

**Conspiracy Reels: An Experiment Investigating the Personal and Political Impact of  
Brief Fake News Exposure**

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# **Conspiracy Reels: An Experiment Investigating the Personal and Political Impact of Brief Fake News Exposure**

## **Introduction**

Due to the widespread adoption of social media and the proliferation of conspiracy content on common social media platforms, there is some evidence that conspiracy theory exposure amongst the public may have increased compared to previous decades (Zeng et al., 2022). Digital social media appears to amplify the spread of conspiracies (Zeng et al., 2022), a concerning trend considering billions of people use social media (DataReportal, 2024). As seen during the COVID pandemic, the mass online dissemination and adoption of conspiracy narratives can have negative real-world consequences for individuals, societies, and governments (Hughes et al., 2022).

Previous research investigating the effects of conspiracy exposure shows that merely exposing a viewer to conspiratorial media content is often all that is required to produce behaviors and attitudes antithetical to any well-functioning democratic society. For example, exposure to pro-conspiracy content reduces the intent to engage in politics (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), promotes prejudice across outgroups (Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020), reduces trust in government institutions (Einstein and Glick, 2015), and increases the intent to engage in violent action (Moskalenko, Pavlović, & Romanova, 2024). A recent meta-analysis revealed that belief in conspiracies is negatively correlated with multiple types of self-efficacy, including external and political efficacy (Bowes, Costello, & Tasimi, 2023), potentially leading to a reduction in the willingness to participate in democracy.

While existing research highlights the anti-democratic effects of conspiracy exposure and explores the psychological correlates of conspiracy belief, no studies have experimentally examined the impact of conspiracies presented in short, reel-style video formats, such as those commonly found on TikTok or YouTube. Prior experimental studies have primarily

relied on exposing participants to written conspiracy articles (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020; Lamberty & Leiser, 2019) or brief paragraphs of conspiracy content (Moskalenko, Pavlović, & Romanova, 2024). Other studies have used longer video clips with questionable contemporary political relevance, such as three-minute clips about the moon-landing conspiracy (Balafoutas et al., 2021). To date, no research has investigated whether exposure to contemporary conspiracies through short-form videos diminishes feelings of efficacy or political efficacy, leaving a critical gap in understanding how modern media formats influence these outcomes. We also examined the differences between conspiracy video content targeting a specific demographic group and content that does not reference any particular demographic group. This comparison aimed to determine whether demographic targeting, a common tactic in controversial conspiracy videos, produces distinct effects.

### **Experimental Design**

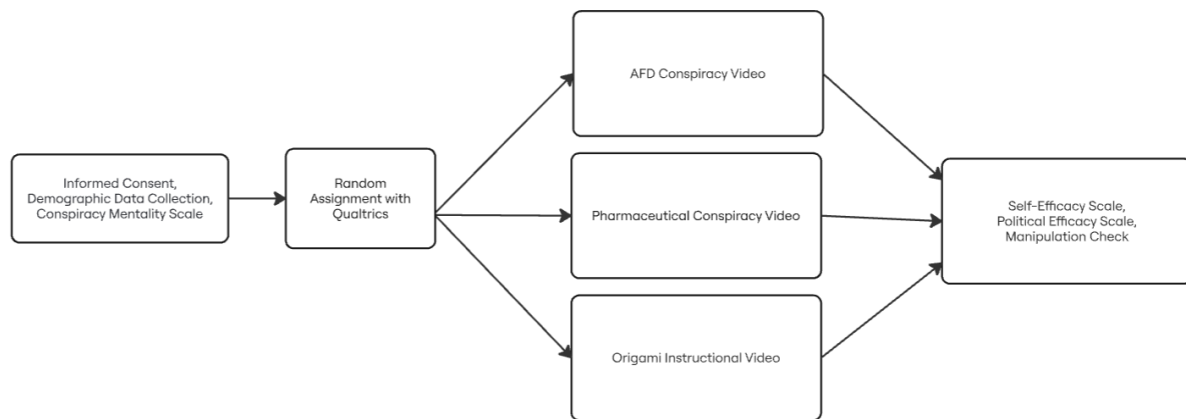
The research design is a between-subjects, post-test design. The participants were randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. The independent variable (IV) for this study is the type of video exposure, which is categorized into two main groups: the control group and the experimental group. Control group participants were exposed to a neutral video (i.e. an instructional origami video). Experimental group participants were exposed to conspiracy-themed videos, which were further divided into two subgroups: group-based fake news (conspiracy videos targeting specific groups) and non-group-based fake news (conspiracy videos with general themes).

