Conspiracy Theories in Modern Society: An Exploration of Psychological and Sociological Factors

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories have the power to shape popular attitudes, beliefs, and actions, which makes their academic study crucial (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Conspiracy theories can cultivate extremist viewpoints, undermine official narratives (e.g., public health campaigns and government initiatives), and weaken trust in democratic processes, leading to other detrimental socio-political repercussions. The aim of this research was to explore the psychological and sociological factors of conspiracy theories in modern society. With an Australasian focus, the research consisted of two studies. Study 1 surveyed ($N = 100$) participants using self-report scales, including the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT), an adapted Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Data analysis from Study 1 found a significant positive correlation between the BCT and the ACB ($r = .804$, $p < .001$), and a weak, non-significant positive correlation with the ACB and RSES ($r = .014$, $p = .893$). However, no significant correlation was found between the BCT and the RSES ($r = -.057$, $p = .572$). Results between the BCT and ACB supported a monological belief system, where belief in one conspiracy theory increases the likelihood of believing in others. Study 2 involved semi-structured one-to-one interviews with ($N = 7$) participants identified from Study 1. Data analysis from Study 2 found that participants had a range of conspiracy beliefs, with the most common being the existence of aliens. Thematic analysis highlighted key psychological and sociological influences and motivations behind their beliefs, including personal experiences and selective information processing, with mainstream and social media playing an important role. Participants demonstrated critical evaluation of information as well as scepticism toward conventional sources, particularly mainstream media and government narratives. Participants described facing opposition from others regarding their beliefs and used various strategies, such as selective engagement to maintain a sense of empowerment and control. In sum, this research contributes to current

research by integrating psychological and sociological perspectives of participants within an Australasian context to gain further understanding of conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, belief systems, psychology, sociology, motivations

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I thought writing this acknowledgement would be the easy part, but as I sit here and think about you all, I realise how hard this is going to be.

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Introduction

During this era of rapid digital media growth and information exchange, conspiracy theories have become a common occurrence in modern society. In addition to challenging accepted knowledge, these narratives, which are frequently based on mistrust and scepticism, can also influence individual and collective beliefs and behaviours. Exploring the psychological and sociological elements that support conspiracy theories' appeal is essential to addressing their impact on public discourse and social cohesion (Nefes et al., 2023). The acceptance and proliferation of these theories are further influenced by sociological factors, such as group dynamics and cultural context, while psychological factors, such as cognitive biases, the demand for certainty, and social identity, play crucial roles in the increased confidence of such theories.

This thesis aims to explore the psychological and sociological factors of conspiracy theories in modern society. By exploring the way in which these factors feature in modern society, we can acquire a deeper comprehension of what leads people to accept and propagate conspiratorial beliefs. Conspiracy theory research is mostly conducted in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with relatively little coming from Australasia. This research, with its Australasian focus, aims both to assess whether these findings align with previous Western research. It also seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the relevance of conspiracy theories by offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how such beliefs shape modern social landscapes. Considering the potential adverse effects that conspiracy theories may have on both public and private life, it is critical to investigate why some people have particular beliefs and what influences people's propensity to believe in them (Loziak & Havrillová, 2024).

What is a Conspiracy Theory?

The term ‘conspiracy theory’ has been a subject of debate across various academic disciplines (Keeley, 1999; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Stokes (2023) contend that Philosophers situate themselves with a particularist versus generalist position. Particularists argue for a broad definition that would allow for individual events not commonly thought of as conspiracy theories to be assessed rather than making generalisations (Harris, 2022; Stokes, 2023). Particularists assert that theories should be assessed on a case-by-case basis and that by adding more classifications to the definition, such as involving powerful elites who influence events for their personal gain, would make it too restrictive (Harris, 2022; Stokes, 2023). According to Keeley (1999), who holds a particularists view “a conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons - the conspirators - acting in secret” (p. 116). Conversely, generalists argue that such a broad definition does not reflect what we really mean when talking about ‘conspiracy theories or theorists’ (Harris, 2022; Stokes, 2023). They assert that conspiracy theories be classed by grouping together beliefs which reject event explanations by powerful elites, who are thought to be manipulating events for their own benefit, such as the moon landing (Harris, 2022; Stokes, 2023).

Greater consensus has been reached within psychological literature, which suggests that a conspiracy theory involves multiple individuals collaborating covertly toward a common, concealed objective (Baden & Sharon, 2021; Douglas et al., 2022; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). It is also agreed that conspiracy theories are created to make sense of unexplained social phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019). The broad definition by the particularists, where each individual theory be assessed on a case-by-case basis means that genuine scepticism may be labelled as a conspiracy. However, the narrow definition of

generalists means that some theories may be overlooked as merely being from sceptical, disgruntled factions of society. The psychological definitions, though seemingly aligned with a more generalist view goes further to look at the reasoning for the conspiracy belief, thus allowing for a broader inclusiveness of the term.

This research adopts the psychological definition, which emphasises that conspiracy theories involve multiple individuals covertly working toward a concealed goal, rather than taking a philosophical view, such as the broad particularist approach (Keely, 1999). The psychological definition reflects how conspiracy theories perform in modern society, including how they influence behaviours, shape belief systems and promote distrust (Douglas et al., 2017; Jolley et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022). In psychological terms, conspiracy theories are generally viewed as beliefs that offer explanations for significant political and societal events, such as assassinations of public figures or acts of terrorism, by attributing them to malicious plots carried out by secretive and often powerful forces (Keeley, 1999; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Conspiracy theories often challenge more conventional and straightforward explanations for events (Bruder et al., 2013). The term 'conspiracy theory' is also often portrayed with a negative narrative (Douglas et al., 2022; Harambam & Aupers, 2017).

Prevalence of Belief in Conspiracy Theories

In recent years, the prevalence of conspiracy theories has received increased scholarly attention due to a growing number of studies suggesting that increasing populations hold such beliefs, particularly in times of social uncertainty (Loziak & Havrillová, 2024; Sutton & Douglas, 2022; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Factors that seem to contribute are age, gender, urban or rural location, income, political support, and education (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Van Prooijen, 2017). Conspiracy theories also

have long been connected to extreme, and radical groups and movements and at their most extreme, can legitimise violence as a political tool (Hughey, 2021; Kużelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022). People who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to also believe in other, unrelated – or, crucially, even contradictory – conspiracy theories (Wood et al., 2012).

Much of the research comes from America, with numerous studies on conspiracy beliefs. Early research, such as Goertzel (1994), was one of the first studies to empirically measure the prevalence and psychological factors behind belief in conspiracy theories becoming influential. The Goertzel (1994) study, which involved randomly selected participants ($N = 348$) from New Jersey's southwestern counties, reported that only 6.2% of participants believed that none of the ten conspiracies presented to them were likely to be true. Expanding on this, Oliver and Wood (2014) aimed to examine the extent of conspiracy theory knowledge and beliefs in the US based on representative samples from 2006 to 2011. They reported that in 2011, every participant in the sample indicated they had heard of at least one of the conspiratorial narratives presented to them, with more than 55% of respondents believing at least one of these theories (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Further analysis of those respondents showed that 27% believed two theories, with comparable results across the 2006 and 2010 samples (Oliver & Wood, 2014). These findings suggest that the majority of Americans are aware of a variety of conspiracy theories, with almost half agreeing with at least one theory, suggesting that conspiracism is a steady feature of popular opinion (Oliver & Wood, 2014).

Uscinski et al. (2022) analysed how the percentage of Americans who believed in 37 specific conspiracy theories has changed over time, with durations ranging from seven months (COVID-19) to 55 years (John F. Kennedy assassination). Only six of the 37 theories analysed showed significant growth over time, with increases ranging from four to ten

percentage points (Uscinski et al., 2022). Of note was the long standing theory asserting that more than one person was responsible for the assassination of JFK which increased by six percent between 1966 and 2021 (Uscinski et al., 2022). This is consistent with the findings reported by Goertzel (1994) where participants belief in the theory that Oswald did not act alone increased over time. Goertzel detailed results from a 1966 Gallup poll on the John F. Kennedy assassination which found that 36% of respondents believed that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. This was in sharp contrast to the results of subsequent polls in 1976, 1983, and 1988, where the responses to the same question were only 11%, 11%, and 13%, respectively (Goertzel, 1994). In a similar vein, the Goertzel (1994) study asked participants "There has recently been a good deal of interest in the assassination of President John Kennedy. Do you think it likely that Kennedy was killed by an organised conspiracy, or do you think it more likely that he was killed by a lone gunman?" (p. 732), to which only 14% felt the assassin acted alone. This indicates that while certain conspiracies, such as the JFK assassination remain relatively stable over time, beliefs in others fluctuate depending on current events and societal focus.

Research from other countries indicates that the prevalence of conspiracy belief in the US is comparable. According to Drochon (2018), people in Europe (Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden) and Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) were just as likely as Americans to believe in at least one conspiracy theory. In 2015, the first study, which had respondents from Great Britain (N = 1,759), revealed that more than half (55%) agreed with at least one of the allegations regarding the cabal, AIDS, aliens, climate change, or Sharia law (Drochon, 2018). In contrast to 19% of Americans believing that 9/11 was a conspiracy by the government (Oliver & Wood, 2014), the study by Drochon (2018) revealed that 11% of Britons agreed. Additionally, compared to 13% of Americans, 18% of Britons thought climate change was a fraud (Drochon, 2018; Oliver & Wood, 2015). One key question that asked

respondents if they believed that secret factions of society are running the world revealed that 31% of Argentinians, 47% of Portuguese, and 10% of Swedes agreed (Drochon, 2018).

Australasian research by Marques et al. (2022) revealed that almost all participants were familiar with at least one conspiracy theory from a list of 15, with 95.1% of Australians and 97.2% of New Zealanders indicating prior awareness. When focusing on seven local conspiracies, tailored for with Australian or New Zealand respondents, awareness was lower but still significant, with 77.7% of Australians and 71.8% of New Zealanders reporting familiarity with at least one (Marques et al., 2022). Of the eight international conspiracy theories offered, the moon landings being faked were the most recognised with New Zealanders (82%) and Australians (75%) having heard this (Marques et al., 2022). However, of the seven localised conspiracies, theories relating to sports were the most well known and most agreed with. Australians were most familiar with the racehorse Phar Lap conspiracies, 50%, and New Zealanders with the 1995 All Black's team being poisoned (over 60%), with 31% of Australians and 32% of New Zealanders agreeing in some form with them (Marques et al., 2022).

As highlighted by research across various geographical areas, the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs is a worldwide phenomenon and continue to be a persistent feature of public opinion. Although certain theories, such as those related to JFK's assassination, the moon landings, or the cabal ruling the world, have gained international attention, local conspiracies, such as those explored by Marques et al. (2022) hold sway with specific populations.

Aims of Current Study and Rationale

The issue with much of the current research is that it is largely based in Western countries, much of it consists of cross sectional observational studies, and many employ a

simplistic model that does not consider how individuals' underlying psychological, social, and political motivations simultaneously interact with or affect their information environments, beliefs, and behaviours. Additionally, even though some conspiracy theories attract large audiences, few act on those beliefs, and often research does not consider this distinction. Thus, this research aims to consider both psychological and sociological factors as contributing to and sustaining belief in conspiracy theories.

A two-study design was utilised, with Study 1 using the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and an adapted Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale to determine which individuals hold strong conspiracy beliefs, both in terms of the number of endorsed statements and strength of opinion. Those with the 'strongest' scores, combined values (taking reverse scores into account) and number of beliefs were invited to participate in a one on one semi-structured interview. The aim of Study 2 was to interview participants to explore the psychological and sociological factors of conspiracy beliefs in Australasia. Interview questions focused on the formation, persistence, and spread of these beliefs to increase understanding of how and why people come to hold and accept conspiracy beliefs.

Literature Review

Reasons for Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Individuals are often drawn to conspiracy theories as a way to reduce epistemic uncertainty (Papaioannou et al., 2023; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), foster a sense of belonging to a group (Douglas et al., 2017), regain a sense of control (Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015) and fulfil a need for individuality (Lantian et al., 2017). Conspiracy theories have also consistently been linked to ideas suggesting that those who experience disempowerment, low self-esteem, social exclusion, and marginalisation are more prone to believe conspiracies (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). Other researchers have explored the connection to cognitive biases, identity, and threats as reasons for conspiracy belief (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013; Robertson et al., 2022; Swami, 2012).

Conspiracy theories often flourish during periods of social upheaval, such as in the midst of political crises or election periods, as well as in response to major global events (e.g., a pandemic such as COVID) and challenging societal circumstances. Important to note is that real conspiracies do occur, such as MKUltra, a covert CIA initiative that took place from the 1950s to the 1970s (Susan, 2018). The MKUltra project consisted of experiments in mind control and behavioural manipulation that were carried out across US and Canadian hospitals, universities, prisons, on both military personnel and civilians without their informed consent (Susan, 2018). The conspiracy theory of mind control and ‘brain washing’ stemmed from the Cold War ,where western citizens who lacked knowledge of cultural understanding around communism believed such techniques were used by communist forces to control soldiers (Susan, 2018). It is therefore crucial to distinguish conspiracy theories from critical narratives, particularly in modern society where online communication apps, such as Telegram, are prevalent and people have an increasing exposure to information

through the internet and social media (Korenčić et al., 2024). If distinctions are unable to be made, there is an increased chance of pushing individuals toward conspiracy communities (Korenčić et al., 2024). For instance, labelling content as conspiratorial simply because it challenges mainstream views may push those who are questioning societal norms closer to these communities (Korenčić et al., 2024). The development of a fully conspiratorial worldview is often the end result of a gradual process that begins with scepticism toward established political and social beliefs and processes (Franks et al., 2017; Korenčić et al., 2024; Sutton & Douglas, 2022).

Psychological Factors and Theories of Belief Development

Psychological factors and theories of conspiracy belief development require a multifaceted approach to understand how beliefs come to be formed and sustained. Individual development of conspiratorial belief and attitudes can be influenced by various psychological traits and frameworks, such as narcissism, self-esteem, social identity theory, powerlessness, existential threat, and the monological belief system. These factors are shaped by cognitive biases, stereotypes, and group dynamics, which can significantly affect the way people interpret information and form beliefs. These are explored in more detail below.

Narcissism

Although this research did not specifically explore narcissism, it is important to acknowledge that individual and collective narcissism have been increasingly recognised as a psychological trait correlated with the support of conspiracy beliefs. Research suggests that narcissists may be more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs due to their heightened self-consciousness, tendency to believe they are the main focus of attention, and a belief that others' actions are intentionally targeted against them (Cichocka et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). Three studies by Cichocka et al. (2016) examined the connection between

individual narcissism and the support of conspiracy theories. Surveys with U.S. based respondents, (N = 202, 275, and 510) respectively, demonstrated that both general conspiracy ideation (Studies 1 and 2) and belief in particular conspiracy theories were consistently strongly predicted by individual narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2016). Notably, narcissism predicted belief in conspiracy theories regardless of whether they implicated in-group or out-group members, even when accounting for collective narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2016). Lantian et al. (2017) assert this connection arises as conspiracy beliefs often serve as a way for narcissistic individuals to validate their inflated sense of importance and uniqueness, a form of social motivation (Douglas et al., 2017).

Cosgrove and Murphy (2023) aimed to expand on current research examining the connection between conspiratorial beliefs about COVID-19 and various narcissistic traits, with an emphasis on introspection and education as protective factors. They found that conspiracy theories were more likely to be supported by people who had higher levels of grandiosity, overall narcissism, and a desire for uniqueness (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023). However, contrary to expectations, the analysis showed that those who held such traits in conjunction with higher levels of education had an increased probability of accepting conspiracy beliefs (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023). According to the findings, conspiracy views were predicted by narcissism and a lack of cognitive reflection, or intuitive thinking. Higher degrees of cognitive reflection, on the other hand, were shown to mitigate the effect of narcissism on support for conspiracy theories (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023). Findings suggest that while cognitive reflection can mitigate the influence of conspiracy belief adoption among individuals with narcissistic traits, education alone does not provide the same protective effect (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023). This research advances the knowledge of the function and constraints that education and critical thinking abilities hold in defending against conspiratorial belief. The absence of education demographics in the second study may limit

any conclusions that could be drawn, particularly whether cognitive reflection is uniquely protective. Further, considering that narcissistic individuals tend to exaggerate their own abilities and skills, the responses obtained through the use of self-report measures may not be accurate (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023).

Collective narcissism, where individuals possess an inflated sense of superiority and entitlement about their group, such as their nation, religion, or ethnicity, rather than focusing on their own personal importance, has also been correlated with conspiracy belief. Golec de Zavala and Federico (2018) examined the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and collective narcissism throughout the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Data was gathered between July and November 2016 using a longitudinal design, with the hypothesis that greater collective narcissism among Americans would predict an increase in conspiracy thinking during this time. Individuals with higher authoritarian tendencies and a greater need for cognitive closure (who seek certainty) were more inclined to support conspiracy theories at both data collection points (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). In contrast, factors such as strong sense of American identity, greater political knowledge, and increased levels of trust were linked with lower levels of conspiratorial thinking at both time points. Controlling for various covariates, such as social trust and education, findings demonstrated that collective narcissism consistently predicted higher levels of conspiracy thinking across both time points, with a stronger correlation observed in November (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). This correlation suggests that individuals with high collective narcissism were influenced during the presidential campaign, thus strengthening the likelihood of conspiratorial thinking (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018).

Bertin et al. (2021) used French samples to conduct three studies to examine the mediation model linking national collective narcissism, conspiracy beliefs in climate change,

and the denial of climate science. The pilot study revealed that climate change conspiracy belief and national collective narcissism are significantly positively correlated. Nevertheless, no positive relationship was found between national identification and conspiracy belief in climate change or national collective narcissism (Bertin et al., 2021). Study 1 showed both climate change conspiracy belief and national collective narcissism to be inversely correlated with climate science acceptance (Bertin et al., 2021). Though contrary to findings of the pilot study, national identification was positively correlated to national collective narcissism. Study 2 found that conspiracy belief about climate change persisted in mediating the link between national collective narcissism and the denial of climate science. These findings suggest that denial of climate change science is significantly associated with people with high levels of national collective narcissism who hold conspiracy beliefs about climate change (Bertin et al., 2021).

The findings across these studies collectively highlight the role of narcissism and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs (Bertin et al., 2021; Cichocka et al., 2016; Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023; Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022). Narcissistic individuals, whether focused on their individual or collective identity, are more prone to conspiracy thinking, as these beliefs often serve to validate narcissistic traits such as grandiosity (i.e. a sense of superiority and uniqueness and affirm their self-image). The influence of narcissism on conspiracy belief persists across various contexts, including political and environmental issues, and is not easily mitigated by factors such as education or cognitive reflection alone. These findings are important for understanding the psychological drivers behind the denial of scientific consensus, particularly on issues like vaccinations, and highlight the need for more nuanced approaches in addressing misinformation. The research suggests that addressing underlying narcissistic tendencies could be a critical factor in

reducing susceptibility to conspiracy theories and promoting acceptance of scientific evidence.

Self-Esteem

Conspiracy theory belief has been demonstrated to be influenced by self-esteem, albeit findings on the effects of self-esteem on conspiracy thinking across research have been conflicting. Therefore, this research incorporated the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a well validated and proven measure, to explore the relationship between self-esteem and conspiratorial belief within an Australasian context. Self-esteem, which relates to one's evaluation of their own value and abilities (Rosenberg, 1965), has been defined by Chen and Lee (2013) as one's view of oneself at any given moment and can be either negative or positive. Those with low self-esteem often harbour doubts about their competence and self-worth (Swami et al., 2011), while individuals with high self-esteem are inclined to see themselves as capable and worthy (Birkeland et al., 2012).

Low self-esteem has been correlated, albeit inconsistently, with a greater likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories. This association may arise because conspiracy narratives provide individuals with a way to interpret their social surroundings while addressing feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, or a perceived lack of control (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011). For some individuals, adopting conspiracy theories can be used as a means of feeling more unique or knowledgeable, thereby compensating for low confidence in their capacity to understand or manage complex societal issues (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). People with lower self-esteem may also be more prone to embrace conspiratorial thinking as a coping mechanism, using these beliefs to explain perceived injustices or personal setbacks in a way that shifts blame externally (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Conversely, those with high self-esteem are

generally less likely to subscribe to conspiracy theories, as they tend to exhibit greater trust in institutions and a more optimistic worldview (Cichocka et al., 2016).

While individuals with low self-esteem may seek validation or a sense of control through belief in conspiracies, those with high self-esteem may gravitate toward conspiratorial narratives that reinforce their feelings of superiority or group identity (Lantian et al., 2017). For example, some studies indicate that individuals who perceive themselves as unique or exceptional may be more likely to endorse conspiracies that position them as part of an enlightened minority (Lantian et al., 2017). The impact of self-esteem on conspiracy beliefs is mediated by other factors, such as the individual's social environment and exposure to misinformation (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). For instance, people with low self-esteem may rely more heavily on external validation and social feedback, which can make them more vulnerable to persuasive or emotionally charged conspiracy narratives shared in their social networks (Jolley & Douglas, 2014).

Interestingly, findings across three studies conducted by Cichocka et al. (2016) challenged the notion that only individuals with low self-esteem support conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). Results suggested that belief in conspiracy theories was not shown to be notably correlated with self-esteem alone (Cichocka et al., 2016). However, self-esteem emerged as a substantial or marginally substantial negative conspiracy belief predictor when the connection between self-esteem and individual narcissism was considered. This suggested that conspiracy theories are negatively correlated with secure self-esteem, which is defined as a steady and non-narcissistic self-perception (Cichocka et al., 2016). Notably, narcissism was consistently more powerful, and when the relationship between poor self-esteem and negative human perceptions was taken into consideration, the effect of self-esteem decreased to almost nothing (Cichocka et al., 2016).

Cichocka et al. (2016) assert that these results contribute to the explanation of the disparate outcomes of earlier studies, (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami, 2012) that examined the correlation between conspiracy theories and self-perception. Further, the findings imply a stronger correlation between these beliefs and self-enhancing personality qualities, such as individual narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2016).

Although low self-esteem is a recurring factor in conspiracy belief, its measurement and interpretation vary across studies. For instance, some self-report measures of self-esteem may fail to account for cultural differences in how self-esteem is expressed (Cai et al., 2007). Additionally, the subjective nature of self-esteem can complicate efforts to distinguish between its stable, trait-like characteristics and more fluid, situational fluctuations (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). The connection between self-esteem and conspiratorial thinking is multifaceted and shaped by a combination of individual traits and environmental influences. While low self-esteem often increases susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking due to a need for control and validation, high self-esteem can also play a role, particularly when conspiratorial narratives align with an individual's identity or social affiliations (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Cichocka et al., 2016). Understanding these dynamics may offer valuable insights into the psychological underpinnings of conspiracy beliefs and help inform interventions to mitigate their spread.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers an understanding of why people believe in conspiracy theories. The theory considers the relationship between one's group and social classification, group membership, intergroup dynamics, and personal identity (Hogg, 2016). One important concept is that individuals categorise themselves into groups, distinguishing between "in-groups" and "out-groups" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). People who

belong to the same race, nationality, political views, or even who subscribe to the same conspiracy theory may be considered in-groups. The norms and values of a person's in-group heavily influence their actions and beliefs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, social identity theory suggests that individuals can modify their perception of their in-group in comparison to others by either altering the basis of comparison (a process known as social creativity) or attempting to change the social hierarchy through collective action (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Research by Nera et al. (2022) postulated that among conspiracy theorists, group identification is positively and causally correlated with perceived discrimination against conspiracy theory supporters. Results from three different studies showed a continuous positive correlation between meta-conspiracy views (where discrimination against conspiracy theorists is seen as a conspiracy in and of itself), increased affiliation with the conspiracy theory group, and perceived discrimination against conspiracy theorists (Nera et al., 2022). Findings from studies two and three revealed that group identification correlates with positive intergroup differentiation (for example, thinking that conspiracy theorists are more intelligent than the general population) and feeling proud of being a conspiracy theorist. Perceived discrimination from the general public did not substantially increase group identification or meta-conspiracy ideas, according to studies one through three. However, Study 3 did reveal that discrimination from powerholders, those in positions of authority, does lead to an increase in both meta-conspiracy beliefs and in-group identification, although the effect size was small (Nera et al., 2022). This suggests that perceived discrimination alone does not entirely increase group identification; rather, it occurs selectively when the discrimination originates from powerful sources. Further, these findings highlight how perceived discrimination strengthens group bonds and positive in-group attitudes, although causality cannot be firmly established from correlational results alone.

