits, attitudes, moods, cognition, and demographics (Landrum et al., 2021).

Even though emotion was identified as a response state that can be influenced by media, researchers noted that "future work ought to examine some of the emotional and excitative response states that can be elicited [by flat Earth conspiracy theories] and how such states mediate the potential relationship between watching these videos and being open to researching flat Earth views" (Landrum et al., 2021, p. 160).

This reiterates how communication literature often employs a cognitive lens to explain susceptibility and information engagement regarding conspiracy theories (Landrum et al., 2021). Thus, emotion is missing from conclusive findings on this phenomenon. While this study did not examine susceptibility specifically, this study closes a gap in communication literature by illustrating how conspiracy theories elicit emotion and how emotion influences information engagement.

2.3.3 Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories

While susceptibility is aided by both emotion and cognition, conspiracy theories possess certain characteristics that increase their sensationalism as well as the ways in which individuals engage with them (Valaskivi, 2022). The prominence of emotion extends into the first characteristic of a conspiracy theory – the element of surprise (Valaskivi, 2022). As an emotion itself, surprise increases engagement with conspiracy theories through sensational claims that run counter to the official narrative (Valaskivi, 2022). Oftentimes, this is achieved via suspenseful or stylistic headlines or thumbnails. When studying surprising headlines, specifically, researchers discovered that individuals experience heightened emotions (i.e. anger, fear, happiness, intrigue, or sadness) without even reading the article (Mousoulidou et al., 2024). For example, assume that an individual sees a headline claiming that Catherine, the Princess of Wales, is staying out of the public because Prince William is having an affair (Noyen, 2024). Unaware that this is a

conspiracy theory, the viewer is immediately intrigued by this headline and its sensational claim. As a result, this positive emotion is more likely to propel the individual to further explore this environment (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004), thus, motivating the individual to engage in information seeking by searching for information about Prince William's affair and how it impacted Princess Catherine.

Additionally, conspiracy theories incorporate mythical narratives or stereotypes within their storylines to foster a sense of group membership (Valaskivi, 2022). The mysticism and stereotypical nature of conspiracy theories can elicit positive emotions, such as interest or joy (Weeks, 2023), or negative emotions, such as anger or anxiety (Weeks, 2023). Through these emotions, conspiracy theories possess the ability to establish groups where members either believe in or reject the conspiracy theory (Valaskivi, 2022). Putting this in relation to the *Titanic*, there are groups of people who believe that the unsinkable ship did not meet her tragic fate due to her collision with an iceberg, but rather, that the iceberg was simply a final ingredient for the *Titanic*'s demise (Bright Side, 2018). These people claim that the *Titanic* sank due to damage sustained after a coal fire ignited in the ship's starboard coal bunker. This resulted in a weakening of *Titanic*'s super-structure which enabled the iceberg to pierce through her hull and open six watertight compartments (Bright Side, 2018). While this study will not target group membership or believability, it will demonstrate how the element of surprise within conspiracy theories can elicit emotion, hence, providing insight into how individuals then engage with this information.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories serve to create enemy images, draw distinctions, and establish boundary lines (Valaskivi, 2022). As the third characteristic of conspiracy theories, this illustrates how conspiracy theories work in tandem with emotion to garner traction and

popularity across social media. Similar to all falsehoods, conspiracy theories employ emotion – especially negative emotions – to pit individuals against one another as each side advocates the validity of the claim that they believe (Carrasco-Farré, 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Weeks, 2023). Oftentimes, the negative emotions that are elicited through this third characteristic can be classified as discrete emotions.

2.3.3.1. The Discrete Emotions Perspective

Discrete emotions illustrate why people are more susceptible to believing in false information as they are often felt at a personal level (Russell, 2003). For example, assume an individual watches a video about the death of Hollywood starlet, Marilyn Monroe. Unbeknownst to the viewer, this video is a conspiracy theory. When the viewers hear that Marilyn's death was not a suicide, but rather an assassination planned by the Kennedys, the viewer becomes angry.

Anger is a negatively valenced emotion that transpires when injustice is perceived to have transpired or when an individual assumes that their goals have been impeded (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Since anger is an emotion that is often associated with a level of certainty or confidence in something, it tends to evoke heuristic-based processing – when an individual forms an immediate conclusion without analytically processing the information (Weeks, 2023).

The lack of processing information is a phenomenon that correlates with the power of conspiracy theories. This is made possible via the social media algorithm as it will provide additional content according to the user's preferences (Thumlert et al., 2022), thus, reducing the chances that the individual will leave the social media site to seek information that either affirms or denies the conspiracy theory.

2.4 Conspiracy Theories and Their Connection to Algorithms

Even though conspiracy theories have been present for ages, their recent popularity is attributed to the rise of social media– such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok (Poleac & Ghergut-Babii, 2024). Each online platform possesses a unique algorithm that provides social media users with an array of content to consume via their recommended page.

Serving as the invisible mediator of our digital culture, algorithms are "intermediaries that co-produce . . . differentiated media experiences, affinities, and patterns of meaning-making, without the user's agreement or awareness" (Thumlert et al., 2022, p. 20). Not only do algorithms influence the content that individuals consume, but they also dictate what people experience online by influencing the communities' users affiliate with, how users interact with others, as well as how individuals can even come to view themselves (Thumlert et al., 2022). As a result, algorithms possess the power to spread conspiracy theories by analyzing and collecting data that is produced by each social media user. To better understand how this is accomplished, it is imperative to first discover the intricacies surrounding the algorithm and how this invisible force operates.

2.4.1 The Power of the Algorithm

An algorithm's power exists in its ability to monitor social media users while also collecting and aggregating user's data, ergo, enabling the algorithm to determine what types of content are considered relevant to each individual (Thumlert et al., 2022). This is often achieved by studying the patterns and behaviors of users. For example, by intentionally searching for information about a certain topic, such as the *RMS Titanic*, the algorithm will recognize this pattern of media consumption and will, thus, begin recommending more content containing this

topic to this social media user. Conversely, if the user is not interested in the content that the algorithm is recommending, they can select “not interested” or “don’t recommend.”

While the individual possesses the ability to choose the content they consume, this also contributes to the algorithm’s influence as individuals are under an illusion of control (Thumlert et al., 2022). This is where the user believes that they are controlling the algorithm by selecting the pieces of media they like, share, dislike, and comment on. In reality, these engagements serve to supply the algorithm with more data and information that then enables it to better tailor, provide, and recommend content to the individual (Thumlert et al., 2022).

2.4.2 How Algorithms Operate

The illusion of control is a vital component of an algorithm’s operation. By providing individuals with an array of content to consume, the algorithm possesses a greater pool of unique data that correlates with each social media user. This data is viewed as an interaction, and each interaction is interpreted by the algorithm as an indicator of interest (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.). In turn, indicators of interest are analyzed based on simple indicators, such as likes or shares. They are also analyzed via complex indicators, such as time spent on a page or profile, search terms, direct messages, as well as a user’s friends and location (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.).

The algorithm utilizes this information to fashion a melting pot of content that it believes will interest the user (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.). It then ranks that content based on how appealing each piece of media might be to the user (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.). If the algorithm believes that a certain piece of content is more likely to interest the user, it will place it higher on the user’s feed, thus, increasing the likelihood that the user will engage with this piece of media (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.). This element of the algorithm’s operation creates

what is known as a filter bubble – when the algorithm places only "the same or similar kinds of information and content into a user's feed" (Incitement and Social Media, n.d., p. 527).

For better and for worse, this function of the algorithm aids in establishing echo chambers whereby the user is only recommended content that aligns with their interests and beliefs.

2.4.3 How the Algorithm Spreads Conspiracy Theories

While the algorithm is programmed to provide content that it perceives the user will consume, it also possesses an affinity for continuously sharing content that receives a high amount of interaction (either in the form of views, likes, comments, and/or shares). This highlights how algorithms are dependent on user attention, and since conspiracy theories historically gain high volumes of user interaction, algorithms are more likely to place this type of content high in the social media user's feed (Valaskivi, 2022). Since algorithms gravitate towards media that draws reactions from as many users as possible, content containing conspiracy theories is frequently pushed out to individuals (Valaskivi, 2022). As a result, conspiracy theories garner higher views and higher reactions because they elicit emotions (Valaskivi, 2022). Furthermore, the algorithm's affinity for conspiracy theories is aided by how the individual engages with the information they encounter through either information seeking or information scanning.

2.5 Information Engagement: Information Seeking and Information Scanning

Information seeking and information scanning are information behaviors that illustrate how an individual engages with the information they encounter (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). To fully understand this concept, it is important to individually analyze information seeking and information scanning.

2.5.1 What is Information Seeking?

Defined as the purposeful acquisition of information from selected sources (Lewis, 2017), information seeking transpires when an individual aims to change their state of knowledge by intentionally searching for information on a given topic, subject, or event. Oftentimes, this practice transpires when an individual displays an active effort to garner information by stepping outside of their typical information seeking patterns by gathering information from mediated and interpersonal sources (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). This can transpire when an individual uses the Internet to find information about a health issue or new skin product (Lewis, 2017). Furthermore, information seeking occurs when an individual uses social media sites, like YouTube, to search for and watch documentaries about the sinking of the *RMS Titanic*. This is an intentional action whereby someone realizes that they possess a knowledge-gap, ergo, they utilize available resources to close this knowledge gap by learning more about the topic at hand.

Another way to view information seeking revolves around how this behavior occurs when an individual needs to fulfill a need (Lewis, 2017). While the term informational need possess a variety of definitions, it is widely agreed that an informational need "refers to the process of perceiving a difference between an ideal state of knowledge and [the individual's] actual state of knowledge" (Van de Wijngaert, 1999, p. 3). This correlates with the element of uncertainty as this need tends to revolve around a knowledge-gap that propels the individual to search for information that is outside of their typical pattern of media consumption.

Oftentimes, this behavior presents itself as a way of responding to a relevant event (Niederdeppe et al., 2007) – such as a cancer diagnosis, a global pandemic, the implosion of a submersible, or celebrity gossip. For instance, during the summer of 2023, the world was fixated

on news surrounding the Ocean Gate submersible, *Titan*, after it disappeared from radar during its voyage to the wreck of the *RMS Titanic* (Whittle et al., 2023). If an individual wanted to learn more about the details surrounding the *Titan*'s implosion, they might search for information about this topic by reading news articles, using the Internet, or turning to social media to watch videos/reels that summarized this tragedy. This example highlights how an individual will engage with information seeking as a means of responding to their need to fill their knowledge-gap about a specific topic, decreasing their uncertainty towards details about this topic.

Moreover, information seeking is also a behavior that can be prompted by the need for stimulation, assurance, entertainment, or distraction (Lewis, 2017). In some cases, an individual will actively seek information based on their desire to alleviate boredom, overload, and/or anxiety (Case, 2012). While obtaining information can satisfy these needs, there are instances where obtaining the information only creates more questions, thus, increasing the individual's awareness of their knowledge-gap (Lewis, 2017). Since information seeking is a dynamic, active process, informational needs are not always satisfied by a singular answer (Lewis, 2017). Instead, due to the desire to obtain knowledge, be entertained, or relieve anxiety, it is more likely that the individual will continue to search for information until they feel as though their need has been fully satisfied.

2.5.2 What is Information Scanning?

In contrast to the active and dynamic nature of information seeking, information scanning is a less purposeful form of obtaining information (Lewis, 2017). Defined, information scanning has been conceptualized as information accession that transpires during routine patterns of exposure to mediated or interpersonal sources that can be recalled with minimal prompting (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). Moreover, information scanning is a balancing act between seeking

information and maintaining a completely passive exposure (Kelly et al., 2010). This is attributed to how people live in a digitized world where information is literally at our fingertips. Individuals are perpetually bombarded by information simply due to their exposure to mass media – be it communication (such as email, WhatsApp, and text messaging), social media, news updates, or the ever-present notification banner (Skurka & Nabi, 2023). Ergo, the continual receipt of information produces a more passive means of acquiring information, thus, making information scanning a more common behavior than information seeking (Lewis, 2017).

This behavior transpires when an individual incidentally encounters information (Lewis, 2017); however, said encounter was sufficient enough to pique the individual's attention to fashion a memory trace that can be remembered later (Niederdeppe et al., 2007).

It is important to note that information scanning differs from other information behaviors such as browsing, serendipity, or incidental exposure. Compared to information scanning, browsing is a concept that includes nondirectional scanning to goal-based scanning (Lewis, 2017). Similarly, serendipity serves as a segment of browsing whereby an individual "who is searching for one subject accidentally discovers information of interest on another topic" (Lewis, 2017, p. 6). Contrarily, information scanning highlights the specificity behind an individual's decision to attend to information that is encountered during routine media use and conversations (Lewis, 2017). To put this in context, serendipity transpires when an individual is perusing YouTube to watch a video about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines MH370, but instead decides to watch a recommended video about the death of Marilyn Monroe. Information scanning occurs when an individual scrolls through Instagram and pauses to watch a reel about the ten interesting facts about the *Titanic*.

In continuation, incidental (or mere) exposure indicates passive learning that transpires when exposure influences what an individual learns about a topic without paying direct attention to the content they are consuming (Lewis, 2017). However, the complexity of information scanning extends beyond incidental exposure as the individual must decide to attend to that information. Information that was not attended to, and was thus incidentally encountered, is less likely to be encoded in an individual's brain (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). Since scanned information is less likely to be deeply encoded in memory (Lewis, 2017), the information is less prominent, more vulnerable to memory distortions, and less likely to be quickly triggered (Niederdeppe et al., 2007).

2.5.3 Information Processing: Information Seeking and Information Scanning

Similar to the acquisition of information, information seeking and scanning each possess different ways in which an individual processes information. Humans process information (1) peripherally/heuristically or (2) centrally/systematically (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). A peripheral or heuristic route of processing correlates with information scanning as minimal effort is required to understand the information (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). Additionally, individuals experience a limited effect on both their cognition and behavior when they engage in peripheral or heuristic processing (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). The central or systematic route of information processing correlates with information seeking as individuals are motivated to "carefully scrutinize message content" which leads "to enduring attitude and behavior change" (Niederdeppe et al., 2007, p. 155).

Even though the aforementioned routes of information processing account for an individual's cognition and behavior, they neglect to explain how emotion influences the ways in which individual's process information, be it peripherally or centrally. While this is an

interesting area to conduct research, this study will not address this as this study is targeting emotion and its influence on information engagement.

2.5.3.1. The Influence of Social Media on Information Seeking and Scanning

With its relevancy and up-to-date nature, social media has become a primary means for people to gain information (Hamid et al., 2016). While 86% of undergraduate college students use social media as a form of social networking (Kim et al., 2014), research highlights how social media platforms are also used to obtain information, especially in regards to news updates (Kim et al., 2014) and health-related information (Lin et al., 2016).

