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Perceptions Versus Reality of QAnon Radicalization: A Comparative Study

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Abstract
The online following of conspiracy theory believers known as QAnon has recently come into focus of U.S. government agencies and terrorism scholars, raising questions about the risk of violence it poses. To address these questions, as well as to triangulate existing research on QAnon's threat, the present study compared survey responses about actual radical intention and activist intention scores of QAnon supporters (n = 113) and non-QAnon participants (n = 287), relative to QAnon's radicalization as perceived by non-QAnon participants. Actual radical intention scores for QAnon supporters were significantly lower than the perceptions of QAnon radical intentions, and were not significantly different than the actual radical intention scores for non-QAnon participants. Activist intention scores were lowest among QAnon supporters, followed by non-QAnon supporters, and then by perceptions of QAnon activist intentions. The implications of the results for public policy are discussed.

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Introduction

The unprecedented events of the January 6th Capitol Riot, including press coverage that spotlighted the involvement of QAnon supporters in the events of that day, brought interest of academics and laypersons to QAnon (Goggin, 2022). QAnon's origins can be traced to the right-wing social media site 4Chan in October of 2017, when a user self-identified as "Q" (referencing the highest level of clearance in the Department of Energy; Aftergood, 1996) suggested they were in Donald Trump's inner circle, and claimed that Hillary Clinton would soon be arrested by the National Guard (Bellingcat, 2021). From this original post on 4Chan, QAnon began to spread to other right-wing message boards known for conspiratorial content, antisemitism, and racism (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Bellingcat, 2021).

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QAnon beliefs

As QAnon grew in popularity among fringe right-wing media, three central tenets of its content became identifiable: "The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshiping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation", "there is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders", and, "because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country" (PRRI, 2021). These ideas over time spread from fringe right-wing media into more mainstream sites, including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, and the number of users engaging with them grew correspondingly (Roose, 2021; PRRI, 2021). According to representative national polls in the U.S. (Enders et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; NPR/Ipsos, 2020), between 5% and 17% of American adults believe QAnon conspiracy theories.

In addition to QAnon's central tenets, its followers tend to believe in many other conspiratorial narratives, including ideas about 5G network, COVID vaccines, COVID virus, Lizard-human hybrids, Flat Earth, and Space Lasers (Dastgeer & Thapaliya, 2022; Greenspan, 2021). This kind of inclusiveness led researchers and the media to dub QAnon's as an "umbrella conspiracy theory" (Xu & Sasahara, 2022), "big tent conspiracy theory," (Greenspan, 2021) or a "sticky ball of conspiracy theories" (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021).

QAnon's ideology often draws on ages-old disinformation narratives. Thus, "blood libel" claims from medieval Europe that accused Jews of stealing Christian children to use their blood for religious ceremonies (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Gottheil et al., 2021), as well as the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*—an early 20th century fabrication that claimed to expose a secret worldwide conspiracy by Jews to take over the world and morally and sexually corrupt Gentile children (Young & Boucher, 2022) seem to have inspired QAnon's narrative of a secret world-wide cabal (led by a Jew—George Soros) that steals children to drink their blood in Satanic rituals (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Other old conspiracies found a new life in QAnon folklore, including the idea of malicious human-lizard hybrids that would take over the earth, which came from a 1990s U.K. fiction writer and conspiracist David Icke's books (Kachuba, 2019), and spread through the QAnon channels to inspire at least two violent murders, one by a QAnon-believing father who killed

his two toddlers (Hernandez, 2021), the other by a QAnon-believer who murdered his brother (Cinone, 2019). Both killers believed their victims were malicious human-lizard or human-serpent hybrids. Likewise, the idea of Flat Earth, which used to prevail cosmological thinking in medieval times, resurfaced in QAnon narratives as a fact secretly withheld from the public that has been intentionally misled by scientists to believe heliocentric theories that QAnon rejects as false (Resende Da Costa, 2021). Perhaps the most notorious of conspiracy theories associated with QAnon, *Pizzagate*, originated several years before the first Q-Drops appeared online, claiming that a basement of a pizza parlor in Washington, D.C. was used to hold kidnapped and tortured children (Papasavva et al., 2021).

QAnon also embraces conspiracy theories inspired by current events. Thus, COVID virus became one of the central topics of discussion on QAnon discussion forums, inspiring sometimes contradictory conspiracies about its origins (either as a hoax or as a biological weapon; Enders et al., 2021), and blaming the government for the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021). Similarly, 5G network, a technological advance of recent years, has been featured in QAnon followers' narratives (Enders et al., 2021; Schaffner, 2020) as a plot to activate microchips from COVID "vaccines" that would then kill or subjugate the vaccinated. Likewise, QAnon developed a new conspiracy theory that claimed that John F. Kennedy, Jr was still alive and residing in Pittsburgh, and that in fact he might be Q—the source of the original messages (Q-drops) that begat the movement (Bruzzese, 2021; Crookes, 2021).

It would not be fair to say that QAnon beliefs include any and all conspiracy theories. It seems that conspiracy theories that make it into the QAnon folklore tend to be of political nature and include ideas about malicious actors or entities (the government, science, the media, celebrities) plotting to take control of the U.S. and/or the world.

In short, QAnon is a diverse collection of beliefs which includes some old conspiracy theories recast with new characters, such as politicians, billionaires, and celebrities, as well as new conspiracy theories inspired by technological advances and current political events. QAnon is a "grass-roots" movement with no clear authorship for Q-drops, no centralized leadership structure or a political platform, and no headquarters or physical address (Moskalenko, 2021a). As a result, adherence to QAnon is fully captured in one's beliefs in QAnon narratives: the only way to be a QAnon follower is to believe in QAnon conspiracy theories.

