

Ecologies of Conspiracy Influencers: A Creator-Centered Lens on Understanding Multiplatform Strategies

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Abstract

Conspiracy influencers have become a major means of spreading health misinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has found that a small number of these influencers are responsible for a large portion of misinformation related to public health. Although there has been research on the spread of misinformation, there has been comparatively little on the strategies conspiracy influencers use to spread their message across platforms. To better understand these strategies, we conducted a cross-sectional study of 55 influencers, analyzing their platform usage, audience size, account creation date, and content originality. Our results indicate that these influencers use multiple platforms to circumvent algorithmic discrimination and deplatforming, tailor their content to monetization channels and that despite the rise in popularity of unmoderated platforms, there's still a reliance on moderated platforms to build an audience. Our findings can inform strategies to combat the spread of health misinformation in the online ecosystem.

Introduction

In the health misinformation space, influencers have emerged as one of the main ways that people are exposed to health conspiracy theories (Baker 2022). Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the “Disinformation Dirty Dozen” were identified as playing an outsized role in the spread of health conspiracy theories related to anti-mask, anti-vaccine and other topics detrimental to public health (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021a). While there has been ample work exploring how misinformation and disinformation narratives spread across different online spaces (Wilson and Starbird 2020), there has been comparatively little work done exploring how conspiracy influencers strategize to take advantage of the multiplatform online ecosystem. Further, conspiracy influencers are like other online influencers; their impact and audience waxes and wanes over the course of their careers (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). Understanding how conspiracy influencers engage with their audiences across the multiplatform environment and what the lifecycle of conspiracy influencers looks like is important for two reasons. First, to be effective, strategies that seek to mitigate the harms of misinformation will need to spread across

multiple platforms and take into account how influencers use resiliency tactics across multiple platforms (Bak-Coleman et al. 2022). Second, the effectiveness of interventions will likely be different, depending on the strategies influencers are using and the phase of their career they are in.

To better understand how conspiracy influencers engage their audiences across multiple platforms and the stages of conspiracy influencers effectiveness, we are taking two approaches. We are taking a cross-sectional approach by taking a core set of health misinformation influencers and capturing what platforms they are on, the size of their audience on those platforms, when they opened their accounts, and if the content is unique or replicated from another site. This study fills a gap in the literature by combining both a creator-centric lens and a multiplatform approach to the study of the spread of misinformation. By combining these approaches we will better understand the relationship between conspiracy theories, conspiracy influencers, monetization tactics, and the spread of audiences. With this in mind, future work will be able to better identify when existing mitigation strategies might be more or less effective, and define the design space for developing more interventions that work across multiple platforms. Ultimately, by contextualizing the role of conspiracy influencers in spreading misinformation to their audiences, we can open up further avenues for stemming the tide of misinformation at the creator level to pair with strategies that focus on content and consumer level interventions.

Previous Work

Conspiracy Theory Influencers We focus on three conspiracies: COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, 5G toxicity, and climate change denialism. COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies and 5G toxicity both exist within the larger wellness conspiracy space, also known as the alternative health industry (Baker 2022). Baker’s work highlights how the wellness industry is already a major space for influencers and is particularly susceptible to misinformation and conspiracism given its emphasis on personal testimonies and anecdotes, often rooted in countercultural ideals. With the COVID-19 pandemic arose a remix of previous established conspiracies, including about anti-vaccination. The Center for Countering Digital Hate’s (CCDH) Disinformation Dozen (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021a) tracked and re-

ported on twelve anti-vaxxer influencers who were responsible for, and profited from (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021b), two-thirds of the content circulating Facebook and Twitter. Wellness conspiracies can also meld into each other. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 5G toxicity not only saw a surge, but older developed narratives of 5G (and general) radio waves toxicity were remixed to a narrative that 5G radio waves were transmitting or activating COVID-19 (Downing et al. 2020). We chose to focus on these three different conspiracy theories to account for any variation in strategy based on different dynamics such as longevity of theory or topic area of theory. In our report we build upon lists of identified influencers in each space and investigate different influencer strategies across across COVID-19, 5G toxicity, and climate change conspiracies to answer our first research question:

RQ1: - How do conspiracy influencers' content strategies change as their audience size grows and how do they compare to those of regular influencers? Are there variations depending on the type of conspiracy theory?

