TACKLING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Executive Summary

Although Conspiracy Theories (CTs) are by no means a recent phenomenon, they do seem to have moved from the fringe to mainstream, and are often considered responsible for a range of societal ills. It is therefore important that we properly understand their role in shaping behaviour and identify possible solutions.

While there is a huge amount of literature on the possible causes of CTs and those who develop and perpetuate them, there has been relatively limited investigation into the wider public's relationship with them. The danger of only focusing on the vocal minority is that we create a skewed understanding of the issues and will fail to act in an effective way to combat misinformation across the population.

A high proportion of the general public do consider at least some of the Conspiracy Theories we asked them about to be plausible

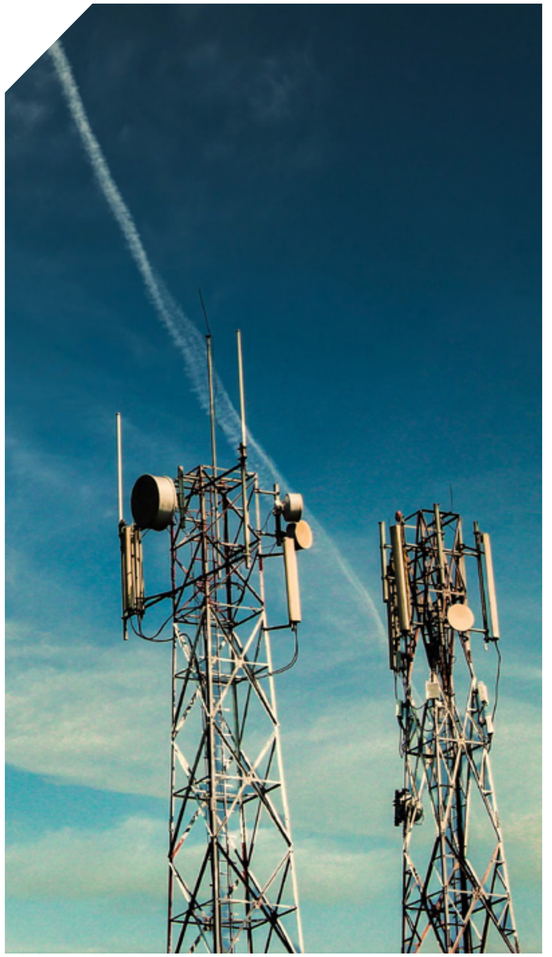
Our survey work identifies some key findings:

The general public approach individual CTs in very different ways – There is a great deal of variability for example, in terms of levels of familiarity, views on plausibility and the provoking of different emotional reactions. This suggests that each needs to be considered and addressed on its own terms.

Many people consider at least some CTs as plausible – A high proportion of the general public do consider at least some of the CTs we asked them about to be plausible: 49% of the public consider at least one out of three CTs they were asked about was somewhat or very plausible – although only 2% consider two or more of those we asked about to be 'very plausible'. This does challenge the notion that CTs are limited to a small proportion of the population: instead, it appears that large swathes of the population have some degree of belief in them.

Plausibility was highly varied between CTs – This reinforces the need for very different approaches to be taken when approaching them. For example, 40% of those familiar with the belief that Princess Diana's death in a car crash was not accidental consider it plausible, versus just 2% of those familiar with the belief that 5G mobile phone towers are responsible for the spread of COVID-19 consider it to be plausible.

Plausibility is nuanced with a dose of scepticism – The majority of the general public appear to have a healthy cynicism about the CTs we asked about. For example, much of the time people would consider that the CT we were asking about was 'not strictly accurate but is a reasonable challenge to official explanations'. Again, there is real variation with 48% (of those familiar with the CT) considering this applied to the notion that the 2008 financial crisis was the result of collusion between bankers and unethical politicians as being not strictly accurate but representing important issues to 13% (of



those familiar with the CT) considering the same for 5G mobile phone towers being responsible for the spread of COVID-19. The overall theme however is clear, belief in any one CT is not a binary issue: people appear willing to accept a degree of nuance and hold uncertainty concerning the topic.

Awareness is high for some CTs, but engagement is low – We found widespread familiarity with at least some CTs, with 94% being familiar with one or more theories that we asked them about (although some are less well known). In contrast, we found, of the CTs we asked about, the percentage who actually created and posted new content on any of the topics was never more than 3%, suggesting that the response of the wider population to these theories may well be less absorbed than what is perhaps seen from a smaller minority of the more vocal segment of the population who are proselytising these CTs.

Varying emotional responses will require different strategies – The way in which different CTs are perceived and engaged with also varies. We found each CT elicits quite different emotional responses and attitudes, again suggesting we need to be cautious in assuming there is a single way to address them.

Social media is not the only source – Contrary to popular opinion, we found that while technology (and social media specifically) has a role to play in perpetuating CTs, our data suggests that this is not the only source of information about CTs, and often not the main one either. People are more likely to say they heard about some CTs from a 'mainstream' news source (such as TV or a broadsheet or tabloid newspaper) than they are from a social media channel. We therefore need to be careful about locating technology as the source of the problem and indeed as the sole focus for possible solutions.

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Overall, we see CTs as something which are a familiar part of human interaction offering a means of emotional and meaningful engagement with others, speculating about possibilities and challenging official explanations. There are clearly and inevitably relatively small segments of the population who accept a much more literal reading of CTs and will be actively promoting them. But we need to take care extrapolating from this small group as it does not necessarily represent the way in which the majority of the population engage with CTs.

We consider that in terms of solutions for the wider population, there is a case to be made for marketers and policymakers to be willing to engage in the conversation about the CT, perhaps commissioning independent studies to examine the suggestions being made. Essentially, we are proposing making organisations part of the dialogue.

We see time and again that there is always a challenge about what are ‘facts’, how they should be used and what conclusions can be drawn from that. To deny that and attempt to close-down discussion simply drives the issue underground and away from public discourse where no influence is possible. This inevitably leads to worse outcomes than allowing the issues, however bizarre and enraging we find them, to be part of the wider public discourse.

Contents

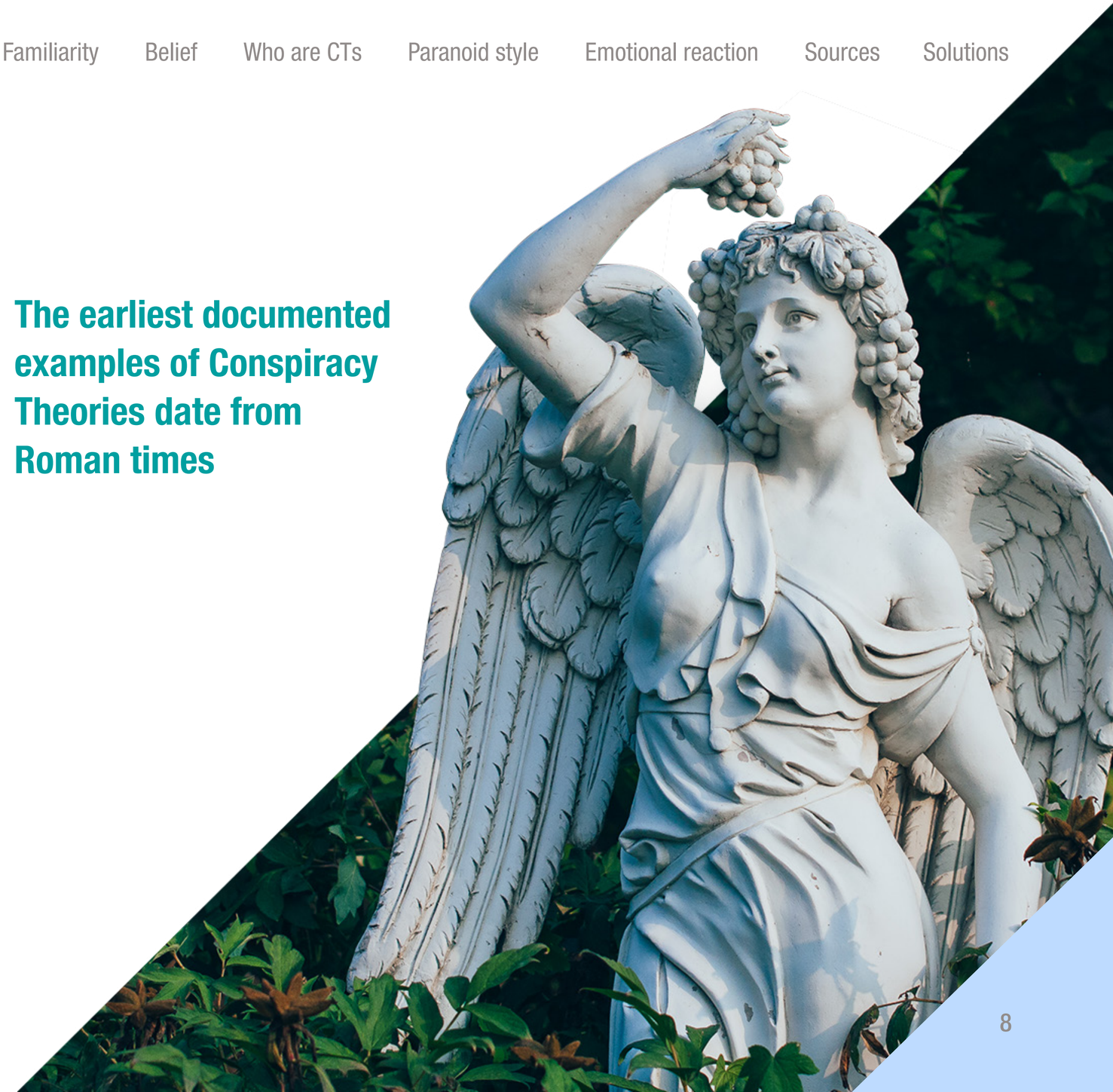
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

While the earliest documented examples of Conspiracy Theories date from Roman times, it can appear that they have recently gone from fringe to mainstream, arguably culminating in the storming of the US Capitol building in January 2021 (with that activity fired up by the CT that the US Presidential election had been 'stolen').

CTs are often identified as responsible for a range of societal ills including people hesitating about getting vaccinated, concerned that it is a government plot to control the population, or 5G masts are being toppled as protestors consider the frequency is responsible for COVID-19. This is not purely a public policy issue either: many of these issues directly impact brands (e.g. 5G masts) and there is increasing evidence that businesses are being targeted with CTs and disinformation.

