

Desert Conspiracies: Social Media And The Shaping Of Anxiety And Fear On Covid-19 In The UAE

Ahmed Mansoori (PhD)¹, Muhammed Musa (PhD)²

¹Assistant Professor Email: A.mansoori@uaeu.ac.ae (Corresponding Author)

²Associate Professor Department of Media and Creative Industries United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain Email: mu.musa@uaeu.ac.ae

Ahmed Mansoori is the current Chair of the Department of Media and Creative Industries at United Arab Emirates University. His teaching and research interests are in journalism studies, media convergence, media and society as well as media development in the Gulf region.

Muhammed Musa joined the United Arab Emirates University from the University of Canterbury in 2014. His research interests in which he has published widely are in political economy of the media, media and social change in Africa, media and sports and new media and political developments in Africa.

Abstract:

Covid-19, first reported in February 2020 has spread to all countries of the world, so that it is now a global crisis of pandemic proportion.

Its impact is felt in all spheres of social life from health, economy, education and culture to professions and their practices.

Like many other governments, the UAE government has embarked on initiatives to curb the spread of the virus in the country. Such initiatives that include lockdowns of town and cities, closure of malls and worship places, suspension of public gatherings, and hand sanitization and use of face mask etc. were propagated through media channels.

In spite of its efforts at creating public awareness about the Covid-19 and the required measures, public beliefs bordering on conspiracy theories are found to be undermining such initiatives and consequently, injurious to the adaptation of appropriate health behavior necessary in curbing the spread of the virus.

This study used focus group interviews and structured surveys among citizens and residents of the UAE to gain insights into the nature of conspiracy beliefs and how they could be inimical to government measures at curbing the spread of the virus.

Our study found among others, that respondents cite social media as sources of their beliefs which range from one that says that the virus is a hoax, to others that say that the virus is manufactured by powerful countries as part of the agenda for attaining hegemony. Yet others believe that big pharma are behind the manufacture of the virus for economic gain.

Keywords: Social media, COVID-19, Conspiracy theory, UAE

Introduction/background:

The world has faced many health challenges in the past such as bubonic plague and influenza, malaria and HIV, AIDS, SARS and Ebola, etc. Yet, none of all these have had a global spread and impact on the world economy and society as the current Covid-19. While there is little or no debate about its origin that links it to the city of Wuhan in China, its quick mobility has seen Covid-19 domesticating itself in every country of the world. Like goods and capital, Coronavirus has also travelled with ease and forced itself into countries, resulting in a global pandemic situation and crises of various dimensions. While it is essentially a health crisis, its impact is felt in spheres ranging from education, economy, polity, infrastructure, and even culture, as the surgical mask has suddenly become an essential fashion code in most countries.

The United Arab Emirates has been attracting world attention for the strides it is making according to United Nations Development Project (UNDP) World Human Development Index that ranks it 35 out of 189 countries. (UNDP 2018). Yet the nucleus for developmental strides achieved is predicated on trade and tourism. Between March of 2020 and now, both tourism and trade have been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic as both exports and orders for commodities have dropped and tourists that provide capital injection into the UAE economy have also stayed away as world airports are shut.

Between the time of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020 to the 29th of January 2021, the UAE has recorded 293,052 cases and a total number of 819 mortalities. The number of recoveries is put at 267, 024. (See worldometers.info).

Country	Total Cases	Total Death	Total Recovered	Deaths/ 1M pop	Total Tests	Tests/ 1M pop	Population
UAE	293,052	819	267,024	81	25,041,562	2,514,497	9,958,877

The UAE today is acknowledged as a global centre of tourism. The country owns both Emirates Air and Etihad Airlines, reputed to be among the world top 10 airlines. Dubai Airport is ranked among the busiest airports in the world. These factors combine to point out that the intensification of human traffic in and out of the UAE makes the country vulnerable to the spread of Covid-19 as passengers travel into the country from all over the world. Consequently, the measures put in place by the authorities to curtail the spread of the virus in the country are based on real rather than imaginary dangers. Among the measures put in place by the National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority (NECDMA), are public awareness on the reality of the spread of the virus by updating the numbers

of new infections including recovery and mortality on daily basis. Such public awareness initiative is embarked upon through both traditional and social media outlets. It is followed by a stipulation of initiatives and protocols that include closure of schools and malls, worship places and restaurants, etc. Curfew is also imposed on towns and cities to curtail movements as well as instructions on social distancing and hand sanitization. For a country with strong Islamic values where congregational prayers are offered five times a day in mosques, closure of such worship places is an indication of the disruption to normality that Covid-19 has imposed on the country.

The public awareness initiative by the government utilized various channels ranging from legacy media to posters and social media. The public awareness offensive by the UAE government stems from the conviction that appropriate public opinion is the most important step in curtailing the spread of Covid-19. As well as the worship centers, malls are usually the most populated social hubs in the UAE that have also been deserted because of the enforced closure.

However, as is the case with other health crises of the past such as HIV-AIDS or climate change, there are assumptions among citizens, often predicated on conspiracy theories that often become the basis of public opinion formation. Scholars have discovered elsewhere that among the most notable conspiracy theories are those pertaining to health and medicine. For example, only 44% of Americans disagree that doctors know that vaccines are harmful, yet they want to vaccinate children. As well as this, 37% believe that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) refuses to release the cure for cancer. (Oliver and Woods, 2014).

To the extent that belief in conspiracy theories may not be confined to the US or the West alone, and to the extent that conspiracy theories are found to be prevalent around health issues, it raises curiosity how public opinion in the UAE on the current Covid-19 is shaped by conspiracy theories. Given the predominance of Arabic and Islamic values what would be the pattern of conspiracy theories on Covid-19 in this desert country? What is the role of social networking sites in the dissemination of such conspiracy theories and how do they shape anxiety and fear among citizens and residents and how do these affect government initiatives of creating awareness on Covid-19? These are among the questions this study is seeking answers for.