Multiplatform Ecosystems

Influencers and users exist within online ecosystems with a suite of apps and affordances (DeVito, Walker, and Birnholtz 2018). Multiplatform techniques range from sharing duplicate content across multiple platforms to embedding and cross-referencing content in complementary ways. Influencers utilize multiplatform techniques as a labor practice to curate their experiences and develop their full identity (Glatt 2022). Influencers also employ multiplatform strategies to spreadbet their labor in order to mitigate risk and avoid becoming too heavily dependent on any one platform (Glatt 2022). Multiplatform strategies can also be strategically weaponized by malicious actors. Starbird and Wilson found disinformation campaign actors utilized platforms across “mainstream” and “alternative” ecosystems to sustain their campaign (Wilson and Starbird 2020). They also found through tracing flows across platforms showcased more subtle ways campaign actors, including state-sponsored, were able to shape disinformation narratives. Similarly, Lewis found “alternative” influencers not only are able to move from mainstream to extreme content across platforms, but also create an “alternative influence network” of influencers, cross promoting each other to create a holistic ecosystem (Lewis 2018). Contextualizing conspiracy influencers within their ecosystem, instead of within a single platform is necessary to understand their full influence and to develop effective interventions. Our work builds on previous multiplatform approaches by taking a creator-centered, quantitative approach to understanding how size of following and type of conspiracy impact where and how conspiracy influencers share their content online.

RQ2: How do conspiracy influencers use multiplatform strategies to build resiliency, engage their audience and monetize their influence as their audience size grows?

Methods

Data Collection

Data was collected for 55 influencers across three conspiracy topics, “COVID-19 vaccines are dangerous,” “5G is toxic,” and “climate change denial”. Using different conspiracies ensures that dynamics identified are common across different kinds of conspiracies rather than an artifact of one conspiracy’s characteristics (see Table 1).

Influencers were first identified through studies highlighting specific topics (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021a) (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021c) followed by snowball sampling to identify other influencers in the space. Snowball sampling was done by using a content marketing platform called Buzzsumo that allows for identification of influencers within a content space (BuzzSumo 2019). We identified influencers across four different categories based on their count of aggregated followers: Nano (1,000-10,000), Micro (10,000-100,000), Macro (100,000 - 1,000,000), and Mega (1,000,000+) (scale categories based on Zarei et al. (Zarei et al. 2020)). We identified a range of influencers with different backgrounds, specifically across race, gender identity, and affiliation to an institution to account for any variations that might arise from influencers identity characteristics. We kept our scope of influencers to those who interact in English across platforms. The set of influencers include those who are people of color (n = 4), female (n = 7), and part of or lead an institution (n = 14).

For each, information was collected at the platform level to develop a view of their ecosystem footprint. Information collected includes: what platforms on which they have accounts, the platform type, date of account start, number of followers, if the account is actively posting. We define “platform” as any dedicated space online where an influencer is posting content or selling materials. This includes online spaces such as personal websites, social media sites (like Twitter or Parler), and private messaging groups that allow for large group broadcasting (such as Telegram). In addition to collecting information about what platforms these influencers are on and how many followers they have on these platforms, we aimed to find number of last known followers an influencer had on a suspended account and the oldest available crawled page for the influencer’s account on online archives (i.e., Wayback Machine). This allowed us to estimate the account age for the oldest account per influencer, thereby allowing us to approximate the amount of time a conspiracy influencer has been on the internet.

Finally, to study how content publishing strategies might differ based on content moderation paradigms adopted by platforms, we classified platforms into two broad categories: platforms with stated policies against misinformation and misrepresentation (referred to as “misinformation moderating” in short), and platforms without any stated policies and thereby largely unmoderated against misinformation (referred to as “misinformation unmoderating” in short) (Buckley and Schafer 2022; Mukherjee 2022).

Data was collected between June 2022 and January 2023, and do not reflect changes (such as more recently adopted platforms or account closures) since then.

Table 1: Breakdown of Influencer Category

Topic	# of Influencers	Nano	Micro	Macro	Mega
COVID-19	16	2	5	5	4
5G	20	3	6	8	3
Climate Change	24	2	3	6	13

Data Analysis

We examine how the number of platforms where conspiracy influencers are active on varies with the size of their audience using the Kruskal-Wallis test. A post-hoc Dunn’s test was conducted to do a pair-wise comparison of groups. We examine how the number of platforms where conspiracy influencers are active on varies with whether they have received an account suspension in the past using a Mann-Whitney U test. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all tests and the data analysis was conducted in the software R version 4.2.2 (R Core Team 2022). Further qualitative insights based on the content posted on each of the platform. We used thematic analysis, including memoing and constant comparison during the analysis process.