The earliest documented examples of Conspiracy Theories date from Roman times

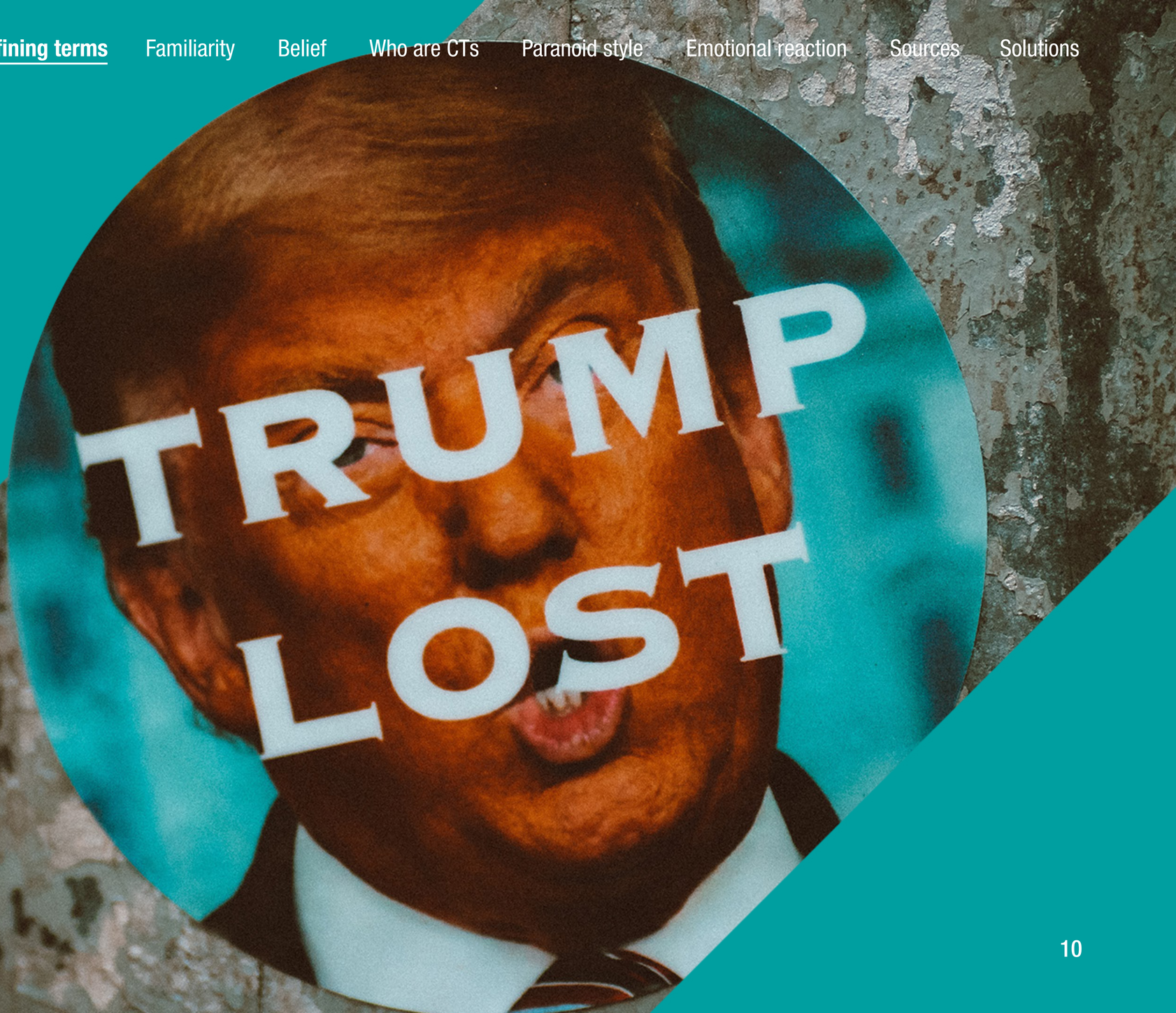


While there is a huge amount of literature on possible causes of CTs and those who develop and perpetuate them, there has been a relatively limited degree of investigation into the wider public's relationship with them. One of the few rigorous academic studies of the wider public's relationship with CTs was undertaken by political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent who analysed a random selection of 104,803 letters sent by readers to the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune between 1890 and 2010. They found widespread engagement with CTs, which their research indicated fluctuated in response to times of enormous social upheaval.

We are, it seems, at a similar point of upheaval so it is perhaps little surprise that CTs have again come to the fore. While the focus of interest and concern is understandably often on those holding particularly strong views on topics such as vaccination and COVID-19, it is not always clear how the wider public participate in CTs. This Ipsos report therefore explores the way the wider public engages with CTs both to understand the challenge, but also to identify how to tackle this important issue.

Conspiracy Theories are often identified as responsible for a range of societal ills, including people hesitating about getting vaccinated, concerned that it is a government plot to control the population

DEFINING TERMS



Defining terms

Conspiracy Theories are the belief that an event or situation is the outcome of a secret plan. Disinformation is false information which is intended to mislead, while misinformation reflects information which is wrong, but without the motive to mislead.

So CTs are based on information which may variously be disinformation, misinformation, and perhaps simply accurate information (given sometimes they are true). The distinctions between the terms move around and definitions are contested, but we shall use these as starting points. We focus our activity on CTs on the understanding that these are an increasingly important and emblematic manifestation of misinformation and disinformation.

Of course, what is a CT, and therefore dismissible, and what is reality and deserves examination, is not straightforward.

From Watergate and Operation Yewtree to Volkswagen emissions and Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, there are many examples of CTs that have subsequently been validated. As such, care needs to be taken not to dismiss beliefs too hastily – the boundary between truth and 'alternative facts' can be precarious. Of course, this adds a layer of complexity to the exploration of 'Conspiracy Theories' as the term itself is often weaponised to do just that – dismiss the beliefs of others.

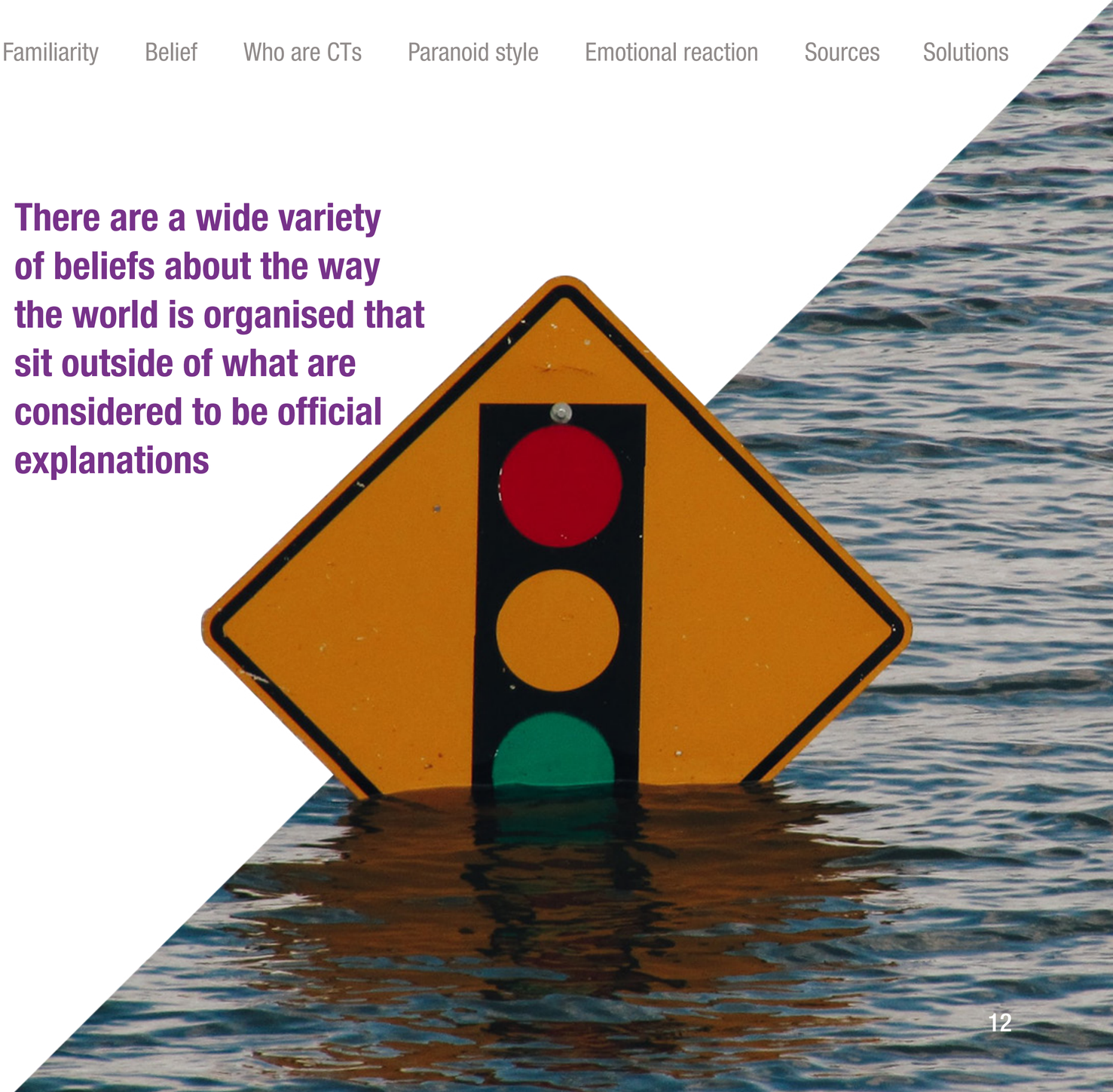
Asking about Conspiracy Theories

When talking to the general public, we avoided using the term CTs given it has a lot of negative associations. Instead, we identified a number of topics that might be considered CTs and introduced these as follows: 'There are a wide variety of beliefs about the way the world is organised that sit outside of what are considered to be official explanations'.

Note that we were careful to include a range of different CTs which included those that are widely discussed (such as the outcome of the 2021 US presidential election), but also include more obscure or florid examples of CTs (such as Governments hiding the presence of extra-terrestrial unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and alien visitors). One of the challenges in this area is the range of CTs and as such any selection will necessarily exclude some (we expect to cover other topics in future research).

We asked all participants for their familiarity with each of the above and then went onto gather more detail from each of up to three (selected at random) of the CTs with which they were familiar. The sample sizes for the number of people that were asked about each CT are included on page 13. Some additional questions about the wider topic were then asked of all participants.