Since information seeking transpires when an individual purposefully searches for information to meet a need (Lewis, 2017), it is unsurprising that it directly correlates with how people use social media. In part, this relationship is attributed to the timeliness that is associated with social media – its information is recent, up-to-date, and can be obtained and shared immediately (Hamid et al., 2016). This illustrates how research suggests that individuals are more likely to search for information via social media as opposed to talking to other people (Kim et al., 2014).

Furthermore, previous research highlights the relationship between social media and information scanning. Since information scanning is less purposeful and transpires when an individual is exposed to information (Niederdeppe et al., 2007), individuals are likely to exhibit this form of information behavior when they are scrolling on social media (Zhu, 2017). This transpires when an individual checks updates on Instagram (Zhu, 2017) or scrolls through their feed. Since information seeking is more common than information scanning, individuals are exposed to a variety of information whenever they are on social media (Zhu, 2017).

2.5.4 Information Seeking and Scanning Models

To better understand how individuals engage with information, researchers often employ information seeking and scanning models, such as the Risk Information Seeking and Processing Model (Bigsby & Hovick, 2018; Griffin et al., 1999; Yang & Kahlor, 2012) or the Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP) (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998; Fisher et al., 2018; Lang, 2006; Skurka & Nabi, 2023). While these models are not being tested in this study, it is necessary to briefly address their functionality to illustrate how literature tends to look at cognitive factors that influence information engagement, often neglecting how emotion influences information engagement.

2.5.4.1. Risk Information Seeking and Processing Model

The Risk Information Seeking and Processing Model (RISP) addresses how cognitive mediators influence behavior (Bigsby & Hovick, 2018). This model proposes that three elements – (1) information sufficiency, (2) perceived information gathering capacity, and (3) relevant channel beliefs –influence the extent to which an individual seeks out information "in both routine and nonroutine channels and the extent to which he or she will spend time and effort analyzing the risk information critically" (Griffin et al., 1999, p. 232).

In congruence with information seeking, the RISP model affirms that motivation plays a crucial role in regards to whether an individual actively seeks out information (Yang &Kahlor, 2012), thus, illustrating how the RISP model can be utilized to address how individuals engage with information in order to fulfill a need.

2.5.4.2. Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing

The Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP) has five major assumptions. Namely, that (1) people are limited in their capacity to process

information, (2) the nature of an individual's motivation whilst obtaining information, (3) the nature of the media, (4) how human behavior is a reflection of time and is continually changing, and (5) that "communication is the overtime interaction between the human motivated information processing system and the communication message" (Lang, 2006, p. 59).

LC4MP asserts that an individual necessitates a stimulus – be it positive or negative – for an individual to engage with information (Lang, 2006). This illustrates – albeit indirectly – how emotion serves as a stimulus that triggers an individual to engage with information. While this study will not directly test this model, it will illustrate how emotion can be added to the LC4MP as it serves as a trigger that motivates an individual to engage with information. Furthermore, this study will illustrate how emotion to a stimulus (such as a conspiracy theory) can propel an individual to actively engage with information (i.e. information seeking) or passively engage with information (i.e. information scanning).

2.6 The Psychology of Emotion

To better comprehend emotion and how it can operate as a trigger for information engagement, it is important to first understand emotion on a psychological level. In psychology, emotions are viewed as a way point for individuals to evaluate their knowledge of the world and to guide their behavior (Vahid, 2024). While emotions often lead to bodily reactions, such as experiencing an increased heart rate when one is angry, researchers determined that this phenomenon extends beyond the physiological reactions that emotions evoke (Vahid, 2024). Instead, emotions are inadvertently intertwined with the object of causation – namely, the person, event, or action that initially elicited, or triggered, the emotion. Since emotions are directed at objects of causation, this illustrates how and why emotions can motivate behavioral responses (Vahid, 2024). For example, when an individual watches a conspiracy theory that

denies that the Holocaust happened (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.), they are more likely to experience an emotion – such as anger – that would then trigger a behavioral response to this object. As demonstrated by the LC4MP model, since the individual's engagement with this information was triggered by the nature of the media (Lang, 2006), the individual's behavioral response could extend anywhere from venting about this conspiracy theory to a friend, to writing a strongly worded comment and positing it on social media.

Furthermore, the type of emotion that an individual experiences also directs the ways in which that individual will interact with the object that initially elicited said emotion. Not surprisingly, there are two categories that emotions typically fall into: Negative and positive. Research illustrates how negative emotions "calibrate psychological stems by calling for mental and behavioral adjustments" (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004, p. 424). In contrast, research determined that positive emotions acted as a cue for the individual to explore the environment that elicited that emotion (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004).

As a result, this relationship highlights how emotions transpire when an individual encounters a circumstance that possesses affective properties (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004). Thus, the perpetual arousal of affective properties leads to an alteration in an individual's action tendencies (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004), hence, further explaining why individuals would opt to further engage with a conspiracy theory by liking the video, sharing it with others, and even conducting their own research on the conspiracy in question. This link demonstrates how emotions evoke a multidimensional alteration in an individuals' "cognitive, social, and physiological activity that guides their actions in [an] environment" (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004, p. 424).

2.7 Emotion in Communication Research: The Connection to the Digital World

Communication research on the relationship between media and emotion has primarily revolved around the digital world and the spread of misinformation. While this concept was briefly addressed earlier in the literature review, research determined that misinformation garners both prevalence and acceptance on online formats because it thrives on emotion (Weeks, 2023). Furthermore, the sharing of content is strongly driven by the social media user's emotional experience(s) (Skurka & Nabi, 2023). This is attributed to how digital spaces – such as social media and online forums – exacerbate emotion-based biases that increase the chances that content consumers will be exposed to, engage with, and believe in falsehoods (Weeks, 2023). In many cases, researchers determined that certain emotions, such as surprise and disgust, contribute to the spread of falsehoods whereas other emotions, like sadness, joy, or appreciation, contribute to the spread of valid information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

When studied through a communications-based lens, emotions are defined as "generally brief, affective, and valenced subjective experiences that occur in response to external stimuli" (Weeks, 2023). Thus, it is cognoscible that the communication-based definition of emotion is rooted in the psychological definition as both attribute this phenomenon to a response that is triggered by an object-based causation. Moreover, similar to psychological studies on this phenomenon, communication research determined that there are a myriad of ways to conceptualize emotion. These include, but are not limited to, dimensional approach, discrete emotions, as well as intrusive or feeling-driven thinking (Weeks, 2023). Each of the aforementioned conceptualizations aid in explaining why falsehoods such as conspiracy theories garner both traction and believability online.

The dimensional approach, also referred to as the core affect, asserts that putting emotions into discrete, categorical states is a difficult feat given that emotional experiences differ from person to person (Russell, 2003). As a result, the core affect is widely observed as a physical state that is experienced along the valence dimension (Russell, 2003).

2.7.1 Emotional Valence

Emotional valence models supply researchers with prominent frameworks to determine how emotions impact false information on online formats. The valence dimension "ranges from positive to negative [emotions], and all affective experiences fall at some point on that continuum" (Weeks, 2023, p. 424). Oftentimes, these models are employed in order to understand how valence can influence the type of information that a content consumer either seeks or attends to (Weeks, 2023), therefore, enabling researchers to evaluate whether individuals are more susceptible to believing false information.

The most perpetually spread conspiracy theories (and pieces of misinformation) revolve around the element of negativity (Carrasco-Farré, 2022). For instance, the proclamations that Catherine, the Princess of Wales, disappeared from public service was not attributed to her health concerns, but instead it was theorized that she was not seen in public because her husband, Prince William, was having an affair (Noyen, 2024). The inclusion of negativity enables content creators to play off of emotional appeals, such as preexisting stereotypes, social divides, anxieties, and negative beliefs (Weeks, 2023).

Even so, researchers discovered that emotional valence is associated with content containing positivity (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). Positivity and psychological arousal, and when combined, can increase how often individuals share online news articles (Berger & Milkman, 2012) as well as commercial and non-commercial videos (Nelson-Field et al., 2013).

However, while some studies note that videos with a positive emotional tone have a greater influence on the viewer (Eckler & Bolls, 2013), the vast majority of research indicates that valence is relatively subjective (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Instead, it was deemed that content creators believe that content that elicits negative emotions – like anger, fear, and/or sadness – will be equally if not more successful in garnering views and shares as content that evokes positive emotions – like love or happiness (Nelson-Field et al., 2013; Rimé et al., 2011).

This leaves room for future research to be conducted, especially in regards to the emotions that are elicited by conspiracy theories. Indeed, previous research determined that people who post comments on online forums, such as Reddit, employed negative and emotionally evocative language (Klein et al., 2019). However, minimal research has been conducted on whether conspiracy theories elicit specific emotions – be they positive or negative. Discovering these responses will not only aid in further understanding the relationship between emotion and conspiracy theories, but doing so will also further the understanding of how/whether emotion influences an individual's information seeking and/or scanning behavior.

2.7.2 Epistemic Emotions

Upon studying emotion in relation to falsehoods, researchers uncovered a specific niche emotions, namely epistemic emotions. Epistemic emotions are "elicited not only through the events themselves, but through the subjective evaluations (appraisals) that individuals make of those events or situations" (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023, p. 2). This illustrates how epistemic emotions correlate with the perceived credibility and knowledge, as well as the processing of information (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023). Research on epistemic emotions determined that these heightened emotions are positively connected to deception by falsehoods while also being negatively connected with the ability for an individual to distinguish between fact and fiction (Rijo &

Waldzus, 2023). Oftentimes, epistemic emotions, such as anger or anxiety (Weeks, 2023), are evoked either by an individual's lack of analytical processing, or by their pre-determined opinion on a topic or event (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023).

Moreover, epistemic emotions are aided by the novelty, sensationalism, and newness that falsehoods are born from and thrive off. To compare, pieces of media that contain truth usually evoke joy or trust (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023), both of which are examples of what could be deemed as normal emotions. In contrast, the novelty of a conspiracy theory often translates into an individual's increased surprise or disgust (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023), both of which are epistemic emotions in response to false content. These findings surrounding novelty illustrate that epistemic emotions that increase an individual's attention to a piece of media, or a topic, may play a factor in why an individual may be susceptible to being deceived by falsehoods (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023).

This illustrates why it is imperative to study the relationship between emotion and historic-based conspiracy theories through the lens of information engagement behaviors such as information seeking and information. In so doing, communication researchers can obtain a better understanding of the emotions that historic-based conspiracy theories elicit and whether certain emotions are more likely to cause a content consumer to further engage with a conspiracy theory by liking and/or sharing the video, as well as watching videos of a similar nature.

2.8 Hypotheses / Research Questions

Previous research illustrates that emotion plays a significant role in whether a content consumer will respond to a falsehood (Russell, 2003; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Weeks, 2023). However, there is a gap in communication literature as minimal research has been conducted on

the relationship between emotion and historic-based conspiracy theories. To close the gap in the literature, this study answered the following research question:

Determining the emotions elicited by watching a conspiracy theory not only furthers the understanding of this phenomenon, but doing so also aids in explaining why people gravitate towards conspiracy theories. Since conspiracy theories are often veiled in elements of truth, this was tested by using a quantitative experiment. Participants were placed in either the control group (where they watch a fact-based video that does not contain a conspiracy theory) or the experimental group (where they watch a conspiracy theory video). Thus, this experiment tested the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1a:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of positive emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.
- **Hypothesis 1b:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of negative emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.

The term "greater" in this hypothesis applies to either a negative or positive emotion. As the literature revealed, negative emotions, such as anxiety or anger, often correlate with higher media engagement (Weeks, 2023). However, the literature also illuminated how positive emotions, although understudied, prompt individuals to explore the environment that elicited that response (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004).

Therefore, this study also uncovered which emotions – be they positive, negative, or both – influenced an individual to engage in information seeking or information scanning behaviors.

- **Research Question 1:** Will greater levels of positive emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?

- **Research Question 2:** Will greater levels of negative emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?

Determining the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories and the emotions they elicit will further the understanding of how people interact with the false information they encounter.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

3.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories and the emotions they elicit from viewers. Moreover, this research also strove to uncover whether the level of an emotion influenced an individual to engage in either information seeking or information scanning.

To do achieve this objective, this study conducted an experiment to test the relationship between conspiracy theories, emotion, and information engagement. Thus, this experiment sought to answer whether greater levels of emotions – be they positive or negative – were elicited when a participant watches a conspiracy theory. The experiment also sought to determine whether participants who were exposed to a conspiracy theory were more likely to actively seek information about the *Titanic* as compared to participants who were not exposed to a conspiracy theory.

3.2 Theoretical Framework of the Method

In order to achieve the aforementioned research objectives and contribute to the existing literature on this phenomenon, this study conducted an experiment as this method provides evidence of causality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Determining causality was especially important as a goal of this research was to discover whether a relationship exists between specific variables – namely, knowledge (about the *Titanic*), conspiracy theories, emotion, and information engagement.

Conducting an experiment to determine the relationship between conspiracy theories and emotion, specifically, has been the method of choice for both psychological (van Prooijen et al.,

2022) and behavioral (Yu et al., 2021) studies. In particular, psychological research often utilizes experiments to better understand the relationship between the entertainment and sensationalistic value of conspiracy theories and emotions (van Prooijen et al., 2022). One such study focused on the Notre Dame fire in Paris that occurred on April 15, 2019 (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Participants in the control condition read a story that supported the official narrative that the Notre Dame fire was an accident, whereas participants in the conspiracy condition read a story that supported the theory "that the Notre Dame was set on fire deliberately, and that the truth was hidden from the public" (van Prooijen, 2022, p. 29). Both conditions had an exact number of words, syntactic and narrative structure, as well as full texts of supplementary materials (van Prooijen et al., 2022).

After reading the provided article, participants completed a measure by rating how entertaining they found the article across 12 dimensions: "Interesting, entertaining, important, engaging, boring, mysterious, adventurous, dull, captivating, exciting, attention-grabbing, and frightening" (van Prooijen et al., 2022, p. 29). Results illustrated that entertainment appraisals were correlated with the intensity, but not the valence of, emotions (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Additionally, the researchers discovered that entertainment appraisals and the intensity of an emotion were correlated with conspiracy beliefs instead of emotional valence (van Prooijen et al., 2022).

This illuminates how conducting an experiment is the most apt method for determining the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. Not only are experiments easy to replicate for future research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014), but their primary benefit stems from their ability to determine causality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014).

This research looked at causality in two ways: (1) whether people hold greater emotions after watching a historic-based conspiracy theory, and (2) whether the emotions influence an individual's information engagement. Since it was initially uncertain whether the emotions individuals hold will encourage active information seeking or peripheral information scanning, this study measured both positive and negative emotions via mediation analysis to determine whether greater emotional responses led to information seeking or information scanning.

