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Reviewing the Stigma: A Critical Analysis of Conspiracy Belief in Social Science Research

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Abstract: The analysis shows that empirical social science studies examining psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy belief are characterized by a persistent deficit orientation, with a strong tendency to pathologize or stigmatize individuals. The core of this research is an empirical content analysis of 25 social sciences studies published between 2020 and 2025.

The analysis identifies a set of recurring patterns in the academic representation of conspiracy believers, including associations with cognitive, social, and psychological deficits, emotional instability, and maladaptive personality traits. The dynamics of marginalization become particularly evident through the examination of discursive practices of delegitimization, which are further sustained by the selective interpretation of research findings.

While some studies acknowledge structural or societal factors that may foster conspiracy beliefs, the narrative remains predominantly individualizing and negative. The findings highlight an ambivalence in the scholarly discourse: although conspiracy beliefs are recognized as complex, multidimensional, and sometimes rooted in legitimate grievances, they are frequently reduced to markers of irrationality or deviance. This suggests the need for greater reflexivity within the scientific community, particularly regarding language, methodological choices, and the balance between critique and stigmatization.

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Background

Individuals who believe in conspiracy theories, often referred to as "conspiracy theorists," are frequently associated with a specific image or stereotype. A closer examination of empirical social science studies published from 2020 to 2025 that focus on the psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers reveals a more nuanced portrayal within this body of academic research.

In the literature, people who believe in conspiracy theories are often portrayed as unable to comprehend the societal complexity of power dynamics and as exhibiting paranoid traits (Fenster 2008). Various negative attributes are used to describe these individuals, such as increased stress, anxiety, avoidant attachment, anomie, political alienation, and low external control (Biddlestone et al. 2025). "This 'misguided' perception of truth forms the basis of most debates surrounding this topic" (Barzen 2024:30).

Recognizing that some conspiracy theories might turn out to be true (e.g., Operation Mockingbird, Watergate, NSA Surveillance scandal) is a crucial step toward developing a more differentiated view of those who consider such theories as potentially plausible (Dentith 2012; Barzen 2024). In this light, belief in specific conspiracy theories may be grounded in real social and political events. As Pigden (1995:1) asks: *"History appears to be littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise […] So why is it naive to believe in conspiracy theories?"*

The following definitions allow for a neutral perspective that acknowledges the possibility that such theories could, in fact, be true. According to Dentith (2012:37), a conspiracy theory is *"an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause."* Similarly, Pigden (1995:4) defines a conspiracy as *"a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action."*

In the literature, critical voices have repeatedly questioned the stigmatization of conspiracy beliefs. Sociological and psychological research often adopts a dismissive, pathologizing stance toward conspiracy thinking (Dentith 2012), despite empirical evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is not

limited to individuals with pathological traits (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). These debates indicate that theories of stigmatization (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001) offer a useful interpretive background for contextualizing the findings discussed later in this article.

Current research shows that conspiracy theories are not believed by a small, marginalized minority, but rather span across a wide range of demographic groups, including age, gender, political orientation, and educational background (Min 2021). Other studies similarly highlight the importance of individual variability in conspiracy beliefs (Oliver and Wood 2014). The value of identifying psychological characteristics associated with conspiracy belief is questionable (Barzen 2025), particularly because it is empirically challenging to distinguish between general conspiracist ideation and belief in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bertlich, and Frenken 2022). Additional limitations in identifying psychological characteristics underlying conspiracy belief arise from the predominant focus on Western countries (Douglas and Sutton 2023), mainstream social media platforms, English-language communication, and individual conspiracy theories (Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng 2023).

Overall, the existing body of research is marked by a high degree of inconsistency and contradiction. This is partly due to the surge in spontaneous scholarly interest in the topic following the emergence of COVID-19 containment measures, often without a shared or consistent definition of conspiracy theories (Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng 2023). Snagovsky and Stockemer (2024) demonstrate that how conspiracy beliefs are measured strongly depends on the survey format: in an experiment with over 3,500 participants, Likert scales yielded much higher agreement than binary or trichotomous response options. These methodological differences help explain contradictory findings in conspiracy belief research, as different survey formats capture different aspects of agreement and skepticism.

Barzen (2025) summarizes several of the contradictory findings in the literature. For example, while some studies report a relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and right-wing authoritarianism (Bruder et al. 2013), others find no such association (Oliver and Wood 2014). Similarly, the suggested link between conspiracy beliefs and anxiety (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017) is challenged by other research (Adam-Troian et al. 2021). Concerning anxiety, it is also worth critically questioning whether such feelings might stem from knowledge of actual, confirmed conspiracies (Faulkner and Cheney 2013). In addition, the assumption that conspiracy belief is associated with a lack of analytical thinking or low levels of education (Swami et al. 2014) has been disputed by other studies as well (Galliford and Furnham 2017).

Even the widely cited theories of Popper (1945) and Hofstadter (1965) regarding belief in conspiracy theories are inherently pathologizing. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper (1945) criticized the tendency to reduce complex social processes to the actions of a hidden elite, a simplification he regarded as an expression of disturbed perception. In contrast, Pigden (1995) critiques oversimplification and neglect of context in Popper's arguments. Hofstadter (1965), in his essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, coined the term "paranoid style" to describe a mode of thinking characterized by excessive mistrust and emotional exaggeration, which undermines rational political discourse. Both perspectives contribute to interpreting conspiracy be-

liefs as an expression of a pathological mindset, a framing that has profoundly influenced the scientific investigation of conspiracy beliefs. It is important to note that both theories are philosophical reflections rather than empirically grounded studies (Barzen 2025).

Research Interest and Relevance

The current state of research and existing theories suggest that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories may be subject to stigmatization. Despite the large number of studies on conspiracy beliefs, there is currently no systematic investigation of how conspiracy beliefs are portrayed in scientific research. The way a social group is represented in the specific body of empirical research focusing on their psychological and social characteristics can have far-reaching consequences. It not only shapes academic discussions within this field but also societal perceptions and potential political responses toward this "group."

This study addresses this research gap by empirically examining how individuals with conspiracy beliefs are portrayed in empirical literature. A particular focus is placed on whether and in what form stigmatization is evident in these portrayals. The following research question will guide the data collection and analysis: *How do empirical studies describe people who believe in conspiracy theories?*

Although this study draws on a large body of predominantly quantitative studies, the analysis itself takes the form of an in-depth qualitative content analysis. The results of this analysis aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how conspiracy belief is represented in the presented discourse.

Methods

Sampling Strategy and Data Corpus

The data corpus consists of empirical articles, as they reflect current scientific discourses. To reflect the current scientific perspective, this study includes only articles published between 2020 and February 2025. This period also marks an increase in research following debates over conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 measures.

Focusing on peer-reviewed articles as an inclusion criterion ensures the academic quality of the sample. To accommodate diverse methodological approaches, articles employing either qualitative or quantitative research designs were included. The search strategy included identifying empirical studies that describe the psychological and social characteristics of individuals who endorse conspiracy theories. No restriction was imposed on the type of conspiracy theories (e.g., medical or climate-related) to adequately capture the breadth of the topic and enable comparative analysis across different domains.

Reviews, opinion pieces, essays, and theoretical works were excluded to maintain a focus on primary research. Studies addressing conspiracy theories without considering their adherents were excluded, for example, those focusing only on algorithms, dissemination, or media representation.

The data corpus was compiled using Web of Science, chosen for its broad interdisciplinary coverage of social science literature. Web of Science provides precise search and filtering functions that support the selection of relevant sources and ensure transparency in the data collection process (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016).

The *search term* was designed to capture diverse perspectives and ensure broad coverage of empirical studies:

("conspiracy theory" OR "conspiracy belief" OR "conspiracy worldview" OR "conspiracy* mindset" OR "conspiracy* thinking") AND ("research" OR "empiric*" OR "study" OR "qualitative" OR "quantitative") AND ("psychology*" OR "sociological" OR "social" OR "characteristics") not ("review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "essay")*

Figure 1. Sampling strategy

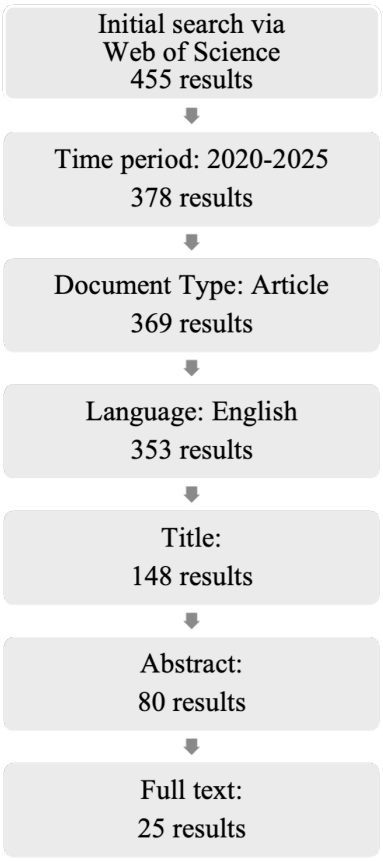


Figure 1 illustrates the search strategy and provides insights into the research field. The initial search yielded 455 results, which were reduced to 378 by limiting the publication period to 2020-2025, highlighting the increase in empirical studies since 2020. Restricting the document type to articles published in English further reduced the results to 353. From the initial search results, only 25 studies met the rigorous inclusion criteria after systematic screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts.