There are a wide variety of beliefs about the way the world is organised that sit outside of what are considered to be official explanations



The topics we selected were:

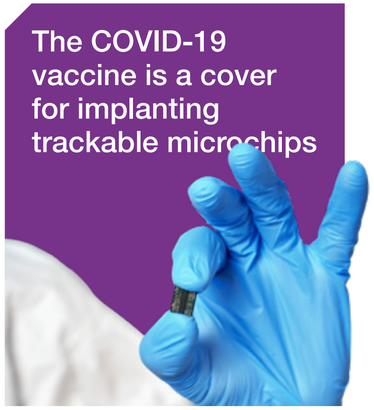
Figure 1:

Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Base **914**

Base **662**

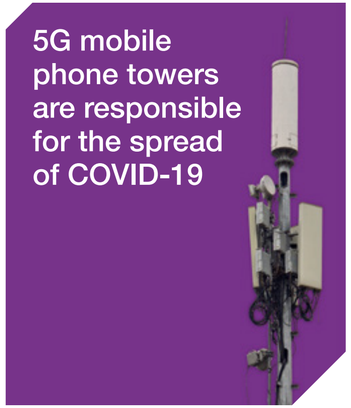


Base **1,114**

Base **1,008**

Base **762**

Base **1,548**



Base **968**

Base **1,300**

Base **1,249**

Base **1,237**

Base **989**

FAMILIARITY WITH CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Familiarity with Conspiracy Theories

The popular description of someone who is familiar with Conspiracy Theories is that of a socially alienated, awkward individual, sitting isolated with their laptop for company. The reality we found however, is somewhat different. While it seems there are a small number of people who are committed to CT beliefs, the wider general public also have a considerable degree of engagement.

There are a number of observations that we can draw here. First, it is clear there is a high degree of familiarity with the CTs that we asked about: many of us are 'part of the discussion'. Second, there is a high level of overlap of familiarity between the theories: we do not find a small subset of the population being responsible for most of this familiarity. Indeed, 94% of those we questioned are very or somewhat familiar with at least one CT and 52% are familiar with at least five of them.

In contrast, of the CTs we asked about, the percentage who actually created and posted new content on any of the topics was never more than 3% among those who had heard of each one, suggesting that the response of the wider population to these theories may well be less adamant than what is often seen from a smaller minority of the more vocal segment of the population who are more actively proselytising these beliefs.

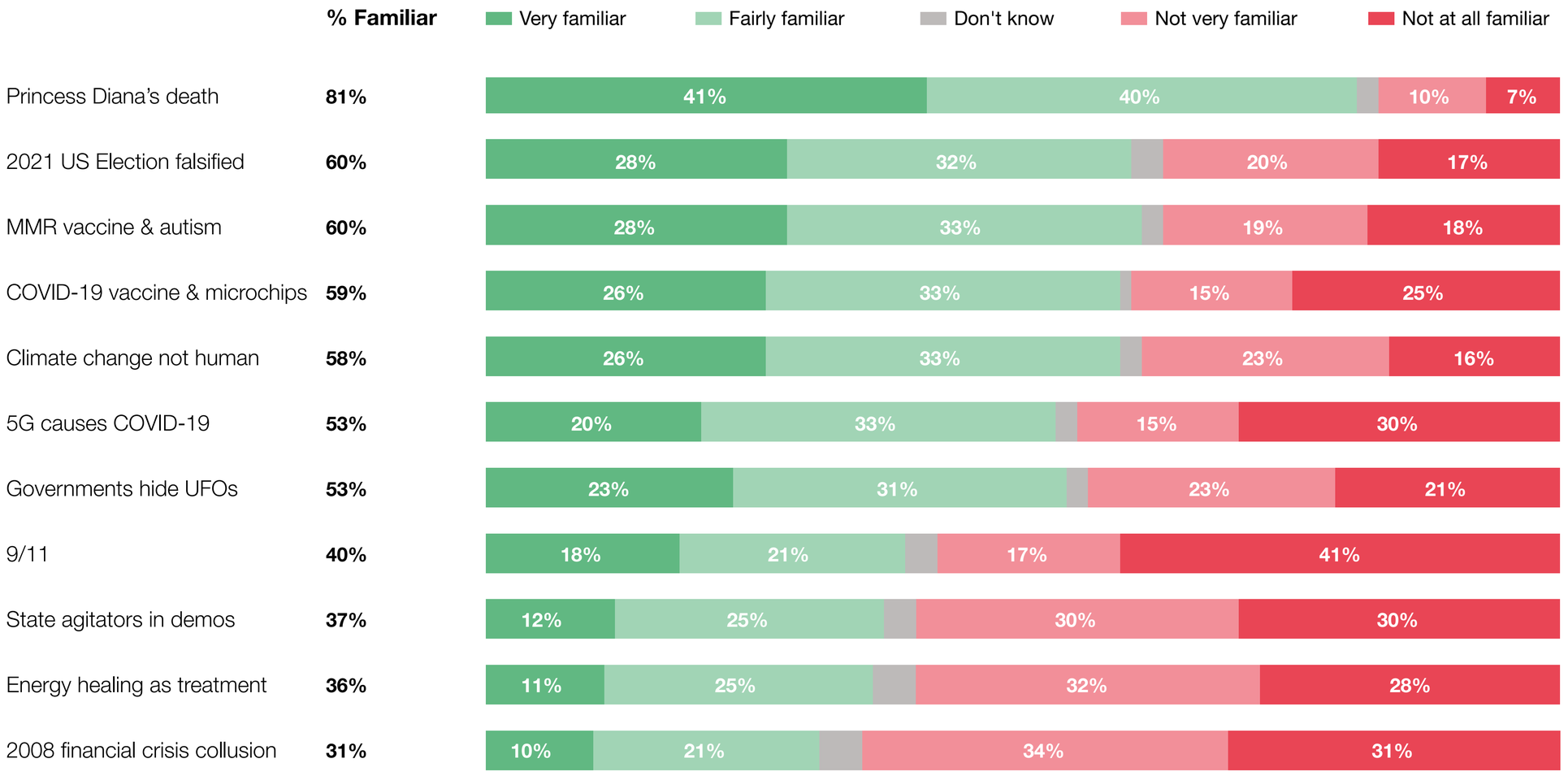
Meanwhile, as we can see in Figure 3, the proportion who say they have read more about it or talked about it to others ranges from 14% to 36% and 17% to 35% respectively (among those heard of each) which does certainly demonstrate at least partial engagement and a degree of 'conversational currency' from the CT which in itself of course encourages dissemination.

Less than 3% of the general public create and post new content

Figure 2:

Familiarity with Conspiracy Theories

There are a wide variety of beliefs about the way the world is organised that sit outside of what are considered to be official explanations. A number of these are given below, can you please identify how familiar or unfamiliar you are with:

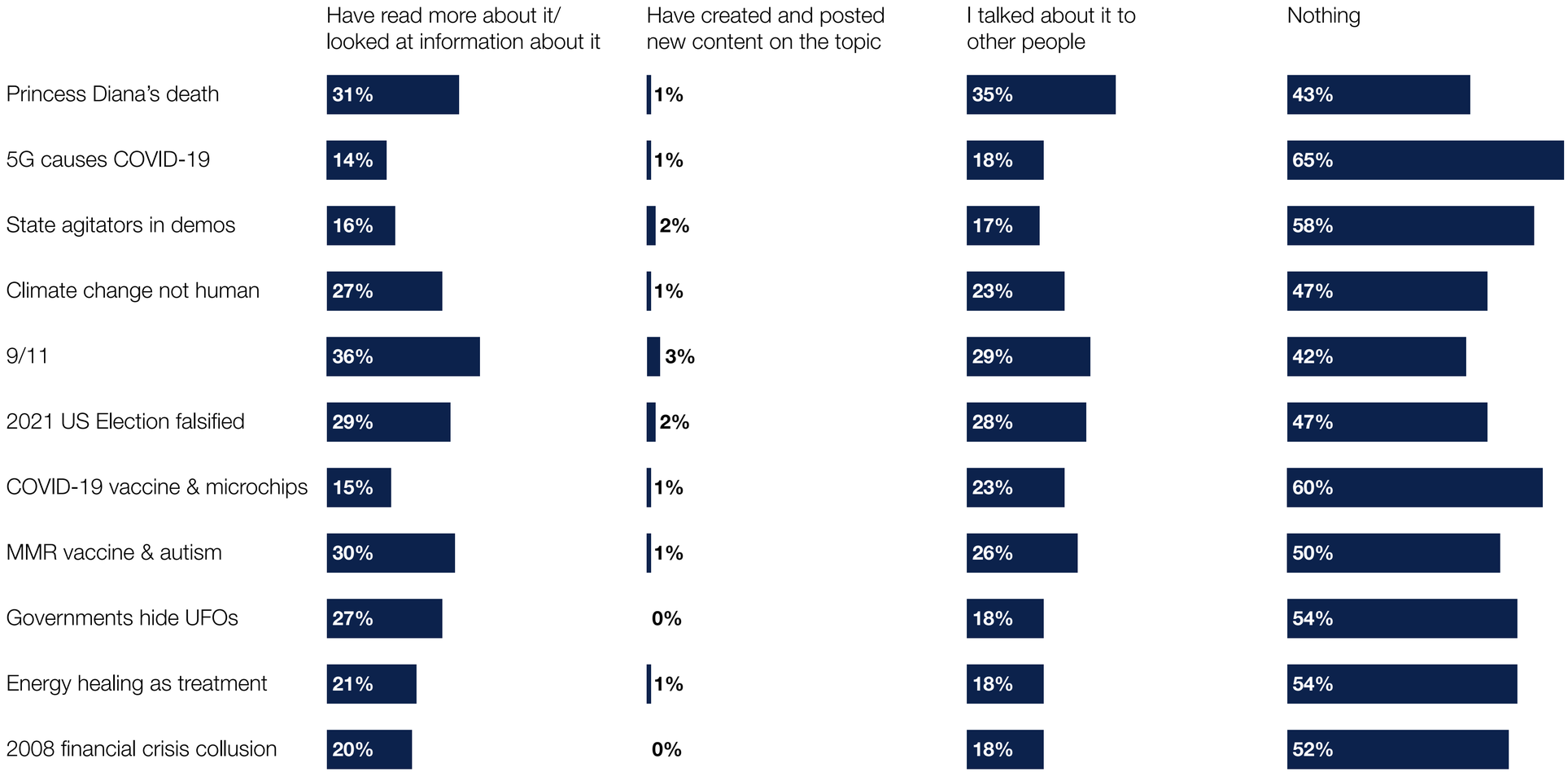


Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Figure 3:
Responses to Conspiracy Theories

Which of the following, if any, have you done concerning the topic of [CONSPIRACY THEORY]?