Robertson et al. (2022) contend that threats to a person's social identity, whether they be political, religious, or racial often give rise to conspiracy beliefs. They assert that individuals are driven to believe and disseminate information that strengthens and bolsters their in-group and disparages their out-group in order to preserve a favourable social identity. Further, when their in-group's reputation is at risk, certain members of the group may be compelled to look for or embrace information, even if it is questionable, that reaffirms the superiority of their group (Robertson et al., 2022). Similarly, studies by Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) and Imhoff and Bruder (2014), Robertson et al. (2022) conclude that conspiracy theories are useful for mitigating identity-related risks since they tend to be unfalsifiable and lessen the blame or failure placed on their group.

Typically, conspiracy theories are considered to be intergroup beliefs, where an in-group believes they are being targeted by powerful out-groups (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014). As well as their strong correlation with psychological drivers of intergroup conflict, Van Prooijen et al. (2018) argue that one of the principles of conspiracy beliefs is that they are social. Van Prooijen et al. (2018) identified two key drivers behind conspiracy beliefs. The first is the need to maintain a strong sense of group identity, which becomes particularly important when individuals perceive their group to be under threat from external forces. People are more likely to be concerned about conspiracies when they feel a strong connection to their group and care about its well-being (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). The second involves protecting against an out-group or coalition perceived as hostile (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). These out-groups often possess characteristics that make them appear threatening, such as negative stereotypes (e.g., minority groups) or power (e.g., political leaders), which fuels suspicion and mistrust toward them (Douglas et al., 2017). Together, a strong attachment to one's group and a perception of external threat from an out-group shape the social basis of conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen et

al., 2018). This is especially evident in politics, where opposing groups, believing the other is trying to conspire or exert dominance against them often adopt and support conspiracy theories to apply political and social change (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2018).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides an explanation of conspiracy mentality, particularly when considering positions between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. Research has demonstrated that conspiracy theorists group status and its members perceived threat to group identity, specifically by those in power strengthens conspiracy resolve (Nera et al., 2022). This aligns with findings from Van Prooijen et al. (2018) who suggest that belief in conspiracies serves two primary functions, preserving group identity perceived to be under threat, and defending against powerful out-groups. Furthermore, Robertson et al. (2022) assert that threats to identity reinforce conspiracy belief, even if the belief is unlikely to maintain a positive social identity. This is supported by Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) and Imhoff and Bruder (2014) who suggest that conspiracy beliefs may be used to mitigate identity risk. Such findings highlight the relationship between social identity theory and conspiracy belief, which helps individuals and groups to navigate perceived threats while also strengthening a sense of identity and belonging.

Powerlessness and Existential Threat

Studies by Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999), Imhoff and Bruder (2014), Jolley and Douglas (2014), and Papaioannou et al. (2023) have demonstrated associations between feelings of powerlessness and belief in conspiracy theories. Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) suggest that conspiracy theories could resonate with individuals who feel powerless, as they provide a way to make sense of their circumstances. This theory provides an external source of blame, enabling people to attribute their misfortunes or challenges to malevolent external

forces, thereby alleviating feelings of uncertainty and helplessness. Further, the study found that people with an external locus of control, those who attribute their circumstances to external forces rather than their own actions are particularly prone to generalised conspiracy thinking (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999).

Jolley and Douglas (2014) explored the behavioural consequences of powerlessness and conspiracy beliefs, finding that these beliefs not only arise from feelings of powerlessness but also reinforce them. Previous studies (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999) demonstrated correlations, without indicating the relationship direction between powerlessness and conspiracy theory endorsement. However, Jolley and Douglas (2014) showed that participants sense of powerlessness towards government was influenced by conspiracy theory exposure. Further, their study revealed that individuals exposed to conspiracy narratives about political or social systems reported greater feelings of disempowerment and were less inclined to participate in constructive civic activities, such as volunteering or voting (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). For instance, participants who believed in conspiracies about government corruption were less motivated to take actions that could potentially address the issues they were concerned about. They argued that this cyclical relationship underscores how conspiracy beliefs can deepen feelings of powerlessness over time, making it even harder for individuals to reengage with societal structures (Jolley & Douglas, 2014).

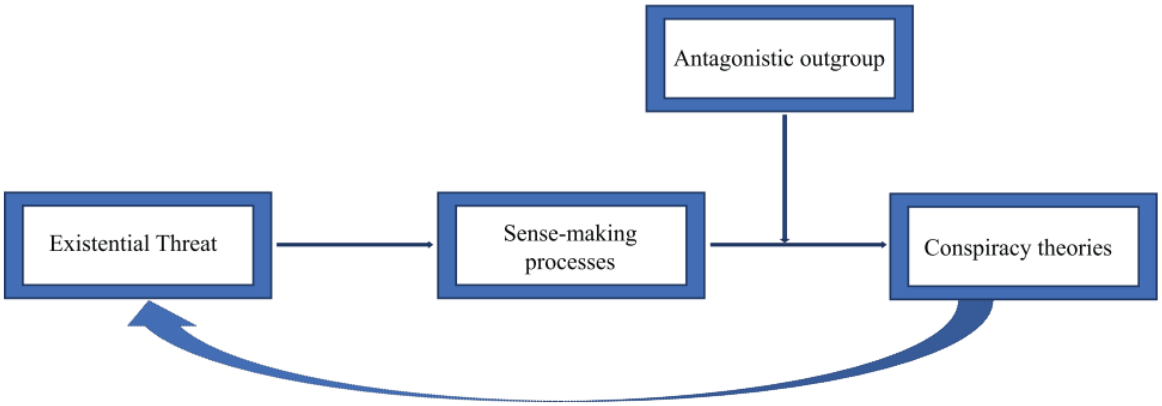
Recent research by Papaioannou et al. (2023) focused on the role that zero-sum thinking, cynicism, and powerlessness hold in the relationship between conspiracy theory belief and populism. They found results to be consistent with previous studies that found socio-political correlations of conspiracy beliefs, including decreased political participation (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). They further assert that powerlessness is positively correlated with

populist attitudes and conspiratorial mentality measures (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Imhoff and Bruder (2014) expanded on this relationship by examining the role of existential threats, such as powerlessness in fostering conspiracy beliefs. As defined by Van Prooijen (2020) an existential threat is the feeling of unease or uncertainty, frequently brought on by upsetting experiences that make one question their beliefs, values, or even their very existence. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) showed that individuals who perceive themselves as disempowered or alienated from societal processes are more likely to gravitate toward conspiracy narratives (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). These beliefs give people a way to attribute individual or group difficulties to the deliberate acts of influential organisations, such as governments or businesses, and demonstrated that people who felt excluded from politics were more inclined to think that there were plots to rig elections or hide government secrets (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Van Prooijen (2020) expanded on previous theories that focus on why people believe some conspiracies and not others by offering an existential threat model of conspiracy theories. As seen in Figure 1. Van Prooijen (2020) aims to address how conspiracy theories increase with existential threat feelings and why these feelings do not predict the occurrence of conspiracy theories on all occasions. This model highlights existential threat as the core of conspiracy theories by increasing individual motivation to understand their physical and social environment.

Figure 1

The Existential Threat Model of Conspiracy Theories



Note. Figure recreated by author based on existential threat model of conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2020).

According to this model, existential threat is the driving force for conspiracy theories, since it makes people more driven to understand their social and physical surroundings (Van Prooijen, 2020). However, these sense-making processes only result in conspiracy theories when there is a salient antagonistic out-group. In other words, conspiracy theories arise when people attempt to make sense of the world after traumatic occurrences, and when a despised out-group is prominent (Van Prooijen, 2020). Whether the out-group is considered to be of high (Government), or low (the elderly) power is irrelevant, the crucial aspect is that the out-group is perceived as untrustworthy and distinct from "us", the regular people (Van Prooijen, 2020).

Liekefett et al. (2023) conducted two longitudinal studies aimed at investigating how existential threat, anxiety, and uncertainty aversion lead to, and result from, conspiracy belief. In line with earlier studies, Liekefett et al. (2023) observed that those who reported increased levels of conspiracy beliefs (between-person level) were also more likely to have overall

higher levels of existential threat, uncertainty aversion, and/or anxiety. Additionally, at an individual level, conspiracy theories predicted increases in existential threat and uncertainty aversion, which was in line with expectations. Based on the findings, the authors suggest that conspiracy theories do degrade people's feelings by escalating feelings of threat, uncertainty, and anxiety (Liekefett et al., 2023). Furthermore, increases in conspiracy beliefs were observed to predict even greater increases in conspiracy views in the subsequent measurement wave in both studies (Liekefett et al., 2023).

Overall, powerlessness is both a cause and consequence of conspiracy beliefs, particularly in the socio-political context. For individuals and communities who feel alienated from systems of power, conspiracy theories offer a means of understanding their experiences, yet these beliefs may also intensify their sense of disempowerment. The existential threat model of conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2020) highlights the relationship between making sense of feelings, such as anxiety, and existential threat with the adoption of conspiracy beliefs. It suggests that conspiracy belief not only offers a way to understand and cope with feelings that occur as a result of perceived existential threat, but can also escalate feelings of uncertainty, reinforcing the cycle of belief. Providing a framework for understanding why people turn to conspiracy beliefs, and the feelings linked to them, particularly during periods of perceived existential threats, can aid in the development of interventions that address the root causes of such feelings, which, in turn, could lessen the propagation of conspiracy theories and promote social cohesion. Fostering feelings of empowerment and inclusion, such as promoting civic engagement and enhancing transparency in decision-making processes would also be useful, and more research is needed in these areas.

Monological Belief System

While real conspiracies do occur, the idea that numerous large-scale conspiracies are taking place simultaneously stretches believability. A key aspect of conspiracist thinking is the propensity to associate belief in one conspiracy theory with belief in multiple, unrelated theories. This concept, known as a monological belief system, of which a key feature is a closed epistemology, suggests that even when conspiracy theories seem logically unrelated, individuals are more likely to accept other conspiracy theories if they subscribe to one (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011). The first empirical study, conducted by Goertzel (1994), observed that belief in several conspiracy theories (e.g., political conspiracies or the creation of AIDS) was positively correlated among participants in a survey. This observation led Goertzel (1994) to propose that conspiracy theory beliefs constitute an interconnected system, where each belief supports and validates the others. Subsequent research has consistently confirmed this finding, indicating that belief in a variety of conspiracy theories, ranging from political motivating theories, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, to those related to 9/11, tends to co-occur (Miller, 2020; Swami et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2022).

Research by Swami et al. (2011) and Wood et al. (2012) provides further support for the idea that conspiracist thinking operates as a monological belief system. In their work, they explored whether conspiracy theory beliefs are influenced by a broader conspiracist worldview, where a viewpoint or set of beliefs by an individual or group attributes circumstances, events, or occurrences to covert, often malevolent schemes of influential people. The findings of a study by Swami et al. (2011) showed a correlation between believing in false conspiracy theories and believing in real-world conspiracies. This was illustrated using twelve false claims about a popular energy drink and demonstrated that

individuals who tend to believe in one conspiracy are more prone to believe in other, different conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2011). This was further expanded upon by Wood et al. (2012), who suggest that belief in any given conspiracy theory is influenced by a larger conspiracist worldview, which includes general beliefs conducive to endorsing multiple theories. For instance, individuals who think that authorities regularly participate in cover-ups are more inclined to accept various conspiracy theories, despite the fact that they contradict one another (Wood et al., 2012). A study on theories about Princess Diana's death showed that people who believed in one theory (e.g., that rogue British secret service agents plotted and carried out her killing) were more likely to endorse a contradictory theory (e.g., that she was murdered as part of a cover up in the killing of Dodi Al-Fayed by his families business rivals), further supporting the idea of a broader conspiracist worldview (Wood et al., 2012).

Expanding further, Brotherton et al. (2013) explored five general categories of beliefs, including the belief in a malevolent government, cover-ups by extraterrestrials, global conspiracies, suppression of information, and threats to personal well-being. These broader, general beliefs were found to strongly correlate with belief in specific conspiracy theories, reinforcing the notion that conspiratorial thinking is shaped by overarching assumptions rather than the specifics of individual theories (Brotherton et al., 2013). This finding supports the notion that people with a conspiracist worldview are likely to interpret events through the lens of suspicion, control, and perceived threats.

Collectively, these findings suggest that conspiracy theory belief is not merely about the details of any particular theory but rather reflects a broader cognitive framework that shapes how individuals perceive the world (Brotherton et al., 2013). This generalised conspiracist worldview helps explain why people may embrace a variety of conspiracy theories, even those that contradict each other (Brotherton et al., 2013). Recognising

conspiracist thinking as a monological belief system has important implications for developing psychometric tools to measure such beliefs, thus providing a more robust foundation for future research into the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to this worldview (Brotherton et al., 2013).

Franks et al. (2017) argue that conspiracy beliefs are more complex than the monological paradigm contends. Rather than being closed and static, conspiratorial thinking is influenced by wider ideological systems, social settings, and personal experiences (Franks et al., 2017; Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Van de Cruys et al., 2024). The idea that conspiracy theories are not isolated or consistent is one of the main arguments against the monological paradigm (Franks et al., 2017). Research indicates that individuals who hold conspiracy theory beliefs often hold multiple, conflicting beliefs, and are capable of adapting their views in response to new or changing information (Franks et al., 2017; Swami et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012). Franks et al. (2017) assert that this flexibility contradicts the assumed closed and unchanging worldview of conspiracy believers associated with the monological paradigm.

Franks et al. (2017) urge consideration of the role of social and contextual factors in the shaping of conspiracy beliefs. Factors such as media consumption, online communities, and personal interactions play a significant role in how people develop and sustain their beliefs (Franks et al., 2017; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). These external influences challenge the monological view by suggesting that conspiracy theorists are shaped by their social networks and broader cultural contexts, which in turn impact how they interpret and engage with conspiracy narratives (Franks et al., 2017; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). Additionally, Franks et al. (2017) argue that conspiracy beliefs are often embedded within larger ideological systems. They are not isolated, irrational thoughts but are part of broader frameworks that individuals use to make sense of complex social, political, or economic events (Franks et al., 2017).

Conspiracy theories can offer alternative explanations for various issues, especially when official narratives seem insufficient or untrustworthy (Douglas et al., 2017). This perspective suggests that conspiracy theories are often ideologically motivated, providing individuals with a way to interpret events in line with their worldview.

Ultimately, Franks et al. (2017) and Sutton and Douglas (2014) call for a more sophisticated approach to understanding conspiratorial thinking, one that moves beyond the monological paradigm. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of why people hold conspiracy beliefs and how these beliefs interact with other areas of their lives. In acknowledging that beliefs are changeable, socially embedded, and ideologically connected, the way that research is carried out could offer greater understanding about how conspiracy theories proliferate in modern society and reveal new ways of addressing their effects.

Recent research, with a focus on Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, by Williams et al. (2025) acknowledges that despite numerous citations in relation to the monological belief system, its primary causal hypothesis has never been extensively tested. Using cross-lagged analysis, the findings from two longitudinal studies statistically supported Goertzel's (1994) monological belief system, which suggests that an individual's belief in one conspiracy increases the likelihood of them believing others (Williams et al., 2025). Internal validity concerns, such as falsification particularly in relation to Study 2, prevented the authors from definitively establishing causal relationships (Williams et al., 2025). Although some contextual factors were accounted for, such as political orientation, it is not clear if others, such as social influences were. Therefore, although the monological belief system is somewhat supported by Williams et al. (2025), it does not discount the insights of Franks et al. (2017), who emphasise the role of social influence in conspiratorial beliefs.

Cognitive Theories

Cognitive theories suggest that conspiracy theories are formed and sustained as a result of particular cognitive biases and processes. Theories, such as illusory pattern perception (Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and confirmation bias, (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017), which are some of the most researched, help to explain why some individuals are more inclined to have conspiratorial beliefs than others. The following sections will explore these cognitive theories in further detail, discussing their roles in conspiracy belief development and examining why they are particularly relevant for understanding why some individuals are more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking than others.

Illusionary Pattern Perception

The cognitive tendency to perceive significant patterns or relationships in seemingly unrelated or random occurrences is known as illusionary pattern perception (Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). This phenomenon arises from the brain's inherent drive to make sense of its surroundings by detecting regularities and causal relationships (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). While this ability is essential for navigating a complex world, it can also lead to cognitive errors when patterns are perceived in situations where no actual connection exists (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). It has been demonstrated that when people are experimentally motivated to look for patterns in their surroundings, they are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Whitson and Galinsky (2008) were among the first to explore the connection between conspiracy theory belief and illusory pattern perception. They suggest that individuals who experience a lack of control may be more likely to seek patterns in random events as a way to impose order and reduce uncertainty. In their study, they manipulated participants' sense of

control and measured their beliefs in areas such as the development of superstition and conspiracy theory belief (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). According to their initial research, the need for structure and patterns is heightened when there is a lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Furthermore, they demonstrated that those who lacked control not only saw more patterns in visual static images, but also thought there was a far higher chance of a conspiracy than the control group of participants (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). This research contends that when individuals were made to feel more secure after experiencing a loss of control, their tendency to perceive illusory patterns was reduced. This observation aligns with psychological approaches used to reduce behaviours such as anxiety by restoring a sense of control to the individual. In turn, the increased security and sense of control can reduce the tendency to interpret non-malicious actions as being malicious and therefore decrease conspiracy belief.

With the aim of strengthening empirical support, Van Prooijen et al. (2018) sought to build on these findings by testing the claim that irrational conspiracy belief and the paranormal are empirically linked to a propensity to see patterns in stimuli that are generated at random. Van Prooijen et al. (2018) assert that the perception of illusory patterns is an underlying cognitive feature of conspiracy and supernatural beliefs. It is suggested that the challenge of differentiating between sequences that appear to have a pattern, such as coin toss data when there is none, is similar to that of differentiating between occurrences that coincidentally occurred and those that did, thus causing increased conspiracy belief (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). The research by Whitson and Galinsky (2008) and Van Prooijen et al. (2018) provide snapshots of the relationship between conspiracy belief and illusory pattern perceptions at a specific moment in time. Yet, due to lack of longitudinal data, evidence of long term conspiracy belief cannot be supported. Further, using experimental manipulation,

such as coin tosses to assess pattern perception, does not reflect the real world, where individuals are exposed to complex narratives that may impact conspiracy belief.

Conversely, Sebalo et al. (2023) found that the endorsement of conspiracy theories was not associated with illusory pattern perceptions. They argue that when additional cognitive processing factors, namely, dual process reasoning (system 1 and system 2 thinking) are considered, the relationship between illusory pattern perception and conspiracy belief disappears (Sebalo et al., 2023). The study's use of small paragraphs rather than statements, as used by Van Prooijen et al. (2018), thus reducing the impact of the narrative, is attributed as one possibility to the differing results. Therefore, Sebalo et al. (2023) suggest that the structure of information (how the narratives are framed) and subsequently processed, has greater influence on conspiracy belief than pattern perception. Nevertheless, this assertion does not explain why some individuals reject some conspiracy beliefs when the narratives are structured similarly, such as in well-known conspiracy belief measures like the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007).

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias refers to the cognitive tendency of individuals to look for, evaluate, and retain information in ways that align with their pre-existing beliefs or expectations, while ignoring evidence that contradicts them (Nickerson, 1998; White, 2022). This tendency is pervasive across various areas of human thought, such as politics, science, and social issues, where it can reinforce pre-established worldviews (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). The effects of confirmation bias are especially noticeable due to algorithms on social media sites and news websites that increasingly curate content based on users' previous behaviours, amplifying their existing beliefs (Uscinski et al., 2022). Media allows individuals to selectively engage with information that supports their views and are unlikely to support

conspiracy theories if they do not already have an interest in the topic (Uscinski et al., 2022). Rather than being a passive outcome of information processing, confirmation bias is an active mechanism by which individuals search for validation, often leading to the reinforcement of polarised opinions (Festinger, 1957). As people selectively engage with information that confirms their beliefs, and avoid or discount information that challenges them, confirmation bias solidifies cognitive dissonance and reduces motivation to engage with opposing perspectives (Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021).

Confirmation bias is a crucial factor in maintaining beliefs, as it leads individuals to selectively accept evidence that supports their conspiracy theories while dismissing contrary information. Research suggests that people who already hold conspiracy beliefs are more inclined to look for and accept evidence that supports their theories, while dismissing or rationalising evidence that contradicts them (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Stall & Petrocelli, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of digital media has created an environment conducive to the spread of conspiracy theories, where users can engage in echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce their beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In such environments, confirmation bias not only sustains conspiracy beliefs but also contributes to their rapid spread, as individuals continue to interact with others who share similar views, further entrenching their positions and increasing ideological polarisation, especially when individuals feel their beliefs are under threat.

Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2020) investigated how selective exposure to political news online is influenced by confirmation bias. The research focused on how media user characteristics (e.g., social comparison tendencies, information processing styles, and national identity) affect these biases. American participants chose between news articles with liberal or conservative stances on eight topics, based on their prior attitudes towards those

topics. The results strongly supported the presence of confirmation bias, especially when participants had more messages to choose from that were consistent with their views (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Participants also engaged in longer attitude-consistent exposure when in a negative mood, aligning with Festinger's (1957) theory that individuals seek information that confirms their beliefs to reduce cognitive dissonance and negative emotions (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Participants who were more inclined to social comparison showed a stronger bias towards selecting information that reinforced their beliefs. Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2020) assert that the findings suggest that those who enjoy complex thinking or are more motivated to process information deeply may be more susceptible to confirmation bias. The study suggests that even highly motivated or capable thinkers may struggle with balanced consideration of political issues, particularly in a complex context, highlighting potential challenges for democratic deliberation when it comes to political information processing (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020).

Consequences of Conspiracy Belief

There are both beneficial and negative consequences of holding conspiracy beliefs. These can be personal, such as affective, behavioural, cognitive changes, or broader social consequences.

Benefits

While conspiracy beliefs are often criticised for their potential harms, they also offer psychological comfort, social cohesion, and intellectual engagement, which could help explain their persistent appeal (Douglas et al., 2019; Van Prooijen, 2022). Psychologically, such beliefs can offer a sense of control and order in an unpredictable world. Research has demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs can serve as a coping mechanism during times of crisis by attributing complex events to the intentional actions of powerful entities (Abalakina-Paap

et al., 1999; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). For some, these beliefs also enable people to derive self-worth by fostering the perception of possessing unique knowledge or insights, creating a sense of superiority over those who are perceived as uninformed (Lantian et al., 2017; Van Prooijen, 2022).

Socially, conspiracy beliefs can foster feelings of belonging and community. Shared suspicions and narratives often connect like-minded individuals, fostering solidarity and group identity, particularly in online forums or social networks (Douglas et al., 2017). Furthermore, in certain contexts, conspiracy beliefs can serve as a tool for marginalised groups to critique and challenge power structures (Douglas et al., 2019). By questioning dominant narratives, these beliefs may bring attention to genuine issues of inequality or corruption that might otherwise remain unexamined, and also encourage greater transparency, particularly in political contexts (Douglas et al., 2019; Swami & Coles, 2010). At times, this critical perspective can also mobilise collective action among individuals who feel their interests or values are threatened (Hughey, 2021). Additionally, a study conducted by Swami et al. (2010) showed that general conspiracist ideas were positively correlated with receptivity to new experiences, and participants also had greater appreciation for unique ideas.

Conspiracy beliefs also provide intellectual stimulation by encouraging individuals to seek and analyse information (Van de Cruys et al., 2024). Although this engagement often reinforces pre-existing biases, it reflects an active interest in understanding societal and political dynamics (Swami et al., 2010). In some cases, these beliefs can promote critical thinking, encouraging scepticism toward authority and dominant ideologies. While this scepticism may veer into cynicism, it can sometimes initiate legitimate inquiry into hidden dynamics of power and governance (Goertzel, 1994).

Negatives

According to research, belief in conspiracy theories correlates strongly with prejudicial attitudes, reinforcing stereotypes and fostering hostility toward targeted groups, often amplifying existing biases (Jolley et al., 2020; Jolley et al., 2024; Tabri et al., 2023). Furthermore, conspiracy theories typically frame minority groups, outsiders, or those perceived as 'other' as scapegoats, accusing them of malevolent intent or secret control over societal events (Van Prooijen et al., 2018).