Content Analysis and Discursive Sensitivity

The qualitative content analysis method proposed by Kuckartz (2014) is particularly well-suited for the present research project, as it offers a systematic yet flexible approach to analyzing large text corpora. This method enables the inductive and deductive development of categories within a structured procedure.

A key advantage of this method lies in its combination of structure and openness: the deductive main categories (positive, negative, neutral) provide an initial broad classification, while the stepwise development of inductive subcategories allows for more nuanced differentiation of the representations. Pre-defined theoretical categories did not guide the inductive, data-driven approach. Codes were developed close to the material and were only interpreted in relation to broader theoretical concepts in the discussion.

Coding units were defined in a content-driven manner: segments ranged from individual sentences to entire paragraphs, depending on whether the text addressed a single coherent topic; a new coding unit was created only when a thematic shift occurred. Where a single passage addressed multiple themes or evaluative aspects, it was coded with more than one code accordingly. Importantly, all codes were generated as close to the text as possible, avoiding interpretation beyond what is explicitly

stated. The assignment of passages to the valence categories positive, neutral, or negative was based on explicit evaluative framing: passages were coded as positive when conspiracy believers or conspiracy beliefs were evaluated in affirmative terms, as negative when they were evaluated in deficit-oriented terms, and as neutral when they were limited to descriptive statements reporting empirical findings or theoretical positions without evaluative judgment. This analysis is also informed by a discursively sensitive perspective, paying attention to linguistic strategies and patterns in the narratives to identify implicit power relations and the ways knowledge or worldviews are legitimized or delegitimized (Reisigl and Wodak 2009), which culminates in an explanatory framework on the discursive dynamic of marginalization that is presented in detail in the results section.

Table 4 clearly links the subcategories to their respective codes, and the results section provides examples in direct quotes from the texts, ensuring the analysis is fully traceable. Coding was conducted with the support of MAXQDA software. In line with Glaser and Strauss (1967), theoretical saturation at the category level was achieved after analyzing 18 articles, as no new overarching categories emerged thereafter. Subsequent articles continued to yield additional codes, but these consistently mapped onto already established categories (e.g., cognitive deficits, psychological deficits), further saturating them rather than expanding the categorical structure.

Table 1 provides a concise overview of the articles' content, including authors and main topics. A full, detailed table is available in Appendix 1, which summarizes key aspects of the 25 selected publications, including study design, sample, methodology, significant findings, and limitations. Journal titles were also included in Appendix 1 to indicate the disciplinary context of each article. For publications containing multiple studies (Marchlewska et al. 2021; Bertin 2024; Enders et al. 2024), the first two were prioritized for their relevance. Where funding information was reported, the studies were supported by public research funding bodies or academic institutions, and no systematic conflicts of interest were indicated.

Across the corpus, conspiracy beliefs are predominantly operationalized using generic conspiracy mentality or broad belief scales that aggregate heterogeneous contents, often combining political, health-related, and cosmological narratives within a single measure. As content-specific instruments are comparatively rare, the corpus does not permit systematic conclusions regarding whether stigmatizing framings vary by the specific type of conspiracy theory under investigation.

Table 1. Data corpus overview: Authors and Topics (CT—Conspiracy Theory; CB—Conspiracy Belief)

Study Info	Research Topic
Albath et al. 2024	Correlation of CBs & psychological needs
Ballová Mikušková 2021	Correlation of CBs, conspiracy mentality & analytic cognitive style
Bertin 2024	Effects of induced victimhood on COVID-19 CBs
Bogatyreva 2024	Correlation of high prostate CTs belief & high institutional trust
Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen 2021	Associations between conspiracy mentality & schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation & right-wing authoritarianism
Enders et al. 2021	Examining the structure & organization of CBs & their coherence as a belief system
Enders et al. 2023a	Modeling correlates of conspiracy thinking
Enders et al. 2023b	Correlation of anti-social personality traits & anti-establishment views with CBs
Enders et al. 2024	Sociodemographic correlates of CBs
Frenken and Imhoff 2022	Correlation of CBs & detection of facial trustworthiness cues
Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024	Differentiating the correlates of judgments of plausible vs. implausible CTs
Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022	Correlation of CBs & schizotypy traits, autistic traits, cognitive flexibility & scientific reasoning
Hall, Franks, and Bauer 2025	Exploring the coexistence of conspiracist & non-conspiracist beliefs
Hausschild et al. 2023	Associations between CBs & epistemic stance, mentalizing & paranoid distress
Lantian et al. 2021	Correlation of critical thinking & CBs
Leveaux et al. 2022	Comparing the lay representations of conspiracy believers & non-believers
Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker 2024	Effects of brooding about societal problems on CBs
Marchlewska et al. 2021	Association of different coping strategies with CBs
Min 2021	Investigation of sociodemographic factors among conspiracy believers
O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus 2025	How belief in a just world, ambiguity tolerance & scientific reasoning influence CBs
Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020	Correlation of CBs & intuitive thinking and jumping to conclusions
Sambol et al. 2024	Correlation of CBs & working memory, cognitive flexibility & affective decision making
Stanovich and Toplak 2024	Association between CBs & rational thinking
Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas 2024	CBs & satisfaction in interpersonal relationships
Yendell and Herbert 2022	Associations between conspiracy mentality & anti-democratic attitudes, racism & religiosity

Source: Self-elaboration.

Results

Common Themes and Main Findings

Most studies report statistically significant, yet small-to-moderate, correlations between conspiracy beliefs and a range of psychological, cognitive, and social variables. A consistent focus on negative attributes is apparent: Conspiracy belief is predominantly conceptualized as a problematic belief system, associated with undesirable traits or behaviors.

Concerning psychological traits, studies frequently examine associations between conspiracy beliefs and characteristics such as paranoia, schizotypy, psychopathy, and narcissism (e.g., Dyrendal et al. 2021; Georgiou et al. 2022; Enders et al. 2023a; Hausschild et al. 2023).

Research on cognitive styles highlights relationships between conspiracy beliefs and a lack of analytical or rational thinking, as well as cognitive biases such as intuitive thinking and jumping to conclusions (e.g., Pytlik et al. 2020; Lantian et al. 2021; Stanovich and Toplak 2024; Sambol et al. 2024). Studies focusing on social and affective factors investigate links between conspiracy beliefs and low institutional trust, feelings of victimhood, or maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., Marchlewska et al. 2021; Albath et al. 2024; Bertin 2024).

A cross-cutting pattern across studies is that findings are mostly correlational and often weak, with no study establishing causality. This significantly limits the explanatory power of individual studies and reflects a field that remains theoretically and empirically fragmented. Nonetheless, some studies report moderate to strong effects:

- Albath and colleagues (2024) found a moderate negative correlation between conspiracy beliefs and the need for control (b = –0.41). However, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs in this study was limited to a single item, raising concerns about construct validity.
- Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen (2021) reported moderate to strong correlations between conspiracy beliefs and paranormal beliefs (r = .58 for women, r = .45 for men), as well as between conspiracy beliefs and social dominance orientation (r = .44 for women, r = .46 for men).
- Enders and colleagues (2023a) identified several psychological traits moderately associated with conspiracy belief, including anomie (r = .40), manicheanism (r = .37), populism (r = .38), and political violence (r = .30).
- Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff (2024) found a strong correlation between conspiracy mentality and belief in implausible conspiracy theories (r = .512).
- Stanovich and Toplak (2024) identified superstitious thinking as the strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs (β = .340) in a comprehensive assessment of rational thinking.

These examples represent the most robust findings in the current literature, yet they remain relatively scarce and indicate that the field lacks cumulative evidence and is marked by many limitations. Table 2 summarizes recurring conceptual, methodological, and sampling-related issues identified across the reviewed studies. These issues are not treated as empirical findings in their own right, but as analytic observations emerging from the systematic reading and comparison of the literature.

Table 2. Recurring limitations across studies

Conceptual issues	Methodological Issues	Sample Biases
• Some studies lack a clear definition of CTs or conflate them with related concepts such as misinformation. • Little differentiation between types of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., plausible vs. implausible). • Inconsistent operationalizations of conspiracy beliefs across studies. • Limited theoretical grounding of the variables measured. • Predominant focus on individual traits; structural and social contexts are largely neglected. • Stigmatizing framings are often left unexamined.	• Predominantly quantitative, self-report, and correlational designs. • Mostly small effect sizes. • No causal inferences. • Use of modified or self-developed scales with limited validity & few items. • Low internal consistency of measures (SPQ, CRT, ETQ). • Artificial experimental settings in some studies. • Lack of replication & inconsistent measurements across studies. • Limited generalizability of findings.	• Some non-representative samples (e.g., students, Prolific users, skewed gender ratios). • Incomplete demographic data in some studies (e.g., age or education). • Overrepresentation of Western countries (USA, Germany, UK). • Underrepresentation of marginalized, older, or less-educated populations. • Recruitment via social media or convenience sampling in some studies. • Small sample sizes in some studies.

Source: Self-elaboration.

As already mentioned in the background of this article, this review reiterates the limitation of the current state of research: contradictory findings. These are particularly evident in sociodemographic factors. So, are conspiracy believers really "socio-economic 'losers'" (Enders et al. 2024:12)? The following table (Table 3) contrasts some of the central conflicting findings, each illustrated with one example study. Quotes from the material supporting the study selection are in Appendix 2.