3.3 Experimental Design

In order to determine the relationship between conspiracy theories, emotion, and information engagement, a two-condition, between subjects, online experiment was conducted. The experiment employed straightforward manipulation whereby a visual stimulus was presented to participants (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The results of this experiment were measured via an online survey.

Participants were first asked questions that measured their knowledge about the *Titanic* before they were exposed to either the fact-based or conspiracy theory video.

In this experiment, participants (n = 392) were randomized into the treatment and control conditions that exposed them to a video about the sinking of the *RMS Titanic*. The fact-based video (n = 199) was fact-based and was a roughly minute-long segment from a History Channel documentary about the *Titanic* (History, 2024). The conspiracy theory video (n = 193) contained a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *Titanic* (Bright Side, 2018). Both conditions did not include social metrics, including but not limited to: A description of the video, likes, shares, number of views, or comments.

After participants watched their respective video, they were asked questions about the extent to which they were feeling specific positive and negative emotions. Then, participants answered questions regarding the ways they would engage with information about the *Titanic*.

3.4 Variables

The experiment consisted of one covariant, one independent variable, two mediating variables, and two dependent variables.

Table 1. *Variables*

Variable	Data measurement instrument
Knowledge (C/I)	Survey responses
Positive emotion (M)	Survey responses
Negative emotion (M)	Survey responses
Information Seeking (D)	Survey responses
Information Scanning (D)	Survey responses

3.4.1 Independent Variable – Knowledge

The covariant variable of the experiment focused on a participant's knowledge about the *Titanic*. This variable uncovered whether participants possessed rudimentary knowledge about the *Titanic*, thus, indicating whether a participant was more likely to experience greater levels of emotions (either positive or negative) as well as engage in either information seeking or scanning after they watch either the fact-based video or the conspiracy theory video.

This variable was measured via closed-ended, ordinal matrix-style questions where participants encountered four facts about the *Titanic.* They were asked to indicate their knowledge about each fact on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "not knowledgeable at all" and 5 = "extremely knowledgeable" (see Appendix H, question 3). This scale was adapted from previous psychological studies where participants were asked about their familiarity with various historic conspiracy theories (Bost et al., 2010).

The knowledge scale had a low level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.68. Therefore, just two items ("The *Titanic* was described as 'unsinkable'" and "The survivors of the *Titanic* were primarily first-class passengers") were combined based on averages into an index ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.96$, *Pearson's R* = .35, $p < .001$).

3.4.2 Mediating Variables – Positive Emotion and Negative Emotion

In this study, emotion served as a mediating variable, which aided in measuring the effect of other variables (Hayes et al., 2011). This variable indicated the relationship between emotion and conspiracy theories, and whether greater levels of either positive or negative emotions were elicited after a participant watched the video containing a conspiracy theory. This variable also indicated whether greater emotions influenced how a participant would engage with information about the *Titanic*.

After watching either the fact-based video or the conspiracy theory video, participants answered closed-ended, ordinal matrix-style questions regarding the extent that they felt specific emotions (see Appendix H). Participants were provided with ten emotions (five positive and five negative).

Participants were asked to rank how strongly they were feeling each emotion on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "a great deal." This measurement was obtained via the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson et al., 1988) – a scale that measures as well as identifies positive and negative emotions, and is frequently used in self-reporting studies (Crawford & Henry, 2010; Hovmand et al., 2023; Watson et al., 1988).

The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) encompasses emotions that are present in both Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) (Watson et al., 1988), and includes 20

terms – 10 positive and 10 negative – to measure emotion (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Watson et al., 1988; Zevon & Tellegen, 1982).

3.4.2.1. Mediator – Positive Emotion

In this study, positive emotion is a mediating variable that is conceptualized as the extent to which individuals experience a state of pleasant engagement that encompasses an array of mood states (Watson et al., 1988). Positive emotion was measured via post-condition questions adapted by the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Watson et al., 1988; Zevon & Tellegen, 1982). The positive emotions included: Attentive, calm, enthusiastic, interested, and surprised.

Reliability for all five positive emotions was low, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.52. If the option of "calm" was deleted, the reliability of this variable would increase to an acceptable level with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69. The four items were averaged into an index ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.72$).

3.4.2.2. Mediator – Negative Emotion

In this study, negative emotion is a mediating variable that is conceptualized as a state of unpleasurable engagement that encompasses an array of mood states (Watson et al., 1988). Negative emotion was measured via post-condition questions adapted by the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Watson et al., 1988; Zevon & Tellegen, 1982). Negative emotions were combined into a single variable, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.75 ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.71$).

3.4.3 Dependent Variables

To determine whether the stimuli impacted how participants engage with information, this study measured both information seeking and information scanning.

3.4.3.1. Information Seeking

First, this study measured information seeking. This dependent variable is conceptualized as whether a participant intends to actively seek out information about a topic from specific sources (Lewis, 2017; Niederdeppe et al., 2007). In this study, information seeking targeted whether participants would actively seek out information about the *Titanic*.

To measure whether the stimulus influenced participants to seek information, this variable was measured by asking participants closed-ended, 5-point Likert scale questions. This scale was adapted from a study that was conducted by Kelly et al. (2010) to measure how participants sought out information on health behaviors. Rather than asking a question about the participant's intention to seek information and providing "yes" or "no" as the answer options, as was done by Kelly et al. (2010), the present study adapted this measurement. Instead, questions were asked about the participant's intention to seek information, and answers were provided on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = "definitely will not" and 5 = "definitely will." These questions were tailored to be more specific to the phenomenon under scrutiny as the questions asked participants "[h]ow likely they were to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by searching for information" on a specific platform. The platforms included: YouTube, Netflix, the Internet, reading a book, and talking to friends. Each of these platforms are consistent with pre-existing literature surrounding the ways in which people can actively seek information about a topic (Lewis, 2017; Niederdeppe et al., 2007).

Moreover, participants answered closed-ended, matrix-style questions regarding the various social media platforms they would use if they were to "actively look for information about the *Titanic.* The social media sites included: Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), Facebook, and Reddit. Participants indicated their intention to seek information on the aforementioned

social media sites on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “definitely will not” and 5 = “definitely will.”

Information seeking was measured through these ten questions (see Appendix H, questions 10-15). The scale had a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s *a* of 0.79. As a result, the ten questions were combined into a single variable by using the average of each of the items ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.63$).

3.4.3.2. Information Scanning

Subsequently, this study then measured information scanning. This dependent variable is defined as information that is accidentally encountered and/or obtained with minimal-to-no effort (Lewis, 2017). In this study, information scanning was measured to determine whether participants were more likely to passively engage with information about the *Titanic*.

The measurement for information scanning was inspired by a scale used in Shim et al.’s (2006) research on cancer information. In this study, the researchers asked a series of closed-ended, ordinal questions that required participants to recall the attention that they gave to health and/or medical topics after encountering information through radio, television, magazines, or newspapers (Shim et al., 2006). Responses were measured by using a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 = “not at all,” and 4 = “a lot.” This measurement was adapted to better suit the objectives of this present study by instead using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = “extremely unlikely” and 5 = “extremely likely.” Additionally, since Shim et al. (2006) focused on legacy media, the present study adapted the measurement to focus on digital media.

Therefore, participants encountered the following prompt: “Imagine you accidentally encounter information about the *Titanic*. How likely is it that you would stop scrolling and notice information about the *Titanic* on the following platforms?” Participants answered five closed-

ended, matrix-style questions on a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix H, question 16). The platforms in question included: Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, online articles and blog posts.

By using these five questions, information scanning was measured and was determined to have a low level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach's *a* of 0.632. As a result, a variable was created with the average of the two most commonly used items, Instagram and TikTok (M = 3.35, SD = 1.15, *Pearson's R* = .32, $p < .001$).

3.5 Stimulus Materials

This study's stimulus material revolved around two videos about the *Titanic* – one possessing solely factual information (fact-based) and another containing a conspiracy theory (conspiracy theory video). Each video focused on the same topic: How the *Titanic* sank. Participants (n = 392) were randomly assigned to either the fact-based video group (n = 199) or the conspiracy theory video group (n = 193).

3.5.1 Fact-Based Video

The fact-based video highlighted an accurate, factual, account of the sinking of the *Titanic* (History, 2024). This video described how the *Titanic* hit the iceberg and included interviews (in the form of both a-roll footage and voice-overs) with historians who studied the *Titanic* (History, 2024). The clip (see Figure 1) used for the fact-based video was taken from a short YouTube documentary that was produced by the History Channel (History, 2024).

Screenshot of the thumbnail of the fact-based video taken from the History (2024) YouTube channel.
Figure 1. Titanic Fact-Based Video

The original title, thumbnail, and name of the YouTube channel were not shared with participants. Furthermore, participants were unaware of the number of views, likes, shares, and comments associated with this video. Participants were not informed that they were watching a factual video about the *Titanic*.

3.5.2 Conspiracy Theory Video

Participants in the conspiracy group watched a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *Titanic* (Bright Side, 2018). This video (see Figure 2) did not overtly state that it was addressing a conspiracy theory; instead, the information was veiled and presented as fact (Bright Side, 2018). This is an example of the smokescreen effect that has been addressed in pre-existing literature surrounding the differences between fact and fiction (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016).

Screenshot of the thumbnail of the conspiracy theory video taken from the YouTube channel, Bright Side (2018).
Figure 2. Titanic Conspiracy Theory Video

The conspiracy theory in this video claimed that the *Titanic* sank because of a coal fire, not the iceberg (Bright Side, 2018). While it is true that there was a coal fire on the *Titanic* (Oceanliner Designs, 2023), conspiracy theories assert that the fire weakened the *Titanic*'s super structure (or hull), consequently enabling the iceberg to easily rip into the steel plates and sink the ocean liner (Bright Side, 2018). This claim connects with two of the three characteristics of a conspiracy theory that were presented in the literature (Valaskivi, 2022). The claim that an iceberg was not the primary cause of the *Titanic*'s sinking is both surprising and sensational

(characteristic one). It also plays off of the myth and stereotype (characteristic two) that the *Titanic* was unsinkable by claiming that the ocean liner was doomed before her voyage even began.

The conspiracy theory video is a short segment of a longer YouTube video that was originally produced by Bright Side (2018). The original title, thumbnail, and name of the YouTube channel were not shared with participants. Furthermore, participants were unaware of the number of views, likes, shares, and comments associated with this video. Participants were not informed that they were watching a conspiracy about the *Titanic*.

However, at the end of the experiment, participants in the conspiracy group were informed that they were exposed to a conspiracy theory about the *Titanic*. Through this, they learned about the conspiracy theory and were subsequently presented with factual information that disproved the conspiracy theory that the coal fire was responsible for the sinking of the *Titanic*. This information/notice of deception was presented at the very end of the experiment, after the participants answered questions pertaining to their knowledge, emotions, and information engagement.

3.6 Data Collection

3.6.1 Population and Sampling

The population of this study included undergraduates at Colorado State University (CSU). This population allowed the study to be taken by a variety of students, thus, providing responses from different ages, stages in degree completion (from first-year to fourth-year), and from different majors. Also, the convenience of this population benefited this research as undergraduate students were more likely to complete this study since it was not only an extra credit opportunity (see Appendices A, B, and C), but because it was also conducted by a reliable

source (Dillman et al., 2014), namely a graduate student who attends their university and is enrolled in the Journalism and Media Communication (JMC) Department.

With the power set at 0.8, a G-power analysis determined that the sample size of this study was 128 (n = 128), where both the control (fact-based video) and the experimental (conspiracy theory video) conditions would have 64 individuals. However, through extensive recruitment, the final sample size included 392 participants (n = 392). Even so, the limitation associated with using a convenient sample connects to how it is not reflective of the entire population (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Be that as it may, sampling undergraduate college students proved to be an effective indication for how people, particularly those within the age-range of 18-24, attend to and process the information that they encounter on social media.

To be eligible to participate, undergraduate students had to meet certain criteria; the participants must be 18 years old or older, and a current undergraduate student attending CSU (see Appendix G).

3.6.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through emails that were sent to professors notifying them of an opportunity to offer extra credit if their students participated in a study that was being conducted for a master's thesis. These emails were sent to professors both within the JMC Department and outside of the Department (see Appendix C). Since online studies often receive low response rates and participation levels (Dillman et al., 2014), a remedy to this limitation was to conduct in-person recruitment and tell undergraduates about the opportunity to participate in this study (see Appendices D and E). If the professor decided to provide this study as an extra credit opportunity for their students, participants were told how they could earn extra credit (see

Appendices D and E). If extra credit was not offered, the students were encouraged to take this study to help further research on this phenomenon.

Moreover, participants were also recruited via the JMC SONA system, a participant database that is overseen and operated by the JMC Department. Through SONA, an email was sent out to undergraduates who were taking a course that was enrolled in the SONA system. This email notified them of the opportunity to participate in this study. While online recruitment can be limited by its inability to develop trust or demonstrate the benefits of participating in the study (Dillman et al., 2014), this can be mitigated by the SONA system itself. Since SONA is operated by the Journalism Department, trust can be established because the recruitment emails are sent by a university-based system (see Appendices A and B). Furthermore, both the initial and reminder emails (see Appendices A and B) were sent by the SONA Coordinator of the JMC Department.

Whether the participants were recruited via email or in-person recruitment, each participant was made aware of the benefits of participating in this study (Jarrett, 2021). The primary benefit was how the participant could receive extra credit by completing the study, a reward that was described in the emails (see Appendices A, B, and C), during in-class recruitment (see Appendices D and E), via a Canvas announcement (see Appendix F) as well as in the study's informed consent form (see Appendix G). Offering extra credit also served as an incentive to increase participation rates as this study was conducted during a time in the semester when extra credit is highly coveted. The entire study took less than 10 minutes to complete, making it worth 0.5 SONA credits. This converts into around 5 points or 0.5% in a typical CSU course.

3.6.3 IRB Adherence

During the recruitment process, undergraduates were informed of the following: That they consent to participating in this study; participation is voluntary; they retain the legal capacity to provide and/or withdraw their consent without facing retribution; they can withdraw participation at any time without facing retribution; they acknowledge the requirements of being at least 18 years old to participate; they affirm their status as a current undergraduate student; and they retain anonymity throughout the study's entirety (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). This information was shared via an informed consent form before the student completed the study (see Appendix G).

3.6.4 Data Collection Procedures

Participants were first notified that this study was available for them to participate in via in-class recruitment (see Appendices D and E) or via a Canvas announcement (see Appendix F). If the student was recruited via SONA, they were notified before the study went live, while the study was live, and two weeks before the study closed (see Appendices A and B). As previously mentioned, participants were also recruited via in-class recruitment (see Appendices D and E). In both email and in-class recruitment, undergraduate students were incentivized to participate as fully completing this study provided participants with extra credit (in certain classes).

