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Misinformation Susceptibility: Partisan & Novel Misinformation is More Believable

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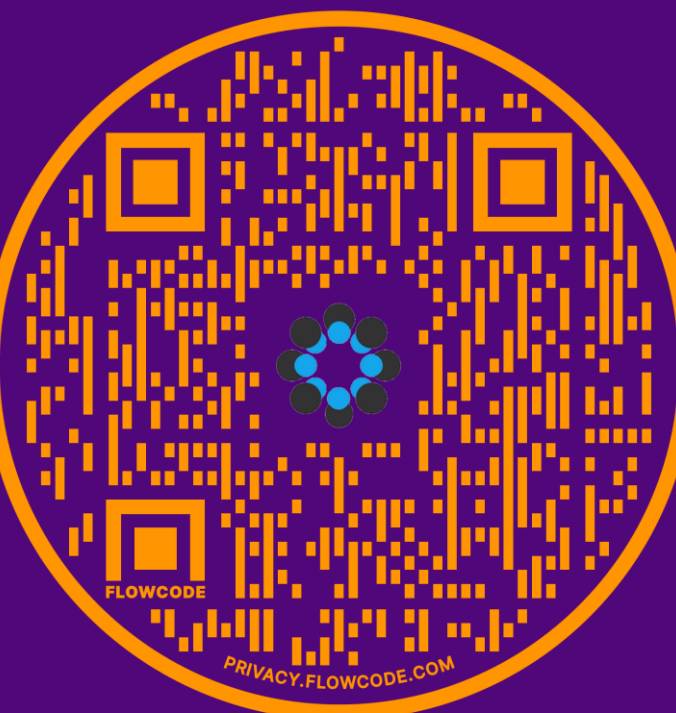
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INTRODUCTION

This preregistered study examines how susceptibility to misinformation is affected by its novelty and partisan appeal. Prior research done by Jost et al. (2003) and Zmigrod et al. (2019) have differed in whether an ideological asymmetry exists contributing to heightened susceptibility to misinformation. Our study explores this debate between the ‘rigidity of the right’ versus the ‘rigidity of the extremes.’

Additionally, the present study builds upon previous research assessing the impact of prior exposure to misinformation (what we loosely define as ‘organic’ and ‘novel’) and susceptibility (Pennycook et al., 2018). We also explored whether or not several individual difference variables are related to susceptibility.

Hypotheses:

- Conservatives and liberals will be more likely to believe misinformation is true and more confident in their belief if...
- the misinformation appeals to their partisan identity
 - the misinformation is not novel

Participants high in...

- Cognitive sophistication will be less susceptible to misinformation
- Conscientiousness will be less susceptible to misinformation
- Dogmatism will be more susceptible to misinformation

METHOD

Participants:

194 Prolific participants (White = 80.4% Men = 58.2%)
Median age = 37.5 SD = 14.3 Range = 18-79

Measures:

- Short Social Dominance Orientation scale (Aichholzer & Lechner, 2021) $\alpha = .867$
Sample: “Superior societal groups should dominate inferior groups.”
- Cognitive Sophistication (Pennycook et al., 2015; Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2016) $\alpha = .766$
Sample: “If you’re running a race and you pass the person in second place, what place are you in?”
- Ten Item Personality Measure- Conscientiousness subscale (Gosling et al., 2003) $\alpha = .644$
Sample: “I see myself as... dependable, self-disciplined.”
- Updated Dogmatism Scale (Shearman & Levine, 2006) $\alpha = .773$
Sample: “There is a single correct way to do most things.”
- Demographic measures (e.g., political identification, SES, gender)

Procedure & Design:

Study Design: 2 x 2 x 3

- 2 (political orientation; between)
- 2 (statement novelty; within)
- 3 (partisan appeal; within)

All participants were presented with 15 FALSE statements in random order
Participants rated each statement as TRUE or FALSE (Susceptibility)
They then assessed their confidence (1-4 Likert scale)

Statement Characteristics:

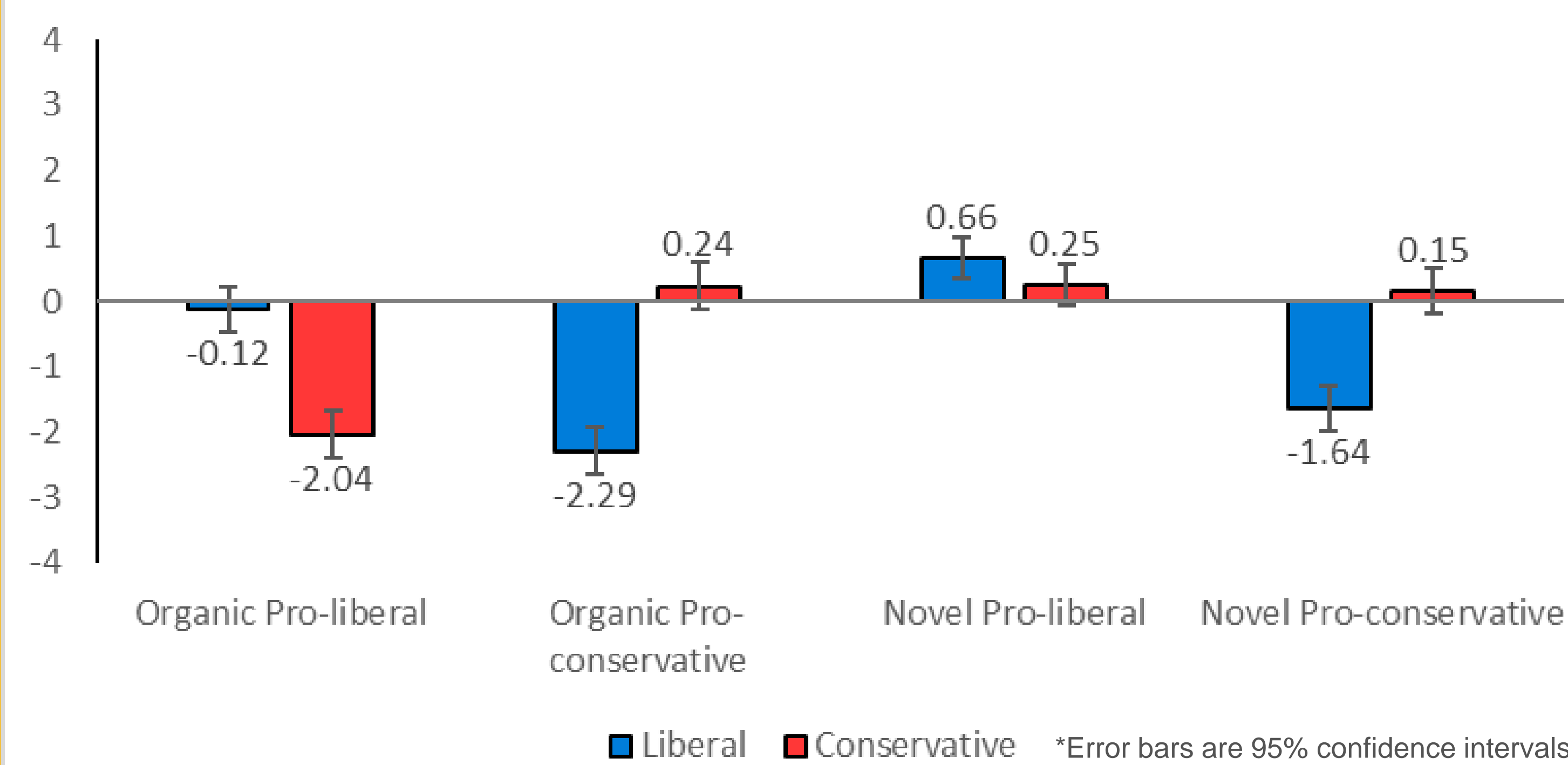
- Six statements were ‘pro-liberal’
- Six statements were ‘pro-conservative’
- Half of pro-liberal and pro-conservative statements were novel (3)
- Half of pro-liberal and pro-conservative statements were organic (3)
- Three statements were politically neutral

TAKEAWAY

People are more susceptible to misinformation that appeals to their partisan identity, especially if they have not encountered that misinformation previously.

BELIEF IN MISINFORMATION

Confidence in Novel & Partisan Misinformation



EXAMPLE ITEMS

Neutral

Walt Disney arranged to have himself cryogenically frozen after his death.

Conservative Organic

Disney refused to cast Tim Allen in the new movie ‘Light Year’ due to his conservative beliefs.

Conservative Novel

In a leaked recording Target officials said, “just slap a couple of rainbows [and some minorities] on the ads and the liberals will eat it up.”

Liberal Organic

Florida banned “To Kill a Mockingbird” because of its negative portrayal of white people and racial propaganda.

Liberal Novel

Chick-fil-a has been reportedly requiring employees to sign waivers that allow the establishment to fire them, should they find any public statements about their sexual orientation.

FINDINGS

- There was a significant three-way interaction between political orientation, novelty, and bias on confidence, $\eta_p^2 = .145, p < .001$.
- Liberals were more likely to judge misinformation to be true and confident if that misinformation was novel ($\eta_p^2 = .273, p < .001$) and appealed to their partisan affiliations ($\eta_p^2 = .687, p < .001$).
- If information was pro-liberal, conservatives were more likely to judge misinformation to be true and confident if the item was novel than organic ($\eta_p^2 = .622, p < .001$).
- If information was pro-conservative, conservatives were equally likely to judge misinformation to be true and confident regardless of novelty ($\eta_p^2 = .002, p = .700$).
- Participants who scored lower on measures of cognitive sophistication and higher on measures of social dominance were more likely to believe misinformation ($R^2 = .193, p < .001$).
- There was no significant relationship between susceptibility and conscientiousness or dogmatism.

REGRESSION TABLE

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient		95% Confidence Intervals		
	β	Std. Error	Beta	<i>t</i>	Significance	Lower	Upper
(constant)	0.296	0.096		3.086	.002	.107	.485
Conscientiousness	0	0.009	.004	0.051	.959	-.017	.018
Dogmatism	0.056	0.035	.127	1.609	.109	-.013	.125
Social Dominance	0.018	0.009	.162	2.087	.038	.001	.035
Cognitive Sophistication	-0.026	0.006	-.294	-4.386	<.001	-.037	-.014

Dependent Variable: Susceptibility to misinformation

CONCLUSIONS

- The decreased susceptibility to organic statements might reflect the effect of fluency due to prior exposure, such that previous exposure to these organic statements in the past have inoculated them against believing in the misinformation now (e.g., fact-checking).
- Alternatively, the susceptibility of novel misinformation could point to the public’s reduced skills in resisting new misinformation, suggesting that strategies that equip the public with skills to combat new misinformation rather than relying only on debunking are needed. Moreover, these results highlight that novelty or ‘newness’ of misinformation is a meaningful factor in understanding its influence over the public.
- Given near equal susceptibility among liberals and conservatives, these results provide further evidence against an ideological asymmetry among conservatives and liberals.