Table 3. Contradicting findings

Conspiracy believers…	Yes	No
tend to follow an ideology	Enders et al. 2024	Stanovich and Toplak 2024
have a lower level of education	Yendell and Herbert 2022	Frenken and Imhoff 2022
are more religious	Min 2021	Marchlewska et al. 2021
tend to be older	Min 2021	Enders et al. 2024
are more likely to be male	Enders et al. 2024	Dyrendal et al. 2024
are more likely to be white	Min 2021	Enders et al. 2024
have low analytical thinking	Ballová Mikušková 2021	Georgiou et al. 2022
are a threat to democratic values	Yendell and Herbert 2022	Hall et al. 2025
have a psychological disorder	Georgiou et al. 2022	Pytlik et al. 2020
show maladaptive mistrust	Frenken and Imhoff 2022	Hausschild et al. 2023
show high gullibility	Lantian et al. 2021	Hausschild et al. 2023

Source: Self-elaboration.

Despite frequent attempts to define conspiracy believers in terms of negative traits, empirical findings remain contradictory. This suggests that conspiracy belief is not reliably associated with a specific "deficit profile" but may instead reflect a complex, context-dependent phenomenon.

In light of the inconsistent and often deficit-oriented findings in the quantitative literature, two qualitative approaches attempt to capture the complexity of conspiracy belief. These studies explore how such beliefs are formed, maintained, and meaningfully integrated into individual worldviews.

Hall, Franks, and Bauer (2025) conducted in-depth interviews with 41 participants to examine how conspiracist and non-conspiracist beliefs coexist within individuals. Their thematic coding revealed five escalating types of belief coexistence, from cognitive dissonance to integrative frameworks. This points to a nuanced, internally dialogical structure of belief systems, rather than a rigid conspiracist mindset.

The study by Leveaux and colleagues (2022) includes qualitative elements and uses lexometric analysis to examine how participants (n = 939) define conspiracy theories. They identified four distinct clusters of lay representations, which correlated with the level of conspiracist belief. Interestingly, those with low conspiracy beliefs focused more on pathologizing believers, whereas high believers emphasized political content. Notably, Leveaux and colleagues (2022) are the only study in the corpus that does not include negative characterizations of conspiracy believers. Although participants report pathologizing attributions, these are presented descriptively, with multiple perspectives and interpretive possibilities offered, such that the study itself refrains from reproducing evaluative judgments.

Together, these studies offer a more differentiated view of conspiracy belief, not as a fixed deficit, but as a dynamic, socially and cognitively embedded phenomenon.

Among the quantitative studies, four can be identified that take a largely neutral stance toward belief in conspiracy theories (Frenken and Imhoff 2022; Bogatyreva 2024; Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024; Stanovich and Toplak 2024). What sets these studies apart is their use of neutral definitions of conspiracy belief that do not presuppose cognitive or moral deficiencies. Instead, they consider systemic and potentially legitimate reasons for the emergence of such beliefs. Moreover, these studies explicitly address the stigmatization of conspiracy believers. Negative findings are reported as study-specific results, not as facts. In total, only six studies adopt a largely neutral tone.

Results of the Content Analysis

The following table (Table 4) presents the main categories and codes derived from the content analysis. Categories and codes are elaborated and empirically illustrated with quotations from the material in the subsequent results section. The results are grouped according to three main categories: positive (green), neutral (yellow), and negative (red). For each subcategory, all assigned codes are listed to provide a transparent insight into how conspiracy beliefs are described. Of the coded text passages, 45 were classified as positive (distributed across 14 articles), 168 as neutral (distributed across all 25 articles), and 1,237 as negative (distributed across 24

articles). These absolute frequencies represent coding density under the adopted coding rules and are not normalized by article length or number of coded segments. Taken together, they point to a substantial asymmetry in how conspiracy believers are characterized across the coded material.

Table 4. Results of the Content Analysis

Categories	Codes
CB: justified response	Rooted in legitimate social causes, based on real negative experiences with powerful groups, suppression risks harm if concerns are valid
CB: adaptive mistrust	CB as an epistemic tool, adaptive strategy of mistrust, fosters democratic values via critical scrutiny of hidden processes, evolutionary advantage in detecting harmful coalitions, more intense information seeking
CB: mental utility	CB as a cognitive & psychological benefit, linked to higher analytical thinking, a stronger sense of meaning in life, increases self-esteem
Descriptions & Context	CB is widespread across society, varies by region & topic, spreads via social media, distinction between a general conspiratorial mindset & specific CTs is essential, CTs can function as belief systems, show parallels to religion, are not necessarily monological
Neutral mental traits	CB is a psychologically normal & context-dependent psychological phenomenon, the origins and influencing factors of CBs are unclear, the link to cognition is controversial, can reflect a distinct cognitive style, CTs believers differentiate between plausible and implausible theories, conspiracy mentality can be learned
Lack of associations	Individual belief influences how conspiracy theories are defined and perceived, no consistent link between conspiracy belief & negative traits (mistrust, mental disorders, low analytical thinking, gullibility, ideological extremes, excessive social media use), no consistent association with demographic factors (gender, age, education, political orientation, religion, ethnicity), inconsistent findings
Cognitive deficits	CB is unjustified/irrational, is based on magical/paranormal thinking, offers simple explanations for contradictory or complex situations, results from a low level of education, is based on a false perception of malevolence & power, is based on logical fallacies, CTs believers show deficient thinking, do not think analytically/rationally/objectively, prefer intuitive thinking, cannot assess the credibility of sources, glorify their critical thinking, misjudge trustworthiness, are naive & gullible, are easily manipulated, believe anything as long as it contradicts the official version, believe suspicious theories, have weak arguments, are poorly informed, misjudge their thinking ability, have a populist attitude, reject scientific consensus, exhibit manichean thinking, have a confirmation bias, have a cognitive bias (jumping-to-conclusions)
Psychological deficits	CB stems from a general psychological predisposition, is a psychological deviation, results from low psychological need satisfaction, leads to paranoid stress, is clinically relevant and should be treated, is a dysfunctional/avoidant coping strategy, CTs believers have an insecure attachment style, suffer from their inner world, are psychopathic, have experienced trauma, have delusions, tend to be neurodivergent, have autistic & schizotypal traits, experience anomie, ruminate
Emotional instability	CB is caused by stress, results from frustration of basic needs, can help cope with a frustrated sense of meaning in life, provides a sense of control, CTs believers have difficulties regulating their emotions, believe in an unjust world, are strongly convinced of threats, have unjustified fears/paranoia/insecurity, are misled by emotionally-charged narratives
Maladaptive personality traits	CB changes a person's identity, CTs believers are selfish, ignorant, racist, sadistic, pessimistic, argumentative, dogmatic, eccentric, cynical, not open-minded, willing to knowingly share false information online, tend to be criminal, violent, correlate with dark triad traits (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy), exploit the victim role, have low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, antisocial orientation, want to be special

Categories	Codes
Social & adaptive deficits	CB leads to social withdrawal, dissatisfaction in interpersonal relationships, family division, CTs believers see themselves as victims, are resistant to interventions, are distrustful of others (interpersonal, institutions, authorities, experts), try to convince others, use social media extensively, struggle to take others' perspectives, seek acceptance within CBs social groups, are more likely to be unemployed, feel socially excluded or isolated, have difficulties adapting to society
Negative societal consequences	CB should be reduced, threatens democracy, leads to social division, fosters racism, discrimination & antisemitism, CTs are instrumentalized in non-democratic countries, CTs believers are spreading conspiracy theories, politically disengaged, questioning election results, sowing political distrust, holding extreme political positions and ideologies, tend to radicalize, are prone to right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, show anti-establishment attitudes, have lower pro-environmental attitudes, exhibit negative health behavior, frequently abstain from voting

Source: Self-elaboration.

All positive categories converge on a crucial insight: conspiracy theories can be, or become, true. This point is raised explicitly by Stanovich and Toplak (2024:18), who ask in their discussion: "In a world of increasing complexity and global interaction—and increasing potential conflicts among fractious and polarised interest groups—why wouldn't you think that some of the groups were colluding and coordinating to advance a goal that remains empirically opaque to the public?"

Concrete examples of real-world manipulation or public health scandals mentioned in the studies include the Iran-Contra Affair and the Watergate scandal (Hausschild et al. 2023), as well as the contaminated blood and Depakine scandals in France (Leveaux et al. 2022). A certain degree of conspiracy belief is described as an adaptive strategy of mistrust, sometimes necessary to uncover political corruption (e.g., Frenken and Imhoff 2022; Hausschild et al. 2023; Stanovich and Toplak 2024).

Several studies include neutral descriptions of conspiracy beliefs. Some of these statements provide contextual or descriptive information without evaluative framing. For example, Leveaux and colleagues (2022:335) note that "the media coverage of conspiracy theories (CTs) has drastically increased over the past few years." Sambol and colleagues (2024:1) write that "Conspiracies have always existed in society," and Enders and colleagues (2024:2) observe that "most people believe one or a few conspiracy theories."

Statements categorized as neutral also include findings that do not confirm assumed negative associations. Enders and colleagues (2023a:7), for example, report that "neither [is] the extremity of ideological (0.004, $p > .999$) or partisan (−0.04, $p > .999$) orientation" significantly associated with conspiracy belief. Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff (2024:19) explicitly challenge earlier findings by stating: "Contrary to previous research…our findings did not provide evidence supporting a general bias of conspiracy mentality in informational processing." Likewise, Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:6) note that their results "did not find a significant association" between conspiracy beliefs and analytic thinking.