After the study reached its target sample size, the data collection began. Data was collected by using Qualtrics – a web-based survey and data collection tool for creating and conducting online surveys (Colorado State University, n.d.). While incomplete responses were subsequently deleted, over 250 complete responses were collected and exported from Qualtrics into a .sav file compatible with IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistic software. Since this data was collected through an online survey, files containing this data were

saved in the following format: “researcher’slastname_surveydata_version#.” The researcher also examined whether the participant(s) fully answered the questions in the post condition survey, and only complete responses qualified for the final data analysis.

The data was stored by the researcher on password-protected computers and no identifying information from participants was collected or stored; participants remained anonymous. Furthermore, the researcher was responsible for backing up this data to an external hard drive once a week to ensure that the data is collected and secured. Only the researcher and primary advisor/PI had access to the study’s results and Qualtrics data.

Once the data was collected, the results were analyzed and presented in the form of a master’s thesis. Upon the thesis’ defense and completion, the data will be destroyed. The data for this project will not be preserved beyond the lifetime of the project.

3.6.5 Pilot Study

The pilot study for this research was conducted via survey for a final assignment in Survey Design (JTC-793). This survey focused on emotions pertaining to historic-based conspiracy theories at-large, rather than a specific, niche conspiracy theory. The historic events studied included: The events of 9/11, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the Holocaust, the death of Marilyn Monroe, and the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370. While the *Titanic* was mentioned, specific conspiracy theories about the ocean liner were intentionally left unaddressed as to avoid inadvertently priming undergraduate students who could potentially participate in both the pilot study and the experiment that was conducted for the master’s thesis.

With IRB approving this survey, participants were recruited via the SONA system, as well as in-class recruitment, and were informed of the opportunity to earn extra credit by fully completing the 10-minute survey on historic-based conspiracy theories and emotion. The

objective was to have at least 120 students participate in the survey. The pilot study tested the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Familiarity with historical conspiracy theories positively correlates with positive emotional response and is weaker than with negative emotional response.
- **Hypothesis 2a:** Positive emotional response positively correlates with information seeking and is greater than with information scanning.
- **Hypothesis 2b:** Negative emotional response positively correlates with information scanning and is greater than with information seeking.

Participants (n = 180) were first provided with a definition of a conspiracy theory ("[a] conspiracy theory is the belief that a secret, but influential, individual, group, or organization is responsible for an event. From U.S. politics to historic events, conspiracy theories have become popular pieces of content on social media.") before they were then asked how familiar they were with the events of 9/11, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the Holocaust, the death of Marilyn Monroe, and the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370.

The participants read a provided conspiracy theory about the death of Marilyn Monroe, the disappearance of MH370, and the events of 9/11. For each conspiracy theory, participants were subsequently asked about the extent to which they felt anger, confusion, interest, and surprise (two negative and two positive emotions). Participants were then asked if they saw themselves wanting to learn more about historic-based conspiracy theory. Those who answered "yes" were provided with questions that measured information seeking. Those who answered "no" were provided with questions that measured information scanning. The data was then collected and analyzed by using a Pearson's r test.

3.6.5.1. Pilot Study's Results

The results indicated that H1 was partially supported. The results showed that familiarity with historic-based conspiracy theories does have a relationship with positive emotions $r(159) = .151$, $p = .057$); however, the results also showed that individuals who were familiar with historic-based conspiracy theories were also likely to experience a negative emotional response, $r(159) = .163$, $p = .040$.

Furthermore, H2a was supported as the results illustrated that individuals who experienced a positive emotional response to a historic-based conspiracy theory were more likely to engage in information seeking, $r(127) = .346$, $p < .001$. In contrast, H2b was partially rejected as the results indicated that individuals were more likely to engage in information seeking when they experienced a negative emotional response to a historic-based conspiracy theory, $r(127) = .285$, $p < .001$.

Therefore, the pilot study's findings indicated that both positive and negative emotional responses are likely to prompt an individual to actively seek out information regarding a historic-based conspiracy theory. These findings served as the foundation for how the experiment and corresponding survey were developed for the master's thesis as they indicated that there was a relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement.

The master's thesis took these findings and dove deeper into this relationship by testing emotional responses and information engagement as they pertain to a singular historic-based conspiracy theory – the sinking of the *Titanic.* Rather than exposing each participant to a conspiracy theory, participants were randomly exposed to either a fact-based video or a conspiracy theory video. The master's experiment also increased the number of emotions under speculation from four (two positive and two negative) to ten (five positive and five negative).

Lastly, the master's experiment asked participants questions pertaining to both information seeking and scanning, thus, providing a more concrete understanding for whether participants who feel greater levels of positive or negative emotions truly engage in information seeking or information scanning behavior.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Analytical Approach

Before analysis began, the data was cleaned to remove non-responses, lurkers, or in-complete responses. The data was then downloaded from Qualtrics XM and analyzed via the software program, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). To understand the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement, a two-condition, between subjects, online experiment was conducted. The proposed hypotheses and research questions are as follows:

- **Hypothesis 1a:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of positive emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.
- **Hypothesis 1b:** Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of negative emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.
- **Research Question 1:** Will greater levels of positive emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?
- **Research Question 2:** Will greater levels of negative emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?

Table 2. *Relationship Between Hypotheses, Research Questions, Data, and Analysis*

Hypotheses / Research Questions	Data Source	Variables
Hypothesis 1a: Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of positive emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.	▪ Student survey	▪ Conspiracy theory ▪ Positive emotions
Hypothesis 1b: Participants who watch the conspiracy theory video will experience greater levels of negative emotion than those who watch the fact-based video.	▪ Student survey	▪ Conspiracy theory ▪ Negative emotions
Research Question 1: Will greater levels of positive emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?	▪ Student survey	▪ Conspiracy theory ▪ Positive emotions ▪ Information seeking ▪ Information scanning
Research Question 2: Will greater levels of negative emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?	▪ Student Survey	▪ Conspiracy theory ▪ Negative emotions ▪ Information seeking ▪ Information scanning

4.1.1 Hypothesis Testing

H1a and 1b were tested via Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to determine whether the levels of emotions were different between the fact-based and the conspiracy theory groups. Utilizing an ANCOVA was the most apt means of analysis for these hypotheses as it controls for the categorical variable (conspiracy theory video or fact-based video) on a continuous dependent variable (positive and negative emotions) (Lehigh University, n.d.). This study used the F-test of significance to determine if a difference exists between watching a conspiracy theory video or a fact-based video and the reported levels of both positive and negative emotions.

4.1.1.1. Hypothesis Testing – H1a

An ANCOVA was conducted to determine whether participants who watched the conspiracy theory video experienced a greater level of positive emotion than those who watched the fact-based video, while controlling for knowledge. There was a statistically significant difference in reported positive emotions between the two conditions, $F(1,389) = 26.89$, $p < .001$ (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Positive Emotion Descriptive Statistics*

	Conspiracy Theory Video (n = 193)			Fact-Based Video (n = 199)		
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Attentive	193	3.02	0.10	199	1.81	0.70
Calm	192	2.80	1.14	199	2.94	0.98
Enthusiastic	192	1.69	0.86	199	2.78	1.23
Interested	193	3.54	0.92	199	1.55	0.82
Surprised	192	3.45	1.15	199	3.31	0.92

Positive Emotion Scale. N = Number of participants, M = Mean, SD = Standard of Deviation

Participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory video ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.72$) were more likely to have greater levels of positive emotional responses compared to participants who watched the fact-based video ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.68$). The model found a partial eta-squared of .068, a medium effect size. This finding supports H1a as participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory video experienced greater levels of positive emotions as compared to participants who were exposed to the fact-based video.

4.1.1.2. Hypothesis Testing – H1b

An ANCOVA was also conducted to determine whether participants who watched the conspiracy theory video experienced a greater level of negative emotion than those who watched

the fact-based video. There was not a statistically significant difference in reported negative emotion between the two conditions, $F(1,388) = 1.52$, $p = .218$ (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Negative Emotion Descriptive Statistics*

	Conspiracy Theory Video (n = 193)			Fact-Based Video (n = 199)		
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Angry	192	1.78	0.95	199	1.81	0.70
Bored	192	1.70	0.82	199	1.60	0.87
Irritated	192	1.84	1.06	199	1.73	0.90
Sad	192	2.24	1.13	199	1.60	0.90
Upset	192	1.80	1.07	199	2.30	1.23

Negative Emotion Scale. N = Number of participants, M = Mean, SD = Standard of Deviation

Participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory video ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.73$) were less likely to have greater levels of negative emotional responses compared to participants who watched the fact-based video ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.70$). The model found a partial eta-squared of .004, a small effect size. This does not support H1b as participants who watched the conspiracy theory video did not experience greater levels of negative emotion as compared to participants who were exposed to the fact-based video.

4.1.2 Testing Research Questions

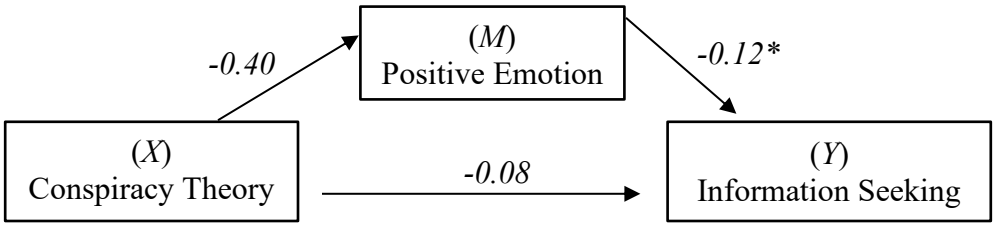
RQ1 and RQ2 were measured via mediation analysis and was tested via Hayes's Process Macro Mediation Analysis – Model 4 (Hayes et al., 2011). Mediation analysis was an appropriate way to measure these research questions as it demonstrates whether an effect exists between variables by illustrating why the effect exists (Hayes et al., 2011). This study employed the simplest mediation model (Model 4) (see Figures 3 - 6) whereby *X*'s effect on *Y* transpires both directly (the link from *X* to *Y*) and indirectly (Hayes et al., 2011). The indirect effect reveals "*X*'s effect on [the] mediator variable *M*, which then affects *Y*" (Hayes et al., 2011, p. 435).

In the case of this study, *X* = conspiracy theory, *M* = positive and negative emotions, and *Y* = information seeking and information scanning. Thus, the mediation analysis was conducted to determine whether or not an effect existed between conspiracy theories, positive and negative emotion, as well as information seeking and scanning. The mediation analysis tested the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** Will greater levels of positive emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?
- **Research Question 2:** Will greater levels of negative emotion be related to (a) information seeking or (b) information scanning?

4.1.2.1. Mediation Analysis – Positive Emotion and Information Seeking

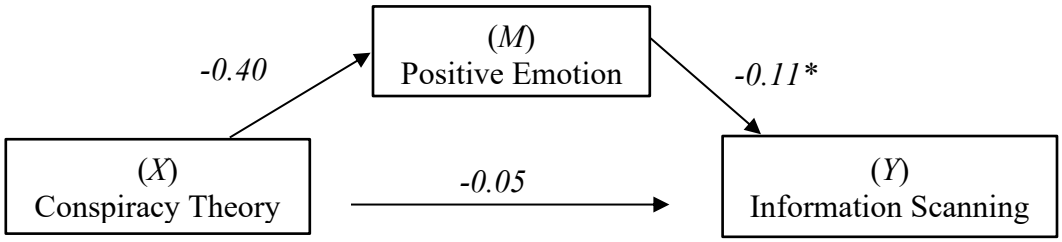
Mediation analysis revealed that the direct effect (c' + a*b) of a conspiracy theory on information seeking was not significant ($b = 0.081$, t [388.0] = 1.342, $p = .180$). However, perceived knowledge about the *Titanic* was significant for positive emotion mediating information seeking. The indirect effect (a*b) indicates that, with the inclusion of a mediating variable (*M* = positive emotion), greater levels of emotion will lead to information seeking (indirect = -0.115, *SE* = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.180, -0.061]). The R^2 in the model with just the mediator and dependent variable was .132 ($p < .001$), which indicates that the model explains 13.2% of the variance in positive emotion amongst participants. R-squared is an effect size measure in mediation analysis (Fairchild et al., 2009). Therefore, the mediation analysis indicates that positive emotion mediates the effect that a conspiracy theory will have on information seeking (see Figure 3). However, since the confidence intervals are close to zero, the practical significance may not be as strongly present in these results. Additionally, the direct effect on *b* is quite small.



Hayes's Process Macro Mediation Analysis Model 4 (Hayes et al., 2011). * = Statistically Significant
Figure 3. Simple Mediation Model 4 – Positive Emotion and Information Seeking

4.1.2.2. Mediation Analysis – Positive Emotion and Information Scanning

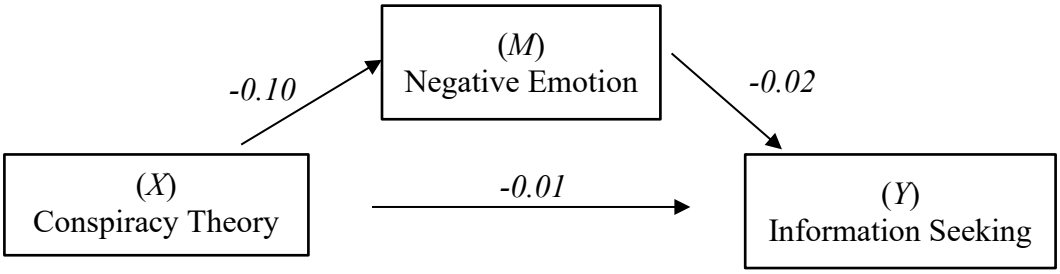
Mediation analysis also revealed that the direct effect (c' + a*b) of a conspiracy theory on information scanning was not significant (b = 0.057, t [388.0] = 0.483, p = .629). The indirect effect (a*b) indicated that, with the inclusion of a mediating variable (M = positive emotion), greater levels of emotion will lead to information scanning (indirect = -0.111, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.195, -0.047]). The R^2 in the model with just the mediator and dependent variable was .037 (p < .001), which indicates that the model explains 3.7% of the variance in positive emotion amongst participants. Therefore, the mediation analysis indicates that positive emotion mediates the effect that a conspiracy theory will have on information scanning (see Figure 4). However, since the confidence intervals are close to zero, the practical significance may not be as strongly present in these results. Additionally, the direct effect on b is quite small.