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Click here to view all responses

Note that although there are broad trends concerning the way people respond to CTs, there is also significant variation. For example, while 31% of those familiar with the CT that Princess Diana's death in a car crash was not accidental, read more about it or looked at information about it, a much higher 36% (of those familiar with it) did so if they were familiar with the CT that the collapse of the World Trade Centre buildings on 9/11 was due to controlled demolition, not terrorism.

This example again supports the importance of considering CTs individually rather than treating them all in the same way.

While it seems there are a small number of people who are committed to Conspiracy Theory beliefs, the wider general public also have a considerable degree of engagement

DO PEOPLE BELIEVE CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Do people believe Conspiracy Theories?

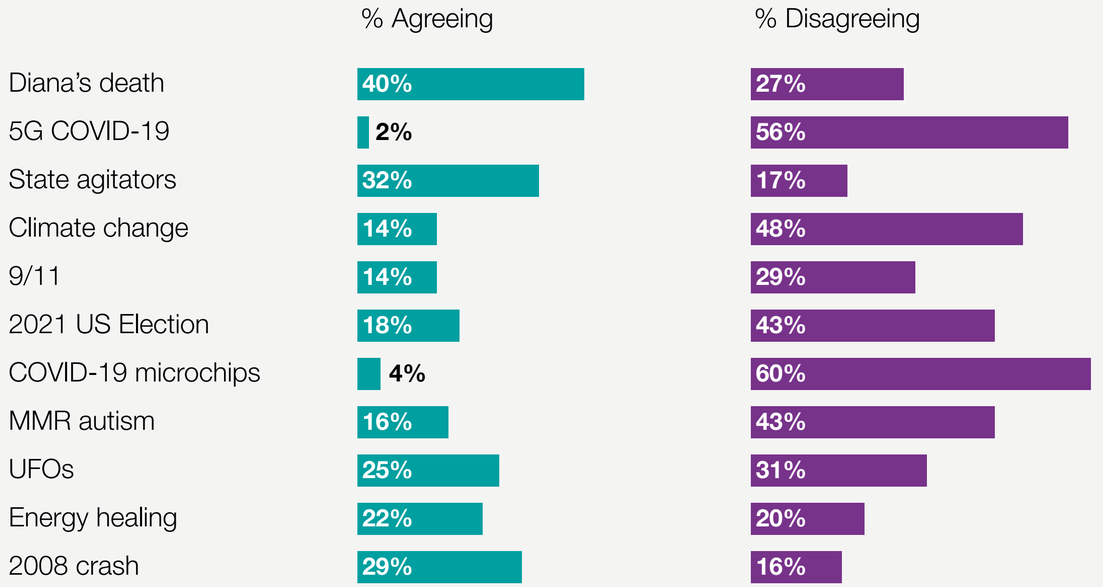
Not only are a high proportion of the general public aware of Conspiracy Theories but consider at least some of the CTs, we asked them about to be 'plausible'. Figure 4 shows the distribution of plausibility by CT. Overall, 49% of the public consider at least one of the three CTs we asked them about to be somewhat or very plausible. We found that 19% of people considered that two or more CTs (of the three we randomly assigned to them of those they had heard of) were very or somewhat plausible.

While this is an important point, it is nevertheless accompanied by a finding that the majority of the general public appear to have a healthy cynicism about CTs as many may not approach them entirely literally. In fact, we can see that people have a more nuanced relationship with them, as shown in Figure 5:

Figure 4:

Percentage considering the Conspiracy Theory 'plausible'

Do you agree or disagree with the following points about the information concerning [CONSPIRACY THEORY]? It seems plausible.



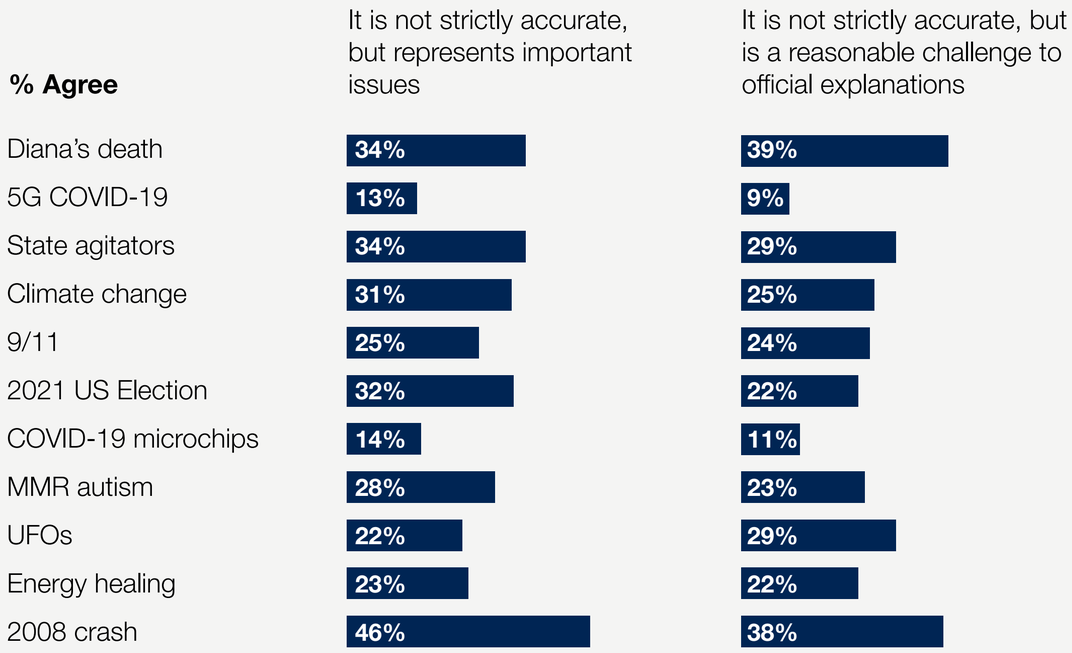
Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement – rebased to reflect overall population (see Figure 1) of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Figure 5:

Perceived intention of Conspiracy Theories

Do you agree or disagree with the following concerning [CONSPIRACY THEORY]?



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

On this basis we can see that belief in the topic is not a binary issue: people are willing to accept a degree of nuance and hold uncertainty concerning CTs. We can see that people occupy a somewhat paradoxical position, with a suspension of disbelief to make room for the legitimate questions that it raises.

This notion is supported in the way that there is a high overlap between those that consider a CT plausible and those that consider it 'not strictly accurate but a reasonable challenge'. For example, of those familiar with the CT that Princess Diana's death in a car crash was not accidental, 54% of those that consider it to be plausible believe it is 'not strictly accurate but a reasonable challenge'. This falls to just 15% agreement among those that do not consider it plausible. Hence, we can see beliefs are nuanced – there is not a clear dividing line between what is 'plausible' and 'what is not strictly true but a reasonable challenge'.

WHO ARE CONSPIRACY THEORISTS?

Who are Conspiracy Theorists?

While bearing in mind the nuance with which the general public engage with Conspiracy Theories, there is clearly widespread 'plausibility' of a range of CT beliefs. But are there demographic characteristics with a higher propensity to believe in CTs?

To examine this, we created two groups from our data: one group (20% of the general public) considered at least two of the three CTs we asked about to be plausible, while the other group (17% of the general public) considered none to be plausible. We compared both groups, as shown in Figure 6:

Lower income households and those with fewer qualifications do seem to be slightly more likely to consider the Conspiracy Theory plausible

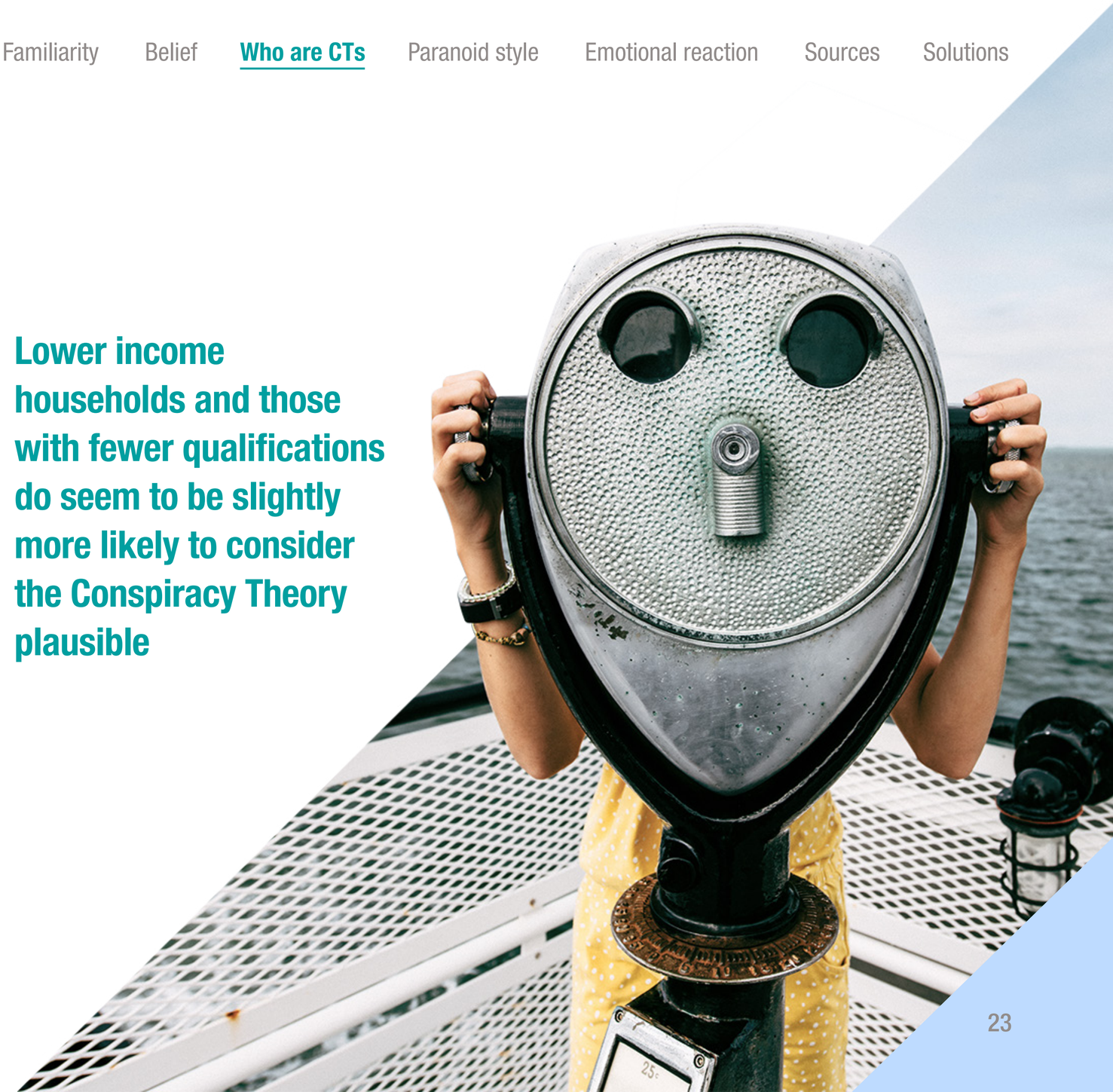
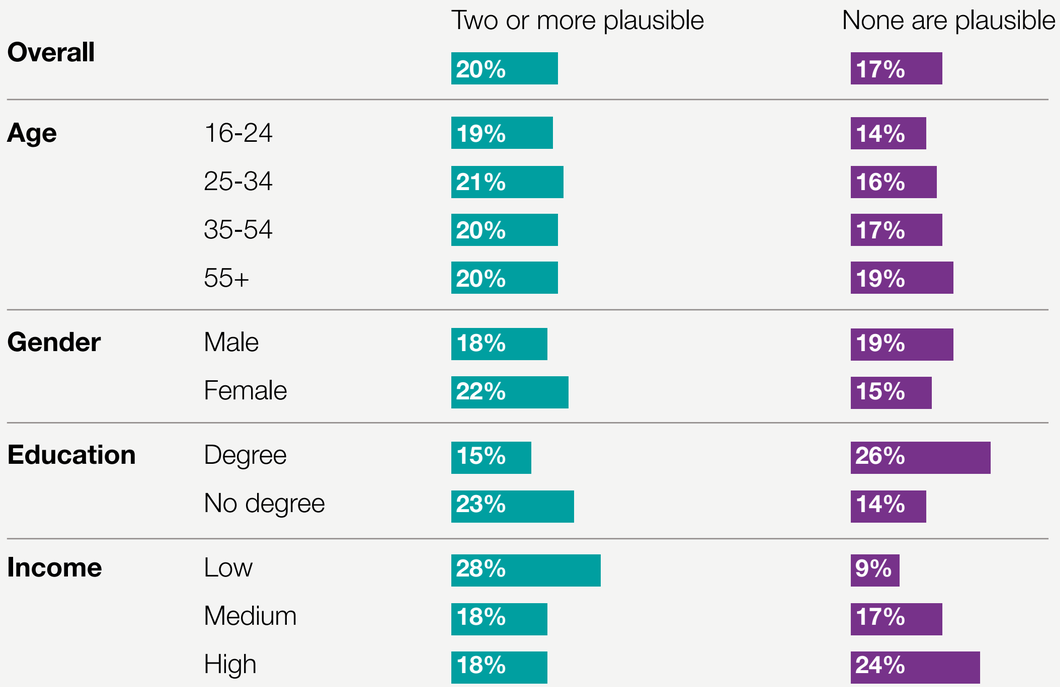