The study includes three dependent variables (DVs): self-efficacy, measured using the New General Self-Efficacy (NGSE) scale, and internal political efficacy and external political efficacy, both measured using a political efficacy scale (PES) created by the researchers.

Our null hypothesis states that exposure to either type of video has no effect on self-efficacy or political efficacy scores while our alternative hypothesis is that exposure to a conspiracy video leads to lower scores on the PES and NGSE scales compared to the control group.

**Figure 1**

*Experimental Workflow*



The study's design relies on the manipulation of the independent variable through carefully crafted videos that were standardized in format. The videos were created using the Pictory platform, with scripts developed to align with theories of persuasion and misinformation. Each video was structured to last approximately one minute, featuring engaging visuals and narrations designed to mimic real-world media content.

We conducted a pre-test with a separate participant sample to validate the manipulation of the nine videos. Pre-test participants rated each video using semantic differential scales (see Appendix A) to assess perceived credibility, emotional impact, and engagement. Based on these ratings, we selected the highest-rated video in each category. From the three group-based videos, we chose the AFD video; from the four non-group-based videos, we selected the Pharma Industries video, and from the two neutral control videos, we chose the Origami video (Odag et al., 2024b).

## **Sampling**

The sampling method combined convenience sampling and voluntary response sampling. Researchers distributed the experiment link across their own social media networks, reaching university students, friends, family, and coworkers. Although participants were encouraged to share the experiment link with others, they did not directly provide contact information for referrals.

The sample consisted primarily of young adults, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 62. A majority (64%) were under 30 years old, while 36% were aged from 31 to 62. The group was well educated, with 58.6% having completed formal secondary education.

Although participants came from 27 different countries, the sample leaned Western, with 58% of participants from Europe, the USA, or Australia. The most represented countries were India (n=16), Norway (n=12), and the USA (n=15).

In terms of gender, 47% of the sample identified as male, 33% as female, and 1.2% as non-binary. Regarding religion, 56% identified as religious in some way, with 40.2% identifying as Christian and 29% as atheist. However, religiosity levels were relatively low, with a mean score of 3.9 on a 10-point scale.

Politically, the sample leaned slightly left, averaging 4.3 on a 10-point left-right political spectrum (with 0 being far-left and 10 being far-right). Participants also demonstrated a moderate level of conspiracy-mindedness, scoring an average of 3.8 out of 5 on the conspiracy mentality scale.

## **Procedure**

Upon visiting the experiment Qualtrics link, participants were presented with an informed consent form (see Appendix B) where they were provided with only limited information about the intent of the study. Participants were told that “the purpose of this study is to explore the effect of viewing controversial news videos. The study aims to

measure the impact of short-form political videos on the viewer's perception on certain topics" (Appendix B). After agreeing to the terms of the experiment on the informed consent form, participants were then prompted to answer a series of demographic question items. Once complete, participants were then asked to fill out the conspiracy mentality questionnaire. Participants were then presented randomly with one of three possible videos (either the pharmaceutical conspiracy video, the "AFD" conspiracy video, or the Origami control video). After viewing the randomly assigned short-form video, participants were given a series of questionnaires in the following order: the New General Self-Efficacy Scale, the political efficacy scale with measures of internal and external political efficacy, and a manipulation check questionnaire. Finally, the participants were provided with a formal debrief that showed them exactly what the study aimed to investigate (see Appendix C).

The ethical integrity of this study was guaranteed through an informed consent form that had to be signed by participants before starting the experiment. As this was not a formal study, it did not go through an ethics committee but was approved by Prof. Dr. Ozen Odag. Some of the information had to remain hidden from the participant to not skew the results by revealing the intentions of the experiment; this information was later shared in a debrief form after the questionnaires had been completed.

### **Data Collection**

The experiment Qualtrics link was shared weekly from 19 November 2024 until 10 December 2024 via several WhatsApp chats, Facebook, Instagram, and including a mass email sent to multiple professors at Touro University Berlin. This recruitment strategy yielded 82 participants, with 74 participants completing the study and being included in the final analysis.

During the demographic data collection portion of the Qualtrics survey, participants were asked to provide information about their gender identity, age, highest type of education

completed, citizenship, current country, religious identity, level of religiousness, political orientation, and average amount of daily time spent online.