QAnon as a violent threat

U.S. Governmental security agencies have indicated that QAnon poses a threat of violence: the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a National Terrorism Bulletin, designating QAnon as a dangerous and radicalized terrorist group in connection to the January 6th attack on the Capitol (Levy & Kesling, 2021). Similarly, the director of the FBI, Christopher Wray, suggested that QAnon possesses a potential for violence (Farivar, 2021). In an intelligence community hearing focused on threat assessment, Wray expressed concern that QAnon beliefs can potentially inspire individuals to commit violent federal crimes. Moreover, the QAnon narrative is thought to stir up social unrest and open the door for foreign entities to spread disinformation, while also progressing the majority of QAnon supporters from radicalization to mobilization for an ideologically-motivated political crime within a year (Vanderzielfultz, 2021).

Researchers have also raised concerns about the danger of violent action from QAnon. Thus, Ebner and colleagues (Ebner et al., 2022) analyzed the content of online messages in one of QAnon groups on Telegram. They found high levels of external threat narratives, violence-condoning group norms, as well as demonizing, dehumanizing and derogatory language directed at the outgroup. These findings led the authors to conclude that QAnon is prone to extreme violence and thus poses a risk to national security.

Similarly, Amarasingham and Argentino (2020) argue that “QAnon represents a public security threat with the potential in the future to become a more impactful domestic terror threat” (para. 1). Their assessment is based on case-studies of five QAnon followers charged with criminal offenses, one of which resulted in a criminal conviction for terrorism.

Drawing conclusions about the threat of violent action from QAnon’s based on these research findings is problematic, however. Ebner et al. (2022) findings about the content of QAnon-related posts are disturbing; but it is not clear whether highly radicalized online discourse characterizes the online community as a whole, or is instead a salient representation of a small radical subgroup, and further, whether radical opinions expressed online are predictive of offline behaviors from the same individuals. Research shows that people’s online personas may differ dramatically from their offline attitudes, beliefs and behavior (Blumer & Döring, 2012). Additionally, online expression only captures radical attitudes, which predict less than one percent of radical action (Sageman, 2021; Fajmonova, et al.,

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2017; Moskalenko, 2021), and thus give little indication of offline threat. Along the same lines, Jaki et al. (2019) found that only a small subset of Incel (involuntarily celibate) forum users were responsible for most of the hateful content. A study analyzing posts in Reddit found that only 3 percent of users posted 33 percent of all hateful content (Kumar et al., 2023).

Thus, across various online platforms, there is a systemic participatory inequality in posting behavior, with only a small minority of users (about 10 percent) ever posting, and about 1 percent responsible for most vitriol, while the majority (about 90 percent of users) remain “lurkers” --never contributing to online discourse at all (Nielsen, 2006). Finally, analyses of radical communities online have found that the most violent actors in a radical group tend to behave differently online than the rest of the group: violent members of right-wing-extremist movements were less prolific posters online than their non-violent counterparts (Scrivens et al., 2021). In short, analyses of online content are not necessarily informative for assessing offline threat of violence, especially with a group as numerous as QAnon.

Amarasingham and Argentino’s report (2020) is based not on analyses of online posts but on five case studies. This sample is too small to warrant estimates of danger from a group numbering in the millions. What’s more, two out of five individuals showcased in the paper have been deemed mentally unwell by the courts that ruled their mental illness at least as relevant to their criminal actions as QAnon ideology. The authors warn that one of these, Jessica Prim, exemplified ideological radicalization that can befall many more people, even as they describe Prim’s beliefs that she “is” coronavirus, that she receives direct communication from Donald Trump, and her diagnosis of a psychotic disorder. As it is impossible to causally disentangle psychosis and ideology in Prim’s case, this case cannot be used to estimate danger from the larger community of QAnon followers.

Nonetheless, the disturbing content of QAnon posts, as well as troubling case studies of QAnon followers who committed crimes, suggest the need to investigate further the risks of radicalization and the level of danger stemming from the larger community of QAnon followers. The goal of this paper is to extend and triangulate existing studies to address the same question of the potential threat of violent action QAnon presents.

The perception of QAnon's danger is broadly shared by the lay public (Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022). This perception may be related to the media's representation of QAnon, which tends to highlight and rehash a few salient violent acts of QAnon supporters (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021), including the mother who drowned her three children after steeping in QAnon narratives and coming to believe her children were destined for the "cabal" and would be better off dying by her hand (Los Angeles Times, 2021), or another QAnon follower who shot his wife and was involved in an armed police standoff (Li, 2022). QAnon followers were also among those involved in the January 6th Capitol breach, and some have been charged with violent crimes such as assassination plans for Nancy Pelosi, the murder of a New York mafia boss, and planned kidnappings of important politicians (Watkins, 2019; McCaskill, 2021; Roose, 2021).

The total number of QAnon-following individuals charged with any crime in the U.S., including participation in January 6th riot is, to date, about 200 (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023). Statistically speaking, these 200 individuals represent a tiny minority of the 13-45 million U.S. adults who agree with QAnon beliefs (Moskalenko et al., 2022). (It is important to note that traditional terrorist groups also have a low base rate of offending, and the vast majority of those expressing extremist views will never act on them; Sageman, 2021). However, obscuring the statistical probability of violence stemming from QAnon, the high volume of media reporting on violent acts connected to QAnon may influence the public's opinion by portraying QAnon as a "potentially deadly menace," a cult that poses a "significant national security threat," and as the "most dangerous conspiracy theory of the 21st century" (Blazakis, 2021; Warzel, 2020).