Findings & Discussion

Conspiracy Influencers are Rational Content Creators

The ability to capture attention is crucial for both mainstream influencers and conspiracy influencers, as it is what ultimately allows them to monetize their fame. Building a successful personal brand as a conspiracy influencer requires them to define a target audience, create a unique selling proposition, and provide compelling content that is relevant to that audience. For example, in the case of COVID-19 related anti-vaccine misinformation, several of the most popular influencers were physicians with active medical licenses (Frenkel 2021). While having credentials do help generate credibility with the target audience, the key to building and maintaining a loyal audience over time is having a strong and relatable personality, providing authentic and distinct content, growing a large following, and fostering engagement with that community (Ruiz-Gomez 2019; Tilton 2011). We posit that despite the dissemination of false information to their audiences, conspiracy influencers act as rational economic actors in other aspects of their strategies. Such behaviors include the utilization of multiple platforms to mitigate risks and tailoring content to specific monetization channels.

Conspiracy Influencers spread bet their labor across platforms One way in which conspiracy influencer appear to behave that mimics the behavior of content creators and influencers online is that they tend to spread bet their labor across various platforms, taking advantage and adapting to platform affordances. The practice of utilizing multiple platforms for content dissemination is a prevalent tactic among mainstream content creators, likely stemming from concerns over potential algorithmic invisibility and the sudden loss of

a particular platform (Glatt 2022). This diversification strategy is also adopted by conspiracy influencers, who face an added risk of deplatforming. The utilization of multiple platforms serves as a means to mitigate these risks and ensure a stable audience reach.

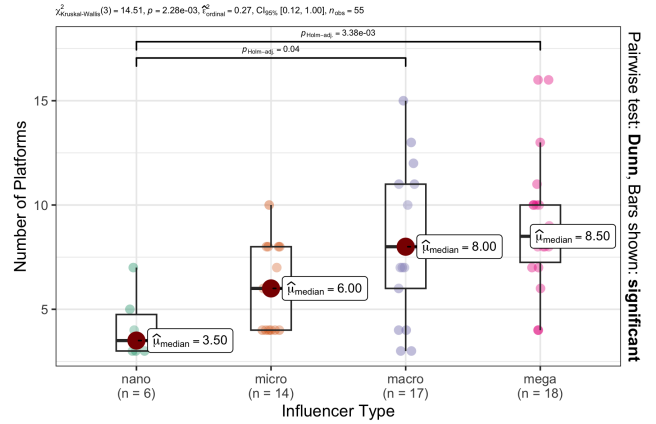


Figure 1: Comparison of Number of platforms an influencer is on with their popularity level. Bars show statistically significant difference in mean from post-hoc pairwise Dunn test.

A Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test comparing the number of platforms influencers are on to their level of popularity (cumulative following across all platforms) revealed a significant difference in the distribution of number of platforms among the influencer types (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2 = 14.264$, $DF = 3$, $P = 0.002$). fig:one shows that a post-hoc Dunn’s test further reveals that influencers with higher popularity (more than 100K total followers) are present on more platforms as compared to their peers with lower popularity levels (less than 10K total followers).

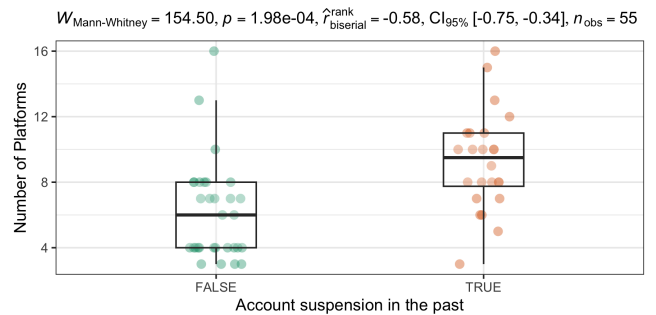


Figure 2: Comparison of Number of Platforms an influencer is on with past suspension.

We further investigated if platform diversification efforts increase based on whether an influencer has been deplatformed in the past. Fig:two shows the results of a Mann-Whitney U test comparing the number of platforms based on past account suspension. Influencers with at least 1 account suspension in the past were present on significantly higher number of publishing channels ($W = 154.5$, $P = 0.0002$).

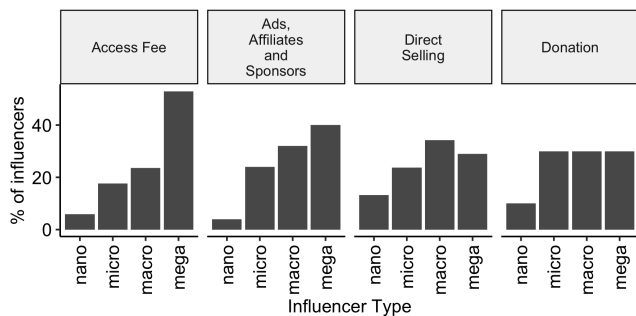


Figure 3: Comparison of types of monetization strategies adopted based on their popularity level.