Conspiracy mentality was measured using 8 items from Imhoff & Bruder's (2014) 12-item conspiracy mentality scale, with items such as "there is no good reason to distrust governments, intelligence agencies, or the media" (see Appendix D). Internal consistency of the scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

Self-efficacy was measured using the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001), with items such as "I will be able to achieve most of my goals that I have set for myself" (see Appendix E). The internal consistency of the self-efficacy scale was high ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

Internal political efficacy was measured using a created political efficacy scale, with items such as "I think that people like me have an influence on what the government does" (see Appendix F). The internal consistency of this 4-item questionnaire was moderate but acceptable ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

External political efficacy was measured using a created political efficacy scale, with items such as "Politicians represent the voice of ordinary people well" (Appendix F). The internal consistency of this 4-item questionnaire was high ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

A manipulation check was conducted using a scale designed to measure participants' perceptions of the videos. Participants were asked to rate the videos on enjoyability, realism, factuality, consistency, and plausibility (see Appendix G). Cronbach's alpha was not calculated for this scale.

## **Data Analysis**

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). We used SPSS to conduct a series of univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effects of video types (i.e. Group-based conspiracy, Non-Group-based conspiracy, Origami



Control) on dependent variables such as self-efficacy, internal political efficacy, and external political efficacy; the univariate ANOVA allowed for inference testing our main hypothesis. These analyses allowed us to test for statistically significant differences between video groups on measures of internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, and self-efficacy. Descriptive statistics and effect sizes (partial eta squared) were also calculated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the observed effects.

Demographics such as age, gender, country of origin, political orientation, religious identity, religiousness, and citizenship were summarized using frequency counts and percentages. We calculated Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal reliability of the Conspiracy Mentality Scale, the Political Efficacy Scale, and the New General Self-Efficacy Scale.

## Results

A one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) conducted to examine the effect of video type on self-efficacy revealed that the effect of video type on self-efficacy was not statistically significant,  $F(2, 72) = 0.09, p = .915, \eta^2 = .002$ . Participants exposed to the Origami Control video ( $M = 3.93, SD = 0.50, N = 27$ ) reported slightly higher self-efficacy compared to those who viewed the Non-Group FN video ( $M = 3.88, SD = 0.61, N = 26$ ) and the Group FN video ( $M = 3.85, SD = 0.87, N = 22$ ). Across all conditions, the overall mean self-efficacy was 3.89 ( $SD = 0.65, N = 75$ ) on a scale of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater self-efficacy (Odag et al., 2024a).

A one-way ANOVA conducted to examine the effect of video type on internal political efficacy indicated no statistically significant effect of video type on internal political efficacy,  $F(2, 71) = 0.02, p = .980, \eta^2 = .001$ . Participants exposed to the Non-Group FN video ( $M = 3.23, SD = 0.68, N = 25$ ) reported slightly higher internal political agency compared to those who viewed the Origami Control video ( $M = 3.21, SD = 0.83, N = 27$ )

and the Group FN video ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ,  $N = 22$ ). The overall mean for internal political agency across all conditions was 3.21 ( $SD = 0.82$ ,  $N = 74$ ) on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater internal political efficacy (Odag et al., 2024a).

A one-way ANOVA conducted to examine the effect of video type on external political efficacy indicated no statistically significant effect of video type on external political efficacy,  $F(2, 71) = 0.96$ ,  $p = .388$ ,  $\eta^2 = .026$ . Participants exposed to the Origami Control video ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ,  $N = 27$ ) reported slightly higher external political efficacy compared to those who viewed the Group FN video ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ,  $N = 22$ ) and the Non-Group FN video ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ,  $N = 25$ ). The overall mean for external political efficacy across all conditions was 2.17 ( $SD = 0.72$ ,  $N = 74$ ) on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater external political efficacy.

A one-way ANOVA conducted to examine the effect of conspiracy mentality on external political efficacy revealed a significant effect of conspiracy mentality on external political efficacy,  $F(1, 70) = 19.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .218$  (Odag et al., 2024a).

The data indicates that our null hypothesis is confirmed: there is no statistically significant effect of video type on any measure of political or self-efficacy. Conspiracy mentality, however, presents as a potential confound to external political efficacy, and should be controlled for future studies.

## Discussion

This study investigated how brief exposure to conspiracy videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels affects personal and political attitudes. The results showed no statistically significant differences in measures of self-efficacy, internal political efficacy, or external political efficacy based on the type of video participants watched. These findings challenge the common assumption that short-form conspiracy content has a strong,

immediate influence on viewers' psychological states or political engagement, particularly compared to longer or more traditional formats.

The lack of significant statistical outcomes suggests that the videos might not be sufficiently impactful, or that external variables, possibly including individual differences in susceptibility to conspiracy theories, could have swayed the results.

## **Evaluation**

External validity was maintained through our use of recent conspiracy theories in a format familiar to participants. By using videos shorter than 90 seconds, like the style prevalent on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, our study mimicked the real-world exposure individuals commonly encounter.

