

# **The Influence of Social Media and Technology on the forming of Conspiracy Theories: Jean Baudrillard versus Psychological view**

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Quinty de Bot

Supervisor: Prof Dr. H. A. E. Zwart

Advisor: Dr. T.K.A.M. De Mey

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## Introduction

The challenge of deciding whether views are epistemically justifiable includes defining the difference between science and pseudoscience. A lot of pseudoscience is connected to conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories are beliefs that claim that there exists some sort of hidden cooperation for a variety of reasons. The word is most commonly used to describe implausible hypotheses that are employed to clarify social phenomena that have many other, far more reasonable explanations.<sup>1</sup> The word “conspiracy theory” refers to a hypothesis or explanation that includes a fundamental element of a conspiracy among a set of agents.<sup>2</sup> An example of such a conspiracy theory is that of 9/11 where people thought that the attack on the World Trade Center was not only carried out by al-Qaeda, but also the government of the US colluded to allow them to succeed.

However, the definition of the term “conspiracy theory” can have a neutral one that does not indicate that conspiracy theory is incorrect or improbably valid. Most of the time it is described in a negative way. The neutral definition will only describe it as a theory that involves a conspiracy or a little bit more elaborative will be an explanation of a phenomenon by the causal agency of a small number of persons operating in secret.<sup>3</sup> In philosophy, they often choose for the epistemically neutral definition. Choosing for a specific definition depends on what the goal of the definition is and this will have an impact. It will determine what we see as a conspiracy theory. Also, the minimal definition will label a surprise party as a conspiracy theory. Therefore, the definition should be supplemented by an additional criterion.<sup>4</sup> As a psychology student, it is interesting to look at conspiracy theories and how they form. True conspiracy theories (for example, the Watergate scandal) are less concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Sven, O. Hansson, “Science and Pseudo-Science,” accessed April 19, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=pseudo-science>.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Pauly, “Conspiracy Theories,” accessed April 19, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/conspiracy-theories/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pauly, “Conspiracy Theories”.

<sup>4</sup> Pauly, “Conspiracy Theories”.

or problematic, so in this thesis, I will take the more extensive definition to make clear what I am talking about and make it more distinct. Thus, here I am using the most commonly used to describe implausible hypotheses that are employed to clarify social phenomena that have many other, far more reasonable explanations.<sup>5</sup>

A lot of psychologists have something to say about this topic. But how is the philosophical view on conspiracy theories? What do philosophers have to say about this subject? Conspiracies have been the subject of philosophical debate since at least Niccolo Machiavelli. His discussion about conspiracies had political purposes. The goal of Machiavelli's explanation was to assist the ruler in avoiding conspiracies intended against him. Simultaneously, he cautions individuals against participating in conspiracies, partially because he feels they seldom achieve their goals.<sup>6</sup> However, Karl Popper is known as the first one who discussed conspiracies from a philosophical perspective. According to Popper, conspiracy theories have a flawed method of explaining social phenomena. He believes that conspiracies can happen, but that very few of them succeed because few things go exactly as planned. So, social science should explain the unintended consequences of deliberate human behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Also, Jean Baudrillard is one philosopher who has a clear opinion about this topic. He has written a lot of books and discussed the most important cultural and social phenomena of the modern age, such as the invalidation of gender, race, and class divisions that shaped the modern world in a new postmodern consumer, media, and high-tech society.<sup>8</sup> He discussed the influence of new media and how this forms our lives nowadays. In his view, this new media and technology had killed "reality" and managed to get away with it, like a "perfect crime". Baudrillard states that we now exist in a reality where the ultimate purpose is

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<sup>5</sup> Hansson, "Science and Pseudo-Science".

<sup>6</sup> Pauly, "Conspiracy Theories".

<sup>7</sup> Pauly, 'Conspiracy Theories'.

<sup>8</sup> Kellner Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard," accessed April 20, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=baudrillard>.

to let reality vanish away while concealing that vanishing.<sup>9</sup> Media do not just represent the real world, but they create it in order to conceal the absence or replication of the empirically real too. And according to Baudrillard, this is a “hyperreality” that exists as a better copy of the world to alleviate our unhappiness with the empirical world we live in. Conspiracy theories are part of this constantly mediated and hyperreal world.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories is an important topic for research in my main study of psychology because it is related to cognition (the ability to absorb, interpret and process knowledge and information). Cognition science is an important part of psychology, and a lot of research is being done on the impact of social media and technology on cognition. Cognition includes functions such as perception, thinking, language, consciousness, memory, attention, and concentration. You can train your cognition in various ways and, of course, cognition is exposed to external influences. For example, social media and technology have a great influence on our cognition, both in a negative and a positive sense. There is also attention (both in philosophy and in psychology) to the effects of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Can the philosophical view have added value for psychologists and even more specifically; can the text of Baudrillard be applied to the theory of psychology? I suspect that Baudrillard’s theory could be very relevant to the psychological view. However, we must keep in mind that in psychology it is all about empirical science, analysing data and drawing a conclusion from this data. A psychological study showed that social media can spread conspiracy theories very easily and therefore conspiracy theorists can get a lot of their information from social media.<sup>11</sup> Another study showed that the coronavirus has led to a lot of discussion on social media. This