The danger posed by QAnon can possibly be better captured by metrics other than radical and violent actions. Rather, QAnon's threat may come in other forms such as strain on the healthcare system, distrust in institutions, and the erosion of democratic practices (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023; Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022; Van Prooijen et al., 2022). Jensen and Kane (2021) argued that QAnon does not represent a traditional national security threat due to differences in who is impacted. For QAnon, it seems that family members of supporters are at the greatest risk for interpersonal violence, unlike other traditional terrorist groups. In this same vein, family members of QAnon supporters report greater levels of

emotional distress and increasingly negative views of society and government (Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022).

Additionally, conspiracy theories promoted by QAnon such as anti-mask, anti-vaxx, and election fraud can result in greater societal impacts. Such viral ideas helped support efforts to undermine the 2020 Presidential election and spread COVID-19 disinformation, potentially impacting public health responses (Hannah, 2021). Conspiracy theory exposure decreases intentions to get vaccinated (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Furthermore, those who believed COVID-19 is a hoax were less willing to engage in normative prevention behaviors, such as social distancing, and more likely to engage in non-normative prevention behaviors, such as ingesting bleach or Ivermectin (Dickson, 2020; Ellis, 2021; Imhoff et al., 2021; Allington et al., 2021; Bierwiaczonek et al., 2020; Marinthe et al., 2020). A small group of people resisting COVID-19 health and safety protocols can generate serious health implications and threats for others (Uscinski et al., 2020).

These adverse effects of QAnon conspiracy beliefs and the ripples they cause in the social fabric represent a new and yet to be fully understood threat. Existing research on terrorism and radicalization is only beginning to grapple with the new, online-based radical ideological movements, such as QAnon or Incels (involuntarily celibate)—whose ideologies share some of the characteristic vitriol of "traditional" terrorist groups—but who are at the same time different from "traditional" terrorist groups in important ways, including lack of centralized leadership and agenda, lack of face-to-face interactions and group dynamics associated with those, and the broad and diverse geographic and demographic spread of their membership (Moskalenko, Kates, et al., 2022; Moskalenko, 2021c). We leave the conceptual and empirical challenges of understanding this new kind of radical movement outside of the scope of this paper, focusing instead on analyzing the specific risk of violent action from QAnon followers.

While the media, governmental security agencies, as well as some scholars, view QAnon as posing a high risk of violence, others hold a different view. Moskalenko and McCauley (2021) argue that QAnon poses relatively little threat of radical action. They find that radical opinion seldom leads to radical action, adding that attempts to police radical opinions may backfire and potentially radicalize otherwise neutral individuals.

The empirical question of how the public’s perception of QAnon threat compares to actual QAnon threat remains open. To reconcile the diverse views on QAnon’s danger, this paper aims to compare public perceptions of Qanon supporters' radicalization with the actual radicalization of QAnon supporters.

Conspiracy beliefs, QAnon, and radicalization

Empirical research has found links between conspiracy belief and non-normative political action. Thus, Pascual-Ferrá and colleagues (2021) analyzed the language used in Twitter interactions among individuals using pro-mask and anti-mask hashtags. Tweets using anti-mask hashtags were significantly more likely to contain verbally aggressive and toxic language than their pro-mask counterparts. Additionally, engagement with conspiracy theories makes it more difficult for individuals on the losing political side to accept the loss (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). In general, conspiracy belief decreases an individual’s intention to participate in legal and normative forms of political engagement, while increasing intentions to participate in illegal non-normative forms of engagement (Imhoff et al., 2021). Tracked over the course of a year, holding conspiracy beliefs increases one’s likelihood of engaging in illegal, non-normative political action (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019).

Conspiracy endorsement can influence political engagement: Marchlewska and colleagues (2019) claim that conspiracy theories are associated with hostility towards outgroups and beliefs of ingroup superiority. This outgroup hostility could also be understood as high levels of intergroup anxiety, which is thought to be fueled by a need to belong (Fasce et al., 2021). While conspiracy endorsement is associated with hostility towards whole groups, it can also be used as a tool to channel political aggression towards specific figures or individuals (Vegetti & Littvay, 2022). Evidence of this is seen in some of the targets of QAnon conspiracies, such as Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, presented in a critical light which allows QAnon supporters to express their negative feelings toward these political figures by spreading QAnon narratives.

Although growing polarization within the United States could foster QAnon into a formidable danger, the echo-chambers that prevent dialogue across political divides can drive radicalization on both sides (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020). For example, research finds that both Democrats and Republicans tend to dehumanize members of the out-party,

supporting the idea of bipartisan radicalization (Martherus et al., 2019). When individuals are exposed to actions by "attitudinal opponents" (e.g. Democrats vs. Republicans) which they perceive as intentionally inflicting harm, their attitudes can become grounded in an individual's core values (D'Amore et al., 2021). In other words, negative perceptions of the actions of political and ideological opponents may strengthen attitudes, driving polarization and increasing radicalization.

Individuals are more likely to become affectively polarized when they feel threatened by their perceived rivals, especially when communicating directly (Marchal, 2021). One team of researchers had Republicans and Democrats follow Twitter bots that retweeted messages by politicians and "opinion leaders" (i.e. Candace Owens) of the opposite party. The results suggested that exposure to opposing political views strengthened individuals' pre-existing political views, potentially driving political polarization (Bail et al., 2018). Taking into account polarization on both sides of the American political divide, another goal of this study is to compare radicalization of non-QAnon individuals with that of QAnon believers. To our knowledge, no study to date has compared outsiders' perceptions of QAnon radicalization to measures of actual QAnon radicalization. Neither has an empirical comparison between radicalization of QAnon supporters and non-QAnon supporters been carried out. The present study, therefore, offers an important new insight into the broader context of polarization and radicalization that surrounds the phenomenon of QAnon.

Following previous research, we predict a significant difference between perceived radicalization of QAnon supporters and actual radicalization of non-QAnon individuals (Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022). However, we had no basis for predicting other comparisons (between QAnon followers' own radicalization and (a) their radicalization as perceived by non-QAnon; or (b) actual radicalization of QAnon followers). These comparisons, therefore, will be exploratory in nature.