The presence of such neutral statements, even within studies that predominantly frame conspiracy beliefs in negative terms, suggests that the discourse is not

monolithic. Rather, it contains moments of restraint, complexity, and even contradiction, indicating that alternative perspectives exist within the field.

Looking at the section of the table (Table 4) on negative attributions, it becomes evident that conspiracy beliefs are predominantly framed as resulting from intrapersonal deficits.

Cognitive deficits are particularly frequently cited in this context, often in a derogatory manner. For example: "Given this, it seems plausible that individuals with heightened cognitive flexibility, working memory, and affective decision-making capabilities might also display reduced conspiracy beliefs, due to their increased capacity to effectively evaluate evidence and resist unverified or emotionally charged narratives" (Sambol et al. 2024:2). In some cases, conspiracy believers are even denied the capacity to act as rational citizens: "It is important not to neglect efforts in critical thinking education that would allow individuals to behave as autonomous and informed citizens" (Lantian et al. 2021:681; see also Ballová Mikušková 2021). Additionally, statements based on weak effects without establishing causality can be found: "As hypothesised, it was found [that] individuals with high CT beliefs would have the highest clinical scores, lower scientific reasoning scores and a stronger bias against disconfirmatory evidence" (Georgiou et al. 2022:8).

In several studies, conspiracy belief is framed as a consequence of underlying *psychological deficits* or unmet psychological needs. This perspective is reflected in pathologizing language and clinical framings, such as references to "schizotypal and autistic traits" (Georgiou et al. 2022:1) or the proposal that research on conspiracy belief may inform "therapeutic and preventive interventions" (Hausschild et al. 2023:8). Such approaches construct conspiracy belief as a deviation from psychological normality, further emphasized by phrases like the "urgent need to combat the non-normative behaviors associated with conspiracy theory beliefs" (Enders et al. 2024:2). Moreover, conspiracy belief is portrayed as a maladaptive coping mechanism, when people are "seeking refuge in conspiracy theories" (Albath et al. 2024:10), or as a consequence of impaired psychological need regulation: "deviations in psychological need satisfaction may precede conspiracy belief" (Albath et al. 2024:3). Such representations not only individualize and medicalize conspiracy belief, but also contribute to a discursive construction of conspiracy beliefs as psychologically deviant, thereby reinforcing normative boundaries of mental health, rationality, and social conformity.

A further prominent category concerns *emotional instability* as a factor contributing to conspiracy beliefs: "People turn to conspiracy beliefs when they feel uncertainty, when they feel unsafe, and when they experience lack of (sociopolitical) control and psychological empowerment, and feel powerless and anxious" (Ballová Mikušková 2021:199). Across several studies, individuals prone to conspiracy thinking are described as struggling with emotion regulation and stress adaptation. Marchlewska and colleagues (2021:544), for instance, suggest that "improving people's ability to cope with stress might inadvertently reduce the appeal of conspiracy theories." Similarly, Bertin (2024:35) frames conspiracy believers as emotionally vulnerable, highlighting the "victimizing effects of conspiracy beliefs." Hausschild and colleagues (2023:2) describe them as experiencing "difficulties in self- and interpersonal regulation and reduced adaptation to society," while also emphasizing that epistemic mistrust and paranoid distress often remain unregulated: "indi-

viduals may try to regulate this distress via 'organizing' it within conspiracy theories" (Hausschild et al. 2023:2). These studies suggest conspiracy beliefs may not simply stem from a deficit in cognition or information literacy, but from affective instability and unmet emotional needs.

Another category refers to negative and *maladaptive personality traits*. Conspiracy believers are, for example, described as exhibiting characteristics associated with the "dark triad personality traits" (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy) (Enders et al. 2023a:1), and possessing a "weakened ego" (Yendell and Herbert 2022:232). Yendell and Herbert (2022:238) find that "conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracies go hand in hand with a lack of support for democracy, a lack of a sense of political agency, and with racist, anti-Muslim, and right-wing extremist attitudes." Moreover, their worldview is portrayed as "negatively distorted" (Liekefett et al. 2024:15) and "relatively pessimistic" (Enders et al. 2023a:9). Yendell and Herbert (2022:233) also note a pronounced "desire to be unique," while Enders and colleagues (2023b:255) describe them as "people with anti-social and conflictual styles who are inherently less amenable to 'correction' or persuasion by outside forces." These findings culminate in a portrayal of conspiracy believers as psychologically and socially deviant.

Across the analyzed studies, conspiracy belief is frequently associated with various forms of *social and adaptive deficits*. Toribio-Flórez and colleagues (2024:2) suggest that conspiracist ideation can transform personal identity in ways that "are likely to further distance conspiracy believers from their social network and diminish the quality of their relationships." This notion is echoed by Albath and colleagues (2024:2), who describe feelings of "being socially excluded and ignored by others" as a central experience of conspiracy believers. Frenken and Imhoff (2022:3) further emphasize a pervasive "undifferentiated and generalized mistrust attitude," which contributes to social alienation and a breakdown of interpersonal trust. Together, these findings construct a narrative in which conspiracy belief is a socially disintegrating force.

The last subcategory summarizes codes that describe *negative societal consequences* of conspiracy belief. Yendell and Herbert (2022:229) argue that they are "associated with significant public threats and harms," while O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus (2025:4) explicitly refer to them as "harmful beliefs." Similarly, Marchlewska and colleagues (2021:545) note that "conspiracy beliefs may lead to socially undesirable behavior" and undermine social cohesion. Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:2) emphasize that conspiracy beliefs are linked to "the rejection of generally accepted social norms." According to Min (2021:1), conspiracy theories "present serious challenges to society as they distort public opinions and attack the informational basis of democracy." Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas (2024:2) highlight that such beliefs "have negative consequences, not just due to their oppositional nature, but also as perceived threats to common goods accepted by the social majority," and Hausschild and colleagues (2023:2) warn that "On a societal level, individuals' more extreme positioning towards socially transmitted information in specific domains may ultimately be a factor in the forming of irreconcilable groups and an indicator of societal separation." Taken together, these studies construct conspiracy belief as a destabilizing force for a democratic society.

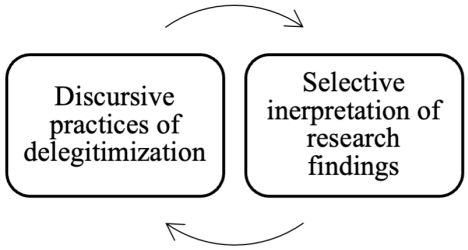
Overall, the negative attributions found in the analyzed studies follow a strongly individualizing,

deficit-oriented narrative. They pathologize belief in conspiracy theories by framing it as a symptom of cognitive, emotional, or social failure. This suggests a moralizing stance and reflects dominant discursive patterns that construct conspiracy beliefs as a form of deviance from socially accepted standards.

Discursive Dynamic of Marginalization

The dynamics of marginalization of conspiracy believers in the analyzed studies become particularly evident through the examination of *discursive practices of delegitimization*, which are further sustained by the *selective interpretation of research findings* (Fig. 2). The concept of "delegitimization" was not applied as a code within the content analysis but is useful as an explanatory analytical key category for synthesizing the overall findings, particularly the recurring negative attributions, informed by a discursively sensitive reading attentive to power relations and processes of epistemic devaluation (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

Figure 2. Discursive Dynamic of Marginalization



Source: Self-elaboration.

Discursive delegitimization through devaluation occurs mostly implicitly, for example, by associating conspiracy beliefs with a range of negative variables. This is, for instance, evident in the claim that "we should understand anti-social personality traits and conflictual behaviours as characteristics of the types of people that are attracted to [conspiracy belief]" (Enders et al. 2023b:256).

Explicit delegitimization, marked by a mocking and openly scornful tone, can also be observed in formulations such as: "the conspiracy myth is no longer about strengthening the weakened ego, but about reshaping the world: In the world of conspiracy ideologists, the reality principle no longer applies. The world is supposed to adapt to one's own wishes and needs" (Yendell and Herbert 2022:232). This kind of rhetoric signals a shift from analytical description to polemical judgment.

An openly derogatory example can also be found in the sarcastic title: "Maybe a Free Thinker but Not a Critical One" (Lantian et al. 2021:1). Through irony, the title highlights the alleged lack of critical thinking among conspiracy believers, contributing to their symbolic devaluation.

A similarly condescending tone is evident in descriptions such as "people who fall down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories" (Toribio-Flórez et al. 2024:2), which imply a loss of rationality and control. Conspiracy believers are portrayed as unable to accurately assess their cognitive abilities, as evidenced by the recurring observation that they describe themselves as researchers or investigators (Pytlik et al. 2020). However, this self-perception is frequently presented with irony, implying that these individuals believe they are engaged in critical inquiry, while they are thought to be drawn to oversimplified explanations for complex problems they fail to understand (Lantian et al. 2021; Liekefett et al. 2024). This rhetorical strategy subtly ridicules

their epistemic aspirations, reinforcing their exclusion from legitimate knowledge production.