Swami (2012) used the *Belief in the Jewish Conspiracy Theory,* the *Attitudes Toward Israel Scale* (Cohen et al., 2009) and the *Modern Racism Scale* (McConahay et al., 1981) among others, on Malays based in Kuala Lumpur to explore the ideological variables and belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory. The findings showed that among Malaysian Malays, believing in the Jewish conspiracy theory was substantially linked to anti-Israeli sentiments, contemporary racism against Chinese people, right-wing authoritarianism, and a tendency toward social domination (Swami, 2012). An explanation of these findings was provided by Swami (2012), who pointed out that the Jewish conspiracy idea might provide a way to voice an anti-Chinese polemic that would otherwise go unspoken because it is unlawful and politically inadvisable to specifically criticise the Chinese (Reid, 2010). The anti-Jewish conspiracy theory, in other words, offers a rudimentary means of expressing racial sentiment to the extent that overt anti-Chinese speech must be kept hidden (Swami, 2012).

Studies by Imhoff and Bruder (2014) explored conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude, emphasising its relationship with intergroup prejudice. Results found that prejudice unidirectionally predicted anti-Semitism and that prejudice was distinctively predicted by conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). They argue that in addition to encouraging negatively biased perceptions of influential individuals and organisations,

scepticism about those in positions of authority can also result in particular attributions that place the blame for negative events on these groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). This blame can set off actions aimed at disrupting the status quo and challenging dominant power dynamics (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Using residents from the United Kingdom, research by Jolley et al. (2020) offered experimental evidence illustrating the effect conspiracy theories have on intergroup attitudes. They found that prejudice and discrimination against Jewish people increased when participants were exposed to conspiracy ideas about them (Jolley et al., 2020). This study not only confirmed that such exposure heightened prejudice against the targeted group but also demonstrated that this prejudice biased a person's behavioural patterns, such as anti-Jewish voting preferences (Jolley et al., 2020). These results provide experimental evidence that conspiracy theories do more than shape attitudes, they can also lead to discriminatory behaviours (Jolley et al., 2020). Similarly, an additional study demonstrated that being exposed to conspiracy theories increases bias against the out-group implicated in the alleged plot, as well as other, uninvolved out-groups (Jolley et al., 2020). Findings specifically suggested an indirect effect, whereby being exposed to Jewish conspiracy theories increased secondary out-group prejudice (Jolley et al., 2020). A wide spectrum of out-groups, such as the elderly, Arabs, the impoverished, and those receiving benefits, were shown to be affected by the development of biased attitudes (Jolley et al., 2020). These findings imply that the effects of conspiracy theory exposure on intergroup relations might be far more extensive than first thought and have the potential to lessen more general intergroup tolerance (Jolley et al., 2020).

Other research has shown prejudice pertaining to Muslim immigration and efforts to "Islamicise" Europe, as these studies were able to show causal evidence of prejudice resulting

from conspiracy theories (Jolley et al., 2020; Swami et al., 2018). Jolley et al. (2020) highlight the role of conspiracy beliefs in fostering negative perceptions and discriminatory attitudes against groups perceived as outsiders and suggest a causal relationship. Conspiracy theories can exacerbate social divisions and prejudice in modern societies (Jolley et al., 2020).

More negative behavioural outcomes include support for political violence, criminal behaviour, and other specific behaviours such as vaccine refusal, or not following public health or other messaging from governments or authorities (Uscinski et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories often serve as instruments for political and ideological propaganda, exaggerating intergroup differences and portraying out-groups as existential threats. These narratives can escalate into real-world discrimination and even violence, as evidenced by hate crimes inspired by conspiracy-driven ideologies.

Summary

Research suggests that conspiracy beliefs may support social identity or provide psychological comfort, however, it has also been demonstrated that they may contribute to the dissemination of false narratives and increased prejudice (Douglas et al., 2019, Jolley et al., 2020). Despite the abundance of conspiracy belief research, most studies are largely quantitative, focusing on populations in the United States or Europe, and often lack an integrated psychological or sociological focus. This research aims to address the gaps and provide a more holistic understanding of conspiracy beliefs by utilising a primarily qualitative method, having an Australasian focus, and integrating both psychological and sociological perspectives.

Methods

This section discusses epistemology and reflexivity and then moves to outlining the two phases of collecting data. The aim of Study 1 was to survey Australian and New Zealand participants about current conspiracy beliefs. Through the use of conspiracy belief measurement scales, this study aimed to ensure that participants who indicated strong beliefs were invited to participate in interviews to discuss their beliefs. Study 2 involved interviewing these participants, with the aim of exploring the psychological and sociological factors that influence and impact their conspiracy beliefs.

Philosophical Assumptions

Critical Realism (CR) is a philosophical approach that acknowledges that there is an external objective reality, while recognising that individuals interpret and construct their own meanings and understandings based on their experiences (Peter & Park, 2018). CR positions itself as an alternative between interpretivism and positivism and integrates a relativistic epistemology with ontological realism (Lawani, 2021; Maxwell, 2022; Stutchbury, 2022). This perspective suggests that reality is not solely reliant on observation and can exist independently of our thoughts (Lawani, 2021). This dual focus allows for the exploration of both structural influences on beliefs and the personal interpretation of them (Lawani, 2021; Maxwell, 2022; Stutchbury, 2022). CR also acknowledges that although events may 'actually exist', we can only ever have partial access to this reality, and people come to know things in different ways (Maxwell, 2022; Stutchbury, 2022).

Critical realism is appropriate for this study for two main reasons. First, I acknowledge that some conspiracies have previously occurred and that you can explore beliefs using reliable and valid measures such as the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scales. Second, CR allows for the research to

explore how different individuals make sense of different conspiracies, assuming their beliefs are shaped by social contexts, time, and place. This research acknowledges the complexity of belief systems and how they can be grounded in objective reality, as well as emerge within specific cultural and temporal settings.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, an essential element of qualitative research, enables the researcher to recognise and address their influence on the study's methodology and outcomes (Parker, 1999). Being reflexive requires the researcher to actively and critically assess any biases, assumptions, or experiences that may influence the study. Reflection must therefore be seen as a holistic and integrated concept at three levels: theory, design, and practice (Pousti et al., 2020). Accordingly, it is necessary that reflection at each level is considered independently, as well as how reflection at one level affects reflection at the other levels (Pousti et al., 2020).

My positionality is influenced by several key factors, and I realise the importance of reflexivity in critically assessing how my biases, assumptions, and experiences shape my research. To mitigate any undue influence on my research, I actively engaged in ongoing reflection throughout all levels of my research: theory, design, and practice. For instance, while I acknowledge my scepticism of certain conspiracy theories, viewing some as unrealistic or illogical, I also accept that there can be some truth in certain theories. I consider myself to be a logical person and generally trust scientific knowledge and its applications within society. Yet, this trust is balanced by personal experiences with medical professionals, which have led me to question the way in which scientific principles are sometimes misunderstood. It is my contention that those who apply these principles do not always adhere to them, fully understand them, or implement them as intended. Additionally, my belief that social media has significantly increased the accessibility and dissemination of

conspiracy theories, often resulting in more negative than positive outcomes, required me to critically examine my assumptions to ensure they did not influence my analysis. Engaging in regular discussions with my supervisor during this research project, provided an essential reflexive space, allowing me to openly express my thoughts and to ensure that any personal bias did not compromise the integrity of the data that was analysed.

Ethics

Low risk ethics approval was obtained for Study 1 and 2 in the same application (4000028761). This study was evaluated by peer review by Dr. Kathryn McGuigan, as well as an additional School of Psychology faculty member, who was not involved in the study, and was determined to be low risk according to the criteria set by Massey University (see Appendix D). As such, a low risk application was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, which was approved under notification 4000028761.

To protect the rights and welfare of participants, this research adhered to strict ethical standards. Key ethical issues considered included informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, participant risks, cultural considerations, and data storage procedures. The Massey University Code of Ethics (Massey University, 2017) was followed in all studies for this thesis research. All study participants were aged 18 years or over and were not deemed to be vulnerable. Data were securely stored on a password-protected laptop, ensuring compliance with data protection standards. In exchange for their time, once participants had completed the survey and data had been checked for completeness, they were paid through Prolific. The participants who completed the interview were given additional koha, also through Prolific, as compensation. Payments for each were made within five working days of completing the studies.

We engaged in discussions guided by the principles of Te Ara Tika to address cultural sensitivities. Considerations included the use of Te Reo Māori in the survey, equitable access for participants facing digital exclusion, and the appropriateness of recruitment strategies. Given the low number of participants required relative to the extensive network on the Prolific page, we deemed the risk of snowball sampling concerns to be minimal. Ethnicity data were collected on a voluntary basis; however, we did not assume generalisability of the responses to the broader Māori community or any other specific group. In practice, there was one Māori/NZ European and two Pacific Islander responses from the New Zealand survey sample and one Aboriginal response from the Australian survey sample. One interviewee was Pacific Islander. All interviewees were treated equally, and respectfully.

Study 1

The research used a non-experimental survey exploratory design to collect descriptive data on New Zealand and Australian participants' beliefs and attitudes regarding conspiracy theories. Participants were selected through an online sampling platform (Prolific), and the survey was distributed via web link, ensuring broad accessibility. The aim was to identify participants who, based on conspiracy belief scale scores, held strong beliefs, so that they could be invited to participate in Study 2 of this research.

A structured questionnaire was created using Qualtrics, an advanced online survey platform, which allowed for the seamless distribution of the survey and efficient data collection. The survey consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling a comprehensive analysis of participants' views (a copy of the survey information sheet can be located in Appendix A). The survey included three measures, the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale, the Australasian Conspiracy Belief scale (ACB), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The first two measures are designed to assess specific dimensions of individual and collective beliefs. It was important to include the RSES, as research has consistently pointed to the role of self-esteem in conspiracy beliefs. To ensure the validity of the results, attention was given to question clarity and logical flow, with the inclusion of reverse-scored items to account for response bias. The descriptive statistics, including Cronbach's alpha for each measure can be located in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Variables in Study 1

Measure	Cronbach's α	Mean	*SD*	N of Items
Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT)	.842	2.48	0.809	8
Australasian Conspiracy Belief	.870	1.74	0.731	8
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)	.901	1.89	0.554	10

Measures

The ***Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories*** **(BCT)** scale was originally developed as a 6-item measure by Leman and Cinnirella (2007). This tool was adapted into an 8-item version by the same authors in 2013, incorporating real world organisations and events, to assess individuals' belief in specific conspiracy theories. Items are presented as statements (e.g., "The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental conspiracy"), and participants use a 5-point Likert-type scale to respond, ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Don't know*, 4 = *Agree* to 5 = *Strongly agree* (see Table 2). The scores range from the lowest possible, 8, to the highest, 40, with higher scores indicating stronger conspiracy belief.

Greater belief in real-world conspiracy theories is indicated by higher scores, which are calculated by adding up all of the items. To mitigate response bias and enhance the reliability and validity of the measure, two statements (1 and 3) are reversed scored. By reversing the scoring on certain items, researchers reduce the likelihood that participants will engage in acquiescence bias, the inclination to agree with statements regardless of their content, thereby ensuring more thoughtful and deliberate responses. This approach also promotes construct validity by compelling respondents to carefully consider both positively and negatively worded items, which helps ensure the scale captures a more accurate representation of the construct. Moreover, reversed scoring contributes to the internal

consistency of the scale, as it assesses whether respondents' answers remain consistent across a variety of item types that tap into the same underlying concept. By detecting potential response inconsistencies, such as contradictory answers or random responding, reversed scoring can also signal issues with engagement or understanding. The scale items included in the final BCT measure are presented in Table 2. The current study reported reliable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 (see Table 1).

Table 2

Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) Scale

Item	Question
1.	There was no conspiracy involved in the assassination of John. F. Kennedy. (-)
2.	The European Union is trying to take control of the United Kingdom.
3.	Princess Diana's death was an accident. (-)
4.	Governments are suppressing evidence of the existence of aliens.
5.	The AIDS virus was created in a laboratory.
6.	The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental conspiracy.
7.	The American moon landings were faked.
8.	A government exercise was behind the suicide at Jones Town.

Note. Participants are asked to rate their beliefs in a 5-point scale (1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, don't know; 4, agree; 5, strongly agree). Total score (including reverse items) indicates levels of belief in conspiracy theories.

(-) items are reverse scored.

The ***Australasian Conspiracy Belief*** **(ACB)** scale (Marques et al., 2022) was adapted from the Australian and New Zealand local conspiracy theories, previously selected by researchers to include known narratives drawn from online sources and newsprint. The measure was reduced from 14 to 8 statements, where participants indicated their level of

agreement with the narrative using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Don't know,* 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). In line with prior research, a fabricated conspiracy narrative was included (Marques et al., 2022; Oliver & Wood, 2014). For this purpose, an updated version of the Compact Fluorescent Light Bulb conspiracy was employed (Oliver & Wood, 2014), which stated: "The Government is mandating the switch to LED light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control." The scale items included in the final Australasian measure are presented in Table 3, with possible scores ranging from 8 to 40, with higher scores indicating stronger conspiracy belief. The current study reported reliable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 (see Table 1).

Table 3

Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) Scale

Item	Question
1.	COVID-19 is a biological weapon intentionally created and released by China or the USA.
2.	Do you believe it is true that the government has a secret program that uses airplanes to put harmful chemicals into the air (often called "chemtrails")?
3.	Climate change has been invented by government to control people's lifestyles.
4.	The Christchurch Mosque shootings were orchestrated with the intent of restricting gun laws in New Zealand.
5.	The Government is covering up the health risks of the new 5G cellular network.
6.	Fluoride is being used in water supplies to dim the minds of ordinary citizens and make them easier to control.
7.	The Government is mandating the switch to LED light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control.
8.	The earth is flat, not a globe.

Note. Participants are asked to rate their beliefs in a 5-point scale (1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, don't know; 4, agree; 5, strongly agree). Total score indicates levels of belief in conspiracy theories.

The ***Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*** **(RSES)** (Rosenberg, 1965) (Table 4) was used to measure participant self-worth. Consisting of 10 items, the scale assesses both positive and negative self-evaluations, capturing an individual's overall self-esteem. Respondents rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale, with statements such as "I feel that I am a person of worth" and "At times, I think I am no good at all." The scale includes both positively and negatively worded items, and the responses are summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. The scale has a range of 0 to 30, with 30 representing the highest possible score. Scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem. The RSES has demonstrated strong reliability and validity, making it a popular tool in psychological research, and is especially useful for examining the relationship between self-esteem and various psychological constructs, such as mental health outcomes. The scale items included in the final RSES measure are presented in Table 4. The current study reported reliable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 (see Table 1).

Table 4

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Item	Question
1.	I feel that I'm a person of worth.
2.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3.	All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure. (-)
4.	I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of. (-)
6.	I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8.	I wish I could have more respect for myself. (-)
9.	I certainly feel useless at times. (-)
10.	At times I think I am no good at all. (-)

Note. Participants are asked to rate their beliefs in a 4-point scale (0, strongly disagree; 1, disagree; 2, agree; 3, strongly agree). The scale ranges from 0-30 (including reverse items). Scores between 15 and 25 are within normal range; scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem.

(-) items are reverse scored

Participants and Procedure

This survey of (N = 100) people used voluntary response sampling. The Study was set up in June 2024, however recruitment was not actioned until October 17, 2024, through the data collection platform Prolific (prolific.com), where potential participants were directed to an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. The survey consisted of two sections. The first asked questions about background information (demographics), and the main survey, which included two self-report scales that are widely used in research to measure tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories, and one self-report scale widely used to measure self-esteem. To reduce likelihood of bots, there was also one free-from question that asked participants "What is your strongest conspiracy belief (i.e. Which conspiracy resonates most with you?)".

Pre-screening criteria on Prolific enabled specific participants to be targeted. The initial pre-screening requirement was that applicants had to be presently residing in Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand. The reasoning for this was that the majority of research on conspiracy theories stems from Europe and the US, thus, it is critical to learn more about the psychological underpinnings of conspiracy theory belief in Australasia. Furthermore, this survey was used to gauge prevalence and strength in conspiracy beliefs so that participants with the strongest beliefs could be interviewed for Study 2.

Additional pre-screening, where potential participants had previously selected on Prolific that they would be willing to take part in either a face to face video or non-video interview, was also included. Prolific only permits users who are aged 18 or over to register on their platform; therefore, all participants were 18 years or older. The potential participants (n = 2,771), who could view the study's advertisement were identified by the inclusion criteria. Participants were asked to provide their unique Prolific identification code and were only able to complete the study once.

Exclusion Criteria

In addition to the Prolific pre-screening criteria, three exclusion criteria were included in the study's information, which was available to participants both prior to and upon commencing the survey. Participants who selected "no" in response to the informed consent question were automatically removed from the survey.

1. Incomplete responses: Participants who provide incomplete or unreliable responses during the initial data collection (the survey) may be excluded to maintain data validity and quality.
2. Inability to provide informed consent: Participants who are unable to provide informed consent due to factors such as age (e.g., younger than 18).

3. Ethical Considerations: Participants who engage in behaviours or express beliefs that raise ethical concerns, such as advocating violence, may be excluded to uphold ethical standards and ensure participant safety.

Sample After Exclusions

One participant "returned", meaning the participant chose to exit the study prematurely or remove their submission after completing the study. No further information was provided regarding this participant. Despite progressing through 100 percent of the study, two participants "timed out" of the maximum time set by Prolific to complete the study. This time limit, 44 minutes, was automatically set based on the study's estimated completion time of 10 minutes. One of the timed-out participants answered all the questions, however, the other missed one scale question. Both Participants were excluded, leaving 100 remaining participants. Of the 100, two participants missed the Relationship status question. No other missing data was found. The median study completion time was 5.55 minutes. Upon Study 1 completion and checking for missing data, each of the 100 participants was compensated £1.25 for their time.

Demographics of Participants

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 76 years, with a mean age of $\mu = 37.85$ (SD = 11.84). A total of 70% of the participants were Australian, with 37% identifying as female and 63% as male. The remaining 30% were New Zealanders, with 40% identifying as female and 60% male. The majority of participants identified as European/Caucasian/ Pākehā, 74% of Australians and 73% of New Zealanders. Full demographics for the final sample size of survey participants (N = 100) can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Full Demographics for Study 1

Demographic	**Group**	**Australian (*n* = 70)**	**New Zealand (*n* = 30)**
Age	18 – 24	7	2
	25 – 34	26	10
	35 – 44	23	10
	45 – 54	7	4
	55 – 64	5	3
	65 – 74	1	1
	75 or older	1	0
Gender	Female	26	12
	Male	44	18
Ethnicity	Aboriginal	1	0
	Asian	17	5
	European/Caucasian/ Pākehā	52	22
	Māori/Pacific Island	0	3
Relationship Status	Single	26	13
	De-facto	14	8
	Married	28	9
	Widowed	0	0
	Other	2	0
Highest Level of	High School	9	7
Education Attained	Certificate/apprenticeship	11	2
	Bachelors/Post graduate diploma	37	18
	Master	12	2
	Doctorate	1	1
Occupation	Unemployed/Homemaker	7	3
	Student	3	1
	Self-employed	7	2
	Professionals	25	13
	Technicians and trades workers	0	1
	Community and service workers	2	0

Demographic	Group	Australian (*n* = 70)	New Zealand (*n* = 30)
	Clerical and administrative	16	8
	Sales workers	5	1
	Labourers	2	0
	Retired	3	1
Annual Salary	Less than $10,000	0	0
	$10,000–$19,999	4	0
	$20,000–$29,999	4	4
	$30,000–$39,999	3	1
	$40,000–$49,999	6	1
	$50,000–$59,999	6	3
	$60,000–$69,999	4	4
	$70,000–$79,999	5	3
	$80,000–$89,999	7	2
	$90,000–$99,999	2	2
	$100,000-$149,999	16	6
	$150,000 or more	8	1
	Unknown/Prefer not to say	5	3

Ethics

To ensure that potential participants were fully informed, the study details were provided on the Prolific website prior to their involvement. Those who were interested were then directed to Qualtrics via a web link where the information sheet was again provided (Appendix A). Participants were asked to confirm their understanding and consent to involvement by selecting “Yes” prior to being able to commence the survey. Only those who provided explicit consent were able to continue, ensuring that participation was voluntary. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any

time. To maintain anonymity, participant data were identified solely through their Prolific IDs, ensuring that personal information remained confidential.

Data Analysis

All data collection, processing procedures, and analyses were conducted following ethics approval. After data completion, the raw data were exported from Qualtrics to Microsoft Excel. Raw data was copied to a separate (Full Data) tab, and the initial analysis involved identifying any duplicate Prolific IDs and ensuring responses were 100 percent complete. Subsequently, with the exception of the Prolific ID, all other identifying columns, such as participants' IP address, and latitude and longitude, were removed. Additionally, to improve data cleanliness, any superfluous columns, such as start date and user language, were removed. Next, data was split into a further three tabs according to measures used (BCT, ACB, and RSES). The scale scores for the measures were calculated and summed by attributing numerical values to the response selections (e.g., 'Strongly Agree' = 5). Additionally, reverse-scored items were incorporated into the calculations as appropriate. The Microsoft Excel analysis tool 'Anova: Two-Factor Without Replication' was used with the numerical values for each measure to calculate the mean squares (MS) for the factor and error, allowing for Cronbach's alpha calculations. This data was subsequently rechecked using the Factor: Reliability analysis tool in Jamovi 2.6.19.

A separate Microsoft Excel file was created containing demographic data and numerical scores from the three variables (BCT, ACB, and RSES). Further analysis was conducted using the R programming language, RStudio, and psych package included in the Jamovi 2024 software.

Results of Study 1

The results of the survey are presented here. A Spearman's correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between the three variables, the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale, the Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Table 6 and Figure 2 show there was a significant positive correlation found between the BCT and the ACB (r = .804, p <.001). There was a weak, non-significant positive correlation with the ACB and RSES (r = .014, p = .893) (see Figure 3). However, no significant correlation was found between the BCT and the RSES (r = -.057, p = .572) (see Figure 4). Further, Spearman's correlation between the three main variables (BCT, ACB and RSES), as well as participants education level (1 = High school, 2 = Certificate/apprenticeship, 3 = Bachelors/Post graduate diploma, 4 = Master, 5 = Doctorate) was conducted. Education was positively correlated with RSES (r = .332, p = <.001) (see Figure 5).