Methods

Data for the present study came from two previous surveys (Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2023). In both surveys, participants were solicited from Prolific, an online participant recruitment service for behavioral science with better participant selection and

screening, and more ethical pay for participants in comparison to other platforms, such as MechanicalTurk. All participants read and signed an informed consent form that assured them of anonymity of their responses. Participants were warned that some questions could cause psychological distress, and that they could choose to skip any questions or stop responding at any time.

To assess radicalization and gauge potential threat, we used the Activism and Radicalism Intentions scale (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), which was externally validated by demonstrating significant correlations between Radical Intentions Scale and previous participation in illegal or violent protests among Ukrainian students (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), as well as with current membership in violent prison gangs among Texas prison inmates (Decker & Pyrooz, 2019; Pavlović et al., 2022). Although intention for radical action is not yet radical action, ARIS offers a good survey-based approximation for assessing the potential of radical action.

To assess beliefs in QAnon conspiracy theories, we used an 8-item scale, each question on which represented a specific conspiracy theory associated with QAnon, from Satan-worshipping cabal, to Adrenochrome sourced from tortured children, to Space Lasers and Lizard People; previous research indicated a high internal consistency of this scale, suggesting people's beliefs in different QAnon conspiracies tends to inter-correlate (Moskalenko et al., 2023). Although more people believe in the Satan-worshipping and blood-drinking cabal than believe in Lizard people or Space Lasers, we chose to set inclusion criteria to include all eight beliefs rather than the more QAnon-mainstream ones for two reasons. First, existing research on QAnon often count individuals as QAnon followers if even one QAnon belief was expressed by them: for example, START database of QAnon offenders includes individuals who only expressed belief in Lizard people or in Pizzagate (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023). Second, by including more than the most popular QAnon beliefs, we hoped to maximize the odds of ending up with the subsample of QAnon followers who were the most fervent believers. This approach is consistent with group identity theory that states that groups often embrace beliefs that are viewed as absurd by outsiders as a means of signaling ingroup commitment (Williams, 2022), and this tendency is especially strong when group members are distrustful of outgroups (Baurmann, 2007). Following this theory, we sought to increase the likelihood of

capturing radical intentions among our QAnon-following participants by selecting them on the basis of highest ingroup commitment as represented by expressing fervent belief in the group's ideology.

Study 1

Data for non-QAnon participants come from a survey conducted on October 11, 2021 to assess the impact of loved ones' QAnon conspiracy beliefs on their relationships with friends and family who did not themselves believe QAnon conspiracy theories (Moskalenko et al., 2022). Native English speakers residing within the U.S. were invited to complete a study about "Belief in Conspiracies" in exchange for an average pay of 9.63 USD per hour. With the average time to complete the survey sitting at roughly 9.5 minutes, participants received 1.50 USD. The sample consisted of 287 participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 75, with a mean of 32.92 (SD=12.42) and identified as male (118, 41%), female (157, 55%), and non-binary/other (12, 4%).

Study 2

Data for QAnon supporters comes from a survey conducted between October 5th, 2021 and November 5th, 2021 to investigate relationships among: conspiracy theory endorsement; radical intentions (including support for the January 6th Capitol Hill riot); and personality variables (Moskalenko et al., 2023). Participants were invited to take part in a study about "Beliefs and Background" in exchange for an average pay of 9.50 USD per hour. With the average time to complete the survey of approximately 7 minutes, participants received about 1.20 USD.

Participants were selected into the study based on demographic variables: fluency in English and U.S. citizenship/residency. Additionally, to maximize the likelihood of selecting QAnon-believing participants, we selected only participants who self-identified as Republicans: roughly 43% of QAnon supporters are registered Republicans, compared to 19% Democrats (PRRI, 2022). Also in an attempt to maximize the number of QAnon supporters in our sample, we selected for individuals who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election: about 50% of Trump supporters support QAnon, and Trump voters are more likely to endorse QAnon allegations even if they haven't heard of QAnon (Bote, 2020; Bump,

2020). Lastly, we selected for individuals identifying as politically conservative: the majority of conservatives (over 62%) believe at least one core QAnon conspiracy (Swann, 2021). By utilizing these screening criteria, we intended to maximize the odds of selecting QAnon-identifying respondents into the study, which could be a challenging task on survey sites such as Prolific.co (Rogers, 2021).

In addition to establishing screening criteria to increase likelihood of QAnon followers among our participants, we asked participants about their QAnon beliefs using an 8-item QAnon conspiracy belief scale (i.e., "A child-trafficking ring run by celebrities like Tom Hanks and Oprah and high-profile politicians like Bill and Hillary Clinton torture children in order to harvest adrenochrome from their blood."; "There are malicious lizard-human hybrids living among people."; (Pavlović et al., 2022), with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Disagree strongly to 5=Agree strongly). For the present study, only those participants whose average score on the 8-item QAnon belief scale was above the scale's midpoint of 2.5 were selected (average score on QAnon conspiracy beliefs scale: M=3.05, SD=.05).

This selection resulted in a subsample of 113 participants. Their ages ranged from 18 to 69 (M= 36.35; SD=13.63). Roughly one third of participants identified as male (36, 32%), the rest identified as female (77, 68%).