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Goreis and Oswald D. Kothgassner, “Social Media as Vehicle for Conspiracy Beliefs on Covid-19,” *Digital Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2020): 36-39, <https://doi.org/10.24989/dp.v1i2.1866>.

resulted in conspiracy theories among the people on social media.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile Baudrillard also uses empiricism, the way in which the empiricism is obtained and used is different. So, there is a difference in how Baudrillard and psychologists deal with empiricism; they use different empirical methods. In my thesis I am going to compare the philosophical view of Baudrillard with the psychological view. In general, the French philosophical view can be a bit exaggerated in comparison to psychology. Also, in principle, philosophy is a normative (critical) science, so they not only use analyses, but they also take a position in a debate and they make assessments based on values (like rationality, fairness, and transparency). So, there may be a certain tension between psychology and philosophy. I want to see if the philosophical view can have added value for psychologists. Social media is everywhere nowadays and new technologies are developing faster and faster, so we cannot ignore this fact anymore. The influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories can be very harmful for our society. That is why it is important to investigate this. In the book *The Perfect Crime*, Jean Baudrillard claims that media and technology have a big impact on the forming of conspiracy theories. He has a negative view on social media and technology and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, he might even go a step further and we can interpret that he claims that social media is not only a medium to spread those conspiracy theories more easily, but they are also actually the producers of those theories. The question is then; does Baudrillard himself has a “conspiracy theory” about social media producing those conspiracy theories? If this is the case, social media has a different role in Baudrillard’s theory than in psychological theories. They both clearly have a negative image of social media and its influence on conspiracy theories, but psychology focuses more on the empirical analysis and definitely do not have a conspiracy theory about social media, it is only a

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<sup>12</sup> Wasim Ahmed et al., “Covid-19 and the 5G Conspiracy Theory: Social Network Analysis of Twitter Data,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 5 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2196/19458>.

medium to spread those conspiracy theories. They want to come up with ways to reduce the impact of social media on the forming of conspiracy theories. In my thesis, I will argue that Jean Baudrillard's theory (and thus the philosophical perspective) has additional value for psychologists, because it is good to see a different angle on this topic.

In my thesis I am going to argue this by making some argumentative steps. First, I am going to elaborate on the definition of conspiracy theories. Thereafter, I am going to explain the view of Jean Baudrillard on the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Then, I am going to clarify the psychological view on this topic and compare this with the philosophical view. Lastly, I will give a conclusion with some recommendations for future investigations.

**Part 1: The influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories: Baudrillard**

**Influence media and technology on the world: earlier writings**

Jean Baudrillard is often related to postmodern and poststructuralist theory and therefore it is hard to find out what his connection is to traditional and contemporary philosophy. He focuses on major events and occurrences of the time by combining philosophy, social theory and a distinctive cultural metaphysics. He can be viewed as a prominent guru of French postmodern philosophy, but he may also be understood as a philosopher who blends social and cultural critique in creative and controversial manners, as well as an author who has formed his unique way of writing.<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard has written a lot of books and made his statements on a variety of topics. Most of these comments were on important cultural and sociological issues of the modern age, such as media and high-tech society and the influence of these new media on the world. This is also the standpoint that I am going to discuss in my thesis. Baudrillard is well-known for his critique on the current systems of contemporary thought. He discussed the influence of technology on modern society and created his own philosophical viewpoints on this.

In the late 1960s, Baudrillard released a set of books that made him popular worldwide. His first book was released in 1968 (1996), which was called *The System of Objects*.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, he published his book in 1970 (1998) which was called *The Consumer Society*.<sup>15</sup> The last one of the three series of books was *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* in 1972 (1981).<sup>16</sup> These books discuss a critical sociology, that integrates

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>14</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict. (London: Verso, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973).

Lefebvre's (1972 and 1991)<sup>17</sup> investigations of ordinary life with the social semiology that investigates the life of signals in social life. His first two books focus on the object system of consumer society, whereas the third book focuses more on the intersection of political economics and semiotics. He was the first one to use semiology to examine how things are encoded within a system of signals and meanings that influence current media and consumer society. He examines the influence of this system of objects and signs on our daily life by blending semiological research, Marxian political economy, and consumer society sociology.<sup>18</sup>

Baudrillard argued that the change from competitive market capitalism to monopoly capitalism necessitated more emphasis on the demand management, enhancing and guiding consumption. Therefore, Baudrillard decided to focus his research on semiotics (the role of signals, images, messages and languages and daily life in a historical context). From roughly 1920 through the 1960s, the desire to increase the demand was a complement to concerns about reducing manufacturing costs and growing manufacturing. During this period of capitalism, new manufacturing techniques and new technology resulted in a greater focus on the consumption and needs of the customers, that caused a regime of *sign-value*, as defined by Baudrillard.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this, mass media and new communication technologies resulted in even more signs, messages and communication spectacles leading to an explosion of sign-value. The sign-value became a crucial element of commodities and consumption<sup>20</sup> in the consumerist culture. Commodities are presented and consumed much more for their sign-

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1971 [1968]).