Table 6

Correlations of Measures Used for Study 1

		BCT Total	ACB Total	RSES Total	Education Level
Spearman's rho					
BCT Total	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.804**	-.057	-.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001	.572	.237
	N	100	100	100	100
ACB Total	Correlation Coefficient	.804**	1.000	.014	-.059
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.	.893	.559
	N	100	100	100	100
RSES Total	Correlation Coefficient	-.057	.014	1.000	.332**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.572	.893	.	<.001
	N	100	100	100	100
Education Level	Correlation Coefficient	-.119	-.059	.332**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.237	.559	<.001	.
	N	100	100	100	100

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2

Scatter Plot of the Relationship Between BCT and ACB Scales in Study 1

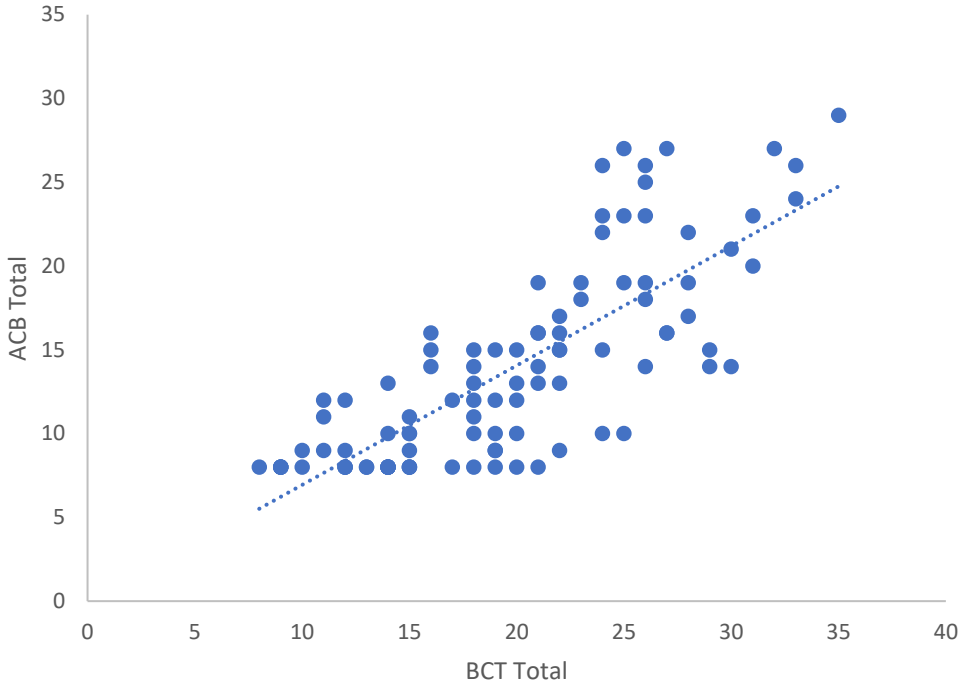


Figure 3

Scatter Plot of the Relationship Between ACB Scale and RSES in Study 1

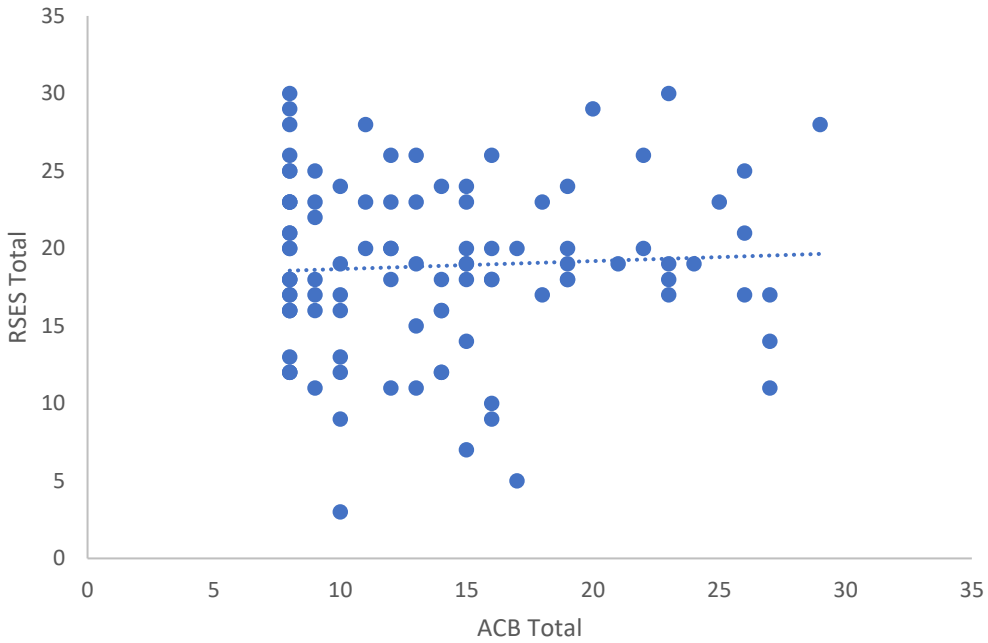


Figure 4

Scatter Plot of the Relationship Between BCT Scale and RSES in Study 1

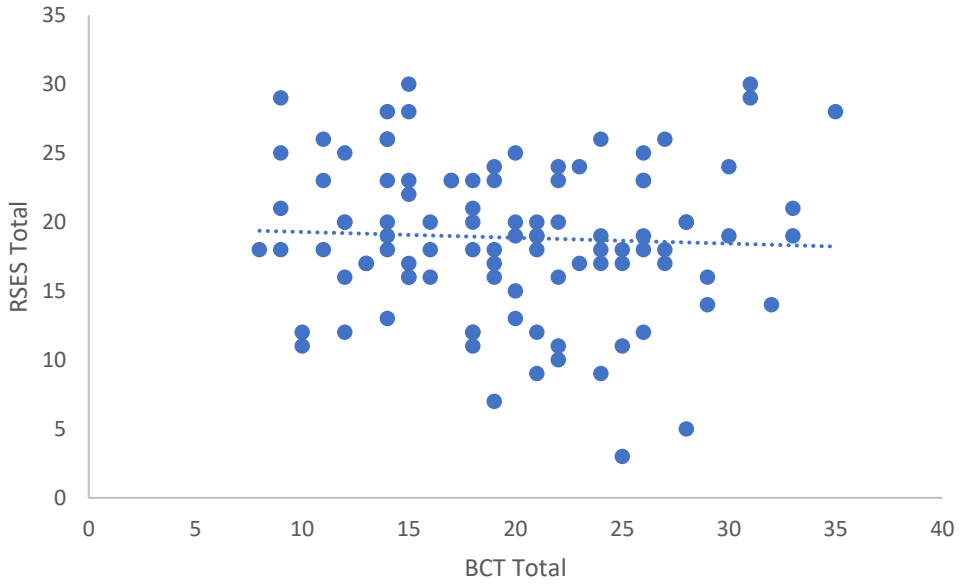
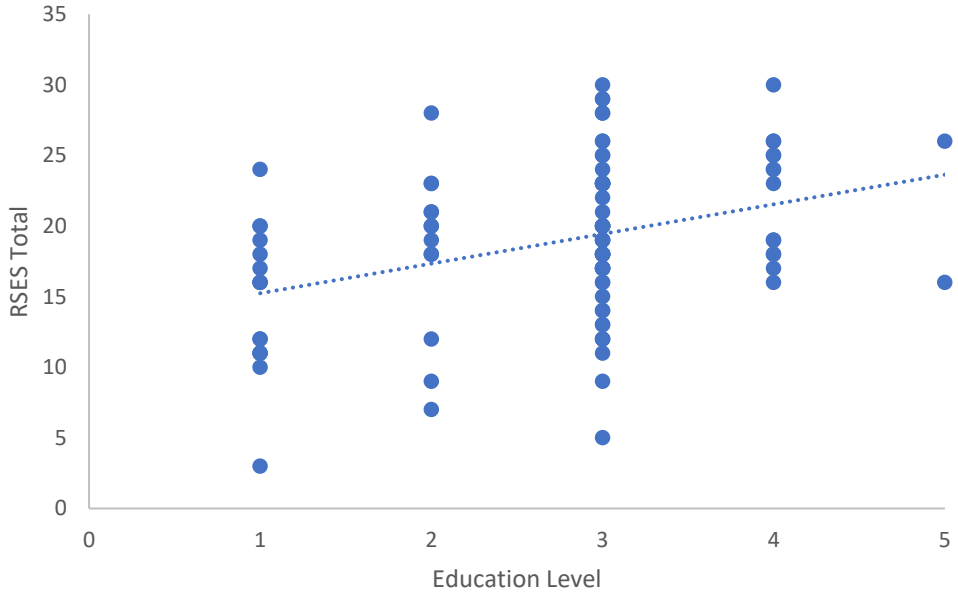


Figure 5

Scatter Plot of the Relationship Between Educational Level and RSES in Study 1

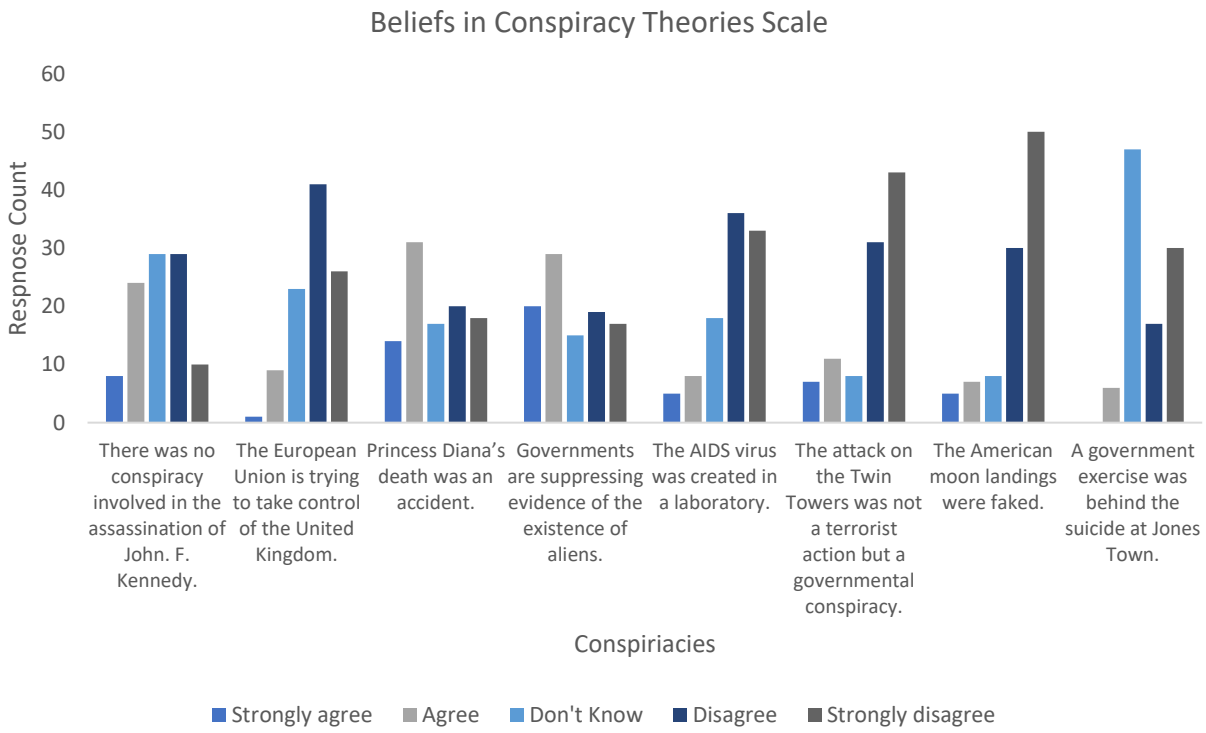


BCT

Figure 6 shows the summary of participant responses for the eight BCT statements, highlighting levels of agreement. The reverse scoring for statements one and three has been accounted for in the data presentation.

Figure 6

Summary of BCT Scale Responses



The findings show that there are varying levels of conspiracy belief within the BCT (see Table 7). Some theories are widely accepted, while others were only partially supported or completely rejected. The most supported conspiracy was the belief that governments are suppressing evidence of the existence of aliens (49%). The greatest disagreed with statements were observed in relation to 'fake moon landings' (80%) and the government being behind the twin towers attacks (9/11) (74%). Similarly, the belief that the AIDS virus was created in a laboratory was largely dismissed (69% disagreement). However, uncertainty was high

regarding the Jonestown massacre, with 47% of respondents unsure. Participant opinions in relation to the JFK and Princess Diana theories were more divided, with more even splits of 'agreement' and 'disagreements.

Table 7

Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) Total Scores

BCT Conspiracy Theories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
There was no conspiracy involved in the assassination of JFK*	8	24	29	29	10
The European Union is trying to take control of the United Kingdom	1	9	23	41	26
Princess Diana's death was an accident *	14	31	17	20	18
Governments are suppressing evidence of the existence of aliens.	20	29	15	19	17
The AIDS virus was created in a laboratory.	5	8	18	36	33
The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental conspiracy.	7	11	8	31	43
The American moon landings were faked.	5	7	8	30	50
A government exercise was behind the suicide at Jones Town.	0	6	47	17	30

Note. *items represent the reverse score statements

Table 8 illustrates the frequency of belief in BCT, presenting the number of 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' responses, along with 'Strongly Disagree' or 'Disagree' responses for reverse-scored statements. The data shows that 50% of participants (N = 100) endorsed zero

or one conspiracy belief. The majority of participants (70%) believed two or fewer conspiracies, with 30% endorsing three or more. This suggests that, although some participants may hold a conspiratorial belief, monological thinking within this sample does not appear to be strongly supported. If monological belief were to be strongly supported, it could be expected that a higher concentration of participants would endorse more than two beliefs. However, the data indicates that, rather than being an either-or belief, conspiracy belief varies across individuals and may be influenced by other underlying factors, such as institutional trust.

Table 8

Frequencies of Count of 'Strongly Agree/Agree' or 'Strongly Disagree/Disagree (for Reverse Scored Items) BCT Beliefs

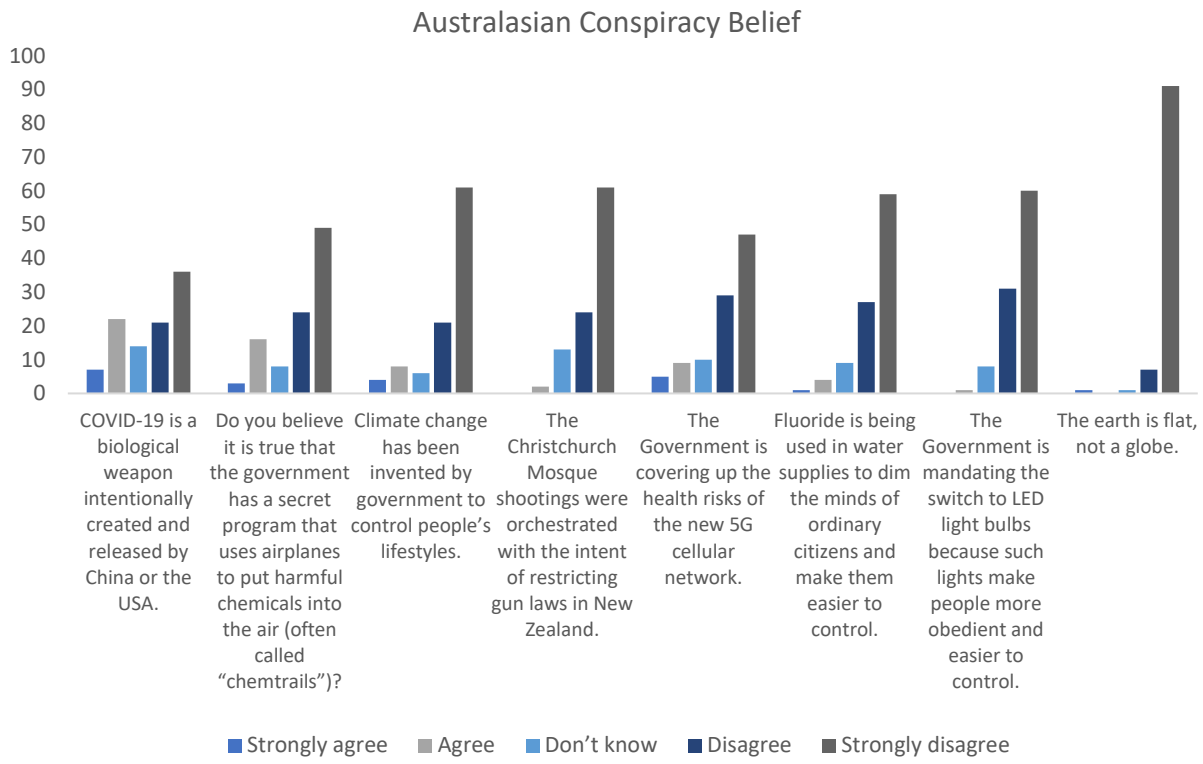
Count of BCT Beliefs	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
0	28	28.0%	28.0%
1	22	22.0%	50.0%
2	20	20.0%	70.0%
3	10	10.0%	80.0%
4	12	12.0%	92.0%
5	4	4.0%	96.0%
6	3	3.0%	99.0%
7	1	1.0%	100.0%

ACB

The participant (N = 100) responses, showing level of agreement for the adapted Australasian Conspiracy Belief scale are summarised in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Summary of ACB Scale Responses



The theory with the most support (7% strongly agreed, 22% agreed) was that "COVID-19 was intentionally created by China or the USA as a biological weapon" (see Table 9). Further, with 14% responding 'Don't Know', it is likely that misinformation and the feeling of lack of transparency by Governments during the pandemic had some influence. The flat earth theory had the highest rejection rate, with 98% disagreement (91% strongly disagree), showing high consensus across participants. Interestingly, none of the participants (N = 100) strongly agreed, though 9% either 'Agreed' (n = 1) or responded 'Didn't know' (n = 8) to the fabricated theory adapted from previous research (Marques et al., 2022; Oliver & Wood, 2014): "The Government is mandating the switch to LED light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control". This is lower than in previous

research (Marques et al., 2022) where 6.4% of Australians (*N* = 1011) and 5.2 % of New Zealanders (*N* = 754) either 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' with this theory.

Table 9

Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) Total Scores

ACB Conspiracy Theories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
COVID-19 is a biological weapon intentionally created and released by China or the USA.	7	22	14	21	36
Do you believe it is true that the government has a secret program that uses airplanes to put harmful chemicals into the air (often called "chemtrails")?	3	16	8	24	49
Climate change has been invented by government to control people's lifestyles.	4	8	6	21	61
The Christchurch Mosque shootings shootings were orchestrated with the intent of restricting gun laws in New Zealand.	0	2	13	24	61
The Government is covering up the health risks of the new 5G cellular network.	5	9	10	29	47
Fluoride is being used in water supplies to dim the minds of ordinary citizens and make them easier to control.	1	4	9	27	59
The Government is mandating the switch to LED light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control.	0	1	8	31	60
The earth is flat, not a globe.	1	0	1	7	91

Below, Table 10 illustrates the frequency of belief in ACB, presenting the number of 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' responses, to scale statements. A significant number of participants (61%) did not 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' with any of the ACB statements, with 77% only agreeing to one or fewer. Further, only 7% supported three or more of the theories. This suggests belief in these particular theories is not common, nor evenly distributed. With most participants (89%) only accepting two or fewer beliefs, monological belief is not widely supported within this sample.

Table 10

Frequencies of Count of 'Strongly Agree or Agree' Response to ACB Beliefs

Count of ACB Beliefs	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
0	61	61.0%	61.0%
1	16	16.0%	77.0%
2	12	12.0%	89.0%
3	4	4.0%	93.0%
4	4	4.0%	97.0%
5	3	3.0%	100.00%

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (*RSES)*

With the scale ranging from 0-30, and reverse score items considered, the mean Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) score of 18.9 (SD = 5.54) and median score of 19, suggest that self-esteem levels of participants (N = 100) are relatively balanced, supporting a mostly normal distribution (see Table 11 and Figure 8).

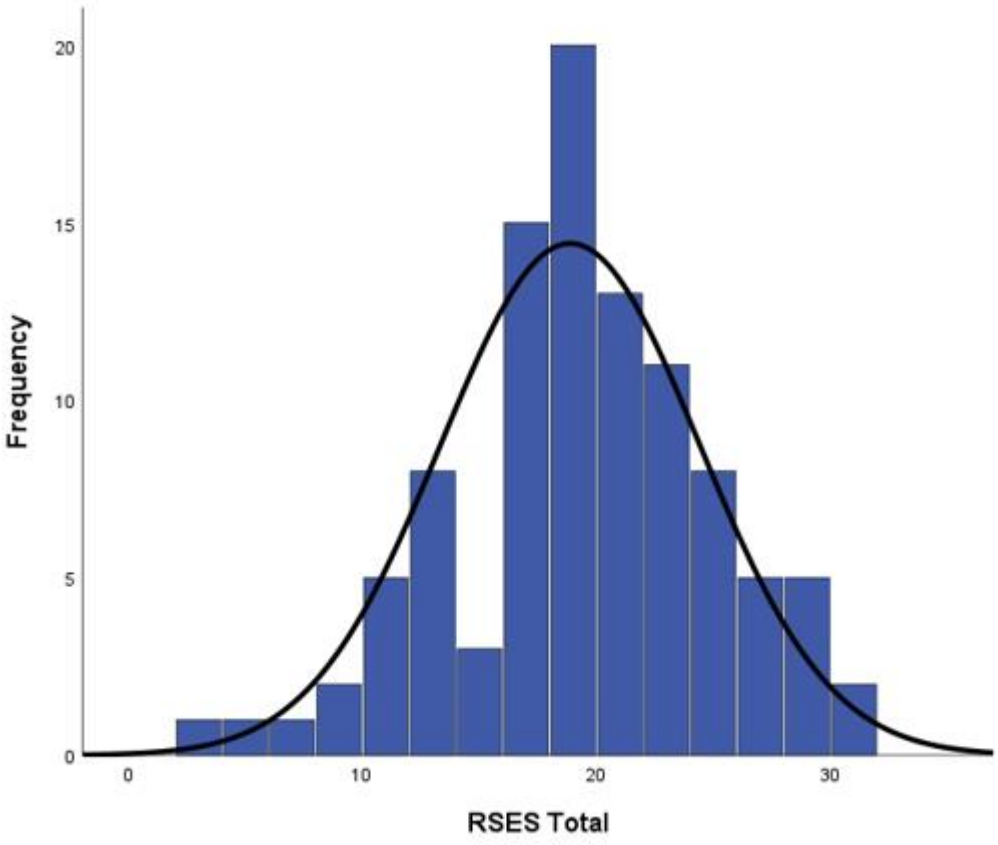
Table 11

Total RSES Response Scores

	N	Missing	Mean	Median	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
RSES Total	100	0	18.9	19.0	5.54	3	30

Figure 8

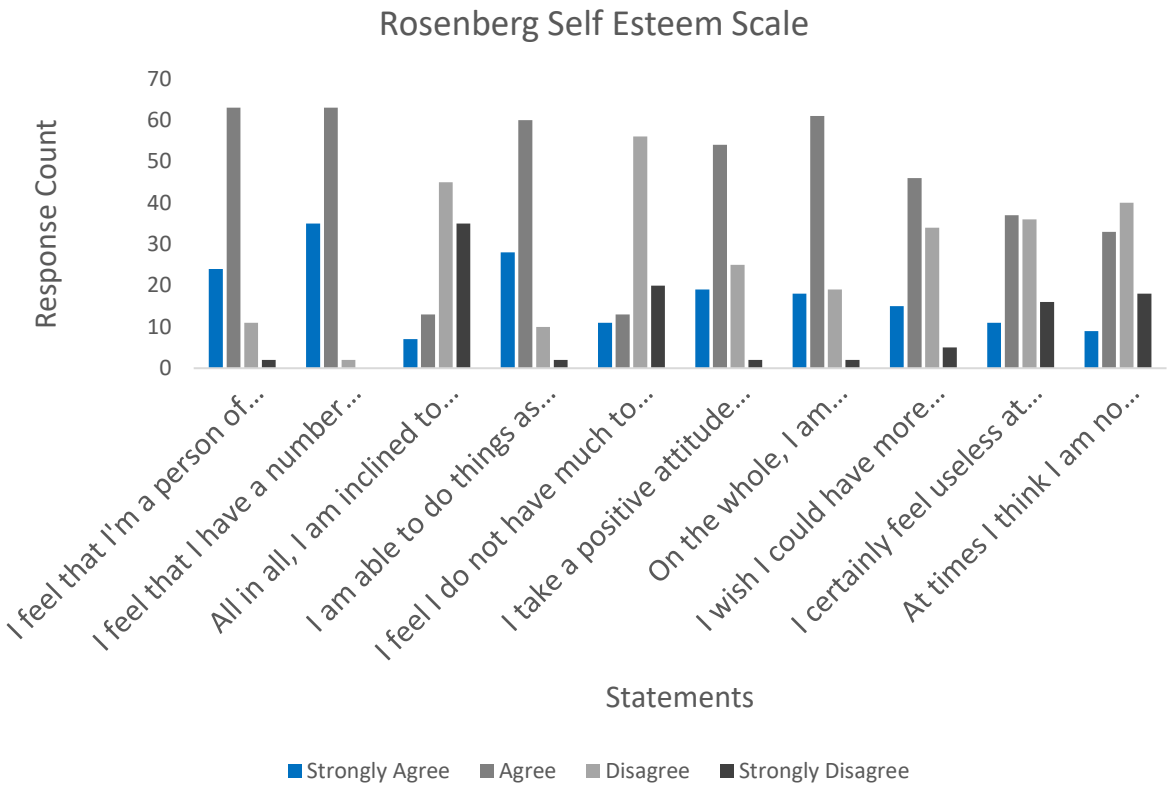
Distribution of RSES Total Scores



The RSES results (see Figure 9 and Table 12) suggest that the majority of participants have a positive self-view, with 87% feeling that they are a person of worth and 98% feeling they have a number of good qualities.