Conspiracy beliefs are described as "non-normative beliefs that currently concern social scientists and political observers" (Enders et al. 2023b:248) and are often portrayed as something that should be reduced. However, such reduction is described as unlikely because conspiracy believers are attributed with numerous negative traits, suggesting that interventions would be ineffective: "those who exhibit the highest levels of conspiracy thinking also possess psychological and political traits (e.g., dogmatism, argumentative, distrusting, narcissistic) that would seemingly make them hostile to perceived corrections or interventions from outsiders" (Enders et al. 2023a:9).

Besides devaluations, many studies seem primarily concerned with confirming their hypotheses, often failing to demonstrate the critical thinking they claim conspiracy believers lack. An example is Sambol and colleagues (2024:4), who, despite their study showing no evidence of causality, conclude that *"[f]uture research should explore whether cognitive exercises or 'brain training' programs targeting working memory and cognitive flexibility can reduce an individual's susceptibility to conspiracy theories."*

Another issue in this field concerns the use of titles that imply a strong connection or even causality, such as Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:1): *"Thinking Preferences and Conspiracy Belief: Intuitive Thinking and the Jumping to Conclusions Bias as a Basis for the Belief in Conspiracy Theories."* Despite the suggestive title, the study produced only weak results without establishing causality, relied on a non-representative sample with generally low levels of conspiracy belief, and was based on an artificial experimental design.

The narrative of the intellectually or psychologically deficient conspiracy believer is maintained through selective interpretation and framing of results, aligning findings with preconceived hypotheses, even when the empirical support is weak. For instance, Min (2021:1) reports that conspiracy believers tend to be "older White males with high conservatism and Protestantism" despite only weak statistical associations. Similarly, Yendell and Herbert (2022:236) state optimistically that their results "provide important information on the connections between conspiracy mentality, religiosity and political or anti-democratic attitudes" and link these findings to the concept of the "authoritarian syndrome" (Decker et al. 2020), although their data are based on weak effects without causality (see also Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020; Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022; Sambol et al. 2024). In some cases, this tendency goes so far that practical implications for therapeutic interventions with conspiracy believers are derived from similarly weak findings (Hausschild et al. 2023).

A similar dynamic occurs when studies report findings that could cast conspiracy believers in a positive light, only to then undermine these implications through reinterpretation. Albath and colleagues (2024), for instance, consider a link between conspiracy belief and increased meaning in life and self-esteem, but ultimately reverse the association, attributing it to temporary fluctuations in meaning and narcissism instead. Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020) briefly acknowledge traits such as analytical thinking, only to frame them as misperceptions or motivated reasoning. Ballová Mikušková (2021:191) notes potential social benefits, yet these are quickly subordinated to "more serious disadvantages." Such patterns suggest a tendency to undermine findings that might challenge the prevailing narrative.

Although there appears to be some awareness of the potential legitimacy of conspiracy thinking, the dominant negative narrative is maintained. Sympathy is extended only to a limited subset of conspiracy believers: "with respect to individuals whose social groups have endured subjugation and even the perpetration of real conspiracies. In other words, patterns in the sociodemographic correlates of conspiracism may be interpreted to paint a sympathetic picture of at least some conspiracy theory believers" (Enders et al. 2024:12).

Discussion

Theoretical Context: The Stigma of Conspiracy Theorists

Stigma theory is not introduced as an explanatory model that structured the coding process, but as an interpretive framework to contextualize and critically reflect on the patterns identified in the results. Erving Goffman (1963) defines *stigma* as an attribute that discredits an individual in the eyes of society and marks them as *different* or *inferior*. Stigmatization is not an individual trait but a social process, shaped by normative ascriptions and societal power structures. Goffman distinguishes between various types of stigma, including character-based stigma (conceptual overlap with the category of maladaptive personality traits), which refers to perceived moral or psychological flaws. He emphasizes that stigma affects both how individuals are socially perceived and how they perceive themselves. Particularly relevant in the context of conspiracy beliefs is the notion of discreditable stigma, stigmatizing attributes that are not immediately visible and can be concealed. It is likely that individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs may often choose to hide their views to avoid social exclusion or discrimination.

Drawing from this theoretical perspective, the common pathologization of conspiracy belief can be critically examined. Pathologization is understood as one mechanism of stigmatization rather than its equivalent. Frequent attributions of emotional and cognitive deficits can be understood as stigmatizing practices that not only devalue conspiracy beliefs psychologically but also contribute to the social marginalization of those who hold such views. By labelling conspiracy believers as "mentally ill" or "socially dysfunctional," scientific discourse reproduces power structures that delegitimize dissenting perspectives and push those affected into a damaged social identity. This reflects the function of stigma described by Goffman, as a mechanism of social control that reinforces norms and enables social exclusion.

The stigmatization of conspiracy beliefs can produce significant epistemic inequality. Many empirical studies implicitly position researchers as having privileged access to "truth," thereby framing alternative perspectives as irrational or pathological rather than engaging with them meaningfully. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as a process involving labeling, stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination, all of which are reinforced by power structures. When the label "conspiracy theorist" is applied uncritically or instrumentally, it can lead to the dismissal of legitimate doubts about official narratives.

To make explicit how the empirically derived categories relate to established concepts of stigmatization, the following paragraph summarizes how the findings map onto core components of stigma theory. The identified categories can be related to key elements of stigmatization as conceptualized by Goffman (1963) and by Link and Phelan (2001). Attributions such as cognitive deficits, psychologi-

cal deficits, emotional instability, and maladaptive personality traits function as forms of labeling and stereotyping. Constructions of negative societal consequences, social deficits, and maladaptivity further contribute to processes of social separation and status loss by positioning conspiracy believers as socially inferior. In contrast, categories such as justified response, adaptive mistrust, and mental utility complicate these stigmatizing constructions by framing conspiracy belief as contextually meaningful rather than inherently pathological.

Linking the findings with Goffman's stigma theory shows that stigmatizing conspiracy beliefs reflects broader power structures. Research should therefore avoid stigmatizing attributions and more carefully capture its social complexity. This analytical stance resonates with Becker's (1967) call to temporarily take the perspective of marginalized groups to understand how social judgments are produced. Becker's notion of "hierarchies of credibility" (1967:241) further helps to situate the delegitimization of conspiracy belief within broader power relations, in which those labelled as conspiracy theorists are often positioned as socially inferior. A similar perspective can be found within the sociology of scientific knowledge, particularly the Edinburgh Strong Programme, which emphasizes suspending judgments about the truth or falsity of beliefs to examine how knowledge claims are socially produced (Barnes and Bloor 1982; Bloor 1984). From this perspective, conspiracy beliefs can be approached as contested claims within specific epistemic contexts rather than evaluated solely in terms of their presumed correctness.

Methodological Implications

Methodologically, the strong deficit focus and attempts to construct psychological profiles raise questions, especially given contradictory findings that show conspiracy belief as a complex, society-wide phenomenon. Linking conspiracy beliefs to ethnicity (e.g., Min 2021; Enders et al. 2023a) appears particularly questionable. At this point, it appears that the scientific community may have allowed itself to engage in a practice reminiscent of what it often attributes to conspiracy believers: confirmation bias and the search for simplistic explanations for complex social phenomena.

Most studies in this field rely on quantitative designs, yet it may be premature to focus solely on them. Rather than testing often speculative hypotheses (Popper 1945; Hofstadter 1965), exploratory work could clarify which aspects of conspiracy belief are relevant. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note, theory risks being confirmed by selective evidence. Acknowledging the subjectivity of research decisions underscores the value of qualitative methods that foster reflexivity.

Measuring conspiracy belief quantitatively is complex. The line between conspiracy and reality can be narrow, and it matters whether one examines specific theories or a general conspiratorial mindset. Precise definitions are crucial; overly negative, undifferentiated ones risk producing results of limited interpretive value. The development of scales faces additional challenges due to the potentially shifting truth-value of conspiracy theories. A notable example is belief in COVID-19-related conspiracies. As Bertin (2024:29) notes: "The measures were the same as in Study 1, except that I modified two items of the COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs scale because they referred to outdated political events." When constructing scales, it is also important to distinguish between falsifiable claims (e.g., the vaccine alters DNA) and politically charged interpretations

(e.g., the death toll has been exaggerated) (items from Enders et al. 2024). Furthermore, some items may be problematic because they reflect reasonable opinions about the socio-political world. For instance, the widely used Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al. 2013) includes statements such as: "I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about" and "I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions." Agreement with such items may simply indicate a realistic view of political and bureaucratic processes, rather than an "irrational" response (Stanovich and Toplak 2024:17).

Many scales additionally focus on absurd or easily falsifiable theories, thereby capturing only the extreme, irrational end of conspiratorial thinking. This risks distorting the overall picture, giving the impression that conspiracy belief is inherently "disordered" or pathological (Stanovich and Toplak 2024:17). Items such as those concerning alien contact can further reduce the content validity of scales if no distinction is made between socially relevant conspiracies (politics, health, power) and more fantastical theories. For this reason, Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker (2024) deliberately excluded such items from their measurement.

Whenever conspiracy beliefs are linked to negative intrapersonal deficits, structural issues are overlooked, and the substantive existence of conspiracy theories themselves is effectively negated. Therefore, it would be valuable to conduct correlational studies examining the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and positive traits, such as empathy, creativity, or prosocial behavior, an area that remains largely unexplored in the current literature.

Practical Implications

How societies confront conspiracy beliefs serves as a test for democratic resilience. The vitality of democratic systems is revealed in how they accommodate dissent (Boese et al. 2021). Striking a careful balance between safeguarding against misinformation and maintaining space for critical inquiry can be understood as a marker of democratic robustness.