Understanding conspiracy theories:

Conspiracy theory is a communication that explains events, situations, or processes by alluding a sinister motive by some malicious or bad intentioned persons or powerful groups with a hidden agenda for such action. The world is familiar with several unverifiable narratives about health, medicine and vaccines, terrorist attacks and assassinations, climate change and wars, etc. In many of these narratives, what is conveyed is that actions and outcomes are never open but hidden, with powerful forces behind them as they plot to unleash evil acts. And while conspiracy narratives have been around for long, it is also correct to assert that they have found intensification today because of contemporary technological developments. The arrival of the Internet, new and social media platforms that gave new and unprecedented powers to citizens to bypass editorial gatekeeping has enhanced the speed and spread of conspiracy theories in the modern world. (See Klein et al. 2015, cf. Sapountzis and Condeor 2013, Harambam and Aupers 2015).

The implication of this development, especially in any collective government or health officials' attempt to come up with initiatives aimed at creating awareness necessary for developing correct attitudes needed to curb the spread of the pandemic, is enormous. For whatever public awareness, initiative that is unfolded will have to compete with conspiracy narratives. The pervasiveness of conspiracy theories in modern societies because of the ease with which they are disseminated but also because of the audiovisual support that backs them, has contributed to the emergence of a general conspiracy worldview among communities on some events in society. Conspiracy worldview in this regard is

A belief system in which conspiracy is the dominant force in history and the truth of major events is hidden from the public as a matter, of course. (Wood and Douglas, 2015,3)

Why people could hold a conspiracy, worldview is discussed by several scholars. (See Wood and Douglas 2015, Wood et al 2012, Van Prooijen et al. 2015, and Inglehart 1987). Some scholars have traced a relationship between holding a conspiracy worldviews and a feeling of powerlessness. (See, for example, Hamsher et al 1968, Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999, Whitson and Galinsky 2008).

Of interest to us although, is the Wood and Douglas association of the conspiracy worldview with ‘opposition to mainstream’ or a ‘distrust of the institutions of society’. Van Prooijen et al. (2015) and Inglehart (1987), opine that generally, the conspiracy worldview tends to be found more among people in the margins of the political mainstream than among those within. For us, opposition to mainstream or being in its margins is a function of power relations where people with conspiracy worldview feel more inclined to align with narratives that are alternative or stand in opposition to the mainstream. AS Wood and Douglas observe;

On this basis, it seems quite likely that the conspiracist mindset is characterized to a large extent by disbelief in official narratives rather than positive belief in alternatives, leading to a widespread acceptance of many different and overtly unrelated conspiracy theories. (Wood and Douglas, 2015)

Among some commentators, holding conspiracy, worldviews could also be associated with people who are alienated and insecure and both are related to powerlessness and marginalization. A person who is alienated from the rest of the society is more likely to be suspicious of conventional wisdom and narratives subscribed to by the larger society. Often such a person becomes more open to aligning with oppositional narratives and to groups with similar conspiracists dispositions. (See also Grohol, J.M 2020).

Citizens within nations can feel alienated and such feelings could give rise to a dominant national narrative that subscribes to such a feeling of collective alienation within the context of global power. As will be shown in this study, some of the conspiracy worldviews held by respondents are based on perceived power relations where they easily subscribe to the conspiracy narratives and views of the US and powerful countries, as well as powerful Western pharmaceutical companies as those behind bad happenings in the world.

While holding a conspiracy worldview is a universal phenomenon in the sense that conspiracists are found in every country of the world, certain conspiracy theories will be culture specific. While there will be a conspiracy theory about camels that is found among people in the UAE or Gulf where the camel is a domestic animal, such a view may not be known or held in countries where the camel is unknown. Consequently, conflict between Arab countries are commonly believed as deliberately planted discord by the British or international Jewish lobby, etc. Anyone who has lived in the Gulf region will be familiar with the prevalence of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. The colonial history of the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, domestic market policy, especially make citizens and leaders in the region susceptible to conspiracy views.

Among the most commonly circulating universal conspiracy theories are the ones related to health and medicine, possibly because many diseases are also universal. Edward Jenner’s milestone discovery of a vaccine against smallpox in 1796 was not only greeted with relief and accomplishment but was also followed by a barrage of conspiracy theories by a world unfamiliar with vaccines or how they work. Consequently, conspiracy theories on the smallpox vaccine ranged from one that says vaccines will make people grow horns to others

claiming that vaccines would actually kill. Since that time, the world has continued to hear one conspiracy after the other about vaccines. In Pakistan, for instance, as was the case in Nigeria with large Muslim populations, governments have struggled to eradicate polio because of a long-held conspiracy theory that polio is a grand scheme by the CIA to reduce the world Muslim population. (See Andrade and Hussain 2018, SteelFisher et al. 2015). This conspiracy theory also feeds into the one on pharmaceutical companies and, given that many leading ones are US based, there is a conspiracy theory claiming they have a cure for cancer but refusing to make the drug available as a way of de-populating the world.

Conspiracy theories around viruses from HIV, AIDS to SARS, Ebola, and now Covid-19 are rampant and have serious consequences on appropriate health behavior and practices. Bogart and Bird (2003), have revealed a conspiracist view among African-Americans that HIV is a US government invention designed to de-populate the black community. As a result, members of the community became reluctant in the use of safety or protective measures. The Ebola virus is also one that has a conspiracy theories built around it along similar lines as HIV in terms of agency, namely, that the United States government is behind the creation of the virus for a sinister motives. (Knight 2013). In conspiracy worldview, bad things don't just happen and there has to be a human agency that could be in the form of a person, corporation or government or group, etc. behind those happenings.

In the current Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy ideation is pointing to familiar causal factors such as government, pharmaceutical companies, and rich people such as Bill Gates. Andre captures the narrative by observing that;

SARS and Covid-19 have also been discussed in conspiracy theory circles, either as a biological

weapons against the Chinese or as an invention of the Chinese government. (2020,3)

Conspiracy theories around Covid-19 have benefitted from the ubiquity of social media platforms. On Facebook and WhatsApp and other platforms 'an urban legend that the pandemic was predicted in an early '80s, Dean Koontz thriller has been circulating---'. (Joseph, E.U Enders, 2020).

The following conspiracy theories are the key ones that have been made the focus of our analysis in this study.

- a. Coronavirus is a hoax
- b. Coronavirus is invented by world superpowers for economic gain/domination
- c. Coronavirus is developed in a laboratory and distributed to the world
- d. Coronavirus is an opportunity for Bill Gates and Pharma to make money

These conspiracy theories were not arrived at in a vacuum. Respondents were asked what they know and believe about Covid-19. These four conspiracy theories among others, appeared as the most prevalent information and beliefs held among the majority of respondents.