Hayes's Process Macro Mediation Analysis Model 4 (Hayes et al., 2011). * = Statistically Significant
Figure 4. Simple Mediation Model 4 – Positive Emotion and Information Scanning

4.1.2.3. Mediation Analysis – Negative Emotion and Information Seeking

Furthermore, mediation analysis also revealed that the direct effect (c' + a*b) of a conspiracy theory on information seeking was not significant (b = -0.013, t [388.0] = -0.225, p = .821). The indirect effect (a*b) indicates that, with the inclusion of a mediating variable (M = negative emotion), greater levels of emotion are not significantly related to greater levels of information seeking (indirect = -0.019, SE = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.053, 0.011]). The R^2 in the model with just the mediator and dependent variable was .074 (p < .001), which indicates that the model explains 7.4% of the variance in negative emotion amongst participants. Therefore, the mediation analysis indicates that negative emotion does not mediate the effect that a conspiracy theory will have on information seeking (see Figure 5).

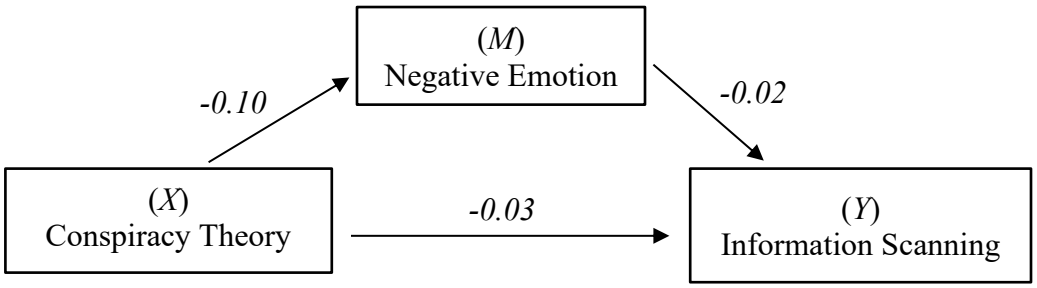


Hayes's Process Macro Mediation Analysis Model 4 (Hayes et al., 2011).
Figure 5. Simple Mediation Model 4 – Negative Emotion and Information Seeking

4.1.2.4. Mediation Analysis – Negative Emotion and Information Scanning

Lastly, mediation analysis also revealed that the direct effect (c' + a*b) of a conspiracy theory on information scanning was not significant (b = -0.028, t [388.0] = -0.249, p = .803). The indirect effect (a*b) indicates that, with the inclusion of a mediating variable (M = negative emotion), greater levels of emotion are not significantly related to greater levels of information scanning (indirect = -0.214, SE = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.064, 0.012]). The R^2 in the model with just

the mediator and dependent variable was .026 ($p < .001$), which indicates that the model explains 2.6% of the variance in negative emotion amongst participants. Therefore, the mediation analysis indicates that negative emotion does not mediate the effect that a conspiracy theory will have on information scanning (see Figure 6).



Hayes's Process Macro Mediation Analysis Model 4 (Hayes et al., 2011).
Figure 6. Simple Mediation Model 4 – Negative Emotion and Information Scanning

4.2 Results Summary

Findings from this experiment indicate that H1a is supported, meaning that participants who watched the conspiracy theory video experienced greater levels of positive emotion than those who did not watch the conspiracy theory video. The findings also indicate that H1b is not supported as participants who watched the conspiracy theory video did not experience greater levels of negative emotion as compared to participants who watched the fact-based video.

Moreover, the results from this experiment revealed that positive emotion mediates historic-based conspiracy theories, information seeking, and information scanning. However, the results discovered that negative emotion does not mediate historic-based conspiracy theories and information seeking. Lastly, the results also indicate that negative emotion does not mediate historic-based conspiracy theories and information scanning.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The sensationalism and grandeur of conspiracy theories create compelling storylines that run counter to the official narrative of an event. These unheard-of tales employ phrases – such as "they've been hiding this" or "what they forgot" – to lure in audiences. In effect, this fashions a smokescreen in which individuals are unable to distinguish between fact and fiction (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2016). While the smokescreen effect is common in narratives surrounding politics and health (Valaskivi, 2022), it is equally prominent in conspiracy theories about historic events.

Historic-based conspiracy theories question the events of 9/11 (Swami et al., 2009) and the Holocaust (Rathje, 2021), re-examine the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Margolis, 2011), and transform the storyline of the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* from an unfortunate accident to a maritime disaster caused by pride and human hubris (Butler, 2012).

While the phenomenon of conspiracy theories has been widely researched, historic-based conspiracy theories and their impact on the social and digital world have received minimum study in the field of communication scholarship. Furthermore, little research has been conducted on historic-based conspiracy theories in conjunction with emotion and information engagement. Consequently, this fashions a gap in the understanding of the relationship between these variables and whether individuals will engage with information upon experiencing great levels of an emotional response (be it positive or negative) after being exposed to a historic-based conspiracy theory. Thus, this research not only serves as the foundation for understanding this relationship, but it also aids in closing the gap in communication literature.

The existing literature illustrates the various ways that conspiracy theories garner prominence. For something to be considered a conspiracy theory, it must possess specific characteristics: Either the element of surprise, the incorporation of mythical narratives or stereotypes, and/or the ability to create enemy images, draw distinctions, and establish boundary lines (Valaskivi, 2022). It is through these characteristics that algorithms continuously push and recommend content containing conspiracy theories on various social media platforms (Valaskivi, 2022). The reason for this is because the algorithm can seemingly guarantee that this type of content will garner high engagement in the form of views, likes, shares, and comments – each of which serve as indicators of a viewer's interest in consuming and engaging with content containing conspiracy theories (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.).

This study encapsulated the aforementioned findings by incorporating them into the stimulus material. The conspiracy theory video that participants were randomly exposed to contained two of the three characteristics of a conspiracy theory – it possessed an element of surprise (i.e. that the *Titanic* sank due to a coal fire, not an iceberg), and it played off the stereotype that the *Titanic* was thought to be unsinkable (Bright Side, 2018). Additionally, this stimulus mirrored the types of conspiracy theories that the algorithm presents to people as they scroll through social media. The conspiracy is dramatic, presents the information as "new findings" (Bright Side, 2018), and distorts fact from fiction by playing off the official narrative before twisting it to reflect a new agenda.

Furthermore, the current literature illustrates that content that evokes negative emotions are more likely to prompt the viewer to adjust their behavioral patterns (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004). As a result, previous research indicates that popular conspiracy theories tend to target negative emotions (Carrasco-Farré, 2022). In contrast, existing literature also

discovered that content that elicits positive emotions are more likely to act as a cue for an individual to explore the environment that prompted that emotion (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004).

The present study took these previous findings into account and further tested them. This was achieved by testing for both positive and negative emotions that were elicited by a specific, historic-based conspiracy theory. In so doing, this study aids in closing the gap in the literature as it demonstrates how popular conspiracy theories, such as the *Titanic* coal fire, can evoke greater levels of positive emotion versus greater levels of negative emotion.

Lastly, existing literature reveals the ways in which individuals engage with information. People can either actively pursue information, known as information seeking, or they can passively encounter information, known as information scanning (Lewis, 2017; Niederdeppe et al., 2007). En masse, it is more common for individuals to engage in information scanning since humans are notorious cognitive misers (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998). Therefore, the pursuit of information has become more motivationally driven since people are perpetually bombarded with information through social media (Skurka & Nabi, 2023), ergo, the need to actively search for information is significantly reduced.

The present study sought to further understand information seeking and information scanning by testing how conspiracy theories influence the ways in which individuals engage with information. The objective was to determine whether watching a conspiracy theory video about the sinking of the *Titanic* causes participants to experience greater levels of positive or negative emotion, thus, determining whether greater levels of positive or negative emotion lead to information seeking or information scanning behavior.

In the end, the research yielded enlightening results – a relationship does, indeed, exist between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and the ways in which individuals engage with information.

5.1 Understanding the Results

5.1.1 Historic-Based Conspiracy Theories and Positive Emotion

With the *RMS Titanic* serving as the epicenter of this research, the results illustrate that individuals who are exposed to a conspiracy theory video about the sinking of the *Titanic* are more likely to experience greater levels of positive emotion than those who watch a fact-based video about the sinking of the *Titanic*, supporting H1a. The practical significance of the results for H1a show that the medium effect size of positive emotion has the potential to apply to research outside of this study as it demonstrates how historic-based conspiracy theories possess the ability to evoke positive emotions from individuals. This indicates how positive emotion serves as a means of captivating an audience through interest, curiosity, and surprise.

In many ways, this revelation correlates with what can be deemed as the dopamine effect, how social media provides users with continuous positive sensations – such as pleasure – through content, views, likes, and shares (Thangavel, 2024). The connection to dopamine harkens back to how false information within conspiracy theories triggers epistemic emotions, such as interest (Weeks, 2023) or surprise (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023). Furthermore, this illustrates how conspiracy theories harness the element of surprise in order to procure positive emotional responses from viewers and increase their engagement with this content. As a result, this finding also illustrates how the sensationalism and uniqueness of conspiracy theories evoke feelings of interest and surprise that proceed to spark the curiosity and desire to learn more about the historic event addressed within the conspiracy theory.

5.1.2 Historic-Based Conspiracy Theories and Negative Emotion

Moreover, the results of this research demonstrate that H1b was not supported, and that the effect size was relatively small. In the end, participants who watched the conspiracy theory video did not experience greater levels of negative emotion as compared to those who watched the fact-based video. Interestingly, this provides a greater understanding of the types of emotions that are evoked by conspiracy theories. Even though existing literature highlights how negative emotions are commonly evoked by conspiracy theories (Carrasco-Farré, 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Weeks, 2023), the present research reveals that positive emotions are just as likely to be elicited by watching a conspiracy theory about a historic event.

5.1.3 Positive Emotion: Information Seeking and Information Scanning

Previous literature found that conspiracy theories that elicit negative emotional responses are likely to cause the viewer to adjust their behavior (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004). However, the findings from the present study indicate that conspiracy theories that elicit greater levels of positive emotional responses are equally likely to prompt an individual to alter their behavior. This adds dimension to the dynamics of understanding people's behavior in the digital media landscape as it illustrates the impact that positive emotion can have on the ways in which individuals engage with the information they encounter online (Weeks, 2023). If an individual stumbles upon a conspiracy theory that makes them feel positive emotions, they are more likely to adjust their behavior by either deciding to pay attention to the information or actively search for more information about the topic addressed within the conspiracy theory.

This form of digital media behavior was uncovered in this study through a mediation analysis which yielded results that highlight how positive emotion mediates (or influences) the relationship between the stimulus – a conspiracy theory about the *Titanic* – and information

seeking. While this study's mediation analysis yielded an explained variance of 13.2%, its practical significance may not be as strong.

Even so, this study illustrates how positive emotions in response to a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *Titanic* can influence individuals to actively search for information about the *Titanic.* This correlates with information seeking as an individual will intentionally find ways to learn, watch, and consume more content about the *Titanic* to increase their understanding of this historic event, to satisfy their desire to uncover more details about the ocean liner, to be entertained, or even alleviate boredom (Case, 2012; Lewis, 2017). As the literature further demonstrates, the desire to learn more about a topic often comes from an individual's subconscious awareness of their knowledge-gap surrounding a particular topic (Lewis, 2017). Thus, individuals will search for information in order to close the gap between their current state of knowledge and their desired state of knowledge (Van de Wijngaert, 1999).

A primary way that information seeking is conducted is on social media, as illustrated by this study (see section 5.2.3). In many ways, this finding serves as a mirror that reflects real-world behavior while also increasing the understanding of how people interact with information on social media. Encountering a piece of content that garners one's attention, sparks interest, or evokes surprise will likely propel an individual to actively search for more information about a given topic. This behavior can be derived from the curiosity and pleasure that are correlated with the positive emotions that ensue from engaging with content. When individuals encounter a video or reel that makes them feel good, it is feasible to assume that they will chase that positive feeling and search for ways in which that positive emotion can be replicated or elongated. This connects to the dopamine effect – something feels good, so an individual is more likely to want to receive that dopamine "hit" in other ways.

Additionally, positive emotions in response to a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the *Titanic* can also influence individuals to pay attention to information about the *Titanic.* This connects to information scanning and is achieved when an individual decides to break out of their routine pattern of media use (such as endless scrolling on social media) by electing to pay attention to content that they accidentally encounter online. This could be achieved when an individual stops scrolling on social media or watches a recommended and/or trending YouTube video. In either case, the individual was not actively searching for the information; however, the positive emotional experience upon noticing this content is enough for them to decide to momentarily attend to information about the *Titanic*. While this study's mediation analysis yielded an explained variance of 3.7%, the effect size is relatively small, meaning that it's practical significance may not be as strong.

Even so, this study's results demonstrate that positive emotion also mediates information scanning. While information scanning is a more passive behavior (Kelly et al., 2010), and a more common way for individuals to obtain information (Lewis, 2017), the dopamine effect also applies to this relationship. This is attributed to how individuals who passively engage with information are more likely to notice and pay attention to information that piques their interest and gains their attention (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). In a world where negativity is quite prominent on social media, encountering content that makes one feel positive can be a rarity, hence, an individual is more likely to stop scrolling on social media and passively attend to historic-based conspiracy theories that prompt interest, curiosity, and surprise. As this research discovered, this is especially prominent on social media sites – namely Instagram and TikTok – that encourage users to unwittingly fall down a rabbit hole of ceaseless scrolling.

Moreover, positive emotions' relationship with information scanning can influence an individual in different ways. For example, assume an individual elects to watch the entire conspiracy theory video about the *Titanic* and experiences a positive emotion, but decides to scroll to the next piece of media. The content was enough to spark the individual's interest and hold their attention, but it did not motivate the individual to actively search for more information about the *Titanic* and break out of their routine pattern of information exposure. However, information scanning can metamorphosize into information seeking. Since an individual must decide to attend to the information (Niederdeppe et al., 2007), there is the possibility that the individual may then be motivated to learn more about the topic. For instance, imagine an individual accidentally encounters a conspiracy theory video about the *Titanic.* The individual watches the entire video and experiences great levels of positive emotion – specifically interest, curiosity, and surprise. The spark has been ignited, and the individual begins searching for more videos about the *Titanic.* As a result, the individual breaks out of their passive, routine pattern of information exposure by actively searching for information, thus, transcending from information scanning to information seeking.

These results illuminate the polyamorous relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, positive emotion, and information engagement. A conspiracy theory about the *Titanic* is likely to elicit positive emotion, therefore, the individual is more likely to either attend to the information or actively search for more information about the infamous ocean liner. Regardless of the form of information engagement, positive emotion mediates how individuals respond to conspiracy theories about the *Titanic*.