Standardized questionnaires from previous validated research were adapted to maintain internal validity. Videos that were used in our experiment were standardized with regards to format, length, audio and visual dimensions. This ensured a uniform experience across all conditions. A pre-test was used to evaluate the effects of different videos. With regard to the pre-test and final experiment, different participation groups were used.

The sampling strategy combined convenience sampling with voluntary response methods. While this approach allowed for a culturally diverse sample representing individuals from 27 countries, it still skewed toward a Western demographic, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to non-Western contexts. Additionally, the sample consisted predominantly of highly educated individuals, introducing a self-selection bias that may influence the generalizability of the results.

The study did find a significant relationship between conspiracy mentality and external political efficacy. This suggests that an individual's predisposition toward conspiracy mentality plays a key role in how they respond to such content. Thus, the impact

of these videos is not solely determined by their content; it is also shaped by the viewer's psychological traits and mindset.

## **Conclusion**

Based on these findings, future research should be conducted to look at the cumulative effects of repeated exposure to conspiracy videos. While brief single exposure to conspiracy videos may not have a measurable effect on efficacy, repeated exposure through longitudinal approaches could produce a different outcome. This would allow researchers to track how watching multiple videos, similar or varied in theme, might shape beliefs and attitudes over time.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Test Questionnaire

The following questions were used to rate participants' perceptions of the eight videos shown during the pre-test. Participants rated their agreement with the statements below on a semantic differential scale.

Not believable at all						Very believable at all
Not authentic at all						Very authentic at all
Not impactful at all						Very impactful at all
Not truthful at all						Very truthful at all

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Form**

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to agree to a Consent Form on the last page of this document. Please make sure you have read and understood all pages of this form before signing.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of viewing controversial news videos. The study aims to measure the impact of short-form political videos on the viewer's perception on certain topics. The information gathered from this experiment will contribute to our understanding of media use and its effects on people. This experiment is being conducted as part of the coursework for a research methods course at Touro University Berlin, supervised by Prof. Dr. Özen Odag.

#### **What will my participation in this study involve?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will first be asked to fill out a short, anonymous demographic questionnaire. You will then watch a short video, which will be followed by another questionnaire. The information that you provide will only be used for the purpose of this experiment.

#### **What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?**

While there are no direct personal benefits to participating in this study, your involvement may provide the researchers with valuable insights about digital media's impact on political issues.

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. However, you may experience discomfort and feelings of emotional distress upon viewing some of the video



content. These effects are temporary. You will receive a debriefing procedure that will address any concerns you may have in this experiment.

### **What are my rights?**

As a participant in this study, you have the following rights:

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, without any penalty or explanation.

**Right to Withdraw:** You may stop the experiment at any time, or withdraw your consent, without any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw, any information you have already provided will not be used in the research unless you give your explicit consent.

**Confidentiality:** All the information you share will be treated with strict confidentiality. All information collected during the experiment will be automatically anonymized. Therefore, no personally identifiable information will be collected.

**Access to Information:** You may request access to the information collected during the experiment and review how your data will be used in the research. If you would like a copy of the final research report, our team will be happy to provide one for you.

### **Debriefing procedure**

After the experiment is completed, we will provide you with a debrief to explain the purpose of the research in more detail and address any questions or concerns you may have. During the debriefing, we will discuss how your contributions will be used in the research and ensure that you feel comfortable with the information provided. If any part of the discussion caused discomfort or raised any issues, our team is available to discuss and clarify. Additionally, if you wish, we will share the findings of the research with you once it is completed, and you can request a copy of the final report.

Who do I contact for more information or for any concerns I might have?

Any potential comments may be shared with Joel Alex at [jalex@student.touro.edu](mailto:jalex@student.touro.edu) and/or

Paul Weller at [pweller@student.touro.edu](mailto:pweller@student.touro.edu) or Diana Woo at [dwoo@student.touro.edu](mailto:dwoo@student.touro.edu)

Thank you for your participation.

## **Appendix C**

### **Debriefing Form**

Thank you for your participation in this research study!

#### **What we could not tell you beforehand:**

In this study, you were shown a short video framed as a political video with controversial political content. However, the video was entirely fabricated by us, the research team!

The information portrayed in the video you saw was constructed solely for the purpose of this study!

We could not let you know about the fabricated nature of our video beforehand, as you might then not have reacted genuinely to it. We had to withhold the fabricated nature of the video to make sure we get hold of your ‘true’ responses.