Results

Present Study

Demographics. The combined sample of 400 participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75, with a mean of 33.89 (SD=12.85). Participants identified as female (234, 59%), male (154, 39%), and non-binary/other (12, 3%). Frequencies for race/ethnicity of the samples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequencies for Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	QAnon N (%)	non-QAnon N (%)	Total N (%)
White/Caucasian	100 (88%)	205 (71%)	305 (76%)
Black	2 (2%)	23 (8%)	25 (6%)
Hispanic	5 (4%)	31 (11%)	36 (9%)
East Asian	2 (2%)	8 (3%)	10 (3%)
South Asian	2 (2%)	7 (2%)	9 (2%)
Multiracial/Mixed	2 (2%)	13 (5%)	15 (4%)

The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian, Hispanic, and Black, with a larger proportion of the QAnon sample identifying as White/Caucasian.

Activist intentions, Radical intentions. We measured the activist and radical intentions of participants using the Activism and Radicalism Intention Scales, which assess intentions to participate in legal and non-violent political actions (Activism Intentions Scale; AIS), as well as intentions to participate in illegal and violent political actions (Radical Intentions Scale; RIS; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). Participants' responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1=Disagree completely, to 7=Agree completely.

Activism Intentions Scale included questions about legal and non-violent political action, (e.g. "I would travel for one hour to join a public rally, protest, or demonstration in support of my group"; M=5.28, SD=1.56, Cronbach's Alpha = .89).

Radical Intentions Scale included questions about illegal and violent political action, (e.g. "I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating members of my group"; M=4.18, SD=2.08, Cronbach's Alpha = .93).

QAnon followers were asked questions on AIS and RIS only about their own intentions. On the other hand, participants who were not QAnon followers we asked to fill out

AIS and RIS twice: first about themselves (i.e. "I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent"); later, they were also asked to answer the same questions, but now about QAnon followers (i.e. "thinking now not about yourself, but about QAnon followers, would you say that QAnon followers would participate in a public protest against oppression of their group even if they thought the protest might turn violent ?"). Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha values for the AIS and RIS for each group are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Means, (Standard Deviations) and Chronbach's Alphas for Activism Intentions Scale (AIS) and Radicalism Intentions Scale (RIS) among QAnon Followers (QAnon), non-QAnon participants (non-QAnon), and QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon followers (Perceived QAnon)

Subscale	QAnon M (*SD*)	non-QAnon M (*SD*)	Perceived QAnon M (*SD*)
AIS	4.64 (*1.63*), α = .86	5.10 (*1.62*), α =.89	5.70 (*1.35*), α = .90
RIS	2.84 (*1.49*), α = .81	3.08 (*1.65*), α = .84	5.81 (*1.49*), α = .94

For the present study, we compared average ARS and RIS scores as reported by QAnon supporters to those reported by non-QAnon, as well as to QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon (Moskalenko et al., 2023; Moskalenko et al., 2022).[2]

Radical Intentions Scale (RIS). A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare radical intention scores among QAnon followers; non-QAnon individuals, and QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon followers. The results revealed a statistically significant difference in mean radical intention scores, $F(2, 684) = 269.79$ ($p < .01$). Post hoc analyses using Tukey's

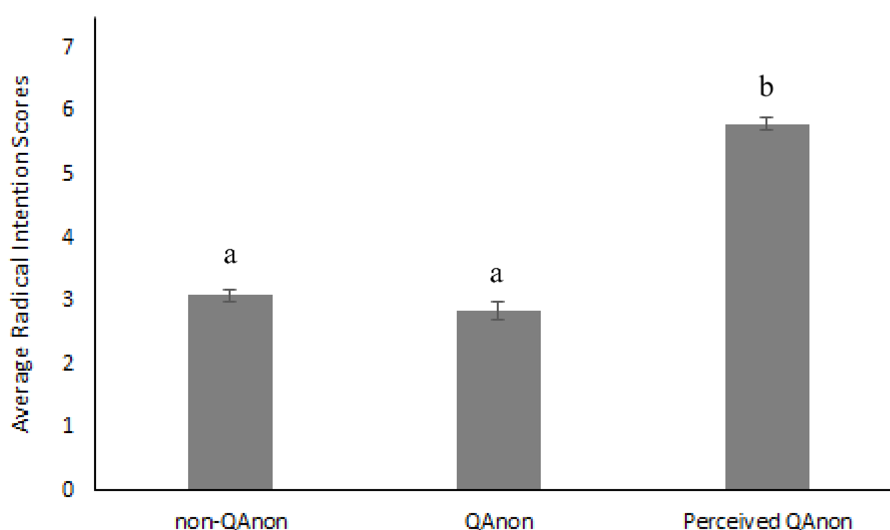
[2] In Study 1, responses to the questions on the ARIS scale were on a 5-point Likert scale, whereas in Study 2 a 7-point Likert scale was used. To compare average scores across the two surveys, we converted the 5-point Likert scale into a 7-point Likert scale, using the following formula (where x_5 = the original 5-point Likert score and x_7 = the converted 7-point Likert score): $x_7 = (x_5 - 1)(6/4) + 1$ (Lewis & Sauro, 2020).

HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the mean RIS was significantly different between perceived QAnon scores and actual QAnon scores (p <.01). Additionally, Tukey's HSD Test revealed that the mean RIS was significantly different between non-QAnon participants and perceived QAnon (p <.01). There was no significant difference in mean RIS between the non-QAnon followers' scores and the QAnon followers' scores (p = ns.).

Figure 1 depicts average mean RIS scores of: QAnon followers; non-QAnon individuals, and perceived QAnon.

Figure 1

Average Radical Intention Scores of: QAnon followers; non-QAnon individuals; and QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon follower



Note. Bars demarked by different superscripts are significantly different. Error bars represent 1 SEM.

Thus, in our study, QAnon supporters reported lower radical intentions than what non-QAnon participants attributed to QAnon followers. What's more, QAnon followers' radical intentions did not differ from those of non-QAnon individuals.