5.1.4 Negative Emotion: Information Seeking and Information Scanning

Furthermore, the results from this study reveal that negative emotion does not mediate either information seeking or information scanning. While this finding contradicts results from existing literature (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004), it does provide the opportunity to better understand why mediation does not exist in this scenario.

A primary reason for this could be attributed to how the conspiracy theory video elicited greater positive activating emotions and greater deactivating negative emotions. Activating emotions serve as a sect of achieving emotions which can be classified across three different dimensions: Valence, arousal, and object focus (Pekrun et al., 2023). In particular, arousal refers to an activation of physiological systems, such as heart or respiration rate, and is then mirrored in an individual's feelings (Pekrun et al., 2023). When it comes to emotion, arousal is reflected by either activating (high arousal) emotions or deactivating (low arousal) emotions (Pekrun et al., 2023). Activating emotions include excitement or surprise, whereas deactivating emotions include boredom or sadness.

This illustrates how the present study yielded results that correlated with greater positive activating emotions and greater deactivating negative emotions. For example, participants were asked to gauge positive emotions that reflected activation (high arousal) while the negative emotions more closely mirrored deactivation (low arousal). The positive activating emotions included "surprise," "interest," and "enthusiasm," whereas the negative deactivating emotions included "boredom," "upset," and "sad." Therefore, since this study possessed greater deactivating emotions, it is likely that participants who felt negative emotions were not aroused by the conspiracy theory they were exposed to, hence, the results indicated that negative emotion does not mediate information seeking or information scanning.

Another reason for the lack of mediation could be attributed to the nature of the stimulus. The conspiracy theory video focused on how the *Titanic* sank, not on the deaths of her passengers. Had the conspiracy theory been about what happened to the *Titanic*'s passengers, then perhaps negative emotion would mediate information seeking and/or information scanning. For example, had the stimulus contained a conspiracy theory asserting that third class passengers were locked below decks on the *Titanic* (which has been proven false by *Titanic* historians), it is reasonable to assume that greater levels of negative emotion would have been elicited. As a result, negative emotion might mediate information seeking as individuals could want to learn about whether third class passengers were trapped below decks as the *Titanic* descended into the icy depths of the Atlantic. Furthermore, the aforementioned conspiracy theory could evoke negative emotions that cause an individual to decide to pay attention to the information within the video they accidentally encountered, hence, enabling negative emotion to mediate information scanning.

5.1.5 Historic-Based Conspiracy Theories and Political Ideology

Given previous research regarding political interpretation of conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2009), this study asked participants to indicate their political ideology in regards to how they perceive both economic and social issues. While political ideology was re-run as a covariate as part of this study's models, it was not statistically significant. In other words, political ideology did not influence the emotional responses (be they positive or negative) that participants experienced upon watching either the conspiracy theory video or the fact-based video about the sinking of the *Titanic*. Additionally, political ideology was not significant in regards to how participants engaged with information upon experiencing either positive or

negative emotions. As a result, the data for political ideology was not included in the findings of this study.

The reason behind political ideology's lack of statistical significance lies in how the *Titanic* is not strongly affiliated with politics. Unlike other historic-based conspiracy theories that have direct political affiliations – such as the death of President John F. Kennedy (Willman, 1998) – or moments in history that have underlying political affiliations – such as the death of Marilyn Monroe (Margolis, 2011) – the *Titanic* does not possess strong political undercurrents. It is not affiliated with either the Republican or Democratic party; it does not contain Conservative or Liberal agendas; it does not revolve around political figures. As a result, participants who were exposed to either the conspiracy theory video or the fact-based video about the *Titanic* experienced emotions that stemmed purely from the ship herself and the information about her. Political ideology neither influenced the level to which participants experienced positive or negative emotions, nor whether positive or negative emotions mediated information engagement.

5.2 The Contributions of this Research

By conducting an experiment, this research determined that a relationship does exist between historic-based conspiracy theories, positive emotion, and information engagement. It not only builds off findings from previous literature, but it also serves as the foundation for understanding this relationship and why it exists.

5.2.1 Positive Emotion Mediates Information Engagement

Therefore, this study contributes to the realm of communication scholarship as it further illustrates the gravitas of the phenomenon that is conspiracy theories. This research adds to the understanding of conspiracy theories by illuminating how positive emotion mediates the relationship between conspiracy theories, information seeking, and information scanning.

Emotions such as interest and surprise trigger the desire for an individual to search for, and attend to, information that pertains to the topic within the conspiracy theory.

Interestingly, these findings highlight how individuals are likely to either pay attention to, or seek information about, a topic after they are exposed to a conspiracy theory. Compared to factual information about the *Titanic*, it is intriguing to note that encountering a conspiracy theory is more likely to trigger the desire to engage with information about the *Titanic*. This is because a majority of the positive emotions within this study were activating emotions that evoked high arousal in participants (Pekrun et al., 2023). This revealed how the arousal of interest and surprise are more likely to prompt an individual to engage with information by either seeking or electing to scan information since activation "leads to cognitive alertness and facilitates mental effort underpinning cognitive and behavioral action" (Pekrun et al., 2023, p. 148). Positive activating emotions also correlate with how conspiracy theories are sensational, new, exciting, and unique (Valaskivi, 2022), thus, prompting individuals to be curious about this information and desire to further explore this media environment.

5.2.2 Why Historic-Based Conspiracy Theories Gain Engagement

Additionally, the present research further contributes to communication scholarship by indicating why historic-based conspiracy theories about the *Titanic* garner prominence – they elicit activating positive emotions that activate a dopamine response and prompt viewers to further engage with information. To address the former aspect of this assertion, in this study, the positive emotions that participants felt at greater levels were all activating emotions – namely, interest and surprise. Through this form of emotional arousal (Pekrun et al., 2023), activating emotions are more likely to prompt an individual to engage with information by either searching for it (information seeking) or attending to it (information scanning). In contrast, this research

illustrates that deactivating negative emotions are less likely to cause individuals to engage with information.

When considering information engagement, an individual can engage with information in a variety of ways. However, this is most often done on social media whereby an individual actively searches for information or elects to pay attention to information about the *Titanic*. Ergo, this study serves as a mirror for how people encounter information on social media. By randomly exposing participants to either a conspiracy theory video or a fact-based video about the *Titanic*, this study replicated how the algorithm is more likely to present users with content containing conspiracy theories (Incitement and Social Media, n.d.). Consequently, this creates a seemingly unbreakable cycle of engagement with, and an accelerating consumption of conspiracy theories. Ergo, this increases the prominence of conspiracy theories, the pursuit of a dopamine "hit," as well as the likelihood that users will begin to align with and justify the narratives presented in the conspiracy theories they consume.

Therefore, this study not only demonstrates what makes conspiracy theories so prevalent, but it contributes to the phenomenon of falsehoods as a whole. Falsehoods – such as misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories – all play off people's emotions. As a result, the present study's results imply that positive emotion can serve as a catalyst that propels individuals to engage with falsehoods by searching for information that correlates with the conspiracy theory they were exposed to. Moreover, positive emotion can entice an individual to pay attention to false information by luring them to momentarily acknowledge the details included within the conspiracy theory. While information scanning is passive in nature (Kelly et al., 2010), the decision to attend to information is enough for the individual to create a memory

trace that can recall these details with minimal prompting (Niederdeppe et al., 2007), therefore, perpetuating the internalization of false fables over verified narratives.

Thus, the aforementioned forms of information engagement serve as a caution for researchers as they demonstrate how positive emotions could be weaponized. While negative emotional responses to content can cause factions and division amongst people, positive emotional responses can be equally problematic as they encourage users to chase the dopamine effect.

5.2.3 Young Adults and Social Media

Consequently, the dopamine effect could increase a user's propensity for being on social media as the algorithm provides unending content that evokes positive emotions that are triggered by simply swiping the screen again, and again, and again (Thangavel, 2024).

This is primarily reflected by the present study's data sample. Since participants were undergraduate college students at Colorado State University, who were at least 18 years old or older, this sample is indicative of undergraduate college students at American universities, who are at least 18 years old or older. Members within this sample, and thus this population, are more likely to be on social media and utilize these platforms to obtain information. This is reflected in how participants in this study indicated that they would use Instagram and/or TikTok to engage with information about the *Titanic*. As a result, these findings closely correlate with how this specific population would emotionally respond to and engage with information about the *Titanic* upon exposure to a conspiracy theory about the ocean liner.

5.2.4 The Conspiracy Mindset

Furthermore, this study also yielded results that provide a better understanding of the conspiracy mindset. To reiterate, a conspiracy mindset is associated with disliking powerful

groups in society and instead viewing them as responsible for negative political and economic events (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). While the *Titanic* is not a political historic event, the findings from this research illustrate how researchers can further conceptualize the conspiracy mindset phenomenon.

This study illustrated how exposure to historic-based conspiracy theories about the *Titanic* evokes greater levels of positive emotion, thus, influencing individuals to engage with information by actively searching for it or deciding to attend to it. Since the conspiracy mindset can connect to motivated reasoning (Kahan, 2023), this research demonstrates how individuals can search for/attend to information that fits within their desire to alter their understanding of a specific topic (Kahan, 2023). As a result, this study's findings highlight how positive emotion fosters information engagement, potentially decreasing an individual's propensity for possessing a conspiracy mindset. The study also provides room for future research to be conducted on the conspiracy mindset (see section 5.4).

5.3 Critical Analysis

Even though this study does yield enlightening results that contribute to communication scholarship, this research is not without limitations. While measures were taken to reduce their prominence, limitations were present in the study's stimulus and sample, as well as the historic event that served as the epicenter of this research.

5.3.1 Instrument Limitations

Limitations associated with the study's instruments revolve around how the survey's questions may have been interpreted by the participants. If a participant misinterpreted what a question is asking, this may have provided false data for the variable that the question measured, be it knowledge about the *Titanic*, emotion, or information engagement.

To account for this limitation, the researcher of this study took a graduate-level course on survey design to learn how to write questions in a manner that reduced the likelihood of participant misinterpretation. Furthermore, the post-condition survey was pre-tested with peers (i.e. fellow graduate students) to determine whether the questions were interpreted as intended. The pre-testing revealed that the questions were interpreted as intended and that the video randomization feature worked properly.

Even so, a limitation associated with this study revolves around its higher emphasis on positive activating emotions and negative deactivating emotions. To provide a better balance of activating and deactivating emotions, this study should have included more activating negative emotions – such as suspicion and frustration (anger and irritation were already included). This would have provided a better indication of how participants were emotionally aroused after watching either the conspiracy theory video or the fact-based video.

In addition, during the data collection, it was uncovered that numerous participants only got two of the three options correct in the manipulation check of the experiment (see Appendix H, question 7). While two-out-of-three correct responses were still considered valid data, questions arose as to what may have caused participants to select an answer that did not pertain to the video that they were exposed to.

Most commonly, participants who were exposed to the fact-based video would select two options that correlated with their video and one option that correlated with the conspiracy theory video. The fact-based options that the participants should have selected included: "The *Titanic* hit the iceberg 37-seconds after the iceberg was spotted," "[m]ost passengers did not notice the impact of the iceberg," and "*Titanic* turned left to try to avoid hitting the iceberg." However, some participants who watched the fact-based video would select two of the aforementioned

options, and one of the options for the conspiracy theory video. The options that correlated with the conspiracy theory video included: “The coal fire was burning for three weeks before someone noticed it,” “[a] coal fire caused the Titanic to sink,” and “[a] journalist discovered a 30-foot long black spot on the hull of the Titanic.”

There are three possible explanations for this error. One revolves around a participant’s dedication to this study. If the participant was rushing through this experiment and did not watch the video in its entirety (despite its short length), it is likely that they missed this key information and guessed on this question.

Another possibility is that participants who watched the fact-based video were also already aware of the coal fire conspiracy theory. This could explain why participants who were exposed to the fact-based video commonly selected an incorrect response of either “[a] journalist discovered a 30-foot-long black spot on the hull of the *Titanic*” or “[a] coal fire caused the *Titanic* to sink.” Since two options include the number 30, participants could have selected “the [a] journalist discovered a 30-foot-long black spot on the hull of the *Titanic*” instead of the correct option of “[t]he *Titanic* hit the iceberg 37-seconds after the iceberg was spotted.” Again, this harkens back to whether the participants took their time to answer each question, or whether they were rushed.

In regards to incorrect answers for the conspiracy theory video check, the data revealed that the most commonly selected incorrect options were “*Titanic* turned left to try to avoid hitting the iceberg” or “[m]ost passengers did not notice the impact of the iceberg.” A possible explanation as to why participants selected these options revolves around how they connect to, arguably, common knowledge about the *Titanic*. However, this explanation may not be as likely as the question specifically stated that “[s]ome of these details were included in your video.

Select three details that you remember from your video." Once again, this harkens back to whether the participants took their time to answer each question, or whether they were rushed.

Another instrumental limitation pertains to the stimulus itself. Initially, the researcher proposed to pull both a fact-based video and a conspiracy theory video from the same source, namely Bright Side. The intention behind this was to ensure that the videos were edited in a similar nature, ensuring that the only aspect that was manipulated was the information within each video. However, upon scouring YouTube for a purely factual *Titanic* video from Bright Side, it was deemed nearly impossible as each video contained some element of misinformation – be it in the auditory information or in the visual information – namely how the sinking of the *Titanic* was animated.

Therefore, the stimulus instead consisted of a fact-based video from the History Channel (2024) and a conspiracy theory video from Bright Side (2018). As a result, participants were exposed to videos that were vastly different in both the nature of the information, how the information was presented, and how the video was edited. It may have been evident to participants that the fact-based video was purely factual through its inclusion of historians, narration, and professional-quality animation of the *Titanic*. Similarly, it is likely that participants may have been aware that the conspiracy theory video was covering a conspiracy theory. Even though the words "conspiracy theory" were never uttered in the segment that participants were exposed to, this may have been implied through the narrator's tone/inflection, the background music, as well as how the video was edited (Bright Side, 2018).

While the aforementioned elements were limitations, they enhanced the authenticity of this research. By using stimuli from YouTube videos, the realistic nature of this experimental manipulation adds external validity to this study's findings. The replication of the type of content

that individuals inadvertently encounter on social media is something that a controlled experimental environment would not encapsulate as easily.

Lastly, it is possible that an instrumental limitation lies in how participants may have been aware of the coal fire conspiracy theory prior to entering the experiment due to its prominence on social media. However, it is unlikely that prior exposure to this conspiracy theory significantly impacted a participant's responses as they could still be interested in or surprised by this conspiracy theory and desire to learn more about it.