Whereas Wood and Douglas have linked a conspiratorial world views with people who are usually in opposition to the mainstream or those with a high level of distrust for institutions of society, this study reveals another dimension to the conspiratorial world views. A number of conspiracy theories we came across in this study relate to the origin and scale of Covid-19 in the country, vaccines, cures or motives behind the human 'manufacture' of the virus, etc. One of the leading voices in the propagation of the conspiracy theory about Chinese laboratory manufacture of the coronavirus is President Donald Trump, who repeatedly tweeting and asserted in conventional media, that he has seen

evidence that the virus originated from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. His position as President accords him the status of importance as a news source or what Hall et al. call 'primary definer' of public narratives (1971). His use of social media has given him additional power of bypassing editorial gatekeeping in mainstream media and therefore his views go out without verification.

On the other hand, Chinese authorities are also known to be propagating another version of conspiracy theory as government officials promote a narrative that Covid-19 might actually have originated in the US. Mr Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stated in a tweet on 12th March that 'it might have been the US army that brought the virus to Wuhan.' (Sardarizadeth and Robinson, 2020).

That both President Trump and Chinese authorities are associated with a version of unsubstantiated claims on the origin of the virus indicates the geo-political contestation behind these conspiracy views. We have earlier cited the proposition by Wood and Douglas (2015), that conspiratorial mindset is spread among those in 'opposition to mainstream' or with 'distrust of the institutions of society.' The WHO is a global health institution that has constantly reiterated the 'natural origin' of the virus. Also, the office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees US spy agencies issued public statement contrary to the views propagated by President Trump, that it endorses the 'wide scientific consensus' on the natural origin of the virus. (See Singh, M et al 2020). Distrust of the institutions of society whether media, health, intelligence or science has been one of the landmarks of Trump's leadership in his tenure as President.

Conspiracism in the Gulf

We have noted earlier that conspiracy theory and conspiracism are universal phenomena in the

sense that they are found in all countries of the world. In the same light, it is also true that susceptibility to Conspiracism is also shaped by culture and historical experiences of a people. In this regard, the historical experiences of Gulf countries have nurtured a suspicion towards modernism, capitalism, socialism etc. a suspicion that feeds into a repertoire of conspiratorial constructions when dealing with issues or developments coming from outside the region. Zonis and Joseph observed that:

Deeply in grain beliefs about the enmity to Arabs, to Islam of imperialism, Bolshevism, Zionism, Capitalism, Westernism, Modernism, Judaism and Christianity tend to make these "isms", and individuals that represent them stock characters in ready-made conspiracy dramas. (1994, 458)

Looked at from this perspective, conspiracy theory has become part of the language of popular culture from which one can get a glimpse of political dynamics and thinking in the region.

Even though a universal phenomenon, conspiracy theory in the Gulf region could be different form conspiracy theory in Western societies. According to Gray (2010) conspiracy theory in say the US could be largely a discourse among individuals in society (but we have seen a change during the era of Trump's presidency), but in the Arab World, it usually operates at two levels. Conspiracy theory could be a "tool of state communication with society" and, secondly an "explanatory popular discourse" in everyday discussion.

The political history of the Arab World has played an important role in shaping conspiracy beliefs through three significant developments ie,

colonialism, the Arab Israeli conflict, and domestic market policies that ushered globalization. Colonialism has impacted political and economic development of the region by exerting control on the destiny of the region and shaping values and group identity (Fanon, 1965). The emerging political elite on the other hand, in spite of their role as vanguard of modernization in the post-colonial era were often viewed as extension of colonial rule and consequently become subjected to conspiracy ideation.

The emergence of the Israeli State and unending conflict surrounding this development has left an enduring conspiracy narrative of various types. For instance, any conflict among or between Arab countries is interpreted as an Israeli initiative to cause disaffection among Arabs. For their relationship with Israel, Western governments, corporations, and institutions especially in the US, Britain, etc. are viewed as promoters of Israeli agenda in the region.

The emergence of the open market system that accompanied globalization as global social order is the third point in the formation of the conspiracy narrative in the Gulf region. Trade liberalization and market de-regulation have seen increasing presence of Western corporations and businesses in the Gulf countries. Their presence is also preceded by domestic policies of de-regulation and subsidy removal in various sectors. But as Gray observed

When such policies fail to deliver what they have promised, and especially if they marginalize (sub) groups, conspiracism will likely manifest itself as a popular explanation for the policies and their impacts, probably linking foreign intervention (economic in this policy instance but

related in many minds to a broader cultural and social penetration of the region by the US and Western culture and cultural symbols) to the negative results of the state's liberalist development policies. (Gray, 2010, 114)

Such "othering" of the West arising from disappointment with domestic market policies provides a foundation on which subsequent anti-Western sentiments are built. (See Lewis, 1993, Sadiki 2004).

Generally, though, scholars have identified two levels of conspiracy theories in the Gulf region. Conspiracism could be among citizens and based on any of the three factors highlighted above, i.e., colonialism, Arab Israeli conflict, and globalization ushered in by domestic market or neo-liberal policies. At the level of citizens therefore, any or a combination of these three factors could make them susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories especially those bordering on fear or suspicion of Western governments, Western institutions and or Western prescriptions whether they are US or British, about Covid-19 protocol or vaccinations etc.

The second level at which conspiracy theory exists in the Gulf is among state actors themselves especially in countries where popular means of communication is owned and controlled by state. In such situations, conspiracism that absolves the state or deflect attention from the shortcomings of state actors by either putting blame on the doorsteps of outside, usually Israelis, Westerners etc. and the state as a saviour is often propagated. According to Gray:

All the above has three - pronged effect of strengthening popular nationalism, diverting opposition energies away from the state or its

leadership, and reinforcing the state as source against a perceived enemy -all of which are especially useful to states, such as those common in the Middle East, ----
 ---. (2010, 121)

While we have attempted to unpack the notion of conspiracy theory and conspiracism in general and the possible causes and levels at which they occur in the Gulf or Middle East, such attempt should provide a context for understanding the rise of conspiracy beliefs around Covid-19 and the measures put in place in the UAE to curtail the spread of the virus.

Methodology:

This study has used survey method to gain insight into news consumption trends on Covid-19 in the UAE.

The research has few components to it that consequently informs the method of generating data.