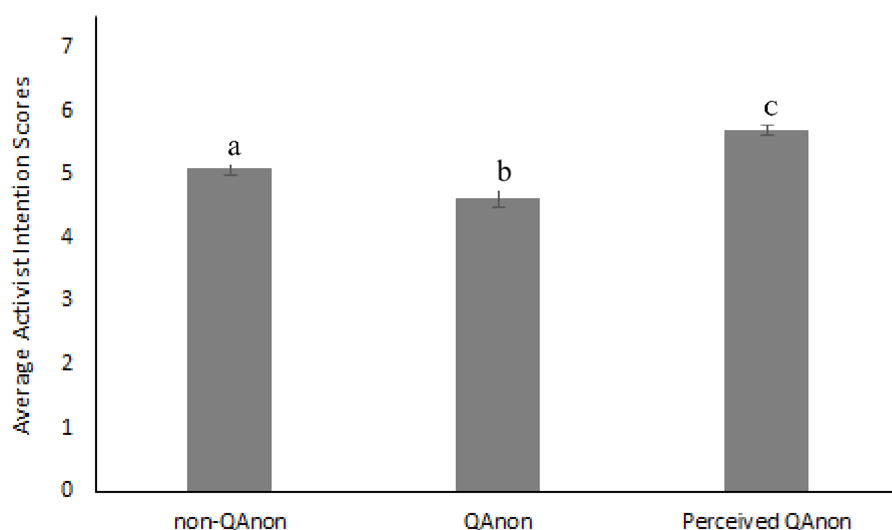
Activist Intention Scale (AIS). A one-way ANOVA was used to compare activist intention scores among QAnon followers; non-QAnon individuals, and QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon followers. It revealed a statistically significant difference in mean activist intention scores, $F(2, 684) = 23.45$ ($p < .01$). Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the AIS was significantly different between the QAnon

followers’ and the perceived QAnon scores ($p <.01$). Additionally, the mean AIS was significantly different between QAnon followers’ scores and those of non-QAnon individuals ($p = .02$). Lastly, the mean value of activist intention scores was significantly different between the non-QAnon followers and perceived QAnon followers' scores ($p <.01$).

Figure 2 depicts average scores on Activism Intentions Scale (AIS) of non-QAnon individuals, QAnon followers, and perceived QAnon.

Figure 2

Average Activist Intention Scale Scores of: QAnon supporters; non-QAnon individuals; and QAnon as perceived by non-QAnon followers



Note. Bars demarked by different superscripts are significantly different. Error bars represent 1 SEM.

These results suggest that QAnon followers have lower levels of activist intentions than the non-QAnon individuals, which in turn are lower than the public’s perceptions of QAnon activist intentions.

Overall, on both measures—RIS and AIS, perceived QAnon intentions were significantly higher than we found among QAnon followers in our study. In fact, actual radical intentions of QAnon followers were not significantly different as those of our non-QAnon participants, and actual activist intentions of QAnon followers in our study were significantly lower than those of our non-QAnon participants. In other words, in this study,

we found a view of QAnon as dangerous among non-QAnon followers, a view that was not supported by empirical findings from actual QAnon followers.

One interpretation of the high perception of threat among non-QAnon followers is their personal experiences with QAnon loved ones. As already mentioned, QAnon beliefs are more likely to result in a threat to loved ones than radical beliefs of other terrorist groups (Jensen & Kane, 2021), and it's possible that those of our participants personal experiences with a loved one who believed in QAnon conspiracy theories led them to believe QAnon as a whole presents a high risk of violent action. To address this interpretation, we compared responses of those non-QAnon participants who reported a QAnon loved ones with those who did not.

Sample Comparison. In Study 2, participants were asked if they have a loved one who supports QAnon, to which they responded: "Yes" (n=232), "No" (n=28), or "Maybe" (n=27). Using a one-way ANOVA, we found no significant differences among these groups in mean variables including: non-QAnon activism, $F(2, 284) = .27$ ($p=.77$), non-QAnon radicalism ($p=.75$), perceptions of QAnon activism ($p=.30$), perceptions of QAnon radicalism ($p=.63$). In other words, in our sample, individuals who had a QAnon loved one did not significantly differ from those who didn't have a QAnon loved one in their own or in their perception of QAnon's activism or radicalism. Therefore, the differences between real and perceived QAnon threat are not explained by participants personal history (or lack thereof) with a QAnon follower.

Discussion

Over the past few years, QAnon conspiracies have grown in popularity in the U.S. (PRRI, 2021). Media reports of QAnon supporters committing shocking and violent crimes have garnered public attention (Watkins, 2019; McCaskill, 2021; Roose, 2021), characterizing QAnon as "cult-like" and a "deadly menace" (Blazakis, 2021; Hassan, 2020). The Department of Homeland Security issued a National Terrorism Bulletin for domestic extremists, highlighting QAnon and related conspiracy groups, following the involvement of QAnon supporters in the January 6th riot at Capitol Hill (Levy & Kesling, 2021; Goggin, 2022). Academics expressed diverse opinions on the degree of violent threat QAnon poses (Goggin,

2022), with some arguing that QAnon poses little threat for radical action (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2021) and others claiming that QAnon inspires individuals to commit violent crimes (Farivar, 2021), and poses danger of political violence stemming from QAnon's ideology (Amarasingham & Argentino, 2020; Ebner et al., 2022).