#### **What the study was actually about:**

The study's primary aim was to examine whether exposure to conspiracy videos on social media influences (1) our sense of self-efficacy (our belief in our own ability to succeed) and (2) political efficacy (our belief in our influence over political processes). By presenting the content as real, we aimed to simulate a genuine social media environment in which we often interact with such media content.

The impact of conspiracy myths on self-efficacy and political efficacy have not yet been studied by researchers and we are hoping to find out more about this link (you can read up on the current state-of-the-art research on conspiracy myths in this article).

#### **The design of our experiment:**

To test the effect of social media conspiracy videos on self-efficacy and political efficacy we created three videos, of which you randomly saw only one! Of the three videos, two presented conspiracy myths, while one was a non-conspiracy video. The non-conspiracy

video (about origami) constituted our ‘control’ video. We were assuming that the control-video would not affect or even increase self-efficacy and political efficacy, while we expected the conspiracy videos to lower these aspects.

### **Our video content in short:**

Video 1 was about classic right-wing conspiracies that often allege that immigration leads to economic strain, such as job competition and welfare abuse, while posing a threat to cultural or national identity. These arguments frequently link migrants to rising crime rates or social instability, framing immigration as part of a larger agenda to weaken borders or undermine traditional values. See the Website of the [American Immigration Council](#) or the [HIAS](#) debunking such narratives as absolutely false!

Video 2 presented conspiracies about the pharmaceutical industry, often alleging that it prioritizes profits over public health by suppressing cures, exaggerating disease threats, or promoting unnecessary treatments. These narratives claim that pharmaceutical companies, in collusion with governments or regulatory agencies, exploit illnesses through hidden agendas prolonging diseases. See [FactCheck.org](#) debunking these narratives as absolutely fake.

Video 3, our control-video, was about Origami, the Japanese art of paper folding, which symbolizes creativity and transformation, turning a simple sheet of paper into intricate designs like cranes, flowers, or animals without cutting or gluing (see <https://origami-resource-center.com>).

The control video was important for the design of the study, to see with more certainty if specifically conspiracy videos have the assumed detrimental effects on self-efficacy and political efficacy – by comparison to other types of videos on social media.

### **Right to withdraw data**

Now that you know what our study was really about, you may choose to withdraw your data from the study without penalty.

Please check the REMOVE DATA box below if you want your data removed! We will remove all your data if we see this box clicked.

At the same time, please remember that your data are invaluable to us!

**Our credentials:**

This experimental study was conducted as part of the undergraduate Experimental Psychology course at Touro University Berlin supervised by Prof. Dr. Özen Odağ. If you have questions or comments about the study, you may contact Inés Gómez at [i.gomez@student.touro.edu](mailto:i.gomez@student.touro.edu).

To store this debriefing sheet in your files please click [here](#).

We thank you again for your participation!

## **Appendix D**

### **Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire was administered to participants as part of the study examining conspiracy mentality. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale:

0 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

1. There are many Important things happening in the world about which public is not informed.
2. Politicians and other leaders are nothing but the strings puppets of powers operating in the background.
3. Most people do not recognize to what extent our life is determined by conspiracies that are concocted in secret.
4. There is no good reason to distrust government intelligence agencies or the media.
5. International intelligence agencies have their hands in our everyday life to a much larger degree than people assume.
6. Most people do not see how much our lives are determined by plots hatched in secret.

## **Appendix E**

### **New General Self-Efficacy Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire was administered to participants as part of the study examining self-efficacy. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale:

0 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly Agree.

1. I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.
2. When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.
3. In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.
4. I believe I can succeed at almost any endeavor to which I set my mind.
5. I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.
6. I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.
7. Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.
8. Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.

## **Appendix F**

### **Political Efficacy Scale**

The following questionnaire was administered to participants as part of the study examining Political efficacy. Questions from one to four are Internal Political Efficacy and questions five to eight are External Political Efficacy. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale:

0 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

1. I am good at understanding and assessing important political issues.
2. I have the confidence to take an active part in a discussion about political issues.
3. There are many ways for citizens to successfully influence politics.
4. I think that people like me have an influence on what the government does.
5. Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people.
6. Politicians care about what ordinary people think.
7. Politicians represent the voice of ordinary people well.
8. I trust that politicians represent my concerns.



## **Appendix G**

### **Manipulation Check**

The following questions were used to evaluate the participants' perceptions of the video shown during the study. Participants rated their agreement with the statements below using a 5-point Likert scale:

0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

1. The video showed something plausible.
2. What was shown in the video typically happens in real life.
3. The video was based on facts.
4. The video showed a consistent story.
5. The visual elements of the video were realistic.
6. The video was very enjoyable.