On the one hand it will seek to gain insightson patterns of existing beliefs on Covid-19 and their circulation among communities in the UAE. On the other, it will seek to obtain insights into nature of narratives with a view to finding beliefs that are inimical to government initiatives and measures at curbing the spread of the pandemic.

To this end, a focus group interview was held with four groups of five adults and youths between the ages of 18-60 members each across the country. Two groups were females only and two other groups were males only.

Also, a structural survey of 500 adults and youths from the entire country was undertaken. Survey questionnaires were developed in Arabic and English. (See questionnaire in Appendix). The survey was sent to few colleagues in the department who have knowledge of survey

methods for review and feedback. Then, a pilot study was undertaken among 10 students in the Department for reliability. A score of 0.90 was recorded and this translates to a very reliable survey.

Survey respondents were sought among citizens and Arabic speaking residents. Such sample population for the survey will especially give us the opportunity to gain insight into the role of Arab values in shaping conspiracy worldviews on Covid-19. All respondents were asked for voluntary consent and were also given the opportunity to withdraw from the survey at any time they desire.

In administering the survey, we adopted the convenient sampling method due to limitations imposed by the COVID-19 protocols, and difficulty to access to the full target population for a representative sample. Even though convenient sampling has got known drawbacks such as sampling and selection bias, etc. we still find it appropriate for this research because the participants are geographically spread out across the country, and data collection more practical within our budget and time.

Recruitment and sampling:

Participants for the focus group were recruited online and the focus group sessions were conducted on ZOOM platform because the interviews took place at the time of government-imposed restrictions on movements and gatherings.

Participants in the survey were also recruited online as we used survey monkey in administering the questionnaire. Focus group participants were assured of confidentiality and told they will not be identified by name in the presentation of the findings.

Data collection:

a. Focus group interviews:

A focus group interview with four groups of bilingual adults was held in July to August 2020. Two groups are entirely female of five members each and the two other groups are males of five members each. The purpose of the focus group session is to gain insight into what kind of conspiracy narratives about Covid-19 exist among people in the UAE.

What emerges is that it is only in the two female focus groups that the existence of the virus itself was dismissed.

Every time someone wants to obstruct our lives we hear that there is a disease that will kill us. I

Know there is no disease. It is the same familiar trend. They want to see if we can obey orders.

Ok, I will abide by what they say so I am not penalized. May be, they will fine me if I decide to

Remain outside after 6pm.

(Fatima A.)

But for Rukayya in the same female group Coronavirus exists even though she has her own belief and explanation.

You see these Western countries and their Israeli friends don't want the rest of us to live in

Peace. They invented the virus so they can spread it around the world. Very soon they will

manufacture the medicine for it and send it to the world at a huge fee. When we get sick, they

get rich. I saw the video in black and white where they planned for this virus a long time ago. I

am telling you this will not end. In another year or two, another disease will be invented and we

will pay for its cure even though they created it. But because of our innocence God will not live

them have their way. One day the disease they created will consume them alone.

(Rukayya, B)

None of the male groups doubted the existence of the virus. Instead, they hold various opinions alluding to the source and agency as well as motive behind its emergence and spread.

This is not the first time the so-called powerful nations are punishing the world. They did it with

HIV/AIDS and now they are doing it with Corona. At the end, they will make sure they target it to

Countries like ours.

(Ali, A)

Abdullah's belief that Bill Gates and US pharmaceutical companies have knowledge of the virus even if they did not manufacture it is based on a photoshop sign of a 'Bill Gates 'Center for Global Human Population Reduction'.

I had it sent to me on WhatsApp by a very well-informed friend and I am sure by now they would

have removed the sign for fear of world condemnation. It was clearly written 'Center for world

population reduction.’ These people have no morality when it comes to their interest for money.

(Abdullah, S.)

For Hisham, the Coronavirus is part of superpower preparation for biological warfare.

They manufactured the virus in their labs. You know they have labs. You know they have labs

Where they manufacture all kinds of viruses as part of their preparations, and they always test

them against innocent countries like ours.

(Hisham, A).

While members of Hisham’s group agreed with his thesis that the virus was manufactured in a lab and possibly tested in less powerful countries there was no explanation as to how it would arrive in these countries.

For Omar, the alarm about coronavirus in our part of the world is misplaced and unnecessary.

You see, my reasons are two. First, virus does not survive in hot climates so there is no reason we

Should worry ourselves and stop having our normal lives. If you are the kind of people who are

Easily believe and get worried about what you hear in the media I have a solution for you. Take

Raw garlic each day and you will be protected from known and unknown diseases.

(Omar, A)

Figure (1) What is your normal source of news in the UAE?

What emerges from the focus group interviews is that people are not without opinions about Covid-19. These opinions vary from one that denies the existence of the virus to those that believe it is a deliberate creation either for economic gain or for control. One of the female groups believe it is an attempt ‘to impose further control on normal human activities.

b. Survey

The questionnaires were administered via survey monkey responses were retrieved online after a period of seven days. These survey results are presented in descriptive statistics only.

In terms of distribution of respondents in the survey there were 221 females or 44% of the respondents and 279 males representing 55.8%. Majority of the respondents (49%), both male and female were in the age category of 31-45 years. Those in the age bracket of 18-30 were second and accounted for 28.5% and those in age bracket 45-60 came third at 16.3%.

41% of the respondents have a bachelor’s degree while 25% have postgraduate qualifications. Put together, over 66% of the respondents have a bachelor’s degree and above.

All the respondents are either Emirati citizens or Arabs from other Arab countries. This indicates that an overwhelming majority of respondents are from the same linguistics and by implications cultural backgrounds.