For policymakers, this implies that conspiracy beliefs should not be dismissed wholesale. More productive responses involve addressing the underlying social conditions that make such narratives persuasive, ranging from deficits in transparency to experiences of corruption and entrenched power asymmetries. Strengthening genuine transparency can help to undercut the perceived necessity of conspiracy thinking. Rather than stigmatization, democratic institutions should foster participatory arenas, such as citizen dialogues, community forums, and other inclusive deliberative spaces, that enable constructive engagement (Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014).

Media representation is equally consequential. Portraying believers in conspiracies in disparaging ways risks deepening social divides. In contrast, nuanced reporting that differentiates between unfounded claims and legitimate grievances creates openings for more inclusive and neutral public debate. Sensationalist coverage that amplifies mistrust should therefore be avoided (Čejková and Macková 2025).

For social work and related fields, the challenge is to take conspiracy beliefs seriously without dismissing them as irrational. Such beliefs may serve

as coping strategies, reflect distrust, or stem from marginalization. Distinguishing legitimate concerns from unfounded convictions is essential (Nera and Schöpfer 2023). Sensitive engagement helps maintain trust, while fostering critical media literacy beyond debunking "fake news" requires awareness of power relations and discursive framings. Empowerment-oriented approaches can strengthen democratic participation and resilience (Muringa and Adjin-Tettey 2024).

Researchers should reflect on their positionality and avoid pathologizing language, as labeling conspiracy believers as "irrational" can reinforce stigma, deepen polarization, and hinder dialogue. Dismissive portrayals may also weaken public trust in science if people feel their views are devalued.

Limitations

The corpus of 25 empirical articles, published between 2020 and 2025, provides a focused insight into contemporary discursive patterns on conspiracy beliefs. However, the restricted time frame limits the ability to assess longer-term changes in discursive strategies. Examining such historical shifts would require a follow-up study with a broader temporal scope. Restricting the search to English-language articles, although justified by the dominance of English in international research on conspiracy theories, might overlook important findings from non-English-speaking contexts.

The use of a single database was a deliberate choice to maintain precision and manageability; however, this may have led to the omission of studies indexed exclusively in other databases, potentially narrowing the scope of the included literature.

By deliberately selecting the data corpus according to clearly defined criteria, this study achieved theoretical saturation within the categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This highlights that, despite the limited sample size, a comprehensive and nuanced reconstruction of the representations of conspiracy believers in the empirical discourse was possible.

The sampled articles were predominantly published in journals from social and personality psychology, with smaller contributions from political science and interdisciplinary journals. This study focuses specifically on empirical social science research examining psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers, which may limit the generalizability of findings to the broader academic discourse. Future research could benefit from incorporating additional perspectives, such as media representation or dissemination studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding and to test the robustness of the observed deficit orientation.

Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis shows that, across empirical social science studies on the psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers from 2020 to 2025, there is a persistent deficit orientation, with a strong tendency to pathologize or stigmatize individuals. Although some contributions acknowledge the complexity of conspiracy thinking and its entanglement with broader social, political, and historical contexts, these perspectives remain exceptions. By framing conspiracy believers predominantly in terms of intrapersonal deficits, research risks reinforcing polarization, reproducing stigma, and overlooking the power relations and structural conditions that may, in fact, enable real conspiracies.

Future studies should adopt more reflexive approaches, critically examining their own assumptions and the potential consequences of their terminology and research design. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches could help to capture the nuanced, ambivalent, and context-dependent character of conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, exploring potential positive correlations, such as links to creativity or civic engagement, could counterbalance the current overemphasis on pathology. A more differentiated research agenda is therefore essential, not only for achieving scientific accuracy and reflexivity, but also for ensuring reliable and transparent scholarship, which is vital for sustaining public trust and upholding democratic values.

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Appendix

Under "Study Info," authors and study countries are listed. In the second column, key aspects of the studies are listed: Research Topic, Sample, Methods, Results, Limitations, and Journal. The table reflects the heterogeneity of the studies, with its structure flexibly adapted to each study's specific design and features. Reliability coefficients are reported only where relevant for interpretation. Studies with neutral descriptions of conspiracy beliefs are marked with "X." Abbreviations include CB (conspiracy belief), CT (conspiracy theory), and n.s. (not significant), with instruments detailed in section 3 (Methods).