5.3.2 Data Sampling Limitations

Limitations surrounding data primarily revolved around its sample. Since participants were undergraduate students at Colorado State University, the results are more indicative of how people within this demographic (educated, young, American college students) will respond to historic-based conspiracy theories. This population is highly familiar with the type of media that was tested in this experiment – namely conspiracy theories and their presence on social media. Undergraduates tend to possess an affinity for social media; hence, it is likely that they frequently encounter conspiracy theories, misinformation, and fake news online. Therefore, it is feasible to assume that some participants may have been aware of the coal fire conspiracy theory as they may have already watched the Bright Side (2018) video on YouTube. Additionally, it is possible that some participants may have been able to discern that the conspiracy theory video was, in fact, a conspiracy theory – especially students who are studying journalism and are taught how to identify falsehoods.

Consequently, these results do not strongly indicate how individuals who are not educated, young, American college students would respond to historic-based conspiracy theories. For example, the results do not reflect how the elder generation would emotionally respond to or

engage with information about the *Titanic* upon exposure to either a conspiracy theory video or a fact-based video. Since the elder generation might be more aware of the factual story of the *Titanic*, it would be interesting to determine whether they would have a greater positive or negative emotional response to the conspiracy theory video versus the fact-based video. Additionally, since the elder generation may not understand social media as well as the younger generation, it is feasible to assume that they would search for information about the *Titanic* by reading a book or by talking (in-person) to others. Future research could employ this study and instead sample this population.

Furthermore, this study's results did not sample individuals who are not highly educated. As a result, the results do not indicate how this population would respond to a conspiracy theory video about the *Titanic* as opposed to a fact-based video about the *Titanic*. However, it is possible to assume that those who are not highly educated may possess a stronger conspiracy mindset, ergo, increasing a positive emotional response to the conspiracy theory. While it is feasible to believe that this would prompt individuals to seek information about the *Titanic*, future research would need to determine how this population would search for information, whether it is on social media or by talking (in-person) to others.

5.3.3 Selected Historic Event

Another limitation is in regards to the historic event that served as the research's epicenter. While the *Titanic* is arguably the most popular maritime disaster, and while previous literature reveals that it is the third most known/recognizable word in the English language (Butler, 2012), it is still a niche historic event. As a result, there are possible factors that can be attributed as to why participants experienced greater levels of positive emotion as compared to negative emotion.

One explanation revolves around the amount of time that has passed since the *Titanic* sank. With 113 years passing since the ocean liner disappeared beneath the surface, it is likely that people in the modern day are more fascinated with the event than they are scarred by it. Had this experiment been conducted closer to when the *Titanic* sank, it is more likely that participants would experience negative emotions regardless of whether they were exposed to the conspiracy theory video or the fact-based video.

Another aspect of the limitation of time is the ever-increasing glamorization of the *Titanic*. With documentaries, films, musicals, and YouTube videos all focusing on the *Titanic*, she has become less of a historic figure and more of an icon. Once again, there is a separation from the reality of her sinking and what is seen on the screen. People can watch simulations of the *Titanic*'s sinking (Titanic: Honor and Glory, 2024), and then click on the next YouTube video.

Furthermore, despite the *Titanic*'s death toll, her sinking is arguably not as horrific as other moments in history, such as the events of 9/11 or the Holocaust. Had this study utilized either of the aforementioned historic events as its epicenter, it is likely that participants would have overwhelmingly experienced greater levels of negative emotion. This could be attributed to the recency of 9/11, the passed-down knowledge of the Holocaust, as well as the awareness that individuals may have to conspiracy theories that claim that both events never occurred.

Moreover, the *Titanic* is not an inherently divisive historic event. The majority of people can agree that the *Titanic* sank because she hit an iceberg. In contrast, there is likely to be more division amongst people regarding the true cause of death for Marilyn Monroe, President John F. Kennedy, and Diana, the Princess of Wales.

While any of the aforementioned historic events could have been the epicenter of this research, *Titanic* was selected for a reason. A majority of historic-based conspiracy theories possess a political element and can cause political division. As a result, it could be more challenging to determine whether the emotional response was attributed to the conspiracy theory or an individual's political affiliation. Indeed, there are conspiracy theories about the *Titanic* that possess political undertones; however, the coal fire conspiracy theory that was used for this study focused solely on a narrative that runs counter to the official report of what cause the *Titanic* to sink. This makes the *Titanic* an important event to study because it provides the opportunity to uncover the dynamics of digital media behavior within the social media environment without having politics contaminate how people emotionally respond to conspiracy theories.

Ergo, the *Titanic* was the perfect vessel to conduct this research. Not only is she a historic event that aids in closing the gap in communication literature, but findings connected to conspiracy theories about the ocean liner demonstrate how people emotionally respond to, and engage with, information about historic-based conspiracy theories that do not possess political underpinnings.

5.4 Future Research

As a result, this study paves the way for future research to be conducted on the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement.

5.4.1 Research on Other Historic Events

As briefly addressed earlier (see section 5.3.3), future research could employ the same framework that was used in this study and apply it to a different historic event. For example, future research could test emotional responses and information engagement as they pertain to conspiracy theories about more recent historic events, such as 9/11. These results would likely

yield greater levels of negative emotions, providing an additional layer to the understanding of how emotion mediates between conspiracy theories and information engagement.

The same could be done in regards to a controversial death of a beloved figure. Future research could highlight a conspiracy theory about the death of Marilyn Monroe and determine the ways in which emotion and information engagement were influenced. In this type of study, future research could also seek to test whether the presented conspiracy theory creates division amongst participants. To do so, using a focus group as a method of choice might be apt. Incorporating the conspiracy theory characteristic of creating enemy images, drawing distinctions, and establishing boundary lines (Valaskivi, 2022) would aid in illuminating the power of conspiracy theories and how this characteristic, in particular, can evoke greater levels of emotional responses that can negatively impact human-to-human relationships.

5.4.2 Research on the Conspiracy Mindset

Furthermore, future research can be done on whether greater levels of emotion (be they positive or negative) influence information engagement and, thus, the conspiracy mindset. Future research could determine whether participants are receptive to believing the conspiracy by measuring for believability and exposing participants to other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994). Believability could also be measured by determining whether participants believe a certain genre of conspiracy theories (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019), for example historic-based conspiracy theories versus political conspiracy theories.

5.4.3 Research on the Depth of Processing

Moreover, future research on this topic can target depth of processing by determining how participants process the information they are exposed to – be it fact-based or conspiracy-based. While this could be achieved in various ways, a rudimentary option revolves around the

Heuristic Systematic Information Processing Model (HSM) (Todorov et al., 2022). Since this cognitive model aids in studying persuasion and depth of processing (Todorov et al., 2022), it can help future researchers understand whether individuals shallowly or deeply process the information within conspiracy theories. This can be achieved by deciphering whether a participant processes the information systematically or heuristically (Todorov et al., 2022). Not only does this connect back to existing literature on how conspiracy theories are easier to cognitively process (Bago et al., 2022), but it further highlights why conspiracy theories garner believability amongst the masses. HSM can also be employed to understand how deeply individuals engage with information. Systematic processing could be tested as a mediating variable for information scanning whereas heuristic processing could be tested as a mediating variable for information seeking.

Similar to HSM, future research could utilize dual processing theory to determine how participants process the information within conspiracy theories. This could provide a better understanding of the human cognition as researchers could decipher whether participants use system 1 (which is affect, automatic, experiential, intuitive, and narrative-based) or system 2 (which is analytical, deliberative, logical, slow, and verbally-based) to process false information (Djulbegovic et al., 2012). In so doing, future research could address whether participants seek information to learn more about the conspiracy theory by either trying to prove its plausibility or disprove its accuracy.

Furthermore, future research could take the present study and connect it to information processing models, such as RISP or LC4MP (see section 2.5.4). New research could focus on the *Titanic* (or an alternate historic event, if desired), and test information engagement models by

incorporating emotion into these models. This could be achieved by highlighting the ways in which emotion influences how people engage with, encounter, and perceive information.

5.4.4 Research on Other Genres of Conspiracy Theories

Lastly, future research can take the results of this study and apply them to conspiracy theories that are not based on historic events. Communication research is filled with scholarship pertaining to political (Porter & Wood, 2022) and health-based falsehoods (van der Linden, 2022), thus, future research could add to the existing knowledge on these phenomena by determining the influence of emotion on said genres of conspiracy theories. Future research could uncover whether emotion – be it positive or negative – mediates the relationship between conspiracy theories and susceptibility; conspiracy theories and believability; and, of course, conspiracy theories and information engagement. Once again, future research could connect any of these findings to the depth of information processing.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The *RMS Titanic*, one of the largest man-made objects ever made, permanently resides at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean in a broken, tattered heap of debris. For over 100 years, her story lives on in both fact and fiction. Now, *Titanic* lives on in the findings of this research.

With conspiracy theories spreading about the sinking of the *Titanic*, the goal of this research was to determine the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. After conducting an experiment whereby participants were exposed to either a fact-based video or a conspiracy theory video about the *Titanic*'s sinking, it was determined that a relationship does exist between the aforementioned variables. In particular, the research illustrated how positive emotions were experienced at greater levels by participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory video, thus, influencing how they engage with information by either actively seeking information about the *Titanic* (information seeking) or deciding to pay attention to information about the *Titanic* (information scanning). This research contributes to the existing scholarship on this phenomenon as it aids in closing the gap in the communication literature by focusing on conspiracy theories about a historic event. Additionally, this research exemplifies how positive emotion mediates historic-based conspiracy theories, information seeking, as well as information scanning by illustrating how positive emotions spark surprise, cause curiosity, and incite interest.

Not only do these findings serve as the foundation for future research to be conducted on this phenomenon, but the results also act as a cautionary tale – much like the *Titanic* herself. The belief in an official narrative can easily be lost if people fall for the enticing sensationalism and grandeur of conspiracy theories. If researchers do not heed the impact that conspiracy theories

have on emotion and information engagement, the truth of a historic event could lie at the bottom of the ocean – forgotten and eroding away more and more with each new conspiracy theory. Like the *RMS Titanic*, this study serves as a way for communication scholarship to expand and for research on the relationship between historic-based conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement to go on and on.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment – SONA Initial Mass Email

Hello,

If you are receiving this email, it is because one or more of your instructors, in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication, has registered you to participate in academic research for the chance to earn extra credit through the SONA system.

By fully completing studies in the SONA system, you can earn extra credit for any JTC class that you are enrolled in that uses the SONA system. You only have to take the study once to get the extra credit for every class. You can earn this extra credit by participating in the following study.

Title: Speculative Narratives.

Online survey → Open until February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. MST

Description: The goal of this study is to understand the relationship between conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. It will take at least 10 minutes to complete the entire study. Participants will remain anonymous, and this study will not collect your personal information. Participation is completely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please do so sooner than later. Participation is on a first come, first served basis, and the study will close on February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m.

Appendix B: Recruitment – SONA Reminder Mass Email

Hello,

Thank you to those who have completed this study, we appreciate your time. For those of you who have not completed this study, there is still time to do so. But don't hesitate. This study will be closing on February 19th and there are limited chances available to complete this survey.

By fully completing studies in the SONA system, you can earn extra credit for any JTC class that you are enrolled in that uses the SONA system. You only have to take the survey once to get the extra credit for every class. You can earn this extra credit by participating in the following study.

Title: Speculative Narratives.

Online survey → Open until February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. MST.

Description: The goal of this study is to understand the relationship between conspiracy theories, emotions, and information engagement. It will take at least 10 minutes to complete the entire study. Participants will remain anonymous, and this study will not collect your personal information. Participation is completely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please do so sooner than later. This study will be closing on February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m.

Appendix C: Email to Professors

To Whomever this may concern,

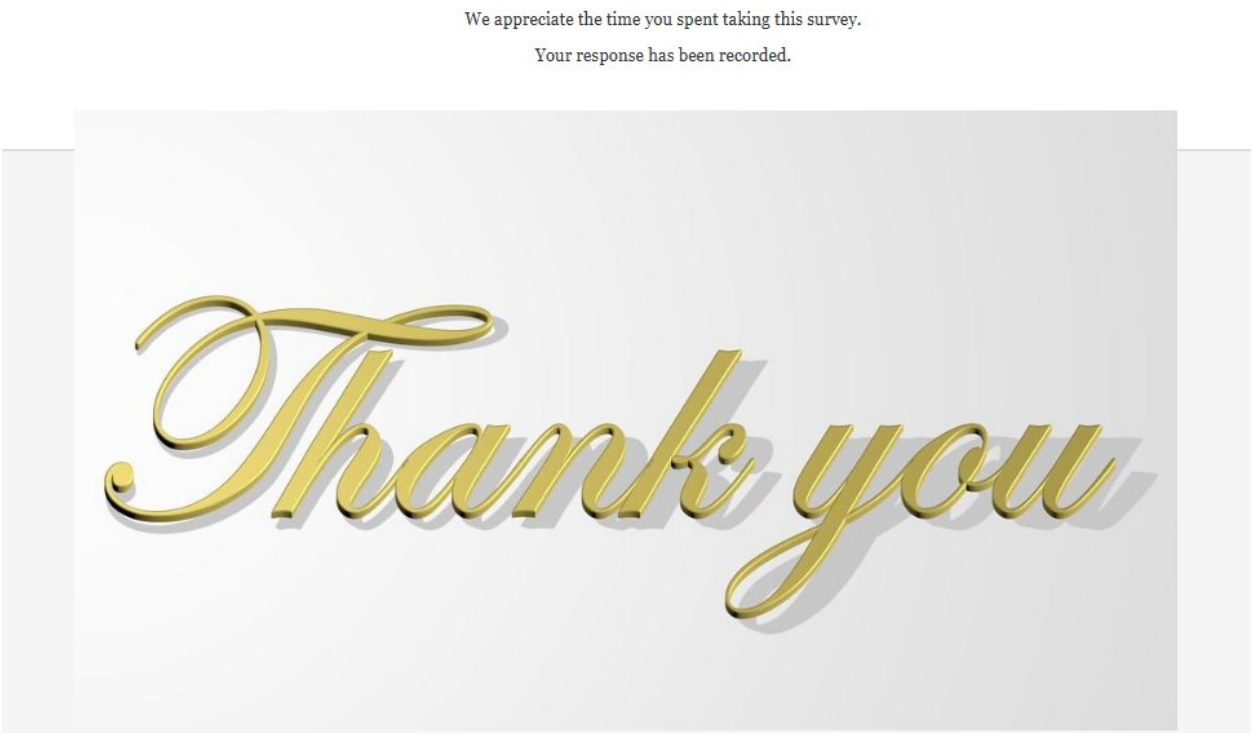
I hope this email finds you well and that you are having a lovely start to your week. My name is Megan, and I am a second-year graduate student in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication. I am currently conducting research for my master's thesis, and I was wondering if you would be willing to offer participation in my study as an extra credit opportunity for your students. I am conducting an online experiment where participants will be randomly assigned to watch either a fact-based video about the *Titanic* or a conspiracy theory-based video about the *Titanic* – the historic ship, not the James Cameron film. After watching their respective video, participants will answer a short survey (created in Qualtrics) about their emotions and how they would engage with information about the *Titanic*. The study will take less than ten minutes to complete, and participation is voluntary, consent-based, and responses will remain anonymous. To receive the extra credit, participants will need to submit proof of completion to an assignment on your Canvas page. The proof of completion is the end-of-study screen (please see attached image).