-*Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991 [1947; 1958]).

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>19</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>20</sup> Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996)

value than for their use value. According to Baudrillard, the whole system is built around the consumption and presentation of goods by which persons obtain status, identity, and stature.<sup>21</sup>

### **Influence media and technology on the world: later writings, *The Perfect Crime***

In Baudrillard's later writings (after 1970), he elaborates further on the notion he made in the other earlier books. However, he changes from a Marxist view to a neo-aristocratic and metaphysical view. At this moment, he appears to believe that pre-capitalist cultures were regulated by symbolic trading systems. Thus, he showed a distinction in history between symbolic cultures (pre-modern exchange) and productivist cultures (production and goods exchange).<sup>22</sup> As a result, he distanced himself somewhat from the philosophy of Marx, arguing that it is not radical enough to deal with the capitalistic society and the problems that brings it with it. He therefore states that he has a more effective and adequate way of dealing with this by structuring the production in a better way instead of offering an entirely different type of society with other values and ways of living.<sup>23</sup>

In his book *The Perfect Crime* you can see this turn and he illustrates there the problem of modern society. This book is a return to what he discussed in his book "Simulacra and Simulations".<sup>24</sup> He explains that our current status has been swiftly overrun by a worldwide phenomenon, which is called the "Perfect Crime". All the social media has caused a Virtual Reality that has murdered the real reality. The offender has never been detected and the body of the real has never been discovered, so there is no victim, no killer, and no proof. Therefore, the crime is perfect.<sup>25</sup> This "Perfect Crime" succeeds to develop itself with new methods of prediction every time. The crime is always already committed before we know it.

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>23</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>24</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan press, 1994)

<sup>25</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 1.

It is impossible to link it to the initial crime.<sup>26</sup> He is referring here to his digital time system, which can move backwards and forwards infinitely. It is the era of moving data (data is never static). Baudrillard's view portrays a terror scenario instead of what first was seen as hope for what technological progress may offer mankind. He indicates that from the start, the global materialization, and the acceptance of it as real, causes a problem which is that there is no essential boundary anymore between the distinction of a thing itself and the copy/simulation of that thing that allows the resemblance to be feasible. It is arbitrary to make a distinction between a system and its polar opposite, as if one can exist without one another.<sup>27</sup> He describes the separation of substances and anti-substances at the start of the cosmos which shows that he is not only using metaphysics in his theory, but cosmology as well. At first, matter and anti-matter were unified, but now they are separated from one another, and this was the beginning of the world. Anti-matter is nothing in itself but can change itself into anything and matter and anti-matter are separated by the shattering of "symmetry". Therefore, anti-matter is vanished out of space.<sup>28</sup> However, there are still some gaps in our ability to comprehend this process.

This argumentation refers to his earlier work that addresses simulation and the connection with seduction. The simulation is the world that we now live in and the seduction refers to the compensatory illusion of this simulated world. These simulations lack to encompass everything that the world is and therefore this "crime" of killing the world can never be "perfect". It always leaves a trail. However, leaving evidence is contradictory because it is precisely this that makes it a crime. So, when a crime continually strives for perfection and does not want to leave any evidence, it will only be a crime when it does not succeed. The crime or the perpetrator is always eager to be detected. This is the same for a

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<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 1.

simulation. Even though this “perfection” can exist and can be whole from the start without us knowing, it can only exist if we can observe it or can talk about it. A simulation can thus never be whole or complete, because there must be someplace beyond it from where it can be viewed.<sup>29</sup>

This insight is a new step in his argumentation or a new way of understanding, that we did not see before. He states that this “illusion” is a limitation of the simulations, and it means the same as most basic criteria of empirical validation in an unattainable equation. Strange reversible processes, such as plagues, parasites, and diseases, affect simulations when they get too strong and powerful;<sup>30</sup> however, this is just like the evident limit of the human viewer and history must exist for them to have any influence at all. As a result, he calls the underlying truth of the largest radical equality of all which is that subjects and objects are the same and unified.<sup>31</sup> He means to say with this that these objective fates are already present in the subject. Here, he retains the subject’s place in his ideas. The role of people in his theory is that they hinder simulations from achieving an overpowering supremacy.<sup>32</sup> The fundamental criteria for empirical observation, which is exactly to be assumed to be overcome by simulation, are the ones that should stay to have an impact. These simulations cannot get rid of this kind of common “reality”.<sup>33</sup> So digitalization promotes transparency and the automatic disappearance of personal characteristics such as arbitrariness and ambivalence in favour of usefulness.<sup>34</sup> Thus all those dualities, like subject-object that I discussed earlier are becoming one, as a result of digitalization.