Figure 6:

Plausibility of Conspiracy Theories by demographic characteristics

Do you agree or disagree with the following points about the information concerning [CONSPIRACY THEORY]? It seems plausible.



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

While these findings do show some patterns, they also challenge the notion that there is a particular group of people who consider CTs plausible. Lower income households and those with fewer qualifications do seem to be slightly more likely to consider the CT plausible, but this by no means fully explains the degree of belief in CTs. This applies as equally to the 2% of the population who consider two or more CTs as ‘very plausible’.

IS THERE A ‘PARANOID STYLE’?

Is there a ‘paranoid style’?

American historian Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 essay entitled The Paranoid Style in American Politics suggested that a feeling of dispossession fostered the belief that societal ills cannot be explained by incompetence, but rather a secretive conspiracy of the powerful.

To explore this type of difference in outlook, we asked about attitudes known to be related to CTs. Michael Barkun identified a number of characteristics considered to be related to adherence with CT beliefs:

- In history, there are no coincidences, no cockups
- Nothing is as it seems: you need to look beneath the surface to detect the actions and the intentions of the evil conspirators
- Everything is connected: if you dig deep enough you find hidden connections between people and institutions and events

Consistent with the widely held nature of CTs, we also find that these types of ‘conspiratorial attitudes’ are held by a substantial proportion of the general public, as set out in Figure 7.

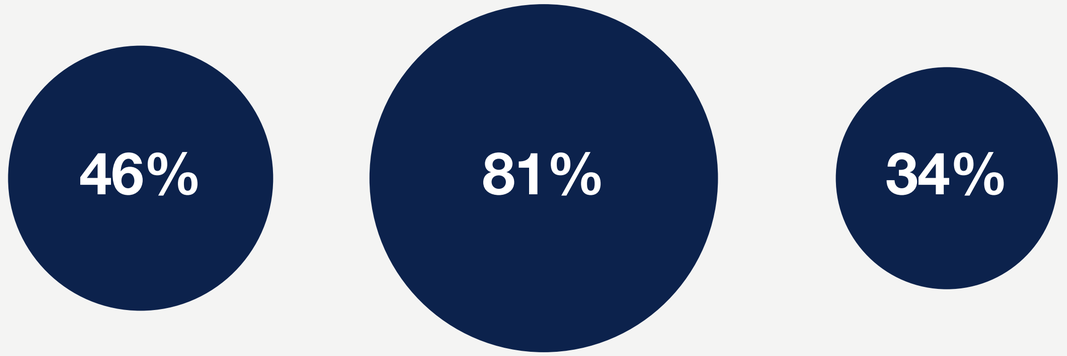
While these views are fairly common in the population (with some variation), we can see they are somewhat more prevalent among those who consider CTs are plausible. Again, referencing the two groups, one considering at least two CTs to be plausible and the other considering none to be plausible, we can see that the former are more likely to agree with these ‘conspiratorial attitudes’.

We sought to examine if there were differences between the two groups in the way they perceive the trustworthiness of different types of organisations and institutions. We can see in Figure 9 that distrust is high in a range of types of organisation and institutions across the general population as a whole.

If we look at trust by the two groups, one considering at least two CTs to be plausible and the other considering none to be plausible, we can see that the former has higher distrust.

Hence, we can see the way in which those that consider CTs to be plausible are more likely to consider institutions less trustworthy. However, we need to consider that, across the general population, there is fairly widespread distrust in a number of types of organisations and institutions. As such we need to take care attributing this to a 'conspiratorial mindset'.

Figure 7:
Agreement with 'conspiratorial attitudes'
Do you agree or disagree with the following? …



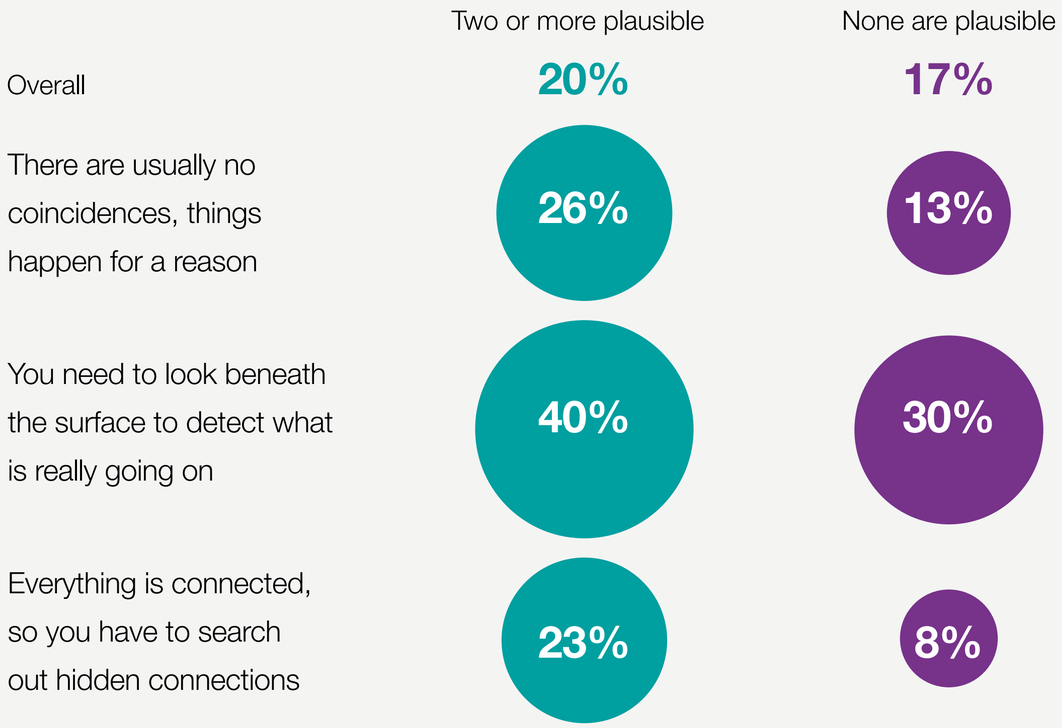
Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Figure 8:

Agreement with 'conspiratorial attitudes' by plausibility

Do you agree or disagree with the following? …



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

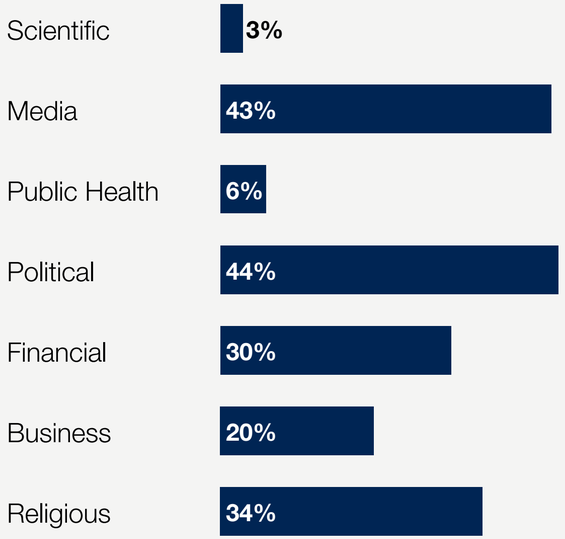
Base
Two or more plausible (841), None are plausible (724) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

In addition, there is a case that the widely held attitudes we see as consistent with 'conspiratorial thinking' are consistent with critical thinking skills that we generally consider to be an ideal in the way we evaluate evidence. As Peter Knight points out, the notion that 'everything is connected' is not only a premise of CTs but also underpins 'epidemiology, ecology, risk theory, systems theory, complexity theory, theories of globalization, boosterism for the Internet, and even poststructuralist literary theories about intertextuality'.