Figure 9

Summary of RSES Responses



Further, 88% felt that they were able to do things as well as most people, suggesting confidence in their abilities. However, 61% wished they had more respect for themselves, and 48% felt useless at times. Overall, the results suggest that, despite some expressions of low self-esteem, it is not widespread, and self-esteem is generally high.

Table 12

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) Total Scores

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that I'm a person of worth.	24	63	11	2
I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	35	63	2	-
All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure. *	7	13	45	35
I am able to do things as well as most other people.	28	60	10	2
I feel I do not have much to be proud of. *	11	13	56	20
I take a positive attitude toward myself.	19	54	25	2
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	18	61	19	2
I wish I could have more respect for myself. *	15	46	34	5
I certainly feel useless at times. *	11	37	36	16
At times I think I am no good at all. *	9	33	40	18

Note. * items represent the reverse score statements

Table 13 illustrates the frequency of RSES scores, presenting the number of 'Strongly disagree' or 'Disagree' responses, along with 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' responses for reverse-scored statements. Supporting the notion that most individuals in this sample (N = 100) have a relatively high self-esteem, 58% of participants endorsed two or less statements

reflecting low self-esteem. However, 1% of participants endorsed all 10 self-esteem-related statements and 14% agreed with four or more, indicating that a small subgroup experiences more frequent feelings of low self-worth. The response spread, with some participants only supporting one or two low self-esteem statements, while others supported four or more, suggests that self-esteem may fluctuate, allowing for bouts of confidence while still experiencing occasions of self-doubt.

Table 13

Frequencies of Count of 'Strongly Disagree/Disagree' or 'Strongly Agree/Agree (for Reverse Scored Items) RSES Beliefs

Count of RSES Beliefs	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
0	25	25.0%	25.0%
1	19	19.0%	44.0%
2	14	14.0%	58.0%
3	11	11.0%	69.0%
4	10	10.0%	79.0%
5	3	3.0%	82.0%
6	4	4.0%	86.0%
7	6	6.0%	92.0%
8	4	4.0%	96.0%
9	3	3.0%	99.0%
10	1	1.0%	100.0%

Conclusion

The results from the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scales utilised during Study 1 were primarily used to determine participants who met the criteria for Study 2. Participants qualified if they held at least, one strongly held belief, as indicated by their responses of 'Strongly Agree' or 'Strongly Disagree' to reverse-scored items on the scale, and a total score of 35 or higher across both the BCT and ACB scales. Although the BCT and ACB on their own did not support monological belief theory, the significant positive correlation between them supports the idea that belief in conspiracy theories tends to be interconnected. This reinforces the concept of a monological belief system; however, it was not strongly prevalent in this sample.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and education level were utilised to provide additional insights. Education level was positively correlated with self-esteem, which could indicate that higher education levels are associated with higher self-esteem, i.e., higher education leads to greater confidence and self-worth. However further research of these correlations would be required.

Study 2

The research design for this study was a qualitative, semi-structured interview-based design aimed at exploring participants' conspiracy beliefs and the psychological and sociological factors associated with them. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of participants (from Study 1) to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives regarding conspiracy beliefs. The semi-structured format offered flexibility, enabling the interviewer to explore further based on participants' responses, while ensuring consistency across interviews. This approach also provided rich, detailed data regarding how individuals perceive and engage with conspiracy theories, as well as the psychological factors that may contribute to these beliefs. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed via closed captioning, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. This qualitative design facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and beliefs, which quantitative methods might not fully capture (Curry et al., 2009). Furthermore, qualitative online interviews provide flexibility in time scheduling and location for data collection; while ensuring compliance with safety restrictions of this research, such as age (Swift, 2022). While the small sample size limits generalisability, the qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex psychological and social factors influencing conspiracy belief, providing valuable insights that can inform future research and measures (Douglas et al., 2017; Guest et al., 2006).

Participants and Procedure

This study focused on individuals with strong conspiracy beliefs. Participants who responded with either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Strongly Disagree’ to reverse-scored items on the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and the Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale, and who accumulated a total of three or more such responses across both scales, were

selected for further participation. The study was initially set up July 2024, however, was not actioned until November 2024 when potential participants were identified from Study 1 and subsequently consisted of 11 recruitment spaces. This targeted approach ensured that the study focused on individuals with significant engagement in conspiracy beliefs, thereby enriching the data with relevant perspectives. Compensation of GBP £15.00 was offered via Prolific upon completion of the interview, ensuring ethical engagement and participant motivation.

Only one of the initial 11 invitees accepted the invitation, and three participants returned the invitation. As such, Prolific Study 1 was closed due to a low response rate from potential respondents. To address this, a secondary offer was made, which was limited to four recruitment spaces to ensure the study could move forward. Eligibility criteria for this offer required participants to have at least one strongly held belief, as indicated by their responses of ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Strongly Disagree’ to reverse-scored items on the scale. Additionally, participants needed to have a total score of 35 or higher across both the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scales. This approach yielded a total of 30 participants, which included the 10 unresponsive individuals from the initial offer who had not completed the interview. However, due to a technical issue, only 29 of these eligible participants were ultimately invited to participate in the interview process. To compensate for their time, each participant was offered GBP £18.00, which was paid through Prolific upon the successful completion of their interview.

Once again, the response rate was slow. After five days and only two interview acceptances, a private message was sent via Prolific to the remaining potential respondents. The message read: 'Hi there, you recently completed part one of my research, and I would love for you to join the second part, the interview. There are only a couple of spaces, and it

would be conducted via Zoom. You DO NOT need to have your camera on. All you need to do is book a time and day that is suitable for you via Doodle. A bonus of £10 will be paid to those who complete the interview.' This message quickly resulted in two more responses, thus fulfilling the required four recruitment places, and the project was subsequently automatically closed.

Later that same day, two additional potential respondents reached out shortly after the recruitment places had been filled. They expressed their interest in participating in the interview and mentioned that they had clicked 'Yes' on the invitation, but nothing happened afterward. Both were informed that this was likely a timing issue with other respondents. As the submissions had already closed, I advised them that I would contact Prolific to inquire about increasing the submission allowances. Meanwhile, both of these potential respondents proceeded to book their interview slots via Doodle.

Selected participants who made bookings were invited to attend a recorded, one-on-one semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. To maintain anonymity, all pre-interview communication was conducted through Prolific emails or the scheduling tool Doodle. Participants were able to choose their own time and date for the interview and were advised they were not required to use their cameras during the interview, though they had the option to do so if they wished. Once a suitable time was chosen via Doodle, a Zoom link was provided for the scheduled session. The interviews were designed to last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. As the interview data was kept separate from the initial survey responses, participants were asked to provide their Prolific ID when making the booking on Doodle. The interview comprised open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants' psychological and sociological factors and their conspiracy beliefs. Participants were assured that the interviews would be a safe space, allowing them to decline to answer any question, pause the interview,

or withdraw from the study up to two weeks post-interview. Additionally, participants could request a list of questions prior to the interview and were offered the opportunity to review and approve the transcript afterward. The information sheet and interview questions can be located in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

Exclusion Criteria

Along with the Prolific pre-screening criteria used in Study 1, three additional exclusion criteria were provided in the study information, which participants had access to prior to accepting the study invitation.

1. Inability to provide informed consent: Participants who are unable to provide informed consent due to factors such as age (e.g., younger than 18 at the time of interview completion).
2. Ethical Considerations: Participants who engage in behaviours or express beliefs that raise ethical concerns, such as advocating violence, may be excluded to uphold ethical standards and ensure participant safety.
3. Lack of Strong Conspiracy Beliefs: Participants who do not hold strong or significant beliefs in conspiracy theories may be excluded to maintain focus on those who actively engage with and endorse such beliefs.

Demographics of Participants

A total of seven people were interviewed (six from Australia and one from New Zealand). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 76 years, with a mean age of $\mu = 44.10$ (SD = 19.40; see Tables 14 and 15).

Table 14

Descriptives of age – Total Participants

	Mean	Median	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
Age	44.1	41	19.4	20	76

Table 15

Descriptives of age by Country

Age	Mean	Median	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Australian	46.7	42.5	20.0	20	76	6
New Zealand	29.0	29	NaN	29	29	1

Full demographics for the final sample size of interview participants (n = 7) can be found in Table 16.

Table 16

Full Demographics for Study 2

Demographic	Group	Australian (*n* = 6)	New Zealand (*n* = 1)
Age	18 – 24	1	0
	25 – 34	0	1
	35 – 44	3	0
	45 – 54	0	0
	55 – 64	1	0
	65 – 74	0	0
	75 or older	1	0
Gender	Female	1	1
	Male	5	0
Ethnicity	Aboriginal	0	0

Demographic	Group	Australian (*n* = 6)	New Zealand (*n* = 1)
	Asian	1	0
	European/Caucasian/ Pākehā	5	0
	Māori/Pacific Island	0	1
Relationship Status	Single	2	1
	De-facto	0	0
	Married	4	0
	Widowed	0	0
	Other	0	0
Highest Level of	High School	1	0
Education Attained	Certificate/apprenticeship	2	0
	Bachelors/Post graduate diploma	2	1
	Master	1	0
	Doctorate	0	0
Occupation	Unemployed/Homemaker	1	0
	Student	1	0
	Self-employed	1	1
	Professionals	1	0
	Technicians and trades workers	0	0
	Community and service workers	1	0
	Clerical and Administrative	0	0
	Sales workers	0	0
	Labourers	0	0
	Retired	1	0
Annual Salary	Less than $10,000	0	0
	$10,000–$19,999	2	0
	$20,000–$29,999	0	0
	$30,000–$39,999	2	0
	$40,000–$49,999	0	0
	$50,000–$59,999	1	0
	$60,000–$69,999	0	0
	$70,000–$79,999	0	0

Demographic	Group	Australian (*n* = 6)	New Zealand (*n* = 1)
	$80,000–$89,999	0	0
	$90,000–$99,999	0	0
	$100,000-$149,999	0	0
	$150,000 or more	1	1
	Unknown/Prefer not to say	0	0

Table 17 shows the survey results for the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale, the Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) for the interviewed participants. The BCT and ACB scores range from the lowest possible, 8, to the highest, 40. Higher scores on the BCT and ACB indicate stronger conspiracy belief. The RSES scores range from 0-30, with those who scored between 15 and 25 inclusive considered within the normal range for RSES, while those below 15 suggest low self-esteem.

Table 17

Conspiracy Belief (BCT and ACT) and Self-Esteem Scale Scores of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	BCT	ACB	RSES
One	41	Male	32	27	14
Two	76	Male	28	19	20
Three	29	Female	31	23	30
Four	20	Male	27	16	18
Five	36	Male	26	26	25
Six	44	Male	21	14	18
Seven	63	Female	24	23	18

Data Analysis

Following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis in this study used an inductive approach to qualitative research. The process involved data familiarisation, coding, initial theme generation, theme review and refinement, theme definition and naming, and final write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns or themes within the data, allowing for exploration of recurring themes. This method is both flexible and widely applicable across various fields (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One of its main advantages is its adaptability, as it can be applied to a broad range of research questions, and it allows researchers to focus on rich, detailed data that provides deep insights into complex phenomena. The method's flexibility also extends to the theoretical framework, allowing for inductive or deductive analysis depending on the research aim. However, thematic analysis has its limitations, including potential subjectivity and bias, as the identification of themes heavily relies on the researcher's interpretations. This subjectivity can affect the reliability and replicability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, the process can be time consuming, especially when developing the theme and coding, and it necessitates reflective and thoughtful analysis to ensure accuracy and depth. Notwithstanding these difficulties, when applied properly, thematic analysis is still a useful technique for examining contextual and complex material.

During the data familiarisation phase, both the interview and closed caption data were reviewed multiple times upon interview completion. The purpose of this initial immersive engagement was to ensure data quality, where any recoding text errors were rectified, and also to become inherently familiar with the data. This phase also incorporated reflexivity

where reflection on potential biases, assumptions, and preconceptions that could shape the analysis were discussed with my supervisor.

As per recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), to mitigate any potential biases and maintain accuracy, the data coding was completed over several months. Closed caption data was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet, with a separate column for each interviewee. The data was cleaned to remove filler words and unrelated verbal expressions, such as "umm," "yeah," and "okay," to enhance clarity and ensure the accuracy of the thematic analysis and then colour coded for each interview question across all responses. This step was undertaken to assist in later recognition of themes and was done several times to ensure any ad hoc interview questions were colour coded appropriately.

Once coding was completed the data was explored to identify recurring patterns and similarities for the initial theme generation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes that conveyed relatable concepts were created based on the entire colour coded data.

Upon review, any initial themes were removed if they were not representative of the full data or refined to ensure coherence. This involved re-examining the dataset to verify whether the themes accurately captured significant aspects of the data. Some themes were consolidated due to conceptual overlap, while others were refined to enhance specificity. During this stage, data excerpts were noted and mapped to corresponding themes.

Next, each theme was clearly defined and named to encapsulate its core meaning. Concise, descriptive labels were assigned to ensure clarity and accessibility. This phase also involved articulating how each theme contributed to addressing the research questions, specifically in the formation, spread, or persistence of conspiracy beliefs, thereby strengthening the analytical narrative. Some of the analysis ended up being linked to the questions I asked the participants.

The final phase of the analysis, the write-up, involved consolidating data into a clear and structured report. This included selecting key quotes from participants to illustrate the main themes and explaining how these themes help answer the research questions. The findings were then connected to existing research and theories to show how they fit into the broader academic discussion. Care was taken to ensure that the report was well-organised, logical, and easy to follow. Each theme was explained in detail, supported by real examples from the data, and linked to relevant literature. The goal was to create a final write-up that not only accurately represented the participants' perspectives but also contributed meaningful insights to the study of conspiracy beliefs.

Findings for Study 2

The findings emerged from multiple iterations of data analysis and theme refinement to best capture the dataset. The major themes identified were influences and motivations (personal motivations and negotiating media) and impacts of conspiracy belief (scepticism and opposition, evaluation of credibility, empowerment and control), negative societal consequences and self-esteem. The following section provides a brief overview of the conspiracy theories held by participants, and the reasoning behind them.

Belief in Conspiracies

Participants were asked to share any conspiracy theory they strongly believed in or had encountered, as well as the factors that initially drew them to the theory. Table 18 provides a summary of the main beliefs for the participants grouped into the different theories (taken from the Study 1 survey results). Conspiracy beliefs often emerge from a combination of personal interests, scepticism towards mainstream narratives, and exposure to alternative explanations. This was evident for all of the participants and is explored further below. The most commonly reported belief was in the existence of aliens, with three participants reporting this belief. While most participants discussed a single conspiracy belief, participants 2, 3, and 6 mentioned multiple beliefs, suggesting a possible connection between belief in one theory and openness to others. This aligns with existing research indicating that belief in one conspiracy theory often increases susceptibility to others, even if they are unrelated (Wood et al., 2012).

Table 18

Main Conspiracy Theory Beliefs of Participants

Conspiracy Theory	Description of reasoning	Participant
New World Order	Government global agenda, elites in power and UN control	Two
Covid Vaccines	Hesitation and scepticism	Two
	Suspicious and damaged by vaccine	Seven
Afterlife	Humans start and end life in the same place	Three
Existence of Aliens	Extraterrestrial life, carbon-based life, and the size of the universe	One
	Intelligent species exist in multiple universes	Three
	Unidentified objects, government cover-up and alien existence	Six
Princess Dianas Death	Planned and not an accident	Four
9/11 Conspiracy	Deliberate job and not a terrorist attack	Five
JFK Assassination	More than just Oswald involved. Oswald conveniently shot	Six

Participant 1 highlighted their belief in aliens, citing the vastness of the universe and the increasing discovery of habitable planets as logical bases for their conviction.

> *"The existence of aliens is probably my biggest one…we're finding more and more about the universe every single day. with, you know, the new telescope the James Webb Telescope being able to detect planets and find the habitable*

zones and stuff like that that the conditions for life are more and more common than we would have thought." – Participant #1

This belief was significantly shaped by early exposure to science fiction, which cultivated a fascination with the unknown and the potential for life beyond Earth. The participant's attraction to this theory was not merely scientific but also romantic, finding the notion of humanity not being alone in the universe both humbling and exciting.

"…I grew up on a fairly healthy dose of sci-fi, so it's always been…kind of my wheelhouse. And I think there's a bit of romance in it, just the fact that, you know, we're not alone…We're not as big as we might like to think it's a bit humbling." – Participant #1

Beliefs in government-related conspiracy theories, such as the New World Order or vaccination conspiracies, were rooted in a distrust of powerful elites and perceived hidden agendas. Participant 2 expressed a moderate belief in the New World Order, influenced by literature that discusses global governance and elite manipulation.

"The new world order, the government global agenda it's probably one that's in my mind… I think it's the thing that Trump's railing on where he's where he's referring to the elites, which are the people in power and they're operating at a higher level than what the public is… I think it's very possible. And I do see some evidence of collusion... people are being ordered to do things by the UN like in the countries. Vaccination conspiracies you know particularly with the COVID." – Participant #2

Their exposure to worldwide publications like *Nexus* and *New Dawn* fed into their perception of collusion at higher levels of power. This participant's belief was also shaped by

a mix of personal observation and broader societal narratives, reflecting the complex interplay between individual experiences and external information sources.

> *"…a number of things but I think. Things that I've seen. Things that I read. And I tend to read magazines like The Nexus and New Dawn and uncensored."* – Participant #2

Similar to participant 1, participant 3 expressed strong belief in an afterlife conspiracy and the existence of other intelligent species across multiple universes.

> *"One that comes to the top of my head is like afterlife conspiracy that we start where we end off... I believe in and that humans aren't the only intelligent species that currently exist. Maybe in our current universe, but not in every universe that simultaneously exists"* – Participant #3

This belief was significantly influenced by personal exploration and exposure to specific literature, such as *Journey of Souls* by Dr. Michael Newton, which aligned with their experiences with a clairvoyant. The shift from childhood beliefs, excluding religious aspects to these alternative theories was driven by a search for deeper understanding and self-education. Personal encounters, such as the clairvoyant session, provided compelling evidence that reinforced these beliefs.

> *"…breaking away from like childhood beliefs you know when you grow up. I wouldn't say like in religion…you've sort of explored the world and your mind is more open to what you've trained to believe, a lot of it came through like self-education… I would read a lot…one of the biggest breakthroughs was a book I read called The Journey of Souls by Dr. Michael Newton."* – Participant #3

> *"…I'm a big believer in like signs… I was at crossroads and especially in my career and the word like clairvoyant just kept popping up…she had said something to me that literally no living person on earth should have known… she had recommended me that book"* – Participant #3

Suspicion that Princess Dianas death was planned, potentially due to her actions or status that may have been unfavourable to the royal family led participant 4 to have scepticism towards the official explanation of her car crash.

> *"I guess one about Princess Diana. Definitely something fishy going on there. I don't think she died from whatever they mentioned, it was planned…either they didn't like that she was a royal or she either said or have acted in a way that was not royal…"* – Participant #4

This belief is further reinforced by parallels drawn between the treatment of Diana and Meghan Markle, particularly in terms of their perceived rejection by the royal family. The suspicions are furthered by inconsistencies in the official narrative surrounding the car crash and the notion that the royal family would have had precautions in place to prevent this type of incident.

> *"…I guess how the royal family don't really like Meghan Markle because she's not royal as well. That also kind of caused my suspicion and also some details about the car crash didn't make that didn't really make that much sense to me. Especially since the royal family they wouldn't have taken extra precaution…"* – Participant #4

Participant 5 discussed his belief in the 9/11 conspiracy theory, which they described as deliberate. His attraction to this theory stemmed from its high-profile nature and the fact that it occurred within his lifetime, making it a significant event for personal reflection.

> "*…one example would be that 911 was deliberate job… it's a very high profile one and not that long ago so it's like within my lifetime*." – Participant #5

Belief in government cover-ups related to Area 51 and unidentified flying objects (UFOs) were conspiracies believed by participant 6. Stemming from a fascination of space aliens, they felt, that considering the vastness of space, it would be naïve to think we are alone. They referenced watching interviews and footage involving pilots and government officials that supported his scepticism about the transparency of information regarding extraterrestrial life.

> "*…there's probably a couple that I sort of believe like, one probably to do with like aliens and Area 51 and things like that*." – Participant #6

Participant 6's belief is underpinned by a general distrust in government narratives, as he feels that the full extent of these phenomena is not disclosed to the public. His belief is bolstered by historical instances where initial government denials were later contradicted by emerging evidence. This pattern of secrecy and revelation fosters his belief that not all information about these topics is accessible to the public. His perspective illustrates how conspiracy theories can be sustained by perceived gaps in official accounts, prompting individuals to seek alternative sources of information that align with their suspicions.

> "*…there's like a lot of interviews with like pilots and things like that and they've shown footage where originally the government's like denied it and*

> *then they've sort of back pedalled a bit…I'm anti-government or anything like that, but I do believe that they don't tell you everything*." – Participant #6

Although participant 7 asserted they did not strongly adhere to any single conspiracy theory, they did express uncertainty and suspicion regarding the COVID-19 vaccine.

> "*…there's sort of things around the COVID vaccines. I don't know what I* actually believe. But I do believe there's something suspicious…" – Participant #7

The participants personal experience of having been 'damaged' by the vaccine fosters an environment where they feel more inclined to entertain suspicious or conspiratorial explanations.

> "*…because of personally feeling damaged by the vaccine. So that makes it easier to believe things that might be said about you know along the lines of conspiracy theory."* – Participant #7

Responses from participants illustrate the diverse motivations behind their main conspiracy belief, ranging from personal experiences and early exposure to specific media, and societal mistrust. As particularly evident with participants 4 and 6's scepticism toward institutional authority aligns with research that correlates distrust as a key factor in conspiracy thinking (Goertzel, 1994; Hughey, 2021; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). Additionally, psychological factors such as a need for certainty in uncertain situations and a preference for simplistic explanations of complex events often contribute to the acceptance of conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias also play a critical role in the inclination toward conspiracy beliefs (Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021). These factors highlight the multifaceted nature of conspiracy belief formation,

influenced by both individual cognitive processes and broader social dynamics. These are explored further in the following sections.

Influences and Motivations

There were personal motivations behind the construction of and maintenance of the conspiracy beliefs which are discussed below. The role of media was also a significant influencer, so this was also an important theme.

Personal Motivations: Experience and Information Seeking

This theme captures the participants' viewpoints on what role personal experience plays in their conspiracy beliefs. Views on conspiracy theories can often be influenced by a range of personal experiences, which lead to individuals either adopting or rejecting conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017). While some people may relate specific experiences reinforcing their belief, others may garner influence through family values or societal narratives. Exposure to unexplained phenomena or stories about government secrecy can increase a person's susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Conversely, lack of direct evidence in one's life or discrepancy between conspiracy theories and actual reality could foster scepticism. Responses from this research reveal the diverse and complex nature of how personal experience intersects with belief in conspiracy theories, offering rich insight into the psychological and social factors at play.

Participant 1 maintains their belief in aliens as something they developed independently, indicating a desire for understanding.

> *"I think it's something I came to on my own…The aliens, yeah, that's kind of me." ...If it was spirits and ghosts and spooky stuff I would say, yeah, because mum's well into that. I've seen, you know, enough stories to have a, you know,*

a fairly decent opinion on it. But yeah, there's definitely something going on there." – Participant #1

The participant acknowledges that their beliefs about spirits and ghosts are influenced by their mother's strong interest in such phenomena. This suggest that the individual's belief system is shaped both by their own reasoning and by the influence of close family members.

This sentiment was shared by participant 2, who asserted that they did not spend much time online and that their views on specific theories are influenced by what they observe or fail to observe in their immediate environment.

"…*for me it's probably more what I see."* – Participant #2

Participant 2 goes on to express doubt about certain theories because they have not witnessed any concrete, observable evidence of them occurring, such as soldiers marching down the street or other overt signs of events.

"that's where a bit of doubt comes in is this really all going on… we haven't got soldiers marching down the street here or anything horrible like that. The proof of a pudding is..." – Participant #2

Their doubt suggests a critical thinking approach, where they remain cautious and require tangible proof before fully accepting a conspiracy theory. However, the following statement suggests an openness to the possibility of covert activities, though their beliefs remain tentative due to lack of visible evidence.