Appendix 1. Data corpus complete overview

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Albath et al. 2024, Switzerland, UK, Australia, New Zealand	Correlation of CBs & Psychological needs n = 55.269; Mage = 53.63; SD = 14.23; 64% female; via New Zealand Attitudes & Values CB: 1 item (perception of official explanations as distorted/incomplete); Other variables: Control, Belonging, Self-esteem, Meaning in life; Measured at T1-T4 Correlation CBs & Control: b = –0.41; Belonging: b = –0.21; Meaning in life: b = –0.06; Self-esteem: b = –0.12 (all $p < .001$) No definition of CTs; CBs assessed with 1 item; other constructs 2-3 items; Belonging (low reliability); CBs & control: moderate correlation; others weak/n.s.; No causality *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*
Ballová Mikušková 2021, Slovakia	Correlation of CBs, conspiracy mentality & analytic cognitive style n = 470; Mage = 42.35; SD = 13.1; 49.4% female; non-student sample; via Qualtrics Slovak CB Scale (SCBS), Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ), Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), Jellybean Task (Dominator Neglect), The Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI), Master Rationality Motive Scale (MRMS) Correlation SCBS & CMQ: r = .64, $p < .001$; CRT: r = –.22, $p < .001$; Jellybean Task: r = –.15, $p < .01$; REI (Experiential Thinking): r = .18, $p < .001$; REI (Rational Thinking): r = –.19, $p < .001$; MRMS: r = –.28, $p < .001$ Moderate CB: M = 3.11; SD = 1.06 (6 items), Jellybean Task simplifies reasoning to basic probability, MRMS unclear construct validity, No causality *Studia Psychologica*
Bertin 2024, Belgium	Effects of induced Victimhood on COVID-19 CBs Study 1: n = 352; Mage = 28.1; SD = 9.57; 38.35 % female; Study 2: n = 378; Mage = 53.2; SD = 12.8; 50.26% female, French; via Foule Factory Study 1: Participants viewed COVID-19 data (19 countries). Questions induced negative, positive, or no comparisons for France. COVID-19 CBs Scale; Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire; Competitive & Exclusive Victimhood Scales; Study 2 added the Blaming Conflicting Groups Scale Study 1: Competitive victimhood was successfully induced (M = 2.13 vs. 1.83, $F(1,349) = 11.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .032$; Study 2: Competitive M = 3.02 vs. 2.03, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .22$; Exclusive M = 2.90 vs. 2.18, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .13$) but no effect on CB & blame attribution COVID-19 CB Scale was adjusted during the study due to outdated political events; Measures were frequently adapted; No causality *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*
Bogatyreva 2024, Switzerland X	Correlation of high prostate CT belief & high institutional trust n = 819; Mage = 37.7; SD = 10.7; 47.9% female, Residents of Russia; via Yandex.Toloka Prostate Specific CB Scale (PSCBS); Generic CBs Scale (GCB); Institutional trust (4-point Likert scale); Cognitive reflection skills: 3 math problems PSCBS & government malfeasance (GCB subscale) r = –.39; GCB excluding government malfeasance r = .28; institutional trust r = .45; (all $p < .001$); Cognitive reflection skills (r = .07, p = .037); GCB & Cognitive Reflection skills (r = .06, p = .096) Moderate CB: M = 3.44, SD = 1.11; GCB is not unidimensional; social desirability bias in Russia is considered high by the author; No causality *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen 2021, Norway	Associations between conspiracy mentality & schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism n = 883, Age = Not stated; 62% female; only students 2/3 of them first year Belief in Specific CTs; Schizotypal Personality Questionnaire-Brief (Odd Beliefs, Paranoid Ideation); Paranormal Beliefs (PB); Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA); Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO); Results for male (m), female (f) CBs & Schizotypal odd beliefs m: r = .28, f: r = .38; Paranoid ideation m: r = .26, f: r = .20; PB m: r = .45, f: r = .58; SDO m: r = .46, f: r = .44; RWA m: r = .33, f: r = .38 BSCT means: 2.18 (m), 2.29 (f) on a 7-point scale; Survey conducted in 2016 with mostly first-year students; No age reported; BSCT, SPQ, PB, RWA (modified or self-developed); SPQ & RWA: borderline internal consistency; Effect sizes weak to moderate; No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Enders et al. 2021, USA	Examining the Structure & Organization of CBs & their coherence as a belief system n = 2.023; Age & Gender: Not stated; U.S. adults; via Qualtrics Agreement with 20 CTs; Similarity mapped via nonmetric multidimensional scaling (mean Euclidean distances, R/*smacof*); Variables: partisan & ideological identity, psychopathy, machiavellianism, narcissism, spreading false information, political violence 2 main dimensions shaping CB: Partisan/ideological identity & antisocial orientations Only negative variables; Limited set of CTs; U.S.-specific data; No standards for CT selection; Unclear cluster stability; No causality *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*
Enders et al. 2023a, USA	Modeling correlates of conspiracy thinking n = 2015; U.S. adults; Sample was quota-based to match the U.S. population in age, gender, education, income, ethnicity; via Qualtrics American Conspiracy Thinking Scale (ACTS): Correlation analysis with 34 psychological, political & social characteristics Model explains 24% of variance; Anomie: r = .40; Argumentativeness: r = .26; Dogmatism: r = .24; Narcissism: r = .21; Psychopathy: r = .27; Machiavellianism: r = .23; Manicheanism: r = .37; Populism: r = 0.38; Political violence: r = .30; Political interest: r = −.10; Partisan: Only support for Biden shows correlation: r = −.09; Sharing false information online: r = .29, Age: r = −.26, White: r = −.17, Black: r = .19; all $p < .001$ Only negative variables; Quota sample; 76% unexplained variance; U.S.-specific data; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; No causality *Scientific Reports*
Enders et al. 2023b, USA	Correlates Anti-Social Personality Traits & Anti-Establishment Views with Beliefs in CTs n = 2.065; Mage = 46; SD = Not stated; 52 % female; U.S. adults; via Qualtrics CB: Election Fraud (EF), QAnon (Q), COVID-19 (COV); Dark Personality Traits: Machiavellianism (M), Narcissism (N), Psychopathy (P); Anti-Establishment (AE) N.s. omitted; N & Q: r = .136, COV: r = .052; P & EF: r = .067, Q: r = .093, COV: r = .167; AE & EF: r = .399, COV: r = .314; all $p < .001$ but N & COV $p < .01$ No definition of CT; Mage SD missing; U.S.-specific data; CT & misinformation used synonymously; Limited to specific CTs; Weak correlations; No causality *American Politics Research*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Enders et al. 2024, USA, UK, Canada	Sociodemographic correlates of CBs Study 1: n = 2.021; via Qualtrics; Study 2: n = 26.416; via YouGov; U.S. adults Study 1: Agreement with 39 CTs & sociodemographics; Study 2: Agreement with 11 CTs & sociodemographics in 20 additional countries Study 1: Age *r* = –.16 (sig. in 90%), Female *r* = .03 (sig. in 56%), Education & Income: *r* = –.1 (sig. in 82–85%), White: r = –.09 (sig. in 90%), Black: r = .08 (sig. in 85%), Hispanic: r = .05 (sig. in 54%); Study 2: Correlations consistent across countries, Age: *r* = –.05 (sig. in 50%), Education: *r* = –.09 (sig. in 64%), Sex: *r* = –.01 (sig. in 29%) Heterogeneous CTs tested; Ethnicity & income not replicated; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; Weak correlations; No causality *Scientific Reports*
Frenken and Imhoff 2022, Germany X	Correlation of CBs & detection of facial trustworthiness cues Study 1: n = 280; Study 2: n = 283; Age & Gender: Not stated; both via Prolific Study 1: Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS) & Binary decision task on computer-generated faces (neutral, ±1 SD trustworthiness); Study 2: Same task with real faces Study 1: Higher CMS → lower trust (r = –.131, p = .028); Study 2: Higher CMS → lower trust (r = –.154, p = .01); Both n.s.: age, education, gender Limited sample details; Small effect sizes; Artificial experimental settings; Unaccounted confounders; Weak correlations; No causality *Applied Cognitive Psychology*
Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024, Germany X	Differentiating the Correlates of Judgments of Plausible vs. Implausible CTs Study 1: n = 271; Mage = 40.97; SD = 15.9; 50.9% female; Study 2: n =292 (47% female); Mage = 42.53; SD = 14.05; both via Prolific (UK & USA) Study 1: Psychological traits & judgments of 3 plausible vs. 3 implausible fictional CTs; Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS), Plausible/Implausible CT-Judgments (PCT/ICT); Critical Thinking Disposition (CTD); Modified Cognitive Reflection Task (CRT); Bullshit Receptivity Scale (BRS); Rational-Experiential Inventory: Rational Thinking (RT), Experimental Thinking (ET); Study 2: Same scales, more background info (t3) BADE-test Study 1: PCTs & CMS: r = .319; ICTs & CMS: r = .512; CRT: –.269; BRS: .224; RT: –.223, ET: .229; Study 2: PCTs (t3): r = .157; ICTs (t3) & CMS: r = .26; BRS: r = .154; RT: r = –.206; Only significant correlations ($p < .01$) are reported CTD self-reported; Confirmation bias t3; Fictional CTs reduce ecological validity; CRT reliability low (α = .62–.64); Weak correlations, No causality *Social Psychological and Personality Science*
Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022, Australia	Correlation of CBs & schizotypy traits, autistic traits, cognitive flexibility, scientific reasoning n = 565; Age & Gender: Not stated; 36.81% female; via Prolific; 80%: Education beyond secondary level, 24,1%: Diagnosis of a mental health disorder Autism-spectrum Quotient, short (AQ); Multidimensional Schizotypy Scale, short (MS); Analytical thinking (REIm, R); Generalized CB Scale (GCBS); COVID-19 CBs; Scientific Reasoning Scale (SRS); Active open-minded thinking beliefs (AOT); BADE-test Higher GCBS correlates with lower SRS; No patterns for other variables; Class 1: Lower CB than Class 5 (Δ = –5.48, p = .001) & higher scientific reasoning (Δ = –4.15, p = .001) No definition of CT; Scientific & analytical thinking are weighted differently; Non-clinical sample; LPA used for categorization; No causality *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Hall, Franks, and Bauer 2025, UK X	Exploring the Coexistence of Conspiracist & Non-Conspiracist Beliefs n = 41; Mage = 48.8; SD = 15.6; 15 females; CT-related groups & an event Semi-structured interviews (M = 113 min, SD = 28.8); Dimensions of thematical coding: Type of conspiracist worldview (light suspicion to strong spiritual commitment), Mode of dialogical coexistence of beliefs (describing how contradictory beliefs are held together) 5 escalating types: Cognitive dissonance between beliefs, Analogical beliefs, Target-dependent beliefs, Synthetic beliefs, Integrative beliefs Non-representative sample; Spiritual CT worldviews overrepresented; Data from England *European Journal of Social Psychology*
Hausschild et al. 2023, Germany	Associations between CBs & epistemic stance, mentalizing, paranoid distress n = 595; Mage = 43.05; SD = 18.87; 48.32% female; via SoSci Survey Epistemic Trust, Mistrust Questionnaire (ETQ); Paranoia Checklist (PC); Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ); Mentalizing Questionnaire (MQ) Only significant result: More epistemic trust → More paranoid distress (β = .178, p = .004); More paranoid distress → More CB (β = .255, p < .001) Model fit suboptimal (CFI = .88); Partly contradictory results; ETQ (α = .67-.81), Small effect sizes; No causality *Research in Psychotherapy*
Lantian et al. 2021, France	Correlation of critical thinking & CBs Study 1: n = 86; Mage: 18.82; SD = 2.67; 98% female; Study 2: n = 252; Mage: 21.8, SD = 8.94; 83% female; Both studies: Psychology students Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Test (CTT), Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCB) Study 1: Critical Thinking & CB, r(84) = −.20, p = .064; Study 2: Critical Thinking & CB, r(250) = −.18, p = .005 Non-diverse sample; GCB not unidimensional; Ennis-Weir test uncommon & bias-prone, Study 1: n.s.; Weak correlations; No causality *Applied Cognitive Psychology*
Leveaux et al. 2022, France, Belgium X	Comparing the Lay Representations of Conspiracy Believers & Non-Believers n = 939; Mage = 36.2; SD = 12.1; 27.68% female, French participants; via Facebook Generic CB Scale (GCB) (without 'alien contacts'); Lexometric Analysis of vocabulary & definitions; 1) 4 words associated with CT, 2) Definition CT 4 clusters: 1) Low CBs: Psychological aspects of CTs (38.02%); 2) Moderate CBs: Conspiring groups & CTs (27.91%); 3) High CBs: Historical events (11.86%); 4) High CBs: Societal & political processes criticized by CTs (22.21%). Pattern: High GCB focus on CT content (e.g., lies, government, 9/11), low GCB on believers (e.g., paranoia, biases). Follow-up study (n = 271) replicated results Recruitment via social media; French sample; Generally low GCB scores; Reduction of complex worldviews to single terms *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*
Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker 2024, Switzerland	Effects of Brooding about Societal Problems on CBs n = 2.007; Mage = Age 52.03; SD 14.09; 54.62% female; via SoSci Panel The main study was based on 4 pilot studies; Participants were assigned to control, brooding, or reflection groups. T1: 7-item CBs scale. T2: Brooding group reflected emotionally on their worry topic; Reflection group analyzed the topic to evaluate possible explanations SESOI (d=.2): Brooding: t = –3.41, p < .001, d=0.18, Reflection: n.s. Risk of demand or reactance effects due to repeated measures; Higher dropout in experimental groups; No active control condition; Conceptual overlap between brooding, reflection, anxiety; Effect Brooding (weak), Reflection (n.s.); No causality *Collabra Psychology*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Marchlewska et al. 2021, Poland, UK	Association of different coping strategies with CBs Study 1: n = 199; Mage = 24.45; SD = 9.30; 55.78% female; via Facebook & University; Study 2: n = 411; Mage = 35.7; SD = 10.6; 74.4% female; via Prolific; Both British Study 1: Association between belief in Snooper's Charter CT & coping strategies (COPE): Avoidance, Self-sufficient coping, Social support, Religion; Study 2: Association between general CT belief (GCB) & COPE Study 1: CBs & Avoidance r = .26 (p < .001), Social support −.15 (p < .05), Religion −.18 (p < .05); Study 2: GCB & Avoidance r = .23 (p < .001) Heading implies strong results, but correlations are weak or n.s.; Study 1: mostly students; British sample; Overlap between Anxiety & Coping strategies *British Journal of Social Psychology*
Min 2021, USA	Investigation of sociodemographic factors among conspiracy believers n = 3.441; Mage = 44.42; SD = 16.65; 57% female; via Qualtrics CBs: Agreement with 3 CTs (9/11, Obama birther, Global warming hoax); Sociodemographics CBs prevalence 33.7-41.6%; 9/11-believer: 28.2% republican, 35% democrat, 40.4% independent, 36% female, 30.6% male, 22.2% White, 48.6% Latino/a, 50.7% Black, 38.9% Asian, 30.7% protestant, 33% catholic, 48.5% Muslim, no religion/other 37.9%; Obama birther believer: 63.3% republican, 22.3% democrat, 41.7% independent, 40.7% female, 42.9% male, 43.6% White, 34.7% Latino/a, 33.7% Black, 34.3% Asian, 49.7% protestant, 41.6% catholic, 45.5% Muslim, no religion/other 30.3%; Global warming hoax-believer: 52.4% republican, 23.3% democrat, 33.9% independent, 33.8% female, 39.7% male, 35.4% White, 39.8% Latino/a, 40.3% Black, 34.3% Asian, 42.3% protestant, 37.5% catholic, 33.3% Muslim, no religion/other 27.5% Values vary greatly by CT; Study used 2 conservative, 1 liberal CT; Network diversity had a small effect on CBs; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; No causality *American Politics Journal*
O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus 2025, Australia	How belief in a just world, ambiguity tolerance & scientific reasoning influence CBs n = 163; Mage: 32.0; SD = 13.91; 55.2% female; 79% Australian; 49% with bachelor's degree; liberal-leaning; via networks, University, Prolific Just World Scale, Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale (GCB), Multiple Stimulus Types Ambiguity Scale-II, Scientific Reasoning Scale Stronger belief in a just world predicted moderately lower CBs (b = −0.37, p = .001); Higher scientific reasoning slightly reduced CBs (b = −0.12, p < .001); No other effects No definition of CT, Small sample; Moderate CBs (M = 2.26, SD = 0.94); No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020, Germany	Correlation of CBs & Intuitive Thinking, Jumping to Conclusions n = 488; Mage = 28.11; SD = 7.79; 60,45% female; via SurveyCircle Generic CB Scale (GCBS) modified; Rational-Experimental Inventory (Subscale Need for Cognition, Faith in Intuition); Modified Beads Task Males scored higher in analytical thinking (M = 73.52 vs. 68.73; p < .001), females scored higher in intuitive thinking (M = 62.92 vs. 59.33; p = .004); JTC bias → higher CBs (M = 2.99 vs. 2.58, *p* < .001), higher faith in intuition (*M* = 66.41 vs. 60.67, *p* < .001), lower need for cognition (*M* = 64.78 vs. 71.59, *p* = .001) than without JTC bias. Faith in intuition → CBs (*b* = 0.34, *p* < .001), need for cognition → CBs (*b* = −0.07, *p* = .13) SurveyCircle mostly students/researchers, Modified GCBS limits comparability; Low overall CBs scores (M = 2.63); Beads Task: artificial experiment, may reflect risk-taking rather than reasoning, only a few showed JTC bias (n = 69), no causality *Frontiers in Psychiatry*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Sambol et al. 2024, Australia	Correlation of CBs & working memory, cognitive flexibility, affective decision making n = 194; Mage = 35.56; SD = 10.0; 52% female; via Prolific, 52% Australians, 48% USA, 21% Highschool, 16% Sub-Bachelor, 45% Bachelor, 18% Postgraduate Generic Conspiracy Belief Scale, Covid-19 CB Scale, Card Sorting Task (modified), N-Back task, Iowa Gambling Test – Generating 3 Profiles of Executive Functioning (EF) CBs & Low EF (M = 24.56, SD = 10.01) > Moderate EF (M = 19.04, SD = 7.91; p = .042) > High EF (M = 15.80, SD = 6.89; p = .0001) No definition of CT, Small sample, No Bonferroni-Correction, Card Sorting Task was modified, EF groups (Low n = 25, Moderate n = 128, High n = 41) based on sample-specific scores, No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Stanovich and Toplak 2024, Canada X	Association between CBs & rational thinking Group 1: n = 359, Mage = 20.1, 68.86% female; Group 2: n = 397, Mage = 32.4, 41.81% female; SDage: Not stated Comprehensive Assessment of Rational Thinking with added CBs subtest, Cognitive ability: Analogy, Antonym & Vocabulary task (Split-half, Spearman-Brown, r = .86) Strongest predictors of CBs (all p < .001): Superstitious Thinking (β = .340), Probabilistic Reasoning (β = –.167), Actively Open-Minded Thinking (β = –.148) → This predictors explained 29% of the variance (R^2 = .290) No disclosure of limitations, Low reliability in analogy task; No SDage; No education level reported; Addition of own items limits comparability with other studies; No causality *Thinking and Reasoning*
Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas, 2024, UK	CBs & satisfaction in interpersonal relationships Study 1: n = 201; Mage = 38.1; SD = 13.59; 48.26% female; Study 2: n = 801; Mage = 41.08; SD = 13.84; 49.31% female; both via Prolific Study 1: Participants read 8 CT statements, name 1 believer & 1 non-believer for each, provide demographics & closeness ratings & relationship satisfaction questionnaire; Study 2: Hypothetical scenarios: Someone in their network endorses or rejects a CT; pre-post design measured changes in relationship satisfaction Study 1: Relationships with CT believers are less satisfying (M = 4.67 vs. 6.02; SD = 1.57 vs. 0.95; t(200) = –11.15). Study 2: Participants expected a drop in relationship satisfaction if someone endorsed a CT (Mdiff = –0.13, SE = 0.03) vs. rejected (Mdiff = 0.01, SE = 0.03) Sample: Mostly weak to moderate CBs; UK & USA only; relationship impact assessed hypothetically; methodological limits in direct CBs manipulation; No causality *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*
Yendell and Herbert 2022, Germany, Norway	Associations between conspiracy mentality & anti-democratic attitudes, racism, religiosity n = 1093; Mage = 44.29; SD = 15.9; 50.3% female; Data from Respondi's Access Panel Self-developed items on conspiracy mentality, support for democratic values, racist attitudes, religious affiliation Conspiracy Mentality & Support of democracy: r = –.082, Satisfaction with democracy in the UK: r = –.158, Anti-Muslim sentiment: r = .169, Anti-Black racism: r = .172, Right-Wing-Extremist-Worldview: r = .20, Religious fundamentalism: r = .158 (all p< .001) Lack of clearly validated scales & reported α; Conceptually overloaded; over 50% of CBs variance unexplained; No causality *Politics and Governance*