A very interesting feature of the data generated is the revelation that online and social media are normal sources of news to 91% of the respondents. On coronavirus specifically, online and social media is a source of news to about 89% of the respondents. (See Figure 1, and Figure 2)

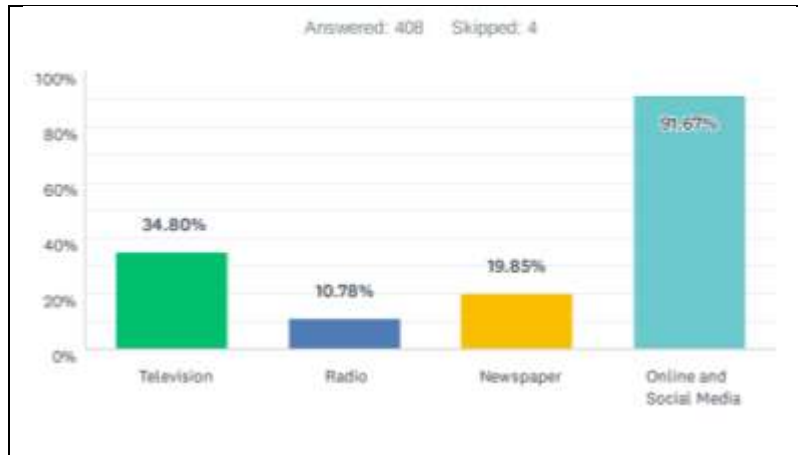
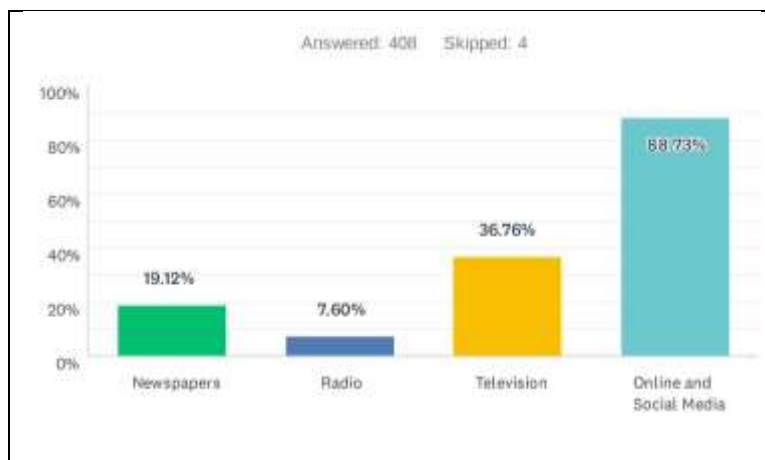
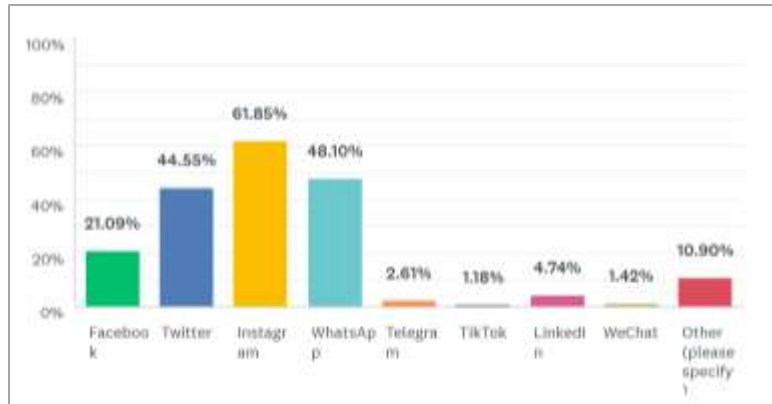


Figure (2) What is your normal source of news on Coronavirus in the UAE?



Even though the UAE government through the 'National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority' has embarked on public awareness initiatives to enlighten people on how to mitigate the spread of the virus announcement through mobile phone, SMS came second with 59%, while TV is third with 45%. (see Figure 3).

Figure (3) Which of the following social media platforms do you often use for news on Coronavirus?



About half of the respondents (53%) disagree that coronavirus is a hoax while the rest fall between agreeing and unsure. (see Figure 4). Interestingly, only 31% disagree that coronavirus was invented by world most powerful countries as an economic power game. In the same light, only 22% of respondents disagree that coronavirus was developed in a laboratory and distributed to the world (see Figures 5 and 6).

Only 28% of the respondents (see Figure 7) disagree that the world superpowers already have a vaccine for coronavirus but simply hiding it. On the claim that prominent world leaders are ignoring safety measures such as wearing face masks because they are already vaccinated, only 32% disagree that the number of deaths from coronavirus is exaggerated (see Figure 12).

Figure (4) Coronavirus is a hoax

32% disagree with the narrative (see Figure 8) and only about 31% disagreed that coronavirus was developed by world superpowers to enhance their domination of the world as well as depopulate Third World countries (see Figure 9). The results show that 26% disagreed that coronavirus is a ploy by Bill Gates and pharmaceutical companies to make money through the sale of medication (see Figure 10). Also, about 35% of respondents disagreed that coronavirus is an opportunity for Bill Gates and the big pharmaceutical companies in their money-making venture (see Figure 11), and about 32% disagreed that the number of deaths from coronavirus is exaggerated (see Figure 12).

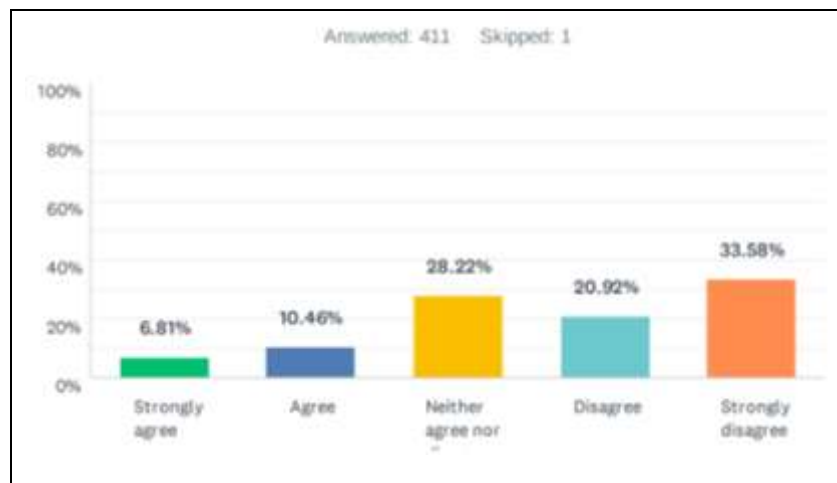


Figure (5) Coronavirus was invented by world most powerful countries as an economic power game