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<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 40, Jean Baudrillard. *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998) 33.

<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 40, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 58, *Paroxysm*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 66.

So, Baudrillard claims that media and technology has killed this “reality” and we exist now in a reality where the greatest purpose of the sign is to make reality vanish while also masking that vanishment.<sup>35</sup> But what I already explained is that a crime never is flawless and for perfection is constantly punished by simulation which is the global domain of media with the copies and replications of the reality, infinite digital traces shining on our screens.

### **Influence media and technology on forming of conspiracy theories: later writings, *The Perfect Crime***

Social media and technology not only correspond to reality but can create it in order to conceal the missing presence or replication of the empirical reality. This is a “hyperreality” according to Baudrillard, that exists outside the world as a better replication of the reality to alleviate our unhappiness with the empirical reality we live in.<sup>36</sup> This world we live in now is constantly mediated and influenced by social media and communication technologies and this creates a hyperreal world. All that information that is spread on the internet has influence on how fast conspiracy theories can spread. A lot of screens are connected globally and these displays begin to overpower and supplant the underlying world. So, social media and communication technologies obfuscate the “real” empirical world. As a result, social media become more “real” than the empirical reality.

Baudrillard says that because of social media, that created this new reality, conspiracy theories are forming. If you not only obfuscate reality but also remove any traces of the intellectual conspiracy from someone’s mind, then the system is stirring up its own denial and speeding up its own demise through the lack of reality. More and more information is released via social media and this has destroyed real meaning<sup>37</sup> and because everything is connected

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<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 17.

with everything via Internet, we cannot longer build a system of facts on a world that is now independent of this extended mind of technologies. As a result, this gives us the impression that the entire universe may vanish as if by magic. Therefore, the world does not desire to exist any longer or continue to exist. It looks for the cleverest means to get away from reality. It ponders what may lead to its demise.<sup>38</sup> So we are now caught in a void, we know something is false but we are not able to grasp the actual reality.<sup>39</sup> Therefore social media causes the forming of conspiracy theories to get a grip on the reality. Persons can now live in parallel realities in this hyperreal world because there are no epistemic filters. While everybody focusses on different aspects of hyperreality, all those views become equally valid. There is no position anymore from where we can evaluate or critically assess the beliefs outside of the structure that creates it. A factual structure is not viable anymore. Therefore, it is easy to believe in conspiracy theories, because in a digital world conspiracy theories are equally valid as other theories. It is hard to refute those theories. According to Baudrillard, the digital world we now live in (produced by social media and new technologies) have triggered the formation of conspiracy theories. Ironically perhaps, we might conclude that Baudrillard *himself* develops a conspiracy theory about social media that deliberately spread conspiracy theories to attract attention, influence public opinion or influence elections. Social media are not only a medium to spread those conspiracy theories, but it is also an active producer of conspiracy theories. We can interpret that Baudrillard does not only think that social media are a medium to spread the conspiracy theories, but that they have caused the forming of conspiracy theories. From that we can deduce that social media had an active role in the forming of conspiracy theories.

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<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 2.

## **Part 2: The influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy**

### **theories: Psychological view**

#### **The influence of social media and technology on the world: psychological view**

Now we looked at the philosophical view of Baudrillard, we are going to focus on the psychological view. Psychology relies a lot on research and empiricism and uses different empirical methods than Baudrillard. We cannot imagine a world without social media and technology anymore. Nowadays the influence of these social media technologies is so big and it is getting even bigger and bigger. A lot of psychological research is done on the influence of these fast developing social media technologies, because it has a big impact on our lives and cognition. Cognition is an important field of study for psychology, because it includes a lot of functions that humans execute through their cognition. Meanwhile social media can have their positive sides and it is very handy in a lot of situations (like you can text or call someone every time you need them or when there is an emergency), it also have many drawbacks. Researchers highlight the advantages of allowing people to communicate their ideas and emotions while also receiving social support.<sup>40</sup> Also, cognition can be trained through social media and new technology, and they can have positive effects on our cognition. For example, a study shows that the use of social media by the elderly resulted in better inhibitory control, which is the extent in which a person can override a reflexive

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<sup>40</sup> Fenne Große Deters, and Matthias R. Mehl, "Does posting Facebook status updates increase or decrease loneliness? An online social networking experiment," *Social psychological and personality science* 4, no. 5 (2013): 579-586, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1948550612469233>; Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families (Clinical Report)," *Pediatric Clinical Practice Guidelines & Policies*, March 2013, pp. 916-916, [https://doi.org/10.1542/9781581108224-the15\\_sub01](https://doi.org/10.1542/9781581108224-the15_sub01); Larry D. Rosen, "Social Networking's Good and Bad Impacts on Kids," *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e621532011-001>.