Significant disagreement surrounds the belief that QAnon poses a violent and radical threat. However, QAnon is likely unique in the non-traditional threat it presents to our society through the strain widely-circulated conspiracy theories put on public trust in democracy, institutions, and our healthcare system (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023; Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022; Van Prooijen et al., 2022). Moreover, QAnon is different than traditional domestic terrorist organizations which most frequently target government, military, and police locations/personnel for violent attacks (Doxsee, 2022). Rather, QAnon supporters tend to inflict the most violence and damage on their family and friends (Jensen & Kane, 2021; Moskalenko, Burton, et al., 2022). Many of the conspiracy theories associated with QAnon have broader social impacts, such as spreading disinformation about COVID-19 and helping to undermine the 2020 Presidential election (Hannah, 2021). Exposure to these conspiracy theories decreases peoples' willingness to get vaccinated and to engage in normative COVID-19 prevention behaviors (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Dickson, 2020; Ellis, 2021; Imhoff et al., 2021; Allington et al., 2021; Bierwiaczonek et al., 2020; Marinthe et al., 2020). If even a small portion of the population refuses to engage in preventative behaviors it can result in serious health consequences for others (Uscinski et al., 2020).

In these ways, QAnon stands apart from traditional terrorist groups. While terrorist groups can also utilize disinformation to promote their cause (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; UNCRI Publications, 2021), QAnon's entire ideology is built upon disinformation, much of which is harmful to the society. For this study, we chose to focus on the threat of radical action posed by QAnon, but it is necessary to clarify that the overall threat posed by QAnon to society is more unique and nuanced than radical action alone.

The present study is, to our knowledge, the first to date to investigate radical intentions (intentions for violent or illegal political action) of QAnon followers, as compared to perceptions of QAnon by non-QAnon individuals. We found that perceptions of QAnon radical intentions were significantly higher than actual radical intentions of QAnon followers. What's more, QAnon followers' radical intentions did not differ from those of our non-

QAnon participants. In other words, although QAnon followers are sometimes seen as dangerous, in our study, they reported radical intentions at a rate similar to non-QAnon participants. The measure of radical intentions we used (RIS, Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009) has been demonstrated to predict former and current violent and/or illegal engagements (Decker & Pyrooz, 2019; Pavlović et al., 2022), and thus offers a useful proxy for gauging potential threat of violent or illegal political action. Our data, therefore, suggest that concerns about QAnon's violent threat may be exaggerated.

We also compared activist intentions (intentions for legal and non-violent political action) among QAnon followers, non-QAnon participants, and perceived activist intentions of QAnon as reported by non-QAnon participants. Here, the pattern was somewhat different than that with radical intentions. Namely, all three comparison groups were significantly different from one another, with QAnon followers reporting the lowest activist intentions, non-QAnon individuals reporting higher activist intentions for themselves and even higher activist intentions estimated for QAnon followers. In other words, as with comparison of radical intentions, actual activist intentions of QAnon followers were lower than perceived by non-QAnon participants. In turn, non-QAnon participants reported greater activist intentions than did QAnon followers. In other words, our data demonstrate that QAnon is misperceived by outsiders on their activist intentions as well as on radical intentions.

Because our Study 2 sample included participants with loved ones who supported QAnon (often resulting in negatively impacted relationships) as well as participants without these experiences, it could be suggested that those who personally suffered ill effects of QAnon beliefs may overestimate the danger posed by QAnon, resulting in the observed data pattern. However, comparing respondents with and without QAnon loved ones, we did not find significant differences in their mean scores on own or perceived QAnon's radical or activist intentions. This finding suggests that the observed misperception of QAnon is not only a result of personal history of respondents but is likely a more general trend that extends to those without a direct experience with QAnon followers.

Our findings are consistent with behavioral data collected to date on QAnon followers' criminal and violent action. Statistically speaking, tens of millions of QAnon supporters in the U.S. are estimated to have radical opinions (Enders et al., 2021; NPR/Ipsos, 2020), whereas only about 200 QAnon supporters to date have been implicated in either

radical political action or criminal action in the U.S. (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023). Taking the lowest estimate of QAnon support from a representative national poll (about 5% of American adults; Enders et al., 2021) out of the total number of American adults (about 209 million; U.S. Demographic Statistics, 2022), this estimate projects to about 10,450,000 American adults who believe QAnon conspiracies. The rate of QAnon followers involved in any kind of political or other kind of crime, therefore, is 200 out of 10,450,000, or 1 out of 52,250. In other words, fewer than .001 percent of QAnon followers have been involved in illegal action.

For comparison, consider rates of arrests among USA adults from just one year (START QAnon data above aggregates over several years since QAnon emerged in 2017) that reports 4.3 million arrests for all possible crimes in the USA in 2021 (Duffin, 2022). This crime rate from the general population of about 209 million adults represents roughly 2/100 American adults, or 2 percent. In other words, statistically speaking, an average American adult is more likely to be implicated in a crime than an average QAnon follower. This comparison invites two questions: first, how can that be true, and second, why does it seem intuitively false?

Our hypothesis about how QAnon followers can be less prone to criminal action than an average American is twofold. First, case studies of QAnon followers often portray people with mental illness (Amarasingham & Argentino, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). In fact, the rates of previously diagnosed mental illness of QAnon followers among January 6th is significantly greater than that of an average American adult (Jensen & Kane, 2021; Moskalenko, 2021b). This suggests that many of those who express strong beliefs in QAnon narratives may be consumed by issues stemming from depression, anxiety, or psychotic disorder that render them incapable of engaging in criminal or radical political activity.

Second, case studies of QAnon followers reveal just how much time they devote to online pursuits of “their own research” which they call “baking the crumbs” and “connecting the dots”—with some reportedly neglecting their minor dependents’ needs in favor of online participation in QAnon forums (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). This suggests that perhaps QAnon followers spend so much of their time and effort in virtual online world of QAnon conspiracy theories that little time and energy is left for crime or for political action.

Related to this explanation of inaction is the content of QAnon beliefs, which is explanatory rather than mobilizing. QAnon conspiracy theories explain how the world "really" works, but they don't give recommendations on how to make it better or how to make one's life better in it beyond slogans like "trust the plan" and "wait for the storm" (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Spending all their time learning about how things are without any actionable intelligence besides instructions to wait faithfully and patiently suggests that QAnon's beliefs might be conducive to passivity rather than radical action.

