UNH Research: Conspiracy Beliefs Higher Among Millennials and Trump Supporters

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DURHAM, N.H.—Is the Earth flat? Did NASA fake the moon landings? Do COVID-19 vaccinations implant microchips in people? A recent survey by the University of New Hampshire looked at the public acceptance of these types of conspiracy claims compared to statements based on scientific facts. They found only around 10% agreed with conspiracy claims and while that was low overall, it was significantly higher among certain subgroups including millennials and supporters of former President Donald Trump.

“Pseudo-scientific conspiracy claims get a lot of attention in the headlines and on social media, like Facebook and Twitter, where they are avidly shared by believers and trolls, giving the

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impression that support for such claims is growing,” said
Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology and senior fellow at
the Carsey School of Public Policy. “But we found that only nine to
12% of people agree with these claims.”

In their nationwide study, researchers asked people to respond to
a series of statements that seemed to be related to science but
were a mix of conspiracy beliefs (like vaccination microchips) right
alongside well-established basic scientific facts (like the Earth is
very old). Despite the recent mistrust and doubt in science during
the pandemic, the respondents surveyed nationwide agreed
mostly with the statements based on scientific facts, ranging from
58% for statements on human evolution, to 83% for statements
like the Earth revolving around the sun.

Researchers say conspiratorial thinking, or conspiracist ideation,
has become a prominent feature of current U.S. politics, shaping
how many people think about elections, the COVID-19 pandemic
and other issues. Researchers chose conspiracies that did not
have any overt political connections, such as Trump’s claims
about the “stolen” 2020 presidential election. Still, Trump followers
were more likely to agree with the conspiracies and less likely to
agree with basic science.

“Besides politics, age or generational patterns are prominent but it
is not clear why millennials would be more open to flat Earth and
microchip conspiracies,” said Hamilton. “One thought is that social
media could play a role with younger generations frequenting
more conspiracy-rich corners of the internet.”

Researchers point to broad anti-vaccine claims that are widely
available on social media that have been discredited in the
scientific literature. Millennial, as well as Generation Z,
respondents were also less likely to agree that vaccines have
mostly been a benefit to human health, as opposed to older
generations who have more experience with diseases like polio,
mumps and measles. Regarding claims like the implanted microchip, researchers point to the possibility that younger generations may be more accustomed to the increase in constant public and private surveillance in society. Researchers caution on any generational perceptions, noting that younger respondents were significantly more likely to agree with the scientific consensus that climate change is happening now and caused mainly by human activities.

The nationwide POLES 2021 survey, focused on science knowledge and perceptions, was supported by the National Science Foundation.

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