reaction with another one.<sup>41</sup> However, a lot of social scientists show that social media has a lot of negative consequences and they have voiced their concerns about how teenagers use social media and the resulting harm to their personal and social growth.<sup>42</sup> There is also a correlation between social media usage and psychological issues. These concerns are confirmed by a lot of research. A systematic review in psychology looked at the impact of social media on depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. The results could be divided into four categories: the time people used for social media, the activities they did, the investment and the addiction. Depression, anxiety, and psychological distress were all linked across all those categories.<sup>43</sup> Another systematic review of 11 studies found a modest but significant result of the link between social media usage and depressed symptoms in children and adolescents.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, one study shows that excessive social media usage causes social media fatigue, which leads to increased anxiety and depression.<sup>45</sup> Also, this research shows that the well-known term ‘fear of missing out’, that is caused by social media, had an indirect impact on social media fatigue.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kelly Quinn, “Cognitive Effects of Social Media Use: A Case of Older Adults,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 3 (2018): p. 205630511878720, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118787203>.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Twenge, "Generation me: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other," *New York: Basic Books. Vandervoort, D.(1999). Quality of social support in mental and physical health. Current Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2006): 205.

<sup>43</sup> Betül Keles, Niall McCrae and Annmarie Grealish, “A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents.” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (2020): 79-93, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>.

<sup>44</sup> Niall McCrae, “The weaponizing of mental health.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 75, no 4 (2018): 709-710, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jan.13878>.

<sup>45</sup> Amandeep Dhir et al., “Online Social Media Fatigue and Psychological Wellbeing—a Study of Compulsive Use, Fear of Missing out, Fatigue, Anxiety and Depression,” *International Journal of Information Management* 40 (2018): pp. 141-152, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.01.012>.

<sup>46</sup> Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur and Chen, “Online social media fatigue and psychological well-being,” 141-152.

So, we can conclude out of this that there is much research that show that social media and technology have a negative impact on people's mental health. Psychologists state that there are some positive influences of social media, but it is mostly overruled by the negative sides of it.

### **Influence social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories:**

#### **psychological view**

Consequently, we can look at the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Multiple psychological research show a link between social media usage and beliefs in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are nowadays widely shared through social media. Questionable beliefs regarding election fraud and the COVID-19 vaccination safety quickly transit social networks, frequently bypassing censorship and the algorithms are even more boosted by this.<sup>47</sup> Social media is often seen as the one that spreads the misinformation and enhances conspiracy beliefs.<sup>48</sup> Implementation of those beliefs can have real-world implications for politics and actions, raising major concerns about the influence of social media on people's belief in harmful misinformation.<sup>49</sup>

First of all, a large body of research show that there is a strong link between using social media and believing in conspiracy theories.<sup>50</sup> Conspiracy theories can quickly spread

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<sup>47</sup> Soroush Vosoughi, Deb S. Roy and Sinan Aral, "The spread of true and false news online" *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–1151, DOI: [10.1126/science.aap9559](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559)

<sup>48</sup> Emily K. Vraga, Leticia Bode, and Melissa Tully, "Creating News Literacy Messages to Enhance Expert Corrections of Misinformation on Twitter," *Communication Research* 49, no. 2 (2020): 245-267, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219898094>; Kelly, R. Garrett, "Social Media's Contribution to Political Misperceptions in U.S. Presidential Elections," *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213500>.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel, Jolley, Silvia Mari and Karen M. Douglas (2020) Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. In: Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories . Routledge, London, 231-241, ISBN 9780815361749

<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Dolores Albarracín, "The Relation between Media Consumption and Misinformation at the Outset of the SARS-COV-2 Pandemic in the US," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020->

through social media platforms, and those who believe in conspiracies are more inclined to receive that information via social media – and this last notion is vital knowledge in order to escape this circular loop of misinformation.<sup>51</sup> A modern topic that has led to a lot of conspiracy theories, is the coronavirus. The rapidly spreading coronavirus resulted in more debates on the internet and under these debates there were also a number of conspiracies shared by people on the internet. It is crucial to understand these causes of false news and misinformation and enacting swift procedures to pinpoint and eliminate disinformation to counter it.<sup>52</sup>

So, we can see that much research has been done on the influence of social media on conspiracy beliefs,<sup>53</sup> but there is still a lot of uncertainty around the social media use leading to the forming of conspiracy theories. In a study, this link between social media news consumption and the creation of conspiracy belief was tested.<sup>54</sup> They showed that social media news consumption was linked to increased beliefs in conspiracy theories. This confirmed the findings of a previous study that also had the same results.<sup>55</sup> The positive correlation might be linked to the disinformation posing as reliable information on social

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[012](#); Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel, “Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2007): 353-372, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900708400210>.

<sup>51</sup> Goreis and Kothgassner, “Social Media as Vehicle for Conspiracy Beliefs,” 36-39.