Source: Self-elaboration.

Appendix 2. Contradicting findings with quotations

Conspiracy Believers…	Yes	No
tend to follow an ideology	Enders et al. 2024 "ideological tendencies"	Stanovich and Toplak 2024 "ideological association"
have a lower level of education	Yendell and Herbert 2022 "Lower educational qualifications are linked with conspiracy belief"	Frenken and Imhoff 2022 "education status [was] unrelated to… conspiracy mentality"
are more religious	Min 2021 "Almost a half of the Protestants believed in… conspiracies, whereas only small portions of those with no religion did so"	Marchlewska et al. 2021 "religious coping will positively predict belief in general notions of conspiracy"
tend to be older	Min 2021 "those who have higher beliefs in conservative conspiracy theories tended to be old, male, White"	Enders et al. 2024 "suggesting that older individuals tend to be less likely to believe conspiracy"
are more likely to be male	Enders et al. 2024 "males are very slightly more likely than females to believe conspiracy theories"	Dyrendal et al. 2021 "find no difference between men and women in belief in specific conspiracy theories"
are more likely to be white	Min 2021 "older White males with high conservatism and Protestantism showed higher endorsement of conservative conspiracy theories"	Enders et al. 2024 "White respondents tend to agree with fewer conspiracy theories"
have low analytical thinking	Ballová Mikušková 2021 "conspiracy beliefs were predicted by a lower level of cognitive reflection"	Georgiou et al. 2022 "higher analytical reasoning scores co-occurred with higher CT beliefs"
are a threat to democratic values	Yendell and Herbert 2022 "dangers of conspiracy thinking for democracy"	Hall et al. 2025 "conspiracist belief is linked to support for democratic principles"
have a psychological disorder	Georgiou et al. 2022 "Schizotypal and autistic traits have both been implicated in the development of conspiracy theory"	Pytlik et al. 2020 "believing in conspiracy theories per se is not a mental disorder"
show maladaptive mistrust	Frenken and Imhoff 2022 "following the assumption that mistrust is a central psychological component behind the endorsement of conspiracy theories"	Hausschild et al. 2023 "epistemic trust may represent a factor in individuals turning to conspiracy belief"
show high gullibility	Lantian et al. 2021 "As predicted by the gullible conspiracist hypothesis"	Hausschild et al. 2023 "Findings did not suggest that epistemic mistrust and credulity…were associated with conspiracy mentality"

Source: Self-elaboration.

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