Figure 9:

Percentage considering institution / organisation is untrustworthy

Where would you place ... in terms of trustworthiness on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is completely untrustworthy and 10 is completely trustworthy? Untrustworthy = 0-3

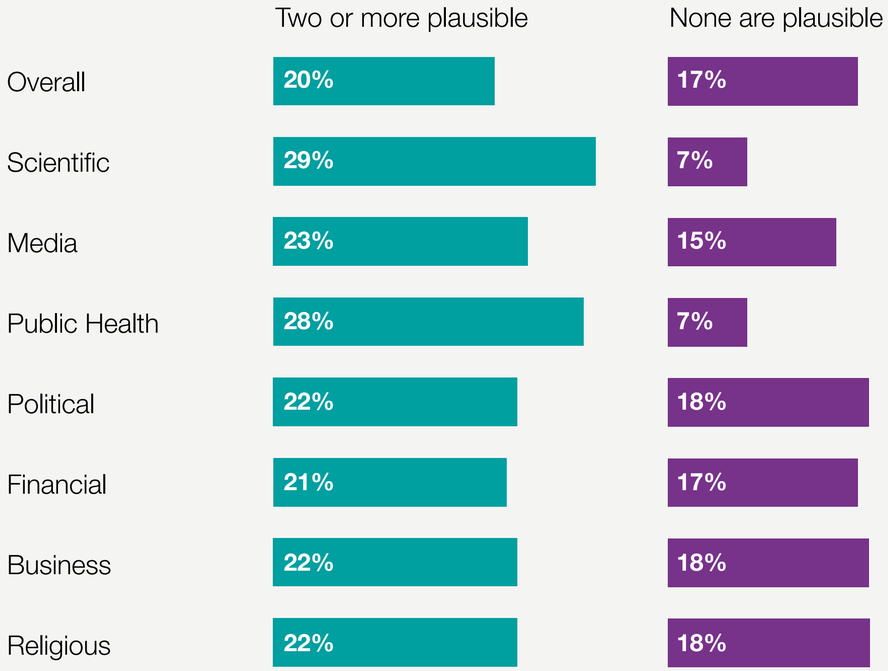


Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Figure 10:

Percentage considering institution / organisation is untrustworthy by plausibility of Conspiracy Theory



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
Two or more plausible (841), None are plausible (724) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

EMOTIONAL REACTION TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Emotional reaction to Conspiracy Theories

Supporting the notion of 'conversational currency', the Conspiracy Theories we asked about evoked a range of emotional responses – we identified a wide variety of ways people reported they made them feel, as set out in Figure 11.

The degree of emotional engagement is not inconsiderable: CTs seem to be platforms for a wide range of feelings which operate at a number of levels, including for the topic itself (the sad death of Princess Diana), as well as the emotional reaction to the claim that is made (e.g. that her death was not accidental).

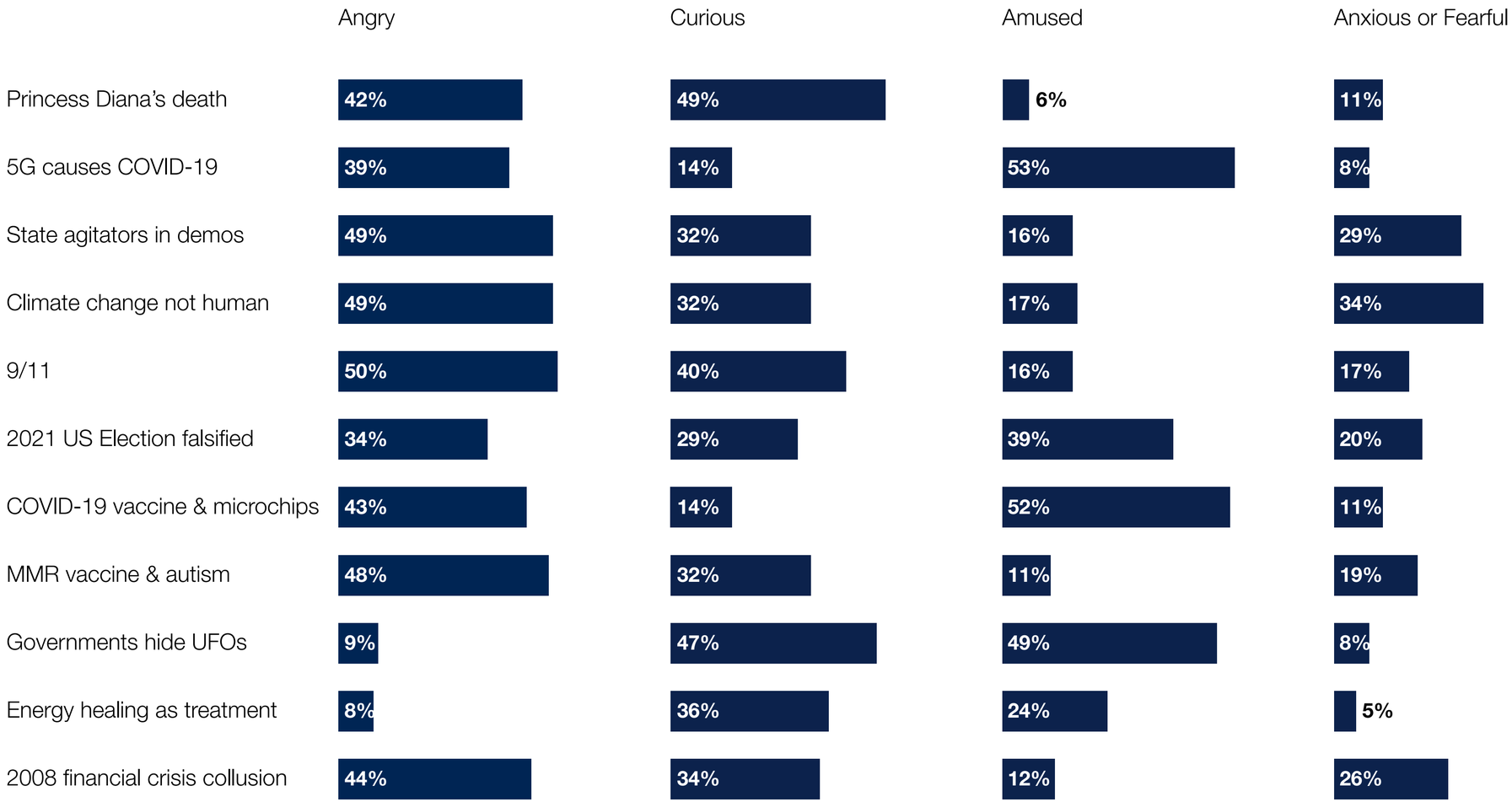
Given the CTs we asked about elicit varying emotional responses and attitudes, we need to be cautious in assuming there is a single way to address them.

For example, people were more likely to be 'excited' in response to 'Governments hiding the presence of extra-terrestrial unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and alien visitors' while 'amusement' is a common response to the theory that '5G mobile phone towers are responsible for the spread of COVID-19'.

We can start to see the way that simply 'othering' or rejecting outright CTs is unlikely to be successful: people will engage with them for a whole host of different reasons, often simply for conversational or entertainment reasons. It seems inevitable they will enter conversations as they have currency which means that policymakers and marketers will need to understand the nature of these encounters and be part of the dialogue.

Figure 11:
Emotional response to Conspiracy Theories

How does the topic of [CONSPIRACY THEORY] make you feel?

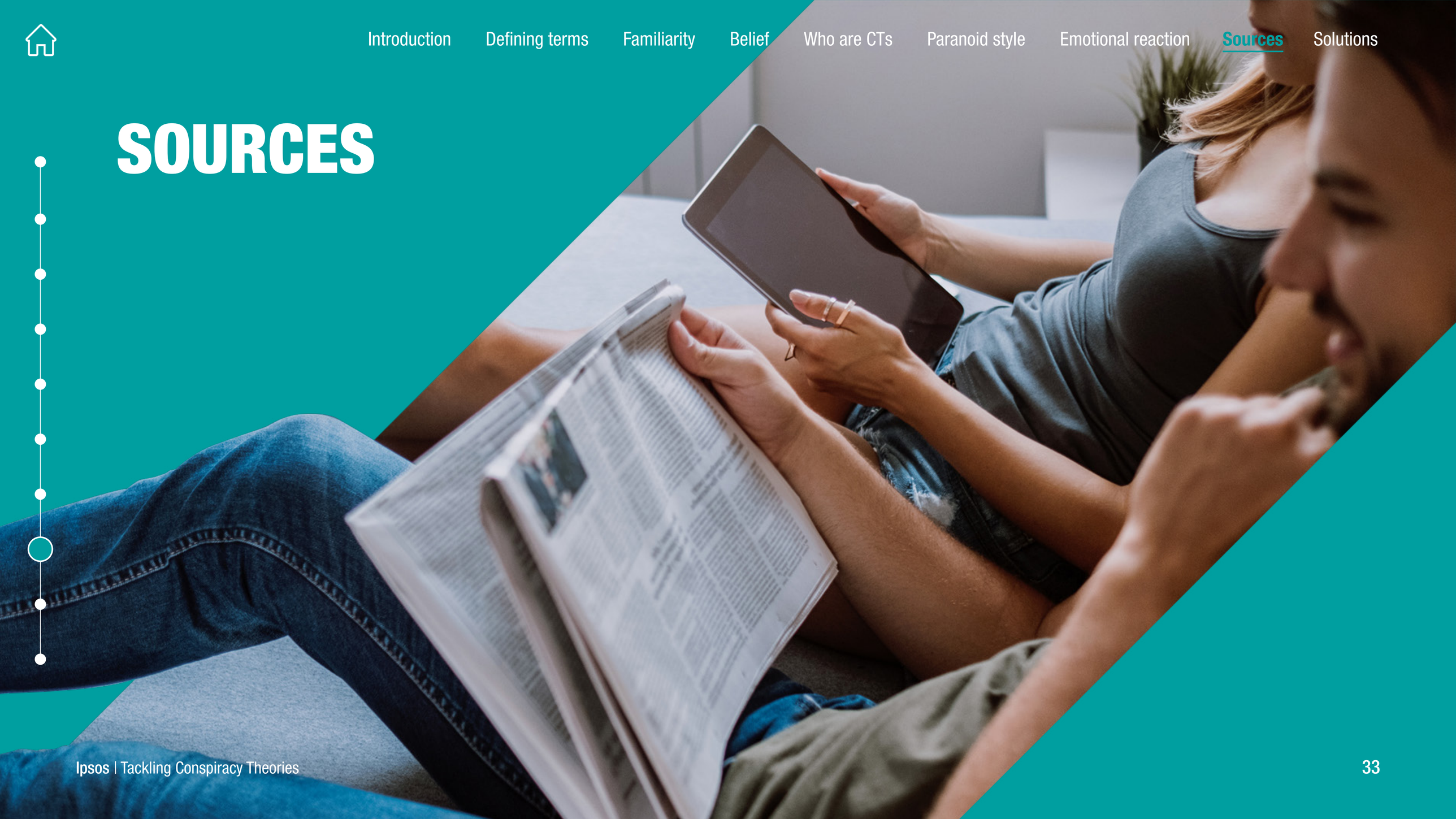


Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Click here to view all emotions