<sup>52</sup> Wasim Ahmed et al., “Covid-19 and the 5G Conspiracy Theory: Social Network Analysis of Twitter Data,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 5 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2196/19458>.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Allington et al., “Health-Protective Behaviour, Social Media Usage and Conspiracy Belief during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency,” *Psychological Medicine* 51, no. 10 (September 2020): 1763-1769, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003329172000224x>.

<sup>54</sup> Xizhu Xiao, Porismita Borah, and Yan Su, “The Dangers of Blind Trust: Examining the Interplay among Social Media News Use, Misinformation Identification, and News Trust on Conspiracy Beliefs,” *Public Understanding of Science* 30, no. 8 (May 2021): 977-992, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662521998025>.

<sup>55</sup> Allington et al., “Health-Protective Behaviour, Social Media Usage and Conspiracy Belief,” 1763-1769; Garrett, “Social Media’s Contribution to Political Misperceptions in U.S”.

media. Also, the trust in social media news use is a substantial moderator of the association between using social media news and having more conspiracy beliefs.<sup>56</sup>

### **Factors that influence the connection between social media and the forming of conspiracies: individual sensitivity for conspiracies**

However, according to related research about the creation of people's opinions and beliefs and the impact of social media, it is crucial to sort out individual-level motives and adopt specific viewpoints to determine these relationships.<sup>57</sup> In the above some factors have already been discussed, like the disinformation that is posed on social media as a reliable resource and the trust that people have in this information given on social media. Two other studies show that people who get their information from social media and use social media very often are most likely to believe in conspiracy theories and misinformation. Nevertheless, this link is dependent on the tendency to think in conspiracies (so the tendency to see important events as the result of conspiracy theories), so the link between the usage of social media and believing in conspiracies gets stronger when complot thinking increases.<sup>58</sup> This informs us about the link between social media usage and beliefs in conspiracy theories.

So, to conclude all the above mentioned in this section of the psychological view, psychologists definitely think that social media has a big influence on the forming of conspiracy theories and that social media is a medium for spreading those conspiracies more rapidly. They argue that social media enhance the forming of conspiracy theories and mostly state that it has negative consequences, in particular on mental health of people. However, they argue that it is not the only cause for the forming of conspiracy theories. Social media

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<sup>56</sup> Xiao et al., 'The Dangers of Blind Trust,' 977-992.

<sup>57</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S Hahn, "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use," *Journal of Communication* 59, no. 1 (2009): 19-39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x>.

<sup>58</sup> Adam M. Enders et al., "The Relationship between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation," *Political Behavior*, July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6>.

reinforces the forming of conspiracy theories, but also other factors play a role. This is a different view than that of Baudrillard, which I will explain in the last part.

### **Part 3: Comparison: Baudrillard's view versus psychological view**

Although the theory of Baudrillard is quite insightful and can help the psychological view to get another angle on the topic, we also must keep in mind that his work is also very exaggerating. It is debatable if his work should be interpreted as science fiction or philosophy. Clearly, he wants to show both sides; for the social scientists (like psychology), he wants them to believe that he offers important insights on the modern social world. He shows them what actually is going on, how the reality really is. On the other side, for anti-social theorists the fiction side is more interesting. Similarly, he occasionally invites cultural metaphysicians to see his theory as real observations and analyses of the contemporary reality, meanwhile he also secures those who are not believing in those theories. So, deciding whether Baudrillard's theories should be understood as fact or fiction, and if it can be seen as science fiction and pataphysics or as philosophy, social theory and cultural metaphysics is hard.<sup>59</sup> Although he appears to give a metaphysical theory, his work can also be seen as pataphysics, which is a certain kind of metaphysics that is heavily influenced by Alfred Jarry's pataphysics.<sup>60</sup> According to Jarry, pataphysics is the study of what is beyond the world of metaphysics. It investigates the principles that control exceptions and describe a world in addition to this one. Another, a little bit less ambitious one, is that it explains a world that people can view (and possibly must view) in place of the traditional one. The definition that Jarry gives of pataphysics is that it is the study of fictional solutions, where attributes of things, as represented through the digital world, are metaphorically attributed to their lineaments.<sup>61</sup> Just as the pataphysical world that Jarry describes in his book<sup>62</sup>, along with the other works that are more theoretical explanations of pataphysics, the world in Baudrillard's eyes are likewise completely ludicrous. Similarly to the pataphysics of Jarry, the world of Baudrillard is also full

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<sup>59</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>60</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

<sup>61</sup> Alfred Jarry. "What is Pataphysics?," *Evergreen Review*, 13 (1963): 131-51.