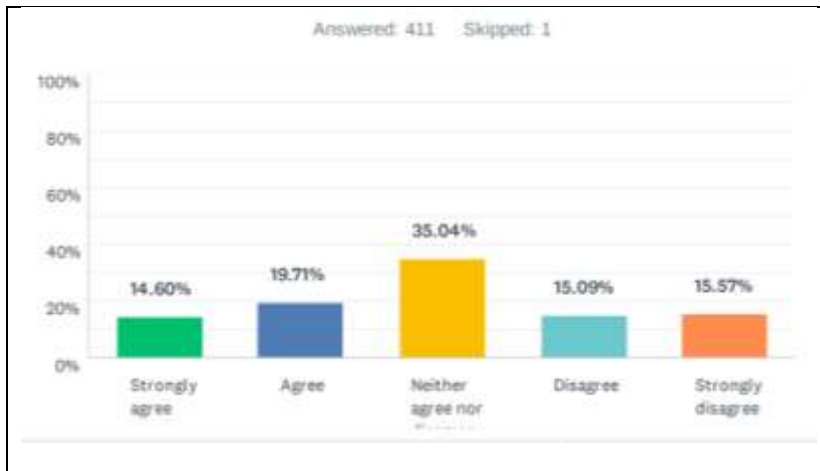


Figure (6) Coronavirus was developed in a laboratory and distributed to the world

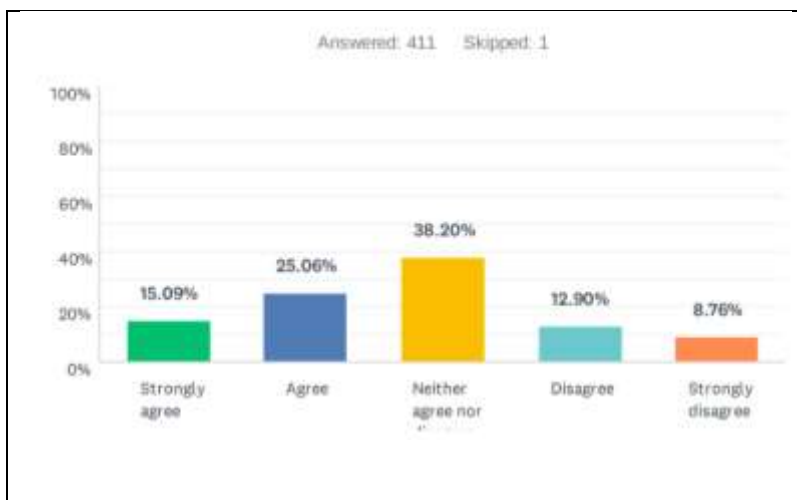


Figure (7) The world superpowers have long developed a vaccine for coronavirus but hiding it

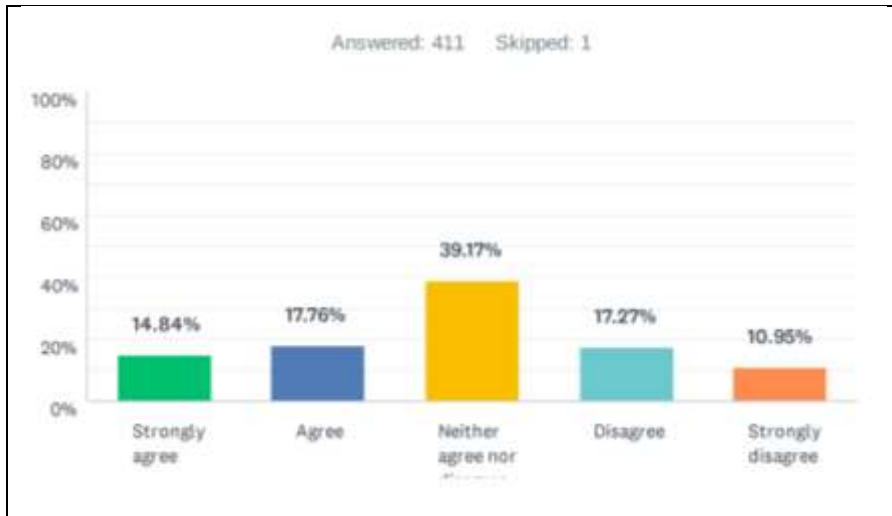


Figure (8) The prominent world leaders ignore guidelines like social distancing, public gathering, wearing the face mask because they are already vaccinated.

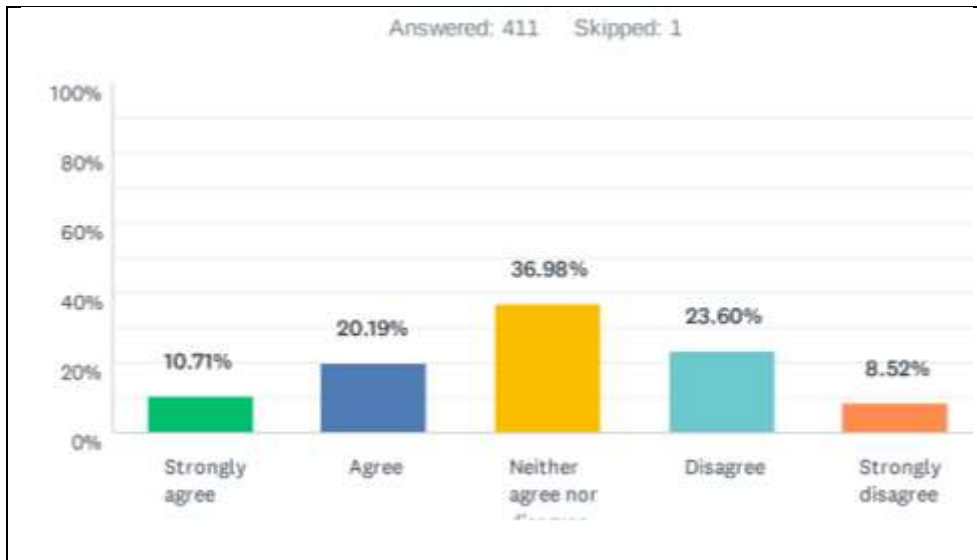


Figure (9) Coronavirus was developed by world superpowers to enhance their domination of the world by reducing the population of 3rd World countries.