"…*if it's happening it's very well hidden at this stage anyway."* – Participant #2

According to participant 3, their views on conspiracy theories were influenced by digital content, specifically a video about intelligent life and multiple universes that filled gaps in her knowledge. They applied a selective approach to information, acknowledging the importance of critical thinking in the digital age.

> *"...we're living in a digital age... the internet has a lot of information out there...years ago I <watched> a video, it wasn't evidence of something, <however>, the way that the person was explaining it made a lot of sense. So you sort of take that information and you apply it to what you already know, you become educated in your own view."* – Participant #3

This experience illustrates the theme of digital content as a source of validation and the application of new information to existing beliefs to develop an informed personal view of conspiracy theories.

The response from participant 4 alluded to historical and contemporary events influencing their conspiracy views. They highlight a current occurrence of genocide that is, according to them, not being covered in the media.

> *"...a particular genocide is happening right now, and it's not even being mentioned at all in the media."* – Participant #4

Additionally, they draw attention to the historical mistreatment of Aboriginals, citing that only one Australian prime minister has officially apologised as well as the lack of acknowledgment of the holocaust. These experiences led them to question the motives behind such omissions.

> "*…also in Australia the only prime minister that apologised to the aboriginals was Kevin Rudd. None of the governments even acknowledged about the*

Holocaust that happened against them. So I started drawing suspicion there... don't acknowledge it but for I guess…not really good reasons." – Participant #4

Participant 5 emphasised that their belief is not influenced by direct personal experiences. Instead, they attributed their beliefs to observations of world events that seemed to make sense to them.

"*…not personal, just observation <of> world events, like what seems to make sense."* – Participant #5

This suggests that their engagement with conspiracy theories is more in interpreting and making sense of global occurrences rather than drawing from personal experiences.

Similarly, the response from participant 6 states that they have not personally experienced events that have influenced their views on conspiracy theories.

"*I don't think like anything in particular, I've experienced personally."* – Participant #6

To explore these beliefs, they mention the use of digital platforms, as well as conversing with others who claim to have witnessed 'things', which they acknowledge often result false information. However, one such conspiracy involved a levitating woman, of which their reference to multiple witnesses from different locations further underscores his view that certain events seem too significant to be mere coincidences or fabrications.

"I know I've spoken to people I know and that who've said they've seen things… it turns out to be nothing. There's other times where I think there's evidence… there's too much going on for it to be nothing at all. I was

watching another doco like on Netflix…this woman like was floated out of a window…quite a number of witnesses…that wasn't like from like one location…there's something's going on. – Participant #6

These exposures appear to play a significant role of influence and further, both contribute to his sense of and scepticism and intrigue.

Participant 7's response indicates that their views on conspiracy theories, specifically were influenced by personal health experiences. They mention experiencing damage from the COVID-19 vaccination.

"Yes, well, the damage to me, so definitely." – Participant #7

This demonstrates how a firsthand negative experience can influence an individual's perception and contribute to their acceptance in related conspiracy theories.

For participant 1, their opinions on spirits and ghosts were influenced by family beliefs. The participants were not uncritical, and some remained sceptical due to a lack of observable evidence in their environment (participant 2), which aligns with a cautious and evidence-based perspective on conspiracy theories, while advocating for the questioning and evaluating of theories based on empirical evidence. For Participant 4, who questioned the reasons behind the absence of recognition of some historical tragedies, historical and social narratives were quite important. This suspicion fits ideas of institutional mistrust and the quest for different answers in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017; Goertzel, 1994). Participant 5 also claimed to get their opinions from seeing world events, implying that indirect experiences and more general socio-political settings had equal influence. Their dependence on external events highlights how people could resort to conspiracy theories as

explanatory frameworks for difficult or uncertain world events, particularly in cases when official narratives seem inadequate or unsatisfactory (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

Direct personal experience was only mentioned by participant 7, who recounted how a firsthand negative experience led to scepticism of official narratives surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine. This is consistent with studies by Galliford and Furnham (2017) showing a positive link between belief in medical conspiracies and belief in political conspiracies. These results show how direct and indirect personal experiences shape people's opinions on conspiracy theories, therefore highlighting the complicated interaction between cognitive processes and social effects in the development and validation of such beliefs.

Various heuristics contribute to conspiracy thinking, including the representativeness heuristic, where individuals judge events based on how closely they resemble patterns (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007; Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Furthermore, the conjunction fallacy plays a role in conspiracy belief formation, as individuals tend to seek complex explanations for events as more likely rather than simpler ones (Brotherton & French, 2014; Stall & Petrocelli, 2023). Similarly, the availability heuristic, the tendency to make judgements about individuals based on the most up-to-date information remembered by them and proportionality bias, where individuals believe significant events must have equally significant causes, further fuel conspiracy thinking (Mircică, 2017; Stall & Petrocelli, 2023). Participant 6’s reliance on second-hand experiences and media reinforces the idea that conspiracy beliefs often arise from indirect rather than direct personal encounters. Digital content was also used to validate their views, demonstrating the role of selective information in shaping beliefs and filling gaps in personal knowledge, further influencing their beliefs (Enders et al., 2023). Media is explored in more depth in the following section.

Overall, the findings draw attention to some of the complex factors and reasons for either acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories. The responses suggest that conspiratorial belief is not only the result of misinformation or irrational thinking, but are often shaped by personal experiences, such as exposure to unexplained phenomena, family influence, media, and historical knowledge. The differing approaches shown by participants highlight varying levels of critical thinking and scepticism, demonstrating how broader social contexts often play a role in shaping or distorting perceptions of truth, which in turn often reinforce the belief in conspiracy theories.

The Role of Mainstream News and Social Media in Conspiracy Theories

This theme captures the complexities of the participants' engagement with and use of mainstream media and social media in their conspiracy beliefs. Mainstream news and social media play a strong role in modern society and are also thought to be responsible for increases in conspiracy theories by 77% of Americans (Uscinski et al., 2022). Enders et al. (2023) also illustrated that individuals who regularly use social media, as well as source news from social media are more likely to hold conspiracy beliefs.

Participant 1 stated that, despite the increased presence of aliens in mainstream media, people still considered it a fringe belief.

> *"I think it's still seen as kind of this fringe belief… but then more and more of our media and the content we consume is based around you know these, you know sci-fi shows and space shows, they're more prolific than ever, so I think it's becoming more normalised."* – Participant #1

This suggests that extended coverage of theories within mainstream media allows what was once considered abnormal to become normalised, shifting public perceptions. For

participant 1, this increased media visibility meant their belief in aliens, although still considered ‘fringe’ was helping to desensitise individuals to the belief and thus making them less socially stigmatised. This participant felt that this normalising effect may encourage individuals to be more open to such ideas, reducing the need for ‘believers’ to hide or downplay their beliefs.

Participant 2 offered a more generalised perspective, using wars as an example. They felt that media influence was dependent on the specific conspiracy, the country promoting it, and whether it aligned with that country’s geopolitical agenda.

> *“If I looked at a certain thing like man-made wars and how war ideology goes in the world I would say, yes… if you're looking at wars, say, which war. Because they're going to say different things happening in different wars. Right. Depending on who the US supports.”* – Participant #2

The role of the United States in global conflicts was particularly significant for Participant 2, emphasising how media coverage is often selective, shaped by power dynamics, and capable of controlling the dominant narrative. This highlights the belief that media can be used as a tool by institutions to influence or reinforce which conspiracy theories gain traction or are suppressed according to ideological and geopolitical drivers. The implication here is that conspiracy beliefs are not just random or irrational but are often rooted in geopolitical realities, historical events, and selective information dissemination. As a result, media consumers may struggle to distinguish between propaganda or strategic misinformation, thus potentially increasing mistrust of narratives and feelings of bias and manipulation.

Participant 3 also expressed distrust in mainstream media, adding that they only utilised social media for personal development or work related purposes. They believed that

rather than providing impartial or objective information, mainstream news organisations deliberately shaped narratives to suit particular objectives.

> "*I'm a consumer if I need to be like if it if it means it's a personal development thing or if it's my career… I don't watch the news…because it's a big narrative. It's a big media influenced world… paint this narrative so that our viewers can believe what we're trying to say. So everything is point of view."* – Participant #3

This response highlights a broader distrust in mainstream media, with media institutions being perceived to have overt and hidden agendas. This scepticism extends beyond specific outlets, reinforcing the belief that no media can be fully trusted. As a result, individuals may disengage from traditional journalism or turn to alternative, often unregulated sources, thus deepening echo chambers.

The response from participant 4 also indicated belief that media outlets tailored narratives depending on regions or countries and, in doing so covered 'things' up. This was illustrated by a story about a Russian mother's murder by her son that had not been well mentioned, particularly by Western media.

> *"I noticed that different media outlets depending on the region… or the country, the media would generally tend to cover up different things… recent case in Russia where the child brutally murdered his own mother…hasn't really been mentioned particularly in, I guess, Western media."* – Participant #4

They also claimed that social media can make it more difficult for individuals to discern the truth of conspiracies due to the spread of false information.

> *"I think social media sometimes can cause confusion… I guess the point of the conspiracy theory can either be real but then it uses like fake or made up evidence or it's just a lot of clutter and makes it more confusing."* – Participant #4

This division between social media and mainstream media, though in different ways, reflects a larger mistrust toward both. Mainstream media is considered as agenda-driven, and providing simplistic narratives to the general public, whereas social media is seen as a place where certain platforms may promote misinformation, while others offer more in-depth discussions.

Participant 5 differentiated between media platforms, suggesting that sites such as Facebook and Instagram are for lower level truth seekers who make conspiracy claims without evidence. Conversely, sites such as 'X' or Twitter are more credible and provide solid arguments for the 'truth'. Lastly, mainstream media is useful for 'fluff' pieces but was more opinion or agenda based and less about the 'truth', likely because that is all the mass population can handle.

> *"…more interested in more lower level or more mundane sort of less intellectual discussion for example Facebook or Instagram…role is to convince people without much facts or evidence…detailed thread on Twitter or X those ones is much more credibility or ability to the reasoning and evidence… digging to the truth and digging into the truth provide a more solid argument for a particular theory. Whereas the mainstream media… its potential to inject potential opinions or agendas like angling at a certain angling… can become less about truth."* – Participant #5

Ideally, they suggest that the population, irrespective of what they uncover should strive to find the truth, however, does not feel the population is ready for this.

> *"…there's that line from the Simpsons where Homer says, 'you can't handle the truth' like I think that's true of a lot of the population."* – Participant #5

Compared to the days of the library or newspapers, participant 6 concedes that with the amount and ease of information media provides, especially social media such as YouTube, it increases the likelihood of conspiracy theories.

> "*The information is just there for you and uh And then like with all the different platforms…YouTube's great for You know, especially like, you know, because I like looking at the conspiracy theory things…I think, yeah, definitely like this day and age with all the information and that it's sort of it can lead to a lot more out their theories as well, but it gives people, I guess, a platform for talking about these sort of things and that as well."* – Participant #6

Participant 7 claimed media enabled the spread the untrustworthy new and information making it difficult to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction.

> *"I think they are a really good breeding ground for fake news and fake information and it's very, very hard nowadays to extract what is true and what isn't."* – Participant #7

Participants presented varied views on how media plays a role in reinforcing or challenging conspiracy theories, but there was consensus from participants that media contributes to the spread of conspiracies, which is consistent with current research. Aligning with the sentiments of Douglas et al., (2017), several participants highlighted the importance of contextual factors, such as media types or differing media narratives across countries, that

shape conspiracy belief. Distrust of mainstream media, mentioned by participant 3 and 4, as well as selective narratives are consistent with research that claims conspiracy believers are unlikely to trust such institutions (Hughey, 2021; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). The suggestions by participant 6, that certain social media platforms promote public discourse and accelerate conspiracy theories are supported by Lewandowsky et al. (2017). These responses demonstrate the role media plays in influencing views on conspiracy theories.

Impacts of Conspiracy Belief

There are a number of impacts of having conspiracy beliefs identified by the participants. These are broken down into scepticism and opposition, evaluation of credibility and empowerment and control.

Scepticism and Opposition

This theme captures whether the participants encountered scepticism and opposition to their beliefs and how they dealt with this. Conspiracy theorists are often dismissed as crazy or irrational (Coady, 2007). They can also be portrayed as gullible members of society who fall prey to echo chambers, particularly on social media, where they gain reinforcement of their belief, allowing them to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance (Douglas et al., 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Van de Cruys et al., 2024).

Participant 1 felt that despite increasing evidence, believers in Aliens are often still portrayed as having mental health issues by the media. However, they acknowledged that people had the right to their opinions and encouraged ongoing conversations.

> "*…the guy who believes in aliens is always set up as well. The nut jobs with tinfoil hats and all that and he lives in a van. He's crazy kind of thing… I'm*

fine with you know being not believed or doubted. People are always entitled to their opinions, again I think it's healthy discourse." – Participant #1

The opposite approach was taken by participant 2, who found the scepticism frustrating and was only interested in conversing with those who were open to the possibility of conspiracies.

"…*with a bit of frustration because some people don't believe that sort of thing <conspiratorial things> and I tend not to talk to those people. I think there's becoming more awareness of the possibilities… some people I can talk freely to and just some I can't."* – Participant #2

Participant 3 acknowledged having encountered both and recalled a particular instance with their aunt, who expressed scepticism when the participant suggested positive thinking in aid of her granddad's health. The participant is a strong believer in positive thinking, while the aunt thought the theories about this were all farfetched. The aunt ultimately tried this herself and saw positive results, so was swayed in her thinking.

"Oh, 100%...tell her, you align yourself in that frequency…so I was showing her these techniques and it's funny because six months after that, she was telling me that she thought I was crazy… what is this girl getting into with her conspiracy theories? she actually applied what I was telling her…she did the visualisation… the first time in five years, they walked out of that appointment feeling optimistic about his health." – Participant #3

Participant 4 overcomes the scepticism they frequently encounter when discussing theories by focusing on facts and logic. They also attribute this strategy to a possible coping mechanism, as some conspiracy theories are difficult to handle.

"*Definitely. That's happened now a lot of times… I like to just go by some facts and logic… maybe it could be a coping mechanism… to be honest, some conspiracy theories are very difficult to handle mentally."* – Participant #4

Participant 5 adopts a cautious approach, stating that they have not faced any opposition or scepticism since they avoid talking about theories with closed minded people and are reluctant to initiate such conversations without knowing the individual.

"No, Because, yeah, I wouldn't just speak of it to any random person…it would have been like people that were open to ideas… I wouldn't bring it up unless I knew the person." – Participant #5

Taking a more inclusive and open approach, participant 6 enjoys engaging with a range of people, and recognises that everyone is entitled to their opinion. They claim that even if they disagree with certain theories, such as flat earth, it is still interesting to hear the arguments.

"I'm not going to not talk to someone all that because they don't have the same beliefs as me or not. But everyone's entitled to their opinion. There are some conspiracy theories… like the flat earth… think that's a bit crazy… some of the stuff that they sort of say is interesting." – Participant #6

Additionally, participant 7's response differs based on the individual and their level of scepticism and opposition. In an attempt to avoid conflict, they present their argument but otherwise do not engage.

"Oh, yes, definitely. That's usually the way with this sort of thing…it depends <on> who it is and how forceful it is… I'll just state my case again and then withdraw… I don't like conflict." – Participant #7

Consistent with Coady (2007), participants expressed the scepticism and opposition they receive when sharing their conspiracy beliefs. Findings of participants 1 and 6 acknowledge the stigma surrounding conspiracy beliefs, though they still aimed for open and respectful discussions to appear knowledgeable. Interestingly, this response style was discussed by Douglas et al. (2019), who suggested that research of online advocates of conspiracy theories was always careful to appear open-minded and rational. Several other participants, namely 2, 5 and 7, all preferred to maintain separation from non-believers. This aligns with studies on the use of online echo chambers being used to reinforce conspiracy belief, as well as provide a sense of belonging (Douglas et al., 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). However, explanations offered by researchers for these tactics thus far only relate to online experiences and do not translate to in person experiences, therefore further qualitative research is needed. Overall, participants in this research employed varied strategies, from openness to selective engagement and avoidance to contend with the scepticism and opposition they encountered.

Evaluation of Credibility

This theme captures the processes participants went through to evaluate the information they located around their conspiracy belief. The credibility of different sources and any changes in belief are also discussed in this theme. In the context of conspiracy theories, distinguishing fact from fiction is increasingly difficult. Conspiracy theories often rely on cognitive biases and appeal to those who are sceptical of government officials and the institutions they represent, making information evaluation critical (Douglas et al., 2017; Federico et al., 2018). Research indicates that those who lack critical thinking skills are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories without challenging their validity (Swami et al., 2014).

Participant 1 emphasised the importance of checking multiple sources, however, expressed scepticism against mainstream media. According to them, this media source is more focused on opinion pieces. They stated they were more likely to follow theories that affected them or their family directly, such as COVID, and they were dismissive of theories they considered too farfetched, such as flat earth. They acknowledged that they did not do their own direct scientific research and held a preference for aggregator sites such as Reddit, which they felt were more credible due to the diverse literature available, though felt there were also elements of echo chambers. They also indicated that most of their beliefs remain consistent over time, with little reconsideration of previously held views.

> "*I usually like to have as many sources as possible… If it's way out there, I'll just dismiss it. if it is something that generally will affect me like you know my health, my well-being, my family's well-being, I'll follow up on it to see how credible it is… I'm not going out and interviewing doctors or anything like that, a bit more than say the talking heads on the news…I was on Reddit fairly heavily, re COVID…its good and bad, the echo chamber thing again."*
>
> *"I mean, most of the ones I do believe in, I still believe in."* – Participant #1

Expressing distrust in relying on a single source, participant 2 also preferred a diverse selection of sources when evaluating theories. While they made use of mainstream media, this was more of a validation strategy for content they saw ahead of time on sites such as Telegram. They were also unlikely to reconsider held theories, asserting that by the time they had decided, a significant amount of time had been spent evaluating information.

> "*There's no one spot. I don't think I can trust any one spot… that can be wrong and then you're wrong. I tend to look at a lot of things… media, magazines,*

what you read in the paper, Telegram. I'll see it a day ahead of the mainstream media. That's one of the validating things."

"No, not really <anything I've changed my mind about>, not in that area, probably not in a lot of areas actually. It sounds like I could make a mistake but by the time I make my mind up on something, I've actually spent quite a bit of time forming that mind." – Participant #2

Participant 3 suggested validation was subjective to the individual and emphasised the importance of personal and tangible experiences in order for them to determine this. Although they do not equate this belief with a conspiracy theory, they have, as an adult reconsidered previously held beliefs about religious teachings surrounding death in the Christian faith.

"*I think it has to be subjective to the individual. So, it needs to have had an impact on that person individually… has had a tangible impact in my life…I validate it from that."*

"I don't know if it's a, I'll say conspiracy theory because it can't be backed by science…the basis was that when we die, we get buried and our souls are like lingering around until Jesus comes to earth and then we all arise you know that kind of thing. I still believe in God, though even as a kid, I always felt like there was something amiss there… now I've grown, I'm like, okay, I don't believe in that anymore" – Participant #3

The nature of the source was participant 4's main validation concern, and they were also eager to seek opposing opinions to gain a wider perspective. Participant 4 mentioned that, because Google is heavily censored and because influencers post on social media to garner attention, they were hesitant to use certain media sources. Instead, they relied on their

own experiences to distinguish between what they thought was fact and fiction. They also had never reconsidered any of their beliefs.

> *"I'll have to look at the first the person who's saying it, their credibility. Google or Bing, for example, some searches would be removed… definitely some censorship. Some social media influencers just maybe for attention. I would definitely ask for opposing opinions… want to see someone else's perspective who really heavily criticises conspiracy itself. If it's people in real life then, if I have any particular past experiences or memory that would suggest that the conspiracy theory is true."*– Participant #4

Participant 5 sought validation from a variety of sources that had demonstrated objective reporting on past theories, as well as aggregator sites such as Google to see trends. They did feel that some sites or communities had an increased likelihood of the 'truth' being discussed. This participant was less interested in who was propagating a theory, with the 'truth' being the most important thing. As such, they were open to reconsidering theories as new evidence arose. They were able to offer an example of this, where they initially believed evidence that the sun would implode, but upon further investigation, felt this theory was not feasible.

> "*I'd check where I've seen more like objective news or arguments…based on previous experience. Certain sites or communities might have a higher change of the truth being discussed…I check there… also check like the new usual news sites, aggregator <ones> like Google…to see what the headlines are…a wide range of sources*."
>
> "*Yeah, definitely. As new evidence comes in. One theory…the sun is on the brink of a cyclical disaster...initially evidence presented seemed to point*

towards this…more reading and listening made me question it…theory not as solid as it presented." – Participant #5

If the theory is of interest, then multiple sources of validation, including YouTube, were used by participant 6 to get the supporting and opposing sides of an argument. They acknowledged that the credibility of the poster can be difficult to ascertain and would consider other postings by the same user to determine this. They recalled one particular theory that continues to fluctuate with surrounding aliens and the building of the pyramids. They suggested this reconsideration is based on past experience, which may have shaped their beliefs.

"I'd probably…watch the video… they'll present what their reasoning… if I'm still not sure… I might go on to like another YouTube channel or something. If there's one way like I'm particularly interested or fascinated by then I may, like, go, okay, look I might look at another one for say pro and then go, okay, I might now have a look at and against one as well. It helps if it's from someone credible… can be hard to with even especially like YouTube… I may like look at some of their other content and that as well to sort of have a look and see."

"I sort of lean towards maybe a little bit more but not as much these days… the pyramids maybe being built by aliens… I thought at the time I did think like civilisations could build sort of structures… it could have been <aliens> possible to do it. I used to like watching Stargate and stuff like that when I was growing up. So that sort of was to do with it." – Participant #6

Not a frequent social media user, participant 7 relies on experienced based validation, placing more trust in opinions of family and friends. They were open to reconsideration of

beliefs, though felt information sourced from mainstream media may not always be accurate, and therefore personal stories were more credible.

> *"It's very hard. I probably mostly would just go by other people's experiences with that particular thing."*

> *"Depending on what was said. I'm open to that, yes. I've listened to them all, but I guess friends and family would be the most influential for me. I think people are just swayed by mainstream information. I don't know that always people are giving you the right information from. If someone had a personal experience and I'd probably more like to listen to that."* – Participant #7

When assessing a theory, numerous participants stressed the importance of looking for diverse sources. They did, however, also exhibit a deep mistrust of the mainstream media, seeing it as severely restricted, skewed, or opinion driven. For instance, participant 1 cited the presence of echo chambers, favouring aggregator platforms like Reddit over conventional news sources, while participant 7 questioned the accuracy of these sources. This scepticism is consistent with earlier studies that indicate people's mistrust in traditional media is growing (Difonzo, 2018; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Several participants highlighted the significance of personal experiences in assessing theory viability. However, others, such as participant 3 went further, suggesting validation was subjective. Although some participants, such as participant 2 remain steadfast in their beliefs, others, like participant 5 showed a willingness to reconsider their beliefs when new evidence was offered. This is supported by the theory that people who actively absorb information from a variety of sources can be more receptive to changing their thoughts (Swami et al., 2014).

Empowerment and Control

This theme explores the role of power, empowerment, and control for the participants, and how they manage this in relation to their beliefs and the meaning they attribute to them. Prior research has suggested that conspiracy theories offer individuals a sense of empowerment and control, particularly during times of uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2017; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). For instance, during chaotic events such as 9/11, conspiracy beliefs may have provided a simpler explanation for complex situations and may serve as a coping mechanism (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Research suggests that those with a high external locus of control, who feel that many life events are determined by outside forces, are more prone to this need for control (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999).

Participant 1 recalled how government restrictions during the global pandemic may have left individuals feeling powerless and inevitably pushed back as a way to reassert control over their lives.

> *"Absolutely, yeah...the COVID one would be the most relevant… being told you've got to wear these masks, you've got to stay inside… media is yelling at you…or you're a bad person. The natural inclination would be to rebel against that… breaking the mask mandates and then going out… you can only push people so far before they push back*." – Participant #1

Conversely, participant 2 rejected the idea that believing in conspiracies provides a sense of control, instead suggesting that those in positions of authority do. They did, however, acknowledge gaining a sense of fulfilment or control from the idea of knowing something that others may not. They also expressed frustration at being forced to do things when their belief renders the requirement unnecessary.