These possible explanations of our results—that QAnon followers are less activist and no more radical than other Americans—can seem surprising. We suggest the surprise is created by media portrayals of QAnon, which offer salient examples of QAnon radicals and criminals that readily jump to mind when thinking about QAnon's threat. The high rate and alarmed tone of media coverage of QAnon-linked crimes (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2021) may influence public perception of QAnon threat, as has happened, for example, with media coverage of Muslim-perpetrated terrorism attacks, which receive five times more much media coverage calling them "terrorism" than do similar attacks perpetrated by Whites (Betus et al., 2020).

The availability heuristic is a tendency to rely on easily available examples when making mental estimates (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973); owing to media representation, the easy availability of QAnon's salient and dangerous examples can result in a perceptual over-estimation of the threat. At the same time, people tend to ignore base rates (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) (such as the ones provided above on relative frequency of crime out of the population of QAnon followers versus out of the population of American adults). Ignoring base rates is a tendency especially problematic with rare phenomena such as terrorism (Moskalenko, 2021c; Sageman, 2021). The salience of QAnon crimes and their ideology, combined with the obscurity of base rates, adds up to a perfect storm when trying to gauge the threat of violent action posed by QAnon. It is for this reason that empirical studies such as ours are especially important to inform policy and security professionals' decisions about how best to channel resources. Overall, our results suggest that QAnon may not be as radical in their intentions as many people believe; in fact it may be no more radical than non-QAnon individuals. Radical opinions, including those that tend to characterize QAnon beliefs, rarely lead to radical action (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Attempts to police radical opinions

have the potential to create grievances within the targeted community, increasing radicalism of current supporters or of individuals who may have remained neutral without intervention. It is useful, therefore, to both the public and policymakers, to accurately gauge the true level of danger of violence posed by QAnon, to avoid unnecessary and potentially politically costly action.

There are millions of QAnon followers worldwide sharing an ideology (Dastgeer & Thapaliya, 2022; Greenspan, 2021; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Censoring QAnon online could potentially backfire, playing into the perception of an all-powerful cabal looking to persecute people outside of the "status quo." To reduce the appeal and threat of conspiracy theories, a more fruitful course of action would include increasing government transparency, strengthening online fact-checking resources, bolstering internet and digital literacy, and educating the public in information gathering and evaluation (Chan et al., 2021; Porter & Wood, 2021; Bin Naeem & Boulos, 2021). These large scale initiatives are likely to go a long way in limiting the potential ill impacts of QAnon's disinformation and curtailing the danger it carries outside of political violence, such as threatening democratic processes, reducing social trust and undermining institutions. In addition to broad measures, researchers have suggested more specific techniques to counter spread and influence of conspiracy theories, such as "prebunking" or "inoculation" in which people are less likely to believe disinformation if they are forewarned (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021); increasing opportunities for socialization and reducing loneliness (Chmiel & Thompson, 2022; Brachier & Schachter, 2020); and mindfulness- based interventions (Rodrigo, et al., 2022; Bansal & Weinschenk, 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations of this study. One is that we used two convenience samples taken at two singular points in time. Moreover, the two samples were not collected at the same time but a few weeks apart. The phenomenon of QAnon is ever-changing and evolving; longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional polls will be required to track opinion change.

Another limitation is our relatively modest sample size. As millions of Americans believe QAnon conspiracy theories, it is likely this large group includes some opinion subcultures that could be distinguished in larger samples. Larger sample sizes would help to address the same questions we raised with more reliability and generalizability. It could also be informative for future surveys to assess additional relevant variables, including mental illness, personality, attitudes toward QAnon, and other individual characteristics, to see how they interact with QAnon beliefs and radical intentions—both actual and as perceived by non-QAnon followers.

It is also important to note that our participants with QAnon beliefs could have been especially suspicious, and thus could have answered our questions about activist and radical intentions with less honesty than participants who were not QAnon followers. Future studies should take this possibility into consideration and include questions to probe participant suspiciousness. Alternatively, future research could ask QAnon followers about their radical intentions at political rallies or protests, where their very presence would provide a measure of confidence in their positive responses about radical intentions. Comparing those responses with responses of QAnon followers online could establish some anchor points of the RIS scores from politically active versus politically inert QAnon followers.

It's also worth highlighting that, while our study focused on intentions for illegal and violent actions, these are not the only kind of dangers that a group such as QAnon can foster. For example, resistance to COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic, which caused thousands of excess deaths, was empirically linked with QAnon beliefs, exemplifying how these beliefs can contribute to socially destructive and sometimes deadly behavior (Smith et al., 2022). Likewise, legal and nonviolent political action that falls outside of radical or terrorist definition can yet be detrimental to the democratic processes; examples include banning certain books from public libraries, pressuring school boards to restrict instruction in science, or obstructing proceedings of public institutions--all of which have been attempted by QAnon followers (Smith, et al., 2022). In other words, although our study focused on intentions for radical (illegal and violent) actions, there are different kinds of threats stemming from QAnon belies that warrant concerns, and future empirical investigations. If anything, the fact that QAnon poses relatively little threat of political violence, yet it stirs so much controversy, political polarization, fractionation of the societal, communal and family connections, should

alert the academic and policymaker community to the fact that QAnon represents a qualitatively new danger, and that our existing measures to assess and counter terrorism and radicalization may need to be revisited and revised to address the threat QAnon presents.

Most important, our results point to the need to triangulate research methodologies when estimating threat of illegal and violent action. Analyses of online posting behavior and case studies should be interpreted alongside criminal base rates and polling data for the same groups.

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