SOURCES

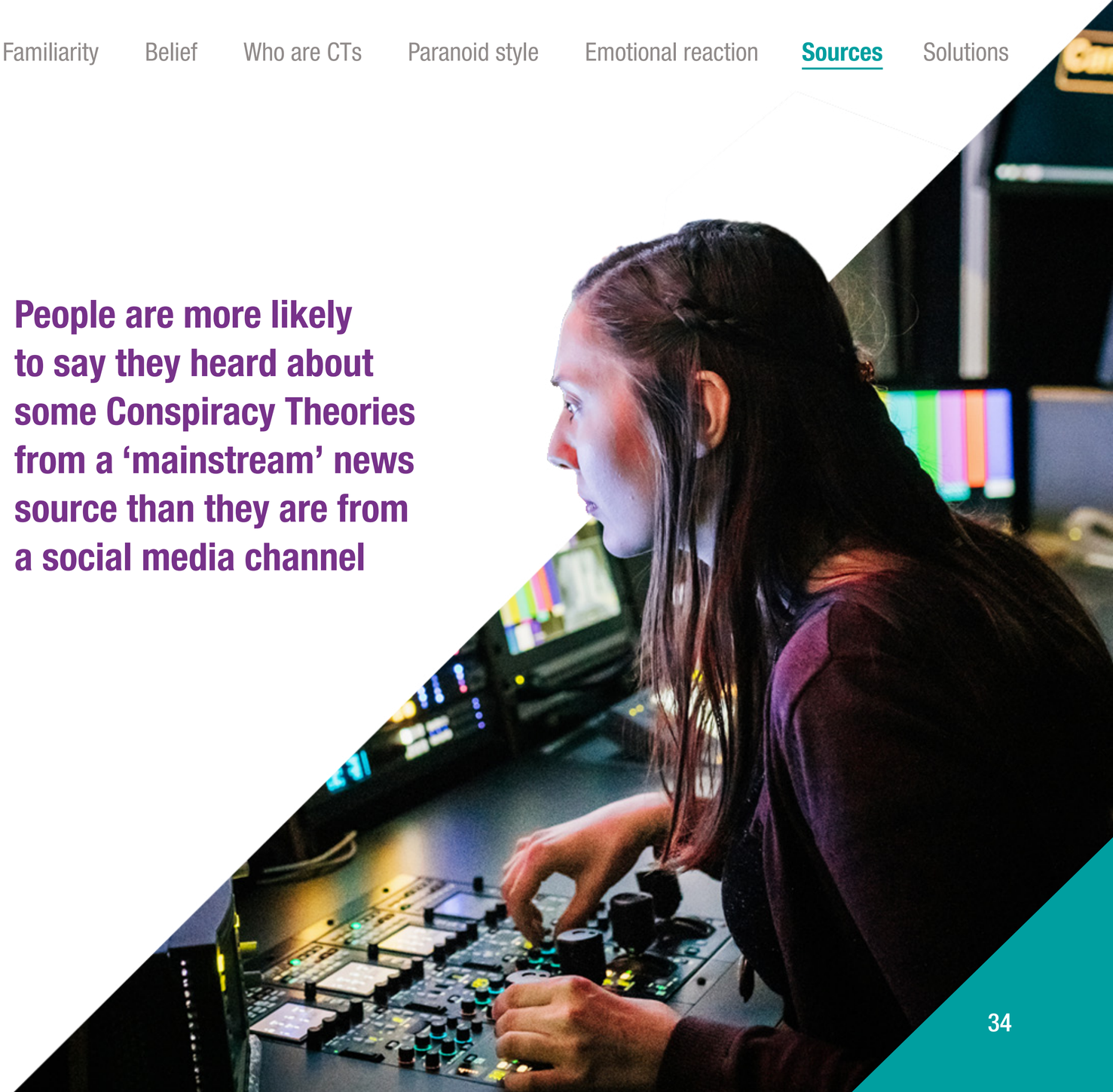


Sources

Finally, contrary to popular opinion, we found that while technology (and social media specifically) has a role to play in perpetuating Conspiracy Theories, our data suggests that these are not the only source of information about CTs – nor always the main ones. People are more likely to say they heard about some CTs (such as Princess Diana's death or the falsification of the 2021 US Presidential election) from a 'mainstream' news source (such as TV or a broadsheet or tabloid newspaper) than they are from a social media channel.

So, while claims are made about the impact of technology as a key reason for the increase in CTs and disinformation generally, we shouldn't assume they are the only issue. Clearly trying to disentangle the societal impact of different information sources on society at

People are more likely to say they heard about some Conspiracy Theories from a 'mainstream' news source than they are from a social media channel



large is never going to be an easy task. But in one of the relatively few well-resourced and solid pieces of work done in this space, the Harvard Berkman Klein Center analysed allegations relating to voter mail-in fraud which was a huge controversy in the 2020 US presidential election. The researchers concluded that this issue was part of a systematic campaign amplified by a wide range of traditional media outlets, concluding:

"Our findings suggest that this highly effective disinformation campaign, with potentially profound effects for both participation in, and the legitimacy of, the 2020 election, was an elite-driven, mass-media led process. Social media played only a secondary role."

This supports another study conducted in 2017 which found greater internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarisation among US demographic groups.

We therefore need to be careful about locating technology as the sole source of the problem and indeed as the only focus for possible solutions (not least as CTs can be traced back to Roman times, well before the advent of the internet!).

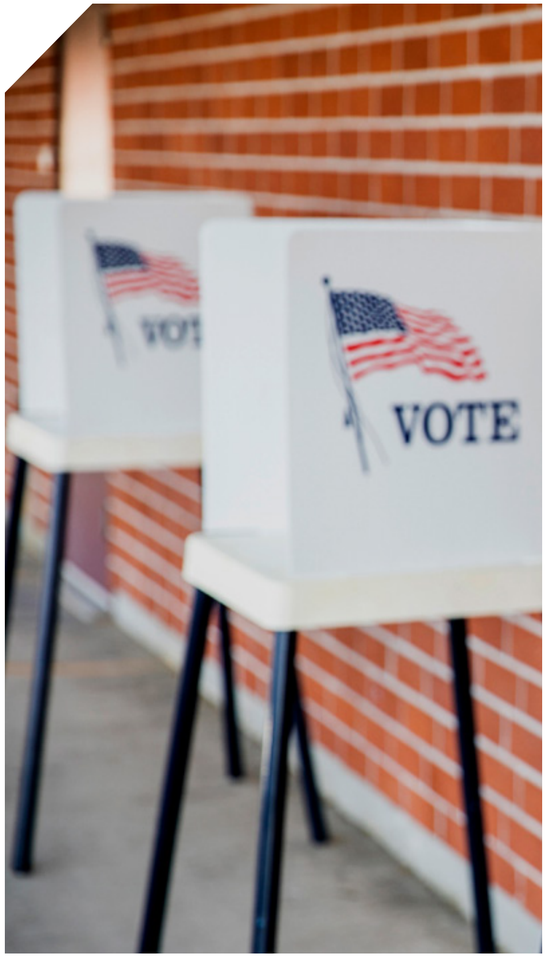
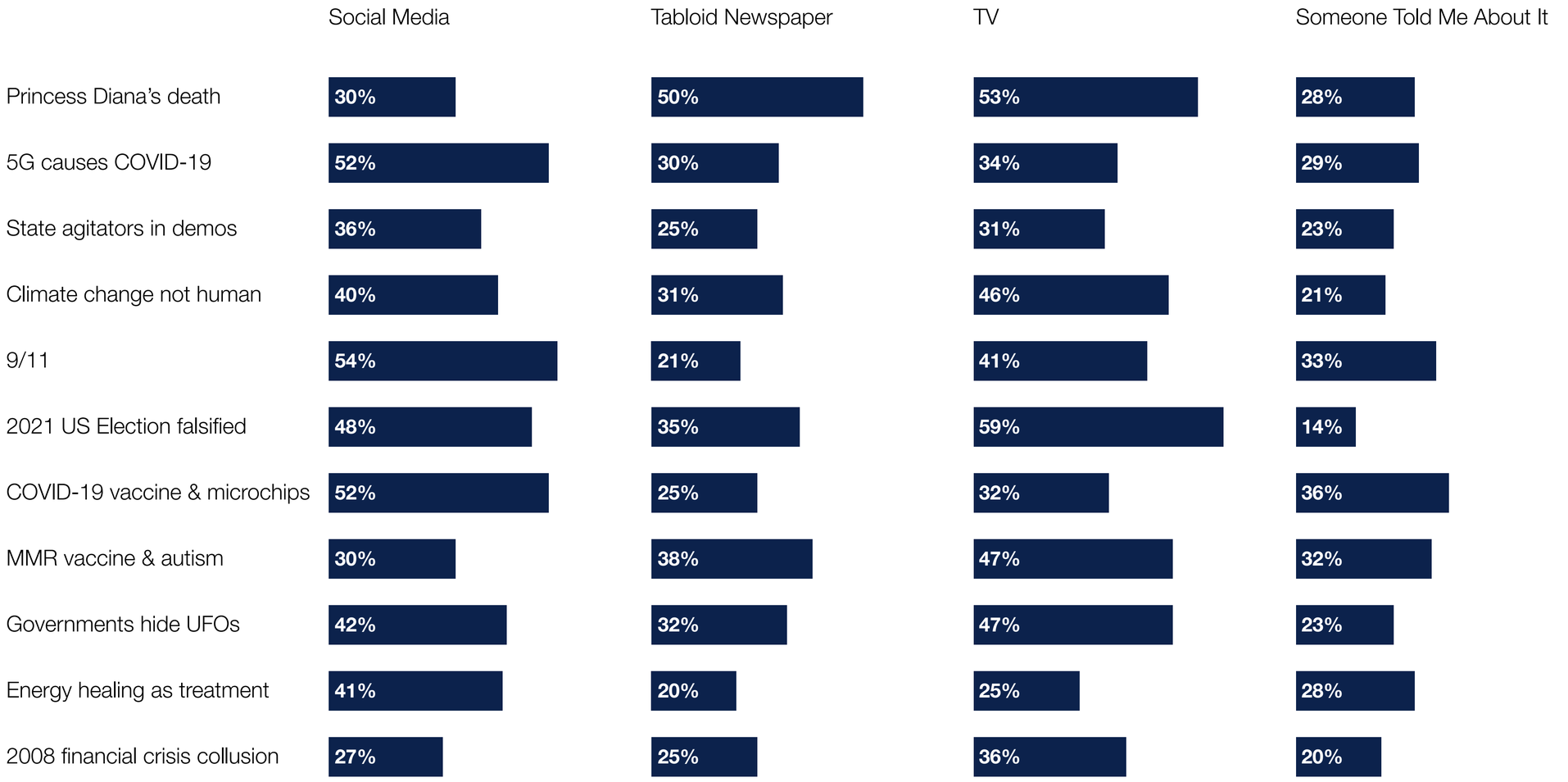


Figure 12:

Where people have seen or heard about the Conspiracy Theory

Where have you seen or heard about [CONSPIRACY THEORY]?