If permissible, may I please come to the beginning of one of your lectures to recruit participants for this study? The recruitment pitch will last less than five-minutes and I can also provide you with a description of the study and a link to the study to post as an announcement on your Canvas page. If an in-class pitch is not an option, would you please be willing to post an announcement on your Canvas page informing your students of the opportunity to earn some extra credit? Please let me know if either option works for you.

Best,

Megan

Proof of Completion



Information Shared with Professors Who Were Not Part of the SONA System:

The bullet points below outline how the professor could award the extra credit. Please know that the above image is for the professor's reference only and should not be included as an example on Canvas.

- Students should submit a screenshot of the end-of-study screen (see the above screenshot). This will indicate that the student was both eligible to participate in the study, and that they completed the study in its entirety.
- To award the extra credit, I recommend creating an assignment on Canvas where students upload and submit a file – in this case, the screenshot of the end-of-study screen. As far as the amount of extra credit to award, I shall leave that to the professor to decide.

Appendix D: In-Class Recruitment Script

Good day everyone,

My name is Megan, and I am a second-year graduate student in the Journalism and Media Communication Department.

I am conducting research for the Journalism Department, and I would really appreciate your help. I am very interested in the *Titanic*, and I am interested in seeing how others feel about this historic event. I am currently conducting a study where participants will watch a short video about the *Titanic* – the historic ship, not the James Cameron film. Participants will then be asked about the emotions they felt while watching the video, and how they would engage with information about the *Titanic.*

It will only take ten minutes to complete this study, and it can be done either from the comfort of your own home or in class, if your professor is open to it. By participating and fully completing this study, you automatically get extra credit. You only have to take the study once to get this extra credit.

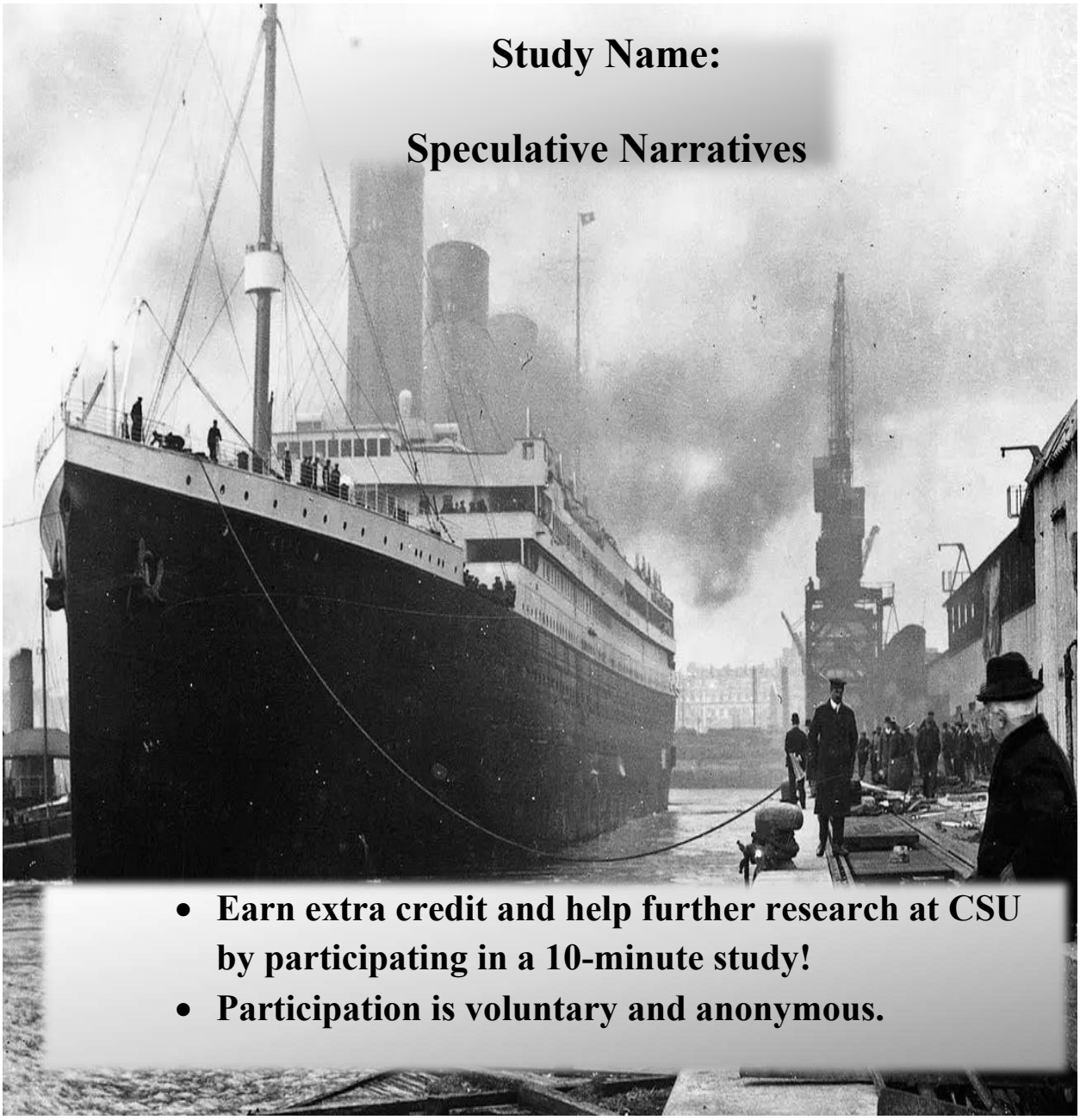
Please know the participation is voluntary and completely anonymous; your name and personal information will not be required or collected.

The study will close on February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at the email address that is listed on this PowerPoint slide.

Thank you.

Appendix E: In-Class Recruitment PowerPoint Slide



Appendix F: Canvas Announcement

Hello everyone,

My name is Megan, and I am a second-year graduate student studying Journalism and Media Communication here at CSU. I am currently conducting research for the Journalism Department, and I would really appreciate your help and participation in this study.

This research focuses on the relationship between narratives about the *Titanic*, emotion, and information engagement. The study asks participants to watch a short video about the *Titanic* (the historic ship, not the 1997 James Cameron film). Then, participants will complete a short survey that asks how they feel after watching the video and how they would engage with information about the *Titanic*.

It will take less than 10 minutes to complete the entire study. Participation is completely voluntary, and each participant will remain anonymous. Participants must be above 18-years-old and currently enrolled as an undergraduate at Colorado State University.

By participating in this study, you have the opportunity to earn **extra credit**. To earn the extra credit, you will need to fully complete the survey by answering each question. Then, take a screenshot of the end-of-survey screen. This screen will show the words "Thank you." Be sure to submit the screenshot to Canvas to earn your extra credit points.

The study will end on **February 19th, 2025**, at 11:59 p.m., so be sure to get your responses in before the deadline to earn the extra credit. If you are interested in participating, please click the following link: https://colostate.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5AqZ81KMyPWlDUO

Appendix G: Informed Consent

Project Title: Speculative Narratives

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ashley Anderson, Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Communication, Colorado State University

Co-Investigator: Megan Klane – Graduate Student, Department of Journalism and Media Communication, Colorado State University

Purpose, Procedure, and Duration: We are researchers from Colorado State University (CSU) in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication inviting you to participate in an experiment. We want to learn more about the relationship between historic events, emotions, and information engagement.

If you agree to participate in our study, you will be asked to watch a short (roughly 2-minute) video about the Titanic – the historic ship, not the James Cameron film. You will then complete a survey that asks you about the emotions you felt while watching this video, and how you would engage with information about the Titanic. The entire study will take less than ten (10) minutes to complete. We expect 128 people to participate. To participate, you must meet the following requirements.

Eligibility: You must meet the following requirements to participate in this research study:

- You must be 18 years old or older.
- You must be a current undergraduate student at Colorado State University.

Risks: If our questions make you feel uncomfortable or upset, you can skip any question you don't want to answer. You can also stop the experiment and survey at any time.

We will make every effort to safeguard your data. However, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet.

Benefits: You may not benefit personally from being in this study, but your answers could help us understand more about the relationship between historic events, emotion, and information engagement. If you are an undergraduate student currently enrolled at Colorado State University, you could also earn extra credit in applicable courses.

Alternative Opportunities: See your course syllabus or instructor for more information about alternative class credit, if you are an undergraduate student currently enrolled at Colorado State University.

Privacy and Future Use: Your responses to the research experiment and corresponding survey are anonymous. That means we won't know which responses are yours. We won't collect names, internet addresses, email addresses, or any other identifiable information.

We will not use your responses in future research or share them with other researchers.

Complaints or Concerns: If you have questions about the study, please contact the researcher using the contact information provided above. If you have any questions about your rights as a

volunteer in this research, contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu

Thank you for taking the time to consider our study. You do not have to participate in our study, but we hope you will. To ensure your responses will be included in our study, please complete the survey by Wednesday, February 19th, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. MST.

Please select an option below to indicate you read this information and you wish to participate.

I have read the informed consent form and I consent to participate in this study.

- Yes, and I verify I am at least 18 years old and a current undergraduate student at CSU. Enter the study.
- No, I am either under 18-years-old, not a current undergraduate student at CSU, or do not want to participate in the study. I will not receive extra credit.

Appendix H: Survey Questions

This appendix provides the questions that measured the participants' knowledge of what happened to the *Titanic*, their emotion(s), as well as how they would engage with information about the *Titanic*. Questions 1 and 2 focused on the informed consent form (see Appendix G) and questions 4 through 6 pertained to watching the videos.

Measuring Knowledge about the *Titanic*

Q3: The following questions will ask you about your knowledge about the RMS Titanic. These questions are focusing on the historic ship, not the James Cameron movie. How knowledgeable are you about the following Titanic facts?

	Not knowledge-able at all	Slightly knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Very knowledgeable	Extremely knowledge-able
The *Titanic sank on April 15, 1912*	○	○	○	○	○
The *Titanic* was described as "unsinkable."	○	○	○	○	○
The *Titanic* has two sister ships, the *RMS Olympic* and the *HMHS Britannic*.	○	○	○	○	○
The survivors of the *Titanic* were primarily first-class passengers.	○	○	○	○	○

Video Manipulation Check

Q7: Some of these details were included in your video. Select three details that you remember from your video.

- ☐ The coal fire was burning for three weeks before someone noticed it.
- ☐ The *Titanic* hit the iceberg 37-seconds after the iceberg was spotted.
- ☐ A coal fire caused the *Titanic* to sink.
- ☐ Most passengers did not notice the impact of the iceberg.
- ☐ A journalist discovered a 30-foot-long black spot on the hull of the *Titanic*.
- ☐ *Titanic* turned left to try to avoid hitting the iceberg.

Measuring Emotion

Q8: After watching this video, to what extent do you feel the following emotions?

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Angry	○	○	○	○	○
Interested	○	○	○	○	○
Bored	○	○	○	○	○
Surprised	○	○	○	○	○
Upset	○	○	○	○	○
Enthusiastic	○	○	○	○	○
Sad	○	○	○	○	○
Attentive	○	○	○	○	○
Irritated	○	○	○	○	○
Calm	○	○	○	○	○

Measuring Information Seeking

Q9: When people watch a video, they might want to learn more about the topic of that video, in this case, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Other times, people accidentally come across information or don't come across information at all.

Q10: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by watching a documentary about it on YouTube?

Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
○	○	○	○	○

Q11: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by watching a documentary about it on Netflix?

Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
○	○	○	○	○

Q12: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by searching for information on the Internet?

Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
○	○	○	○	○

Q13: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by reading a book about it?

Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
○	○	○	○	○

Q14: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* by asking your friends about it?

Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
○	○	○	○	○

Q15: How likely are you to actively look for information about the *Titanic* on the following social media platforms?

	Definitely will not	Probably will not	Might or might not	Probably will	Definitely will
Instagram	○	○	○	○	○
TikTok	○	○	○	○	○
X (Twitter)	○	○	○	○	○
Facebook	○	○	○	○	○
Reddit	○	○	○	○	○

Measuring Information Scanning

Q16: Imagine you accidentally encounter information about the *Titanic*. How likely is it that you would stop scrolling and notice information about the *Titanic* on the following platforms?

	Extremely unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither unlikely or likely	Somewhat likely	Extremely likely
Instagram	○	○	○	○	○
YouTube	○	○	○	○	○
TikTok	○	○	○	○	○
Online articles	○	○	○	○	○
Blog post	○	○	○	○	○

Demographics

Q17: The terms “liberal” and “conservative” may mean different things to people, depending on the kind of issue one is considering. In terms of economic issues, would you say you are:

- o Very liberal
- o Liberal
- o Somewhat liberal
- o Moderate
- o Somewhat conservative
- o Conservative
- o Very conservative

Q18: Now, thinking in terms of social issues, would you say you are:

- o Very liberal
- o Liberal
- o Somewhat liberal
- o Moderate
- o Somewhat conservative
- o Conservative
- o Very conservative

Debriefing Materials

This information was shared with participants who were randomly exposed to the conspiracy theory video.

"Before you go, it is important to share that the video you watched was a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the Titanic. A conspiracy theory is the belief that a secret incident, individual, group, or organization is responsible for an event.

The goal of this study is to determine whether conspiracy theories about historic events cause greater emotions and information engagement than facts do. Telling you that you were watching a conspiracy theory could have changed your responses and made them less authentic.

If you don't want your responses used as data/results and decide to withdraw your consent, you won't face any retribution or consequences. Please remember that you have the right to withdraw your consent at any time without facing retribution or consequences.

The conspiracy theory that you watched focused on how the Titanic sank because a coal fire weakened her hull and caused the iceberg to easily puncture through the metal. This theory is false. While there was a coal fire on the Titanic, scientists have proven that the coal fire did not weaken the Titanic's hull, and it did not cause her to sink. Even if the coal fire never started, the iceberg still would have sunk the Titanic as it compromised six of her water-tight compartments (compartments that keep the water out). The Titanic could have survived the sinking only if five of her water-tight compartments were flooded.

To learn more about how the Titanic truly sank, please feel free to visit: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Titanic.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ashley Anderson – Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Communication, Colorado State University

Co-Investigator: Megan Klane – Graduate Student, Department of Journalism and Media Communication, Colorado State University."