

## A Shot of Reality: Unmasking Discrimination, the Infodemic, and COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

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### Abstract

In this online presentation, I intend to provide an insight into developing research emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. The mutating effects of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its COVID-19 disease has seen the latter half of 2021 characterised by the (re)introduction of state-sanctioned protocols. As many countries seek to perturb community transmission rates, the imposed initiatives are all too familiar. Where daily press briefings implore compliance and the uptake of vaccinations, it is imperative to address how the growth of virus transmission exacerbates an aggressive, misinformed conspiracy movement. Describing how a lack of medical knowledge characterises emerging infectious disease outbreaks, I argue that the conspiracy mentality sows seeds of distrust and cultivates a distorted mentality. Furthermore, conspiracy theorists prove to be opportunistic; they galvanise crowds based on narratives of collective victimisation, signalling group disobedience to conform to COVID-19 health mandates and social norms. Here, conspirators relay false allegations that downplay the virus's contagiousness, capitalise upon vaccination anxieties, and make it difficult to discern the sources that dis/misinform, thus impeding a cohesive public health response. I claim that the infodemic – an overabundance of on and offline falsehoods – is weaponised by the growing amalgamation of conspiracy groups. I identify how discriminative allegations are enshrined within popular COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. This has far-reaching implications which impact the micro, meso, and macro levels of all societies. To substantiate these claims, I incorporate statistical data and refer to pertinent examples. These reflect how concealed narratives of xenophobia and race-hatred underscore conspiracy mobilisation and the infodemic movement. I conclude by advocating how our definitions of a "new normal" must consider that access to reliable sources of information needs to be framed as a fundamental human right.

**Keywords:** Conspiracy Theories; COVID-19; Dis/Misinformation; Racism; Xenophobia