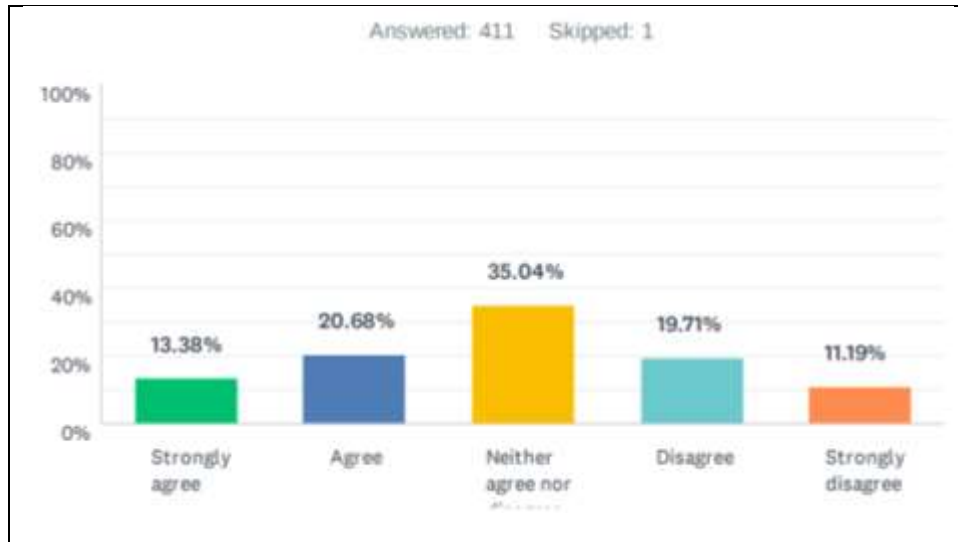


Figure (10) Coronavirus is an opportunity by Bill Gates and pharmaceutical companies to make money by selling medication.

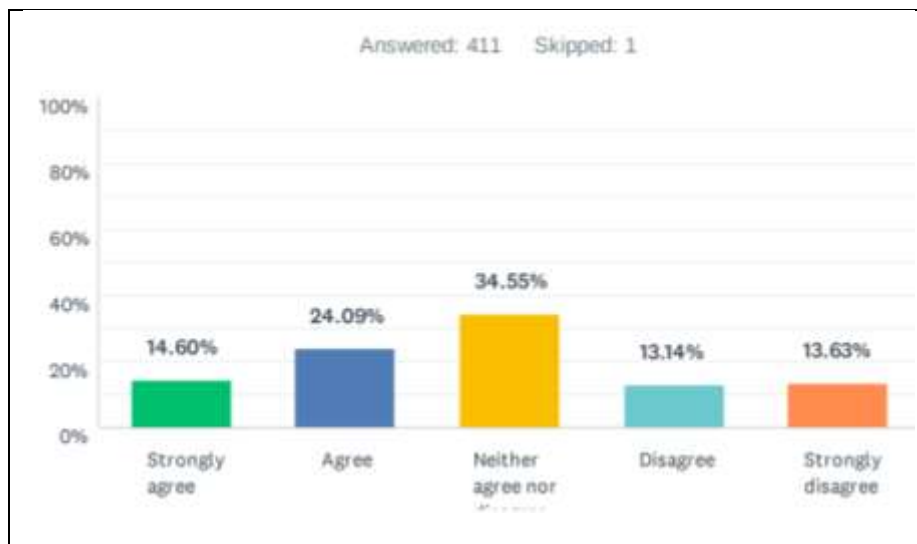


Figure (11) Coronavirus is an opportunity for Bill Gates to get human beings to be chipped for the purpose of control and money making.

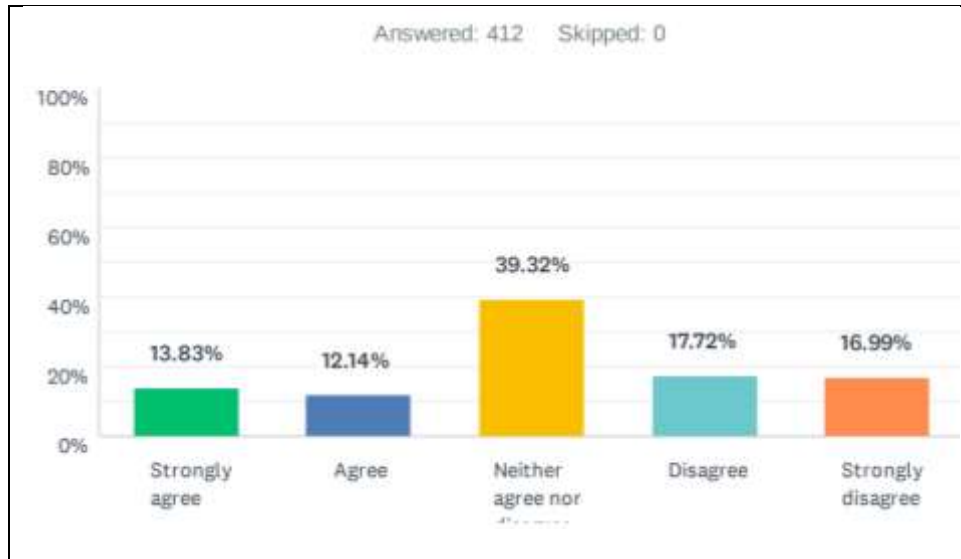
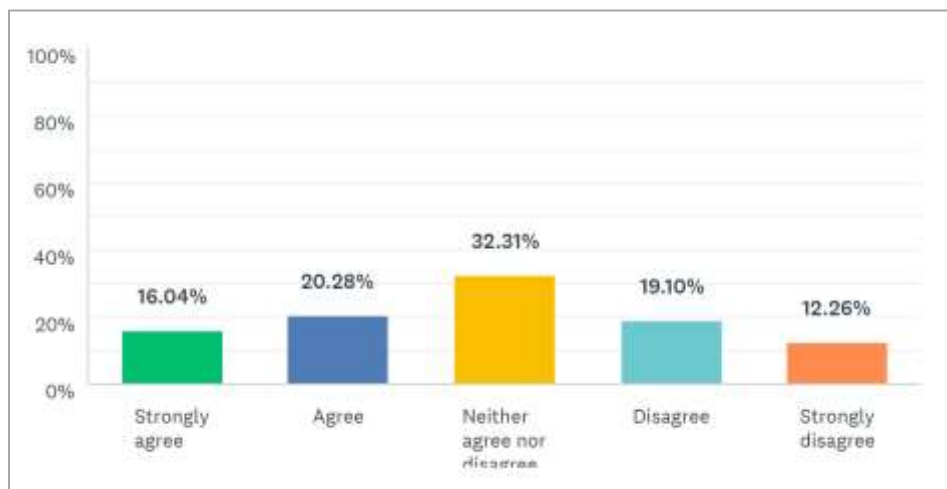


Figure (12) The number of deaths from Coronavirus is exaggerated to raise fear and promote the demand for vaccine.