Conspiracy Influencers diversify their monetization channels In order to mitigate the risk of algorithmic discrimination, lowered visibility and deplatforming, conspiracy influencers diversify their monetization channels. We group monetization channels along the following categories:

1. **Access Fee:** subscription or patronship model where audience gets access to exclusive content for a fee
2. **Ads, affiliates and sponsors:** audience attention is monetized using ads, affiliate links, or sponsored content.
3. **Direct Selling:** stores that sell goods (like supplements) or services (like one on one consultations).
4. **Donation:** donations, in fiat or cryptocurrency

In fig:three we observe that influencers with small audience sizes (Nano / Micro influencers) were more heavily dependent on donations and direct selling compared to those with larger audience sizes (Macro/Mega influencers). Moreover, we observe a growing trend of larger influencers turning towards an "exclusive content for a fee" model to avoid reliance on advertising revenues from misinformation moderating platforms where they are at risk of deplatforming.

Conspiracy Influencers adopt channel specific publishing strategies Our qualitative evaluation of cross platform behavior of conspiracy influencers showed that reposting or cross-posting behaviors are rare across mainstream platforms. Instead, we observe that Macro and Mega influencers, remix content to adopt to specific platform affordances and incentives before posting. For example, a long form interview video hosted on a platform, where misinformation is largely unmoderated, would get clipped into multiple short form videos so as to make information more consumable to a wider audience base. This aligns with the fact that the misinformation moderating platforms skewed towards larger audience bases. Where reposting or cross-posting did exist was across misinformation moderating platforms to misinformation unmoderating platforms (e.g. BitChute) (Bitchute 2021; Buckley and Schafer 2022; Mukherjee 2022) as another form of resiliency building by 'backing up' their work across platforms. Finally, we observe that influencers with larger audiences (Macro and Mega) tend to self-censor on platforms that moderate misinformation, in accordance with perceived enforcement.

Conspiracy influencers rely on moderated spaces for building an audience

Looking through our data set, a pattern emerges of how the role of niche platforms changes as an influencer's audience scales. Mega and Nano influencers are more reliant on moderated, popular platforms for large segments of their audience share compared to Micro and Macro influencers, for whom niche, unmoderated platforms play a larger role (see fig:four).

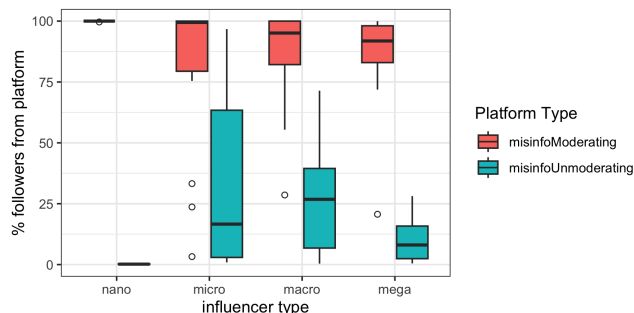


Figure 4: Comparison of provenance of audience based on platform categorization and influencer popularity level.

In spite of the growing range of platform choices emerging in the misinformation unmoderated space (Roose 2017), there remains a significant reliance on moderated platforms for audience building. When examining the role of these platforms in the ecosystem of conspiracy theories through a content-centric lens, unmoderated platforms may appear to play a large role (Velásquez et al. 2021). However, when using a creator-centric lens as employed in this study, it becomes apparent that while unmoderated platforms may serve as the origin of a lot of these conspiracy theories, it is on mainstream platforms that they are disseminated to a wider audience. This highlights the importance of utilizing multiple analytical perspectives in understanding complex and systemic issues of misinformation dissemination. Using a content-centric, or a consumer-centric, or a creator-centric lens alone would not entirely be adequate; rather, they all offer distinct insights and potential avenues for intervention.

Limitations & Conclusions

It is important to note that our dataset is limited to influencers who have yet to be fully deplatformed, thus will naturally exhibit survivorship bias. Replication of these studies is needed with larger, more diverse data sets to allow for more robust findings. These replications should include different conspiracy types (acute and chronic, different topics), languages, and geographies to identify trends that are specific to certain types of conspiracies and cultural norms. Building on the results of this project would allow us to more accurately forecast what the dynamics of misinformation spread look like across the whole online ecosystem, which would further allow us to build more effective and efficient interventions.

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