<sup>62</sup> Alfred Jarry, *The Ubu Roi*, New York: Grove Press (1969).

of unexpected things, reversal, delusion, blasphemy, obscenity and the need to astonish.<sup>63</sup> So, Baudrillard's way of reasoning (and in general the way of reasoning in philosophy) is different than how psychologists develop their arguments. They both use empiricism for their argumentation, but the methods are different. Baudrillard and philosophy in general, adopt a normative (critical) perspective, so they take a certain position in a debate and base their argumentation on values and rationality. Also, if we see Baudrillard's work in the light of pataphysics, it is another kind of science than psychology. Psychology claims to take a neutral position in a debate and draws conclusions based on the outcomes of empirical research or systematic review of literature. So, there may be a certain tension between psychology and philosophy. However, Baudrillard has made some fundamental impact on the modern social theory. His description of a profound mutation unfolding inside modern civilizations and the development of a new style of simulation in the mid-1970s, which showed the impact of media, information, and technology on the overall civilization, is very unique and noteworthy. Also, his work in *The Perfect Crime* gives a lot of new information and perspective about the influence of these media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Therefore, we can conclude that the theory of Jean Baudrillard about the influence of social media and new technology on the forming of conspiracy theories definitely is valuable information for psychologists and has added value to the theories of social scientists. However, the role of social media in the eyes of Baudrillard is different than that of psychologists. Psychologists state that social media has a big influence on the forming of conspiracy theories and via social media those theories can spread more easily, but Baudrillard goes a step further to state that social media is not only a medium to spread conspiracy theories, but it is the cause of the forming of conspiracy theories. So, it has a more active role in the forming of conspiracy theories. So, we must keep this in mind. So, then the question is, to which extent can we use

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<sup>63</sup> Douglas, "Jean Baudrillard".

this theory of Baudrillard in social theories? It is definitely useful to look at different views on this topic, but what we can exactly use of this theory of Baudrillard in psychology is not clear. I will discuss this further in the conclusion.

## Conclusion

In this Bachelor Thesis the main question was about what the influence is of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories and hereby I compared the view of Baudrillard (the philosophical view) with the psychological view and asked the question whether the theory of Baudrillard can have an added value for psychologists. In the introduction, I first clarified the definition of “conspiracy theory”, because this can have a neutral one or a negative one. Mostly, the term is described in a negative sense, so a conspiracy theory is seen as something incorrect. In contrast, the neutral definition can only describe a conspiracy theory as a theory that involves a conspiracy, or a step further is a description of a phenomenon by the causal agency of a small number of persons operating in secret. In philosophy, the neutral definition is mostly used, but in this essay, I used the negative definition, because this definition is more distinct and clear. Also, I asked the question what the difference was in empirical methods between Baudrillard (and philosophy in general) and psychology. Furthermore, to decide whether Baudrillard’s theory can have added value for psychologists it is important to look at what role social media and technology play in Baudrillard’s view compared to the psychological view. I answered all these questions in my thesis following some argumentative steps.

To answer the main question, I first looked at the view of Jean Baudrillard and what his ideas were about the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. In this part, I elaborated on the arguments of Baudrillard and discussed what role social media and technology has according to him. First, I wrote about the perspective of Baudrillard on the influence of social media and technologies in general. This was also divided in two parts: his early writings and his later writings (with the focus on *The Perfect Crime*). In his early writings he explained how signals and objects in the current society influence our lives. There has been a shift from competitive market capitalism to

monopoly capitalism which resulted in a more consumerist society. He focussed in his early writings on semiotics, which is the study of signals, images, messages, and languages that we use in our everyday lives in a historical context. A *sign-value* was developed caused by the growing technologies, mass media and consumptions. This led to even more signals, messages and communication spectacles, resulting in a even bigger *sign-value*. So, now the whole system is built on this *sign-value* instead of their *use-value*.

In his later writings he shifts from a Marxist view to a neo-aristocratic and metaphysical view. He shows that there is a distinction in history between symbolic cultures and productivist cultures. In contrast to Marxism, he states that we have to built an entirely different society with different values and norms to deal with the problems of current capitalistic society. In the book *The Perfect Crime* he elaborates further on this idea and the problem of current society. Nowadays, the world is overpowered by what he calls “the perfect crime”, which is that the social media has killed the real reality and has come away with it. This Virtual Reality we now live in, has caused a crime where no killer, body or victim is found. So that is why the crime is called perfect. These new technologies were first seen as something good for the world, but it has now become a horror scenario, because there is no distinction anymore between what is real and what is simulated. Matter and anti-matter are now separated from each other, but we cannot understand this process completely. The simulations that we now live in, lack to encompass everything that the world is and thus the crime of murdering the world cannot be perfect. However, a crime will strive for perfection and do not want to leave any trail, it is only a crime when we can find the evidence. A simulation works the same way, because it can strive for perfection and this can exist, however it cannot be complete without us viewing this. Thus, the simulation needs us to exist. People have a big influence on simulations to hinder their overruling power. He argues from this that those subjects and objects are unified, so the objective fates are present in the subject.

Thus, the subject is still necessary and these dualities, like subject-object that is discussed in his earlier writings, are now becoming one. This is caused by digitalization. So, because of media and technology, we now live in a virtual reality that has killed the real reality and has come away with it. However, a crime cannot be perfect, and this perfection is punished by the simulation of the reality.