"*No, it's the opposite. I feel like other elements of trying to control things. In some ways there is a little bit of control with me or a little bit of satisfaction that if I think I know something and somebody's wanting me to do it…<it is legally required>… that would cause a frustration*." – Participant #2

Participant 3 questions whether conspiracy beliefs provide empowerment. Rather, they suggest that lack of knowledge may be of greater influence in conspiracy belief over a quest for control. Using the COVID-19 as an example and taking a pragmatic approach, they explain their motivations in taking this <the first vaccine> was based on lack of information and uncertainty. However, once they felt further informed, largely based on their personal observations, they felt the second vaccine was not of urgency.

"I don't know if there's a sense of empowerment or if it's just a lack of knowledge. As an example I took the vaccine, and I took the first dose. I didn't take the second dose… a lot of it was, did I was in-depthly educate myself and what the vaccine was… how it would have affected my body…that's when I would have made that informed decision… it was more so not that I didn't care about who was distributing it or why it was being distributed, it was more so I don't know the outcome of it if I don't take it." – Participant #3

It was asserted by participant 4 that, in addition to gaining a sense of power, conspiracy belief also provides a sense of identity and self-determination.

"*Yes, it gives individuality. But it's not just about power. It's also about understanding what's happening versus what we're just being told… that's a pretty basic human component to make judgment on something."* – Participant #4

Participant 5 expressed uncertainty, suggesting environmental stressors as well as a person's inherent personality to be the main drivers. They further implied that these factors lead to a desire to understand the 'truth' and question the status quo when life was not going to plan, thus motivating them to seek alternative explanations.

> "*Possibly…maybe people might in the first place be pushed towards like trying to find out the truth events in their life like the life somehow becomes less comfortable…they want to question why it's like that. I think…the main driver or reason would be just in nature…these environmental stresses…the main thing is still inherent, like inherent personality."* – Participant #5

Comments from participant 6 indicate that they somewhat consider conspiracy belief allows an individual to attain control and a sense of empowerment, though at times individuals believe what they want. This implies that individuals search for confirmation, whether in the narrative or groups offered through conspiracy belief. They suggest that others, particularly on social media, may feel powerful due to their ability to influence others.

> *"There could be elements to that that are definitely true. Sometimes people you know they will believe what they want to believe. For some people too it may be… being on social media… they have lots of subscribers and followers… they're thinking to me that they've got a lot more power that influence other people."* – Participant #6

Participant 7 was more certain, stating that going against mainstream opinions has the opposite effect. This suggests that those who have conspiracy beliefs may feel marginalised and powerless.

"*No, not if it's against whatever most people are thinking, <less part of society>.*" – Participant #7

Several participants agreed that conspiracy belief may provide a feeling of control or empowerment during times of uncertainty or during chaotic events. This was consistent with research, where simpler explanations for complex situations were shown to offer individuals a sense of security and help them gain understanding of their environment (Douglas et al., 2017; Papaioannou et al., 2023). For instance, participant 1 suggested that during the COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of powerlessness motivated individuals to revolt against the government in an effort to regain control. This is further supported by research demonstrating that during times of uncertainty and perceived lack of control, individuals were more likely to see patterns where none exist and question those in positions of authority to reassert autonomy (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Participants 3, 4, 5, and 6 go further, suggesting in addition to power and control, other factors, such as personal agency or lack of knowledge, could be primary motivating factors. These align with findings by Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) that demonstrated the notion that conspiracy belief offers simple explanations was not supported as a primary factor. Conversely, according to participants 2 and 7, individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs, usually at odds with mainstream beliefs were often left feeling excluded and marginalised.

Negative Societal Consequences

This theme explores the negative consequences of having conspiracy beliefs, including any personal consequences and the participants views on trust in wider institutions. Belief in and exposure to conspiracy theories can have a significant impact on social cohesiveness, institutional trust, and society as a whole. Research suggests that conspiracy belief promotes prejudice, erodes social capital, and exacerbates divisions in society (Jolley et

al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Van de Cruys et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in the context of political or health events, causing divides and mistrust (Allington et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2019; Jolley et al., 2020).

Participant 1 suggests that conspiracy theories play a role in societal narratives, particularly influencing media that can be both educational and entertaining. They acknowledge that confidence in institutions can be eroded, especially when 'conspiracies' are proven to be true, citing MKUltra as an example. They do not consider themselves to have encountered any negative consequences, other than the occasional eye rolls.

> *"In the way that it influences media… It's part of the stories we tell each other, for entertainment or education… yeah, I'd say, influences us. There was this government program called MKUltra… everyone thought was a conspiracy that the US Government was drugging the water… 10 years later documents got declassified, turns out they were drug in the water… it shakes your confidence in the establishment… erodes confidence."*
>
> *"Oh, not negative. You know, you met with some eye rolls occasionally, but that's not going to do you any harm... I've never lost a job because of anything I believe."* – Participant #1

Participant 2 suggests that the majority of the population is not aware of most conspiracy theories and therefore carry on with day to day lives without much societal effect. However, COVID-19 lockdowns were offered as an example of possible effects, and only those in the 'know' were actually affected. They mention they are more cautious when required to receive any vaccination. This suggests the participant did not believe in the lockdown requirement as they knew the 'truth'. This participant could not recall any notable personal negative impact, other than having their beliefs dismissed by colleagues.

> *"I don't think that most people are sort of even aware of all this. It's flowing under the radar. You've got to read those magazines… most people don't…So they just go about their day-to-day life. I'm now thinking I probably shouldn't get shots of anything… it's a big decision now…In some ways. I mean, if you look at the lockdown thing, yes <it affected trust in institution and social cohesion>…Lockdown I suppose <was a tangible consequence to society>."*
>
> *"I can't readily recall one. When I was working, work mates might say, you're off with the fairies, you know nothing serious… hasn't been anything notable, no great disadvantage."* – Participant #2

In complete agreement, participant 3 acknowledges the effects conspiracy belief has on society, especially in how individuals make decisions. Although they have had no direct negative consequences due to their beliefs, utilising COVID-19 vaccinations as an example, they mention what they observed and how it created societal prejudices and increased institutional distrust.

> *"100%. If people are not able to make decisions for themselves. Yeah, I think it is because the more that people know in any conspiracy theory, the more they become aware of who is providing the information and where is that informational channel coming from…people become more like suspicious. I have that distrust <of the media>."*
>
> *"I think that not for me personally, but what I've seen I think you brought it up before about the vaccine <in Study 1 survey>. This is a government controlled vaccine or this vaccine is here to help us or, you know, the companies like some are like, you can't send your children to school if they're not vaccinated everyone just has to make informed decision what they think is best for their*

family. So I think that one there was what divided a lot within the country…*then there's sort of that prejudice."* – Participant #3

Along with mistrust, Participant 4 was also concerned about being controlled and thinking independently, especially with certain conspiracy theories like COVID-19. They stated how society was divided, people were forced, oppressed, or led to believe that it <the vaccine> was optional, though in reality, they were restricted. As far as they were aware, they had not faced any negative consequences as a result of their beliefs.

"Mistrust, but not just mistrust, also allowing us to think for ourselves rather than have someone else think for us and be controlled… free speech, freedom of opinion. We kind of was forced to take it <the COVID-19 vaccine>, actually I didn't… they said we had an option but then it was kind of um coercion… privileges taken away so it's not really an option."

"No negative consequences… to do with the beliefs… certain people are just going to try to find anything that of me that looks particularly bad… so I don't think it was <due to beliefs>." – Participant #4

Though they agree that conspiracy belief affects trust, particularly if a 'theory' has been found out to be true, participant 5 takes a more subjective view of societal impacts. They suggest that not being able to be authentic and having to conform may lead to negative impacts in society. Further, they express dissatisfaction and frustration at having to censor themselves as a negative consequence of their conspiracy beliefs.

"Yes, I guess, definitely <effects trust>, especially if it's a wrongdoing that's historically been done and covered up. It's subjective… if the theories are conducive to healthy society and by that, I mean like seeking the truth…

having to pretend… or act a certain way where it's not natural or not beneficial to society."

Negative consequences is quite general, see negative consequences… in a sense that you have to maybe do something or say something in certain situations that you know aren't true just to not yeah rock the boat in certain situations…censor myself…being forced to go a lot with or support something that is untrue." – Participant #5

Participant 6 suggests that having increased access to information allows individuals to source, evaluate, and form opinions, which affects institutional trust and, overtime erodes trust. Other than being called 'crazy', they had not experienced any negative consequences for their beliefs and understood how they are perceived by others, though noted they are sure of their beliefs and unlikely to be swayed from them.

"Oh, I think it definitely does… now you can look up anything you want, and people can talk about certain subjects…give maybe credible information or just information…people can stop and think and go, oh, yeah, look, I agree with that, or I don't. You know, they might then start judging certain organisations."

"The worst has probably just been… someone just thinks I'm crazy or something. If that's what I believe, then like…it's going to be probably pretty hard to change my mind unless there's something concrete proof. Tt hasn't been like at the stage where like someone's like stopped talking… they may think I'm an idiot or whatever and then not talk to me. And like, I'm not going to lose sleep over that. Personal relationships with friends and things like that

like it's never been like; I'm not going to spoke to you anymore or anything like that." – Participant #6

Participant 7 expressed agreement, indicating that increased conspiracy beliefs may have a detrimental effect on society until they are proven, particularly with division of people and conflict over their beliefs. They noted that increased distrust was more likely to be directed against government and institutions rather than individuals. While they acknowledged such beliefs could lead to tangible consequences, such as lower political engagement, including reduced voting, they personally had not experienced any negative consequences based on their own beliefs.

"Yes <mass belief could affect society>… generally, if it's a conspiracy theory and masses of people are believing it, until it's proved it would have a probably a negative effect because it would be dividing people. Yes <may create more distrust in society> with institution or the government. Yes, I think that that would be the case <reduced voting>, yes."

"No <I have not faced any negative consequences as a result of my beliefs>." – Participant #7

The findings support that belief in, and exposure to conspiracy theories can erode social cohesion as well as institutional trust, particularly in the context of health and political events (Jolley et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). While the majority of participants did not indicate any negative personal consequences from their beliefs, they acknowledged the wider societal implications, including increased distrust in governments and the possibility of decreased political participation (Allington et al., 2021). Several participants also highlighted how distrust and scepticism toward institutions both increase and are reinforced when

conspiracies, such as MKUltra, are later proven to be true, thus contributing to the erosion of social trust.

Furthermore, the participant responses support the notion that conspiracy beliefs influence broader social trust. Although personal consequences endured by participants were minimal, the wider effects on institutional confidence were evident. This suggests that even when individuals do not encounter direct personal consequences, the collective impact of conspiracy beliefs can undermine public trust in key institutions, such as government, media, and health organisations (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Hughey, 2021). Such beliefs perpetuate a cycle of scepticism, making it harder to rebuild social cohesion and public confidence, which is critical in maintaining a well-functioning, trusting society (Allington et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Interestingly, some participants described a sense of being more aware or enlightened than others, referring to the general public as lacking critical awareness or 'sheep'. This belief that others blindly follow mainstream narratives, while the participant 'sees the truth', reflects a recurring theme of intellectual and moral superiority. The participants positioned themselves as members of an exclusive, observant minority that is able to think critically and withstand persuasion. By setting oneself apart from the ignorant or obedient mass, these phrases serve a societal purpose in addition to enhancing a sense of individuality and understanding.

> *"But there's definitely some things going on that I don't think the general public knows about or not aware of anyway.* < conspiracy theories are shaped by public opinion and societal attitudes*?> Yes, I think so. Not so much me, but I think it's definitely shaped public opinion. Because people are like a flock of sheep."* – Participant #2

> *"*<commonalities…traits of people more inclined to believe or not believe in something> *It's a hard one to answer, I think, but I think like the only thing I guess from my experience with like talking to people I feel it's like more people who are more open-minded sort of have that view where I think other people who I'm just sort of happy just to go with just like the stock standard ways of life and don't really question things* < more sheep driven ?> *yeah"* – Participant #6

These perspectives may be indicative of underlying motivations tied to self-enhancement, where belief in conspiracies affirms the individual's sense of special knowledge or insight that others are perceived to lack. This aligns with psychological research that links conspiracy beliefs with narcissistic traits, particularly collective or individual narcissism, which emphasise one's distinctiveness and superiority (Cichocka et al., 2016; Lantian et al., 2017). In this sense, conspiracy theories serve as both frameworks for explaining ambiguous occurrences and strategies for preserving one's sense of self and identity in relation to a larger social group. Using phrases like 'sheep mentality' demonstrates a worldview that is heavily influenced by comparison and differentiation between the misinformed out-group and the knowledgeable in-group.

Self-Esteem

Findings regarding self-esteem and conspiracy beliefs are inconsistent. Lantian et al. (2017) have suggested that low self-esteem is correlated with increased conspiracy belief. Such beliefs are considered to be used as coping mechanism for perceived lack of control or powerlessness that an individual faces (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011). However, those with high self-esteem are also suggested to be drawn to conspiracy narratives that support their group identity (Lantian et al., 2017). Conversely, other researchers

(Cichocka et al., 2016) assert that individuals with high self-esteem are less inclined to believe in conspiracies because they have greater institutional trust and a more positive worldview.

This inconsistency in the relationship between self-esteem and conspiracy belief relationships was evident in the survey data and also with the interviewed participants. Of the seven participants, the majority (71%) scored within the normal range for self-report RSES, (15-25). However, the two outliers consisted of the lowest and highest RSES scorers, 14 and 30 respectively. Interestingly, both of these participants were the highest scorers of the BCT scale, 32 and 31 respectively. The participant with the lowest RSES score (14) was also the highest scorer on the ACB scale (27), with the highest RESE scorer (30) being the joint third highest ACB scorer (23) (see Table 17).

These findings suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and conspiracy belief is complex and may be mediated by other factors, such as individual social environment, personality, experiences, or even the belief itself (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Furthermore, cultural differences and the subjectivity of self-esteem make assessment challenging (Cai et al., 2007; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). These nuances suggest that further understanding of how self-esteem interacts with conspiracy beliefs must be considered if developing effective strategies aimed at reducing conspiracy theory appeal is the basis of future study.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous research, demonstrating that belief in conspiracy theories is shaped by various psychological and sociological factors. Participants articulated a range of conspiracy beliefs, including the existence of extraterrestrial life, government cover-ups, and alternative explanations for historical events. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, this study considered and explored the role of personal experiences and media, as well as examining the psychological motivations and societal impacts behind conspiratorial beliefs, highlighting the broad psychological and sociological implications. Several key themes emerged, offering a nuanced understanding of why individuals adopt and maintain conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Belief Motivations

Belief in conspiracy theories is often influenced by individual experiences, media exposure, and cognitive tendencies (Douglas et al., 2017; Enders et al., 2023; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This was the case in this research, with several participants referring to formative experiences that led them to and supported conspiratorial thinking. For instance, early exposure to science fiction led some participants to develop beliefs about extraterrestrial life, demonstrating how cultural influences can shape beliefs. Social constructionism posits that an individual may have multiple realities that are influenced by personal experiences and social interactions (Burr, 2015). This is consistent with the responses of participants who describe how the development of their ideas stems from either their own autonomous experiences or familial influence. One participant demonstrated this by revealing that, although their interest in supernatural phenomena, such as ghosts, was influenced by their mother, their belief in extraterrestrial life was formed independently. This reflects broader research, such as that conducted by Jones et al. (2011), which proposes social reinforcement

learning, in which repeated and positive social reinforcement shapes individual behaviour. Therefore, it is plausible that social learning may play a role in the development of conspiracy belief.

Another important factor that influenced conspiracy belief was institutional distrust. Participants who subscribed to government related conspiracy theories, such as COVID-19 vaccine scepticism or the New World Order, demonstrated suspicion toward elites and global institutions. This supports previous research showing how institutional distrust fosters conspiratorial belief (Goertzel, 1994; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). One participant who supported the New World Order theory referred to publications such as Nexus and New Dawn, which often promote conspiracy theories and suggest global governance as being complicit in the implementation of totalitarianism. The tendency to look for information from alternative sources that support preconceived notions is thought to be a characteristic of conspiratorial thinking (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; White, 2022).

Furthermore, feelings of betrayal, anger, and mistrust towards government, media, and scientific institutions were recurrent, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs are not merely cognitive in nature, but are deeply intertwined with emotional responses. Participants' responses suggested that exposure to and belief in conspiracy theories may contribute to the erosion of institutional trust, particularly in political and health-related contexts (Jolley et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The narratives shared by interviewees reflected a broader distrust in governmental and institutional authority, often reinforced by historical events where conspiratorial claims based on government secrecy and deceit were later substantiated, such as MKUltra (Oliver & Wood, 2014). This demonstrates how retroactive confirmation may serve to strengthen preexisting conspiracy theories.

Psychological factors of conspiracy belief were also evident in participants' responses. The need for certainty and control in unpredictable situations is a recurring theme in conspiracy research (Douglas et al., 2017; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). This is consistent with the responses from participants who indicated that conspiracy theories can offer a sense of understanding and belonging, particularly during times of crisis or uncertainty. The belief in an afterlife conspiracy, for example, provides a structured, predictable view of existence that offers comfort in the face of uncertainty. Similarly, some participants expressed discontent and frustration with mainstream explanations for historical events such as 9/11 or the death of Princess Diana, suggesting a preference for alternative explanations that provided greater simplicity. This aligns with previous research suggesting that conspiracy theories function as cognitive shortcuts, providing structured explanations where none may be readily available (Douglas et al., 2017; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Although not evident in these research findings, cognitive tendencies, such as illusionary pattern perception, are thought to play a crucial role in conspiracy belief formation (Van Prooijen et al., 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Further research suggests that individuals prone to detecting patterns in ambiguous stimuli are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021). Furthermore, cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, reinforce these beliefs by encouraging individuals to seek out information that supports their pre-existing views while dismissing contradictory evidence (Brotherton et al., 2013; Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021; Wood et al., 2012). This was expressed by one participant who described how conspiracy theories provided them with clarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by uncertainty and fear, thus solidifying their own suspicion after experiencing a negative vaccine outcome. This cognitive bias was evident with some participants reluctance to accept mainstream narratives, reinforcing the idea that conspiracy belief and cognitive processing tendencies are intertwined.

Societal Consequences

The societal impact of conspiracy beliefs is significant, particularly concerning trust in institutions, political engagement, and social cohesion. While most participants did not report experiencing direct negative personal consequences due to their conspiracy beliefs, they acknowledged the possibility of wider societal implications, particularly the erosion of public confidence in government. This was particularly evident in the context of political and health-related issues, which is consistent with current literature (Allington et al., 2021). One participant noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicting beliefs about vaccines led to significant societal fractures. This supports research that demonstrates conspiracy beliefs increase societal polarisation by reinforcing in-group and out-group biases, which promote mistrust between social groups (Jolley et al., 2020; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

Furthermore, research highlights how conspiracy theories contribute to prejudice and discrimination, especially when particular groups are portrayed as threats (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Swami et al., 2012). Participants shared similar sentiments, suggesting individuals who believed mainstream narratives as misled. These perspectives highlight the potential for conspiracy beliefs to exacerbate social division and increase prejudice or discrimination, thus further reducing social cohesion.

Additionally, conspiracy theories have been shown to have detrimental effects on civic engagement. Research by Jolley and Douglas (2014), found that exposure to conspiracy theories can heighten feelings of disempowerment and decrease political engagement. This was supported by participants who suggested that conspiracy theories may lead to reduced compliance with public health measures or voting. This highlights the power conspiracy theories may have in undermining efforts to reduce public health crises or to threaten democracy.

These results suggest that while individuals may not personally suffer for their views, the cumulative effect of widespread conspiracy belief can lead to significant societal shifts, undermining institutions, increasing social division and reducing democratic processes.

Media Influence and Selective Exposure

Media consumption patterns among participants demonstrated a strong preference for alternative news sources, independent blogs, and social media. These media types were frequently cited as the primary source of information, with participants expressing distrust toward mainstream media. Many perceived traditional news outlets as biased or agenda-driven, a sentiment consistent with research indicating that conspiracy believers often distrust mainstream institutions (Douglas et al., 2017; Hughey, 2021). One participant explicitly rejected mainstream news, arguing that it manipulates narratives to shape public opinion. This aligns with findings that individuals who distrust the mainstream media are more likely to rely on alternative sources, which may further reinforce conspiracy beliefs (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

Social media platforms were also identified as crucial in shaping conspiracy beliefs. Several participants described how online communities provided validation for their views, highlighting the role of digital echo chambers in reinforcing belief systems. One participant noted that while aliens remain a fringe belief in mainstream discourse, the increasing presence of extraterrestrial themes in popular culture has contributed to the normalisation of the idea. This supports the argument that repeated media exposure can desensitise individuals to previously unconventional ideas (Enders et al., 2023). Furthermore, it corresponds with findings by researchers who argue that online networks facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories by creating insular environments where dissenting perspectives are minimised (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). One participant

differentiated between different social media platforms, noting that sites such as Twitter/X provided more rigorous discussions, while Facebook and Instagram were perceived as less intellectually rigorous. This illustrates how individuals may seek platforms that align with their desired level of engagement in conspiracy discourse.

Additionally, selective media consumption was evident, with several participants actively seeking out sources that aligned with their perspective while dismissing opposing views as biased or manipulated. These findings align with those of Nickerson (1998) and Stall and Petrocelli (2023) on the role of confirmation bias and the reinforcement of belief systems. Interestingly, some participants who had initially encountered conspiracy theories with scepticism reported gradually adopting them after prolonged exposure to community discussions and curated online content, demonstrating the persuasive power of repeated misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Furthermore, some participants preferred aggregator platforms such as Reddit, where they could access a diverse range of perspectives while simultaneously encountering echo chambers that reinforced their views. One participant explicitly mentioned that they had stopped engaging with traditional news sources altogether due to distrust. This is consistent with studies on media fragmentation and the self-reinforcing nature of conspiracy beliefs through selective information processing (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The intersection between conspiracy beliefs and digital misinformation underscores the necessity for greater digital literacy education to empower individuals to evaluate information critically.

Responses to Scepticism and Opposition

Participants exhibited varied responses to scepticism and opposition regarding their conspiracy beliefs. Some welcomed debate and regarded opposing views as a necessary part of discourse, while others preferred to avoid interactions with non-believers. One participant

acknowledged the stigma associated with conspiracy beliefs, highlighting media portrayals that depict believers as irrational or mentally unstable. This aligns with research suggesting how conspiracy theorists often attempt to present themselves as rational and open-minded (Douglas et al., 2019). Participants who strongly adhered to conspiracy theories often described experiencing scepticism or ridicule from others, yet they also reported finding community and validation within groups that shared their views, reinforcing the social identity aspect of belief formation. This reflects findings by Grant et al. (2015) on online vaccine scepticism sites, which found that presenting both sides of the argument was effective in strengthening support for antivaccination. These experiences suggest that scepticism from outsiders may unintentionally strengthen conspiracy theorists' resolve by enhancing group identity and reinforcing the perception of shared adversity (Nera et al., 2022).

Furthermore, several participants articulated a clear preference for engaging exclusively with like-minded communities, supporting research that highlights selective exposure and reinforcement within echo chambers (Douglas et al., 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). This strategy aligns with research demonstrating that believers frequently seek validation rather than confrontation, choosing environments that reinforce rather than challenge their beliefs (Douglas et al., 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Participants who did engage with sceptics reported frustration, perceiving scepticism as indicative of an unwillingness to genuinely consider alternative perspectives. This perception echoes broader literature highlighting how conspiracy believers often regard themselves as holding superior insights that are often dismissed by mainstream society (Lantian et al., 2017; Van Prooijen, 2022).

Empowerment and Control Through Conspiracy Beliefs

The belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to feelings of empowerment and control, particularly during periods of uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2017; Papaioannou et al., 2023). Several participants suggested that believing in conspiracies provided a sense of autonomy and independence, particularly by rejecting mainstream narratives that are often perceived as restrictive or manipulative. For instance, one participant argued that government restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where individuals sought alternative explanations to reassert control over their lives. This aligns closely with prior research indicating that conspiracy theories often function as coping mechanisms in response to perceived threats to personal autonomy and control during crises (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Liekefett et al. (2023) further suggest that conspiracy beliefs may provide benefits, such as empowerment to those who feel alienated and disadvantaged by society. Ultimately, whether conspiracy beliefs provide individuals with a sense of control or leave them feeling isolated is influenced by societal context, personal perspectives, and how they choose to engage with these beliefs. However, not all participants viewed conspiracy belief as inherently empowering. Some suggested that rather than providing a sense of control, conspiracy theories could foster frustration and alienation. This aligns with research that contends that while conspiracy beliefs can offer empowerment to some, they can also exacerbate feelings of marginalisation, potentially leading to social alienation, particularly when their views conflict with mainstream narratives (Liekefett et al., 2023).