Discussion:

Previous studies on conspiracy theories in relation to health have largely been on Western societies. (See for example Wood and Douglas, 2015) What emerges from this study however is that conspiracy theories related to health are not confined to Western societies and are found in countries of the North. To the extent that our data is generated among Arabic speaking citizens and residents in the UAE is an indication of the prevalence of conspiracy theories in countries of

the North. Beliefs among respondents that Covid-19 is Jewish conspiracy or superpower play for world domination points to geo-political factors in the formation of such beliefs.

The existence of these conspiracy theories in the UAE is supported by the fact that majority of the respondents believe in them. But to the extent that majority of the respondents (about 79%) are in the ages of 18-45 years point to the fact the conspiracy theories are most ripe among the most active and mobile population in the UAE.

Looking at the demographic of respondents it is clear that majority are educated Emirati citizens and Arabs therefore largely bound by similar cultural values. Thus, it could be said also that the Arabic cultural values are no insulation to conspiracy beliefs.

According to the ITU's 'Measuring the Information Society Report', the UAE has attained 95% Internet penetration in 2017, up from 91% in 2016. The country is also said to have 92% mobile Internet users and over 96% active social media accounts. And to the extent that 91.6% and 88.7% have indicated that online and social media are their normal sources of news and news on coronavirus we would argue that there is a correlation between Internet use and spread of conspiracy theories in the UAE. A bigger picture arising from the data though is, even though conspiracy theories pre-date the digital revolution the ubiquity of the Internet, especially social media platforms has intensified the ease with which conspiracy narratives are entrenched in the UAE. This is in line with the claim by Wood (2013) that the Internet is not responsible for conspiracy theories but has facilitated their dissemination especially with appeal to images and sound.

The revelation from the data pointing to majority of respondents closely not disagreeing with all the conspiracy theories in the study points to two important facts. First, when one believes in a conspiracy theory the more such a person is likely to believe in others whether conspiracy theories are related or not. (See Goertzel, 1994, Swami et al 2011, Wood et al 2012, Wood and Douglas 2015). This tendency to believe in conspiracy narratives according to Wood and Douglas as evidence of conspiracy worldview that they describe as

A belief system in which conspiracy worldview that they describe as the dominant force in history and the truth of major events is hidden from the

public as a matter of course. (Wood and Douglas 2015,3)

From what emerges in the data we can discern three strands or directions of the conspiracy theories. First, a conspiracist view in the UAE sees the coronavirus as laboratory manufactured. Second, a conspiracist view in the UAE aligns the virus with superpower hegemony project. Third, conspiracist view in the UAE is also one that says the world and UAE casualties from the virus is exaggerated. Yet, these two conspiracy world views can be related to powerlessness and anxiety that they speak to. For instance, the conspiracy worldview about coronavirus as superpower hegemony project and coronavirus as laboratory manufactured speak to familiar conspiracy public opinion in the Arab world on many things that have Western power involvement. Conflicts in these regions for example, are usually explained by conspiracy narratives as deliberately planted and orchestrated feud, as handiwork of British colonialists and or international Jewish lobby. The economic downturn, regulated movement, closure of public spaces, isolation etc. enhance anxiety that in turn make people vulnerable to agency narratives. Such narratives became the more easier to be believed and therefore shared on social platforms when there are images and videos to support them. A preponderant number of respondents cite a familiar even though fake photoshopped image of 'Bill & Belinda Gates Centre for Reducing World Population' as evidence that Bill gates is out to make money as from the Coronavirus pandemic. Footage of Dean Koontz 1980 thriller on WhatsApp is cited by a preponderant percentage of respondents as evidence that Western powers are aware and indeed prepared for the virus. This narrative find explanation with Hans Morgenthau's classical conception of power that is often cited in discussing international relations. Holsti submits Morgenthau's perception of power to imply that:

--regardless of the goals and objectives of government, the immediate aim of all state action is to obtain and increase power. Since by definition all states seek to maximize their power, international politics can be conceived of and analyzed as a struggle between independent units seeking to dominate others. (Holsti, K.J 1964,179).

The ambiguity and reductionist tone in Morgenthau's stand on power in international relations provides ammunition to conspiracists to reduce relations between nations within the confines of 'domination'. Not that the international political landscape has no instance of attempts by one nation trying to exert domination over another, but that to explain every instance of contemporary happenings as predicated on desire for domination is merely conspiratorial.

Conclusion:

Like most governments around the world the UAE Government launched its public awareness initiatives and introduction of measures to curb the spread of the virus such as hand sanitization, curfew in cities and towns, closures of schools and malls as well as suspension of congregations in the early days of the pandemic in March. In spite of the effort in this awareness campaign through conventional and social media it was realized that initial public response was lack luster as people were not fully compliant and therefore numbers of new infections were on the rise.

The government became especially concerned that its efforts in creating awareness and appropriate behavior and attitude to mitigate the spread of the virus is undermined by conspiracy theories and falsehood. This prompted the Attorney General Dr Hamad Al-Shamsi to issue a public statement.

The UAE government has been proactive in taking all the required precautionary measures to address the dangers posed by Covid-19-spreading fake information and rumours about the virus on social media---deliberately or out of ignorance-cause panic and chaos in society, and those who're doing this will face legal consequences. (Al-Shamsi, H. in WAM, 16th March 2020)

Many respondents indicate the belief that superpower quest for world domination, Jewish conspiracy as well as Pharmaceutical companies search for revenue is behind the spread of the virus. Such respondents also indicate that they would only comply with government measures out of fear of sanction by law and the accompanying punishment. What our study has revealed though is that public awareness strategy adopted by the UAE government has not factored the role and extent of conspiracy theories in shaping understanding about covid-19. For whereas public awareness efforts by the government are aiming at developing understanding and therefore desirable attitudes that would mitigate the spread of covid-19 in the UAE, citizens and residents who are largely Arabic speakers hold various forms of conspiracy worldviews about covid-19 that are inimical to government information strategies aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. Such conspiracy theories as our study revealed, are largely predicated on power relations between nations of the world as well as feelings of frustration in times of health crises.

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