Then, I discussed his work about the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Social media and communication technologies have created a “hyperreality” and because of this new way of spreading information and creating a new reality, conspiracy theories are formed. Nowadays, the reality is covered up and the system is denying and speeding up its own demise through the lack of reality. Because of the increase of information spreading on social media and the connection between everything on social media, real meaning is gone and there are no facts possible anymore that are independent of these social media technologies. So, there is now a void that unable us to get a grip on the real reality. That is why, social media is now influencing the forming of conspiracy theories to get a grip on the reality. Everyone can live now in parallel realities where there are no epistemic filters. There is no true or false anymore, everything has become equally valid, and we cannot evaluate or critically assess the beliefs outside of this structure that creates it. Therefore, it has become easy to believe in conspiracy theories, because there is nothing anymore to validate their correctness, and it is evenly valid as other theories. The way he states this, we can interpret that Baudrillard *himself* has a conspiracy theory about social media that spread conspiracy theories on purpose to attract attention or influence people’s attention. Social media is therefore not only a medium, but also the cause of the forming of conspiracy theories.

After this, I clarified the psychological view on this topic. Psychologists use different empirical methods than Baudrillard. They did a lot of research about social media and its

impact. They found some positive sides; it gives people social support, and they can express their ideas and emotions. Also, it can better our cognition, such as inhibitory control in elderly. However, most research have found negative effects of social media, mostly causing psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. So, social media and technology has mostly a negative impact on the mental health.

Furthermore, there is also a big influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Social media is often the one that spreads the misinformation and enhances conspiracy beliefs. Various research shows a strong connection between social media usage and believing in conspiracy theories. Social media is a medium to spread those conspiracy theories more rapidly and those who believe in conspiracy theories find most of their information via social media. A lot of research has been done on the influence of social media on conspiracy beliefs, however there is still a lot not sure about social media leading to the forming of conspiracy theories and how big the influence of social media is. There are a lot of other factors that play a role in the forming of conspiracy theories, like the misinformation that is placed on social media as a reliable source and the trust people have in the information that is posted on social media. Also, the tendency to think in conspiracies has an influence on how strong the connection is between the usage of social media and believing in conspiracies. So, psychologists found a big influence of social media on the forming of conspiracy theories, but there are a lot of different factors that play a role. Therefore, the role of social media is that it only is a medium to spread those conspiracy theories more rapidly and is not the only cause for the forming of conspiracy theories.

Finally, I compared the view of Baudrillard with the psychological view. The first thing to keep in mind is that Baudrillard's work is very exaggerating compared to the psychological view. Furthermore, Baudrillard's work is difficult to interpret, because we can see his theory as science fiction or as philosophy. He confirms the theory of social scientists

and shows what is going on in reality, but also those of anti-social theorists and the fiction side. So, it is hard to decide whether Baudrillard's theory can be seen in the light of science fiction and pataphysics or as philosophy, social theory, and cultural metaphysics. Similar to the pataphysics of Jarry, the world how Baurdrillard sees it is also ludicrous. So, we could say that his work is maybe more based on pataphysics. Furthermore, Baudrillard's way of reasoning is different than that of psychology. They both use empiricism for their argumentation, but with different methods. Baudrillard (and philosophy) take a certain position in a debate and base their arguments on rationality and values. In contrast, psychologist claim to take a neutral position and draw conclusions based on the outcomes of their empirical experiments or systematic reviews. Also, social media has a different role in psychology than in Baudrillard's theory. Meanwhile psychologists only see social media as a medium to spread conspiracy theories, Baudrillard sees social media as the cause of the forming of conspiracy theories. So, we can say that the contrast between Baudrillard and psychologists is weak and strong technological determinism (or more specifically media determinism) versus social constructivism.

Thus, as we can see, there are quite some differences between Baudrillard and psychology. However, Baudrillard has also made a crucial impact on the modern social theory. His view on social media and technology is very insightful and unique. Furthermore, his book *The Perfect Crime* gives new and noteworthy information about the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories. Also, psychologists and social scientists can take inspiration from Baudrillard by using their methods to empirically investigate the extend to which social media are the root cause (and not simply the accelerator) of conspiracy theories.

To sum up, we can conclude that the theory of Jean Baudrillard about the influence of social media and technology on the forming of conspiracy theories definitely is valuable

information for psychologists and has added value to the theories of social scientists.

However, we have to keep in mind that there are some differences between psychology and Baudrillard's theory, most importantly the different empirical methods they use and the different roles social media play in their theories. Therefore, we cannot say precisely what we can use from the theory of Baudrillard. What we can say for sure, is that the theory of Baudrillard is useful for psychology to give a new perspective on the topic. Also, his theory can be used as inspiration to further investigate the role of social media and to what extent social media is the root cause of conspiracy theories. So, further research is necessary to get to know more about the role of social media on the forming of conspiracy theories and what to do about it.

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