Additionally, research by Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) and Swami et al. (2011) explains that conspiracy narratives can particularly appeal to individuals experiencing feelings of powerlessness or insecurity by providing an external locus of control, allowing

individuals to attribute their circumstances to external forces rather than their own actions. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that conspiracy beliefs can also intensify negative psychological outcomes. Jolley and Douglas (2014) demonstrate that while conspiracy beliefs initially serve to reduce feelings of powerlessness, prolonged engagement can increase feelings of disempowerment and reduce engagement.

While conspiracy theories may initially offer perceived empowerment, clarity, and emotional comfort, long-term engagement can increase feelings of alienation, anxiety, and disempowerment, underscoring the importance of context and individual experiences in shaping these outcomes.

Social Identity and Group Influence

Several participants described how their beliefs aligned with and were validated by online communities, reinforcing the idea that social identity theory plays a crucial role in belief maintenance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Many participants viewed conspiracy theorists as a marginalised or enlightened in-group fighting against a powerful, deceptive out-group. This aligns with Nera et al. (2022), who found that perceived discrimination against conspiracy believers strengthened their group identification.

Furthermore, social networks, both online and offline, served as echo chambers, where conspiracy narratives were repeatedly validated and rarely challenged. Participants who engaged primarily with alternative media sources reported a deep mistrust of mainstream information, supporting prior research on media fragmentation and its role in the proliferation of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In contrast, individuals with diverse social networks that included sceptics of conspiracy theories were more likely to reconsider their beliefs, suggesting that exposure to varied perspectives may serve as a moderating factor.

Some participants described experiencing a shift in their beliefs over time, particularly in response to new information. This suggests that while conspiracy beliefs can be deeply entrenched, they are not always static (Williams et al., 2024). Several interviewees recounted how initial scepticism about a particular theory evolved into strong belief after prolonged exposure to community discussions and curated online content, demonstrating the persuasive power of repeated misinformation. Others described abandoning certain conspiracy beliefs when they became untenable but subsequently replacing them with alternative theories, supporting the idea that conspiracy belief functions as an overarching worldview rather than an attachment to specific narratives.

Narcissism and the Role of Self-Enhancement

Although this study did not explicitly measure narcissism, several participants expressed views that reflected narcissistic tendencies. For example, some participants portrayed themselves as being more aware than others, and the general population as being 'sheep' like. Such comments suggest a belief in possessing superior insight, aligning with prior research showing that individuals with narcissistic traits may be particularly drawn to conspiracy theories as a means of affirming their distinctiveness and self-importance (Cichocka et al., 2016; Lantian et al., 2017). Cosgrove and Murphy (2023) further highlight that narcissism is closely linked to a desire for uniqueness and recognition, needs that are fulfilled when individuals perceive themselves as holding exclusive knowledge or insight unavailable to others. This perception was evident in participants who framed themselves as enlightened or independent thinkers, implicitly contrasting themselves with a misled or passive majority. These patterns reflect the concept of grandiose narcissism, which is associated with feelings of superiority and a belief in belonging to an intellectual elite. Although having a high sense of self-worth is frequently seen as a defence against conspiracy

theories, it can also strengthen conspiratorial thinking when combined with narcissistic traits (Cichocka et al., 2016).

The connection between narcissistic self-enhancement and conspiratorial beliefs may explain why education or intellectual capabilities do not always safeguard against conspiratorial thinking (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023). Participants frequently cited their own extensive research, or independent thinking, as reasons for their adherence to conspiracy theories. This suggests a cognitive bias linked to narcissistic self-perception, where individuals perceive their own interpretations as inherently superior to mainstream or expert opinions. Nonetheless, more research is needed to understand how these feelings might shape conspiracy belief.

Self-Esteem and Monological Belief Systems

Using the RSES as a measure, the findings from this study did not demonstrate strong links between self-esteem and conspiracy beliefs, with 71% percent of participants falling within the normal RSES range. This suggests that self-esteem alone is not a definitive predictor or protector of conspiracy belief. This aligns with previous literature findings, where self-esteem's role appears to be influenced by other factors, such as narcissism, social identity, and perceived powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Cichocka et al., 2016). Quantitative results indicated a weak, non-significant positive correlation between the Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale and RSES (r = .014, p = .893), and similarly, no significant correlation between the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale and RSES (r = -.057, p = .572) was found. This further reinforces the complexity of the relationship between self-esteem and conspiratorial thinking, highlighting the possibility that other mediating psychological or sociological factors are likely more influential in shaping conspiracy belief than self-esteem alone. Despite the continued inconsistencies of findings in

relation to self-esteem and conspiracy mentality, self-esteem plays an important role in understanding the psychological motivations of conspiracy belief, particularly, when considered alongside broader constructs like narcissism and social identity.

The theory of monological belief systems, where belief in one conspiracy increases the likelihood of believing others, even when they are contradictory (Wood et al., 2012) has proven more consistent across research. This study's results showed a significant positive correlation between the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) scale and the Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scale ($r = .804$, $p < .001$), supporting the idea that conspiracy beliefs form a self-reinforcing worldview rather than isolated opinions (Goertzel, 1994). In recognising this, the monological conspiracy theory is valuable because it allows researchers to understand how conspiracy beliefs are formed, disseminated, and reinforced, all of which are vital knowledge to addressing the dissemination of misinformation and increasing social cohesiveness.

It is important to acknowledge that conspiracy beliefs are not entirely rigid. Recent research by Franks et al. (2017) and Williams et al. (2024) suggests that while conspiracy beliefs are interrelated, they may also adapt or shift in response to new information or changing social contexts. Participants in this study described similar experiences, often dismissing conspiracy theories, particularly when they felt those theories were no longer supported by existing information. This adaptive pattern supports the idea that conspiracy beliefs function more as flexible frameworks rather than static or unchanging beliefs.

This observed flexibility in conspiracy beliefs may also relate to broader emotional drivers, rather than mere cognitive rigidity. Participants often linked their changing conspiracy beliefs to evolving personal experiences or new narratives encountered through media sources. This aligns with Sutton and Douglas's (2014) assertion that conspiratorial

thinking is influenced by social interactions, information exposure, and emotional states. These findings emphasise the importance of addressing the social and emotional contexts that underpin conspiracy beliefs, rather than solely focusing on their cognitive dimensions.

Implications

With the aid of digital media and information sharing, the dissemination of conspiracy theories has become increasingly common in contemporary culture. These narratives, which are often founded on suspicion and distrust, can affect both individual and group beliefs and behaviours. To address conspiracy theories' influence on public discourse and societal cohesiveness, it is crucial to explore the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to their proliferation (Nefes et al., 2023). Psychological factors, such as social identity, cognitive biases, and the need for certainty, as well as sociological factors, such as cultural context and group dynamics, have been demonstrated as crucial elements in both the acceptance and propagation of conspiracy belief.

This study sought to explore the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the belief in conspiracy theories in modern society, focusing on the Australasian context, which has remained relatively under researched compared to that of Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Allington et al., 2021; Dagnall et al., 2023; Drochon et al., 2018; Tabri et al., 2023; Uscinski et al., 2022). By analysing these factors, this study aimed to provide a better understanding of why individuals believe conspiracy theories. Further, this study attempted to ascertain whether findings from Australasia were consistent with those from other Western countries. The results suggest that much like in other Western societies, conspiracy beliefs in Australasia are influenced by distrust in institutions, the search for meaning and certainty, and the role of digital media in disseminating misinformation. This highlights how conspiracy beliefs have wider implications, where social factors and cognitive

biases may contribute to the formation of conspiracy theories, thus widening societal divides and lowering civic engagement. These findings support the need for the development of methods to reduce the spread of false information and improve societal resilience. By fostering critical thinking, promoting trust in credible institutions, and encouraging responsible media consumption, it may be possible to counteract the negative impacts of conspiracy beliefs and contribute to a more informed and engaged population.

With social media facilitating the accelerated dissemination of conspiracy theories, and misinformation becoming more difficult to discern, media literacy and critical thinking skills are paramount in modern society (Cosgrove & Murphy, 2023; Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021). Conspiracy theories may be less likely to proliferate if educational programmes that teach analytical thinking, starting in primary school are implemented. The programmes could teach individuals the ability to differentiate between credible and unreliable sources, which may reduce the spread of conspiracy theories. Additionally, findings highlighted the potential role that conspiracy beliefs play in eroding institutional trust. Given that media has the ability to influence conspiracy belief, government institutions and media executives must work together to implement policies that balance freedom of speech with the mitigation of misinformation.

Furthermore, dismissing or ridiculing individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs does not dissuade them from believing. In order to combat disinformation, that is often linked to conspiracy theories and given that conspiracy belief is closely linked to their identities and personal experiences, the way we engage with individuals must be considered, including being non-confrontational and open to respectful dialogue. In summary, this research supports the extensive quantitative research that asserts the need for a nuanced approach to addressing conspiracy belief in modern society.

Limitations

The use of Prolific may have led to sample bias as 74% of participants self-described as European/Caucasian/ Pākehā and 62% identified as male. The use of self-report scales in Study 1, along with the modest koha (incentive), may have influenced the authenticity of responses, as some individuals may have participated for the incentive rather than a genuine belief in conspiracy theories (Prolific, 2024). This was considered, but the ease of recruitment using Prolific outweighed the downsides (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Additionally, using Prolific means the sample only includes a group of people who want to participate in research and are happy to use a system that they do not consider institutionally problematic. This may skew the sample toward more tech savvy individuals, potentially limiting diversity, and may mean that the participants conspiracy beliefs do not reflect the wider population.

The sample size ($N = 100$) for Study 1 is small, however, the primary purpose of Study 1 was to identify participants to interview for Study 2 who had relatively high conspiracy beliefs. Participants were selected based on the scores from the two conspiracy measures: the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) scales. The adapted Australasian Conspiracy Beliefs scale used in this research was not formally validated, though its reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha (0.87), indicated good internal consistency. The lack of pre-registration reduces transparency in the initial stages of research planning. Furthermore, the study's regional focus on Australasia limits the generalisability of findings, making them less applicable to broader populations or other cultural contexts.

While the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used in Study 1 to explore correlations between self-esteem and conspiratorial belief via the BCT and ACB scales, the

interview questions in Study 2 did not explicitly explore self-esteem. As a result, this research may not fully capture the personal reflections related to self-worth that may influence conspiracy belief. While qualitative thematic analysis allows for the exploration of personal experiences and deeper insights into participant perspectives, it carries the risk of subjectivity, where the researcher may identify themes that are not truly present in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). However, this was managed through reflection at all stages of the research.

Interview Reflection

The qualitative process, specifically the interviews, provided insights about how participants engaged with conspiracy theories in a psychological and social context that could not be achieved with a solely quantitative process. One interesting observation following the interviews was that some participants who initially seemed reserved throughout the interviews became more open once the recording was turned off and the interview officially ended. Additionally, over half of the participants were eager to continue the conversation once the official interview and recording ceased. This suggests that the presence of recording devices may have influenced some participants' willingness to fully express their conspiracy beliefs.

Further, despite having previously provided information about the research purpose, both in writing during recruitment and verbally at the beginning of each interview, once recording stopped, some participants required reassurance of the research reasoning and were eager to understand my personal perspective on conspiracy belief. Confirmation of anonymity was another concern for some participants. These participant responses reflect a distrust that aligns with broader research findings of distrust and scepticism among conspiracy believers, as well as the search for confirmation bias and having 'safe' spaces to discuss such beliefs. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of conspiracy belief and the

true psychological and sociological factors that shape them, future research should consider these elements. Creating environments where participants feel able to express their beliefs is paramount to gaining more authentic insights into conspiratorial thinking.

Future Research

Given the increasing acceptance and proliferation of conspiracy theories, future research should explore the increasing use of media and how it reinforces or challenges conspiracy belief. Specifically it would be useful to explore how individuals engage with misinformation and the level of discernment required across media platforms, which would increase understanding of the more nuanced drivers of conspiracy thinking. All types of media need to be explored, as they are unique and used differently depending on age, gender, location, access to the internet, and so on.

Further, the relationship between conspiracy belief and demonstrated societal impacts, such as declining institutional trust and political polarisation should be investigated in more detail. More longitudinal studies would be beneficial across wider populations to determine how conspiracy beliefs evolve over time, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long term societal impacts that conspiracy beliefs have.

There is also a need for more qualitative research to explore specific drivers, motivators, and the complexity of belief systems. This is difficult to do when the very institution (universities) can be seen as an organisation that is contributing to conspiracies. Additionally, more research within and across non-Western cultures is necessary. Despite the challenges of researching conspiracy beliefs using qualitative methodologies, there is a strong need for research that explores the complexities of creation and maintenance of beliefs, challenging beliefs and the impact of holding these beliefs.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the increasing volume of research on conspiracy beliefs by exploring the psychological and sociological factors influencing belief in modern society. Consistent with prior research, the results highlight how cognitive biases, institutional distrust, social identity, and media contribute to conspiratorial thinking. A significant finding from Study 1 related to the monological belief system, which suggests that belief in one conspiracy theory increases the likelihood of belief in others, even when they are contradictory and that beliefs are interconnected. Although individually the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories (BCT) and Australasian Conspiracy Belief (ACB) measurement scales did not independently support monological belief, the significant positive correlation between these measures suggests that belief in conspiratorial belief is interconnected. Qualitative analysis in Study 2 further illuminated these complexities, highlighting selective information processing, personal experiences, and critical scepticism of mainstream narratives as crucial factors shaping conspiratorial beliefs. Media, particularly social media, emerged as a significant vehicle for reinforcing conspiracy theories, underscoring the sociological dimensions of modern conspiracy belief proliferation.

Theoretically, this research supports the monological belief system while promoting a more complex interpretation that takes identity formation, social networks, and individual empowerment into account. It draws attention to how sociological elements like group identity and selective media exposure interact with psychological desires like empowerment and control. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of developing educational initiatives promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and open discourse to reduce susceptibility to conspiracy theories. Public health campaigns, policy-making strategies, and

educational programs would particularly benefit from acknowledging the complex psychological and sociological dynamics identified here.

Future research should expand on these findings using longitudinal studies to explore how conspiracy beliefs evolve over time and their broader societal impacts. Investigating effective interventions to increase resilience against conspiratorial narratives would also be valuable. While recognising limitations such as small sample sizes and potential self-selection biases, this research provides robust insights into conspiracy theories in modern society. Understanding the social and psychological processes that support conspiracy theories might help guide future policy initiatives that aim to improve social cohesiveness and institutional trust in an increasingly dispersed information environment.

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Appendix A

Research Information Sheet (Survey)

Research Information Sheet (Survey)

Conspiracy theories in modern society: An exploration of psychological and sociological factors

Researcher Introduction

Kia ora, my name is Clare Jeffries, and I am completing my Master of Arts (Psychology) at Massey University.

Project Description and Invitation

Conspiracy theories have the power to shape popular attitudes, beliefs, and actions. The aim of this project is to consider the impact of conspiracy theories and beliefs on modern society by exploring the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the formation, spread, and persistence of conspiracy theories.

This research project consists of a survey that is expected to take 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey will include basic demographic questions followed by two self-report scales to ascertain tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and one self-report scale that measures self-esteem.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

In addition to using Prolific, this study may be advertised on NZ and Australian Facebook pages, with the option for it to be shared across the site. Recruitment is limited to those who meet the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria for the study include:

- Be aged 18 years or older.
- Must be willing to participate in a recorded 30 to 60 minute one on one semi structured interview that will be conducted via Zoom.
- Participants must be citizens of and currently reside in Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia.
- Responses to be completed in English.

Exclusion criteria for the study include:

- Incomplete responses: Participants who provide incomplete or unreliable responses during the initial data collection (the survey) may be excluded to maintain data validity and quality.

- Inability to provide informed consent: Participants who are unable to provide informed consent due to factors such as age (e.g., younger than 18).
- Ethical Considerations: Participants who engage in behaviours or express beliefs that raise ethical concerns, such as advocating violence, may be excluded to uphold ethical standards and ensure participant safety.

If you participate, what will you be required to do?

If you decide to participate in this study, please follow the link provided below. The survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and will remain open until 03 November 2024 or until required participant levels are reached, whichever occurs first.

The survey consists of two sections. The first asks questions about your background information (demographics), and the main survey that includes two self-report scales that are widely used in research to measure tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories and one self-report scale that is widely used to measure self-esteem.

Your identity will remain anonymous, and you will only be known by your Prolific ID number.

The survey should be completed in one sitting, meaning you will need to complete both sections in one go, though there is no time limit, and you can take time to think about how you would like to answer any of the questions.

Risks and Benefits

It is not anticipated that involvement in this study will involve any risks or discomfort to participants.

Data Management

All personal information and data collected during this study will be stored securely on a password-protected network that only myself, the researcher, and my supervisor, Dr Kathryn McGuigan, will be able to access. The anonymous data will be stored for five years and then destroyed. I will be responsible for making sure that your data will only be used for the purposes mentioned in this information sheet – my thesis and academic publications.

Participant's Rights

Completion and submission of the questionnaire implies consent. You have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study up until you submit your responses;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

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Te Kura Pūkenga Tangata

Thank you for taking the time to enquire about this study and to read this information sheet. We greatly appreciate your consideration of this invitation, and we welcome your participation in this study. If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to reach out to either myself, or my supervisor, Dr Kathryn McGuigan, at the details below.

Project Contacts

Researcher: Clare Jeffries

Email: Clare.Jeffries.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisor: Dr Kathryn McGuigan

Email: K.Mcguigan@massey.ac.nz

Statement of Ethical Approval

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. ".

Appendix B

Information Sheet (Interview)

Research Information Sheet (Interview)

Conspiracy theories in modern society: An exploration of psychological and sociological factors

Researcher Introduction

Kia ora, my name is Clare Jeffries, and I am completing my Master of Arts (Psychology) at Massey University. Please read this information sheet and ask any questions that arise before deciding whether to participate.

Project Description and Invitation

Conspiracy theories have the power to shape popular attitudes, beliefs, and actions. The aim of this project is to consider the impact of conspiracy theories and beliefs on modern society by exploring the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the formation, proliferation and persistence of conspiracy theories.

Inclusion criteria for the study include:

- Be aged 18 years or older.
- Must be willing to participate in a recorded 30 to 60 minute one on one semi structured interview that will be conducted via Zoom.
- Participants must be citizens of and currently reside in Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia.
- Responses to be completed in English.

Exclusion criteria for the study include:

- Inability to provide informed consent: Participants who are unable to provide informed consent due to factors such as age (e.g., younger than 18 at the time of survey completion).
- Ethical Considerations: Participants who engage in behaviours or express beliefs that raise ethical concerns, such as advocating violence, may be excluded to uphold ethical standards and ensure participant safety.
- Lack of Strong Conspiracy Beliefs: Participants who do not hold strong or significant beliefs in conspiracy theories may be excluded to maintain focus on those who actively engage with and endorse such beliefs.

If you participate, what will you be required to do?

Participants will be invited to attend a recorded one on one semi-structured interview that will be conducted via Zoom.

To ensure anonymity, all communication prior to the interview will take place either via Prolific emails or the time booking system Doodle, as required. You will be asked to select a time and day via Doodle, (follow the link, click on 'Preview', select a day and time). Once booked then a Zoom link will be provided for your attendance.

You will not be required to turn your camera on, though may do so if you wish.

The interview is expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes. As this data is held separately from part 1 of the study (the survey you completed earlier), you will once again be asked for your Prolific ID. Then you will be asked a series of open ended questions about your beliefs, values and relationships. The interviews will be a safe place for us to have a conversation. You will be able decline to answer any question, pause the interview and withdraw from the study up until 2 weeks following the interview. I can send you the list of questions prior to the interview and I will be able to return the transcript to you for your approval following the interview.

Risks and Benefits

It is not anticipated that involvement in this study will involve any risks or discomfort to participants.

Data Management

All personal information and data collected during this study will be stored securely on a password-protected network that only myself, the researcher, and my supervisor, Dr Kathryn McGuigan, will be able to access. The anonymous data will be stored for five years and then destroyed. I will be responsible for making sure that your data will only be used for the purposes mentioned in this information sheet – my thesis and academic publications.

Participant's Rights

You have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study up to two weeks after your interview;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

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Te Kura Pūkenga Tangata

Thank you for taking the time to enquire about this study and to read this information sheet. We greatly appreciate your consideration of this invitation, and we welcome your participation in this study. If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to reach out to either myself, or my supervisor, Dr Kathryn McGuigan, at the details below.

Project Contacts

Researcher: Clare Jeffries

Email: Clare.Jeffries.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisor: Dr Kathryn McGuigan

Email: K.Mcguigan@massey.ac.nz

Statement of Ethical Approval

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. ".

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Semi-structured interview questions

Hi, my name is Clare, thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. It is expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes. Do not be alarmed if you see me writing, I will be taking notes during this interview to further analyse for commonalties in responses and themes across interviewees. I will start by asking open ended questions, where you are free to provide any response, you wish. You may pass on any question or withdraw at any time. Payment will be made within 7 days upon the completion of the interview. Do you have any questions or concerns?

Ok, are you comfortable and ready to begin?

Can you tell me about any conspiracy theories that you strongly believe in or have encountered? **What is this theory and what do you believe?**

What initially drew you to these theories?

Can you describe any personal experiences that have influenced your views on conspiracy theories?

Can you describe any instances where you've encountered scepticism or opposition to your conspiracy beliefs? How do you respond to such challenges?

Could you tell me about a time when your belief in conspiracy theories have affected your relationships?

Do you have friends or family members who share similar beliefs in conspiracy theories? How do these relationships influence your beliefs?

In your opinion, what role do mainstream media, social media, and online communities play in reinforcing or challenging conspiracy beliefs?

How do you perceive the credibility of information sources, and what criteria do you use to evaluate the validity of conspiracy theories?

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Have there been conspiracy theories that you believed in that you have since questioned or reconsidered? What prompted these moments of doubt?

Do you think conspiracy theories are shaped by public opinion and societal attitudes?

From your perspective, what impact do you think widespread belief in conspiracy theories has on society as a whole?

Have you observed any instances where belief in conspiracy theories has led to tangible consequences or actions in society?

Have you noticed any commonalities among people who share similar conspiracy beliefs? What do you think drives these shared beliefs?

How do you think exposure to conspiracy theories affects trust in institutions and social cohesion?

Do you find that believing in conspiracy theories gives you a sense of empowerment or control over chaotic events? If so, can you provide an example?

Has there been a time where you have faced negative consequences as a result of your beliefs in conspiracy theories? What effect did that have on you?

Is there anything else you might like to talk about today?

Thank you very much for your time in completing this interview, payment compensation will be made within 7 days.

Appendix D

Ethics Approval

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

26/04/2024

Dear: Clare Jeffries

Re: Low Risk Notification - 4000028761 - The impact of conspiracy theories on society: An exploration of psychological and sociological factors

Thank you for submitting a low risk notification for your research/teaching/evaluation.

This email is to acknowledge receipt of the low risk notification and to inform you that the details of your project have been recorded in our database for inclusion in the annual reports to the Health Research Council Ethics Committee (HRCEC) and the Massey University Research Committee (URC).

You may proceed with your research, though it is advisable to provide a couple of weeks before commencing, as all low risk notifications are checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor. You may be contacted if your application is incomplete and/or further clarification is required.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis.

If a sponsoring organisation, funding authority (e.g., the Health Research Council) or a journal require evidence of ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee (with an approval number), you need to complete a full Massey University Human Ethics application to be reviewed and approved by one of our Human Ethics Committees. Applications must be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of the research.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. "

Please include the following statement on all public documents (e.g., information sheet, consent form) related to your project:

> ***This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.***
>
> ***If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Massey University Human Ethics by email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz.***

I wish you all the best in your research, teaching or evaluation activities and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of ethics principles and practices.

Ngā mihi nui,

Professor Tracy Riley
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 951 6841; 06 951 6840
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.nz