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

Click here to view all channels

DISCUSSION AND SOLUTIONS

Discussion and Solutions

Overall, we see Conspiracy Theories as something which are a familiar part of human interaction, offering a means of emotional and meaningful engagement with others, speculating about possibilities and challenging official explanations. There are clearly and inevitably relatively small segments of the population who accept a much more literal reading of CTs and will be actively promoting them. But we need to take care extrapolating from this small group as it does not necessarily represent the way in which the majority of the population engage with CTs.

Our research suggests a nuanced picture of widespread engagement with CTs but far from blind belief: plausibility is accompanied by a scepticism that the CT is 'not strictly accurate'. They are conversational currency, evoking emotional responses and discussion rather than always resulting in negative outcomes.

We need to consider more closely the content of the beliefs themselves

We can see very clearly how the general public approach individual CTs in very different ways – there is a great deal of variability for example, in terms of levels of familiarity, views on plausibility and the provoking of different emotional reactions. This suggests two key points. First, that each needs to be considered and addressed on its own terms. Second, this challenges monological explanations for CTs (the tendency for belief in one CT to be correlated with belief in others reflecting a closed mindset). As such we can question the degree to which we simply inspect the process by which people come to hold CT beliefs and instead we need to consider more closely the content of the beliefs themselves. Understanding the social, cultural and political contexts of these beliefs is likely to be a much more useful avenue to tackling them.

Solutions

How we understand and manage CTs arguably sits at the very heart of the way we understand ourselves, the way we occupy a shared knowledge and understanding of the world, but also whether or how we tolerate difference. Power is at the very heart of this challenge – not only in terms of the history of structural inequalities between educated, scientifically trained experts and ordinary lay-people, but also in terms of an increased polarisation of economic resources.

The challenge is what we do to address CTs. Drawing on the academic literature as well as our survey data to understand the mechanisms that shape the behaviour is an important first step. But, of course, the focus of what we do is very much top of mind.

And what we do is not only important in terms of our societal and political discourse, but also has very important and tangible implications for commercial organisations. As ‘brand purpose’ becomes an increasingly important part of a commercial organisation’s strategy, then it is easy to see how this can be derailed

by conspiracy theorising. Or how a brand's reputation can quickly and easily become tarnished. This is an issue for which all organisations need to be literate and engaged.

Our research indicates that engagement with CTs is widespread, but also nuanced and sophisticated. This is a natural part of human discourse that has always been with us and always will be. To presume the issue is due to a slow-witted population that needs training in how to evaluate evidence is not enough. Our survey data shows a much more complex relationship with these beliefs than perhaps some of the theories of CTs have necessarily given credit previously.

Two things now need to happen. First, there is a need for much more extensive, nuanced, and intelligent research of populations to help to unpick, or 'diagnose' the different mechanisms in play that are determining CT related behaviours. Currently there is a propensity to assume that CTs are the same across the topics covered and segments of the population. Within this report we have begun to identify some starting points for exploring what the key dimensions of difference are that need to be unearthed, measured, and analysed. These differences need to be considered in the way we tackle the issue.

Second, we need more work to identify strategies that address CTs – both to protect people against them before they personally invest in them, but also to find ways to engage with those that already have. Sometimes this may be about facilitating ways to have the discussion, to bring unofficial and illegitimate conversations into a wider public forum. This does happen of course, for example as we have recently seen the dialogue about whether COVID-19 was due to a lab-leak or natural causes from a wet-market has moved from CT into 'official' and 'legitimate' channels.

We consider that our research is pointing towards organisations being part of the conversations, engaging and being open, as well as commissioning independent studies to examine the suggestions being made. But we see time and again that there is always a challenge about what are 'facts', how they should be used and what conclusions can be drawn from that. To deny that and either ignore or attempt to close-down discussion simply drives the issue underground and causes information vacuums where there are no voices to put forward the counter-argument. The implications that flow from this are as follows:

Implications for brands: Brands are arguably well placed to tackle CTs; much of the work of the brand is to drive sentiment, understanding when, how and with what to engage with the conversations taking place. This is the skill set of marketers and advertising creatives powered by consumer research to understand the social dialogues that are taking place with CTs and how to be part of them.

Implications for government: In a way, the government job is similar to that of brands – but in addition there is a need for greater engagement with the small number of people actively promulgating harmful CTs. More work needs to be undertaken to identify and engage with these groups.

Overall, we note that our suggestions do possibly run the risk of amplifying the CTs and in that process they are potentially more likely to be heard and therefore gain credibility. We also note there is a danger of reputational harm if brands and institutions are seen to promote or engage with them. While we acknowledge these risks, the wider point remains that people have no shortage of means to communicate and will be drawn to emotionally engaging stories. We consider that there is real merit and indeed necessity in being part of the conversation and to engage.

APPENDIX

Figure 3:
Responses to Conspiracy Theories

Which of the following, if any, have you done concerning the topic of [CONSPIRACY THEORY]?

	Have read more about it/looked at information about it	Have created and posted new content on the topic	I reshared, forwarded or repeated information on this topic	I 'liked' posts about it (or equivalent) on social media	I talked about it to other people	Nothing	Cannot remember
Princess Diana's death in a car crash was not accidental	31%	1%	2%	4%	35%	43%	4%
5G mobile phone towers are responsible for the spread of COVID-19	14%	1%	0%	1%	18%	65%	2%
Agitators secretly working for the authorities are regularly placed and planted in peaceful demonstrations to spark violence	16%	2%	2%	2%	17%	58%	7%
Climate change is not due to human activity	27%	1%	2%	3%	23%	47%	5%
The collapse of the World Trade Centre buildings on 9/11 was due to a controlled demolition, not terrorism	36%	3%	4%	4%	29%	42%	5%
The outcome of the 2021 US presidential election was deliberately falsified	29%	2%	2%	3%	28%	47%	5%
The COVID-19 vaccine is a cover for implanting trackable microchips	15%	1%	1%	1%	23%	60%	3%
There is a link between the MMR vaccine and autism	30%	1%	2%	1%	26%	50%	4%
Governments hide the presence of extra-terrestrial unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and alien visitors	27%	0%	2%	4%	18%	54%	6%
Energy healing can treat health conditions and promote wellbeing	21%	1%	2%	7%	18%	54%	8%
The 2008 financial crisis was the result of collusion between bankers and unethical politicians	20%	0%	1%	3%	18%	52%	12%

Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

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Figure 11:
Emotional response to Conspiracy Theories

How does the topic of [CONSPIRACY THEORY] make you feel?

	Angry	Resentful	Curious	Excited	Amused	Surprised	Disgusted	Frustrated	Anxious or fearful
Diana's death	42%	22%	49%	3%	6%	29%	54%	35%	11%
5G COVID-19	39%	21%	14%	2%	53%	36%	38%	48%	8%
State agitators	49%	35%	32%	3%	16%	22%	56%	43%	29%
Climate Change	49%	32%	32%	3%	17%	34%	49%	54%	34%
9/11	50%	27%	40%	5%	16%	41%	56%	43%	17%
2021 US Election	34%	18%	29%	3%	39%	18%	44%	36%	20%
COVID-19 microchips	43%	22%	14%	1%	52%	32%	44%	54%	11%
MMR autism	48%	25%	32%	2%	11%	31%	44%	51%	19%
UFOs	9%	6%	47%	16%	49%	16%	8%	13%	8%
Energy Healing	8%	6%	36%	19%	24%	17%	8%	11%	5%
2008 crash	44%	41%	34%	3%	12%	15%	50%	46%	26%

Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

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Figure 12:

Where people have seen or heard about the Conspiracy Theory

Where have you seen or heard about [CONSPIRACY THEORY]?

	Social media	Public online forum	Private online conversation	Broadsheet newspaper	Tabloid newspaper	Place of worship	Wellbeing group	Radio	TV	Someone told me about it	By email
Diana's death	30%	12%	2%	25%	50%	0%	1%	23%	53%	28%	1%
5G COVID-19	52%	11%	2%	22%	30%	0%	0%	20%	34%	29%	1%
State agitators	36%	12%	2%	19%	25%	0%	0%	15%	31%	23%	2%
Climate Change	40%	12%	2%	25%	31%	1%	1%	22%	46%	21%	2%
9/11	54%	17%	3%	16%	21%	1%	1%	14%	41%	33%	1%
2021 US Election	48%	12%	2%	31%	35%	1%	0%	30%	59%	14%	1%
COVID-19 microchips	52%	13%	2%	18%	25%	0%	0%	19%	32%	36%	1%
MMR autism	30%	14%	3%	27%	38%	1%	2%	24%	47%	32%	0%
UFOs	42%	14%	2%	12%	32%	1%	1%	13%	47%	23%	1%
Energy Healing	41%	11%	2%	10%	20%	2%	9%	12%	25%	28%	3%
2008 crash	27%	9%	1%	20%	25%	0%	0%	17%	36%	20%	1%

Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement (see Figure 1) from total sample of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

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Technical note

Ipsos MORI interviewed online a representative sample of 4,192 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom between 13 and 19 May 2021. Survey data has been collected by Ipsos MORI's UK KnowledgePanel, an online random probability panel which provides gold standard insights into the UK population, by providing bigger sample sizes via the most rigorous research methods. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household in order to reflect the profile of the population of the United Kingdom. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

CONTACT US

Colin Strong
Head of Behavioural Science
colin.strong@ipsos.com

+44 (0)20 3059 5000
www.ipsos-mori.com
@IpsosMORI

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At Ipsos we believe our clients need more than a data supplier, they need a partner who can produce accurate and relevant information and turn it into actionable truth.

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